

PROTECTING EUROPE AGAINST MIGRATION. LAW AND JUSTICE'S POPULIST DISCOURSE IN THE POLISH PARLIAMENT¹

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Abstract

From the 2015 migration crisis up to the 2021 border crisis with Belarus, migration has become a growing subject of concern in Poland. Migration has been considerably politicised and mediated, and has also been increasingly discussed in relation to other issues, including the further development of European integration. Migration has been one basis for questioning the current role and functioning of the EU, as well as the place that Poland should have in it. The aim of this paper is to analyse how migration and the critique of the EU are associated and instrumentally referred to in populist claims of members of parliament (MPs). The analysis of the discourse produced by the right-wing populist political party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS) constitutes the main case study of this research, which has been carried out by studying parliamentary debates collected during the Sejm's 8th parliamentary term (2015—2019) and analysed through a qualitative analysis. The paper contributes to a further understanding of the nature of PiS's discursive opposition to migration and the EU in the Polish national parliament. The research points out to different layers of critique, as well as their articulation used by PiS MPs as a strategy to construct their vision of what they want for Poland and of what Europe ought to be. In this perspective, PiS MPs put forward the protection of Poland and of Europe as their main aim facing growing migration concerns, which crucially echoes the PiS government's reaction to the 2021 border crisis.

Key words: *populism, Poland, migration, European Union, Parliament*

Introduction

From the 2015 migration crisis up to the 2021 border crisis with Belarus³, migration remains high on the political agenda in the European Union (EU). The so-called migration crisis which happened in Europe in the years 2015—2016 indeed triggered huge challenges for European member states (EUMS) as diverse approaches, poli-

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³ The Belarus-EU or Belarusian-Polish border crisis is unfolding at the time of writing this paper.

cies and rhetoric have been witnessed across Europe, posing serious questions regarding solidarity within the EU (Matuszczyk 2017). The EU-Belarusian border crisis unfolding in the second half of 2021 engendered similar challenges, although the way forward — moving towards more security — seems to have created less controversy between EUMS and the EU. In addition to migration as a significant issue in the EU, populist political parties are on the rise in Europe. Populist leaders are frequently portrayed as a threat to the future development and further integration of the EU. Furthermore, migration usually makes up part of their claims and criticism towards contemporary society, underlining a double distinction between (1) “the people” vs. “the (national, European and/or international) elites” and (2) “us” vs. “them” (Rooduijn 2019).

Against this backdrop, the EU is facing several crucial on-going challenges, which tend to question its role, values and future. From an ever-closer EU to completely disintegrated European nation-states, diverse scenarios are being developed as to what the future of Europe could be. Theoretically, this re-consideration of the future of European integration is exemplified with different constitutional models that the EU could possibly shift towards, notably cosmopolitan, intergovernmental or federal (Fossum 2021).

This paper addresses these linked challenges — populism, migration and the future of Europe — by investigating how migration and the critique of the EU are referred to and associated in populist claims. Whilst populist parties have been flourishing across Europe, this paper zooms in on one particular case study: the Polish right-wing populist political party Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* — PiS). The aim of this paper is therefore to analyse how PiS members of parliament (MPs) discursively refer to and link issues of migration and the EU; in other words, how anti-migration and anti-elitism unite in populist claims. This research focuses on the supply side of political populism by analysing the party’s populist rhetoric on migration and on the EU during debates held in the Polish parliament. In order to do so, a qualitative analysis has been carried out on a selection of parliamentary debates from the *Sejm* during the 8th parliamentary term (2015–2019). This paper investigates Polish discourse during the 2015 migration crisis and argues that the analysis of previous debates on migration helps to understand the more recent Polish-Belarusian border crisis and the subsequent response of the PiS government to this direct — in a territorial sense — challenge.

After introducing the understanding of populism used throughout this research, the Law and Justice party and its reactions to the migration crises are presented. The results of the analysis show the reference to the people, the discursive representation of migrants and the opposition to the EU. The last developed point touches upon the vision of Europe according to PiS MPs and the role given to Po-

land in it. Eventually, the paper concludes by relating analysed discourse to the reaction of the Polish government during the 2021 border crisis.

