



Populism, historical discourse and foreign policy: the case of Poland's Law and Justice government

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Abstract

This article analyses how, in Poland, the populist political orientation of the ruling party (Law and Justice—PiS) has coloured the historical discourse of the government and has affected, in turn, its foreign policy and diplomatic relations. We argue that the historical discourse of the PiS government is a reflection of the party's reliance on populism as a political mode of articulation in that it seeks to promote a Manichean, dichotomic and totalizing re-definition of the categories of victim, hero and perpetrator—and of Poland's roles in this trinity. The article details the direct and indirect repercussions of PiS populist-inspired historical posture on Poland's foreign policy by analysing its policies towards—and relations with—Ukraine and Germany. As such, the article sheds light on the under-explored links between populism and historical memory and makes a contribution to the nascent scholarship on the foreign policy of populist governments.

Keywords Populism · Foreign policy · Memory · Poland · Germany · Ukraine

Introduction

As made explicit in the words of President Andrzej Duda upon entering office, the populist Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*—PiS) came to power with the intention both to 'bring necessary corrections' to Poland's foreign policy (Duda 2015a) and to 'fight for historical truth in relations with neighbours' through an 'active historical policy' (Duda 2015b). These two undertakings have been pursued in parallel and have affected one another. Since the party won an

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absolute majority in the legislative elections of 2015 and took the reins of executive power, the historical policy of the PiS government has had, indeed, direct and indirect implications for the country's foreign policy and diplomatic relations.

This is most visible in relation to the international repercussions of the adoption of the IPN Act amendment (also dubbed the 'Holocaust law' abroad) as well to Poland's policies towards two of its immediate neighbours, namely Germany and Ukraine. The PiS leadership has often resorted to anti-German rhetoric in political and historical debates while Polish-Ukrainian bilateral relations have deteriorated over historical memory. This contrasts not just with the policies and discourse of the previous government (Civic Platform, *Platforma Obywatelska*—PO), but also more profoundly with what had constituted Poland's foreign policy tradition since 1989. The geopolitical and ontological project of the 'Return to Europe', which has for long been seen as going through Germany, and the strategic project of seeing Ukraine integrated in Euro-Atlantic structures have constituted, since 1989, crucial vectors in Poland's foreign policy tradition (Kuzniar 2009; Zajac 2016). But, in castigating Germany's politico-cultural hegemony in Europe and going as far differentially emphasizing Poland's 'Easternness' in that context, and in threatening Ukraine of blocking or delaying its (hypothetical) future accession to the EU, the PiS government appeared ready to discard—rhetorically at least—both vectors when put in the balance against memory politics.

How profound are these apparent shifts and how are they linked to PiS' posture on memory politics? What characterizes—and is distinctive in—the historical policy of the PiS government? How has it influenced or affected its foreign policy, in what sense and to what extent? In tackling these questions, the present article aims to address two empirical and theoretical puzzles. On the one hand, it unpacks the content and foundations of the historical discourse and policy of the PiS government with a view to determine how much they are a reflection of the party's populist orientation. On the other hand, it sheds light on how historical discourse, whether reflecting an ideological, strategic or accidental practice by governments, can spill over foreign policy. In doing so, we thus approach the question of the relationship between history and foreign policy from two sides: we look at how domestic historical policy can have immediate repercussions on diplomatic relations and at how populist-historical discursive practices can be reflected in—and influence—foreign policy.

From a political and ideological point of view, PiS can be characterized as a conservative, nationalist and populist party (Szczerbiak 2017; Stanley and Czesnik 2019; Rooduijn et al. 2019). Conservatism and, especially, nationalism certainly constitute important foundations in the party's attitudes and approach towards historical memory. Yet, they are not sufficient to explain, in themselves, the contrasts and characteristics noted above. For instance, while the nationalist positioning of the PiS government could have led to expect a renewed and radical emphasis on Russia in its historical discourse and foreign policy, even more so as the party had made of the 2010 Smolensk plane crash a 'foundational myth' when in the opposition, the distinctiveness of PiS positions in its first years in office pertained more to Germany



or Ukraine than to Russia.¹ Similarly, while PiS' conservatism helps elucidate some of the government's positions on the Communist period, such as the emphasis on the illegitimate character of the regime to the extent of denying the period between 1945 and 1989 as counting as Polish statehood (see for instance: BBC 2018), it appears less relevant in explaining its distinctive attitudes towards World War II and the Holocaust. As detailed below, these attitudes can be characterized as a proactive attempt to promote a Manichean, dichotomous and totalizing re-definition of Poland's role and place in the victim-hero-perpetrator trinity.

With regard to the first of the aforementioned puzzles, we argue that, beyond its nationalist and conservative roots, the historical discourse of the PiS government is also a reflection of its reliance on populism as a political practice and discursive mode of articulation. There is little scholarship available on the relationship between populism and memory politics, and the article thus aims to make a contribution in that sense. We identify a number of patterns by which populist practice or rhetorical strategies might be reflected in historical discourse, which we illustrate with reference to the case of PiS.

Identifying what characterizes and animates the historical discourse of the PiS government does not suffice, however, to anticipate, capture or understand its effects on foreign policy. This requires identifying the pathways through which history and memory, as it is processed by societies and used by governments, might come to influence foreign policy outputs. We approach historical representations as discursive constructions, which allows both to integrate their contingent and constructed nature and to conceptualize their effects on foreign policy outputs. Policy-makers constantly have to articulate their policy preferences with historical markers from the nation's security imaginary and, as such, shape and are constrained by the structures of signification in which foreign policy is formulated and debated (Weldes 1999; Waever 2002; Hansen 2006). Through their articulatory practice, policy-makers and political leaders produce meaning and representations of Self and Other that come to inform the definition of the national interest and enable certain policies while disabling others.

We argue that the historical discourse of the PiS government is empowering certain resonant rhetorical commonplaces, interpretations and narratives which turn some policy options more operational and 'legitimate' while effectively ruling out alternatives (compare: Krebs and Jackson 2007). As such, by shedding light on how historical narratives animated by the articulatory practice of populism come to influence foreign policy practice, we contribute to the nascent but growing literature on the relationship between populism and foreign policy (Chrissyogelos 2017; Verbeek and Zaslove 2017; Plagemann and Destradi 2019; Wojczewski 2019; Cadier 2019b).

