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Challenges of education on the subject of diversity in contemporary Poland – an introduction

Poland is a very young democracy struggling with many problems related to the lack of strong mechanisms of defence against populism, extreme ideologies and dictatorial inclinations of some politicians. Polish society is just learning what it means to be a responsible citizen, and the ideas of liberal democracy are often perceived as alien, dangerous and threatening to the so-called Polish national tradition.

Following the latest presidential and parliamentary elections, won decisively by the populist nationalist right, the society became even more polarized, which resulted in incessant conflicts and demonstrations of both sides in the streets of Polish cities. The new government would very much like to turn back the time and return to the twentieth century, when all Poles were, according to them, Catholics, when there was no Internet, and, consequently, the access to information was very limited and easily controlled by the authorities. The rulers consider liberal democracy and the ideals of civil society as a threat to themselves and to the national identity of Poles. It is significant that the word “nation” is strikingly present in the public sphere controlled by those in power. And like any administration with authoritarian and populist tendencies, it seeks to control the lives of citizens in all their manifestations: from the intention to introduce a total ban on abortion, through changes in the education system and in the whole syllabus taught in Polish schools, up to persuading Poles that on the borders of their country “thousands of Islamists are just lurking there, waiting to rape Polish women and force the remaining Poles to convert to Islam”. For more than a year, the party that rules Poland has been totally deaf to any contesting arguments, it is absolutely not concerned with the rise of xenophobic attitudes and physical attacks on foreigners, even on persons with not quite Slavic features, calling these incidents irrelevant margins and explaining them by justified fear of refugees. At the same time, increasingly more visible in the public sphere and supported by the rulers are such extreme groups as the National Radical Camp, with an openly racist profile, or the All-Polish Youth – an organization preparing for political activity the far-right political groups.

In a young, fragile democracy, where young people often do not see any bright future in front of them, the nationalist, even fascist slogans are gaining a lot of support.

This is noted by scientists studying the subject, such as Dr Hab. Michał Bilewicz, whose recent research shows that due to the so-called Good Change (the election slogan of the ruling party), the xenophobic, homophobic and anti-Semitic attitudes among Polish youth have increased significantly since 2015. This is also seen by Polish teachers. Observations made by two of them are presented below. They are both very committed educators who devoted much of their work and energy to opening their students to cultural diversity, to shaping an attitude open to dialogue and learning from the richness of multiculturalism.

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