Populism as a Political Communication Strategy

The term populism has become more popular in recent years (Stavrakakis et al. 2017; Rooduijn 2019), although its definition has remained quite elusive (Canovan 2004; Mudde 2004). Populism might easily be conflated with other concepts, such as nativism and Euroscepticism (Rooduijn 2019), which makes defining and operationalising populism as an analytical concept more challenging. Whilst populism might be used to describe a thin ideology (Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008), this paper focuses on populism as referring to a communication strategy that advances a set of ideas based on people-centrism and anti-elitism (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2015). In this perspective, populism can be defined as a “style of political communication that utilizes particular communicative practices and routines that simultaneously connect and divide, and construct and reconstruct identities in the pursuit of power” (Block and Negrine 2017, 190). Taking this definition as a starting point, populism is defined as a political phenomenon articulated around conflict and characterised by a strong discursive component of opposition. Through expressive and emotional language (Holtmann, Krappidel and Rehse 2006), populism can hence be defined as the use of discourse and speech to connect to “the people” and, by the same token, confront those who are not part of it (Block and Negrine 2017).

When discussing the links and overlaps between nationalism and populism, Brubaker conceptualises populism as a “double constitutive relation of vertical and horizontal oppositions” (2019, 14). According to him, “the people” can be characterised in populist discourse in various ways, e.g., as plebs, sovereign or a bounded community of values. However, if the nodal point of populism is “the people”, what demarcates populist rhetoric from nationalist discourse is this double construction:

— Vertically, in that “the people” are constructed against those who have more or less — typically the elites;

— Horizontally, in which “the people” are defined as a community in opposition to those outside the political entity — e.g., migrants — but also those within — as might be the case with elites (Ibid.).

Accordingly, populism can be defined as a political communication style based on three core elements (Jagers and Walgrave 2007): (1) reference to the people considered as a monolithic entity (Canovan 2002), (2) elite critique — on the domestic, European and/or international level — and (3) exclusion of certain groups, which are said not to fit in the previously-described society. In academic literature, we can find definitions of populism ranging from thin (usually in opposition) to

thick; *thin* referring to only the first criteria, i.e., appeal to the people for identification purposes; *thick* as a combination of the three aforementioned elements. In between the thin and thick definitions, populism can be anti-elitist — a combination of (1) and (2) elements, i.e., focusing on elite critique — or excluding — a union of elements (1) and (3), i.e., especially excluding certain groups of people (Jagers and Walgrave 2007). Populism is hence characterised by its antagonist nature towards different groups, i.e., elites and/or minorities. Brubaker further argues that populism is not only about defining “the people”, but can also be considered as a double opposition and how populists “link vertical and horizontal oppositions by positioning “the elite” as both on top and outside” (2019, 14).

This study therefore focuses on these two elements — elite critique and exclusion, as used when characterising the thick definition of populism — and analyses if and how exclusionary claims⁴ and elite critique unite in populist discourse. Focusing on a particular context — parliamentary debates on migration and on European affairs — this paper investigates how anti-migration statements are linked to a broader criticism of elites, elites situated on the European level.

Rhetoric, media and identity have been identified as three key features used by populist parties and politicians in their communication to gain electoral support (Block and Negrine 2017). Whilst rhetoric refers to the use of emotional elements to trigger connection with the audience, the media’s role in the development of populism has often been underlined and analysed as a means of promulgation (*Ib.*). Eventually, identity is a key feature in this paper: identity is understood as being mobile and socially constructed through different elements such as “the resources of history, language and culture” (Hall 2011, 3) and implies differencing dynamics, in the sense of excluding certain groups — usually portrayed as significant others, in opposition to the auto-portrayed self — and in this case, migrants.

This paper investigates populist anti-elite claims in connection to statements on migration, as well as the reverse. Whilst elite critique might be addressed both to national and European elites, in this research I pay particular attention to the European ones, as the migration crisis in Poland has been mostly considered in relation to the EU rather than on the national level. In this perspective, populism is said to possess a strong link with Euroscepticism — as understood as the disapproval of European integration (Kneuer 2019; Harmsen 2010). However, one needs to point out the different degrees of disapproval that exist and, therefore, the diverse forms of Euroscepticism (Ramswell 2018).

