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Populism, Religion and Catholic Civil Society in Poland: The Case of Primary Education

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This article analyses two cases of populist mobilisation – namely, one against a primary school entry-age reform and another against WHO sexuality education and the concept of gender – that took place in Poland between 2008 and 2019. Both campaigns had a populist character and were oriented towards restoring social justice taken away from 'the people' by a morally corrupted 'elite'. There are differences between the cases that can be analytically delineated by assessing whether a religious mobilisation has an overt or a covert character. While the series of protests against the school-age reform represents a case of mobilisation with covert religious symbolism, the campaigns against sexuality education and the use of the concept of gender are characterised by overt religious populism. To characterise the dynamics of the two campaigns, the study uses the concept of a moral panic, emphasising the importance of moral entrepreneurs waging ideological war against the government and/or liberal experts conceived of as 'folk devils'.

Keywords: Poland, populism, Catholic Church, sexuality education, gender.

Introduction

Since the presidential and parliamentary elections that both took place in 2015, the political scene in Poland has been dominated by the populist right. However, even before the populist turn in the composition of the government, widely networked Catholic lay organisations became very active, grew in membership, and mobilised various kinds of resources, including alternative expertise, and produced powerful social campaigns. Two of the most prominent campaigns were directed against the previous (centre-right–liberal) government's reforms lowering the primary school starting age from seven to six and experimenting with elements of gender-sensitive and LGBT-friendly sexuality education, the latter term used by the World Health Organization, marking a broad approach to human sexuality (WHO, 2011). In line with the themed section's main theme, this article will focus on how social policy reforms can re-employ religious discourses that consolidate conservative civil society. Catholic civil society mobilisation around education reform, the strong anti-elite attitude and emphasis on 'the people' characterise the populist orientation of these parental movements, which rapidly became socially and politically influential (Rooduijn, 2014; Kaltwasser *et al.*, 2017). At the same time, civil society mobilisation around social policy reform represents a case of effective community building directed against the (imagined) foreign and domestic influence of liberal elites (Mudde, 2004). To analyse the developments in Poland, this article explores the case of mobilisation against education reforms by applying the notion of moral panic and

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focusing on the crucial role of moral entrepreneurs, who mobilise society at large against 'folk devils' (Cohen, 2002; Strupiechowska, 2017). To characterise the differences between the two cases under analysis, I differentiate between *covert* vs. *overt* religious symbolism used by the populist mobilisations.

This article is organised as follows. First, the discussion of the literature briefly outlines the analytical framework of this study, which is followed by methodological remarks. Second, two cases of populist mobilisation are discussed: a) a campaign against the school-age reform and b) a campaign against sexuality and gender equality education in early education. The final section summarises the findings.

Religion and populist mobilisation around social policy: a review

Studying populism (in Eastern Europe): concepts and actors

As far as the concept of populism is concerned, various authors tend to agree that it is characterised by an emphasis on 'the people', anti-elite attitudes, perceptions of people as forming a homogeneous society, and proclamations of a serious crisis (Rooduijn, 2014). Further, classifications of the concept of populism differentiate between populism as a political ideology (Mudde, 2004), political style (Laclau, 2005), and political strategy (Jansen, 2011) or as a discourse (Wodak, 2015; Aslanidis, 2016) (for a full discussion of the concept of populism, see Jawad, Béland and Pavolini, 2021).

Studies on right-wing populism in Eastern Europe have focused on interpreting the core features of populism in the context of anti-establishment parties (Engler *et al*., 2019) or an 'illiberal backlash' (Fomina and Kucharczyk, 2016). The East-Central European region, despite aiming to appear 'modern' and 'Europeanized' before joining the European Union in 2004, has recently seen a wave of right-wing parties emphasising national values attract popular support (Lendvai and Stubbs, 2015). Poland first experienced the right-wing political shift in 2005, when the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PiS) took office for two years, and again in 2015, with its popular support stabilising to attract more than 40 per cent of voters. Existing studies on the effect of populism on social policy reforms in Eastern Europe connect social policy reforms with new authoritarian regimes (Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa, 2020) or 'illiberalism' (Szikra, 2014). Apart from Poland's new universal family benefit programme that is contributing to a decrease in poverty among families with children, other welfare policies are often favouring middle class and excluding low-income families (Szelewa and Polakowski, 2020).

