

**De/Constructing a Polish Nation.
On the Entanglements of Gender,
Sexuality, Family and Nationalism in
Right-Wing Sexual Politics in Poland¹**

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Abstract

The article provides an overview of (far-right) sexual politics in Poland, its historical traditions and contexts, and also discusses some of its recent developments, highlighting international and geopolitical contexts. It is argued that the political restructuring process initiated by the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in 2015 and further advanced by a right-wing coalition does not only target the state and democratic principles of the rule of law. Through the introduction of specifically familist, right-wing nationalist policies, society as such is also targeted, conservative and national Catholic values and lifestyles are privileged,

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while other groups such as LGBTQ* people are threatened with social and political exclusion. The war against Ukraine, which escalated in 2022, revealed further geopolitical dimensions of gender and sexual politics.

Keywords: Poland, sexual politics, LGBTQ*, geopolitics, familist nationalism.

Introduction

This article discusses the connection between nation, gender and sexuality in Poland and explores why this connection is so prevalent in Polish right-wing discourses. As in other contexts, there are different varieties of nationalism in Poland that compete with or influence each other. In this analysis of right-wing gender politics, I focus specifically on primordial ethnonationalism influenced by Catholicism (Meyer Resende 2015). Catholic nationalism, which goes hand in hand with conservative gender politics influenced by Catholic moral concepts, is currently the hegemonic form of nationalism in Poland. At the centre of this variant of nationalism is a familist (Notz 2015) worldview. In connection with nationalism, the concept of family and family trees by no means refers only to the heterosexual nuclear family, but to racist ideas about the origin of peoples (McClintock 1993, 66). The specifically familist character of right-wing Polish nationalisms was exemplified by gender politics after the *Law and Justice Party* (PiS) came to power in 2015.

The political restructuring process initiated by PiS, which has led, among other things, to the invocation of pre-Article 7 and Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union (Scheppele and Pech 2018), includes not only the dismantling of democratic rule, the nationalisation and centralisation of state administrative structures, institutions and media (Sutowski 2017), but also, in perspective, is (biopolitically) targeting the population of the state itself. Through various state programmes and

measures as well as disciplinary mechanisms conservative and national Catholic values and lifestyles are privileged and materially supported. The assertion of national Catholic moral concepts, however, causes trouble not only for those who do not conform to these concepts, but also for those who are supposed to exemplify right-wing normative ideals. This article's aim is to give an overview on (far) right sexual politics in Poland, its historical traditions and contexts, and discusses also some of its recent developments, while highlighting international and geopolitical linkages.

1. Traditions, contexts and actors of right-wing gender politics and familist nationalism in Poland

According to Mosse (1985), constructions of national identity in nationalisms are often linked to heteronormativity and conservative family values and, as McClintock puts it, the unity of the nation is produced through gender difference (McClintock 1993, 61). The situation is similar in Polish ethno-nationalist ideas about the composition of the nation (*naród*), in which gender difference and complementarity, with corresponding role assignments, are of elementary importance. Women accordingly have a mission to fulfil: the 'spiritual' and 'biological' reproduction of the Polish nation. In the history of Polish independence movements, as well as in the various traditions of nationalist thought in Poland, the family is also of great importance, because it is seen as the basic building block preserving the nation over generations, even in times of foreign domination and occupation (including by Prussian, Russian, German National Socialist as well as Soviet occupiers and oppressors) and when no sovereign Polish state existed.

Scholars have pointed out the special significance of the myth of 'Mother Poland' in this regard. This myth was shaped, among other things, by the poem "To Mother Poland" from 1830. In it, mothers are called upon to raise and sacrifice their sons to the struggle for national independence (Janion 1996; Pickhan 2006).

According to Pickhan, the myth strengthened the position of women in the family, but female emancipation from the family framework could always also be interpreted as a “betrayal of the fatherland” (2006, 12). Mother Poland is a building block of national identity (Keinz 2008), as well as a moral guide to this day. It was cultivated not only in national independence movements, but also in the post-war period of the state-socialist People’s Republic . Although the Polish People’s Republic (PRL) defined itself through anti-fascism, rhetorical figures and narratives of nationalist (or even national democratic - *Endecja*) movements of the far-right political spectrum were partially revived and integrated during the period of state-socialism (Kraft 2010). In the course of political pluralisation after 1989, Christian fundamentalism as well as Catholic ethno-nationalism increasingly regained strength, drawing on traditions of thought from the ultra-right, fascist like spectrum of pre-war ‘national movements’ (*ruchy narodowe*) and their intellectual leaders such as Roman Dmowski (1864-1939).

In recent Polish politics the right-wing government and political parties, far right and National Catholic movements and actors, right-wing Christian fundamentalist civil society organisations (e.g. *Piotr Skarga Institute*, *Ordo Iuris*) and the *Roman Catholic Church* appear together as the primary opponents of women’s and LGBTQ* rights and equality. The *Catholic Church* gained significant influence on state structures and politics in the 1990s (Mishtal 2015, 35; Meyer Resende 2015). To this day, it plays a central role in the propagation of conservative moral and value concepts (Zielińska 2002; Keinz 2008; Mishtal 2015) and thus in the development of right-wing sexual politics. Both the *Polish Catholic Church* and the ultra-right and national Catholic movements and parties propagate an ethnic understanding of national identity in the tradition of national democracy (“*Polak katolik*”), according to which belonging to the Polish nation is inseparably linked to Catholicism. In the framework of familist nationalism, the heterosexual family and its women are transformed into a kind of internal border regime of the nation,

whose reproduction should be meticulously guarded. The tightening of the abortion law in 1993, forbidding the termination of pregnancies for social reasons, can be seen as one of the first successful implementations of familist nationalist and national-Catholic social ideas. Since then, the socio-political fields of conflict around gender and sexuality have been multiplying continuously. Over decades national Catholicism gained more and more popularity and has meanwhile been able to assume a dominant status in public discourses and party politics (Stanley 2017; Ramme 2019c).