¹ Russia became prominent in the historical discourse of the PiS government as of 2019 and in the context of a historical dispute over the causes of World War II and responsibility for the Holocaust largely triggered by Vladimir Putin. See: 'Russia and Poland's Holocaust War of Words, in Quotes', *The Moscow Times*, 20 January 2020. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/01/28/russia-and-polands-holocaust-war-of-words-in-quotes-a69066>.



The argument is developed in successive steps. First, relying on the work of Ernesto Laclau and his followers, we conceptualize populism as a discursive practice and set forth a number of hypotheses about how it might translate or be reflected into historical narratives. Subsequently, building on the discourse analysis literature in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), we present the theoretical framework underpinning our investigation of the influence of memory politics and historical discourse on foreign policy. Then, we analyse the PiS government's domestic historical discourse showing how it reflects the party's populist orientation. Finally, case studies of Warsaw's policies towards Germany and Ukraine and a discussion of the international implications of the IPN Act elucidate how the historical posture of the PiS government has spilled over Poland's foreign policy. The conclusion summarizes the findings and their implications for the study of the relationship between populism, history and foreign policy.

Populism, history and foreign policy: a conceptual framework

Populism and historical discourse

The task of capturing the specific characteristics of populism is rendered intricate by the historical, geographical and political diversity of the movements coming under—but rarely claiming—this label. In this context, scholars of comparative politics have set forth and relied on different theoretical lenses to define and characterize populism, conceptualizing it alternatively as a thin or 'thin-centred ideology' (Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008), a political strategy (Weyland 2017), a political style (Moffitt and Tormey 2014) or a discourse (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). In our endeavour to unpack how the PiS government's populist orientation underpins its attitude towards historical memory and affects, in turn, its foreign policy, we regard the theoretical position conceptualizing populism as a *discourse* as being the most promising and most appropriate. Quite simply, it is as discourse that historical representations are accessible to the analyst and it is thus at this level that their relationship to populism and foreign policy can (and should) be investigated.

The approach conceptualizing populism as a *discursive mode of political articulation* has been above all developed by Laclau (2005a, b), building on the broader social theory he established with Chantal Mouffe (2001) and that has been expanded by their followers (Howarth et al. 2000; Howarth and Torfing 2005). The basic epistemological contention of this position—and of discourse analysis more generally (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Dunn and Neumann 2016)—is that language is performative and relational. It is *performative* in the sense that it does not simply express or reflect but more profoundly constitutes social reality. Language is also *relational* in the sense that meaning and social identities are constructed through contingent relations between terms (or signifiers). Actors produce, reproduce and contest these relations through their discursive practices: they mobilize, weave together and establish chains of connotations between pre-existing linguistic elements in a bid to construct arrangements of meaning—a process referred to as *articulation* (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 105). Discourses are produced out of these



articulatory practices and constitute, as such, ‘social and political construction that establishes a system of relations between different objects and practices, while providing positions with which social agents can identify’ (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 3).

Populism is one such discourse. It is performative in the sense that it does not simply ‘express some kind of original popular identity [but] actually constitutes the latter’ and it is relational in the sense that this identity is constructed in opposition to ‘the power’ (or ‘elite’) and around the nodal point ‘the people’ (Laclau 2005b, 48). What makes a movement populist then is not its actual political or ideological contents, but the particular logic of articulation of these contents (ibid. 33). This logic is characterized by two processes: the construction of an equivalential chain between unsatisfied demands and the creation of an internal frontier dichotomizing the social. On the one hand, the populist discourse establishes a link between heterogeneous social demands on the negative basis that they remain unfulfilled. Particular demands find themselves aggregated with other unrelated demands, thus losing their particularistic character to acquire a universal one and forming a chain of equivalence that constitutes a popular subject (ibid. 35–38). This leads the populist discourse, on the other hand, to advance an antagonistic representation of society as being divided between two camps, the power (or establishment) and the underdog. PiS very much relies on these two processes in its political discourse, which helped it gain power by aggregating dispersed grievances of different groups and classes under the joint notion of ‘Poland in ruin’—depicting a weak state in which the societal majority suffers poverty in contrast to and because of the alienating liberal elite.

What is likely to be consequential for policy in particular is the mechanisms or articulatory practices through which the aforementioned internal frontiers and equivalential chains are constructed. The first is the totalization and castigation of the ‘power’ that is accused of frustrating social demands and that is denounced and opposed by populism, for the creation of a chain of equivalence and an internal frontier necessarily imply to represent the other ‘side’. Thus, as emphasized by Laclau, ‘there is no populism without discursive construction of an enemy’ (Laclau 2005b, 39). The second is the structuring of populist discourse around the nodal point of ‘the People’. The populist articulatory practice constitutes ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ as the antagonistic poles of social reality, which can alternatively be defined in political, socio-economic, cultural or historical terms, open to constant re-definition or contestation. For instance, PiS politicians interchangeably castigate the representatives and supporters of the opposition of being liberal (in contrast to the conservative People), detached economic beneficiaries of unjust transformation (which exploited the People) or imitating the West (and scorning the pristine traditional People). Characteristically of the populist discourse, ‘the people’ is systematically constructed as an ‘underdog’ in a down/up political antagonism, while by contrast the nationalist discourse constructs ‘the people’ as ‘nation’ in an in/out political antagonism (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017).

In the light of the above, we can expect the articulatory practice of populism to be reflected in historical discourses in two possible ways: either through the ‘construction of an underdog as an historical agent’ (Laclau 2005b, 47) or, conversely, through the *construction of the historical agent as an underdog*.



On the one hand, populist actors might mobilize historical representations, symbols and narratives in the articulation of the populist discourse—that is in the *creation of an internal frontier*, the *construction of a chain of equivalence*, the *interpellation of the popular subject* or the *othering of the elites*. These articulations never take place in a political vacuum and thus research ought to study the ‘complex and antagonistic language games’ developed in a specific political culture around the claim of incarnating people’s interest and identities (Stavrakakis 2017, 538), games that might involve ‘recognition and idealization, rejection and demonization’. On the other hand, the structure or logic of articulation of populism can be replicated in historical discourse. Concretely, this would translate into dichotomous historical narratives that tend to position the country (or nation) as an underdog on a vertical axis and to castigate historical adversaries as ‘elites’.

