

Illiberal Challenge to Liberal Democracy The Case of Poland

Jan Kubik

Abstract

The essay offers three sets of ideas. First, I define illiberal challenge and identify its three components (populism, organizational antipluralism, and ideological monism). Second, I discuss three causes of this challenge: economic, political, and cultural. Third, using this framework, I analyze the Polish case, concluding that the illiberal challenge in this country is considerable, but too weak to threaten liberal democracy. Important argument is that, in order to explain the staying power of illiberalism (or any other ideology), we need a theory that accounts for *both the demand and supply sides of politics*, particularly cultural politics.

Keywords: Illiberalism, populism, Poland, cultural politics, antipluralism, ideological monism.

The Problem

Liberal democracy is not a stable equilibrium under all conditions.¹ Among the challenges it has historically faced, illiberalism is arguably most common and most dangerous. The most famous case of democracy that caved in under the weight of illiberalism was Weimar Germany. Then, after World War I, the process of collapse took fifteen years. Two important questions to answer in 2012 are: (1) What is the balance of illiberal and liberal forces in Central Europe after twenty years of democratic transformations? and (2) Are illiberal forces strong enough to pose a viable challenge to democracy? The questions are not purely academic, as the neighborhood is populated by states that are either autocratic (Belarus) or have acquired a political system aptly labeled by Way and Levitsky “competitive authoritarianism” (e.g., Ukraine). To investigate the

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¹ Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

strength and nature of the illiberal challenge, I engage in an analysis of a single case: Poland.

Definitions

Illiberalism can be conveniently defined as a political option that is based on three principles: (1) populism, (2) (organizational) antipluralism, and (3) ideological monism.

The main feature of *populism* is the exaltation of the “will of the people” that can be—it is assumed—directly expressed and enacted if only proper institutional conditions are provided. Consequently, populist politics entails the rejection or curtailment of the mechanisms of indirect (say, parliamentary) democracy and the high level of trust in a (strong) *leader* who is able to embody and articulate common goals as well as lead. Populists tend to focus their political energy on defining and protecting some kind of political “substance” (for example, national) rather than political procedures (say, rules of parliamentarism). When substance and procedure are in conflict, the former trumps the latter, at least in rhetoric.²

In its extreme form, organizational *antipluralism* means a set of strategies that aim at the elimination of all potential or actual competitors in a given political field. In democracy, antipluralism assumes usually a milder form: *denial of legitimacy* to all/most political adversaries. They are often portrayed as “impure” and/or as representing some “alien” principles of identity or “hostile” interests.

Finally, ideological *monism* can mean an attempt to impose a single ideology on the society, but since this is difficult, the task is the promotion of the only “proper” ideology and the discrediting of ideological competitors. In particular, any political ideology that promotes principles of plurality and tolerance is seen as contemptible and threatening to the cultural “substance” that needs to be protected.

Illiberal challenge to democracy may take several forms, but by and large it comes either from the left or the right. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the left has lost much of its luster, so the post-1989 illiberalism is almost exclusively right-wing and often takes the form of “ethno-nationalist xenophobia.”³

² Mudde defines populism in a slightly different manner: “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.” See Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 562. A related concept of economic populism is crisply defined in Robert R. Kaufman and Barbara Stallings, “The Political Economy of Latin American Populism,” in *The Macroeconomics of Populism in Latin America*, ed. Rudiger Dornbusch and Sebastian Edwards (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 15-43. See, in particular, 15-16. I do not deal with this type of populism here.

³ Jens Rydgren, “Radical Right-wing Populism in Denmark and Sweden: Explaining Party System Change and Stability,” *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 30, no. 1 (2010): 57.

Explanations

For the sake of a short essay, it is convenient to signal three types of causes of the illiberal challenge: economic, political, and cultural.

