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Opportunistic nationalism and racism: race, nation, and online mobilization in the context of the Polish Independence March 2020

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ABSTRACT

The article is dedicated to the issue of the online racism among football fans at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic when due to national restrictions, participation in football matches was unavailable, by the example of the 2020 Polish Independence March. In particular, the research is dedicated to the fans' mobilization to participate in the March. The main research questions include: (1) What actors/groups did fans perceive as the main antagonists in the context of the Independence March?; (2) Was the racist content present in the discourse?; (3) Did fans refer to the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of the Independence March?. The research has been pursued through qualitative content analysis of a topic dedicated to the 2020 Independence March on the most prominent internet forum of Polish football fans kibice.net.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected almost all spheres of social life. In football, one of the most overwhelming consequences of the restrictions (and in many countries, the hard lockdown) was limiting or banning fans' attendance at matches, which hit both the traditional rituals of the fandom culture and the financial structure of European football. The latter aspect even led to an attempt to establish a new competition – called Super League – thanks to which the elite of clubs from Europe would be guaranteed substantial financial resources. The idea of organizing the Super League met with massive criticism, and it also sparked protests from fans. Protests took various forms, such as hanging banners around the stadiums or manifesting on the streets (especially in England). In many countries, the impossibility of experiencing ritual practices that are permanently embedded in the fandom culture has caused understandable frustration, which sometimes led to street protests, turning into clashes with the police. For the most ardent fans, football mediated by digital media provides only a substitute for authentic experiences. However – paradoxically – the internet network is currently one of the most critical areas for mobilizing football fans' resources. Grassroots culture of fandom, together with Internet communication and protest action,¹ provide an example of social movements expressing their opposition against both the corporate world as well as political enemies.

The analysis of the role of social media in social movements mobilization and protest has been demonstrated in a multidimensional way.² This topic has also been evaluated in football fans' context.³ This article investigates the extraordinary mode of fans' mobilization – during social

circumstances on an unprecedented scale when the regular participation was limited – by social media. We analyse the process of online fan mobilization in Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic by the example of the annual Independence March. It is one of Poland's most important patriotic events, gathering tens of thousands of people every year. Many Polish football fans consider it an exceptional opportunity to express their political preferences and anti-system attitudes. However, the pandemic reality made this opportunity strictly limited, and as a result, a significant amount of political expression has moved to cyberspace. Therefore, this paper aims to analyse the online activity of football fans in the context of the Independence March. This analysis is based on three research questions: (1) What actors/groups did fans perceive as the main antagonists in the context of the Independence March?; (2) Was the racist content present in the discourse?; (3) Did fans refer to the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of the Independence March?.

The article is structured as follows: In the first paragraphs, we analyse racism in football fandom in Eastern and Central Europe and Poland. Next, the examples of various kinds of nationalist marches considered a tool of expression of fans' racism are analysed. Additionally, we elaborate on the impact the COVID-19 has had on fans activities. We demonstrate that pandemic evokes many protest actions performed by fans. After the methodology section, we provide the main findings of our research based on content analysis of the discussion on the participation in 2020 Independence March at the most popular online forum of Polish football fans. In this part and in the discussion that followed, we analytically develop research questions.

Racism and football fans in Central and Eastern Europe

Football is presented as an area where race is an important element of collective identity.⁴ It is emphasized that football often serves as a tool of inclusion of race minorities.⁵ However, it is also used as a platform for racism – through hate speech or acts of violence.⁶ Sports competition is a sphere where the idea of nation is celebrated,⁷ as well as an arena of pop nationalism⁸ and a way of 'performing the nation'.⁹ In effect, it creates a sense of nationality-based 'ourness'. However, sport essentializes the idea of the nation.¹⁰ Within the sports frame, the nation is presented as a space of one specific race, language, and religion.¹¹ Within this concept, there is no place for otherness. In many European countries, especially Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries,¹² a nation is imagined as a group of white people, usually Christians with traditional views.¹³ At the same time, fans themselves usually constitute a homogeneous collective. In the case of Poland, it is generally characterized by masculinity, whiteness, attachment to the Roman Catholic Church, and conservative views.¹⁴ As a result, the inclusion of non-white people or Muslims in the national community is often met with negation or hostility by representatives of certain groups.¹⁵ These situations open the door for xenophobia, manifested through racism.¹⁶ It aims to exclude others from the community and maintain the supremacy of its group. Racism at football stadiums has recently been tackled in almost all parts of Europe. However, the race issues are particularly noticeable due to the nations' homogeneity and a lack of multicultural traditions. In effect, racist behaviours occur in CEE relatively frequently, with many groups of supporters being involved in racist incidents. They proclaim racist slogans by banners, flags or chants. Moreover, fans are also engaged in out-of-stadium racist manifestations or violent behaviours. For example, Bulgarian fans caused widely reported racist abuse of England national players in 2019.¹⁷ Racist incidents happened recently in Montenegro¹⁸ and Ukraine.¹⁹ Groups of Hungarian fans participate in racist (anti-Roma) and antisemitic incidents.²⁰ Football hooligans in Czechia²¹ or Slovakia²² proclaim right-wing extremism by racist and antisemitic displays (shouting, chants), using far-right symbols on banners, or declaring hostility against Muslims. We could observe examples of racist,²³ anti-Muslim,²⁴ or neo-Nazi attitudes²⁵ among Serbian fandom. Finally, many authors describe Russian hooligans as one of the most aggressive and far-right-oriented supporters. They are main characters in many racist incidents, mostly involving dark-skinned players from Africa or Latin America.²⁶ Recently, the most famous incident was Zenit St Petersburg fans' protest by hanging the racist banner at the

