Markowska, Agnieszka

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Agnieszka Markowska
Milieu Law & Policy Consulting, Brussels, Belgium
corresponding author: agnieszka.markowska@milieu.be

State of Democracy in Poland versus Environmental Protection

Abstract
The paper starts with a review of literature focusing on links between democracy and environmental protection, pointing out a fair weight of scientific evidence that democratic societies on average enjoy a higher level of environmental quality than autocracies. It subsequently provides a quick insight into the recent trends in the state of democracy and the rule of law in Poland as well as a few examples of measures taken concerning environmental policy that have been undertaken after 2015. The paper concludes by expressing concern about certain negative patterns in the Polish environmental policy in the past few years, which seem to be connected to the deficiencies in the rule of law and democracy as observed in Poland. The shrinking space for civil society to participate in democratic governance concerning environmental issues and the excessive appetite of the current government for large infrastructural investments seem to be in contradiction with the European and global strive for sustainable development and tackling climate change. It remains to be seen if the recent negative trends in the Polish environmental policy will have a structural impact on the state of environment in Poland.

Keywords
democracy | environmental policy | Poland | rule of law

JEL Codes
H41, H83

1. Introduction

Poland was the first country from the communist bloc which managed, after over 40 years, to become free from its political and economic dependence on the Soviet Union and enter a path of democratic transformation. Poor state of environment, and in particular high levels of air pollution, was a landmark of the past communist regime not only in Poland but in the whole Eastern European region.

Environmental protection was fortunately not left behind in the programme of deep political and economic transition that started in the early 1990s. The creation of a system of fees and fines for using the environment in the spirit of the Polluter-Pays-Principle and the distribution of the financial resources collected in this way through a unique system of environmental funds functioning at various administrative levels were important processes pertaining to these reforms. Strengthening the State Inspectorate for Environmental Protection led to the closure of some of the most persistent polluting companies, while conversion of 10% of a part of the Polish foreign debt to environmental investments through the EcoFund helped in financing priority undertakings in this area (Winiecki, 2019).

Reforms of the environmental policy occurred parallel to the democratic transition of the country, with accession of Poland to the EU in May 2004 being an important milestone for both processes. Adoption of the EU *acquis* in its part relating to the environment and signing a range of international treaties and conventions contributed to improvement of environmental parameters such as air and water quality, and expanding of the area covered with biodiversity protection measures.

In recent years, violations of democratic governance and the rule of law observed in Poland have raised concerns in EU institutions and in international fora of politicians and academics. Deficiencies in democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights can affect many areas of economic and social life. While environmental protection policy is not one of the most obvious areas to be affected, the impacts of persistent gaps in democracy

and the rule of law may potentially have severe consequences for the state of environment in Poland and for the country's achievement of goals set in international environmental and climate agreements for many years to come.

The purpose of this paper is, first, to highlight the interaction between democracy and the state of environment based on literature review. Subsequently, the paper provides a summary of recent trends in democracy and the rule of law in Poland, and then it analyses a couple of examples of recent political decisions which can be seen as violations of a democratic and sustainable approach to environmental policy. In conclusion, the paper raises concern for the future state of environment in Poland in the light of the current trend.

2. Literature Review

There is a vast body of literature devoted to studying the links between democracy and environment. The short literature review provided here does not aim to be exhaustive – it merely sketches hypotheses and arguments found in a few prominent publications on this topic.

Attempts to tackle the question whether democracy is superior to other political regimes in achieving high levels of environmental protection date back to late 1960s. Writers such as Hardin (1968) or Heilbronner (1974) doubted whether democracies were capable of constraining environmentally damaging economic activities in the world of limited natural resources. Free individuals or interest groups may have a tendency to overexploit commonly available natural resources. According to these authors, authoritarian regimes might be necessary to prevent the 'tragedy of the commons'.

A number of authors including Payne (1995), Dryzek (1987), and Paehlke (1995) argued that democracy and environmental quality are in fact compatible. A central argument raised is that environmental degradation typically benefits the financial elites while imposing (external) costs on the whole population. The democratic sharing of power in the society can in principle provide enough weight to prevent the environmental degradation fuelled by the appetite of large businesses (Winslow, 2005).