Periods of economic restructuring or downturn, generating rising unemployment and income disparity, seem to be a major cause of the rise in popularity of illiberal, populist ideologies. In an often-posed mechanism, people suffering economic misfortune turn to simple explanations and tend to accept uncomplicated political visions and policy recommendations.⁴ These are offered by illiberal ideologies advocated by various movements or parties. The problem is that while the *economic crisis theories* explain the rise of *demand* for “easy” solutions, they do not offer explanations of why and how specific ideologies and political organizations are produced and propagated in some crisis periods and not in others. In short, such theories do not deal well with the *supply* side of the political equation.

Political causes of illiberalism can be grouped into two types: organizational and material. To be successful, political movements or parties that champion antipluralism need to marshal sufficient resources. Organization means cadres and control of or influence over “supportive” institutions, for example, the media. Material resources need to come in the form of cash or property.

Cultural causes of illiberalism should be analyzed from two angles. As in other areas of political analysis, it is convenient to think about *demand* and *supply*, while examining the relationship between culture and politics. Conventional political-culture approaches focus on studying aggregates of attitudes and provide answers to the *demand* side (*What do they believe in and thus what do they want?*). Systematic studies of attitudes, opinions, and so on, allow social scientists to reconstruct *cultural climates* that evolve and change, and are more or less conducive to the spread of illiberal/populist ideas. The theories that explain changes in demand (for ideologies) tend to be exogenous and thus reductionist, as they locate the causes of cultural change in extra-cultural factors, such as economic crises or political action. The endogenous theories focus on the *supply* of ideas, cultural frames, or discourses that are seen as autonomous (albeit nonexclusive) causes of cultural change (for example, the articulation and propagation of ideological monism often associated with populism). Discursive attacks that deny the legitimacy of either the whole system or (some) political actors are of particular interest. In general, the

⁴ According to Kalb, Piccone was the first to predict the emergence of such a reaction when he wrote: “The French New Right seems to be onto something when it counterposes a universalizing New Class seeking to impose an abstract liberal agenda on everyone, and populists wanting to live their lives in their communities, with their particular cultures, institutions, religions [,] etc.” See Don Kalb, “Conversations with a Polish Populist: Tracing Hidden Histories of Globalization, Class, and Depression in Postsocialism (and Beyond),” *American Ethnologist* 36, no. 2 (2009): 208.

supply-side analysis of political culture answers such questions as: *Why do people hold certain beliefs?* and *Where do those beliefs come from?*

The analysis that focuses on the *demand side* of the politically relevant cultural “elements” tends to treat culture as a dominant syndrome of attitudes prevalent in a given society, a syndrome that is shaped by history and is characterized by certain immutability. This is the domain of *long durée*, and culture is seen here largely as a *constraint* on political action. The supply-side type of analysis treats culture as a set of discourses, symbols, ideas, and so on, that are construed as *resources* (i.e., carriers of meaning that are malleable enough to allow for useful manipulation [by political entrepreneurs] to achieve their [political] goals).

An important group of theories that is directly relevant for the study of illiberalism and its relation to political and economic transformations is theories of *cultural trauma*.⁵ There is no room here to analyze them, but suffice it to say that they tend to suffer from two theoretical shortcomings. First, they tend to focus on the *demand* side of politics (economic dislocations cause trauma and traumatized people search for [simple] solutions) and do not pay enough attention to the *supply* side. As a result, they underestimate or even neglect both the strategic actions of political entrepreneurs who manipulate the cultural material and the availability of cultural materials malleable enough to become useful political weapons. It should be noted, however, that the thoroughly constructivist version of the theory, advocated by Alexander, avoids these pitfalls, as he emphasizes the constructed nature of trauma. In his argument, not all traumatogenic events or processes result in cultural trauma; only those that are interpreted for the public as “traumatic.”

Poland

Equipped with these analytical tools, I take a quick look at Poland, an important case among the last twentieth-century democratizations. By all accounts, this country is one of the most successful cases of post-communist/post-authoritarian transformation. Moreover, it has at least three unique features: (1) it was the country with the most massive popular challenge to state socialism (Solidarity), (2) it was a pioneer in initiating the democratization in the Soviet bloc, and (3) it introduced the earliest and most radical neo-liberal economic reforms (January 1990).