Historical discourse and foreign policy

After having formulated a number of hypotheses about how populism as an articulatory practice might affect or be reflected in historical discourse, we now briefly turn to specifying how we expect the latter to influence foreign policy outputs. While rarely put in doubt, the ‘political consequences’ of collective memory, its effects on power constellations and policies, remain undertheorized (Müller 2002). The rich literature on memory studies has documented the contextual, contingent and politically consequential nature of historical memory (Halbwachs 1992; Lebow et al. 2006), yet without shedding light on the mechanisms by which it conditions policy outputs. On its part, the FPA scholarship grounded in cognitive psychology did endeavour to theorize such a causal pathway (Vertzberger 1986; Khong 1992; Houghton 1996), but often at the price of ignoring the contingent nature of historical memory and of treating it, instead, as given and unproblematic. We contend that the post-structuralist lens of discourse theory presented above allows both to integrate the constructed and contingent nature of historical representations and to conceptualize their effects on policies. Applying the same theoretical lens in studying, on the one hand, the relationship between populism and historical memory and, on the other hand, the relationship between historical memory and foreign policy also allows retaining continuity and coherence in our overall analytical framework.

Discourse theory approaches foreign policy as a political argument. More specifically, it emphasizes and studies the ‘constitutive significance of representations of identity for formulating and debating foreign policies’ (Hansen 2006, 5). In promoting a policy preference or justifying a policy choice, it is indeed ‘always necessary for policy-makers to be able to argue where “this takes us” and how it resonates with the state’s vision of itself’ (Waever 2002, 27). For instance, in the foreign policies of Central European countries, the institutionalization of the ‘Return to Europe’ narrative had long meant that any policy options that would make a country appear ‘Eastern’ rather than ‘Western’ was deemed illegitimate (Szulecki 2015; Cadier 2019a, 84).

Representations of identity and of the polity itself are not fixed, however, but subject to continuous negotiation, reproduction and contestation. In promoting their policy preferences or justifying their policy choices, policy-makers construct and



temporarily fix meaning through their articulations of the cultural raw materials and linguistic elements that constitute a state's security imaginary and they produce, as such, specific representations of international politics and of the place of the state within it (Weldes 1999, 97–103). The manner in which meaning is produced and attached to various objects or subjects of international politics is 'constituting particular interpretive dispositions which create certain possibilities [for policies] and preclude others' (Doty 1993, 298): representations of foreign policy situations and of the national interest will condition how the former will be tackled and the latter defended.

In other words, in promoting particular articulations of cultural and historical raw materials constitutive of a state's security imaginary, a populist-inspired historical discourse might promote specific images of Self and Others, influencing how relations among states are represented and how the state might act. By delimiting the realm of the possible in terms of policy articulation and by creating interpretative dispositions, historical discourse contributes to disable certain policy choices while enabling others and, as such, influences foreign policy outputs. In analysing foreign policy, historical discourse must thus be approached as 'framings of meaning and lens of interpretation rather than as objective historical truths' (Hansen 2006, 7).

Against 'pedagogics of shame': the populist logic of PiS' historical discourse

In Poland, there has been a 'high demand for historical narrations' among the public, one that has been driven and fuelled by 'political uses of history' (Mink 2017, 36). The Polish context is notably characterized by a polarization between the proponents of a critical understanding of Polish history—an approach initiated in the *samizdat* (underground) literature under Communism that aims at complementing the deeply engraved collective memory representations of Polish victimhood and heroism with an exploration of Polish guilt—and those vehemently rejecting such approach as unpatriotic. This polarization owes at least as much to political than to academic cleavages and has become more acute since the 2000s (Traba 2009). PiS has had a clear, persistent and proactive position in these debates: it has long vilified the critical approach, dubbing it the 'pedagogy of shame' and charging it with undermining national strength by hinting that Poles should be ashamed of their nation. As expressed by PiS politician and Deputy Minister of Culture and National Heritage Jarosław Sellin, the party asserts that 'wise historical policies should maintain pride in [Poland's] past achievements' and wishes to 'put an end to the allegations that history should be left to historians only' (cited in: Żuk 2018, 1052).

Since it came to power, the PiS government has sought, through its historical policy, not only to undo the projects associated with the critical approach, but also more profoundly to 'overturn the historical narratives in place up to 2015 by advancing a hegemonic vision of [Polish] history in the twentieth century' (Mink 2017, 45). It has done so through administrative and legislative acts, such as the takeover of the World War II Museum in Gdansk, the establishment of a Polish National Foundation and state support for the nongovernmental Polish League Against Defamation,



and finally the IPN Act that criminalized mentions of Polish involvements in crimes committed during WWII and extended the mandate of the Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej—IPN) to protecting Poland’s reputation abroad (Janicki and Władyka 2015; Charnysh and Finkel 2018; Siddi and Gaweda 2019). What is generally referred to as the ‘IPN Act’ is, in fact, a 2018 amendment to the 1998 legislation formally entitled the ‘Act on the Institute of National Remembrance’. The amendment notably changed two of its articles (Article 2 and 55a), introducing a fine and a possible 3-year prison sentence for any claims made ‘publicly and contrary to the facts, that the Polish Nation or the Republic of Poland is responsible or co-responsible for Nazi crimes committed by the Third Reich’ (Bucholc and Komornik 2019; IPN 2018).

In essence, the aim is to promote a ‘set of interpretations of past event as correct understandings of [the] nation’s historical experiences’, which can then be used by the government to legitimize contemporary ideologies and policies since remembrance constitutes a ‘powerful instrument of social mobilization, identity construction and political competition’ (Wawrzyński 2017, 297, 294). To be sure, PiS historical policy ought to be placed in context: it takes root in the domestic debates and polarization described above and it largely filled a gap left open by the previous governments (Harper 2018), ramping up some instruments of memory politics that were *already* in place (such as the IPN). In addition, it should be noted that several of PiS core positions are actually shared across the board in Poland,² while many of those that *are* distinctive often proceed from its nationalist and conservative political ideology and agenda. At the same time, however, we argue that the manner in which PiS’ historical arguments are articulated also reflects the discursive practice of populism to a significant extent.