Payne (1995), in his argumentation pointed at poor environmental outcomes of countries like the Soviet Union together with the Eastern European communist bloc and China. He provided five arguments why democracy is superior in securing higher environmental quality: (1) freedom to gather and disseminate information under democracy facilitates organisation of environmental interests and puts pressure on policy-makers; (2) accountability of governments to the public; (3) political learning – democratic societies and governments are more open and likely to learn from scientific and other independent sources; (4) internationalism – democratic governments tend to favour international cooperation as a means to solve global problems; (5) the free market, which provides incentives for creating pressure on producers ('green consumerism') and is a better fit for using market-based instruments to tackle pollution than non-market based instruments.

According to Dryzek (1997), though generally democracy has a positive impact on environment, it often suffers from the asymmetric influence of corporate interests. Profit-seeking corporations which favour activities that may be damaging for the environment support the coming to power of certain political leaders. Once in power, the leaders respond to the interests of large businesses, which may lead to creation of polyarchies that may become a threat for democratic ideals.

Paehlke (1996) pointed out a dichotomy between the local and national levels. Midlarsky (1998) seems to have found some confirmation of this hypothesis on an empirical level: in his modelling he found a statistically significant positive effect of democracy on protected land area, but at the same time, he found a negative correlation between democracy and deforestation, soil erosion and CO_2 (carbon dioxide). Winslow (2005) carried out a statistical analysis of three indicators of urban air pollution monitored in the Global Environmental Monitoring System (GEMS): sulphur dioxide, suspended particular matter and smoke (dark particular matter) versus two democracy indices (Freedom House (FH) Index and Polity III). Using these indices, she found support for the hypothesis that the more democratic a country, the less urban air pollution – in line with the idea that democracy works well at local level.

Li and Reuveny (2006) examined the effect of democracy on five aspects of human-induced environmental degradation statistically: carbon dioxide emissions, nitrogen dioxide emissions, deforestation, land degradation and organic pollution in water. They found that democracy reduces all the

five types of environmental degradation included in the model.

Neumayer (2002) found strong evidence that democracies are positively correlated to the degree of fulfilment of international environmental commitments. According to this analysis, democratic countries sign and ratify more multilateral agreements, participate in more international environmental organisations, are more likely to have a National Council on Sustainable Development in their country and provide better access to environmentally relevant information than non-democracies.

Pickering, Bäckstrand and Schlosberg (2020) provide an overview of a set of studies touching upon the environment-democracy nexus. They distinguish the concept of 'ecological democracy' from 'environmental democracy'.[1] Environmental democracy has its foundations from the Rio de Janeiro Environmental and Development Declaration of 1992, which in its Principle 10 states that 'Environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level'. The adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement in 2015 reinforced the idea that participation by a broad spectrum of actors in global sustainable development diplomacy is essential for effective solving of global problems.

Environmental democracy can be achieved through cooperation between the general public, non-governmental organisations and public administration authorities. It should happen at a level as close as possible to the affected citizens. In environmental democracy, it is necessary to ensure the right to environmental information and the right of access to justice in environmental matters (Cabaj and Łachacz, 2010).

The adoption of the Aarhus Convention in 1998 was an important milestone for strengthening the concept of environmental democracy and for putting it into practice (Jendrośka, 2002). Poland ratified the convention in 2001; after its publication in the Official Journal in 2003, it has become a part of the Polish legal order. It consists of specific legal standards giving the public a fairly clear mandate and imposing certain obligations on administrative authorities. Three main areas regulated by the convention are: (1) disclosure and dissemination of environmental information; (2) public participation in the decision-making processes concerning the environment; and (3) providing access to justice in this area.

Concluding the literature review, it can be stated that despite the existing controversies and debates, there is a weight of argumentation and empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis that democracies achieve better environmental outcomes than autocracies.

