The Usual Suspects? Conspiracy Theories and the Covid-19 Pandemic in Poland

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Introduction

Soon after the party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) carried an absolute majority in the 2015 parliamentary elections, The Guardian commented that Poland had just been taken over by conspiracy theorists. It seemed outrageous that an older, rather inconspicuous man by the name of Jarosław Kaczyński had managed to convince the country of a “shadowy leftwing cabal” and catapulted his party, publicly known for trying to reshape Poland’s democracy, into government (Davies 2016). In the preceding two decades, Poland had been praised for its successful transformation from a socialist to a liberal democratic country. Why would the Poles give a right-wing populist party with a penchant to conspiracy theories permission to regress from this tedious process? After conspiracy theories had undergone a thorough stigmatization in many Western countries, they were not taken at face value by public institutions and experts of public relevance anymore. The PiS-party’s triumph, fueled by positive reception of their vigorous rhetoric in a considerable part of Polish society, seemed inexplicable in a country acclimated so well to Western standards of living.

Fast forward to the end of 2021, when Poland is on the brink of a fourth wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Polish state media channel TVP emphatically reminds their viewers in the newscast Wiadomości to protect others and get vaccinated. Previously launched vaccination campaigns have only yielded short-term results. Be it a national lottery promising monetary and material prizes, a vaccination-competition between the Polish municipalities or educational campaigns at schools: none of these efforts ultimately turned out to be convincing enough. Neither for the large number of vaccine-skeptics making Poland one of the most vaccine-reluctant countries in Europe (Kości 2021), nor for oppositional critics who believe that the PiS government was never serious about their fight
against the widespread vaccine-skepticism in Poland in the first place (Gajek and Ćwiklak 2021). Too often President Andrzej Duda and other politicians of the PiS spoke negatively about vaccines in the past, even going as far as denouncing flu-shots, taking the stance that vaccinations were a matter of individual preference and Covid-19 vaccines were legally questionable experiments on children (Gajek and Ćwiklak 2021). Such ambiguous messages likely helped the government win voters for the presidential election in 2020 on both sides of the vaccine debate. In September 2021, close to the vaccine lottery’s final, the government’s inconsistency ultimately got its comeuppance as Poland lagged behind many other European countries, with barely 60 percent of its citizens having received their first dose (Forsal 2022).

Since the early stages of the pandemic, the World Health Organization has warned against the global dangers arising from the worldwide spread of Covid-19-related misinformation, often manifesting in conspiracy theories and fake news. The contemporary variety and visibility of conspiracy theories might give the wrong impression that the world has entered a golden age of conspiracy theories (Butter 2020, 6). The unprecedented technological advancement has indeed contributed to a faster and therefore more dangerous, less controllable spread of information countering traditional epistemic authorities such as governments, scientific experts, and media outlets. In many countries, however, conspiracy theories were already en vogue before the pandemic hit, and in Poland, Covid-19 conspiracy theories have only been the tip of the iceberg.

Notwithstanding, the Covid-19 pandemic has provided an exceptional starting point for beginning to uncover the trajectory of conspiracy theories in Poland. Many conspiracy theories circulating during this time are not entirely new but adapted versions of already familiar narratives, with previously known conspirators woven into the new setting. Accordingly, I focus on how the pandemic has affected the belief in conspiracist content by covering some of the latest trends in Poland. I discuss how global conspiracy theories differ from local ones and explain how some of the political and historical conditions specific for Poland have affected the conspiracist trends observable during the Covid-19 pandemic. The premise of this chapter is that conspiracy theories are not only means of finding truth in times of uncertainty but also central for the affirmation of already existing values and premeditated conceptions in their respective societies that are in need of further validation (Bailey qtd. in Sobo and Drążkiewicz 2021, 69).

An Inventory of Poland’s Difficult Relationship with Vaccines

Public health organizations, governments, media, and scientists have paid a great deal of attention to vaccine-skepticism, anti-vaccination, and their respective connections with conspiracy theories as it became clear that SARS-CoV-2 could only be vanquished with an appropriate vaccine and its extensive distribution among the population. Mandatory inoculation has been met with harsh criticism all around
the world, but in Poland where vaccine-skepticism and anti-vaccine sentiments already run deep, it has turned out to be a particularly loaded topic.