In its *structure*, PiS’ historical discourse partly reproduces the dichotomous and totalizing logic of articulation that characterizes populism. The gist of PiS historical argument on WWII, and the core of its revision of Holocaust historiography as reflected in the amended IPN Act, is that victims cannot be perpetrators (but can be heroes): the (undeniable) heavy suffering of Poland and its people in the conflict means that they cannot be associated with or accused of acts that belong to the perpetrator category. This appeared clearly, for instance, when, in reacting to a new US law on compensations for spoiled properties of individual Polish Jews, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki declared ‘let’s remember the tragic history of the Polish nation ... we were the most murdered victims here during WWII and for this reason we will never agree to [pay] any compensation for anyone’, while the PiS chairman Jarosław Kaczyński stated that ‘Poland has no [financial] war obligations, whether from a legal point of view or from the point of view of fundamental morality and decency’.³ In PiS’ historical discourse, the categories of ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’

² This is true, for instance, of the emphasis on Poland’s martyrdom and heroism in WW2, the adherence to the totalitarian paradigm equating Nazism and Communism or the belief in a special Polish role in Europe’s history (see: Siddi and Gaweda 2019, 4).

³ ‘Premier: nie będzie zgody na wypłatę odszkodowań z naszej strony’, *PolskieRadio24*, 05/05/2019. <https://polskieradio24.pl/5/1222/Artykul/2303654,Premier-nie-bedzie-zgody-na-wyplate-odszkodowan-z-naszej-strony>.



are totalized and essentialized, just as for the categories of ‘people’ and ‘elites’ in the populist discourse. In addition, as for populism (Mudde 2004), this dichotomy is essentially moralistic: ‘attention is drawn to past tragedies in ways that could achieve moral and political gains’ (Charnysh and Finkel 2018).

Secondly and more acutely, PiS has mobilized historical representations, symbols and narratives in the articulation of its populist discourse. In *creating an internal frontier* and *othering the elites*, PiS representatives have often taken the past as point of reference. They have notably discursively opposed the ‘bad elites of the liberal-communist past’ to a ‘simple and real nation’, along the lines of a ‘dichotomous’ and ‘timeless’ division of society (Żuk and Żuk 2018, 137). In charging domestic liberal elites—such as the former dissident intellectual Adam Michnik and his influential daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*—with conceiving and promoting the ‘pedagogy of shame’, PiS politicians have sought to represent them as traitors ready to complicity sell out the pride of the Polish nation and to present themselves, by contrast, as patriotic defenders of the honour of the Polish people (Szulecki 2019, ch. 10).

More specifically, PiS representatives have regularly established parallels between contemporary and past political antagonisms or between current and old elites, implicitly or explicitly associating liberal elites, and especially the former PO government and its policies, with the Communist regime or even with Nazi Germany.⁴ PiS politicians have regularly accused the liberal elites that oversaw the post-1989 transition of having been complacent with Communist apparatchiks (see for instance: Duda 2015c) and actually came to represent the 1989 Roundtable talks as a ‘betrayal’ where ‘Communists shared power with their former agents’.⁵ This led the current Defense Minister, Mariusz Błaszczak, to claim that it is only under the PiS government that Communism officially ended in Poland (Mazzini 2018). This reinterpretation of history and the representation of a ‘communist-liberal past’ is directly relevant for foreign policy: following its electoral victory, PiS brought significant personnel re-shuffles upon the MFA, in the name of purging former agents of the Communist police but also, in practice, diplomats deemed too close to the ideas or leaders of the previous government. Finally and more generally, the PiS has sought to *other* liberal domestic liberal elites by castigating them as having been timelessly subservient to external powers. In Parliament, Jarosław Kaczyński directly addressed PO members in these terms: ‘you are the external party today, you are compromising Poland, you are against Poland. You have always been’.⁶ As

⁴ For instance, in taking over the Gdansk WWII museum, which had been initially conceived by an historian close to the PO in line with the memory politics of the previous government, the PiS Deputy Minister of Culture Jarosław Sellin argued that ‘changes were necessary because the original exhibition purportedly adopted a German point of view’ (Siddi and Gaweda 2019, 10), while the former PO leader Donald Tusk, a member of the borderland Kashubian minority, is often depicted as a Nazi in PiS-related fringe right media.

⁵ ‘Podczas Okrągłego Stołu komuniści podzielili się władzą z własnymi agentami? Zybortowicz wyjaśnia’, *Dziennik.pl*, 07/02/2019. <https://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/polityka/artykuly/590761.zybortowicz-z-walesa-okragly-stol-komunisci-agenci-wladza-prl-solidarnosc.html>.

⁶ ‘Kaczyński do PO: “Jesteście partią zewnętrzną”’, *Gazeta Prawna*, 09/03/2017. <http://www.gazeta-prawna.pl/artykuly/1026095,kaczynski-do-po-partia-zewnetrzna-pis.html>.



noted by Żuk and Żuk (2018, 142), the discursive categories of ‘external party’ or ‘abroad’ have a strong resonance in the ‘historical and martyrological awareness of Polish society’ as they evoke the Partitions of Poland and the loss of independence between 1795 and 1918 as a result of foreign invasions.

Similarly, in PiS political discourse, the populist practices of *creating a chain of equivalence* and *interpellating the popular subject* have also relied at times on the articulation of historical raw materials. The chain of equivalence established between frustrated social demands is best exemplified by PiS foreign policy motto of ‘Rising from our knees’, which in its political subjectivization amounts to constructing an underdog as an historical agent. According to PiS logic, just as for ‘the people’ on the domestic political scene, Poland has been kept down on the regional scene by EU elites and European powers (Germany especially), with the complicity of domestic elites. In that sense, the motto reflects the kind of vertical political antagonism that was identified above as characterizing the populist discourse and the way it constructs identities.

Historical resources are also mobilized to empower the figures of victim and hero, which are both fuelling the populist narrative of moral superiority of the (Polish) People. Clear parallels exist between the categories of victims and underdogs: PiS’ ‘reactivation of the myths associated to Polish martyrology’ (Kurska 2016) can at least partially be read as a feature of its populist discourse with the victim presented as historical underdog, but morally victorious. The nation’s ‘unique’ historical experience of martyrdom and courage is to justify its broader international mission. Krzysztof Szczerski, President Duda’s chief of staff and one of the key PiS foreign policy architects, wrote in a programmatic book that he was hoping Polish emigrants could ‘re-evangelise Europe’ as in his views ‘many countries are waiting for [Poland], the homeland of Saint John Paul II, to show the way again’.⁷ Here and elsewhere, PiS politicians implicitly invoked the image of Poland as a ‘Christ of Nations’, that is of a morally superior victim that has suffered for the greater good of Europe (Harper 2018, 133). Populism’s idealization of the people as pure and infallible (Müller 2016) can be seen as underpinning both a glorification of its heroism and a rejection of accusations of any historical wrongdoings.

