

Family-Centered World Ordering: Polish Conservative Civil Society Seeking Remedies to the World in Crisis

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This article analyzes bottom-up, conservative, and reactionary world ordering from the margins. It explores actors, visions, and practices of alternative, family-centered world ordering, taking the case of Polish conservative civil society organizations. Members of these organizations came to resent the liberal world order through their own everyday experiences of living through the capitalist transition in Poland after the end of communism in 1989. Consequently, they see the world plunged into overlapping crises of the liberal world order and neoliberal capitalism and seek alternatives. The article investigates where the family-centered visions originate from, how they develop from the ground up, and how they are enacted at community, municipal, national, and international levels. Pointing to the fluidity of the margins, the article shows how conservative civil society has gradually moved from the margins to a central place of the political scene in contemporary Poland and increasingly also internationally.

Cet article analyse les approches ascendantes, conservatrices et réactionnaires de l'ordre du monde à partir des marges. Il s'intéresse aux acteurs, visions et pratiques d'ordres alternatifs centrés sur la famille, en prenant le cas d'organisations de la société civile conservatrice polonaise. Les membres de ces organisations en sont venus à détester l'ordre mondial libéral à cause de leur propre expérience quotidienne de la transition capitaliste en Pologne après la fin du communisme en 1989. Par conséquent, ils voient le monde plongé dans des crises de l'ordre mondial libéral et du capitalisme néolibéral qui se chevauchent, et cherchent des alternatives. L'article enquête sur l'origine des visions centrées sur la famille, leur naissance et leur développement, et leur concrétisation aux niveaux communautaire, municipal, national et international. Indicateur de la fluidité des marges, l'article montre le déplacement graduel de la société civile conservatrice des marges vers une place centrale sur la scène politique de la Pologne contemporaine, mais aussi de plus en plus à l'international.

Este artículo analiza el ordenamiento mundial que tiene lugar desde abajo hacia arriba, que es conservador y reaccionario y que procede desde los márgenes. El artículo estudia los agentes, las visiones y las prácticas de un orden mundial alternativo y centrado en la familia, tomando como ejemplo el caso de las organizaciones conservadoras de la sociedad civil polaca. Los miembros de estas organizaciones llegaron a sentirse incómodos con el orden mundial liberal debido a sus propias experiencias cotidianas, fruto de vivir la transición al capitalismo en Polonia después del fin del comunismo en 1989. En consecuencia, los miembros de estas organizaciones perciben que el mundo está sumido en una serie de crisis superpuestas que tienen su origen en el orden mundial liberal y en el capitalismo neoliberal, y buscan alternativas para estas. El artículo investiga dónde se originan las visiones centradas en la familia, cómo se desarrollan desde la base y cómo se promulgan a nivel comunitario, municipal, nacional e internacional. El artículo demuestra, a la vez que señala la fluidez de los márgenes, cómo la sociedad civil conservadora se ha desplazado gradualmente desde los márgenes a un lugar central de la escena política en la Polonia contemporánea y, cada vez más, también a nivel internacional.

Introduction

This article analyzes bottom-up, conservative, and reactionary world ordering, which refers to a process in which existing global normative and institutional architectures are questioned and other visions of desirable order are collectively developed and undertaken. It explores one particular critique of the current, liberal world order that has been enacted from the margins by conservative civil society in Poland. Albeit unavoidably overstressing and including a broad spectrum of views, the conservative denominative is attributed to groups that share skepticism toward the liberal world order and frame their criticism in a traditionalist manner. The article focuses on conservative civil society which places the family at the center of people's lives, as well as broader societal and political processes, as calls for family welfare. It thus investigates why exactly these groups contest the liberal world order, what alternative visions they develop, and how they work toward the realization of their ideas on community, municipal, national, and international scales.

Different contributions to this special issue point to a multiplicity of meanings that are attributed to the liberal world order, depending on the scale and context, and, consequently, identify different reasons for discontent among actors who are at the normative and material margins of world politics. In the case of Polish conservative civil society, the liberal world order is defined as liberal values, which give primacy to individual rights and freedoms, and neoliberal capitalism, which implies deregulation of the market and state withdrawal from welfare provision. In contrast, visions developed by such conservative organizations from the ground up, which denounce this order, are centered around a hetero-normative family unit with at least two or three children, call for a strong local community, rely on Catholic values (although not necessarily on guidance of the Catholic Church), and demand more state responsibility for welfare provision and well-being of families.

The article advances an argument that conservative but overall moderate and pragmatic civil society, which is formed around families and advocates for more family

welfare, offers an interesting case of world ordering from the margins.¹ While it could be argued that normatively such organizations are part of the global right (Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019; Cupać and Ebetürk 2020), they nonetheless lack an ultraconservative religious positioning and do not advance explicitly nationalist, racist, anti-feminist, anti-LGBT, and Islamophobic claims. Such visions, lacking big controversies, are largely overlooked in recent IR literature on anti-globalization resistance, which tends to focus either on the radical, anti-gender and anti-LGBT movements, and populist far right (Köttig, Bitzan, and Petö 2017; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Abrahamsen et al. 2020; Dietze and Roth 2020; Nash and Browne 2020), or on left-wing feminist and decolonial activism against heteropatriarchy and nationalism (Hawkesworth 2018; Jivraj, Bakshi, and Posocco 2020). But more “ordinary” visions based on socioeconomic claims can equally contribute to theory building. As Bilgin (2018) observes, inequalities (concerning gender, class, and race, but also socioeconomic conditions like in Poland’s case) navigated from the margins also generate unique conceptions of the international.

In the case of Polish conservative civil society, the definition of margins is twofold, and refers to a positionality at the normative and socioeconomic edges of, first, the Polish political scene, and, second, the liberal world order. Such organizations advocating for the well-being of families started growing in Poland in the mid-1990s. Initially, they occupied a marginal position in Polish postcommunist politics in that they aimed to challenge neoliberal understandings of progress and development, which became dominant in Poland and the wider former Eastern Bloc following a transition from communist governance and command economy to democracy and free market in 1989/1991. The end of communism constituted a rupture in state commitments to welfare in the broader postsocialist and post-Soviet region, as the social contract based on state provision of secure jobs and welfare in exchange for political loyalty was terminated (Cook 1993; Pascall and Kwak 2005, 71). In post-1989 Poland, state commitment to families and, consequently, family and child allowances declined significantly (Ingłot, Szikra, and Rał 2012, 29). Economic policies foregrounding capitalism led to high unemployment rates, in particular among women—due to a fast-spreading assumption that care obligations make mothers unreliable, less profitable employees (Pascall and Kwak 2005, 106–16). In reaction to these processes, ideas promoted by emerging conservative civil society were centered around a strong family institution, which these groups viewed as a central societal unit and a social safety net against precarity. But in the context of privatization and progressing neoliberalism (Buchowski 2017), as well as simultaneous liberalization of societal values and loosening of family ties due to cultural globalization and mass labor emigration (Slany 2002; White et al. 2018), these demands seemed socially backward. Moreover, while many of these organizations positioned themselves critically toward Poland’s communist past, their postulates for state support to families recalled redistributive social policy from that period. Advocating for protective family policy was viewed as communist nostalgia, for which there was no place in the new political discourse. Indeed, the Polish version of the

so-called postcommunist “shock therapy” (Sachs 1994), the Balcerowicz Plan approved by the International Monetary Fund, envisaged reforms advancing individual responsibility for well-being and self-reliance, but not a protectionist state. In this context, the family-centered world order visions developed by Polish conservative social society should be seen as reactionary to the liberal world order. They were born from their members’ first-hand experiences of Polish capitalism through everyday hardships, which fueled demands for change.

