

## **The Many Faces of Tolerance. Attitudes toward Diversity in Poland**

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One can hardly imagine a better timing for the publication of a book about the levels of social tolerance in Poland. The most recent Polish presidential and parliamentary elections were held in the year after the book's publication. The candidates of the right-wing conservative party Law and Justice won both of these, with surprisingly high levels of support. The revival of heated nationalism, traditional views of the role of women in society, and support for vaguely defined "Christian values" raised serious concerns among political commentators about the state of democracy and tolerance. The level of tolerance toward various minorities, as well as to women in general, and the social variables that influence it, is precisely what Ewa A. Golebiowska studies in her current book. As variables, she focuses on education, age, religiosity, area of residence, gender, political interest, ideological self-identification, psychological inclination toward authoritarianism, interpersonal trust, post-materialist individual values, economic perception, satisfaction with Polish democracy, and inter-group contact. According to her research, the prototype of a tolerant person in Poland is a young, childless, educated, and non-religious urban male, and who, moreover, is generally satisfied with his life and the level of democracy in Poland.

The subject studied by Golebiowska is obviously not a new one. The attitude towards minorities within Polish society has become something of a fashionable topic, both in Polish and international academic circles because of the extant "stereotype of Poland as a hotbed of intolerance" (p. 170). In particular, Jan T. Gross' s publication "Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland" in 2001 inspired a number of analyses ranging from newspaper articles to academic studies about the Polish attitude towards "the other" in the past and present. [1]

Golebiowska' s book differs from these works in many regards. Firstly, it is methodologically a clear quantitative approach, which has served to fill a large gap in the literature on the topic. One usually finds only surveys of limited scope (e.g. studies on the attitude of Poles toward selected nations only) and their interpretations or qualitative analyses. Although some qualitative research (mostly literary or historical in nature) produces remarkable results [2], others often reproduce various forms of hetero- and auto-stereotypes in a consensual – one might even go so far as to say canonical – way. Due to the lack of transparent methodology, the texts often oscillate between academic and popularizing essays. An example of this could be the well-known collective

monograph "Narody i stereotypy" [3] and its recent update "Narody i stereotypy 25 lat później" [4]. Golebiowska's text elaborates on various sociological surveys (usually Polish General Social Surveys and survey data collected by the Center for the Study of Public Opinion) and applies standard quantitative procedures, bringing a very refreshing perspective into this scholarly field.

Another important innovation of Golebiowska's book is an exceptionally broad definition of the dimensions of tolerance. Using a highly standardized American system of opinion polls as a template for her research, she combines fields – for instance ethnic and gender prejudices – that in Polish literature are usually treated separately. It became quite popular after 1989 to rediscover ethnic diversity, and to celebrate it in an environment of almost total ethno-cultural homogeneity. It is therefore no wonder that, as Golebiowska puts it, attitudes towards ethnic minorities have improved. As opposed to a negligible number of ethnic minorities, sexual minorities actually exist and strive for equal rights in contemporary Poland. Prejudice against them remains strong, and opinions on the role of women in society very rigid which is well illustrated also in the ongoing debate about anti-abortion laws in Poland. This somewhat non-traditional combination sheds a different light on the issue of tolerance in Poland and disturbs an otherwise idyllic-seeming picture. Hence, Golebiowska admits that "the actual levels of intolerance are in many instances substantial, have not necessarily lessened during the period since Poland's recent democratization, and, in some cases, have even shown a tendency to grow" (p. 170).

However, using the US-derived model of tolerance assessment also brings about certain complications. First of all, the Polish surveys used by Golebiowska are too varied. They usually do not precisely address the studied variables. Some fit more into Golebiowska's focus, some less. Some are robust and reliable; some are rather superficial with limited applicability. Nevertheless, it must be stated clearly that Golebiowska is aware of these shortcomings and deals with them openly.

