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The Politicization of European integration and the question of sovereignty in Visegrad countries. A Polish example.

Current debates on the future of the EU as well as the nature of the European integration and its relation to a nation-state reveal more disagreements among political actors in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Originally, both on elites and societies level, the overall supportive attitudes to the idea of European integration prevailed. Recently however a more nuanced and critical position resulting from both domestic variables as well as the crises in which the EU has been embroiled in recent years, most notably that of the Eurozone and the migration issue are developing in the region. One can argue that the politicization of European integration reached CEE a number of years after the enlargement. The return to the concept of sovereignty became one of the most attractive positions for political actors as they were able to utilize a known, well anchored and resonating concept. The call for ‘renationalisation’, ‘deuropeanisation’ became popular, and capturing such positions from the perspective of politicization allows us to better understand what really is being contested in terms of European integration. The main aim of this paper is to discuss these concepts and provide some empirical insight into the patterns of

political discourse on European integration with a special focus on the notion of sovereignty in Poland based on parliamentary debates.¹

Politicization, renationalization or a return to normal politics?

Scholars growingly focus on the phenomenon of the politicization of European integration and its policies. Three features of the process are crucial: the increase in the salience of the EU in national debates understood as a bigger visibility, expanded spectrum of the actors involved in the debates and finally polarization of opinions about the topic (de Wilde 2011; Hutter, Grande 2014). Politicization can be treated as an opportunity to channel critical, polarised opinions on European integration into the democratic institutions on national and European levels, because, as Bellamy and Kröger rightly argue, “the politicization of EU affairs need not be equated with Euroscepticism and the rise of populist movements”, but rather it indicates a process of domestication and normalization (Bellamy, Kröger 2016).

For the CEE region – as will be argued below – obtaining full membership initiated a significant change in how the discourse on European integration was constructed. Moreover, one of the most important triggers for the politicization that coincided with enlargement was the failure of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe (CFE) and the initiation of work on the Reform (Lisbon) Treaty. Additionally, the presence of radical-right parties in the national setting is conducive to this increased polarization, but there is also an additional model where (such as in the British and German case) a polarization occurs between the major political parties (Hutter, Grande 2014). In the CEE context, both factors are in place. The Polish case, for instance, illustrates that both radical parties, as well as the increasing competition between main political parties – Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska – PO) and Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PiS) – triggered such processes. Finally, scholars argue that the framing strategy can impact the process of politicization and that representing European integration in cultural and identitarian frames are more conducive to politicization (Hutter, Grande 2014: 1015).

The politicization of European integration reached CEE some time after the enlargement and, apart from the factors discussed above, additional aspects seem to have prompted the politicization of the European integration in the region. It can be argued that there was a special nexus among the external EU pressure (through conditionality) and favorable conditions at a domestic level in CEE that resulted in

them obtaining full membership and transforming politics, economy and society. But scholars also note that the discourse on integration with Western structures was securitized. Paraphrasing McDonald, it proceeded along the following lines: the failure in the process of enlargement (and also any delay) was positioned as a threat to survival, which in turn (with the agreement of the societies) enabled leaders to render emergency measures and the suspension of ‘normal politics’ in dealing with enlargement (McDonald 2008). The process resulted in, amongst others, a high degree of efficiency in terms of conditionality policy, as most of the substantial criticism as to how the enlargement was proceeding was rejected as a threat to the ultimate goal. In other words, this was achieved through the establishment of a hegemonic discourse of securitization which legitimized suspension – in order to avoid any delay in enlargement – of normal, bargaining-based politics concerning decisions related to the conditions spelled out by the EU. The proponents of integration excessively used the securitization arguments, stressing the threats to Polish sovereignty and the national interest which would result from any delay in integration with the EU. Jarosław Kaczyński emphasized in the Sejm in 2003: “During the first few years of the Polish III Republic the main task, even though rarely phrased this way, was the accommodation of our country to the structures of the West. It was a necessity and without achieving it all else would be impossible. This process is reaching its end today. Entry into the European Union will stop this process” (Kaczyński 22.01.2003)¹. As we can see, in the line of argumentation of a right-wing party leader, he perceived European integration (as well as integration with NATO) as a prerequisite for his country’s development, modernization, security and prosperity – in other words “all else”. The Members of Parliament (MP) from the main parties, both ruling and opposition, frequently used such a narrative. Even the populist parties, which were traditionally Eurosceptic, used this discourse even though they much more frequently raised doubts about the details of the conditions of membership. Atsuko Higashino’s argument aptly summarized such a construction – enlargement in CEE countries was securitized for the sake of obtaining a more secure position in Europe and, ultimately, to desecuritize (Higashino 2004).

