



Research Article

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Framing Solidarity. Feminist Patriots Opposing the Far Right in Contemporary Poland

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2019-0040>

Received October 30, 2018; accepted May 30, 2019

Abstract: Due to the attempts to restrict the abortion law in Poland in 2016, we could observe a new broad-based feminist movement emerge. This successful movement became known worldwide through the Black Protests and the massive Polish Women's Strike that took place in October 2016. While this new movement is impressive in its scope and can be described as one of the most successful opposition movements to the ethno-nationalist right wing and fundamentalist Catholicism, it also deploys a patriotic rhetoric and makes use of national symbols and categories of belonging. Feminism and nationalism in Poland are usually described as in opposition, although that relationship is much more complex and changing. Over decades, a general shift towards right-wing nationalism in Poland has occurred, which, in various ways, has also affected feminist actors and (counter)discourses. It seems that patriotism is used to combat nationalism, which has proved to be a successful strategy. Taking the example of feminist mobilizations and movements in Poland, this paper discusses the (im)possible link between patriotism, nationalism and feminism in order to ask what it means for feminist politics and female solidarity when belonging is framed in different ways.

Keywords: framing belonging; social movements; ethno-nationalism; embodied nationalism; public discourse

A surprising response to extreme nationalism and religious fundamentalism in Poland appeared in the mass mobilization against a legislative initiative introducing a total ban on abortion in 2016, which culminated in a massive Women's Strike in October the same year. While the popular resistance was definitely a huge success and had a significant impact on the revitalization of political practices from below, it also made a discursive shift visible. When looking at the public discourse of contemporary initiatives and campaigns, it is striking that it is mainly "Polish women" who are addressed by the movement and not for example "citizens" or "inhabitants" of the country. It seems that patriotism is being used to combat nationalism and this has proven a successful strategy.

This shift marks a clear difference from the language and discursive strategies of feminist movements in the 1990s and 2000s, which referred mainly to a transnational imaginary, along with the human rights discourse of the UN, the "West" and the European Union. Over decades, a general shift towards right-wing nationalism has been occurring in Poland, which, in various ways, has also affected feminist actors and counter-discourses. Those in turn have increasingly started to focus on problems of national belonging and national imaginaries, whereas today's feminist mobilizations have taken this even a step further. The public discourse accompanying these mobilizations could already be described as an expression of popular feminist patriotism.

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This paper focuses on the ways that belonging is framed with respect to the nation in contemporary feminist movements in Poland and discusses (im)possible links between feminism and nationalism.¹ The aim of the paper is to reconstruct the most prominent discourses and moments in which “feminist patriotism” has been introduced into mainstream feminist public discourse. It applies a critical perspective to the nationalization of feminist discourses and practices. I will also provide examples of the intentional merging of far-right nationalism with feminism, ultimately in order to inquire into the possible implications of different politics of belonging for feminist solidarity and for building successful opposition to the global rise of the ethno-nationalist far right.

Framing Belonging: Approaches to the ‘National’ in Feminist Movements and Nationalism in Poland

Although the case studies analyzed here refer mainly to the Republic of Poland, the issues addressed are relevant beyond that particular context. Feminist movements all around the world are faced with the problem of how to position themselves with regard to the national causes and states in which they operate. The relationship between nationalism and feminism is handled very differently depending on national and (geo)political contexts and colonial histories, the status of feminism and women’s emancipation, as well as the political orientation of the respective feminist movements and environments.

I propose to analyze feminist stances towards the nation and transnationalism through the frame of belonging. I understand belonging first of all as an analytical category describing an organizing principle, which is formulated as an alternative category to that of “identity” and not as a form of emotional attachment to a community which is complementary to the notion of “identity,” as Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias define it (Yuval-Davis et al 2).

Feminist politics and its relationship with nationalism very much depend on the social, political and historical context in which a feminist movement operates, but these also depend on the intersectional situatedness of feminist actors, the multiple principles that organize their individual belonging and existential legitimacy. Since the end of the 19th century, women’s movements in Poland have been historically linked to struggles for national independence (Górnicka-Boratyńska, Stegmann 203, Chojnowski 42-43). To speak about a “Polish women’s movement” in times when Poland did not exist as an independent country, when territories defined as “Polish” by national movements still remained under partition or in times when the borders and the sovereignty of a country were being contested and transforming, is not just an act of constitution of a female political community, but it is also an act constitutive of ‘a nation’ as well as a contribution to a certain national project.

The figure of ‘the nation’ and that of belonging through ‘nationhood’ are still highly contested in today’s politically sovereign Republic of Poland. These figures function first of all as political means for organizing symbolic and institutional inclusions and exclusions, thus implying a kind of “tactical nationalism” (Verdery 84). Rogers Brubaker makes an important point when he argues for the need to decouple categories of analysis from categories of practice (10). He defines ‘the nation’ as a practical category produced within nationalist discourses. Therefore, according to Brubaker, scientists need to be very careful with regard to the applied categories and their reification (5). He suggests it is to better leave ‘the nation’ as an entity and enduring community to the nationalists (10).

Since feminist movements and actors always operate in concrete political contexts, with variable nationalist ideological traditions and institutionalized nation-forms, it is important to understand how ‘the nation’ is evoked and produced in the practice of feminist movements and discourse. This concerns especially those less obvious cases where movements mobilize in defense against nationalism and

¹ This paper analyzes only public performances and public discourse. The resources I have made use of in writing this article include publications by feminist actors and groups, social media, secondary resources such as print and digital media, as well as participatory observation at public events (e.g., Kongres Kobiet 2007, Manifa demonstrations, Black Protests and the Women’s Strike Protests).

nationalist practices of exclusion.