stadium over the signing of dark-skinned Brazilian Malcolm.²⁷ The incidents mentioned above are just a few examples of racism in Central and Eastern European football. Nevertheless, we should stress that racist behaviours also appear in other countries: the United Kingdom, France, Germany, or Italy.²⁸

Racism and nationalism in Polish football

Without a doubt, the period after system transformation in Poland (1989) was one of the most prominent in the context of racism in Polish football. Earlier – especially in the interwar period – political and class divisions seemed to be more crucial than national or ethnic identities, although several examples of antisemitism in the field of football were recorded at that time.²⁹ The growing phenomenon of racism in the 1990s was connected mainly to the economic chaos with which many fans (and other Polish citizens) struggled. This period was also characterized by profound anomie (understood in the frame of Durkheimian sociology as a breakdown of key standards essential for regulating behaviours). After the collapse of communism, old cultural patterns (rooted in communist mentality) were not replaced by new ones, leading many fans to engagement in pathological behaviours.³⁰ It resulted in the establishment of highly aggressive hooligans groups committing many acts of violence. As generally young people, fans had been searching for community values and ideological patterns, which resulted in some fans' engagement in extreme political movements. In the 1990s, it was something common to see Celtic cross or even swastika symbol (fans of Ruch Chorzów even used chants with words: 'Adolf Hitler KS Ruch'; KS is an acronym for 'sports club' in Polish) at the stadiums what referred fans' preferences to the ideology of 'racial purity' and 'white power'.³¹ The subculture of Skinheads approached fandom culture very tight, and as a consequence, fans visually resembled skinheads (hair cut very short, army boots with white shoelaces, etc.). For many commentators, the fandom community was an excellent platform for extreme right-wing groups and parties.³² As the first black players began to play in the Polish league, racist chants and behaviours were also detected. As one fan of Victoria Jaworzno mentioned:

In this group, there were ideological national socialists, who showed their sympathies during matches by waving flags with a skull, shouting 'SS SA Victoria', displaying the symbols of the KKK [Ku Klux Klan, ed. authors] (...). The beating of a black player of Garbarnia [a club from Cracow, ed. authors], which received wide coverage in the media, was associated with Victoria skinhead fans.³³

In the first years after the collapse of communism, racist language and attitudes were not prosecuted. Therefore, it wasn't rare to hear chants like: 'Our race, white race'; 'Fucking Nigger'; 'Go out Bamboo', 'Poland for Poles'. One of the Columbian footballers playing for Polish clubs at the end of the first and the beginning of the second decades of the XXI century experienced words: 'Nigro, do you want a banana?'³⁴ Some fans threw bananas at black players, as in the case of Nigerian Emanuel Olisadebe (who accepted Polish citizenship in 2000).³⁵ Also, Roger Guerreiro, born in Brazil, after becoming a Polish citizen, experienced the banner 'Roger, you will never be a Pole'. In 2008 Senegalese player Pape Samba Ba was the victim of the 'monkey' chant expressed by GKS Katowice fans.³⁶ Between 2009 and 2011, 56 racist/fascist symbols were detected, such as the Celtic cross, the symbol of the National-radical camp.³⁷ This case became significantly sensitive before Euro 2012 after Sol Campbell, in the context of travelling to Poland and Ukraine, said 'Stay at home, watch it on TV. Don't even risk it ... because you could end up coming back in a coffin' and after BBC's Documentary 'Stadiums of Hate'. As existing research demonstrates, however, similar reactions could be regarded in the context of moral panic and media manipulation.³⁸

Nowadays, it seems that Polish football – however not free from some incidents (e.g. in 2020, black players from Polonia Warsaw and Bytovia Bytów experienced racist chants from the terraces) – has been undergoing the process of modernization in terms of tackling racism. It is connected with institutional pressure (from UEFA and Polish authorities) and certain social changes (e.g. increasing sensitivity to racist content).