Populism also possesses strong links with nationalism (Brubaker 2019), especially when considering a thick definition of populism. Indeed, both concepts pre-

⁴ Conceptualised as anti-migration statements.

sent exclusionary discourse and/or practices that can be considered as harmful to the democratic order, as “[i]n the European context, populism is habitually associated with xenophobic politics and parties of the extreme or radical right (and therefore considered to be dangerous)” (van Kessel 2015, 2). This paper consequently investigates the exclusionary dimension of populist discourse and its interconnection with elite critique in the discourse of PiS MPs.

PiS and the Migration Crises

The Law and Justice party was created in 2001, and from the 2005 parliamentary elections essentially transitioned from being a party focused on crime and corruption issues to becoming a “genuine populist party” (van Kessel 2015, 62). The party also embraces conservative and nationalist discourse (Dakowska 2010), as well as a soft Eurosceptic position towards the EU (Szczerbiak 2004; Ivaldi 2019, 123). When it comes to migration, the party favours a restrictive migration policy (Ivaldi 2019, 266). Analysis of populist members of the European Parliament’s discourse on the EU’s democracy promotion highlights the sovereignty and nativist dimensions of PiS claims, especially when confound with migration concerns (Buzogány, Costa and Góra 2021).

The PiS party won all major elections since 2015 (parliamentary, presidential and European) and has remained in power since — being the dominating party within the ruling coalition United Right (*Zjednoczona Prawica*). From 2015 onwards, the PiS-led government has had a tumultuous relation with the EU, criticising several of its policies, not only in relation to migration and asylum policies, but also touching upon the environment, the rule of law and judicial independence. In this perspective, one could question the aim of the Polish government towards the European Union. Even regarding the case of Białowieża — a forest located on the border between Poland and Belarus that has been a site of contestation between the PiS government and the EU since 2016 — it has been argued that “the activities in the forest do not qualify as public safety measures, but rather as demonstrations of the reluctance of the current Polish government to observe the rule of law” (Douma 2017). Whilst, on the discursive level, the Polish government continues to stress the fact that Poland actually belongs to the EU and is not thinking about exiting it (Orłowski 2017), several manoeuvres clearly question the willingness of the PiS government to respect the Union’s values. These controversial political moves — often considered as an illiberal turn (see e.g., Appel 2019) — notably resulted in the triggering of Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (TUE) in December 2017 and continuous tensions between Poland and EU institutions.

Happening also in 2015, the increased number of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants coming to the European Union’s territory has raised controversy in Europe.

Migration has been considered and framed as a crisis, as EUMS and EU institutions were disunified on how to handle the situation. Nonetheless, the migration crisis did not affect all European countries in an equal manner, principally due to the migration routes taken to enter Europe. Due to this, Poland has been largely detached from the migration crisis. However, in an attempt to better manage the crisis, the European Union set up several measures whose implementation impacted every EUMS on the domestic level. The main problematic decision for PiS has been the relocation mechanism set up by the European Commission in May and September 2015. PiS has firmly opposed refugee quotas — alongside other countries from the Visegrad group — since the party's return to power in 2015, leading to a fierce fight against EU institutions. Accordingly, migration has been a topic of considerable importance in the past few years in Poland, during which the homogeneity of the Polish society has often been underlined in opposition to security concerns, as well as the diversity that accepting migrants could bring to Poland. Identity-based arguments have been central when discussing migration, stressing the importance of Christian values in Poland, especially by Polish populist radical right parties (Styczyńska 2018). PiS anti-migrant rhetoric has been considered an important factor in the party's electoral success in 2015 (Klaus 2017). Eventually, the discussion on migration since 2015 has resulted in a greater politicisation and securitisation of immigration in Poland, in both discourse and law-implementation (Pędziwiatr 2019).

