Is it possible to defeat right-wing populist authorities by winning elections? The erosion of democracy and the system of the triple-masters class in Poland

Piotr Żuk [1]* and Anna Pacześniak [2]

[1]The Centre for Civil Rights and Democracy Research, Wrocław, Poland, [2]Department of Political Science, University of Wrocław, Wrocław, Poland

The article poses an extremely important question of whether it is possible to remove authoritarian authorities using the methods of parliamentary democracy in a situation where the government has weakened or dismantled democratic mechanisms and institutions. The article treats the rule of right-wing populists as a comprehensive ruling system of the triple-masters class (identified with the apparatus of the ruling party), who fully controls the political, cultural, and economic spheres. The nationalist cultural and ideological superstructure legitimizes the rule of right-wing populists, but it is only a means to build the economic hegemony of the triple-masters class and strengthen their political power. Based on the material gathered during focus group interviews with opposition party activists, the article outlines the main problems faced by the opposition in the state of the triple-masters class.

KEYWORDS

authoritarianisms, erosion of democracy, elections, state, triple-masters class, right-wing populism, nationalist populism

Introduction: Can the defeated and the democratic opposition win against the ruling right-wing populists?

The experiences of Poland and Hungary raise the question of whether it is possible to stop populist political authoritarianisms through the procedure of democratic elections. Previous analyses of right-wing populism and growing authoritarianisms in Eastern Europe have drawn attention to the specific rhetoric and language of the populist government (Krzyzanowska and Krzyzanowski, 2018; Żuk and Żuk, 2018a), and enumerated subsequent defects of democracy that made up the process of de-democratization [campaign against non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government control of media, nepotism, and corruption; (Bogaards, 2018)], analyzed the dislike of Eastern European countries for sexual minorities (Żuk and Żuk, 2020) and

the manifestations of their discrimination in the form of the so-called "LGBT-free zones" (Żuk et al., 2021). The role of the European Union (EU) in blocking and legitimizing authoritarian regimes in Poland and Hungary has been discussed (Bozóki and Hegedus, 2018). It has been shown how the leaders of the ruling parties in Poland and Hungary use patronal politics and state capture to build informal networks governing the state for the benefit of private political coteries (Sata and Karolewski, 2020). All these analyses are important but, while focusing on selected phenomena, they do not treat the state ruled by right-wing populists as a separate and comprehensive system.

However, the wave of right-wing populism, which spread across Eastern Europe 25–30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in response to the effects of the neoliberal transformation initiated after 1989 (Żuk and Toporowski, 2020), increasingly gave the impression of a phenomenon that was not a temporary "failure of democracy" but a structured change of the social system in its various spheres. Hence, it is most appropriate to ask how long right-wing populists will be in power in Poland or Hungary (Csehi, 2019) and whether they can be defeated using the weakened democratic procedures. The questions posed in this article concern not only Poland or Hungary. These are more universal issues. These questions may well be asked in the context of the situation in Turkey, Brazil and any other country where a populist right-wing government has dismantled democratic institutions.

It is equally important for this article to answer another question: What is the situation of the opposition political parties in countries such as Poland after the autocratization process has already begun but before formal democracy has completely collapsed? (Boese et al., 2021). It has already been considered whether the erosion of democracy is endogenous decay or exogenous erosion (Gerschewski, 2021). However, there are no analyses of the situation in Poland or Hungary indicating the opportunities and potential sources for reversing these socio-political trends. This article fills this gap and tries to answer the question of whether the opposition parties in Poland have any ideas about how to respond to the situation in which the state is colonized by the Law and Justice (PiS) party under the conditions of the radical polarization of society, which accelerates autocratization and serves the populist authorities (Somer et al., 2021; and completely changes the rules of political competition).

The third goal of this article is to identify certain permanent features and universal frameworks of the political system that is created by right-wing populists after gaining power, using the example of the developments in Poland. The thesis defended in this article assumes that the dismantling of democratic institutions and civil rights is not so much a deviation from the rules of liberal democracy, but a systemic process based on a completely separate logic that, at the same time, retains the names and façades of selected institutions. The resulting

system, which is called the rule of the triple-masters class (and is described later in this article), indicates that the ruling right-wing populists colonize the cultural, ideological, economic, and political spheres to strengthen their rule. All these changes, including the legal system, are just an instrument they use to destroy any autonomous spheres of public life and create a police state. The goal of the logic of the right-wing populist authorities as the ruling class is to maximize control over the behavior of people and thus increase the scope of its power. From this perspective, the right-wing populists aim at keeping, reproducing and taking advantage of economic and political benefits from the prevailing authoritarian system.

This article contributes to considering the relationship between democracy and right-wing populism by attempting to emphasize the class nature of the right-wing populist system of power. Contrary to analyses of right-wing populism made from liberal perspectives, which focus on rhetoric, ideology, media coverage, internet misinformation and the entire cultural superstructure created by right-wing radicals, in line with critical tradition, this analysis treats right-wing populism as a total system of power. Paradoxically, although right-wing populists strive for power using the slogan of "limiting the influence of the elites" and representing the "will of the people," in practice, after gaining power, they implement a classic class hegemony: new elites control every area of public life and exploit common social resources.

PiS as an illustration of the rule and logic of right-wing populists

Poland under PiS and Hungary under Orbán are two extreme cases in Europe, where the ruling right-wing populists have dismantled democratic institutions. Both cases, however, can be a good illustration of the logic of the right-wing radicals. In the rhetorical area, they replace "class" and a class perspective with the notion of "nation" and a nationalist perspective. At the same time, they strive to act as defenders of "traditional, religious, national values, and the social security of ordinary people" who are threatened by "cosmopolitan elites" and the "EU bureaucracy." Thus, at the propaganda level, they combine the defense of social issues with the defense of the "national order." This procedure allows them to turn the lower classes into their political base and build a new type of "class-national" identity.

Therefore, new terms defining the right-wing populists as "new working-class parties" have appeared in the political sphere (Betz and Meret, 2013). This phenomenon has been reported in many countries: in Italy, where the northern traditionally leftist regions have been affected by the xenophobic Lega Nord (Zazzara, 2018); in the United States, where part of the working class supporting Trump's nationalist slogans helped him win the 2016 elections (Davis, 2017); and in Poland, where the

people's classes have backed right-wing PiS populists (Ost, 2018). Right-wing populists who wave national flags and promise to represent the people's classes are a wider phenomenon that can be observed in different countries.

How did populism and nationalism ally? Jaakko Heiskanen considers the link between populism and nationalism to be a permanent element of contemporary politics. He explains that this phenomenon is a response to globalization and the situation in which the national space loses its erstwhile status as the privileged site of political activity. In this context, the growing nationalism and populism can be interpreted as an attempt to reassert the modern state as the privileged locus of politics (Heiskanen, 2021). What do these two phenomena have in common? According to Heiskanen, populism and nationalism emerge from the combination of two political principles in the context of a modern territorial state: the principle of political representation and the principle of people's sovereignty. In response to the crisis of both these principles, first, the sovereign people need to be identified, and second, the sovereign people need to be represented in the place of power (Heiskanen, 2021). Thus, efficiently wrapped in national colors, the promise to create a "safe community" of sovereign people who will have their political representatives under conditions of unpredictable globalization triggered the political wave of nationalist populism. This not only influenced the political dynamics and outlined new dividing lines, but also translated directly into shifts in the electoral base. Didier Eribon perfectly describes and explains this shift using the example of France. He shows how numerous representatives of the working class and the people's classes that had previously supported the French Communist Party turned into the voters of Le Pen's National Front (Eribon, 2009). Seeking shelter from neoliberal globalization under the umbrella of nationalist populists was possible only under certain conditions. The first was the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the absence of a real systemic alternative to capitalist logic. The second condition resulting from the former was the crisis, the confusion and the cautious attitude of the European left, which left the working classes to themselves and seemed to believe in the neo-liberal "end of history" that was to come in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The fact that the people's classes wanted to defend their stability and social security at rallies organized by right-wing populists indicated that they needed to remodel their own identity. The coveted community and pronoun "we" no longer referred to class position and former opposition to capitalists and the bourgeoisie (Eribon, 2009). As "class" was replaced with "nation," this time "we" referred to national identity and was directed against "others" and "strangers." This linguistic shift and the rhetorical tricks used by national populists promised a "new secure world," unity and a "fullness to come," as well as the promise of filling the void (Mandelbaum, 2020).

However, nationalist rhetoric, homophobia, ideological obsession with refugees and the gender perspective, and other slogans excluding minorities used by the right-wing populists in power are only cultural tools that they use to strengthen the political and economic hegemony of the triple-masters class created by people associated with the ruling party apparatus. The cultural superstructure is only used to legitimize the power of right-wing populists, integrate their political base and encourage them to constantly "fight for truth, nation and sovereignty." Their real goal, however, is to control the state apparatus and economic and financial resources that will allow "new elites" to be created. In this sense, although the social rhetoric of "the defense of ordinary people" is of propaganda significance, in the political practice of right-wing populists, it does not contradict neoliberal logic. Moreover, neoliberalism proves to be a useful mechanism for strengthening the economic and political hegemony of the triple-masters class. Hence, the mixture of authoritarianism, nationalism and neoliberalism has become a permanent element of the political system created by the right-wing populists. Examples of these practices can be found in many places around the world including in the Philippines (Ramos, 2021), Brazil (de Souza, 2020), Hungary (Fabry, 2019), and Turkey (Akçay, 2021). Also in Poland, the social policy of PiS did not undermine, contrary to their propaganda, the logic of neoliberalism (Shields, 2021). On the other hand, the combination of nationalist ideology, neoliberal practices and the weakening of democratic institutions has allowed them to radically change the political system. It is worth noting at this point that when Orbán spoke of the rejection of liberal democracy, he meant rejection of support for multiculturalism, open immigration policies, and non-traditional family structures (Plattner, 2020). Interestingly, researchers of the manifestations of illiberal democracy also focus primarily on cultural and ideological aspects. They pay less attention to the fact that "illiberal Orbán" can be at the same time the most "neoliberal Orbán" (the same applies to Erdogan in Turkey, Bolsonaro in Brazil and the PiS government in Poland). The strategy of being illiberal and neoliberal at the same time allows the triple-masters class to politically seduce the people's classes and, on the other hand, exploit them and gain a hegemonic advantage over them both politically and economically.