According to Leila Abdou, “today it is ‘gender equality’ rather than ‘male superiority’ which is portrayed in nationalist discourses as defining European nation states” (85). That is not exactly the case with the dominant discourse in Poland, which represents predominantly an androcentric (Boehmer 7) and familistic version of nationalism that very much centers around a never-ending struggle for “national sovereignty.” Poland’s relationship to ‘Europeanness’ also appears much more complex. ‘Europe’ is associated with the European Union, Brussels and the former ‘West,’ which is framed in contemporary right-wing discourses as an imperial power (e.g., Korolczuk and Graff). In Poland, right-wing anti-feminist rhetoric echoes elements of older anti-Semitic and anti-communist discourses that were popular among pre-war radical nationalists who were in favor of building a Catholic State of the Polish Nation, the so-called *Endecja*.²

According to this type of nationalism, the survival of the Polish nation can only be guaranteed by the traditional heterosexual family that reproduces it, in spite of any “foreign rule” that may be imposed. The popularity of this specific tradition of Catholic ethno-nationalism among contemporary nationalists (*narodowcy*) might explain why nationalism in Poland remains predominantly androcentric and familistic and has thus far not integrated homo-nationalist or gender equality perspectives.

The National Shift in Feminist Politics

Feminism in Poland, like feminism elsewhere, is a plural movement, one that consists of a variability of political orientations and also includes political goals with regard to the ways a future society is imagined. The majority of feminist initiatives arising since the system change in Poland span a political spectrum including centrist, liberal, left-wing and anarchist viewpoints. Nevertheless, tracing the mainstream public feminist discourse and the way belonging is framed reveals significant changes among the most influential and most visible feminist actors and initiatives. During the 1990s, feminists often referred to the idea of a “feminism beyond borders” or a transnational feminist movement. After accession to the European Union, however, the nation of Poland became a central reference point, not only for the right wing but for feminist discourse as well. A change in discourse can be traced in examples of prominent influential Warsaw-based feminist actors and initiatives, such as the Women’s Day Demonstration *Manifa*.³ In the early years, the demonstrations were organized with reference to a transnational (or worldwide) feminist movement and frequently used the women’s human rights discourse of the UN. The demonstration (later called *Manifa*) took place for the first time in March 2000 and was organized within the frame of the World Women’s March initiated by feminists in Quebec. It was described as the Światowy Marsz Kobiet (World Women’s March) and its main slogan was: “A democracy without women is half a democracy” (“Demokracja bez kobiet to pół demokracji”). One of the main slogans of the second *Manifa* in December 2000 was based on a quote from Virginia Woolf: “As a woman, I have no country. As a woman, I want no country. As a woman, my country is the world.” The use of this quote as the main slogan on a banner did resonate with the transnational feminist perspective framing that event, as well as with the perception of women’s rights as a global issue and feminism as something that does not stop at national borders nor that is relevant exclusively within

² Poland has two major traditions of nationalism/patriotism that serve as main points of reference for contemporary politics. One is based in socialism and the idea of a multiethnic state (embodied by the ‘father of independence’ Marshal Józef Piłsudski and the *Sanacja*), and the other is represented by the *Endecja*. *Endecja*, or *Endeks* refer to the so-called *Narodowa Demokracja* (National Democrats). Today’s extreme right have been influenced by the thought of *Endecja* and by Roman Dmowski, the anti-Semitic leader of the pre-war nationalist movement (Pankowski 4-5). The shift in right-wing politics towards the far-right national-Catholic position is not only evident in voting behavior and overall opinions and prejudices (e.g., Rędzio and Soral) but can also be traced through the political history of the Law and Justice party, which is now in power. In 2015, their focus was still the Home Army (*Amia Krajowa*) and Józef Piłsudski’s legacy. Now, in 2018, Roman Dmowski and the anti-communist guerilla ‘cursed soldiers’ (*żołnierze wyklęci*) have become very central.

³ The first 8th of March Demonstration (later called *Manifa*) was organized in Warsaw in 2000. By now similar demonstrations called *Manifa* take place in many other cities and regions in Poland (among them Łódź, Wrocław, Kraków, Poznań, Rzeszów, Olsztyn, Kielce, Bydgoszcz, Lublin, Katowice).

frames of national belonging.

After Poland moved towards accession to the EU, women's rights actors believed that becoming a member of the European Union would eventually result in standards for women's rights in Poland reaching levels consistent with most EU countries.⁴ This was not exactly the case. Even before accession, feminist initiatives in Poland were greatly disappointed with the European Union and the accession agreement. In a manifesto called "Manifesta," issued for the *Manifa* demonstration in 2003, the authors wrote: "Let's not let them trade a woman's right to decide her own life—not for the Church, not for Europe, not for a political arrangement." The "Manifesta" expressed a popular feminist critique of the European Union and the government, one that accused them of having abandoned women's rights in order to get the support of the Catholic Church for EU accession. The reason for this disappointment was that, during the accession period, 'moral' issues—meaning reproductive issues—had been excluded from EU oversight and defined as an exclusively national matter.

Paradoxically, after EU accession, it was not just the conservative right wing and far right that gained power. The frame of the nation-state also came to be understood as one of the most relevant for addressing issues of women's rights related to reproduction. From that time on, it seemed that for many activists there existed no way around the 'nation,' which increasingly became the focus of feminist politics.

Significant first signs of this change in discourse, which took place on many different levels, can be traced in the public interventions and writings of Agnieszka Graff, a prominent feminist public figure and author of both academic and popular books on feminism.⁵ In 2007, she published an article in the daily newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* entitled "Polishness is No Property of *Endeks*" ("Polskość nie jest własnością endeków"), which can be seen a crucial marker initiating a shift towards feminist patriotism. In this article, she argues against identifying patriotism with the nationalism performed in the tradition of the pre-war National Democrats, or *Endeks*. She insists on an essential difference between those two terms and declares herself a "feminist patriot."

After this intervention in the public discourse, the author became the most vocal public feminist intellectual promoting feminist patriotism. Because she is so influential in shaping opinions within the feminist movement and amplifying the debate on patriotism and feminism, her views on patriotism deserve special attention.

It is important to note that Graff criticizes ethnic right-wing nationalism, which is based on the idea of the homogeneity of the Polish nation; she claims her patriotism is more closely aligned with concepts of a nation based on citizenship and certain political projects (Graff, *Rykoszetem* 215).⁶ Still, the author defines national belonging as the "key element of modern responsiveness, the central criterion defining one's identity, a system organizing our orientation in the world."