On the one hand, most studies on populism in Eastern Europe discussed right-wing populist turns, mostly looking at changes in the political composition of the *government*, while being less interested in other social actors. On the other hand, researchers observed an anti-Western and/or anti-globalist turn in social values, often reflected in the political choices that these societies are making (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018). As Korolczuk (2017a) argued, Eastern European societies have long been characterised by a lack of social capital, with citizens concentrating on family life, isolating themselves from political battles. However, Jacobssen and Korolczuk (2017) also pointed to various examples of a new wave of social mobilisation linked to civil society revival and politicisation. Moreover, Korolczuk (2017b) stressed the importance of *parental* activism, among others, giving the Polish 'Save the Little Ones' initiative against the school-age reform as an example of successful social resistance.

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This article recognises the variety of actors mobilising for concrete political goals, with an emphasis on populist mobilisation beyond the electoral process. Thus, in the first step, this analysis follows Aslanidis's (2016) interpretation of

> *populist social movements (. . .) as non-institutional collective mobilization along a catch-all political platform of grievances that divides society between an overwhelming majority of "pure people" and a "corrupt elite," demanding the restoration of popular sovereignty in the name of the former* (Aslanidis, 2016: 391).

As argued by Jawad, Béland and Pavolini (2021), mobilisation of 'ordinary people' against the elite has an impact on social policy reforms, as many cases of populist mobilization are about changes and/or shifts in social policy programmes that 'provide greater social justice'. One example of the liberal project perceived as alien and elitist has been the framework of gender equality, which has triggered campaigns (labelled 'anti-gender campaigns') orchestrated by the Church and Catholic civil society organisations 'defending' 'ordinary people' against 'depravation', often representing a transnational phenomenon (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018). In the context of Eastern European post-communist transformation, these campaigns against the use of the term 'gender' are interpreted as a symbolic glue and form of anti-colonialism, as well as resistance to globalisation, individualisation, and neoliberal commodification (Kováts and Põim, 2015; Korolczuk and Graff, 2018). An important anti-elitist trigger was the European Union and the EU emphasis on the upward convergence in terms of social policy model that can be generally defined as social investment or gender mainstreaming, often perceived as 'technocratic' and imposed from above (Rawłuszko, 2019; Szelewa and Polakowski, 2020). Especially regarding the Polish case, any analysis of populism needs be complemented by an understanding of the emphasis on the *religious* basis of the paradigmatic ideational background for social mobilisation around policy reforms. The Church has participated in strengthening nationalist discourses, serving as a chief signifier of national identity, and providing the blueprint for the ideal Polish patriot as being a *Catholic* Pole (Chałubiński, 1994). As Kozlowska, Béland and Lecours (Kozlowska *et al*., 2016) suggest, the persistence of strict abortion laws was possible thanks to the coupling of nationalist and religious discourses in public debates around abortion law and justifications behind certain policy developments. Similarly, Grzymała-Busse (2015) argued that the Church's influence and use of its 'moral authority' depends on its historical role. Thus, its perceived role in 'defending' and/or 'protecting' the nation legitimised the Church's access to the institutional sphere of policymaking. In Poland, the role of the Church in 'overthrowing' Communism has been perceived as crucial, with Catholic priests often involved in the opposition movement and with the political leadership of the Pope John Paul II having an influence on the country's politics (Szelewa, 2016).

However, focusing solely on the Church as an institution is not sufficient to explain religious influence on public policies. Even during state socialism, churches provided infrastructure and support for Catholic civil society organisations campaigning against abortion (Szelewa, 2016). The recent resurgence of civil society in Poland has been dominated by religious organisations: 79 per cent of all civil society organisations in Poland either have an explicitly religious background or are otherwise linked to the Catholic Church (Korolczuk, 2017a). This article analyses the role of lay organisations alongside the Catholic Church. As I will argue, the explicit engagement of the Church is not always necessary even when campaigns conducted by civil society organisations are motivated by religion.

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Analysing the religious background of mobilisations: covert vs. overt

The influence of religion can also be understood in parallel to the phenomenon of populism (Zuquete, 2017). The centrality of the dualism between good and evil, 'the diametrically conflicting principles of Light and Darkness' (Zuquete, 2017: 566), mirrors the opposition between 'the people, who are exalted, and the elite, who are condemned' (Woods, 2014, 3–5 quoted in Zuquete, 2017: 566). Moreover, religion itself can be understood as an ideology, with its emphasis on identity and community-building mechanisms (Kotwas and Kubik, 2019). Altogether, the aforementioned features of religious mobilisation delineate 'religious populism' as a subcategory of populism (Zuquete, 2017).