In the mid-2010s, however, the marginal positionality of conservative civil society started to transform, gradually moving toward the center of Poland’s political scene. In particular, with the conservative shift in Polish politics, marked by the formation of the 2015 majority government by the Law and Justice Party, these organizations started gaining more attention and recognition. Their postulates for more state attention to families coincided with the importance that the Law and Justice government attributed to traditional families. The party presented family as a means to reassert Polish national identity, against what it sees as various forms of normative domination that Poland has been subjected to: Soviet oppression in the past and the EU imposing liberal values in the present (Korolczuk 2020; Gwiazda 2021). Because of this partial overlap with the government’s agenda, the positionality of conservative civil society organizations has shifted from a reactionary to a dominating one. The recognition was discursive, but also financial. Until the subsequent government change in 2023, several such organizations advised the Law and Justice government by participating in consultative bodies and implementing state-funded projects. Although reliance on state funding makes them dependent on the government and secured their loyalty, they nonetheless continued pointing to insufficiencies of family policy solutions—although not anymore as fierce critics, but as government allies and implementing partners. This shows that Polish conservative civil society has in many ways benefited from the ideological shift that reshaped the center of Polish politics in a conservative manner, and since 2015 has been actively contributing to foregrounding this shift. As this case suggests more broadly, marginality is not a fixed condition. Subsequently, the second argument arising from the Polish case is that marginality, be it domestic or international, should be seen as a dynamic type of positionality. Timing and the broader sociopolitical context are of crucial importance for the success of world ordering projects at the margins.

Inspired by the sociology of knowledge, particularly the strands drawing on Marx’s materialism (Turner 2019, 35), the article explores how knowledge claims made by conservative civil society are embedded in socioeconomic and political conditions in which they emerge. Moreover, drawing on Ludwik Fleck’s (1980 [1935]) writing about cognition as collective action, it conceptualizes conservative civil society organizations as thought collectives. They form when people with similar backgrounds start loosely exchanging ideas and, in the course of repeated interactions, collectively produce certain thought styles, in this case referring to family-centered world order visions. Two case studies of influential, nation-wide organizations illustrate these dynamics. The first one is the Large Families Association (*Związek Dużych Rodzin* 3+), which represents families with many children, particularly low-income ones, and attempts to change a negative public image of such families, conflated with pathology. The second organization is Tato.Net, which promotes responsible fatherhood and speaks to fathers from different

¹Notably, this strand of civil society is different from religious organizations (such as *Ordo Iuris* in Poland), which expand their activism to family matters, but mainly by opposing abortion and same-sex marriages rather than contributing to family policy (institutions, benefits, and services). Family-oriented civil society organizations that this article focuses on start from well-being-related postulates. While they might refer to Catholic values, their main agendas are socioeconomic and welfare-oriented and pragmatic rather than ideological.

social groups, from ordinary working-class men to prisoners and labor migrants.

Following this introduction, the next section explains the methodology. The article then provides an overview of actors, visions, and practices of family-centered world ordering in Poland. Two case studies of organizations that actively enact such world order visions follow. The conclusion reflects on what the Polish case suggests more broadly about world ordering from the margins.

Methodology

The article is informed by interviews with thirty individuals who have been involved in shaping family policy in post-communist Poland: academics who participated in policy-oriented research projects and expert commissions, civil society organizations and former politicians (in many cases these positionalities are overlapping). Given a relatively small circle of people involved in family policymaking, interviewees were selected because of their high profile and impact on the field and through recommendations from previous interlocutors. The article also relies on observations conducted in 2022 and 2023 at sixteen family and family policy-related events: conferences, civil society gatherings, demonstrations, marches, government-organized family picnics, and concerts. These data are complemented with an analysis of statements, websites and publications of two case study organizations. All data were analyzed through a combination of thematic and discourse analysis, i.e., by examining the data to identify common patterns as well as uncover underlying normativity and relations of power.

The cases of the Large Families Association and Tato.Net were selected due to their impact on the family policy field, similar leadership models, visions, and development trajectories, as well as my access to these organizations. Both organizations were founded and are led by elites but represent interests of larger social groups (large families and fathers). As explained below, they started as local bottom-up initiatives and gradually scaled up their activities to national and then international levels. Over the years, while remaining close to the centers of power, both organizations, have skillfully avoided aligning with concrete political parties, and refrained from entering morality disputes on topics that are highly politically contentious in the country, such as abortion, feminism, and LGBT rights (see Żuk and Żuk 2020). Instead, they remained focused on family policy (laws and social programs designed to support parents and facilitate raising children), which has been largely overshadowed in broader ideological disagreements in Poland.

Interpretivist research requires reflexivity regarding the researcher's standpoint. In this respect, this article is an endeavor to think *through* and *with* the margins, but not *from* the margins. While I attempt to understand world ordering struggles of Polish conservative civil society, I do not identify with them personally. I grew up in Poland, and I am an insider in terms of my native language and cultural socialization which allows me to grasp normative debates and their subtexts. However, I am also an outsider given that my professional and research trajectories took place abroad, equally Western and Eastern from Poland. I am not embedded in the field of Polish political science, which remains highly politicized and divided along the religious/secular, conservative/liberal, pro/against-government lines (see Warczuk and Zarycki 2018, 19). Arguably, this distance allowed me to conduct fieldwork among moderate conservative civil society orga-

nizations (such as the Association and Tato.Net) without either sympathizing with them or dismissing their claims. At the same time, my access to more conservative groups, for example, characterized by Catholic fanaticism (such as *Ordo Iuris*), was limited.

Actors, Visions, and Practices of Family-Centered World Ordering

How Family-Centered Visions Emerge

Polish conservative civil society organizations that are active in the family policy field resemble what Fleck (1980, 55–6) conceptualizes as thought collectives (*Denkkollektive*). They started forming around charismatic leaders, and like many civil society initiatives that emerged in post-1989 Poland and were oriented toward social assistance (Juros et al. 2004, 265–566), they gathered friends, neighbors and colleagues who were “losers” of the capitalist transformation and faced similar, mostly financial problems. They began to exchange ideas and bond over what Fleck (1980, 60) describes as a specific mood (*Stimmung*).

As mentioned above, the mood in these groups was reactive and centered around a feeling of discrimination and stigmatization. In some cases, it referred to a discontent with socioeconomic inequalities resulting from the introduction of the capitalist economy in Poland (Ingolot 2008, 270–1), which particularly affected low-income families with many children. Privatization and decentralization, combined with hyperinflation and budget deficits, reshaped the state's role in welfare provision and resulted in a rollback of family allowances and state childcare services (Szelewa 2015, 112–25). This is because while the postcommunist state allowed families to take more control of their lives, it also tasked them with finding solutions for their own problems (Pascall and Kwak 2005, 74). The mood that united other groups was framed around their discontent with progressing societal liberalization in Poland, which resulted in secularization and religious disaffiliation. This process manifested itself in a loosening importance of the traditional family institution, challenged by growing divorce rates and premarital sexual relations. New variations of family emerged, including informal cohabitation, voluntary childlessness, single parenthood, and nonheterosexual relations gained visibility (Kwak 2014). These postmodern societal processes, as Slany (2002, 105) writes, signaled the disappearance of the “theological unambiguity of marriage and its parental mission.” In many cases, these different moods coincided, creating an impression that a decreasing state commitment to families was accompanied by a demise of family as such.