3. Recent Trends in Democracy and the Rule of Law in Poland

Democracy, literally translated from the ancient Greek, means 'the rule of the people'. According to a popular definition of the former U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, a democratic government is 'the government of the people, by the people and for the people'. Diamond and Morlino (2016) list four key elements of democracy: free and fair elections leading to the formation of a government, active participation of citizens in politics and civic life, protection of human rights for all citizens and the rule of law in which all citizens are equally treated.

Western states, including EU members, are liberal democracies, which means that the power of the society or its representatives is implemented through a system of rules and institutions organised according to the separation of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of governance. The rule of law keeps the system in balance, providing predictability, impartial courts and safeguarding human rights and the equality before the law (Bond and Gostyńska-Jakubowska, 2020).

A recent wave of populism affecting many countries around the globe including several EU Member States poses a threat to democracy and the rule of law. Populism can mimic democracy by presenting the vision of governance where the will of the people ('the pure people') should be directly followed but at the same time disregarding or modifying the role of democratically established institutions and minority groups and limiting the free flow of information (Grzymała-Busse, Kuo, Fukuyama & McFaul, 2020).

1 This paper focuses on environmental democracy. Ecological democracy is more radical (ecocentric rather than anthropocentric) and critical of the potential of the existing liberal democratic institutions to tackle the environmental problems of today while environmental democracy stresses the need for transformative change and reconfiguring relationships between local, national and global decision-making.

Since 2015, the rule of law and the state of democracy in Poland have seen a gradual decline. According to the European Parliament (2020), deterioration of the rule of law in Poland concerns primarily the independence of the judiciary and public media from the executive branch. Growing problems have also been observed in the area of fundamental rights (especially regarding the rights of minorities) and freedom to associate and assembly. Recent legal changes have imposed limits on fair and impartial distribution of public funds to civil society, which can impact the functioning of (environmental) NGOs.

The European Commission has issued several recommendations to the Polish government to reverse the breaches of the EU law but the measures undertaken were not fully satisfactory. In December 2017, the Commission issued a proposal for a Council Decision on the determination of a clear risk of a serious breach by the Republic of Poland of the rule of law (EC, 2017). The rule of law framework established by the European Commission consists of three stages: (1) Commission's assessment; (2) Commission's recommendation and (3) monitoring following the Commission's recommendation – all these stages have been applied to Poland. If no solution is found within the rule of law framework, Article 7 of the Treaty on the European Union may be triggered to ensure the EU country complies with EU values. Article 7 of the Treaty provides for special mechanisms with far-reaching sanctions including suspension of the voting rights and, eventually, a possibility of limiting access to EU funding (European Commission, 2019).

In its 'Nations in Transit 2020', FH has categorised Poland as a 'semi-consolidated democracy', recently downgrading from the category of 'consolidated democracy' (Csaky, 2020). Deterioration of democratic governance can be reflected by several indices that measure the state of democracy and its specific components in various countries around the World. The figures below present recent developments in three of such indices: FH, The World Justice Project (WJP) and Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI).

Figure 1 and Figure 2 based on the FH and the WJP indicators show the trends for Poland are against the trends observed in a selection of other countries. It can be seen that a downward tendency in Poland started in 2016. A similar process of deterioration of the rule of law and democracy has recently been observed in Hungary (starting a few years earlier, reflecting coming into power of a populist government). Western European economies such as Germany, the Netherlands and the leader of the ranking Denmark are characterised with a relatively stable trend; Czechia, which has a similar historical and economic background such as Poland and Hungary, has become the leader of democratic governance in the post-communist bloc. Figure 3 shows recent deterioration of the rule of law index in Poland based on the World Bank's WGI.

4. Examples of Recent Approaches to Environmental Policy in Poland

Populist governments often undertake exploitative policies towards the environment, striving to prove to their electorate how productive the economy can be under their management – even if only in a short term. Nationalism, religion or tradition are often used instrumentally to fuel the arguments supporting such damaging practices. The following sections provide a few examples of such policies undertaken in recent years in Poland.

