



EXPLORING THE COLLAPSE

of the Bipolar World and the Emergence of
a New Identity in Central-Eastern Europe

Student Conference Proceedings

Dagmara Sikora (ed.)



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a New Identity in Central-Eastern Europe
Students' Conference proceedings

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Introduction

DAGMARA SIKORA

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Time is out of joint once more. Three months have passed between the conference and the publication of its proceedings; three months, and yet it feels like a lifetime. What in December existed only as potential scenarios, still safely hidden under the guise of paranoid exaggeration, is now our reality. The first part of the conference title – “Exploring the collapse” – does not serve as a poetic metaphor anymore. It describes our current condition, and the only hope it offers is the hope for the possibility of grasping and investigating this collapse. But how does one grasp the excess of an ending?

We can no longer indulge ourselves in observing how the impossible becomes the new ordinary – the very idea of impossibility seems to be losing its meaning. In a constant procession of impossibilities, what remains is a state of stupor or awe, like in Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* with our layer of reality falling apart. This publication is an outcome of the second international student – doctoral student conference which took place on 5 and 6 December 2024. The proceedings may therefore be treated as a guest from the past.

In their investigations, the authors once again focus on the Central and Eastern Europe as a place for which creating a new identity and identities may be a matter of life and death. Europe, and Central and Eastern Europe in particular, for the first time in decades finds itself in a position where its hitherto biggest ally may soon become its most dangerous foe. The frantic search for new coordinates is a vulnerability irresistible both for Russia and its allies and billionaires with near-unlimited power and *The Handmaid's Tale* fantasies. As the idea of European integration was born from the ashes of one of the darkest moments in European history, one might hope that this time Europe will emerge from this collapse stronger, more just and more capable of defending the values of which it boasts. Yet, Clint Smith's words hang in the air:

When people say, 'we have made it through worse before'
all I hear is the wind slapping against the gravestones
of those who did not make it, those who did not
survive to see the confetti fall from the sky those who
did not live to watch the parade roll down the street.¹

The book opens with a chapter written by Adam Kozlovski who shows how unresolved, multi-faceted tensions between the Lithuanian majority and the Polish minority in Lithuania are being played off by Putin's Russia. Geopolitical, socio-economic and historical (both in terms of micro and macro

¹ Clint Smith, "When people say, 'we have made it through worse before'", in. *Above Ground: Poems*. New York, Little, Brown and Company, 2023, no pagination.

history) aspects shape a complex relationship that is an easy target for Russian disinformation and infiltration. Even when Lithuanian and Polish governments eventually started putting out at least some of the fires, Russian influence remained prevalent. This contributed to an ambiguous stance of the Polish minority following Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014. However, the author ends on an optimistic note, noting that the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 tightened co-operation between Polish and Lithuanian governments, which leads to continuous improvement of the situation of the Polish minority and the majority-minority relationship itself.

In the second chapter, Hubert Ostapowicz analyses the role played by the Independence March in the formation and growing success of Polish far-right movements. The takeover of one of the most important national holidays and the establishment of a monopoly on its celebration allowed for merging extremist groups with seemingly neutral participants, whom the author calls "families with children", at one event. By that means, the Independence March contributed to the normalisation of xenophobic, homophobic and anti-Ukrainian slogans which have become a regular, almost transparent part of the celebration. According to Ostapowicz, the Independence March enabled the consolidation of the previously fragmented far right and introduced it to the mainstream. By analysing the history of the movement, the author illustrates the formation of nationalist identity which, due to its growing importance on the Polish political scene, is likely to have a significant impact on the course of the upcoming presidential elections.

In the third chapter, Konrad Koźbiał provides an analysis of the usage of the EU symbols by anti-EU politicians from

member states from the Central – Eastern Europe. Focusing on the examples of Viktor Orbán, Václav Klaus and Grzegorz Braun, the author shows how the European symbols remain a handy tool for current political interests through anti-European gestures. This way, the meaning of the symbols simultaneously extends beyond support for the idea of the European integration and encompasses the opposition to autocracy and these politicians themselves. The author reflects on the possible protection of the European symbols in the future.

The second section of the book focuses on Slovakia. The fourth chapter written by Paulína Maťašeje serves as a warning. The author shows dangerous actions of Slovak politicians targeting free media and journalists that investigate the ruling coalition and its business ties. Although Slovak society and the international community were shocked by the murder of an investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his wife, it was only a fraction of the consistently anti-journalistic practice carried out by Mečiar's and Fico's governments. In this context, it is worth noting the growing importance of alternative media that act as propaganda mouthpieces and are mainly beyond any journalistic scrutiny.

In the fifth chapter, Filip Koźmiński takes a closer look at the situation of Slovakia in terms of transitional justice after 1989, which is unique compared to other Central and Eastern European countries. Due to political and social factors, this part of decommunisation process in Slovakia was done in a makeshift way, not always properly anchored in law. The author analyses political background of such decisions.

The sixth chapter is devoted to the history of the Formula One Grand Prix in Hungary during the Cold War era. Despite

being associated with capitalist values from its inception, the Formula One racing was extremely popular in the Hungarian People's Republic. By examining archival material, Mikołaj Poślada studies the development of this form of motorsport and its impact on the relations between the Western and Eastern Blocs. According to the author, the decision to build a racing track in Budapest and host regular Grand Prix races was a significant part of sport diplomacy. Not only did it bring the motorsport to the East Bloc but also created a small window in the Iron Curtain a few years before its ultimate collapse.

In the final chapter of the book, Kacper Mroczka critically investigates the relationship between neoliberalism as an ideology standing behind the European integration and changes in the identity of Central and Eastern European member states. Transformation redefined national identities in the CEE, harnessing them to the free market and basing them on a dialectical relationship with the hegemonic West. The Euroscepticism of the populist outburst is therefore the other side of the same coin. According to the author, the entire process of integration and Europeanisation requires profound changes.

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Polish minority in Lithuania in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War

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Abstract

The issue of the rights of the Polish national minority in Lithuania has been present in Polish – Lithuanian relations since the regaining of independence by both countries. They were often a point of contention in relations between Vilnius and Warsaw, which usually caused the deterioration of contacts between the governments of both countries. Another significant problem was the situation of the said minority, which often was perceived through the prism of stereotypes and historical narratives among the public. Internal tensions between the dominant ethnic group, the Lithuanians, and the Polish minority have intensified after the outbreak of the Russo – Ukrainian war in 2014. The information war waged by Russia in the region at that time resulted in various provocations that incited aggravation of inter-ethnic relations. Areas densely inhabited by national minorities, including Poles, became the target of Russian propaganda, which affected the situation

within the country. The Lithuanian government's retaliation against Russian influence in the media, as well as the strategies for integrating national minorities during this period, will be discussed. The Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania, representing the Polish minority and Polish – Lithuanian cooperation, will be critical in addressing this issue. The reactions of the Polish minority to the events in Belarus in 2020, the border crisis, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 will also be crucial in understanding this problem. All these issues will be discussed in a geopolitical and historical context, with an attempt to find solutions to these problems.

Keywords: Polish – Lithuanian relations, Russo – Ukrainian war, propaganda, The Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania, national minorities

Introduction

The events in Ukraine in 2014, namely the outbreak of separatist movements in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, led to significant changes in the international arena. Many European countries began to distance themselves from Russia and weaken bilateral relations, while Ukraine's change of course towards a pro-European vector forced it to take new steps towards European integration. We can also consider this period in terms of intensification of disinformation and hybrid activities by Russia abroad. A particularly important target of Russian propaganda was the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which due to

their geographical proximity and historical past constitute an important element of the Kremlin's expansionist policy. The object of the propaganda narrative, especially in the Baltic countries, was national minorities. Such problematic issues as education, language rights or historical memory were often used by the Russian regime media to stimulate inter-ethnic conflicts in the country, which would lead to destabilization of the situation in the region.¹ Although in most cases this concerned the Russian minority or the Russian-speaking population, in the case of Lithuania it also concerned Lithuanian Poles, who constitute 6.5% of the country's total population.²

The Polish minority in Lithuania is a unique group in many respects. Unlike the aforementioned Russian minorities in other countries, it is not an immigrant population, but an autochthonous one, living mostly in the areas around Vilnius. This group is also more susceptible to Russian influence, which results from the weaker economic situation and the lack of appropriate attention from the central government to the problems of this minority. Issues of cultural autonomy, such as education in the native language, bilingual signs, or the spelling of surnames, are particularly controversial. The heterogeneous mutual perception of Lithuanians and Poles also leads to the stigmatization or isolation of this minority, which creates favorable ground for Russian propaganda to

¹ Aleksandra Ketlerienė, *Russian and Belarusian Information Operations Targeting Relations Between Poland and Lithuania* (Vilnius: INFO OPS Poland Foundation, 2023), 4.

² Lietuvos Respublikos 2021 m. gyventojų ir būstų surašymo rezultatai – *Tautybė, gimtoji kalba ir tikyba* (Vilnius: Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, 2021).

reveal itself as an advocate of “wronged minorities”.³ In the discussed topic, an important issue is Polish – Lithuanian relations, which also influenced the opinion of the Polish minority on the ongoing conflict.

This work will present the situation of Poles in Lithuania in the face of geopolitical changes, in particular – the growing threat from Russia. It will discuss aspects that contributed to the formation of the current position of the Polish minority in the country. It will also present how Russian propaganda affected members of this community and how this affected Polish – Lithuanian relations. It will also examine how the governments of Lithuania and Poland acted to solve the problems of the Polish minority, including in the information field. It is hypothesized that in the face of the war in Ukraine, the position of Poles on the conflict was not uniform, which resulted from the significant impact of Russian disinformation on the environment, and the changing condition of Polish – Lithuanian relations was also of great importance here. Recently, there have also been visible tendencies indicating a change in the position of Poles in Lithuania towards the discussed conflict to a more pro-Western one, which may result from efforts by Warsaw and Vilnius to improve the condition of this minority.

To provide background on the contemporary situation of Polish minority in Lithuania, the historical method was used, as well as the behavioral method to assess the level of expression in the discussion circulating around such topics as war in Ukraine, Russian activity in the region or ethnic minorities.

³ Ketlerienė, Russian and Belarusian Information Operations, 4.

An institutional and legal analysis was also used in relation to the Lithuanian government's policy regarding national minorities and Russian disinformation. In the article, many resources, such as scientific papers, reports and analyses, press articles, both by Polish and Lithuanian authors, were used to objectively present the topic.

Historical context

In order to understand the processes taking place among the Polish community in Lithuania in the period under discussion, it is worth familiarizing oneself with the historical context, especially in the area of Polish – Lithuanian Polish – Lithuanian relations and Russian influence on Lithuanian Poles. The Lithuanian society still remembers the interwar period when Vilnius was annexed to the Republic of Poland as a result of the staged Żeligowski's Mutiny. This city, the historical capital of Lithuania, was a point of dispute between Poland and Lithuania. In this conflict, the government in Warsaw based its territorial claims on the demographic composition of the city and its surroundings, which were mostly inhabited by Poles, while Lithuanians made up only 1–2%.⁴ This conflict was first used by the Soviet Union in 1939, when, in the Soviet – Lithuanian Mutual Assistance Treaty, Vilnius

⁴ Barbara Jundo – Kaliszewska, *Zakładnicy historii. Mniejszość polska w postradzieckiej Litwie* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2019), 42–47.

was transferred from Soviet-occupied Poland to Lithuania.⁵ These events have appeared many times in the historical or propaganda narratives of these countries.

In later years, the instrumental use of the Polish minority by the Russian authorities in post-war Lithuania is also traced. The issue of Polish education and culture in Soviet Lithuania is often raised in Polish scientific literature.⁶ Some scientists attribute the existence of educational institutions with Polish as the language of instruction to the decisions of the Kremlin authorities, who, unlike the Lithuanian republican authorities, sought to maintain the possibility of education in Polish. It is also believed that it resulted from the policy of “divide and rule” implemented by the Soviets, who saw the Polish minority as a counterweight in the event of Lithuania becoming independent from the USSR.

This issue became visible at the end of the 1980s, when, in the face of the emerging independent Lithuanian state, autonomist movements developed in the Vilnius region, striving to create political autonomy for the local Polish population.⁷ Although some sources indicate that this movement was grassroots in nature and resulted from the fears of the Polish minority about the possible Lithuanization or assimilation of the community, in the later stages of the creation of autonomy the KGB’s particular interest in this matter is noted as well as

⁵ Jundo – Kaliszewska, *Zakładnicy historii*, 61–62.

⁶ Cezary Żołędowski, *Białorusini i Litwini w Polsce, Polacy na Białorusi i Litwie. Uwarunkowania współczesnych stosunków między większością i mniejszościami narodowymi*, (Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza ASPRA-JR, 2003), 248–249.

⁷ Żołędowski, *Białorusini i Litwini w Polsce*, 248–249.

the direct influence of the Soviet intelligence agencies on the development of the situation in this period.⁸ It can be said that Polish – Lithuanian relations and the situation of the Polish minority in Lithuania were often instrumentally used by the Soviet Union and later by Russia.

Interethnic Relations Between Lithuanians and Poles in Lithuania

An important factor in understanding the position of the Polish minority in Lithuania is also the concept of the processes taking place in inter-ethnic relations in the country between Lithuanians and the aforementioned minority. Here, historical events, as well as Polish – Lithuanian relations and the geopolitical situation in the region, are of great importance. The occupation of the Vilnius region by Poland in the inter-war period is still strongly present in Lithuanian historical discourse, which to some extent also reflects on the current majority-minority relations in the country. Attempts to create Polish autonomy in Lithuania also had a huge impact on the shape of the policy of the central authorities of the Republic of Lithuania. The Polish autonomous movement, which was born as a result of the Autumn of Nations and the desire to preserve its own national identity, affected inter-ethnic relations in the country and the relations between Vilnius and Warsaw, and this issue was often exploited by the Russian propaganda machine.

⁸ Jundo – Kaliszewska, *Zakładnicy historii*, 249–251.

In the Russian foreign policy, countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which were formerly a part of Russian Empire or Soviet Union, are a matter of great importance. The doctrine of so-called *russskiy mir*, i.e., the Russian sphere of influence, which is often maintained by the means of Russian language and culture, is a key instrument in obtaining the leverage over its western neighbours. The main goal of this policy is to reestablish Russian positions in this region which were lost after the fall of Soviet Union. Poland and Lithuania, on the other hand, are both implementing pro-Western foreign policy within the EU and NATO and cooperation between these two countries is crucial in that matter. This situation has been an obstacle for Russia to achieve its goals, which is why it wanted to worsen the relations between these two countries, implementing the policy of “divide and rule”. The real and important problems of Poles in Lithuania have become an important tool of Russian propaganda in order to worsen the relations between Lithuania and Poland.

The actions of the Lithuanian and Polish authorities in this regard also contributed to this, as evidenced by the fact that the demands of the Polish minority in Lithuania have not been implemented for many years, those issues remained an important topic in the Polish – Lithuanian relations. Even now, in the national media, the topic of Poles in Lithuania has been revealed in the case of attempts at reforms by the central government in the area of the education of national minorities or the legislation concerning the linguistic or cultural rights of the Polish community. This results in the Polish minority being perceived negatively in social discourse, which is also influenced by the activities of Lithuanian nationalist circles,

who often question the identity of Poles in Lithuania, denying them the right to have the status of a national minority.⁹ In addition, there is the low economic level of regions inhabited by the Polish community, which results in the lack of opportunities for advancement in society for many Lithuanian Poles.¹⁰

A significant problem, which is an important element of this article, is also the strong influence of the Russian media on the Polish minority in Lithuania. Many elements translate into this, and it is difficult to clearly indicate the cause. However, we can identify certain factors that contributed to this. For example, the absence of retransmitted Polish television, which ceased its operations in Lithuania in the mid-nineties due to unprofitability, opened up a large field for Russian media, which, due to the knowledge of this language by the Polish minority and the attractiveness of the transmitted content, gained popularity, which influenced the far-reaching Russification of the community, which had already begun in Soviet times.¹¹ Also, frequent disputes with the Lithuanian authorities regarding the rights of national minorities and sometimes

⁹ Mariusz Antonowicz, "Tautinės mažumos ar tautinės bendrijos?", *VU TSPMI*, November 15, 2024, <https://www.tspmi.vu.lt/komentarai/tautines-mazumos-ar-tautines-bendrijos-m-antonovic/>.

¹⁰ Vytautas Keršanskas, "Deterring disinformation? Lessons from Lithuania's countermeasures since 2014," *Hybrid CoE Paper* 6 (April 2021): 7–8, https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/20210427_Hybrid-CoE-Paper-6_Deterring-disinformation_WEB.pdf.

¹¹ "Russification of Lithuanians of Polish origin decreasing: Lithuania's Justice Minister," *TVP World*, May 8, 2024, <https://tvpworld.com/77420219/russification-of-lithuanians-of-polish-origin-decreasing-lithuanias-justice-minister>.

tense Polish – Lithuanian relations gave Russia the opportunity to use these conflicts to its advantage, positioning itself as an advocate of “wronged minorities”. It can therefore be said that tense relations with the Lithuanian authorities, as well as susceptibility to Russian propaganda, contributed to the creation of a situation that became dangerous in the context of the war in Ukraine.

2014: Changes in the Narrative

The events in Ukraine in 2014 had a major impact on the social situation in Lithuania. During this period, Russian propaganda was actively operating in the post-Soviet area, trying to discredit the Lithuanian authorities and destabilize the situation in the country. In addition to many anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western content, there were also narratives aimed at the internal situation in the Republic of Lithuania. Among the criticism of the country’s pro-Western course and the alleged poor economic situation, topics related to the situation of national minorities in Lithuania were often mentioned.¹² Much attention was paid to the Russian minority due to its presence in all three Baltic countries, although the position of Russians in Lithuania differed significantly from their position in Latvia and Estonia, where, in addition, there was the problem of statelessness and the transition of teaching in public schools of the Russian minority to state languages.¹³

¹² Ketlerienė, Russian and belarusian information operations.

¹³ “Lenkų kalbos ir lenkų bendruomenės Lietuvoje išsaugojimo ir vystymo strategija «Vilniaus kraštas 2040»,” *Polski Klub Dyskusyjny*,

For the aforementioned reasons, Kremlin propaganda paid a lot of attention to the Polish minority, thus trying to conflict it with the Lithuanians, and consequently to worsen relations between Poland and Lithuania, which could lead to stopping the cooperation of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in order to strengthen the defense against Russia. At that time, there were many provocations aimed at spreading distrust and hostility between different ethnic groups. One such media case was the creation of a group on the social media portal Facebook called “Wileńska Republika Ludowa – Виленская Народная Республика” (*Vilnius People’s Republic*), propagating anti-Western and separatist rhetoric.¹⁴ Its name referred to the self-proclaimed republics that were established in eastern Ukraine at that time: the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Luhansk People’s Republic, whose activities were supported in various ways by Russia. This and similar situations aroused associations between the Vilnius region and Donbas, which also had a negative impact on the image of Poles in Lithuania.

As a result of the intensified disinformation war on the part of Russia, Lithuania has taken many actions to combat Russian propaganda. Since 2014, many decisions have been made at the state level to limit the presence of the Russian narrative in public space, including banning the retransmission of many Russian channels, strengthening cyberspace protection, and initiating many programs in cooperation with

November 15, 2024, [https://tmde.lrv.lt/uploads/tmde/documents/files/Wileńszczyzna%202040%20\(LT\).pdf](https://tmde.lrv.lt/uploads/tmde/documents/files/Wileńszczyzna%202040%20(LT).pdf).

¹⁴ “Wileńska Republika Ludowa – na razie w internecie,” *zw.lt*, January 29, 2015, <https://zw.lt/wilno-wilenszczyzna/wilenska-republika-ludowa-na-razie-w-internecie/>.

non-governmental entities to refute and combat disinformation in the media.¹⁵ Many actions were also taken aimed at national minorities. During this time, pro-Western and pro-European content in Russian and Polish was popularized. In cooperation with the Polish government, Polish-language channels were also retransmitted in the Vilnius region – in this way, for the first time in almost 30 years, Polish media increased their presence in Lithuania. This also resulted in a change in the narratives within the Polish community in Lithuania.

EAPL in the Context of Polish – Lithuanian Relations and the Russian Threat

It is also worth mentioning that the Polish minority in Lithuania stands out among other ethnic groups in the country for its high degree of organization and mobilization. During the time of independent Lithuania, many organizations were established to cultivate Polish culture, language, and education. Folk groups, local media, and trade unions were actively formed, and much attention was paid to maintaining the network of schools with Polish as the language of instruction. Various political organizations were also established, including one of them – the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance – which had a significant impact on the formation of policy regarding the rights of national minorities in Lithuania. Representatives of this party hold power in two administrative units – Vilnius and Šalčininkai districts,

¹⁵ Keršanskas, “Deterring disinformation,” 10–12.

and have also often participated in government coalitions in the Vilnius city government, Trakai and Švenčionys districts.¹⁶ It has also often entered the government of the Republic of Lithuania as part of a coalition, as a result of which it had an impact on the state's policy towards national minorities and served as a link between Poland and Lithuania.

Nevertheless, the activities of EAPL in Lithuanian society, including among Poles in Lithuania, were assessed ambiguously. This was primarily due to the often-controversial attitude towards the conflict in Ukraine or the issue of Lithuania's relations with Russia. The party was criticized, among other things, for entering into an alliance with organizations of the Russian minority, including the Russian Alliance, whose members were suspected of collaborating with Russian intelligence services. The participation of the party leader Waldemar Tomaszewski at the celebrations of the Russian Victory Day on May 9 in 2014, where he was wearing a St. George's ribbon, which is considered a symbol of Russian nationalism, was received very negatively.¹⁷

There is also a belief that such actions of the party authorities result from the desire to gain votes from the Russian minority, which are necessary to exceed the 5 percent barrier

¹⁶ Worth noting that after the 2023 municipal elections the situation in Vilnius district significantly changed, as Robert Duchniewicz, the candidate of the Social Democratic party of Lithuania, was elected mayor of the municipality, while EAPL maintained its majority, leading to cohabitation in local government.

¹⁷ Violeta Grigaliūnaitė, "Antakalnio kapinėse Pergalės dienos minėjime skambėjo tik rusų kalba ir mirgėjo Georgijaus juostelių spalvos," *15min.lt*, May 9, 2014, <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/antakalnio-kapinese-pergales-dienos-minejime-skambejo-tik-rusu-kalba-ir-mirgejo-georgijaus-juosteliu-spalvos-56-425350>.

in the parliamentary elections as national minorities does not enjoy any special provisions regarding electoral process. This may also be the reason for the electoral coalition with the Russian Alliance.¹⁸ Also, the actions of the party representatives delegated to the government do not indicate that they are implementing a pro-Russian policy. An example of this can be the actions of Rita Tamašunienė, Minister of Internal Affairs of Lithuania in 2019–2020, whose ministry supported Belarusian political refugees during the protests against election fraud in Belarus in August 2020. The strengthening of Polish – Lithuanian relations and the implementation of Euro-Atlantic integration at that time also show the political nature of EAPL. It is also important that such demands of the Polish minority as the legalization of the surname in its original form, bilingual topographic signs or the return of property nationalized in Soviet times were mostly raised only by EAPL politicians, although the situation is changing in this field as well.

Poles in Lithuania in Relation to Russia and Belarus

As it was mentioned before, Poles in Lithuania are more susceptible to Russian propaganda due to their knowledge of the Russian language and other social factors. Studies have shown that the Russian and Polish minorities use Russian media

¹⁸ “Analiza działalności politycznej Akcji Wyborczej Polaków na Litwie,” Fundacja KoLibier, accessed November 15, 2024, <https://www.koliber.org/publikacje/analiza-mniejszosc-polska-na-litwie-analiza-dzialalnosci-politycznej-akcji-wyborczej-polakow-na-litwie/>.

much more often than the general public.¹⁹ Studies conducted in 2016 also show that the Polish and Russian minorities viewed Russia positively to a similar extent – at that time, 66% of Russians living in Lithuania and 64% of Poles viewed Russia favourably, while 71% of the general Lithuanian society viewed Russia as a country hostile to Lithuania.²⁰

Despite this, it cannot be concluded from the studies provided that Poles in Lithuania are openly pro-Russian. According to some sociologists, such responses could have been dictated by the desire to demonstrate dissatisfaction with the Lithuanian authorities, which results from the lack of investments in regions closely inhabited by the Polish minority and the resulting economic impoverishment, as well as actions sometimes taken to reduce the rights of national minorities to education in their native language.²¹

Resentment towards the Lithuanian authorities may also result from the events of 2021, when as a result of the crisis on the border with Belarus, which was forced by immigrants from the Middle East and Africa brought by the Belarusian regime. The decisions of the central authorities to settle illegal immigrants in the town of Dieveniškės near the border with Belarus caused great controversy in the Polish community.

¹⁹ Keršanskas, “Deterring disinformation,” 9.

²⁰ Ewelina Mokrzecka, “Dlaczego litewscy Polacy są bardziej sprzyjają Rosji i Białorusi niż miejscowi Rosjanie?,” *LRT.lt Wiadomości*, January 6, 2023, <https://www.lrt.lt/pl/wiadomosci/1261/1860417/dlaczego-litewscy-polacy-bardziej-sympatyzuja-rosji-i-bialorusi-niz-miejscowi-rosjanie?fbclid=IwAR0HK8kchNURoynnvqHEy-Z9TWlxoHmBP25pRdEYBPfQC3Z-SkiOwzJ5jB0>.

²¹ Keršanskas, “Deterring disinformation,” 7–8.

