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Populism of the Government on the Polish Socio-Political Scene (2015–2023)

Abstract: After three waves of populism in the Third Polish Republic, the phenomenon surged after 2015, when the United Right coalition, led by the Law and Justice party, took power. Its program was filled with sweeping political, economic, and cultural changes. The aim of the article is to analyze populism on the Polish socio-political scene in the years 2015–2023. A working hypothesis is related to this: after 2015, populism among political actors in Poland increased, particularly among the parties in the ruling coalition, becoming one of the most important instruments of governance. The research questions serve to test this hypothesis: Has populism gained strength in Poland since 2015? To what extent did it influence the activities of the parties in the ruling coalition? Based on theoretical knowledge describing the phenomenon of populism and related examples from Polish socio-political life, is it possible to identify its (populism's) specificity in Poland? The research positively verified the hypothesis, identifying trends confirming the growth of populism in Poland during the period under review. The adopted methods included content analysis (reports and data analyses, politicians' statements), quantitative and qualitative research (concerning the state of democracy), and comparative analysis, which allowed for a comparison of the scale of populism in Poland to other countries during the period under review.

Key words: populism, Polish political system, parliamentary elections, Law and Justice

Introduction

Populism is a political phenomenon that, although difficult to precisely define, is attracting the attention of a growing number of researchers. Its range of meaning encompasses various forms of activity, social movements, acts of protest, political parties, ideas, slogans, and rhetorical devices. Its broad reach is visible in various regions of the world, which is related to varying emphases on the components that constitute populism. Its revived presence in Eastern Europe was noted already in the first decade of this century (Mudde, 2007, p. 295). This was confirmed in Poland: in 2015, radical right parties came to power, which, however, should be distinguished from the extreme right. While the latter are anti-democratic and anti-systemic in nature, the former, although opposing many principles of liberal democracy, retain their democratic status (Mudde, 2007, pp. 26–31). The governing coalition, dubbed the United Right (Zjednoczona Prawica), was formed by three parties: Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość), Solidarity Poland (Solidarna Polska), and Agreement (Porozumienie). Its platform was filled with wide-ranging political, economic, and cultural changes.

This article aims to analyze the phenomenon of populism on the Polish socio-political scene from 2015 to 2023. A working hypothesis is related to this: after 2015, populism among political actors in Poland increased, particularly visible among the parties

in the ruling coalition, becoming one of the most important instruments of governance. The research questions that will serve to verify this hypothesis are: Has populism gained ground in Poland since 2015? To what extent has it influenced the activities of the parties in the ruling coalition? Based on theoretical knowledge describing the phenomenon of populism and related examples from Polish socio-political life, can we identify its specific domestic characteristics? What trends contributed to the rise in populist behavior? The adopted methods included content analysis (reports and data analyses, politicians' statements), quantitative and qualitative research (concerning the state of democracy), and comparative analysis, which allowed for a comparison of the scale of populism in Poland to other countries during the period under study.

Populism “without” definition

Populism, being a controversial concept, remains difficult to define unambiguously (Mudde, 2002, p. 295; Laclau, 1979, p. 143). While Paul Taggart emphasizes that the term “populism” is characterized by “troublesome conceptual instability” (2000, p. 1), Cas Mudde cites as many as twenty-six types (2007, p. 385). It is also impossible to label this phenomenon as unequivocally right-wing or left-wing, because, as Margaret Canovan notes, populism “can be both, the other, or neither – all depending on the combination of varieties currently under discussion” (Wysocka, 2011).

Attempting to construct a typology of populism also remains complex. For example, a diachronic reference allows us to identify two varieties: classical (glorification of values espoused by small rural communities in the 19th century) and contemporary (varieties found in Latin America and in post-colonial and post-communist countries) (Stankiewicz, 2006, p. 505).

Pierre-André Taguieff presented a different proposal, viewing populism as a style of conducting politics; he distinguished between protest populism and identity populism (1995, pp. 25–26). The former is characterized by open criticism of elites associated with all evil and corruption, while simultaneously demanding greater participation in power by the people, who possess all the moral attributes necessary for this. The latter, on the other hand, focuses on the people representing a homogeneous whole of a specific national group, whose enemy is anyone who imposes a different lifestyle or culture on the people or diminishes the significance of the native ethnic community.