In her eyes, patriotism and "national identity" are related to a "certain landscape," "language," place of birth and culture. According to Graff, patriotism is a "feeling"—a feeling of community, togetherness

⁴ I do not discuss in this article the problematic issues of neoliberal transformation; nor do I discuss how UN human rights discourse, 'Europe' and ideas about European sexual and gender modernity are used in feminist politics, although all of these are also part of my research. See for example my article "Women's Uprising in Poland. Embodied Claims between the Nation and Europe" (Ramme).

⁵ She counts as one of the 10 most well-known feminist public figures with a regular presence in mainstream media. Her writings often mirror discussions held in feminist environments in Warsaw, but she also has a meaningful influence on the development of feminist trends and discourses countrywide.

⁶ In the Polish context, and among many contemporary intellectuals who oppose the nationalist far right (including Graff), Jan Józef Lipski's essay "Dwie ojczyzny, dwa patriotyzmy" (Two Fatherlands, Two Patriotisms) is "programmatic" for a critical (and socialist) patriotic standpoint. Such a patriotism also allows criticism of one's "own nation," its individual members and "national" practices and traditions. In addition, Maria Janion (prominent literary studies professor) had a major influence on academic feminists in Poland (some of which were her students) and the ways that they interpret Polish national identity and culture (see e.g., Kulawik and Ingbrant's article "Maria Janion. A tree spreading seeds"). Her views are influenced by rationalist and modernist thought and she is highly critical of messianic nationalism and the Polish ethos of martyrdom. Most important in regard to her influence on feminism are her writings on the figure of Mother Poland/Polonia and gendered nationalism (see for example the book *Kobiety a Duch Innosci* or an English translation of Janion's writings "Farewell to Poland? The Uprising of a Nation").

and ties with a certain group, according to which someone will favor a group perceived as their “own” people (Ibid. 215, 218-219). Graff refers to the 2nd *Manifa* in 2000, focusing one aspect of her critique on its cosmopolitan and universalizing character, which she finds expressed in a quote from Virginia Woolf: “As a woman, I have no country...” (Ibid. 69). Graff writes: “No doubt our feminism in those times was based in thinking in terms of a transnational [orig. *ponadnarodowa*] women’s community and a global sisterhood.” She distances herself from the idea of a feminism which is not defined by national boundaries and writes: “It is not possible to unsubscribe from the tradition of one’s own country, to claim belonging to a larger community, global or continental. It looks like, as a woman, I have a Fatherland, no matter if I want it or not” (Ibid. 73). The transformation of her feminist beliefs appears here very clearly.

Her major critique of nationalism is that it treats women as symbols and bearers of the nation while suppressing “real” “living” women, who are forced to exemplify the nation. Her critique clearly resonates with Maria Janion’s critical analysis of Polish gendered national narratives and myths (Janion, *Niesamowita* 263-274) as well as other feminist critiques of the ways that females are constituted as symbolical bearers of the nation (Yuval-Davies 17, Winter). In the book *Magma* published in 2010, Graff asserts that the question of how to “renegotiate the place of women in national mythologies” is one of the most interesting issues for contemporary feminist thought (Graff, *Magma*, 58).

Even though Graff criticizes the universalism of a “global sisterhood,” her language implies another type of universalism. Throughout the text, she speaks in the plural (“we”) instead of the singular, although it seems she is describing her own thoughts and feelings. The “we” she refers to is “Polish feminism,” represented by Polish females (“Polki”) who fight for equality with Polish men. What she does not speak about are people as “citizens of the country” or “feminists living in Poland.” National identities, as well as binary genders, she describes as historical and imagined. Still, in her writings they appear as universally binding and somehow take an essentialist shape. Even though the idea is to differentiate between a “critical” or civic patriotism and an ethnic nationalism, according to the proclaimed identity order that is constituted in her writings, women and men are first of all Poles—women and men of a certain nation, living together in a national landscape and a common culture, constituting a “we.”⁷

The change in feminist discourse also becomes especially visible in the identity categories that are applied within public statements and appeals or in the names chosen for feminist initiatives. For example, in 2009, the Congress of Polish Women (*Kongres Kobiet Polskich*) was launched. The main slogan of the Congress (later called simply Congress of Women) was then “Women for Poland—Poland for Women” (“Kobiety dla Polski—Polska dla Kobiet”) and one surprising element of the program at the time was the singing of the national anthem. One aim of the Congress, among others, was definitely to lay claim to the representation of “Polish women” (and not just women living in Poland). The Congress of Polish Women turned out to be a huge success; the absence of some marginalized groups did, however, lead to protests. For instance, during the Congress, flyers were circulated asking the question, “Is a lesbian a Polish woman?”

Using the self-description “Polish Women” for a feminist congress can be seen not only as an attempt to reorganize frames of belonging but also as a challenge to nationalist politics of representation that attempt to monopolize definitions of national belonging. It was still unusual at the time for a non-governmental feminist initiative to call itself “Polish” or “national.” However, the designation has been (and still is) popular among the nationalist far right in their endeavors to legitimate an exclusive claim to representing the ‘native’ Polish people. The use of such labels as “Polish” and “national” (*narodowe*) within a nationalist discursive practice often serves to distinguish Poles from non-legitimate ‘non-Polish’ others (e.g., Jews, feminists, homosexuals, communists, leftists) in order to exclude them from the political community of the nation.

In a famous speech inaugurating the Congress, Maria Janion referred to the legacy of *Solidarność* and called for a “completion” of the political transformation through the creation of “female solidarity” and through a “reordering” of the cultural-symbolic sphere (Kulawik and Ingbrant). The Congress of Polish

⁷ Graff has further reflected on this topic and the issue of feminist patriotism; see for example her article from 2014, “Gdzie jesteś, polski feminizmie? Pochwała sporu i niejasności.” Nevertheless, I’m not able to discuss here the many aspects or the development of Graff’s approach to nationalism and patriotism.

