



RESEARCH REPORT  
ENGLISH VERSION

projekt: *polska*<sup>®</sup>

# Democracy without Minorities

The relationship between minorities  
and populism in Poland and Hungary

**ENoP**  
EUROPEAN NETWORK OF  
POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS

This publication has been published by the European Network of Political Foundations in cooperation with the Projekt: Polska Foundation. Co-funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union and the European Network of Political Foundations.



**Co-funded by  
the European Union**

Publisher:

European Network of Political Foundations – ENoP

Rue de l'Industrie 42

B-1040 Bruxelles

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**Translation:** Natalia Czekalska, Jeff Treisbach

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Stubendorf

CHAPTER IV

**NATIONAL  
AND ETHNIC  
MINORITIES**



## TWO TALES OF ANTI-MINORITY APPROACHES

Edit Zgut-Przybylska

**T**hirty-two years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, multiple crises led to the destabilisation of political systems in Central and Eastern Europe. Hungary and Poland are powerful examples of this region taking a political turn towards not only extreme conservative but also anti-liberal<sup>74</sup> politics. The dominant strategy of radical right-wing parties was that they traditionally mobilised against historical minorities, such as the Roma, the Jews, and national minorities. Given that Hungary and Poland are rather homogeneous countries<sup>75</sup>, Fidesz-KDNP and PiS (Law and Justice) could build momentum on the refugee crisis in 2015 by capitalising on existing prejudices. The political exploitation of moral panic-mongering contributed to their electoral successes in Hungary and Poland<sup>76</sup>.

They combine nationalist and ultraconservative ideas in a catch-all style, weaponizing migration and minority rights. Riding the wave of ‘anti-others’ has been closely linked with the escalation of culture wars and the renewal of social conservatism. While it eventually brought them closer to the Western radical right-wing parties, xenophobia has risen in Hungary and Poland<sup>77</sup>.

The exclusionary populist impact is traceable in their political discourses, institutional reforms, and policy measures. However, their approaches towards national minorities

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74 Coman, R., Volintiru, C. (2021). Anti-Liberal Ideas and Institutional Change in Central and Eastern Europe. *European Politics and Society*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2021.1956236>

75 Up until 1920, Hungary was a multi-ethnic state where Hungarians made up 50% of the population. Then the Treaty of Trianon transformed the country into a rather homogeneous state where Hungarians comprised 90% of all citizens. Similarly, Poland was a multinational and multi-ethnic country for centuries. But by the end of the second World War, Poland also became an ethnic monolith, with over 95% of its population consisting of Polish Catholics.

76 Kende, A., Krekó, P. (2020). Xenophobia, Prejudice, and Right-Wing Populism in East-Central Europe. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 34, 29–33. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2019.11.011>

77 Cichocki, P., Jabkowski, P. (2019). Immigration Attitudes in the Wake of the 2015 Migration Crisis in the Visegrád Group Countries. *Intersections*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v5i1.480>

are different – while the United Right coalition (which is how PiS and its allies call their coalition) mostly fuels sentiments against the German minority, Fidesz puts the most emphasis on the largest ethnic minority, the Roma.

It does not happen in a vacuum: Fidesz and PiS have framed the politics that fit them into a broader global populist trend<sup>78</sup>, challenging liberal democracy and exploiting anti-establishment sentiments. Right-wing populists in Central and Eastern Europe built their legitimacy on the notion that the 1989 transition was a failure, therefore, a new ‘illiberal transition’ was needed – which practically led to the capture of the democratic institutions.

### **Instrumentalising national/ethnic minorities**

Differentiating between ethnic Hungarians and ‘others’ has been central to Fidesz’s rhetoric since 2010. It is centred around the idea of an ethnically and culturally homogeneous nation, which serves to unify the conservative base of the party<sup>79</sup>. The Orbán government has been constantly deepening its connections with far-right actors both rhetorically, ideologically and in practical terms. During his inauguration in May 2022, Viktor Orbán gave a speech in the Hungarian Parliament, touching upon the elements of the great replacement theory<sup>80</sup>. Similarly, during his annual summer speech in Băile Tuşnad in Romania, the Hungarian Prime Minister spoke of ‘mixed race’ societies in Western Europe that he does not want Hungary to become<sup>81</sup>. After hosting the first European offshoot of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest, he also spoke at the CPAC organised in Texas, where he reinforced his views<sup>82</sup>. His rhetoric has been based on fears about security for years, which amplified social anxieties and generally fed into the rejection of minorities.