4.1. Białowieża forest

The Białowieża forest is the largest remaining part of the primeval forest which once stretched across Europe. It is a (UNESCO) World Heritage Site; in 2007 the forest was declared as the Natura 2000 site covering an area of over 60 ha. It was designated as a 'site of Community importance' in accordance with the Habitats Directive and as a special protection area for birds under the Birds Directive.

In 2016, the Polish Minister of Environment authorised almost tripling of timber harvesting in the Białowieża Forest, which was deemed to be necessary due to the spread of a spruce bark beetle. Work began on the removal of dead trees and trees affected by the beetle in over half of the area of the Natura 2000 site. Environmental NGOs and scientists launched a series of protests but they were not successful in stopping the works.

The activities launched by the forest managers were undertaken in the spirit of the Minister Szyszko's interpretation of the biblical rule from the book of Genesis, which he had often recalled during various speeches and interviews. Genesis 1:28 states: *And God*

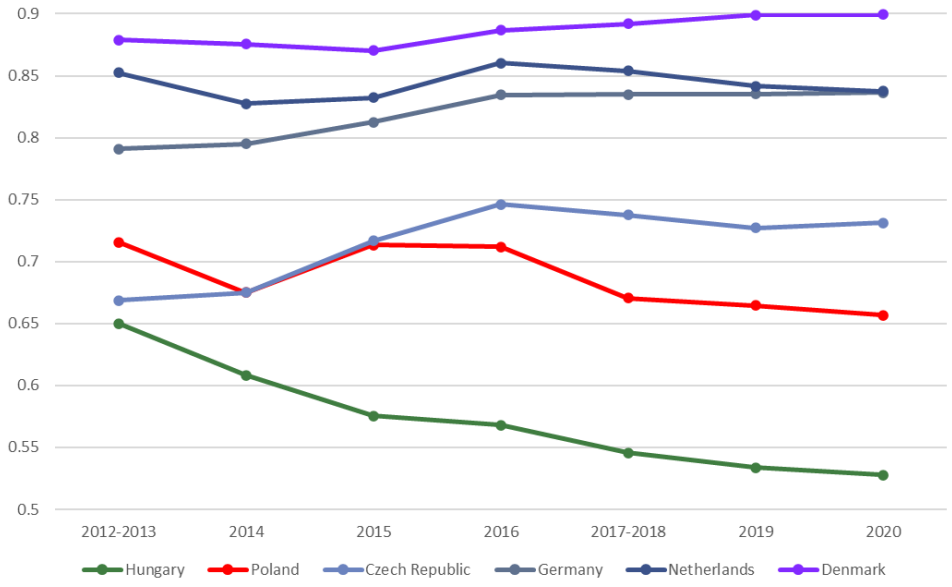

Figure 1. The WJP rule of law indices for the selected countries, 2012–2020. Source: The WJP Rule of Law Index 2020, www.worldjusticeproject.org. *Notes*: Factors of the WJP Rule of Law Index include: constraints on government powers, absence of corruption, open government, fundamental rights, order and security, regulatory enforcement, civil justice and criminal justice. The index measures perception of the rule of law worldwide based on household and expert surveys in 128 countries. For full description of the methodology, check https://worldjusticeproject.org/our-work/wjp-rule-law-index. WJP, World Justice Project