To characterise the two cases of mobilisation, I draw a distinction between the *overt* and *covert* dimensions of religious populism. Specifically, an *overt* dimension of religious populism defines contexts 'where populists are doing God's work here on earth against its Godless enemies' (Zuquete, 2017: 567), while a *covert* dimension of religious mobilisation shapes politics in a broader sense. Analysing an overtly religious case of mobilisation is simpler: manifestations of faith expressed in favour of or against certain policy proposals are often published in religious organisations' official statements, such as episcopate letters, or – in the case of lay organisations – their programmatic documents, reports, explicit references to the Bible, papal Encyclicals, etc. (Szelewa, 2016). It is more challenging to detect the *covert* dimension of a religious mobilisation: these may be characterised either by the access of religiously motivated actors to the 'quiet corridors of power' (Grzymała-Busse, 2015: 2) or by Catholic civil society campaigns that are seemingly based on evidence-based and 'rational' argumentation but with hidden motivations embedded in the faith. As argued by Kuhar (2014), actors motivated by religion currently tend to 'refrain from using 'biblical discourse', substituting it with what appears as a rational, scientific discourse moulded into reassuring and populist common-sense statements' (Kuhar, 2014: 84). In order to grasp the covertly religious motivation of the main actors, it is necessary to understand that religious motives often represent a 'bricolage of meanings', influences and motives, where social networks, and a spatial embeddedness of activism in the church can signal the presence of religious motives, 'hidden from the plain sight' (Cadge and Konieczny, 2014).

Mobilisation via moral panics

Finally, to better characterise the mechanism through which the two cases of mobilisation portray and escalate the opposition between the *people* and the *elite*, I use the notion of moral panic, understood as 'the process of arousing social concern over an issue—usually the work of moral entrepreneurs and the mass media' (Scott, 2015: 492). Moral panics often intensify around the fate of the most vulnerable members of society – children. The argument here is that populist pursuits need mass mobilisation associated with fear (Wodak, 2015) and in opposition to an imagined and portrayed enemy (Krinsky, 2016). Examples provided by the literature on moral panics include panics over 'gay education' in schools (Luzia, 2008) or around day nurseries (Chimonas, 2005). Education reforms, especially addressed to young children, tend to trigger debates on child well-being, with various interpretations and positions among the actors mobilising around the reform. When a reform proposal is presented and framed as a threat to children, such a narrative can turn into a moral panic. While, among the cases analysed in this article, the moral panic was certainly most visible in the case of sexuality education, parents' protest

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against the school-age reform could also be characterised as a mobilisation induced through a panic (Strupiechowska, 2017). Moral panic provides a useful tool to grasp the use of religious *and* populist argumentation to characterise the opposition between the people and the elite in defence of the vulnerable. When viewed as a *process* of mobilisation, the concept of moral panic helps illustrate how the 'regular' social concern escalates into much more profound social phenomenon (Scott, 2015).

Methodology

The analysis is based on the structured focused case study method, with a qualitative analysis of media reports on the campaigns under study. Hence, I used resources collected on the webpage 'Save Our Little Ones' (the initiative against lowering the school entry age), which lists 3,967 articles mentioning the campaign, with links to its internet sources, constituting a database with articles published between 2008 and 2015. Apart from focussing on the well-known media, I selected articles covering the role of political leaders, decisionmakers and the Church itself. I selected about a 5 per cent sample of articles/videos, i.e. 206 out of 3,967, first grouping them into mainstream, opposition, Catholic local media, and selecting a sample of articles proportionally representing these groups. Thus, the sample was comprised of 1) the mainstream media: *Gazeta Wyborcza, Rzeczpospolita, Dziennik Gazeta Prawna* (40 articles), TV and radio stations: *TVP, Polish Radio*, *TVN*, and the major web portals (30); 2) right-wing media supporting *opposition*, especially Law and Justice*: wPolityce, wSumie*, *Niezależna*, *Fronda* (50), and 3) the *Catholic* media*: Radio Maryja*, *Nasz Dziennik*, *Gość Niedzielny*, *Deon*, *Polonia Christiania/Pch24.pl*, *info.wiara* (50). I also reviewed twenty articles published by local media (newspapers, webpages of radio stations). Since I was interested in the arguments used by the campaigners themselves, I watched all sixteen YouTube videos listed on the webpage. In regard to the sexuality education and anti-gender campaign, no similar collection of articles was available and the campaign(s) have been much less centralised. Therefore, I examined materials published on the webpages of the Christian umbrella organisation CitizenGO, as well as three campaigns: "No to gender", "Stop paedophilia" and "Stop sexualization of our children". These included leaflets, updates on protests, letters to the Parliament/government offices, notes on interventions and media appearances of the organisations' leaders, video materials, altogether over 100 articles.

