Sociology

'Crisis' and Migration in Poland: Discursive Shifts, Anti-Pluralism and the Politicisation of Exclusion

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Abstract

This essay illustrates the extent to which crisis has had an impact on public perceptions and discourses of contemporary migration in Poland. We focus on the actual moment of the 'coming together' between crisis- and immigration-related discourses and argue that this connection has arisen as part of the recent political strategies of Poland's right-wing populist government 'Law and Justice' (PiS) party. The strong anti-immigration and anti-refugee rhetoric orchestrated by PiS across the Polish public sphere has also played a pivotal role in countenancing xenophobic as well as outright racist sentiments in wider Polish public discourse and society.

Keywords

Anti-refugee rhetoric, crisis, discursive shifts, migration, Poland, public sphere

Crisis and Immigration in Poland

This essay aims to briefly illustrate the extent to which crisis has had an impact on public perceptions and discourses of contemporary migration in Poland. The central premise of the article is that the link between migration and crisis was, for a long time, absent from the Polish public sphere. As discussed below, this link was introduced only very recently – more specifically in the context of Europe's so-called 'refugee crisis' in 2015 – as part of a politically motivated, strategic move to promote anti-immigrant views by the current right-wing populist governing party, Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* – PiS).

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Our particular interest here lies in the actual moment of the 'coming together' between crisis- and immigration-related discourses, and in showing how human mobility has come to be perceived and discursively constructed, even if not outright labelled, as a form of 'crisis'. This process was neither straightforward nor, at least initially, explicit. Hence, while the word 'crisis' was incorporated into official and apparently neutral-sounding language (for instance, in discussions about EU asylum seeker relocation quotas set in 2015), it would eventually become increasingly related to progressively radical views against refugees and immigration in general.

The recent establishment of the connection between crisis and immigration has also led to the creation of new turns of phrase including, most notably, that of '*kryzys migrancki*' (migrant crisis). Alongside the other and more neutral-sounding '*kryzys migracyjny*' (migration crisis), the former term is now used in both public and private discourses in Poland, not only to describe certain events (such as the increase in refugees arriving on southern European shores during 2015) but also to express negative attitudes about migrants in Poland. '*Migrancki*' as a word is, in fact, somewhat unusual and carries implicit negative connotations through associations with words such as, inter alia, '*dyletancki*' (dilettante) or '*oszukański/oszukancki*' (bogus). Hence, narrations about Europe's recent 'refugee crisis' have enabled the formation of a variety of imaginaries based upon exclusionary, ethno-nationalist and even Islamophobic views that have, in turn, served to strategically politicise the topic of immigration in contemporary Poland.

A cursory historical analysis of the use of the word *kryzys*, however, reveals that the above development is a new phenomenon in Polish public discourse. In fact, general references to *kryzys* had previously been somewhat limited and if the term was used at all it was mainly associated with economic, political or socio-economic variations of crisis. Such was the case in post-war communist public discourse in which any aspect of economic downturn or related socio-economic distress was defined as 'crisis' by the communist propaganda, also in order to minimise the role of the regime's flawed policies. For example, on the few occasions that food rationing was introduced during the 1980s, this was invariably legitimised by the unspecified notion of 'crisis', which deflected attention from the consequences of macroeconomic and industrial policies (Grala, 2005). The very same logic persisted well into the post-1989 period of transformation. Successive periods of internal economic adversity – especially during the institutionalisation of the free-market system and accelerated modernisation of the early 1990s (Alexander et al., 2004; Ziółkowski, 1999) – were narrated in terms of *kryzys* in both political and media spheres. Unsurprisingly, the 2008 global financial and economic crisis turned '*kryzys*' into a more sustained topic of public debate but here the common argument was that this was an extraneous, international crisis that had a rather limited political and economic impact on Poland (Krzyżanowska, 2012a).