A year after the right-wing populist PiS party took power in Poland in 2015, it was rightly pointed out that "the party aims not only to transform certain external conditions but also to accomplish a comprehensive re-invention of mentality and radically re-direct the trajectory of social thinking" (Koczanowicz, 2016). However, this process went further and 7 years after PiS came to power, the authoritarian state has pacified not only the cultural and ideological sphere but also many other dimensions of public life. Mechanisms indicated in the literature as obstacles to the process of democratic erosion, such as parliamentary and judicial oversight (horizontal accountability), pressures from civil society and the media (diagonal accountability), or electoral competition between

parties and within parties (vertical accountability; Laebens and Lührmann, 2021) have largely stopped working in Poland. The authorities have ignored and/or repressed the grassroots protests of civil society (Karolewski, 2016). The authorities have limited the independence of courts by pacifying the Constitutional Tribunal, taking over the National Council of the Judiciary (*Krajowa Rada Sadownictwa*—KRS) and conducting other actions to intimidate judges, all of which can be described as a constitutional coup (Sadurski, 2019). Public media, including television, have become a propaganda mouthpiece for right-wing populists. The political experiment, which is the rule of the right-wing populists in Poland and Hungary, can be a reference point for analyzing the political behavior of right-wing populists in other countries where populists are just aspiring to power or are in the initial stage of expanding their political influence (as happened after the elections in Italy and Sweden in 2022).

In Poland and Hungary, right-wing populism has become well-rooted. Both regimes were further strengthened after another PiS victory in the 2019 elections that were still free but held under unfair conditions (e.g., complete subordination of the state media to PiS's propaganda; Markowski, 2020) and Orbán's third successive victory in Hungary in 2018. Hence, in the afterword to his book, Lendvai (2019) points out that one can only count on a miracle when it comes to removing Orbán from power in Hungary. The next elections in Hungary, which took place in the spring of 2022 confirmed this opinion—the united opposition, formed by various groups, was defeated when it clashed with the Orbán regime. In Poland, the next elections are planned for the autumn of 2023.

Leszek Nowak's concept of the triple-masters class

If we agree with the opinion of Porter-Szucs (2018) that under the surface of anti-communism proclaimed by PiS, there is a political trend derived from the period and style of the communist authorities, it is right to use theories and concepts that analyse and accurately expose the style of communist rule. Leszek Nowak's concept of the triple-masters class is one such very current approach to the analysis of power in the state governed by PiS.

Leszek Nowak's concept is referred to as non-Marxist historical materialism. It was used to analyse the system of power in the communist state and was the basis for a theory explaining the dynamics of social conflicts (Nowak, 2011c).

This theory states that there are three types of class divisions in society occurring in the economic, cultural and political dimensions. The basis of these divisions is the appropriation by the ruling minority of coercive measures in politics (it creates a division into classes of rulers and citizens), the means of production in the economy (it creates a division into owners and employees) and also the means of spiritual production in culture

(it creates a division into priests and believers). These three kinds of divisions can be cumulative, and if the same class controls the economy, culture and politics, it forms a triple-masters class. Thus, there is a strong conflict between the people's class and the triple-masters class (playing the role of rulers, owners and priests at the same time). In the communist state, the role of the triple-masters class was played by the apparatus of the communist party, which fully controlled the state. The party/state aimed to reproduce power and fully control the economic, cultural and political spheres of society. In that sense, the main goals of the triple-masters class were to maximize its political rule and perpetuate its hegemony by controlling culture and economy.

Nowak describes this mechanism of the rule of the triple-masters class against society as follows:

> "Firstly, as the rulers—they monopolize political decisions, depriving those who are affected by them of any possibility of influencing them. Secondly, as the owners—the party apparatus controls factories, trade and banks, decides about work and wages, and is thus a classic exploiter who bases the state's income on the poverty of workers. Finally, as the monopolists of the means of indoctrination—they impose a way of thinking that is convenient for them on the masses of people through television, press, schools and universities." (Nowak, 2011d)

In the ideal model of the triple-masters class system, an organized minority in a party/state controls not only the means of production and the economic sphere that may serve members of the triple-masters class, their families and the immediate environment associated with that class but also the means of state coercion and the means of spiritual production (ideology, propaganda apparatus, the means of producing, and distributing dominant cultural patterns).

PiS as the triple-masters class and the role of lawfare in post-2015 Poland

Although Nowak's concept was a good tool for unmasking the power in the communist system, it regained its freshness after PiS won power in Poland. The PiS party apparatus, which has gradually taken over successive state institutions and pacified independent areas of social life, fully deserves the name of the triple-masters class. The same applies to the Fidesz party in Hungary, which has created a mafia state (Magyar, 2016). In both Hungary and Poland, the right-wing populist parties in power meet all the conditions to be called a triple-masters class. From this perspective, right-wing populism is not some temporary failure of the democratic system; it is a completely separate and comprehensive system of rule based on total party/state control over the cultural, economic and political spheres. The

triple-masters class is the ruling class in the literal sense of the term.

The means to perpetuate and expand the influence of the triple-masters class is lawfare, understood most simply as the strategic use of law as a weapon in political conflicts. The military connotations of lawfare are related to one of the definitions of this term, which is composed of two elements: (1) using the law to obtain effects similar to those obtained *via* conventional military action; (2) the action must be motivated by a desire to weaken or destroy the adversary (Zanin et al., 2022, p. 3). However, lawfare can be used not only in international conflicts but also in domestic political battles, in which one of the parties tries to fight political opponents and weaken the entire existing system of legal safeguards.

As Jaume Castan Pinos and Mark Friis Hau write:

> "[S]oft domestic lawfare' opens the door for the abuse and politicization of the legal system and can have serious consequences for democratic backsliding and the independence of the judiciary… Domestic lawfare involves the strategic manipulation of legal instruments, including packing courts, selection of favorable judges, constitutional amendments, etc., to combat political opponents, leading to loss of judicial impartiality and erosion of elective democracy, or democratic backsliding." (Pinos and Hau, 2023, p. 41)

Using lawfare does not need to involve shutting down certain institutions. They can be completely neutralized and turned into meaningless props in the political spectacle: Poland—similar to Hungary—has, at least on paper, the institutions of a democratic constitutional state but the power of these institutions has been undermined and their independence compromised (Pinos and Hau, 2023, p. 42). Consistent application of lawfare after 2015 allowed the triple-masters class in the PiS party apparatus to take control of successive areas of public life.

Media and campaigns of hatred: Cultural hegemony and doctrinal power

Orbán's earlier actions in Hungary were an example for Kaczyński, the leader of PiS, in creating a monopoly in the media and culture. There, institutions responsible for supervising public and private media were completely pacified, a large number of the media was taken over by oligarchs linked to Orbán and access was limited to the resources necessary to operate in the media market. Disinformation spread by the authorities was also based on limited access to public information (Polyák, 2019).

Having gained power in Poland, PiS quickly took over the public media (radio and television), and immediately dismissed several 100 journalists (Grela, 2016). The party gradually took over other media centers through intimidation and the

brutalization of public language. At that time, public television became the PiS party's broadcaster and the main propaganda tool of the triple-masters class. In the following years, other parts of the media market were taken over. For example, in 2020, the state-owned company Orlen, a large Polish oil refiner and petrol retailer, took over the Polska Press group, which owns 20 out of the 24 regional dailies published in Poland and nearly 120 local weeklies, as well as numerous internet portals (Żuk and Żuk, 2022a). In 2021, the government attacked TVN, a private television station which had a liberal orientation and criticized PiS for appropriating the state and the public sphere. According to the law called LEX TVN, the owners of the station (in this case it was the Discovery conglomerate) were to get rid of the majority controlling stake and were forced to resell their shares. This idea had been previously tested in Russia and Hungary, where media unfavorable to the authorities had been expropriated either by the state or by oligarchs associated with the state authorities. This project had been blocked in Poland under pressure from the United States administration and public protests.

The ideological control also extended to cultural institutions whose directors were replaced with those who obeyed the PiS authorities. A similar thing happened in the sphere of education, where the autonomy of schools was limited, and the directors of educational institutions were subordinated to school superintendents who supervised how PiS's educational policy was implemented in practice. Changes in school curricula commenced, the so-called "pedagogy of shame" was rejected and "the politics of memory" was treated as a tool of political struggle and a way to perpetuate the right-wing nationalist interpretation of the past (Żuk, 2021). From the very beginning, the Catholic Church was a strong ideological and doctrinal support for the PiS authorities. This alliance between the throne and the altar not only legitimized PiS's creeping constitutional coup but also made PiS's state an ultra-conservative area reluctant to any ethnic, sexual, and cultural minorities.

