

HOW BEST TO RESPOND TO THE RISE OF POPULIST EXTREMISM

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Populist extremism – and its accompanying phenomena such as racism and xenophobia – is a multi-faceted problem, which goes well beyond voting patterns. It has broader social and cultural aspects. Any durable solution needs to go beyond party political considerations, too.

It has been argued that populist extremism arises out of structural issues such as the uncertainties of the global economy. On the other hand, the actual nature of the populist response is largely determined by the cultural setting, which is often conditioned by the peculiarities of national traditions. The cultural context is crucial to determining the boundaries of socially acceptable and unacceptable forms of expressing social anger. The normative aspects of populist extremism cannot be underestimated. At its ideological core, racist populism questions the very basic values of contemporary civilization: human rights and the equal dignity of all human beings. Therefore, it poses a threat to the very fabric of contemporary pluralist democratic society.

Although Europe is thought of as a beacon of progress and human rights, dangerous right-wing populist parties entered governments in several EU countries in the recent years. One such relatively recent example is Poland in 2006-2007, when the Kaczynski government included populist extremist leaders. Can any lessons be learnt from the cultural-political struggles of that period? Arguably, the confrontation of cultural resources was an important element during those emotionally charged months.

The entrance of extremists into government was a fruit of a longer social-cultural process which made expressions of xenophobic populism socially acceptable. A shift in the electronic media market accompanied a record level of unemployment in the absence of a progressive discursive alternative. It led to an increasingly simplified and aggressive style of delivering the political message. The anachronistic political vision of the nationalist radicals could, paradoxically, fit well in the quintessentially modern (or post-modern) virtual reality of media discourses. The crude identity message of ethnonationalism circulates well in the chaotic and disoriented culture of post-industrial media society. The nationalist and anti-Semitic *Radio Maryja* provided the main symbolic framework for the coalition and the *Radio Maryja* founder, Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, was instrumental in bringing the partners together.

The conservative-populist coalition in Poland lasted for just a little longer than a year. It was voted out of office in October 2007. It did not fundamentally change the country's basic outlook. Nevertheless, its immediate effect could be observed through the rhetoric climate it created and through the government's hardline language. Discursive acts are also an important part of the construction of political reality, especially on the part of elected leaders. Political statements ('representations of reality') are as 'real' elements of the public realm as policies themselves. According to Jon Fiske, 'To the extent that representations are real in their effects, they produce what passes for real in any particular conditions. Social reality and representation are mutually constitutive, and the relations between them are necessarily political.'¹

The leader of the extreme-right League of Polish Families (LPR), Roman Giertych, became the Minister of Education and set about injecting his radical ideology in the school curriculum. That appointment led to a particularly intensive series of protests. Demonstrations by students and teachers, and other forms of protest against Giertych's policies were a common feature during the Kaczynski government period. Moreover, the mainstream media published a series of highly damaging revelations on neo-nazi connections and behaviour of members of the LPR. As a result, the public's indifference to the extreme-right infiltration of the political mainstream became much reduced.

On the other hand, an alternative cultural-political mobilization took place, with a broad coalition of anti-fascist and human rights groups as well as intellectuals, artists and various other figures voicing their resistance to the increasingly intolerant political climate.

The vibrant independent media and the civil society mobilization were crucial factors in defeating the populist extremists. The Polish anti-fascist/anti-racist and anti-discrimination movement had been building its own cultural resources since the mid-1990s. It developed its own sources of legitimacy and it had bases of support in vital cultural circuits such as popular music. The high-profile awareness-raising campaigns 'Music Against Racism' and 'Let's Kick Racism out of the Stadiums' can serve as examples. As a result, the populist radical right faced a powerful social-cultural counter-movement to reckon with.

On the level of party politics, the liberal opposition managed to present a credible alternative to the populist right and translated the cultural resources of resistance into voter mobilization. Donald Tusk, the leader of the opposition Civic Platform party, inspired followers with his positive message of 'the politics of love' as a symbolic alternative to the government's politics of hate. The emotional aspects of the counter-movement to right-wing populism should not be underestimated. In the words of Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, 'the emotions most directly connected to moral sensibilities, such as shame, guilt, and pride, are especially pervasive as motivators of action'.²

It is interesting to note that liberal-democratic politics in Poland triumphed over the populist right with relatively little assistance from abroad. The international reactions to the populist extremists' participation in the government of an EU member-state were extremely low-key compared to the EU's response to the entry of Jörg Haider's far-right party into the Austrian government in 2000. The timidity of the European-level response was a source of disappointment to civil society activists in Poland. Clearly, the European Union needs to re-think what can be considered the right mechanism for its reaction to extremist populism in the future: at the moment such a mechanism is missing.