Women also exemplifies the feminist involvement in the so-called “politics of memory” that were taking place on many different levels.⁸ Next to representative claims, one aim of the Congress was to integrate women into the national narratives, which had been monopolized to a great extent by the right wing, giving credit only to Polish men. One of the main topics of the first Congress was the role women played in the *Solidarność* movement. Even today, highlighting the involvement of women in the anti-communist *Solidarność* movement serves to justify claims for women’s rights, equal representation and access to state power structures.

Another element of this struggle is a battle over national symbols, such as symbols of resistance related to *Solidarność* or the “Fighting Poland” (*Polska Walcząca*) slogan from World War II. The poster for the *Manifa* demonstration in March 2013 might serve as a prominent example of how this struggle has developed over time. The main slogan was “For an Independent Polish Woman” (“O Polkę niepodległą”). The organizers appropriated an older symbol of resistance against the fascist German occupation dating back to WWII, which was originally used by the Home Army (AK, or *Armia Krajowa*). This symbol had recently become a contested object, fought over by various political agendas. The slogan and use of this symbol could be interpreted as a subversive strategy but also as a flirtation with patriotic discourses. It raised a lot of controversies, but it also received approval by some for whom feminism and patriotism or nationalism were not in contradiction. In a brochure issued for the *Manifa* demonstration, the organizers from the group PK8M wrote:

We have patriotic symbols, but we still do not have the right of protection for our bodies. Where is our independence? Polish independence, despite historical circumstances, is the favorite (and replacement) topic of many politicians. When there is no invader, then we will make one up. But this will still be a rehashed, abstract independence, even for those who can independently, autonomously decide about the fate of their own bodies. What does independence mean for us women? Let’s find out what will happen if we change the word Poland [*Polska*] into the phrase Polish women [*Polka*]. Then we might discover that Poland is not a woman but women are Poland. Every debate in the parliament is a word made flesh—or, to be exact: their word made the flesh of our body.

One day before the demonstration, on March 7th 2013, a debate took place. In the invitation, the organizers declared that the intention was to “deconstruct Polish heroic narratives by women” and to ask whether, in Poland, it were possible to “use national symbols in a subversive, emancipatory way” (“Manifa, czyli kto szarga narodowe świętości?,” *Krytyka Polityczna*, March 6, 2013).

In a heated debate on Facebook, with people opting for internationalism and/or opposing the use of right-wing language, left-wing journalist Piotr Szumlewicz asked whether it’s really necessary to take over the language of the right wing in order to defend emancipatory postulates. Organizers of *Manifa* replied: “Is independence only right wing? Does the red and white flag belong only to the ONR [*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny*, the National-Radical Camp]?” (Facebook page of PK8M).

In a follow-up article titled “No Move Without the Nation” (“Bez narodu ani rusz”) written together with Agnieszka Mroziak, Szumlewicz further criticized the way the ‘nation’ was being used to frame feminist ways of thinking about women and challenged the idea that the right wing had stolen ‘patriotism’ and the nation, doubting that these terms needed to be taken back. The authors saw this debate as proof of those feminists’ inability to free themselves from thinking about community in national categories, risking the exclusion of all other foreign nationals (Mroziak and Szumlewicz 2013).

⁸ In addition to popular feminist “herstory” activities (e.g., book publishing, blogs, events), this also includes, among other things, the organization of exhibitions, historical walks, historical re-enactments, the production of movies and art works (e.g., murals). An important part of memory politics is the drawing of analogies between now and then and the insertion of oneself into those historical narratives. For example, the Polish Women’s Strike was frequently compared to a historical narrative about Polish suffragettes visiting Piłsudski carrying umbrellas and all dressed in black.

The Feminist Patriotic Uprising

Attempts to tighten the already restrictive abortion law in 2016 caused a huge mobilization, which also expressed disagreement with the (bio)politics and “embodied nationalism” (McClintock 66) of the current representatives of the state. While ‘restoring’ this new (according to the far right ‘original’) nation, the hierarchy of valuable life had to be reorganized: pregnant women should sacrifice themselves for the survival of the unborn and the future nation. The ‘bodily’ dimension of disagreement with being positioned as ‘disposable’—to speak in Butlerian terms (Butler 25)—unfolded in many ways.⁹

Within these protests against the far right, a reorganization of the relationship between the ‘national body’ and the ‘female body,’ as its symbol and territory, began to take shape (Ramme). Next to the familiar circulating transnational feminist signs, the creative appropriation (both affirmative and ridiculing) of symbols related to national movements, fights and uprisings for national independence could be observed in the visual language of the protests.

Symbols of female body parts were transformed into symbols of resistance and appeared on signs and banners, taking the battle over national symbols to another level, as it became a matter of popular feminist resistance. Symbols of the *Solidarność* movement and of the 1944 anti-Nazi Warsaw Uprising, even the ‘cursed soldiers’ of the anti-communist resistance were transformed into signs of the sovereignty of the bodies of (Polish) women with regard to the state, the government and the Catholic Church. They began to appear all across the country.

Among them, the symbol of “Fighting Poland” (*Polska Walcząca*) was transformed into a feminist symbol of “Polish women fighting” (*Polka Walcząca*), familiar from the March 9, 2013, feminist demonstration in Warsaw. The anchor symbol was also transformed into a symbol of femininity, decorated with long hair or breasts, and appeared in many variations on banners, stickers and shields (compare e.g., Korolczuk 103). Only this time, it was no longer possible to determine whether the use was ironic or not.

At a Black Protest in October 2016, the police confiscated one banner and, in 2017, trials were held after individuals had altered signs in Warsaw, Kielce and Szczecin. They were accused of insulting the “Fighting Poland” symbol, protected by law since 2014. During the trial, some of the accused explained their use of the symbol in affirmative and patriotic terms, stressing their personal ties to heroic Polish history. While in Warsaw and Szczecin the activists were not punished by the judge, the court of law in Kielce decided the activist was guilty of insulting a national symbol.

