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# INSTITUTIONS OF CULTURE AND POPULISM IN POLAND

## RE-IMAGINING NARRATIVES OF NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN HERITAGE

**ABSTRACT**

Between 2015 and 2021, Poland's cultural landscape shifted due to a neo-traditionalist turn in state politics, reshaping heritage narratives and cultural policy. Populist discourse emphasised national and community values, redefining culture's role in politics through institutional restructuring, policy changes and financial reforms. This article examines how populist politics influence cultural institutions and the construction of national and European heritage narratives. Based on structured interviews (2020-2021) with key cultural representatives and policy analysis, our findings reveal that neo-traditionalism operates on an ideational level, shaping cultural policy and heritage narratives. This shift reimagines national identity narratives and their relationship with Europe. Our findings reveal a complex interplay between state cultural policy and the evolution of heritage narratives.

**Keywords:** cultural institutions, heritage narration, public discourse, populism, neo-traditionalism, Poland

## INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Poland observed a pronounced shift in political and cultural discourse, influenced by a populist agenda that emphasises a homogeneous national identity and the value of Polish culture and tradition in terms of public discourse and as part of the agenda for indispensable changes. This political strategy has profound implications for cultural policy. Firstly, it employs a neo-traditionalist discourse, favouring a broad view of Polish culture, derived from spiritual and national ties and Poland's difficult history.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, it is a discourse of political effectiveness that refers to shared social beliefs about former neglects and promotes the communication of dignified representation of Polish culture for all audiences, from local communities to the international public.<sup>2</sup>

The article analyses the impact of populist discourse on cultural institutions and heritage narratives, highlighting neo-traditionalism as a key element of the cultural politics present in political programmes. The translation of these into the functioning of cultural institutions, however, reveals complex interpretations and modalities of adaptation to the demands of authorities, audiences and public trends. In the first part of the article, we introduce the concept of neo-traditionalism and demonstrate its presence at the time in the political programmes on culture and official communications regarding cultural policy.<sup>3</sup> In the second part, we present the outcomes of qualitative research

<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by a grant from the European Union's HORIZON 2020 Research and Innovation programme "Populist Rebellion Against Modernity in 21st Century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism" (POPREBEL) [Grant Agreement no. 822682]. *For centuries, it was Polish culture that was the spiritual element that allowed Polishness to survive [...] Caring for it and nurturing it is not only a task for the state, but also a moral obligation. As a national community, we must care for the great legacy left to us by our ancestors and support the artistic aspirations and explorations of Poles who measure themselves against both the eternal questions relating to the universal human experience and those describing and evaluating us as a national community.* ("Bezpieczna przyszłość Polaków 2030" [Secure Future of Poles 2030], *Law and Justice Party Programme*, 2023, p. 119, at <https://pis.org.pl/dokumenty>, 25 February 2025). It is worth noting that this programme devotes a separate chapter to the discussion of "The Great Policy of Culture and Education Reform." Communication on cultural policy was not present under this label before. In 2019, the programme discussed the challenges of defending national identity. *The great challenge of today is shaping and strengthening the identity of the Polish political community. Every nation and state need a coherent and attractive identity basis for its survival, cohesion and development, to ensure appropriate position and success in international competition. Identity determines our development opportunities...* "Polski model państwa dobrobytu" [Polish Welfare State Model], *Law and Justice Programme*, 2019, p. 214, at <http://pis.org.pl/aktualnosci/program-prawa-i-sprawiedliwosci>, 10 January 2022.

<sup>2</sup> See: "Najważniejsze dokonania MKiDN z ostatnich dwóch lat" [The Most Important Achievements of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage in the Last Two Years], *Ministerstwo Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego*, 13 November 2017, at <http://mkidn.gov.pl/pages/posts/najwazniejsze-dokonania-mkidn-z-ostatnich-dwoch-lat-7895.php>, 1 October 2021; "Bezpieczna przyszłość Polaków 2030...", pp. 119-132, 231-235.

<sup>3</sup> This policy focus was on communication and cultural diplomacy, i.e. building a national brand, defending Poland's good name and the development of economic aspects such as the creative industry. "Polski model państwa dobrobytu..." pp. 214-232. See also: P. Surowiec, M. Kania-Lundholm, M. Winiarska-Brodowska, "Towards Illiberal Conditioning? New Politics of Media Regulations in Poland (2015-2018)," *East European Politics*, vol. 36, no. 1 (2019), pp. 27-43.

that highlights the perspectives of cultural institutions at both central and local levels. Our research demonstrates that a neo-traditionalistic perspective legitimises populist policy through cultural narratives that redefine the relationship between the national community and Europe.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POPULISM, NEO-TRADITIONALISM AND HERITAGE NARRATION

There is academic evidence stating the specific agenda of populism regarding one's "own" culture.<sup>4</sup> History and heritage, as the core of national identity, are prioritised and reinterpreted to enhance traditions and values, validate the proposed social order and foster a sense of community. These elements are milestones in the symbolic thickening of populism.<sup>5</sup> This political strategy and communication style is based on divisions, social distrust and symbolic conflicts. It confirms and reinforces narratives of collective identity, exposes the "enemies", "threats" and "traitors"<sup>6</sup> and operates with rhetoric that relates current activities to historical and religious differences and symbolic bonds that empower the populist political discourse.

Focus on cultural identity is a key component of neo-traditionalist trends, which position the return to tradition against modernisation and reinterpret relations of power – political, economic, social, cultural, etc. – in terms of various forms of cultural oppression.<sup>7</sup> In this perception, culture easily becomes a shelter for values and traditions "from here" that are important for "the people at the heartland."<sup>8</sup> Specific "affectual narrative" displaying the historically created processes, civilisational meaning and mobilisation and effectiveness on gaining the purposes<sup>9</sup> appreciates these elements that bring ontological security, built the sense of dignity and pride and refers to experience and shared beliefs and sentiments.<sup>10</sup> Culture becomes a space saturated with emotions

<sup>4</sup> P. Ostiguy, "Socio-Cultural Approach," in R. Kaltwasser, C.P. Taggart, P.O. Espejo, P. Ostiguy, *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford 2017, pp. 73-97; C. Mudde, C. Rovira Kaltwasser, "Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective: Reflections on the Contemporary and Future Research Agenda," *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 51, no. 13 (2018), pp. 1667-1693.

<sup>5</sup> M. Kotwas, J. Kubik, "Symbolic Thickening of Public Culture and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Poland," *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2019), pp. 435-471.