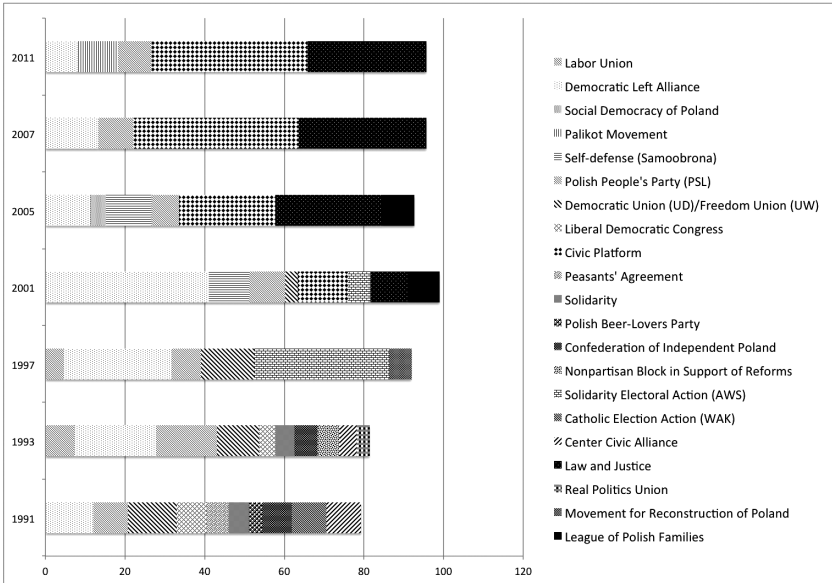
As our research and other studies show, illiberalism in post-1989 Poland has been strong, at least in some periods, but not strong enough to derail liberal democracy.⁶ The illiberal parties of consequence have included over the last

⁵ Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁶ Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik, *Rebellious Civil Society: Popular Protest and Democratic Consolidation in Poland, 1989-1993* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Cas

two decades: the League of Polish Families (LPR), Self-Defense, and the Law and Justice Party (PiS). The coalition of these three parties ruled Poland between 2005 and 2007. As this coalition disintegrated, the elections of 2007 were won by the moderate center-right Civic Platform (PO). The Platform won again in 2011. The changing composition of Sejm, the lower house of the Polish parliament since the fall of communism, is depicted in figure 1.

Figure 1. The Changing Composition of Sejm (Lower House of the Polish Parliament), 1991-2011 (share of seats in percent)



Note: The graph illustrates the share of seats in Sejm (1991-2011). Only the parties that won at least 3 percent of the seats are included.

Note the dramatic shift of power in the Sejm from the left to the right between the 2001 and 2005 elections. The post-communist left (black dots, white background) suffered a humiliating defeat (dropping from 216 seats to 55) while PiS (white dots, black background) gained 111 seats (rising from 44 to 155 seats). PiS's success was short-lived, however. Its power peaked in 2007 (166 seats) and its share of seats declined in 2011 (to 157 seats). More importantly, the parliamentary power of the moderate PO (chessboard) has

Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Rafal Pankowski, *The Populist Radical Right in Poland: The Patriots* (London: Routledge, 2010).

increased systematically since 2005 (65 seats in 2001, 133 in 2005, 209 in 2007, and 207 in 2011).

A quick look at the distribution of votes shows that PiS, after winning a plurality of votes in the October 2005 elections by a relatively slim margin (27 percent compared to Civic Platform's 24.1 percent), lost decisively in both the November 2007 (32.1 percent in contrast to Civic Platform's 41.5 percent) and October 2011 elections (29.89 percent compared to Civic Platform's 39.18 percent). I interpret this trend as the solidification of *moderate centrism* in Polish politics and the rejection of illiberalism by a significant plurality of voters. So, illiberalism has not become a dominant force in Polish politics. It has become a fixture on the Polish political scene, however, with considerable consequences for the tenor of Polish politics.

