

Far-right parties in Poland band together to find parliament foothold

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For many outside observers of Poland's ruling party, Law and Justice (PiS) seems like it must set the right-wing bounds of the country's political spectrum. After all, it has overseen a nationalist, conservative shift since it took power in 2015. But a new coalition is hoping to challenge PiS in Poland's Oct. 13 elections by going even further right – and is setting off alarm bells.



The leadership of the Konfederacja coalition view themselves as true conservatives and saviors of the Catholic Polish nation. They espouse traditional family values, oppose abortion, and reject migration, especially from the Muslim world. And they worry Germany will turn the European Union into a supracountry adhering to the values of liberal elites.

Critics, however, label them neo-Nazis and fascists. Leading figures in the coalition make remarks and adopt positions many consider sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic. And observers say their increasing prominence is a result of normalization by PiS.

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Gdańsk, Poland

When Poland goes to the polls this weekend in parliamentary elections, it is the ruling Law and Justice party that challengers will be gunning for. Over the past four years, Law and Justice (PiS) has moved the country rightward by pushing a populist, anti-immigrant, pro-Catholic agenda.

But as far as Poland's far-right nationalist parties are concerned, PiS hasn't gone far enough. And so they have formed a coalition –Konfederacja – in the hope of turning their popularity among young voters into parliamentary seats on Oct. 13 – and thus to become the first party to challenge PiS from the right.

“We are mostly nationalists, we remember the etnos [people with a common origin] in our ideas,” says Michał Urbaniak, as he sits in a kebab restaurant in the port city of Gdańsk. Mr. Urbaniak is a regional head of the National Movement party, which is part of Konfederacja. “We decided to be together and to be elected together because it is easier to take at least 5% of voters needed to be in the parliament.”

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“Things that would not be heard on television a few years ago are now part of the mainstream,” says Jacek Dziegielewski, a Gdańsk-based researcher with the anti-racism Never Again Association, pointing to an uptick in hate crimes since PiS came to power in 2015. “They are just pushing those boundaries.”

Patriotism, Catholic values, and low taxes

That same day at Konfederacja's electoral convention at a hotel in Gdańsk, a procession of men sporting polished shoes and pristine suits took to the podium to vie to be the main face of the new coalition. Their speeches were peppered with

praise for the Roman Catholic Church and scathing criticism toward Poland's ruling party – particularly its generous social spending. Anti-migrant and anti-LGBTQ views were par for the course.

There is still a range of opinion within Konfederacja, says far-right libertarian politician Janusz Korwin-Mikke, who served in the European Parliament from 2014 to 2018. He claims it is not unlike the U.S. Republican Party, bringing together a mix of conservatives, neo-conservatives, paleoconservatives, and libertarians. “Everyone hates everyone but they form a party” brought together by an even greater hatred of socialism, he says. “It is much better for a country to be ruled by a monkey than by socialists.”

Robert Winnicki, leader of the far-right National Movement, says the European Union “wants to build a world without the family, without God, and without nations. We don't want such a world.”

Robert Winnicki, the 34-year-old leader of the National Movement, has no more love for PiS. “Today, the current government is more dependent on the United States than the previous one was on Berlin. But not only that, it also falls on the face in front of Tel Aviv and it is a real threat to Polish interests, Polish property, and our money!”

Mr. Winnicki acknowledges the presence of neo-Nazi elements in some Polish nationalist events like the annual celebrations of Poland's Independence Day marches, but distances himself from their ideology. He says that what separates Polish nationalist groups from both neo-Nazis and the EU is belief in God.

“Why did [mass executions] happen in the Soviet Union? Why did it happen in Nazi Germany?” he asks. “Those were the systems that threw out God and threw out Christian values. Because if the national values go with Christianity, nobody will murder a group because you have different skin color, because you are a different nation. ... That's the line.”

As Konfederacja leaders presented their views in Gdańsk, dozens of young men fresh out of school and at the start of their careers listened. Their politics didn't always align with those being advocated by the speakers. While many expressed antipathy for the LGBTQ movement, others disavowed conservative views on the roles of men and women. Patriotism, Catholic values, and the coalition's promises of low taxes were the primary reasons given for their support.

“Young men will not think about their families as long as the taxes are high,” says first-time voter Mateusz Michalski, who opposes gender quotas in the workplace but has no problem with the gay community. “This is what young people care about – about their work after they graduate and about family.”

“Young people are our base,” says Mr. Winnicki, whose assistants have been drawn from the All-Polish Youth movement and Pride and Modernity, a now outlawed far-right group that was embroiled in the mock celebration of Hitler's birthday. “They are our foundations. But not everyone who likes something on the internet goes to the elections, that is our problem.”

The All-Polish Youth movement – which has about 1,000 members spread across Poland – is part of the effort to get the vote out for Konfederacja among younger voters. At one of their branches in Warsaw, campaign posters filled several boxes. Spokesman Mateusz Marzoch says the group is trying to “professionalize” its work.

Direct recruitment efforts focus on high schools and universities at the start of the academic year, as well as young men attending patriotic events and marches. Social media is also central to the recruitment drive – although their radical views have gotten them kicked off Facebook twice.

Mr. Marzoch credits the group's uninterrupted presence on Facebook since 2017 to the appointment of Adam Andruszkiewicz, a former All-Polish Youth leader, as digital deputy affairs minister, and a stronger defense of “freedom of expression” by the government. The group now claims an informal support base of 5,000 people who can be counted on to show up at “happenings” it organizes.

“The more extreme a group is,” warns Mr. Dziegielewski, the anti-racism researcher, “the more they try to camouflage.”

A creeping threat?

The new prominence of the Polish far-right has worried many that their language and agenda is becoming normalized, at least in part due to PiS's own rhetoric.

Calls for a mono-ethnic Poland, for example, have replaced outright racist slurs. Equating adherence to the Muslim faith with a risk of terrorist behavior is another hallmark of the Polish far-right world view. Language such as the "Holocaust Corporation" – the notion that the contemporary Jewish community tries to profit from the 20th-century mass killings – betrays anti-Semitic sentiment in the ranks of PiS, Konfederacja, and the All-Polish Youth.

In January, Gdańsk Mayor Paweł Adamowicz, a defender of migrants and the LGBTQ community, was murdered. While the attacker's motives appeared to be personal rather than ideological, many saw the killing of Mr. Adamowicz as a byproduct of hate speech. Notably, the All-Polish Youth movement had issued a fake "political death certificate" for the pro-European politician, listing the "cause of death" as "liberalism, multiculturalism, and stupidity."

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The Polish far-right is also viewed with alarm by international organizations. The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in August called upon Poland to ban many of its existing far-right groups and parties as its constitution requires. And an October 2018 European Parliament resolution on the rise of neo-fascist violence noted a demonstration by the Polish National Radical Camp movement in the southern city of Katowice, where they strung pictures of six members of European Parliament from makeshift gallows. It also objected to the use of fascist symbols and xenophobic banners at demonstrations.

"The far-right is becoming more popular," says Mr. Dziegielewski. "We don't see swastikas but we see the Celtic cross. They try to show themselves as patriots and they are becoming more bold."

<http://techdeeps.com/far-right-parties-in-poland-band-together-to-find-parliament-foothold/>