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78 Cianetti, L., Dawson, J., Hanley, S. (2018). Rethinking ‘Democratic Backsliding’ in Central and Eastern Europe – Looking beyond Hungary and Poland. *East European Politics*, 34(3), 243–256.

79 Bozóki, A., Simon, E. (2019). Two Faces of Hungary: From Democratization to Democratic Backsliding. In: Ramet, S. P. & C. M. Hassenstab (Eds.), *Central and Southeast European Politics since 1989*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 221–248.

80 V. Orbán’s speech in the National Assembly on May 24, 2022. <https://miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-beszede-a-miniszterek-bemutatasan-2/>;

81 V. Orbán’s speech in Bale Tusnad on July 23, 2022. <https://miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-eloadasa-a-xxxi-balvanyosi-nyari-szabadegyetem-es-diaktaborban/>

82 Tharor, I. (2022, September 4). Analysis | Orbán at CPAC Brings the ‘Far-Right International’ into Focus. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/04/orban-hungary-far-right-international-cpac-conservative/>

As for the political representation of national/ethnic minorities, the Hungarian model is relatively original in the region<sup>83</sup>. It does not recognise the plural electoral law and distinguishes between small and middle-size minorities<sup>84</sup>. They can be represented directly in two ways in the Hungarian National Assembly. One of them is the preferential mandate, which is one of the most unjust and least-known elements of the Hungarian electoral system introduced by Fidesz in 2011. It requires 25% of the number of votes that are normally required for the total number of seats available in the parliament – around 25 000 votes. The problem is that the small number of registered minority voters is an obvious indication that most of the minorities will not reach the preferential quota. It is beyond coincidence that only the relatively large and well-organised German minority has been able to obtain such a mandate in 2018 and 2022. It was achieved by the same candidate who was previously a Fidesz-KDNP local councillor, which means that he already belonged to the constitutional parliamentary majority of the ruling elite<sup>85</sup>.

Another way to be represented is to have an advocate/spokesperson who did not pass the preferential quota but came first on the list of candidates from a minority's National Self-Government. They do not have voting rights but a consultative status: the person can speak during the plenary whenever there is a relevant issue on the agenda. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) eventually ruled that the shortcomings of the minority voting system in Hungary constitute a violation of the right to non-discrimination as it leads to the disenfranchisement of minority voters<sup>86</sup>. Furthermore, it provides a window for clientelist corruption – in the previous parliamentary cycle, the Roma Advocate was Félix Farkas, a key ally to Fidesz, promised state contracts for the members of the NSG in return for political support towards the ruling elite<sup>87</sup>.

While the Orbán government does not explicitly target registered national minorities, its populism developed an exclusionary, anti-Roma edge. It includes segregated

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83 The recognised communities in Hungary are: Armenian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Greek, German, Polish, Roma (Romani), Romanian, Ruthenian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovenian, and Ukrainian.

84 Halász, I. (2022). Representation of National and Ethnic Minorities in the Hungarian Parliament. *Studia Iuridica Lublinensia*, 31(5), 67–84. <https://doi.org/10.17951/sil.2022.31.5.67–84>

85 Halász, I. (2022).

86 Kállai, P. (2022, December 20). Preferential non-representation? Case of Bakirdzi and E.C. v Hungary. *Strasbourg Observers*. <https://strasbourgobservers.com/2022/12/20/preferential-non-representation-case-of-bakirdzi-and-e-c-v-hungary/>

87 Zgut, E. (2022, February 2). The Orbán Regime Intimidates Roma Community to Win the Elections. *Visegrad Insight*. <https://visegradinsight.eu/the-orban-regime-intimidates-roma-community-to-win-the-elections/>

housing and education within a broader strategy ‘to steer popular sentiments of dispossession and disenfranchisement against internal and external “enemies”’<sup>88</sup>. In 2019 the government launched a public campaign against the Roma community by rejecting a court decision on compensating Roma students whose education suffered due to racial segregation. By claiming that the Roma get a ‘significant sum without having to work for it in any way’<sup>89</sup>. Viktor Orbán invoked massive stereotypes about the largest officially recognised ethnic minority group in Hungary. Capturing the media in a top-down, centralised fashion played a central role in pursuing a populist narrative against minorities and migrants.

