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## ► To cite this version:

Valentin Behr. From Anticommunism to Antiliberalism. Polish Conservative intellectuals' involvement in the transnational circulation of ideas. Politics of Symbolization Across Central and Eastern Europe. Strategies, Conflicts, Solutions, 2021. halshs-03552168

**HAL Id: halshs-03552168**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03552168>**

Submitted on 2 Feb 2022

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**From Anticommunism to Antiliberalism.  
Polish Conservative intellectuals' involvement in the transnational circulation of ideas**

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Chapter in Elżbieta Hałas and Nicolas Maslowski (eds.), *Politics of Symbolization Across Central and Eastern Europe. Strategies, Conflicts, Solutions*, Peter Lang (Studies in Sociology: Symbols, Theory and Society), 2021, p. 241-259.

**Abstract**

Referring to Europe mainly as a Christian civilization, the Polish Law and Justice Party (PiS) takes part in the current struggle over the definition of European values. This chapter argues that current Polish political conservatism is embedded in and contributes to the global conservative political ideas (both European and non-european) that have emerged and consolidated since the 1980s. It focuses on the narrative about European values that has been shaped by Polish conservative intellectuals. The transnational perspective adopted permits to emphasize the circulation of ideas within transnational networks of conservative intellectuals. First, the group of Polish intellectuals that have contributed to shape PiS's political offer is described. Second, the Polish case is situated in the broader context of the reconfiguration of the European Right. Finally, this chapter takes a closer look at the ideology that is promoted by Polish conservative intellectuals, both in Poland and within transnational circles.

**Keywords:** Poland; intellectuals; conservative ideas; transnational circulation of ideas; European values.

## Introduction

During Spring 2020, the *Stowarzyszenie Tworców dla Rzeczypospolitej* [Association of Creators for the Republic], a Polish NGO founded by a Polish Member of the European Parliament from the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* [Law and Justice, PiS] party – Zdzisław Krasnodębski – released on social media a “Preamble for the Constitution of a Federation of European Nations”. Advocating for a “confederation of Nation States”, this constitutional project relies on an allegedly common Western European culture. That culture would have been

*“shaped by various sources, out of which we have to particularly underline the teaching of the Old Testament, Greek thought, Roman State art, the Christian revelation and the heritage of the Romanic, Germanic and Slavic people, and saw the light in an institutionalised form since the formation of the spiritual sovereignty of the Church and of the political authority of the imperial dignity restored in 800.”*<sup>1</sup>

Far from being a solely Polish project, the Preamble was drafted by David Engels, a Belgian historian, professor at the Université libre de Bruxelles and, since 2018, at the *Instytut Zachodni* [Western Institute] in Poznan.

Far from isolated, this example of East-West cooperation is part of a broader phenomenon: in recent years, right-wing conservative projects attempting at thinking Europe anew, understood not only as the European Union (EU) but also more generally as European civilization, have emerged: Visegrad States, with Poland and Hungary’s “illiberal democracy” at the forefront, tried to challenge the Paris-Berlin axis in EU politics; Donald Trump’s former adviser Steve Bannon settled *The Movement*, a Brussels-based organization which ambioned – and failed – to rally European populists and nationalists in the prospect of the 2019 European election; European intellectuals from several EU States made an attempt to outline the tenets of a European conservative renewal<sup>2</sup>. Engels’ “Preamble for the Constitution of a Federation of European Nations”, together with his book *Renovatio Europae* (Engels 2019), is part of that latter attempt.

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: <https://www.davidengels.be/preamble> (accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>2</sup> See the “Paris Statement”, signed by intellectuals participating in the activities of the Centre for European Renewal, a conservative pan-European think tank to which I shall come back later in this chapter, available at: <https://thetrueeurope.eu/> (accessed 20 August 2020).

These projects are not ideologically homogeneous. However, they are signs of a work of ideological production, or a metapolitical<sup>3</sup> work, realized by loose and partly overlapping transnational networks. These networks bring together a few politicians, but mainly scholars and intellectuals. They contribute to the “democratic backslide” to which many research works have been dedicated recently, however the ideological dimension of that phenomenon remains under researched so far.