Anti-vaccine movements have existed since the eighteenth century but only gained widespread popularity in the 1990s. Particularly in Poland, there has been a significant influx of such movements in the last decade. Whereas the number of unvaccinated Polish children used to stagnate at around 4,000 per year between 2006 and 2010, after 2010 it had been steadily rising and reached 48,000 in 2019 (Demczuk 2021, 89). In many Western countries, flu-shots also enjoyed an overall greater popularity than in Poland, where barely 4 percent got vaccinated (Sobierański qtd. in Sieradzka 2020).

The anti-vaccine movement that acquired most attention in the Polish media is Ogólnopolskie Stowarzyszenie Wiedzy o Szczepieniach STOP NOP [Polish Association of Knowledge about Vaccines STOP NOP]. NOP is short for Niepożądane Odczyny Poszczepienne and translates to “undesirable post-vaccination reactions.” STOP NOP is an association which in 2018 became famous for initiating an anti-vaccine petition that was signed by 120,000 Polish citizens and was supported especially by politicians of the far-right in Poland. During the Covid-19 pandemic, STOP NOP’s Facebook webpage has played a central role in the distribution of Covid-19-related myths about vaccines and masks (Demczuk 2021, 86). What is more, long-known conspiracy theories thematizing the safety and efficacy of vaccines and the clash of interests between the vulnerable patient and Big Pharma experienced a renaissance during the pandemic (114). During their demonstrations, which were documented on Facebook, representatives of STOP NOP availed themselves of various historical tropes to underline their claims.

Drawing on George Orwell’s dystopian novel 1984, the activists stood up against the circumstances imposed upon them by this “plandemic” in which Covid-19 measurements caused a “segregation” of vaccine proponents and insurgents, sought to “totally control” the citizens and deprive them of their freedom. The demonstrators, who dressed in line with the prisoners’ clothing from Auschwitz–Birkenau and carried “vaccination sets free” banners reminiscent of the cynical concentration camp gate inscription “Arbeit macht frei,” were convinced that their situation in 2021 was comparable with that of the Jews in the Third Reich (Demczuk 2021, 114–17). The medical experiments imposed upon them were proof that “Dr. Mengele is killing again” (116–17), that history was repeating itself, and the atrocities of the “plandemic” conspirators therefore needed to be answered with a second edition of the Nuremberg trials (Norymberga 2.0 2021).

Whereas anti-vaccine protests certainly played an important role in voicing such conspiracy theories, the gateway to a broad and fast spread of conspiracy theories particularly befitted social media groups which turned to hotspots for the accumulation of conspiracy theories surrounding Covid-19. Facebook groups such as “STOP NOP,” the Covid-19 denying “Nie wierzę w Koronawirusa – Grupa wsparcia: NIE JESTEŚ SAM” [I don’t believe in the coronavirus – Support group/ YOU’RE NOT ALONE], or the profile “Przeciwko układom szkodzącym Polsce” [“Against deals hurting Poland”] have been harbor to 160,000, 100,000,
and 120,000 members, respectively (Bodziorny 2020; Ogólnopolskie Stowarzyszenie Wiedzy o Szczepieniach STOP NOP 2022; Przeciwko układom szkodzącym Polsce 2022).

Polish celebrities and influencers, spreading their critique and skepticism toward Covid-19 and vaccines on social media, further instigated the debate around Covid-19 conspiracies as their “expertise” won them large support among their followers. The presumably most prominent example is Edyta Górniak, a renowned Polish singer who achieved the second place in the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest (Kafkadesk 2021). Górniak drew attention to herself with inconsistent claims about the pandemic such as Covid-19 being a “sign from heaven” and the Covid-19 patients in hospitals actually being crisis actors. Other celebrities such as former model Viola Kolakowska or pop singer Ivan Komarenko also spread doubts about the nature of Covid-19 and vaccines. It is beyond question that those celebrities’ own personal views in regard to the Covid-19 pandemic have served as an example to their thousands of followers (Kafkadesk 2021).