The response of the Hungarian government and radical groups to the European ‘migration crisis’ brought about a significant shift in public discourse in 2015. As Political Capital pointed out, the anti-immigration stance might have ‘acted as a veil covering up misgivings which never went away about other minorities’<sup>90</sup>. Motives behind anti-Semitism and anti-Roma sentiments are highly similar in Hungary, where the feeling of national superiority is based on the notion of collective victimhood. It is exploited not by a disdain for other groups but mainly by a yearning for security (and partly cultural security). Should the demand for security and predictability increase during a crisis, it also increases the importance of one’s own group and its norms; therefore, all external groups necessarily are seen as breaching these norms<sup>91</sup>.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that contrary to its harsh anti-refugee policy, the Orbán government promised to help Ukrainians crossing the Hungarian borders. But the ‘demolished’ asylum system made it harder for Ukrainians to integrate. Furthermore, the Hungarian Prime Minister avoided naming Vladimir Putin as being responsible for the war and confronted the Ukrainian government instead, which generated significant discomfort among the Ukrainian minorities/refugees in Hungary<sup>92</sup>.

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88 Dániel, S., Samu, B. (2020, January 15). Orbán: Compensating Romas for school segregation is “unjust” for the rest of the community. *Index.hu*. [https://index.hu/english/2020/01/15/gyongyospata\\_roma\\_school\\_segregation\\_hungary\\_viktor\\_orban/](https://index.hu/english/2020/01/15/gyongyospata_roma_school_segregation_hungary_viktor_orban/)

89 Dániel, S., Samu, B. (2020, January 15).

90 Juhász, A., et al. (2017). *The Year of Rearrangement. The Populist Right and the Far-Right in Contemporary Hungary*. Budapest: Political Capital Kft. and Social Development Institute Kft. [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/Atrendezodes%20Eve\\_ENG\\_oldalpar.pdf](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/Atrendezodes%20Eve_ENG_oldalpar.pdf)

91 Juhász, A., et al. (2017).

92 France24 (2022, May 20). Hungary’s neutral war stance puts off Ukraine refugees. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220520-hungary-s-neutral-war-stance-puts-off-ukraine-refugees>

### ‘Camouflaged German allegiance’

Poland has followed a similar path after PiS won the elections in 2015, and Jarosław Kaczyński branded the liberal notions of democracy as a Western imposition. The government pushed a strongly anti-liberal agenda of rejecting personal freedoms, in particular pluralism and multiculturalism, same-sex marriage, gender, and euthanasia. This approach mirrored a collective fear of losing national identity, the West’s excessive influence, and its cultural hegemony<sup>93</sup>. PiS considers Catholic and national values to be the fundamental basis of the Polish state. Its party program between 2007–2009 addressed issues regarding national and ethnic minorities<sup>94</sup> incidentally. It also perceived and presented the manifestation of Silesia, as well as, to some extent, the political activity of the German minority as ‘just another way of defining oneself other than as Polish and presumably the acceptance of camouflaged German allegiance’<sup>95</sup>. PiS also criticised the opposition Civic Platform (PO) party for ‘strongly underlining the importance of the regions, of which a particular aspect is Donald Tusk’s emphasis on his Kashubian identity’<sup>96</sup>.

The European ‘refugee crisis’ further shifted the mainstream public discourse in Poland. The United Right coalition fuelled an ‘anti-other’ and anti-migrant rhetoric, which went hand in hand with a Eurosceptic agenda. The exclusionary edge towards German minorities became the most prominent both in terms of legislation and the government’s rhetoric. The United Right can kill two birds with one stone – polarise native Polish citizens and others, and pursue a strongly anti-German approach.

The ruling elite claims that Germany has never truly accounted for the crimes against the Polish Nation committed between 1939–1945. It could be also linked to the so-called ‘antemurale’ narrative of the Polish conservative political thinking – that Poland

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93 Kotwas, M., Kubik, J. (2019). Symbolic Thickening of Public Culture and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Poland. *East European Politics and Societies: And Cultures*, 33(2), 435–471. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325419826691>

94 Poland’s minorities are classified into three main categories: national minorities, mostly defined as groups associated with a nearby kin-state (German, Czech, Slovak, Ukrainian, Belorussian, Lithuanian, Russian, along with Armenian and Jewish), ethnic minorities (Tatar, Karaim, Lemko and Roma) and regional minorities (Kashub). Silesians, while comprising the largest minority group, are not recognised as a national minority.