For both cases I reviewed programmatic documents of the organisations mentioned, as well as legislative initiatives (such as the one to conduct a referendum in the case of primary age reform), draft bills (for example, the one banning sexuality education and the use of gender and gender identity) and policy documents (including WHO sexuality education standards or handbook for gender education in kindergarten). Finally, I did research on the website of Polish Episcopate, screening letters and official press releases that could relate to the two cases.

'Save the Little Ones': the Elbanowscys against the school-age reform

The reform

A coalition formed by the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) under the leadership of Donald Tusk, together with the People's Polish Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe,

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PSL), was in power for two consecutive terms in office between 2007 and 2015. Both parties can be classified as liberal and centre-right. One important reform proposed by the government was the lowering of the primary education entry age from seven to six years old, to be implemented from 2009. Apart from reducing educational inequalities and investing in children's capacities, a major goal of the reform was to increase the availability of early childhood education and care. In other words, moving a whole age cohort of children to primary school almost automatically meant expanding kindergartens' capacity to admit children at the age of three to five, who at that time had only limited access to kindergarten (40 per cent enrolment rate in 2005/2006, GUS 2006).

The reform was postponed until 2014 due to social protests centred on the 'Save the Little Ones' campaign initiated by the young married couple Karolina and Tomasz Elbanowscy (the parents of seven children). Until then, parents were able to choose whether their children entered school at the age of six or one year later, and the share of parents who decided for the second option never exceeded 20 per cent (GUS, 2016). This option was closed in 2014, when all six-year-olds had to enter first grade. After the Law and Justice (PiS) electoral victory in both the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2015, the school-age reform was reversed, and, since 2016, parents can again decide the age of school entry.

The mobilisation

As already mentioned, the Elbanowscy couple orchestrated a widespread campaign against the reform. The title of the campaign was 'Save Our Little Ones'. The Elbanowscys operated via their own NGO, Ombudsman for Parents' Rights. It is important to stress that the Catholic Church was not actively engaged in the campaign and did not issue any official statement condemning the reform, in a sharp contrast with the other case. The character of this movement was broad, with the Elbanowscys acting as moral entrepreneurs and central figures mobilising less structured groups around their own NGO, with strong support from the Catholic media (Pawłowska, 2013).

Presenting various types of threats to children's well-being and development, the Elbanowscys argued that schools were completely unprepared to implement the reform and were not ready to admit such young children, in terms of either infrastructure or teachers' pedagogical approach (Sadura *et al*., 2019). The couple became heroes, praised for their leadership, their courage to speak in the name of concerned parents and their repeated attempts to mobilise and present new legislative initiatives to stop the reform. Apart from the widespread media campaign, the organisation collected signatures under several petitions and bills. While at least 100,000 signatures are required to submit a bill to parliament, the Elbanowscys managed to collect 350,000 signatures in 2011 and then a million signatures under the initiative to hold a referendum on the reform in 2013 and again in 2015. The signatures were collected at schools via parents' committees but also after Sunday mass at churches (Kubik, 2013). Both referendum initiatives were rejected by the Parliament. As from 2014 parents no longer had a choice on their children's school-entry age, the Elbanowscys added another layer to their strategy, suggesting ways to delay primary-school entry with some concrete instructions. Parents could use a 'backdoor' option when children were examined by a paediatrician to assess their readiness to enter the school system and therefore to possibly delay the moment for one year. The Ombudsman for Parents' Rights Association and Foundation ran a hotline for parents,

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instructing them on how to proceed to obtain such a decision from a paediatrician. Altogether, the campaign was active between 2008 and 2015.