This town was mostly inhabited by Polish people, and this decision caused great dissatisfaction of residents and local government authorities. There were a series of protests, which eventually led to the reversal of this decision. However, later it was decided to change the temporary location of the migrants to the training ground in Rūdninkai – there too were protests from the local population, also mostly Polish. Unfortunately, the situation escalated here when the Lithuanian special forces dispersed the protesters using pepper spray and physical force.²²

As for the relations of the Polish minority with Belarus, the historical geographical location of the Vilnius region, which lies on both sides of the border, also plays a key role here. As a consequence, many Poles in Lithuania have family members and relatives in Belarus, and they often went there to visit family graves.²³ Hence, in surveys, the vast majority of Poles in Lithuania perceive Belarus favourably, even in the 2023 survey, they are the only group in Lithuanian society that assessed Belarus more positively than negatively.²⁴ Nevertheless, this does not mean approval of the Lukashenko regime. This can also be evidenced by the solidarity actions organized by the Union of Poles in Lithuania, which supported the

²² “Scuffles break out as activists block road to would-be migrant camp in Lithuania,” *LRT.lt ENGLISH*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1457752/scuffles-break-out-as-activists-block-road-to-would-be-migrant-camp-in-lithuania>.

²³ “Odwiedzanie cmentarzy na Białorusi i Litwie,” *TVP Wilno*, October 31, 2023, <https://wilno.tvp.pl/73808912/odwiedzanie-cmentarzy-na-bialorusi-i-litwie>.

²⁴ Mokrzecka, “Dlaczego litewscy Polacy”.

protesters in Belarus in 2020.²⁵ Despite this, it is difficult to clearly assess the position of the Polish minority in relation to the aforementioned countries. This also results from doubts about the research methodology, which does not divide respondents into variables such as place of residence, education, and financial situation.²⁶ This could allow for a different perception of the results of this type of research.

Situation After 2022: Narrative and Further Prospects

After the Russian military invasion began in February 2022, Lithuanian society consolidated. Lithuania, like other Baltic countries, was among the countries actively supporting the fighting Ukraine. A total of over 90,000 war refugees from Ukraine arrived in Lithuania, and several initiatives were launched to support the Ukrainians who arrived here.²⁷ Such initiatives were also launched by Poles in Lithuania. The Union of Poles in Lithuania initiated the “Vilnius Region for Ukraine” campaign,²⁸ and local governments ruled

²⁵ “«Polacy z Wilna łączą się z Białorusinami». Akcja solidarności w stolicy Litwy,” *niezależna.pl*, August 19, 2020, <https://niezalezna.pl/swiat/polacy-z-wilna-lacza-sie-z-bialorusinami-akcja-solidarnosci-w-stolicy-litwy-zdjecia/347173>.

²⁶ Mokrzecka, “Dlaczego litewscy Polacy”.

²⁷ “Karo pabėgėliai iš Ukrainos – statistika,” Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, accessed November 15, 2024, <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/socialine-integracija/lietuva-ukrainai/karo-pabegeliai-is-ukrainos-statistika/>.

²⁸ “Rusza akcja «Wileńszczyzna — Ukrainie! »,” *Kurier Wileński*, March 1, 2022, <https://kurierwilenski.lt/2022/03/01/rusza-akcja-wilenszczyzna-ukrainie/>.

by EAPL also launched financial relief and material support for the Ukrainians who arrived.²⁹ It is also worth mentioning that Polish – Lithuanian cooperation in the field of helping Ukraine also strengthened, and both countries jointly sought support for it from other Western countries.

Nevertheless, controversies were not avoided at that time. In addition to the intensified fight against the *ruskiy mir* and the decommunization of public space, proposals were made at the government forum to eliminate Russian-language education. In addition to removing Russian as a second foreign language in the country's schools, it was also proposed to get rid of schools with Russian as the language of instruction.³⁰ Such proposals sparked wide-ranging discussions in society, and the Polish minority approached such proposals with concern. Although these proposals concerned only Russian-language schools, the precedent that would result from such a decision could later be used to do the same to Polish-language schools. In the end, however, the proposals to change the school system in the languages of national minorities were not implemented.

During this time, however, a number of positive changes to language rights for minorities occurred. In 2022, the

²⁹ “Wsparcie dla przybyłych Ukraińców: możliwości wsparcia socjalnego i aktualne informacje o stosowanych środkach”, Samorząd rejonu wileńskiego, accessed November 15, 2024, <https://vrsa.lt/pl/mieszkancom/nawosci/154/wsparcie-dla-przybylych-ukraincow-mozliwosci-wsparcia-socjalnego-i-aktualne-informacje-o-stosowanych-srodkach:2922>.

³⁰ “Lithuania’s education minister suggests phasing out Russian schools,” *LRT.lt ENGLISH*, January 5, 2024, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2164235/lithuania-s-education-minister-suggests-phasing-out-russian-schools>.

Lithuanian Seimas adopted the Law on the Spelling of Names and Surnames in Documents, which allowed the use of the letters *w, x, q* in the spelling of names in identity documents.³¹ In November 2024, the Parliament also passed the Law on National Minorities, which, despite criticism due to the lack of detailed provisions regarding the use of minority languages in public spaces, established a definition of a national minority.³² Despite many demands of Poles in Lithuania still being unrealized, a positive trend in the implementation of these issues has been visible recently.

Although in the face of Russia's attack on Ukraine, Lithuanian society perceives the Russian Federation and Belarus in a much more negative light, the influence of Russian propaganda is still visible. Despite this, we can talk about positive changes, especially among the Polish minority, which, as a result of the increased availability of Polish-language media, including those created in Lithuania – *TVP Wilno*, *LRT Wiadomości* – is becoming less susceptible to Russian narratives. This is also the result of Polish – Lithuanian cooperation, within which many cultural and anti-disinformation initiatives have been implemented.

³¹ Bartosz Chmielewski, "Lithuania: a step towards allowing the original spelling of non-Lithuanian surnames," Centre for Eastern Studies, accessed November 16, 2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2022-01-21/lithuania-a-step-towards-allowing-original-spelling-non-lithuanian>.

³² "Lithuania passes national minorities law after 15-year break," *LRT.lt ENGLISH*, November 7, 2024, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2407819/lithuania-passes-national-minorities-law-after-15-year-break>.

Conclusion

The information presented here shows that the Polish minority in Lithuania has been in an ambiguous position regarding the Russian – Ukrainian war since 2014. Historical and social conditions have contributed to certain antagonisms between the Polish minority and Lithuanians. The russification of the Polish community in Soviet times had a significant impact on its susceptibility to Russian propaganda in the times of independent Lithuania. On the one hand, some of the aforementioned behaviours of the leaders of the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania, which spread Lithuanians' distrust of the Polish minority, had a negative impact on the perception of Poles in Lithuania. On the other hand, actions of the Lithuanian authorities towards the Polish minority, such as restrictions on education in Polish language, were also negatively received by Poles in Lithuania. Regardless of this, part of the Polish community and organizations associating Poles in Lithuania supported Ukraine and the Belarusian opposition. Also, the trends visible in recent years may indicate that the situation of the Polish minority will improve, and the postulates expressed by them may be implemented in the near future.

It was therefore possible to present the situation of the Polish minority in the context of the changes in the geopolitical sphere and the threat from Russia that have taken place in recent years, was presented. The causes of the community's susceptibility to Russian propaganda and how the narrative spread by Russia shaped the position of Poles in Lithuania, were depicted. The hypothesis that in the face of the war in Ukraine the position of Poles towards the conflict was not

homogenous, which resulted from the large impact of Russian disinformation on the environment, and that the changing condition of Polish – Lithuanian relations played a significant role here, was proven. Although Russian influence is still visible in the Polish community, it is on the decline and Polish – Lithuanian relations are gaining much greater importance, which may indicate good prospects for Poles in Lithuania.

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Not Only Families with Children – Correlation Between the Dynamic Development of the Independence March and the Rise of Nationalistic Identity in Polish Society. An Analysis Based on the History of the Event and Its Connection to the Polish Right-Wing Political Parties

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Abstract

Every year on 11 November the Independence March passes through the streets of Warsaw. It is held by the far-right circles to commemorate the Polish regaining of independence after World War One. However, it is not only a symbolic event. The Independence March serves various purposes for Polish right-wing politicians and far-right extremists. Since its establishment at the beginning of the last decade, the Independence

March has become the largest annual nationalistic demonstration in Europe. Every year It gathers several dozen or even several hundred thousand participants with right-wing political views. This swift development of the event coincided with the rise of nationalistic attitudes in Polish society. The paper aims to indicate and prove that this rise is at least partially caused by the existence of the Independence March which is used by the right-wing political parties to promote themselves. To prove this, analytical research methods encompassing academic papers, news pieces, statistical data, and historical sources, were used. This analysis indicates the connection between the establishment of the March, the teaming up of the particular far-right milieux, and their entry into mainstream Polish politics in the last dozen or so years. Additionally, the importance of the nationalistic electorate in contemporary Polish politics is emphasized.

Keywords: The Independence March, 11 November, Polish nationalism, Far-right extremism, contemporary Polish politics

Introduction

Although nationalism could be seen as a positive value,¹ history shows that many nationalist movements led to conflicts, multinational antagonisms, and internal instability. In recent years we can observe the rise of nationalist ideas and right-wing political parties' popularity in many liberal democracies in Europe. The consequences of this worldwide phenomenon are yet to be known but for the time being, researchers can investigate the reasons behind this shift to the right in individual cases.

In Poland, this political shift to the right manifested particularly in the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość; PiS) party's accession to power after the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2015, their subsequent wins in 2019 and 2020 and the establishment of the Polish Parliament by far-right, nationalistic Confederation Freedom and Independence (Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość) party, that entered the Parliament in 2019. These events, however, do not exist in a vacuum. All of them represent the broader societal change that occurred in Poland simultaneously with the rapid development of the Independence March (Marsz Niepodległości) held annually on 11 November in Warsaw.

Starting with only a few hundred participants, the March became the biggest regularly held nationalist demonstration

¹ Tetyana Koshmanova, Tetyana Ravchyna, Nationalism as a Positive Value?, In: Kari Kantasalmi, Gunilla Holm (edi.), *The State, Schooling and Identity, Education Dialogues with/in the Global South* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 79.

in Europe. It serves several purposes for the nationalist milieu both in Poland and abroad. The March is “an ideological apparatus and meeting hub for European neo-fascist, nationalist, nationalist-revolutionary, and neo-Nazi activists and supporters.”² It is also an excellent opportunity for promoting and normalising nationalist ideas, recruiting new members to nationalist organisations, and exhibiting the power of the nationalist milieu.

The paper aims to describe the development of the Independence March and prove that its rise in popularity and attendance which occurred since 2010 not only coincided with the rise of nationalism in Polish society but also propelled it by enabling the nationalistic milieu to enter mainstream politics. To prove this, the author uses analytical research methods encompassing academic papers, news pieces, statistical data, and historical sources. Firstly, the history of the National Independence Day celebration is presented. Next, the author provides a description of relatively small nationalist demonstrations that took place before the pivotal year 2010 and official bigger-scale marches that began in the last decade. This is followed by a brief overview of the international connections between the March organisers and the foreign nationalists. Subsequently, the linkage between the popularity of nationalist ideas in Polish society and the development of the Independence March is presented. Next is a brief description of the March as a tool used to gain political support and its

² Przemysław Witkowski, Jakub Woroncow and Dominik Puchała, *The Polish Independence March as a Contact Hub and a Model for European Extremism* (Counter Extremism Project, 2023), 14.

connections to the PiS and Confederation's popularity. Finally, the paper ends with an analysis of the Independence March's influence on Polish society, the political scene, and reality. The author tries to prove that the dualist nature of the event which could be presented either as a dangerous and radical manifestation or as a peaceful event consisting mostly of "patriotic families with children" enables it to shape the Polish political landscape.

History of the Independence March

Most of the Polish historiography strongly emphasises the martyrology of the Polish nation.³ So it does not come as surprise that many public holidays in Poland are related to the martyrdom of the Polish people over the ages. Even National Independence Day celebrated on 11 November is officially honoured gravely, unlike many other countries. National Independence Day held on 11 November was established as a public holiday for the first time in 1937 and was celebrated only twice before the outbreak of the Second World War.⁴ This date was picked primarily as a symbol, since nothing critical regarding Poland's independence happened on 11 Novem-

³ Dominika Sitnicka, "Polacy wycierpieli najwięcej ze wszystkich narodów świata. Tak uważa 74 proc. badanych (Polaków)", OKO.press, July 13, 2019, <https://oko.press/polacy-wycierpieli-najwiecej-ze-wszystkich-narodow-swiata-tak-uwaza-74-proc-badanych-polakow>.

⁴ "Ustawa z dnia 23 kwietnia 1937 r. o Świącie Niepodległości", ISAP, Accessed November 15, 2024, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19370330255>.

ber 1918. Regaining independence was a slow process that started before November 1918 and took a few more years, so picking a specific date marking Poland's independence was a difficult task.⁵ 11 November 1918 is a significant date in Western Europe since the Armistice of Compiègne was signed that day, however, some major Polish cities like Cracow were free of foreign forces since October of that year and fights for independence in some other Polish lands lasted even to 1922.⁶ Nonetheless, it was this date that was chosen as a symbol of the nation's independence, and even if this decision was overturned during the Nazi occupation of Poland and the Polish People's Republic, it was restored in 1989 by the first democratically elected Polish government ruling since the Second World War.⁷

First marches held to commemorate Polish independence were organised in the nineties, but they were attended only by a few hundred people from violent skinhead and nationalistic circles. This situation continued through the 2000s. Those celebrations were participated by members of organisations such as National Rebirth of Poland (Narodowe Odrodzenie Polski; NOP), National Radical Camp (Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny; ONR) and All-Polish Youth (Młodzież Wszechpolska; MW).

⁵ Włodzimierz Borodziej, Maciej Górny and Piotr Tadeusz Kwiatkowski, 11.11.1918. Niepodległość i Pamięć w Europie Środkowej (Kraków: Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, 2018), 104.

⁶ Andrzej Dróżdż, 100 lat obchodów Święta Niepodległości 1918–2018: katalog wystawy (Kraków: Fundacja Centrum Dokumentacji Czynu Niepodległościowego, 2018), 7.

⁷ “Ustawa z dnia 15 lutego 1989 r. o ustanowieniu Narodowego Święta Niepodległości,” ISAP, Accessed 15 November 2024, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=wdu19890060034>.

Usually, they clashed with anarchist or leftist counterdemonstrations and the police. There are some instances of openly fascist or nazi slogans and symbols usage during those demonstrations between 1990 and 2010.⁸

The situation changed after 2010 when the first official Independence March was held. It was organised by joined forces of All-Polish Youth and National Radical Camp.⁹ It was attended by around 2 thousand participants and was faced by a similar-sized leftist counterdemonstration. That year, however, a media spotlight on clashes between police, event participants and counterdemonstrators were larger than before. This spotlight started the rapid growth in the popularity of the event. Some researchers claim that the Smolensk plane crash that happened prior, in April 2010, also helped the March to evolve, because it brought together Polish society in mourning, and as a consequence, it popularised a communal nationalistic way of thinking in society.¹⁰

In 2011, the Independence March attracted around 20 thousand participants (according to organisers). During this gathering, several riots occurred. The March participants

⁸ Grzegorz Szymanik, "Skini, policja i antyfaszyści. Konflikt trwa od lat", *Wyborcza.pl*, November 9, 2012, https://warszawa.wyborcza.pl/warszawa/56,34862,10624511,Skini__policja_i_antyfaszysci__Konflikt_trwa_od_lat.html.

⁹ Paweł Malendowicz, "Marsz Niepodległości, czyli inna Europa jest możliwa", *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska*, sectio K – Politologia 23, no. 2 (2016): 196.

¹⁰ Dariusz Kosiński, Małgorzata Wasion-Czoba, "Pięć lat po katastrofie : mocny podział, bez perspektywy pojednania", *e-teart.pl*, April 9, 2015, <https://e-teatr.pl/prof-kosinski-piec-lat-po-katastrofie-mocny-podzial-bez-perspektywy-pojednania-a195965>.

attacked Colourful Independence (Kolorowa Niepodległa) – a peaceful counter manifestation, that had clashed with the police on a scale larger than ever before, and at the end of the March, nationalists set fire to and burned outside broadcast van belonging to the TVN (liberal TV station).¹¹ Later that year the Independence March Association (Stowarzyszenie Marsz Niepodległości) was officially registered. Since then, the Association has been the main organiser of the Independence March to date. Following that, Independence March became an inherent part of the National Independence Day celebration, and its attendance rose to several dozen or even several hundred thousand people. The March in the right-wing media is presented as a peaceful patriotic demonstration, but clashes with police, speeches by extremist politicians and arson are regular occurrences on 11 November.

In 2012, 25 thousand to 50 thousand people attended the March. The slogan of the event was “Let’s get Poland back” („Odzyskajmy Polskę”). Clashes with the police started after participants walked just a few hundred metres. As a result of those fights, 176 people were arrested¹². Next year, in the 2013 Independence March, the slogan was “A new generation is coming!” („Idzie nowe pokolenie!”). The most memorable incidents during the March were the arson of the art installation “Rainbow,” a nationalist attack on anarchist squat Przychodnia,

¹¹ “Ponad dwa lata więzienia i 1,5 mln zł odszkodowania za spalenie wozu TVN”, *Newsweek.pl*, May 22, 2014, <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/woz-tvn-kara-za-spalenie-samochodu-tvn-newsweekpl/ev234d4>.

¹² Witkowski, Woroncow and Puchała, *The Polish Independence March as a Contact Hub and a Model for European Extremism*, 21.

and a riot that broke out in front of the Russian embassy in Poland¹³. In 2014, the March attracted around 30 thousand participants¹⁴ and went under the slogan “Army of Patriots” („Armia patriotów”). Once again fights between the participants and the police broke out and 276 people were arrested. In 2015, the March slogan was “Poland for Poles, Poles for Poland” („Polska dla Polaków, Polacy dla Polski”). According to police estimates, the event attracted at least 70 thousand people.¹⁵ Some minor incidents took place after the March ended but they were not as spectacular as in previous years.¹⁶

In 2015, significant political change occurred in Poland. Liberal-conservative Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska; PO) which had governed the country since 2007, lost both parliamentary and presidential elections to the right-wing populist PiS party. Many PiS politicians sympathised with the Independence March ideas, so during the PiS administration,

¹³ Sebastian Słowiński, “Marsz Niepodległości: Bitwa pod Empikiem, podpalenia, groźby, pobicia. Sprawdzamy, czy sprawcy zostali ukarani”, *Wyborcza.pl*, November 11, 2024, <https://warszawa.wyborcza.pl/warszawa/7,54420,31444978,marsz-niepodleglosci-historia-podpalen-i-naruszania-prawa.html>.

¹⁴ “Kilkudziesięciu rannych, ponad 270 zatrzymanych”, *TVN24.pl*, November 11, 2024, <https://tvn24.pl/tvnwarszawa/najnowsze/kilkudziesieciu-rannych-ponad-270-zatrzymanych-ls143595>.

¹⁵ “Obchody Święta Niepodległości. Prezydent: źródłem patriotyzmu, jego siłą, jest miłość”, *Polskie Radio 24*, November 11, 2015, <https://polskieradio24.pl/artykul/1543440,Obchody-Swieta-Niepodleglosci-i-Prezydent-zrodlem-patriotyzmu-jego-sila-jest-milosc>.

¹⁶ “Marsz Niepodległości: królowały antyimigranckie hasła, ale obyło się bez poważnych incydentów”, *Polskie Radio 24*, November 11, 2015, <https://polskieradio24.pl/artykul/1543373,Marsz-Niepodleglosci-bez-powaznych-incydentow-ale-z-antyimigranckimi-haslami>.

organisers of the event got large sums of government funding for their operations. In 2016, the March attracted at least 75 thousand people,¹⁷ and went under the slogan “Poland as a stronghold of Europe” („Polska bastionem Europy”). Unlike the previous years, the governing party representatives attended the March and took part in the nationalist celebrations. A letter from Andrzej Duda, president of Poland, was read out loud during the event.¹⁸ Official reports on the scale of the 2017 Independence March fluctuated between 30 thousand and 60 thousand participants.¹⁹ The slogan that year was “We want God” („My chcemy Boga”) and the March ran relatively peacefully compared to the previous years.

The Independence March held in 2018 was a breakthrough for a few reasons. Firstly, the PO mayor of Warsaw Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz attempted to ban the March, but only a few days before 11 November, District Court in Warsaw revoked the mayor’s decision.²⁰ Secondly, the year 2018 was the 100th anniversary of regaining independence by Poland

¹⁷ “Marsz Niepodległości w Warszawie”, Rzeczpospolita.pl, November 11, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20171113003219/http://www.rp.pl/11-listopada/161119806-Marsz-Niepodleglosci-w-Warszawie.html>.

¹⁸ “Marsz Niepodległości: List prezydenta do uczestników”, Dzieje.pl, November 11, 2016, <https://dzieje.pl/aktualnosci/marsz-niepodleglosci-list-prezydenta-do-uczestnikow>.

¹⁹ “Marsz Niepodległości przeszedł ulicami Warszawy. Sprzeczne dane o frekwencji”, RMF24.pl, November 11, 2017, https://www.rmf24.pl/fakty/polska/news-marsz-niepodleglosci-przeszedl-ulicami-warszawy-sprzeczne-da,nId,2463993#crp_state=1.

²⁰ Witkowski, Woroncow and Puchała, The Polish Independence March as a Contact Hub and a Model for European Extremism, 22.

and that year's March was officially co-organised by the Polish government.²¹ Before the official Independence March, PiS organised an accompanying March "For you Poland" („Dla Ciebie Polsko”) during which the president of Poland gave a speech. Thirdly, it was an all-time record in terms of attendance. According to police estimates, about 250 thousand people showed up.²² The official March that year was held under the slogan "God, Honor, Fatherland" („Bóg, Honor, Ojczyzna”), which is the motto of the Polish army. Although this cooperation with the government was profitable for the Independence March Association in the short term, it resulted in internal conflicts and fractures in the organisation in the long run.

The 2019 March was held under the slogan "Keep the nation under your care" („Miej w opiece Naród cały”) – a quote from a Polish Religious song „Z dawna Tyś Królową”. The event attracted around 47 thousand people according to city hall officials or even 150 thousand people according to the organiser reports.²³ That year another breakthrough for the Polish nationalistic milieu happened. The radical, conservative, nationalistically free-market political party, Confederation

²¹ "Oświadczenie w sprawie Marszu z okazji 100. Rocznicy Odzyskania Niepodległości", Chancellery of the Prime Minister, November 7, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190528081319/https://www.premier.gov.pl/wydarzenia/aktualnosci/oswiadczenie-w-sprawie-marszu-z-okazji-100-rocznicy-odzyskania-niepodleglosci.html>.

²² Witkowski, Woroncow and Puchała, The Polish Independence March as a Contact Hub and a Model for European Extremism, 23.

²³ "11 listopada w Warszawie: marsz narodowców „przebiegł w bezpieczny sposób”, TVN24.pl, November 11, 2018, <https://tvn24.pl/tvnwarszawa/ulice/warszawa-swieto-niepodleglosci-2019-relacja-z-obchodow-st1847097>.

Freedom and Independence, entered the Polish Parliament with 11 MPs. Confederation is an “umbrella party” consisting of few distinct political movements like National Movement (Ruch Narodowy; RN), New Hope (Nowa Nadzieja) previously known as Coalition for the Renewal of the Republic of Poland Freedom and Hope (KORWiN), Confederation of the Polish Crown (Konfederacja Korony Polskiej) and Libertarians (Wolnościowcy). All those minor parties have their own identity and niche but only together they can exceed the electoral threshold. National Movement for example is a mainly nationalistic party, New Hope members are nationalistic free-marketers and Confederation of the Polish Crown sympathisers are mainly anti-EU, anti-vaccine, pro-Russian. All those groups, however, are closely related to the Independence March. The National Movement even stemmed from the Independence March Association in 2012²⁴ (and entered the Polish Parliament in 2015 with 5 MPs, before the rest of the parties that comprise the Confederation).²⁵

In 2020, marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, the Independence March was supposed to not be organised due to the COVID restrictions. Gatherings larger than 5 people were banned at the time, therefore March in its usual form was illegal. Because of that it was officially banned a few days before 11 November by the mayor of Warsaw, Rafał

²⁴ Witkowski, Woroncow and Puchała, The Polish Independence March as a Contact Hub and a Model for European Extremism, 19.

²⁵ Szymon Wiśniewski, Posłowie Ruchu Narodowego w Sejmie, RuchNarodowy.net, October 27, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160304212608/http://ruchnarodowy.net/poslowie-ruchu-narodowego-w-sejmie/>.

Trzaskowski.²⁶ However, the Independence March Association found a legal loophole and announced that the March would be held in a motorised form, without walking participants. In reality, many walking participants took part in the event and as a consequence, the March repeatedly clashed with the police. It was one of the most turbulent Independence Marches in history. One of such clashes took place next to the Empik store near the Charles de Gaulle Roundabout and was recorded and posted online. Soon it became a viral meme known as the “Battle of Empik”.²⁷ Furthermore, after that one of the flats near the route of the March was set afire by the hooligan participants trying to throw burning flares at the rainbow flag hanging on a balcony two stories above. Later, Warsaw police press secretary reported that 35 police officers got injured, 36 participants got arrested and 260 people got fined during the event.²⁸

²⁶ Rafał Trzaskowski (@trzaskowski_), “W związku z negatywną opinią Sanepidu, nie wyrażam zgody na organizację #11listopada zgłoszonego Marszu Niepodległości. Opinia inspekcji sanitarnej, o którą również wystąpił wojewoda, wskazuje na trudną sytuację epidemiczną #koronawirus, szczególnie w @warszawa i całym Mazowszu.”, Twitter, November 6, 2020, https://x.com/trzaskowski_/status/1324644783931990016?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1324644783931990016%7Ctwgr%5E350b6e4e9fe90f834b3b021b2fabd51dc99203e4%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Ftn24.pl%2Ftnwarszawa%2Fnajnowsze%2Fmarsz-niepodleglosci-2020-rafal-trzaskowski-nie-wyrazil-zgody-na-organizacje-marszu-11-listopada-w-warszawie-st4743801.