Although this article deals with the problem of right-wing politics and actors and shows the background to this, it should not be forgotten that the political landscape in Poland is characterised by contrasts. Particularly formative for the structuring of the political field is the competition between an EU-critical Catholic-influenced ethno-nationalism and a liberal-democratically oriented pro-EU civil nationalism. Having said that, it should be added that in addition to the massive shift to the right that has been observed for many years and ultimately led to the takeover of the state structures by the PiS party in 2015, there are also countervailing developments in Poland, as well as a lively extra-parliamentary opposition - including strong and widespread LGBTQ* and women's movements (e.g. Korolczuk *et al.* 2019), which also enjoy broad support from the population. This scope of politics in Poland, however, is not part of this particular analysis of right-wing sexual politics.

2. Main narratives and historical connections between familism and nationalism in right-wing discourses

With regard to the operationalisation of familist ideologies in contemporary right-wing nationalist political discourses, their radicality and dissemination, Poland plays a pioneering role in Europe since the discourse was applied already during state-socialism and framed as a part of an oppositional nationalist and Catholic

discourse to state-socialism and communism. The question arises as to why the family in particular could become such a successful anchor point of right-wing politics.

In addition to the nationalist functionalisation of the family institution described above for the reproduction of a (Catholic) nation with and without the state, after 1989 both the family and the church took on additional important social functions of a safety net that partially replaced or supplemented state care structures. In times of communism the state acted in a patriarchal-authoritarian way as a “parent state” (Verdery 1996, 62) and provided basic services and care infrastructure for its citizens. Nevertheless, in reality such services were also limited, as the distribution of access to state infrastructure, education and various resources was often based on corruption and nepotism, thus favouring those close to the power apparatus. The transformation to a market-oriented democracy in the 1990s worsened the situation for many, as it also led to mass unemployment and a massive reduction in state social assistance (e.g. housing allocations, kindergartens, guaranteed work/income etc.). In the course of the neoliberal transformation, reproductive work became increasingly “feminised” (Ivi, 81). In Poland, there are no unemployment benefits comparable to those in many states of the “old” EU, so that people without income are dependent on private networks like the family, friends, but also the *Polish Roman Catholic Church*. The church organises old people’s homes, hospitals, shelters for women and their children forced to flee violent partners, kindergartens, help for the homeless, schools, universities and receives state subsidies for such work, thus increasing the dependency on this religious organisation.

Added to this is the context of a more general discrediting of socialist ideas and values through the experience of authoritarianism during state-socialism and Soviet dependency. The *Roman Catholic Church* was also able to fill this vacuum of values (Keinz 2008). The *Catholic Church* is one of the most important advocates

of familism in Poland. Reproduction through national family structures, including the transmission of Catholicism, is regarded in official church doctrine as one of the most important God-given provisions. In this context, the persistent myth of Mother Poland takes on further significance. The idealised female type of Mother Poland, dominant in right-wing conservative rhetoric, is contrasted with female life plans and female roles that do not correspond to this image (Chołuj 2009, 4; 2015).

Abortion, feminism, non-heterosexual people and lifestyles are presented in national Catholic right-wing populist rhetoric as a ‘threat’ to the family and the Polish nation (Verdery 1996, 82; Keinz 2008; Kulpa 2012; Jawor 2018). As in other international right-wing discourses, right-wing milieus, together with the *Catholic Church* in Poland, warn against ‘colonisation’ by ‘gender’ and ‘Brussels or the EU’ (Korolczuk and Graff 2018) and portray gender equality as a product of ‘foreign’ domination (Keinz 2008, 100). In the context of familism in connection with Polish nationalism, an occupation narrative also comes into play (Ramme 2019c, 471). Particularly in connection with the problematisation of abortion, the collective memory of National Socialist and Soviet domination is repeatedly invoked, as well as the crimes against the Polish population on the part of the German National Socialists and under Stalin. For example, on a flyer distributed in Warsaw in the mid-1990s, when there were attempts to liberalise the abortion law, which was tightened in 1993. The flyer, entitled “Will the left reintroduce Stalinist and Hitlerian lawlessness?”, features images of Stalin and Hitler and ends with a call to prevent “recent Poles from being deprived of the right to life”. The flyer is a typical example of right-wing narratives in which, among other things, the analogy to the German Nazi occupation policy is made.