Visions that gradually developed from these moods, which Fleck (1980, 186–7) calls a thought style (*Denkstil*), included images of what the world should not look like, along with alternative, desired forms of the world order. A thought style, as Fleck (1980, 68) writes, is never completed. It includes passive elements (*passive Koppelungen*), which are taken for granted by members of the thought collective and treated as an objective, unquestionable reality, as well as active elements (*aktive Koppelungen*), which are continuously reshaped based on specific needs of this collective and an evolving systemic context. In the case of Polish conservative civil society, the family unit constitutes such a passive element in that it is seen as a central societal unit at local, national, and international scales. This is a heteronormative notion of family, bounded through marriage, with clearly delineated male and female roles that are not equal but complementary: the father is the main decision-maker

and breadwinner, and the mother is primarily responsible for the upbringing of children. The focus is thus placed on partnership based on matching competences, production of offspring, and parenthood, which is viewed as a biologically natural and simultaneously a morally fulfilling experience. Such a family model is more than two-generational, as it also involves living in close relations with grandparents, other relatives, and solidarity with the local community. The family also requires active support from the state, which should provide high-quality social services (childcare, education, healthcare) and financial allowances customized to the needs of each family. In turn, the Catholic Church should guide the family morally by fostering a community spirit and encouraging good acts and virtues.

As for the active elements of family-centered thought styles, these depend on the specific concern of thought collectives. For instance, the two case study organizations, the Large Families Association founded in 2007 and Tato.Net in 2004, focus, respectively, on families with many children and fathers. Despite referring to a traditional understanding of family in their activism, these groups nonetheless do not align with the so-called anti-gender groups in that they neither openly protest nor declare to be against, for instance, contraception, sexuality education, and LGBT rights. Other examples of civil society organizations with socioeconomic agendas include the Komeński Children's Development Foundation (*Fundacja Rozwoju Dzieci im. Komeńskiego*), launched in 2003, which works with children at risk of exclusion (from rural areas and with a migration background), and the Federation for Educational Initiatives (*Federacja Inicjatyw Oświatowych*), which since 1999 has been advocating for better quality education and expanding nursery and kindergarten networks in rural areas.

While these groups organize around clearly defined socioeconomic demands, on the opposite side of the wide spectrum of conservative civil society, there are organizations approaching family through a strictly religious lens. For example, the Institute for Integrated Prevention (*Instytut Profilaktyki Zintegrowanej*), founded in 2012, promotes sexual abstinence and marriage as a way or prevention of risky behavior among children and adolescents. Even further in terms of the intense uncritical devotion, there is the Mother and Father Foundation (*Fundacja Mamy i Taty*), opened in 2010, which defines its mission as “protecting children from anti-family initiatives,”² which in practice means the organization of anti-abortion campaigns. The fanatical, ultra-conservative Polish Catholic think tank Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture (*Fundacja Instytut na Rzecz Kultury Prawnej Ordo Iuris*), founded in 2013, engages in anti-divorce, anti-abortion, and anti-LGBT activism.³

These active elements of family-centered visions are continuously refined, and even reshaped in reaction to changing discourses and structural conditions at local, national, and international levels. In Poland, the position of conservative civil society organizations changed because of two domestic processes that took place in the 2000s and 2010s.

Changing Political Context in Poland

The first trend is related to the nature of expertise in policymaking in Poland. In communist times and in the 1990s,

as a direct communist-era legacy, the expert status in the field of social policy was attributed to academics. In the case of family policy, these were mostly demographers and, to a lesser extent, sociologists. However, as a result of Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, there has been a change in an understanding of whose knowledge claims are legitimate and who is allowed to influence policies. Pre-accession requirements required a vibrant civil society and a multinodal mode of governance in which policymakers and civil society would come together (Juros et al. 2004; Szarfenberg 2019, 122). This broadened the notion of expertise beyond academic knowledge and elevated the status of embodied knowledge—coming from people with either practical training (practitioners) or personal, everyday life experience (activists). As a result of these changes, in the mid-2000s, professional and community-based civil society organizations started being regularly consulted and involved in family policymaking (Ingłot, Szikra, and Rał 2012, 29). The peculiarity of Poland's case concerns the fact that EU-supported promotion of civil society gave rise to conservative organizations, and not only liberal ones. This trend is counterintuitive to most literature on Europeanization in Poland, which tends to focus on the role of liberal nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in advocating for, for example, the rights of sexual minorities (see O'Dwyer 2010).

The second, parallel trend concerned the aforementioned ideological shift in Poland, which happened as a result of parliamentary elections in 2015, that brought to power the right-wing national-conservative Law and Justice Party. Previously, Law and Justice had already won the parliamentary elections in 2005 and, between 2005 and 2007, headed a minority coalition with two nationalist and agrarian parties. Already back then, the party entered into conflict with the European Parliament, which accused it of homophobia. But it was only in 2015, after eight years in opposition, that Law and Justice won the majority of seats in the lower house of the parliament. This enabled the party to govern without a coalition partner—something that has never previously before been in postcommunist Poland. In addition, the majority in the upper house and backing of the president Andrzej Duda, who was formerly a member of this party, allowed it to effectively implement its agenda without a need to make compromises with other parties. Consequently, between 2015 and 2023, the Law and Justice government has promoted Catholic conservative morality with several contentious discourses and policy initiatives. One of the most controversial policies concerned the imposition of a near-total ban on abortion in 2021 that tightened an already repressive abortion law, which resulted in unprecedented social mobilization and nation-wide protests.

The Law and Justice government has actively engaged in fighting what it calls a “gender ideology” (*ideologia gender*) by actively targeting feminists, the LGBT community, and a more liberal public in general. Such scapegoating happened through sanctioning of symbolic violence through, for example, introducing “LGBT-free zones” in some Law and Justice-controlled municipalities. The anti-gender framing became a central element of a right-wing postcolonial discourse about Poland resisting liberal values that are imposed on the country by the EU (Korolczuk 2020). This discourse featured references to a “Pole-Catholic” (*Polak-katolik*) tasked with a mission to defend the “traditional family” (*tradycyjna rodzina*) and the “Christian civilisation” (*chrześcijańska cywilizacja*) against a decadent, leftist “gender ideology” that creates moral chaos (Żuk and Żuk 2020). The government presented its anti-gender campaign as a demographic necessity, in that it prevents Polish men from

²Mother and Father Foundation. *O Nas*. <https://serwisrodziny.pl/o-nas/>.

³Ordo Iuris receives significant media attention in Poland and abroad due to its shocking statements stigmatizing women and the LGBT community, but it did not exercise direct influence on family-related policies.

becoming soft (and homosexual) and women from becoming feminists, which would result in Poland's depopulation (Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019, 551–2). Besides opposing the EU, this national conservative discourse targeted migrants and refugees, especially from Muslim countries, whose culture is presented as incompatible with Christian values that Poland ought to defend (Korolczuk 2020).

In the economic field, the Law and Justice government advocated for stronger state interventionism in the economy, principally by imposing higher taxes on foreign-owned large enterprises operating on the Polish market. These revenues allowed the government to increase state support to families and the poor, initially mainly by introducing cash bonuses such as child-rearing payments “500+,” birth grants for newborns, family tax relief, as well as some housing subsidies for low-income families. In parallel, the government either introduced or expanded many childcare services and institutions, mainly oriented at mothers, as well as housing assistance programs for newly formed families (Ingлот et al. 2022, 224–55). Overall, this shows that the arrival of the Law and Justice government marked the end of an explicitly neoliberal policy tangent that Poland followed consistently since 1989, despite different left-wing and center-right parties participating in the country's political scene.