Anti-Pluralism and the Shift from Emigration to Immigration

The recent establishment of the connection between crisis and immigration needs to be understood as the upshot of two very important 'discursive shifts' (Krzyżanowski, 2018). First, it is vital to see this connection not as part of an ongoing tradition of talking about

'crisis' as such but rather as the evolution and perpetuation of a longstanding anti-pluralist stance in Polish society (Starnawski, 2003). At its roots, this stance is eminently political. It stems from the fact that both before and after 1989 Poland had never experienced the development of a western-style polarisation between 'left' and 'right' positions in the political spectrum (Markowski, 1997; Zarycki, 2000). Moreover, despite some efforts, Polish post-1989 civil society has remained, on the whole, weak and continues to be largely ineffectual in counteracting politically driven, anti-pluralist visions (Ekiert and Kubik, 2014). Accordingly, just like elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe (Azmanova, 2009; Krzyżanowska, 2010, 2012b), the views and ideologies existing in Polish society often cannot be easily classified as, say, 'liberal' or 'conservative'. They have mainly been encapsulated and articulated in an array of hybrid political positions, including that of the current PiS government, that have often been underpinned by neoliberal and/or anti-pluralist agendas.

This particular situation has effectively contributed to the lack of development of a deliberative public sphere in Poland after 1989 and has meant that many anti-pluralist or exclusionary imaginaries propagated by the political establishment have ultimately become normalised in Polish society in the absence of any contestation or counter-discursive positions. As a result, Polish politics has remained the key locus for the articulation of various ideological worldviews that have sought to dictate how issues such as social and cultural diversity are defined and (should be) perceived.

Second, the emergent discursive link between immigration and crisis constitutes a significant break with the traditionally strong emphasis on emigration in the Polish collective imagination. This switch was particularly unexpected in the wake of Poland's EU accession in 2004, which saw Polish emigration once again assume a prominent position in national debates as several million Poles left the country for western and northern European states (although, significantly, none, or at least very few, of the related processes was interpreted as a 'crisis').

Importantly, the hegemonic role of emigration in shaping ideas about mobility in Poland has always been framed strongly in culturalist and ethno-nationalist terms. Relatively little attention has been paid, for instance, to the class-based character of outward migration (for a notable exception, see Thomas and Znaniecki, 1927) or to the fact that various deep-seated discriminatory patterns in the Polish society (e.g. anti-Semitism) were often at the roots of different waves of emigration. At the same time, few have been concerned to grapple with Poland's internal cultural diversity (or, in most cases, acute lack thereof). This has ultimately had a profound influence upon the post-1989 Polish public sphere and, crucially, has left the national media ill-prepared for addressing migration and multiculturalism (Krzyżanowski, 2014) or indeed many other forms of pluralism or diversity.

From Anti-Pluralism to Anti-Immigration: The Case of the 'Refugee Crisis'

As already noted, Europe's so-called 'Refugee Crisis' that has evolved since 2015 has not only brought about an unprecedented increase in the quantity of news items about migrants and refugees but has also been one of the main reasons for a qualitative change in Polish public discourse that has translated into a notable radicalisation of exclusionary views.

These changes have been fuelled by the governing Law and Justice party that has been intent on introducing and championing an anti-immigration agenda in Poland, at the same time as advancing its already entrenched set of isolationist, Eurosceptic and ethno-nationalist positions (Krzyżanowski, 2018). By drumming up fears about refugees and asylum seekers – as Islamic 'intruders' who have arrived en masse during the Refugee Crisis and who are now ready to 'invade' Christian Poland (see below) – the PiS government has sought to increase opposition towards the EU and thereby legitimate Poland's unwillingness to accept any refugees as part of its legal commitment to the EU's relocation programme. Poland's quota of asylum seekers relocated from Italy and Greece was set at 6182 refugees, but as of late September 2017 Poland was, besides Hungary, the only member of the programme that had still not admitted a single person.[1] The government's refusal to comply with the programme resulted in the European Commission launching a legal case against Poland as well as Hungary and the Czech Republic in June 2017.

It is interesting to note that the politicisation of the arrival of asylum seekers in Europe by Polish politicians during this period rarely made mention of the word 'crisis' unless this was coupled with 'immigration'. Moreover, the bulk of the discursive representation focused less on the usual understanding of crisis (such as the overcrowded conditions on islands in Greece or the tensions on borders in south-eastern Europe) than on the alleged implications that this movement of people would potentially pose to Poland and Polish society. This was done by deploying the classic topoi of populist anti-immigration rhetoric (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001): presenting migrants as a threat and as arriving in great numbers, emphasising their purported criminality and aggressiveness, or claiming their readiness to destroy Christian civilisation.

