Contesting Europe: Strategies and Legacies in Polish Political Competition

Peter Vermeersch

* Catholic University of Leuven,

Online publication date: 13 April 2010

To cite this Article Vermeersch, Peter (2010) 'Contesting Europe: Strategies and Legacies in Polish Political Competition', Europe-Asia Studies, 62: 3, 503 — 522

To link to this Article DOI: 10.1080/09668131003647853

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09668131003647853

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or
systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or
distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents
will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses
should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss,
actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly
or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Contesting Europe: Strategies and Legacies in Polish Political Competition

PETER VERMEERSCH

Abstract

This essay explores positions on European integration in the campaigns of a number of mainstream Polish political parties in recent elections. It shows how contestations of the European Union have, to some extent, been driven by strategic considerations related to inter-party competition. In Poland’s fluid party landscape, political actors have sometimes relied on Euroscepticism to create seemingly clear lines of division between themselves and their political competitors. Yet these Eurosceptic views interact with, and are therefore also constrained by, certain legacies: ideas on the relationship between Europe and Poland that are already part of the cultural context.

At first glance there seems nothing remarkable about the fact that political parties in Europe sometimes rely on anti-European Union (EU) rhetoric for mere tactical reasons. One can find cases of this in various recent national elections across the EU. These are the sort of campaigns that are not primarily concerned with any realistic assessment of the strengths and problems of the European integration process; rather they are instances of electoral opportunism. Parties hope to win votes simply by pitting the national interest, of which they often claim to be the only genuine representatives, against the interests of the alleged undemocratic decision makers in Brussels.

Yet electoral opportunism in itself does not always fully explain the complex picture that arises in some particular cases. Poland, the largest new EU member state in Central and Eastern Europe, is a case that merits closer attention exactly for this

Research for this article was supported by the Fund for Scientific Research—Flanders. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their comments and Arista Maria Cirtautas for her critical advice and careful reading of the text. I wish to thank the Instytut Studiów Politycznych of the Polish Academy of Sciences for hosting me for desk research in the late spring of 2007. I have relied on the Institute’s archives and on the following of the Institute’s publications: Paszkiewicz (1996), Slodkowska (2001a, 2001b, 2003) and Slodkowska and Dolbakowska (2002, 2004, 2006). Campaign quotes in this article come from the political programmes and other campaign documents reprinted in these volumes.
reason. Survey data from the Polish Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS) and Eurobarometer indicate that citizens have been satisfied, and even very enthusiastic, about EU membership, and that in the years after accession, if anything, Polish popular support for the EU increased (Szczerbiak 2007, pp. 7–8). At the same time, however, a number of parties have firmly held on to their tough stance towards the EU. What is it that has made these parties decide to persist with this strategy?

The argument I want to explore in this article suggests that Eurosceptic campaigning in Poland is not simply and solely about ideas on European integration but also, and perhaps even more, about domestic political competition. Rhetorical competition about the EU in Poland needs to be seen as part and parcel of an ongoing process of party system formation. It creates and highlights seemingly clear lines of division between political parties, which otherwise find themselves in a context where political cleavages are blurred and the party landscape is still rather fluid. A momentary rise in Eurosceptic campaigning should not therefore be directly interpreted as the reflection of a sudden growth of opposition against EU integration among the citizens, and neither is it necessarily a sign of encroaching dissatisfaction among the mainstream political elites with the entire European integration project. What we see rather is the deployment of such campaigning strategies in the context of a game whereby parties vie with each other for a clear and identifiable position in the emerging party system—and by party system I mean here a more or less stable pattern of interactions between parties as has evolved in established Western democracies (Bardi & Mair 2008). In Poland, anti-EU arguments, and the pro-EU responses they sometimes provoke, serve as convenient indicators of political difference. Moreover, they compete with, or serve to recalibrate, other markers of political differentiation. In particular, as I will show, they are used to compete with divisions inherited from the country’s early post-1989 past. I will limit my analysis in this essay to the interaction between the debate on the EU and that last-mentioned axis of competition.

A few clarifications are in order. Firstly, I am primarily interested here in studying mainstream parties. Radical fringe parties, in particular the League of Polish Families (Liga Polskich Rodzin, LPR) and Self-Defence (Samoobrona), may have been more consistently hostile to the EU than mainstream parties, and they may have been successful in mobilising sections of the Polish public that have been consistently Eurosceptic (Markowski & Tucker 2008), but overall they represent a small section of the political spectrum—even though in 2006 and 2007 their power suddenly, yet only for a brief period, increased after Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) brought both of them into the governing coalition. More critical to this analysis is to determine what larger parties—and PiS is indeed the main example—have tried to achieve by mobilising the European theme. PiS is a self-declared mainstream party with standpoints on the EU that have been, at best, ambivalent. In the run-up to the 2003 referendum on EU accession, for example, it argued that it would offer only conditional support to EU accession. Later the party, although never as bluntly hostile to the EU as LPR and Samoobrona, made no secret of its disapproval of deeper European integration, the euro and the constitutional treaty, making instead a case for increased national sovereignty and the reintroduction of Christian values. Its mainstream competitors since 2001, the social-democrats of the Democratic Left Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej, SLD) and the liberal-conservative Civic
Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO), have generally conveyed a more positive message about the EU.

Secondly, this essay’s purpose is to formulate an argument about the way Euroscepticism functions among Polish political actors; I will not examine what drives the voters for Eurosceptic or Eurocritical parties. Accordingly, this essay will not seek to replicate, or test, but rather will complement the extant, often quite sophisticated research on Polish voter behaviour.¹

Thirdly, my focus is mainly restricted to Poland, but it also complements research that considers the impact of EU accession on domestic political competition in Central and Eastern Europe in a more comparative fashion. It adds empirical substance to findings by Vachudova (2008), for example, who argues that in the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe the EU accession process had an impact on party competition and that, after securing EU accession, the parameters for party competition broadened, opening up political space for Euroscepticism (Vachudova & Hooghe 2009). In several countries, EU accession seems to have provided political parties with new opportunities for redefining their position along an axis that distinguishes defenders of the national institutions from proponents of supranational governance. In Hungary, as well as in Poland, this seems to have made nationalism an important new discourse of political differentiation (Fox & Vermeersch 2009).