A remake of a famous *Solidarność* poster (“W samo południe”) also became one of the symbols of the strike. After the strike, the conservative trade union *NSZZ Solidarność* reported the use of the graphic as a crime to the authorities, though without success.¹⁰

The intentions of those creative appropriations or subversions of national symbols, languages and narratives are not homogeneous, since they might be ironic, affirmative or meant as a rejection of nationalism or patriotic narratives altogether. However, the protests taking place in opposition to attempts to criminalize abortion were much different from earlier feminist demonstrations such as, for instance, *Manifa*. More recent protests have been full of national symbols, red and white colors and the Polish flag. Although human rights and ‘European norms’ and even self-positionings as ‘European’ are still very common in feminist politics, the emphasis on national belonging and references to national history have become a dominant element.

The reasons that the women’s protests in 2016 were so successful in impressing the party in power were not only because participants posed a challenge to right-wing populism through a mass scale mobilization and by positioning themselves as ‘ordinary women’ (Ramme and Snochowska-Gonzalez) but also because they frequently positioned themselves publicly as ‘Polish women’ (*Polki*). After those mobilizations in 2016 and the success in claiming the representation of ‘Polish women’ by the newly arisen movement, the use

⁹ For discussion of the link between nationalism, biopolitics and reproduction in Poland see also the work of Teresa Kulawik (2017).

¹⁰ The district prosecutor in Gdańsk refused to initiate legal proceedings. Additionally, the logo’s original creator, Jerzy Janiszewski, opposed the prosecution, declaring that he personally has nothing against the use of this sign by the women’s demonstrations and that, on the contrary, he is happy that the sign still represents the values that it originally stood for.

of national categories of belonging in feminist politics, public appellations, self-descriptions and even academic articles in Poland has become inflationary. For example, on October 10, 2017, the main banner in front of the Warsaw Women’s Strike demonstration featured the phrase “Angry Polish Women” (“Wściekłe Polki”) and, in September of the same year, the initiative Save the Women (*Ratujmy Kobiety*) together with the Grand Coalition for Equality and Choice (*Wielka Koalicja za Równością i Wyborem*) organized a demonstration under the title “Free Polish Women—Free Poland. All for One, One for All” (“Wolne Polki—Wolna Polska. Wszyscy za jedną, jedna za wszystkich”). Then, in spring 2018, an initiative named Informal Group of Polish Women (*Nieformalna Grupa Polek*) had billboards put up displaying the sentence “Polish women want legal abortion.”

Even feminist NGOs who have existed for decades now, like the Federation for Women and Family Planning (*Federacja na rzecz Kobiet i Planowania Rodziny*), started to use the term ‘Polish women’ when promoting events, whereas before it would have been uncommon to use national specifications while addressing people.

And in academic texts it can be observed that expressions such as “population,” “inhabitants,” etc., give way to words referring to nationality (“polka,” “polak,” “polacy”). The language and categories of belonging suggest that this was a struggle of ‘Polish women’—not citizens of the Polish state nor all the people affected by that state’s legislation. In addition, the celebrations of 100 years of women’s suffrage and Polish independence in the fall of 2018 were accompanied by an explosion of events organized from within feminist environments (e.g., NGOs, academics and curators), highlighting heroic female involvement in national independence struggles.

The events seemed to focus predominately on what Agnieszka Graff defined in 2010 as the most important task for feminism: the renegotiation of “the place of women in national mythologies.” Critical reflections on, for example, anti-Semitic or ethnic nationalism among early women activists were marginal.¹¹ The popular and mainstream feminist opposition to nationalism, at least at the discursive level, seems to be directed first of all against an “androcentric nationalism” (Boehmer 7), while very often linking the opposition to nationalism with a positive form of patriotism.

Today’s feminist movements not only make efforts at shaping the notion of ‘the nation’ but also actively engage in processes of producing, maintaining or re-constituting a ‘nation,’ as well as a certain type of nation-state—one that is based on democratic rather than authoritarian principles.

The patriotism of groups like the Polish Women’s Strike (*Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet*, or OSK) also take up the struggle against the revival of far-right or nationalist movements. Interestingly, the new popular feminist movement has also become one of the most important anti-fascist movements. They are successfully counter-protesting against far right-wing marches, thus putting themselves at great risk of bodily harm through confrontations with nationalists and the police.

The Polish Women’s Strike has collaborated with feminists from Argentina to launch a new global grassroots movement—the International Women’s Strike (*Międzynarodowy Strajk Kobiet*), which first took place in March 2017. It was a huge success and can also be seen as a step towards a new form of solidarity that crosses national boundaries. Still, the International Women’s Strike cannot be described as having transcended ‘the national.’ There was a visible identification with national categories of belonging and with thinking along national boundaries, which differentiated it from transnational feminist identifications in the 1990s. While women of different nationalities do in fact support each other, they are still defined by national belonging in more substantial ways than merely being affected by certain legislation.

That the Polish Women’s Strike inspired both the Women’s March on Washington and the International Women’s Strike also became a ground for national pride: “It was we, the Polish women, who called out for a strike, in which by now already 50 countries are participating!” (Facebook page of OSK, March 6, 2017).

¹¹ More differentiated perspectives on the history of early women activists and their historical social and political activities can be found in academic discussions, events and publications among feminist historians (see for example events by the Seminar of Women’s History and History of Gender Łucja Charewiczowa).

‘Feminist Nationalism’—an Oxymoron?

Having outlined some of the key examples of ‘Polish feminist patriotism,’ I will delve further into the question of a possible compatibility between feminism and its supposedly greatest opponent in contemporary Poland: far-right nationalism.

While, throughout the 1990s, nationalist right-wing political parties and far-right groups predominantly consisted of men, over the intervening years one can observe a growing number of women participants. Women on the far right in Poland have thus far been engaged most often in anti-choice activism and in familist and fundamentalist Catholic organizations. Nevertheless, in post-socialist Poland, the existence of extreme right-wing nationalist women’s organizations and activists is quite a new phenomenon (Gąsiorowska, Konwerska).¹²

Most of these women see themselves as opposing feminism. They are predominately anti-choice, they affirm the traditional place of women in the heterosexual family and, especially the activists from the national (*narodowe*) women’s groups, they link being female with certain beauty standards.¹³ A similar message, combined with strong anti-feminist rhetoric, can be observed within the women’s group In the Name of the Ladies (*W Imieniu Dam*), which is closely affiliated with the ONR and the All-Polish Youth. Between 2013 and 2017, anti-feminist protests were held on March 8th in several towns in Poland, with a rather low number of attendees.