C. Mudde, in turn, based his typology on three types of populism (2007). Agrarian populism appeals to anti-elitist slogans, folk traditions, and rural lifestyles, while also alluding to belief in God and religious values. Economic populism grants the state an active role in the economy, demanding the transfer of export revenues to the domestic market and the development of a social welfare system, regardless of the increase in state budget expenditures and the risk of inflation. Political populism prioritizes direct democracy over liberal democracy, emphasizes threats to state sovereignty from outsiders by appealing to nationalism, and directs its slogans not to the excluded but to defenders concerned with national identity.

Some of the types of populism are exemplified in research on its Polish variant. It has a distinctly contemporary character and incorporates elements of both protest and

identity strengthening. All three types were present in the platforms of Polish parties in power between 2015 and 2023.

In Polish literature, the concepts of populism and populist are understood in diverse and therefore unclear ways (Stępińska et al., 2017, p. 1). Authors usually invoke the classic distinction between two groups – the pure and wise “people” and the privileged, corrupt, and arrogant “elites” (Dzwończyk, 2000; Szacki, 2006). The specificity of contemporary Polish populism can be expressed by a list of its prototypical indicators (Przyłęcki, 2012). However, the understanding of the concept itself remains controversial, defined either as a way of political thinking situated between ideology, fundamentalism, and its post-tribal character (Bäcker, 2007), as a syndrome of emotions and expectations (Szacki, 2003), or as a socio-political movement responding to the demands of modernization of contemporary societies (Marczewska-Rytko, 1995). Dzwończyk (1995) introduces the category of “political situation,” which comprises three aspects: doctrine, social engineering, and the psychosocial dimension. Other researchers consider populism a political strategy in which – besides rhetoric – reference to the “wisdom of the people” is crucial (Przyłęcki, 2012; Nalewajko, 2013). In turn, linguists, when describing the populist communication style, point to its specific features, including general concepts, references to values, a simplified worldview, quasi-evidence, and sharp oppositions and hyperboles (Bralczyk, 2003; Ożóg, 2013; Burda, 2012). Studies conducted by Polish researchers usually focus on theoretical considerations and multiplying arguments for the populist provenance of political groups (Przyłęcki, 2012; Wysocka, 2009; Kasprowicz, 2013) or on analyses of the image of political leaders and/or their communication style (Kostrzębski, 2002; Czechowska-Derkacz, 2012). They also point to the strong links between (right-wing) populism and the institutional position of the Catholic Church, which reinforces moralizing discourse and the role of traditional values within it (Buzalka, 2008; Pankowski, 2010). The development of populism in Poland (and more broadly: in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe) is also facilitated by the anti-state attitude rooted in the experience of communist regimes, lack of respect for state institutions and the visible limitations of the still young democracy, i.e. the fluidity of parties, minor differences in political agenda, weak ties with the electorate and low voter turnout (Kasińska-Metryka, Dudała, 2025; Markowski, 2004; Kucharczyk, Wysocka, 2008; Lipiński, 2009).

A new wave of Polish populism

Analyses of Polish populism at the turn of the 21st century identify three main waves: those related to the presidential election (1991), the activities of Christian-nationalist parties, and the parliamentary election (2001) (Przyłęcki, 2012, pp. 66–85). The first occurred during the first presidential election in 1991, when the biggest surprise was the runoff of a completely unknown Stanisław Tymiński. He easily appealed to public emotions and expectations, targeting his electoral appeal primarily at working-class groups, promising a rapid improvement in the financial situation of broad swaths of citizens. He presented himself as the only “man outside the system” and a staunch opponent of the economic reforms of the time. During the campaign, he used a “black file” contain-

ing documents allegedly incriminating Lech Wałęsa. There are many opinions claiming that Tymiński was the first populist of the transforming Central European democracies (Pacześniak, De Waele, 2010, p. 9).

The next wave of Polish populism is associated with the activities of parties that invoked Christian and nationalist themes in their platforms. The largest of these, with their own parliamentary representation, embraced populist themes, which were expressed through the intense glorification and mythologization of history, the emphasis on social solidarity, the criticism of foreign capital supposedly threatening national sovereignty, the linking of the poor state of the state to the lack of political and economic lustration, and the undermining of the position of the then-government while simultaneously making promises “for all.” In this way, they sought to maintain power, but without sufficient consideration for the changing geopolitical environment, the need for foreign investment, and the transformations taking place in society, including in assessing the recent political changes.