This essay has three main sections. I will begin by situating the Polish case briefly in a broader comparative context. The first section will address the following question: what does research on EU integration politics in Western Europe teach us about the connection between party positions on EU integration on the one hand and traditional domestic political competition about the national interest on the other? At first glance, party positions on Europe seem rather closely linked to classical ideological standpoints: radical left-wing and radical right-wing parties clearly oppose EU integration. Moreover, the more nationalist they are, the more parties are considered to be against the EU. But on closer inspection, the picture is more complex. Nationalism does not overlap entirely with Euroscepticism; and anti-EU arguments increasingly play a role in the campaigns of self-proclaimed centrist parties as well as those of the radicals.

In the second section I will discuss the conceptual tools that enable us to examine specific topics—in this case ‘the nation’ and ‘Europe’—in Polish electoral campaigning. To make sense of the various uses of anti-EU and pro-EU arguments I consider them to be forms of political ‘framing’. I borrow the term ‘framing’ from social movement literature but apply it here to explore how political parties construct the meaning of particular mobilising terms. In their political campaigns parties may frame the same issue in different ways. This tactical manipulation of meaning, however, does not happen in a vacuum. Political actors produce narratives about Europe and EU membership within a context of existing political cleavages and debates. This context can here be defined as a form of legacy; it is the ‘extant stock of meanings, beliefs, ideologies, practices, values, myths, narratives and the like’ (Benford & Snow 2000, p. 629) that impose particular constraints on what meaning actors might successfully

attribute to European integration and EU membership. To a certain extent, political parties may try to popularise new framings by selecting particular elements from a rich and multifaceted reservoir of historical and cultural narratives. Often, however, they are also forced to react to what other actors have already put forward as dominant narratives.

The third section analyses how Polish political parties have framed Europe and EU integration before and after the accession of 2004 and shows how these framings are to be understood, not as absolute standpoints, but as views that are dependent on shifting positions in the domain of domestic political competition. To gain insight into the meanings of the pro-European or Eurosceptic arguments that political parties put forward, the debate about Europe needs to be examined as embedded in the process of party system formation. The empirical analysis in this third section is based on party programmes and public party positions.

**Party positions on European integration in the Western part of the EU**

What does research about the political uses of anti-EU discourse in Western Europe teach us, and how is it relevant for the study of the Polish case? Most of the research on this topic concludes that the basis for anti-EU and pro-EU standpoints in Western Europe is mainly ideological. Aspinwall, for example, found that, in the Western part of the EU, ‘the location of parties and governments in a Left–Right space serves as a good independent explanation of preferences on integration’ (Aspinwall 2002, p. 82). Other researchers arrive at roughly similar conclusions (Marks & Hooghe 2006). Centrist parties are generally in favour of European integration; the architects of European integration have usually been among them, and they generally seem to be inclined to agree with the principle of the need to reduce national state power and channel this power to a supranational level of government. Extreme parties, on the other hand, both those on the right and the left of the political spectrum tend to be critical of European integration and in some cases even seek to reverse the integration process. They either argue that European integration will take too much of the economic power out of the hands of the national governments, or they argue that the EU is a project that is simply too neo-liberal.

Moving away from the purely economic left–right dimension, one might ask if nationalism is a good indicator of a party’s position on European integration in Western Europe. That certainly seems to be the case with radical parties. They oppose European integration not only as a result of their radical position on a left–right ideological spectrum, but also because, according to their interpretation of what EU integration will lead to, any form of transnational co-operation is a threat to the (imagined) unity of the nation. On the basis of expert surveys, Marks and Hooghe (2006) conclude that in Western Europe there is a strong correlation between a political party’s adherence to traditional, authoritarian and nationalist values and its view on European integration. Often anti-immigrant parties are anti-European parties and oppose European integration for the same reason that they oppose immigration: because they regard the growth of the number of foreigners as a threat to the national community. However, apart from radical parties, the relationship between Euroscepticism and nationalism in Western Europe might be more complex than the above
picture leads us to assume. There are two indications that this might indeed be the case.

First, there are a number of mainstream parties in Western Europe, both on the left and the right, that have become, to some extent, more nationalist and Eurosceptic. Mainstream parties on the left of the spectrum, for example, might still endorse European integration but only when they can persuade themselves (and their electoral base) that the EU does not pose a threat to the social welfare systems on the level of the state. Mainstream parties on the right, on the other hand, might endorse the economic liberalisation brought on by European integration but might oppose the opening up of the borders in the fear that it poses a threat to national cultural values. According to research by Kriesi *et al.* (2008, pp. 13–17) current waves of globalisation, such as EU integration, may indeed have an impact on established positions in domestic political competition among mainstream parties.

Second, there are a number of moderate regionalist and nationalist minority movements that favour the European integration project. According to Keating (2004), European integration has provided a new discursive space within which to project nationality claims. For that reason, one can find other political parties across Western Europe emphasising a greater form of independence within an international context that has fundamentally changed the nature of the national state. These ‘counter-state nationalists’, to borrow Brubaker’s term (Brubaker 2004, p. 144), may have had diverse views on how intergovernmental or supranational the EU should become, but they have, in general, been supportive of the European integration project because it is seen as leading to a diminishing of state control over regions and an increased externalisation of competences and functions that were previously centralised on the level of the state. Even traditional radicalised left-wing opponents of European integration among the nationalist regionalists in Western Europe, such as the Galician and the Breton movements, have come to see the EU in a more favourable light thanks to a gradual shift of emphasis in European integration discourse towards more social solidarity (Keating 2004, p. 371).