Indeed, the flourishing scholarly literature devoted to the rise of illiberal or authoritarian governments throughout the world have been focusing on party politics, voters’ support and institutional change (Csillag and Szelenyi 2015; Rupnik 2017; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Blokker 2019; Vachudova 2019). Political parties such as PiS in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary have often been labelled as “populist” (Mudde 2007; Pankowski 2010; Minkenberg 2017;) and/or “Eurosceptic” (Neumayer 2008; Dakowska 2010). Nonetheless, the academic literature dedicated to populism and Euroscepticism is rarely preoccupied with ideology. It seldom questions the societal blueprint supported by these political groupings. An exception is the literature devoted to the ideational dimension of the democratic backslide, often inspired by political economy and/or discourse analysis (Bluhm and Varga 2019). As Buzogány and Varga, put it, “the contestation of liberalism is not reducible to political parties and instead should be approached as a broader phenomenon”, namely by tackling its ideological dimension (Buzogány and Varga 2018).

While populism has often been labelled as a “thin” ideology, I would argue that “conservative” is a more appropriate label when it comes to describing the worldview of the Polish intellectuals I deal with in this chapter, for at least two reasons. First, they claim the conservative label for themselves, so even if we should put into question the way social actors define themselves, it seems to be a good starting point in the case of political thinkers. Second, this label permits to free oneself from certain preconceptions conveyed by other labels such as populism, illiberalism or Euroscepticism. All too often, such labels implicitly convey assumptions that tend to “exoticize” Central Europe as a region that would be *a priori* undemocratic. The notion of conservatism, on the

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<sup>3</sup> By metapolitical work, I mean political reflection produced by “intellectuals rejecting direct and activist parliamentary or extra-parliamentary political interventions and focusing their energies on changing hearts and minds and the ‘conquest’ of civil society”. See Bar-On (2013, 3).

contrary, permits us to situate the PiS party and its intellectual backers within a broader phenomenon, that of the ideological reconfiguration of European right-wing parties, in their diversity (Christian-democracy, neo-conservatism, neo-liberalism, nativism, etc.). I thus follow Frédéric Zalewski's proposal to consider the “democratic backslide” in Hungary and Poland as “conservative revolutions”, that is, as variants of the conservative shifts that occurred in the United States and Great Britain in the 1980s (Zalewski 2016).

Hence, it is important not to reduce the “democratic backslide” to a Central European or post-communist problem. The puzzle at stake is that of an emerging transnational cooperation between European conservatives. The “National Conservatism Conference” organized in Rome in early 2020, which brought together intellectual and political figures such as Ryszard Legutko – Polish PiS MEP and philosopher – , Marion Maréchal (from the French National Rally) and Viktor Orban, among other speakers from all over Europe, was just another example of that potential cooperation.

Thus, there is a need for in-depth studies of what has been described as a “cultural backlash” that would bear similarities between Donald Trump’s election as President of the United States, Brexit and the rise of “authoritarian populism” (Norris and Inglehart 2019). The uses of “gender ideology” and the “refugee crisis” in the context of electoral campaigns in Poland has already been emphasized (Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Lewis and Waligórska 2019). “Culture wars” seem to be particularly intense in Central Europe, where since 1989 political divides have been articulated around cultural rather than social issues (Kubik 2003; Ost 2005; Brier 2009).

Since political ideas are social constructs, it is necessary to look at the actors – mainly intellectuals – who produce them and therefore foster the cultural divides. Kubik emphasizes the role of “cultural entrepreneurs” (i.e. political and cultural elites) to underline the fact that cultural legacies are “transmitted”, not “received from”: they are not just a “weight” of the past, they are constructed, shaped, used, by these entrepreneurs (Kubik 2003, 318). As demonstrated by Bourdieu, intellectuals have the power of preserving or transforming the social world by preserving or transforming the categories of perception of that world (Bourdieu 1992, 2001). Bourdieu’s field theory constitutes a particularly relevant methodological framework to study the political role of the Polish intelligentsia which, due to historical reasons and Poland’s positions as a “semi-periphery” of Western Europe,

appears more autonomous from the State than in most Western countries. That would explain the rather favoured position of members of the intelligentsia and the domination of cultural capital over political capital within the Polish field of power (Zarycki, Smoczyński, and Warczok 2017; Smoczyński and Zarycki 2017).