Nationalistic marches as a tool for football fans' racism in CEE

Marches are one of the most popular forms of demonstrating national identity. Dozens of them take place all over Europe. Most of them are patriotic manifestations organized by the state authorities. However, many others are the initiatives of far-right political parties and social groups. In Central and Eastern European countries, the best-known marches are the Russian March on National Unity Day (November 4), March on Victory Day in the Great Patriotic War in Russia (May 9). Other famous marches in CEE include: Anti-Trianon March in Hungary (June 4); March on the anniversary of Hungary's 1956 uprising (October 23); Ukrainian New Year's Eve March to honour the anniversary of the birth of Stepan Bandera (January 2); Independent Slovakia march (March 14); or Lukov March in Bulgaria – an event praising Hristo Lukov, minister of war, who supported Nazi Germany during the Second World War (February 16).

In Poland, the most important nationalistic march is the Independence March (November 11). It commemorates the restoration of Poland's sovereignty from the Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian empires on 11 November 1918. It has been organized in Warsaw since 2008 by the Polish National Radical Camp and other far-right groups.³⁹ Every year 60–100 thousand people participate in the March.⁴⁰ Initially, it only brought together nationalist circles, and only a few hundred people took part. Interestingly, state authorities attended some editions of the March. Over time, however, its popularity grew, leading other right-wing, conservative and religious groups to participate. During the marches, regular street fights and clashes with the police often occur.⁴¹ Besides, racist and xenophobic slogans are proclaimed: 'Pure Poland, white Poland', 'God, Honour, Fatherland', 'Death to enemies of the fatherland', 'Europe will be white or deserted', 'All different, all white', 'White Europe of brotherly nations', 'Pride, Pride, the National Pride', 'Our civilisation, our rules'.⁴²

Most of these marches involve football supporters.⁴³ In some, they even become primary organizational support. For many groups of fans, the Independence March is the essential world-view event of the year. Therefore, the event itself is preceded by several weeks of campaigning to attract supporters to the participation. Ultras encourage each other by hanging banners in the stands and chanting slogans. Stadiums thus become places of agitation for the March. During the football matches, supporters can find out about the ideological message of the marches. Additionally, they also discuss organizational matters of the trip to Warsaw. Thus, sports arenas are a platform of right-wing and racist mobilization, leading us to the main research problem considered in this article. The COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of the football stadiums changed the process of mobilization of fans to participate in March. With the unavailability of the main medium of encouragement to participate in the March, the Internet became the key forum.

COVID-19 and its impact on football fans' acts of racism

Fans, similarly to other social groups, are experiencing all consequences related to the pandemic times. After months of lockdown and closed stadiums, authorities of some countries started to allow fans to be part of the game at the stadium, e.g. in Israel and Russia. In England, the sentence 'football without fans is nothing' has gained importance not only in the economic context (losses from the

so-called Matchday revenue) but mostly – in the social and cultural background.⁴⁴ Simultaneously, fans in many countries got involved in social actions related to COVID-19.⁴⁵ They supported and provided many charity initiatives. Additionally, in many countries, closed stadiums have influenced the fans' emotions. In Poland, fans hung banners with the sentence 'Open Stadiums!' visible from the lowest league to the Ekstraklasa (the highest division). Fans of Legia Warsaw protested in March 2021 near their stadium, violating many health restrictions. In Germany, some anti-restrictions protests were supported by 'militant Neo-Nazis' football hooligans.⁴⁶ In October 2010, fans from 30 Czech groups participated in a huge protest against pandemic restrictions in Prague. Fans presented a banner with the inscription: 'Together against restrictions'. Fans protested together with restaurants' owners or taxi drivers. After some peaceful actions (e.g. speeches from various participants), riots broke out, and some fans were arrested.⁴⁷ Also, fans from Slovakian clubs organized in October 2020 a protest against COVID-19 restrictions in front of the City Council in Bratislava, where they fired pyrotechnics and fought the police. Some protests also happened in Italy where ultras of Napoli, Roma and Bologna started a fierce confrontation with police. In many European countries, football fans gathered around stadiums where they fired pyrotechnics and loudly express their dissatisfaction over restrictions. Additionally, some hooligans groups have become more active in arranged fights beyond the football context. It could be considered as one of the consequences of closed stadiums. Most mobilizations are possible due to fans' networks operating on the Internet.

As a consequence of the pandemic lockdown, many fans' mobilizations have moved to the Internet. The organizers of the Independence March in Poland also used social media in a very intensive way. Notably, most websites related to the football fandom culture published relevant announcements encouraging participation in the March. For example, the website called *Stadionowi oprawcy* ('Stadium's oppressors') issued an appeal: 'This is a war about our rights! Attendance is obligatory!'⁴⁸ The same website reported live from the March, using pictures and descriptions provided by fans of many Polish clubs attending the March, making it easier to estimate what crews participated in the March and what was their size. Also, one of the biggest fans' fan page – Polish Hooligans (app. 150 thousand followers), promoted March with a calling: 'The Independence March is coming'. Similar calling could be found on other fan pages (e.g. fan page 'It is us, Hooligans', with 129 thousand followers – 'The Independence March is coming, everyone to the capital of Poland').