One of the strengths of this campaign was that it appealed to a wide group of parents, using a general set of arguments about the need to keep control in the hands of parents without being explicit about the campaign's religious motives. Thus, while the majority of the articles under review that were published in the 'liberal' media, such as *Newsweek* or *Gazeta Wyborcza*, were in support of the reform, some of them were sympathetic to the Elbanowscys' campaign (Michalewicz, 2013; Pezda, 2013). Simultaneously, all the articles published by the right-wing media were against the reform, with more than half of them published by Catholic or Christian websites. The Elbanowscys acted as moral entrepreneurs inducing waves of moral panic as they collected signatures for their legal initiatives through the use of two sets of arguments. First, there was an argument about parents 'defending themselves and their children' against 'bureaucrats from the Ministry of Education' 'experimenting on our children' (Konik-Korn, 2013). When speaking in parliament before the vote on the referendum bill, Karolina Elbanowska argued that the movement she represented was 'apolitical' and asked then prime minister Ewa Kopacz to consider 'ordinary people', citing Kopacz's profession as a paediatrician (RadioMaryja.pl, 2015). Elbanowska also presented the group of protesting parents as 'having both feet on the ground', unlike the 'reckless' government (RadioMaryja.pl, 2013). In her interpretation, parents were putting their children at risk of being traumatised due to schools being unprepared and crowded and their children being too young to face the realities of primary school (Stefaniuk, 2015). In her speech in parliament in 2015, Karolina Elbanowska also raised the issue of paediatricians and the public clinics that decide on six-year-olds' readiness to enter first grade being pressured by the authorities, with individual paediatricians faced with threat of losing their employment if they issue 'too many deferrals' (Elbanowska, 2015), here also identifying paediatricians as vulnerable to the authorities.

Second, the opposition between 'ordinary people' and a technocratic elite experimenting on children was further strengthened by the claim that the ultimate goal of sending children to school one year earlier was to make them labour-market ready and therefore to address the policy problem of a shrinking tax base (Elbanowska and Elbanowski, 2011). Another version of this argument was that parents wanted to protect their children against the state 'stealing their childhood' (NaszDziennik.pl, 2014). Parental mobilisation was therefore directed against state institutions 'training' children to become employees and tax-payers as fast as possible and investing in their human capital. In relation to the latter, the Elbanowscys also recalled Civic Platform ministers declaring early on that the reform also aimed to repair the pension system (Pezda, 2008; PolskieRadio.pl, 2008). Addressing the MPs in 2015, Karolina Elbanowska (2015) argued that the government 'wants to send our children to school earlier, because otherwise there will be no one working to finance our pensions'. In this way, she continued, the government does 'not care about children's well-being, but the pensioners' well-being' (Elbanowska, 2015). The moral entrepreneurs' main message was not overtly motivated by religion, and if it was, the religious references were quite general. Although in public appearances in the mainstream media, the couple avoided religious references, in one of their interviews for the Catholic media, they shared their faith and how prayers helped them in their 'battles' (Legutko, 2015). In their book from 2015, the Elbanowscys mention collecting signatures in churches, which were often the local centres of mobilisation (Elbanowska and Elbanowski, 2015). They also share a story of how they believed that prayer helped Tomasz Elbanowski on the day of a debate in parliament in November 2013: after being stuck in

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traffic, he miraculously smuggled a poster reading 'Children and parents have no voice' into parliament during the debate over the referendum initiative to display just near his wife while she was addressing parliament (Elbanowska and Elbanowski, 2015).

An image of Tomasz Elbanowski standing with this poster near his wife on the rostrum and being confronted by Donald Tusk became one of the foundational symbols further driving the protest. One of the few references to religion took place during Karolina Elbanowska's address to parliament in 2015 before another referendum initiative. She was referring to Civic Platform politicians using private-sector schooling, specifically the former minister of education (who introduced the reform in 2009) running a network of private schools, the minister of education sending her children to a private school, and the deputy prime minister sending his sons to one of the most prestigious schools in the UK (Elbanowska, 2015). She finished her speech by quoting the words of Jesus on Pharisees: 'They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them' (Matthew 23:4). Using it as a punchline, Karolina Elbanowska confirmed at least two important characteristics of her movement. First, she repeated the reference to a conflict of interests among the elite, who claim the right to provide the most reliable and only legitimate expertise while at the same time distancing themselves from the effects of the reforms they introduce, unlike ordinary people, who are forced to bear the heavy burden of the reforms. Second, although Karolina Elbanowska rarely used religious references in her interviews, she deliberately chose a quotation from the gospels, which stressed her usually not so apparent religious background.