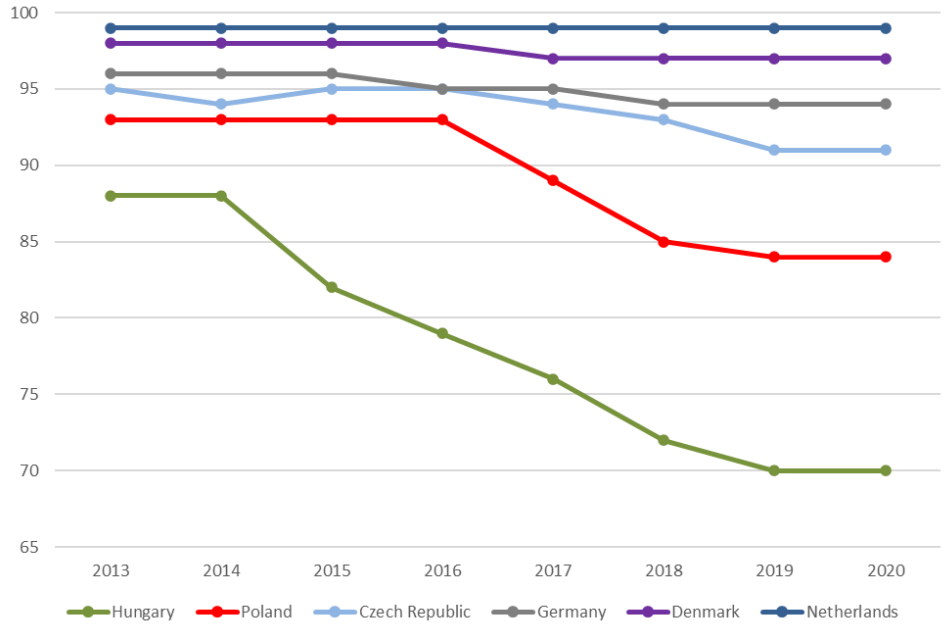

Figure 2. Freedom in the World indices for the selected countries, 2013–2020. *Source*: FH, https://freedomhouse.org/. Notes: Sub-categories of the Freedom in the World index include: electoral process, political pluralism, functioning of government, freedom of expression and belief, associational and organisational rights, rule of law, personal autonomy and individual rights. The index is developed by a team of in-house and external analysts and expert advisers from the academic, think tank and human rights communities. For full description of the methodology, check https://freedom-house.org/reports/freedom-in-the-world/freedom-in-the-world-research-methodology. FH, Freedom House

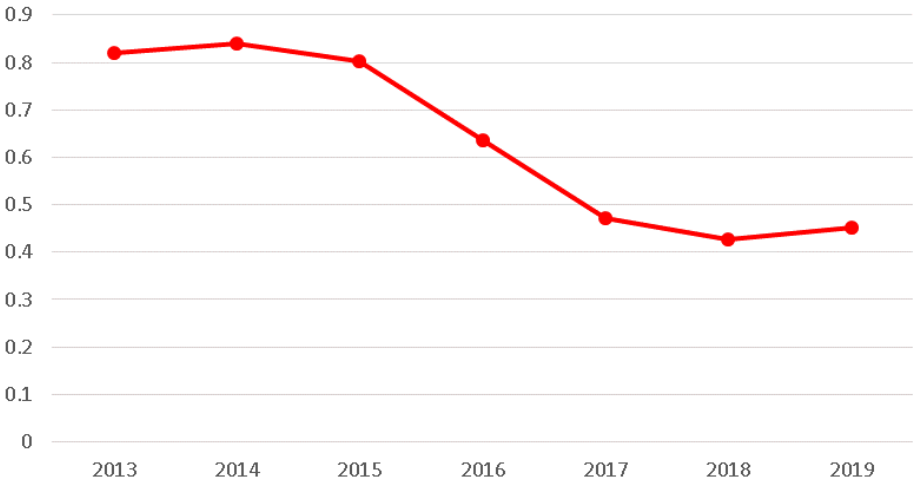

Figure 3. WGI index measuring the rule of law in Poland, 2013–2019. *Source*: WGI, http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/#home. *Notes*: The WGI summarise the views on the quality of governance provided by a large number of citizen, enterprise and expert respondents which are gathered from a number of institutes, think tanks, non-governmental organisations, international organisations and private sector firms. The WGIs do not reflect the official views of the World Bank or individual countries. WGI, Worldwide Governance Indicators

said to them, Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth. (Hall, 2017). According to the Minister, this passage would justify exploitation of natural resources to accommodate human needs. It can be noted that in Poland, being a predominantly Catholic country, justifying governmental actions with passages from the Bible adds a special weight to argumentation.