Two other problems occur concerning Golebiowska's analyses. Firstly, one of the most evident accelerators of intolerance, identified in the US environment and confirmed by Golebiowska also in Poland, is the role of religion (in this case, Roman Catholicism). Simply put, the more religious, the less tolerant. This simple equation may be true for both Poland and the USA, where religiosity is a mass phenomenon, predominantly bigoted, and often anti-intellectual. However, this is also exceptional in the context of most other Western societies. In many European countries, religious authorities or political figures who openly claim a religious affiliation (such as Angela Merkel) often belong among the tolerant voices. This "different" form of religiosity, well-represented by the current Pope Francis and indeed extant also in the USA and Poland, is neglected in Golebiowska's thinking. Therefore, rather than a generalizing of American causal relations with a Polish example, further explanation of "why Christianity in Poland is less tolerant than in some other European states" could have been more valuable for the readers.

Second, the assessment of tolerance for political dissent also seems to be under the strong influence of the American model. In this case, one cannot ignore the very different experiences with democracy in Poland and the USA. Whereas in America the democratic political system is firmly grounded in centuries of uninterrupted development, democracy in Poland is young and fragile. "Dissenters" (or more precisely, anti-democratic groups such as far-right nationalists) are not merely some marginal rarity whose freedom of speech must be

protected. In Poland these are politically relevant, and moreover not very tolerant towards their political counterparts. Far-right extremists have close ties to the Law and Justice Party, which is currently in power for the second time in Poland. Thus, a true sign of tolerance could have been protection of the freedoms of political moderates and more vulnerable minorities in the face of the oppression of these so-called "dissenters". Although this fact is repeatedly acknowledged in Golebiowska's text (pp. 115, 134, 176), she has applied and analyzed the standard set of variables in this case, too. Hence she draws the conclusion, for instance, that a younger age – unlike with other fields of tolerance in her focus – does not correlate with higher levels of tolerance, especially in regard to far-right extremists. This finding is perceived by Golebiowska as an exception and something "counter to expectations" (p. 136). But the young might be tolerant in this case, too, i.e. they simply want to protect vulnerable groups from the "intolerant" politicians.

Having read this book, one must ponder the level of tolerance among Poles as a nation, especially as the book does not provide any definite conclusions. Although the author presents certain interpretation as far as the dynamic within particular fields of tolerance is concerned (e.g. claiming that anti-Semitism is slowly diminishing), the reader will not find out whether the level of Polish tolerance in general is lower, higher or similar to other nations. Of course, Golebiowska never claims to answer this kind of question. Nevertheless, some comparison with other nations (for example Germans or Czechs) would elevate the value of the book considerably.

To conclude, on the one hand, the precise methodology of quantitative research applied has brought "true science" to a large number of studies of Polish national character and stereotypes, often relying on reproduced clichés and biased standpoints with a heavy normative flavor. On the other hand, deeper analyses independent from its American model and, possibly, some broader international comparison would have helped the book to be a cornerstone in understanding the question of (in)tolerance in Poland.

[1] A summary of the discussion on the case of Jedwabne is presented in Polonsky, A.; Michlic, J. B.: *The Neighbors Respond: the Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004.

[2] See for example Cała, A.: *Wizerunek Żyda w polskiej kulturze ludowej*, Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2005.

[3] Walas, T. (ed.): *Narody i stereotypy*, Kraków: Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, 1995.

[4] Kusek, R.; Purchla, J.; Sanetra-Szeliga, J.: *Narody i stereotypy 25 lat później*, Kraków: Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, 2015.



#### **Zitierweise:**

Dr. Ondřej Klípa: Rezension zu: Ewa A. Golebiowska: *The Many Faces of Tolerance. Attitudes toward Diversity in Poland*, 2014, in: <https://www.pol-int.org/de/node/2116#r5165>.

<https://www.pol-int.org/de/node/2116?j5Q6rewycZ5HtUDXTWpx7UZE=1&r=5165>