Polish websites and fan pages fit in the global tendencies related to using new digital media in effective networking for mobilization. As Manuel Castells states, due to new communication networks, 'social movements are able to intervene more decisively in the new communication space'.⁴⁹ Existing research demonstrates that social media help enlarge social networks and increase exposure to relevant information concerning political participation.⁵⁰ Fans are given new tools of mobilization that have a greater impact and audience (compared to the traditional mobilization of resources) but simultaneously are more difficult to control. Additionally, as many fans' websites connect people with similar political tendencies, announcements or callings published on these websites can affect political expression and mobilization more decisively.

Football fans have used online platforms for a long time. However, the contemporary situation is characterized by a stronger significance of the Internet as a communication method. Fans can comment on the performance of their beloved teams (as it is not possible to evaluate it live) and can express their frustration against pandemic restriction. In the context of political appeals, the situation seems to be even more severe as one of the most important events for fans in the context of their political engagement (even if it has been boiled down to performative shouting of slogans, firing up pyrotechnics and presenting flags; and, in extreme cases, to violent confrontations with the police and left-wing groups) – the Independence March – did not provide the same opportunities for political expression in 2020 as in previous years. Therefore, the online space has become a key stronghold, forced by

extraordinary circumstances on the one hand, but on the other hand perfectly safe, as posts on internet fans' forums guaranteed much greater anonymity than smoke from flares on the streets or even a balaclava. As we show in the analysis of one of the most important Internet forums for Polish football fans, the online space has been perfectly used to express political beliefs, including racist attitudes.

Methods

The empirical component of the article was based on the qualitative content analysis⁵¹ of a topic dedicated to the 2020 Independence March on the most prominent internet forum of Polish football fans kibice.net. The study covered all of the 267 posts published between 2 November 2020, and 1 December 2020 (the March was held on November 11, which is the Polish Independence Day, commemorating the restoration of Poland's Independence in 1918). The forum topic initially was created to discuss the participation of football fans from different clubs (the forum kibice.net is used by different fan groups, including antagonized) in the projected 2020 Independence March, which as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, was not allowed by Warsaw municipal authorities. Still, it was also a forum for exchanging retrospective thoughts and comments once the March was over.

Content analysis was performed with the focus on the following research questions: (1) What actors/groups did fans perceive as the main antagonists in the context of the Independence March?; (2) Was the racist content present in the discourse?; (3) Did fans refer to the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of the Independence March?

The decision to select an online forum as a research subject stemmed from the fact that Polish football fans could not meet during football matches due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Thus, stadiums lost their function as a place where fans' ideas could be presented in a performative way (although the Internet had become a means of arranging football fans' undertakings long before the pandemic, as a matter of fact, previous editions of the Independence March also had dedicated topics on the kibice.net forum every year since 2009).

One of the most striking limitations of the employed method is that the views expressed on the online forum may not be fully representative of the broad group of Polish football fans. However, qualitative data analysis is not leading to statistical generalization but rather to understand a -phenomenon,⁵² even though content analysis has also been pursued as a quantitative research method.⁵³ Accordingly, a handful of forum users were relatively more active (published more posts) than the others. Still, since key posts from the perspective of the goals of the research were not subject to criticism from other users of the forum, we may assume that they are shared throughout the community (unlike the issues that raised arguments among users, such as attitudes towards the COVID-19 pandemic, organizers of the Independence March or certain political parties).

Results

The main motto of the 2020 edition of the March of Independence was 'Our Civilisation, Our Rules', which by itself can be assessed as having racist and offensive implications. The slogan has been introduced in the official poster of the March, published by the author of the opening post in the analysed topic of the forum. The poster included references to the heritage of Polish hussars (Polish elite cavalry serving between sixteenth and eighteenth century) and revealed the character of the March – the poster presents a hussar destroying a star, which is half-rainbow (symbolizing LGBT+ community) and half-red (symbolizing communism). Thus, evaluating the March poster, we can assume it was directed in principle against LGBT+ activists/community (or ideology as Polish right-wing political activists often describe it) and the left-wing ideology (its followers are pejoratively termed as '*lefties*'). Both groups were often considered to share many common features or intertwining.

What actors/groups did fans perceive as the main antagonists in the context of the Independence March?