Contrary to the 2015 migration crisis, the 2021 border crisis presents a direct challenge for Poland, which shares a border with Belarus — this border being both Poland and the EU's external border. Since late summer 2021, an estimated number of 2,000 people attempted to reach the EU through the Polish-Belarus border in a controversial move by the Belarusian regime. Poland as well as Lithuania have indeed been confronted with an unprecedented number of people trying to cross the border. The arrival of migrants has been facilitated by the Lukashenko regime in retaliation for sanctions imposed by the EU following the 2020 Belarus presidential elections. Criticised as a “inhuman instrumentalisation of migrants” (European Parliament 2021), the situation resulted in new border fences being built and increased border patrols. Poland declared a state of emergency along bordering regions to Belarus (in over 180 localities in Podlaskie and Lublin Voivodeships), thus limiting humanitarian assistance and reporting from the border area (Cienski 2021). The security dimension of the crisis outstripping humanitarian considerations and the pushbacks at the border have been met with criticism from civil society, aid organisations and several political groups on both national and European levels (Wesel 2021). Whilst being in the middle of a fight with EU institutions regarding the rule of law in Poland, the hard security stance of the PiS-led government during the border crisis has been mostly supported within the EU (Erlanger 2021). The Polish gov-

ernment hence attempted to change the narrative to actually present itself as the defender of Europe (Kranz 2021).

Whilst the two crises impacted Poland to a different extent territorially, both presented challenges intrinsically linked to the EU. Before presenting the results of the analysis, the following section briefly outlines the methodology used in this research.

Data Collection and Methodology

The research carried out in this paper focuses on parliamentary debates in the Polish *Sejm* during the 8th parliamentary term (2015—2019). Parliaments and the produced parliamentary speeches — which are part of the broad denomination of political discourses (Wodak and van Dijk 2000) — can be considered as significant institutions in democracies, as “they tailor national legislation, represent different interests and exercise a strong impact on public opinion formation” (Maatsch 2011, 36, see also Liebert 1995). Parliamentary debates are usually not given a lot of attention — notably in comparison to media when it comes to the circulation of ideas within the society — as they do not possess as much widespread public visibility. Nevertheless, parliaments can be considered primary and highly significant arenas for national debate, which “started to open up a wide public dialogue” (Ilie 2010, 1).

A total of 18 debates have been analysed. Parliamentary debates have been selected when words related to migration — “*uchodźca*” (refugee), “*migracja*” (migration) and “*(i)migrant(ka)*” ((im)migrant) — occurred in the title of the debates. This way, seven debates on migration have been selected. 11 debates on European affairs are also part of the analysis. Indeed, MPs in the *Sejm* proceed to review European affairs every semester; these debates have been included in the sample of data for analysis. All selected debates are plenary sessions. The analysis has been carried out on the written transcripts of debates available on the website of the *Sejm*⁵. The present research does not exhaustively review all debates on migration in the *Sejm*, but focuses on a selection of parliamentary debates on migration as an illustration of the discourse produced by MPs from PiS⁶ in the Polish parliament.

⁵ The full list of selected parliamentary debates including links is available in the references.

⁶ The author is well-aware that MPs might individually have different points of view or rhetoric on the issues, however the paper refers to PiS as a relatively homogenous entity — not due to a generalisation or disregard of the possible heterogeneity amongst the party, but because of the mitigating effect of parliaments. Indeed, party cohesion and (voting) unity hold a central place in legislatures, which have been analysed through diverse lenses (see e.g. Hazan (2006) for institutional and sociological explanations, Saalfeld (1995) for ration-

The analysed period of time focuses on the 8th electoral term (from October 2015 until November 2019), in which the PiS held the majority in the Polish parliament with 235 seats out of 460 (Sejm 2015). The paper strictly presents a qualitative analysis of the speeches.

Linking Anti-Migration and Anti-Elitism: How Does It Manifest in Populist Discourse?

The analysis of parliamentary debates focuses on the three elements constitutive of a thick definition of populism (understood as a communication style) — i.e., references to “the people”, exclusionary claims (towards refugees and migrants) and elite critique.

The Polish Nation and Its Identity

As previously stated, reference to the people is at the very heart of populist discourse. Speeches during parliamentary debates are usually not considered as directly addressing the electorate. However, research shows that parliamentary debates have gained media visibility in the past few years, notably when touching upon European affairs (Auel, Eisele and Kinski 2017). References to “the people” can be made by MPs to define who they are representing through their work in parliament. PiS MPs, holding a majority in the *Sejm*, often referred to the people as “our” and in that sense ought to be prioritised:

First you need to take care of the safety of your loved ones, family, *your own nation*, and then the whole world.