Next, I use the categories introduced earlier to examine illiberalism of the major right-wing political party, PiS. Populism (as I define it here) is the cornerstone of the party's program. Its politicians not only frequently challenge the legitimacy of the specific institutions of representative democracy (for example, other parties), but also, for a while, they vigorously championed a comprehensive ideology delegitimizing the whole post-communist political order.⁷

Organizational antipluralism is difficult to practice in a system that has instituted solid protections of indirect democracy. Poland has done so. Therefore, since the outright delegitimation of political adversaries is impossible, the main strategy is to discredit them as often and in as many venues as possible. The battleground is thus primarily cultural, although many attempts have been made to achieve control over at least some institutions, particularly in the media and public education. The main institutional success of PiS was the control it achieved over the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), whose chairman from 2005 to 2010, Janusz Kurtyka, openly proclaimed his pro-PiS orientation.

Ideological monism of PiS is apparent in its politicians' frequent discrediting of other political options as "alien" (to the Polish national substance). Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the leader of the party, often resorts to rhetorical strategies of innuendo to suggest that his adversaries are "traitors" or "agents." He frequently challenges their anticommunist credentials and their "true" Solidarity backgrounds. The party is staunchly nationalistic and its leaders are prone to incite or exacerbate "collective narcissism"⁸ via rhetorical

⁷ It is conventional to refer to the post-1989 Polish political regime as the Third Republic. PiS argued that this republic was illegitimate, mostly because of the power and influence of excommunists, and for a while advocated the formation of the Fourth Republic.

⁸ Golec de Zavala et al., write: "We propose a concept of collective narcissism, which describes an ingroup identification tied to an emotional group identification investment in an unrealistic belief about the unparalleled greatness of an ingroup. By introducing this concept, we seek to shed new light on the capacity of positive group esteem to inspire intergroup aggressiveness." Agnieszka Golec de Zavala, Aleksandra Cichocka, Roy Eidelson, and Nuwan Jayawickreme, "Collective

tirades directed against either Germany or Russia (or both). Tismaneanu identifies such cultural strategy as offering “fantasies of salvation.”⁹ The picture of the world the party proposes is relatively simple and tends to be of the “black and white” variety.

PiS, therefore, possesses all three attributes of a party whose philosophy is illiberalism, which is promoted and practiced within the restrictions of a well-functioning democracy. Its electoral successes, however, are modest, to say the least. Let’s return to the theories introduced earlier to explain this situation.

The economic theories predict that the appeal of illiberalism increases when the economic situation worsens and declines when that situation improves. The relative lack of success of PiS and similar parties in Poland can be explained by the fact that the Polish economy over the last twenty years has had the best economic performance of all post-communist countries. There are, of course, categories of people (less educated, older, living in [some] rural areas) whose lives have not improved since the fall of communism and often have worsened. These people tend to vote for PiS in high numbers, particularly since the party made a decisive switch toward the populist right.¹⁰

Political causes of a party’s success, as noted earlier, fall into two categories, organizational and material. Organizationally, PiS was a well-functioning machine, at least until 2011-2012 (when two major groups of party activists split),¹¹ with local and regional offices distributed throughout the whole country, and with particular strength in the south and east of Poland. The party, founded by the Kaczynski twins in 1998, has been systematically building its base since then. Its problem, whose significance will be tested soon in political practice, is defections. For complex reasons, Kaczynski’s dictatorial style being arguably the most important, the party recently suffered two waves of high-level defections. Some members of the earlier splinter group joined PO; the most recent defectors formed a new right-wing party (Solidarna Polska), whose long-term prospects as of now are hard to predict. PiS is closely allied with a set of cultural institutions, among which the most prominent is the ultra-Catholic and populist *Radio Maryja*, that often promotes (though with limited success¹²) cultural parochialism and ethnic exclusivism. PiS also enjoys the support of some sectors of the Catholic Church’s hierarchy and clergy.

