

The Contradictions of PiS's Poland

Article by Adam Balcer

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The arrival to power of the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party in 2015 was to be a turning point for Poland. Since then, PiS has led the country on a course characterised by Euroscepticism and the erosion of democracy. Adam Balcer zooms in on two issues which will shape Poland's future: energy policy and relations with Ukraine. Tracing the contradictions embedded within these policies back to the ruling party's worldview, this analysis captures key aspects of the country's increasingly treacherous path.

PiS, the soft Eurosceptic national-populist party that has ruled Poland since 2015, has dramatically changed the country. Today, Poland is visibly less democratic and further away from the EU mainstream. Its relations with several key partners continue to deteriorate. The roots of these developments stem from PiS's worldview and have given birth to serious contradictions within Polish state policy, both internally and externally. Relations with Ukraine and energy policy are two critical issues that will shape Poland's future. The number of Ukrainian migrants in Poland is growing and, in the context of Russia's neo-imperial policy, Ukraine is of key significance for Poland's security. Regarding energy, the costs of transition away from coal will be enormous and will only be dwarfed by the costs of not taking action. These two issues are closely linked to the long-term demographic challenges facing Poland as a society and an economy. According to [UN projections](#), between 2019 and 2050 Poland's population in a median scenario may decrease by almost 30 per cent. Yet on both these issues, and as with the rule of law, PiS's stances are only deepening the contradictions facing Poland and risk creating further problems in the near future.

PiS's victory in the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2015 was the first time a single party had controlled government in Poland since the fall of communism. Since entering power, PiS has gravely undermined the rule of law. [Freedom House](#), an American foundation that evaluates political systems across the world, assesses that the ruling party is "waging an all-out war against the judges of its own country" and is setting "a dangerous precedent for antiliberal politicians inside and outside Europe." The continuation of that war will mean that at some point in coming years Poland will most probably be reclassified as "partly free" by Freedom House. Hungary became the first EU member state to be relegated to this status in 2019. Dismantling the rule of law has provoked the reaction of EU institutions. The EU triggered Article 7 disciplinary measures against Poland for the first time in 2017. Under that procedure, Poland became the subject of hearings at the Council and European Parliament debates. Several critical resolutions were endorsed by a two-thirds majority. The European Commission referred Poland to the European Court of Justice over various laws concerning "reforms of the judiciary", and the European court has already ruled against Poland in one verdict. Nevertheless, PiS stubbornly continues its "reforms".

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The compromise between Poland and the EU on the rule of law is fundamentally difficult because the rejection of the division of powers is deeply entrenched in PiS's worldview. Their vision of the nation is an ethnic and traditionalist monolith founded on common roots, religion, and language. The nation is personified: that its sovereign will is expressed through the ruling elite, unconstrained by law, constitutes PiS's organising principle. The history of Poland is strongly idealised (victims and heroes) and the current world is seen as an arena of tough competition between the nation states vigorously defending sovereignty and national interests. In consequence, PiS supports EU membership for its funds and the single market but suspects that the EU is a vehicle for "hidden" German hegemony. It wants to dramatically reverse the EU integration and for veto powers to return.

Poland's black gold

The PiS government bases its energy balance on dirty hydrocarbons. Coal is considered to ensure Polish sovereignty and economic and geopolitical security. Under PiS, decreased dependence on Russian imports has been pursued on an unprecedented scale. However, at the same time, PiS also believes that renewable energy is too expensive and of limited potential in Poland. Moreover, PiS considers ecology to be the new radical quasi-religion of the far left that has conquered Western Europe.

According to the [International Energy Agency](#), the share of renewables in Poland's total primary energy supply had been increasing until 2015, but began to decrease after PiS entered power. A genuine reversal of that trend is highly unlikely because the Polish government does not have a strategic plan for the development of renewable energy. In effect, under PiS, Poland has surpassed France and Italy to become the second largest polluter in the EU after Germany. Proportionally to the size of its economy, Poland is most definitely the largest polluter among big EU economies. Again, it is symptomatic that Polish carbon emissions decreased between [2010 and 2015](#) but started to rise after PiS won the elections. These increased by more than 10 per cent up to 2018 and continue to rise.

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Poland is dependent on coal for almost half of its total primary energy supply. The Polish "addiction" to carbon results in a contradictory approach to Russia. Despite the poor state of Polish-Russian relations, the PiS government radically increased coal imports from Russia, Russian coal being much cheaper than that produced in Poland. The volume of coal imported by Poland from Russia rose by around three times between 2015 and 2018, and increasing coal exports is an important Russian foreign policy goal in of itself. In the same period, coal production in Poland has decreased substantially. In 2018, Russian coal accounted for almost 80 per cent of Polish coal imports and was equivalent to over 20 per cent of Polish production. The figures for 2019 dropped somewhat but remain considerable. The slight decrease in coal consumption under PiS has only been achieved through a substantial increase in oil and gas imports. [60 per cent of Poland's gas imports](#) come from Russia, and the same goes for oil. But Russia's import share has diminished considerably under PiS and this trend will continue.

PiS's energy policy rests on strong support in Poland. Generally, Poles support decarbonisation, but the devil is in the details. In an opinion poll conducted in May 2019, almost 55 per cent of Poles declared that they would not support giving up coal production if it required mine closures, while more than 40 per cent of people endorsed the decarbonisation of the Polish energy sector. In another [survey from August 2019](#), more than 20 per cent of respondents rejected decarbonisation, while over 40 per cent supported it but only without financial costs (which is impossible).