(Konrad Głębocki, MP, 28. 1. 2016)⁷

This discursive conception of belonging and unity was made in an attempt to define and address the people that PiS MPs represent and that they consequently ought to protect:

It is *our duty to ensure the safety of Poles*, it is our duty to ensure that we do not allow the situation that is taking place in Germany, which is taking place in Sweden. We have all witnessed the number of rapes and crimes committed.

(Dominik Tarczyński, MP, 9. 3. 2016)

al choice analysis or Russell (2014) for a psychological approach). Consequently, MPs disagreeing with their party's line are usually given less chances to speak during parliamentary debates, which usually results in a rather homogenous discourse at the party level inside legislatures.

⁷ All translation from English to Polish are from the author of the paper, as well as emphasis marked in italics. Quotes are taken from PiS MPs and government representatives' addresses to the *Sejm* during the selected parliamentary debates.

In PiS discourse, “the Polish people” were clearly constructed as a subject exclusively linked to the concept of nation. This observation highlights the links between nationalism and populism, as in the Polish case the definition of “the people” coincides with the notion of “the nation”. PiS MPs stressed a civilizational gap with migrants depicted outside of the nation and considered in total opposition to Polish values, which ultimately gave rise to claims supporting the exclusion of migrants.

Discursive Representation of Migrants

As previously mentioned, migration has become a growing topic of concern in Poland since 2015, as it has been heavily politicised and rhetorically associated with a criticism of the EU concerning its management of the migration crisis. In this sense, the crisis asserted a divide between Western and Eastern Europe, based on identity-centred arguments (Mach and Styczyńska 2016). In Poland, migrants have hence been subject to numerous myths (Pawlak 2018) and emotional anti-immigration statements (Frelak 2019) in public discourse.

References to refugees and migrants — which are different categories implying the implementation of protective measures for refugees — were mixed together in discourse. Indeed, PiS MPs fused both categories stating that the EU and EUMS were “unable to effectively separate actual war refugees from economic immigrants” (Szymon Szykowski vel Sęk, MP, 9. 2. 2016). This way, MPs created a category of “unwanted immigrants” linked to different depreciative predicates, e.g., “economic” or “illegal” migrants. MPs discursively associated migrants with illegality, violence and lies:

Well, Western European countries have made huge mistakes in immigration policy, mindlessly letting in a large number of *culturally foreign immigrants*, and there are problems that we are all aware of — burning cars in the suburbs of Paris, figuratively speaking. The honourable MP [Marcin Świącicki (PO)] spoke about the excellent development of London as a multicultural city. It should also be remembered that it was on the street of London that a British soldier was stripped of his head with a machete, and not by Native British. This is the kind of problem we do not need in Poland, that we should not take in.

(Marcin Hoła, MP, 9. 3. 2016)

Thereby, a seeming clash of civilisations was depicted, in which Poland was highly threatened by migrants coming to Europe. It was through the Catholic denomination of the homogenous Polish nation and these references to violence that MPs appealed to their people and stressed specific Polish characteristics and values

depicted in total opposition to those of migrants. These two distinct societal entities were discursively framed as incompatible:

Because we have to look into the future, how will the whole of Europe behave and what will be the *impact of Islam* on European civilization.

(Michał Wojtkiewicz, MP, 28. 1. 2016)

Therefore, the reference to “the people” was made in contrast to the “lack of values” of migrants, through a “positive—negative antithesis” (Stanley 2008, 106) based on religion and identity-driven arguments. Hence, it can be argued that “the people” as characterised in PiS’s discourse is defined as a bounded community threatened by the outside, i.e., by refugees and migrants coming to Europe. In this respect, the discursive representation of migrants — and their exclusion — constitutes a horizontal opposition — as previously described as a feature of populist claims — following which migrants are seen as undesired outsiders. These anti-migration and exclusionist arguments were intrinsically linked to criticism of the EU.