²⁷ “Bitwa pod Empikiem. Przypominamy, jak wyglądało to dramatyczne wydarzenie”, Wirtualna Polska, November 10, 2021, <https://video.wp.pl/bitwa-pod-empikiem-przypominamy-jak-wygladalo-to-dramatyczne-wydarzenie-6703340650182273v>.

²⁸ “35 policjantów rannych podczas Marszu Niepodległości”, PAP.pl, November 12, 2020, pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C755002%2C35-policjantow-rannych-podczas-marszu-niepodleglosci.html.

The 2021, March was held in the usual form, without any covid restrictions. It was much more orderly than the year before. According to the organisers, 100 thousand to 150 thousand people took part in the event. The official slogan was “Independence not for sale” („Niepodległość nie na sprzedaż”).²⁹ In the following year, 2022, the March gathered 100 thousand participants according to the organisers’ claims.³⁰ Celebrations went relatively peacefully but contrary to previous editions, disagreements in the Independence March Association became visible on the March itself. In October, Robert Bąkiewicz, chairman of the Independence March Association (who got removed from this position just a few months later) connected to PiS, announced that the official slogan of the March was “Strong Nation, Great Poland” („Silny Naród, Wielka Polska”). However, a few days earlier the Warsaw division of All-Polish Youth, associated with some Confederation politicians, announced that their official slogan during the March is “Poland is a Nation State” („Polska Państwem Narodowym”). Both in 2021 and 2022, many right-wing PiS politicians such as Patryk Jaki, Janusz Kowalski, Antoni Macierewicz, and Zbigniew Ziobro attended the March.³¹

²⁹ “Ile osób przyszło na Marsz Niepodległości? Są sprzeczne dane. Ratusz nie liczy, rzecznik PiS odpowiada memem”, Wprost.pl, November 11, 2021, [wprost.pl/kraj/10542383/ile-osob-przyszlo-na-marsz-niepodleglosci-sprzeczne-dane-o-frekwencji.html](https://www.wprost.pl/kraj/10542383/ile-osob-przyszlo-na-marsz-niepodleglosci-sprzeczne-dane-o-frekwencji.html).

³⁰ “Marsz Niepodległości 2022. W tym roku mniej uczestników”, Radio Plus, November 14, 2022, <https://www.radioplus.pl/wiadomosci/marsz-niepodleglosci-2022-w-tym-roku-mniej-uczestnikow-aa-Aegv-a861-fEjn.html>.

³¹ Urszula Ziemska, “Marsz Niepodległości 2021. Uroczystość była państwowa, ale polityków PiS przyszła garstka”, Gazeta.pl,

On the 15th of October 2023, PiS lost the elections for the first time since 2015, however new, more liberal, government was not formed until 13 December.³² During this in-between period, the Independence March was held. Despite the government change, the event went relatively peacefully and gathered around 40 thousand people according to the mayor of Warsaw.³³ That year's slogan was "Poland Is Not Yet Lost" („Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła”) which is the first verse of the Polish national anthem. PiS politicians did not participate in the Independence March that year, since the party organised its own Polish Independence celebration a day earlier, during the Smolensk monthly anniversary (monthly commemoration of the Smolensk plane crash held by most prominent PiS politicians since 10 April 2010).

The Independence March held in 2024, also proceeded without major incidents. It gathered around 90 thousand people, according to the mayor's office reports, and even 250 thousand participants, according to organisers.³⁴ It went un-

November 11, 2021, <https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,114884,27796088,marsz-niepodleglosci-2021-ktorzy-politycy-wzieli-udzial-w-przemarszu.html>.

³² Patryk Rutkowski, "Stało się. Andrzej Duda powołał premiera Donalda Tuska i jego Radę Ministrów", *Gazeta.pl*, December 13, 2023, <https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,114884,30501552,zaprzysiezenie-nowego-rzadu-andrzej-duda-powolal-premiera-donald.html>.

³³ "Frekwencja na Marszu Niepodległości. Policzyliśmy, ile mogło być osób", *Onet.pl*, November 11, 2023, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/frekwencja-na-marszu-niepodleglosci-policzyalismy-ile-moglo-byc-osob/1t74lzx>.

³⁴ "Komuś dwoi się w oczach. „Organizatorzy marszu zawsze podają więcej”", *TVP.info*, November 12, 2024, <https://www.tvp>.

der the slogan “The Power of Great Poland is Us” („Wielkie Polski moc to my”), which is a quote from “Hymn Młodych”, the interwar period’s song that became a symbol of the nationalistic National Democracy movement. That year many prominent PiS politicians sitting in Polish and European Parliaments attended the March. Among them was the leader of the PiS party, Jarosław Kaczyński, who attended the March for the first time. According to political sciences experts, Kaczyński did that to attract more nationalist voters in next year’s presidential election.³⁵ Additionally, in 2024, as well as in recent years, members of the Confederation of the Polish Crown attended the March with anti-Ukrainian statements and banners. This year, however, they were booed and verbally abused by the ONR members.

The Independence March as a hub for far-right extremists from different countries

According to researchers from the Counter Extremism Project, foreign right-wing radicals started appearing at the Independence March as early as 2011.³⁶ Since then until today,

info/83440594/marsz-niepodleglosci-2024-w-warszawie-ilu-ludzi-w-nim-uczestniczylo-miasto-podaje-ze-90-tys-narodowcy-ze-250-tys.

³⁵ “Jak obecność PiS na Marszu Niepodległości wpłynie na wybory prezydenckie? Politolog odpowiada” PAP.pl, November 14, 2024, <https://pap.pl/aktualnosci/jak-obecnosc-pis-na-marszu-niepodleglosci-wplynie-na-wybory-prezydenckie-politolog>.

³⁶ Witkowski, Woroncow and Puchała, The Polish Independence March as a Contact Hub and a Model for European Extremism, 43.

individual groups that co-organise the March invite guests from different far-right milieus. In the last 13 years people from extremist, nationalistic, fascist, or even neo-nazi groups, from all over Europe, attended the Independence March. Those represented organisations include but are not limited to the Ukrainian “Azov” Regiment, Jobbik from Hungary, Forza Nuova from Italy, or Ľudová strana – Naše Slovensko from Slovakia. According to CEP researchers, “During the more than 10 years since its inception, the Independence March has developed into a pan-European festival of right-wing extremism and the largest public nationalist event not only in Europe but globally.”³⁷ This internationalisation enabled the organisers of the Independence March to establish political contacts all over Europe which allowed those foreign actors to influence the Polish political scene and vice versa.

The connection between the Independence March and the rise of a nationalist identity in Poland

The Independence March serves another purpose for nationalists in Polish society. It is a hub unifying and gathering people from different far-right circles in one place and under one banner. It is an excellent PR stunt and a show of the power of the nationalistic milieu. Even if conflicts between the different groups comprising the March are inevitable, in the overall image it is a cohesive political force.

³⁷ Witkowski, Woroncow and Puchała, *The Polish Independence March as a Contact Hub and a Model for European Extremism*, 55.

The considerable popularity of the Independence March allowed far-right activists and politicians to introduce their agenda into the mainstream public debate. They normalised extremist slogans by using them or appearing next to them at the same event. And even if they usually have to tone down their rhetoric while they appear in mainstream media, they still can use dog-whistle tactics to get through to their desired audience.

Thanks to this entry into the mainstream, presently, the Independence March is an inherent part of the 11 November celebrations. The case of the 2020 March which took place despite the ban and COVID restrictions proved this. Violent supporters of the March can even go as far as fighting and trying to injure the police officers to ensure that the March will go forward.

Nonetheless, the Independence March does not consist only of violent hooligans. There is another side of the coin and statements that the Independence March is simply a peaceful demonstration consisting mainly of “families with children”.³⁸ Indeed, even some left-wing media outlets agree that violent hooligans are the loud minority during the recent Independence Marches. The majority of the participants consist of “normal” people.³⁹ However, many of those people externalise their nationalistic political views and join chant like “Death to the

³⁸ Tomasz Sakiewicz (@TomaszSakiewicz), “Rodziny z dziećmi tłumnie przybyły na Marsz Niepodległości”, Twitter, November 11, 2024, <https://x.com/TomaszSakiewicz/status/1856005606848471091>.

³⁹ Dominika Sitnicka, Witold Głowacki, “Na Marszu Niepodległości rodziny z dziećmi pięknie śpiewały: „Znajdzie się kij”, [WIDZIMY TO TAK]” OKO.press, November 12, 2024, <https://oko.press/na-marszu-niepodleglosci-rodziny-z-dziecmi-pieknie-spiewaly-znajdzie-sie-kij-widze-to-tak>.

Enemies of the Fatherland” („Śmierć wrogom ojczyzny”), “Poland for Poles” („Polska dla Polaków”), “Deport all Ukrainians” („Deportować wszystkich Ukraińców”) or “Faggoting prohibited” („Zakaz pedałowania”). Some participants are even surprised by this dominance of vulgar slogans and their prevalence over patriotic ones.⁴⁰

As a result, this more casual profile of the average participant makes it possible for the Independence March to become an occasion for promoting a nationalistic identity and normalising it. It is an opportunity to recruit new members to far-right organisations but also to just win over an average Pole’s sympathy and enter the mainstream. Many March participants do not care or mind the aggressive, homophobic, or racist slogans. They are attending the event to express their patriotic feelings communally,⁴¹ thus legitimising the March itself by collaborating with more violent participants.

⁴⁰ Maciej Nowakowski, Jakub Chełmiński, “Święto Niepodległości w Warszawie. Narodowcy przeszli przez stolicę, ale nie tylko oni świętowali 11 listopada [Tak RELACJONOWALIŚMY]”, *Wyborcza.pl*, November 11, 2024, https://warszawa.wyborcza.pl/warszawa/14,54420,31454772,swieto-niepodleglosci-w-warszawie-narodowcy-ida-przez.html?_ga=2.205787731.111732043.1731341516-2052048380.1728816587#S.MT-K.C-B.1-L.1.duzy.

⁴¹ Jakub Krzywiecki, “Dwa oblicza Marszu Niepodległości. Nie ma żadnej alternatywy”, *Interia.pl*, November 11, 2024, <https://wydarzenia.interia.pl/kraj/news-dwa-oblicza-marszu-niepodleglosci-nie-ma-zadnej-alternatywy,nId,7853526>.

The Independence March and the Mainstream Polish Political Scene

The Independence March enables many radical and far-right politicians to promote themselves and their organisations. The Independence March sympathisers are a relatively important part of the Polish electorate, consequently, the two biggest Polish right-wing parties, PiS and Confederation, are constantly competing for the vote of this group.

As mentioned earlier, representatives from various nationalistic organisations, associations, and informal groups got together at the beginning of the last decade and formed the Independence March Association. This organisation served as a ground for establishing the National Movement, whose politicians nowadays sit in the Polish Parliament as a part of the Confederation. Krzysztof Bosak, one of the former organisers of the Independence March, ran for the office of the president of Poland on behalf of the Confederation party in 2020 receiving 6,78% of the votes in the first round.⁴² In 2023, Confederation got 7,16% of the votes in the parliamentary election,⁴³ and Bosak even became a Vice-Marshal of the Sejm (Polish parliament).⁴⁴ His political career is an excellent

⁴² “First round voting results”, National Electoral Commission, Accessed November 15, 2024, <https://prezydent20200628.pkw.gov.pl/prezydent20200628/en/wyniki/1/pl>.

⁴³ “Results of voting in 2023 elections for Sejm”, National Electoral Commission, Accessed November 15, 2024, <https://sejmsenat2023.pkw.gov.pl/sejmsenat2023/en/sejm/wynik/pl>.

⁴⁴ “Krzysztof Bosak”, Sejm.gov, Accessed November 15, 2024, <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm10.nsf/posel.xsp?id=033>.

example of how the registration of the Independence March in 2011 enabled many extremist activists and politicians to gain mainstream recognition and eventually achieve major political successes.

The Confederation is not the only party that tries to profit from the popularity of the Independence March though. The largest right-wing party in Poland, PiS, allocated large sums of money to organise the Independence March (In 2023 it was about 11,4 million zlotys).⁴⁵ The 2018 edition of the March was even co-organised by the PiS, as mentioned in the second part of this paper. However, those connections to the party ruling between 2015 and 2023 led to some conflicts between the March organisers. Although PiS is the biggest right-wing party in Poland, many of its politics are controversial for more free-market-oriented or anti-Ukrainian nationalists. So, it shouldn't come as a surprise that those connections to the ruling party caused conflicts in the Independence March Association. As a result of those conflicts, in 2023, Robert Bąkiewicz, chairman of the Independence March Association was removed from his position. Later that year Bąkiewicz ran in a parliamentary election from the PiS list but did not get enough votes to enter the Polish parliament⁴⁶. So, linkage to the Independence March is not enough to win over the PiS voter.

⁴⁵ Aleksandra Krzysztozek, "Marsz Niepodległości: W czym tkwi jego europejski fenomen?", Euractiv.pl, May 1, 2023, <https://www.euractiv.pl/section/polityka-wewnetrzna-ue/news/marsz-niepodleglosci-w-czym-tkwi-jego-europejski-fenomen/>.

⁴⁶ "Results of voting for BĄKIEWICZ Robert", National Electoral Commission, Accessed November 15, 2024, <https://sejmsenat2023.pkw.gov.pl/sejmsenat2023/en/sejm/kandydat/29625/17/2745233>.

However, in 2024, prominent PiS politicians again attended the Independence March.⁴⁷ This is due to the upcoming presidential election in 2025. No matter if this decision will affect next year's election or not, this proves that the nationalistic milieu matters in Polish politics, and it is worth it for right-wing parties to compete for nationalist votes. Although the nationalist electorate voting for the National Movement corresponds only to about 2 percent of voting Polish citizens, the Independence March attendees and sympathisers are a broader target that may be crucial to winning the 2025 presidential election, since the last election result was determined by a 1 percent difference between the candidates in the second round.⁴⁸

Conclusions

In the first section of the paper, the author provided the reader with a history of the Polish Independence celebration and a more extensive description of the history of the Independence March and its swift development. Then, recounted the course of events, the slogan, and the estimated attendance for every Independence March since 2010.

⁴⁷ "Jarosław Kaczyński i kilkudziesięciu polityków PiS dołączyło do marszu w Warszawie", TVN24.pl, November 11, 2024, <https://tvn24.pl/polska/jaroslaw-kaczynski-i-kilkudziesieciu-politykow-pis-na-marszu-niepodleglosci-w-warszawie-st8175099>.

⁴⁸ "Presidential Election The Republic of Poland 2020", National Electoral Commission, Accessed November 15, 2024, <https://prezydent20200628.pkw.gov.pl/prezydent20200628/en>.

This analysis illustrates how quickly it changed from a marginal event that was attended only by a few hundred people into the biggest nationalistic demonstration in Europe. This evolution coincided with the bigger change in Polish society and the renaissance of nationalist thought. One could even argue that the existence of the March alone paved the way for this change in how nationalism is perceived. The Independence March defined contemporary Polish nationalism.

Presently, the Independence March is an inherent way of commemorating Polish Independence and celebrating 11 November for many Polish citizens. Its establishment after 2010 consolidated the Polish far-right milieu and served as a base for creating organisations such as the National Movement or the Confederation. In other words, if not for the Independence March and Independence March Association establishment, which consolidated the Polish nationalists, there could be no far-right party in the Polish Parliament, since individually none of the far-right parties can exceed the electoral threshold on its own. Even today, with all the conflicts inside the organisation, the Independence March serves as a show of power and a PR stunt of the nationalistic milieu in Poland.

Additionally, the Independence March is known internationally, and it serves as a meeting hub for extremists from all over Europe. Many representatives of foreign far-right organisations attended the March at least once in the last 13 years. The organisation of the March is also an excellent reason to gather funds by far-right circles. It also enabled the far-right activists to get public funds from the PiS government.

However, since its beginning, the Independence March participant profile changed. Many of the people who go to the

demonstration are not violent hooligans, but average middle-class people, senior citizens, or even families with children. Their participation normalises the March and understates the nationalistic violence, homophobia, or racism that are expressed every year during the event. Polish government involvement in the event organisation, change in the profile of the average participant, consistency of the riots to which we are used as a society, normalised the extremist part of the Independence March. And even if the peak of the March popularity occurred 6 years ago, in 2018,⁴⁹ the change that it caused will stay with us for a longer time.

Today, extremist nationalist parties are a part of the Polish mainstream. Conservative PiS party that governed Poland between 2015 and 2023 supported the March both ideologically and financially. The Confederation, the most extremist mainstream political force in Poland, even partially stemmed from the Independence March Association. Nationalists are a significant part of the Polish electorate, and those two parties are nowadays in a constant struggle for the votes of those voters. This struggle manifests itself every year on 11 November when representatives attend the March and promote it on their social media profiles. In 2025, once more, we will see the result of this competition during the presidential election, in which the nationalistic votes and mobilisation of the electorate could determine the outcome of the election.

⁴⁹ This could be confirmed by, for example, Google Trends data that shows that the 2018 rise of interest in the term “Marsz Niepodległości” is still unmatched today.

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Central – European Politicians and Their Negative Attitude Towards European Union Symbols

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Abstract

European Union symbols: the twelve-star flag, Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, Europe Day celebrated on 9th May and motto 'United in diversity' are well known and recognized across Europe. Moreover, people in EU countries started to identify themselves with them, or at least view these in a positive way, to the point when the use of these symbols became common in public sphere.

Nevertheless, this phenomenon also has another side. Widespread usage of the EU symbols met some opponents, who did not hesitate to take highly controversial actions against them. In the perspective of Central – European politics, the most famous – or infamous – because of their acts became three Eurosceptic politicians, from three different countries: Viktor Orbán, Václav Klaus and Grzegorz Braun.

This study will focus on their specific acts and decisions held by these politicians in the symbolic sphere, with the aim to demonstrate their opposition against the idea of European Integration, European Union policies and promote Eurosceptic political stance in the process.

Keywords: Euroscepticism, EU symbols, Central – European politics, Václav Klaus, Viktor Orban, Grzegorz Braun

Introduction

Symbols defined as objects or signs used for representing certain ideas, organisations, groups or generally other things,¹ are an important part of our life. As animal symbolicus,² we make them all the time and consequently encounter them everywhere. They affect us both subconsciously and consciously, being present as the material embodiments of them on the example of national flags or coats of arms and in the immaterial sphere as anthems, mottos, and myths. Some of the symbols are considered problematic and forbidden from usage, while others become used during protests and manifestations against oppression. However, it is not the symbols themselves but the social aspect of our relationship with them – understood as forming an opinion about them – should be examined to get

¹ “Symbol,” Dictionary Cambridge, accessed November 2, 2024, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/symbol>.

² Katarzyna Wróbel. “Symbol jako narzędzie współczesnej polityki w aspekcie propagandy politycznej”, *Acta Scientifica Academiae Ostroviensis* no. 20, (2005): 6.

a broader view on the political actions. The opinion one holds might be the effect of misunderstanding the meaning behind symbols, personal prejudices and the political or ideological hostility towards the values which certain symbols represent.

In this regard, interesting cases for studying the relationship between symbols and politics include political acts taken against symbols by Václav Klaus, Viktor Obran and Grzegorz Braun – politicians from Central and Eastern European countries: Czechia, Hungary and Poland, who share similar views and a narrative corresponding to the right-wing populism.³ Chosen examples show two important problems. Primarily, these actions are common and have their capability of causing controversy not only when they are done by politicians holding high position – President, Prime Minister, Minister – or person known internationally, but also when the one responsible for it is generally unrecognized, holds position of ordinary party chairman of a small party or is political activists outside of party. Secondly, selected cases illustrate that presented phenomenon occurs in at least three countries of the Visegrad group.

Why and how do these politicians demonstrate their hostility toward European Union structures and reforms, by actions such as taking out the EU flag from the building, in which elections to the European Parliament are held? Why do they at the governmental level refuse to represent symbols of organisation, which their country is part of? What do the

³ Ruth Wodak, Michal Krzyżanowski, “Right-wing populism in Europe & USA: Contesting politics & discourse beyond ‘Orbanism’ and ‘Trumpism’”, *Journal of Language and Politics* no. 16, (2017), 5–6.

EU symbols represent? How did the EU flag become a symbol used by and associated with pro-democratic opposition against their controversial decisions in politics? All of these are important questions that arise in the topic of current-day political usage of symbols by or against the Eurosceptic politicians that will be examined in this research.

Reasons for political usage of symbols

Before proceeding to the examination of the phenomenon of relation between symbols and politicians, it is necessary to clearly describe symbols' position and role they play in politics. Regardless of usage, context and form of symbols, affective connotation is their integral part. They are supposed to trigger emotional reactions, be thought-provoking and sometimes even encourage certain actions.⁴ This phenomenon makes them a viable tool to be used in the political sphere. Besides propaganda, nation and identity building, identifying one group from another or just including them in speeches during party rallies, symbols play a key role here, given the example of the 19th century nation-building processes.⁵ Nowadays almost every political party and organisation uses them, and it is debatable whenever modern politics can exist without them, which phenomenon is clearly visible on the example

⁴ Albrecht Sonntag, "Political Symbols, Citizenship and Communication", presented at the UACES European Citizenship Closing Conference, London, (2010): 5.

⁵ Ibidem, 6–9.

of national symbols. Usage of national symbols, being clear manifestation of political power and nationalism, became common to the level, where it is constantly overlooked.⁶

The European Union is not an exception from this. Famous twelve-star flag, Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, Europe Day celebrated on 9th May and motto 'United in diversity' ideally match the conception of political symbol usage. These well-known symbols could be described as instruments, manifestation of power, and generally positively connotated creation with aim to appeal to and influence defined group – Europeans – and manifests the culture of continent. And furthermore, they play a key role in the process of identity creation i.e. in terms of the collective identity idea of European, Europeanness and European Patriotism, which often refers to The European Symbols is present.⁷ In addition to that, there is no such thing as a European Constitution – in which things such as coat of arms or anthem would be clearly listed – and efforts to create a document of this rank failed. Previously mentioned symbols, the EU flag and Ode to the Joy especially, somehow mimic that conception of state defined official canon of symbols and with their popularity, recognition, and emotional attachment they could play this role ideally. In 2004, 92% of surveyed recognized these symbols and 82% of them answered that they are good for representing Europe.⁸ However, currently they cannot really replace national symbols and it

⁶ Michael Billing, "Banal Nationalism", (1995), 8–9.

⁷ Katarzyna Wróbel, "Symbol jako narzędzie współczesnej polityki w aspekcie propagandy politycznej", 7–11.

⁸ Albrecht Sonntag, "Political Symbols, Citizenship and Communication", 5.

is subject of ongoing debate if they are, should be or will be treated with the same rank as them.⁹ There is an opinion that the EU suffers from the emotional deficit, and emotionalization of politics is complicated, being an national element, which is hard to implement on the organisation level.¹⁰ Status of the EU symbols in member countries, where they coexist with the national pantheon in the political sphere differ from country to country and is generally heterogenous, depending on various things, from the ruling party and social attitude, political culture, awareness to the severity of propaganda of certain values, which are considered important – and in the matter of their promotion and enforcing symbolic violence,¹¹ state itself has a major influence as monopolist.

Although symbols or even constructed identities are useful in politics, it is necessary to emphasize that, in Western countries, in the majority of cases they are not the reason for major political decisions. Background of the most important national decisions such as membership in international organisations is more complex and determined by the factors like economic development, security, and other possible benefits of international cooperation. However, this situation could raise questions about the real usefulness of symbols, which would help us with understanding why politicians take

⁹ Katarzyna Wróbel.”Symbol jako narzędzie współczesnej polityki w aspekcie propagandy politycznej”, 11.

¹⁰ Albrecht Sonntag, “Political Symbols, Citizenship and Communication”, 12–13.

¹¹ “Pierre Bourdieu’s Concept of Symbolic Violence” Philo-Notes, accessed November 4, 2024, <https://philonotes.com/2023/06/pierre-bourdieu-s-concept-of-symbolic-violence>.

actions against them. If symbols cannot influence major decisions, why should we pay attention to them? Can the view of symbols' usefulness be defended? Even though they alone are not influential on the macro scale, they still can be part of the major processes, but should be analysed and used as tools, transmitters of values, manifestation of political change and general attitudes. Symbols in this context were used during the Euromaidan protests in 2014, and in the recent past during the ones, which took place in Georgia.¹² During these protests use of the European Union flag was in general a manifestation of opposition against the pro-Russian government and in the case of at least some percent of protesters, probably also a demonstration of support for the European values. However, symbols are just symbols, manifestations of certain values do not always come with their implementation and most importantly, there is a problem with the values defining. What do protesters mean when they use the EU flag? To which values exactly are they referring? Is there only one correct canon and way of interpretation, and if the majority of them knows it or agrees with it? In conclusion, while symbols might be useful, their significance should not be exaggerated, and their interpretation is not homogenous.

¹² Serhyi Kvit, "The Ideology of the Euromaidan", *Social, Health, and Communication Studies Journal* (2014), 29.