Image 1: Photo of the flyer from the nineties titled "Will the left reintroduce Stalinist and Hitlerian lawlessness?"²

Abortion is presented as a continuation of a genocide on Polish people (Verdery 1996, 79). Narratives of the national Catholic right in Poland about the survival of the nation threatened by 'anti-Polonism'³ conceal rhetoric similar to that spread by other far-right groups who refer to conspiracy theories and evoke the threat of a so-called death of the nation or the great replacement (Botsch and Kopke 2018; Cornejo-Valle and Ramme 2022). Abortion advocates and women's rights activists, on the other hand, are repeatedly described as representatives of a conspiracy against 'the people' and women's emancipation efforts, feminism, gender mainstreaming or demands for rights for LGBTQ* as Marxist and/or Jewish-

² The text of the flyer was signed by Jan Musiał and is in the private archive of the author.

³ On the concept of 'anti-Polonism' and its political operationalisation both historically (e.g. by the III Reich) and in contemporary Polish politics, see e.g. the comprehensive Wikipedia entry on *anti-Polish sentiment* - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Polish_sentiment (retrieved 30 July 2019).

inspired⁴. According to such hidden or open, unconcealed antisemitic rhetoric, feminism and LGBTQ* are tools of an ‘international Jewry’ waging a war against the ‘Polish people’ and organized with the help of enormous financial resources from outside of the country. For example, *Ordo Iuris* (offshoot of the *Piotr Skarga Institute* which is linked to the *Family, Tradition and Private Property* network) portrayed the *Polish Women’s Strike* of 3 October 2016, which was demonstrably spontaneous and organised throughout the country, as a project planned, directed and financed from outside⁵.



Image 2: Screenshot of the website with Ordo Iuris 2017 report titled “Black Protests: spontaneous movement or effect of a massive financial investment?”

⁴ See e.g. the pastoral letter of the Polish Bishops' Conference of 2013 which speaks of a ‘Marxist-inspired’ ‘gender ideology/genderism’: Episkopat Polski: List pasterski na Niedzielę Świętej Rodziny 2013 roku, 29 December 2013, <https://episkopat.pl/list-pasterski-na-niedziele-swietej-rodziny-2013-roku/> (10 June 2016).

⁵ See e.g. Dueholm, Natalia und Ordo Iuris Analysis Department (2017).

Even under the concept of ‘family’, which at first seems neutral or even positive, are hidden not only anti-feminist and homophobic, but often deeply racist attitudes. These are not only marginally represented but have long been established in the mainstream: prominent examples of a familist mobilisation were, for example, the Europe-wide campaigns against gender equality, gender diversity and women’s emancipation, which were summarised under the term ‘gender ideology’ (Hark and Villa 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017).

The Polish variant began in 2013 with a pastoral letter from the *Polish Bishops’ Conference* delivered in Catholic churches nationwide (Duda 2016). A statement by Archbishop Jędraszewski, made in July 2013 in the context of the campaign, refers to further ideological contexts: “gender” was an invention of Friedrich Engels, “gender ideology” was “dangerous” because it was based on a “negation of God” and contradicted the biological destiny of human beings, leading ultimately to a “decline of civilisation”. The archbishop could even imagine that in the future “the few remaining white people, here in Europe, would be put on display for other races”⁶. Thus, according to the Deputy President of the Polish Bishops’ Conference since 2014, it is not only the Polish people and family that are threatened, but the ‘white’ people and the entire ‘Christian Civilisation’. This statement illustrates how the concept of the family is interwoven with racist ways of thinking. But by no means just any heterosexual nuclear family is meant, since the ‘people’ are defined by ‘whiteness’, a common ‘biological’ ancestry, Catholic religious affiliation, as well as by a conservative and anti-communist (‘spiritual’) mindset.

In March 2019, on the other hand, Jędraszewski called for a “Catholic counter-revolution” to restore the “moral order” of before the student revolution of

⁶ Quote after Łg/eKAI (2013), *Abp Jędraszewski: gender obraca się przeciwko rodzinie i posiadaniu dzieci*, Katolicka Agencja Informacyjna/Catholic News Agency, 17 November 2013, <https://ekai.pl/abp-jedraszewski-gender-obraca-sie-przeciwko-rodzinie-i-posiadaniu-dzieci/> (retrieved 10 October 2016).

1968⁷. With the narratives of the threatening ‘death of the people’, the ‘downfall of the Christian West’, the ‘civilisation of death’ as well as the destruction of an ‘original’ social order by the 1960s or the Enlightenment, similar patterns of argumentation can be seen as among other *volkisch* and right-wing extremist groups in Europe and North America (see for example Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Lang and Ulrich 2018; Cornejo-Valle and Ramme 2022; Möser *et al.* 2022).

Among national Catholics in Poland, the self-image of a still (in contrast to the ‘West’) authentic European, white and Christian people’s nation is increasingly being built up. In addition to the self-definition as ‘*Antemurale Christianitatis*’⁸, there is also an increasing call for a mission of “re-Christianisation of Europe” against gender diversity, gender mainstreaming, feminism, LGBTQ*, Islam and people of Muslim faith as well as people with other than fundamentalist Catholic and ultra-right worldviews (Cornejo-Valle and Ramme 2022).