Critique of the European “Elites”

This paper argues that after the PiS regained in 2015, the anti-elite discourse produced by this party partly transformed from anti-establishment to anti-European elite claims. It seems logical that as the party held the majority in the parliament, the main adversary shifted from the former party in government — i.e., Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska* — PO) — to the EU as being an entity “above” the national level for certain political decisions, including when it comes to migration. For PiS MPs, migration has thus been a political opportunity used to firmly disprove of the EU actions.

From 2015 onwards, PiS MPs adamantly opposed the EU’s decisions regarding the relocation scheme for refugees, which was “imposed from above” (Szymon Szykowski vel Sęk, MP, 13.04.2018). MPs usually stressed the fact that the decision related to accepting refugees and migrants on European territory was not their choice, but was actually made by foreign entities — EU institutions — and those decisions “somehow excludes the sovereignty of a member state in who and how many refugees, in what amount, to accept” (Szymon Szykowski vel Sęk, MP, 1. 12. 2016). As one could expect, this imposition by a foreign power strongly resonates with Polish history. This strategy of picturing the country in a weaker position in comparison to other EUMS and the EU as imposing decisions on Poland can be interpreted as part of a populist communication strategy.

Whilst the term “elite” was barely used during debates *per se*, it is interesting to analyse the images and vocabulary used to talk about the EU, especially in reference to European decision-makers. In addition to picturing them as above and imposing decisions, PiS MPs also used a different discursive strategy. References to

illness were made by PiS MPs when describing the EU. In fact, the EU and its policies were often depicted as pathological:

We oppose only this *faulty, pathological*, automatic relocation system, because we think it is absolutely contrary to the interests of not only Poland but also of Europe.

(Jakub Skiba, Secretary of State at the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration, 21. 10. 2016)

In this way, the EU was depicted as sick, but even more so as the EU was said to be threatening its own existence by accepting migrants:

From a *suicidal* European Union policy of accepting immigrants from Africa and the Middle East and the intention to relocate them in many countries, including Poland, there must be a retreat and it seems that it is slowly happening, not only from the societies of individual countries — some have already tried it — but also from prominent politicians.

(Krzysztof Szulowski, MP, 1. 12. 2016)

This mix of elites depicted as imposing decisions of Poland whilst being sick and suicidal has been done as a way to legitimise the party's discourse on migration and on Europe. Indeed, PiS positioned itself in contrast to the EU, which did not know what to do regarding the migration situation.

Whilst the study of populism initially conceptualises that the critique of the elites is linked to corruption, some scholars have noted a change in rhetoric in that elites tend to be “seen as living in different worlds, playing by different rules [...] out of touch with the concerns and problems of ordinary people and condescending towards their values, habits and ways of life” (Brubaker 2019, 11). Additionally, in line with Brubaker's argument (Ibid.), the (European) elites are subject to both vertical opposition — pictured “on top” of the Polish people and imposing decisions on them — and horizontal opposition — as being “outside” of the Polish reality and affecting people's identity by their otherness. The portrayal of the EU as sick and unable to deal with migration, constitutes a horizontal opposition, in which the European elite is portrayed as a significant other unable to understand Polish reality. PiS MPs therefore regretted that the EU, in its current shape, was “making the European nations a multicultural mass, in which it will no longer be possible to return on a larger scale to the Christian roots of the continent” (Konrad Głębocki, MP, 28. 1. 2016).

The Role of Poland in and for the EU

Both anti-migration and anti-European elites' statements brought MPs to describe what they would like the EU to be and what the role of Poland should be in it. To

begin with, PiS MPs demanded a more restrictive migration policy that should be decided upon only on the national level:

We believe that immigration and refugee policy should remain in the hands of the Polish state and should be applied restrictively.

(Szymon Szyrkowski vel Sęk, MP, 9. 3. 2016)

Additionally, PiS MPs further stressed the importance of Poland for the defence and for the future of the European Union, in which it ought to have the role of protector against both migrants coming to alter Polish (Christian) values and European elites depicted as ill and suicidal. In this perspective, PiS MPs praised the Polish fight against EU decisions on migration, and pictured themselves as the sane ones in opposition to the sick EU:

It is worth fighting hard for your interests, it is *worth fighting hard for common sense*, because the adoption of Poland's position by the entire European Union regarding immigrants is a *triumph of common sense* in the European Union.