The Elbanowscys gained concrete political support. It emerged mainly among Law and Justice politicians, who voted to support the campaign's consecutive initiatives in parliament. Unlike government representatives, high-profile politicians from PiS, such as the presidential candidate Andrzej Duda or the (future) prime minister Beata Szydło, were keen to meet the Elbanowscys early in 2015 and declared that they would reverse the school-age reform (Gazeta Polska, 2015; Gazeta Prawna, 2015). Soon after Law and Justice's electoral victories in 2015, these promises were fulfilled. Moreover, the Elbanowscys entered the government offices as advisers of the new minister of education, while their NGO also received substantial financial support. Although they often stressed their political independence from the Law and Justice government, they actively supported the government, for example, in the case of the teachers' strike in 2019 (Rzeczpospolita, 2019). Their current activities are divided among various NGOs with personal and financial links, often cross-referenced in their publications or on the organisations' websites. The network comprises the Ombudsperson for Parents' Rights Foundation, with its main goal currently being to 'prevent children from being taken from families without court approval', and the Mom Is Not Alone organisation – an openly anti-choice NGO supporting pregnant women, with clear ties to American anti-choice organisations (Rzecznikrodzicow.pl, 2020). Compared to their previous level of engagement and visibility, the couple currently keeps a low profile, while at the same time more openly referring to religious symbolism and their commitment to their faith.

'Satanist plan of the genderists': protests against sexuality education

Sexuality education and WHO standards

Access to sexuality education in Poland is quite limited. Although the Act on Family Planning includes regulations on the introduction of sexuality education in schools, so far,

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this issue has been neglected. In fact, many schools of different levels do not carry out regular sexuality education classes, and approximately 14 per cent of pupils have not attended any classes on sexuality (Skonieczna, 2014). Importantly, sexuality education is currently incorporated into an overall course named 'Preparation for Family Life'. The curriculum is quite conservative, with implicit rather than explicit references to people's sexuality and adhering to traditional gender roles.

This conservative vision is incompatible with internationally recognised standards for sexuality education, which has been a subject of public debate since 2013. Measures counteracting gender stereotypes in school curricula were included in programmes funded by the European Social Fund, while the need to introduce modern sexuality education was highlighted by progressive NGOs and the Government Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment, Agnieszka Kozłowska-Rajewicz (Suchecka, 2014), referring to the World Health Organization's sexual education guidelines published in 2010 (WHO, 2011). One of the document's goals was to introduce elements of sexual education during children's early years, aimed at, among other objectives, raising children's awareness of inappropriate sexual behaviour towards them and assisting children whose gender identity may not follow their sex assigned at birth. However, the issues around sexual orientation and gender identity in particular turned out to be very controversial. The document states that 'between the second and third year of their lives, [children] discover the physical differences between men and women. During this time children start to discover their own bodies (early childhood masturbation, self-stimulation) and they may also try to examine the bodies of their friends (playing doctor)' (WHO, 2011: 23). A heated debate was also raised by WHO's argument that 'toddlers [between two and three] learn that they are boys or girls (they develop their gender identity)' (WHO, 2011: 24). It was also controversial that the WHO recommended including education on 'gender identity and sexual orientation, including coming out/homosexuality' (WHO, 2011: 46) in curricula for teenage children. Around that time, a handbook called 'Equal kindergarten' was published with several strategies and guidelines for introducing the gender education programme at preschool centres (Dzierzgowska *et al*., 2013).

The mobilisation

As a reaction to these programmes and standards to be recommended by the Ministry of Education, an alliance of NGOs, with Catholic lay organisations at its core (see details below), and in cooperation with Law and Justice politicians, began widespread campaigns targeting sexual educators and gender equality education in kindergartens (PCh24.pl, 2013). In the case of sexual education, a concrete 'folk devil' was the World Health Organization, together with the government and educators from the NGOs running sexual education programmes. Sexual education was discussed under the label of 'sexualisation of our children' or as an 'organized, collective rape of the child's soul' (Oko, 2013). Dariusz Oko, a priest and one of the strongest opponents of 'gender ideology', was frequently present in the media and was also the architect of these social campaigns. Protesting parents aligned under several initiatives: 'Stop Sexualization of Our Children' (SSOC), 'No to Gender' (with a broader spectrum of issues addressed) and 'Stop Paedophilia'. The latter initiative engaged in collecting signatures for a bill banning sexuality education inspired by the WHO standards, with the suggestion that 'encouraging sexual behaviour' among children contributes to paedophilia and pornography, while

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'pushing children into the hands of gay people' (Kośmiński, 2014, quoting the initiators of the bill). The bill, together with 250,000 signatures, was submitted to parliament in 2014, and, after the first vote, was referred for further processing to a parliamentary committee, which in fact meant freezing it, i.e. neither rejecting nor proceeding to adopt it.