Problem of Interpretation of Symbols. The Case of European Union Flag

Regarding the representative role of symbols, relation between them and politics, and the issue of their different interpretations it can be investigated that the EU Symbols themselves also experience this phenomenon, which results in the different approaches and attitudes to them. The European Union flag, consisting of 12 golden stars placed on the blue background, officially stand for the solidarity and unity.¹³ Nevertheless, even with the most recognizable and well rooted in social awareness symbol is subject to different interpretations and analyses. Does the blue as a background, combined with stars colour represents sky and the universe? In the European culture across history, blue was associated with virtues and was also considered symbol of aristocratic blood, in psychological interpretation this symbol was related to restraining emotions, being reversed, and in religious interpretation it was connected with sacrum sphere.¹⁴ The situation is similar with the 12 golden stars and even with the fact that they form a circle. Not only the stars themselves but also chosen number and combination of both these elements, can be interpreted in biblical way – Arsene Heitz, one of the flag project authors, admitted

¹³ “Principles countries history, symbols”, European-Union, accessed November 8, 2024, https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/symbols/european-flag_en.

¹⁴ Aleksandra Nowakowska, „Komunikacja symboliczna poprzez flagę europejską a budowanie międzykulturowej wspólnoty”, In: *Europejski Rok Dialogu Międzykulturowego*, edited by: Cz. Maja, K. Marchlewska, Bydgoszcz (2008), 17–19.

himself that he was inspired by Mariological themes – but reference to the Greek mythology, The Twelve Roman Tables and even Dante's Divine Comedy can be found.¹⁵

Not only the European Union flag, but also the other symbols are subject of different approaches and interpretations, which could have both positive and negative consequences. This situation means that more people could refer to them, find references to their beliefs and in the process become less hostile towards the symbol. On the other side, when a symbol can be interpreted in different ways, not only the list of promises it offers – and dissatisfaction as a result of their non-fulfilment – becomes undefined, but also the symbol might be misunderstood, as intention behind its creation was different. Moreover, for some people it could probably be more difficult to identify themselves with non-strictly defined, open set of values and they can even be discontented with the flexibility of interpretation itself. As the EU symbols are non-heterogeneous, it is not surprising, that attitudes towards them are different. However, while this could explain the differences in the attitudes toward symbols based on the freedom of interpretation and symbol misunderstanding, it does not answer the question of the attitudes, whose sources are ideological beliefs and political plans. These cases should be considered separately.

¹⁵ Ibidem, 19–22.

Viktor Orbán. Solidarity with Szeklers, not with EU

First, and probably one of the most important examples of attitudes towards the EU symbols, because of its actuality, is the case of Viktor Orbán's Euroscepticism. At its current extent, manifested by acts and words, it is not only sceptical about some EU policies, but generally holds anti-EU beliefs. Viktor Orbán, being leader of the anti-EU, nationalist-oriented party FIDESZ and continuously Prime Minister of Hungary since 2010 (previously holding the office from 1998 to 2002), is one of the key figures among European Eurosceptics. Despite the fact that Hungary is one of the beneficiary countries of EU funds, Orbán not only blames Brussels for their control over EU funds spending and other reasons, but also blocks EU resolutions.¹⁶ Furthermore, his leadership is marked by undermining migration agreements, reinterpreting rules, taking over public space and institutions with arbitrary appointments to positions,¹⁷ opposing Hungary's participation in the Prosecutor Office, "reorganizing" the political system,¹⁸ and

¹⁶ András Inotai, „Hungary: Euroscepticism and Nationalism” *In Euroscepticism and the Future of Europe. Views from the Capitals*, edited by Michael Kaeding, Johannes Pollak, and Paul Schmidt (2020), 59–61, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-41272-2>.

¹⁷ “Vigorous Flagging in the Heart of Europe: The Hungarian Homeland under the Right-Wing Regime”, e-flux journal, accessed 13 November, 2024, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/57/60438/vigorous-flagging-in-the-heart-of-europe-the-hungarian-homeland-under-the-right-wing-regime/>.

¹⁸ Scheppele, Kim Lane. “How Viktor Orbán Wins.” *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 3, (2022): 55–56 <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0039>.

most importantly, binding ties with Russia and Turkey.¹⁹ Worrisomely, Orban's political orientation and narrative did not change after Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. His threats and actions such as violating EU law as part of electoral tactic and blocking weapon transit through Hungary only showed that he intends to continue with line of undermining European Union projects, just to fulfil his own short-sighted interest.²⁰

However, Viktor Orban's political stance is not only manifested by his decisions and efforts to cause disruption, but also through the symbolic sphere. In Orban's Hungary, memory politics involve propagating the memory of the treaty of Trianon in the form of monuments, speeches and events, sometimes of nationalist character and full of historical revisionism.²¹ However, commemorating the treaty itself is not as important as the political usage and construction of the narrative around this historical event, with the clear purpose of supporting the current Prime Minister's claims and FIDESZ goals. While the narrative created around Trianon is not homogenous, it consists of multiple layers and sides used depending, whenever it is addressed to Hungarians and the "domestic front" or to foreign diplomats and international public.²² On the one hand,

¹⁹ Inotai, „Hungary: Euroscepticism and Nationalism” , 60–61.

²⁰ Scheppele, Kim Lane. “How Viktor Orbán Wins.”, 48–49.

²¹ “Narratives of the Trianon trauma”, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, accessed 15 November, 2024, <https://cz.boell.org/en/2021/01/15/narratives-trianon-trauma>.

²² “Democracy Digest: The Two Faces of Hungary’s “Trianon Tragedy””, Balkaninsight, accessed 13 November, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/02/21/democracy-digest-the-two-faces-of-hungarys-trianon-tragedy/>.

there are beliefs that Trianon was the worst day in history of the Hungary and the memory of the unjust treaty should be remembered. On the other hand, a conciliatory narration of cooperation and looking into the future is presented abroad. The second narration at the first glance looks promising, but it should be closely monitored, because behind the promises there is the problem of Szeklers autonomy and Hungarian influence in the Transylvania region.

Szeklers, who are a Hungarian minority living in Romania, are the subject of a profound debate in Hungarian politics, since their case is complicated and connected not only to the topic of Trianon, loss of land and perspective of autonomy, but also to the Ceausescu regime, Romanianization and their own tradition cultivation. However, does it explain very symbolic act of the replacement of the European Union flag with the Szeklers flag on the Parliament Building? There are two connected aspects that could explain this action: the importance of Szeklers votes in elections and Orbán's attitude towards the EU. Szeklers, as a part of the "near-abroad", are a constant element of the Prime Minister's electoral strategy. In the previous elections, a majority of them voted for FIDESZ, a trend which was present since Orbán gave them citizenship rights in 2011 and voting rights in 2012 and in 2022 to ensure his victory and mobilize the electorate from Transylvania, launched a propaganda campaign with the aim of accusing joint opposition of revoking the citizenship plan.²³

²³ "A Tale of Two Diasporas: The Battle for Hungarian Voters Abroad", Radio Free Europe, accessed 13 November 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/hungary-election-diaspora-orban-marki-zay/31712662.html>.

In fact, for Orbán, the position of Szekelers and appealing to them is more important than manifesting solidarity with the EU. In the huge part of Szekelers, Orbán has a useful group of supporters vulnerable to nationalistic propaganda, which he can represent. On the contrary, the European Union for Orbán is a problematic partner, which wants to control him and stands in opposition to his controversial politics and voting practices such as promoting gerrymandering and voter tourism.²⁴ The European Union flag has no positive connotation for Orbán, who views the European values as endangered by the organisation. Although he does not intend to leave the EU, he still presents it as dangerous and ignorant, calling it “abusive father” in his speeches.²⁵ Consequently, the Prime Minister’s symbol choice is clear: he prefers and prioritise the Szekelers flag, which could be interpreted as sort of national struggle and solidarity. On the other hand, the European flag, which as a symbol was not important for the Prime Minister, was often used by the people who protested his autocratic tendencies and violations of the rule of law during demonstrations.

²⁴ Scheppele, Kim Lane. “How Viktor Orbán Wins.”, 52–56.

²⁵ Hayes Kennedy, Catherine May. „Speaking Like a Eurosceptic: The Rhetoric and Metaphors Undermining the EU”, DePaul University, (2020): 12.

Václav Klaus. The European Flag over the Castle

Václav Klaus, the Czech Republic's president from 2003 to 2013, despite the fact that he officially retired, is still considered another key figure of Euroscepticism in Central Europe, who keeps writing about politics and is still present in the Czech academic discourse. The retired president not only comments on subjects from the COVID-2019 pandemic, the war in Ukraine to the Czech presidential elections of 2023,²⁶ but also visits foreign universities such as the controversial in Poland University of Business and Applied Sciences 'Varsovia', previously known as Collegium Humanum (currently a subject of ongoing investigation with criminal activity allegations)²⁷ – where Václav Klaus was appointed an Honorary Professor.²⁸ Furthermore, Václav Klaus participates in very symbolic private meetings with figures who are controversial across the whole European scene, among whom were Eurosceptic or generally right-wing politicians, such as the

²⁶ See: Václav Klaus, Jiří Weigl, and Institut Václava Klause. „Válka na Ukrajině: předběžná zpráva”, Institut Václava Klause (2022), Václav Klaus, et al. „Česká společnost pod tíhou přímé volby: prezidentské volby 2023 očima Institutu Václava Klause”. *Institut Václava Klause* (2023), etc.

²⁷ Collegium Humanum scandal – further detainees, Central Anti-Corruption-Bureau of Poland, accessed 15 November 2024, <https://cba.gov.pl/en/news/1095,Collegium-Humanum-scandal-further-detainees.html>.

²⁸ President Václav Klaus appointed Honorary Professor of Uczelnia Biznesu i Nauk Stosowanych „Varsovia”, accessed 15 November 2024, <https://varsovia.study/en/president-vaclav-klaus-appointed-honorary-professor-of-collegium-humanum/>.

previously described Viktor Orban, former President of the Czech Republic Miloš Zeman, President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić, and President of Poland Andrzej Duda, who got an invitation and decided to meet with these politicians – among which some, such as also present Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, are representing a pro-Russian stance – taking action against Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs recommendations.²⁹

The Euroscepticism of former President Václav Klaus is not a new phenomenon, but a deeply studied and interesting case. During his term, the Czech Republic became a member country of the European Union, the fiftieth anniversary of the European Economic Community's foundation was celebrated, and, most significantly, he ultimately undermined plans and efforts to create the Constitution for Europe. Václav Klaus, being founder and long-time leader of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), which in published in the manifest published in 2021, criticized political aspects of the EU membership and pioneered Euroscepticism in Czech politics, had a huge role in inspiring, creating and popularization of Eurosceptic narration.³⁰ Although in 2003, President was in charge, during Czech accession to the EU, later during many interviews and speeches he criticized the organisation – gaining a lot of the

²⁹ „Andrzej Duda na urodzinach Miloša Zemana. Wiceszef MSZ: Sugerowaliśmy, żeby nie jechał”, Rzeczpospolita, accessed November 14, 2024, <https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art41216041-andrzej-duda-na-urodzinach-milosa-zemana-wiceszef-msz-sugerowalismy-zeby-nie-jechal>.

³⁰ Krzysztof Koźbiał. “Znaczenie Eurosceptycyzmu Na Scenie Politycznej Republiki Czeskiej.” *Politeja* 17, no. 3(66), (2020): 265, <https://doi.org/10.12797/politeja.17.2020.66.18>.

attention from Czech media – and dedicated himself to undermine the further integration.³¹

Before analysing the symbolic representation of Václav Klaus beliefs, it is necessary to emphasize that the President was not alone in his views. The whole Czech political scene was driven by Euroscepticism and these tendencies were common in Czech society, even before the country's accession. The Euroscepticism, be it soft variant – generally opposing political aspect of the European integration, while supporting economic benefits – or not, is omnipresent, and manifested in public sphere.³² Only 55,2% of all entitled to vote participated in accession referendum, with the 77,3% of them supporting this decision. After sixteen years, in 2019, the percentage of people who trust European Union was 36%.³³ Furthermore, most of the Czech parties shared some level of Euroscepticism, looking negatively at the integration process, the Czech position in the organisation, bureaucracy and the other factors.

The great example of Klaus's attitude towards symbols and the EU politics was failed predecessor of Lisbon Treaty – the

³¹ Havlík, Vratislav, and Ondřej Mocek, Václav Klaus as a driver of Czech Euroscepticism, in: *Reviewing European Union Accession*, edited by: Tom Hashimoto, Michael Rhimes, (2017): 99–101.

³² Zdeněk Sychra, Petr Kratochvíl, “Czechia: Who Is the Most Eurosceptic of Them All? The Eurosceptic Race to the Bottom” In *Euroscepticism and the Future of Europe. Views from the Capitals*, edited by Michael Kaeding, Johannes Pollak, and Paul Schmidt (2020), 29–30.

³³ Koźbiał, Krzysztof. “Znaczenie Eurosceptycyzmu Na Scenie Politycznej Republiki Czeskiej.” *Politeja* 17, no. 3(66) (2020): 270–272 <https://doi.org/10.12797/politeja.17.2020.66.18>.

project of the Constitution Treaty. For the Czech President, idea of the constitution establishment was not only created in the wave of the inflated enthusiasm but also exaggerated in terms of solutions and too deeply interfering with symbolic sphere as “constitution” is something very ceremonial, prestigious, and considered domain of countries. In later Lisbon Treaty, which after experience with the Constitution Treaty, focused mostly at political reforms - but firstly maintained some symbolism – it was for Václav Klaus that the emotional aspect of Europe was negated.³⁴ References to the constitution idea and such monuments ideas – emphasizing further integration or touching symbolic aspects characteristic for sovereign countries – in the final shape of Lisbon treaty were removed.³⁵ It is not surprising, that the Czech Republic was the last country to sign Lisbon treaty.

The European Union flag as a symbol became another example of Václav Klaus era and Euroscepticism in Czech political life. Flying over the EU flag next to the national ones is currently standard and almost omnipresent practice observed in member countries of the European Union. The EU flag is not only somehow legitimizing for governments and member countries, but also shows their support for organisation, integration, cooperation, shared values, and efforts in building Europe. Obviously, setting the European Union flag on state buildings is not and never was required by any law. It was just pro-integration, pro-EU political gesture, which became

³⁴ Albrecht Sonntag, “Political Symbols, Citizenship and Communication”, 3.

³⁵ Havlík, Vratislav, and Ondřej Mocek, “Vaclav Klaus as a driver of Czech Euroscepticism”, 102.

wide-spread practice. However, when such gesture became a practice, what could be said about the removal of the EU flag from the Parliament building like Viktor Orban or refusal to fly it over Prague Castle – an important place for Czech people’s – what happened in the case of Václav Klaus.³⁶ The former President of Czech Republic, not only during his term, but the most of political career, shared Eurosceptic views, supported anti-EU parties and undermining integration processes and criticized the EU and supported Russia, accusing EU for being behind the crisis in relations,³⁷ even after the end of his term, only concluded his own political stance, which he represented. Similarly to the Orban case, his negative attitude towards European symbols was a confirmation of the Eurosceptic stance, manifested by other mentioned political decisions.

Furthermore, with the Václav Klaus case there was also another symbolic situation. When the President has changed after the elections in 2013, among the first actions of the new Czech president was the decision to fly the EU flag.³⁸ However, time has shown that it did not mean any spectacular change in the topic of Euroscepticism in Czech Republic. Office of President after “The Klaus era”, was held by another Eurosceptic, Miloš Zeman for the next 10 years. Even though he decided to fly the EU flag, his political beliefs, actions and general attitude

³⁶ Albrecht Sonntag, “Political Symbols, Citizenship and Communication”, 3.

³⁷ Havlík, Vratislav, and Ondřej Mocek, “Vaclav Klaus as a driver of Czech Euroscepticism”, 110.

³⁸ Lopatka J. “Czech president raises EU flag to signal change from Klaus era”, Reuters, accessed November 13, 2024 <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSBRE9320DP>.

were not very different from his predecessor. Miloš Zeman's presidency showed that it is worth to keep in mind that even when symbols are untouched directly or even restored, the political course still may be of Eurosceptic and even at some point of anti-EU character. During his latest birthday, we could observe Zeman meeting with his predecessor Klaus and other Eurosceptic politicians.

Grzegorz Braun. MEP Who Disrupted Parliamentary Elections

Last, but not least, among the politicians who undermine European Union values publicly and constantly attack the organisation in media with aim to leverage Eurosceptical and right-wing voters and gain more political influence there is Grzegorz Braun. What differs in his case from the two previously presented personas is the fact that during his long political and despite running for office of President of Poland in 2015, Mayor of Gdańsk in 2019 and Rzeszów in 2021, he did not reach any high political office. However, being unknown outside Poland before, during his term as a member of the Polish Parliament (2019-2024), he managed to gain a negative kind of fame, because of his controversial act of Hannukah celebration disruption in December of 2023, when he used a fire extinguisher to put out candles lit on menorah.³⁹

³⁹ "Polish right-wing MP douses Jewish menorah with fire extinguisher", Politico, accessed 15 November 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/grzegorz-braun-poland-parliament-jewish-hanukkah-menorah/>.

Before gaining his negative popularity outside of Poland, Grzegorz Braun was already known in Poland not only for his Eurosceptic, but overall anti-EU and anti-democratic stance, combined with Covid-2019 denialism, and anti-Ukrainian attitude.⁴⁰ However, Braun as a politician, and also as an author and film director – as these were his other professions – never made it to mainstream. Even though he never became the driving force in public sphere, he was elected to the Polish Parliament twice and subsequently to the European Parliament. In 2019, he gained a seat in Polish Parliament with 5,29% of all votes in his electoral district,⁴¹ and in 2023 with 3,99%,⁴² which was enough to get mandate. In both elections, he was member of Eurosceptic, radical party Confederation Liberty and Independence. Furthermore, in the elections to the European Parliament in 2024, he secured even bigger share of votes, exactly 7,64%.⁴³

⁴⁰ “Scandalous Polish MP Grzegorz Brown tore down the flag of Ukraine on The Kosciuszko mound in Krakow: what is known”, Information agency Ukrainian National News, accessed 15 November 2024, <https://unn.ua/en/news/scandalous-polish-mp-grzegorz-brown-tore-down-the-flag-of-ukraine-on-the-kosciuszko-mound-in-krakow-what-is-known>.

⁴¹ Polish Parliamentary Elections Results of voting for Grzegorz Braun in 2019, accessed: 15 November 2024, <https://sejmsenat2019.pkw.gov.pl/sejmsenat2019/en/wyniki/kandydat/1300018/sejm/okr/23>.

⁴² Polish Parliamentary Elections Results of voting for Grzegorz Braun in 2023, accessed: 15 November 2024, <https://sejmsenat2023.pkw.gov.pl/sejmsenat2023/en/sejm/kandydat/29615/23/2743500>.

⁴³ European Parliament Election Results of voting for Grzegorz Braun in 2024, accessed 15 November 2024, <https://wybory.gov.pl/pe2024/en/kandydat/3943066>.

However, how is the case of such politician connected to the European symbols and why it is unordinary? Grzegorz Braun's case serves more as a warning and an illustration of a politician, who despite causing a controversy and his radical actions is being elected. Furthermore, it shows an absurd behaviour and gaps in the election system and its functionality, which is accepted by the electorate and publicly approved by part of them. As a candidate to the European Parliament, Braun disrupted the elections by his demand made to the Election Commission, in which he requested them to take away the EU flag.⁴⁴ In fact, he did not do anything illegal with his request – nor did the other discussed Eurosceptic politicians with their actions against the EU symbols – as the European Union flag did not have to be a part of the polling place decoration. However, the case of an MEP candidate, who did not hesitate to take an action against the EU symbols, manifests his hostile intentions and beliefs in action and after that is elected is worrisome. Should candidates with clear intention to undermine the European Union and cause controversy, be elected or even allowed to run for the office?

⁴⁴ “Grzegorz Braun zażądał usunięcia unijnej flagi, komisja ją wyniosła. „Tu jest Polska”. Nagranie”, tvp24, accessed November 15, 2024, <https://tvn24.pl/kielce/grzegorz-braun-zadal-usuniecie-flagi-unii-europejskiej-w-lokalu-wyborczym-komisja-ja-wyniosla-nagranie-st7958329>.

Conclusion

Euroscepticism in the European Union is still a present phenomenon, which can be manifested not only in the direct actions taken to undermine the integration, cooperation, and shared values by blocking reforms and choosing the authoritarian way and causing disruption, but also by attitude towards the EU symbols. Politicians who share Eurosceptic beliefs or are generally anti-EU have tendency to manifest it publicly. Regardless of their political position, be it MEP, Prime-Minister or President, they are doing it either as part of their performance, desire for publicity and to cause controversy like Braun, or silently – with intention to manifest other political beliefs and as a part of “greater” plan like Orban.

European symbols and the attitude towards them manifested by Central and Eastern European politicians should not be ignored and treated leniently. Their attitude is a public reflection and manifestation of their beliefs. When it is manifested by refusal to fly flag in representative place, it is just a gesture of opposition. However, when it takes on radical course and relates to actions as disruption of official elections, it becomes a serious warning, even when a person causing disruption is himself candidate to the European Parliament and is elected as MEP. On the one hand, people choose politicians who are causing disruption. On the other hand, the EU symbols are also used widely in demonstration against Eurosceptic politicians in the EU and outside of it, against regimes leaning towards autocracy.

The evidence presented in the article, not only shows importance of analysing symbolical sphere, but also shows

some of the weaknesses, which are connected to the EU symbols and symbols overall. However, the question of ways to fight with interpretation problems, disruptions or generally preventing conflict in this area of political life is still open and requires further examination. Currently, most of the EU countries do not have any legal protection of the EU symbols, while in contradiction it is common practice to protect national ones. Should the European Union or member countries forbid the EU flag and other symbols desecration or take effort to promote symbols and focus more on identity creation?

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The Evolution of Slovak Politics and Media: Shaping Political Identity and Its Societal Impact in the Post-Bipolar World

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Abstract

The article examines how Slovak politics and media have transformed over time and how they have influenced Slovak society and its identity. Further, it examines the evolution of politicians' media rhetoric and their interactions with different media outlets, highlighting the shift from the communist era to the democratic framework, using the history of the Slovak Republic as a case study. The primary focus of this study is the impact of politics on the media and journalism itself. The post-socialist period raised concerns about the rise of strongman politics, which is known for shaping Slovak national and political identity, spreading anti-western sentiment, nationalism, and populism. All of these aspects are strengthened by the separation of 'friendly' and 'unfriendly' media

to the coalition, which negatively shapes relations between oppositional politics and voters and investigative journalists and media in general. It also addresses the rise of populism and nationalism, particularly regarding issues such as immigration, LGBTQ+ rights, and traditional values, which are often portrayed as Western imports incompatible with Slovak culture. Additionally, the paper also highlights crucial events starting from the fall of communism, the reigns of Vladimír Mečiar, the reign of Robert Fico up to the assassination of Ján Kuciak, and current cases of manipulating the independent media and suppressing democratic institutions. Furthermore, the analysis is based on the question how different the political narratives in alternative and mainstream media are. This study looks at its impact on democracy, civil society, and national cohesion in Slovakia by describing the challenges to democracy in an increasingly polarized environment.

Keywords: Slovak media, journalism, socialism, Vladimír Mečiar, Róbert Fico, Ján Kuciak, alternative media, press freedom, politics, manipulation

Introduction

Journalism has become a very vulnerable profession in today's world, even though it is considered a fundamental pillar of democracy. It is not only Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) that has experienced attacks on journalists, in some cases even ending with an assassination. In this article, we emphasize the most intriguing cases of journalists under political pressure

connected with specific politicians and political parties. It is essential to emphasize the unfair, illegal, and immoral attacks on the journalist, as said before, sometimes threatening their lives. This article explores whether Slovakia has experienced backsliding democracy and informational autocracy¹ since the fall of communism in 1989 and the birth of the Slovak Republic in 1993. Media in Slovakia has been under constant political pressure, starting with the leadership of Vladimír Mečiar, and actions against journalists have strengthened in the years of the reign of Róbert Fico. There have been many signs of undermining democracy, such as the erosion of press freedom by influential figures. Another sign is selective legal action surveillance against journalists and independent media outlets. On this matter, it is claimed that such practices aimed against journalists and independent media have increased in recent years.²

Slovakia, as a member of the European Union (EU), should be following the rules and recommendations of the EU institutions and agencies. The EU is crucial in asserting a free and independent press, which ensures transparency, holding power accountable, and safeguarding citizen.³ However, rising populism goes hand in hand with the rise of Euroscepticism driven by the political reality in Slovakia. Slovakia is a country

¹ Farská, Kristína. *Eroded Resilience of Democracy: Attacks on Journalists as Part of a Political Agenda in Slovakia*. Master's thesis, Charles University, 2024, 6.

² Aktuality.sk, „Počet Útokov na Novinárov Výrazne Narastá,” last modified October 25, 2023.

³ „Media Freedom in the EU,” Consilium – Council of the European Union, accessed November 17, 2024.

that was established by a peaceful split of Czechoslovakia. In this article, the period researched reaches the moment of the creation of the Slovak Republic, touching upon the past and current governments, which has experienced six presidents to this day. Furthermore, this article looks closer to the reigns of controversial political figures (loved and hated) Vladimír Mečiar and Róbert Fico coming to the most devastating event in the field of journalism – the assassination of an investigative journalist Ján Kuciak in 2018. It also poses a question of how the attitude of politicians has developed since then.

