



# The anti-vaccine movement in Poland: The socio-cultural conditions of the opposition to vaccination and threats to public health



Piotr Żuk<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Paweł Żuk<sup>b</sup>, Justyna Lisiewicz-Jakubaszko<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Wrocław, Department of Sociology, Poland

<sup>b</sup> The Centre for Civil Rights and Democracy Research, Poland

<sup>c</sup> Department of Endocrinology, Diabetology and Metabolic Diseases of the 4th Military Clinical Hospital, Poland

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## ABSTRACT

The article analyses the cultural and political contexts of the revival of the anti-vaccine movement in Poland. According to the authors, the attempt to institutionalise and politicise anti-vaccine activists is part of the wider phenomenon of political populism in Eastern Europe. The attempt to abolish compulsory vaccinations, which is supported by right-wing populists, shows that the anti-Enlightenment and anti-Western shift in the public sphere in Eastern Europe can also affect the area of health protection. Western pharmaceutical concerns may be the same target of populist attacks as refugees and migrants. The authors claim that, like in the case of political nationalism, a widespread educational campaign and bottom-up social legal and political measures need to be implemented to combat disinformation about vaccination.

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explain the motives of the actions taken by the increasingly active anti-vaccine movement for the abolition of the obligatory vaccination of children in Poland, and to describe the possible effects of such initiatives. While this phenomenon may have serious medical consequences and be a threat to public health, it has socio-cultural causes and is strongly dependent on the political context.

The phenomenon of the anti-vaccine movement should be analysed due to the increasing range of its influence and the attempts taken to institutionalise it. In August 2018, a citizens' bill that abolishes the obligation to vaccinate was introduced for consideration in the Polish parliament. The bill was signed by 121,000 people. Supported by the right-wing populist Law and Justice (PiS) party and nationalistic Kukiz'15 party, the bill was sent for further study in October 2018. Although the project was ultimately rejected in the parliament in November 2018 under pressure from the medical community and some media, it did not weaken the activity of anti-vaccinationists.

## 2. Methods and data

This article presents results of surveys on vaccination in Poland and outlines the arguments of anti-vaccine activists and their political connections. We also show the cultural context in which the anti-vaccine movement develops.

Materials used include websites of the anti-vaccine movement, as well as statements from the websites of medical and nursing organisations considering the proposals to abolish mandatory vaccinations in Poland.

## 3. Avoiding vaccinations: The scale of the phenomenon and legal regulations in Poland

While about 4000 people per year refused vaccinations in Poland between 2006 and 2010, this number increased from about 5000 to over 16,000 between 2011 and 2015, reaching nearly 24,000 in 2016 [1]. Moreover, this number reached approximately 30,000 in 2017 and, although there is still no official data, according to epidemiologists it will amount to 40,000 in 2018. The Supreme Audit Office (*Najwyższa Izba Kontroli*—NIK) warns that this number may be even higher because clinics do not inform public health officials of all refusals [2]. Data on the avoidance of compulsory vaccinations is worrying doctors: exceeding the safety barrier, defined as a few percent of the population being

\* Corresponding author at: Instytut Socjologii, ul. Koszarowa 3, 51-149 Wrocław, Poland.

E-mail addresses: [pzuk@uni.wroc.pl](mailto:pzuk@uni.wroc.pl) (P. Żuk), [justyna.jak@interia.pl](mailto:justyna.jak@interia.pl) (J. Lisiewicz-Jakubaszko).

unvaccinated, is a threat to the so-called collective resistance and may lead to outbreaks of infectious diseases.

This kind of threat is real as indicated, among others, by the recorded increase in measles cases: 132 cases were recorded in Poland in 2016, 84 more than a year earlier. During this period, the number of patients with pertussis also increased. While only 3% of respondents admitted that their children had not been vaccinated for an infectious disease at least once [3], the number of those who are sceptical about specific vaccines is rapidly growing. More than 30% believe that vaccination is mainly in the interest of pharmaceutical companies, 37% say that “vaccines can cause serious side effects and complications in children” and 22% repeat the slogans of anti-vaccine movements indicating that vaccinations can cause autism (Fig. 1).