However, while the main audience for the party’s historical revisionism is at home, by casting the nation as a uniform agent, contrasted with other nations, PiS blurred the line between domestic and international narratives and its historical policies spilled over diplomatic relations and Poland’s reputation. The amended Article 55a of the IPN Act sparked international controversy and a flood of critique not only from foreign media and academics, but also diplomats and politicians, most importantly from Israel and the USA. For instance, the White House is said to have imposed a ban on Presidential-level meetings between the USA and Poland to protest against the act.⁸ Beyond this specific case and as we now analyse, PiS broader

⁷ Cited in: ‘Minister Krzysztof Szczerski proponuje wystawianie Polakom katolickich paszportów’, *Newsweek Polska*, 24/04/2019. <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/minister-krzysztof-szczerski-proponuje-wystawianie-polakom-katolickich-paszportow-to/gr2e23s>.

⁸ ‘Trump and Poland: From Love to Hate in Under Nine Months’, *Daily Beast*, 03/09/2018. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-and-poland-from-love-to-hate-in-under-nine-months>.



historical posture had repercussions on its relations with—and policies towards—Ukraine and Germany.

Implications for foreign policy practice: relations with Germany and Ukraine

As noted in Introduction, the most salient alterations in Poland's foreign policy rhetoric and diplomatic relations under the PiS government have pertained to Germany and Ukraine. In this section, we substantiate this point and analyse how historical representations and narratives related to these two countries have been articulated in Polish foreign policy discourse. We notably aim to determine whether and how much these articulations reflect the populist logic and to understand the implications for foreign policy practice. The cases of Ukraine and Germany offer variations for the analysis, both in terms of context and results. The respective attitudes of these two diplomatic interlocutors have, indeed, been markedly different: while Germany has maintained a (traditional) cautious approach towards historical memory as well as an explicit acknowledgement of its own historical guilt, Ukraine has displayed a much more offensive and confrontational posture, being itself engaged in a process of national identity building as well as in a war (Klymenko 2019). Furthermore, variations are also apparent in Warsaw's own approach: while the PiS government has deliberately instrumentalized historical representations of Germany as a rhetorical device in its populist political discourse as well as foreign policy strategy, in the case of Ukraine it is more PiS domestic remembrance policy and its reactions to Kyiv's own memory politics that have indirectly spilled over Warsaw's diplomatic posture.

Germany

In a famous speech pronounced in Berlin in 2011, the then Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski declared that he was now 'fearing German power less than German inaction' (Sikorski 2011). In doing so, he was both casting aside Poland's historical anxieties towards its powerful neighbour and calling for German leadership in Europe. In stark contrast, the PiS government regularly emphasizes historical grievances between the two countries and denounces Germany's hegemonic position in Europe.

Historical references to Germany are frequent in PiS foreign policy discourse. They notably appear along three patterns: diplomacy serving as a transmission belt for historical policy; historical experience invoked in the context of foreign policy strategy; and historical narratives being put at the service of populist politics. First, PiS historical policy translated into foreign policy to the extent that some of its constitutive statements or claims relating to Germany have been transmitted through diplomatic channels. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) took an active role in promoting the Polish historical narrative on World War II and in monitoring and combatting, through its network of embassies abroad, associations made between Poland and the Holocaust. For instance, on the Ministry's webpage listing



and detailing the thematic priorities of Polish diplomacy, ‘German Concentration Camps’ was listed along categories such as ‘Security Policy’, ‘Foreign Economic Policy’, ‘International Organizations’, ‘Polish Aid’ or ‘Eastern Partnership’.⁹ To be sure, a proactive denunciation of the fallacious expression ‘Polish Death Camps’ has been a constant of Polish diplomacy: between 2008 and 2015, the previous government had issued 913 statements in response to mentions of this expression (Poland’s Holocaust Law 2018). What is distinctive in the approach of the PiS government is, as evoked above, the totalization of the categories of victims and perpetrators and the regular insistence on Germany’s role. Accusing Berlin of attempting to diminish its responsibilities for the crimes committed during WWII the PiS has sought, instead, to emphasize them, notably by inviting for the term ‘Nazi’ to be systematically replaced by ‘German’ in historical accounts.¹⁰ Relatedly, parallels between Nazi and contemporary Germany have also been established and stressed in the context of PiS government’s revival of Polish demands for war reparations, which (Communist) Poland had initially renounced in the 1950s but that the PiS now demand from Germany as a long overdue historical justice (Poland Revives German War Reparations Demand 2017).

Second, the PiS government has activated references to its historical experience in a strategic or instrumental manner. The rhetorical attacks against Germany and aforementioned emphasis of its WWII crimes seemingly redoubled, in fact, after the PiS government faced a Rule of Law infringement probe from the European Commission. World War II references were also mobilized in the debates on the refugee crisis. Invoking a clear distinction between good and evil, victims/heroes and perpetrators, they became an easily available tool for deflecting moral arguments raised against Poland’s refusal to accept even the smallest number of refugees. With Germany positioning itself as a champion of humanitarianism, Poland was—even if not explicitly—cast as a villain in European debates. The PiS government’s insistence on history as a forever returning reality and particularly the continuous reminding of Germany of its Nazi past can be read as an attempt to acquire, in these debates, a more favourable position of moral superiority in place of moral inferiority. It amounts, in other words, to a strategic (use of) historical narrative (see: Subotić 2016; Introduction of the Special Issue). Through a discourse analysis lens, whether the invocation of historical narratives and representations reflects an ideological belief or is used strategically is not relevant; they equally contribute to shape the structure of meaning in which foreign policy is formulated and debated and, as such, foreign policy action.

Third and directly related to our concern here, PiS has also mobilized historical representations and narratives in the context of its populist logic of political articulation. PiS’ anti-German posture and rhetoric, which was already apparent when the party was in power between 2005 and 2007 (Longhurst 2013, 366), is largely rooted

⁹ See: https://www.msz.gov.pl/en/foreign_policy/german_concentration_camps/.