Aside from the populist and nationalist dimensions of this ideological shift, abandoning liberal normativity and more economic interventionism had serious repercussions for family policy under the Law and Justice government. Previously, policymakers in postcommunist Poland used to see families as a financial burden, rather than an investment (Szelewa 2015, 112–25). In the 1990s, in the context of capitalist restructuring and shock therapy, protectionist communist-era family policy shrank to countering effects of social exclusion of vulnerable groups, such as multichild families—that were largely seen as dysfunctional, as the first case study explains. At that time, there was no need to actively promote family given that there was already a surplus of human resources in the domestic labor market and labor emigration to Western Europe was growing. Between the late 1990s and mid-2000s, family benefits increased but they were still limited to supporting vulnerable groups instead of strengthening care and education services for all families (Szarfenberg 2019, 121–4). Against this background, the Law and Justice government brought a big change, as family policy started being seen as a long-term social investment and support for families was presented as a national mechanism of social justice—albeit a clearly populist one. In this context, the family policy under the Law and Justice government followed a mixture of socioeconomic and nationalist objectives. It aimed to reduce child poverty and stimulate birth rates to tackle a demographic decline, seeing increased fertility among Polish families as a feasible alternative for immigration from non-Christian countries—by taking multiethnic and multicultural Western European countries as antimodels.

These two processes, promotion of civil society and an ideological shift in Poland, explain why conservative civil society organizations that were preoccupied with family matters moved from a marginal position toward the front of the political scene. The passive elements of these organizations' thought style—their firm conviction about the importance of family in society—overlapped with the new dominant discourse. As a result of their changing positionality, the active elements of their thought style shifted from a reactive approach to being supportive toward the circles of power. Many organizations saw that moment as an opportunity. They recognized that to influence policies, they needed

to become active at the national level and gain the trust of policymakers.

As I could observe during my field research, as a result of these changes, many such organizations started scaling up their activities. First, they professionalized by hiring marketing and communication specialists to assist their charismatic leaders. Second, they strengthened their research components to be able to present themselves as specialists and not only activists. Third, they started interacting with the media and opened social media channels to influence the public discourse more effectively. Fourth, many organizations began engaging with government actors by participating in consultative bodies, such as the Family Council (*Rada Rodziny*) by the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, to exercise direct influence on family policies. Their financial situation improved significantly, as they also started obtaining state funding.⁴

Perhaps counterintuitively, although the Law and Justice government's policies met the expectations even of the NGOs that were the most active in their pursuit of family-related spending and services, and in some cases outbid their expectations, these organizations did not lose relevance in Polish politics. Rather, their role transformed. Conservative civil society started helping the government implement its policies, whereas access to state funding allowed these organizations to increase the coverage of their activities (see also Ingлот et al. 2022, 243–4). This created a win-win situation for both the state and conservative civil society. When observing several government-organized family policy events in 2022 and 2023, I could see that these organizations continued to be involved in proposing, developing, and piloting new policy initiatives. Their direct experience of interacting with families throughout the country was usually presented by the government as their added value, in that these organizations' observations allowed the government to refine its policy ideas. A very recent example are mothers' clubs, which started as self-help groups of young women who emigrated from small towns to big cities and who, in the absence of their parents' support, struggled with the first experience of motherhood and loneliness during their maternity leave.⁵ Drawing on the experience of the most popular mothers' clubs, in 2022 the government allocated 7 million PLN (1.6 million USD) to pilot a nationwide network of similar institutions where families with newborns could strengthen their parental competences.⁶

Overall, the overlap of interests of the government and conservative civil society opened many new doors to these organizations and allowed them to scale up their activism and develop in many directions. From informal thought collectives (Fleck 1980, 55–6), they turned into full-fledged practitioners who share and reproduce their family-centered thought style through everyday project implementation and interactions with politicians and the media.

International Engagement

After the domestic conservative turn, the Law and Justice government has been actively engaging internationally,

⁴Albeit these organizations eventually received support and subsidies from the government, it would not be accurate to classify them as state-mobilized movements (see Ekiert and Perry 2020). In terms of their origins, they were not mobilized by the state to help advance its agenda, and their ideas do not always overlap with the Law and Justice ideology.

⁵Interview with Magdalena Łazeba from the mothers' club “Przymierze Rodzin” in Warsaw, May 24, 2023.

⁶Participant observation at the first annual reunion of mothers' clubs in Warsaw, September 22, 2023.

seeking allies in its anti-liberal counterrevolution. For example, in 2020 Poland signed an anti-abortion Geneva Consensus Declaration initiated by the US Secretary of State under Donal Trump, Mike Pompeo. Poland has also been an active participant of anti-gender mobilization in various United Nations fora, led by a coalition of postcommunist, Catholic and Islamic states united in the aim to safeguard the “traditional family” (Cupać and Ebetürk 2020). In this context, it is striking that overall Polish conservative civil society focusing on family does not reveal substantial international aspirations. This is different from Polish liberal civil society organizations, particularly the ones engaging with liberal feminism and rights of sexual minorities, which have been much more connected to European and international networks, both ideationally and financially (O’Dwyer 2010). One particular strand of the conservative civil society that has been looking for allies abroad are Catholic fundamentalist groups (Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019, 552), which frequency have been communicating with radical anti-gender and anti-LGBT movements elsewhere (Nash and Browne 2020, 13–9). But these heteronormative activists are often more ideological than practical, in that beyond advocating against abortion and same-sex marriages, they rarely engage in discussions on specific family policy solutions. Notably, reaching out to other conservative networks and seeking international funding became a solution for groups that have been marginalized even in an already conservative political scene in Poland: either because their visions are on an extreme right tangent or because they were excluded from state funding by rival organizations.

According to my observations, for most moderate conservative organizations which are active in the family policy field, international engagement is limited to interacting with like-minded organizations from abroad and acquiring membership in international networks following similar causes. Such international engagement serves two primary purposes. First, it increases the prestige of these groups by providing them with additional sources of legitimacy stemming from recognition (even if only symbolic) from abroad. Second, it allows them to learn from experiences of similar organizations in other countries and further develop their own activism. Notably, while this engagement enriches their thinking, it does not reshape it diametrically.

The reluctance to scale up abroad can be explained by a limited added value of international engagement for these organizations. It might even be contradictory to their missions, given that these organizations point to a crisis of the liberal world order. As a result, as the next sections illustrate, their family-centered world ordering visions and practices explicitly focus on community, municipal, and national levels.

Children as a Source of Hope in the World Plunged into a Crisis of Human Relations

Children-Centered Vision

The Large Families Association is one of the most visible and influential representatives of conservative civil society involved in family policy in Poland. The organization registered in 2007 and defined its mission as protection of social and economic interests of large families—where family is defined as a “marriage between a man and a woman” and brings up “at least three children of their own or adopted.”⁷

⁷ZDR 3+. *Statut Związku Dużych Rodzin* 3+. https://www.3plus.pl/assets/file/3181,STATUT%20ZDR3+%20ujednolicony_%2010_10_2021.pdf.

All translations from Polish are mine.

The group started organizing in the mid-2000s, initially as an informal thought collective of like-minded parents who faced similar socioeconomic problems and lived in the surroundings of Warsaw. The founding members were not ordinary low-income families (who eventually became its main support base), but included families with highly educated parents, who impoverished significantly in the 1990s. What they shared was a direct, negative experience of Poland’s postcommunist transformation. For example, the family of the first leader of the Association, psychologist Joanna Krupska (born in 1959) moved to the outskirts of Warsaw because it could not anymore allow living in the capital while raising seven children.⁸

These economic hardships overlapped with a sense of legal injustice. As the website states, the Association developed “in opposition to the unfair treatment of families, especially large families, by the Polish legal system.”⁹ The Association argued that women bringing up multiple children should be actively supported by the state because they assist the state for free, given that in future their children will work and pay taxes. Accordingly, it claimed that women who renounce their professional career and stay at home to raise children deserve a retirement pension, for which they were not eligible according to the Polish legislation in the early 2000s. Moreover, the Association questioned the overall bases of Polish family policy at that time, arguing that it was oriented toward mitigating the negative effects of the postcommunist transformation, such as rampant unemployment. However, as the Association argued, it did not reward large families who actively contributed to the society and state in moral and financial terms.