At the end of the year 2020 when Covid-19 skepticism and an antipathy toward masks peaked in Poland (Cybulska and Pankowski 2020, 15), the daily newspaper Rzeczpospolita (RP) commissioned a survey to investigate the levels of the Covid-19 vaccine acceptance rates in Poland. The researchers found their respondents to be divided almost equally along the lines of approval and disapproval of the vaccine: when the respondents to the RP survey were asked whether they would consider getting vaccinated when there was an opportunity to do so, only 47 percent declared their willingness, while 44 percent refused to do so (Dąbrowska 2020).

In a follow-up question investigating the specific reasons for a vaccine refusal among those who had declined to get vaccinated, 42 percent of the respondents voiced skepticism about the hasty admission of the vaccine. Among respondents of the remaining 58 percent, a combined number of 48 percent of the respondents reflected vaccine myths typically associated with Covid-19 conspiracy theories; they compared the nature of Covid-19 to that of the flu (17 percent), considered Covid-19 conquerable with a healthy lifestyle (15 percent), found vaccines generally unhelpful (14 percent), or believed the pandemic was fake and created by corporations (2 percent) (Dąbrowska 2020).

Obviously, only a confined number of the respondents phrased explicit anti-vaccine sentiments paired with concerns about potential conspiracies. The majority, rather implicitly reflecting that their knowledge might have been influenced by scientifically unorthodox facts, belongs to the group of vaccine-skeptics. As their responses vary, the motives of vaccine skeptics can be quite different, ranging from a general skepticism toward scientific expertise via a general reluctance toward vaccinations to the belief that an infection with Covid-19 can be controlled with a healthy nutrition.

A psychological study on the multidimensional factors inducing vaccine hesitancy in Poland adds further insight to these findings. Researchers found vaccine hesitancy to be persistently high throughout different stages of the pandemic and subject to various factors. Among demographic predictors such as age, sex,
financial capabilities, and income level, belief in conspiracy theories was confirmed to be an important predictor of vaccine abandonment (Sowa et al. 2021, 13). The high levels of vaccine hesitancy in Poland and its connection to conspiracy theories testify to a widespread lack of scientific knowledge about vaccines and a recourse to magic spells and superstition (Sobierajski qtd. in Sieradzka 2020). Magical thinking, which is based upon simplified thought patterns, inherently forestalls scientific reasoning – a condition which substantially benefits conspiracy theorizing (Kozik 2021, 4).

Religious observance has also been associated with a greater disregard for governmental health restrictions, less knowledge about Covid-19, and a higher acceptance of conspiracy theories (Boguszewski et al. 2020, 8). In Poland, where “in the course of over 1,000 years, Polish nationality has become closely identified with the Catholic faith” (Hruby 1982, 318), the Catholic Church is an important moral authority. As religious practices increased during the first months of the pandemic (Boguszewski et al. 2020, 1), it became a heated public matter whether clergy members recommended protection from the coronavirus by following the health restrictions imposed by the government or bypassed them by downplaying the seriousness of the virus. While many churches adapted to the new restrictions, some others did not. It was found that clergy members distorted the nature of the virus, framing it as comparable with a flu or linking its origin to the “sins of abortion and homosexuality,” a notion typically found in LGBT-related conspiracy theories (Koschalka 2020).

It is undeniable that the functionality of social media, with their echo chambers and insufficiency of gatekeeping, served as prerequisites of Covid-19 conspiracy theories and other forms of alternative knowledge to catch on so widely (Wróblewski 2020, 29; Veltzé 2021, 26). Celebrities, influencers, and social media groups followed by hundreds of thousands helped distribute alternative knowledge. Apart from phenomena conditioned by a digital transformation that affected not only Poland but countries all over the world as well in a similar fashion, there are indications that the barrier between orthodox and unorthodox knowledge is more negotiable in Poland than in other European countries. The observation that traditional authorities such as government officials, politicians, or the clergy facilitated vaccine skepticism by spreading conspiracy theories or at least failing to distance themselves clearly from them indicates that conspiracy theories might have a different status in Poland than in other European countries where conspiracy theories are more likely to be stigmatized and their political use frowned upon.