The pacification of the civil sphere sparked dramatic protests, including the return to the forms of protests that took place in the darkest periods of communist Poland, such as the self-immolation of Piotr Szczesny in Warsaw in 2017 (Żuk and Żuk, 2018b). Nevertheless, the nationalist authorities were moving forward. The triple-masters class did not just want to fulfill the role of ideological priests. It also wanted to be the owner of the country.

"The PiS's family on its own:" State funds in the service of those in power and the economic domination of the triple-masters class

As regards Hungary, Magyar (2016, p. 73) writes that "the concentration of political power and an accumulation

of wealth by the adopted political family are carried through concomitantly, as they mutually presuppose each other: they are one another's tools and objectives at the same time." The same model functioned in the state governed by PiS—the ruling party took care of the financial backing of the triple-masters class and its families.

While in the communist period control over workplaces and companies had been exercised by the company committees of the communist party, under PiS, control over state-owned companies was exercised by members of management boards and supervisory boards appointed by the party. On the one hand, PiS's raid of State Treasury companies and supervisory boards was to satisfy the financial appetites of party activists. On the other, Kaczyński, the leader of PiS, overtly said that it was about building new economic elites and creating "Polish capital." PiS's version of capitalism was supposed to serve the triple-masters class and have national colors. As Kaczyński claimed, "all the stories that capital has no nationality… are fairy tales" (wPolityce.pl, 2021). This was typical of the wave of East European populists who "have sought to develop a national capitalist class while balancing reliance on Western capital through closer economic relations with authoritarian countries" (Orenstein and Bugarič, 2020). The model of a state controlled by the triple-masters class in the economic dimension described in this article resembles the hegemonic structure named ordonationalism in the context of Hungary under Orbán's rule. This structure connects:

> "(1) a newly empowered nationalist state invested in flexibilizing domestic labor and controlling access to domestic capitalist accumulation; (2) a national state captured by political actors as a means toward controlling access to domestic capital accumulation; (3) a novel regime of social reproduction, linking financialization, flexibilization of labor, steep decline in supporting social reproduction, and supporting consumption as a source of social reproduction." (Geva, 2021)

The idea of linking economic capital with party structures has accompanied Kaczyński since the early 1990's. Since then, a network of parties and businesses has been operating in Poland, forming the financial backbone of today's PiS (Kondzińska and Szpala, 2020). The seizure of power in 2015 enabled PiS to rapidly accelerate the building of "national capital," which was the backbone of the party, allowing the triple-masters class to rule economically at local, regional and central levels.

The belief that capital may still have national colors in the globalized world was one of the main elements of economic nationalism supported by Kaczyński. He argued that:

> "All the stories that capital has no nationality, that all the mechanisms that have defined relations between states and nations for centuries have suddenly ceased to function,

are fairy tales told by the strongest players intentionally. The reason is the still strong intention to dominate the weak. Due to the course of history… we are still in a weaker position, but we are following the right path to strengthen it. We are also still a large enough nation to be a significant power. An economic and military power, but also a spiritual power." (Stowarzyszenie Dziennikarzy Polskich, 2021)

The idea of defending "national capital" in practice was also associated with supporting "resource nationalism" (Conversi, 2020) and defending the mining industry in Poland. In practice, this meant full support for state-owned coal companies, led by nominees of the triple class. This strategy had to lead to conflicts with the EU's energy and climate policy. An illustration of this attitude was the conflict over the Turów mine and power plant, located close to the border between the Czech Republic and Germany, which the Czech government and environmental movements demanded to close due to environmental threats. The PiS government gave full support to the coal-energy company and presented it on the propaganda level as a defense of Polish industry against EU bureaucrats (Żuk and Żuk, 2022c). Each manifestation of the defense of "national capital" by the right-wing populists meant in practice the defense of the power of the triple class over the economy and the state.

The state and its structures in the hands of PiS politicians

The cultural, ideological and economic rule of the triple-masters class was to strengthen and reproduce their political rule. The state structures began to be subordinated to the interests of the triple-masters class quickly after the PiS party gained power in 2015. In addition to the purges in the public media, the civil service was pacified, the prosecutor's office became an instrument for destroying political opponents, and the police and special services looked for evidence against PiS's opponents and were reduced to the role of an armed wing of the ruling party and private bodyguards of PiS politicians. PiS encountered the greatest resistance from courts and judges. However, repressions against judges and the pacification of the National Council of the Judiciary and then the Constitutional Tribunal, which was reduced to the role of a tool in the hands of PiS, which legalized all government actions and rejected those provisions of EU law that were contrary to the actions of the triple-masters class, and finally the takeover of the Supreme Court, resulted in a systematic loss of the independence and autonomy of the judiciary. The process of subordinating state structures to the triple-masters class was carried out similarly as had happened earlier in Hungary. As Wojciech Sadurski writes, the most important elements of creating a party/state in Poland are:

- fast-tracking of radical legislative changes; attacks on NGOs and new media legislation;
- disempowering and capturing the Constitutional Court; removal of the "old" judges (of ordinary courts) by lowering the retirement age;
- specific attacks on the chief justices of the respective Supreme Courts;
- restructuring of the KRS through the politicization of its selection; altering the membership rules of the electoral commission with the effect of giving the ruling party control of the commission;
- identifying the EU as a foreign, hostile entity which illegitimately interferes in the internal affairs of its member states (Sadurski, 2019).

The specific nature of the rule of the triple-masters class, the features of which are fully possessed by the PiS party (Table 1), prompts serious reflection on how to answer the following questions: Is equal and fair electoral competition possible at all under such conditions? Can PiS be removed from power peacefully and democratically? Is PiS capable of turning its authoritarian rule into a complete dictatorship? Answers to these questions were sought among members of the official parliamentary political opposition.

Research methods, collection of empirical data, and description of respondents

One of the research assumptions was to show how opposition party activists assessed the chances of stopping the populist authorities. The authors wanted to see the socio-political world under PiS's rule through the eyes of opposition activists. This idea refers directly to the concept of the "humanist coefficient" developed by Florian Znaniecki and his postulate to analyse social and cultural reality by taking account of the meaning that the participants of a social world give to the examined reality (Znaniecki, 2011). In this sense, the presented statements of respondents and the data collected from political activists are assessments that do not have to refer to their actual chances of winning the elections and are not objective descriptions of the political situation. These are the opinions expressed by the surveyed activists from their point of view about the social and political reality under the rule of right-wing populists. However, certain conclusions can be drawn from these statements as to the real opportunities for and threats to the defense of democracy in Poland.

In turn, our considerations and analyses are also expressed from a certain perspective. Agreeing with the opinion of Wodak (1989) that critical analysis cannot remain descriptive and neutral, we do not hide our criticism of populist right-wing in Poland. We agree with Charles Wright Mill's suggestions

about how social scientists do science. Mills (2000) points out that active social science researchers do not have to allow their analyses to be read accidentally, or their moral judgments to be hidden. Determining the positions from which social reflection is made is more methodologically correct and morally honest than keeping political judgments and assessments undisclosed and hidden under the mask of artificial objectivity and neutrality. Therefore, we do not intend to hide our concern and worry about the fate of democracy and civil rights in Poland and throughout Eastern Europe.
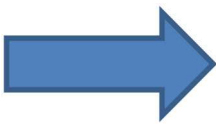
We decided that the most spontaneous statements could be obtained from political activists at the regional level, who are the immediate backbone of those working at the national level. Under conditions of political authoritarianism, opposition parliamentarians are quite often subject to self-censorship and sometimes it is difficult to obtain open assessments of political developments from them. These barriers are smaller in the case of regional activists. Having direct daily contact with national activists, they know well the current opinions that prevail in the opposition parties. We defined regional activists—based on which respondents were sampled—as: voivodeship councilors; parliamentary assistants working in the offices of the opposition parties; members of regional party authorities; direct supporters of national activists; and people organizing political campaigns at the regional level.

The respondents included representatives of the Civic Coalition (*Koalicja Obywatelska*—KO), the Polish People's Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe—PSL), and the New Left (Nowa Lewica—NL). The authors also planned interviews with Szymon Hołownia's Poland 2050 (*Polska 2050 Szymona Hołowni*) but members of this group refused to participate in the study. All the studied political circles formed the opposition after 2015.

KO is made up of several parties, the largest of which is Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*—PO). PO was in power twice: from 2007 until 2011 and later, between 2011 and 2015, acting as a senior partner in a coalition with the Polish People's Party (PSL) and occupied the office of the Prime Minister for two full terms. This center-right party formed in 2001 combines economic neoliberalism with social conservatism. Most of all, PO wants to appear as a champion of pragmatism, modernization and European integration. To attract more support and broaden its electorate base, it has tried to appeal to more and more circles and social groups, gradually incorporating a "leftist sensibility."

PSL also changed its political status after the 2015 general election, moving into opposition after 8 years of co-governing the country. PSL maintains that agriculture is one of the key sectors of the Polish economy and aspires to represent the rural electorate and farmers. However, it is aware of the fact that its traditional, natural voter base has been shrinking. Hence, it has recently been trying to revamp itself as a Christian-Democratic formation open also to citizens from outside rural areas. PSL is a pivot party with high coalition potential. It has been involved in

TABLE 1 Logic and scheme of rule by the PiS party as the triple-masters class.

