

The Polish Catholic Church has become intertwined with Euroscepticism and the promotion of conservative “national values”

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*After a surge of support in the Presidential and General Elections last year, the right-wing national conservative Law and Justice Party now dominates Polish politics. In this post, **Simona Guerra** explores the government’s relationship with the Polish Church and its role in fuelling religious Euroscepticism and supporting draconian abortion laws. She writes that the close alliance shows there are mutual benefits and the Catholic Church does not easily give up its spiritual, moral and social authority.*



President A. Duda and Cardinal S. Dziwisz during Boże Ciało. Credit: [Dominique Capronnier](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

2016 is a Jubilee year in Poland, and to mark the occasion Pope Francis will visit Kraków in July. Catholicism holds a unique position in Poland, as it is symbolically and historically linked to the foundation of the Polish state. However, it also has a significant and apparently growing role in contemporary Polish politics. Increasingly, religious events are becoming platforms for political discussions, while religious figures are attending state ceremonies and are enjoying an influential voice in policymaking. This dynamic was in evidence on 14 April, when Poland’s Prime Minister, speaking at a ceremony celebrating the 1,050th anniversary of the Catholic Church as the national faith, accused [more established EU member states of behaviour which suggested a feeling of superiority to newer member states from Central and Eastern Europe, such as Poland](#). Meanwhile, religious leaders weighed in on live debates over the potential move towards a more restrictive Abortion law, with Polish bishops openly in support of the initiative.

The Abortion rules in Poland are already very restrictive. The 1993 Family Planning Act stated abortion is legal only in very specific circumstances, namely:

1. When pregnancy is a threat to the health of the pregnant woman,
2. When the embryo is irreversibly damaged,
3. When there is justified suspicion (confirmed by a prosecutor) that pregnancy is the result of an illegal act.

Doctors who perform illegal abortions are subject to punishment of up to three years of prison, and while this law was slightly relaxed in 1996, it was subsequently tightened when abortion was ruled as unconstitutional on the basis that the Polish Constitution includes provisions of legal protection of life to every human being (Art.38). Young Poles – particularly women – have protested often and fiercely against possible further restrictions, supported by civil society groups, and the Prime Minister Beata Szydło and others (who personally support it) appear to have softened their stance and are reconsidering their position.

'Family friendly' programmes formed a centrepiece of the Law and Justice party's (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*: PiS) electoral campaign, and this month the government launched its flagship '500+' programme, which allocates a monthly allowance of 500 złoty (112-114 Euros) for all second born and subsequent children until they reach 18 years of age. It is for all to see that the "holy" alliance between PiS (the ruling social conservative party) and the conservative Church is viewed by both as mutually beneficial. As explained [in my research](#), 'Euro-sceptic Allies or Euro-enthusiast Friends? The Political Discourse of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland' and forthcoming monograph, 'Religion and Euro-scepticism in Post-Communist Europe', when the Church decides to enter the political arena, the PiS respects the Church's privileges and is happy to commit itself to explicit guarantees regarding their 'Christian social' programme.

Since 2005, Poland has seen the alternation between the social right, represented by PiS, and the liberal right, represented by Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*: PO). The liberal right PO won the 2007 and 2012 elections under the leadership of Donald Tusk (now president of the European Council) and Poland experienced continuity in power for the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union and Poland's transition to multi-party democracy. The stable leadership of the liberal party, and the added success of PO at the presidential elections, guided Poland during its first decade in the EU. This coincided with a strong economic situation, and pro-EU attitudes were picked up in public opinion polls. In the months after joining the EU, the average level of support has never declined below 72% ([CBOS](#)) with very low levels of opposition to the EU integration process.

This all changed in May 2015 when the presidential elections saw a neck-to-neck race between the PiS and PO candidates, and the unexpected victory of Andrzej Duda (PiS). This was followed by a further convincing victory for PiS in the October general election. The surge can be attributed to the discontent towards the government, which has emerged due to the unpopular pension reforms, raising the retirement age to 67, social concerns around unemployment, the refugee crisis and the wave of young emigration abroad. In the UK alone, Poles make up the second largest national group of foreign-born citizens (at 8.7%) and the largest numbers of foreign citizens (13%) (2011 Census data and [Oxford Migration Observatory](#)). The wave of migration abroad may also signal rising expectations, which the government has been unable to keep pace with, despite the rising standards of living and benefits that came with EU membership.

The PO has led a narrative on the success of Poland as a winner of the transition across the region, but this has increasingly been seen as arrogant triumphalism of the elites. As a result, those from the areas of poverty that persist across the country preferred to vote for conservative political parties, while protest parties won in particular the vote of young people. The consequent PiS victory has heralded a predictable turn towards more socially conservative policies, attempts to control education, pro-life stances and the promotion of religion in everyday life.

It is perhaps unsurprising that Roman Catholic countries with a predominant Catholic post-Communist society see the Church as having a legitimate role in political life. In post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe, membership of the religious community and membership of the nation often go hand in hand. The notion of belonging together – free from the Soviet regime – overlapped with those values and norms that were developed and strengthened the nation during the years of democratisation.

The Catholic Church can be controversial in the sense that it has been ambiguous with regard to modernisation and democratisation in the past. When there is an alliance between religion and politics, it can result in a social and cultural partnership which controls and influences the government agenda and moves policy in a social conservative (and Euro-sceptic) direction, which represents a context in which the Church is willing to resist liberal

developments. As a result, the Polish Catholic Church has become intertwined with Euroscepticism and the promotion of 'national values', as well as a vocal proponent of restrictive abortion laws.

Public opinion currently still favours the government, but Poland has come under the EU spotlight for weakening the Constitutional Tribunal and the European Commission has begun monitoring the [rule of law](#) due to concerns over the new government's actions. This could add further fuel to religious Euroscepticism in the short term, but in the longer term the Church's close and open association with a single political party could [undermine its position](#) as a moral authority in Poland, while as shown [in my research](#), it has already lost part of its role as guide in people's life.

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