Global Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories and the (Far-) Right in Poland

It is important to note that the spreading of conspiracy theories about the pandemic seems to be fitting to the politicians of the far-right in Poland, who have given unequivocal support to anti-vaccine movements and their conspiracist thinking. This has subsequently given such conspiracies the power to move some of the
debates found in social media groups to the Polish parliament where the anti-vaccine coalition of parties Konfederacja has raised particular attention over the course of the pandemic. Emerged from a consolidation of the libertarian and euroskeptic party KORWiN (an allusion to its founder Janusz Korwin-Mikke), the nationalist Ruch Narodowy [National Movement], and the monarchist Konfederacja Korony Polskiej [Confederation of the Polish Crown], Konfederacja’s supporters are known for causing furor and regularly challenging the Polish government under PiS. Their openly displayed antipathy toward vaccines as well as “Jews, homosexuals, abortion, taxes and the EU” (Szczerbiak 2020) makes Konfederacja currently the coalition of parties with the highest relative percentage of conspiracy theorists (Czech and Scigaj 2020, 9–10).

The relationship between political affiliation and belief in conspiracy theories has been thematized repeatedly in research and the media landscape, leading to an almost commonsensical – although not in all cases justified – correlation between right-wing political affiliation and conspiracy theories (Czech 2018, 664). In a comparative study encompassing all four Visegrád countries Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, researchers found that narratives criticizing the West and their democratic systems, suggesting the danger of global control aspirations, or voicing concerns about vaccines or the actual circumstances of the pandemic, proved to hold a particular popularity among political groupings of the Polish (far-) right political spectrum (Political Capital 2020, 2–7).

Similar conclusions can be drawn from a survey in which belief in global conspiracy narratives – claiming for instance that the virus was created and spread by a Chinese lab, produced as a biological weapon to reduce the world population, or to enforce purchases of unsafe vaccines to the benefit of pharmaceutical companies – was investigated for correlation with support of a particular party. In this multi-partisan comparison of Polish parties, global conspiracy narratives thematizing plots of foreign actors were found to be relatively more accepted among the electorate of the United Right (Zjednoczona Prawica) – a conglomerate of EU-skeptic, national conservative and Christian-democratic parties with the ruling PiS at the top – and the far-right Confederation (Konfederacja) as compared to other parties, typically situated more on the liberal or left side of the political spectrum (Czech and Scigaj 2020, 30).