Cultural dimension	subordinating the public media completely to the PiS party/state;
	financing the press related to the PiS authorities by state-owned companies;
	taking over the press by state-owned companies (such as Orlen);
	taking control over cultural institutions (personnel policy in theaters, censorship of theatrical performances);
	limiting the autonomy of schools (subjecting school principals to the strict supervision of chief education officers—state officials operating at the regional level and responsible for the sphere of education);
	disseminating the nationalist vision of history (for example, rejecting the so-called "pedagogy of shame" in school curricula and disseminating nationalism);
	co-financing social organizations that are "civic support" of the party/state (nationalist, Church-related and conservative organizations);
	assigning the Catholic Church a privileged role in promoting the policy and the party/state entering a close alliance with the Church;
	spreading homophobia, nationalism, the fight against LGBT and "foreign influences" in culture as useful ideological instruments to perpetuate the power of the party/state.
Economic dimension	implementing the policy of creating "new financial elites" and "strengthening Polish capital;"
	pursuing personnel policy in state-owned companies based not on economic or substantive criteria, but on party and political criteria;
	subordinating the rules of the labor market in state-controlled companies to the interests of PiS activists;
	attempting to link economic capital with the PiS party environment;
	disseminating economic nationalism ("Polish goods," "Polish agriculture," "Polish mines")—in this context, rejecting the EU energy and climate policy treated as an attack on "Polish sovereignty"
Political dimension	fully subordinating the prosecutor's office, police and secret services to the interests of the PiS party/state;
	subordinating the Constitutional Tribunal to the orders of the PiS authorities to legitimize the government's actions;
	subordinating the judicial system to the PiS party and reducing the autonomy of the courts;
	tightening up the provisions of the penal law and treating the penal code as a tool of political struggle against opponents of the government;
	discrediting and attacking independent social movements and civic organizations
Centralization of power in the state and monopoly over political decisions in the hands of the PiS party/state apparatus	Liquidating an independent public sphere, radically shrinking the framework of public and political debate, destroying basic democratic mechanisms

cabinets on numerous occasions. From 1993 to 1997 and from 1997 to 2001 it partnered with the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD). From 2007 until 2011 and from 2011 until 2015, it formed a coalition with PO, on both occasions as a junior partner.

NL is the last Polish party selected for analysis. This party was created as a result of the unification of two formations in June 2021: SLD and Spring (*Wiosna*) by Robert Biedroń. In 2015, when the right-wing populists took power in Poland, the left did not enter parliament at all. This was the effect of a long-term crisis that

continued even though the left returned to parliament in 2019.

Focus group interviews (FGIs) were conducted with each of these political circles in two groups according to structured interview scenarios: two groups including KO activists, two groups consisting of PSL activists, and two groups with NL activists. There were six to eight respondents in each of these groups. In total, FGIs were carried out in six groups. Each FGI lasted from 90 to over 120 min and was then transcribed. The transcriptions obtained were the basis for further analyses.

Although the results of FGIs, like other methods of qualitative research, are not representative, they show some dominant ways of thinking and trends in the planned activities of the studied environment. In this case, these are activists of the opposition parties working under the pressure of the authoritarian authorities and the state ruled by right-wing populists. Under the conditions of reduced social activity and a lower level of trust—caused by the cultural and political atmosphere of authoritarianism—direct contact with the respondents and the guarantee of anonymity made it possible to obtain honest and critical opinions.

All FGIs were conducted between August and September 2021, that is, 2 years before the parliamentary election campaign planned in Poland, which, according to the election calendar, should take place in the second half of 2023.

A framework of social and political challenges faced by the opposition in a state ruled by the triple-masters class

Holding on to the assumption that the political reality of the state governed by PiS in many respects resembles the mechanisms and the social world under the communist regime, it is worth recalling the main framework of this reality:

> "What we have, therefore, is a party-state that must continue its monopoly, ignore genuine experts, lie, encourage servility and contempt for the public, engage in a constant war with its citizens, and, most important, destroy all social bonds that it does not control. And since it must do all this in order to survive, it cannot give an inch to popular demands, out of fear that it will then be forced to give more. For all these reasons, therefore, the system seems hopelessly unreformable." (Ost, 1990, p. 60)

It can be assumed that both in communist Poland and under PiS's rule, "the inflexibility of a social system is partially dependent on the degree to which the population is convinced of its inflexibility" (Ost, 1990, p. 60). In this sense, the persistence of an authoritarian system that seems closed and not very flexible, however, depends to a large extent on the attitude and strategy of society and all opposition groups. How did the circles of the political opposition in Poland perceive the possibility of reversing the course of events after 6 years of PiS's rule?

Can the "political losers" still win against the state of the right-wing populists?

The party/state control over public life and the complete rule of the triple-masters class in many social spheres may give the impression that any political change is no longer possible, and the prevailing system will reproduce while maintaining the last appearances of democratic order in the form of parliamentary elections. However, these may be rigged elections.

As a KO activist claimed:

> "We have a chance, as the opposition, to control these elections by introducing statesmen and social control. On the other hand, some democratic mechanisms are, in fact, disturbed. If one party uses the state budget to finance its campaign through public television, it is difficult to speak of equal opportunities. Well, because it is known that the reach of public television is much greater than that of private stations. Particularly in the provinces. However, these elections can still be controlled. And we can still win them and remove PiS from power." (KO)

The above statement is a good illustration of the fairly widespread belief among the circles of the political opposition that the authorities will play an unfair game and the triple-masters class will make open political fouls. On the other hand, this statement expresses the still-present attitude of hope that it may still be possible to stop the authoritarian roller that has been accelerating in Poland since 2015.

Some respondents pointed out that it was already difficult to vote for a candidate of the democratic opposition during the 2020 presidential elections:

> "If there is a slight difference between votes for PiS and the opposition, it will be like in the case of Trzaskowski's presidential campaign (the liberal-democratic opposition candidate in 2020): causing problems with elections among the Polish diaspora abroad and obstructing voting. It was breaking the rules. Loopholes will be used, and the term of office will be extended. Everything will be possible." (KO)

Opposition activists also noticed the risk of manipulation of election procedures, which could be introduced in the style of the triple-masters class: without public consultation, all of a sudden and with a lack of access to information:

> "It will suddenly turn out that three months before the elections—obviously contrary to all the rules of correct legislation—some amendment to the electoral code will come into force, which will completely reverse and deregulate this election process and will put both opposition parties and civil society up against the wall, because there will be too little time to react, and the entire machinery of the establishment will follow its rhythm. This is, in my opinion, the greatest threat in the current situation." (NL)

Left-wing activists additionally emphasized that PiS controlled state-owned companies staffed by populist right-wing activists. This allowed them to finance the campaigns of

PiS candidates using state money. However, it was an equally important challenge to convince opposition activists that the government would do everything not to lose control over the state as this could mean that people from the PiS party/state apparatus would suffer serious legal consequences and it could be a "fight for life" for them:

> "Now PiS runs its campaign in such a way that those who are in State Treasury companies will pay PLN 70,000 for the campaign of a PiS candidate. And how can we talk about fair elections when votes may be fairly counted in committees the one person one vote on its own does not mean anything when you have complete financial advantage…
>
> Now, under the new law, it is the minister and not the National Electoral Commission who appoints commission members so it is not known how it will end. I am afraid that I do not know if they will succeed, but PiS politicians will certainly try to push for their next victory even on their knees because they know that if this does not work out, someone will hold them accountable." (NL)

The statement of the left-wing activist shows that the next parliamentary elections in Poland will not be "ordinary elections." The stakes for both sides are enormous: the PiS party/state triple-masters class will be determined to defend their positions as the defeat may not only bring political but also legal and criminal consequences. In turn, this may be the last chance for the opposition to defend themselves against openly authoritarian politicians who may remain in power for many years.

Party/state repression

The Specter of the legal judgement of the triple-masters class's rule made opposition activists believe that the PiS party/state might not want to hand over power peacefully. Opposition activists admitted that there was a possibility of an open confrontation between authoritarian authorities and society, but they did not want to think about such a variant:

> "Nobody is prepared to openly confront the authorities. Because no one assumes that even in such a quasi-democracy as we now have in Poland, even in such conditions, it is difficult for us to understand and assume that the authorities can use the police and the army to shoot at people." (KO)

The authoritarian state does not have to use police repression and coercive measures on a massive scale. It may attack selected people (social activists, opposition politicians, and lawyers) and build an atmosphere of widespread

intimidation, possible repression and surveillance. This is a common mechanism occurring in various authoritarian systems—while maintaining the appearance of democratic institutions, they suppress all resistance and intimidate society, claiming that they uphold law and order (Arslanalp and Deniz Erkmen, 2020).