Thinking in terms of differentiated social fields permits to grasp the multipositionnality of Polish conservative intellectuals, which is indeed considerable: Legutko and Krasnodębski are both scholars and Members of the European Parliament at the same time. They also have been quite successful as columnists in the press and media for a while. At the crossroads between the political, intellectual and media fields, they enjoy a genuine multipositionnality that permits them to cumulate resources, such as political, social and symbolic capital. The biographic approach adopted in this chapter permits to highlight the successful career of such intellectual entrepreneurs, who have had some success in the field of ideological production, both in Poland and abroad. Indeed, their social and intellectual trajectories should not be isolated from the dynamics of the transnational exchanges in which they participate.

Focusing on Polish actors, but willing to resist any form of methodological nationalism, this chapter seeks to show how the work of ideological production by Polish conservative intellectuals resonates with developments elsewhere in Europe (and beyond). The aim is not to set up Central Europe as a model or a warning to the world (Krastev and Holmes 2019), but to treat it as a vantage point from which to grasp reconfigurations of the European Right.

To do so, I will focus on the way European values are tackled by Polish conservative intellectuals. Defined by Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, European values are subject to conflicting uses, in the absence of a consensus on their meaning (Foret and Calligaro 2018; Coman and Leconte 2019)<sup>4</sup>. While article 7 has been triggered against Poland's reforms of the judiciary that would threaten the rule of law, the conflict is not just about diverging understandings of European values, but about the very definition of European identity and, therefore, of the course of the European Union.

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<sup>4</sup> The Treaty on European Union identifies human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights as EU values.

This chapter is divided into three parts. First, the group of Polish intellectuals that have contributed to shape PiS's understanding of European values is described. Second, they are situated in the broader context of the reconfiguration of the European Right, by examining transnational networks to which they have contributed so far. Finally, I take a closer look at the ideology that is promoted by Polish conservative intellectuals, both in Poland and within transnational circles.

### **1/ Between academia, media and politics: the conservative fraction of the Polish intelligentsia**

It has already been noticed that intellectuals have directly contributed not only to the elaboration of Law and Justice's political offer, but also to the concrete exercise of power by that Party, as members of parliament or as experts and policy advisers (Dąbrowska 2019). Conservative intellectuals seem to have been particularly efficient in creating a set of think tanks that have greatly contributed to design Law and Justice's manifestos. While this has been well established in the case of economic policies (Dąbrowska, Buzogány, and Varga 2019), I focus here on values and morality issues.

Among Polish conservative think tanks, the *Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej* [Centre for Political Thought, OMP] deserves special attention. Established in the early 1990s, the OMP has been one of the hotbeds of conservative political philosophy in Poland. Other think tanks, journals and magazines have contributed to the development of conservative ideas since the 1990s (Matyja 2015), however it is striking how several scholars that took part in the metapolitical work of the OMP (mainly conferences and publications) have subsequently held leading political positions with the support of PiS. To name just a few, among the most illustrative of multipositionnality and among the most active in the public debate are Andrzej Nowak, Wojciech Roszkowski, Krzysztof Szczerski and the aforementioned Zdzisław Krasnodębski and Ryszard Legutko<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The biographical information provided here has been collected online (institutional websites, media websites, *Wikipedia*) and during two interviews I conducted with Ryszard Legutko and Zdzisław Krasnodębski.

### **Biography of Zdzisław Krasnodębski**

Krasnodębski, born in 1953, graduated in sociology at the University of Warsaw (1976), where he defended a PhD in 1984. He lectured at the University of Warsaw. Since the early 1980s, he made a few stays in German universities. From 1991 to 1995, he was a professor at the universities of Kassel and then Bremen. When he returned to Poland he was, next to his academic career, a columnist for several newspapers and magazines of a conservative and/or catholic orientation, such as *Znak*, *Rzeczpospolita*, *Gazeta Polska* and *W Sieci*. After the creation of the PiS party in 2001, he progressively became a close adviser to that party. In 2010, the President of the Republic of Poland Lech Kaczyński appointed him a member of the National Development Council, an advisory body to the President. In 2014, he became a member of the PiS Programme Council before being elected a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) following the European elections held the same year. Between 2018 and 2019, he served as vice-president of the European Parliament and was re-elected as MEP in 2019. In his essays and press articles, Krasnodębski has been a strong advocate of the PiS party and criticized on many occasions the so-called liberal-left opposition. In 2016, he became a co-host of *Konfrontacje Idei* [Confrontation of Ideas], a programme displayed every second week on Polish public radio.