Desecuritizing meant that in the context of post-enlargement there was a return to normal politics and a pluralization of discourse as regards European

¹ All translations of the interventions of Members of Polish Parliament are authors’ own.

integration. This is because, since CEE countries joined the EU, the ultimate threat behind the mechanisms of securitization ceased to exist. As a result, the process of desecuritization occurred, meaning a return to normal, bargaining-based politics and discourse on European integration and re-politicization understood as a return to the kind of bargaining processes that happen in the public sphere where many various opinions are expressed (Hansen 2012). Re-politicization then should be seen as a process of producing new competing discourses to achieve hegemonic status on the domestic level in CEE states. This was visible in Poland almost immediately after the accession in 2004. On the one level the political scene became polarized when it comes to the general opinions about the future shape of European integration, what was visible particularly in the context of debates on CFE and Lisbon Treaty or the economic crisis in the EU. The second level of debate after 2004 on European issues concerns the divergent opinions expressed about the various policies of the EU and the way they are managed and implemented. In the former case, research demonstrates for instance that concerning external relations and especially the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the process took some time and the polarization of opinions has become gradually more visible since 2010 and onwards (Góra 2016).

Additionally, and last but not least, instead of raising the (re)politicization phenomenon, the concept of renationalisation is often recalled in the CEE context. In his Berlin speech in February 2012, Herman van Rompuy stated that “what we are currently going through is not a ‘renationalisation of European politics’, no, it is the ‘Europeanisation of national political life’. And ultimately, with all its limits and its risks, this change will make the European project stronger” (van Rompuy 2012). As shown in many studies, Europeanisation is a useful concept which helps to open up the complicated area of impact of the political processes in the EU on domestic level. Renationalisation can be conceptualized as a ‘reverted Europeanisation’. If the latter means an overarching impact of EU institutions on the political reality in member states (Radaelli 2000) – then renationalisation means an expression of the lack of agreement to further Europeanisation or in a radical version, reverting its effects.

Nationalization, as opposed to supranationalization, means in this context that more national interests as well as nation-state and national frames of reference are brought to the fore in discourse, in contrast to the European community interest, supranational solidarity, etc. The term renationalization is derived from economics

and originally meant that the assets of a company are reclaimed by a government in order to increase national government control over its functioning. In the context of this paper it refers to the idea of returning in discursive practices, at least to the intergovernmental concepts of European integration especially experienced under the increasing tensions caused by the global economic crisis. In practice, the phenomenon entails the reversing of some EU initiatives allegedly leading to further political integration. It also refers to the increasing focus on the national interest and community as the main goals of the political process. This is to be seen in both populist groupings as well as in mainstream parties all over the EU, but it is especially striking in CEE.

Sovereignty *versus* European integration in Polish discourse.

The main characteristic of the pre-enlargement debates was that it concerned mostly the question of whether or not to integrate and what exactly the EU and integration with it meant for Polish society and the nation (Góra, Mach 2010). It was focusing on costs and benefits of integration. The concept of sovereignty occupied a special position for a society which had been under foreign rule for a long time and it became central to the early debates on European integration. The prominence of sovereignty in Polish discourse resulted in strong support for integration with the European Union on the one hand but with the intergovernmental model of integration being preferred on the other. The nation-state, national sovereignty and identification should be protected and European institutions were designed to express the national interest of its member states. This characterizes in a nutshell the moderate Eurosceptic position in Polish politics understood as support for integration but very cautious and skeptical toward the further deepening of integration (Styczyńska 2014). The federal option has rarely been openly supported, both before 2004 and immediately after enlargement. However, one can argue that there was an option promoted in Poland which stressed both strong support for integration with moderate agreement for the further deepening of integration, especially in the economic sphere. In fact, the discourse in Poland on European integration always stressed a certain protection of national identity and sovereignty. Yet both identity and sovereignty for proponents of European integration could be perceived in the manner that being in the EU actually strengthens them rather than endangers them.