The analysed topic of the forum, dedicated to the 2020 edition of the March of Independence, reveals several fault lines perceived by Polish football fans. Just as in the official poster of the Independence March, the online discussion reveals the main foes according to the football fans: the LGBT+ activists and ‘lefties’. If LGBT+ is considered, the offensive homophobic language was used in three main contexts. Firstly, in reference to liberal political elites that sympathize with LGBT+ activism. President of Warsaw Rafał Trzaskowski (from *Platforma Obywatelska* [Civic Platform], the biggest opposition party) was a particularly frequent object of such insults. Users wrote, for example: ‘the march legally can be vetoed by the rainbow Rafałek’, ‘Rafałek does not authorise the March ... I can’t stand it. Prick walks across Warsaw with fa**ts but does not authorize our March’. In these statements, users referred to Trzaskowski’s official support for left-wing and LGBT+ manifestations in Warsaw in the preceding months. Secondly, forum users were directly insulting LGBT+ communities. One of the users described Margot, an LGBT+ activist, as a ‘genetic wanker’. Homosexuals were often called using offensive words and were accused of spreading HIV/AIDS. In some contexts, LGBT+ was perceived as a direct threat. One user wrote: ‘it does not even resemble a woman. An ordinary man with tits. And it’s dangerous because it corrupts normal women’. Thirdly, it was used to insult other forum users who have been accused of homosexual orientation. For example, one of the users wrote to another ‘no wonder you’ve been thrown away from polonia and legia [football teams based in Warsaw: Polonia Warszawa and Legia Warszawa, ed. authors], all you have left are the memories and taste of a prick in your mouth’. Therefore, many users equalled homosexuality to an insult. We should mention that homosexual ‘etiquette’ is used as a standard tool of denigration of fans from opposite clubs in Poland.⁵⁴ Thus, offensive language was directed not only against the LGBT+ communities but also liberal elites that support them, while being gay appeared as a convenient way of insulting other fans.

The users of the forum were also very offensive against left-wing ideology. A more holistic overview of the discussion on the 2020 Independence March among the football fans indicates that, according to them, left-wing ideology, whose supporters were termed ‘lefties’ or ‘commies’, is a major threat to Polish society. Forum users wrote that ‘there are many threats since leftist hydra raises its head’, ‘that is exactly what leftists want, to divide nationalists and football fans’, ‘right-wing weakens while the commies grow stronger’.

Apart from such defensive statements, users were also offensively insulting left-wing activists. Some users wrote, for example: ‘you abortionist’, ‘leftist who**s’, ‘40-year old fat feminist that no one wants to fuck’ or ‘furious rags of furious uteruses’ concerning a rainbow flag hanging on one of the balconies during the March (during the Independence March an apartment with a rainbow flag hanging was set on fire by participants). These and other statements on the forum reveal far-right political views shared by its users and a feeling of a threat by the liberal changes across the society.

Content analysis of the online forum, apart from the antagonism against left-wing and the LGBT+, allowed observing other dichotomies as well. The forum users also stood against political elites, including the nationalist organizers of the Independence March. We need to remember that the March itself was not organized by the football fans but by Polish nationalist communities. The formal organizer was the Association of the March of Independence, a far-right NGO with declared aims including presenting the paramount significance of Catholicism in social life, disseminating knowledge about Polish history, sustaining and disseminating national, civic, and cultural traditions.⁵⁵

Forum users were also very critical of mainstream political elites, often regardless of their views or ideologies. In this context, forum users wrote, for example: ‘Concluding – f**k PiS [acronym for Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice), the ruling party in Poland, ed. authors], f**k ONR [acronym for Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny (National Radical Camp)], a far-right political party, ed.

authors], ‘if not PiS then who? Don’t you remember how it was under PO? [acronym for Platforma Obywatelska (Civic Platform), the main opposition party, ed. authors] Anyway, f**k them all including the models from the confederation’ [Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość (Confederation Freedom and Independence) is a right-wing political coalition, with representatives in Polish parliament]. These statements were directed, in principle, against all the parties of the Polish political spectrum, although, of course, left-wing and centrists received particular criticism. Interestingly, many users spoke against nationalist activists and organizers of the Independence March – for creating divisions among the right-wing. Nationalists were also accused of getting along with the authorities and police – the latter generally being described as a traditional foe of all the fans.

Was the racist content present in the discourse?

While analysing the forum, racist language was also observed, but it did not become any of the fans’ rhetoric’s key themes. In fact, the racist language was much less frequent than other offensive forms: homophobic and directed against left-wing activists and followers. Racist language, when present, had in principle either a form of invectives against other users of the forum (those presenting different opinions, supporting other football teams, etc.) or was used to insult criticized groups, political elites in particular. Invectives against other forum users can be exemplified by statements such as ‘F*** you Jews’ or ‘You can do something about that if your mother was of mosaic faith’. Insulting representatives of political elites with the use of racist language, in turn, could be observed in statements, such as ‘Apart from that, aren’t you curious about the fact of over-representation (...) of the people with “Moses’s” ancestry among the nominal antisemites’, ‘Let the Jewish elite from Nowogrodzka [The headquarters of the Law and Justice, a ruling party on Poland, is located at Nowogrodzka Street, ed. authors] march’, ‘We shouldn’t be surprised if the khazar jew bosak [Reference to Krzysztof Bosak, a right-wing politician, member of parliament, 2020 candidate for President of the Republic, ed. authors] is the father figure of the right-wing’.