### **Biography of Ryszard Legutko**

Born in 1949, Legutko graduated at Jagiellonian University in Cracow, in English philology (1973) and in philosophy (1976). He became a member of the academic staff in the same university, as a specialist of ancient Greek philosophy. An English-speaking academic, interested in conservative political thought, he had the opportunity to travel to the West as visiting scholar to the University of Chicago at the beginning of the 1980s. When he came back to Poland, Legutko joined the editorial team of the underground magazine *Arka*, published in Cracow since 1983. Legutko was its chief editor from 1987 to 1991. From 1992 to 2005, he was the chairman of the Centre for Political Thought (OMP). In 2005, following PiS victory in both presidential and legislative elections, Legutko stepped into professional politics. He was elected senator and resigned from his position of chairman of the OMP. He was then briefly minister of Education in 2007 and failed to be re-elected



as senator after the early legislative elections held in the fall of 2007. Then, he joined the Cabinet of the President of the Republic of Poland, before being elected as MEP in 2009. He has been re-elected twice, in 2014 and 2019. In the European Parliament, Legutko is the co-chairman of the European Conservatives and Reformists group (ECR), that associates the PiS representatives with the British conservatives, among others. His book *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies*, published in 2016 as the English translation of a book previously published in Polish, enjoyed a genuine echo in European conservative circles (Legutko 2016).

Next to Krasnodębski and Legutko, many PiS politicians and political advisers have been involved in the OMP's activities. To name just a few, among them are Ryszard Terlecki, professor of history, currently chairman of the PiS parliamentary caucus in the lower house of the Polish parliament; Andrzej Nowak, professor of history, a well-known public intellectual and adviser of the President of the Republic of Poland, who replaced Legutko as chief editor of the *Arka* magazine in 1991; Wojciech Roszkowski, also a historian, who was a PiS MEP between 2004 and 2009 and recently published a political essay devoted to the “fall of Western civilization” (Roszkowski 2019); and Krzysztof Szczerski, professor of political science, currently Head of the Cabinet of the President of the Republic of Poland and his adviser for European Affairs. Such multipositionnality is not peculiar to conservative intellectuals. Rather, it is a structural feature of the Polish intelligentsia (Zarycki, Smoczyński, and Warczok 2017). It clearly distinguishes Polish intellectuals – for whom the metapolitical work is directly linked with personal political careers – from most of their counterparts in the transnational networks I will present in the next section.

I will deal with Krasnodębski and Legutko in the first place, as they are particularly relevant for the purpose of this chapter. Indeed, they both are allegedly close advisers of Jarosław Kaczyński, the head of the PiS party (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2018). Besides, they co-authored the opening chapter on “values” in the party's program for the 2019 electoral campaign in the legislative election<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Interview led by Valentin Behr with Ryszard Legutko, Brussels, 15 October 2019.

Finally, they are the most active in conservative transnational networks, due to their academic background and thanks to their positions as MEPs<sup>7</sup>.

These intellectuals' multipositionnality, at the crossroads between the academia, the media and politics, is a social resource: it permits some ubiquity, which is a distinctive feature of members of the elite (Boltanski 1973). Multipositionnality results in the blurring of frontiers between scholarly work and political involvement, between the academic and the intellectual fields (Pinto 1986). One can assume that such blurring favours intellectuals' influence, on both the definition of the public debate (via conferences and publications) and the definition of the political offer (through positions of advisers). Taking part in the "struggle for the imposition of the dominant worldview", intellectuals make a key contribution to the definition of the realm of the "politically thinkable". Their work of ideological production contributes to the shaping of what Bourdieu calls "doxa", i.e. "the set of beliefs that form the basis of the worldview and make the world go without saying" (Sapiro 2007).