In post-communist Central and Eastern Europe the picture is perhaps even more complex. Here, as in Western Europe, a process of realignment might be happening, but in a context where the party systems are rather new, or still in full development. Instead of leading to the transformation of an existing stable political space, as we may be witnessing in Western Europe, in Central and Eastern Europe European integration functions as a critical element in an ongoing process of a party system formation that has more or less started from scratch in the transition period.

2The Flemish nationalist party in Belgium [the New Flemish Alliance (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*), N-VA], to name just one striking example, argues against the existence of Belgium as a state by relying on the classical nationalist argument that ‘their’ nation (the Flemish nation) is a more ‘natural’ entity with objectively knowable borders that should coincide with an independent Flemish state. But their nationalism does not stand in the way of a relatively stark pro-EU attitude, since they believe that a certain form of European integration could be beneficial in bringing about Flemish independence. These Flemish nationalists have traditionally relied on a culturalist reasoning to support particular aspects of the European integration project. For example, they welcomed the monetary union not because of any belief in its intrinsic value for the European economy but because of their belief that it would protect Flanders (not Belgium) against the risks of globalisation (Beyers & Kerremans 2001).
In this process of party system formation in Central and Eastern Europe, we might identify a number of trends that are similar to trends in the restructuring process in Western Europe. What is similar, for example, is that radical parties on the left and the right of the economic ideological perspective tend to be more against European integration. Like in Western Europe, radical nationalists, both those who seek to support the existing borders of the state and those who want to homogenise the putative national population or ‘protect’ that population from growing ethnic heterogeneity, are very often suspicious of any efforts towards European integration. Particular regional nationalists in Central and Eastern Europe, such as the Silesians, or national minority movements, such as the Hungarians outside Hungary, may, however, express themselves politically in favour of the European integration project in the hope that it will improve their position as minority groups. Some minority activists in Central and Eastern Europe, for example the Roma, have had a more ambiguous position towards the EU (Vermeersch 2002).

In addition, although Central and Eastern Europe overall has produced mainly pro-EU mainstream parties, recently there have been some important exceptions. There are now indeed a number of self-described mainstream centrist parties that make use of nationalist arguments and that take a critical and self-protective stance on matters of European integration. Like their counterparts in the West, they do not completely reject the European integration project in the same way radical parties would do, but their endorsement of the European integration process has become conditional. Arguably, Poland is the country where such mainstream Euroscepticism has been most clearly visible.

**Analyzing discourses about Europe and EU membership as framing practices**

What conceptual tools do we have to study the use of Euroscepticism in the campaigns of a self-proclaimed mainstream party such as PiS in Poland? We will gain some clarity, I argue, when we consider campaign discourses on Europe and EU membership not merely as ideological positions, but as discourses that are meant to communicate other messages too, some of which may be more linked to the logic of domestic competition than to fundamental ideas about the European integration process itself. One way of analysing the production of multiple messages on Europe and EU membership is to see it as the result of various framing practices. Framing has usually been the focus of social movement studies. In this literature, movement actors are viewed as ‘signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders and observers’ (Benford & Snow 2000, p. 613). Social movement scholars are particularly interested in what way activists can raise concern for a problematic condition and foster collective protest through offering a set of arguments that define a culpable agent, a cause and a solution. Framing processes may also lead to definitions of who belongs to the core support audience of a movement and who should be considered as opponents. In this way, movement actors can foster solidarity among an otherwise diverse audience and they can set specific targets for changing existing conditions. In response to the resultant collective action frames, other actors (often authorities or those who are blamed for the problem) will engage in counter-framing strategies. By offering
alternative ‘diagnostic frames’ these latter actors try to undermine the credibility and mobilising potential of collective protest frames.

Although framing is a concept that has mainly proved its worth in social movement studies, it is an analytical lens through which one can look at campaigns by political parties and identify processes of signification in that field as well. Political parties normally do not seek to engage in contentious politics; they are rather aimed at mobilising the electorate and carving out a unique and identifiable position for themselves in the party system. In contrast to social movement actors, political parties do not seek to organise strong protest movements outside of the electoral arena. Like movement actors, however, they do seek to diffuse a particular understanding of a policy problem in order to promote certain policy options as more acceptable and more logical than others.

Examining party positions on Europe and EU membership through the conceptual lens provided by the framing literature is useful because it allows us to consider the possibilities of strategic reinterpretation as well as the limits within which such processes of reinterpretation can work. It points to opportunities for reframing as well as to contexts that constrain reframing. In Poland, political elites have some flexibility in interpreting Polish history and national identity for strategic purposes. Different episodes from history can be invoked either as evidence of the European character of their national history or their separate and unique national traditions. The history of Central and Eastern Europe as a part of Europe or as Europe’s nearby ‘other’ provides some material for competing interpretations. The end of the communist period, for example, can be seen as a ‘return to Europe’, but it can also be framed as ‘the recovery of a sovereign state and national independence’ (Zubrzycki 2001, p. 631). Political actors might actively connect this latter framing to the actions of the Solidarność movement, which was widely seen as engaged in a struggle for the nation against the communist state. Yet not every framing might resonate equally well among the media and among voters, and historical episodes do not lend themselves to an unlimited range of reframings. The narratives that Polish political elites deploy will have to find resonance within the realm of existing ideas about the relationship between Poland and Europe. Standpoints on Europe will also have to be formulated in a context where a number of oppositions are already present. The framings of the European integration process thus interact with, and are to some extent also constrained by, other factors. In Poland, these other factors include existing cleavages inherited from the early post-1989 period. There have been defining debates between those who call for social solidarity and those who favour market liberalism, those who seek reconciliation with the communist past and those who prefer lustration, and those who present themselves as defenders of the national(ist) moral order and those who seek to create a more cosmopolitan concept of the Polish nation. When political actors put forward a new framing of EU accession, they cannot do this in a vacuum. They bring it into a field of existing position-defining debates.