Still, some of the members of those organizations declare themselves to be ‘feminists’—like, for example, women from the organization Women for the Nation (*Kobiety dla Narodu*) such as Maria Piasecka-Łopuszańska.¹⁴ Women for the Nation (dissolved in 2013) is a spin-off organization of the Women’s Section of the National Movement (*Sekcja Kobieta Ruchu Narodowego*) (Gąsiorowska). Its former leader, Anna Holocher, a member of the ONR, described the Women’s Section as an anti-feminist organization. According to Holocher, a feminist patriot or feminist nationalist would be an “oxymoron.” She also describes feminists as “feminazis” because, she claims, Nazis “allowed abortions of the Polish people and of ‘sub-human’ nations. Today feminists want the same things” (Holocher). The ‘national feminist’ Piasecka-Łopuszańska, who has also been a member of Women for the Nation, claims to be a granddaughter of Bolesław Piasecki, the most prominent post-war leader of the Polish nationalist movement.¹⁵

Other organizations presently active with strong ties to the National Movement are the National Women’s Organization (*Narodowa Organizacja Kobiet*, or NOK) and the Confederation of Women of the Republic of Poland (*Konfederacja Kobiet Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*), both of which borrow their names from pre-war women’s organizations.¹⁶ In January 2017, together they organized an anti-choice conference in the Polish *Sejm*¹⁷, defending “the unborn life” and “endangered and discriminated against authentic, natural femininity.”

That nationalist women’s attitudes towards feminism might develop and change over time is evident in an article which appeared in the online autonomous nationalist magazine *Szturm* in 2016. In it, the author, Maria Pilarczyk, advocated a nationalist, extreme right-wing feminism. According to Pilarczyk, the

¹² Right-wing women activists became more visible around 2012 and 2013. The numbers of visible female participants at far-right rallies is still increasing. In 2015, 25% of the *Marsz Niepodległości* consisted of females (Malinowska et al 4). There also exist a number of women who support conservative and right-wing politics or who are active in parties (e.g., Grzebalska, Zacharenko).

¹³ A great example of this is the conference “How to be a Charming Woman” (“Być Kobietą Urzekającą”), which was organized for women seeking to “discover the real beauty of womanhood” and “take care of their external beauty” (bycurzekajaca.pl).

¹⁴ See for example the video interview in wSense.tv (2018).

¹⁵ Piasecki was the former head of such groups as the ONR and the ONR-Falanga, who nevertheless obtained significant political power in the People’s Republic of Poland (Lipski). He also ran the PAX Association, which was responsible for keeping fascist ideology alive in the early 1990s.

¹⁶ The original NOK was established in 1919, and although it was nearer to *Endecja* (National Democracy) on the political spectrum, members claimed a degree of independence, asserting they were representing the specific interests of Polish women, as a group that “is different, although differentially equal” (Chojnowski 42-43).

¹⁷ The *Sejm* is the lower house of the Polish parliament.

number of women in nationalist organizations continues to grow; by now, every tenth member is female. She demands equality for nationalist women, who she says do not need men to defend them from rape. Rape, she writes, is committed not only by non-Christian migrants but also by white Christian Polish men. Pilarczyk believes that feminism is nevertheless entirely compatible with nationalism—as long as feminists themselves recognize that God and nation come first (Pilarczyk).

Even so, most radical nationalist women continue identifying as anti-feminist. A campaign by far-right activists titled #NotAFeminist! (*# NieJestemFeministką!*) that was launched in February 2018 proves this tendency. The authors complain: “It annoys us that only feminists and leftists claim to have the right to speak about women, while normal women are overlooked (...). We are initiating the campaign: I am a woman, #NotAFeminist! Join us!” The campaign had little impact, though feminists responded to the far-right women by disseminating pro-feminist video confessions.

Despite the dominance of anti-feminist attitudes, the use of national symbols and national narratives within feminist discourse might prepare the ground not just for feminist-patriotic but feminist-nationalist and feminist-chauvinist voices as well. However, the only aim of voices like these would be to abolish androcentric and familistic versions of nationalism in order to achieve equality between “white Polish men” and “white Polish women.”

Today, if you type into Google the ironic double entendre used for the March 8th Demonstration in 2013, “independent Polish woman” (“niepodległa Polka”), the first hit is a nationalist anti-Muslim blog depicting: a radical nationalist female. This demonstrates that not only national and nationalist but also feminist symbols, slogans and phrases are easy to adapt and transform.¹⁸

While feminists joined the battle over national symbols and the category of the Polish nation, the far-right wing and the ruling Law and Justice party had already to a significant extent been using women’s safety as an argument while spreading fear about the sexual threat represented by racial, ethnic and religious ‘others.’

But the Polish government and the far right are not only focused on a politics of fear and on spreading moral panic. The Ministry of Defense organizes classes in self-defense for women all over the country and invites women to join the voluntary civic paramilitary branch of the Territorial Defense Forces (*Obrona Terytorialna Kraju*, or OTK).

In 2016, with a majority of votes, the Polish *Sejm* declared the year 2017 the “Year of Women.” On November 11, 2018, on the 100th anniversary of Polish independence, President Andrzej Duda, on live television with his wife, addressed the Polish Nation as “Polish men” and “Polish women.” He celebrated Polish independence together with women’s suffrage.

This marks a shift in the politics of memory as they’ve been practiced so far, although this does not indicate any changes with regard to the conservative familistic political agenda. In the very same month, the president also announced his support for legislation forbidding “homosexual propaganda” as well as legislation that would further criminalize abortion.