However, a similar inclination to conspiracy theorizing does not imply a homogeneity of right-wing voters in Poland. In contrast to the ruling PiS which became particularly famous for causing stirs around their conspiracist interpretations connected with the Smolensk airplane disaster in 2010, the far-right Konfederacja is oppositional, anti-systemic, and Poland’s strongest vaccine opponent in the Sejm. In politically deeply polarized countries like Poland, conspiracy theories are not unusual in mainstream parties but even more popular in anti-systemic parties. While the PiS has distanced itself from spreading conspiracy theories candidly, Konfederacja has shown to be unvarnished about voicing conspiracy theories. Over the course of the pandemic, Gregorz Braun, a parliamentarian of the Konfederacja and renowned conspiracy theorist, frequently attracted negative
attention with controversial historical tropes. To illustrate the perceived intolerability of the health restrictions imposed by the Polish government, Braun likened wearing masks to the first forceful procedures of Nazis against Jews, which later culminated in their extinction. He called “those responsible for the current situation . . . war criminals” and predicted that health minister Adam Niedzielski would be hanged for his activities one day (Wądolowska 2021). These statements appear paradoxical in the light of Gregorz Braun’s own “long history of antisemitic conspiracy theories” but only at first sight. When in June 2020, President Andrzej Duda visited the United States, the Polish national television heralded that, following a promise from then US President Donald Trump, Poland would be the first country to receive the coronavirus vaccine (Sobo and Drążkiewicz 2021, 77). This announcement was met with harsh criticism on behalf of vaccine skeptics. A discussion among members of the aforementioned Facebook group “I don’t believe in the Coronavirus – Support group/YOU’RE NOT ALONE,” in which tropes from World War II were mixed with allegations of Duda being a representative of the “Jewish lobby” and Poland a battlefield for the experiments of Big Pharma, exemplifies the regularly tensed and contradicting level of conspiracist discussions specifically among followers of the Konfederacja (Sobo and Drążkiewicz 2021, 77). Such content-wise incompatible conspiracy theories can be also seen as reflections of a “generalised political attitude” toward the few powerful who are perceived to harm society (Imhoff and Bruder 2014). Antisemitic and other foreign enemy images, which are an essential component of many conspiracy theories all over the world, are particularly important for the radical nationalist supporters of the Konfederacja as they draw on “locally rooted sentiments and already-internalised culturally specific tropes” (Sobo and Drążkiewicz 2021, 77). It is therefore not unusual to read about antisemitic chants during Konfederacja-supported anti-vaccine protests and simultaneous calls for the Norymberga 2.0 trials on behalf of the anti-vaccine organization STOP NOP, which has been tightly connected with Konfederacja.

Despite a few significant differences between the parties of the right-wing in Poland, the PiS-party’s electorate often overlaps with that of Konfederacja. During the presidential elections, the run-off and ultimate decision is typically a matter of choice between the conservative and the liberal camp, usually represented by someone respectively associated with the national conservative PiS on the one side and the more progressive but traditionally center-right Platforma Obywatelska (PO) on the other. The PiS-party has long noticed Konfederacja’s importance for their political success, not least during the presidential elections in 2020 which occurred during the pandemic and further polarized the political sphere. With the young and eloquent representative Krzysztof Bosak as Konfederacja’s candidate (Szczerbiak 2020), the party initially attracted many young Poles to vote for him. When the presidential election came up to a run-off between the PiS-affiliated candidate Andrzej Duda and the liberal, PO-affiliated Rafał Trzaskowski, both had to contend for the remaining voters from the other parties. Respectively, it comes
as no surprise that current-day President of Poland Andrzej Duda did not go out on a limb with vaccine praises and other controversial topics during the electoral campaign.

Local Conspiracy Narratives and the Opposition’s Upheaval against the PiS

The Polish government’s politics of concessions and restrictions have been a specific cause for concern during the pandemic. On various occasions, critics accused the PiS-party’s leaders of trying to exploit the circumstances of the pandemic to enforce their own political interests and restrict Polish citizens’ freedom through unlawful means (Tilles 2021). Determined to let the presidential election take place on May 10, 2020, as originally scheduled, the ruling PiS did not flinch from trying to change the electoral law to their own and undermine legal obstacles to let the election happen via mail – a way that the PiS had previously rejected due to its alleged potential for manipulation (Bucholc and Komornik 2020, 55). The PiS-party’s attempts to bypass the opposition in a vote about a postponement of the election were denounced as a “coup,” especially because it would have been more favorable to the governing PiS than to oppositional parties to let the election take place as planned (Wanat 2020). Accordingly, there is evidence which suggests that during the pandemic, the degree of political polarization in Poland has been further deepened and the popularity of conspiracy narratives stabilized as skepticism toward the righteousness of the Polish government’s restrictions and legal changes in the light of the 2020 presidential election grew (Czech and Scigaj 2020, 9).

Local conspiracy narratives, which thematize potential plots made by domestic instead of foreign actors, turned out to enjoy an overall even higher approval than global conspiracy narratives. Sixty-eight percent of all respondents to Czech’s and Scigaj’s multi-partisan study at least displayed a tendential agreement with the claims that the Polish government has been hiding information about the actual scale of the pandemic and adjusting health restrictions in a way that would benefit them during the presidential elections in 2020 (Czech and Scigaj 2020, 21). Sixty-three percent at least somewhat agreed with the statement that the Polish government was exploiting the pandemic to restrict democracy in Poland. Interior allegations toward the Polish government were least supported by voters of the United Right while all the other, oppositional parties observed – especially the far-right Konfederacja – displayed a considerable support for local conspiracy assertions (30–31).