As already mentioned, the campaign mobilised around Catholic and Christian NGOs. A Civic Coalition for the Family emerged at this time, composed of forty-one organisations, including thirteen organisations explicitly referring to Catholicism or patrons among the saints or linked to prayer activities (often separate for men and women), while other organisations aligned with local Catholic parishes (Nurzyński, 2018a). Currently still very active, this coalition issued several strategic documents openly admitting that 'Catholic circles inspired establishment of the Coalition' and advocating for replacing the principle of 'gender mainstreaming' with 'family mainstreaming' (Nurzyński, 2018b), mimicking a similar move of the Hungarian government (Szikra, 2014). Further, the coalition also declared that it is 'open for cooperation with Churches and other religious associations that defend the family composed of a mom, dad and children, and that oppose gender ideology' (KEP, 2019a).

Interestingly, the campaigners did not differentiate between targeting gender equality education understood as undermining traditional gender roles, the education about identification with gender different from someone's sex/gender assigned at birth and sexual identity or LGBT rights. Instead, all of these issues were conflated and centred around rejecting the concept of 'gender' (as constructed, choosable, non-biological). The coalition issued a textbook with a set of guidelines for parents and educators, where the first recommendation for the parents is to join the Christian organisation CitizenGO and follow its campaigns (Barciński, 2014). CitizenGO reports more than 840,000 members in Poland (CitizenGo, 2020) and continues to wage an aggressive campaign against 'LGBT ideology', i.e. against any visibility or recognition of LGBT rights. CitizenGO's first campaigns were precisely against sexual education in preschool facilities, when the organisation collected over 123,000 signatures (Korzekwa-Kaliszuk, 2013), in parallel with the 'Stop Paedophilia' initiative.

In the media, the issue of sexuality education escalated into a form of moral panic, most notably in 2013/2014. The most recognisable and most often repeated imagery evoked 'forcing boys to wear dresses and skirts' (wPolityce.pl, 2013) or encouraging children to touch their genitalia and 'teach[ing] them to masturbate' (Kośmiński, 2014). Another often repeated phrase was that education on gender identity 'blasts children out of their [biological] sex' (Kawlewska, 2014). Moreover, the media reported stories of boys traumatised from being forced to wear dresses or play with typically girly toys while crying and trying to escape (PCh24.pl, 2013). Right-wing journalists also 'exposed' educational materials such as an instruction video where children were encouraged to play with dolls with visible genitalia, undress them, touch the dolls' intimate parts and then draw their shape on paper (Nykiel, 2014). The campaigners pointed to parents' right to decide the worldview of their children as presented during their preschool education, positing an opposition between parents being deprived of control over their children's education and sexual educators taking over their children's souls and 'spreading depravation' instead of promoting modesty and sexual abstinence for unmarried persons, i.e. in line with the teachings of Pope Francis and Pope Benedict (Jóźwik, 2019).

Therefore, as far as the mobilisation around sexuality education, LGBT rights and the concept of gender is concerned, it had a markedly religious character, organised within and supported by the Catholic hierarchy, with the religious references being very explicit

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and overt. Sexuality educators were treated as evil, as noted in the petition submitted by CitizenGO:

> *[The] Satanist plan of the genderists is clear. Children are persuaded that sexual relations among same sex people are something normal .... This is to show that Christian morality is attacked, to be replaced by a devil's chaos of debauchery .... God calls us to a life of purity or marriage, with the goal to procreate and to raise children with love to the Creator* (Fronda.pl, 2019).

For gender equality education in kindergartens, the argument raised by these organisations was similar to the one used in the campaign against the school-age reform, i.e. that the programme involved 'experimenting on our children' (Suchecka, 2017). As during PiS's term in office (since 2015), local authorities, especially in larger cities, declared that they would introduce equality education in the kindergartens/schools under their jurisdiction, Law and Justice politicians were active at a local level. Aligned with parents' organisations, PiS politicians aimed to 'save' children from 'depravation' by voting against the introduction of the programme into curricula by local municipalities, often with success (Suchecka, 2017).