What is characteristic of all the forms of racist language used in the online discussion is the domination of antisemitic insults. Antisemitic content and chants have a long tradition mostly between fans from Łódź and Cracow what stems from the historical background of these cities.⁵⁶ Only one user referred to the black race, but the context of his statement concerned accusation of homosexuality against another user. Interestingly, none of the insults appears to have been directed against members of other races. Rather, it was a form of accusing others of being Jews. The statements, at the same time, were not targeting Jews or any other nation directly. Instead, being a Jew appeared to be an accepted invective, similarly to being gay.

Did fans refer to the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of the Independence March?

The problem of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the central aspects considered in this issue of Soccer and Society, was also present in the discussion on the forum, though it has not become an overriding theme. Users discussed the feasibility of organizing the Independence March in the light of the restrictions during the second wave of the pandemic in Poland. Some argued whether COVID-19 was dangerous. Still, the problem of the pandemic did not dominate the discourse. Instead, the forum users complained that the Independence March was not treated equally by the authorities as the left-wing and LGBT+ manifestations organized earlier. Besides the COVID-19 pandemic, such complaints also referred to the behaviour of the police, which was claimed to have acted more aggressively against football fans.

Concluding, the empirical analysis revealed that the attitudes of football fans on the kibice.net online forum reflected the declared motivations of the 2020 Independence March – to defend Poland against left-wing activism, which also covers activities of the

LGBT+ communities. Forum users were also criticizing political elites, police, and the nationalist organizers of the March. The discussion was not free from racism, but other races were not considered a threat. Rather, the racist language was used as invectives against others: members of political elites or other forum users, who were called ‘Jews’. As to the problem of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was present in the discussion but did not become an overriding theme. Considering the reasons for fans’ participation in the March, it appears that their main incentive was to stand against those perceived as threats to the traditional landscape of Polish society, free from left-wing ideology and LGBT+ activism, as well as to have an opportunity of presenting their views regardless of political elites, including the right-wing.

Discussion

The results of the study of the topic dedicated to the 2020 Independence March on the kibice.net forum presented above reveal explicitly anti-left-wing attitudes shared by Polish football fans. Such an orientation is, of course, nothing new, with football fans traditionally sharing conservative political views. However, these attitudes cannot be interpreted regardless of Poland’s current political and social developments, which appear to strengthen the traditional anti-left-wing approach. Autumn 2020, apart from the COVID-19 pandemic, was marked by massive manifestations across Poland against the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal, limiting the possibility of legal abortion. The immense character of the protest was unprecedented since the collapse of communism in Poland. Interestingly, from the beginning, selected groups of football hooligans and nationalists attempted to attack the protesters (particularly if protesters were associated as leftist groups in the eyes of hooligans) on various occasions,⁵⁷ although football fans as a whole were not unanimous and some appeared to have supported the postulates of Polish woman.⁵⁸ Alongside more frequent LGBT+ manifestations in recent years, all this marked a specific fault line within the Polish society. Participation in the Independence March for many football fans was supposed to respond to these developments – to defend Poland from the ‘lefties’ and LGBT+. Both groups have long been considered as ‘enemies’ among Polish football fans, although this attitude appears to have gained impetus in response to their increased activity recently.

The emphasis on defending Poland from left-wing and LGBT+, observed while analysing the kibice.net forum, to some extent contrasts with the main themes of the earlier editions of the Independence March, which traditionally has been allowing right-wing participants to react to current events in Poland. Each year the March has had a different slogan revealing the most important idea of the manifestation. The slogans from 2012 to 2020 are listed in Table 1 (in 2010–2011 the March did not have a main slogan).

The overview of the slogans allows distinguishing the central values declared by the participants: religion, tradition, homeland. They also believe in strength, community, commitment and the vital role they are to play in Europe. At the same time, the slogans indicate Poland’s main enemies:

Table 1. Main slogans of Independence Marches in 2012–2020.

Year	Main slogan of the March
2012	Reclaim Poland! (‘Odzyskajmy Polskę’)
2013	The new generation is coming! (‘Idzie nowe pokolenie!’)
2014	The Army of Patriots (‘Armia Patriotów’)
2015	Poland for Poles, Poles for Poland (‘Polska dla Polaków, Polacy dla Polski’)
2016	Poland as a bastion of Europe (‘Polska bastionem Europy’)
2017	We want God (‘My chcemy Boga’)
2018	God, Honour, Homeland (‘Bóg, Honor, Ojczyzna’)
2019	Protect the whole nation (‘Miej w opiece naród cały’)
2020	Our civilization, our rules! (‘Nasza cywilizacja, nasze zasady’)

Source: Own study based on publicly available data

atheists and followers of other religions than Catholicism, foreigners living in Poland, unspecified external actors harming Poland. Finally, we should stress that some of these slogans are explicitly xenophobic or racist.