A KO activist explains this mechanism as follows:

> "This is not a widespread issue. They select one person from, let's say, the Women's Strike or some other protest. The accusations made against this person are often absurd and unfounded, completely trumped-up, only to intimidate the rest of them." (KO)

The mechanism of individual provocation and surveillance aimed at selected persons is well-illustrated by the use of the Pegasus spyware by special services fully subordinated to the PiS authorities. Once installed on victims' smartphones, this offensive intelligence weapon allowed secret services to fully surveil independent lawyers and opposition politicians (conversations, text messages, the location of the person using the smartphone, sound from the microphone, and camera images). This spyware was used in 45 countries (including Bahrain, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) to fight the opponents of governments and assisted in the violation of civil rights (Marczak et al., 2018). It was also used by special services in Poland. These actions of the authorities could have had a large impact on the course of the election campaign and daily political activity. As stated by Krzysztof Brejza, a KO parliamentarian who was the chief of the KO election staff during the 2019 election campaign and (as it turned out at the end of 2021), at the same time, was under surveillance by special services using Pegasus:

> "Were it not for this attack by Pegasus, PiS would not currently have a majority in the Parliament. What impact will this have? If these people can attack and destroy the headquarters of the competition, the opposition, in this way, play so dirty, so brutally and perfidiously, so contrary to any principles of democracy and even human honesty, I am sure that these elections (planned in 2023—the authors' note) will be at least as unfair as the 2019 elections." (Wysocka-Schnepf, 2021)

Together or not? On the problems of cooperation between opposition groups under the rule of the populist government

In addition to surveillance, the attacks of the secret services on the opposition are also intended to break up and divide the opponents of PiS's triple-masters class. Some of the activists were

aware of this threat. It is all the more dangerous that, as a KO activist claimed, "Even politically engaged public opinion may not notice that these conflicts are often artificially created. Even pumped up."

The divisions among the opposition not only make day-to-day cooperation difficult, but most of all reduce the chances of PiS being removed from power. This is particularly important in the context of the electoral law in force in Poland, which is based on the D'Hondt method. This method is based on party-list proportional representation (Bormann and Golder, 2013), particularly strengthens large groups and rewards different parties for uniting on one electoral list. Opposition activists were aware of these challenges in Poland:

> "In fact, nothing influences the ruling party so well as the division between the opposition parties. And this is exactly what the situation looks like now. Because the more opponents argue, the more PiS simply benefits from it. And this is also largely what this term of PiS's office relies on. Because if the opposition parties were united and did not allow themselves to be pitted against each other in such a way, it would certainly be easier, if not to win, to at least achieve a better result." (KO)

Regardless of whether various opposition groups can form a single coalition, it is important to coordinate the actions of anti-government forces under the rule of the authoritarian authorities. A left-wing activist spoke about it as follows:

> "I believe that even minimal coordination of the opposition's activities is necessary as it is completely absent at the moment. And here we do not need some great unity, a grand coalition and to act together, but at least some coordination of activities, for example, not attacking each other." (NL)

However, due to the atmosphere of distrust that each authoritarian government introduces, various groups try to save the remnants of their own political identities instead of seeking compromises and cooperation. Although broader coalitions are more rational under such conditions, the threatening situation makes the defense of one's political environment prevail. An illustration of this attitude may be the statements by both left-wing activists and a PSL politician:

> "With such a broad electoral list it is impossible to work out a common message. And it is known that without this message, without programmes, it is impossible to win. Going with the slogan that we need to remove PiS from power is not a prescription." (NL)
>
> "I am opposed to talks on grouping together. I don't think this is going to bring any good results. I believe that we, the New Left, should focus on building a special, interesting

left-wing offer for the electorate. Because we are not fighting for the support of other political parties, but we are fighting for our electorate and social support." (NL)

> "I would very much like PSL to run in the elections on its own. The party has over 120 years of tradition and I think it really has a very good chance. It is a party that can merge, talk, join, not divide, and so on. Today we are on the political market as the Polish Coalition [*Koalicja Polska*] of the PSL, so there is an open door inviting cooperation." (PSL)

On the one hand, opposition activists defended their political identities and were reluctant to cooperate. On the other hand, they noticed that the divisions introduced by the right-wing populist authorities not only covered the political dimension but also antagonized various social groups. These conflicts also spilt over into private and family lives. The triple-masters class, which imposed a black-and-white vision of the world thanks to its propaganda and domination in the political and cultural spheres, consciously deepened social conflicts that made any grassroots social activities difficult. These phenomena are illustrated by the following statements by PSL activists:

> "PiS is fanaticism. They are ready to die for their dogmas; they are capable of killing people of different views." (PSL)
>
> "It's spreading over the whole of society. Families are quarreling. They stop being in touch. I have a problem in my family because I have a very right-wing family and I do not even say that I am in the PSL party. I avoid it. I would feel weird about that at a family dinner, so I keep them at a distance." (PSL)

What can connect and bring activists from various opposition groups closer together in practice are grassroots protests organized by social movements and civic initiatives concerning specific issues. An example is the demonstrations of the Women's Strike, organized in 2016 and the autumn of 2020 in defense of the right to abortion prohibited by the PiS government. They gathered hundreds of thousands of people on the streets (Hall, 2019). Although these protests were a manifestation of a spontaneous burst of activity by civil society, they united various political circles on the streets against PiS's rule. As KO and PSL activists claimed:

> "The Women's Strike was a perfect example of the situation in which we could all really be together beyond divisions, of course with differences. Hand in hand just to walk and fight for women's rights and freedom. And that was it." (KO)
>
> "I participated in the women's strikes, I supported it. I have leftist views in this respect. I would never have an abortion performed, but I believe that freedom and choice belong to everyone. This is a human right." (PSL)

The activity of civic movements was the reason for establishing mutual contacts between opposition activists associated with political parties and local social activists. Although the distrust and willingness to maintain autonomy by activists of social movements did not always allow them to identify with opposition parties:

> "Our office also directly cooperated with law firms that provided legal support to people from the Women's Strike. We provided support in every possible form because we identified with it. It is important to support such social initiatives. However, these people, social activists, do not always want to identify with party forces." (KO)

However, what is important for supporting the democratization process under the rule of the triple-masters class is the mutual complementation of the opposition's activities organized in political parties with the "street opposition" at the level of social movements and initiatives. The latter sheds light on the most drastic manifestations of violations of civil rights; it is a form of pressure exerted not only on the authorities but also on the opposition, which it forces to be more active and expressive. On the other hand, an institutionalized opposition may be the basis for supporting grassroots protests with legal, material and infrastructural assistance (publicity, printing materials, transport, etc.). However, both groups must collaborate during election campaigns and mobilize those groups that succumb to apathy and choose to withdraw completely from public life. The living social tissue which is created by citizens outside the official structures of the state and breaks apathy and indifference is always a priceless space in authoritarian systems.

Economic pressure on people's classes and the production of a social base for the populist right

When analyzing the system of right-wing populists' rule, one cannot ignore the economic dimension. Regardless of whether we talk about provincial supporters of Trump in the US, the support of people's classes for Brexit in Great Britain (Mckenzie, 2017) and the wave of populism in Eastern Europe, we should recognize the economic causes of these phenomena are rooted in the crisis of modern capitalism (Chowdhury and Żuk, 2018), as well as emphasize and expose the fact that economic tensions are covered with a nationalist-populist narrative. In other words, right-wing populism is a good indicator of real economic problems and social inequalities, and at the same time a substitute cultural and identity response to real class exclusion.

The process of replacing the word "class" with the category of "nation" in building the political identity of those who did not benefit from neoliberal capitalism was not only a semantic change. It was a real political transformation that shifted people's classes from left-wing to populist-nationalist positions and set new political goals:

> "According to one, the world is changing to your disadvantage because of economic policies favoring elites, requiring changes in public and workplace policy. The other contends that the problem is political elites not representing the nation, of which you are an upstanding citizen, and that such enemies ought to be punished. With 'normality' pushed and 'class' shunned, 'nation' had a free ride as the cry around which to galvanize critics." (Ost, 2015, p. 544)

This phenomenon was visible in Poland, where PiS's electorate consisted of the residents of the provinces and workers (especially from small towns), who never felt the liberal prosperity of the market transformation. Therefore, "for this group, nationalism is not just identity with a swagger, but a concrete economic appeal: We will build industry at home, we will renovate the places liberalism bypassed, and we will not allow Poles to be treated as neocolonial subjects" (Ost, 2018, p. 122). Young people from the lower classes also shifted toward the nationalist right—they were the main members of the annual Independence Marches gathering the extreme right (Żuk and Żuk, 2022b). It was also the young losers' frustration with the neoliberal transformation that pushed them into the cultural framework of right-wing populism. This trend was present not only in Poland and Eastern Europe but was also a wider phenomenon. van der Linden (2018) links this lower class's shift with the crisis of the old Left workers' parties and the growing working-class support for radical right-wing populism.

In Poland, PiS won power by reviving nationalist and xenophobic sentiments during the so-called 2015 migration crisis and by promising social support for losers of the neoliberal transformation. Although their flagship Family 500+ programme (Shields, 2019), aimed at helping families with children, did not undermine the neoliberal logic, did not really change the social structure and even made it dependent on the grace of the neoliberal state, it was a big magnet generating political support for PiS (Shields, 2021).

Moreover, PiS's social policy was even appreciated by some left-wing activists and, at the same time, it blocked access to the traditional left-wing electorate. As one of the local left-wing activists claimed:

> "Whatever you say about PiS, people at the bottom might get a little better thanks to these social programmes. And they are much more satisfied with what they have today than with what they had a few years ago. Today, it is difficult for the left to attract this electorate." (NL)

In this way, the populist-nationalist policy attracted the losers of the neoliberal transformation. This legitimized PiS's rule, which was an East European hybrid of radical conservatism, nationalism, neoliberalism and paternalistic social policy (Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton, 2020). These mechanisms successfully undercut the left's access to the lower classes. According to an NL activist:

> "The left has lost the votes of the older electorate. Today, in my opinion, this senior electorate is voting for PiS, and this is what the research shows. And now, I think the left should consider how to regain PiS's electorate. The social electorate."

