

# Soros' Polish Media Acquisition Gets Old Dogs Whistling



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Feb 22, 2019

George Soros is an easy hate figure for the Hungarian government. The ruling party's campaign slogan last year was simple enough: "Don't let Soros have the last laugh." One of his pet projects in his homeland, the Central European University, was forced to move to Vienna recently as liberal media is on the defensive in Budapest.

But Poland is not Hungary, despite what it might seem. Dog whistling anti-Semitism is no longer a serious strategy. Or is it?

When Polish newspaper publisher Agora and a fund backed by Soros last week won a bid to buy Poland's second-largest radio station the reactions were not that dissimilar, broached largely in a language of protecting 'national' media. As opposed to what, some asked?

Agora, whose assets include the Gazeta Wyborcza daily and a talk radio station agreed to buy 40% of Eurozet for 130.8 million zlotys (\$34 million) from Prague-based Czech Media Invest. SFS Ventures, a vehicle that includes a Soros-backed fund, are to buy the rest.

## 'We' the people

Poland's government said it didn't want Soros to buy the radio station, which has a nearly 13% of the market.

Pro-government publishers, some backed by loan guarantees from state-owned banks, wanted to buy Eurozet. In December 2018, Fratria, the owner of the wpolityce.pl website, said it was interested in Eurozet.

When first made public by Agora in January, a spokesperson for the government said the deal represented a threat to Polish media pluralism.

The Polish state has to do everything it can to prevent market speculators from increasing their influence on the media market," said PiS spokeswoman Beata Mazurek.

Deputy Culture Minister Pawel Lewandowski said the government lacked tools for analyzing "concentration on the media market with multiple platforms [or which could] measure concentration on the market of ideas," with regards to the cross-market holdings of groups. Senate Speaker Stanislaw Karczewski remarking in November that foreign ownership "isn't healthy."

I'm in favor of re-Polonization of the media, banks and other institutions, which should be majority-owned by Poles," he told Rzeczpospolita daily, adding: "In the U.S., there's no French or German television providing news on US matters."

## 'Repolonization' has a toxic past

From Dmowski to Kaczyński there is a straight line through the interwar period, the war, communism and after. This continuity is the most amazing aspect of modern Polish politics," Professor Michael Steinlauf says. "The main change is the apparently diminished role of anti-Semitism. I say apparently because it's still there under the surface," he adds.

PiS speaks of refugees as disease-ridden and a threat to Europe, of the "worst sort of Poles" (i.e. those that demonstrate against it), it calls other political opponents – people like European Council president Donald Tusk -

murderers, a renowned Polish-American historian a traitor and the icon of the anti-communist struggle, Lech Wałęsa, a communist spy.

It is a language of contamination, deployed within a wider discourse of “European values” and for Europe, read “white and Christian.”

### **Liberalism in crisis**

Anita Prazmowska, a professor of history at the London School of Economics, says, "For PiS what matters is a radical right program, in which the Jews as the carriers of un-Polish ideas have been replaced with Muslims, refugees, secular ideas and so on," Prazmowska says.

Others note that a key condition facilitating the rise of the right is a crisis in the idea of progress.

Progress has never been a natural concept in Eastern Europe,” U.S. political scientist David Ost believes. "The region fiercely embraced progress only under communist party control," he says.

Liberals, he goes on, have a very different conception of the nation—as something to be developed and improved, not just cherished, Ost suggests. "To the extent that they say this aloud, they get run over by the ‘patriots.’ To the extent that they hide it, they are unable to challenge the patriots. It’s because of the trap of nation-talk that liberals promoted the idea of ‘civil society,’ instead," he says.

The notion of civil society, he suggests, became the way liberals in Poland could make progress and still remain Polish, i.e. patriots.

At least that was the vision of the 1970s’ new left, and of much of Solidarity, too. PiS now wages war on the idea of ‘civil society’ and speaks only of ‘the nation.’"

PiS’ predecessor, Civic Platform (PO), set up and led by Tusk before his 2014 departure to Brussels, Ost argues, sought to change the subject to modernity during its eight years in power than ended in late 2015.

But with ‘modernity’ having resulted in economic crisis, PiS has had considerable success with its discursive contention. To this day nation-talk remains a minefield liberals still do not quite know how to navigate,” Ost comments.

### **Both “Exotic” and “Ours”**

“Individuals that don't stand up for the prominent place of Catholicism and its symbols in the public sphere and advocate instead a civic-secular Poland, are turned into ‘Jews,’” Genevieve Zubrzycki, a sociologist at the University of Michigan, argues.

Precisely because Jewishness carries specific significations and symbolic capital that other minorities in Poland do not possess, it is primarily through Jews and Jewishness that a modern multicultural Poland is articulated,” she says.

As Jewishness becomes a symbol standing for a liberal, plural, civic, and secular Poland, Poland is said by the conservative Catholic Right to be ruled by ‘Jews’ - symbolic Jews - who must be neutralized.

Poland is thus host to the apparently curious phenomenon of anti-Semitism in a country with very few Jews,” she goes on. "Jews are non-threatening and available to be filled with one’s fantasies: nightmares or dreams depending on one’s political orientation."

### **Anti-semitism without Jews**

Others see greater nuance in the PiS approach. Anthony Polonsky, Professor Emeritus of Holocaust Studies at Brandeis University, for example, believes that PiS is not an anti-Semitic party.

"The Kaczyński brothers came into politics during the 1968 crisis and see anti-Semitism as a 'communist phenomenon.' As a result Jarosław Kaczyński has avoided anti-Semitic tropes in his ideological discourse," Polonsky continues.

"This is a very right-wing, but not anti-Semitic government," he adds.

