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“A Guest in the House, God in the House”¹ (as long as he/He’s one of us)

After the democratic breakthrough of 1989 Poland embarked on a process of thorough transformation that covered a number of fields. A series of reforms were initiated whose aim was not only to turn the country into a free-market economy, but also to change Polish society into a modern and fully democratic community, on a par with its Western European counterparts. The changes were to bring about the creation of a liberal society that would be inclusive and open to the diversity of its own citizens and the world at large.

This, unfortunately, may be a song of the past. A series of actions have taken place in Poland since the last parliamentary election in autumn 2015 that, in my opinion, are squandering many post-1989 achievements. The current government, from the start, set about introducing reforms that signified a departure from the liberal, open-minded and democratic state and society that many Poles hoped had been re-established after the forty five years of totalitarian Communist rule; reforms that spell the conversion of Poland into a parochial backwater of nationalism, chauvinism, homophobia, xenophobia and inegalitarian gender roles; reforms that the ruling elite, ironically, refers to as “good change”. Sadly, the top-down transmission of these backward and regressive ideas, renamed “patriotism”, “national pride” and “traditional values”, has a corrosive effect on the younger generation, some of whom find them appealing and attractive. In this respect, the detrimental influence of “good change” on the mentality and perception of young Poles may be difficult to rectify. Teaching openness and acceptance is becoming increasingly difficult with such brazen permission to hate.

The Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016 is *post-truth* – an adjective defined as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’². The politicians and ideologues of the Law and Justice party (PiS) have mastered post-truths to perfection, by cherry-picking

¹ A Polish adage on Polish hospitality.

² <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016> (accessed 7 January, 2016).

data that suit them or by drawing on fallacious ones, by conjuring up non-existing facts as well as reinventing, reshaping, reinterpreting or renaming the present and past reality.

The ruling elite are creating new truths, for instance by the persistent reiteration of ungrounded and harmful stereotypes about homosexuals, feminism, socio-cultural gender, Islam and all “others”. For a few years now, they have been tilting at the windmills of (what they have renamed) “gender ideology”, fighting for the chastity and innocence of pure Polish souls (especially those of immaculate Polish children), deaf and immune to arguments refuting their hellfire crusade, such as those provided by academics, including a Catholic professor. And the Ministry of Justice is working on a motion to rescind the *Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*, accepted by the previous government, unhappy about “gender” being defined as socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men, rather than a fixed and once-and-for-all biological category only.

They Law and Justice politicians have also been speaking of the calamitous effect of “promoting and propagating homosexuality”, as if psychosexual orientation could be a fad and a matter of a temporary decision taken on the spur of a moment or on a whim.

It is thus no wonder that any talk of introducing systemic anti-discrimination education to Polish schools in such an ideological atmosphere is bound to be unsuccessful, and that consequently Polish students automatically repeat the stereotypes they hear, often ignorant of basic facts about gender, feminism or homosexuality, and unable to learn about them at school.

By way of explanation, it must be clarified that so far no Polish government, leftist, centrist or rightist, has created any system of anti-discrimination education. Yet the current conservative nationalist right-wing government not only does not regard such education as necessary, but deems it harmful as undermining apparently true Polish values (i.e. conservatism and traditionalism).

Subsequently, there is no system of anti-discrimination education in Poland, nor does there seem to be any hope of it being introduced in the near future. Neither is there any system of multicultural education in Polish schools, which could teach the diversity of the world and the natural beauty of this fact. Both these areas of education would greatly contribute to filling the infinite ignorance of Polish students (and Polish society in general), at the same time breaking the spell of strangeness, fear and hatred of a wider world, so different from the largely monolithic Polish society.