3. The familist nationalism of the so-called “IV Republic”

In 2005, after the first political takeover by the *Law and Justice Party* (PiS) as part of a coalition, the so-called “IV Polish Republic” (IV Rzeczpospolita or IV RP) was proclaimed. The term is understood as distinct from the III Polish Republic (Przyłęcki 2012, 119). The necessity of a IV RP is justified by the fact that no real system change took place in Poland after 1989. Former communist elites, according to the narrative, had allied themselves with former opposition members (including the *Civic Platform*, PO⁹) and were in fact the ones who ruled the country outside of democratic mechanisms and enriched themselves at the expense of the

⁷ Quote after Folfasińska, Joanna und Archidiecezja Krakowska (2019), *Abp Jędraszewski: potrzebna jest kontrrewolucja katolicka*, 21 March 2019, *Niedziela*. Tygodnik Katolicki - <https://www.niedziela.pl/artukul/41572/Abp-Jedraszewski-potrzebna-jest> (retrieved 12 May 2019).

⁸ In English “Bastion of Christian Unity”.

⁹ In Polish “Platforma Obywatelska” (PO).

population (Wysocka 2009). According to this narrative, the country would not only need a change of these elites, but also a moral renewal in the spirit of patriotism and Catholicism, which would initiate action in the interest of the ‘true Polish people’¹⁰. While some of the sentiments are based on anger about the unjust transformation of the 1990s, it should not be forgotten that this is also a familiar pattern of far-right and even fascist ideologies. In this respect, it is also about the establishment of privileges and the rivalry between certain groups of the population and others.

The revived foreign domination, colonisation or occupation narrative is a characteristic feature of right-wing discourses in Poland and serves to justify the claim of a transfer of power, which is presented as a transfer of power to the ‘real Polish people’¹¹. Differences can only be seen in the form of the narrative of occupation/foreign domination, as well as in how the ‘occupiers’ are defined and the extent of the supposed ‘occupation’ or ‘subversion’ of state institutions is described. Belonging to the ‘true Polish people’ is defined in the rhetoric of the national Catholic mainstream in terms of ‘correct’ family lineage, according to which the political and religious orientation or practice of parents and other family members also counts in the assessment of individuals. In right-wing media and in political debates for the purpose of legitimising political actions, representation and claims to power, ancestry is one of the most important criteria. Thus, the question of whether someone or their family members come from an anti-

¹⁰ See for example Pap, *Kaczyński tłumaczy istotę dobrej zmiany: ma wymiar społeczny, obywatelski, ekonomiczny i narodowy*, 14 October 2018, gazetaprawna.pl; or *Dla Kaczyńskiego stawka tych wyborów jest oczywista. “stare układy albo dobra zmiana”*, 06 October 2018, www.dziennik.pl.

¹¹ An example of such a contemporary discourse is the book *Repolonizować Polskę* (Repolonise Poland) by the Professor of the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences (ISPPAN) Wojciech Roszkowski (published by the ultra-right Biały Kruk), in which various authors (among them professors, politicians and priests) claim that Poland is being “depopulated” (wynarodowienie) in foreign hands and should be “repolonised”.

communist, Catholic, 'patriotic and Polish' family is a constant theme in the evaluation of politicians and public figures.

Since coming to power in 2015, the PiS party has been implementing an all-encompassing socio-political and socio-economic restructuring under the umbrella term of 'good change' (*dobra zmiana*) (Sutowski 2017). An important component of the measures of 'Good Change' is built on a conservative sexual and gender policy, at the centre of which is the heterosexual nuclear family consisting of married parents (i.e. father, mother) and their children, who together are considered the basic unit of the nation. The state programme "Family+" (*Rodzina+*), as well as more recently "Pregnancy+" (2019) and at the local level the so-called "extended family cards" (*Karta duzej rodziny*) are examples of such family-centred support measures.

These measures could be interpreted as social redistributive policies that mitigate the impact of previous neoliberal transformations, but such a perspective overlooks the fact that these measures are in line with right-wing politics of familist nationalism, that privilege certain groups over others and also aim to institutionally secure male hegemony. If one does not consider such support measures as "Family+" in isolation, but in the context of other political decisions, the biopolitical dimension of state family policy is revealed: while married couples with children receive support regardless of income (for the second child since 2015, and since mid-2019 also for the first), different requirements make it more difficult for single parents (i.e. divorced parents, or parents of illegitimate children) to receive benefits. In parallel with the introduction of support programmes for married heterosexual families, support for prevention programmes against violence in the family (e.g. the crisis telephone *Niebieska Linia* or the *Women's Rights Centre - Centrum Praw Kobiet*) was discontinued. The Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence) is also presented as a threat to the family and

national sovereignty in discourses by the government, President Andrzej Duda and the *Catholic Church*, among others (Ramme 2019a).

The right-wing rhetoric according to which women in Poland are accorded special respect contrasts with the fact that the right of pregnant persons to their physical integrity is actually denied. The restriction of reproductive rights has been an ongoing process through the limited access to contraceptives or through limiting possibilities to terminate through abortion, even in cases where that is formally legal. Poland's Constitutional Tribunal decision from October 2020 to ban the termination of pregnancies in cases of severe and irreversible foetal defect or incurable illness that threatens the foetus' life came into force 27 January 2021. Since the legitimacy of Poland's Constitutional Tribunal and its democratic foundation are being challenged, the legal basis of the judgment is also in dispute, which is why doctors - no matter what they decide - act on an uncertain legal basis. The ruling has already led to massive protests after in November 2021 the media revealed the death of a pregnant woman from sepsis in a case in which the medical personal was waiting for a definite confirmation of the death of the foetus before removing it.

