Women's Uprising in Poland Embodied Claims between the Nation and Europe

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ABSTRACT

In 2016 a legislative proposal introducing an abortion ban resulted in female mass mobilisations. The protests went along with frequent claims of Polish as well as European belonging. Next to this, creative appropriations of patriotic symbols related to national movements, fights and uprisings for independence and their transformation into a sign of female bodily sovereignty could be observed all over the country. The appearance of bodies needs to be looked at in relation to the concrete political context and conditions in which bodies materialise (Butler 2015). Bodies are in this sense always relational, but they also depend. The article argues that the constitution of 'European bodies' can serve to empower people exposed to and oppressed by nationalist biopolitics. In such cases a 'European body' might be constituted in distinction to the nation/nationalism and its claim of ownership on female bodies (the 'national body') and by performing multiple belongings extending national belonging.

KEYWORDS

European Union, feminist movement, nationalism, Poland, sovereignty

This article examines the ways in which struggles for (bodily) autonomy are related to claims of European and national belonging in Poland. In this country bodies became especially relevant to political discussions since the conservative party PiS (Law and Justice) came to power and initiated a media and legislative campaign that argues that women would need to sacrifice for the integrity of Polish families and the survival of the nation. Since 2016 the gendered body along with its intimacies and vulnerabilities entered the realm of political struggles in a scale unseen before, as right-wing and religious fundamentalist actors started to introduce new legislative proposals subjecting women to the (biological) reproduction of the national body. Despite existing criticisms over the colonial legacy, East-West hierarchies of belonging and the constitution of an idea of 'proper Europeans', whereby refugees and migrants have

no place (Kattago 2017; Lewicki 2016), Europe as an embodied idea has played an important role in opposing these measures: not only as a model of resistance against ethnic-nationalist and fundamentalist catholic state biopolitics (governing bodies appearance, belonging, survival and death – Foucault [1997]) but also as a form of ‘othering’ (Keinz 2008), as Polish officials insist in their public statements in framing the EU as an imperial power imposing foreign values and ways of looking on the Polish people. In this sense the study of bodies (Butler 2015) requires a relational approach, performing belonging through multiple scales.

In 2016, besides the attempts to further criminalise abortion, the Polish government questioned the legitimacy of The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), which the previous government had ratified in 2015. Before that already the Episcopate of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland had intervened, stating that the convention restricts the ‘sovereign competences of Poland in deciding about ethics and the protection of the family’ (Miziński 2015). One of the key arguments against the convention was that it introduced a cultural concept of ‘gender’, talking of reproductive self-determination and criticising the denial of access to abortion as a form of violence. When opposing the ratification of the convention, actual president Andrzej Duda (then in the electoral campaign) declared that the convention ‘transports foreign content’ and is ‘oppositional to our tradition and culture, with all this we were raised with, what has built the strength of our nation, in the strength of the family’ (Duda 2015).

In recent Polish politics the female body marks the territory on which the nation’s very survival is at stake as well its sovereignty as a state. In the last years multiple protests have been organised against this correlation of the nation with the female body, using creative appropriation of patriotic symbols with symbols of female body parts such as the uterus, breasts or long hair, now transformed into signs of personal autonomy, Europeanisation and of a female national independence. In the online petition ‘Manifest of Free Polish Woman’ (‘Manifest Wolnej Polki’) (Molenda and Wenta-Mielcarek 2016), activists call the commissioner of the EU to issue a supportive statement to the right to legal abortion in Poland. Also, issues such as the proposed ban on abortion or the lack of access to contraception were taken up by the EU-Parliament in several debates and resolutions. ‘European belonging’ in the discourse of the women revolting would also imply

certain standards in regards to gender equality and bodily autonomy in opposition to a rule over their bodies and an exposure to domestic and sexual violence. Sometimes such statements went along with linking 'Europe' with 'civility' or by defining opponents as 'not European'. 'Kaczyński is not a European politician!', 'Shame on you! Europe is watching!' were statements said during a protest in Berlin in October 2016 (N. N. 2016), as a reaction to Jarosław Kaczyński's (leader of the party 'Law and Justice') declaration that every single foetus should be given birth to, even if only for the sake that it can be christened and buried (PAP 2016).

Alongside the mass protests a new phenomenon of public and semi-public sharing of experiences related to the intimate sphere of bodies and their governing could be observed. For example, in early 2017 the wife of local politician Rafał Piasecki ('Law and Justice') revealed photos and records documenting the domestic violence she experienced within that marriage (Kijowska 2017). Such exposures relate to the denial of the problem of domestic violence by the state, for whom the integrity of the family unit for ensuring the reproduction of the national body is the higher good, instead of the integrity of (female) individuals.

In contrast, the EU and its institutions support the idea of the right to 'integrity of a person' (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Article 3) while simultaneously upholding the juristic integrity of nation-states. The nation-state remains in charge of protecting women's human rights granted by the EU (Erdman 2014). It is still the national governments and their institutions that govern most bodies in Europe; however, when positioning themselves as 'European Polish women', the protestors implied that Europe as an idea could be used as a tool for disciplining right-wing political actors in Poland via framing them as underdeveloped and as representatives of the postsocialist *incomplete* Europe. Also, one could argue that Europe and European institutions such as the European Court of Justice, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe (at least symbolically) help to extend the bodily autonomy of women beyond the frame of the nation-state and its internal gender regimes. By positioning themselves as European not only in political discourses but also through the practice of physical mobility within the EU (e.g., in order to terminate pregnancies), territorialised and nationalised female bodies regain agency and extend their borders and possible belongings without overcoming national dependency completely. Sovereignty in such cases is gained through claiming multiple and parallel belongings and by placing oneself in between and in a switching positioning – from Poland to Europe and vice versa.

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