Besides being grounded in socioeconomic struggles, the vision developed by the Association relied on strong normative grounds, as it “grew from the conviction about the value of a large family.”¹⁰ The Association wanted to counter a new, negative discourse that saw raising multiple children as a societal burden. In the course of Poland’s transformation, the ideology of collective interest, reflected in redistributive state policies, was replaced by individual rights and responsibility. Poverty became a sign of personal failure and a reason for shame, rather than an indicator of systemic failure. Krupska recalls that each time she took public transport together with her many children, people could not stop staring at her and judging her aloud. She used to constantly enter discussions with passersby, trying to convince them that a large family was not necessarily pathological. Indeed, one of the Association’s goals was to break such an image of a large family that struggles with alcoholism and violence and that is unable to use contraception. As Krupska recalls, “We did not agree with this, we had a sense of our own value, and the value of a choice of having many children, we fought for the equality of such a choice.”¹¹

The children-centered world order vision developed by the Association views raising many children as enriching and fulfilling. The organization sees a large family as “a natural environment for human development” and a “a positive choice of a life full of hardships, but above all of joy and happiness.”¹² The large family is thus placed at the center of society, the state, and the international system. At the societal level, the Association sees the family unit as “the first social phenomenon,” “a model of all social organization,” and “a place where people are prepared for life in

⁸Interview with Joanna Krupska, Grodzisk Mazowiecki, May 26, 2022.

⁹ZDR 3+. *Historia*. <https://www.3plus.pl/pl/historia>.

¹⁰Idem.

¹¹Interview with Krupska.

¹²ZDR 3+. *Misja i Statut*. <https://www.3plus.pl/pl/misja-i-statut>.

society” (Krupska 2022, 8). The Association also demands an active role from the state in supporting the family. This support, however, should be limited to the provision of generous family allowances, matching the needs of individual families, and high-quality public services. But the organization opposes state intervention in upbringing methods, viewing this domain as a space where citizens in a democratic state can exercise their rights and freedoms. For this reason, in 2010, the Association fiercely opposed changes to the amendments to the national law on countering domestic violence, arguing that they “undermined parental authority” and suggesting that the state should focus on combating “crimes *against* the family” rather than *within* the family.¹³

The Association displays a similar “pick and choose” attitude at the international level. For example, the organization has often called on the Polish government to combat child poverty and create systemic solutions for families that would meet European Union standards. At the same time, it views international gender-related norms as too liberal and politicized. For instance, in 2012 the Association issued a statement against the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention against violence against women and domestic violence (that Poland eventually ratified in 2015). Rather than negating the problem of domestic violence, the Association particularly opposed the fact that the Convention places a big focus on individual human rights rather than the family unit and promotes equality of genders rather than their complementarity. The Association argued that this convention “undermines the sense of existence of the family as such” and “contradicts the definition of marriage contained in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland”¹⁴ and by that “negates one of the basic duties of the state, which is to support and protect the family.”¹⁵ This example reveals that the organization associates the liberal world order with a crisis of human relations and family values. It sees this crisis as a threat to the family unit and calls the state and the family to withstand it (see Krupska 2022, 8).

Multifaceted Activism at National, Local, and Community Levels

The Association started as a community-based organization and initially gathered fifty people. Its development trajectories, however, significantly differ from other conservative organizations, which first grew a community network and only then developed policy aspirations. In contrast, the Association started reaching out to policymakers before it began forming a nation-wide network of large families. This is because its founding members were well established in Polish intellectual circles, and some were also active politically. When the Association was taking its first steps, Krupska’s husband, Janusz Krupski, a historian turned state official, was the head of the Office for War Veterans and Victims of Oppression under the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. As Krupska recalls, “entering the system through

Janusz’s position was easier.”¹⁶ Thanks to her husband, she managed to meet several politicians from various parts of the political scene and gain their sympathy for the cause of large families. Moreover, many high-level politicians, such as Bronisław Komorowski (president of Poland between 2010 and 2015), also had large families and became natural allies of the Association in political circles.

In parallel, the Association also liaised with its natural ideological ally, the Catholic Church (Inglot, Szikra, and Rał 2012, 30). Pragmatically, official communication channels between the Polish government and the Church became an effective entry point for the Association to lobby for its ideas at the national level. In the late 2000s, Krupska began writing opinion statements on Polish family policy for the Polish Episcopal Conference, which is the central organ of the Catholic Church in Poland. This institution, in turn, relied on Krupska’s statements during meetings of the joint commission of the Polish government and the Church, established back in 1949 to solve disagreements between the Polish (back then communist) government and the religious community.

Moreover, from the very beginning, the Association started reaching out to high-profile activists and scholars who also had big families, who formed its team of experts. These connections brought fruits over time, as these individuals supported the causes of the organization in several ways. For example, an award-winning journalist and member of the Association, Bartosz Marczuk, co-created the Government Family Policy Programme 2006–2007, which introduced an additional family allowance that was beneficial for large families.¹⁷ In 2019, another member, a prominent activist of the Polish scout movement, Dorota Bojemska, became the chairwoman of the aforementioned Family Council, which advises the government on family policy and develops specific policy programs.¹⁸ Another figure, an esteemed Polish economist Marek Kośny from the Economic University of Wrocław, has supported policy-oriented research of the Association over the years (e.g., ZDR 3+ 2021a) and foregrounded research on economic insecurity of large families in academic circles.¹⁹

Since its early days, the Association has also aimed to transform the negative public discourse concerning big families, considering it harmful and unjust. Here, one strategy has been to carve some space in the media, which, according to Krupska, was not easy because the Association’s views contradicted the dominant liberal discourse of the mid- and late 2000s. She was keen to enter into a conversation with authors that presented what she saw as a black-or-white picture of Polish women, but liberal newspapers refused to publish her texts.²⁰ In one response to opinion pieces that were critical about women’s attachment to the family sphere (Bunda 2006; *Gazeta Wyborcza* 2006), Krupska argued that categorizing women as either backward “traditionalists” (*tradycjonalistki*) or progressive “feminists” (*feministki*) does not reflect the reality of most women who skillfully combine these two stances in everyday life. She also wrote that this juxtaposition is a manipulative strategy in service of neoliberal capitalism, aiming to:

create a positive attitude towards the activation of women in the labour market. By creating this anti-nomy, the media tries to convince us that working

¹³ZDR 3+. *List Otwarty ZDR w Sprawie Projektu Ustawy o Zmianie Ustawy o Przeciwdziałaniu Przemocy w Rodzinie*. February 24, 2010. <https://www.3plus.pl/pl/opinie-i-stanowiska/92,List-otwarty-ZDR-w-sprawie-projektu-ustawy-o-zmianie-ustawy-o-przeciwdzialaniu-przemocy-w-rodzinie>.

¹⁴Article 18 of the Polish constitution defines marriage as “a union of a man and a woman” and affirms that “the family, motherhood and parenthood shall be placed under protection and care of the Republic of Poland.”

¹⁵ZDR 3+. *ZDR3 + Przeciw Ratyfikacji „Konwencji Rady Europy w Sprawie Zapobiegania i Zwalczania Przemocy Wobec Kobiet i Przemocy Domowej”*. August 4, 2012. <https://www.3plus.pl/pl/opinie-i-stanowiska/94,ZDR3-przeciw-ratyfikacji-Konwencji-Rady-Europy-w-sprawie-zapobiegania-i-zwalczania-przemocy-wobec-kobiet-i-przemocy-domowej>.

¹⁶Interview with Krupska.

¹⁷Interview with Bartosz Marczuk, Warsaw, May 18, 2022.

¹⁸Interview with Dorota Bojemska, Warsaw, May 19, 2022.

¹⁹Interview with Marek Kośny, online, January 19, 2023.