The third and strongest wave arrived with the parliamentary elections of 2001. The Sejm saw the entry of Self-Defense of the Republic of Poland, a protest party that capitalized on contesting the current reality, employing slogans of agrarian and economic populism, and the League of Polish Families, which drew on a political populism characterized by sharp Catholic-nationalist rhetoric. In 2006, both parties signed an agreement as part of a government coalition led by Law and Justice (PiS). For the first time, typically populist parties formed a government, which also influenced PiS, which more frequently employed populist – national-xenophobic and Eurosceptic – slogans in its political discourse. The discourse radicalized after the Smolensk disaster (2010) and Jarosław Kaczyński’s presidential election defeat, when its extreme conservative wing took power within the party. The 2014 European Parliament elections and the 2015 presidential and subsequent parliamentary elections brought an intensification of populist discourse. These elections revealed a range of themes, aptly termed indicators (categories) of populism. Some of them were expressed in the language of negation and rejection, such as Euroscepticism, anti-Germanism, anti-communism, and anti-elitism. Others focused on criticism of the Third Polish Republic, democracy, and liberalism. The third part consisted of chosen values and postulates requiring protection or implementation, such as sovereignty, land, nation, tradition, and social justice (Przyłęcki, 2012, pp. 119–122).

The Right united by Populism

The semantic polysemy of populism makes it unfounded to attempt to precisely define it within the right-left dichotomy. For example, in Poland after 2015, a right-wing coalition held power, combining economic populism, close to left-wing social postulates, with political populism, invoking right-wing nationalist slogans. The seven theses formulated by Jan-Werner Müller (2017) can serve to clarify this phenomenon. Their universal and explanatory value allows them to present a broad spectrum of issues, providing numerous examples confirming the Polish populism of the government in the period under review. At the same time, they reveal a deepening crisis of democracy, for

which a debate considering the validity of some of the postulates put forward by populists could be a remedy.

1. Against the Elites

Populism elevates those willing to speak on behalf of the “true people,” thus contesting the currently influential “elites.” While maintaining the legitimacy of political representation, populists nevertheless claim exclusive rights to representation (Müller, 2017, p. 95).

This assumption was confirmed by the narrative used by politicians in the ruling camp: they spoke on behalf of “ordinary Poles,” defending them against the various “elites of the Third Polish Republic.” The political problem was presented as personal, and responsibility for current difficulties was placed on a specific group of people of questionable morality. Since promises of accountability brought them to power, the essence of exercising power became the repayment of the debt of public trust, of which subsequent social groups fell victim (Pietryga, 2016).

The legal community has suffered opprobrium as part of the so-called judicial reform. A media campaign organized by the Polish National Foundation, intended to justify the proposed changes, received widespread coverage. However, reliable information was replaced by a message discrediting judges in the eyes of citizens, primarily through billboards. “The compilation of false or biased information does not serve to build Poland’s authority and image,” the National Council of the Judiciary of Poland wrote in a statement criticizing the campaign (Sobczak, 2017).

The ruling camp also questioned the influence and importance of the academic community. A flashpoint was the presentation of the ministerial project “Academic Freedom Package” (Ministry of Education and Science, 2020). The announcement of the amendment to the law called for guaranteeing teachers freedom of teaching, speech, and research. Meanwhile, according to the Free Science Initiative, the proposed proposals “open the door to pseudoscience, religious fanaticism, and xenophobia. Such ideas – hiding under the guise of freedom (sic!) – embody the desire to ideologize universities and build a «new science»” (Zywar, 2020). Tensions also arose in relations with the teaching community. During the strike by education workers in the spring of 2019, numerous offensive statements were made against them. This was accompanied by a campaign disseminating ministerial announcements about alleged pay raises for teachers (Ambroziak, 2019).

Relations with the media community also experienced tensions. The spark was a proposal to introduce additional fees for online and traditional advertising, which these groups called “a tribute to Polish viewers, listeners, readers, and internet users, as well as Polish productions, culture, entertainment, sports, and the media” (WZI, 2021). An open letter on this matter was signed by 43 signatories, including Poland’s largest media groups and publishers. While the government argued the decision needed to tax international giants, opponents saw it as weakening or even eliminating free and independent media. Another attempt was to force through the so-called *lex TVN*. According to the government, the purpose of the new law was to introduce regulations that would block entities from outside the European Economic Area from taking control of broadcasters. Meanwhile, the proposed

changes were deemed to be “a blatant manifestation of the instrumentalization of the law to pursue partisan interests, inconsistent with the guarantees of freedom of expression, the principle of a democratic state ruled by law and the EU principle of the free movement of capital” (Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 2021).