Insinuations about the Polish government, such as their attempt to hide the actual scale of the pandemic to enhance their chances to win the presidential elections, are no spawn of oppositional conspiracy theorists but a recurring theme in the private, oppositional media channels in Poland (Sobo and Drążkiewicz 2021, 78). In contrast to the conspiracy theories supported by the far-right oppositional Konfederacja, however, the conspiracy narratives voiced by the other, more
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liberal-left opponents to the ruling party “have retained their status as a justified form of political criticism” (78) as their content is different than that of other conspiracy theories. Since oppositional critique has been suppressed by epistemic authorities such as state-affiliated media and other governmental institutions, narratives suspecting the government of clandestine actions have become conspiracist in the sense that they constitute heterodox knowledge from the perspective of the current government.

Conspiracy Theories Between Poland’s Past and Future

The currently observable popularity of conspiracy theories in Poland is not merely a result of the pandemic but a phenomenon, which was already described by researchers a few years ago. In 2018, a study claimed even that the variety and popularity of conspiracy theories in Poland are a result of a “collective conspiracy mentality.” This collective mental state in which the perceived trustworthiness of one’s in-group is distinctly separated from that of out-groups is substantial and momentous for intergroup relations because it typically imputes out-groups with an ill-intendedness and willingness to conspire “against the in-group” (Soral et al. 2018, 1). The “collective conspiracy mentality” in Poland feeds off the specific history of the country and applies to Poles with a “particular type of Polish national identity,” who assume that Poland’s painful historical experiences remain applicable to present political dynamics (1). With the Polish people having

[Endured struggles for independence from Russia, Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the nineteenth century, from Fascist Germany and the Soviet Union during World War II, and from Communism in the 1940s-80s’, the spectrum of potential foreign and local conspiracists is broad.

(Sobo and Drężkiewicz 2021, 77)

However, from the perspective of a never-ending victimhood of Poland, former occupying powers like Germany or Russia can unfold a significance for conspiracy theories just as much as other out-groups like the Jews, Muslims, or the “liberal powers” of the opposition, the LGBT-community or the European Union. The fact that it was not uncommon for Poles to be involved in some clandestine plot to protect their national sovereignty against the foreign occupants underlines the finding that conspiracy theories unfold ever more importance in societies with a history of actual conspiracies (Soral et al. 2018, 2; Schlipphak, Bollwerk, and Back 2021, 11).

The propensity for conspiracy theories in Poland is important for understanding Poland’s break with liberal democracy and its turn to a “non-liberal democracy” (Reykowski, quoted in Kofta and Soral 2019, 2) when the PiS-party’s 2015 accession to power came to happen. To those unfamiliar with the country’s sociocultural predispositions, the PiS-party’s win was unexpected and seemingly came out of the blue. In fact, quite the reverse is true, as the takeover of the PiS marked just
another escalation between the liberals and conservatives in a gradual process of political polarization. The 1989 Round Table Talks between the ruling communists and representatives of the resistance movement Solidarność (Solidarity), in which Lech Wałęsa, latter President of Poland, other prominent figures of the liberal elite as well as the Kaczyński brothers had participated, first seemed like a promising basis for Poland’s future without communism. But the Solidarity was a diverse social movement where some tensions between conservatives and liberals had already emerged before 1989. The enmities escalated with the Round Table Talks as some members of the Solidarity had preferred a revolution instead of negotiating a compromise with the communists (Kofta and Soral 2019, 3). These disagreements yielded increasingly diverging visions for Poland’s political direction, which ultimately ended up dividing Poles into two major camps: proponents of liberalism and progress who considered the Western model to be the legitimate one for Poland, and those who rejected Poland’s forceful integration into the Western world. A conspiracy theory, which accompanied this political cleavage, denounced the Round Table as a “hoax” (Kofta and Soral 2019, 4), and the current political system in Poland as the result of a treacherous pact between communists and liberals, who had sacrificed the future of the “real Poles” to their own, primarily economic, benefits, the “real revolution” yet to come (Davies 2016).