In order to gain a better understanding of the actual meaning political actors want to attach to the topic of EU integration, we need to focus attention on this broader context of meaning. Campaign messages on EU integration contain multiple referents and by untangling these referents we might gain a better understanding of the underlying dynamics involved.
The argument I want to explore in the rest of this essay holds that some mainstream political actors in Poland at some points have tried to reframe their campaign narrative about Europe for strategic reasons. In other words, the aim of their Euroscepticism was not primarily questioning European integration but rather differentiating their own position from that of their political opponents. These parties tried to introduce Euroscepticism in order to carve out a clear position for themselves in the domestic political configuration. During most of the 1990s, however, the dominant frame of the necessity of a ‘return to Europe’ limited possibilities for such a Eurosceptic reframing. The space for this reframing opened up only after it was evident to all political actors that EU membership would indeed be guaranteed. At that point there was more certainty about the long-term prospects of European integration. This allowed parties to be critical of the practice of EU integration without, however, having to jeopardise the principle of EU membership itself.

The EU and Polish party narratives before and after 2004

The focus on European integration as a norm: the consensus of the 1990s

Throughout most of the 1990s, successful mainstream political actors in Poland maintained a favourable view of the European integration process and were generally supportive of the idea that the country needed to become a member of the EU as soon as possible. During the 1995 campaign for the presidency, for example, Lech Wałęsa, Aleksander Kwaśniewski and Lech Kaczyński all mentioned EU membership as a crucial foreign policy goal even though they represented very different political camps and ideological preferences. In parliamentary elections, too, post-communist left wing politicians, post-Solidarity moral conservatives and pro-business neo-liberals all argued in favour of EU accession. In the run-up to the parliamentary elections of 1997, there were positive references to the EU in the electoral programmes of the incumbent SLD (Słodkowska & Dolbakowska 2004, pp. 115–35), its main (and successful) conservative rival, Solidarity Election Action (Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność, AWS) (Słodkowska & Dolbakowska 2004, pp. 99–102), and all of the smaller parties that could secure parliamentary representation. Even the Polish Peasant Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL) and the nationalist Movement for the Reconstruction of Poland (Ruch Odbudowy Polski, ROP) offered viewpoints suggesting that progress towards EU accession was basically self-evident.

To be sure, one of the notable things in the campaign material of the 1990s was that parties and candidates reserved very little space to discuss and explain the positive value of EU accession. Their endorsement of the EU was sometimes expressed as an explicit part of their foreign policy programme, but almost as often it was a more or less tacit assumption, hidden in general remarks made about certain policy options and the state of the country. Yet the unobtrusiveness of the subject in the electoral campaigning of that time is not necessarily an indication of its perceived unimportance. The fact that EU membership was apparently not considered a topic

3Party programmes as they are reprinted in Słodkowska (2003).
that needed further elaboration was perhaps evidence instead of its pervasiveness as a basic, underlying policy preference among a wide range of political actors.

Although there was, even as early as 1993, discussion about whether the political practice of European integration was ideal and whether Poland should agree with the course taken, there seemed to be, on a deeper level, agreement on the normative value of European integration. Many parties seemed to be inclined to highlight this conviction in their party programmes. The most pro-European parties in the first half of the 1990s argued that Poland needed to become a member of the European Union ‘as soon as possible’, as the UW formulated the matter in 1995 (Paszkiewicz 1996, p. 312). Others were more hesitant about the timing and the modalities, but still explicitly accepted it as a guiding principle. Parties that sounded critical of the process of enlargement and the benefits Poland might have from a closer association with the EU apparently still wanted to emphasise that the underlying idea was to be supported. This preference was usually framed as part of a larger argument about the ‘return’ of Poland to Europe (as a cultural and a political region) after the Cold War and about the final ‘unification’ of the continent.

Poland’s culture and national economy were often portrayed as inextricably bound up with European culture and economy. There were almost no parties, and certainly no mainstream parties, that explicitly opposed the underlying principle. Variation was to be found in the degree in which the parties emphasised either cultural or economic dimensions. In 1997, for example, AWS argued that European accession was an economically useful response to a cultural given: ‘we will help to create the unity of the continent based on the Christian roots of our civilization’ (Słodkowska & Dolbakowska 2004, p. 107).

Underlying such cultural pronouncements was, of course, a hardly hidden discourse about geopolitics. Poland’s eagerness to join the EU can be framed in a context that starts from the assumption that a Europe that includes the whole of ‘Eastern’ Europe will remain a fiction, because there is still a crucial political dividing line between the West and the East of the continent. As Hagen writes, ‘In many respects, the East–West dichotomy has continued to serve as Europe’s dominant geographical paradigm despite the end of the Cold War, although important shifts and debates over new lines of demarcation and definition are underway’ (Hagen 2003, p. 509). In the 1990s, Polish parties overwhelmingly sought to shift the border of Eastern Europe to the East in order to present themselves as part of the West. All main contenders in the parliamentary elections between 1991 and 2001 linked issues of international policy with the allegedly precarious position of Poland between two powerful countries, Germany and Russia, with Polish independence largely seen as independence from Russia. In this context, EU membership, along with NATO membership, was seen as a guarantee of Poland’s independence.

All of this did not preclude a certain hesitancy about the concrete direction of the European integration process. AWS argued in 1997 that, in terms of political practice, they preferred to be part of a Europe that would not be supranational but rather intergovernmental in the Gaullist tradition of ‘Europe des Patries’ (‘Europa Ojczyzny’) (Słodkowska & Dolbakowska 2004, p. 107). But the dominance of the cultural, economic and geopolitical frame had a strong effect on the position of those parties that sought a more anti-European course. Even rabid nationalists could not formulate
a basic objection against the European unification project without condemning themselves to the margins of the political spectrum. When they formulated criticism of the EU project, they framed those arguments as ‘Euro-realist’ arguments or arguments that would not go against the basic assumption that the inclusion of Poland in Europe is essentially a good thing (Neumayer 2008, p. 142). *Samoobrona*, for example, which would become known as the most virulent anti-EU party at the end of the decade, was in the first half of the 1990s still making a bid for the centre based on the argument that, as the party formulated it, there is ‘a valid need for European integration’ (Paszkiewicz 1996, p. 91).