¹⁰ For instance, in replacement of the expression ‘Polish death camp’, the Polish MFA has proposed the following on its aforementioned dedicated webpage: ‘German (Nazi) concentration camp/extermination camp in the territory of German-occupied Poland’. See: https://www.msz.gov.pl/en/foreign_policy/german_concentration_camps/.



in its national-conservative ideology. Germany is cast as the historical Other to the Polish nation and as the hegemonic power imposing cultural liberalism to the rest of Europe. But there is also something distinctively populist in the way Germany is represented—namely as the ‘elite’ or ‘establishment’—and in the way Poland’s identity is constructed in opposition—namely as an ‘underdog’—in the political and foreign policy discourse of the PiS government. Germany is charged with keeping Poland down (or on its ‘knees’) and with encroaching on its sovereignty, through its assets in the Polish economy and media, and with the complicit help of Polish domestic liberal elites, notably those from the previous PO government (Balcer et al. 2017, 4). It is in the context of this framing of Berlin as the ‘establishment’ of Europe frustrating Polish political demands that PiS policy-makers have not hesitated to invoke a distinctive historical ‘Eastern’ identity for Poland as a justification for rejecting Germany’s policies, cultural model and historical accounts.¹¹ Such representation of Poland’s identity marks a significant departure from the ‘Return to Europe’ narrative, which had constituted both an ontological and geopolitical project for Poland and other Central European countries, leading policy-makers to emphasize their state’s Western identity and reject any associations with the ‘East’ (hence the insistence on ‘Central Europe’) (Cadier 2012; Szulecki 2015). In that sense, PiS foreign policy practice reflects and feeds into a broader trend in Central Europe, namely the partial rejection of normative conformity and identification with the West in the context of a regional counter-hegemonic strategy (Kazharski 2018). In Poland, the formalization of this strategy is grounded in the political orientation of the current government and notably relies on populist articulations of historical references to Germany in foreign policy discourse.

To what extent has PiS government’s, partially populist-inspired, historical discourse on Germany been reflected into its foreign policy practice? It should be noted first of all that there has been, overall, a discrepancy between a confrontational and uncontrolled rhetoric on Germany and rather cautious policy decisions. In addition, the rhetorical elements showcased above do not represent Poland’s foreign policy discourse towards Germany in its entirety: they have been paralleled by more traditional, positive diplomatic references to the close relationship between the two countries (see for instance: Szczerski 2016). Nevertheless, without having radically overturned it, the PiS government has brought upon concrete alterations in Poland’s Germany policy, especially in its first year in power. Upon entering office, it formulated four conditions for a normal partnership with Germany that were largely deemed as ‘prohibitive’ by analysts (Kuźniar 2016, 13). Most tellingly, in its programmatic speech on Poland’s foreign policy priorities for 2016, Foreign Minister Waszczykowski’s downgraded Germany from the place of top priority partner in the EU—which it had been occupying in Polish diplomacy since 1989—and conferred that role, instead, to the UK (Waszczykowski 2016). The aforementioned conditions were eventually dropped and Germany regained its place as top priority partner in

¹¹ See the interview with the director of President Duda’s press office: ‘Zawsze będziemy krajem Wschodu: Z Markiem Magierowskim rozmawia Łukasz Pawłowski’, *Kultura Liberalna*, 24/05/2016. <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2016/05/24/marek-magierowski-andrzej-duda-ocena-prezydent/>.



the 2017 speech (in the meantime, the UK had voted to leave the EU), but these two outputs clearly illustrate PiS government's foreign policy preferences. More profoundly, as expressed by German diplomats' characterization of the PiS government as 'unresponsive' and as having 'disappointed' their own government, the bilateral relationship has deteriorated overall and reached one of its lowest point since 1989 (Buras and Janning 2018, 5). To be sure, the PiS government's populist and historical discourse is not the sole constituent of its positions and decisions on Germany—opposing visions on the future of the EU, responses to the migration crisis, or contentious dossiers such as NordStream 2 and the desire to break with the pro-German orientation of the PO government have also played a role. But this discourse has certainly enabled and empowered this policy direction and has been reflected in diplomatic practices, with implications for the texture of the bilateral relationship.

Ukraine

Ukraine has been a top priority of Polish diplomacy since it became independent in 1991. An independent and Western-oriented Ukraine is regarded by Polish foreign policy elites as a necessary geopolitical buffer against Russia's power in the region and as being vital for Poland's own security (Zwolski 2018, 180–181). This vision has notably lead Warsaw to be one of steadiest supporters of Ukraine's accession to NATO and the EU. Furthermore, the advent of a democratic and friendly Ukraine is central to certain ideas and self-understandings that have been informing Poland's foreign policy over the past decades, such the grand strategy project of ULB (an acronym for Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus) coined by émigré intellectuals Juliusz Mieroszewski and Jerzy Giedroyc (Szulecki 2016, 23), and the recurring idea of 'Prometheanism' (Kowal 2019).¹² Overall, in its foreign policy decisions or in multilateral forums such as the EU or NATO, the PiS government has re-affirmed rather than put into question the traditional Polish geopolitical vision of Ukraine. But its domestic remembrance policy has spilled over its diplomatic relations with Kyiv, which have been marked by tensions over historical memory and have seen the Promethean idea being increasingly side-lined.

An important factor prompting a rhetorical shift on Ukraine has been the tension between the ULB rationality, which purposefully brackets off historical animosities as unhelpful bygones, and PiS historical discourse in which Ukrainians are vilified as perpetrators in the same categories as German Nazis. In this relationship, the Poland's victim figure rises to prominence, as the most significant symbol of Polish martyrdom at the hands of Ukrainian nationalists is the 1943–1944 Volhynia massacres, which saw some 60–100,000 Polish civilians killed. While the scale and atrocity of these events are historically undeniable, the blending of a nationalist lens and a populist articulation of the historical underdog suffering from alien Others obscures the broader context of Polish–Ukrainian relations in which the massacre occurred.

¹² Prometheanism emerged already under Poland's century long partitions and ascribed a pivotal role to Poland as the Prometheus of Eastern Europe, carrying the flame of freedom to its fellow nations to the East.



Unwilling to see Ukraine's own griefs against Polish oppression as legitimate, the result of this meeting of a nationalist historical discourse and a populist denial of anything beyond own martyrdom fuels confrontation and spills over to bilateral relations in a context where Kyiv was itself adopting an uncompromising and radical posture. The resulting escalation in memory conflict between the two governments, which is analysed below on the Polish side (for an analysis of Ukraine's policies, see Klymenko 2019), sharply contrast with the rather positive societal relations between the two countries, as illustrated by the fact that the massive recent influx of Ukrainian labour migrants have been well integrated in Poland.