Conferences gathering various members of the elite such as scholars, journalists, politicians or clergymen, constitute important "*lieux neutres*" (neutral spaces) which favour the rapprochement and collusions between different fractions of the field of power (Bourdieu and Boltanski 1976). Since its creation, the OMP has played a key role in the organization of such events, contributing to provide political leaders with new catchwords and ideas. The conferences *Polska Wielki Projekt* [Poland's Great Project], organized each year since 2011 by the OMP together with other conservative NGOs and think tanks, consisted initially in an attempt at shaping a cultural counter hegemony in the Gramscian sense. Since PiS came to power in 2015, it has become a major event organized under the patronage of the President of the Republic of Poland and sponsored by big public companies. It gathers members of governments, CEOs of big public companies, intellectuals and politicians from across Europe, who meet to discuss various issues such as economic policies, challenges of EU integration and of course, morality issues. Hence, I agree with Trencsény when he points at

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<sup>7</sup> Here it is worth recalling that academic degrees and expertise are key resources for political careers at the EU level (Beauvallet and Michon 2010; Neumayer 2010).

*“the profound ambiguity of the notion of civil society, which, in the context of the East European transitions, has been perceived as a key agent of democratization. To the contrary, what the last decade has shown is the immense power of a profoundly antiliberal civic mobilization that has created an antidemocratic and often ethno-nationalist “parallel polis” [...].”* (Trencsényi 2014, 151)

Decentring the focus of analysis from political parties to the work of ideological production that takes place primarily within civil society, invites to reflect on the social forces that support the so-called illiberal regimes, be it business interests or NGOs such as *Ordo Iuris* which, in Poland, lobbied for a total ban on abortion. By looking at the field of ideological production, it is therefore not a question of considering that a party like PiS would be more ideological and less pragmatic than another, but of considering the configurations of actors that support this party and contribute to setting its agenda.

The social space in which Polish conservative intellectuals operate, i.e. the field of ideological production, is also dependent on transnational intellectual exchanges. Ideas are products that circulate internationally, although this circulation goes hand in hand with differentiated appropriations and translations, depending on the characteristics of the national and transnational spaces between which ideas circulate (Bourdieu 2002). The following section examines some transnational spaces in which conservative ideas circulate.

## **2/ From the Cold War to EU accession: Polish contributions to right-wing transnational networks**

Among the rich scholarly literature devoted to the transnational circulation of ideas, the dissemination of hegemonic ideas produced in the United States or Western Europe has dominated the field so far. This is the case with studies on the diffusion of neo-liberalism, through transnational think tanks such as the Mont-Pèlerin Society (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). However, little is known of transnational conservative networks.

Based on my ongoing research, I have been able to identify at least three distinct networks. This is by no means exhaustive, but it permits to highlight the diversity of the meeting spaces and their progressive evolution over time. These networks were indeed constituted at different times and invite us to consider the ideological evolution of the Right since the end of the Cold War.

First of all, Cold War anti-communist networks have been channels of circulation of conservative ideas. The already mentioned *Arka* magazine – whom Legutko was chief editor in the 1980s – hosted contributions from Western authors, mostly French, British and US conservatives, neoconservatives and libertarians. Many Western authors were contributors of anti-communist and conservative publications such as *Encounter*, the *Salisbury Review* or *Commentary*. Contacts between *Arka*'s editorial staff and Western scholars are also illustrated by the international “Patronage Council” that was made of prominent Western intellectuals, who were supposed to constitute a symbolic protection for the underground magazine. All of them had links with anti-communist Cold War organizations such as the *Congress for Cultural Freedom* (1950-1967) – which became the *International Association for Cultural Freedom* (1967-1978) after it was revealed that the organization had been financed by the CIA<sup>8</sup> – and the *Committee for the Free World*, a neoconservative anti-communist think tank in the United States.

Next to the criticism of soviet-style regimes, communism and totalitarianism, contributors to the magazine shared their concerns about Western “culture wars” and “political correctness”, thus contributing to the diffusion of Western conservative thinking in Poland, already before 1989. As a result, criticism towards Western liberal democracy was a quite common topic in *Arka* even before the fall of the communist regime.