Kaczyński has in fact been openly critical of anti-Semitism in Poland.

"Yes, that is the case, but in the tropes used there is a very clear link between the current Islamophobia and the Polish anti-Semitism of 100 years ago," Konstanty Gebert, a Polish-Jewish journalist and academic tells me.

What has happened is that a rock was lifted and now we can see what was underneath. PiS in its statements is totally not anti-Semitic, but when it comes to actions it does nothing. Poland has become a nastier place and PiS and the Church are not helping resolve this," Gebert says.

PiS's aim has been to prevent what happened in Hungary, where Jobbik - highlighting anti-Semitic and anti-Roma racism - grew strong as the contender to the right of Fidesz. PiS policy is that "to the right of us must be only the wall," Ost explains.

The far right and outlets for national Catholic opinion such as Radio Maryja have played on certain culturally embedded assumptions about Jews, in part also infusing any public debate on the issue with questions of international pressure, often phrased as forms of "International Jewish" pressure, for example, on issues of property restitution.

It touched a central plank of the Kaczyński mythology, namely of Poles' cleanliness, as victims and heroes, or both.

The University of Warsaw's Centre for Research on Prejudice found that acceptance for anti-Semitic hate speech – especially among young Poles on the internet – had risen since 2014.

A study found that 37% of those surveyed voiced negative attitudes towards Jews in 2016, up from 32% the previous year, while 56% said they would not accept a Jewish person in their family, an increase of nearly 10% from 2014.

Rafał Pankowski, a professor at Collegium Civitas in Warsaw and deputy editor of the *Nigdy Wiecej* (Never Again) magazine since 1996, says there has been a noticeable change in the political and discursive climate.

It has become so much easier for people to say things they would never have said openly over the last 25 years," he says.

Katrin Steffen, a historian at the University of Hamburg's Nordost Institute in Lüneburg, suggests nobody else – until now - had taken over the demonic role of the "symbolic, mystical Jew," which survived, she says, "in society's collective imagination even though there were hardly any Jews left in Poland after the war."

A symbolic Jew has existed in the Polish consciousness as a key element of the auto-stereotype of many Poles and is why it is possible to revive the image of the 'perfidious' Jew in any political crisis."

The image, she argues, appeals in different ways to existing patterns of thought, ranging from Jews as communists or capitalists, to dissidents or Zionists who are hiding behind the scenes, conspiring against the Poles and secretly pulling the strings.

The result is a Judaisation of the rejected 'other' – and it has never been left to the Jews or the 'others' to decide who was a Jew and who were the 'others,'" Steffen says.

“Formerly, it was the Jews who bore the brunt of this argument; nowadays, it affects others. In the perception of the political right, these are primarily feminists and homosexuals,” she goes on.

### **New Others: Muslims**

Poland was asked by the EU to accept 7,000 relocated asylum seekers in 2015, a move that Kaczyński called into question. Poland refused.

First, the number of foreigners rises rapidly, then they stop obeying our laws and our customs, then they aggressively impose their sensitivities and demands in various spheres of life. If someone says this is not true, just take a look around Europe,” Kaczyński said.

The refugee crisis in the Polish right-wing press was often presented as an Islamic invasion of Europe and at the same time, Western Europe was seen as a culture dominated by leftist influence, in which values like Christianity, tradition and family had been forgotten.

There is thus a paradoxical element to the rhetorical struggle, with a certain stress put on Germany, which tends to be described as promoting values alien to Polish culture and opposed to countries that want to preserve a certain social homogeneity.

One columnist wrote about a “leftist-genderist idiocracy,” at the same time presenting refugees as eager beneficiaries of the European welfare state.

The problem with communism, for most of the Catholic hierarchy, was not that it challenged capitalism and democracy. Quite the contrary: they saw it as the culmination of all the evils unleashed by capitalism and democracy. It stood at the very bottom of the slippery slope down which humanity had been descending since the Enlightenment,” Porter-Szűcs suggests.

### **Polish ‘philosemitism’**

But every reactionary turn has its own reaction and “Polish ‘philosemitism’ – the attempt to build and promote a plural society in (and against) an ethnically and religiously homogenous nation-state – has grown in recent years.

Although the diversity that characterised Poland for most of its history is unlikely to return, civic and cosmopolitan nationalists see the recognition of that legacy as a tool not only to build an open society, but also to mark Poland as a polity that meets the standards of an internationally normative model of nationhood that values and encourages pluralism and multiculturalism,” Zubrzycki argues.

This she argues is part of a plan to “soften, stretch, and reshape” the symbolic boundaries of Polishness that the Right has sought to harden and shrink using a conservative, nationalist version of Catholicism as its primary tool.

The ‘Jewish turn’ is a means to symbolically reclaim the pluralistic society that was eradicated during World War II, the memory of which the socialist state materially erased and ideologically suppressed in its effort to legitimise and naturalise the new borders and new demographic makeup of the postwar nation-state,” Zubrzycki says.

Michael Meng, an Associate Professor of European history at Clemson University, refers to this process as “redemptive cosmopolitanism,” which he defines as the “commemorative display of multi-ethnicity that celebrates the cathartic, redemptive transformation of Germans and Poles into tolerant democratic citizens.”

Formerly Jewish spaces become, he argues, signifiers of redemptive cosmopolitanism, “a performative embrace of the Jewish past that celebrates the liberal, democratic nation-state rather than thinking critically about its past and present failures.”

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/joharper/2019/02/22/soros-polish-media-acquisition-gets-old-dogs-whistling/?fbclid=IwAR24V69zlxRCtvDwHCPd08msZAO982PF6MApk59ReiKuCst2N1YgEaalV44#673422463b80>