Anti-vaccine movements demand a change of law and the abolition of the obligation to vaccinate children in Poland. As of 2018,

vaccinations against tuberculosis, hepatitis, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, polio, haemophilus influenzae type B, measles, mumps, rubella and pneumococci are obligatory [4]. According to existing regulations in Poland, parents who do not vaccinate their child on time receive a reminder with a call to do it within seven days. If, despite the call, the vaccination is not performed, the province governor may impose a fine on the parents at the request of the health inspector, the amount of which depends, inter alia, on the number of avoided vaccinations. The maximum amount of the fine is PLN 10,000 (about USD 2700) and it can be imposed many times (the total amount of fines cannot exceed PLN 50,000—about USD 13,500). Most often, the amount of the fine is lower, ranging from about PLN 200 (USD 55) to PLN 700 (USD 190). A fined parent has the right to lodge a complaint to the Minister of Health, who may revoke the decision. If the decision is upheld, the parents can appeal to the administrative court [3].



Fig. 1. There are different opinions about vaccinations today. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (CBOS, 2017).

#### 4. The social and political context

The citizens' bill was submitted to parliament on the initiative of the association “Stop NOP,” which on its website reproduces information proclaimed by the American anti-vaccine movements about the connection of vaccinations with autism and encephalopathy [5]. In Poland, like in other countries, anti-vaccine activists used similar propaganda tricks [6]: they showed that scientific consensus was the result of a complex and secretive conspiracy (under Polish conditions, these claims were given an anti-Western character), using fake experts as authorities combined with denigration of scientific and recognised knowledge; they used false analogies and fragmentary information (they showed that the lack of compulsory vaccinations in countries such as Norway did not lead to epidemic outbreaks, but they did not add that the lack of compulsory vaccinations led to an increase in measles in Romania).

The main purpose of the bill is to abandon obligatory vaccinations and make them voluntary. Under the new Vaccinations Act, this is justified by “the need to introduce changes due to the occurrence of adverse post-vaccination reactions (*niepożądane odczyny poszczepienne*—NOP) that cannot be prevented if vaccinations are obligatory” [7].

The campaign of the association “Stop NOP” has its supporters in the Polish parliament. In 2016, a Parliamentary Group for the Security of the Vaccines for Children and Adults Programme was formed. It is primarily composed of Kukiz'15 club members and non-attached MPs related to the nationalist movement, such as Robert Winnicki. These are the same right-wing populists who contributed to the campaign against *in vitro* fertilisation [8] and supported nationalist demands to close borders to refugees. Among the goals of the group are “to lift sanctions for not vaccinating a child and to cooperate with non-governmental and medical organisations that are independent of pharmaceutical producers” [9].

Due to the political alliance with the PiS and Kukiz'15 parties, the anti-vaccine movement in Poland is an element of the nationalist populist narrative [10]. A similar trend—according to some authors—was observed in the United States, where voices sceptical about vaccines were most often expressed by Trump's supporters during the presidential campaign. After his victory, the anti-vaccine movements became even more active [11]. The lack of mandatory vaccinations for children took on a particularly dramatic scale in Ukraine. This was caused by both political chaos and complete disorganisation of public life. In 2008, 95% of Ukrainian children were vaccinated against measles and this percentage dropped to 68% in 2013. The situation became particularly dramatic in 2016 as only 31% of planned vaccinations for six-year-olds were performed. The situation also deteriorated dramatically in the case of other diseases. In 2016, only 19% of children received the recommended doses of vaccinations against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis, and 56% against polio [12]. The situation in Ukraine is particularly important for Poland due to the epidemiological security of the society. According to estimates, the number of economic migrants from Ukraine in Poland ranged from approximately 1 million to 1.5 million in 2018.

In the opinion of the Supreme Council of Nurses and Midwives, the draft regulations abolishing the obligation of preventive vaccination jeopardise the public interest of Polish society. “Currently, the statutory obligation to undergo protective vaccination for certain infectious diseases is imposed on every person staying on the territory of the Republic of Poland and has a strong justification resulting not only from caring for the health of an individual patient but, above all, from the need to ensure

public health of the whole society” [13]. The voice of medical circles, particularly in the context of the public health care crisis in Poland (which is manifested by the economic migration of doctors and nurses to Western European countries, staff shortages in the health care system, insufficient health expenditures and long patients' waiting times to see specialist doctors) [14], is increasingly silenced by the anti-vaccine propaganda, which takes place primarily on the internet, including Facebook and Twitter [15].