<sup>6</sup> C. Mudde, C. Rovira Kaltwasser, "Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective...", pp. 1676-1678.

<sup>7</sup> P. Norris, R. Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash, Trump, Brexit and Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge 2018; J. Kubik, "Neo-Feudalism and Neo-Traditionalism as Responses to Liberalism," *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2024), pp. 1067-1079.

<sup>8</sup> S. Patten, "[Review of Populism, by P. Taggart]," *Labour / Le Travail*, vol. 48 (2001), pp. 335-336.

<sup>9</sup> P. Ostiguy, "Socio-Cultural Approach...", p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> F. Melito, "Finding the Roots of Neo-Traditionalist Populism in Poland: 'Cultural Displacement' and European Integration," *New Perspectives*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2021), pp. 23-44; Z. Mach, "Right-Wing Populism, Euroscepticism, and Neo-Traditionalism in Central and Eastern Europe," in J. Sondel-Cedarmas, F. Berti (eds), *The Right-Wing Critique of Europe: Nationalist, Sovereignist and Right-Wing populist Attitudes to the EU*, Abington 2022, pp. 22-31.

and symbols that refer to community, security and locality, often in simplistic ways. Consequently, cultural policy is characterised by a preference for clear-cut and distinctive narratives, as well as the restitution of collective identity and self-image.<sup>11</sup> It is also based on a vision of rendering historical justice by aligning social nostalgia and memory narratives with the idea of restoring national greatness and exploiting contemporary divisions between “us” and “them”.<sup>12</sup>

The return to history and heritage is in fact a trend that strengthens public interest in culture.<sup>13</sup> The connection between contemporary populism and heritage is all the more justified. As Ashworth notes, the rise of the main heritage institutions *corresponds in time to the rise of a nationalism that seeks to create and delimit the mythical entity ‘nation’ and: ...is actively used for various political and social purposes, including the legitimisation of political ideologies and jurisdictions at multiple spatial scales.*<sup>14</sup> Other scholars reinforce this view by describing cultural heritage as *a resource that is constantly being transformed, adjusted and interpreted contemporaneously by many users*<sup>15</sup> and defining it as *a process that identifies, classifies, legitimises and manages the past as a heritage.*<sup>16</sup> These perspectives emphasise that heritage is an unfinished and constantly occurring process related to a discourse that establishes heritage, although it is socially lived and felt as the most permanent and unchanging part of culture.<sup>17</sup> Heritage is, thus, employed by cultural institutions to shape collective memory and identity, often serving as a tool for both inclusion and exclusion in the political sphere.

Neo-traditionalistic visions in cultural policy not only call for the celebration of national history and heritage, but also redefine the role of cultural institutions as guardians of an “authentic” national narrative. The emphasis on national identity has led to a deliberate de-emphasis of European values, which are portrayed as modernistic, alien and distant from the “real” Polish ethos. This dualistic presentation of culture – as

<sup>11</sup> H.G. Betz, “Facets of Nativism: A Heuristic Exploration,” *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 53, no. 2 (2019), p. 113.

<sup>12</sup> See: A. Pirro, *The Populist Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe: Ideology, Impact and Electoral Performance*, London 2015; M. Kotwas, J. Kubik, “Beyond ‘Making Poland Great Again’: Nostalgia in Polish Populist and Non-Populist Discourses,” *Sociological Forum*, vol. 37, no. S1 (2022), pp. 1360-1386; R. Riedel, “Authoritarian Populism and Collective Memory Manipulation,” in M. Oswald (ed.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Populism*, Cham 2022, pp. 195-211.

<sup>13</sup> See: D. Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, Cambridge 1998; M. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*, New York 2011; A. Kaya, *Populism and Heritage in Europe: Lost in Diversity and Unity*, Abington 2019.

<sup>14</sup> G.J. Ashworth, “Heritage in Fragments: A Fragmented Instrument for Fragmented Policies,” in M.M. Murzyn, J. Purchla (eds), *Cultural Heritage in the 21st Century: Opportunities and Challenges*, transl. by J. Taylor-Kucia, Kraków 2007, pp. 29-30.

<sup>15</sup> M. Murzyn-Kupisz, “Cultural Heritage in a Time of Change: Opportunities and Challenges,” in M.M. Murzyn, J. Purchla (eds), *Cultural Heritage in the 21st Century...*, pp. 139-154.

<sup>16</sup> L. Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, London–New York 2006, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> P. Erdösi, “Navigation towards the Heritage Islands in the Central European Sea,” in: M. Murzyn-Kupisz, J. Purchla (eds), *Cultural Heritage in the 21st Century...*, pp. 87-96.

simultaneously national and as the antithesis of an “imposed” European identity – sets the stage for the tensions explored throughout this study.

## SPECIFIC PERSPECTIVE ON CULTURAL POLICY IN POLAND IN 2015-2023<sup>18</sup>

In this part, we describe only the perspective on culture, which was a vital component of populist politics. The year 2015 can be considered a turning point in the field of culture in Poland, as the new government brought considerable changes to state policies regarding culture. In 2017, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage published on its website a list of changes and initiatives taken by the ministry, which included, among other things, an unprecedented increase in budgetary funds for culture, the establishment of new cultural and scientific institutions, co-management of local government cultural institutions, expansion of the museum network and changes in the law.

This perspective on culture was twofold – it was observed: 1) on the ideational level as implementation of neo-traditionalistic perspectives through reframing the identity and heritage discourse; 2) on the pragmatic level of economy and politics, where culture was introduced as a “developmental mechanism” and “factor of economic growth”.<sup>19</sup> This understanding brought together the concept of effectiveness and genuine care for culture, defined as a heritage to be preserved and a vital, unique resource of people.

According to the provisions of the Law and Justice Party (referred to in this paragraph as PiS) Programme from 2019, culture is a *development mechanism* and *investments in culture are not only investments in people, changing their thinking, mentality and cultural aspirations (...), but also a direct factor in the development of the economy*.<sup>20</sup> Culture is presented as important for economic and technological development, with mentions of the creative industry, video games and new technologies. The priority given to culture is evidenced by the substantial budget increase<sup>21</sup> and the investment of resources in numerous projects, the launching of new institutions and funding programmes since 2015.<sup>22</sup> All European funds allocated to culture have been also distributed during

<sup>18</sup> See: „Raport 'Piękno. Pamięć. Wspólnota.' Działania Ministerstwa Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego 2016-2023” [Beauty. Memory. Community. Activities of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage 2016-2023], at <https://www.gov.pl/attachment/c99d6042-bb07-4b7b-8f47-02a8c2d0b301>, 3 March 2025.