Three main stances regarding European integration and the role of Poland in it after 2004 could be mapped based on the analysis of parliamentary debates in Poland: acceptance of deepening integration and federalization, soft renationalization – where the argument is mostly on combining the acceptance of the idea of integration and a skeptical assessment of the initiatives designed to deepen integration and, finally, hard renationalization in the form of direct claims of return to the intergovernmental character of the EU (Góra 2015). These visions correspond with other analysis on Polish discourse on European integration also stressing existence of distinctive views (Karolewski, Mehlhausen 2017). The following analysis is based on the analysis of selected parliamentary debates of the 7th term in office of the Polish parliament (2011-2015).

In the Sejm, direct references to the federal model of integration were brought forward especially in debates directly referring to the reaction to the economic crisis in the EU. It also appeared in regular debates on the state of European affairs and on foreign policy. It was also connected to the fact that it was then that the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Radosław Sikorski, openly admitted to federation as a desired model of integration. His speech in Berlin in 2011 resonated especially in the Polish parliament (Sikorski 2011) and afterwards he often repeated his major thesis about deepening integration and creating a ‘genuine political union’ in the Polish Sejm (i.e. Sikorski 29.03.2012).

What has certainly changed since pre-enlargement and in the first years after 2004 was that the federalization of the EU became seen as being straightforward by both proponents of future integration and those opposing such a scenario. The proponents seemed less afraid to openly debate the federal model of integration, perceiving it as desired and accepted. The references to the federal model appeared often in debates on the Euro crisis. The possibility of remaining outside the core of Europe (namely the Eurozone) was perceived as a major threat for Poland. It was referred to as returning again to the peripheries of the EU, not being able to control or influence decisions and ultimately devastating the principle of solidarity (based on which, it was argued Poland received financial support from the EU redistributive policies). However, what is striking is that while the acceptance for the federal model was expressed, there was a lack of reflection on how it should function. The proponents also often focused on the division of competences between member states and European institutions, claiming that the process of sharing and enhancing the EU

level competences was continuously progressing. It also brought the question of democratic control. As one of the MPs stated: “I think you do not understand that the European Union is us. Brussels is Poles, these are representatives elected by us, this is the Commission. We control them. This democracy is European, it is not some alien body. (...) No this is Poland, this is we” (Święcicki 19.02.2013). On the contrary, the negative perceptions of federalism were frequent among right wing MPs skeptical toward the project of European integration. Federalism was often dubbed the ‘European superstate’ and perceived as a destruction of independence, sovereignty and identity.

Most right-wing MPs expressed a moderate renationalization discourse. According to this conceptualization, it means that they disagreed with further integration, certainly any form of federalization of the EU yet were proponents of integration. What is even more interesting is that they were actually trying to prevent “putting the screws on our own heads” (using Witold Gombrowicz famous metaphor) of being anti-European (Szczerski 29.03.2012). In most cases they perceived European integration as a tough game of competing national interests where a strong stance and the veto are the normal instruments of political processes. Special attention was paid to the growing importance of Germany within the EU. It was consistent with the view – promoted by influential intellectuals – that the nature of relations in the EU was based on a game of interests between parties where power still counts (Cichocki 2004, Krasnodębski 2005). One of the emanations of the ‘realistic’ approach was the debate about the post-enlargement shape of the EU institutions. In particular, voting in the Council of Ministers was perceived as a crucial area. In Poland the debate about the reform of the voting system was understood – among others aspects – as the ability to block Germany, which Poles should not give away (Jabłońska 2009; Kaźmierczak 2009). Similarly, in the 7th Sejm Germany was frequently perceived by right wing MPs as a new leader in Europe, but not necessarily a desired leader in Poland.