2. Against Pluralism

Populists typically claim the exclusive right to represent the nation, denying it to other political competitors, while excluding critics from national belonging. Opposing the ruling elites, they consider them immoral, and they consider the united nation and its infallible will the sole repository of values (Müller, 2017, p. 95).

The primary reference point for the Polish version of this type of conflict remains the European Union institutions, where accusations of betraying national interests have been made. Opposition politicians were usually the victims of such slander from the ruling party, and any critical statements about the political situation in the country were described as “denunciations of our country to foreign media.” An example is the case of a Civic Coalition (KO) MEP who signed a letter demanding the European Commission introduce a so-called conditionality mechanism (European funds disbursed only if the rule of law is observed). At that time, she was accused of infidelity, her husband’s German origin was mentioned, and one of the PiS MEPs compared her to blackmailers: the result of these words was a lost case for infringement of personal rights and her dismissal from the position of Vice-President of the European Parliament.

Donald Tusk, leader of the then-opposition Civic Platform, was portrayed in a similar way. Accused of destroying Poland, he was accused of making it dependent on Germany and of pursuing pro-Russian policies. Pro-government public media commented on his return to the Polish political scene as a threat, portraying him as a German agent tasked with sowing hatred, deepening conflicts, and leading the country to destruction. These comments were accompanied by excerpts from Tusk’s speech to CDU politicians, which he delivered in German (Chrzczonowicz, 2021).

An example of the use of language that discredits political rivals, reinforced by populist rhetoric, is the commentary on the resolution adopted by the European Parliament criticizing Poland and Hungary regarding the rule of law (2019). It emphasized respect for the values enshrined in the treaties and called on both countries to respect the principle of the primacy of European Union law. Evidence of the deteriorating situation in these countries was provided by reports and statements from the European Commission, the UN, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe. Among those supporting the resolution were opposition Polish MEPs. It was they who were targeted with words denigrating national identity and accusations of treason.

3. The Only Right Policy

Populists argue for their cause by defending the common good of a given community. However, this usually conceals a desire to represent the “true people,” which in turn leads to the development of a right policy. This allows them to exploit the “true people” or the “silent majority” against elected officials (Müller, 2017, pp. 95–96).

The Polish “understanding” of the common good is rarely truly shared, and a place in the homeland belongs only to a select few (those chosen by the authorities). An example is a migration policy based on “scaremongers with refugees or immigrants (interchangeably), confusing concepts, perpetuating stereotypes, and a series of more or less deliberate omissions” (Nowak, 2019). The refugee crisis in Europe was accompanied by a fear campaign conducted in Poland, based on disinformation and contempt. Its effects included, among other things, an increase in hate crime cases (RPO and ODIHR/OSCE, 2018). The government’s actions taken by the Border Service towards refugees on the Polish-Belarusian border were deemed a violation of the Geneva Convention. Officers erected a border wall reinforced with barbed wire, refused to aid migrants, and took aggressive action against migrants and volunteers aiding; The decision to introduce a state of emergency in the border areas was considered unjustified and taken without political consultations.

Another manifestation of “right politics” were statements described as homophobic, which were an expression of “political calculation, low personal culture, religious beliefs or simply ignorance” (Szymczak, Pacewicz, 2019).

4. Confirming the People’s Will

An important element of populist rhetoric is the demand for a referendum to initiate/consolidate the process of democratic will-formation. However, the slogan of increasing political participation usually conceals a desire to reinforce the belief in the “will of the true people” (Müller, 2017, p. 96).

An example of such aspirations was the proposal to hold a constitutional referendum, proposed by President Andrzej Duda (with the ruling coalition remaining passive). Unfortunately, when it turned out that over half of Poles declared their reluctance to amend the constitution, the idea was hastily withdrawn. As a result, the motion was rejected by the Senate, where the majority were members of the ruling party, the same party from which the president hailed. The interpretation of the entire situation, which was blamed on opposition politicians, was bizarre (Leszczyński, 2018). Another example was a citizens’ motion to hold a referendum on education reform, which collected over 910,000 signatures. Unfortunately, because the proposed question directly concerned changes implemented by the government (“Are you against the education reform implemented by the government on September 1, 2017?”) and the result could have been unfavorable for the government, the Sejm, with coalition votes, did not support the resolution ordering the referendum.