Narcissism and Its Social Consequences,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 97 (2009): 1074.

⁹ Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Fantasies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism, and Myth in Post-communist Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

¹⁰ Pankowski, *The Populist Radical Right in Poland*, 165-167.

¹¹ Polska Jest Najważniejsza (PJN) was funded in December 2010 and was registered as a separate party on March 17, 2011. Solidarna Polska was funded in March 2012 and registered on June 1, 2012. Both splits weakened PiS, the organizational power of the right-wing, and its leader, Jarosław Kaczyński.

¹² According to data published on <http://www.radiomaryja.pl.eu.org/> (accessed December 7, 2012), the listeners of *Radio Maryja* constituted about 3-4 percent of all potential radio listeners (about thirty million) on a given day in years 2004-2012.

I do not have the full picture of the material base behind PiS's staying power. Since 2001, Polish political parties have been financed predominantly from the state budget. The amount of governmental subvention is determined by the electoral results. PiS has been profiting from its relatively large electoral support and sizeable parliamentary representation. For example, its total governmental subvention in 2008 was 35.5 million Polish *zloty* (over ten million dollars) (compared to PO's almost 38 million).¹³ Cynically, one may say that, while the party's strategy has not resulted and is increasingly unlikely to result in bringing it to power (with the exception of the 2005-2007 period), it does generate a stream of income (via subventions) that sustains its professional personnel. Additionally, the salaries of parliamentarians and subventions for their offices are not negligible.

As noted, cultural explanations should have both a supply and demand side. Many studies of the demand side emphasize the *long durée* conservatism and susceptibility to illiberal visions among a sizeable sector of the Polish populace (up to 30 percent). And, it has been shown that discourses based on simple binaries tend to be more effective in resonating with people who have the heightened need for *cognitive closure* and epistemic clarity. Such needs—in the light of available research—are higher among the politicians and supporters of the right than of the center (the situation on the left is more complex). As the Polish political psychologist, Agnieszka Golec, writes:

Studies on epistemic motivation and political preference confirm that supporters of the political right are motivated to avoid cognitive uncertainty and complex information processing. They prefer clear, simple and unambiguous situations, a familiar and predictable environment, avoiding change and tending to hold on to their opinions despite disconfirming information. These tendencies were found among supporters of conservative parties in established Western democracies (e.g. Kimmelmeier (1997) in Germany; Jost et al (1999) in the US) and among politicians representing right wing parties in post-communist countries.¹⁴

Analyses of the demand side (the existing syndromes of attitudes or opinions) need to be complemented by studies of the supply side. Only the latter can provide explanations of why climates of opinion (*Zeitgeist*) or

¹³ Jaroslaw Zbieranek, ed., *Subwencje z budzetu panstwa dla partii politycznych. Jawnosci i kontrola* [State budget subventions for political parties: Transparency and control] (Warsaw: Instytut Spraw Publicznych, 2008).

¹⁴ Agnieszka Golec de Zavala, "Cognitive Skills and Motivation to Adapt to Social Change among Polish Politicians," in *The Psychology of Politicians*, ed. Ashley Weinberg (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 76-96.

dominant popular convictions sometimes change and sometimes do not. The answers must come from the study of deliberate framing (signifying) activities by cultural entrepreneurs via specific media and educational institutions, political parties' "propaganda" operations among them. Here, PiS has engaged in mnemonic war and has been relentless in propagating its vision of Polish post-1989 transformation as a period of wasted opportunities. This period has its roots in the "illegitimate" deal at the Round Table that guaranteed excommunists too much influence in the public, particularly the economic, life of the country. All other parties in Polish politics celebrate the Round Table as an unprecedented achievement that allowed Poland to enter a path of democratic transformation without violence. But PiS's aggressive strategy aimed at the delegitimization of its competitors has proven to be ineffective, as this party has been unable to win enough electoral support to gain power (with the exception of the 2005-2007 period).