The position famously recalled French ideas of the Europe of Nations (and intergovernmentalism) with the emphasis put on national interests and limited common institutions. The process of integration should be based on the protection of the nation-state, national sovereignty and identity. National interest was revoked as a clear guiding principle for actions of the government on the EU level. As Krzysztof Szczerski further clarified, “[the European] Union is good because thanks to it we

can [do] more and not less. Therefore we must actively protect our national interests within the frames of European politics especially in those areas where deepening [of integration] can violate it” (Szczerski 29.03.2012). They frequently expressed a specific version of protectionism in European politics by focusing on the protection of crucial competences of the nation state in the areas of economy, budget, monetary policy etc. The main arguments against the deepening of integration were constructed around the future introduction of the Euro in Poland, which was also seen somewhat skeptically by public opinion.

It seems that in the debates in the Polish parliament it was very difficult to construct a discourse on the rejection of European integration, especially taking into account the predominantly positive assessment of integration by citizens (Góra 2015). The major critical position shown above was relatively moderate as it accepted integration as such. There were, however, some claims severely criticizing the EU, mostly from within United Poland (Solidarna Polska – SP) and right wing circles of PiS that can be labeled as hard renationalization. As one of the SP MPs stated in reference to the ideas of further federalization: “We will be only a country that accepts the decisions of European powers. Are we going to face the sad fate of Greece or Hungary that are lectured by Brussels technocrats? Are we heading toward the federation in which Poles will not be able to speak Polish, even more will not be able to learn Polish history, to refer to Polish identity, which allegedly is not modern enough and is parochial? Are we heading toward Europe that will be a Union of Germany and France aiming at introducing a European economic government and which is not in accordance to the economic and national interest of Poland?” (Mularczyk, 29.03.2012), Interestingly, these positions were strengthened in the next term in office after the victory of PiS in the 2015 elections, but the detailed analysis of such claims exceeds the scope of this paper.

Concluding remarks

Polish political discourse on European integration in the last decade has witnessed politicization, understood as the increase of divergent opinions on the future of integration and the scope and content of particular EU policies. It seems, however, that in contrast to the old member states (that obviously do not have uniform experiences) it is predominantly the result of developing a more nuanced position on the complex nature of European integration after enlargement. Furthermore, the

Eurozone crisis became a main trigger for the debates on the future of the integration in Poland in the period of 2011-2015.

Three main positions were clarified on the Polish political scene with regard to the future of European integration: the proponents of European integration took a moderate federalist stance. The sovereignty of the country was predominantly presented as a concept that can be shared in order to strengthen the country's position within the growingly interdependent international environment. The right wing PiS developed a predominantly moderate Eurosceptic stance calling for soft renationalization and rather slowing down integration. European integration was framed as being driven by power politics within the EU with special attention being paid to the growing German position in the bloc. Perceived within such frames, sovereignty was depicted as a fundamental value and European integration was accepted only to the extent that it enforced and strengthened it. Finally, the position of hard renationalization was detected in the debates, even if it was something of a marginal option in the analyzed period. The stance drew on similar arguments already visible in Poland in the pre-enlargement period focusing on the threat to Polish identity and culture coming from Western Europe. Interestingly, however, the arguments promoted by political actors sympathetic to this vision were predominantly framed in cultural and identitarian terms which – as argued in the literature – is quite conducive for politicization. The position of national sovereignty dominated the third option and was mainly perceived in terms of exclusive categories: either there is national sovereignty or it is to be replaced (at the expense of the nation) by the European superstate.

The material analyzed in this paper covers the period prior to the 2015 elections in Poland which brought to power a new right wing coalition: United Right led by PiS. The new government position regarding European integration was largely consistent with their previous stance but one can observe the growing prominence of the hard renationalization group in PiS government discourse on European integration. The new government's collision course with European institutions (most notably the European Commission) regarding the quality of democracy in the country also strengthened the functionality of such a discourse in defending one's own position and led to its growing prominence in ruling circles. The migration crisis acted as a significant trigger as it brought a useful scheme for revoking the

sovereignty card. However, rigorous discourse analysis is required to further substantiate these observations covering the current Sejm term in office.

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