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Postmodernism versus state during pandemic period. The case of Poland¹

Iwona Jakimowicz-Pisarska²

Abstract

The last few months because of COVID-19 pandemic we were able to observe the new challenge for nation states, state's structures and their leaders. Moreover, in the whole world, governments still have to reorganise the states' functioning and adapt new tools and solutions to unknown conditions. As usually, unpredictable issues push the states to modernisation and enquire searching more and more convenient transformation of the state's structure. What is more, this dynamic challenge, which creates an unavoidable situation, betray the weakest and the strongest faces of each state in the world. This text is focused on the European experiences and pays the readers' attention on the examples of European state's reactions in the face of pandemics. The aim of the author is to show the issues which appeared visibly and undoubtedly in European states' functioning on the example of particular decisions and actions taken the last few weeks.

Introduction and methodological background

In this article postmodernism will be the methodological base. There are philosophical or purely theoretical studies on postmodernism as a theory, but it has not been fully applied as a basis for a study on politics or its selected aspects (Bernacki, 2000; Kuźniarz, 2011). This is the reason why, the author would like to show how this paradigm can be used to analyse the current political decisions. We all, the political science researchers, are not only viewers but also participants of the last changes, this method seems to be even more suitable and appropriate to this topic. In the opinion of postmodernists, objective epistemology is not possible, as the researcher is always a part of the researched reality and his involvement, preferences or spectrum of knowledge influence the degree of cognition of the studied political and social space. Thus, research methods, in the postmodern perspective, are neither measurable nor objectively verifiable. Thus, despite critical remarks regarding the objectives of this approach (Barut, 2017; Blok, 2018; Habermas, 2014; Hahne, 2007; Kubera, 2013; Ptaszek, 2009), it seems particularly useful in a specific case of researching the functions of the European nation-state. Moreover, postmodernism, as a current of thought, implies the necessity of combining various areas of knowledge, i.e. history, philosophy or cultural studies, and the acknowledgement of the fact that erudition and intellectually efficient human mind do not have to be sufficient to understand reality. Rather, the postmodernists identify a link between the knowledge obtained and the power by which it was acquired and exercised. The functioning of

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postmodernism within the political science, or even in a more narrow sense as a theory of international relations, is based on a deconstructive approach. Thus, the interpretation of the researched phenomena, subjects or events, is relative, as it is conditioned by the place and time of the researcher and the researched reality.

The main picture of pandemic in Poland from a postmodern perspective

In Europe the pandemic crisis has blown out more or less in March 2020. Almost all European states reacted on the COVID-19 spreading at the same time but their first decisions and other steps were different. What caused that, in spite of the same time many governments made different decisions?

Common for all EU states was a decision about lockdown and as a result all Schengen borders were closed immediately for movements of EU civilians as well the others groups of people. In spite of Sweden and Great Britain all countries limited the civil rights of their inhabitants like: freedom of movement outside the country but also inside the country.

For postmodernists, politics is understood as solving problems "here and now". It is the specific political and social problems that are the subject of the researcher's attention, not the hierarchical perception of state institutions and their mechanisms of solving the emerging tasks resulting from this structure. The main aim of all governments was to stop spreading the pandemic virus and decrease the number of people who can be ill in the short term perspective. So, although the virus can't be stopped by closing the state's borders and the sources of COVID-19 weren't only inside the counties' territory but also in common for more than one political jurisdiction regions, the political impression was done and the European leaders were able to announce their success in the first part of fight with COVID-19. From a postmodernistic perspective, the aims which solve the problems "here and now" were managed to achieve. After over 3 months of the lockdown decision the number of people who are ill is lower and lower in almost all EU states.

On the other hand, this first decision is a clear proof how important still the border issue is and the strong people thinking about the state as a territory. Globalisation changed the meaning of borders as lines dividing areas and forced states to act also in extra-territorial space. The contemporary theories of postmodernism do not question the primacy of the nation-state in the international space, but the dispute between them concerns the extent to which the contemporary nation-state has the power to act independently on the international stage, and to what extent it is determined by the structure of the globalised system in which it functions (Czaputowicz, 2007). More and more state's activities is in no relation with the physical aspects of the land and less and less important the size of the country is getting to its development and international position. However, the decision about the board closing

seems to remind an old picture of kingdom where walls around the territory and closed gates were a symbol of protection and security. In spite of globalization and more invisible web of international connections in the world, the way of thinking about state is still based on the territorial security. Where the closed fort gives people an illusion of defense and security.

In Poland the Prime Minister and his ministers not only let citizens stay at home, avoid going abroad and traveling between the cities inside the country by reducing the number of public transport connections rapidly but also took a decision about closing the air space over the country³. All these actions weren't able to limit the COVID-19 spreading substantially but were a clear sign for everybody that the government treats the issue indeed. This shows the strength of ruling leaders were also used as a part of domestic policy in current fight before the next Presidential elections of May 2020 (Berendt & Santora, 2020)⁴. Moreover in Poland, the narration about the COVID-19 was also kept in military convention – the government led the war; mobilized the army of doctors; all ruling politicians serve the citizens and the state. Using this kind of category of vocabulary makes an impression of full control and strength from the political establishment side.