Most of these slogans should be linked to current events at the time. The calls of the 2012–2014 marches can be associated with the right-wing opposition to the liberal party ruling Poland at the time – the Civic Platform.⁵⁹ The slogans from 2015 to 2016 referred to the migration crisis, whereas those from 2017 to 2019 responded to religious tension and the weakening position of the Catholic Church in Poland. The 2020 slogan can be interpreted as a response to the ongoing discussion about LGBT+ rights and the social protests against the tightening of abortion laws. The 2020 Independence March appears to have been less racist, and the most likely reason for this is the shift of accents concerning the perceived enemy. Instead of fearing the ‘menace’ of Islamists flooding into the Polish society as refugees, the rage shifted towards LGBT+ and left-wing activists, although the latter group was criticized even before – for its readiness to accept refugees. It leads to a more general consideration concerning the Polish annual Independence March. Generally, they allow articulating opposition against certain enemies, while their cyclical character allows ‘updating’ such enemies based on the current political and social development, both in Poland and worldwide. Therefore, it is reasonable to acknowledge that Polish fans create ‘opportunistic racism’ or ‘opportunistic xenophobia’. There are plenty of enemies that fans fight against, but particular enemies’ relevance is connected to actual ideological opportunity and general moods in society. It also means that Polish fans should not be considered a political movement based on a stable and consistent ideological programme. No doubt, they can be characterized by – broadly validated – conservatism, but it is an ‘opportunistic conservatism’ with flexible ‘targets’.

Besides, the popularity of the March also reveals another important point. Although various forms of virtual collectiveness are increasingly important, a physical co-presence is still fundamental to a sense of community. It is the performance of large numbers of nationalists that makes their views visible in the public space. Online mobilization provides an essential organizational backdrop. However, offline participation transforms the imagined community into the embodied community. Only offline participation, the possibility of confrontation in a real, physical environment seems to make sense for fans – accordingly with their historical experience in this form of activism where they could prove their superiority. Traditionally, stadiums, streets, railway stations, pubs and parks have been the main areas of fans’ expressions. Cyberspace can be regarded only as a less significant substitute: important in terms of mobilization, but secondary in the context of fighting against all (more or less imagined) enemies.

Concluding remarks

Online racism among Polish football fans should be discussed in conjunction with their explicitly conservative political views and values (as quantitative and qualitative data demonstrate).⁶⁰ We could observe it in many of the analysed posts of the forum, with nationalists pictured as those who share hooligans’ views mostly. Football hooligans worldwide tend to share the hard masculine identity,⁶¹ and the nexus between football hooligans and nationalists is also nothing extraordinary. Football hooliganism is sometimes considered as one of few international far-right subcultures. Just as far-right movements, hooligan subcultures often attract white, working-class males, making the commonalities between both groups in terms of political views not surprising.⁶² This link is strongly visible in Eastern Europe. For example, football hooligans in Serbia, alongside right-wing extremists, jointly responded against gay parades.⁶³ Similarly, the Russian football fans subculture shares many commonalities with the Russian far-right.⁶⁴ As our content analysis demonstrated, it is similar with Polish football fans. Racism, on the other hand, is somehow embedded in the far-right ideology. Definitions of right-wing extremism as a political ideology usually include such features as racism, xenophobia, and nationalism.⁶⁵ As a result, racist views shared by Polish football fans should not surprise and should be considered a direct consequence of the social and

demographic background of this subculture. Our analysis of the call for participation in the 2020 Independence March did not reveal an explicit racist approach because the major enemy was different this time, which stemmed from Poland's recent political and social developments. Still, the fact that racism (in the form of antisemitism) was visible – in the form of invectives – implies that inner racism is still present among Polish football fans.