Not only the discourse of the state but that of far-right groups as well seems to change in consequence of the inclusion of women in national narratives. For example, in March 2018, the NOK released a “historical” brochure titled “The Voice of Women on the 100th anniversary of Women’s Suffrage in Poland” (“Głos kobiet w 100. rocznicę przyznania praw wyborczych kobietom w Polsce”) which links the activities of today’s ethno-nationalist far-right women to the activities of pre-war women’s rights advocates in Poland (NOK). The release event for this brochure officially took place in the Polish *Sejm*, making it one of many activities celebrating women’s suffrage, their involvement in the struggle for independence and early women’s rights movements as “nation-building elements.”

The predominantly androcentric version of nationalism in Poland seems to be slowly transforming.

¹⁸ For a critical discussion of nationalist and feminist memory politics in Poland, Hungary, Ukraine and Russia see also the special issue of *Baltic World* “Herstory Revisionism. Women’s participation in political upheavals,” edited by Weronika Grzebalska and Andrea Pető. Among other things, the authors discuss examples of nationalist “herstory” and remark that “feminists do not have a monopoly on writing women’s history” (Grzebalska 41).

Nationalist Hegemonies and Troubling Distinctions

An important question is, how far can feminism take the political operationalization of national identities, while at the same time rejecting nationalist right-wing concepts and remaining inclusive beyond the national frame? Feminists who declare themselves patriots are not alone. Representative studies conducted in 2016 and 2018 by the public opinion polling agency CBOS show that the majority of people in Poland (88%) declare themselves patriots. The survey from 2016 shows something else as well. It appeared that most respondents (52%) also had difficulties distinguishing between patriotism and nationalism. Among those who declared themselves patriots, there was also a visible tendency towards support for nationalist viewpoints. This difficulty indicates how vague the practical distinction between patriotism and nationalism in fact is.¹⁹

Today's women's movement in Poland (including feminist patriots) constitutes itself in opposition to far-right nationalism and Catholic fundamentalism. And yet, one also has to consider that the women's movement will not be entirely immune to a racist politics of fear or to ongoing far-right nationalist propaganda. At this point there is no observable discursive coalition between feminism and the far and ethnonationalist right. Nevertheless, racist propaganda from sources like the website Euroislam.pl—which is known for spreading fake news about Western Europe being dominated by Islam and women living in fear of Muslim men—has been shared on the Facebook profiles of local feminist groups like Gals for Gals. The propagation of materials like this on the internet has an incidental character that is largely unreflective and users are often uninformed about the sources of their information. Which means that, in order to make a clear distinction between “feminist patriotism” and for example ethnic nationalism, what is needed is constant critical reflection, on one's own and other women's othering practices, their possible entanglements with nationalism and the hierarchies of solidarity that get applied, not only historically but also by contemporary women's rights activists.

Next to the above-mentioned problems, it must be emphasized that this paper is concerned first of all with a public discourse, one that appears in a nationalist and very populist political context. And this raises another important question, which demands further investigation: Is the deployment of patriotism in feminist activism a necessary step (as some argue) within an already overwhelmingly nationalist context? Is this a step that is needed in order to break down a right-wing hegemony and move towards other, non-nationalist ideas of citizenship or community?

At this stage, it looks very much like the creative recuperation of national symbols, the inflationary exposures of national belonging, has been one of the most successful strategies for breaking down the far right's hegemonial position in defining the nation. Such a counter-patriotism may also eventually lead towards a pluralization of homogeneous and exclusionary concepts of national belonging, which could possibly result in other (eventually not national) ways of framing solidarity in the future.²⁰

Nevertheless, the view that feminism has a patriotic mission and should contribute to nation-building is a contested one, especially among (queer) feminist activists, like the contemporary organizers of the *Manifa* March 8th Demonstration in Warsaw. They remind us that biopolitical projects undertaken by religious fundamentalists and the far right actually do threaten the health and life of numerous groups of people—no matter their conformity with gender binaries or their citizenship status or their ability to fulfill some imaginary cultural, racist or ethnic criteria of national belonging.

¹⁹ This is also the case for the distinction between so-called civic and ethnic nationalism (as it has been defined by e.g., Kohn). Nations are still imagined as coherent cultures and/or defined through nativism; in most countries in Europe, including Poland, children acquire citizenship based on the principle of *jus sanguinis*. The CBOS survey from 2018 did not include questions about nationalism.

²⁰ Signs of another change in discourse, one that references citizenship as well as a multi- or post-ethnic understanding of the nation, can already be traced in the discourse of other oppositional and emancipatory movements in the country (such as the Polish Women's Strike). These movements are starting to include “ethnic minorities,” foreign nationals and refugees into their discursive frameworks of solidarity (see also Ramme and Snochowska-Gonzalez 114). However, whether the above-mentioned groups addressed by these movements will also come to be counted as “Polish women” remains an open question. Next to this, a quite new phenome is the rising interest in (Polish/national) feminist communism (including pre-war and pre-1989 communist women activism) among some feminist circles can be observed.

“We, the Women of Poland”²¹—Framing Solidarity

Taking the example of feminist mobilizations and movements in Poland, this paper discusses the (im)possible link between patriotism, nationalism and feminism. It asks what it means for feminist politics and female solidarity when belonging is framed in different ways. The shift in discourse towards the national, which may also be seen as a side effect of defensive struggles with national discourses and exclusive frames of belonging, does not automatically indicate that feminism in Poland has in general turned patriotic or nationalist. It is important to differentiate the various relationships and entanglements between feminism and nationalism. The 2013 *Manifa* evinces a more strategic and ironic use of national symbols. The first Congress of Polish Women (KK), meanwhile, stands as an example of serious politics of memory, which aims at including women in national narratives while also claiming to represent “Polish women” in general.

Within the popular feminist protests that have been taking place since 2016, the strong deployment of national symbols and use of the phrase “Polish women” in the names of protest events all correspond with demands of solidarity and rights for “Polish women.” These emergent movements can be described not only as feminist but as patriotic as well.

One early sign of such portending developments were Agnieszka Graff’s writings and interventions between 2007 and 2013, which doubtless can be defined as promoting ‘feminist patriotism.’ Her vision of patriotism is however very much in contrast with right-wing ethnic nationalism. Even so, recall that Graff defines the nation as the “the central criterion defining one’s identity, a system organizing our orientation in the world.” Such an acknowledgement of the hegemonic position of ‘the nation’ is first of all proof of the huge success of a nationalist discourse and its efforts to produce and reify a national imaginary. This imaginary then comes to function as a superior principle of perception determining the orientation within a given society, including all its social hierarchies.