Slovak journalists have been experiencing various types of systematic attacks, such as personal attacks, hate speech and procedures, loss of employment, limited access to government buildings, and underestimation of their abilities. Free media such as SME, Denník N, and Aktuality. Sk has been accused of being manipulated or under the pressure of external third parties. The last topic this article touches upon is alternative media and their relations with politicians. It explains how different they are from the mainstream media, what impacts on the society they have, and why they are popular among current (since 2023) coalition politicians.

Methodology

This article explains the transformation of Slovak politics and media since the fall of communism which reflects 35 years of the history of the Slovak Republic. It highlights the hypothesis that media freedom and investigative journalism in Slovakia have been systematically undermined by political elites,

leading to erosion in public trust and democratic backsliding. The main focus is placed on the definitions of press freedom, investigative journalism, manipulation of media, attacks on journalists, and alternative journalism. The data for essential and valuable research and conclusions were explained through three methods. The first is systemic analysis which examines the relationship between Slovak politics and media through a comparative lens, focusing on their interdependence, influence on social identity, and democratic values. By this method, this study identifies patterns of media manipulation and freedom. The second method used in this article is the comparative method. It contrasts two of Slovakia's prime ministers Vladimír Mečiar and Róbert Fico. This comparison identifies mostly similarities in their ways of leadership and their impact on various aspects of the state, including media and society. Last but not least, a case study of Slovakia was used to examine specific periods and pivotal elements such as the assassination of Ján Kuciak, offering detailed insights into the interplay between political actions and media dynamics. In terms of research methods, document analysis was used to analyze sources such as media reports, academic studies, and articles. The data and information on freedom indices, media ownership patterns, and public trust surveys were evaluated by quantitative analysis.

Key Definitions and Transformation of Media and Journalism from the Socialist Era to the Slovak Republic

Media are known for their various forms and types; however, the definitions vary. In this part of this paper, definitions of key narratives will be explained. The Slovak Republic's roots in Czechoslovakia, which was re-established after the Second World War (WWII) in 1945, are crucial for the development of free and independent media. Czechoslovakia was taken over by the Soviet Union – communist rule in 1948, under which it functioned as a socialist state within the Eastern European communist bloc. In 1968, during the Prague Spring, Czechoslovakia experienced a short period of political liberalization when political leaders demanded greater autonomy. In 1969, Czechoslovakia was transformed into a federation with a center in Prague. During the Soviet era, socialist media was a system in which media outlets were state-controlled and centralized. Propaganda and ideology prevailed in the socialist regimes, while suppressing freedom of speech and opinions. Media were sources of information that favoured the government and maintained social control. In these systems, freedom of expression was restricted, and independent journalism was heavily censored.⁴ The definition of socialist media points out that socialist media operate under collective ownership and state supervision.⁵ Directly speaking, all media

⁴ J.D.H. Downing, *The SAGE Handbook of Media Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2004).

⁵ Mihelj, Sabina. „Understanding Socialist Television: Concepts, Objects, Methods.” 2014.

at that time were securely aligned with the official political party. The last two decades of Czechoslovakia saw a decline of communism, which brought the Velvet Revolution in 1989, which ended communist rule in Czechoslovakia, leading to democratic reforms and a peaceful split of the two countries. It is also known as the Velvet Divorce, resulting in the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia on January 1, 1993. This is the date that created two independent states: the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. Political and systemic changes influenced the media. The doors opened to the independent media and freedom of speech. However, it was not that easy. Furthermore, the roles in the new-formed media were taken by former state officials, which had a huge impact on the full democratization of media content, which was also represented in centralized decision-making structures.

Coming to the next crucial aspect of media and the ability to voice one's opinion and the right to be informed by truth and information based on research and facts, it is essential to interpret what values press freedom represents. Press freedom is a fundamental democratic principle coded in Article 11 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. It represents the right of media outlets and journalists to publish information and opinions without censorship or government interference. The EU stands for the free and independent press, which secures transparency, accountability of authorities, and the right to information.⁶ Freedom, in this case, also means that journalists are free

⁶ European Parliamentary Research Service. *Understanding Socialist Media: Concepts and Implications*. Brussels: European Parliament, 2022.

to write and critically access information based on facts without experiencing violence, intimidation, and being threatened.

Furthermore, freedom of the press brought to the media system also alternative media that are becoming more visible in Slovakia. Alternative media in this article are shown as friendly outlets for certain political figures. In comparison, mainstream media tend to be more critical, and alternative ones create a comfortable space for controversial politicians. Alternative media platforms use a non-critical interviewing style and avoid controversial topics to keep the topic positive and beneficial for the state and citizens. By appearing on these platforms, politicians undermine trust in mainstream (traditional) media, often by putting themselves in a position of a victim that is targeted by the 'bad' mainstream journalists. The last narrative in this section is investigative journalism. This type of journalism is part of a healthy democracy and can be defined as "the unveiling of matters that are concealed either deliberately by someone in a position of power, or accidentally, behind a chaotic mass of facts and circumstances that obscure understanding"⁷ In Slovakia, the rise of investigative journalism began in the nineties. Before this period of democratization, together with the birth of two independent countries, such a type of journalism did not exist. Press freedom brought into the limelight investigative journalism; however, it was challenged by political pressures. The mandate of former Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar put pressure on journalists because of exposing corruption, clientelism, and abuses of power by political elites. In the 2000s, investigative journalism could develop, for instance, under SME

⁷ H. De Burgh, *Investigative Journalism: Context and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2008).

or Denník N, where journalists could report scandals in depth. The pressures from politicians continued in various forms from presidents and prime ministers, especially Róbert Fico. The media situation escalated in 2018 when an investigative journalist, Ján Kuciak, was assassinated with his spouse in their own house. Since then, there have been changes in the political arena, although the current (2024) political situation unfortunately contributes to threatening journalists and separating friendly and unfriendly media outlets. Further, this text will dive into the specific political figures and case studies of Slovakia, explaining the complexity and the critical nature of the situation regarding the status of media in Slovakia.

Most Significant Political Figures and Their Attitude to Journalists

Vladimír Mečiar

Vladimír Mečiar is a Slovak prominent politician who led Slovakia as a Prime Minister three times (1990–1991, 1992–1994, 1994–1998). He was a leader of a political party Movement from a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) and is known for his authoritarian style of leadership. Consolidation of power seemed to be his goal since he was one of the first politicians standing in person by the dissolution of Czechoslovakia and further democratic transition.⁸ During his three mandates, he

⁸ Grigorij Mesežnikov and Miroslav Kollár, eds. *Voľby 2006: Analýza volebných programov politických strán a hnutí*. Bratislava: Inštitút pre verejné otázky, 2006.

opposed the media and attempted to control them. He and his government intimidated, harassed, and threatened independent journalists with legal consequences, whom they perceived as a threat to their reputation. Critical voices were silenced by his deeds against independent and free media. His approach included strong systematic attacks on journalists, which was also a part of backsliding democracy in Slovakia.⁹ The example of Mečiar could be juxtaposed with the argument of Guriev and Treisman,¹⁰ which highlights that controlling media is a means of limiting and steering the public perception as well as the information the society receives. Mečiar privatized and controlled media such as Danubianprint and STV – a Slovak public TV channel, was significantly scrutinized. STV was established in 1993 and has undergone constant changes under the Mečiar's coalition.¹¹ On the one hand, the opposition did not get a space in the new debates. On the other hand, there was a TV program called 'How to Continue Mr. Prime Minister' ('Ako ďalej pán pressed vlády'), which gave Mečiar space to express and define policies and next steps without opposition, criticism, and uncomfortable questions.

Furthermore, Mečiar considered a radio channel – Rádio Twist, and a private TV channel – Markíza, as 'bad' media

⁹ Farská, Kristína. *Eroded Resilience of Democracy: Attacks on Journalists as Part of a Political Agenda in Slovakia*. Master's thesis, Charles University, 2024, 5.

¹⁰ Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century*, Princeton University Press, 2022.

¹¹ Martina Kovaříková, *Antimečiarismus na Slovensku* (master's thesis, Univerzita Karlova v Praze, Filozofická fakulta, Praha, 2011), 31.

outlets. Radio Twist was suspended due to not being favoured by Mečiar's coalition MPs. It was a consequence of Radio Twist attempt to resist political pressure and persevere the wave of manipulation. The radio alternative was Radio Free Europe (RFE) ('Slobodná Európa'), which was established in 1950 and ceased to exist in 2004 in Slovakia. There were attempts by state institutions to terminate the license of RFE.

The most criticized media by Mečiar was SME. SME informed citizens about scandals and controversies such as 'Mečiar Amnesties' and the kidnapping of the president's Kováč son in 1995, which had political implications due to which SME faced accusations. In 1998, Mečiar put to the court a journalist from an independent media SME for his critical article. The court decided that the journalist had to apologize, provided that he complied with the document containing the apology. In Slovakia during the last decade of the 20th century, Slovenský Syndikát Novinárov was considered an institution that secures freedom of speech, supports independent journalists, and is the voice of journalism even when facing threats and pressure. The government at that time did not agree with such an independent institution. Therefore, Združenie slovenských novinárov (ZSN) was established and was financed by the state. Fortunately, ZSN became independent in the end.

In 1998, an amendment to the law was connected to the election campaigns. This regulation effectively banned politicians from using private media outlets during their campaigns. It was an attempt to control the political narrative and restrict freedom of speech.

In addition, the threatening of journalists was not rare during his era. It was not only oral but also physical harassment

attacks on the journalists and media outlets' assets. The car of a journalist from Media Nova was demolished, and two journalists from Nový Čas were bullied by posters in the streets. The posters showed the journalists as homosexual, and they claimed that they sexually abused young boys.

Furthermore, he also banned private media from the political 'life' as Fico, Slovak prime minister, does even in his current mandate. Such steps do not refer to the democratic pillars and, therefore, negatively impact civil society and 'train' journalists' patience. Many journalists suffer mentally, and therefore, we could speak about long-term consequences on one's life¹². Mečiar's political career was over when HZDS lost to a coalition of Mikuláš Dzurinda. In 1999 and 2004, he appeared as a candidate for president. However, he did not succeed. His last attempt to remain in politics was in 2006 when he was part of a coalition with SMER-SD, and in 2010, HZDS did not pass the election threshold. Mečiar officially announced the end of his political career in 2014.

Róbert Fico

Róbert Fico became a member of parliament (MP) of the political party SDL in 1992. In 1998, Fico established the political party SMER-SD. In 2002, SMER-SD became the second most powerful political party in Slovakia, and in 2006, SMER-SD won parliamentary elections for the first time. Currently,

¹² Farská, Kristína. *Eroded Resilience of Democracy: Attacks on Journalists as Part of a Political Agenda in Slovakia*. Master's thesis, Charles University, 2024, 11–12.

he is a prime minister who is fulfilling this mandate for the fourth time. At the same time, he is a leader of the political party Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-SD). His populist rhetoric has a lot of supporters, thanks to whom he won the elections in September 2023. However, the survey in October 2024 showed that only 32% of people trust him.¹³

When it comes to his attitude towards journalists and media, it has been changing over time. Fico has been dividing media into two 'groups' since 2007, referring to one 'group' as opposition media, which immediately means not friendly to the coalition because of the critical and investigative journalism. In 2007, Fico started accusing the media and putting them in front of the court, where he demanded around 235 000€ in total between 2007 and 2012.¹⁴ Furthermore, in 2009, he pointed out that journalists are 'dirty anti-Slovak prostitutes' and 'pigs terrorizing his family'.¹⁵ By such rhetoric, he expressed disagreement with free critical media. These media should be representing opposition to Fico's government and policies, understanding from Fico's words.

During Fico's third mandate as a prime minister, his party, SMER-SD, filed multiple lawsuits against critical journalists and media outlets. These political figures addressed inappropriate articles to be retracted, which was a sign of encouraging

¹³ Prieskum dôveryhodnosti bol uskutočnený v období od 8.10.2024 do 17.10.2024 na vzorke 1000 respondentov." SME.sk.

¹⁴ Farská, Kristína. *Eroded Resilience of Democracy: Attacks on Journalists as Part of a Political Agenda in Slovakia*. Master's thesis, Charles University, 2024, 12.

¹⁵ Denník N, „Fico: Novinárom Ste Špinavé Protislovenské Prostitútky," last modified November 23, 2016.

self-censorship. The lawsuits imposed financial and psychological pressure on journalists which was needed for Fico to influence the media. The journalists were supposed to retract or alter their critical articles.

During Fico's third government Ján Kuciak, an investigative journalist, was assassinated together with his spouse in their house in Veľká Mača in the west of Slovakia.

Assassination of Ján Kuciak

Ján Kuciak was 27 years old when he was assassinated by people whose names are already known. Ján Kuciak worked for Aktuality.sk. He was assassinated on February 21st, 2018. It was the first murder of a journalist in the Slovak independent era. One more suspicious case is the disappearance of an investigative journalist, Pavol Rýpal, in 2008 however, he was not found dead. Surprisingly, before the brutal act, Ján Kuciak asked for a bodyguard and strengthened personal security because he felt threatened, especially after calls from Kočner. 5 years after the assassination, the investigation of this case proved that the motive of the murder was Kuciak's investigative work.¹⁶ Unfortunately, there is evidence that the person responsible for orchestrating the murder was a controversial entrepreneur, Marián Kočner, who should have been frustrated by Kuciak's findings about his illegal practices connected to tax fraud and other suspicious activities. Kuciak investigated connections

¹⁶ Bianka Francistyová and Ján Višňovský, „Journalism in Slovakia Five Years After the Murder of Ján Kuciak,” Media Literacy and Academic Research, 2023, 127.

between organized crime and the high political elite. He was mainly fighting against corruption. At the time when he was murdered, he was working on an article that explained Slovak political networks with the Italian mafia group 'Ndrangheta'.¹⁷ Kuciak's investigative work also focused on SMER-SD (and other government insiders) and possible cooperation with mafia. The resignation of Fico was seen as a prepared move to prevent the government from falling apart and, therefore, prevent SMER-SD from losing power.

After the murder, social change and governmental crisis occurred. Róbert Fico stood in front of the cameras with bodyguards and €1 million on the table. It was broadcast through the Slovak national TV channel. This way, they wanted to motivate everyone who had any information connected to the murder to inform the state elites, and in return, they offered a financial reward. In the turmoil of such circumstances, the first to resign was a minister of culture, Marek Maďarič, later on, Róbert Kaliňák – the minister of interior, and Robert Fico resigned on the 15th of March 2018. On the same day, Peter Pellegrini got a responsibility to form a government.

The assassination clearly showed that the state failed to protect journalists. As a consequence of the assassination, people changed their political preferences, went to protest in the streets for justice and fair investigation, supported journalism, and defended the values of a democratic state. During the next government, a new Act on Media Services and an Act on publications were adopted. It should have ensured media is

¹⁷ Talianska mafia na Slovensku: jej chápadlá siahajú aj do politiky." Aktuality.sk. February 28, 2018. Accessed November 17, 2024.

pluralistic, has healthy competition, and independent journalism.¹⁸ Unfortunately, after such escalation of the situation in Slovakia, the attacks on journalists still prevailed even though the Act on Publications and the Act on Media Services came into effect that brought significant transparency to the ownership and financing of print and digital media.

The assassination revealed how deeply corruption is entrenched in Slovak politics and how fragile Slovak democratic institutions are.

Current Situation including Alternative Media

After regaining the majority and forming a party coalition, Fico became more aggressive in the way he treats journalists, both in his rhetoric and actions. Fico formed his 4th coalition in October 2023, he carried on his war against journalists, liberals, and the LGBTQ+ community. He refused to talk to a few media outlets as also the whole coalition did.¹⁹

Fico put TV Markíza, Dennik N, Dennik SME, and Aktu-
ality.sk into one unfriendly ‘basket’, soon after the formation of his government in 2023. In this part, we are focusing on exact events that happened since October 2023 in chronological order. Zuzana Čaputová’s perspective provides a broader picture

¹⁸ Bianka Francistyová and Ján Višňovský, „Journalism in Slovakia Five Years After the Murder of Ján Kuciak,” Media Literacy and Academic Research, 2023, 130.

¹⁹ Farská, Kristína. Eroded Resilience of Democracy: Attacks on Journalists as Part of a Political Agenda in Slovakia. Master’s thesis, Charles University, 2024, 13.

of politics in Slovakia and the potential connection between Mečiar and Fico. Čaputová, former Slovak president, sees the link between these two eras in getting Slovakia into isolation through a strong leader who is followed by the masses.²⁰ This is also tightly connected to the attitudes of the current coalition to journalism and journalists. One of Robert Fico's first actions in office took place on 3 December 2023. Fico cut off communication with media outlets TV Markíza, Denník N, Sme, and Aktuality. He did not want them to enter the Government office, which turned out to be illegal, so he and other coalition parties refused to communicate with them by any means. As a reason, he claimed that they are not informing the public appropriately and their information is not impartial. His attitude towards journalism was a huge shift since, in 1998, he stood on the side of non-restricting information and safeguarding democracy.²¹ Fico also made a critical remark on these media outlets during one of his press conferences: "All you want is negativity at any cost. You are obsessed with spreading hatred. You're just making up what you can come up with against us."²² Later on in February 2024, minister of Culture Martina Šimkovičová undermined Radio and Television Slovakia (RTVS) – a Slovak national TV channel, when

²⁰ Tabery, Erik, and Zuzana Čaputová. *Nestratiť sa sama sebe*. Bratislava: N Press, 2023, 25–26.

²¹ Plus 7 Dní, „VIDEO: Zabúda Robert Fico? Kedysi zastával slobody prejavu, dnes uráža novinárov,” December 7, 2023.

²² *Ste posadnutí diablom, hovorí Fico novinárom, keď sa pýtajú na koalíčné spory v Hlase. Prehovorili o Kotlárovi a Šimkovičovej.* Denník N. Last modified October 8, 2024. Accessed November 17, 2024.

she said that RTVS is not functioning for the state. She claimed that RTVS is “not an impartial institution that provides viewers and listeners with objective and balanced information.”²³ She insisted on creating space for Slovak production because the current broadcasts, debates, and programs supposedly do not represent all views and opinions. The attacks on journalists escalated in a situation when journalist Zuzana Kovačič Hanzelová suspended her appearance in political programs due to threats from politicians, internet trolls, and even physical attacks on the street.

In the following months, the RTVS government suspended RTVS and established the Slovak Television and Radio (STVR). The ethical commission was created, and its representatives will be chosen by Matica Slovenská. The law was passed in April 2024, and later on in September, Vera Jourová, in that time the Vice-President of the European Commission for Values and Transparency, addressed a letter to M. Šimkovičová in which she expressed the criticism of new members of the Commission of STVR, which could also be elaborated by the European Commission. Surprisingly, in May 2024, Slovakia experienced an assassination attempt on Prime Minister Róbert Fico. This attempt was immediately denounced by society, journalists, and all political figures. When Róbert Fico was able to speak either through another minister or himself, he accused journalists, liberals, and the West of the escalation of the situation.²⁴

²³ Šimkovičová sa obula do RTVS: ‘Nie je nestranná, neplní si svoju funkciu a často skĺza do bulváru.’ Startitup.sk. Last modified February 28, 2024. Accessed November 17, 2024.

²⁴ Fico prehovoril prvýkrát po atentáte: Nemám dôvod veriť, že išlo o útok osamelého pomätenca.” HNonline.sk. Last modified June 5, 2024.

Journalists and opposition politicians immediately called for calming down and bringing peace to society through deeds, words, and rhetoric. However, Fico accused especially unfriendly media and said that the person who tried to kill him was connected to one of the opposition political parties. The coalition was talking about reconciliation even though the politicians' rhetoric had not changed, and politicians continued rejecting to attend prominent political debates. After this attempt, TV Markíza suspended a political debate 'Na Telo' after the host Michal Kovačič expressed his thoughts and experience on the manipulation of information in Markíza. The television reacted – "He misused broadcast time to present personal opinions in violation of the Media Services Act and the journalistic code of ethics."²⁵ After that, his contract was terminated.

In October this year, Róbert Fico named journalists as 'bloodthirsty bastards' and reacted to the assassination attempt of Donald Trump as follows – "If the attacker on D. Trump understood Slovak, it would have been enough for him to read Denník N, Sme, or Aktuality to get the urge to 'deal with' the unruly former president of the USA. It is the same story, like a copy-paste scenario."²⁶

The last developments in this matter were shocking. On October 1, 2024, Robert Fico filed a lawsuit against Peter Bárty, the editor-in-chief of the portal Aktuality.sk, over his book 'Fico-Obsessed with Power.' Fico demanded an apology

²⁵ Markíza reaguje na tvrdenia moderátora Michala Kovačiča o cenzúre a tlakoch na redaktorov." Aktuality.sk. Last modified November 16, 2024. Accessed November 17, 2024.

²⁶ TA3. „Scéna Ako Cez Kopirák: Fico Reagoval na Atentát na Trumpa." Last modified November 10, 2023.

and compensation of 10000€. Furthermore, Fico gave an interview on Russian television where he accused Europe's strongest countries of helping Ukraine, and he expressed support for Putin. It was on the same day that the government approved a proposal to change the correction of media. Under this proposal, politicians are no longer obliged to explain why the article is not 'friendly' to them. If a media outlet or a journalist does not accept the directive, they will be fined up to 15000€.

Alternative media

Alternative media, such as social media, are a source of information without journalistic scrutiny. They represent sources of information that are not verified and mainly focus on the positives of a politician's political situation. In their materials, there is a visible agreement with the claims of interviewees, which can be detrimental to the state or any other important issue. The hosts do not hide their political preferences, which makes them party related. The alternative media also function as a source that steers public opinion, often in favour of certain coalitions and political parties with populist or even authoritarian features. The current minister of culture of the Slovak Republic, Martina Šimkovičová, is very active on social media, which is used to promote questionable information and data.

Another controversial figure is Bombic, who is a prosecuted extremist. He ran a YouTube channel where Slovak coalition politicians could freely express their thoughts without being judged. When his channel was deleted by YouTube, it raised concerns among Slovak politicians.

One of the alternative channels is Infovojna.sk, where the deputy chairman of parliament, Tibor Gašpar, said that some investigators do not work according to their terms, and the minister of defence said that the legal pursuit of opponents was beginning but at a slow pace. Political figures are portrayed in such media and channels as heroes, and their work and deeds are admirable.

Conclusion

Slovakia underwent some developments in terms of journalist-political relations. Unfortunately, not many of them can be considered positive, meaning contributing to journalists' well-being and safeguarding democratic values. Freedom of the press has been jeopardized by Mečiar's and Fico's governments. Alternative media oppose the critical and investigative work of impartial journalists, which contributes to the escalation of emotions and political preferences within the state. Investigative journalism has been threatened by the assassination of Ján Kuciak, which was an unprecedented case in Slovakia. Fortunately, people reacted immediately, and for a moment, Slovakia felt that the civil society had enough strength to steer the political situation. People felt that investigative journalists' work was based on an accurate data, which is essential for ensuring fairness and upholding a consistent and lawful state. "Journalists are supposed to ask real questions; they are supposed to be unpleasant; they control politicians and force them to be better so that the country is in a better condition than it is. We will not lean

forward,”²⁷ says the editor-in-chief of Denník N Matúš Kostolný. Harald Schuman, German journalist, also contributed to the description of how the government should interact with the society:

The government has an obligation to inform the public. They cannot refuse to respond to selected media outlets that they have deemed unfriendly, and those media outlets have won the case. The minister must also answer to the media he does not like. The right to information is guaranteed by the German constitution and, I believe, by the Slovak constitution as well.²⁸

This all applies to both governments described in the article. Mečiar set the base for injustice and a complicated environment for the investigation of cases to sustain the power. Fico’s attitude towards journalists has become more radical over the years, and he continued to follow Mečiar’s footsteps by maintaining strong coalition ties rooted in corruption. The ties are so strong that anyone critical of their plans, laws, and policies is considered to be liberal, ‘sunny’ – a term implying naïve idealism and excessive optimism – and influenced by the West. Therefore, it is beneficial for the coalition to give interviews to the alternative media where nobody is confronting them with facts and bulletproof data.

²⁷ Denník N, „Atentát Nič Nemení na Povinnosti Médií Klast’ Neprijemné Otázky,” last modified November 9, 2023.

²⁸ Denník N, „Odborník na Slobodu Médií Harald Schumann: Prekvapuje Ma, Aká Krátkozraká Je Vaša Vláda, Zaplatia za To Daňoví Poplatníci,” last modified November 16, 2023.

Overall, it is essential to gather information and support journalists to be informed and reach democratic values. The fundamental values can be protected only by scrutinizing the elites and making them accountable for what the world inevitably needs: impartial and free journalists.