Moreover, when nationalist arguments were used to oppose the arguments of the pro-market reform parties in Poland, they did not contain strong overtones of anti-Europeanism. When the Confederation of an Independent Poland (*Konfederacja Polski Niepodległej*, KPN) issued an attack on Balcerowicz’s shock-therapy privatisation policy in the elections of 1993, it did so within a nationalist framework. Its programme material promised to effectuate ‘the replacement of the currently implemented anti-national and anti-Polish economic model of the Balcerowicz plan’. At the same time, such a ‘nationalisation’ of economic reform did not lead the party to disengage from European economic reforms. In its 1992 programme, the party argued that ‘Poland, as a country between East and West, has weighty obligations in the new organizations of our region and in helping to create a unified Europe of nations’ (Paszkiewicz 1996, p. 53).

The onset of the twenty-first century however, produced a somewhat different discourse. Since the early 2000s, a number of political parties have given more prominence to standpoints that are critical of the EU. Radical anti-EU voices gained unprecedented salience as two extremist parties achieved parliamentary representation in 2001. More important, however, was a perceptual change in the discourse on European affairs within parties that sought to be mainstream catch-all parties. In its 2005 campaign, PiS argued that further European integration fostered centralising tendencies that would threaten Polish identity (PiS 2005, p. 9). PiS became successful as a party with a programme that combined conservative Catholicism, nationalism, distrust of the uncontrolled free market, anti-corruption and strict lustration. In 2006, the party formed a government with the two radical parties in parliament: *Samoobrona*, the anti-establishment party of Andrzej Lepper mainly known for its roadblocks against capitalism, its populist strategies towards farmers and its view of European integration as catastrophic for Polish agriculture; and LPR, a fringe party representing the radically nationalist, conservative and extreme Catholic right. The anti-EU image of the PiS-led government attracted increased international attention when, in the context of the June 2007 Summit dealing with the constitutional treaty, Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński made references to German aggression against Poland in the Second World War in an attempt to obstruct the new EU ‘double majority’ voting system in the Council, a tactical gesture that was widely interpreted as anti-European.4

---

4Kaczyński argued that Poland would have had a much larger population if the Germans had not attacked the country. The double majority voting formula is based on population size (55% of member states representing 65% of the EU population) and reduces the share of the vote that Poland had been
Moreover, even the self-described pro-EU opponents of PiS during the parliamentary elections of 2005 and 2007 sometimes relied on a discourse that was far more outspoken in its criticism of the EU than anything during the 1990s. In 2003, the neo-liberal and pro-business party PO sought to capitalise on the inconsistencies in PiS’s views on Europe by developing a more nationalist and patriotic position on the EU, including its own defence of the Nice voting provisions (Szczerbiak 2007, p. 6). Although PO did not want to be seen as a Eurosceptic party, its campaign in 2005 did not seek a radical revision of Poland’s position as a critical voice in the EU.

Significantly, however, opinion surveys indicate that this increasing EU criticism in Polish domestic political party campaigning since 2000 has not been accompanied by growing levels of Euroscepticism among the broader public (Szczerbiak 2007), which means that the surge of political Euroscepticism is not strongly rooted socially. Eurosceptic parties received more votes in 2001 and in 2005, but in both elections the overall turnout was extremely low, indicating that EU-criticism was not a particularly strong element in helping to bring people to the polls. In the run-up to the 2003 referendum on EU accession, the worry of the government was not about whether enough people would be in favour of accession, but rather that the turnout would be too low to make the result of the referendum valid. [In the end the turnout was 58.85% of the eligible voters; 77.45% voted in favour and 22.55% against accession (Jasiewicz & Jasiewicz-Betkiewicz 2004, p. 1111).]

If EU-critical political stances cannot simply be explained as a response to growing electoral uncertainty about the EU, what are the domestic political uses of anti-EU discourse for self-described centrist parties such as PiS? First, I argue, domestic views on European integration in Poland are to be understood as the expression of a changing balance between a deeply held conviction and a strategic framing related to the context of domestic political competition. Since 2001, centrist political actors have mainly used anti-EU rhetoric to serve purposes that relate to the domain of domestic political competition. They were able to focus on such short-term strategic goals (and de-emphasised their deep normative commitment to European integration) because, by that time, EU membership had been more or less secured. The Eurosceptical discourses that gained increased prominence in Poland from 2001 should, therefore, not be seen as the reflection of a growing political dissatisfaction with the entire European integration project, but as the by-product of a domestically oriented rhetorical struggle between mainstream political contenders in a changing and unstable party system in which left-wing and right-wing positions have remained rather unspecified.

Second, since ‘left’ and ‘right’ have remained unspecified categories in Polish politics, the rhetorical struggle about European integration has been deliberately conflated with discussions that revolve around other dividing categorisations. These dividing categories or cleavages comprise the legacies that Polish political actors have allotted in the Nice Treaty. Poland opposed the new formula and, in the context of the negotiations of the Lisbon Treaty in October 2007, managed to postpone its application to 2014. An additional transition period until 2017 is foreseen. After that date extra provisions (known as the Ioannina clause) will make it easier for smaller countries to block a decision. On 2 April 2008, the Polish parliament ratified the Lisbon Treaty.
sought to bring to the public’s attention. In the Polish context, a number of divisive debates have activated the framing of legacies deemed salient by political actors, including discussions about social solidarity versus the free market and disagreement about strict vetting procedures for former communists. In addition, a number of parties, most prominently PiS, have attempted to make nationhood (expressed in a defence of traditional and religious values) a central political dividing line. Ideas about EU membership and the country’s position within the EU have been made part of this political discourse of nationhood. Some politicians have hoped to use it in order to establish a clear position for themselves against their political opponents.