In addition to PiS politicians, the Catholic Church hierarchy has been very vocal in condemning both gender identity/equality education and sexuality education. In their official position on the issue of LGBT rights, bishops have emphasised that the 'ideology denies the natural gender difference and complementarity between men and women' and expressed their concern about the introduction of 'a new approach to sexuality education to school curricula' (KEP, 2019a), quoting Pope Francis, who argues that the recognition of LGBT rights involves a revolution that has 'brought spiritual and material devastation to countless human beings, especially the poorest and most vulnerable' (KEP, 2019a, quoting from Pope Francis in 2014). Using a clearly populist rhetoric, the Church also continues to mobilise civil society to 'defend ordinary people' (especially the most vulnerable) against gender ideology, as the latter may lead to 'anthropological heredity, with dangerous implications' (Gądecki, 2019). The issue of gender ideology and 'protection of the family' has also been the topic of joint meetings of the episcopate and representatives of Catholic lay organisations. A bishop responsible for contacts with NGOs urged the organisations' leaders to actively resist gender education in their communities, stressing that 'it is important to disseminate the Catholic teaching' (KEP, 2019b). At the same time, bishops pointed to the European Union and its structural funds financing equality and diversity education as the sources of this 'demoralization'. As argued by Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki, 'the ideology of genderism' is aimed at 'turning Christian civilisation upside down', while 'huge funds are coming to Poland to finance implementation of ideologies hostile to Christianity' (Rytel-Andrianik, 2019).

In the end, although 'modern' gender education in kindergarten and public schools was not introduced, the 'Stop Paedophilia' bill banning sexuality education and penalising it as 'encouraging paedophilia' remained frozen in parliamentary committees similarly to civil initiatives proposing even stricter abortion laws.

Conclusions

This article differs from previous research on social policy transformation in Eastern Europe not only by taking into account social mobilisation around social policy issues but also by

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stressing its religious dimension and populist character. Two cases were analysed: the mobilisations against the school-age reform and against sexuality education. The two campaigns shared the same organisational background, i.e. Catholic lay organisations and the full support of the Catholic media, as well as the populist character of mobilisation, whereby 'ordinary people', meaning parents, campaigned and organised against the 'elite', meaning the government, education experts, gender educators and the WHO, all of which were accused of 'experimenting on our children'. Both campaigns were oriented towards restoring social justice taken away from 'the people' by a morally corrupted 'elite'.

There were nevertheless several important differences between the two cases, in this study delineated analytically by differentiating between *overt* as opposed to *covert* faith-based mobilisation. The campaign against the school-age reform represents a case of mobilisation with *covert* religious symbolism. Thus, references to religion were scarce and implicit, while at the same time remaining at a general level. The faith-based motivations of the main moral entrepreneurs, the Elbanowscys, were mostly 'hidden in plain sight', revealed only in important moments, such as when Karolina Elbanowska quoted from the gospels during her speech in parliament, or ex post, in the Elbanowscys' memoir, when they mentioned praying before big events or collecting signatures in the churches, therefore taking place in the religious space. All of this happened with only tacit support from the Catholic Church, without its explicit involvement in the mobilisation. In contrast, the campaign against sexuality education was marked by *overt* religious populism. Moral entrepreneurs, such as the priest Dariusz Oko, argued against sexuality education and gender equality with a frequent and open use of faith-based morality explicitly rooted in Catholic dogmas. Similarly, civil society organisations involved in anti-gender campaigns openly associated sexuality education and (the use of) 'gender' with 'Satan', strengthening religious symbolism by referring to God and a natural order in defence of an (established) biological sex and against (possibly fluid) gender identity and culturally constructed gender roles.

Finally, according to some commentators, the visibility of the Elbanowscys' campaign and wide support for the initiative even beyond the alliance of conservative and Catholic NGOs contributed to the double electoral defeat of the Civic Platform by Law and Justice in 2015. This was not without an active role of Law and Justice itself, using the couple's popularity to attract new voters. The party's popularity continues with the recent (2020) re-election of the president Duda, who opposed LGBT rights during his campaign. Future studies connecting the analysis of populism, religion and mobilisations around social policy reforms should investigate these political outcomes.

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