If any anti-discrimination and multicultural education does take place in Polish schools today, it is a result of grass-roots action taken by individual teachers, and less frequently by individual schools. Many schools are not considering any undertaking of this kind for the following reasons:

- They may find it unimportant or even detrimental. Many school principals and teachers are not liberal-minded and do not deem it necessary to teach openness and the value of diverse identities. They themselves, to a greater or lesser extent, disseminate exclusivist, xenophobic, nationalist, homophobic, antisemitic and racist views. The openly propagated discriminatory views of the ruling elite have created an atmosphere of consent to such attitudes among some teachers and students.
- They may find it difficult to organise as the school curriculum does not include space for regular and thorough anti-discrimination education in its own right. Wherever it does exist, it is included in the syllabi of other subjects.
- They may find it politically inviable and undesirable as it might incur the dissatisfaction of the current education authorities.

Carrying out anti-discrimination education is difficult due to examples given by top state officials. The Polish Ombudsman, or the Commissioner for the Protection of Civil Rights to be precise, an office independent of the Polish Cabinet, and currently one of the few offices not (yet) in control of the ruling elite, warns that the number of hate crimes keeps on increasing and reports a threefold rise in the number of attacks on Muslims in Poland in 2016. Yet the Polish Government Representative for Equal Treatment, an official nominated by the ruling Cabinet, is completely ignorant about those figures and does not keep any record of them³. The Polish Minister of the Interior and Administration dismisses any mention of hate crimes in Poland by calling Poland a safe country, where any rare cases of such crimes are committed only by a “margin of the margin”. Public attention, he claims, should be diverted away from Poland and directed towards countries to the west of it that are facing the problems of both hate crimes and terrorists attacks. He also precisely identifies, or so he believes, the causes of these problems by pointing an accusing finger at what he calls Western “multiculti”, political correctness, which he openly castigates, and opening their borders to immigrants from the Middle East and Northern Africa. Sleep safe and sound, sweet Poland.

As if that were not enough, the Prime Minister dissolved the Council for the Prevention of Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Intolerance in April 2016, whose members included

³ By the way, the current government has changed the name of the office to that of the “Government Representative for Civic Society and Equal Treatment”, as if in an attempt, I presume, to dilute the subversive overtone of egalitarianism inscribed in the nature of that post.

representatives of various ministries, the police and other state offices. And the Polish Ministry of Justice sees nothing reprehensible in propagating the Neo-Nazi version of the Celtic cross, accompanied by the slogan “white pride”. Surely, states the Ministry, these symbols simply stand for a “movement that opposes miscegenation”, and are by no means references to Nazism or Fascism, illegal in Poland.

The government politicians have thus proven that, contrary to Poles’ own high opinion of their hospitality and openness, on which they frequently pride themselves, some sections of Polish society are increasingly xenophobic and closed to otherness. Their Catholicism, in turn, is merely nominal, rather than essential and integral, going against the fundamental message of the Christian “love of thy neighbour” and advocating a commandment of “hate thy neighbour in word and deed”. Sadly, the ruling elite is largely to blame. Welcome to great white Catholic (?) Poland.

The ideologues of the current government are also active in post-truths concerning the Polish past. Since the autumn of 2015, and even much before it, they have been reinterpreting, reshaping or even remaking Polish contemporary history, basing their work not on recent and ground-breaking historical findings, but on pure willingness to mold historical events for their own political and ideological ends. Thus, the story of the Solidarity trade union of 1980 has been retold without Lech Wałęsa in it, with the balance shifted towards marginal heroes that side with the current regime, and all this facilitated by the total control of the Polish state TV and radio. And whenever a renowned contemporary historical figure of well-established reputation and authority happens to criticise Law and Justice openly, then such a person is brutally and coarsely belittled or even denigrated, something which befell Professor Władysław Bartoszewski, a prisoner of Auschwitz and a member of the Polish underground during WWII, a prisoner of the Stalinist regime in post-war Poland, a member of the anti-Communist opposition, and a successful Minister of Foreign Affairs in post-1989 Poland.