(Jan Dziedziczak, MP, 13. 9. 2018).

Whilst firmly criticising the EU, PiS MPs did not mention leaving it. Conversely, they rather attempted to influence it more:

The European Union is heading towards solutions proposed consistently by Poland, so Poland has pushed solutions into the forum of the European Union that are *rational solutions* that solve the problem but respect other people.

(Jan Dziedziczak, MP, 13. 3. 2019)

As a result, PiS MPs emphasised Poland's relevance for the EU's defence and future, presenting the party as a constructive actor protecting Europe. Indeed, Poland, and *a fortiori* PiS, claimed the role of protector against both migrants coming to alter their (Christian) values and an irresponsible EU imposing decisions on member states.

Concluding Remarks

This paper attempted to give an overview of the populist discourse produced following the 2015 migration crisis by PiS on migration and the European Union, to both of which the political party is critical of and even in deep opposition to. Building on populism as defined as a political communication style based on three elements — (1) reference to the people, (2) critique of the elites and (3) exclusion of certain groups — this paper displayed the articulation between these elements in the specific case of PiS discourse in the Polish parliament during the 8th parliamentary term.

Due to the nature of parliamentary debates, the appeal to the people might not be directly observed *per se* as one could argue that the content of parliamentary discourse is more addressed to political actors than to broader society. Yet, throughout all debates what is understood as “the people” was clearly defined by MPs. The “Polish people” were depicted as a homogenous mass of people thinking alike and sharing similar (Christian) values. This definition was linked to an understanding of the nation as essential in the establishment and further development of the Polish nation-state. The nation is in this sense considered as an exclusionary concept in which only culturally-fitting people are seen as legitimate in the political arena. Additionally, “the Polish people” were also depicted by the negative of what they are not, i.e., migrants and European elites.

With regard to the elite critique and exclusion of certain groups — in this case of refugees and migrants — the analysis of parliamentary debates on migration and on the European Union has proven to be a significant method to investigate this discursive political strategy. The excluding element of a populist communication strategy was heavily present in discourse. Furthermore, MPs’ references to — and representation of — migrants were more often than not linked to a harsh critique of the EU. As argued by Brubaker, populism might be characterised as this “two-dimensional space in which vertical and horizontal oppositions are constitutively intertwined” (2019, 15). The horizontal opposition is highly noticeable when it comes to refugees and migrants, who were depicted as outsiders to and others from the Polish people due to their foreign civilisation, culture and religion. This horizontal opposition was linked to a critique of European elites, as the latter were criticised for imposing decisions on Poland regarding migration — decisions that endanger the Polish nation — which is characterised as a vertical opposition to the Polish people. Consequently, MPs advocated for the protection of national sovereignty and values. Furthermore, the horizontal opposition exists in PiS discourse regarding refugees and migrants, as well as regarding European elites. Indeed, European elites were framed as outsiders in their holding of multicultural values. Additionally, European elites were seen as being ill due to the nature of international relations and the presence of migrants on European territory. Thus, in reaction to European elites depicted as sick and suicidal, PiS MPs stressed the role of Poland in the defence of the Polish and *a fortiori* European civilisation, of which Christianity was considered as a core component. One could consequently wonder if this strategy of picturing European elites as “sick outsiders” rather than “corrupted dictators” has been a factor influencing the electorate and leading to political gain.

Coming back to the present-day situation, the discourse of PiS during the 2015 migration crisis assuredly informs the PiS government’s position during the 2021 Polish-Belarusian border crisis. Indeed, PiS putting itself forward as the protector of

Poland and by the same token of Europe — territorially, by protecting EU's external border — is an image used by the Polish government during the crisis. Commentators actually noted the instrumentalisation of this rhetoric (Erlangen 2021), which could lead to a shift in the way Poland is acting and perceived in the EU. Indeed, after years of tensions with EU institutions, managing to change the perspective and present Poland as safeguarding Europe in the geopolitical game with Belarus might be of crucial importance for the future of Europe and the role of Poland in it. Further research on discourse around the 2021 crisis is needed to investigate whether a similar populist communication strategy is being used, as well as its impact for Europe.

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