Besides *Arka*'s international connections, it is worth mentioning the *Jagiellonian Trust* Foundation, an NGO established in the early 1980s by the late British conservative philosopher Roger Scruton and Caroline Cox, a member of the British House of Lords. Designed on the model of the *Jan Hus Educational Foundation*, set up earlier to operate in Czechoslovakia, the *Jagiellonian Trust* supported anti-Communist dissent in the former Soviet bloc, supplying conservative circles with books and magazines. Regular lectures by foreign guests were also held in private apartments.

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<sup>8</sup> See Scott-Smith and Lerg (2017).

Legutko and Krasnodębski were the Foundation's contact persons in Poland, in Cracow and Warsaw respectively (Krasnodębski, 2016).

Eurosceptic political networks established already in the 1990s constituted another space of circulation of conservative ideas between East and West. A closer cooperation between British conservatives and their Central European counterparts emerged in the 1990s (Slobodian and Plehwe forthcoming). Indeed, British conservatives have taken the EU enlargement to the East as an opportunity to consolidate a Eurosceptic right-wing that would counter-balance the French-German axis and advocate in favour of an intergovernmental conception of the EU. This ultimately led to the creation of the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists (AECR), launched in March 2009 with the Prague Declaration, spearheaded by the British Tories and members of Vaclav Klaus's ODS (Neumayer 2010). The Prague Declaration linked neoliberal and conservative thinking. In 2010, the AECR launched its own think tank, *New Direction* whose patron was Margaret Thatcher until her death in 2013.

Even if that East-West cooperation was primarily stimulated by the Czech ODS rather than the Polish Law and Justice, PiS has become, next to the British Tories, the most numerous delegations in the European Conservative and Reformists parliamentary group (ECR), that succeeded to AECR following the 2014 European election. Legutko – as president of the PiS delegation in the European Parliament and vice-president of the ECR group since 2017 – and Krasnodębski – as vice-President of the European Parliament between 2018 and 2019 – became thus prominent actors of the European Right. However, the ECR group appears weakened after the departure of the British MEPs following Brexit.

The third space of transnational circulation of conservative ideas is that of the Centre for European Renewal (CER), a pan-European think tank bringing together scholars and intellectuals from across Europe. The CER was established in 2007 by participants to the Vanenburg meetings that take place each year since 2006. It publishes a monthly magazine, *The European Conservative*, which is

*“committed to contributing to a renewal of Western culture, and seeks to promote conservative and Christian thinkers and ideas from Europe, the Americas, and other areas of*

*the world. It thus serves as an outlet for many varieties of ‘conservatism’ — including but not limited to agrarianism, classical liberalism, constitutional monarchism, distributism, libertarianism, radical localism, and traditionalism.”*<sup>9</sup>

Roger Scruton has been a major figure of the CER until his death in January 2020. Among the participants to the Vanenburg meetings and contributors to *The European Conservative* are Ryszard Legutko, David Engels, Hungarian philosopher and Fidesz adviser András Láncki, British writer and political commentator Douglas Murray, and French philosopher Chantal Delsol. The CER, which is formally hosted by the Edmund Burke Foundation in the Netherlands, draws inspiration from the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI), an organization dedicated to the diffusion of conservative political thought on American campuses, which has sponsored the first Vanenburg meetings. Just as the ISI but with meagre means, the CER targets primarily higher education and culture, with an explicit reference to anti-communism. On the first Vanenburg Conference, Douglas Murray stated that: “We may have won the Cold War, but we’ve lost the universities”<sup>10</sup>.

These three distinct networks also correspond to different but partly overlapping historical moments, as do the actors to be found in several of these networks, such as Legutko. The role of the British conservatives in the constitution of an intergovernmentalist coalition opposed to a federal Europe and defending a classic neo-liberal political agenda appears today as one intermediate step. This step may have helped the newcomers from post-communist Europe to learn the rules of the political game at the EU level and to diversify their international connexions, towards the political field rather than academia. It now appears to have come to an end, both as a result of Brexit and the contestation of the neo-liberal consensus in Poland and Hungary, which resulted in the implementation of heterodox economic policies, marked by a form of social redistribution and the desire to support, through State intervention in the economy, a national capitalism.