Notes

1. Hill et al. 'Against Modern Football'.
2. Boulianne, 'Social media use and participation'.
3. Hill et al. 'Against Modern Football'; Doidge, Kossakowski and Mintert. *Ultras. The passion and performance of contemporary football fandom*.
4. Podaliri and Balestri, 'The ultras, racism and football culture in Italy'; Cleland and Cashmore, 'Football fans' views of racism in British football'.
5. Bradbury, 'From racial exclusions to new inclusions'.
6. Burdsey, *Racism and English Football*.
7. Tosa, 'Sport Nationalism in South Korea'.
8. Jaskulowski and Majewski, 'The UEFA European Football Championship 2012 and pop nationalism in Poland'.
9. Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*.
10. Bairner, *National sports and national landscapes*.
11. Arnold, 'Sport and Official Nationalism in Modern Russia'.
12. Berend, 'What is Central and Eastern Europe?'
13. Kossakowski, Nosal and Woźniak, *Politics, ideology and football fandom*; Molnar and Whigham, 'Radical right populist politics in Hungary'.
14. Kossakowski, Nosal and Woźniak, *Politics, ideology and football fandom*, 143–145.
15. *Ibid.*, 172–174.
16. Llopis-Goig, 'Racism, Xenophobia and Intolerance'.
17. BBC Sport, 'Bulgaria fans' racism'.
18. BBC Sport, 'England to report racist abuse of players in Montenegro'
19. BBC Sport, 'Taison: Shakhtar's Brazil midfielder after sending-off following alleged racist abuse'.
20. Barna and Hunyadi, 'Report on Xenophobia and Radical Nationalism in Hungary'.
21. Mareš, *Right-Wing Extremism in the Czech Republic*.
22. Kušnierová, 'Ultras in Trnava'; Nociar, *Right-Wing Extremism in Slovakia*; Harsányi, *Report on hooliganism, racism, antisemitism and intolerance in Slovak football*.
23. Obradovic-Wochink, 'Racism in Serbian football fan culture'; Bakic, *Right-Wing Extremism in Serbia*, 3–5; Ames, 'Serbian football's eye-watering racism problem shows no sign of abating'.
24. Zivanovic, 'Red Star Belgrade Face Punishment for Anti-Muslim Banner'.
25. Tomić, 'On the "right" side?', 106–107.
26. Arnold and Veth, 'Racism and Russian Football Supporters' Culture. A Case for Concern?'; Arnold, 'Systematic Racist Violence in Russia'; Glathe, 'Football Fan Subculture in Russia'.
27. Independent, 'Racist Zenit St Petersburg fans protest over signing of Malcom with banner'; BBC Sport, 'Zenit St Petersburg fans want black and gay players excluded'.
28. FARE, 'Incident list'.
29. Kossakowski, Nosal and Woźniak, *Politics, ideology and football fandom*; Burski and Woźniak, 'The socio-political roots of antisemitism among football fandom'.
30. Kossakowski, *Hooligans, ultras, activist. Polish football fandom in sociological perspective*.
31. Kossakowski, Nosal and Woźniak, *Politics, ideology and football fandom*.
32. Włoch, *Raport dotyczący wybranych przejawów dyskryminacji (rasizm, antysemityzm, ksenofobia i homofobia) w polskim sporcie ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem środowiska kibiców sportowych*; Szejnberg and Jasiński, 'Postawy studentów wobec rasizmu i dyskryminacji rasowej na polskich stadionach'.
33. Kossakowski, Nosal and Woźniak, *Politics, ideology and football fandom*, 101.
34. Purski, *Czuję się obywatelem Polski*.
35. Nosal and Organista, 'Dark-skinned pioneers in European national football teams', 11.
36. Eurosport, 'Kiedyś bananami w Olisadebe, teraz to piłkarze odpowiadają'.
37. Pankowski, *Hateful. Monitoring racism, discrimination and hate crime in Polish and Ukrainian Football 2009–2011*.
38. Rek-Woźniak and Woźniak, 'BBC's Documentary "Stadiums of Hate" and Manufacturing of the News: Case Study in Moral Panics and Media Manipulation'.

39. Łukianow and Kocyba, 'The Right in the Streets'.
40. Taylor, "White Europe".
41. Charlish and Ptak, 'Far-right Polish Independence Day march draws thousands despite ban'.
42. Wiącek, 'The Rhetoric of the "March of Independence" in Poland (2010–2017) as the Answer for the Policy of Multiculturalism in EU and the Refugee Crisis'.
43. Stadionowi Oprawcy, 'LIVE Marsz Niepodległości'.
44. Bond 'COVID-19: the return of football fans'.
45. Mazurkiewicz, 'The Mass Mobilization of Polish Football Fans in the Face of Covid-19'; Perasović 'Covid-19 and the Mobilisation of Ultras in Croatia'; Gennoy, 'Coronavirus: German football ultras pull together in trying times'.
46. Ford, 'Hooligans in 2020'.
47. Honza, 'Demonstracja'.
48. Stadionowi Oprawcy, 'Jedenasty Marsz Niepodległości'.
49. Castells, 'Communication, Power and Counter-Power in the Network Society'.
50. Boulianne, 'Social media use and participation: a meta-analysis of current research'.
51. See: Schreier, 'Qualitative Content Analysis', 170–183.
52. Forman and Damschroder, 'Qualitative Content Analysis', 41.
53. Hsieh and Shannon, 'Three approaches to qualitative content analysis', 1278.
54. See: Kossakowski, Antonowicz and Jakubowska, 'The reproduction of hegemonic masculinity in football fandom'.
55. Stowarzyszenie, 'Cel'.
56. See: Burski and Woźniak, 'The sociopolitical roots of antisemitism'.
57. Magdziarz and Santora, 'Women Converge on Warsaw'.
58. Sportowy. 'Strajk Kobiet: Kogo poprze kibic?'.
59. Jajeczniak, 'The Nationalist Movement in Poland', 53–54.
60. Kossakowski, Nosal and Woźniak, *Politics, ideology and football fandom*; Kossakowski and Besta, 'Football, Conservative Values, and a Feeling of Oneness with the Group'; Grodecki, 'Occasional Nationalists. The National Ideology of Ultras'.
61. Spaaij, 'Football hooliganism as a transnational phenomenon', 426.
62. Mudde, *The Far Right Today*, 62.
63. Nielsen, 'Stronger than the state?', 1040,1043.
64. Glathe, 'Football Fan Subculture in Russia'.
65. Idem, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right*, 10.

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