²⁰Interview with Krupska.

outside the home is an essential element of self-realisation and that it determines the value of a woman.²¹

Writing similar opinion pieces became a standard practice of the Association. In the absence of other venues, the organization started using its website to publish position statements and letters to the government, commenting on state policies and proposing new policy solutions. Over time and especially after the formation of the Law and Justice government in 2015, the Association gained more attention in state media. Still, despite some ideological similarities, the relation between the Association and the conservative government was not straightforward. The Association had previously cooperated with various governments and politicians, including the liberal ones (like the Law and Justice's rival, the Civic Platform), which was initially seen as problematic by the Law and Justice government.²² Due to its persistence, the Association managed to secure a seat at the table. Over time, it started to actively participate in state consultative bodies and receive state funding for civil society development.

Besides lobbying for national policy solutions for large families, throughout the years the Association has also focused on everyday work with local authorities. It tested several of its flagship initiatives locally, and then gradually expanded them to the national level. For example, in 2007 together with the authorities of Grodzisk Mazowiecki, a town near Warsaw where the Association was founded, it launched a Big Family Card (*Karta Dużej Rodziny*), which foresaw discounts for large families in public institutions and many private companies. By 2010, the Card was introduced in more than 100 towns across Poland, and in 2014, it was adopted as a nation-wide initiative.²³ This example demonstrates that the Association has been impacting family policymaking in a small but steady way.

Drawing on these positive experiences of collaborating with local authorities, the Association embarked on developing circles (*kota ZDR 3+*), which gather large families around the country. As of 2023, there were 102 of such circles operating in Poland, with about 7.5 thousand members. These circles, as the Association argues, can better voice the specific needs of large families in a specific locality and induce local family-friendly solutions.²⁴ Since 2013, the Association has annually organized three-day reunions of large families in various cities and towns of the country. These reunions serve to celebrate and promote family values, and foster solidarity among large families (*ZDR 3+ 2021b*). From the early beginning, the Association tried to secure the participation of high-level politicians at the reunions and use this platform to lobby for specific policy changes (*figure 1*). This proved to be a successful strategy, and the reunions are currently organized under the honorary patronage of the president of Poland. This, in turn, secures media interest and fosters the accountability of invited politicians for promises that they make at this event.²⁵

Overall, development trajectories of the Association show that what can be seen as a success of its family-centered world order visions developed from the margins depended

on relentless bottom-up activism as well as timing. The organization has been active on multiple fronts, building bridges with national policymakers, municipalities, and communities. While the organization gained wider attention because of the 2015 conservative turn in Poland, this recognition would not have been possible without the basic, voluntary work that it did in previous years. Although the Association shares with the government the commitment to the family as a central societal unit, it would not be accurate to say that it acts in service of the government or that it simply legitimizes state policies and discourses. Rather, the organization has been using good relations with the Law and Justice government for its own purposes, that is, to advocate for interests of its members and large families. It has, however, remained critical in its assessment of family policy solutions, openly calling, for example, for more state attention to the current housing crisis and an increase in housing allowances.²⁶

Substantiating International Embedding

Although the scope of its activities is limited to Poland, the organization is also embedded in a network of like-minded organizations in Europe. From the very beginning, it has been a member of the European Large Families Confederation (ELFAC), which became its entry point to liaison with similar organizations in Italy, Hungary, Portugal, and Spain. Moreover, as Krupska recalls, the idea to formalize the Association also came from ELFAC, who advised her to register as an NGO to have a real impact on policymaking.²⁷

In the recent few years, as the scope and budget of the Association increased, there has been a generational change within the organization. It started and developed as a network around a charismatic leader, Krupska, but it has then professionalized and become led by young and dynamic marketing and communication specialists who are fluent English speakers.²⁸ As a result, the Association started modeling its activities on the so-called international best practices, looking at other bottom-up family policy initiatives across Europe. For example, drawing on the experience of the Trentino province in Italy, in 2018 ELFAC started piloting a European Network of Family Friendly Municipalities, which promotes municipalities favorable to families (by offering recreational and educational activities and social services). Inspired by this example, in 2020 the Association launched a similar initiative in Poland and has since actively worked with a number of municipalities to help them obtain certificates of family-friendly towns.²⁹ This shows that the direct international engagement of the Association has mainly consisted of substantiating practices: by adapting practices from abroad to the local context, without aspiring for international funding or recognition.

Responsible Fatherhood as a Panacea for the World Deprived of Hope

Father-Centered Vision

While world-ordering visions and practices of the first organization emphasize multichild families, Lublin-based Tato.Net (where *tato* translates as dad) positions itself as a "fathering initiative": a community of and for fathers. Its

²¹Opinion statement, "Tradycjonalistka—czy feministka, czy są inne drogi wyboru dla kobiet?" shared by Krupska.

²²Interview with Krupska.

²³ZDR 3+. *O Karcie Dużej Rodziny*. <https://kdr.3plus.pl/pl/o-karcie-duzej-rodziny>.

²⁴ZDR 3+. *Po Co Są Kota*. <https://www.3plus.pl/pl/Po-co-sa-kola>.

²⁵Participant observation at the annual reunion in Grodzisk Mazowiecki, June 16–18, 2023.

²⁶Idem.

²⁷Interview with Krupska.

²⁸Interviews with press officer Judyta Kruk, managing director Karol Grabiec and deputy managing director Agnieszka Korpowska, Warsaw, May 23, 2022.

²⁹ZDR 3+. *Certyfikacja Samorządów*. <https://www.3plus.pl/pl/Certyfikacja-Samorzadow-1432>.



Figure 1. Annual reunion in Grodzisk Mazowiecki, with Deputy Minister of Family and Social Policy Barbara Socha (second from left), Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Development Piotr Uściński (third), and President of the Social Insurance Institution Gertruda Uścińska (fourth). June 17, 2023. Author's photograph.

mission is to “inspire men to experience fatherhood as a passion and the most important career in life,” help them deepen “fatherly competences,” and promote the “culture of responsible fatherhood.”³⁰ Although it prioritizes fatherhood, the initiative addresses “entire families, so as to build families that are strong due to the presence of a father.”³¹ This world order vision is centered around a strong father role and relies on the assumption that without paternal leadership communities (family, religious groups, or countries) cannot develop ecumenical relations. The latter are understood as a communion between Christian denominations, and more broadly between the East and West, which starts from relationships between the child’s and father’s hearts (Cupiał 2015, 12).

Albeit it represents fathers from different social groups, Tato.Net was founded by the intelligentsia members, like the Association, which signals a gap between the leadership and supporters. It was initiated in 2004 by Dariusz Cupiał (born in the late 1950s), a social entrepreneur and author with a doctorate degree in theology from the Catholic University of Lublin, who has been active in the ecumenic movement since the mid-1990s. As a practicing Catholic and an active member of the local religious community, he has always been interested in the concept of a mission and saw his personal mission as building bridges between people.³² He launched Tato.Net to tackle a crisis of fatherhood, which he views as a side effect of industrial, cultural, and technological revolutions. The idea came from his personal disagree-

ment with what he sees as a “society without fathers”: where the father figure is not discussed publicly, unless in a negative light in relation to domestic violence or divorce. This, in his opinion, is different from motherhood, which is actively supported by society and protected by law. Cupiał’s perceptions resonate with a thesis about a visible “mother-orientation” of Polish family policy that is often pointed out in research (Pascall and Kwak 2005; Inglot et al. 2022). Tato.Net thus represents the strand of fathers’ activism in Poland that can be described as “engaged fathers”—and which stands in contrast with “angry fathers,” who are post-divorce anti-feminists, and “fathers’ advocates,” helping fathers engaging in custody battles with mothers of their children (see Korolczuk and Hryciuk 2017, 123–7).