PiS's affirmative approach to hydrocarbons and its scepticism towards renewable energy are the main reasons

behind Poland's ambivalent stance on the European Green Deal. In December 2019, EU leaders agreed to a 2050 climate neutrality target for the bloc. In order to help poorer polluters among the member states, the EU decided to establish a special Just Transition Mechanism, worth at least 100 billion euros. Poland was the only country that stayed out of the deal. However, the Polish government claims that Poland will be the largest beneficiary of that mechanism. The EU member states will reconsider the Polish position in June 2020. Poland can be expected to demand some opt-outs (for instance, a much later deadline for the neutrality target) – which will meet strong opposition from many member states.

Ukrainian immigration in the shadow of ethnicity and history

After PiS's 2015 victory, Poland experienced a considerable deterioration of its bilateral relations with many important partners, one of which is Ukraine. The Polish prime minister visited Ukraine for the last time in 2015, and Polish-Ukrainian relations have never been so bad as they are today. The politics of memory and the antagonistic interpretation of certain historical events and personalities are the most important sources of tension. The damage and demolition of dozens of Ukrainian monuments in Poland (many of uncertain legal status, as is the case of many Polish monuments in Ukraine) by “unknown” perpetrators, and sometimes local governments, was met with a Ukrainian moratorium on the excavations of Polish historical graves. The new Ukrainian president and government in 2019 contributed to a thaw in relations but there is still no genuine rapprochement between Kiev and Warsaw. The new Ukrainian administration lifted the moratorium but Poland has not reciprocated with the reconstruction of at least some of the demolished or damaged monuments.

The deterioration of relations between Poland and Ukraine is especially challenging for Poland because of two factors. First, Russia has adopted an aggressive neo-imperial policy in Eastern Europe. This push may go further in the coming years: the annexation of Belarus is a possibility. In this context, Ukraine is a strategic rampart protecting Poland against Russia. Second, in an unprecedented demographic process, the number of Ukrainians visiting and working in Poland is increasing radically and a Ukrainian diaspora of seasonal workers is slowly transforming itself from *gastarbeiters* to citizens.

Ukrainians are the largest group among the seasonal labourers allowed to work in Poland. In 2015, at peak, 400 000 Ukrainian workers were in Poland; in 2018-19, there were around 800 000 (the maximum number during the year). Despite the large numbers, this group accounts for little more than 2 per cent of the population and Poland remains the most ethnically homogeneous country in the EU. PiS justifies this opening of the labour market through the cultural similarities of Poles and Ukrainians as fellow Slavs, Christians, and Whites who share an idealised common state tradition of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

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However, PiS's openness has its limits. In 2018, PiS amended Poland's citizenship law and the law on permanent residence. These laws, already restrictive, became even more rigorous. As a result, the number of Ukrainians who have naturalised and received permanent residence or citizenship in recent years is limited. Moreover, the Polish government has not launched any serious integration programmes for Ukrainian people. This policy confirms the predominance of ethnically defined national identity promoted by PiS.

Most Poles perceive the seasonal immigration of Ukrainians positively. However, the majority also rejects the idea of their naturalisation. The arrival of Ukrainians in Poland, together with the state disputes over history, has seen a

dramatic increase in anti-Ukrainian discourse online and an overall deterioration in the attitude of Poles towards the Ukrainians. The attitude of Ukrainians towards Poles is radically better.

Negative attitudes towards Ukrainians are most widespread among far-right and PiS voters. Various forms of hate crime against Ukrainians have increased substantially since 2015, and it is worth noting that, according to a [report](#) led by the Polish ombudsman, the under-reporting of hate crimes is proportionally much higher in Poland than in most Western European countries. The Polish government, promoting a rosy picture of Poland as a traditionally tolerant and benevolent nation, claims that the problem of anti-Ukrainian hate speech and crime barely exists in Poland and has not taken serious steps to counter their rise. Of course, the many cultural similarities between Poles and Ukrainians, the mostly seasonal character of immigration, and the good shape of the Polish economy soften the tensions, but the real stress test will be an economic slowdown.

The Polish scorpion

Poland under PiS is undergoing a dramatic reshuffle of its domestic political system, its foreign policy, and its politics of identity and memory. PiS policy is full of contradictions. The opening of the Polish labour market for Ukrainians on a large scale was accompanied by the tightening up of laws on citizenship and permanent residence, leaving immigrants in limbo. Simultaneously, PiS has seen Poland reach its worst state of bilateral relations with Ukraine in its modern history, and did not decisively counter the rise of anti-Ukrainian feelings. At times, PiS even played that card to gain votes. In this way, PiS is preparing the stage for a Polish nationalistic backlash against Ukrainian immigrants in case of economic slowdown and the *désintéressement* of Polish society in the support of Ukraine against Russian pressure. The decrease of hydrocarbon imports from Russia went hand in hand with a falling share of renewable energy in the Polish energy mix. The prospects for the transition of the Polish energy sector are distant. This situation may strengthen Polish resentment towards the EU, which will, in turn, increase the extent to which financial support for the transition will be conditioned on Warsaw's genuine alignment to the European Green Deal.

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Many commentators and politicians assume that, at some point, PiS will make up its mind and start to behave rationally. But it's also possible that PiS is like the fabled scorpion that stung the frog carrying it across a river, despite knowing that it would doom them both. Asked by the dying frog why it did so, the scorpion replies: "I couldn't help it. It's in my nature."



Adam Balcer is a political scientist, expert in the area of Central-Eastern Europe, the Black Sea region and Polish foreign policy. He is program director at the College of Eastern Europe (KEW). He works also as National Researcher at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). He is lecturer at the Centre of East European Studies (SEW) at the University of Warsaw.

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