<sup>19</sup> “Polski model państwa dobrobytu...,” p. 123.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> In 2015-2019 State expenditure on culture increased by 33.8% and exceeded 1% of the budget (ibidem, p. 124). The Polish state consciously extended responsibility for this sphere of life, which, among others, resulted in a doubling of expenditure on culture (Website of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, at <https://www.gov.pl/web/kultura/dzialania-ministerstwa-kultury-i-dziedzictwa-narodowego-20162023>, 3 March 2025).

<sup>22</sup> Among the new cultural institutions are the Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor (opened in November 2017), the Museum of Westerplatte and the War of 1939 (opened in March 2017), and

analysed period.<sup>23</sup> Reforms in management and administration of culture have brought state patronage and important updates to the law.<sup>24</sup> To sum up, the decisions of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage from 2015 to 2023 embraced a wide range of activities at both central and regional levels and introduced new financial opportunities for cultural initiatives.

This broad agenda of changes has captured the attention of scholars.<sup>25</sup> Neo-traditionalist trends in cultural policy in Poland have been widely observed by scholars in descriptions of the narrative of national identity, emphasising the relationship with religious bonds and history<sup>26</sup> and the reinterpretation of recent history, while the post-communist era of democratisation and Europeanisation has been viewed as “imposed” on the Polish people.<sup>27</sup> This narrative links the topics of welfare and democratic change with culture, illustrating a certain continuity that positions national culture and shared beliefs as traditional “real” values, while undermining European values as modern, secular, relative and, thus, leftist, continuing the legacies of communism.<sup>28</sup> In this context, centralisation policy is presented as a concern for culture, with state patronage of thematic programmes and new cultural institutions seen as solutions that restore balance and proper care for Polish culture and heritage.<sup>29</sup> The idea of serving the people is prominent in narratives of accessibility and effectiveness in cultural management at local and regional levels, highlighting community representation exemplified by the

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the Museum of John Paul II and Primate Wyszyński (opened in November 2018) in the Temple of Divine Providence in Warsaw. The new institutions are dedicated to Polish history and national identity. A list of cultural investments, including all institutions and projects, is available in the programme “Bezpieczna przyszłość Polaków 2030...,” 2023 (pp. 119-132, 192-203) and in the report “Piękno. Pamięć. Wspólnota...” (pp. 20-29).

<sup>23</sup> See: “Polski model państwa dobrobytu...,” p. 114.

<sup>24</sup> The most important amendments include: 1) the amendment to the Act on Organising and Conducting Cultural Activity (Act of 25 October 1991), which specified the procedures for competitions for the director of a cultural institution; 2) the amendment to the Act on the Protection of Monuments, which strengthened the role of the General Conservator of Monuments and established the National Fund for the Protection of Monuments (Act of 22 June 2017). Changes were also made to regulations concerning tax credits for artists and copyright regulations (Act of 22 November 2018).

<sup>25</sup> See: J. Harper (ed.), *Poland's Memory Wars: Essays on Illiberalism*, Budapest–New York 2018; I. Kurz, *Powrót centrali, państwowcy, wyklęci i kasa. Raport z „dobrej zmiany” w kulturze*, Warszawa 2019; Z. Enyedi, “Right-Wing Authoritarian Innovations in Central and Eastern Europe,” *East European Politics*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2020), pp. 363-377.

<sup>26</sup> See: K. Szocik, A. Szyja, “Poland: A Dark Side of Church Cultural Policy,” *Studia Humana*, vol. 4, no. 4 (2015), pp. 13-22; A. Lipiński, G. Szabo, “Heroisation and Victimisation: Populism, Commemorative Narratives and National Days in Hungary and Poland,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2023), pp. 345-362.

<sup>27</sup> See: D. Cadier, K. Szulecki, “Populism, Historical Discourse and Foreign Policy: the Case of Poland's Law and Justice Government,” *International Politics*, vol. 57, no. 6 (2020), pp. 990-1011.

<sup>28</sup> D. Galvan, “Neotraditionalism,” in M. Bevir (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Governance*, Thousand Oaks 2007, p. 599.

<sup>29</sup> I. Kurz, *Powrót centrali, państwowcy, wyklęci i kasa...*, pp. 2-6, 15.

appreciation of folklore and local culture<sup>30</sup> as well as religious customs and local or historical heroes depicted as “forgotten”. All these elements underpin the notion of the “dignity turn” in studies of populism,<sup>31</sup> reflecting a focus on national culture as understood in the popular consciousness of “everymen”.<sup>32</sup>

Some scholars stressed the role of cultural policy in external and domestic communication and diplomacy.<sup>33</sup> In cultural diplomacy, it was a continuation of previous policies focused on the popularisation of knowledge about Poland and Polish history, strengthening the positive image of Poland and presenting its role in world history. However, the relevance of public diplomacy for the domestic dimension and foreign policy on memory emphasised the need to monitor and combat “harmful beliefs”.<sup>34</sup> The cultural policy was found to be crucial in the realm of affirmative rhetoric regarding national pride, combined with the concept of “normalisation”, which refers to the legitimisation of political steps viewed as “good change” in terms of returning to normality.<sup>35</sup>

## RESEARCH GOALS AND METHODOLOGY

This article seeks to reflect on the outcomes of the politics of culture and the ways in which they may affect the institutions of culture and heritage narratives. Based on the literature, we assume that the analysed agenda on culture represents a populist concept of politics<sup>36</sup> and may exemplify the neo-traditional vision embedded in their political strategy. We try to reflect on the outcomes of this turn on the basis of qualitative data –

<sup>30</sup> See: M. Gospodarczyk, Ł. Koźuchowski, “Nowa ludowa historia: charakterystyka i społeczno-polityczne korzenie współczesnych narracji o historii chłopów polskich,” *Studia Socjologiczne*, vol. 2, no. 241 (2021), pp. 177-198.

<sup>31</sup> M. Kotras, “Narracje i strategie argumentacyjne w dyskursie IV RP jako narzędzia wyznaczania granic wspólnot w polskim społeczeństwie,” *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, vol. 62, no. 1 (2018), pp. 141-165; D. Chibner, “Polityka kulturalna. Ocena 3,” in *Rząd Pod lupą. Ranking polityk publicznych 2021*, at <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/rzad-pod-lupa-2021.pdf>, 1 January 2022.