5. State Capture

The demand for exclusive representation of the nation has resulted in a gradual take-over of state institutions: mass clientelism, corruption, and a suppression of criticism from civil society. This is sometimes accompanied by a desire to amend the constitution, resulting in a deep constitutional crisis (Müller, 2017, p. 96).

The scale of state capture by the winning coalition was highlighted in the report by the Civic Development Forum *Party in the State* (Paczocha, 2018). In the first three

years of government, 37 “personnel” laws were passed, enabling the government to seize control of all branches of the government and its subordinate institutions. Thirteen of these laws were passed within 30 days, and another seven within 60 days, which raises the risk of a lack of due diligence in their preparation. Their broad scope was also noted: the new regulations affected healthcare, the prosecutor’s office, the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS), education, veterinary medicine, agriculture, and public media. As a result, “the elimination of competitive procedures means centralization and the abolition of objective recruitment criteria, as well as full control by superiors, delegated by the ruling coalition, over newly appointed managers” (Paczocha, 2018).

Another example was the blatant pressure exerted on local government authorities through the Government Fund for Local Investments. According to a report by the Batory Foundation, in municipalities led by the Law and Justice party (PiS), the average subsidy was over 250 PLN per resident, while in municipalities led by the opposition, it was 25 PLN. This means that over 80% of “opposition” municipalities received no financial assistance, while only 14% of “government” municipalities received no financial assistance (Flis, Swianiewicz, 2021). Similar conclusions can be found in the report of the Association of Polish Cities: “The distribution of funds for voivodeships clearly indicates a party criterion: 8 voivodeships governed by the United Right received PLN 292.4 million (89%), while 8 voivodeships governed by the opposition received PLN 36 million (11%)” (Board of the Association of Polish Cities, 2020).

Massive clientelism is typically accompanied by corrupt practices involving representatives of all levels of government. In Poland during the period under review, the most high-profile scandals were related to the COVID-19 pandemic: fraudulent contracts for the sale of masks, the purchase of ventilators, and tests. A subsidy for public media approved by the Sejm (lower house of parliament) and expenditures on the presidential elections (so-called “envelope elections”), which ultimately were not held, sparked controversy. Public opinion was outraged by uncertainties surrounding the assets of the Prime Minister, the CEO of the state-owned company Orlen, and the President of the Supreme Audit Office, as well as the methods of spending funds from the Justice Fund, managed by the Minister of Justice. A party “sanction resolution” intended to help clear the party of allegations of clientelism and corruption, was a testament to the scale of nepotism. Representatives of the opposition Polish People’s Party (PSL) also addressed this phenomenon, presenting a list of “fat cats” – individuals associated with the ruling party and their families who hold positions in state-owned companies.

The crisis triggered by the changes to the Constitutional Tribunal and the violation of constitutional order in Poland, leading to legal dualism, has had widespread resonance, even abroad. In response, thousands of people demonstrated in the streets of the country’s largest cities, and academic circles appealed for an end to actions that would weaken the Constitutional Tribunal’s role. Courts, legal organizations, human rights organizations, and non-governmental organizations also expressed their critical stance. International institutions – the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, the US Department of State, and numerous countries, and organizations – have also called for respect for the Constitutional Tribunal’s judgments. The theses concerning those in power since 2015, confirmed by examples, demonstrate the growing strength of populism, both in its ideological dimension and in its political style. This phenomenon

appears to be perpetuating, facilitated by a historical policy reinforced by nationalist and religious narratives, and a social policy implemented through the transfer of financial resources in the form of social benefits directed to selected social groups in exchange for electoral support.

Cohabitation with Populism

In the face of the growing phenomenon of populism, the obstacles to its democratic “overcoming” are also intensifying. However, the postulate calling for a debate with populists, considering the specific reality of Poland, remains valid.

6. The Threat to Democracy

The demand for political debate involving groups (leaders) defined as populist should be considered valid. The issues they raise should be considered, rejecting the form in which they are usually presented (Müller, 2017, p. 97).