The focus on the practice of integration in the run-up to accession and after 2004

When EU membership became a tangible and realistic political goal for Poland, political actors became less reticent about their criticism of the European integration process. In contrast to earlier periods, there were now important radical parties that did not shy away from expressing their own views against European unification in principle. Additionally, centrist parties that were critical of certain elements in the practice of the European integration process no longer placed as much emphasis on the fact that they still supported the normative validity of the European integration project.

Among centre-oriented parties, this newly self-assured and openly self-reflective anti-EU discourse now became mainly the hallmark of the post-Solidarity political groupings that had been the main partners in the 1997 government. They were never, however, a real threat to the EU accession process. AWS was a grouping of parties that had been able to co-operate in order to defeat the Social Democrats of the SLD, but in reality it remained a rather unruly political association that after three years of tension with its coalition partner in government, the more progressive and pro-Europe oriented UW, found itself leading a minority government until the elections of 2001. In the run-up to these elections, several parties left AWS and formed new coalitions and alliances. One of these new conservative political forces was PiS, founded by the twin brothers Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński, who tried to profit from their image as ‘owners’ of the ‘real’ heritage of the Solidarity movement as well as their reputation of being strict on justice matters and moral issues.

The 2001 programme documents of PiS revealed a perceptible change in the centrist discourse on EU membership. Although the party admitted that it did not seek to withdraw from the process, more than any centrist party before, it did voice severe criticism of the way in which the negotiations were led. Quite significantly also, it suggested that membership was not supported by the population and therefore could produce ‘fatal’ consequences:

Today, our accession to the EU poses an immense problem. Precisely this goal, of all the matters that we have to undertake in the international arena, is the most important as well as the most controversial one. The decision to enter the Union must be a decision taken by the people in a referendum. In order to make that referendum meaningful, the Poles have to be presented with a credible document that describes all the side effects of entering the Union, both the gains and the losses. Without such a document the decision will be taken blindly, and
later, when there will be difficulties, it may be questioned by the majority, with all the ensuing fatal consequences. (Słodkowska & Dobakowska 2002, pp. 94–95)

Even if this position is not directly anti-EU, it did create the possibility of allying with parties that were more outspoken in their fundamental criticism of European integration, such as the LPR. The LPR, which registered as a new party in April 2001 and included several radical conservative groups, presented the following view in its first official election material:

We stand today before this question: will we realise Polish programmes or also programmes that are foreign to Poland? In consequence—will we have work, and will we eat Polish bread, and will we live in a Polish house? Or will we also, in the context of the European Union or another contemporary tower of Babel, import unemployment, eat foreign bread and live on the streets? Our choice is for an independent and sovereign Poland. (Słodkowska & Dobakowska 2002, p. 243)

In this excerpt, LPR used the metaphors of the tower of Babel and Polish bread in order to reinforce the old theme of Poland’s independence struggle. In the 1990s ‘independence’ meant ‘free from Russia’ and accession to the EU was seen as a way to guarantee this freedom. In the above framing, however, EU membership is portrayed as a threat to Polish independence. A bleak view of the job market and the economy is invoked within this frame without any connection to a discussion of the European economy. The party simply argued that EU membership entailed a crucial loss for Poland, finding it unnecessary to provide any evidence for the claim that accession would make unemployment soar.

Parties that were aiming more at a mainstream electorate did not go as far as LPR in their condemnation of the European integration project, but they did not totally exclude the possibility of making some sort of connection with the radicals. PiS remained silent enough on whether they condemned the EU in principle to make an association thinkable with those who did condemn it. All of this points to the increasing strategic utility of being critical of the European integration project. PiS could de-emphasise its deeper belief in the value of European integration and try to capture that part of the electorate that was represented by the fundamental anti-Europeans of the LPR. Moreover, there were a number of specific circumstances related to domestic party competition that made anti-EU arguments specifically useful for PiS in the period between 2001 and 2005.

First, the party’s turn to criticism of the EU came at the moment of the failure of a conservative government and on the eve of the successful return of the post-communist social democrats to power. The pro-European SLD won the elections of 2001 overwhelmingly. Their candidate, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, had already won the presidency a year earlier and it was the prime minister of an SLD-led government, Leszek Miller, who had negotiated Poland’s accession into the EU at the Copenhagen Summit in December 2002. Since the SLD had negotiated accession, all the opposition’s rhetorical energy could go to the idea that the deal was badly negotiated. Since the basic decision on membership had been taken, moderate parties found themselves in positions in which they could move more safely and confidently in the direction of Euroscepticism. For the anti-SLD opposition parties there was no need
any more to be careful with criticism or to conceal it as ‘Euro-realism’. Since the SLD had already secured membership for Poland, the costs of voicing critical remarks about it would be low. The normative argumentation, linked with a cultural, geopolitical or economic ‘return to Europe’ stance, was abandoned by almost all moderate parties and a more pragmatic discussion about the positive and negative aspects of this particular EU-accession deal emerged.

Second, the connection between anti-EU rhetoric and anti-SLD opposition was reinforced by the fact that the SLD’s record on domestic and foreign policy by many standards proved to be somewhat of a failure. Although the government had successfully negotiated the country’s accession to the EU, it had not remedied problems of unemployment (which rose in 2002 to 18.1%) (Towalski 2003). Moreover, in the course of 2002 and 2003, several SLD politicians had been mentioned in the context of bribery scandals, a fact that severely marred the party’s reputation and diminished its popular base. One important case, known as the ‘Rywin affair’ and by some called the ‘the queen of scandals’ (Millard 2006, p. 1011), featured in newspaper headlines during 2003. Moreover, the position of Prime Minister Leszek Miller was damaged by his implication in another infamous scandal, the Orlen affair. These scandals contributed to the downfall of the entire ‘left’ in Poland and they made corruption and lustration major campaign issues in the elections that followed (Millard 2006, pp. 1011–14). All of this played a significant role in the June 2003 referendum for EU accession, during which almost all opposition parties in parliament voiced some form of criticism of the EU accession process that was simultaneously a less than subtle criticism of the SLD’s track record in government. Apart from the SLD, only the pro-business PO mobilised in favour of accession.