<sup>32</sup> See the Kaczyński declaration about cultural policy. *If I briefly describe the sense of the policy of ‘good change’, then this sense is to defend everything that is our right, which results from Polish culture, Polish tradition (...) but also from this civilisation. (...) this was the sense and this is the sense of ‘good change’*, Jarosław Kaczyński, 2019, after I. Kurz, *Powrót centrali, państwowcy, wyklęci i kasa...*, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> See: B. Ociełka, “Cultural Diplomacy as an External Voice of Cultural Policy: The Case of Poland,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2021), pp. 233-245.

<sup>34</sup> C. Smuniewski, *‘From Memory to Freedom.’ Research on Polish Thinking about National Security and Political Community*, transl. by M. Mazurek, A. Hoyle, Warszawa 2018; A. Lipiński, G. Szabo, “Heroisation and Victimisation...,” pp. 350-356.

<sup>35</sup> M. Krzyżanowski, “Normalisation and the Discursive Construction of ‘New’ Norms and ‘New’ Normality: Discourse in the Paradoxes of Populism and Neoliberalism,” *Social Semiotics*, vol. 30, no. 4 (2020), pp. 431-448; S. Bill, B. Stanley, “Whose Poland Is It to Be? PiS and the Struggle between Monism and Pluralism,” *East European Politics*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2020), pp. 378-394.

<sup>36</sup> See: “Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective...,” pp. 1667-1693.

insights of the representatives of various cultural institutions collected in interviews and an examination of policy documents of the ruling party and government.

The article presents the outcome of qualitative research based on thirteen in-depth interviews, which are grouped according to the sample key into three categories of cultural institutions: Group I: central and nationwide institutions with long-established traditions; Group II: newly established institutions founded after 2015; and Group III: regional and local institutions alongside broader cultural initiatives. For each category, the research explores four main themes: definitions of the role and mission of cultural institutions, assessment of the financial and organisational situation, narration of heritage and presentation of national and European identity and the choice of values shown to the audiences. The interviews were conducted online, transcribed, thematically coded and anonymised.<sup>37</sup> Cross-cutting themes were identified, including the institutions' self-perception, organisational and financial situation and the framing of heritage narratives. This triangulated approach ensures that the analysis is both grounded in primary evidence and informed by current scholarly debates.<sup>38</sup>

## Group I

The first group was combined with long-lasting, central and nationwide institutions whose role relates to the protection of the tangible and intangible heritage of Polish history. These institutions are well-established, have decades of tradition and contribute to the narration of history present in public and social discourse.

These institutions share a belief in their uniqueness and deep historical significance for Poland. The first institution in this group was presented as *a kind of chronicle of Polish culture* (I\_G101, 2021). Another was perceived as a living place of memory, directly related to the identity of the Polish nation; *a monument of history, which is [...] inscribed in our [Polish] DNA* (I\_G103, 2021). Others emphasised exclusivity, such as *the only museum in the world* (I\_G102, 2021) or a mission *to create conditions that enable the effective preservation of cultural heritage for future generations* (I\_G104, 2021).

<sup>37</sup> According to ethics provisions, we anonymised the interviews in order to avoid direct and indirect indicators of our respondents. See: A. Stam, P. Diaz, "Qualitative data anonymisation: theoretical and practical considerations for anonymising interview transcripts," FORS Guide, no. 20, version 1.0. Lausanne: Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences FORS 2023; [https://forscenter.ch/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/qualitative-data-anonymisation\\_final.pdf](https://forscenter.ch/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/qualitative-data-anonymisation_final.pdf). The institutions have been chosen according to the categories (central, regional or new) and in response to the following criteria: 1. showing Polish heritage and addressing their offer to national and international publics, 2. financed by the state (including institutions operating in a model of cooperation with non-state actors), 3. dealing with symbolic sites of the past and proposing interpretations of Polish heritage. We addressed all institutions with an official invitation letter by e-mail, accompanied by information about the research project. The material is the result of the interviews that took place online (pandemic conditions). Some of the invited institutions did not respond or refused to be interviewed. This procedure guarantees the ability to see the similarities of perceptions and the complexity of insights without the interference of prejudices.

<sup>38</sup> See: Introduction and Chapter 1. Populism and Heritage, in A. Kaya, *Populism and Heritage in Europe...*, pp. 5-78.



by implementing standards, shaping social awareness and providing knowledge. Here, the conviction of the institution's importance and uniqueness can be seen in the ambition to shape the public's collective consciousness of heritage.

Two institutions saw the biggest political interference. Both were created as cultural and art centres supervised by consortia of partners. These are safeguards established by the creators of the institution, who *anticipated a bit of this situation [of possible attempts to influence the institution]* (I\_G105, 2021). These centres clearly expressed how deeply political challenges impacted their independence. According to their opinions: *Independent cultural institutions no longer exist in Poland (...) [This] is one of those institutions (...) which is being dissected in some way* (I\_G105, 2021). The second cultural entity recalled the Ministry's interventions and underlined that the institution was created beyond political divisions and for years it had the support of various political options. However, *this ended in 2015 after PiS took power* (I\_G102, 2021).

As to the financial situation of institutions, we saw different patterns of dependence on funding based on the institution's situation and its relationship with the authorities. Group I enjoys stability and security, with well-covered funding needs and some self-sufficiency. Their financial strength, including revenue from ticket sales, allows for independence beyond government support. However, their relationship with the authorities varies.

Institution G101 was satisfied with the trend of changes in financing: *...since 2016, there has been a fundamental increase in spending on culture.* (I\_G101, 2021). Institution G103 secures its stability through various sources of funding (such as state subsidies, income from tourism and EU grants) but emphasised that these sources do not affect the activities undertaken: *In this respect, we are autonomous and the decision about what we do and what we do not, depends on the director only* (I\_G103, 2021). Similarly, institution G104 highlighted its financial stability, supported by multi-year funding from the national historic preservation programme.

Again, institutions G102 and G105 indicated that the relationship between funding and cooperation with the authorities is quite different. They perceive indirect attempts to interfere in both their activities and financing. Institution G102 has faced attempts by state authorities to influence its funding: *When we got this grant, the ministry wanted to force us to share this grant...* (I\_G102, 2021). Institution G105 is financed from three sources: the City Funds, the Ministry of Culture and its own commercial activities. However, this independence of the institution is incomplete due to the direct interference of the government in the financing. As a result, this entity is unable to conduct the programme as it would like: *We have to think very hard now about what actions to take* (I\_G105, 2021).