The crisis of democracy is becoming increasingly visible at the global level. Attention is drawn to the deepening social polarization and manipulation of the information space, which allows not only populists but also autocrats to remain in power. This is confirmed by subsequent reports, including *Informational Autocrats* (Guriev, Treisman, 2019) and *Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World* (Haggard, Kaufman, 2021). The latter report compared the state of democracy in several countries around the world, with particular emphasis on four indicators of democratic erosion. In the period under review (2015–2019), the situation in Poland underwent far-reaching changes, becoming worse than in Hungary, Ukraine, or Russia:

- independence of the Supreme Court (scale 0 [full independence] – 4 [full dependence]): in Poland a decrease by 1.16 points; in Hungary (2010–2019) – by 0.62 points, in Russia (1999–2017) – by 1.19 points;
- media independence (scale 0 [routine censorship] – 4 [rare state interference in the media]): in Poland a drop of 1.82 points; in Hungary (2010–2018) – by 0.95 points, in Russia (1999–2019) – by 2.02 points;
- level of civil liberties (scale 0 [high repression against citizens] – 4 [no repression]): in Poland a decrease by 1.22 points; in Hungary (2010–2019) – by 1.08 points, in Russia (1999–2019) – by 1.72 points;
- integrity of the electoral system (considering personnel changes in electoral institutions consisting in replacing people independent of the ruling party with people associated with it; scale 0 [no autonomy] – 4 [high autonomy of electoral institutions]): in Poland a drop by 1.3 points; in Hungary (2010–2018) – by 1.04 points, in Russia (1999–2016) – by 1.02 points.

All indicators show Poland’s situation as worse than Hungary’s, approaching the Russian level. As a result, Poland ranked fourth (out of sixteen countries studied) in terms of the greatest regression of basic elements of the democratic system: Turkey, Macedonia, and Venezuela fared worse. The situation is further complicated by socio-political polarization, one of the highest in the European Union.

Information control also plays a significant role in the process of weakening democracy: “The key to such regimes, we argue, is the manipulation of information. Rather than terrorizing or indoctrinating the population, rulers survive by leading citizens to believe – rationally but incorrectly – that they are competent and public-spirited. Having won popularity, dictators score points both at home and abroad by mimicking democracy. Violent repression, rather than helping, would be counterproductive because it would undercut the image of capable governance that leaders seek to cultivate” (Guriev, Treisman, 2019, p. 2). To achieve this goal, the government resorts to propaganda, information manipulation, and silencing those who might expose their incompetence. Analysts at Freedom House draw similar conclusions. They emphasize that “since taking power in late 2015, the populist, socially conservative Law and Justice party has taken numerous actions that increase its political influence over state institutions and threaten to hinder Poland’s democratic progress. Recent years have seen an increase in nationalist and homophobic rhetoric” (Freedom House, 2020). Among the areas that received the lowest ratings in the created freedom status were the electoral process, the functioning of the government, freedom of speech and religion, the rights of association and organization, the rule of law, and personal autonomy and individual rights.

7. Insufficient Representation

The accusation raised by populists regarding the underrepresentation of certain groups of citizens undoubtedly remains important. While rejecting the claim of an exclusive right to represent the nation’s interests, the call remains valid to force supporters of liberal democracy to debate the problem of underrepresentation. This raises further issues: the criteria for membership in the political community, the value of pluralism, and ways to address the needs of those supporting populist groups without appealing to frustration, anger, or resentment (Müller, 2017, pp. 97–98).

The issue of underrepresentation among some citizens, however, requires consideration of two elements that significantly hinder substantive discourse (Mierzyńska, 2021). The first is the level of political awareness in society, usually balanced between a majority uninterested in politics and a minority knowledgeable about political reality. It’s difficult to change governments when critical messages about them don’t reach the majority: populists are interested in maintaining this *status quo*. This is achieved by weakening the minority numerically through political corruption, manipulating the message so that it reaches the majority in a distorted form (which benefits the government), and undermining the credibility of authorities who favor the minority. The second element is media control, which strengthens the government’s hegemony. Its extent depends on two variables: the percentage of informed people (relative to the public) and the strength of the government’s influence over the media. Typically, this group is not large enough to require additional repression, which would weaken the government’s image, and at the same time, it is too small to pose a real threat to the state’s information policy. The demand for a debate with populist politicians also demands consideration of the actual circumstances surrounding it. In the Polish context, anti-democratic restrictions remain a hindrance, resulting in the political dependence of the justice system, state interference in the media, declining civil liberties, and the progressive degradation of the autonomy

of electoral institutions. Furthermore, this process is fueled by populist rhetoric prevalent in government bodies, the media, and on the streets.