95 Bąk-Pitucha, A. (2021). The policy of the Polish authorities towards national and ethnic minorities after 1989. *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, 19(3), 205–229. <https://doi.org/10.36874/riesw.2021.3.9>

96 Kaczyński, J. (2011, March 31). Jarosław Kaczyński: „Raport o stanie Rzeczypospolitej”. *wPolityce.pl*. <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/11772-jaroslaw-kaczynski-raport-o-stanie-rzeczypospolitej-tylko-u-nas-fragmenty-programowej-publikacji-prezesa-pis>

is protecting Christianity both from the East (Russia) and the West (Germany)<sup>97</sup>. By depicting Germany as an external threat, the public broadcaster is constantly fuelling conspiracies that the leader of the opposition Donald Tusk is a German collaborator who would undermine Polish sovereignty<sup>98</sup>.

The rhetoric was followed by legislative actions. In a controversial move, the governing coalition issued to cut by two-thirds the number of hours of German lessons provided<sup>99</sup> to children from the country's German minority. Furthermore, the parliament reduced the annual funding for teaching Poland's 150,000-strong German minority by 40 million zloty (EUR 8.8 million) and instead, allocated money to teaching Polish to members of the Polish diaspora in Germany<sup>100</sup>.

In 2016, the government abolished the anti-racism committee, a state council that was tasked with combating racism, despite an increase in hate crimes in the country. Their reasoning was that 'the council proved to be rather inefficient', and there were 'more efficient' bodies that would carry on the work<sup>101</sup>. The body was established by the previous centre-right government (led by Civic Platform), and the decision to dissolve it was condemned by the opposition and Poland's ombudsman<sup>102</sup>.

National minorities have been granted certain privileges with regard to the Polish electoral law. According to the electoral code, committees of national minorities do not have to meet the threshold of 5% of valid votes during parliamentary elections. However, lately, there have been attempts to restrict the political representation of

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97 Stevens, G. R. Jr. (2016). *German Perceptions of Poland and Russia in the Early Modern Period*. [Master's thesis, Clemson University]. Clemson: TirgerPrints. [https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3375&context=all\\_theses](https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3375&context=all_theses)

98 Tilles, D. (2021, August 10). Polish state TV provides almost 100% negative coverage of opposition leader, finds study. *Notes from Poland*. <https://notesfrompoland.com/2021/08/10/polish-state-tv-provides-almost-100-negative-coverage-of-opposition-leader-finds-study/>

99 Tilles, D. (2022, February 10). Poland "discriminating against German minority" with funding cuts, says German government official. *Notes from Poland*. <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/02/10/poland-discriminating-against-german-minority-with-funding-cuts-says-german-government-official>

100 As for the context, Poland has been accusing Germany of breaking the 1991 Treaty of Good Neighbourship, which stipulates that both minorities are to be treated equally in both countries. The Polish government demanded that Germany establishes a federal fund for teaching Polish as a native language, claiming that there was a large disproportion between the support provided to the German minority in Poland and the help the Polish minority receives in Germany. As a result, the German government signalled in November 2022 that the Polish minority in Germany may benefit from the federal funds earmarked for teaching Polish as a native language. See more here: <https://tvpworld.com/64485103/germany-to-allocate-federal-funds-for-teaching-polish>

101 Sheftalovits, Z. (2016, May 5). Poland's PiS abolishes anti-racism body. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/polands-pis-lae-and-justice-party-abolishes-anti-racism-body/>

102 Sheftalovits, Z. (2016, May 5).

minorities. United Poland (*Solidarna Polska*), the hard-right coalition partner to PiS led by the justice minister Zbigniew Ziobro, submitted a bill to abolish the arrangement under which German minorities could receive a seat in the Polish parliament. Their reasoning is that ‘the rules are an unjustified electoral privilege and brazen violation of the rule of law by the Germans’. Ziobro’s party also wants to end state funding for teaching German to children from the minority<sup>103</sup>.

Kaczyński’s government is often trying to make use of the far-right by legitimising their radical messages and, in so doing, legitimises the extreme-right subculture. Kaczyński once famously said, ‘To the right of us, only the wall’ when describing PiS’ goal of rallying all conservative voters in Poland<sup>104</sup>. Seeking to capitalise on its popularity, the representatives of the ruling elite started to celebrate the country’s Independence March on November 11, traditionally organised by Polish extremist and international far-right organisations<sup>105</sup>. PiS party leaders defended the event against accusations that it was a fascist rally, and party members regularly joined the march.<sup>106</sup> It raised serious concerns that the government is implicitly encouraging and reinforcing neo-fascist groups<sup>107</sup>, fostering anti-immigrant, ‘anti-others’ and anti-EU rhetoric.

State-funded Polish media (public TV and radio broadcasters) and private media supporting PiS have played a key role in encouraging the above-mentioned discourse. They reflected prejudice and promoted the ruling elite agenda to attack its opponents. According to the Never Again Association, the anti-Semitic discourse has been strengthened in the public sphere and social media, in particular during the legislative process of revisions to the Code of Administrative Procedure, affecting the restitution process<sup>108</sup>.