A key moment that epitomised the politicised discussion of immigration during this period was a speech delivered by the chairman of the Law and Justice Party, Jarosław Kaczyński, during the debate held in the Polish Parliament on 16 September 2015 that followed 'The Prime Minister's Statement on the Immigration Crisis in Europe and Its Repercussions for Poland'. In it, Kaczyński famously spoke of the dangers of immigration, made a string of outlandish Islamophobic accusations and argued that the lack of controls on immigration elsewhere in Europe, and especially in the key EU member states, had resulted in social unrest and tensions. The speech provided an outline of his diagnosis of the 'crisis' facing Europe and the array of repercussions that this external situation could eventually have upon Poland.

> If anyone says this is not true, then let's look around Europe. Take Sweden, for example, where there are 54 areas of this country under Sharia law, where the state has no control […] What is going on in Italy? Churches are taken over and at times are treated as toilets. What is going on in France? Non-stop fights, Sharia law introduced and even patrols checking whether this is observed. The same is the case in London and even in Germany, usually the toughest of places. Do you really want the same thing to happen in Poland: that we stop feeling at home in our own country? Is this what you want?[2]

Such arguments would be frequently repeated in Kaczyński's subsequent speeches and those of other PiS functionaries, and would reverberate across social media and traditional media outlets. In the process, these politicians effectively defined the issues at

stake with regard to the '*kryzys migrancki*' and contributed to the rise of anti-immigrant discourse in Poland (Krzyżanowski, 2018).

Certainly, the politicisation of migration was not only confined to the political sphere but was also perpetuated by the national media that openly supported the Law and Justice government's positions. For example, in the same week that Kaczynski delivered his infamous speech, two Polish conservative weeklies *Do Rzeczy* (A Matter of Fact) and *W Sieci* (In the Net) ran a number of articles and editorials on what they called the 'immigration crisis in Europe'. Having both published relatively little on immigration up until this point, the two magazines now featured blatantly racist images on their covers:[3] in the first case an aerial view of a large group of Arab-looking migrants, mainly young men but also a few women wearing head scarves, who attempt to press forwards; in the second case a photomontage of three stereotypical Muslim males leaning on what looks like a red and white Polish border post, all of whom are dressed in Middle Eastern robes with one wielding a machine gun and another clutching menacingly an ensign with a white crowned eagle on a red background, in other words Poland's national coat of arms. The accompanying headlines were similarly unsubtle: over the large group of people are emblazoned the words 'Those are invaders not refugees: Let's close Poland's borders' while beneath the three men is the simple warning 'They're coming!'. Moreover, both magazines included several articles that made conspicuous use of the word 'crisis' in conjunction with 'migrant' or 'migration' (*kryzys migrancki/migracyjny*): a clear indication about how the connection drawn between these two dimensions had rapidly become an established and unquestioned truism in media and public discourse.

Since 2015, the connection between crisis and migration has become persistent to the point that the relatively neutral '*kryzys migracyjny*' and the negatively charged '*kryzys migrancki*' are now used almost interchangeably in public discourse, especially in PiS-controlled and sympathetic media.[4] This, again, carries significant implications: it allows the negative meanings and connotations to be widely accepted or 'normalised' (Krzyżanowski and Ledin, 2017) as such linguistic compounds spread into the wider public sphere and eventually turn into key elements of public language about pluralism and diversity.

Notes

1. For information regarding EU relocation quotas and numbers of admitted asylum seekers per member state (as of late September 2017), see https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/press-material/docs/state_of_play_-_relocation_en.pdf.
2. For a full transcript of Kaczyński's speech in Polish, see http://sejm.gov.pl/Sejm7.nsf/posiedzenie.xsp?view=1&posiedzenie=100&dzien=1.
3. See http://www.wirtualnemedia.pl/artykul/okladki-w-sieci-do-rzeczy-i-super-expressu-przeciw-uchodzcom-karnowski-po-prostu-nazywamy-problem (last accessed 6 October 2017).

4.   See, for example, https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/mariusz-blaszczak-o-wyborach-w-niemczech-wplyw-kryzysu-migracyjnego-na-wyniki-6169719928182913a; http://www.polskieradio.pl/5/3/Artykul/1595709,Plan-UE-i-Turcji-na-papierze-Do-przezwyciezenia-jest-wiele-przeszkod-analiza (last accessed 6 October 2017).

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