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Accounting for the Past – the Problem of Lustration in Slovakia

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Abstract

The article analyzes the vetting process in Slovakia after the fall of communism, focusing on the challenges and social difficulties of settling the communist past. Lustration, as a tool for verifying collaborators of the former regime, was intended to purge public life of those involved in security services and human rights violations. The article focuses on the actions of the Slovak state in this matter since 1993. The work presents the situation in the broader context of the political and social situation and the legal solutions applied in the countries of the region mainly with regard to Poland and the Czech Republic. In Slovakia, the process has encountered numerous difficulties, both on the political and social levels. Paradoxically, in contrast to the rest of the countries of the region, the post-communist movement grew into right-wing populist groups in the nineties. This fact blocked a reliable lustration settlement for the period of Vladimír Mečiar's government,

when all vetting activities initiated at the beginning of the decade in Czechoslovakia were extinguished. The situation only changed in part under the new government in 2002 when a new lustration law was finally voted on to settle the legacy of communism and fascist Slovakia. In 2003, the Institute of the Memory of the Nation (in Slovak: *Ústav pamäti národa*) was established as a specialized public institution dedicated to archiving police documents from the period of the fascist Slovak Republic and the communist Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, as well as researching and popularizing knowledge about these periods. The article discusses the historical background of the process, Slovaks relation to communist heritage, the complexity of carrying it out and the impact on the contemporary political and social scene. I put the main focus to analyzing the controversies and divisions that the subject of lustration caused in Slovak society, as well as comparing the situation in Slovakia with other post-communist countries. The methodology of the study is based on a critical analysis of available sources, including government documents, scientific publications in particular publications of the Slovak UPN.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the fall of the Iron Curtain and the transformations of 1989, a group of Central and Eastern European countries faced the problem of coming to terms with the past and legacy of decades of communism. The discussion on this problem was multi-threaded, from issues related to the politics of memory, through the question of the national identity,

economic reforms, to abuses and crimes of the previous regime. As part of my work, I discuss the history of lustration in Slovakia. The history of this process, the attitude of the Slovak authorities and the Slovaks themselves to the lustration is therefore only a fragment of a broader subject of research on Slovak identity and the attitude toward the legacy of the communist era. The starting point of my work is to establish a conceptual definition of lustration. Theoretical considerations on the definitional issue are an important part of the article, as they allow for the systematization of the material in the face of the difficult and multi-threaded subject of transitional justice and lustration. In this section, I present the origins of this term, its connotations, and its role in the broader process of addressing the legacy of the communist era.

In the second part, I present the solutions and attempts to reckon with the past carried out by the new Czechoslovak government after the fall of the communist rule in the autumn of 1989. The main point of the subchapter is the presentation of the solutions of the lustration laws from 1991 and the effects of the lustration solutions introduced therein.

In the following section, I focus on the period of the first years of Slovakia's independence and on the issue of lustration in the country under the rule of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS, *Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko*) and the Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar. The subsection framework covers the period from 1993 (creation of independent Slovakia) to 1998 (end of Mečiar's government).¹ The work presents a picture in a broader context of the political and

¹ Jerold Kellman, „Vladimir Mečiar,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2024.

social situation, the identity relationship of Slovaks to difficult episodes of the communist legacy and the legal solutions applied in the countries of the region, mainly in relation to Polish and the Czech Republic. In Slovakia, this process has encountered numerous difficulties, both on the political and social level. Paradoxically, unlike the rest of the countries in the region, the part of post-communist movement grew in the nineties into right-wing populist groups.² I focus on analyzing the controversies and divisions that the subject of lustration caused in Slovak society.

The last subsection presents solutions introduced by the Mikuláš Dzurinda's government after 1998. The core of this part bases on presentation of reforms and creation of the National Memory Institute (UPN, *Ústav pamäti národa* 2002) as well as comparing the situation in Slovakia with other post-communist countries nowadays.³ The methodology of the study is based on a critical analysis of available sources, including government documents, scientific publications in particular publications of the Slovak UPN. In my work, I will set the analysis of lustration solutions in Slovakia comparatively in the broader context of other countries in the region.

² Andrzej Grajewski, "The Post-Communist Burden: Institutional Settling Accounts with Communism in the Central European Countries – Description of Structures and Circumstances of Their Emergence," *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 2 (2013): 161–162.

³ Patrycja Bukalska, "Lustracja w Krajach Europy Środkowej i Państwach Bałtyckich," *Raport OSW* (2009): 4–10.

Definition

In every country in Central – Eastern Europe, after the beginning of the political transformation, it became an urgent issue to address the crimes and abuses of people associated with a given regime as part of national politics and history in this understanding, memory of difficult heritage is the subject of discourse⁴. The greatest interest was in the activities of the secret services. The terminology used for the accountability measures of this period was modeled after the one developed post-World War II in relation to the Third Reich.

According to Dr. Anna Napiórkowska:

this term appeared for the first time in the discussed context in Czechoslovakia, in mid-1990. In the simplest explanation, it means checking public officials in terms of their possible cooperation with the services of the communist state. On the other hand, its consequence is the removal from their positions and functions of people who were agents or secret collaborators of the former state security services.⁵

The term has its root in the Latin term “lustrare” which means purification by sacrifice.⁶ We owe its popularization to the Czechoslovak Minister of the Interior, Richard Sacher.⁷

⁴ Radosław Zenderowski, „Pamięć i tożsamość narodowa,” *Athenaeum. Polskie Studia Politologiczne* 28 (2011): 149–166.

⁵ Michał Krotoszyński, *Modele sprawiedliwości tranzycyjnej* (2017), 201–208.

⁶ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. „Lustration,” 2008, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/lustration>.

⁷ Agnieszka Opalińska, “Problem Lustracji w Krajach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej i w Krajach Bałtyckich,” *Im Gremium* 2 (2008): 140–149.

The lustration process is designed to be individual rather than collective, and should go hand in hand with the decommunization of offices, the rehabilitation of the victims of the system, and the penalization of abuses and crimes of the past era. This process is twofold: on the one hand, it involves the creation of a democratic order by rejecting the legitimacy of the communist system, and on the other hand, it involves punishment by excluding from public life those who supported the former regime in the past. It takes place on the economic, political, and legal levels, and some researchers consider lustration itself as part of the decommunization process.⁸

The aim is to preemptively protect the new system by removing from office those who have not shown a commitment to democracy and respect for civil rights in the past. Lustration, apart from its preventive and legal function, also has an ethical and educational dimension.⁹ The process should be a kind of way to build respect and trust in officials and politicians. An important aspect that is a contentious issue around the subject of lustration is the opening to free access to information, files related to the activities of the services.¹⁰

⁸ Anna Napiórkowska, “Lustracja ‘Po Polsku,’” *Polski Rocznik Praw Człowieka i Prawa Humanitarnego* 2 (2011): 147–149.

⁹ Opalińska, “Problem Lustracji,” 150–155.

¹⁰ John Gould, *Winners, Losers and the Institutional Effects of Privatization in the Czech and Slovak Republic* (1999), 25–29.

The Period 1989–1993

The first attempts to introduce state lustration date back to the last period of Czechoslovakia's existence. In the subsequent events of the Velvet Revolution, members of the democratic opposition came to power in Czechoslovakia. First, Václav Havel took office as president in December 1989,¹¹ then, before the parliamentary elections in the winter of 1990, State Security (StB, *Štátna bezpečnosť*) a political police force that carried out political terror, was liquidated, and a resolution was adopted introducing lustration procedures for candidates to parliament. In addition to lustration, there was a pressing issue of investigating the activities of the StB during the protests in the autumn of 1989 and its attempts to infiltrate opposition circles. Similarly to the Polish government, the Czechoslovakian authorities in that period had a problem with the mass destruction of the archives of this service.¹² Even before the elections in 1990, a resolution was adopted to investigate whether candidates for parliament were associated with the state security organs from the communist era, and a special commission was created to investigate the activities of the services during the 1989 protests.¹³ The rules provided that the archives of the interior minister could issue a special lustration certificate to confirm or exclude such connections. This was only possible at the discretion of the candidate himself. In principle, all major political parties agreed to use

¹¹ Branislav Kinčok, *Gustáv Husák a jeho doba* (UPN, 2024), 365–373.

¹² Grajewski, “The Post-Communist Burden,” 160–166.

¹³ Bukalska, “Lustracja w Krajach Europy Środkowej,” 4–10.

these procedures, with the exception of the Communist Party, which refused to participate in the lustration process. In the June 1990 elections, the Civic Forum (a party associated with President Havel and originating from anti-communist opposition circles) won the elections unequivocally, gaining nearly half of the seats in both houses of the federal parliament. The decisive victory of the former opposition signaled a continued reckoning with the previous government.¹⁴

The most important achievement in the matter of lustration settlements was the adoption of lustration laws in October 1991. The legislator's aim was to resolve the issue of former party functionaries (including people who studied in Soviet institutions preparing for service in the security organs, StB employees and informers) occupying public positions: the state administration, company of the state treasury, the police, the army, the public media and the main organs of state power, such as the Supreme Court, parliament and government.¹⁵ In the original plan, the lustration obligation was to be in force for 5 years.

Along with the package of laws in 1991, a law guaranteeing free access to archives and making lists of collaborators public was not passed, causing dissatisfaction among some circles of the former democratic opposition. In 1992, the former oppositionist Peter Cibulka illegally published a register of over 200,000 people associated with the StB.¹⁶ The

¹⁴ Opalińska, "Problem Lustracji," 150–155.

¹⁵ Bukalska, "Lustracja w Krajach Europy Środkowej," 4–10.

¹⁶ Paweł Ukielski, "Czeskie Rozliczenia z Komunizmem po 1989 Roku: Rozwiązania Prawne i Instytucjonalne," *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* 18, no. 2: 145–150.

extensiveness of the list resulted from the fact that the list included people who were not aware of their registration in the StB files. The publication aroused a number of controversies. In Poland, a similar act was performed nearly a decade later by Bronisław Wildstein. At the beginning of the nineties, in addition to the lustration laws, the Czechoslovak government carried out a number of activities aimed at settling the difficult legacy of the communist era, such as: the restitution law (aimed at mitigating the unlawful seizure of property after 1948), the rehabilitation of political prisoners, and in 1992 the Coordination Centre for the Investigation of Violence against the Czech Nation was established at the office of the Prosecutor General in the period from 8 May 1945 to 31 December 1989 (*Koordinací Centrum pro vyšetřování násili proti českému narodu v době od 8. května 1945 do 31. prosince 1989*).¹⁷

After several years of political dispute over the nature of the common state of the Czechs and Slovaks, a decision is made to divide the country.¹⁸ The collapse took place on December 31, 1992, and January 1, 1993 was the first day of existence of both of its successor countries.¹⁹ From that moment on, the governments of both countries began to independently create a policy of settling accounts with the communist era. Currently, the actions taken after 1989 by Czechoslovakia and Germany are often considered to be model examples of settling accounts with the communist era.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Krzysztof Żarna, "Przed Rozwodem: Sytuacja Polityczna na Słowacji w Ramach Czeskiej i Słowackiej Republiki Federacyjnej (1990–1992)," *Środkowoeuropejskie Studia Polityczne* 2 (2018): 39–48.

¹⁹ Bukalska, "Lustracja w Krajach Europy Środkowej," 4–10.

Situation in Slovakia in the Period of 1993–1998

The issue of decommunization and lustration, along with systemic and economic issues, was one of the main fields of dispute between the Czech and Slovak sides before 1993.²⁰ The main voice of the Slovak side was the HZDS party, which emerged from some of the Slovak opposition circles centered around the Public Against Violence (VNP, *Verejnost' proti násiliu*) organization. Vladimír Mečiar, one of the leaders of the HZDS, in 1990 took the position of Minister of the Interior and Environment in the Slovak government, and after the successful elections of 1991 he was elected Prime Minister of Slovakia (the Slovak Republic is still within the federation).²¹ Even before 1993, he was skeptical about settling accounts with the previous system, and in the spring of 1991, he was temporarily dismissed from office by the Slovak Parliament due to suspicions that he had been an agent before 1989. After the success of the HZDS in the elections in June 1992, he again took up the position of Prime Minister. Vladimír Mečiar and Czech Prime Minister Václav Klaus are considered to be the architects of the disintegration of the federation.²² After the dissolution of the country, the actions of

²⁰ Gould, *Winners, Losers and the Institutional Effects of Privatization in the Czech and Slovak Republic*, 40–51.

²¹ Kellman, „Vladimir Mečiar,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/VladimirMeciar>.

²² Juraj Marušiak, “The Paradox of Slovakia’s Post-Communist Transition,” *Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung*, 2021, <https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/44863/the-paradox-of-slovakias-post-communist-transition>.

the Czech government and the new Slovak government took diametrically opposed approaches to settling accounts with the communist era. The process of lustration, privatization and decommunization in independent Slovakia since 1993 has been partially stopped by the ruling HZDS party, which was still led by Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar.²³ According to Andrzej Grajewski,

In the struggle for power, Mečiar supported the old communist apparatus, as well as former StB functionaries, who saw in the chapter of the federal state a chance for themselves to save their former influence. There are many indications that Mečiar owed these structures to his rise to power at a decisive moment, namely during the campaign for parliament in June 1992.”²⁴

To this day, Mečiar’s connections with the StB before 1989 and the issue of his contacts with the former communist nomenclatura in the nineties remain a contentious issue. There is no doubt, however, that after 1989 a significant part of the nomenclature supported the HZDS.²⁵ After gaining independence, the Slovak government chose to discontinue the lustration process. Contrary to the law adopted at the beginning of 1991, no commission was established at the Slovak Ministry of the Interior to issue lustration certificates. The lustration law was therefore a dead letter, which expired in 1996

²³ Gould, *Winners, Losers and the Institutional Effects of Privatization in the Czech and Slovak Republic*, 40–51.

²⁴ Grajewski, “The Post-Communist Burden,” 161–162.

²⁵ Gould, *Winners, Losers and the Institutional Effects of Privatization in the Czech and Slovak Republic*, 40–51.

in accordance with the provisions (the Czech side repeatedly extended it). The policy of the HZDS government quickly led to significant social polarization in Slovakia. Particularly important at that time was the political conflict between the president Michal Kováč and the prime minister Vladimír Mečiar. In addition to the issue of decommunization, foreign policy (Slovakia was the only country in the Visegrad Group not to join NATO in 1999, and some HZDS activists were sceptical about the European integration), and economic policy sparked significant social controversy.²⁶

Situation after 1998

After the HZDS lost the parliamentary elections in 1998 and the presidential elections in 1999, another attempt to regulate the issue of lustration and decommunization became possible. What may seem paradoxical is that after the 1998 elections, one of the main groups – besides the center-right Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK, Slovenská demokratická koalícia) – forming the coalition was the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL, Strana demokratickej ľavice), originating from the Slovakian post-communist fraction who created this group after the dissolution of the Communist Party of Slovakia. In the aftermath of parliamentary elections, Mikuláš Dzurinda (SDK) took office as Prime Minister.²⁷ At the end of its term

²⁶ Žarna, “Między Wschodem a Zachodem: Słowacja a Sojusz Północno-atlantyczny,” *Polityka i Społeczeństwo* 7 (2010): 212–216.

²⁷ Piotr Bajda, *Elity Polityczne na Słowacji: Kręta Droga do Nowoczesnego Państwa* (2010), 119–160.

that the government pushed through a law on the opening of the archives of the security services containing document²⁸ from the years 1939-1989 (the National Remembrance Act 2002).²⁹ In addition to the communist era, the period of fascist Slovakia was also included.³⁰ Despite the fact that the issue had been an important part of the political dispute in the nineties, this reform was supported even by a significant part of the opposition. The main achievement, however, was the creation of the National Memory Institute (UPN, Ústav pamäti národa).³¹ The institution has a similar scope of activities as its Polish counterpart, the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej).³² The main task of the UPN is to secure it, systematically compile and publish the archives of the secret services. Compared to other countries, Slovakia has seen a wide opening of access to archives. Under this act, UPN published a list of over 80,000 names of employees and persons registered by the StB.³³ Each person on the list can submit a statement, which will then be recorded under their name. The institution also studies Slovak participation in the Holocaust, conducts scientific prowess and supports

²⁸ *Slovakian Act on Disclosure of Documents Regarding the Activity of State Security Authorities in the Period 1939–1989 and on Founding the Nation's Memory Institute (Ústav Pamäti Národa) and on Amending Certain Acts*, No. 553/2002.

²⁹ Bukalska, "Lustracja w Krajach Europy Środkowej," 4–10.

³⁰ Grajewski, "The Post-Communist Burden," 161–163.

³¹ Opalińska, Agnieszka. „Problem lustracji,” 153–155.

³² Saygun Gökarıksel, "Beyond Transparency: The Communist-Era Secret Police Archives in Postsocialist Eastern Europe," *Archives and Records* 41, no. 3 (2020): 244–248.

³³ Bukalska, "Lustracja w Krajach Europy Środkowej," 4–10.

educational activities. As in Poland, the files of StB associates are available for inspection by ordinary citizens after filling in a specific application to the UPN, anyone can ask the UPN for information whether the services have collected information about them. Despite the undoubted achievements in the area of settling accounts with the past during the eight years of Mikuláš Dzurinda's rule, it was not possible to pass a lustration law regulating the participation of people associated with the security services in public and economic life before 1989. Currently, the only act that has been adopted is the expired federal law of 1991. Compared to other countries in the region, Slovakia is still an exception, this type of law exists in countries such as: Hungary (since 1994), the Czech Republic (extended law from 1991), Germany (since 1992) and Poland (since 1997).³⁴

Summary

In Slovakia, as in other countries in the region, the complex issue of lustration constituted a significant political problem. The first attempts to settle accounts with this difficult legacy of the communist era fell on the final period of Czechoslovakia's existence, and during this period a law regulating the participation of communist activists in key sectors of public and economic life was also introduced. In the early nineties, the issue of transitional justice was one of the axes of the political

³⁴ Opalińska, Agnieszka. „Problem lustracji”, 150–153.

dispute between the Czech side and the Slovak side (represented by HZDS and Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar).

After Slovakia gained independence, decommunization and lustration were not carried out by the Slovakian authorities, headed by Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar. This is most likely due to the links between the HZDS and the former communist nomenclature. It was only after 1998 and the removal of HZDS from power that significant changes in this matter took place. In 2002, the Act on Access to Documents on the Activities of the Secret Police (1939–1989) and on the Establishment of UPN was passed. It is a key document on this issue. However, despite the establishment of the UPN and the wide access to assets, no legal solution regulating the participation of persons associated with the security services in public and economic life before 1989 was introduced. Compared to other countries in the region, Slovakia is still an exception in this aspect.

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The Evolution of the Formula One Grand Prix on the Example of Racing in Hungary. Grand Opening of the Formula One to the Eastern Bloc

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyse the evolution of Formula One using the example of the Hungarian Grand Prix, which played a key role in introducing this prestigious motorsport to the Eastern Bloc countries. Formula One racing, since its inception in 1950, has been dominated by the West, symbolising modernity, technological development, and capitalist values. However, the organisation of the first Hungarian Grand Prix in 1986 marked a watershed moment in the history of the sport, as it was the first time a socialist country was included in the championship calendar.

The paper presents the historical context of the first Hungarian Grand Prix, which played a landmark role in the opening of Formula One to the Eastern Bloc. The paper takes a closer look at both the political circumstances that made

the event possible in 1986, particularly in the context of the Cold War and the growing penetration of Western influence into Central and Eastern Europe. The paper aims to show the Hungarian Grand Prix as a key moment in the building of motorsport relations between East and West and its impact on the further development of Formula One. The paper places particular emphasis on the course of the race and its importance in popularising the sport in regions hitherto isolated from Western forms of entertainment and culture.

The analysis is based on a critical review of source material, such as archival footage of the races and press material, which provides an understanding of the significance of the event from a sporting, political and cultural perspective. The conclusions indicate that the Hungarian Grand Prix became a symbol of the changes taking place in the final phase of the Cold War, acting as a bridge between two worlds and setting new directions for Formula One.

Introduction

Motorsport is one of the most important sports that exist in the world, although the threshold for entry is high. One of the most prestigious branches of motorsport is Formula One, often referred to as its “queen”. Heads of state have often been seen at its races.¹ So-called sports diplomacy, i.e. elements of

¹ “President Sheikh Mohamed and UAE royals attend F1 in Abu Dhabi,” The National, November 26, 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/2023/11/26/president-sheikh-mohamed-attends-abu-dhabi-grand-prix/>.

international cooperation centred around sport, was also conducted around it.

The 1986 Hungarian Grand Prix was a landmark event that symbolically opened Formula One to the countries of the Eastern Bloc. The aim of this paper will be to present this Grand Prix as a breakthrough in the opening of East-West motorsport relations. The paper will give the course of the race in order to better understand its significance for the world of Formula One. The analysis will be based on a critical analysis of the sources, i.e. press materials and archival recordings of the races.

Discussion

Historical Background: Hungarian Grand Prix 1936

On the wave of popularity of the growing motorsport in the world and the formation of many organisations for fans of so-called automobiles,² in 1935 the organisation standardising motor racing called the Association Internationale des Automobile Clubs Reconnus based in Paris (AIACR) gave permission to the Királyi Magyar Automobil Club (KMAC) to hold a prestigious and international car race, one of the Grand Prix, or literally grand prizes. This opened the floodgates for Hungarian racing fans to witness a 50-lap race over 250 kilometres

² *Automobile racing | History, Types & Safety*, Britannica, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/sports/automobile-racing>.

on the track at Népliget, the People's Park in Budapest.³ The leading teams of the time entered the race, including German powerhouses Auto Union and Mercedes-Benz, as well as Italy's Maserati. Sixteen drivers entered the race, while eleven were qualified and seven reached the finish line.⁴ The event was held in front of a large crowd and adverse weather conditions, making it even more challenging. The falling rain made the track slippery, which made driving riskier and fraught with danger, while the pre-heated tarmac melted and introduced a similar effect.⁵ The race itself was won by the Italian, Tazio Nuvolari, who drove an Alfa Romeo 8C-35 with a 3.8-litre inline eight-cylinder engine for the Ferrari team.⁶

The 1936 Hungarian Grand Prix was one of the few Grand Prix races held in the Eastern Europe before the outbreak of the Second World War. The event is part of the long history of motorsport in Hungary and helps to understand, among other things, why the country was the first to feature on the Formula One calendar among the countries of the later socialist bloc.

³ H. Liesemeijer, "Népliget Budapest 1936 Hungarian Grand Prix Circuit," *Circuits of the Past*, accessed November 13, 2024, <https://www.circuitsofthepast.com/nepliget-budapest-1936-hungarian-grand-prix-circuit/>.

⁴ „1936 Hungarian Grand Prix winner, full results and reports | Motorsport Database,” *Motor Sport Magazine*, accessed November 13, 2024. <https://www.motorsportmagazine.com/database/races/1936-hungarian-grand-prix/>.

⁵ L. Snellman, F. Muelas, "I MAGYAR NAGY DIJ", *The Golden Era of Grand Prix Racing*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140316205027/http://www.kolumbus.fi/leif.snellman/gp363.htm#17>, accessed January 7, 2025.

⁶ P. Darnall, „Alfa Romeo 8C35 Grand Prix Cars,” *VeloceToday.com*, <https://velocetoday.com/alfa-romeo-8c35-grand-prix-cars/>.

Historical Background: Bernie Ecclestone and his Role in Formula One

For an understanding of the Hungarian Grand Prix and the sporting contacts in this area between the Eastern and Western worlds, the figure of Bernie Ecclestone is crucial. Ecclestone began his career as a driver and then manager and owner of various teams in the early years of Formula One, a sporting formula born out of the pre-war tradition of organising Grand Prix races. In 1974, together with legends of the sport, Frank Williams, Colin Chapman, Teddy Mayer, Ken Tyrrell, and Max Mosley, he formed the Formula One Constructors Association (the FOCA), an organisation that brings together teams and protects their interests vis-à-vis the Fédération Internationale du Sport Automobile (FISA), the Formula One governing body spun off to this task by the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA). His biggest contribution to the so-called *war between FISA and FOCA* was the establishment of percentage rates for himself, the teams and the race organising body from television broadcasting rights.⁷ As a result of these actions, Bernie accumulated a significant wealth and, due to his status as a good manager and his possession of considerable cash resources, he virtually became the person in charge of Formula One.⁸ He played a key role in the Hungarian Grand Prix agreement.

⁷ „Bernie Ecclestone, the man behind Formula One.”, *BBC News*, November 12, 1997, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/29426.stm.

⁸ Ibid.

Agreement on the 1986 Hungarian Grand Prix

Back in the early 1980s, Bernie Ecclestone was already living the obsession of running a race behind the Iron Curtain, in the Soviet Union, China or Yugoslavia. He considered including a race in the Eastern Europe, as an element to attract new spectators and sponsors. Talks and plans continued on the occasion of the 1980 Olympics, where Ecclestone personally met with Leonid Brezhnev, then First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, talks with the Soviet authorities encountered too many obstacles and ultimately failed.⁹ Ecclestone's attention was soon drawn to Hungary, where the authorities were more open to cooperation with the West and the economy was undergoing some reforms in the spirit of liberalisation, known as Goulash Communism. The idea for this implementation was suggested by Tamás Rohonyi¹⁰ and Frank Tamás.¹¹

The Hungarian authorities were interested in hosting the Grand Prix for several reasons. It was seen as an opportunity to promote the country internationally and attract tourists and investors. Formula One was very popular in the West and also had its fans in the Eastern Bloc countries, including Hungary.

⁹ „A Grand Prix in Russia?”, *grandprix.com*, January 4, 1999, accessed November 13, 2024, <https://www.grandprix.com/news/a-grand-prix-in-russia.html>.

¹⁰ P. Zając, “GP Węgier: Jak w 1986 roku na Węgrzech skończył się komunizm.”, *Parc Fermé*, July 17, 2020, <https://parcfer.me/f1/gp-wegier-jak-w1986-roku-na-wegrzech-skonczy-l-sie-komunizm>.

¹¹ Q. Spurring, “Hungaroring executive found dead in Budapest”, *Autoweek*, June 7, 2012, accessed January 2, 2025, <https://www.autoweek.com/racing/formula-1/a1960151/hungaroring-executive-found-dead-budapest/>.