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103 Tilles, D. (2022, November 26). Bill to “end electoral privilege of German minority” submitted by party in Poland’s ruling coalition. *Notes from Poland*. <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/11/26/bill-to-end-electoral-privilege-of-german-minority-submitted-by-party-in-polands-ruling-coalition/>

104 Ciobanu, C. (2019, November 11). Poland’s independence march is a litmus test of far-right support. *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/11/11/polands-independence-march-a-litmus-test-of-far-right-support/>

105 Euroactiv.com (2018, November 12). Poland holds centenary parade alongside far-right march. *Euractiv.com*. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/poland-holds-centenary-parade-alongside-far-right-march/>

106 Kocyba, P., Lukianow, M. (2020). *The Right in the Streets: The Past and Present of the Polish March of Independence*. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344672615\\_The\\_Right\\_in\\_the\\_Streets\\_The\\_Past\\_and\\_Present\\_of\\_the\\_Polish\\_March\\_of\\_Independence](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344672615_The_Right_in_the_Streets_The_Past_and_Present_of_the_Polish_March_of_Independence)

107 Prior to the local elections in 2018, the far-right All Polish Youth issued death certificates for 11 liberal politicians from the opposition, including Paweł Adamowicz, who was killed later in Gdansk during the finale of the 27th Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity. Before that, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki appointed the former head of this radical organisation as the Deputy Minister for Digital Affairs. With his extremely strong social media outreach, Minister Adam Andruszkiewicz’s task would have been to channel and attract the anti-establishment, radical voters. See more here: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/11/11/polands-independence-march-a-litmus-test-of-far-right-support/>

108 Office of International Religious Freedom (2021). Poland 2021 International Religious Freedom Report. U.S. Department of State.

Nevertheless, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has had a positive impact on the treatment of the Ukrainian minorities as a national group, which is a non-standard approach to refugees for PiS. Legislation, introduced on March 12, only covered Ukrainian nationals, causing much disappointment among, for example, the Belarusian community, who were also aiming at obtaining special rights<sup>109</sup>.

### **True Poles and true Hungarians**

While Polish and Hungarian history has been filled with ‘us versus them’ battles, the public discourses have increasingly focused on what it means to be a true Hungarian (*igaz(i) magyar*) or a true Pole (*prawdziwy Polak*) under Fidesz and PiS rule<sup>110</sup>. Their anti-liberal cocktail fell onto fertile soil, where the lack of social capital and trust in democratic institutions has been traditionally the lowest – even before the Eurozone crisis, let alone the refugee crisis. These governments successfully reflected the fears of social and cultural transformation by weaponizing migration and instrumentalising the crisis Europe had to face in a decade. National belonging indicates not only knowing who ‘we’ are but also recognising who the ‘others’ are. Consequently, national identity makes sense only through the contrast with the ‘others’. In the interpretation of Fidesz and PiS, Hungarians and Poles are Christian, not Jewish or Muslim.

Fostering ‘anti-liberal’, populist, and majoritarian views eventually became a pretext to subvert democracy by undermining checks and balances and polarising societies to the extremes. This is a dangerous zero-sum game that lacks space for counterarguments and pluralism. It poses a serious threat to the quality of democracy, negatively impacts social cohesion, and undermines social stability and trust. Therefore, democratic forces need to re-establish and enforce a reconciliatory political culture to combat social and political polarisation.

They simply can’t fight fire with fire. The opposition has to find a way to undercut the logic of exclusion in both countries. The Hungarian stakeholders should foster a better representation of marginalised ethnic groups in decision-making bodies, especially on the local level. Their Polish counterpart has to speak up against depriving

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109 Babakova, O., et al. (2022). Who is a “true” refugee? On the limits of Polish hospitality. *CMR Spotlights*. <https://www.migracje.uw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Spotlight-JUNE-2022-1-2.pdf>

110 Goździak, E., M., Marton, P. (1994). Where the wild things were. *Electronics Education*, 1994(3), 7. <https://doi.org/10.1049/ee.1994.0068>

the German minorities of their rights to education and political representation. Although the term ‘liberal democracy’ was dragged into the mud by these regimes, democratic forces should embrace it as a badge of honour since the liberal pillars of democracy are indispensable to the democratic process itself. It refers to the utmost protection of minority rights, the equality of individuals, the constitutional restriction on executive power, and the democratic self-government of the people.