The right-wing sexual political orientation of the state becomes evident not only in terms of reproduction policy, but also in terms of legal citizenship. Children of parents with Polish citizenship who are officially considered children of same-sex parents abroad are denied Polish citizenship (see Polish Commissioner for Human Rights 2018a). Primacy is given to the cohesion of married, heterosexual, Polish families, not to the well-being of any individual family members or the support of other social relationships. In July 2019 the Constitutional Court, following an intervention by the prosecutor, ruled that it was permissible to refuse certain services to LGBTQ* people on the grounds of religious conviction (Sobczak 2019). The right of LGBTQ* people to hold public assemblies is also repeatedly challenged by right-wing politicians and demonstrations have been banned because of alleged

security risks, a practice objected to by the Polish Human Rights Ombudsman (see Polish Commissioner for Human Rights 2018b).

While right-wing nationalist and Catholic parties are in government at the national level since the elections in 2015, it must be underlined, that there are nevertheless significant political differences and divergences especially between national and municipal politics, politics in the large cities and smaller towns, and between eastern and western Poland. One example of these differences is the attitude towards LGBTQ* issues in larger cities, which tend to be more liberal when it comes to the acceptance of sexual and gender plurality. While for example the mayor of Warsaw Trzaskowski promised in 2019 to improve the quality of life of LGBTQ* people and signed a so-called “Declaration LGBT+”, regional parliaments and mayors of mainly peripheral localities or municipalities in predominantly eastern regions announced they would work against LGBTQ*-rights and signed corresponding agreements, which had reached a number of almost 90 local jurisdictions by June 2020 (Pająk and Gawron 2022).

The change towards the institutionalisation of right-wing gender and sexual politics described above is supported by a large number of other non-state actors, some of whom pursue even more radical policies than the government. It is probably not a coincidence that in Poland the so-called anti-gender (2013) and anti LGBTQ* campaigns (2019) fall into times of high media attention to cases of clerical child abuse and managed to redirect some of the attention to an alleged threat by a so-called gender and LGBT ideology and lobby to families and children. Far-right sexual politics must also be seen as an answer to the crisis of the *Catholic Church*, eroding male hegemony and liberalisation of social practices in the reproduction of gendered and sexual social regimes.

The child abuse scandals involving the *Polish and International Roman Catholic Church* and the more and more successful attempts to finally force the church to face institutional and legal consequences has put the Church and its position of

moral authority increasingly under strain. The national-catholic right wing is also in a dilemma, as the coherence and basis of the narrative of moral superiority and the family and church as a protective sanctuary is in danger of falling apart. They fail to recognise that sexual abuse, for example, belongs to regimes based on male hegemony and vertical hierarchies in which there is no accountability or social control. With increasing evidence and witnesses, even the national Catholic political fraction can no longer deny the problem of sexual abuse in the church. Instead of taking responsibility, the national-catholic right wing takes refuge in conspiracy theories, by claiming among other things that a powerful ‘homosexual lobby’ has infiltrated the church, allowing them to reformulate the critique of clerical child abuse into an LGBTQ*phobia (Cornejo-Valle and Ramme 2022).

While the clergy and the *Roman Catholic Church* at the local and national levels play an important role in promoting hostility toward LGBTQ* persons and opposition to women’s rights, there are a number of actors, including far-right organisations and Christian fundamentalist organisations that take an even more radical stance than the Vatican, e.g. opposing the Second Vatican Council. *The Institute for Legal Culture Ordo Iuris* (offshoot of the international network Tradition, Family and Private Property, TFP originating in Brazil and its Polish offshoot the *Institute Piotr Skarga*) has been particularly influential and has even gained a foothold in state and governmental structures and in the supreme court (e.g. president of *Ordo Iuris* Aleksander Stępkowski is ex vice-minister and was appointed head of the supreme court by president Duda in 2020¹²). *Ordo Iuris* prepares legislative initiatives (including the 2016 abortion ban bill “Stop Aborcji” that aimed to punish pregnant persons who underwent abortions with several years in prison), provides ministers and trains lawyers to use the legal system in the spirit of Christian fundamentalism and nationalism¹³. Their legal interventions and cases show their links to extreme

¹² He now (2022) has the function of spokesperson for the court.

¹³ See the listed activities on the website of *Institute for Legal Culture Ordo Iuris* - <http://en.ordoiuris.pl/analyses>.

right-wing worldviews and milieus, as the organisation has not only acted legally in the field of reproductive rights restrictions, LGBTQ* rights restrictions, or the protection of ultraconservatives, but has also provided legal support to the extreme right.

Ordo Iuris promoted so-called conversion therapy for non-heterosexual people and also stood behind the drafts and advocacy for the so-called family charter, which presents a much more elaborated legal text, than the municipal “anti-LGBT* declarations” (called by the media “LGBT-free zones”). It presents an attempt to institutionalise right-wing familism at the local political level, while the same time drafting and promoting corresponding legal frameworks for the entire Polish state. The introduction of the so-called family charter or anti-LGBTQ* declarations in 2019 and 2020 were attempts to ban LGBTQ* content from public space, culture, and education, and also to prevent any local political support for non-heterosexual citizens, lifestyles or content.