In this atmosphere where indeed on both sides of the border a nationalist perception dominates, the dynamics of radicalization cripples political dialogue. In July 2016, the Polish parliament voted on an act commemorating 'all the citizens of the II Republic [of Poland] bestially murdered by Ukrainian nationalists', called the Volhynia massacres 'genocide' and established a national day of remembrance (Sejm 2016). A monument commemorating the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in South-Eastern Poland was dismantled, triggering Kyiv's retaliation in the form of banning Polish exhumations and commemoration in Volhynia, as well as the work of Poland's IPN on Ukrainian territory as long as the monument is not rebuilt. When in October 2016 Poland's Minister of Culture and vice-PM Piotr Gliński visited Kyiv, he was unable to settle these issues with his counterpart, while IPN's deputy director emphasized that 'there will be no consent' for attempts to build 'triumph arches' for UPA in Poland.¹³

PiS government emphasized martyrdom and the figure of the victim as the only legitimate one capturing the Polish experience of the wartime relations with Ukraine. Not surprisingly then, when the deputy director of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory drew parallels between the UPA and Poland's Home Army (AK), casting the wartime 'perpetrators' on par with the 'heroes', Waszczykowski declared him a persona non grata in Poland and issued several travel bans, putting President Duda's planned visit to Kyiv in question. Essentialized historical self-identifications (as victims) and essentializing neighbouring Others as (heirs to) perpetrators leads to a vicious circle in which every action of the other side is interpreted through historical-nationalist lens, thus confirming expectations and escalating distrust.

In contrast to the German dossier, we can see that the employment of these historical commonplaces is not strategic action, but habitual and 'organic' in character, emerging from discursive practices rather than rational calculation. The Ukrainian MFA, echoing the historical letter issued by Polish Catholic bishops to their German counterparts in 1965 (Wigura 2013), asked for historical grievances to be dealt with in Christian fashion by 'forgiving and asking for forgiveness'—a statement that was met with instant resistance from Waszczykowski.¹⁴

¹³ 'Polskie ekshumacje wciąż zakazane', *Rzeczpospolita*, 26/10/2017. <https://www.rp.pl/Polityka/310269815-Polskie-ekshumacje-wciaz-zakazane.html>.

¹⁴ 'Tykło u Nas', *wPolityce.pl*, 04/11/2017. <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/365514-tyklo-u-nas-waszczykowski-o-oswiadczeniu-ukrainskiego-msz-dosc-niefrasobliwie-kopiuja-droge-ktora-polscy-biskupi-zaproponowali-niemcom>.



As a party eager to drag in some fringe right constituencies, PiS has long flirted with milieus that cherish memories of Poland's eastern Borderlands (*Kresy*), ranging from nostalgic 'friends of Galicia' to more revisionist radicals. This connection pushes the question of Poland's eastern Borderlands up on the foreign policy priority list. Foreign Minister Waszczykowski used his visit to Lviv, a Polish city until the war, to accuse Ukraine of anti-Polonism and a lack of good will in bilateral relations, using the example of the treatment of the Defenders of Lwów military cemetery.¹⁵

Among these right-wing groups in particular, the historical image of 'wild' Ukrainian nationalists, the vilified UPA and the ideological leader of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), Stepan Bandera, are powerful and easily overwrite good neighbourly political collaboration. The rise of nationalism in Ukraine after 2014 was a seed that fell on the fertile soil of Poland's security imaginary and fed the equalization of Ukrainians with 'Banderites'. Despite clear nationalist and conservative credentials, these groups and by consequence, much of PiS mainstream, follows discursive tropes disseminated by Communist propaganda, which exploited the figure of the Ukrainian nationalist insurgent for its own purposes. The amendment of the IPN Act in 2018, apart from the 'Holocaust clause' in Article 51, also included a change to Article 2, which added crimes against Polish citizens committed by 'Ukrainian nationalists'.¹⁶ While in 2019 it was declared unconstitutional and void by Poland's Constitutional Tribunal and blocked by the President, it caused a recurring controversy in Ukrainian media and among Ukrainian historians and policy-makers.

In spite of its radical rhetoric, however, the PiS government has not fundamentally altered Poland's foreign policy when it comes to Ukraine. Warsaw has continued to advocate Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO (in these multilateral forums especially), provide the country with economic support, and be actively engaged in initiatives condemning the 2014 annexation of Crimea and Russia's actions in Eastern Ukraine.¹⁷ Symbolically, the PiS government has also carried forward and concretized the project of establishing a joint Polish-Lithuanian-Ukrainian brigade. However, diplomacy has at times been hijacked by domestic political considerations over historical memory. In the direct and unpredictable style that characterizes populist leadership, PiS representatives did not hesitate to make statements contradicting the policy pursued. For instance, during a meeting with a right-wing discussion club, the deputy MFA Jan Parys stated that 'it is not the case that

¹⁵ 'Witold Waszczykowski na Ukrainie: "Komu przeszkadzały te lwy? Kto wszczyna problemy?"', *Gazeta Prawna*, 05/11/2017. <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/artykuly/1082778,ukraina-witold-waszczykowski-zlozyl-hold-obroncom-lwowa-na-cmentarzu-orlat.html>. Also known as the «Eaglet Cemetery» and constituting a part of Lviv's largest historic cemetery, the Defenders of Lwów memorial is the burial site for the Polish soldiers and volunteers, as well as American and French allies, who died during the Polish-Ukrainian conflict over Lwów/Lviv in 1918 and the Polish-Soviet War of 1920.

¹⁶ The proposed amendment to Article 2, while passed through the Sejm with the support of the PiS majority, was proposed by the nationalist wing of the right-wing populist Kukiz'15 Movement.

¹⁷ Paweł Wroński, 'Dalej wspieramy Ukrainę', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 16/12/2015. <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75968,19351493,dalej-wspieramy-ukraine.html?disableRedirects=true>.



the existence of Ukraine is a condition for a free Poland ... Ukraine needs Poland, Poland can very well do without Ukraine'.¹⁸ Similarly, invoking the example of Greece's policies towards North Macedonia, Foreign Minister threatened to veto Ukraine's hypothetical future accession to the EU unless Kyiv changes course in its memory policies.¹⁹ Thus, overall, while Poland's economic and security relations with Ukraine remain relatively smooth, the contention around historical matters has undermined the broader political climate since 2016, 'disorganizing Polish-Ukrainian relations' as a think tank expert noted (cited in: Szoszyn 2017).