Finally, I take a quick look at two theories that, *inter alia*, propose explanations of the "right wing/populist/illiberal reaction" to rapid political and economic transformations and/or dramatic dislocations associated with globalization. One, proposed by Alexander et al., and briefly introduced above, the *cultural trauma theory*, seems to suggest that the antiliberal cultural backlash (for example, right-wing reaction) should have happened relatively early during the process of post-communist transformation. It did not. In Poland, the parties of the illiberal/populist right did not play any major role during the early transitional period and gradually have been gaining strength and achieved power, however briefly, only in the middle of the first decade of the 2000s, fifteen years after the commencement of transformation.

As the cultural trauma theory may not be fully convincing, its two competitors are worthy of consideration. First, there exists an underarticulated theory that focuses on the supply side of cultural politics in post-communist states. According to this theory, the rise of illiberalism is explained primarily by the entrepreneurial activities of politicians, grass-root movements, and activists who promote this worldview and the political programs based on it, which *frame* the situation as "bad," "unbearable," and so on.

Second, on the demand side, cultural trauma theory has a strong competitor in a theory I would call *transformational exhaustion*. Its essence is disappointment with the *elitism*¹⁵ of the initial period of reforms and their outcomes. This gives rise to a growing sense of exclusion that underpins the populace's thrashing around in its search for alternative interpretive frames and political solutions. As Ost observes:

¹⁵ Jacek Wasilewski, "Trudny test demokratycznego elityzmu" [A difficult test of democratic elitism], in *Legitimizacja w Polsce. Nieustający kryzys w zmieniających się warunkach* [Legitimization in Poland: A continuous crisis in changing conditions], ed. Andrzej Rychard and Henryk Domanski (Warsaw: IFiS PAN, 2010), 33-59.

Many turned to the right because the right offered them an outlet for their economic anger and a narrative to explain their economic problems that liberals, believing they held sway over workers, consistently failed to provide. In the end, workers drifted to the right because their erstwhile intellectual allies pushed them there.¹⁶

Ost's explanation is incomplete; it deals mostly with the *delayed demand* for new ideas or narratives. But while some intellectuals and politicians might have been guilty of "pushing," others have been hard at work at "pulling" workers (and other people) toward illiberal explanations and policy positions. A robust explanation of the 2005-2007 success of PiS and its allies, and of the PiS's staying power, should come therefore from a combination of these two theoretical leads. On the demand side, it is a *delayed response* to the transformational hardships and the sense of exclusion. This seems to be the hallmark of the *second phase of democratic consolidation*. On the supply side, it is the skillful elaboration and propagation of *illiberal/populist narratives* that are as always directed against two adversaries: elitism and pluralism.¹⁷

It seems to me that, in order to develop a robust theory of the illiberal challenge in post-communist Europe (and arguably elsewhere), we need to explain both the nature of the *delayed popular response to the tribulations of early transformations* (thus, also a more systematic study of the genesis and consequences of the elitism characteristic of the initial period of reforms) and the *success or failure of illiberal discourses* (thus, an examination of the mechanisms of their formulation, propagation, and effectiveness). In the Polish case, the illiberal challenge, though serious, has been so far ineffective. It has proven to be way more effective in Hungary, where the illiberal forces not only were able to form a government but also managed to rewrite the country's constitution. We still do not have a full-fledged theory that would allow us to explain these two different outcomes.

Conclusion

In this short essay, I offered three sets of ideas. First, I defined illiberal challenge and identified its three components (populism, organizational antipluralism, and ideological monism). Second, I briefly discussed three causes of this challenge: economic, political, and cultural. Third, given this analytical framework, I analyzed the Polish case, concluding that the illiberal challenge in this country is considerable, but too weak to threaten liberal democracy. I also

¹⁶ David Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 36.

¹⁷ Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," 543.

argued that the staying power of illiberalism needs to be explained by a theory that accounts for *both the demand and supply sides of politics*, particularly cultural politics.