On 2 May 2004, just one day after Poland’s accession to the EU, Leszek Miller resigned from his position as prime minister, opening the way for what would be a one-year SLD-led government under the premiership of Marek Belka, an ex-finance minister whose candidacy was seen as controversial even within the SLD, and certainly among the group of former SLD politicians who had established a new party called Polish Social Democracy (Socjaldemokracja Polska, SdPl). The poor result of the SdPl

---

5 In December 2002, Lew Rywin, a film producer, had approached the company Agora, the publisher of Poland’s liberal newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza, and, suggesting that he represented people well-placed in government, requested a bribe in return for pushing through adjustments in a draft bill on electronic media that would be favourable to the publisher. The parliamentary commission set up to investigate this affair over the course of 2003 revealed an image of the SLD as ‘arrogant, cynical and morally corrupt’ (Kochanowicz 2007, p. 8) and led to a division in the party. Politicians from the SLD establishment were also named in corruption scandals about money laundering in the gambling industry and involvement in organised crime (Jasiewicz & Jasiewicz-Betkiewicz 2003).

6 Miller was accused of having arranged, in 2002, the dismissal of the chief executive of the oil refiner and petroleum retailer PKN Orlen (Polski Koncern Naftowy Orlen), one of Poland’s largest companies. According to a former state treasury minister in the government, Miller had sought to replace the dismissed CEO with someone favourable to the government (Dudek 2005, p. 470). In this case, too, a special parliamentary investigation commission was set up. The commission energetically examined corruption allegations and unearthed dubious connections between politics, industry and the secret services; but it also created a forum for politically inspired accusations and counteraccusations (Jasiewicz & Jasiewicz-Betkiewicz 2004, p. 1153).
at the elections for the European parliament in June 2004, however, made it necessary for their deputies to continue supporting the SLD-led cabinet for the time being in order to avoid outright defeat in early Sejm elections. When, in the autumn of 2005, Sejm elections were eventually held, they did, as expected, turn into a disaster for the SLD as well as the SdPl.

European integration, party competition and nationalist mobilisation

In the 2000s a number of developments reinforced the connection between nationalism and Eurosceptic political stances in Poland. One was the continuing lack of clarity about what constitutes the ‘left’ and what the ‘right’. Since 2001, PiS, which combines ideas that can be seen as left-wing and right-wing, has attempted to make another political division more central to the debate. During the 2005 campaign it was clear that the main competition would be between the two post-Solidarność groups, PiS and PO. In order to highlight the differences between these two catch-all parties, PiS made the choice to frame its own policy preferences as matters of ‘national interest’. In addition it opted for selecting particular elements of history in order to explain what that national interest was. Here, instead of using the ‘return to Europe’ argument as a discursive foundation, they gave priority to the idea that the protection of the Polish nation was deeply rooted in the struggle against communism (and any other form of foreign domination). This particular frame provided PiS with an opportunity to link nationalism with anti-communism and, thus, with opposition to the SLD.

Constructing this connection was effectuated in several stages. In the first phase a particular meaning was given to the SLD’s involvement in corruption scandals. PiS did not simply argue that the implosion of the SLD was caused by corruption in that party, but that corruption was a symptom of the wider problem of the party’s refusal to break with the communist past. Then, a link was created between communism and the refusal to defend the Polish nation against foreign (Russian) interests. PiS thus reframed its protest against corruption as a fundamental criticism of a lack of national loyalty among all left-wing political actors. PiS argued that corruption provided evidence for their theory that Polish left-wing politicians were still deeply implicated in a well-defined network of people with roots in a communist establishment whose interests were different from those of the nation.

In an interview conducted in April 2004, Lech Kaczyński offered a succinct demonstration of how anti-corruption, opposition against those parties known as left-wing, ideological conservatism and national belonging could be discursively constructed as deeply intertwined phenomena. When asked whether, without PiS, the battle against corruption would become impossible, Kaczyński answered:

Not only the battle with corruption. It is about the destruction of countless pathological power structures, and also about deep state reform, which encompasses ideological and moral foundations. One also has to reveal the entire evilness of the last fifteen years; one has to refer, in the process of building a new state, not to abstractions, but to the real, increasingly malfunctioning moral and ideological convictions among Poles, particularly convictions related to feelings of national belonging. (Kurski 2004)
By constructing a tight association between the narrative of anti-corruption and the promotion of ‘national’ values, the PiS campaign effectively accused left-wing politicians of national betrayal. Their adherence to the left was simply interpreted as a service to foreign powers. This Manichaean conception of political reality was reinforced by suggestive sentences in the programme documents, such as: ‘The Poles have the right to know who served Moscow, and who fought for an independent Fatherland. Who was an executioner, and who was a victim’ (PiS 2005, p. 18). From there, it was a logical step for PiS to condemn the pro-EU politics of SLD. Arguments in favour of European integration were criticised as arguments in favour of the ‘old system’.