On 20 July 2017, the European Commission brought an action before the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) declaring that Poland had failed to fulfil its obligations under the Habitats and Birds Directives.[2] In November 2017, the CJEU issued an order requiring that 'Poland must immediately cease its active forest management operations in the Białowieża Forest, except in exceptional cases where they are strictly necessary to ensure public safety'. Otherwise, Poland would be obliged to pay to the Commission a penalty payment of at least EUR 100 000 per day.[3] The order finally curbed the appetite of the Polish Minister of Environment and the State Forests for cutting the trees in Białowieża.

4.2. Lex Szyszko

In December 2016, following an extremely short legislative process and with violation of parliamentary rules (preventing the opposition to cast their votes),[4] the Polish Parliament endorsed an amendment of the Act on Nature Protection which made it possible for land owners to remove trees of any size from their properties, provided that the trees are not designated nature monuments and that their removal is not triggered by commercial activities. Before this amendment entered into force on 1 January, 2017, land owners had been obliged to ask municipal authorities for approval of the plans to remove trees and shrubs – the amendment effectively abolished this requirement.

The amendment, referred to as 'Lex Szyszko' owing its name to the Minister of Environment who was in power in that time resulted in massive removal of trees. According to estimates of Professor Zbigniew Karaczun from the Warsaw Agricultural University,

2 Court of Justice of the European Union, press release No 48/18 Luxembourg, 17 April 2018, https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2018-04/cp180048en.pdf

3 Order of the Court in Case C-441/17 R Commission v Poland, https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2017-11/cp170122en.pdf

4 The Act was proposed in the middle of December, giving 10 days (between 20th and 30th of December) for receiving comments from interested parties/civil society. The voting was organised in a relatively small room in the Parliament, where Members of the Parliament from opposition were not allowed to enter.

during less than half a year of being in force, the amendment was likely to have resulted in cutting of approximately 3 million of trees in Poland (Gurgul, 2017).

The Act on Nature Protection was corrected in June 2017, introducing a requirement to notify municipal authorities about their plans to remove trees exceeding certain sizes. The relevant authorities must check each case and decide if the land owner can proceed with the planned undertaking. However, according to the report of the Supreme Audit Office (2018), most of the institutions responsible for supervision of tree removals did not fulfil their obligations in this area correctly and diligently. Besides, it will take decades before the losses due to the unfortunate amendment and massive cutting of trees (especially in cities, where the role of green areas and trees is of key importance), can be compensated.

4.3. Windmills' legislation

In 2016, the government enacted a law on wind power installations.[5] According to this piece of legislation, windmills used for electricity production can be installed at a distance from the residential buildings that is not lower than tenfold of their height. In practice this would be around 1.5–2 km, which means that the number of suitable locations for windmills in Poland is very limited. Furthermore, according to this legislation, windmill installations can only be set up on the basis of a local spatial management plan. Many municipalities in Poland do not have such plans, and their preparation usually takes a long time, which introduces another hindrance for windmill investors. The legislation has also introduced a new definition of a 'wind power plant' resulting in an increase of real estate tax for the investors. All these rules create serious obstacles for the development of this sector in Poland.

The new legislation was introduced in response to several local protests as well as nation-wide campaigns against windmills, underpinned with arguments of visual and acoustic damages generated by windmills. While there is scientific evidence that windmills can cause certain negative effects on humans and the environment, professional literature points out that wind energy is associated with relatively low external costs as compared to other primary energy sources. According to the recent report on external costs of energy production per technology calculated using life-cycle analysis (Trinomics, 2020), generation of electricity from wind has the lowest score of external costs among all other analysed primary sources of energy production. According to this study, the estimate of external costs for onshore generation of wind energy within the EU equals EUR 3 per MWh in comparison to EUR 154 per MWh for hard coal, EUR 177 for lignite and EUR 68 per MWh for natural gas.