This trend in Poland, however, reflected a wider phenomenon that can be called the "postmodernization of the left:" abandoning the former class base and egalitarian economic policy in favor of an identity policy (women's rights, LGBT circles, and cultural minorities). This is a deeper problem and material for a separate article. Here it can only be said that this process proceeded in several ways: the more neoliberalism constituted "real politics" in the economic sphere, the more any left-wing alternative in economics was withdrawn and receded into the background. Instead, the left used identity slogans to save the remains of its position. At the same time, the populist right was building bridges to the abandoned and politically homeless lower classes. However, they did so not to change the social structure and solve the problem of inequality, but to impose their cultural and political hegemony on the lower classes and instill a nationalist and xenophobic identity in these circles. This mechanism consolidated the rule of the populist right and completely neutralized the influence of the left. An NL activist talks about this phenomenon as follows:

> "The problem here is that the base of the left is now undefined. Life shows that the slogans of the moral left in society do not practically translate into political support for the left. Even the latest protests, such as the Women's Strike, do not translate into votes at all because these sentiments translate into a support for the liberals, the Civic Platform and discourage ordinary people from the left." (NL)

At the same time, while corrupting successive democratic institutions and destroying the civic sphere, PiS scared the public about the return of liberals who, according to PiS's narrative, would eliminate all social assistance, threaten the "traditional family" and enable LGBT circles to teach children in schools. Moreover, 6 years after PiS's rule began, the opposition liberals did not fully realize that PiS defeated them for economic reasons. Social programmes, such as "Family 500+," were treated in KO circles as a symbol of "overdistribution:"

> "When it comes to 500+, you cannot simply give people money for not actually doing anything. They just get it for nothing. The point is to motivate society to work." (KO)

Other KO activists justified the rejection of social policy, saying that Poland was still a developing country and could not introduce solutions that had already existed in Western European countries:

> "I believe that it is difficult to build a developing country by distributing money left and right. And by not stimulating these people to work, but by encouraging them to simply live on social benefits. We are too poor a country to afford such a thing as social policy, which is pursued in Germany and the Scandinavian countries." (KO)

It can be assumed that the liberal opposition's lack of understanding of the lower classes' position will be the main obstacle to gaining a majority that will remove PiS from power in Poland. This is particularly true because the slogans of defending democracy and civil rights do not reach people living in the provinces. As a left-wing activist emphasized, PiS's paternalism has enormous influence in small towns:

> "Because it is a network of mutual connections that PiS has built. In fact, there are so many people and so many families dependent on the local political ties of PiS that even if they say face to face that they will not vote for PiS because they are ashamed, their own or their families' interests will make them go and vote for PiS. And this is in Poland B where there is no such thing as a vision of a democratic order. There is no such thing there. Benefits in everyday life are what count." (NL)

The ineffectiveness of EU actions and the peripherization of Eastern Europe under the rule of right-wing populists

From the very beginning of breaking the rule of law in Poland and Hungary and fighting the independent judiciary, EU institutions seemed to be helpless. As early as 2018, researchers analyzing this challenge asked about the causes of the EU's powerlessness in the clash with the political authoritarianisms in Poland and Hungary and pointed to the lack of appropriate regulations, the avoidance of open political disputes and, above all, the legal competences of the EU and its legal attitudes to the constitutional orders of the nation states:

> "The national constitutional structure of Member States is not one of those competencies that have been delegated to the EU level. Rather the opposite: national constitutional

structures are protected from EU interference by the Treaty on European Union itself:

> "Article 4(2) TEU: The Union shall respect the equality of Member States before the Treaties as well as their national identities, inherent in their fundamental structures, political and constitutional, inclusive of regional and local self-government…" (Kovács and Scheppele, 2018)

However, the authors of the EU treaty did not foresee that the constitutional order of an EU country could be trampled and subordinated to authoritarian authorities. How did the opposition in Poland assess the EU policy in this context? Generally, negatively. The EU institutions were accused of being helpless and debating instead of taking action:

> "The European Union has such bodies to press the national government to uphold the rule of law. It is said all the time that the dispute over whether or not the rule of law is respected in Poland has been going on for so many years. And over whether or not to cut funds. Well, that's the debating stage all the time, and nothing comes of it. And if the PiS government was pressed to make it clear: either it follows the rules that we have jointly accepted or Polexit. Then, they would have to define themselves. They either stop dismantling courts or they say goodbye to the EU funds." (KO)

A PSL activist had an even more decisive opinion on this matter:

> "I believe that the EU should have done something about it a long time ago. We adopted certain rules, we signed a contract. If we do not implement this agreement, we must expect consequences. This is always and everywhere the case. I believe that the EU should have stamped its foot a long time ago and said that if you don't like it, then goodbye." (PSL)

The above statements show that, in Poland, disappointment with the indecisiveness of the EU authorities is greater among opposition activists at the local and regional levels than among politicians at the national level who refrain from openly criticizing the EU's tardiness. However, the case of Poland has clearly shown that the EU must draw serious conclusions from the lessons given by Kaczyński and Orbán to more efficiently deal with violations of democratic principles. This requires that the EU member states create effective mechanisms at the legal and systemic levels to prevent the violation of civil rights.

This was noted by a KO activist who stressed the lack of legal tools and adequate political power to defend compliance with EU rules:

> "This EU is a bit like the Pope, about whom Stalin asked, how many tanks did he have? Well, he had none. And except for turning off the tap with the cash, there is nothing else that the EU can do." (KO)

A left-wing activist emphasized that the helplessness and pretending that nothing had happened did not only apply to Poland but also to other countries undermining EU values:

> "In my opinion, the actions of the European Commission were far from sufficient. The EU was built to defend certain values. And if these values have been violated many times in one or two or even more countries, including Poland, there should be some reaction. Perhaps it came from such a habit of being a gentlemen's club in which it is sufficient to ask not to violate the Constitution or not to violate women's rights and you do not need to use any special measures. It turns out that it is not and that you join the club, fart and say that nothing happened, and the rest of the gentlemen will say OK, it stinks, but what are we going to do?" (NL)

In the autumn of 2021, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) proved to be a certain means of blocking PiS's policy. It first imposed a penalty payment of EUR 500,000 per day for extending development consent for lignite mining in Turów by up to 6 years without carrying out an environmental impact assessment. Then, in October 2021, the CJEU obliged Poland to pay the European Commission a periodic penalty of EUR 1 million per day for not suspending the application of national regulations, in particular the powers of the Disciplinary Chamber of the Supreme Court (Sobczak, 2021). In December 2021, Kaczyński commented on the actions of the EU institutions as follows: "It can be said that the European institutions have radically rejected the treaties. Exactly so, the treaties ceased to apply in the EU, and the CJEU became a new legislator" (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, 2021).

Penalties for the destruction of the natural environment by the Turów mine were automatically deducted by the European Commission from the EU subsidies for Poland. On the other hand, penalties for the activity of the illegal Disciplinary Chamber of the Supreme Court were still charged until the autumn of 2022. At the same time, the Next Generation EU funds for Poland and Hungary were blocked. Both Kaczyński and Orbán did not intend to meet the expectations of the European Commission. It can be concluded that the attitude of Kaczyński in Poland and Orbán in Hungary was an open declaration of disobedience to the EU and part of a common strategy of the populist right in Europe of criticizing liberal democracy and showing a disregard for EU policy (Varga and Buzogány, 2021). This led to the further peripherization of Eastern European countries.

Conclusion: How to overcome the triple-masters class? Think radically and compromise

After the social upheaval in Poland in 1980 and later after the authorities broke down the social resistance in 1981 by imposing martial law, there were debates on the forms of further protests that were to overthrow the communist government. In the 1980's, Leszek Nowak preached the slogan "neither revolution nor evolution." He emphasized that to break free from the rule of the triple-masters class, society must break free from the bonds of the ruling minority—without this, the ruling system would only recreate oppression. In this sense, revolts are necessary. However, Nowak warned against victorious revolutions. He was afraid that new elites and a new ruling class would emerge from them. Hence, he opted for a revolution of the masses, but without a final revolution—then the weakened authorities would accept evolutionary changes for the benefit of society. If these changes were not satisfactory, there would be another social activation and another conflict until the framework of a system that would meet the conditions of civic democracy emerges. As (Nowak, 2011a, p. 477) emphasized, the condition for such a process is constant pressure on the ruling class: "Progressive corrections only take place when the civil class, despite the defeat, remains decisive enough to speak to the authorities with the only language they understand, the language of power." Elsewhere, Nowak emphasized that compromises are necessary and possible in revolutionary periods, but only when the opponents have balanced forces. "In times of peace, when people are trapped and enslaved… there are no compromises— there is a subcutaneous process of nationalizing social life." Hence, "compromises are good and even necessary to avoid unnecessary sacrifices but compromises last as long as there is a balance of class powers" (Nowak, 2011b, p. 324).

What conclusions can be drawn from Nowak's reflections and the experiences of Polish society during the communist period? Regardless of whether PiS loses the elections or retains power in the state by using its various advantages, social activation and pressure on the authorities should continue. Even after the overthrow of the authoritarian rule of the triple-masters class, further democratization of the system will not take place without social pressure. Hence, the anti-PiS opposition should be supplemented and enlivened by grassroots civic activity. The radicalism of social slogans may be the way to the evolutionary disarming of the state created by PiS.