Perceptions of Europe among Polish cultural institutions vary, focusing primarily on Polish identity while acknowledging Europe's relevance in shaping future initiatives and financial matters. Institution G101 observed that the relationship between Poland and Europe is due to *the conviction that one determines the other as one cannot understand Polish culture without a European context* (I\_G101, 2021). However, the institution *talks about Poland, not to add some insignificant footnote to European history, but to*

*show that Polish culture is one of the important elements of this European puzzle* (I\_G101, 2021). The representative once again pointed to the uniqueness and essence of Polish culture, indicating that *Poland has created works of art and a history of art so important that if it is not taken into account, the image of Europe is diminished or simply false* (I\_G101, 2021). In this approach, it is not Polish European heritage that is exhibited but Poland that shapes Europe.

Institution G103 also emphasised the power of *embedding Polish culture in Europe* (I\_G103, 2021). Poland has been defined as part of Europe with its own strong identity: *We are dealing with a kind of our own identity, transmitting our own identity within Europe, a very strong identity, but at the same time in a very strong relationship with what was happening in Europe* (I\_G103, 2021). The representative of institution G104 also stressed the priority of Polish identity in relation to European identity, which he considers a misconception. He pointed out: *This tendency or attempts to create a single European identity, (...) is doomed to failure. Of course, we can talk about some common values, but this is not enough to build a European identity* (I\_G104, 2021).

Institution G102, on the other hand, considered it quite differently, pointing out that in its activities, it deals mainly with historical migrations in Europe and guests *from all over Europe* (I\_G102, 2021) and, thus, described the museum as *Eurocentric*. In this narrative, Europe (via EU policies, funding and programmes) is an open, unifying and tolerant entity. For institution G105, European values are the key values to convey. They want to present *an image of Europe that is cooperative, tolerant, and free of prejudice, (...) where you can meet. An image of a Europe that speaks, maybe not with one voice, because that's too idealistic (...) and which is a bastion of democracy* (I\_G105, 2021). Referring to Poland in this context, he pointed out how much the country owes to the EU, and a lesson to be learned from the populist crises in the country is that *democracy was not given to us, that we have to take care of democracy* (I\_G105, 2021). The representative, therefore, sees Europe in two ways: as a guarantee of freedom, openness, solidarity and tolerance; and as a guarantee of democracy.

The perception of Polish identity varies even within one group. Both the representatives of institution G103 and institution G101 talked about the concept of Polishness in the European context, stating that one is inseparable from the other. As institution G103 stated, Polish identity combines *what is our own Polish with what is European, universal, somewhat beyond the strict confines of [Polish symbolic place]* (I\_G103, 2021). Institution G104 considered the essence of Polishness much more broadly, stating that our identity is based on common elements such as the canon of culture and shared history. The representative stated that in Poland, the nation is defined in a different way: *It does not have such a strong connection with ethos, as it does in other Western European countries. Therefore, in Poland, a nation is more of a community of ideas and a community of people who care about some specific values* (I\_G104, 2021). The representative of institution G102 also highlighted, by referring to the museum's work, that *there is no Jewish history without Polish history and there is no Polish history without Jewish history* (I\_G102, 2021).

As values conveyed to audiences, our respondents primarily pointed to the value of memory and history and the artistic value of the collection, as well as general ideas related to the institution's mission, such as solidarity, freedom and diversity. The surprising element linking all these statements is that, according to our interviewees, the deeper message of their institutions was found in the "universal" meaning of their values, which they connect to Polish identity. These narratives seem to reflect neo-traditionalist tendencies.

Institution G103 points to the two values of "identity and universalism" that underpin the meaning of this cultural institution. *On the one hand, this is the place where we are, so this is our identity. On the other hand, there is also universalism, because we are always able to demonstrate very strongly our strong links with culture, with European culture* (I\_G103, 2021). Similarly, institution G101 highlights universal values. *At the core of such institutions, which are to preserve the canon, is the ancient triad, that is: beauty, good and truth. (...) We explore the concept of beauty: its significance and its contemporary manifestations. We examine the nature of good and, consequently, evil. Lastly, we seek to uncover the truth. Because we try to speak here without resorting to any mental shortcuts or ideologisation, but presenting a certain vision of the past, which aims to come closer to this ideal of objective truth* (I\_G101, 2021). Such a perspective may raise concerns about the definitions of the mentioned universal values. Our interlocutor seems to be aware of this and explains that: *We have to distinguish between ideologisation, which consists in manipulating (...) or even instrumentalising history.* In their opinion, making choices is *the risk that each institution runs* as cultural institutions should be guided by *objective truth* in communicating to their audiences, and they make choices to achieve this goal (I\_G101, 2021).

The institution G104 declares that *demonstrating the value of heritage is central to our work* (I\_G104, 2021). The importance of collective identity is emphasised *because cultural heritage is such an important resource for developing social capital, because it's just a general value around which we can unite* (I\_G104, 2021). The statements also reveal a kind of utilitarian and pragmatic perspective. *There's no point in protecting heritage if that heritage doesn't serve anyone afterwards, if those values are not used by anyone* (I\_G104, 2021). In summary, the whole statement on heritage values mentions its different meanings (identity building is the most emphasised) and the possibilities for their use. This shows a certain flexibility in the narrative about the meaning of heritage.

According to our interviewee, the message of the institution G105 is *openness, tolerance, the ability to listen (...) Because [it] was a movement open to everyone* (I\_G105, 2021). Such an understanding of openness and dialogue is also related to the observation about changes in the Polish public sphere, in which there is no continuity of the legacy of the movement: *One must have this ability for compromise and dialogue (...) and now I have the impression that unfortunately everything has been thrown away, turned upside down. And all that really matters is the particular interests of a specific social group and that's it.* (I\_G105, 2021). Thus, one can see a clear divergence

between the perspective of the values of state cultural institutions focused on Polishness and identity, as well as the perspective and legacy of dialogue represented by the movement.

## Group II

Group II was combined with newly established institutions that began their activities after 2015 and implemented the state programme for cultural policy. These institutions recognised their role in addressing the new challenges of identity and education for which they were established.