#### 5. A cultural rebellion of semi-periphery countries against the core: A spontaneous movement of anti-vaccinationists in Eastern Europe or a planned intrigue?

The social composition of environments that have a negative or sceptical attitude to vaccination in Poland is dominated by people aged from 25 to 34. Most of them have a lower professional and material status [3]. This would confirm the thesis that the anti-vaccine movement is part of the cultural backlash of the lower classes who reject western modernisation in response to a sense of economic discrimination and lower cultural capital. This opposition of the semi-peripheries (according to Wallerstein, core countries dominate over periphery and semi-periphery countries as they have a stronger economic and political position in the global system and they also determine the current cultural patterns and models of development [16]) experiencing a poorer economic status, may also be manifested by the nationalist reaction to emigrants in eastern Europe [17] and hostility to moral norms prevailing in western Europe. Moreover, under the pretext of dislike for western pharmaceutical concerns, this anti-modernisation opposition may also manifest itself by the growing hostility to obligatory vaccinations. This general attitude against liberal modernisation in the European Union may be a cultural reaction of the poorer semi-periphery countries experiencing colonial subordination to rich core countries, which is expressed with the language of counter-Enlightenment cultural and political populisms (due to the weak local leftist circles and the absence of the language of class interests [18]). The language of class interests (which combines political debate with socio-economic interests and voters' life) has been replaced by the language of cultural divisions in debates (under Polish conditions, these divisions often concern historical and identity issues) [19]. In this way, political disputes concern cultural issues rather than economic models or methods of financing health care (in Poland, these conflicts are related to refugees, the role of the Church in public life and the legality of abortion). As can be seen, the necessity of vaccinations and the truthfulness of scientific claims may also be the topics of politically relevant conflicts.

This mood and the line of social divisions, however, can be strengthened by an appropriate propaganda and disinformation campaign, particularly if it takes place on the internet. As has been shown, “bots and trolls are actively involved in the online public health discourse, skewing discussions about vaccination” [20]. According to the authors of the analysis, Russian trolls and sophisticated bots promote both pro- and anti-vaccine narratives [20]. This diagnosis is particularly accurate in the case of Poland. Journalistic investigations have shown that Russian services tried to influence the electoral result in 2015, which gave power to right-wing populists in Poland [21]. From this perspective, the issue of vaccination goes far beyond the strictly medical dimension and, just like the artificially fuelled hysteria about the reception of refugees in Europe, it is able to be another field of social and political conflict that weakens liberal democracies and strengthens populist movements in Europe.

## 6. Conclusion

The development of the anti-vaccine movement in Poland has accelerated, as has recently been the case in the United States [22], being a manifestation of the modern anti-scientific and anti-modernisation cultural movement described by some as the “new Middle Ages.” Above all, however, it constitutes a threat to public health. The conspiracy theories about the threats to human life related to the use of vaccines that are spread on the internet increase the risk of mass epidemics of infectious diseases in the coming years. This scenario would mean that disinformation in social media and the spread of the “culture of fear” [23] can create social attitudes which may act as a “biological bomb” in specific areas. As the manipulation of information and the creation of certain types of knowledge can have serious medical and political consequences, they should be combated by solid civic education on a mass scale and debunking the myths disseminated by the anti-vaccine movements. However, social and political activities are also important as they can counteract the threat of epidemics in a systemic way.

An example of these activities is a grassroots initiative called “Szczepimy – bo myślimy” [We vaccinate—because we think], which was created in response to the anti-vaccine movement. The leaders of this initiative demand changes in the law on child-care and in the health care act. They want local authorities to introduce the obligation to vaccinate all children before admission to nurseries and kindergartens. Without this, a child would not be admitted to a nursery or kindergarten. This bottom-up initiative was established in autumn 2018 and has already gained the support of the Supreme Medical Chamber [Naczelna Izba Lekarska—NIL]. The medical association states that the postulates of the “We vaccinate—because we think” initiative coincide with its interests. The NIL directly asked the Minister of Health to undertake legislative work aimed at introducing the obligation to present a certificate confirming a child’s mandatory vaccinations prior to admission to a nursery, kindergarten and school [24]. A sharp public dispute is going to take place over the use of vaccines in the coming years in Poland.

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