Literature review of scientific studies related to externalities of wind power production underlines that the negative effects of windmills have a local scale and therefore, regulation of this sector requires ensuring sufficient flexibility to local authorities to account for local circumstances and allow public participation in the decision-making process regarding sitting of the windmills (Zerrahn, 2017). While the Polish Minister of Development in mid-2020 announced plans to amend the windmill legislation, no concrete steps in this regard were taken until the end of 2020. Since the real-time investment in windmills usually takes a couple of years due to technical and legal procedures, even if the legislation becomes more flexible soon, its negative impacts are likely to affect this sector of renewable energy in Poland for many years to come.

4.4. A channel through the Vistula Spit

Over the past few years, the Polish government has launched several large infrastructural investments. Digging a shipping channel through the Vistula Spit and the Central Transportation Port in the vicinity of Łódź are examples of such flagship initiatives. Their approval is streamlined with special pieces of legislation (so-called *specustawa*), which circumvent regular provisions of the Polish law, making certain administrative processes, including Environmental Impact Assessment, less cumbersome for the investors.

The area of the Vistula Spit is a valuable natural environment consisting primarily of vast reed beds, pine forest, dunes and a large brackish reservoir with significant populations of pikeperch, herring and freshwater fish. The location at the mouth of the Vistula River and the sea coastline makes the area very important for migration and wintering of sea and water birds. The Vistula Mouth and Lagoon together

5 Official Journal 2016 item 961, act of 20 May 2016 on investments in the area of wind power plants, https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20160000961

with the adjacent fragment of the Spit, are protected as 'Natura 2000 sites' under the EU Birds and Habitats Directives.

The economy of the Vistula Lagoon has been traditionally based on fishing and trade between Elbląg and the Kaliningrad region. The Lagoon is on average less than 2 m deep and it freezes in winter, which excludes its use for large scale shipping. Despite its modernisation, Elbląg has no great economic potential as a seaport, especially in view of the easily accessible large and expanding nearby ports of Gdansk and Gdynia (Węsławski, Goc & Stempniewicz, 2019).

Regular dredging of the channel which will be necessary to maintain it will have significant negative environmental consequences. Dredging will be a source of dense suspended particles, which will have very negative effects on all filtering organisms and juvenile stages of fish as well as on other organisms coexisting with them in the complex trophic network of the reservoir. The planned and probably underestimated financial outlays are not justified by the very poor economic benefits (the investment is estimated to pay-off in about 450–500 years), however seemingly, there are other interests at stake.

In May 2020, during his electoral campaign, the Polish president Andrzej Duda visited the investment site on the Vistula Spit. During the press briefing he underlined that the construction of the channel will provide the Vistula Lagoon with independent access to the Baltic Sea, strengthening the Polish sovereignty in the region (today, Polish ships sailing into and out of the Vistula Lagoon need to use a Russian-administered strait). The president said at this occasion: 'We want to continue to implement large investments. We do not want to interrupt, limit or reduce them, or God forbid, to give up on them, because these great investments are the driving force of the economy. This is something that history has shown.' (The First News, 2020).

4.5. Controlling NGOs

In August 2020, the Polish Minister of Justice during a press conference organised together with the Minister of Environment announced a new proposal for a legal act on transparency of financing of NGOs. According to the draft act, NGOs whose incomes originate in at least 10% from foreign sources would be obliged, before making any use of the foreign financial resources, to apply for registration at the Ministry of Justice (support from international organisations of which Poland is a part, and from EU bodies, would be excluded from this requirement). The register kept at the Ministry would contain detailed information about the foreign sources of financing.

Furthermore, according to the draft act, the NGOs would be obliged to inform the public about their status as 'an organisation financed from foreign financial sources' – this information would have to be included in the heading of the NGOs websites. The NGOs would also be required to submit detailed reports on the sources of their incomes and on all their projects to the Minister of Justice. According to Marcin Stoczkiewicz from Client Earth,[6] such provisions are aimed at the stigmatisation of NGOs and at undermining public trust on them.