The creation of the CER is more of a metapolitical work, in which the question of European values has a prominent place. However, one should not overestimate the ideological homogeneity of the actors brought together in this initiative, who come from different tendencies – intellectual and

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<sup>9</sup> Available at: <https://europeanconservative.com/about/> (accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Summary of the first Vanenburg meeting, available at: <https://europeanrenewal.org/history/> (accessed 20 August 2020).

political – of the Right. Similarly, the 2019 European elections have shown that despite the increase in seats of right-wing political groups opposed to a federal Europe and their willingness to broaden their alliances, there is currently no consensus between these political forces, either in terms of agenda or of leadership (Camus and Lebourg 2019).

However, at the metapolitical level, we note the existence of meeting spaces between different fractions of the Right. *The Polska Wielki Projekt* conferences are one such place, where intellectuals such as Eric Zemmour, David Engels, or György Schöpflin join the discussions with representatives from Hungarian, Czech, French, or Italian political parties. Such transnational “*lieux neutres*” even reveal connections between fractions of the Right and the Far Right that are otherwise in competition in their respective countries: for instance, members of the French *National Rally* and *Les Républicains*, or of the Italian *Lega* and *Fratelli d'Italia*, took part in the *Polska Wielki Projekt* conferences, albeit on different panels.

It remains to be seen what the political agenda of this prospective pan-European conservative Right might be. The question is even more important as the metapolitical work is above all a way to mobilize voters and to strategically distinguish one’s political camp from its opponents. The work of ideological production is indeed part of the work of political mobilization, by producing catchwords and worldviews.

### **3/ From anti-communism to anti-liberalism**

Looking at the writings of Polish conservative intellectuals, one can easily note a strong adequacy between their discourse and that of the PiS party on a set of “morality issues” such as LGBTIQ rights, gender, immigration, etc., of which the civilizational conception of Europe is an important aspect. To understand how scholars such as Krasnodębski and Legutko became politicians at the forefront of PiS, it is worth coming back to 1989 and its aftermath. As Brier puts it, “The origins of the culture cleavage of the 1990s and 2000s undeniably lie in the social conflict of the 1980s” (Brier 2009, 68). In Poland, right-wing anti-communist narratives describe 1989 as a “false” or “stolen” revolution. They have fuelled Law and Justice’s rhetoric and legitimized its strengthening

control of the Polish State institutions, judiciary and media since 2015. Questioning the “Round Table Agreements” is at the heart of the “4th Republic” project advocated by the PiS (Brier 2009). The belief that 1989 did not mark a genuine break with the communist regime fuels the speeches of the party's leaders, according to which a “liberal left-wing” establishment defending its own interests has been dominating Polish political life for the past thirty years. Thus, the “conservative revolution” led by the PiS since 2015 is legitimized by historical arguments.

If the Polish conservative Right has been rather marginal on the political scene until the 2000s, the anti-communist narrative of post-1989 transformations was actively cultivated by conservative intellectuals. Thus, since the 1990s, OMP and the *Arka/Arcana* magazine have been developing core ideas to be found in the worldview proposed by PiS nowadays. It is worth recalling that the strategy that led to the Round Table Agreements of 1989 was disputed among dissent in the late 1980s already. Fractions of the dissidence movement were hostile to the idea of power sharing between Solidarity and the Communist Party. In 1988 already, Legutko published an article in *Arka* titled “So that the opposition would be the opposition”, in which he criticized what he called the “partnership strategy” (Legutko, 1988).

The lack of consensus in Poland on the meaning of dissent and the political transition of 1989 fuelled political cleavages. The narrative of the political capture by the “liberal-left” was thus reactivated at the time of the debates on the 1997 Constitution, but also during the discussions on EU accession and the European constitution, because the conservative and ethno-religious Right remained durably distant from power and these important texts were for the most part negotiated and adopted by majorities from the post-communist Left (Blokker 2019).

A reactivation of the dissident spirit is reflected in Legutko's book, *The Demon in Democracy*. In this book, Legutko claims that liberal democracy constitutes a danger similar to Soviet-style communism, as both would be ideological projects aiming at destroying “traditional values” (i.e. family, the nation) in order to build a new political social order, defined as secular and post-national. Beyond communism, it is therefore any political project based on the promotion of individual rights that is perceived as threatening the political community. Hence the repeated criticism of the French revolution by Polish conservative intellectuals.