Initial plans included the previous *Népliget* track, a street circuit in the park, followed by another temporary facility in Városliget. Eventually, it was decided to construct a new circuit for motor racing. *The Hungaroring* circuit, built in the hills in Mogyoród, the valley of the three springs, just around twenty kilometres from Budapest, was built in record time – eight months – and opened on 24 March 1986. The track was to be extremely modern and was designed by István Papp and Ferenc Gulácsi.¹²

The track is difficult and technical, problematic for overtaking rivals on it, and its shape was partly forced by an underground jet stream. Its length is 4.014 km. It has even been described as *an oversized go-kart track*. The track is hot during the summer races and its surface is covered with a lot of windblown dust.¹³ This information is important from the perspective of the technical development of the track in later years.

Hungarian Grand Prix 1986

On 10 August 1986, for the first time ever, the Hungarian Grand Prix was held at the *Hungaroring* circuit. The race attracted a huge audience from all over the Eastern Europe, both fans from Hungary and the neighbouring Eastern Bloc countries, as well as racing fans from (both) Germany or Austria.¹⁴

¹² P. Zając, “GP Węgier: Jak w 1986 roku na Węgrzech skończył się komunizm.”

¹³ „History of the Race Track,” *Hungaroring Sport ZRt*, accessed November 13, 2024, <https://hungaroring.hu/site/en/about-us/history-of-the-track>.

¹⁴ B. Remenyik and C. Molnár, “The role of the Formula One Grand Prix in Hungary’s tourism.” *Prosperitas*, vol. IV, March 2017: 96.

Bernie Ecclestone, when asked in an interview before the start of the race, said that organising the race *was easy*.¹⁵ When asked again why the Hungarians wanted to hold the race at home, he replied that it was to showcase and promote the country to the world. Nigel Mansell, a Williams team driver, said that his experience was positive and that the people were nice and helpful.¹⁶ Similar sentiments were expressed by other drivers when asked.

Twenty-six drivers entered qualifying, but the fastest time was set by Lotus driver Ayrton Senna, a young and talented Brazilian who tragically lost his life years later in an accident at Imola during the 1994 San Marino Grand Prix. Second place went to Nelson Piquet, another Brazilian driving for the Williams team. The most memorable moment of the race occurred when Piquet overtook Senna at the first corner in spectacular fashion, putting the car into a controlled slide in what became one of the most famous overtaking manoeuvres in F1 history. In the end, it was Piquet who emerged victorious from this contest, claiming first place, while Senna finished the race in second place. Nigel Mansell finished third, with only ten of the 26 drivers ultimately reaching the finish line.¹⁷

The Polish press, specifically *Przegląd Sportowy*, wrote about the race in glowing terms, and the article was placed on the front page. It was emphasised that the track was incredibly fast, and its construction was outstanding and flawless.

<https://prosperitas.uni-bge.hu/wp-content/prosperitas-upload/the-role-of-the-formula-1-grand-prix-in-hungarys-tourism-165.pdf>.

¹⁵ ESPN (dir.), *1986 Hungarian Grand Prix*, aired August 10, 1986.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ „Hungarian GP, 1986.”, *grandprix.com*, accessed November 13, 2024, <https://www.grandprix.com/races/hungarian-gp-1986.html>.

Despite this, journalist Jerzy Jankiewicz applied a very accessible dose of knowledge for the fans.¹⁸

The first Grand Prix behind the Iron Curtain also attracted sponsors, primarily the big brands associated with Formula One. These included tobacco manufacturers West and Marlboro, car parts manufacturers such as Magneti Marelli, car tyre manufacturers Goodyear and Pirelli, among others. 200,000 spectators attended the circuit.¹⁹ The result remained a record until the 1995 Australian Grand Prix in Adelaide, when the record was surpassed to 210,000. In the early years, Hungarian hotels, taking into account the interest of fans from the West, raised their prices. One hotel, the Sofitel, in 1986 pushed the price up to the equivalent of €400 today, and a booking could be made for no less than three or four nights.²⁰ This shows how important the race was for fans in Hungary and neighbouring countries.

The 1986 Hungarian Grand Prix was another of the landmark events, following the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo, among others, which overcame East-West barriers on the issue of sporting discipline. They were an interesting example of a possible East-West reconciliation despite the earlier boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow and the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, when first the side of the Western countries and then the side of the Eastern Bloc countries were boycotting. Western countries, including

¹⁸ J. Jankiewicz, "Nelson Piquet zwyciężył w rytym Czardasza.", *Przełąd Sportowy*, no. 153, August 11, 1986.

¹⁹ „Hungarian GP, 1986.”, *grandprix.com*.

²⁰ B. Remenyik and C. Molnár, 'The role of the Formula One Grand Prix in Hungary's tourism'.

the United States, boycotted the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow as a protest against the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan, which began in December 1979. The Eastern Bloc countries, led by the Soviet Union, boycotted the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles as a response to the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Games.²¹ The official reason was an alleged fear for the safety of their athletes in the United States and the accusation that the US authorities were waging a hostile campaign against socialist countries.²²

Hungarian Grand Prix 1987

The next edition of the race was no longer surrounded by so much of the exoticism of socialist Hungary, but a crowd of around 200,000 once again flocked to the circuit.²³ The race-course complex had developed compared to the previous year, but these were mainly improvements.

The 1987 Hungarian Grand Prix took place at the *Hungaroring* on 9 August 1987 and was the eighth round of the Formula One season. In qualifying, the best time was achieved by Nigel Mansell of the Williams team, which gave him first place on the grid. Williams was one of the top teams at the time and the FW11B car, equipped with the Honda V6 turbo engine,

²¹ P. Corthorn, 'The Cold War and British Debates over the Boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics', *Cold War History*, no. 13, 2012, p. 43–66.

²² R. S. Edelman, 'The Russians are not coming! The Soviet withdrawal from the games of the XXIII Olympiad.', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, no. 32.1, 2015, p. 9–36.

²³ ESPN (dir.), *1987 Hungarian Grand Prix*, aired August 9, 1987.

had great power and reliability, exemplifying the remarkable technical development and the great importance of developing power units whose reliability was crucial in the harsh conditions that the *Hungaroring* circuit definitely provided. The race itself was dramatic, with many changes of position. At the start, Mansell seemed to be the favourite for victory, but technical problems with a wheel on his car ruined his chances of winning. The win went to his teammate Nelson Piquet.²⁴ This victory was crucial in his battle for the world championship, which he eventually won at the end of the season.

Hungarian Grand Prix 1988

This edition of the race is remembered for the beginning of McLaren's racing dominance, as the team won fifteen out of sixteen race rounds. This season was also the beginning of a tough rivalry and hostility between the two team members towards each other. The two drivers, Brazilian Ayrton Senna and Frenchman Alain Prost, both McLaren drivers, gave their all. This season was fundamental to the development of Formula One, as McLaren's dominance of the competition forced other teams to radically change their approach to car design and team management. McLaren's technical superiority, combined with the incredible skills of Senna and Prost, inspired other teams to do more advanced research into aerodynamics, engines, and electronics. The intense rivalry between Senna and Prost also demonstrated the importance of striking

²⁴ „Hungarian GP, 1987.”, *grandprix.com*, accessed November 13, 2024, <https://www.grandprix.com/races/hungarian-gp-1987.html>.

a balance between driver talent and team harmony, which became a lesson for future teams trying to manage two stars at the same time. The introduction of advanced technologies in the cars, such as active suspension, as well as the emphasis on racing strategies and collaboration with engine suppliers, set new directions in Formula One that are still felt today.

In qualifying, McLaren confirmed its dominance. Ayrton Senna took pole position, his tenth of the season, demonstrating the superiority of his talent and the capabilities of the MP4/4 model, with his teammate Alain Prost lining up next to him on the grid. The McLaren-Honda, powered by a turbocharged engine, was clearly the fastest in the field. Senna held the lead after the start, but Prost chased him from seventh position, trying to find a way to overtake. Due to the characteristics of the track, the battle between the McLaren drivers was more strategic than direct. The biggest surprise was the very competitive performance of Thierry Boutsen in the Benetton, who put up a fight against the dominant McLarens. Similarly, Nelson Piquet, last season's champion, in the Lotus tried to get the best possible result but was unable to match the pace of his rivals at the front.²⁵

²⁵ „1988 Hungarian Grand Prix winner, full results and reports.”, *Motor Sport Magazine*, August 7, 1988, <https://www.motorsportmagazine.com/database/races/1988-hungarian-grand-prix/>.

Hungarian Grand Prix 1989

The year 1989 was a turning point in world history and the end of an era of the East and the West divided by barbed wire. Poland saw the Round Table and contractual elections in June. In Hungary, meanwhile, there was a refugee crisis, with Germans from the German Democratic Republic arriving *for holidays* and then trying to cross into Austria.²⁶

In Formula One, after a year of tough competition and a series of arguments with Ayrton Senna, Alain Prost decided to leave the then top McLaren team for one of the other teams, which turned out to be Ferrari. The *Hungaroring* was modified to remove one of the chicanes, a serpentine corner that forced the driver to slow down in order to increase overtaking opportunities, which were extremely difficult on the track.²⁷

The 1989 Hungarian Grand Prix took place on 13 August at the *Hungaroring* circuit and was the tenth round of the Formula One season. The race went down in history as one of the most surprising events of the year, mainly due to the winner and the exciting course of the competition. In qualifying, Ayrton Senna, representing McLaren, stood in second place. In front of him lined up Riccardo Patrese in the Williams, who showed very good pace. Alain Prost, McLaren's second driver and overall leader, only qualified fifth.

²⁶ K. Stokłosa, "Drogi ucieczki do wolności: Przez Budapeszt, Pragę i Warszawę do Republiki Federalnej Niemiec", *Jak patrzeć na Polskę, Niemcy i świat?*, 2017: 301–304.

²⁷ „History of the Race Track”, *Hungaroring Sport ZRt*.

The race was full of surprises. Breakdowns affected several of the leading drivers, which mixed the cards in the battle for the podium. Nigel Mansell, starting from 12th position, gradually moved to the front. His Ferrari proved to be fast on the *Hungaroring*, with the Briton overtaking his rivals one by one. As Mansell made his way to the front, he began a fierce duel with Ayrton Senna. Both drivers fought for victory, providing fans with unforgettable emotions.²⁸

In 1989 *Przegląd Sportowy* again put a mention of the race on the front page. It was a dry description of the facts and a summary of the race with a presentation of the race results and information about the current contender for the world title with the most points in the drivers' general classification.²⁹

Later years

After 1989, Hungary changed completely: the country became sovereign, transforming from the socialist state into the Republic of Hungary. The symbol of change in Europe was, of course, the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, and in Hungary this symbol was, among other things, the opening of the border with Austria in September that year.

Formula One continued to be popular in Hungary. Hungary was a much cheaper country for Western fans, additionally interesting and still *exotic*, attracting many from Germany

²⁸ J. Boxall, „Autosport 70: How Mansell bested Senna in the greatest F1 Hungarian GP ever.” *Autosport*, July 18, 2020, <https://www.autosport.com/f1/news/autosport-70-how-mansell-bested-senna-in-the-greatest-f1-hungarian-gp-ever-4981034/4981034/>.

²⁹ „Czarny koń górą.”, *Przegląd Sportowy*, no. 158, August 16, 1989.

and Austria. *The Hungaroring* also became a “home race” for Poles after the debut of Robert Kubica, the first Pole in Formula One, who scored his debut at this track in 2006, although he was eventually disqualified for underweight in the car.³⁰ This was an example of the involvement of drivers from countries that not so long ago were on the Soviet side of a world divided into East and West.

Conclusions

The 1986–1989 Hungarian Grand Prix races definitely played their part in promoting the Eastern Bloc among Western Formula One fans. During all its editions, in the era of the Hungarian People’s Republic, the attendance of fans at the track was almost record-breaking. The track itself was adorned with many advertisements of sponsors, mainly manufacturers of parts or accessories around the automotive industry and cigarette companies, which are global giants. The hotel market in Budapest and the surrounding area developed due to the need to build a large base of accommodation for the race organisers, teams, and spectators. The circuit itself was one of the most modern constructions of its kind in the world, and its record-breaking pace of construction stunned many heads. Formula One has established itself in Hungary to a very large extent, and the fact that the race has been held 38 times

³⁰ “Dramatyczny debiut, gigantyczny pech Kubicy,” *Auto Świat*, August 7, 2006, <https://www.auto-swiat.pl/dramatyczny-debiut-gigantyczny-pech-kubicy/zjexsh1>.

since 1986 underlines the quality of the facility, as well as the importance of the venue to the world of motorsport. It presents with certainty that the first edition of the Formula One Hungarian Grand Prix was a landmark in opening the West to racing in the East.

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Economic Transformation as an Identity Project: Neoliberalism, Hegemony, and the Crisis of Sovereignty in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

This article explores the complex interplay between neoliberalism, national identity, and sovereignty in the context of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. The post-1989 transformation of CEE was driven by neoliberal principles, which redefined the region's economic structures and socio-political landscapes. While these policies were initially embraced as pathways to modernization and the European Union (EU) membership, they often conflicted with local traditions and national values. This study is a theoretical approach and a critical content analysis that aims to study neoliberal structures and build the foundations for further theoretical analysis

of changes in CEE countries. In particular, this concerns the issue of growing populism and Euroscepticism, which – as this article shows – are born from the contradictions that arise within the neoliberal agenda. This article demonstrates how the creation and intensification of the neoliberal agenda progressed within institutions, but also across individuals. Presenting it against the background of CEE countries is an additional value because a critical look at identity changes in terms of economic transformation provides valuable conclusions in the context of the issue of sovereignty or identity of societies in CEE countries.

Keywords: economic transformation – hegemony – identity – neoliberalism – sovereignty crisis

Introduction

The issue of identity is the basis for socio-economic functioning and development. The post-1989 economic transformation of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) represents one of the most profound shifts in the region's history, one that reshaped not only its economic structures but also its national identities and perceptions of sovereignty. This transformation, deeply intertwined with neoliberal reforms advocated by the European Union (EU) and other international financial institutions, made CEE countries follow the neoliberal agenda, as prerequisites for EU accession and joining the Western countries. Neoliberalism emerged as both an economic framework and a hegemonic tool, embedding Western ideals of economic

modernity that were often at odds with local traditions and values. It is important to understand how neoliberalism and hegemony have intersected with concepts of national identity and sovereignty, setting the stage for the modern political and economic dynamics observed in the region. Understanding identity and structural issues is a starting point for understanding what drives contemporary populist movements that use narratives about the crisis of sovereignty. All this falls within – as this article will show – the identification project in the CEE region, developed under the aegis of economic transformation. For this purpose, critical content analysis will be used, through which it will be possible to assess how researchers of phenomena within the topic perceived changes.

The Concept of Neoliberalism, Hegemony and Feudality

This part will focus on outlining what neoliberalism is. As conceptualized by scholars like British-American professor David W. Harvey, neoliberalism reflects a global economic order prioritizing free-market principles, reducing state intervention, and promoting open competition as pathways to modernization.¹ It is important to understand that the EU had a benchmark in some international institutions, such as the World Bank (WB), the World Trade Organisation (WTO)

¹ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 2–4.

or the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The essential set of economic policy recommendations created in the United States (US) was named “the Washington Consensus”. In my opinion, this document has great importance on how EU treated the direction of reforms, having a massive influence in terms of hegemonical structure of the Western world from US and leading economic institutions. In 1989, the creator of this set (published in 1990)² – John Williamson – stated in one of his articles that:

The closest I can come to understanding this is to note that my version of the Washington Consensus did indeed focus principally on policy reforms that reduced the role of government, such as privatization and the liberalization of trade, finance, foreign direct investment, and entry and exit. It did this because the orthodoxy of the generation whose ideas were embodied in the practices being challenged in 1989 had been much more statist than was by then regarded as advisable, and hence the policy reforms that were needed at that time were all in the direction of liberalization. This need for liberalization did not necessarily imply a swing to the opposite extreme of market fundamentalism and a minimalist role for government, but such boring possibilities were repressed in the ideological debates of the 1990s.³

² John Williamson, “What Washington Means by Policy Reform,” in *Latin American Adjustment: How Much Has Happened?*, ed. John Williamson (Institute for International Economics, 1990).

³ John Williamson, “What Should the World Bank Think about the Washington Consensus?,” *The World Bank Research Observer* 15, no. 2 (2000): 255–256, <https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/15.2.251>.

It is interesting how Cristoph Hermann made an assumption that:

With this short overview of neoliberal policies, I do not want to leave the impression that neoliberalism is a well-developed and coherent political strategy. Many of the policies are contradictory and pragmatic responses to the shortcomings and antinomies of neoliberal assumptions as formulated in the Washington Consensus. [...] While neoliberalism is an international agenda, the implementation of neoliberal policies is, nevertheless, dependent on local struggles and compromises.⁴

Yet, in the CEE context, the adoption of these principles was not merely an economic choice; it became a cultural and political project, embedding a Western-oriented identity while often marginalizing traditional social structures and values. This transformation aligns with Antonio Gramsci's theories of hegemony, wherein dominant ideologies shape societies' social and cultural landscapes, creating a "common sense" that legitimizes specific political and economic orders.⁵ The EU's promotion of neoliberalism as a criterion for integration thus acted as a hegemonic force, reshaping national identities and pushing CEE countries to align more closely with Western economic and cultural standards. But what does "hegemonic" means? Gramsci itself defined it in on the basis

⁴ Cristoph Hermann, „Neoliberalism in the European Union,” *Studies in Political Economy* 79, no. 1 (2007): 67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19187033.2007.11675092>.

⁵ Antonio Gramsci, "Selections from the prison Notebooks," edited and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (International Publishers, 1991), 12–13; 134; 326.

of the concept of “domination”, where the relations between the forces which defends their economic positions struggles with non-hegemonic groups or classes, which are supposed to be “subordinate”.⁶ The collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the transformation that followed resulted in an ideological reversal of trends in the CEE region. They were caused not only by the fact that a system based on certain rigid conceptual and functional frameworks ceased to exist. The sudden change, despite the requirement for immediate systemic adjustment, initiated a transformation of identity. Alain Supiot’s insights on neoliberalism and European identity further illuminate the impact of these policies on the region’s sovereignty and identity. As Supiot stated:

This revival of feudal bonds is most visible in European law. The supreme power presiding over European institutions is clearly not a sovereign power. The EU directives destined for member states should not be confused with laws, whatever the misunderstandings generated on this issue by Draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. If there is one defining characteristic of this legal order, it is that it transforms member states into vassals of a European Union which is itself deprived of most of the attributes of sovereignty over its citizens. In other words, the supreme authority in Europe has only indirect power over its own populations and requires the mediation of its member states, in the same way the human body requires limbs.⁷

⁶ Ibid., xii-xiv.

⁷ Alain Supiot, *The Spirit of Philadelphia: Social Justice vs. The Total Market* (Verso, 2012), 84.

He argues that European integration, especially through neoliberal economic principles, can erode local governance and national identity, promoting a singular European identity that risks overshadowing regional differences.⁸ For him, this is a sign of the limits of dependence, where:

The market – the cornerstone of the European Community – was ‘common’ insofar as it was based both on competition between companies and solidarity between countries. But this version was doomed from the moment member states and the Commission backed the idea of a total market in which any obstacle to the free circulation of goods and capital, in whatever sector or country it existed, was targeted for destruction. This unchecked extension of the market inevitably destroyed solidarity between member states and introduced competition between their national legal systems.⁹

The gist of this argument is that universal deregulation and an attempt to create a uniform system – in which there are unequal players – leads to a contradiction. This contradiction is a natural symptom of the fact that individual countries, which as a result of participation in the common EU market are less technologically advanced and produce less, are afraid of stronger rivals. On the opposing side there is the concept of solidarity and the idea of interfering with the markets as boldly as possible in order to create a common organism. Economic protectionism is largely due to the fact that a country wishing to apply it has a clear interest in protecting

⁸ Ibid., 87–90.

⁹ Ibid., 87.

its economy or a specific sector from stronger rivals. Nonetheless, the rules imposed within the European Community, for which the chance of using such mechanisms decreases with the growing strength of the institutions governing the common market, bear a sign of hegemonism. CEE countries had to – and still have to – face these types of challenges because after their accession to the EU in 2004 they belong to the group of countries that Gramsci referred to as “subordinate”.¹⁰ However, as Supiot himself noted:

The free circulation of goods and capital is not an end in itself, and it is only of value if it really helps improve people’s lives. It is for the law to extend or restrict the free market, depending on whether the latter enriches people’s working lives and protects them from poverty, or whether on the contrary it deprives people of work and plunges them into poverty. [...] Controlling the circulation of goods between these huge markets would encourage long-term investment, since companies could be confident that all competitors were playing by the same rules. And opportunistic and volatile investments which aim at re-importing onto a home market product whose conditions of manufacture have infringed the social and environmental rules in force on home ground would be less attractive.¹¹

For CEE countries the process of neoliberalization, initially embraced as a symbol of liberation from the Eastern bloc, gradually revealed its implications for national autonomy.

¹⁰ Gramsci, “Selections from the Prison Notebooks,” xii–xiv.

¹¹ Supiot, *The Spirit of Philadelphia: Social Justice vs. The Total Market*, 88.

Market liberalization often led to significant foreign ownership of critical industries, placing strategic economic sectors under external control, which, in turn, affected perceptions of sovereignty. It is important to understand the power and dominance of leading institutions. “Their power has grown in proportion to the decline in the power of nation states”,¹² and because of that – in recent years – a populist backlash against this model has emerged in many CEE countries, challenging the EU’s neoliberal orthodoxy. Populist leaders in Hungary and Poland, for instance, have increasingly framed national identity and sovereignty as values to be protected from Western economic and cultural hegemony, positioning themselves in opposition to EU-imposed neoliberal policies. This movement highlights the inherent tension within the Europeanization project, as CEE nations navigate the complex balance between adopting EU norms and preserving their unique identities. As the crisis of Western hegemony intensifies globally, CEE countries are at a crossroads, reconsidering the extent to which their integration with the EU serves their national interests. The interplay between neoliberal hegemony, identity, and sovereignty in the CEE context invites a revaluation of European integration and its long-term impacts. It is worth to look closer how the EU’s neoliberal agenda has reshaped economic structures, cultural identities, and sovereignty perceptions in CEE countries, drawing on both theoretical insights and empirical evidence to assess the region’s current position in the European project.

¹² Ibid., 89.

Neoliberal Transformation within CEE Countries – the Problem with Globalization?

The economic restructuring of CEE in the post-1989 era represents a defining moment of adaptation and integration with the EU, guided by neoliberal principles mentioned in the second part of the chapter, for example market liberalization, privatization, and deregulation, which are serving as the cornerstone of the transition. These policies not only reshaped the CEE economic landscape but also served as a mechanism of alignment with Western capitalist systems, fundamentally transforming national economies and laying a crucial foundation for eventual EU membership. This section examines the adoption and impact of neoliberal policies in the CEE region, analysing the process both as a pragmatic pathway to development and as a hegemonic force embedded in EU conditionalities. Here, critical theory offers an essential lens through which to explore the complexities of this transformation, particularly regarding the tension between economic modernization and the erosion of local autonomy.

O'Donnell and Schmitter undertook an analysis of the transition. They define “transition” as the “interval between one political regime and another”.¹³ In the case of CEE countries, it offered the introduction of a certain form of democracy including a market system. Dani Rodrik emphasized the importance of the WTO regime, which was established only in 1995, but was the driving force behind global economic

¹³ Guillermo A. O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from authoritarian rule* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 6.

changes. For Rodrik, the WTO proposed and implemented a new type of globalization – hyper-globalization.¹⁴ It meant that any economic management within a country or region had to be subject to international trade and financial flows, and this type of globalization integrated markets primarily based on capital and product exchange, but not necessarily the international recognition and exchange of labor. This type of thinking, promoted by the then most powerful economy in the world and world-famous institutions that were created to maintain the status quo, became more and more deeply rooted in the political and social reality. In particular since the 1980s, when globalization processes became an imperative against which it was impossible to argue. All this was justified – according to Rodrik – by the emphasis on the international competitiveness of countries.¹⁵ The above-mentioned imperative was followed by what was discussed in the earlier parts of this work – deregulation, pressure to reduce taxes (especially corporate taxes), austerity policies and reducing the influence of the labor force, for example through trade unions. The result was the growing role of international corporations aiming at global expansion. When this is achieved – as noticed by representatives of the Frankfurt School and Claude Ake himself – the neoliberal system begins to penetrate deep into the human being. These types of actions cause two types of reactions: either passivity and submission, or firm opposition. Still, returning to the initial considerations, Rodrik seems to

¹⁴ Dani Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2011), 50–54.

¹⁵ Ibid., 50–54.

confirm the enormous influence of the Washington Consensus and the resulting market fundamentalism, identified with neoliberal ideology.¹⁶ Liberalization was also one of the crucial elements of hyper-globalization and, at the same time, of the market fundamentalists' narrative. This "liberalization" was to offer – apart from the recognition of individual freedom and democracy – economic growth, which after the transformation period influenced the shaping of both their economies and political systems. It is worth emphasizing, however, that liberalization can take place without democratization, hence the transformation of CEE countries and the implementation of Western standards carried a specific set of values.¹⁷ Thanks to these authors' observations, one can see how these transformations influence the sovereignty and democratic processes in CEE, as the region was often forced to choose between maintaining traditional economic structures or aligning with Western-imposed reforms.

Nonetheless, to talk about this type of processes that reach beyond certain national, regional and even continental frameworks, we need to look at what is entailed by the process of opening state borders and economies, commonly called globalization. Globalization is a key piece of the puzzle here, because by its nature it blurs certain symbolic borders of a cultural, national or economic nature. Nigerian political philosopher Claude Ake noted that it was the economic foundations that led to globalization processes. Globalization represents a further step in the evolution of the capitalist system, which

¹⁶ Ibid., 51–55.