It can be noted that a similar legal act was implemented in Hungary in 2017. Following a court case initiated by the European Commission, the CJEU has ruled that the Hungarian government was breaking EU law, introducing discriminatory and unjustified restrictions and violating fundamental rights and free movement of capital.[7]

4.6. Veto on reaching climate neutrality

Poland vetoed the pledge on reaching climate neutrality by 2050 presented during the EU summit in June 2019, pointing at too high financial and social costs of limiting coal mining. Among the EU Member States, only Hungary, Czechia and Estonia supported Poland. This decision announced by the Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki, was not surprising, as Poland has a long history of supporting the traditionally strong coal mining sector. It raised, however, some disappointment among the leaders of Western European countries. The Polish prime minister mentioned that the veto is not 'irreversible', which might indicate that EU financial support (e.g. within the Just Transition Mechanism) can eventually help in convincing the Polish government to join the EU pledge (Bielecki, 2019).

6 Interview with Marcin Stoczkiewicz, Client Earth, August 2020.

7 Judgment in case C-78/18, Commission v Hungary, https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2020-06/cp200073en.pdf

4.7. Some positive developments

Despite these negative examples, one should also note some positive developments in the Polish environmental policy in recent years. One example is energy policy. The government of the current political coalition, while initially reluctant to enter the path of energy transformation, gradually realised that, in the light of EU policy in this field, implementation of a radical energy transformation programme will be necessary. This change of approach has resulted in a significant reduction of electricity generation from coal and lignite and increase of the share of renewable energy sources (Macuk, 2020).

Furthermore, in September 2020, Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the governmental coalition, proposed a draft act on the protection of the rights of animals. The new legislation would introduce a ban on animal breeding for fur and a ban on keeping animals in circuses. The act would also limit the possibility of keeping animals on chains and make it possible for NGOs to bring civil actions to courts in order to protect animals. While the draft is not free from deficiencies and loopholes, it is definitely a step in a right direction in the area of animal well-being (Woźniak, 2020).

5. Conclusions

Even though the relationship between democracy and environment is not an easy and uncontroversial one, a substantial body of scientific literature and opinions of international fora engaged in solving (global) environmental issues agree that employing democratic solutions is beneficial for achieving a better state of environment and sustainability in the World.

The deterioration of democratic values in Poland, reflected in several indices measuring the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights, has a negative impact on many areas of social life. Environmental policy has also been affected by unfavourable actions of the populist government in charge since 2015. While certain decisions and legislative changes have certainly resulted in negative impacts on the environment in Poland, some positive developments, including the law proposed for protection of animals, have also been noted.

What raises the most concern in the environmental policy field in Poland is the shrinking space for civil society to participate in the legislative process and fair democratic governance. Another element of concern is the narrative of the governmental representatives stressing the need for Poland to develop more large infrastructural projects, with flagship initiatives such as the channel through the Vistula Spit. Recent developments suggest that the government is focusing more on making a good impression on its electorate in terms of higher GDP and boosting (in the short term) incomes than on ensuring a long-term sustainable development with adequate participation of the society in decision-making. Such a myopic policy may have damaging consequences for the state of environment in Poland for many years to come.

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First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Żylicz, who was my wonderful mentor during my master and doctoral studies at the Department of Economics at the Warsaw University. I remember how I realised after graduating from the first year of my studies that economics was not really something I enjoyed studying. Then I discovered environmental economics, and soon afterwards I was happy to hear that Professor Żylicz was willing to be my scientific advisor. From then, studying economics became exciting; finally I had found a professional area to which I could devote not only my brain but also my heart.

During over 15 years that have passed since my graduation, I have often recalled Professor's calm but determined argumentation in favour of environmental protection that was supported with strictly economic analysis of the specific issues at hand, be it valuation of eutrophication in the Baltic Sea, reintroduction of the lynx in forests or opinions against construction of another dam on the Vistula river. While being always open for cooperation with civil society organisation, he has strived for high professional standards both in his own work and in that of his students.

I am delighted to have an opportunity to contribute to this special jubilee issue of the CEEJ, together with my former colleagues from the Warsaw Ecological Economics Centre and other current and former students and collaborators of Professor Żylicz; with many of them I have participated in numerous environmental conferences and projects, which were rich in professional but also in warm social interactions.

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