Opening Law and Justice's political programme for the 2019 electoral campaign, the chapter on "values" co-authored by Legutko and Krasnodębski defines "Polish Europeanness" with references to the Christian, Greek and Roman heritage (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, 2019). While that heritage is presented as part of a common European identity, the two authors advocate for a "Europe of diversity", "including different political cultures" (p. 19). Thus, they reject any form a cultural unification that would be encouraged by the EU and present their "Eurorealism" as follows:

*"For us, the European Union is primarily a union of states. We are in favour of a 'Europe of homelands'. We want the treaties to be respected and respect for the principle of subsidiarity. We reject political correctness, that is, restrictions on freedom of speech and opinion that are hitting many more and more painfully of Europeans, imposed today not only by cultural violence, but also through administrative action and criminal repression. We do not accept the uncontrolled erosion of the sovereignty of European homelands."* (p. 20)

This ideological corpus is not specifically Polish. *The European Conservative* regularly reports on the progress of perceived threats to the "natural order" across Europe, such as gay marriage, sexual education and gender studies, next to post-colonial issues or immigration. The consequence is a promotion of a conservative vision of European values, best illustrated by the "Paris Statement", a common declaration released by intellectuals of the Centre for European Renewal in May 2017<sup>11</sup>. Titled "A Europe we can believe in", the statement is made of 35 points that form a kind of manifesto. It distinguishes between a "false" Europe, incarnated by the European Union, and a "true Europe", understood as "a community of nations". It criticizes the "denial of Christian roots of Europe", while Muslims would be tolerated. The authors consider that:

*"The true Europe is in jeopardy. The achievements of popular sovereignty, resistance to empire, cosmopolitanism capable of civic love, the Christian legacy of humane and dignified life, a living engagement with our Classical inheritance – all this is slipping away. As the patrons of the false Europe construct their faux Christendom of universal human rights, we are losing our home."*

Finally, the Paris Statement ends with a declaration in support of "populism":

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<sup>11</sup> Available at: <https://thetrueeurope.eu/a-europe-we-can-believe-in/> (accessed 20 August 2020).

*“There is great anxiety in Europe today because of the rise of what is called ‘populism’ [...]. We acknowledge that much in this new political phenomenon can represent a healthy rebellion against the tyranny of the false Europe, which labels as ‘anti-democratic’ any threat to its monopoly on moral legitimacy. The so-called “populism” challenges the dictatorship of the status quo, the ‘fanaticism of the centre’, and rightly so. It is a sign that even in the midst of our degraded and impoverished political culture, the historical agency of the European peoples can be reborn.”*

Here we see how transnational networks brought together thanks to the CER, among others, can serve as advocates of the “illiberal regimes” of Central Europe facing stronger critiques coming from the EU and some member States. Among the signatories of the Paris Statement are conservative intellectuals from France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland. Next to Legutko are Roger Scruton, Chantal Delsol, David Engels, Czech conservative politician Roman Joch and András Láncki, a political philosopher who has been the chairman of *Századvég Foundation*, the principal think-tank of the Fidesz party.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding these transnational networks’ impact on the ongoing reconfiguration of the European Right remains a research agenda. Nonetheless, Central European intellectuals have provided a key contribution to both the shaping of such networks and their ideological equipment. In an interesting move, the Central European “conservative revolutions” appear as references to some of the Western conservatives. Considering themselves as the true defenders of “European values”, understood mainly as Christian, PiS and Fidesz challenge the European values as they have been defined in the European treaties, mainly the rule of law and fundamental rights. Or, to put it like Holly Case: “We are the real Europeans, Orban and Kaczynski claim, and if the West wants to save itself, it will have to imitate the East” (Case 2019). The examination of transnational conservative networks from the perspective of ideological production invites to formulate the hypothesis of a reconfiguration of the European Right on the basis of a cultural agenda, in connection with migration

issues (multiculturalism) and family policy (LGBTIQ rights, abortion, etc.). The apparent success of the rhetoric of “traditional values” in the political competitions of the member States – not only in Central Europe – raises the question of the contours of a political Europe: on which political values should European integration be based?

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