The first institution introduced itself as *a government programme, the government sets the goals and tasks for the entire (...) Programme* (I\_G201, 2021). Unlike previous institutions, which perceived their role as preservers and protectors of memory (who, however, had the right to interpret it), this institution refers to the creation of a new custom/tradition, inspired by historical events but not existing before. Institution G202 pointed to completely new areas of activity *dedicated to a very broad Polish heritage of the 19th and 20th centuries, and at the same time, to a heritage that is defined in these four words: the National Camp and Social Catholicism* (I\_G202, 2021). Here, heritage is, thus, defined in a specific and narrow way and their mission is to preserve it precisely in this form. Another new cultural centre, co-managed by the Ministry with the Archdiocese of Warsaw, deals with the key heroes in the national-Catholic narratives and states that *there is an overabundance of such intellectual output, and however political it may sound, (...) our activities are also not focused only on their lives, (...) but on a broader perspective* (I\_G203, 2021). The goal is to search for new ways of presenting it within the narrative of history and national identity.

This group's financial situation improves yearly, with strong government ties and stable national funding. Institution G202's subsidy rose from over 1 to 7 million PLN in its second year, while institution G203's increased from 3.7 to 6.8 million PLN in 2019-2020, ensuring stability and programme continuity.

In this group, only a few references were found to the concept of Europe or Europeaness. The institution G201 pointed out that the EU and its funds are rather an audience and a tool to show Polish culture and history abroad: *[Polish] institutions, which operate abroad, are supposed to take care of our good name. (...) Their mission will be to promote the idea of Poland and the image of Poland abroad. But it also must be an institution that will be inclusive* (I\_G201, 2021). The priority in foreign relations is, therefore, to create a positive image of Poland and to strengthen Polish identity and patriotism among Poles living abroad. Institution G202 spoke in a similar way about the concept of Europeanism, referring to the Institute's very good relations with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and activities such as the development of a book for the Polish diaspora or scholarly books on Polish history, written *for the nation* (I\_G202, 2021). Their activities are, thus, focused on presenting a full picture of Polishness abroad developed by institution G202 and the Ministry. Institution G203, on the one hand, pointed out that Polish history is related to the European: *There is*

*a temptation to present John Paul II through the prism of Polishness, but we know that he was in fact a European figure and we also want to convey this (I\_G203, 2021).* On the other hand, the representative indicated that the concept of Europe is not crucial: *We do not focus on Europeaness; it is not the role of our institution to create some history. However, we try to convey those values of universalism that our heroes passed on. An example of this universalism is the Decalogue. That Europe is indirectly present, but it's not as central (I\_G203, 2021).*

Newly established institutions emphasise that Polishness and identity are deeply tied to openness and connection. One representative stated, *We as Poles are open-minded despite what we may sometimes hear in the media (I\_G201, 2021).* The second key element for understanding Polish identity is *a sense of building patriotism (I\_G201, 2021).* Another cultural centre echoed this, asserting Poland's historical tolerance and European ties: *Our civilisation is built on Greek philosophy, Roman law and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Poland was a kind of forerunner of tolerance in Europe. While stakes were being burned in the West, extraordinary things were happening in our country to create an open community. We were a pioneer (I\_G203, 2021).* Polishness is, thus, framed as unique within the European context.

Institution G202 introduced the concepts of identity, Polishness and nation, linking each to community. A nation is defined as *a community of people who identify with an inherited cultural transmission (I\_G202, 2021)*, but this is insufficient as it is based on voluntariness: *A nation is not only an ethnic or racial community. Because it is based on a choice (...) It is a matter of identifying oneself and taking responsibility for this community based on culture (I\_G202, 2021).* The nation is described as *an extraordinary space, a natural bond like a family, a natural community and cannot be artificially or ideologically sustained (I\_G202, 2021).* Polish identity is *a very multicoloured mosaic of the nation's experiences" (I\_G202, 2021)*, based on *a leading legacy that is at the intersection of Church history and community history (I\_G202, 2021).* The foundation is the connection between Catholicism and national culture: *If someone violates our cultural connection between the achievements of Catholicism on Polish soil and the achievements of national culture and tries to separate, tries to disavow it, then he de facto disavows the whole (...) Respect for the Catholic or Christian tradition of Poland is a measure of patriotism (I\_G202, 2021).* Other ideas can be included but are additional: *That is also the beauty of our Polish identity, that we can profess values referring to different orders (...) like liberalism or socialism. There is no reason to disavow this branch of our identity. It is necessary and worth tolerating. However, there is no obligation to accept it. On the other hand, there is a much more serious necessity to accept the Polish identity, that is the identity connected with the heritage and with Christian foundations (I\_G202, 2021).* This hierarchy of values shows Polishness as a combination of *Polish culture and Catholic tradition*<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> See: "Wielo-Polak," *Pressje. Teka 55 Klubu Jagiellońskiego*, pp. 6-10, at <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/publikacje/teka-55-wielo-polska>, 20 October 2022.

The new institutions are dedicated, as stated in one of their founding documents, to *...implementing the policy of remembrance in relation to Poland's history and heritage, including the achievements of Polish socio-political thought, with particular emphasis on national, Catholic and conservative thought*<sup>40</sup> They, thus, present the same core values of “universalism and Polishness” as immersed in the axiology of Poles’ collective identity derived from Catholic teaching and national pride, or they seek to reinforce this understanding of Poles’ common heritage.

Institution G203 points to universal values such as love, friendship and tolerance in the popularisation of national heroes: *We tried to create a certain universal path (...) not only for religious people (...) to show that in the lives of these two heroes, clergymen of course, certain universal values were fundamental (...)* (I\_G203, 2021). He admits that this way of presenting is the result of research on the target group, i.e. young people.

Thus, pedagogy and the reinterpretation of spiritual heritage take on a practical and influential role in the modern world. Moreover, the importance of both Catholic heroes in Polish and European history *should also, colloquially speaking, make us proud* (I\_G203, 2021). Through this lens, new cultural institutions invoke universal values within a national-Catholic framework, positioning Polishness and Polish identity as their fundamental foundation.

A detailed lecture on this value perspective was given by the institution G202:

*It is, above all, the inseparable connection of this Polish greatest value that we have cultivated for centuries, namely the love of freedom (...). And this value of the nation as a community also creates the need to be responsible for it. (...) We would like Poles, if they want to be Poles, to understand that it is both a privilege and an obligation, so the value of freedom is understood as a task and not only as a wish. And, of course, this Catholic universalism. We, as a nation, are undoubtedly extremely strongly connected with the moral order, the Catholic order, or more broadly, one can say, in the ideological dimension, secular, not denominational, with the Latin heritage* (I\_G202, 2021).