These allegations against liberals were further fueled in the years preceding the parliamentary elections in 2015 when Poland was governed by the liberal-conservative Platforma Obywatelska (PO), the strongest political opponent of the PiS. While the PO clearly supported Poland’s liberal transformation and further integration into the European Union, the PiS-party constantly cast doubt on this development, pointing out that only those well-off would benefit from it. The PO’s long-standing leader Donald Tusk seemed to be a particularly painful thorn in the side of Jarosław Kaczyński, the PiS-party’s perpetual leader. As a political opponent who kept a good relationship with Germany and France, Tusk and his supporters from the PO appeared as an epitome of liberal treachery who tried to sell out Poland to foreign enemies in the West under the pretext of a liberal transformation and did not shy away from depriving the Poles of their deserved prosperity by increasing taxes, raising the retirement age, and estranging themselves from the Polish society they had claimed to represent.

The seething hostility between Tusk and Kaczyński experienced its showdown with an event in 2010 which would become the foundation for the most powerful conspiracy theory in contemporary Polish history. On April 10, 2010, an airplane with the then President, Lech Kaczyński, Jarosław Kaczyński’s twin brother, and other members of the Polish elite took off to Smolensk in Russia to commemorate the anniversary of the Katyn massacre in 1940, in which over 20,000 Polish military officers and members of the intelligentsia had been killed by the Soviet secret police (Cichowlas 2016, 13). This memorial event was soon overshadowed by the airplane crashing near Smolensk and killing all passengers aboard. With Russia, a long-standing enemy in Poland, trying to deny its culpability for the massacre in 1940 for decades, it was unimaginable for many Poles
to accept the deaths of members of the Polish elite as an accident. What the vernacular soon framed as “Katyn 2” called for an explanation and an accountability of those responsible for “yet another crime that Poland’s enemies inside and outside the country would prefer to cover up” (Cichowlas 2016, 13). When the then prime minister Donald Tusk failed to install an international commission to clarify the circumstances instead of handing the investigation to the Russians, his government was accredited full responsibility for the catastrophe. For Kaczyński and his followers, Tusk’s flawed management of the catastrophe served as a suitable reason to believe that the airplane crash had been a result of a conspiracy between representatives of the PO government and Russia, induced by bomb explosions on board.

The PiS succeeded in recycling historical trauma and well-established prejudices toward common enemies by binding them together into conspiracy theories that could finally explain the disenchantment with various contemporary political realities. Many Poles were not only distressed by the discrepancies surrounding the happenings in Smolensk but also disappointed overall, with the European Union and Poland’s role within it, with liberal democracy as they had experienced it after the fall of communism, and with the PO’s form of government. Kaczyński’s elucidations that their miserable state was an effect of secretive machinations coming from the other side of the political spectrum caught on and made even more sense to those who already believed in a circular course of history in which Poland was the “Christ of Nations,” destined to suffer “over and over again” (Davies 2016).

In that way, the PiS-party’s rhetoric of distrust and interior hostility certainly paved the way for an unprecedented use of conspiracy theories in the Polish political sphere. At the same time, the post-1989 political system in Poland inherited the presumption rooted in Poland’s experience with communism that the government is generally “the enemy of the people,” which “should never be trusted,” irrespective of “who is in power” (Sobo and Drążkiewicz 2021, 78). As the coronavirus has become a constant companion, its relevance as a polarizing force has been slowly fading into the background. With Donald Tusk’s recent return to Polish politics and the emotionally charged coverage on the war in Ukraine piling up in Poland, it remains yet to be seen how alleged conspiracies surrounding the pandemic will even play a role in the 2023 Polish parliamentary election – and which usual suspects make a comeback.

Bibliography


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