The fatherhood-centered vision that Tato.Net developed from the margins contains both progressive and conservative elements. It encourages active fatherhood by incentivizing men to be more involved in children’s physical and psychosocial development. By doing that, Tato.Net deliberately refrains from a patronizing tone. It often stresses that it does not aim to moralize, evaluate, and advise fathers, but rather aims to create a space in which fathers can share problems and solutions, and it is up to individual members to decide how exactly they could become a better father.³³ Tato.Net does not focus exclusively on biological fathers, but it also speaks to and about stepfathers, fathers-in-law, grandfathers, or just father figures (without biological connections). It also does not use religious arguments, even if it draws on Catholic and ecumenic thinking. However, even

³⁰Tato.Net. *O Tato.Net*. <https://tato.net/o-tato-net>

³¹Idem.

³²Interview with Dariusz Cupiał, Warsaw, May 18, 2022.

³³Tato.Net. *Nadzieja i Wizja: Pokaż Dziecku Sens Życia*. <https://forum.tato.net/>.

despite an inclusive approach that goes beyond biological fatherhood and accounts for various forms of cohabitation, this vision still focuses on heteronormative families, which excludes nonheterosexual families (albeit by ignoring their existence rather than directly condemning and demonizing them). Moreover, fatherly competences are understood as men's voluntary contribution to the family life rather than a duty that fathers share with mothers of their children. Such a notion of responsible fatherhood focuses primarily on men spending time with children in their free time: playing, doing sport, and discovering new talents. Yet it does not attribute men with mundane responsibilities, such as childcare, cleaning, and cooking. In other words, once mothers wash, feed, and clothe children, fathers can take over and focus on the intellectual development of their offspring. In this way, Tato.Net's vision tends to reproduce "everyday maternalism" that is commonly practiced in most Polish families, with women managing the family's affairs (White et al. 2018, 109).

This importance attributed to fatherhood stems from Tato.Net's interpretation of the liberal world, as explained in Cupiał's (2015) book "The Columbuses of Our Generation." The title clearly refers to Christopher Columbus, who, as Cupiał writes:

looking for a route to India, he made an unexpected discovery that changed the fate of the world. The contemporary Columbuses are similar—[swimming] in unfamiliar waters, explorers, with strong will, sometimes defeated, but stubbornly striving for the goal of truly being a father to their children. (Cupiał 2015, 17)

This metaphor of drifting in the sea and navigating deep waters suggests that nowadays people, and especially men, are deprived of hope and feel lost in the current world, which is both liberal and neoliberal. The experience of fatherhood, however, can provide a safe ground and bring unexpected hope into men's lives. The book's title also provides a reference to Poland's history, recalling the Generation of Columbuses: those Poles whose adolescence coincided with WWII, and who actively fought against the Nazi occupation of Poland. Cupiał (2015, 15) writes that just like the Generation of Columbuses, who could not enjoy happy, carefree youth because of the war, today's Columbuses—fathers—need to "identify new goals, define norms and set standards." Through this metaphor, Cupiał points to parallels between the wartime and the current liberal world order, both of which deprive people of hope. Like young Poles who found the meaning of their life in resisting foreign occupation, nowadays, in peaceful times (at least in Poland), men should discover the meaning of life in fatherhood.

From a Bottom-Up Initiative to the Government's Endorsement

Although both organizations were initially centered around charismatic leaders, the development trajectories of Tato.Net were more common than those of the Large Families Association. Tato.Net started as an online portal where Cupiał published his reflections of meaningful fatherhood and exchanged resources with other fathers. As the portal kept growing, the fatherhood-centered vision of Tato.Net developed and refined through interactions with internet users, and then groups of fathers in real-life settings.

From the beginning, the organization's leadership started building a bottom-up community of fathers. This happened

through workshops (*WarszTaty*, which is a Polish wordplay for workshops for fathers), which took place around the country on a weekly basis and targeted ordinary fathers—including men who were incarcerated in prisons and detention centers. These workshops revolved around "secrets of effective fatherhood" and advised men how to maintain a work-life balance and improve mutual understanding in families.³⁴ Just like in Fleck's (1980, 68) conception of active elements in thought styles, the central fatherhood-centered vision of Tato.Net has constantly adapted to needs of community members. For example, one such issue voiced by the network concerned difficulties that men faced in establishing relations with adolescent daughters, which prompted Tato.Net to launch workshops on father-daughter relations.

Working with the community, Tato.Net has also developed a network of father clubs (*ojcowskie kluby*), which are locally led support groups for fathers. The clubs allow fathers to exchange experiences and ask for advice, and all members develop individual plans to become "better and more fulfilled father[s]."³⁵ Each month, club members focus on one aspect of fatherhood. For example, they discuss how to foster a conducive atmosphere at home and deal with stress without releasing it on family members. The number of clubs has been growing every year, with fifty of such clubs functioning across Poland in 2023. Some clubs have also opened in countries that are the main destinations of Polish labor migrants, such as the United Kingdom, Germany, the United States, or Sweden. In this way, by reaching out to Polish men working abroad who interact with their children predominantly online, Tato.Net broadened its portfolio with the topic of transnational fatherhood.

Another flagship initiative of the group has been the Tato.Net Forum (figure 2), which allowed it to broaden its presence in the media. Like the annual reunion of the Large Families Association, the forum is organized in medium-size towns across Poland and regularly gathers several hundred fathers. Sessions aim at creating a safe space to exchange experiences and good practices of fatherhood. For example, the 2022 forum was organized under the slogan "Hope and Vision" (*Nadzieja i Wizja*), given that it took place "amidst unprecedented crises which have not been seen for decades and unrest for the future."³⁶ This refers to a crisis of the liberal world order, which according to Tato.Net's deprives people of a clear vision for their future, in this way eroding communities and stripping families of hope. Similarly, the 2023 forum was titled "Strength and Tenderness" (*Sila i Czułość*), and the two qualities were presented as a necessary "father's remedy in times of chaos."³⁷ To overcome the current crisis, the fora feature inspiring fathers from Poland and abroad, from Orthodox religious leaders to engineers and media personalities. At the fora, outstanding fatherly figures are also awarded the Statuette MAX (*Statuetka Max*), which refers to St Maksymilian Kolbe, who sacrificed his life in the Nazi concentration and extermination camp in Auschwitz in exchange for the life of a man who was a father of a family.

Like the Large Families Association, Tato.Net has managed to steadily increase its outreach thanks to a broad range of experts whom it brought on board. These individuals (mostly men) are well positioned in Polish academia,

³⁴Tato.Net. *WarszTaty*. <https://tato.net/warsztaty>.

³⁵Tato.Net. *Ojcowskie Kluby*. <https://tato.net/ojcowskie-kluby>.

³⁶Tato.Net. *Hope & Vision. Show your Child the Purpose of Life*. <https://forum.tato.net/en/>.

³⁷Participant observation at the annual forum in Katowice, held in a hybrid format, October 28, 2023.



Figure 2. Annual Tato.Net forum in Katowice, panel titled “How to develop strength and sensitivity,” with football manager Jerzy Brzęczek (first from left), Tato.Net founder Dariusz Cupiał (third) and singer Andrzej Lampert (sixth). October 28, 2023. Screenshot from an online transmission.

media, and business.³⁸ Establishing entry points to these strategic sectors allowed Tato.Net to broaden its presence in the media, attract additional funding for its activities, and build its research capacity. Tato.Net has gradually strengthened its research component, branding itself as “the first research centre on fatherhood and family policy in Poland and Europe.”³⁹ By that, it broadened its scope beyond a community-based civil society organization, aspiring to be seen as a provider of “neutral” expert knowledge that is based on statistical research (seen as indisputable) and informs policymaking. Here, a key publication of Tato.Net has been the annual Paternity Report, which surveys changing attitudes and practices of fatherhood among men in Poland (Tato.Net 2020). In parallel with academic expert knowledge, Tato.Net promotes embodied knowledge, which is based on everyday experiences of fatherhood. For instance, Cupiał (2015) released a popular science book with stories of ordinary men from Tato.Net, in which they reflect on how fatherhood changed their lives and how they combine work and family duties. Tato.Net also organizes contests for children’s letters to fathers and publishes them regularly, which serves to prove the point about the crucial role that fathers play in their offspring’s lives.