Conclusion

The history of populism in its Polish variant confirms the intensification of this phenomenon after 2015. This is linked to the United Right coalition's rise to power and its subsequent retention through successive victories in parliamentary elections (2015 and 2019), presidential elections (2015 and 2020), local elections (2018), and the European Parliament (2019). This is evident both during the election campaigns and in the implementation of the mandate obtained: a few demands directly referenced populist slogans presented using an appropriate communication style. Both domestic and foreign policy were within the sphere of influence. In the case of the former, specific social and professional groups fell victim to radical anti-elitism. Institutions – both state and non-state – were also drawn into the orbit of the populist narrative. In the international arena, populist rhetoric was directed against European Union bodies and institutions, but also – by inciting social sentiment – against Jewish, German, and Russian communities. The most striking example of populism drawing on ethnic differences was migration policy.

The term “good change,” introduced into Polish political discourse during the PiS parliamentary campaign in 2015, appears to be a ritual incantation intended to transform reality into “good” (Łabendowicz, 2018; Kłosińska, Rusinek, 2019, p. 113). Its powerful, even persuasive, nature makes it a vehicle for populism, reshaping the Polish political scene: it maintains partisan divisions, fuels economic demands, and deconstructs the heterogeneous nature of society. Proving to be an effective tool in the fight for electorate, populism seduces successive leaders seeking to seize power, *hic et nunc*. Thus, it becomes part of mainstream politics and another of its universally acceptable forms, employed by both the government and the opposition. However, if everything proceeds with relative respect for democratic principles, populist threats seem less serious. But what if, under the pressure of ideological “good,” systemic “changes” are deemed necessary? Why then should we disbelieve the words of one Polish parliamentarian, who argues that “the good of the nation prevails over the law”? (Safjan, 2015) The provisions of the Polish constitution guaranteeing civil rights or ensuring the reliability and efficiency of public institutions are not accompanied by a clause of perpetual validity. These issues therefore exceed the framework of theoretical discourse surrounding a phenomenon that everyone talks about, but no one has accurately defined, just as no one has predicted the far-reaching consequences of this sustained impact on citizens, both those with and without the right to vote.

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Populizm władzy na polskiej scenie społeczno-politycznej (2015–2023)

Streszczenie

Po trzech falach populizmu w III RP, wzrost zjawiska odnotowano po 2015 r., gdy władzę w kraju przejęła koalicja Zjednoczona Prawica, na czele której stała partia Prawo i Sprawiedliwość. Jej program wypełniły szeroko zakrojone zmiany polityczne, ekonomiczne i kulturowe. Celem artykułu jest analiza populizmu na polskiej scenie społeczno-politycznej w latach 2015–2023. Z nim związana jest hipoteza robocza: po 2015 r. nastąpił w Polsce wzrost populizmu wśród aktorów politycznych, widoczny zwłaszcza po stronie ugrupowań rządzącej koalicji, stając się jednym z najważniejszych instrumentów sprawowania władzy. Weryfikacji hipotezy służą pytania badawcze: Czy w Polsce po 2015 r. populizm przybrał na sile? W jakim stopniu wpływał na działalność ugrupowań tworzących koalicję rządzącą? Czy można, w oparciu o teoretyczną wiedzę opisującą zjawisko populizmu i odniesione do niej przykłady z polskiego życia społeczno-politycznego, wskazać na jego (populizmu) rodzimą specyfikę? W toku badań zweryfikowano pozytywnie hipotezę, wskazując tendencje potwierdzające wzrost populizmu w Polsce w badanym okresie. W ramach przyjętych metod wykorzystano analizę treści (raporty i analizy danych, wypowiedzi polityków), badania ilościowe i jakościowe (dotyczące stanu demokracji) oraz komparastyka, która pozwoliła porównać skalę populizmu w Polsce do innych krajów w badanym okresie.

Słowa kluczowe: populizm, polski system polityczny, wybory parlamentarne, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość

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