One of the manifestations of historical post-truths is also the propagation of the need to do away with the so-called “pedagogy of shame”. The term itself is an example of conjuring up an alternative reality and contradicting the positive changes that Polish society underwent after 1989, when, thanks to the courage, sincerity and sense of decorum of its intellectual elites, it began to square its accounts with its own past, collective memory and identity. The “pedagogy of shame” refers critically to the efforts of Polish society to come to terms with its own guilt and stains on the national conscience, resulting from its conduct towards its minorities, mostly Jews and mostly during WWII, though also before and after the war. Any attempts at admitting that in addition to moments of heroic glory and moments of suffering as

victims, Polish history, like that of any other nation, also contains events and processes that are shameful and disgraceful are regarded by Law and Justice supporters as acts of treason and the rejection of the Polish nation. Consequently, the murder of the Jews of Jedwabne and other towns in the area in July 1941 is blamed exclusively on the Germans, while the Kielce pogrom of July 1946 is attributed to some undetermined antisemites⁴.

It is, therefore, difficult to teach students that Polishness, like any other national identity, should be based on truth, whatever it is, and that if Poles want to have the moral right to be proud of the glory and accomplishments of its past, they should also have the courage to face, come to terms with and acknowledge all that is reprehensible and dishonourable in it. Accordingly, schools should use both of these areas for didactic purposes and employ them to educate and bring up new generations of open-minded young Poles that can be simultaneously proud and critical of their own past.

Educating open-minded Poles is also difficult for yet another reason. The dominant rhetoric of the ruling elite to describe Polish collective identity is that of ethno-nationalism, drawing on the ignoble tradition of the pre-war National Democracy, as well as the youth movements of All-Polish Youth and the National Radical Camp, whose ideological manifestos feature elements of Fascism and Nazism. Their definition of who is, and who is not, a Pole, and who is one of “us” and “ours”, is very narrow, exclusivist and discriminatory. 1050 years after the first Polish state came into existence, they speak of “pure” Poles, singling out for rejection all those deemed impurely Polish, or not Polish at all, and excluding from “ours-ness” Poles of other ethnic provenance. In other words, they advocate a regressive leap over a millennium of Polish history back to the post-tribal times of the first Polish ruler in the 10th century, ignoring all the historical, social and cultural developments that have attracted people of other ethnic origin to the Polish lands and shaped them into Poles. The most dubious Poles are thought to be those of Muslim and Jewish descent, though German or Ukrainian Poles are looked upon only slightly more favourably.

Ethno-nationalism and pure Polishness are clad in the attire of patriotism, setting a standard of “pure” patriotism. The Polish government looks approvingly on, or at least turns a blind eye to, the nationalists’ March of Independence on Poland’s Independence Day, commending their patriotism. The Polish Minister of National Defence is planning to create a Territorial Defence Force and encouraging “true” patriots to enlist. These brown-shirt-like militia structures are to constitute a military component subordinate to the Minister himself. Fascism and Nazism revisited?

⁴ This is what Anna Zalewska, the current Minister of National Education, and Dr Jarosław Szarek, the President of the Institute of National Remembrance, stated publically last summer.

All this has tangible consequences for Polish education. Let us look at two. Nationalist organisations and WWII and post-war military underground are expected to be uncritically and unquestioningly glorified; there is no official mention of the crimes committed by some of them. And the Holocaust, though not excluded from education, is not narrated as a story of “our” nation, but that of the Jewish nation only, as if three out of the six million of those murdered were not Jewish Poles; and the idea of Holocaust education being taught to a greater extent and organised as a system, until now still unfulfilled, will have to be postponed until some unspecified future.

Fortunately, there are numerous teachers who look at these issues otherwise and are ready to oppose whatever directives may come from above. Yet at grass roots level they have to deal with an increasing number of students lending their ears to the stories of what is put across as Polish greatness, glory and national pride, and fascinated by the collective power of “true” Polish patriotism. Countering an image transmitted by top state officials over the state media with the force of an individual teacher’s authority is therefore a real challenge.