The three key values indicated by Group I – universalism, history and national identity – emerge as central but are framed through a national-Catholic lens. Here, universal values align with Catholic teachings, conscience, the common good and community building. Notably, “community” holds particular significance within the neo-traditionalist narrative of collective identity. Polish identity is understood here in the logic of belonging to a community of nation and spirit, with the religious bond forming the core value framework, one that must be safeguarded from external influence or challenge.

<sup>40</sup> See: Zarządzenie Ministra Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego z dnia 13 lutego 2020 r. w sprawie utworzenia państwowej instytucji kultury – Instytutu Dziedzictwa Myśli Narodowej im. Romana Dmowskiego i Ignacego Paderewskiego, Dz. Urz. Min. Kul. Dziedzic. Narodow. z 2020 r. poz. 10, at <https://bip.mkidn.gov.pl/pages/dzienniki-urzedowe/dzienniki-urzedowe-mkidn/dziennik-urzedowy-2020.php>, 3 March 2025.

### Group III

Regional institutions primarily serve local audiences. As institution G301 states, their focus is on *development, reflection and region (...) we focus on the area of Polish heritage* (I\_G301, 2020). Rather than imposing narratives, these institutions aim to organise, stimulate, monitor and advise. Cooperation with regional authorities plays a key role, as they *act in the service of the province/region* (I\_G301, 2020). While changes in central government have little impact, *local governments have real power in terms of culture* controlling most of the cultural budget. As one interviewee noted, *For me, the Ministry (...) is of no importance* (I\_G302, 2020).

Similarly, institution G305 underlined action for the local audience and collaboration at the local level: *We are a self-governing institution, and our policy is consistent with the idea of the current self-governing authorities* (I\_G305, 2021).

The institution G303 is working through annual conferences on intangible heritage and focuses on its protective role for traditional culture and the need for European integration – *It is a piece of Europe, which has specific cultural values. (...) We would like it not to be lost, we would like to preserve the continuity that still exists in our country* (I\_G303, 2021). The selected area of Europe is also the priority of activities at the institution G304: *It is an institution for which a mission (...) is a broad reflection on the notion of cultural heritage with a particular focus on the region of Central Europe* (I\_G304, 2021). The Centre's activities revolve around two concepts: heritage philosophy and Central Europe. The preservation, perception and relevance of heritage today are, thus, analysed in the context of the history of Central Europe. As the interviewee pointed out, this is particularly important because of the *conflicting visions of memory* (I\_G304, 2021) that exist in the region.

Regional institutions are typically funded by local governments, making their dependence on authorities vary by level. However, institution G304, classified as regional in our research, receives central funds, EU grants and income from its activities, ensuring stability and independence: *This is (...) a safe relationship, (...) that we can all the time conduct and carry out activities* (I\_G304, 2021). In contrast, institution G303 highlights insufficient funding:

*The culture we spend the least on, it is the one we save the most (...) The area of neglected culture will hit us [the society] harder than a missing piece of a pavement. I have a feeling that recently something is going backwards in this area* (I\_G303, 2021). This representative also noted that local funding often mirrors central trends, with cultural spending increasingly shaped by political priorities: *For the vast majority, local governments replicate central trends, so if you only fund a narrow section of culture then they do too* and observes that: *In recent years there have been outlined trends of spending on what the recipient wishes, according to those in power* (I\_G303, 2021). Institution G305 pointed out that under normal, non-pandemic conditions, their budget consists of funds from local governments and own revenues equally, which is a high level of financial independence for a local institution. *We are a local government institution, and our policy is consistent with the idea of the current local authorities (...) Nothing is imposed on us, but*

*it is obvious that our mission must be consistent (...) everyone is responsible and professional enough to know what to do (I\_G305, 2021).*

Institution G301 is another institution financed mainly by local government funds. As indicated in the interview: *The independence of the institution ends where the funds are allocated (I\_G301, 2020).* Therefore, *local governments have real power over culture. The ministry only has a portion of a small budget for culture. The money is in the local governments (I\_G301, 2020).* However, in cooperation and dialogue, it was emphasised that *the authorities commission us with a topic, and what we do with that topic is another matter (I\_G301, 2020).* Local governments, in a sense, “own” a cultural institution since they fund it. They reported a trend of changes that affect the substantive character of organised events: *At the moment we have definitely turned to the right in an obvious way. There have appeared various celebrations that are strongly national, which does not go along with my idea of supporting regional heritage (I\_G302, 2020).* However, it is not the changes at the central level that have shaped this trend, but only the subsequent changes in local governments: *For me, the real caesura started when PiS took power in the province (I\_G302, 2020).*

The regional cultural entities indicated more references to the European region and identity, recognising the important role of cooperation. Institution G304, which explicitly focuses on the Central European region, has developed in its actions well-thought-out references to Europeaness in *the phenomenon of European competition of national memories (I\_G304, 2021).* The concept of *polyphony of memories* was developed, and the role of the institution was defined as a place *enabling polyphony (I\_G304, 2021).* The implication is that the institution is largely focused on recognising the diversity of experiences and finding common ground while understanding various approaches.

Institution G303 pointed out the need to understand regional memory. They noticed that openness existed in Polish traditional culture and it resulted from *a sense of national self-esteem arising from a lack of concern for one's own identity (I\_G303, 2021).* Therefore, the fear of being European is a manifestation of a weak sense of national identity, which they observe in many European countries (including Poland). In their opinion, regional artists recognise this reverse trend of change, aiming rather at the separation of regional memory from national memory. They pointed out that it is crucial to work on *understanding the sense of European integration not as a desire to take away a country's integrity, but as federalisation in order to be more powerful in solving contemporary problems (I\_G303, 2021).* Thus, in their view, Europeaness is a space that guarantees greater understanding and security.

Local institutions relate to Europe through their experience with EU-funded projects, which are often negative. Institution G305 indicated that they have little to do with Europe as *...we are aware of the fact that we do not have any such projects (I\_G305, 2021).* The cooperation with the EU allowed representatives of institution G301 to develop a deeply critical view *...that culture as it functions in the minds of the European Commission is simply some kind of completely archaic concept (I\_G301, 2020).*



Regional institutions, in their perception of Polishness and identity, naturally referred to their region. It was in these institutions that they saw the source and inspiration for their understanding of what Polishness is. Much less frequently did they refer to the notions of national community and Christian tradition. One institution pointed to the European context: *Our Polish culture without the European context would not be complete; it would be untrue, much poorer* (I\_G303, 2021). They recognised the trend of using history to build a national narrative: *In Poland, history is used, this Poland the Christ of nations – although our history is not so unique* (I\_G303, 2021).