The article shows that the greatest challenges faced by opposition activists are: their poor ability to cooperate with each other (and the experience of the opposition in Hungary in the elections of 2022 raises additional doubts as to the idea of a single opposition list of candidates); the enormous media and propaganda advantage of the triple-masters class that controls the state media; the lack of organizational and mental preparation for open repressions and open conflict with the PiS party/state (e.g., in the event of a state of emergency and mass police repression); and the problems with reaching the people's classes that social paternalism makes into PiS voters. The latter issue is related to the programmatic and political weakness of the left, as well as the mental and political barriers between the liberal opposition and PiS social voters. Opposition activists also have well-founded concerns that the election procedures will be manipulated and the election results will be falsified. In the cultural dimension, in addition to controlling the propaganda apparatus, the ruling right-wing populists can create an atmosphere of "national threat" and "siege of the country by enemies from the East and the West" (in the case of Poland, these are the EU and Russia). In this way, the climate of cultural and political nationalist pressure strengthens the hegemony of the party/state. On the other hand, in the

TABLE 2 Obstacles to and challenges for the political opposition in electoral rivalry under the conditions of democratic erosion (data based on the conducted focus group interviews).

	Obstacles and challenges
Political and legal dimension	Possible police provocations and repressions against opposition candidates in political struggle;
	Surveillance of political opposition activists using illegal tools such as Pegasus software;
	Possible manipulation with election procedures by the party/ state apparatus;
	The risk of electoral fraud;
	Possibility of annulling election results by organs subordinate to the party/state.
Cultural and ideological dimension	Total subordination of the public media to the party/state propaganda apparatus;
	Tactical and ideological alliance of the Catholic Church and party/state;
	Building and using the atmosphere of "national threat" and "siege of Poland by enemies from the East and the West" to build nationalist pressure and strengthen the party/state.
Economic and financial dimension	Unlimited funds for the electoral campaign of party/state candidates;
	Possibility of organizing "social transfers" to specific social groups constituting the party/state's electoral base just before the elections;
	Promising social support for the lower classes in return for their political support for the party/state

economic dimension, the party/state has unlimited access to the funds of state-owned companies for their election campaign. Thus, it can also buy certain groups of voters with social transfers (Table 2). Dismantling the institution of law and using lawfare allow the triple-masters class to quickly appropriate the state.

According to the Marxist model, for PiS to collapse politically, the lower classes, who sought refuge from social insecurity in right-wing populism, should deal the party a direct blow for failing to fulfill its social promises and for the economic exploitation carried out by the triple-masters class. All the revolts that took place in Poland during the communist period in 1956, 1970, 1976 and, finally, 1980 were caused by price rises and the deterioration of social standards. In the second step, they came up with emancipatory political slogans. The main force of these revolts was the workers who wanted to overthrow the authorities that had supposedly been appointed by them. Can the economic crisis and sudden increases in the prices of energy, gas and all products that took place in Poland in late 2022 play a similar role as the price rises in the communist period? If so, despite the changed scenery and historical context, the dynamics of social development will be preserved, and the false garments of right-wing populists pretending to defend the people against global capitalism will be torn off.

Another issue is whether the right-wing populists will accept their election defeat. The example of Trump has shown that even after losing elections, the handover of power by right-wing populists is not so easy and obvious. In the case of Poland, where the safeguards of democratic institutions have already been strongly weakened or liquidated, one can have many concerns about the post-election situation, regardless of the election results. However, this is a topic for a separate article and future analyses.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study involving human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent to participate in this study was not required from the participants in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

PŻ and AP contributed to conception, design of the study, and conducted focus group interviews together. PŻ prepared the original version of the article based on the material collected in the focus group interviews. The final version of the article was the joint work of both authors. Both authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

References

Akçay, Ü. (2021). Authoritarian consolidation dynamics in Turkey. *Contemp. Polit.* 27, 79–104. doi: 10.1080/13569775.2020.1845920

Arslanalp, M., and Deniz Erkmen, T. (2020). Mobile Emergency Rule in Turkey: legal repression of protests during authoritarian transformation. *Democratization* 27, 947–969. doi: 10.1080/13510347.2020.1753701

Betz, H.-G., and Meret, S. (2013). "Right-wing populist parties and the working-class vote. What have you done for us lately?" in *Class Politics and the Radical Right*, ed J. Rydgren (London; New York, NY: Routledge), 107–121.

Boese, V. A., Edgell, A. B., Hellmeier, S., Maerz, S. F., and Lindberg, S. I. (2021). How democracies prevail: democratic resilience as a two-stage process. *Democratization* 28, 885–907. doi: 10.1080/13510347.2021.1891413

Bogaards, M. (2018). De-democratization in Hungary: diffusely defective democracy. *Democratization* 25, 1481–1499. doi: 10.1080/13510347.2018.148 5015

Bormann, N.-C., and Golder, M. (2013). Democratic electoral systems around the world, 1946–2011. *Elect. Stud.* 32, 360–369. doi: 10.1016/j.electstud.2013.01.005

Bozóki, A., and Hegedus, D. (2018). An externally constrained hybrid regime: Hungary in the European Union. *Democratization* 25, 1173–1189. doi: 10.1080/13510347.2018.1455664

Chowdhury, A., and Żuk, P. (2018). From crisis to crisis: capitalism, chaos and constant unpredictability. *Econ. Labour Relat. Rev.* 29, 375–393. doi: 10.1177/1035304618811263

Conversi, D. (2020). The ultimate challenge: nationalism and climate change. *Natl. Pap.* 48, 625–636. doi: 10.1017/nps.2020.18

Csehi, R. (2019). Neither episodic, nor destined to failure? The endurance of Hungarian populism after 2010. *Democratization* 26, 1011–1027. doi: 10.1080/13510347.2019.1590814

Davis, M. (2017). *The Great God Trump and the White Working Class. Jacobin, July 2.* (2017). Available online at: https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/02/the-great-god-trump-and-the-white-working-class/ (accessed October 14, 2022).

de Souza, M. L. (2020). The land of the past? Neo-populism, neo-fascism, and the failure of the left in Brazil. *Polit. Geogr.* 83, 102186. doi: 10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102186

Eribon, D. (2009). *Retour à Reims*. Paris: Fayard.

Fabry, A. (2019). Neoliberalism, crisis and authoritarian–ethnicist reaction: the ascendancy of the Orbán regime. *Compet. Change* 23, 165–191. doi: 10.1177/1024529418813834

Gerschewski, J. (2021). Erosion or decay? Conceptualizing causes and mechanisms of democratic regression. *Democratization* 28, 43–62. doi: 10.1080/13510347.2020.1826935

Geva, D. (2021). Orbán's ordonationalism as post-neoliberal hegemony. *Theory Cult. Soc.* 38, 71–93. doi: 10.1177/0263276421999435

Grela, S. (2016). *"Dobra zmiana" miazdzy dziennikarzy i zwiazek zawodowy w Polskim Radiu*. OKO.Press. (2016). Available online at: https://oko.press/dobra-zmiana-miazdzy-dziennikarzy-zwiazki-zawodowe-polskim-radiu/ (accessed October 14, 2022).

Hall, B. (2019). Gendering resistance to right-wing populism: black protest and a new wave of feminist activism in Poland? *Am. Behav. Sci.* 63, 1497–1515. doi: 10.1177/0002764219831731

Heiskanen, J. (2021). The nationalism-populism matrix. *J. Political Ideol.* 26, 335–355. doi: 10.1080/13569317.2020.1825280

Karolewski, I. P. (2016). Protest and participation in post-transformation Poland: the case of the Committee for the Defense of Democracy (KOD). *Communist Post-Communist Stud.* 49, 255–267. doi: 10.1016/j.postcomstud.2016.06.003

Koczanowicz, L. (2016). The Polish case: community and democracy under the PiS. *New Left Rev.* 102, 77–96. Available online at: https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii102/articles/leszek-koczanowicz-the-polish-case

Kondzińska, A., and Szpala, I. (2020). *Prezes i spółki. Imperium Jarosława Kaczyńskiego*. Warszawa: Agora.

Kovács, K., and Scheppele, K. L. (2018). The fragility of an independent judiciary: lessons from Hungary and Poland—and the European Union. *Communist Post-Communist Stud.* 51, 189–200. doi: 10.1016/j.postcomstud.2018.07.005

Krzyzanowska, N., and Krzyzanowski, M. (2018). "Crisis" and migration in Poland: discursive shifts, anti-pluralism and the politicisation of exclusion. *Sociology* 52, 612–618. doi: 10.1177/0038038518757952

Laebens, M. G., and Lührmann, A. (2021). What halts democratic erosion? The changing role of accountability. *Democratization* 28, 908–928. doi: 10.1080/13510347.2021.1897109

Lendvai, P. (2019). *Orban: Europe's New Strongman*. London: Hurst & Company.

Magyar, B. (2016). *Post-Communist Mafia State: The Case of Hungary*. Budapest: Central European University Press. doi: 10.1515/9786155513558

Mandelbaum, M. (2020). "Making Our Country Great Again": the politics of subjectivity in an age of national-populism. *Int. J. Semiot. Law* 33, 451–476. doi: 10.1007/s11196-020-09717-6

Marczak, B., Scott-Railton, J., McKune, S., Abdul Razzak, B., and Deibert, R. (2018). *Hide and Seek: Tracking NSO Group's Pegasus Spyware to Operations in 45 Countries. Citizen Lab Research Report No. 113 (September)*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto.

