



# 2021 EuMePo Country Studies – Introducing the National Context

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The Polish Case

## Poland’s historical turn

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Jean Monnet Network : **European Memory Politics**  
Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union  
and the Centre for Global Studies (EUCAnet.org)



# Poland's historical turn

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After 2015, memory and history became one of the most important axes of Poland's socio-political conflicts. In recent years, they have reached a scale such that the term 'a war of two tribes' is constantly used in media discourse. The governing right, concentrated around the Law and Justice party [Prawo i Sprawiedliwość], has taken determined steps aimed at shaping Poland's culture of memory according to its own patriotic vision. Due to the scale of this phenomenon, we may speak of a historical turn in Polish public life. This phenomenon is based on three pillars, namely:

- a vision of the Polish nation as an innocent victim;
- a perception of the independence and sovereignty of the Polish state as national sanctity;
- a perception of Polishness in ethno-nationalist categories with a strong bond to Roman Catholicism.

Placing emphasis on these three pillars has occurred in response to social expectations, which are based on values deeply rooted in Polish culture. These values are rooted, to a significant degree, in the romantic period, which is inseparably linked with the Polish struggle for national liberation.

The Polish tradition of public conflicts over memory is a fairly short one. The Communist period froze natural socio-cultural processes, shutting down all discussion regarding memory as part of an imposed ideology, which was a mixture of Soviet Communist ideology and nationalist values. Until the end of the 1980s, maintaining a critical approach to national history, whose aim had become 'discovering the blank spots' and 'confronting the dark pages of the past', was only possible in so-called *samizdat* publications and limited to a small community of readers. The breakthrough moment for the Polish culture of memory following 1989 is considered to be the broad discussion which took place concerning Jan T. Gross's book *Neighbours*, which described the mass murder of Jews carried out by the inhabitants of the village of Jedwabne. Law and Justice, along with its party supporters, believe that it was from this moment onwards that public life has been dominated by a critical approach to national history, one which they term 'the education of shame'. Thus, the current policy of the government is perceived, to a large degree, as an expression of opposition towards such a state of affairs, as well as working to rebuild

national pride. It is therefore hard not to notice the 'dignified' dimension of this policy, one which Francis Fukuyama may acknowledge as a policy of identity and its own kind of struggle for recognition.

The historical policy of the government has, however, instigated numerous controversies, mainly among the liberal intelligentsia. In recent years, the loudest conflicts about history and memory have concerned:

- the attitude of Poles towards Jews during the Second World War;
- the historical narrative in the largest museum institutions (the conflict about the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk and that with the director of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews);
- the promotion by government circles of the cult of the 'cursed soldiers', meaning combatants from the anti-communist underground (some of whom were acknowledged several years ago by the Institute of National Memory to have been guilty of war crimes against civilian populations).

The promotion of the vision of history represented by the government has also become one of the factors determining its foreign policy. Aiming to repel attack and criticism from those who accuse Poland of anti-Semitism and a failure to examine its own history critically, the Polish government has attempted to influence the international historical debate by emphasizing the sacrifices born by the Polish nation during the Second World War. It is from here that claims for compensation are directed at Germany, something which have caused a wave of outrage in that country. At the same time, the government has brought about a greater interest in the magnitude of the suffering of the Polish people under the German occupation and encouraged discussions about the responsibility for it. This kind of discussion had, up to then, been almost completely absent from public debate in Germany. The greatest echo in the international arena was heard in January 2018 on the introduction of a law by the Polish government concerning the Institute of National Memory (IPN) making it a criminal offence to accuse the Polish nation of taking part in the Holocaust. This initiative brought about greater damage to Poland's image and led to a significant worsening of relations with Israel. Eventually, the introduced changes were withdrawn. Many contentious issues also exist with Poland's eastern neighbours, which in recent years has led to a cooling of relations with Ukraine and very poor relations with Russia.

It is worth remembering that, currently, history is frequently used as an argument in fuelling political conflicts, which, on the surface, have little in common. A perfect example of which may be the major conflict taking place over Poland's justice system.

In each of the above-mentioned conflicts and actions of the government, at least one of the previously cited pillars characteristic of the Polish right's thought on history is visible. At the basis of the controversial law regarding the IPN lays their own conviction that the sacrifices made by Poles during the Second World War remained unnoticed in the international arena while the frequently used term 'Polish concentration camps', or the popularity of academic works concerning anti-Jewish pogroms, had dangerously moved Poles from the position of victims to the role of perpetrators. One of the ways of strengthening the positions of victims is the cult of the 'cursed soldiers' who, according to current historical interpretations, preferred to sacrifice their lives rather than agree with Poland being subject to the USSR. This peculiar 'independence obsession' described by Marcin Napiórkowski in his book *Turbopatriotyzm*, is also reflected in the shaping of the contemporary image of the relations of Poland with the European Commission, which is presented as an institution threatening national sovereignty.

At the same time, the perception of Polishness in ethno-nationalist categories leads to a

situation in which arguments about the crimes of the ‘cursed soldiers’ committed against Byelorussian or Lithuanian populations seemed to be perceived as being of secondary importance.

There is no doubt that during recent years a peculiar kind of historical turn has occurred in Poland, one which can be noticed in various arenas of public life. This development is visible in popular culture through an enormous increase in the number of films and television productions on historical subjects, history festivals and re-enactment events. There is also a huge popularity of music from the genres of patriotic rock and rap, as well as patriotic clothing among young people (for example tops, t-shirts and tattoos referencing the history of the Warsaw Rising and the ‘cursed soldiers’). The public celebration and demonstration of national memory conceived in this way has currently become very fashionable. Here, one should be aware that this is also accompanied by the blossoming of initiatives related to the discovery and promotion of the history of local communities and forgotten historical figures, mainly Poles.

Election results and broad social involvement in public debates show that the historical policy of Law and Justice has found fertile ground in Poland. This undoubtedly results from the fact that it is based on values, which are deeply rooted in Polish national identity, as well as the sincere conviction that national history and identity have been neglected in recent years. The supporters of this type of patriotism are not hordes of aggressive nationalists. The vast majority of them are ordinary people and good citizens, among whom can be found students, business people and numerous members of the middle class. On the other hand, the government’s flirtation with extreme right-wing circles has led to a disturbing increase in the presence of slogans of a nationalistic and chauvinistic character in public. During recent years, to the right of the governing party a new political force has appeared, one which is openly nationalistic and anti-EU. This party, called Confederation Liberty and Independence [Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość] has had its representatives in the Polish parliament for several months (a result of 6.8% in the 2019 elections). It is difficult not to gain the impression that the direction in which the culture of memory in Poland is heading constitutes an enormous challenge for historical dialogue at a European level. However, Poland is not an island separated from the continent of Europe, and similar processes are currently occurring with great force in many other countries of the European Union.

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The Jean Monnet Network European Memory Politics: Populism, Nationalism and the Challenges to a European Memory Culture (EuMePo) is a partnership between the University of Victoria and the Institute for Political Studies (IEP) at the University of Strasbourg (France), the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan (Poland) and the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Faculty of Social Sciences in Budapest (Hungary). The Jean Monnet Network is co-financed by the Erasmus+ Program of the European Union and the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria.

The Jean Monnet Network has established a transnational team of scholars and collaborators addressing the politics of memory, its use in the mobilizing efforts of populist-nationalist parties across the continent and the tension to an emerging transnational memory culture in the EU.

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