However, power is defined by Foucault as a certain type of relations between individual entities. It is worth noting, however, that Foucault does not perceive these relations as an attempt only to seek the domination of one of the parties, but also reserves the right for the adversary to refuse or rebel against these aspirations. The essence of power is not an obligation, repression or suppression, but the creation, channeling, and reproduction of political forces. It is also a component of the social networks that operate in the state (Błesznowski, 2016). Foucault's main concern is the reflection on the functioning of power and the state in postmodern conditions. As the world is not homogeneous, its activities are not replicable, and the superior subject is the citizen, there is a need to redefine the functions of the state in the international space of postmodern relations. As Czaputowicz (2007: 169-170) explains, Foucault's introduction of the concept of "governmentality" (*gouvernementalité*) is intended to define the consolidation of power exercised by state institutions by means of political economics and security policy in order to govern and influence citizens. Foucault indicated that the European state functions in three dimensions: theological, political and social. In each of the historical periods, other institutions have been responsible for meeting the needs of their respective areas of activity. In such a state, the autonomy of citizens is a delusion. They are subject to the actions of the authorities, which consist of ruling or domination. This distinction introduced by Foucault forces us

³In Europe only two states decided to close their air space – it was Poland and Ukraine.

⁴Finally, the date of Presidential elections was changed under the strong pressure of many people's demonstration and big public debate which was supported by the opposition parties and its leaders. They are expected to be on the 28th of June 2020.

to consider the functions of the state in both cases. While domination is associated with building the hierarchy and order of the state, ruling involves influencing and regulating the lives and behaviours of citizens (Foucault, 2000: 174). In Foucault's opinion, governance is primordial in relation to the state and, preceding the state, it creates it on an ongoing basis (Foucault, 2010: 257). Therefore, the functions of the states result from the style of governing, as a change of style may automatically cause a change in the type of functions necessary for it.

Polish leaders from ruling party PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość ang. Law and Justice) use this narration for the fight for their particular goals and based on Polish historical background and experiences of still vivid communist past. They often link the current situation with the war or any communist past when two groups of society called “they and we” had to stand against each other. As noticed by Marta Figlerowicz in “Foreign Affairs”, some of the ruling party’s actions have stirred offense through their symbolism, but others may have implications that will long outlast the pandemic. During the shutdown, the PiS has promoted legislation that would diminish citizens’ personal autonomy and increase the influence of the PiS for years to come (Filerowicz, 2020). Kaczyński and his team have taken advantage of the quarantine period to advance a conservative legislative agenda. They tried to pass new law regulations which can change the relations of state’s institutions with citizens also after shutdown period and help them to keep the power after the next elections. What is more, Poland’s ruling party has been at odds with democratic norms and with the EU since long before COVID-19 appeared. But during the pandemic, even preexisting tensions have come to a head. The PiS has tried for several years, for instance, to replace Supreme Court judges who don’t agree with the party’s political views. Now they used the pandemic as a tool to explain why so dramatic changes are necessary for them and they explain their point of view even more aggressively. The coronavirus pandemic is not only wreaking destruction on public health and the global economy but disrupts democracy and governance in Poland. It has hit at a time when democracy was already under threat, and it risks exacerbating democratic backsliding and authoritarian consolidation in pro Kaczyński parties and political leaders. There are already signs that Polish government is using the crisis to grant itself more expansive powers than warranted by the health crisis, with insufficient oversight mechanisms, and using their expanded authority to crack down on opposition and tighten their grip on power. One of the most visible aspect of this attitude to Polish domestic policy is the fact that government use the current need to restrict public gatherings as a pretext to crack down on the wave of antigovernment protests. Although Poland has been less tragically hit by the coronavirus than Western Europe so far, the epidemic has already sped up the erosion of democracy.

Post-pandemic democracy in Poland

Nobody knows how the next months can change the picture of democracy in Poland. Poland has again fallen in the annual index of democracy compiled by Freedom House, a US-based NGO. As a result, the country is no longer ranked in the highest category of “consolidated democracy”, according to the report’s methodology. Instead, it is classified as a “semi-consolidated democracy” (Freedom House, 2020). The Presidential elections are only one step to limit the spreading power of Kaczyński and his people. The president has the right to veto new laws and the current government does not have the majority in the Sejm (at least 60% of members of parliament) needed to override it. The opposition hoped that their candidate would win, potentially paralyzing Kaczyński’s party’s efforts to build a “new state”.

Acknowledging that the contemporary nation-state is no longer merely a space of sovereign power and coercion, but has become a performative entity that emerges as a result of certain practices, actions and decisions, postmodernism offers, as a continuation of the positivist, or perhaps even more post-positivist current, tools that can be useful in the study of such a subject (Bauman, 1995). The analysis of the polarization processes of the Polish political scene and the tools which are used by the political parties allows us to redefine already known concepts and to determine them again in the post-modern international space. Similarly, the method of the so-called dual reading, i.e. such a re-reading of the previous actions of the state institutions that will reveal internal tensions and incoherence of their functioning that were overlooked so far, in order to allow for the re-conceptualization of their functioning in postmodernist version (Devetak, 2006). Governmental propaganda, primarily broadcasted by state television, is serving Poles a kind of doublespeak. On the one hand, it is praising the authorities’ fight to rescue Poland from the pandemic; on the other, it claims that the situation in Poland is not bad enough to prevent the presidential election from going ahead. Of course, the governing camp denies the reform has eroded judicial independence and the rule of law, arguing that the courts are more democratic because they are now better equipped to defend citizens’ interests. They also assure public opinion that they want to keep and even develop democratic standards in the future and the pandemic is not a situation which can be used to political fight. Poland’s government, however, argues that its controversial overhaul of the judiciary, public media and other institutions is necessary to sweep away the remnants of the former communist regime. That sounds a bit ridiculous over 30 years after transformation and over 5 years of Kaczyński’s party governs in Poland. As Alexander Wendt notes, the international space, and thus also the state as its most important subject, is a product of ideas, values, experience, it is necessary to constantly observe, study and determine the phenomena that occur in it, so as to be able to diagnose

and analyse processes occurring in it (Wendt, 2008). Nowadays, researchers and analysts will be able to observe how the post pandemic narration can create the new deal of state's functioning in Poland.

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