Like the Large Families Association, Tato.Net managed to gain the trust of the Law and Justice government. This was not only thanks to its elaborated fatherhood-centered world-order conception, which overlapped with the new conservative discourse in the country, but also through its perennial efforts undertaken in many fields (community-building, research, and media). This allowed the group to

access national consultative and decision-making platforms and, in this way, directly influence family policymaking. Like the Association, Tato.Net participates, among others, in the work of the Family Council and the National Development Council under the President. Its annual forum is now organized under the honorary patronage of the president of Poland, which also testifies the government’s endorsement of Tato.Net’s fatherhood-centered vision. This symbolic approval is also accompanied by access to state funding for civil society from both the central government and local municipalities, which helped Tato.Net to further expand its outreach. Consequently, in 2021 the topic of engaged fatherhood was first raised by the government in a public campaign “Fatherhood—Adventure of a Lifetime” (*Ojcostwo—Przygoda Życia*) launched together with Tato.Net. The organization developed a co-constitutive relation with the Law and Justice government while avoiding explicitly positioning itself as a progovernment organization. Instead of featuring Law and Justice politicians as exemplary fathers in its campaigns, Tato.Net promoted public figures and ordinary men. This shows that rather than lip-synching to the government’s discourse, Tato.Net pragmatically uses the trust of the government to reshape this discourse from within by advocating for more attention for fatherhood in state policies.

Legitimizing International Embedding

The Association and Tato.Net followed different strategies of international engagement. As previously discussed, the former has adopted a substantiating approach, reaching out to similar groups abroad to learn from their experiences. The latter uses international connections in both substantiating and legitimizing ways, learning from them but also

³⁸Interviews with board members: technology investor Paweł Bochniarz, online, May 18, 2022, and former chairman of the Mother and Father Foundation Paweł Woliński, Warsaw, May 27, 2022.

³⁹Tato.Net. *Badania*. <https://tato.net/o-tato-net/badania>.

seeking symbolic validation and approval of its ideas among “reputable” activists abroad. These figures include charismatic leaders with a similar profile to Tato.Net’s founder, Cupiał—for example, an American author and activist Ken Canfield. Tato.Net is even modeled on the National Center for Fathering in the United States, founded by Canfield in Kansas in 1990 with the aim to tackle what he calls an “incredible social economic impact of fatherlessness”⁴⁰ (see also Korolczuk and Hryciuk 2017, 127).

Tato.Net has also sought symbolic approval from international religious authorities. In 2023, Cupiał represented Tato.Net at a meeting of the head of the Catholic Church Pope Francis with community leaders from European countries. Reflecting on this event, Cupiał wrote:

The meeting with Pope Francis showed me a very important aspect of the role of a father: healing wounds. The father upholds order and the law, but he is not a legalist. He is endowed with an imagination of mercy and courage that allows him to ask for forgiveness, when needed.⁴¹

As this reflection reveals, such meetings allow Tato.Net to refine its mission, in this case by enriching its fatherhood-centered vision with reconciliatory abilities that fathers should presumably develop. Simultaneously, these events provide the organization with additional legitimacy, signaling that its vision is congruent with the thinking of the Pope and thus endorsed by the Catholic Church.

Conclusion

This article analyzed family-centered world ordering, exploring its actors, visions, and practices. The family-centered visions developed by Polish conservative civil society aspire to offer a remedy to what it sees as a world plunged into two overlapping crises. First, this is a crisis of the liberal world order, of solidary values and human connections. As these organizations claim, the crisis results from an overemphasis on individual rights and freedoms to the detriment of the community, which deprives people of home and makes them feel lost in the world. Second, this is a crisis of neoliberal capitalism. The deregulation of capital markets, privatization, and state withdrawal from welfare provision in Poland had a detrimental impact on families, especially the low-income ones with many children, resulting in their impoverishment. In this light, family-centered world order visions arise from people’s direct experiences of the world order and their discontent with it.

Specific family-centered world order visions might differ among each other, but they rely on similar pillars: they see the family as the basic unit of society. They rely on a heteronormative understanding of family rooted in Catholic thinking, with clearly delineated male and female roles that are not equal but complementary. As this article showed, these visions extend beyond the immediate family unit and are multiscalar. At the community level, they favor a strong local identity centered around families. At the national level, they promote state interventionism. State support, however, should be limited to the provision of financial support and high-quality social services rather than state interference in child upbringing practices. At the international level, these visions oppose international liberal governance, but endorse loose, nonbinding solidarity networks of like-minded organizations, which allow them to exchange ideas.

Although, due to their conservative underpinnings, these groups could be considered part of the global right (Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019; Cupać and Ebetürk 2020), they nonetheless do not actively contribute to populist and racist discourses. In this regard, future research could pay more attention to similar conservative, but overall moderate and pragmatic civil society activism with strong socioeconomic agendas in other contexts—beyond the controversial and much more radical anti-gender and anti-LGBT activism that gained significant scholarly attention in recent years (see Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Nash and Browne 2020).

As for broader implications regarding world ordering from the margins that emerged from the analysis of Polish case, one insight is that the condition of marginality is not fixed, but it represents a fluid and dynamic type of positionality. First, this positionality can shift because of bottom-up activism on community, municipal, and national levels. Second, timing matters too. With the conservative switch in Poland in the mid-2010s, following the establishment of the Law and Justice government, family-centered visions moved from the margins to the center of the dominant political discourse. In this context, the positionality of conservative civil society changed because the overall political environment in the country transformed, and the hierarchy of liberal and conservative visions turned around. Albeit central in Poland, visions of these organizations are still marginal vis-à-vis the broader liberal order. Conservative world ordering, however, is gaining momentum internationally, as explored in other contributions to this special issue.

Another broader finding arising from this article is about *who* can engage in world ordering from the margins. As the cases of the Large Families Association and Tato.Net showed, margins also have their own internal centers and margins. Knowledge claims advanced by these organizations were framed and presented by individuals originating from intellectual circles who shared the socioeconomic situation with other community members but not necessarily their social class in terms of education, professional experiences, and networks.

Finally, the article showed that in terms of their genesis and rationality, family-centered visions should not be seen as an alternative to the current world order, in a strict sense. They do not necessarily oppose the liberal order as a whole but endorse it in some respects while opposing it in others. For instance, it is striking that to frame their claims about the importance of family, Polish conservative civil society often provides the financial-utility argument, pointing out that families with many children are valuable for the state because in the future they will significantly contribute to the state budget by paying income tax. By doing so, these organizations criticize neoliberal capitalism because it focuses on individual rights and simultaneously endorse it by seeing financial contribution as a valid indicator of value of human activity. This example shows that world ordering from the margins, such as family-centered world order visions and practices discussed here, does not always try to dismantle the current world order from inside and build an alternative model. Rather than rejecting it unambiguously, conservative civil society often strives for a better positioning within the current world order by gaining more symbolic recognition and improving its own material conditions.

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⁴⁰National Center for Fathering. *About NCF*. <https://fathers.com/about-ncf/>.

⁴¹Tato.Net. *Ponad Dwie Godziny z Ojcem. . . Świątym*. <https://tato.net/o-tato-net/aktualnosci/ponad-2-godziny-z-ojcem-swiatym>.

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