But even the proponents of right-wing sexual politics fail in their ideas about what society should look like and what norms it should follow. *Ordo Iuris* is a recent example of such failures. In January 2022 several prominent members including Tymoteusz Zych and Karolina Pawłowska left *Ordo Iuris*, some of whom formed a new organisation called Institute *Logos Europa* with international ties to e.g. Spain and Hungary (Terlik 2022). In an official statement to the press *Ordo Iuris* declared they had disputes e.g. regarding the “durability of marriage” and the “protection of families” (Piotrowska 2022). Despite promoting far-right familism and presenting critical stances towards divorce, leaders of the organisation decided to get divorced and also dated the same female - also leader *Ordo Iuris*, despite her being married to one of them. It could be argued that such statements about a private life have no place in a scientific publication. However, they do provide interesting indications of the divergence between social practice, social norms and ideology. This discrepancy, which has been scientifically proven many times and,

in many places, (remember, for example, the shock caused by the Kinsey Reports on Sexual Behaviour of the 1950s in the USA¹⁴), has led, among other things, to a liberalisation of norms concerning gender and sexuality.

Next to this, it needs to be emphasised, that anti-LGBTQ* policies and hate speech also trigger reactions opposite to those intended. After several months of anti-LGBTQ* campaigning by the government, right-wing media and the church, riots and violence broke out against participants of an LGBTQ* march in Białystok at the end of July 2019. Especially since then, solidarity with LGBTQ* people is growing widely.¹⁵ LGBTQ* marches or demonstrations are nowadays organised in all large and in many small cities in Poland in order to protest against attempts to exclude people of non-heterosexual orientation from public life. Some cities, like Krakow, have declared themselves as “LGBT-friendly” and their majors attend LGBTQ*-Pride marches. The EU reacted as well, as the European Parliament condemned the anti-LGBTI politics in Poland in 2019 (European Parliament 2019a; 2019b) and funding from the European Commission’s regional programmes has been held back. Rulings of Polish courts and the reaction of EU-Institutions might have caused that since 2020 there has not been much progress in fostering anti-LGBTQ* and right-wing familist resolutions, according to the documentation by the “Atlas of hate” with the current (April 2022) status of 86 such resolutions by 85 local government units (Pająk and Gawron 2022).

¹⁴ On the impact of the report see for example Mosteller (2010). Also, in the case of Poland, sexual practices are diverse and nuanced, neither following only rigid religious or more “hedonistic” models (Izdebski 2014).

¹⁵ See for example the entry from 02 August 2019 and the Facebook events on Tęczowy Białystok (Rainbow Białystok): <https://www.facebook.com/TeczowyBialystok/>.

4. Trans- and international entanglements of anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ*actors and post-socialist right wing sexual geopolitics

While the EU supports LGBTI rights, EU-critical positions are a common denominator among the most radical actors in right-wing sexual politics, including Christian fundamentalist, ultra-conservative and far-right networks and organisations. Nevertheless, efforts are being made to change the EU and the international framework from within. In cooperation with likeminded right-wing familist networks and organisations, *Ordo Iuris* develops and advocates juristic right-wing familist frameworks for the entire EU, and the UN (Cornejo-Valle and Ramme 2022). Platforms that consolidate right-wing sexual agendas internationally with the help of organisations from Poland are, for example, *C-Fam*, *Family Watch International* or the network “*One of Us*” *European citizens’ initiatives*, the *World Congress of Families (WTF)* or *Agenda Europe*.

Investigative journalists have pointed out international connections of anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ* activists in Poland particularly to Latin America, Russia and Spain. According to the journalist and feminist activist Suchanow, ultraconservative networks such as the *Hazte Oir* had previously tried to push through a similar agenda of right-wing sexual and gender politics in Spain, but with little success (Suchanow 2020). As we have argued (Cornejo-Valle and Ramme 2022), right-wing rhetoric referring to Catholic moral norms finds much more fertile political ground in predominantly Catholic Poland than in also predominantly (Roman) Catholic Spain. In Spain right-wing policies on women’s rights, abortion, or sexuality quickly evoke associations with Francoism, totalitarianism and the ideology of National Catholicism. In Poland, on the other hand, such rhetoric is more easily integrated into an anti-communist framework, which in turn is associated with freedom, resistance to authoritarian state-socialism and foreign domination by the Soviet Union (*Ibidem*).

The anti-communist framework links the far right in Poland with far-right actors in, for example, the USA or Latin America. Despite the application of an “anti-colonial” discursive framework the far right is linked historically to some environments with colonial or even fascist heritage, like the Network of *TFP* initiated in Brazil or the well-known antisemite and sponsor of the far right in Poland Jan Kobyłański - founder of the *Union of Polish Associations and Organizations in Latin America* in Uruguay. Right-wing sexual politics within this framework, are not just symbolic (Möser *et al.* 2022), but a foundation for an essentialist conception about the human family and its division into distinct ethnic organic units.

There are a number of reasons why anti-feminism, familist nationalism, and the spread of LGBTQ*phobias have proven attractive to a heterogeneous group of right-wing actors not only in Poland, but worldwide as well. Particularly intriguing, but still under-researched seem to be the international and geopolitical dimensions of such politics. Suchanow who has analysed the links of anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ* organisations from e.g. Poland particularly with Latin America (*TFP*), Spain (*Hazte Oir*), the USA and Russia points out the geopolitical dimensions of right-wing sexual politics (Suchanow 2020). The international congress “Large Family and Future of Humanity”, held instead of the “World Congress of Families” (WCF) in 2014, took place in Moscow (Stoeckl 2020) and was co-organised among others by the organisations *Hazte Oir* (Spain), *Piotr Skarga Institute* (Poland), that is linked to *Ordo Iuris*, and *Family Policy* (Russia), has been supported by Putin himself, who addressed the congress with a speech, while attending speakers stressed “Russia’s leadership in the moral reconstruction of the world” (Suchanow 2020, 457-466).