Institution G304 pointed out that: *Elements from the past left in some areas are not part of the identity of a given region. Nevertheless, they are part of that cultural landscape* (I\_G304, 2021). At the same time, they stated that national memory is a changing concept: *Memory is changeable, and it is being built up all the time; it is an object of historical policy that each country, and Poland in recent years, wants to pursue. It is a field of conflict (...) it is a field of influence (...) memory can be easily instrumentalised* (I\_G304, 2021).

Institution G305, in their perception of Polishness, referred to patriotism in local terms, stating that identity is based on *identification with Polish nationality and local patriotism* (I\_G305, 2021). An identity constructed in this way allows for the existence of *a sense of Polishness, of belonging to a particular community* (I\_G305, 2021). At the same time, patriotism is not identified solely with key moments in Polish history, but refers more broadly to Catholic traditions. In their opinion, it is crucial to include the experiences of groups existing within the country (e.g. Silesians): *This Polish fabric can shine with other colours besides white and red. Because it should* (I\_G302, 2020). In the interviews, a clear disappointment with the narrow approach to the topic of identity was expressed: *It's run down. And now it would be nice to try to incorporate one into the other* (I\_G302, 2020).

The impact of the value perspective of patriotism and Polish-Catholic identity becomes even clearer when looking at local and regional institutions, which clearly perceive the divergence of European and national-Catholic perspectives on values. In these interviews, we observed the reflection on the existence of two realities that they need to work with – first the reality of Europeanisation met in the project-oriented approach and administrative aspects, and second, the identity-oriented reality of their aims, local environment and public. At the local level, worth is often found not in abstract ideas, but in practice, such as building agreement or obtaining funding. The responses of cultural institutions at the regional level seem to be more cautious. The leading values are memory, openness and diversity, humility of observation and an attempt to understand the cultural reality in which they find themselves. It is worth noting that representatives of regional institutions are those who seem to be most attuned to the nuances of the changes taking place, not only in terms of tangible benefits and losses. They describe trends and ways of thinking about the value of heritage/culture and highlight the need for a certain balance.

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis presented in this study highlights the profound impact of the neo-traditionalistic turn in Poland on cultural institutions and heritage narratives. Firstly, it introduced the discourse of national identity and pride in Polish culture, which was the central ideological axis of the cultural policy programmes and the endorsed heritage narrative of the national and Catholic Polish community and history that clearly reflected the neo-traditionalistic vision. Secondly, it introduced a broad reform of cultural policy, embracing legal, financial and organisational changes that have led to a re-configuration of cultural space for cultural institutions.

Our research allowed us to capture insights from those dealing with heritage narratives and, thus, affected by this agenda. Representatives of cultural institutions at the central, regional and local levels are far from political judgments and display a complex interplay of populist cultural policy with the subtle re-imaginings of heritage narratives focused on presenting the value of Polish heritage to European publics.

The broad agenda on culture brought opportunities and challenges for various institutions. Centralisation efforts combined with financial programmes have strengthened the chosen topics and narratives, offering new possibilities for some institutions. On the other hand, the promoted vision of heritage and history deliberately omitted (in various aspects including finance and organisation) topics and places referring to diversity and inclusiveness. The picture is, however, complex for each category of institutions.

Newly established cultural institutions (Group II) as a product of new politics exemplify the agenda and the ideational perspective of a neo-traditionalistic vision in practice. These institutions operate within a national-Catholic ideological framework and portray Polish identity through Catholic teachings and national duty through the legacies of two crucial figures: Pope John Paul II and Prymas Wyszyński. They shape a heritage discourse that reinforces the government's communicative agenda and demonstrates its effectiveness in terms of the number of projects and an increase in funds. In interviews, representatives describe Europe as a stage to showcase Polishness as historically distinct and rooted in Christian values. Memory narratives emphasise national greatness and are intended to be educational for younger generations.

The perspective of well-established cultural institutions (Group I), which present Polish national history and showcase Polish achievements, is rather different. These institutions' mission to emphasise uniqueness and universal values aligns with the new cultural policy's heritage discourse. However, this does not alter their usual programmes. An exception is made for institutions that portray history from a distinct perspective, emphasising inclusivity, tolerance and diversity. These institutions report experiencing pressure in terms of organisational or financial state interference. They highlight an unprecedented shift in administrative practices, disrupting past cooperation regardless of political perspectives.

Local and regional organisations (Group III) remain either distant from changes or take steps to secure their local functioning. Their priority is managing heritage and

addressing community needs. While they recognise European values like democratisation and participation, their daily work focuses on balancing shifting interests, fostering local belonging and meeting authorities' and audiences' expectations. Their approach reflects a pragmatic navigation between and cooperation with all levels of stakeholders and maintaining a positive opinion of local publics.

Across all groups, a dual focus emerges promoting universal cultural values – identified by institutions as artistic excellence, objective truth and shared heritage – while reinforcing a distinct Polish identity through traditional or national-Catholic narratives. This highlights the evolving role of cultural institutions as agents shaping narratives that connect history with contemporary societal needs.

The process of re-imagining national heritage emphasises national pride, selecting values such as beauty, memory and community (as reflected in the report's title). *We have made a mental shift in our empowerment efforts regarding the historical memory of society. We took care of the existing ones and we established a number of new institutions*, declared the Minister of Culture.<sup>41</sup> This approach, shaped by historical policy, intertwines nuanced views on Europe and Polish identity. The narrative of Polish pride diminishes Europe's appeal, fostering an implicit but subtle "othering" of Europe. Among representatives of cultural institutions, Europe is often seen as irrelevant to their work, with democracy and European values becoming less prominent as they are distanced and unpopular in domestic discourse.

Future research should continue monitoring these trends and assessing the long-term impact of a cultural policy that prioritises narrowed heritage narratives. In particular, the tension between maintaining an independent critical view and fulfilling prescribed obligations remains a key challenge for Poland's cultural institutions in an era defined by political polarisation and cultural contestation.

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<sup>41</sup> Ministers' Piotr Gliński address in the report "Piękno. Pamięć. Wspólnota...", p. 4.

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