The ways identity categories are articulated and mobilized have political consequences. The use of identity categories (such as *Polish women, people, citizens, humans*, etc.) applies a certain frame of belonging and thus also implies certain politics of inclusion and exclusion.

This way, feminism also prepares a ground for an ordinary, quotidian nationalism, which does not necessarily need to articulate itself in an intended and conscious way but still might have a relevant impact on individual and collective choices. Through a continuous activation of selected national cognitive frames, discursive nationalism translates into embodied nationalism (Wehling). This results in a practical thickening of political space, leaving fewer options for articulating resistance beyond the nation frame.

The history of feminism and the variability of feminisms around the world teach us that there exists no “natural,” “automatic” contradiction between feminism and nationalism. When feminist movements rise in opposition to nationalism because nationalism suppresses women, because it is an “androcentric nationalism” (Boehmer 7), such opposition might not necessarily indicate a critical stance towards nationalism per se. Feminists—even the ones struggling with the right wing that excludes them today—are not immune to chauvinism, xenophobia, racism, nativism and all kinds of right-wing, identitarian ideologies.

Still, the Catholic, familistic and androcentric character of nationalism in Poland might prevent most feminists, including popular feminism, from closing (e.g., discursively) ranks with a racist right wing. Conversely, the operationalizing of “gender equality” and appropriation of previously feminist topics by the far right in order to enhance a nationalist agenda can happen only to a certain extent.

Kimberly Crenshaw (10:30), well-known advocate for intersectional justice, and Nancy Fraser (174), critical feminist theorist, both point out how narrow frames might result in us overlooking the cause of a problem. This relates not only to the community included within the frame of solidarity but also to the opponents of gender and sexual equality. The nationalist right wing, even though it presents itself as genuinely national and native, is not a phenomenon that arises from within a single nation, nor has it ever been—not in the early days of fascism at the beginning of the 20th century and not today. The struggle against the rise of the global right is happening in many places all over the world, including the feminist

²¹ Open letter from Kongres Kobiet, International Women’s Strike et.al. (2017).

struggle in Poland. Although there are commonalities in terms of the problems these movements face, new forms of feminist solidarity are still described through national frames of belonging. Paradoxically, while far-right and nationalist movements consolidate internationally beyond whatever ‘national territory’ or ‘nation’ they claim to embody, feminist movements since the mid-2000s increasingly have turned towards the national.

Within an apparently transnational nationalist context, the framing of solidarity in such a way as to include those who do not fit neatly in national identity categories becomes even more important. This would entail the practice of alternative imaginaries of social coexistence, as opposed to further strengthening the marginalizing logic of nationalism. Identity categories at work in political discourses serve not only to frame communities and set the stage for certain political subjects but they also effectively frame solidarity.



Pictures from right to the left:

Anchor-sign Poland Fighting (*Polska Walcząca*) of anti-fascist Warsaw Uprising 1944. Author Jake, licence CC BY 2.0, source <https://www.flickr.com/photos/stillunusual/7761435030/>;

Sign “Poland Fighting” on a wall in 1944. Author Jake, licence CC BY 2.0, source <https://www.flickr.com/photos/stillunusual/7974280531/>;

Flag of Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*). Author Bastianow/Bastian, licence CC BY-SA 2.5, This W3C-unspecified vector image was created with Inkscape on the base of Flaga_PPP.png., source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1039592>;

Original project „For an Independent Polish Woman” (o polkę niepodległą) for the *Manifa* poster in 2013. Author and licence by K. Bratkowska.

Sign „For an Independent Polish Woman” (o polkę niepodległą) at *XVI Manifa* in Warsaw 2013 (photo by last24, source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/last24/>; licence CC BY-SA 2.0)

Transparent at *XVI Manifa* in Warsaw 2013. Photo by last24, source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/last24/>; licence CC BY-SA 2.0;

Official poster for the *Manifa* in 2013. Copyrights PK&M;

Transparent „For an Independent Polish Woman” by the political party *Razem* (prosecuted). Source *Razem* Facebook;

Sign “Polish Woman Fighting” (*Polka walcząca*) from protests in Kielce in 2016 (prosecuted), Image from a campaign by the party *Razem*. Source *Razem* Facebook;

Logo of Solidarność movement by Jerzy Janiszewski. Photo by Brian Solis, licence CC BY 2.0, source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/briansolis/5310058808/>;

Artwork by Sanja Iveković titled „ The Invisible Women of Solidarność” (“Niewidzialne kobiety Solidarności”) from 2009 (Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej) at a women’s right protests in 2016. Photo by Chuck Moravec, source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/21822583@N08/32062709405/>;

Election poster for *Solidarność* by Tomasz Sarnecki „W samo południe 4 czerwca 1989” from 1989 –public display in 2014. Author Thom Quine; licence CC BY-2.0; source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Solidarnosc_\(17022238979\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Solidarnosc_(17022238979).jpg);

„Poland is a women“ banner at a Black Protest in support of abortion rights, Łódź October 2nd 2016. Photo by Zorro2212, licence CC BY-SA 4.0, source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a7/Black_March_in_support_of_abortion_rights%2C_%C5%81%C3%B3d%C5%BA_October_2nd_2016_27.jpg;

A contemporary *Manifa* poster (March 2019) visualising diversity. Copyrights PK&M.

I thank the Viadrina Institute for European Studies at the European University Viadrina (IFES) for their generous support of the copy editing of this publication and Lauren Wolfe for her careful English language editing. I’m thankful as well to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Finding from this research have been partially presented and discussed at conferences and workshops such as the “Women’s Spring: Feminism, Nationalism and Civil Disobedience” at University of Central Lancashire in June 2018; at the RINGS Conference 2017 at the University of Iceland, the “Gender and Transformation in Europe Workshop” at NYU in March 2017. The paper has never been published in any version prior to this one.

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