In addition, PiS politicians also tried to attack politicians from the PO and certain old Solidarity figures (such as Adam Michnik) in their ‘nationalisation’ of criticism of the EU. PiS not only used this framing to develop a powerful opposition against the SLD, but also to differentiate itself from other post-AWS politicians, specifically those who were now members of PO. The degree of almost poisonous hostility PiS directed toward PO in the 2005 presidential campaign, including the insinuation that the father of PO’s presidential candidate, Donald Tusk, had been a volunteer in the Wehrmacht during the Second World War (and thus a traitor of the nation), is a clear illustration of such a differentiating strategy.7

In the second phase, the connection between nationalism and criticism of the EU was reinforced through the efforts of centrists and radical politicians to ‘nationalise’ moral issues. Any development coming from outside Poland was framed as potentially threatening to the traditional moral order of Poland. Underlying the mobilisation campaigns of PiS was a political understanding of the Polish people as a morally homogenous Catholic nation under the constant threat of anti-Polish, anti-religious and, therefore, immoral enemies. Mainly through its close association with Radio Maryja during the 2005 campaign and its formation of a government with the LPR a year later, PiS suggested to the public that it endorsed a radical form of Polish nationalism. Since the LPR was built on political traditions deeply rooted in a politics of blaming a ‘nationalised’ other (in particular the Jews), the whole government’s conservative plank (in fields ranging from women’s rights to bioethics) could be seen as ‘nationalist’, and was indeed presented as such by the government parties themselves.

In this context, the debate on political positions on the EU integration process was conflated with a discussion on what it means to be a ‘true’ representative of the Polish nation and the Polish traditional moral order. Such invocations of the nation were used in order to carve out particular positions in ethical debates (gay rights, euthanasia, abortion) as well as in the areas of how to deal with the communist past (lustration) and with economic reform. When political elites now argued for or against

---

7In response to the ensuing public indignation over this statement, PiS was forced to send official apologies to PO (Tusk’s father had in reality been imprisoned in a concentration camp, so Tusk claimed) and temporarily dismiss Jacek Kurski, the man who first made the accusations, from his position as a PiS campaign manager.
European integration, they deployed competing narratives about the meaning of EU membership. For certain parties, EU membership was framed as related to current threats to traditional values. For others it represented an opportunity to break with the political and cultural traditions of the Soviet era.

Furthermore, this ‘nationalisation’ of EU criticism was apparent in the discussion on the question of land ownership. Jasiewicz and Jasiewicz-Betkiewicz (2003, p. 1052) point out that, although the topic was of secondary importance for the EU, Polish parties questioning the accession agreement put important emphasis on the topic of the right of foreign individuals and companies to purchase land in Poland. Critics argued that the deal being offered would open the door to Germans who would be interested in buying land from the territories in the West of the country that had been ‘regained’ from Germany after the Second World War.

The response of PO to PiS’s conflating of EU criticism with moral arguments came somewhat belatedly. In 2001, PO had still based its campaign on the idea that the normative consensus on the principle of EU integration was self-evident and did not need to be made explicit, since it seemed that this consensus was still largely in place. In the 2007 election campaign PO opted for a more explicit and offensive defence of the principle of European integration and used it against PiS. This defence highlighted the idea that the Polish nation had always been part of European civilisation and that PiS had done nothing but alienate and distance Poland from that cultural zone. In this more offensive pro-EU position, the narrative was clearly a response to the anti-European nationalist framings promoted by PiS. PO added that EU membership had to be defended in order to protect the material well-being of the nation and to improve the international standing of the country. This clearly represented an attempt to reconnect pro-EU arguments with Polish nationalism, albeit a differently constructed nationalism.

Conclusion

This essay has explored the political uses of EU-related arguments in Polish domestic political competition in the 1990s and early 2000s and has argued that Eurosceptic campaigns that do not seem socially rooted or popular in electoral terms are comprehensible when they are seen as part of an ongoing process of political contestation. Increasingly, even centrist politicians have turned to a negative narrative about Europe as a differentiating strategy. The aim of their Euroscepticism was not, in the first place, to question the entire European integration project but rather to differentiate their own position from that of their domestic political opponents in an emerging party system. These politicians tried to introduce Eurosceptism in order to carve out a clear position for their own party in the domestic political party configuration.

Such strategies of differentiation have consistently drawn on political and cultural legacies to render their positions more legitimate and compelling in the eyes of the electorate. The accession process, however, initially limited the possibilities of strategically framing Euroscepticism in terms of Polish nationalism. During most of the 1990s, the idea was widely accepted that EU membership was entirely consistent with Polish national traditions and the ‘return to Europe’ was, therefore,
unquestionable and untouchable in terms of political strategy. This dominant narrative about Poland’s place in Europe, in conjunction with the uncertainties of the accession negotiations, clearly limited possibilities for a Eurosceptic reframing of the matter. Political parties could not afford to be seen as guilty of blocking their own country’s return to Europe.

A new space for Eurosceptic reframing opened up, however, in the early 2000s, after it had become clear that Poland’s EU membership would indeed be guaranteed. Now, parties could more strongly criticise the practice of EU integration without having to question the principle of EU accession. At that point, discussions about Europe were brought into a broader field of political contestation, a field already characterised by a number of position-defining debates inherited from the early post-1989 period, with roots that arguably go back far deeper in Polish history. One axis of competition was centred on the meaning of the Polish national interest. Power-holders and opposition movements in Poland since the early 1990s have competed for political power by articulating the claim that they, and not the others, are the more authentic defenders of the nation. Since 2005, PiS has indeed tried to link a negative view of the EU with anti-corruption, strict lustration, conservative moral values and a more authentic defence of Polish nationhood.

Political actors have thus relied on certain Polish legacies (ideas and views on the relationship between Europe and Poland that are already part of the cultural context) to buttress their position toward the EU as a way, in turn, of buttressing their domestic political positions. Yet, by emphasising particular affiliations with Europe and de-emphasising others, they have also tried to change these narratives, or reinforce the power of particular legacies over others. While the turn to Euroscepticism in Poland was not in any way predetermined by the country’s traditions of nationalism, and in fact Polish national traditions and interests were interpreted as largely consistent with the objective of membership during the accession process, these traditions are now used in framing strategies by political elites to advance their electoral chances in a party system that is still rather fluid and where cultural cleavages have been stronger than socio-economic cleavages in structuring party competition.

Catholic University of Leuven

References