¹⁷ O'Donnell, Schmitter, *Transitions from authoritarian rule*, 9–11.

subjugates reality through global expansion and hegemony, unifying the world under the banner of a common market, production system, and consumption method. Ake pointed to the “creation of a global mass culture” and “ever-developing communication technologies”,¹⁸ symbols of the fourth industrial revolution known as the “information revolution”. Although Ake focused on democracy, his reflections perfectly align with the global trend characterizing the development of the capitalist system. He outlines the source of the process that took place in CEE and is still ongoing. Globalization, which Ake considered economically driven, occurred as a spatial form of the spread of capitalism. The failure of really existing socialism (referring to Soviet-type economic planning) resulted in the immediate consumption of CEE societies and economies by capitalism, which was only given a democratic character due to the requirement of membership in the EU.

The logic presented above was highlighted in particular in a report commissioned by the WB, which focused on the strategy of transition from the planned economy of the former Soviet bloc countries to free market capitalism.¹⁹ The whole report provides further details the economic restructuring process in the post-communist world, advocating a rapid shift from planned to market economies as the optimal path to economic stability and growth. Yet, in practice, this shift produced highly varied outcomes across the region, often

¹⁸ Claude Ake, „Niebezpieczne związki: globalizacja a demokracja,” in *Przyszłość demokracji. Wybór tekstów*, ed. P. Rymarczyk (Biblioteka Polityczna Aletheia, 2005), 327.

¹⁹ Barr et al., *World Development Report 1996: from Plan to Market* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

exacerbating inequality and creating a dual economic structure in which key industries were privatized and often sold to Western corporations. Critically speaking, one could argue that the WB's approach reinforced a Western-centric model of economic development that prioritized global market integration over the preservation of local economic autonomy, leading to dependencies that later fuelled populist and nationalist critiques of neoliberalism. The report itself contains many fragments that fit the neoliberal agenda of those times. One of them is the following:

Most of [...] economies have rejected all or much of central planning and have embarked on a passage – a transition – toward decentralized market mechanisms underpinned by widespread private ownership. Not all follow the same path. [...] Whereas political change toward multiparty democracy was a prime objective in the post-1989 reforms in CEE and the newly independent states of the former USSR, neither China, which initiated economic reforms in 1978, nor Vietnam has experienced a political transition away from governments dominated by the Communist Party. There is thus tremendous variety in the departure points, strategies, and outcomes of transition across countries. Most of the world's economies, at one time or another, have lifted price controls, opened trade, or privatized state enterprises – with varying degrees of success.²⁰

This description shows the perspective not only of the CEE region, but also the global aspect of the transition in the Far East. However, the essence is a positive view of general

²⁰ Ibid., 3.

privatization, openness to free trade and marketization of prices. Another interesting fragment is the one about liberalization:

Why is liberalization so important? It decentralizes production and trading decisions to enterprises and households and directly addresses the two fundamental weaknesses of central planning: poor incentives and poor information. Liberalization exposes firms to customer demand, the profit motive, and competition, and it lets relative prices adjust in line with true scarcities. Liberalized markets process information better than central planners, and when goods and services are traded freely, the price mechanism – Adam Smith’s invisible hand – matches demand and supply. In most cases the outcome is efficient. [...] Whereas planned economies experienced low or negative overall productivity growth despite high capital accumulation, at least half of output growth in advanced market economies since World War II has resulted from productivity gains. Creating markets is an investment in a more dynamic system of economic coordination that fosters long-run productivity and output growth. Finally, liberalization, by depoliticizing resource allocation, helps governments cut subsidies to firms and thus facilitates economic stabilization.²¹

The comment for those fragments itself was published two years later, in 1998 by Gil Eyal, Iván Szelényi and Eleanor R. Townsley. The main message of this book is that the absence of an indigenous capitalist class in CEE created a power vacuum that foreign capital eagerly filled. The authors argue that

²¹ Barr et al., *World Development Report 1996: from Plan to Market*, 22.

this “capitalism without capitalists” left CEE countries vulnerable to external influence, as former socialist bureaucrats often took over privatized industries, working under Western-dictated neoliberal conditions. This perspective is essential in understanding how CEE countries navigated their economic transformations under the double pressure of integrating into the EU’s neoliberal order while attempting to preserve some semblance of national control over economic assets. This perspective is especially important because Polish society in 1993 and Hungarian society in 1994 made their approach to transformation known by choosing parties in democratic elections that were called “ex-communist”.²² As authors highlighted:

The message was: pursue the radical transformation of the economy, privatization, and monetary sobriety, but with caution, and with sufficient attention to the needs of state enterprises, their managers, and even their workers. Was capitalism from above inevitable, then? Both managers and intellectuals gave claimed that it was. They point out that capitalism from below during the late socialist period was a dead-end street. The second economy and the emergent new private sector co-existed with the state economy in a symbiotic way that could not be counted on to produce dynamic evolution towards a fully-fledged capitalist economy.²³

Understanding this perspective is the key to discovering identity that has changed as a result of economic transformation.

²² Gil Eyal et al., *Making Capitalism Without Capitalists: The New Ruling Elites in Eastern Europe* (Verso, 1998), 183.

²³ Ibid., 183.

Thanks to these researchers, they managed to gain a unique sociological insight into the transition from Soviet-style state socialism towards a free-market corporate idyll. Crucially, no class could take over the responsibilities of “capitalists”, either in as state capitalists who run the reins of a centrally planned economy, or as private capitalists in the local sense. This resulted in exposure of political and socio-economic structures to the dominant forces that constitute hegemony as described by Gramsci. This process contributes to the analysis of how deeply capitalism can take root in an individual and at the same time influence her identity.

The rapid imposition of neoliberal principles can be seen as a form of structural coercion, where EU membership was predicated upon the acceptance of Western economic norms at the expense of local sovereignty. The adoption of liberal market policies in exchange for EU support underscores a neoliberal hegemonic project that, while promoting integration, also prioritized compliance over self-determined economic models. As CEE economies embraced market liberalization, their reliance on Western capital and markets intensified, challenging the notion of economic sovereignty and sparking debates around the “conditional” nature of Europeanization. Nonetheless, it must be stated that neoliberal transformation in CEE was far from a simple adoption of Western economic practices. It involved a complex renegotiation of national sovereignty, identity, and autonomy. The structural changes brought about by privatization, deregulation, and market liberalization – especially seen in a logic of Washington Consensus – fundamentally altered the socio-economic fabric of CEE, creating a legacy of dependency that continues to shape the region’s economic policies and

identity. This analysis highlights the need to view the neoliberal transformation of CEE not just as a functional economic strategy, but as a deeply political and ideological process, shaped by the intersection of European hegemony, economic modernization, and the ongoing struggle for national sovereignty. Analysis of the identification project that took place after the collapse of the Soviet bloc mandates an answer to a preliminary question – how could the economic transformation affect the identification of CEE societies, and where do the radical and populist, right-wing populist deviations in the former Soviet bloc countries come from?

The Collapse of the Nation State and Democracy? – Capitalism, National Identity, and the Rise of Populism

Capitalism is the starting point for a new form of economic system that has been implemented in CEE countries. We cannot consider the nature of democracy – especially liberal democracy – without taking into account what capitalism entails. By tracing the historical processes related to democracy Ake noticed that contemporary liberal democracy is a shallow one. Its shallowness consists in the effective abandonment of the rule and sovereignty of the people, assumed as parts of the classical definition of democracy, for economic reasons.²⁴ These are primarily related to globalization, which “pushes the

²⁴ Ake, „Niebezpieczne związki: globalizacja a demokracja,” 323–324, 326.

desocialization of market society towards the abolition of the conditions that make political consciousness and a politically engaged people possible”.²⁵ The author himself believes that “globalization processes have an even more radical impact on the prospects for democracy because they pose a threat of the abolition of society”,²⁶ which the author identifies with the end of capitalist hegemony that followed the Cold War. This perspective gives the market a unique status, because it is not so much above the state, but also does not allow the state to play a significant role or gain any kind of independence. State activity – in line with the neoliberal agenda – is identified with something undesirable, because the market will take care of itself. This functions like a certain modern and global theology, because the market thus completely subsumes society.

As society becomes a market, market values and operational norms come to characterize society as well. This is why consumption, the driving force of the market, has become particularly important in the modern world. Consumption is no longer about making life easier; it is not a means or even a necessity. It took on an existential character and became a true sign of identity. We consume, therefore we are. Our economic identity as consumers increasingly dominates our identity as citizens or even as people – a fact that is reflected in the profound alienation experienced by a large, consumerist segment of our society. [...] Those who do not have the opportunity to be included in the consumer list might as well die because they are of no use to themselves and to everyone else.²⁷

²⁵ Ibid., 331.

²⁶ Ibid., 329.

²⁷ Ibid., 330.

Therefore, it is extremely important to interpret the relationship between globalization processes and capitalism in its identity-forming role. These issues also seem to be confirmed by Bauman, as he pays particular attention to a critical perspective on globalization that illuminates the effects of neoliberalism on local identities. He emphasizes that globalization is a process marked by so-called liquid modernity, where cultural and social values become fluid and less anchored in stable traditions, thereby destabilizing local identities.²⁸ Ulrich Beck highlighted that globalization redefines power structures, weakening the influence of nation-states and creating a “global risk perception” in which national sovereignty becomes increasingly vulnerable to external forces.²⁹ He also states that:

Globalization, however, has introduced a new space and framework for acting politics is no longer subject to the same boundaries as before, and it is no longer tied solely to state actors and institutions, the result being that additional players, new roles, new resources, unfamiliar rules and new contradictions and conflicts appear on the scene.³⁰

Globalization is responsible for consolidating the global hegemony of capitalism, but at the same time it is a symbolic dimension of capitalist expansion. One should ask

²⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Polity, 1998), 12–26, 70.

²⁹ Ulrich Beck, *Power in the Global Age: A New Global Political Economy* (Polity, 2005), 252–254.

³⁰ Beck, *Power in the Global Age: A New Global Political Economy*, 3–4.

oneself – are there any geographical boundaries that capitalism could not cross? Personally, I think they are not. Capitalism and the resulting imperative of competitiveness, efficiency and intensity are the requirements of the modern, global system of production and consumption. This system has led to the creation of multinational corporations that have unprecedented, unrestricted reach and a multitude of resources to use. In addition to a highly homogeneous society, this creates an environment of universal competition. This is where the concept of open borders, propagated in CEE countries after the transition, comes into play. The Western-centric perspective and the neoliberal agenda have left CEE countries exposed to constant and global surveillance – without any possibility of hiding, without any shelter, from the global hierarchy based on capitalist logic.³¹ This type of exposure to global society also causes tensions and anxiety, as the global market tries to standardize values and spread uncertainty related to the transformation of cultures. The radical reconstruction of consumer identity, inherent in the materialistic and technocratic culture of capitalism, affects exposed, uncovered individuals. Identity issues become a source of problems, fueled by subjective superficiality and a deep belief in the need to consume constantly. The goal of this transition is to maintain the global capitalist system within its hegemonic structures, which may symbolically resemble the feudal system. If the imposition of an aggressive, technocratic, and materialistic culture is the action, the reaction consists in a desperate backlash against

³¹ Ake, „Niebezpieczne związki: globalizacja a demokracja,” 336.

these processes – populism, skepticism and nationalism. To conclude, let me quote the words of Claude Ake:

When the market subsumes society and the consumer identity becomes the dominant identity, conducting democratic politics – or, for that matter, any politics at all – becomes virtually impossible. This is not surprising because the market represents particularism, selfishness and concern for purely private matters, while democratic politics is universal. Democratic politics is about collective endeavours and ways of solving common problems. In fact, where there is no initial presumption of the existence of a common cause and the relative “homogeneity” of society that makes the existence of this common cause possible, the basis for democratic participation disappears.³²

Identity in the Conditions of Transformation: Between Neoliberal Universalism and Local Social Structures

Economic and political changes brought about by neoliberalism would not have taken root if not for their implementation within the identity framework of CEE societies. The transformation entailed a profound and far-reaching process of reshaping both individual and collective identities. Still, identity can be understood in several ways. The perspective I adopt focuses on social identity which Piotr Sztompka defines as follows:

³² Ibid., 330.

Social identity is an individual's place in the interhuman space, among others, generating a sense of community – both as the subjective feeling of 'we' and as an objectively defined position within the social structure, shaped by occupied social positions and performed social roles within a shared social environment. The sense of belonging to 'us' is accompanied by an awareness of distinction, or even hostility, toward outsiders, referred to as 'them'.³³

In the context of liquid modernity, Zygmunt Bauman pointed out that it is marked by the "privatization" of values and lifestyles, while identity itself has become fragile, temporary, and lacking any foundation beyond the determination of those who embody it.³⁴ From a philosophical perspective, identity is neither an essential, primordial substance nor a transparent form that can be shaped at will. In the tradition of modern philosophy, identity – whether individual or collective – has been understood as subject to a dialectical tension between agency and structure, freedom and necessity, the constitutive "self" and the world that conditions it. In this sense – akin to Stuart Hall's understanding – every identity is a process rather than a static fact, emerging as the outcome of interactions and tensions between social, economic, and political structures.³⁵ It exists solely in motion, in the

³³ Piotr Sztompka, *Słownik socjologiczny 1000 pojęć* (Znak Horyzont, 2020), 324.

³⁴ Zygmunt Baumann, *Płynna nowoczesność* (Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006), 276–277.

³⁵ Stuart Hall, "Who Needs 'Identity,'" in: *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. S. Hall & P. du Gay (SAGE Publications: London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 1996), 1–5.

act of continuous becoming. Thus, the systemic transformation experienced by CEE societies after 1989 was not merely a replacement of one political and economic order with another but also a radical revaluation of how individuals and communities positioned themselves in relation to the world. In this context, neoliberalism can be understood not only as an economic project but also as a form of cultural hegemony, imposing specific ways of thinking about oneself and the world:

As neoliberalism wages war on public goods and the very idea of a public, including citizenship beyond membership, it dramatically thins public life without killing politics. Struggles remain overpower, hegemonic values, resources, and future trajectories. This persistence of politics amid the destruction of public life and especially educated public life, combined with the marketization of the political sphere, is part of what makes contemporary politics peculiarly unappealing and toxic— full of ranting and posturing, emptied of intellectual seriousness, pandering to an uneducated and manipulable electorate and a celebrity-and-scandal-hungry corporate media. Neoliberalism generates a condition of politics absent democratic institutions that would support a democratic public and all that such a public represents at its best: informed passion, respectful deliberation, aspirational sovereignty, sharp containment of powers that would overrule or undermine it.³⁶

³⁶ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos. Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Zone Books: New York, 2015), 39.

If we agree with Martin Heidegger that human beings do not exist outside their *thrownness* (*Geworfenheit*), then we must also acknowledge that every systemic change reconfigures the horizons of their existence – not through abstract regulatory codes, but through the everyday materiality of life. To quote the German philosopher: “The being of *Dasein* is its ‘there’ in such a way that – whether explicitly or not – it finds itself in its thrownness.”³⁷ This perspective compels us to define a cognitive stance that, in a broader context, gives meaning to the thrownness of *Dasein*. However, this stance is situated in a certain abstract space, in which “*Dasein* is disclosed in its being exposed to its ‘there.’”³⁸ At this point, the issue of “there” (*Da*) emerges as a fundamental element of Heidegger’s philosophy. The first thought that comes to mind may be the spatial placement of *Dasein* in a specific location and time, in a more or less defined “there.” However, the spatial connotations related to physical space are not the essence of “there,” but rather the spatiality of meaning-making and intersubjective relations, along with the sphere in which our self-understanding takes shape.³⁹ Thus, we must assume that our *Dasein* does not appear as a stasis but as a metastable configuration of dynamic displacement. It is not space, but spatiality of meaning-making that is subject to constant deconstruction and reinscription within a broader process, in which the significance of being is always affectively marked

³⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Bycie i czas* (Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2004), 174.

³⁸ Heidegger, *Bycie i czas*, 173.

³⁹ Otto Pöggeler, *Droga myślowa Martina Heideggera* (Czytelnik, 2002), 58.

by the perspective of its potential *Dasein*. Translating this from philosophical language, neoliberalism did not merely impose a specific set of economic rules – it also defined what it means to be a subject. In this sense, neoliberalism is not only an economic project but, above all, an ontological one. Just as modernity shaped the subject through its relation to state sovereignty and social institutions, late capitalism produces the subject as an autonomous individual, both capable of and obligated to self-regulation. Wendy Brown observes that neoliberalism radicalizes the tradition of political liberalism while simultaneously distorting its premises: individual freedom is no longer understood as political liberty but as economic freedom, which subordinates every dimension of life to the logic of entrepreneurship and competition.⁴⁰ In other words, the subject ceases to be a citizen and becomes capital – a self-investment. The conclusion follows naturally, despite its overlap with Claude Ake’s reflections: in the neoliberal world, identity becomes a function of market value. Just as in the classical model, the modern subject constituted itself in relation to state sovereignty, contemporary subject is shaped in relation to market mechanisms – it is as much a subject as it can manage itself in terms of productivity, mobility, and flexibility. In this way, neoliberalism paradoxically becomes hegemonic in the Gramscian sense: its power does not lie in overt domination but in the way it redefines “common sense” – what it means to be human, how one should function in society, which practices and values are acceptable, and which

⁴⁰ Brown, *Undoing the Demos. Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, 9–13, 28–34.

are destined for marginalization. However, this does not mean that the subject's identity is entirely determined by the system. Every hegemony generates resistance, every totalizing narrative cracks under the pressure of practices that cannot be fully subsumed within it. In this sense, the transformation of CEE states was also a field of negotiation, as individuals and communities attempted to find their place in the new conditions, often adapting market rules to local cultural codes. Capitalism in Poland or Hungary never took the same form as in the West – its structures still bear traces of earlier systems of social organization, and interpersonal relations have not been entirely subordinated to the demands of instrumental rationality. Nonetheless, the transformation has firmly embedded new forms of state governance and the nature of power in the CEE region. Elizabeth Dunn notes that:

The transformation of state socialism societies is not only about restructuring political parties, building democratic institutions, or changing ownership systems. Regardless of the scale of difficulty of these individual tasks, the transition is, above all, a fundamental transformation of the nature of power in Eastern Europe. The observation of new forms of governance and the inculcation of new forms of personhood indicate that governmentality in Poland after 1989 has undergone significant changes. [...] post-socialist transformation is a conscious attempt to align governmentality systems in the former Soviet bloc with those of the capitalist First World. It aims to steer Eastern Europe back toward capitalism by making its governing mechanisms resemble those adopted in Western Europe and the United States. The Polish transformation is not merely a transition to an 'ideal' capitalism but part of a much broader

process of globalization, linked to the adoption of identical systems of governmentality and regulation used in countries like Germany, the USA, or Japan. In Poland, as in these countries, politicians and managers are trying to leap into a more flexible, post-Fordist, or neoliberal form of capitalism. It is therefore no surprise that many of the methods and techniques for transforming mentality and economy in Poland are based on techniques developed in Japan, Western Europe, and the United States.⁴¹

Focusing on the “instillation of new forms of personality” mentioned by Dunn, it is worth addressing the issue of local social structures as spaces where neoliberal identity is negotiated. If we agree with Karl Polanyi and his concept of “satanic mills” – that the market economy never exists in a vacuum but is embedded in social structures⁴² – then we will see that the post-communist transformation was not only an adaptation to global capitalism but also an attempt to reshape this capitalism on its own terms. Markets are not purely economic entities – they are rooted in social practices, norms, and historical memory. In post-communist countries, we see how these conditions produce hybrid forms of identity: neoliberal values coexist with a communal ethos, market pragmatism with nostalgia for past stability, individualism with national solidarity. Polanyi’s thought is particularly valuable here be-

⁴¹ Elizabeth Dunn, *Prywatyzując Polskę. O bobofrutach, wielkim biznesie i restrukturyzacji pracy* (Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2017), 14–15.

⁴² Karl Polanyi, *Wielka transformacja. Polityczne i ekonomiczne źródła naszych czasów* (Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2010), 41.

cause, at a time when a significant portion of economists identified with the mainstream and the primacy of market laws, he defined himself as an institutionalist – someone who rejected the idea that market laws define an economy. Instead, he emphasized institutions – social, cultural, and political conditions that are embedded in and evolve within the economy.⁴³ This explains why the transformation in the CEE region led to the development of strong populist narratives. Populism is not just a political reaction but also an attempt to reclaim identity in the face of neoliberal hegemony. The return to concepts such as “sovereignty”, “nation”, or “tradition” can be interpreted not only as a conservative reaction to modernity but also as an expression of ontological anxiety about the disintegration of subjectivity. Perhaps one of the most fundamental effects of neoliberalism is not so much the rise in social inequalities but rather the fragmentation of traditional forms of identification that previously formed the foundation of the community. Michał Wojciechowski observed that beyond its negative associations – such as contempt for the weak, the egoism of the strong, or social Darwinism – economic liberalism in today’s Poland “means the right to unlimited enrichment through theft and exploitation”.⁴⁴ This primarily relates to the fact that identity has shifted from a collective to an individual orienta-

⁴³ Fred Block, Margaret Somers, *Karl Polanyi. Krytyka wolnorynkowego fundamentalizmu* (Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne Heterodox, 2020), 50.

⁴⁴ Aldona Zawajska, „Liberalizm, neoliberalizm, wolność ekonomiczne i polityczna a rozwój gospodarczy kraju,” *Zeszyty Naukowe SGGW – Ekonomika i Organizacja Gospodarki Żywnościowej* no. 58 (2006): 12, <https://doi.org/10.22630/EIOGZ.2006.58.1>.

tion. People began to perceive themselves and their place in the world differently because, before the systemic transformation, under the Polish People's Republic, an individual was part of a community – the workplace, the neighbourhood, or a social class. In the new, post-transformation reality, identity became an individual project – one had to define their own worth according to the new rules of the game. The imperative of self-realization introduced by neoliberalism created a new type of fear – if one does not succeed, it is their own fault. Instead of feeling part of something larger, individuals began defining themselves in terms of efficiency, productivity, and the ability to sell their skills in the market. Even interpersonal relationships began to follow a new economic logic – networking replaced old friendships, and relationships were evaluated based on their utility: “Will this acquaintance benefit me in any way?” This shift primarily influenced every day, seemingly trivial habits – the way people shop, spend their free time, organize urban space, or plan their careers. This demonstrates how deeply neoliberal transformation penetrated people's lives in the CEE region. It was not just an economic reform – it was a restructuring of the very model of existence. Everyday life became a battlefield for survival, and individual success was no longer dependent on the community but on one's ability to adapt in a world that showed no mercy to those unable to adjust to the new order.

Neoliberalism, therefore, not only changed economic rules but also transformed the subject, and along with it – the very way people understand themselves and the world they live in. However, this process is not complete – identity, due to its inherently dynamic nature, remains a contested space.

In my opinion, it is crucial to question the very structure of subjectivity. Its fluidity or rootedness constitutes a key issue in the broader context of a world that imposes specific guidelines regarding the possibility of participation. The contemporary neoliberal order is undoubtedly characterized by a permanent axiom of mobility and flexibility, which implies the movement of individual identities within predefined models – archetypal identity patterns tailored to modern market conditions, as they serve continuous consumption and investment. In this sense, the subject loses their “citizenship” in favour of becoming capital. Thus, contemporary identity involves navigating between these predefined models, which symbolize neoliberal universalism. Perhaps this is why the reaction to this neoliberal universalism has been such a strong tendency to affirm “authentic” national, local, and historical identities – not because they exist in some primordial form, but because their promise of stability and permanence offers a response to the existential anxiety of late capitalism. In this tension between the universalism of neoliberalism and local social structures, the issue is not only political or economic but also a fundamental question: who are we, and who can we be in a world that is constantly transforming?

Summary

This article aimed to create a theoretical framework for analyzing the impact of neoliberal economic transformation on the national identity and sovereignty of CEE countries. I pointed out that neoliberal reforms – including, among others,

widespread privatization, deregulation or liberalization – had not only an economic, but also a cultural and political dimension. This process, embedded in the hegemonic logic of the West, led to the redefinition of national identity, often in opposition to local values and traditions. This text emphasizes that the process of Europeanization – despite initially being perceived as an opportunity for modernization and achieving true “freedom”, has created tensions between globalization and local interests. Economic transformation required compliance with Western market norms, which often resulted in a loss of economic autonomy and an increase in dependence on foreign capital. All this fits into the idea of a hegemonic project which, despite promoting integration, marginalized the sovereignty of the individuals who created the society of CEE countries. In response to these changes, populist movements have emerged opposing the neoliberal order. The leaders of these movements used narratives primarily concerned with sovereignty and identity, the aim of which was to present the EU or Western institutions as a threat to the national interest. In this way, populism has become both a reaction to the crisis of neoliberalism and an expression of local resistance to global processes. Jan Zielonka mentioned in one of his most renowned books that the discussion within interdisciplinary European studies does not address the topic of disintegration. This is a valid point, as the growing populism in the CEE is an element of intellectual sloth that ultimately serves Eurosceptic propaganda.⁴⁵ It is worth emphasizing here that the process of

⁴⁵ Jan Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution: Liberal Europe in Retreat* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 28–29.

Europeanization requires a specific revision, because – given the current shape of societies – it must take into account the cultural diversity and historical experiences of CEE countries. However, as Aldona Zawojska emphasizes: „By joining the EU, we expanded the scope of neoliberalism, adopting the European Community regime as a method of negotiating and administering many international agreements (institutionalized neoliberalism).”⁴⁶ The role of international institutions is to seek a balance between integration and the protection of local values, and not to impose a specific ideology that is valued by capital, perpetuating the technocratic-materialist capitalist logic.

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