Russia has been a forerunner in post-Cold War Europe when it comes to the implementation of specific familist ideology and masculinity that is linked with neotraditionalism, nationalism and the regime change towards (semi)authoritarianism

(Johnson and Saarinen 2013). Family ideology and policy fostered by the Russian state, the *Russian Orthodox Church* and ultraconservatives like Aleksey Komov, Konstantin Malofeev or Vladimir and Natalia Yakunin are supposed to translate “traditional values” driven by an “authoritarian anti-liberalism and anti-communism” (Bluhm and Brand 2019, 240) into practice, while representing “the backbone of national security, supporting the envisioned recovery of Russia as a global power” (*Ibidem*, 223). Homophobic discourses are integral to such geopolitics (Edenborg 2018).

Ideologically, frameworks that link right-wing sexual politics to geopolitics in order to formulate an alternative “epistemology” to the “liberal West” have been developed among others by the fascist philosopher and advocate of Eurasian imperialism Alexander Dugin.¹⁶ Putin’s return to Euro-Asian identity “roots” and “Christian morality” and related right-wing sexual politics serves as an offer to fill an ideological void after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which in Putin’s eyes also enhances Russia’s ideological geopolitical position (Suchanow 2020, 117). The far-right Russian oligarch and billionaire Malofeev, who supposedly sponsored *Agenda Europe* (Datta 2021, 24; Suchanow 2020, 279), and according to the NGO *Right Wing Watch* also allegedly supported the international familist congress in 2014 in Moscow (Blue 2014) has been sanctioned by the EU since the Russian invasion into the Ukrainian territory of Crimea in 2014 (Stoeckl 2020). The EU was accusing him of supporting separatists and destabilising the region in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea (Council of Europe 2014), while the Ukrainian state accused him of supporting military troops in the conflict region.

This link of right-wing sexual politics to specific forms of geopolitics, predatory capitalism, authoritarian states/autocracies based on cronyism/oligarchies and

¹⁶ See, for example, the interview with the far-right philosopher and former co-head of the Russian National Bolshevik Party on a far-right website on geopolitics: Dugin, Alexander; Russell, Thaddeus (2022): Unregistered 193: Interview with Alexander Dugin. Hg. v. Katehon think tank. Geopolitics & Tradition. Available online at <https://katehon.com/en/article/unregistered-193-interview-alexander-dugin>. About Dugin’s geopolitics, see also Ingram (2001).

even arms trade and warmongering might possibly open new research perspective on the connection between hegemonic masculinity, right-wing familism, authoritarianism and the exploitation, propagation and implementation of right-wing sexual political agendas. Alliances among groups of far-right actors and politicians across continents (including the USA and Russia) show that far-right geopolitics of sex and gender cannot be reduced to dichotomies like the West vs. the East, socialism (or victims of Capitalism) vs. (neo)liberalism, re-distribution vs. recognition and so on - which has been a popular explanation of the rise of the far right.

When following the politics of the far right in Poland their focus on anti-EU and anti-German rhetoric contrasts with their very minor critique of Russia. Overall, the Kremlin's and Russia's political elites have been quite successful in developing a neoconservative narrative based on right-wing sexual politics, that have inspired a wide range of far-right followers in the European Union. Most importantly its anti-LGBT legislation, such as the ban on so-called 'homosexual propaganda' in 2013 (Wilkinson 2014; Edenborg 2017) has inspired the right wing to foster similar legislation in post-soviet and post socialist countries in Europe and has been echoed in Poland, where attempts to introduce similar anti-LGBT-legislation are in progress.

Narratives about "the West's" and the European Union's moral decline (Grishaeva 2019; Moss 2017), also function to stir up a fear of the "West" and to divert possible EU-friendly moods especially in post-socialist and post-Soviet states and thus to prevent the expansion of EU-influences or democratisation. Ultimately in his speech concerning the military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 President Putin referred to Russia as a protector of values that are 'true to human nature' and accused 'the west' of imposing values that lead to degeneration: "they destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within" (President of Russia 2022).

After the further Russian invasion into Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the Polish Government at least to some extent paused their anti-EU rhetoric, while parts of the far right, ultra-nationalists and extreme-right church representatives (e.g. *Radio Maryja*) continued both their anti-EU and anti-Ukrainian stance, targeting especially war refugees of colour and (again) accusing them of being a threat to the safety of Polish women (e.g. the *National Guard of the Independence March Association* or *Młodzież Wszechpolska*). Especially far-right actors like *Konfederacja*, *KORWiN*; far-right media like *wRealu24*, *Media Narodowe* (Tatar and Pankowski 2022) that have also been vocal over the years in opposing women and LGBTQ*-rights turned out also when it came to downplaying the Russian invasion, or even indirectly endorsing it. Examples of statements justifying or even endorsing the Russian invasion, also linking it among others with homophobia, in statements like “the world of rainbow murderers is ending”¹⁷, have been collected by *Nigdy Wiecej Association* (*Ibidem*).