Markowski, R. (2020). Plurality support for democratic decay: the 2019 Polish parliamentary election. *West Eur. Polit.* 43, 1513–1525. doi: 10.1080/01402382.2020.1720171

Mckenzie, L. (2017). "It's not ideal": reconsidering "anger" and "apathy" in the Brexit vote among an invisible working class. *Compet. Change* 21, 199–210. doi: 10.1177/1024529417704134

Mills, C. W. (2000). *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nowak, L. (2011a). "Ani ewolucja, ani rewolucja," in *Polska droga od socjalizmu. Pisma polityczne 1980–1989 [Polish Road from Socialism: Political Writings 1980–1989]*, ed K. Brzechczyn (Poznań: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej), 473–480.

Nowak, L. (2011b). "Myśleć radykalnie — działać kompromisowo," in *Polska droga od socjalizmu. Pisma polityczne 1980–1989 [Polish Road from Socialism: Political Writings 1980–1989]*, ed K. Brzechczyn (Poznań: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej), 322–324.

Nowak, L. (2011c). "Polska droga od socjalizmu," in *Pisma polityczne 1980–1989 [Polish Road from Socialism: Political Writings 1980–1989]*, ed K. Krzysztof Brzechczyn (Poznań: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej), 2011.

Nowak, L. (2011d). "Trój-władcy panuja najchetniej w ciemnościach [Triple masters prefer ruling in the dark]," in *Polska droga od socjalizmu. Pisma polityczne 1980–1989 [Polish Road from Socialism: Political Writings 1980–1989]*, ed K. Brzechczyn (Poznań: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej), 368–369.

Orenstein, M. A., and Bugarič, B. (2020). Work, family, fatherland: the political economy of populism in Central and Eastern Europe. *J. Eur. Public Policy* 29, 176–195. doi: 10.1080/13501763.2020.1832557

Ost, D. (1990). *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics. Opposition and Reform in Poland since 1968*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Ost, D. (2015). Class after communism: introduction to the special issue. *East Eur. Polit. Soc.* 29, 543–564. doi: 10.1177/0888325415602057

Ost, D. (2018). Workers and the radical right in Poland. *Int. Labor Work. Class Hist.* 93, 113–124. doi: 10.1017/S0147547917000345

Pinos, J. C., and Hau, M. F. (2023). *Lawfare. New Trajectories in Law*. Abingdon; New York, NY: Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9781003289869

Plattner, M. F. (2020). "Illiberal democracy and the struggle on the right," in *The Emergence of Illiberalism. Understanding a Global Phenomenon*, ed B. Vormann and M.D. Weinman (New York, NY; London: Routledge), 43–57. doi: 10.4324/9780429347368-4

Polyák, G. (2019). "Media in Hungary: three pillars of an illiberal democracy," in *Public Service Broadcasting and Media Systems in Troubled European Democracies*, eds E. Połońska and C. Beckett (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan), 279–303. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-02710-0_13

Porter-Szucs, B. (2018). "The triumph of national communism," in *Poland's Memory Wars: Essays on Illiberalism*, ed J. Harper (Budapest: Central European University Press), 65–79.

Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (2021). *Wywiad z Prezesem PiS, Wicepremierem Jarosławem Kaczyńskim, December 24.* (2021). Available online at: http://pis.org.pl/aktualnosci/wywiad-z-prezesem-pis-wicepremierem-jaroslawem-kaczynskim-17 (accessed October 14, 2022).

Ramos, C. G. (2021). The return of strongman rule in the Philippines: neoliberal roots and developmental implications. *Geoforum* 124, 310–319. doi: 10.1016/j.geoforum.2021.04.001

Sadurski, W. (2019). *Poland's Constitutional Breakdown*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi: 10.1093/oso/9780198840503.001.0001

Sata, R., and Karolewski, I. P. (2020). Caesarean politics in Hungary and Poland. *East Eur. Polit.* 36, 206–225. doi: 10.1080/21599165.2019.1703694

Shields, S. (2019). The paradoxes of necessity: fail forwards neoliberalism, social reproduction, recombinant populism and Poland's 500Plus policy. *Cap. Cl.* 43, 653–669. doi: 10.1177/0309816819880798

Shields, S. (2021). Domesticating neoliberalism: "domification" and the contradictions of the populist countermovement in Poland. *Eur. Asia Stud.* 73, 1622–1640. doi: 10.1080/09668136.2021.1972937

Sobczak, K. (2021). *TSUE: Milion euro kary dziennie za niezawieszenie Izby Dyscyplinarnej. Prawo.pl, October 27.* (2021). Available online at: https://www.prawo.pl/prawnicy-sady/izba-dyscyplinarna-milion-euro-kary-za-niezawieszenie,511425.html (accessed October 14, 2022).

Somer, M., McCoy, J. L., and Luke, R. E. (2021). Pernicious polarization, autocratization and opposition strategies. *Democratization* 28, 929–948. doi: 10.1080/13510347.2020.1865316

Stowarzyszenie Dziennikarzy Polskich (2021). *Prezes PiS: Media niepolskie powinny być w naszym kraju wyjatkiem, January 28.* (2021). Available online at: https://sdp.pl/prezes-pis-media-niepolskie-powinny-byc-w-naszym-kraju-wyjatkiem/ (accessed October 20, 2022).

Stubbs, P., and Lendvai-Bainton, N. (2020). Authoritarian neoliberalism, radical conservatism and social policy within the European Union: Croatia, Hungary and Poland. *Dev. Change* 51, 540–560. doi: 10.1111/dech.12565

van der Linden, M. (2018). Workers and the radical right. *Int. Labor Work. Class Hist.* 93, 74–78. doi: 10.1017/S0147547917000357

Varga, M., and Buzogány, A. (2021). The foreign policy of populists in power: contesting liberalism in Poland and Hungary. *Geopolitics* 26, 1442–1463. doi: 10.1080/14650045.2020.1734564

Wodak, R. (1989). "Introduction," in *Language, Power and Ideology*, ed R. Wodak (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company), xiii–xx. doi: 10.1075/ct.7

wPolityce.pl (2021). *Premier Kaczyński o mediach na antenie wPolsce.pl: Media niepolskie powinny być w naszym kraju wyjatkiem, rzadkim wyjatkiem.* wPolityce.pl. (2021). Available online at: https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/536885-kaczynski-media-niepolskie-powinny-byc-w-polsce-wyjatkiem (accessed October 14, 2022).

Wysocka-Schnepf, D. (2021). *Citizen Lab potwierdza 33 ataki na Brejze. "Gdyby nie Pegasus, PiS nie miałby wiekszości w Sejmie,"* interview with Krzysztof Brejza. wyborcza.pl. (2021). Available online at: https://wyborcza.pl/7,82983,27945094, citizen-lab-potwierdza-33-ataki-na-brejze-gdyby-nie-pegasus.html#S.DT-K.C-B.1-L.1.foto (accessed October 14, 2022).

Zanin, C., Martins, V., Valim, R., Boland, C., and Murur, L. (2022). *Lawfare. Waging War through Law, trans. C. Boland, revised by L. Murur.* London; New York, NY: Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9781003158257

Zazzara, G. (2018). "Italians First": workers on the right amidst old and new populisms. *Int. Labor Work. Class Hist.* 93, 101–112. doi: 10.1017/S0147547917000370

Znaniecki, F. (2011). 84Współczynnik humanistyczny," eds A. Przestalski and J. Włodarek (Poznań: Poznańskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk and Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza).

Żuk, P. (2021). From the anti-semitic campaign in 1968 to the nationalism of the populist right 50 years later: anti-semitic narrative in Poland as a tool of politics. *Ethnopolitics* 2021, 1–22. doi: 10.1080/17449057.2021.1988220

Żuk, P., Pluciński, P., and Żuk, P. (2021). The dialectic of neoliberal exploitation and cultural-sexual exclusion: from special economic zones to LGBT-free zones in Poland. *Antipode* 53, 1571–1595. doi: 10.1111/anti.12721

Żuk, P., and Toporowski, J. (2020). Capitalism after communism: the triumph of neoliberalism, nationalist reaction and waiting for the leftist wave. *Econ. Labour Relat. Rev.* 31, 158–171. doi: 10.1177/1035304620911121

Żuk, P., and Żuk, P. (2018a). Multimodal analysis of the nationalist discourse and historical inspirations of the spectacle of the populist right in Poland between 2015 and 2017. *Discour. Context Media* 26, 135–143. doi: 10.1016/j.dcm.2018.07.005

Żuk, P., and Żuk, P. (2018b). An "Ordinary Man's" protest: self-immolation as a radical political message in Eastern Europe today and in the past. *Soc. Mov. Stud.* 17, 610–617. doi: 10.1080/14742837.2018.1468245

Żuk, P., and Żuk, P. (2020). "Democracy is not for everyone": nationalist homophobia in Eastern Europe and opposition to liberal democracy in the European Union. *Communist Post-Communist Stud.* 53, 1–21. doi: 10.1525/cpcs.2020.53.3.1

Żuk, P., and Żuk, P. (2022a). Energy/power as a tool that disciplines and reproduces the energy order and as a critical-analytical perspective on energy policy. *Energy Policy* 161, 112750. doi: 10.1016/j.enpol.2021.112750

Żuk, P., and Żuk, P. (2022b). The Independence Day as a nationalist ritual: framework of the March of Independence in Poland. *Ethnography* 23, 14–37. doi: 10.1177/14661381211073406

Żuk, P., and Żuk, P. (2022c). The Turów Brown Coal Mine in the shadow of an international conflict: surveying the actions of the European Union Court of Justice and the populist policies of the Polish government. *Extr. Ind. Soc.* 10, 101054. doi: 10.1016/j.exis.2022.101054