Conclusion

Through an analysis of the case of Poland under the rule of the PiS government, this article has provided some insights into the relationship between populism, historical discourse and foreign policy. We have found a clear overlap between the political logic of articulation of populism and the historical discourse of the PiS government. On the one hand, the structure of the latter reflects that of the former in its Manichean, dichotomous and moralistic components. This is notably exemplified by the re-definition and totalization of the categories of victims, heroes and perpetrators in PiS historical discourse. The victim figure especially has become central to PiS domestic populist politics. This is made possible in the Polish context by the broad resonance and unquestionability of national martyrdom (Sitnicka 2019). But this also tends to confirm the links between populism and victimization that have started to receive attention elsewhere: just as re-elaborations of collective memories towards victimization appear to create cultural opportunity structures favourable for the rise of populism (Caramani and Manucci 2019), we can expect populist governments to have a greater tendency to emphasize victimization in their historical policy.

On the other hand, the PiS government has often mobilized historical representations, symbols and narratives in its populist articulatory practice of creating an internal frontier, othering the elites and interpellating the popular subject as underdog. The castigation of liberal elites as undermining national strength by promoting a 'pedagogy of shame' about the past, the likening of these elites to historical foes or perpetrators such as Nazi Germany and the Communist regime, the invocation of the mythology around the heroic martyrdom of Poles and the political slogan of Poland 'raising from its knees' on the European scene all provide potent examples in that sense. These findings on how populism translate into a specific approach to memory politics would, of course, benefit from being tested in other national contexts, but they tend to indicate that, just as foreign policy (Wojczewski 2019), historical policy

¹⁸ See: <https://natemat.pl/224975,zdumiewajaca-wypowiedz-szefa-gabinetu-witolda-waszczykowskiego-o-istnienie-ukrainy-nie-jest-warunkiem-istnienia-wolnej-polski>.

¹⁹ 'Waszczykowski dla "wSieci" o stosunkach polsko-ukraińskich: Nasz przekaz jest bardzo jasny: z Banderą do Europy nie wejdziecie', w *Polityce.pl*, 3/07/2017. <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/347083-waszczykowski-dla-wsieci-o-stosunkach-polsko-ukrainskich-nasz-przekaz-jest-bardzo-jasny-z-bandera-do-europy-nie-wejdziecie>.



can constitute a terrain for populist articulatory practice and the (re)production of a collective identity of the people.

The shift in historical and foreign policy discourses under the PiS government has been especially salient when it comes to Germany and Ukraine. The patterns by which PiS populist articulation of historical representations has permeated foreign policy discourse as well as the implications in terms of foreign policy practice and outcomes have varied, however. In the case of Ukraine, the implications have been limited. The remembrance policy of the PiS government and correlated domestic political considerations have, along with Kyiv's own confrontational posture in memory politics, indirectly impinged on the bilateral relationship, complicating diplomatic and political dialogue. Yet, this has not led to a re-definition of Poland's national interest or foreign policy identity nor to a re-consideration of Poland's policies towards and support to Ukraine—an independent and West-oriented Ukraine continues to be regarded by most mainstream policy-makers in Warsaw as a geopolitical barrier against Russia's threat and as a necessary condition for Polish national security. In the case of Germany by contrast, the mobilization of historical representations in PiS foreign policy discourse has not only been the mark of diplomacy serving as transmission belt for its domestic remembrance policy, but also more profoundly a function of its populist political strategy. The PiS government has largely articulated Poland's identity against Germany and has utilized historical references to World War II to claim moral superiority as victim/underdog, especially in response to the controversies around Poland's refusal to welcome Muslim migrants. Without having driven or determined in and by itself foreign policy choices, this discourse has accompanied and enabled a partial change of direction in Poland's policy towards Germany as well as a deterioration of diplomatic relations. As hinted by discourse theories in foreign policy, PiS populist articulation and historical discourse could have more long-term effects on policies if it durably installs new representations of Self and Other.

Beyond the case of relations with—and policies towards—Ukraine and Germany, another important and concrete policy outcome was the international controversy around the IPN Act amendment of 2018, which attempted to institutionalize Polish victimhood, erase the remembrance of complicity in Jew-killing, and pave the way for a heroic grand narrative at home and abroad. The poorly prepared legislation and the broader rhetoric surrounding it led to an important international controversy which hurt Poland's image abroad and made it vulnerable to attacks by other actors eager to promote their own revisionist historical policy, such as Vladimir Putin. The former director of Warsaw's POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, who was forced to step down after a year-long stand-off with the PiS Minister of Culture who attempted to take over yet another critical and unruly historical institution, suggested that the damage done to Poland's international reputation as related to the Holocaust and World War II remembrance 'makes it unprepared for the kinds of attacks' that Moscow had launched (Dariusz Stola cited in Tygodnik Powszechny 2020).

Our analysis has shed light on how populist politics and its ramifications in historical discourse can affect foreign policy. More than translating into a clear and concrete foreign policy program, populism spills over foreign policy and feeds a



proclivity to over-prioritize domestic politics, engage in undiplomatic diplomacy and indulge in conspiracy theories (Cadier 2019b). This tendency was particularly visible in the recurring domestic struggle that PiS politicians led against what they dubbed a ‘pedagogics of shame’, or as we would see it—a critical approach to recent Polish history—of which the IPN Act was the most important, but by no means the only example. In its historical discourse on—and policies towards—Ukraine and Germany, the PiS government has also clearly sought to target and distinguish itself from its political opponents of the PO. All governments mobilize historical strategic narratives in foreign policy and populists are not necessarily to be expected to do so more often, but they are certainly more likely to gear these narratives against their domestic political opponents. The impact of the historical policy of the PiS government on Polish foreign policy has been mainly evidenced through direct and abrasive—probably often uncontrolled and maybe sometimes unplanned—statements. Populists disregard for norms of ‘appropriate’ political behaviour as a mean to represent the ‘people’ and oppose the ways of the ‘elite’ (Moffitt and Tormey 2014) is likely to find a particular resonance when it comes to memory politics with other states and to diplomatic relations more generally. In a leaked document, the Polish MFA acknowledged that Poland’s international reputation had been damaged in the process, but it attributed this outcome to a ‘lack of understanding’ of foreign observers about Polish internal developments and to their reliance on ‘the opinions of intellectuals and politicians associated with the opposition’ (Wielniński 2018).

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