On the other hand in March 2022 the anti-choice organisation *Fundacja Życie i Rodzina* started targeting women on border crossings or train stations, who had fled from Ukrainian war zones to Poland, many of whom have been victims of rape committed as a war crime seeking to terminate unwanted pregnancies. The activities of *Fundacja Życie i Rodzina* are also part of a campaign related to a new legislative initiative called “abortion is murder” launched in March 20202 that aims at restricting abortion even in cases of rape or incest and sentencing the pregnant person who underwent an abortion with up to eight years in prison. Their website *Fundacja Życie i Rodzina* states that “since the independence of Ukraine in 1991 some 30 million unborn have been killed there” and that “*abortion is a bigger threat to peace*” (*Życie i Rodzina* 2022). Similar statements according to which “termination of pregnancy is worse than war” were a motto of the of anti-choice

¹⁷ This was for example a statement by the main editor of the „Tygodnik Solidarność” (Journal of the Trade Union NZSZ “Solidarność”) and Journalist of “Do Rzeczy” (Tatar and Pankowski 2022, 7).

movements in the famous pilgrimage centre of the *Polish Catholic Church* Jasna Góra gathering chaired by Archbishop Wacław Depo, Metropolitan of Częstochowa (Katolicka Agencja Informacyjna 2022).

Conclusion

It is important for understanding right-wing sexual and gender politics in Poland that nation (*naród*) and state are not analogous concepts. In right-wing nationalist discourses, individuals and their bodies are conceived as part of a coherent body of the nation and thus become territories of a border regime where the reproduction and sovereignty of the nation is guarded (see Kulawik 2017; Ramme 2019a; 2019b; Ramme and Snochowska-Gonzalez 2019; Kulpa 2012). In contrast to LGBTQ* people, heterosexual women form an important part of the symbolic as well as practical construction of the Polish nation, through the role ascribed to them not only to raise their own children within the framework of the nuclear family, but to ‘biologically’ as well as culturally ‘preserve’ their imagined Polish nation. Both the contemporary *Catholic Church* and supporters of Catholic ethno-nationalism in Poland appear as opponents of feminism, equality and LGBTQ* people, seeing them as a threat to Catholic values, national traditions, family cohesion and the continuity of the nation. The anchor point for right-wing politics is the narrative of the perpetual occupation or foreign domination of Poland, which is used to justify the exclusion of certain population groups from the national community (Kulpa 2012, 113). Insofar such right-wing sexual politics not only (re)construct an imaginary nation - they are also practically deconstructing ‘the nation’, by depriving parts of the population of their full and equal citizenship and by introducing a general climate of suspicion regarding possible practices of sexual and gender “misbehaviour”.

The changes that can be observed in Poland since the election victory of the national Catholic right in 2015 do not resemble a revolution but are taking place gradually. Taken as a whole, they are aimed at a fundamental structural transformation not only of the Polish state, but of society itself. The aim is to assert the primacy of the national in all possible social spheres. These developments are supported by far right and nationalist civil society groups, right-wing media, the *Polish Catholic Church*, religious movements and NGOs such as the *TFP* network. In national Catholic discourses in Poland the criteria of national affiliation and stringent restrictive norms regarding sexuality and gender are so narrowly defined that they can be used against any (political) opponent, if desired. The public and violent political rhetoric in which people are grouped together through family (ideational and 'biological') affiliation and no longer perceived as individuals shows frightening similarities to fascist and/or volkisch discourses imaging nations as organic units, that develop as ethnically homogeneous extended family units.

These described contexts of a familist, Catholic nationalism in connection with narratives of an ongoing existential threat to the 'Polish people' and 'Christianity' indicate that the concept of family in the broadest sense refers not only to the nuclear family with father, mother and children, but also to an ethnonationalist or even volkisch principle of descent. Right-wing sexual ideologies and especially familism function well as a containers for far-right and authoritarian ideologies, without these connections being visible at first glance. This explains also why so many discursive alliances can be observed both locally and internationally between heterogeneous far-right political environments, but also environments with sentiments favouring authoritarian rule, especially rule that is granted by a specific birth right and family descent, whether it is by gendered, national, nobility, or other criteria.

Moreover, a look at international interconnections also shows that the spread of right-wing sexual politics is not a specifically Polish phenomenon and that the actors are internationally cooperating and applying similar discursive figures and strategies. In the context of current political developments, such as the war against the Ukraine, it could be observed how right-wing sexual politics are integral to discursive frameworks, that aim at offering geopolitical counter-projects to the “hegemonic liberal West”, which the far right - not only in Russia or Poland, but worldwide - accuses of destroying a “natural order” based on gender binarities and heterosexuality.

Nonetheless, it may turn out that the discrepancy between real social practices and the normative principles of right-wing sexual politics, which are proclaimed to be “natural”, is ultimately the root cause of the inexorable failure of right-wing and ultra conservative agendas. The disintegration of *Ordo Iuris* or the massive problems of the *Roman Catholic Church* to adhere to the guidelines of its own moral teachings are exemplary for this failure. In the end right-wing sexual agendas can ultimately only be enforced through violence and the establishment of authoritarian state structures, in which case they will also be effective means of potentially defaming any political opponents, including within their own right-wing and conservative ranks.

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