

# **“Fascism was never rational”**

## **in conversation with Rafał Pankowski**

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Interview by Leonie Düngefeld  
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Political scientist Rafał Pankowski explores the links between German and Polish nationalists.

**Mr Pankowski, based on German-Polish history, the nationalists from both countries should really be opponents. Why are they not?**

The ideology of fascism has never been rational. Because of the Second World War and the occupation of Poland, it is of course difficult for someone who calls himself a Polish patriot to cooperate with German nationalists. But it happens. This “internationalisation of nationalism” is paradoxical, but it exists.

**How exactly do right-wing nationalists cooperate?**

For example, in the hardcore neo-Nazi scene. In Poland, it is strongly linked to the skinhead subculture, which became popular in the early 1990s. At that time, international neo-Nazi networks like Blood and Honour also came to Poland. It's not a huge scene, but it exists. Especially within the neo-Nazi music scene there is a lot of exchange. The German Nazi rock band Landser produced some records in Poland many years ago. And the NPD printed their newspaper “Deutsche Stimme” here for a while - because it was cheaper and they didn't have to worry about the police. The Polish justice system is not very effective in terms of hate speech and hate crime.

**Why not?**

The constitution prohibits racism, fascism and Nazism, but the prohibition is not enforced. There is a lack of political will and sensitivity. I only remember two cases in which courts referred to the corresponding article. Once, the neo-Nazi group “Pride and Modernity” was banned. A documentary film had shown the members celebrating Hitler's birthday in Nazi uniforms. One of them said: “We are here to celebrate Hitler's birthday and the glory of our homeland Poland.” That's when you saw the lack of logic.

**What beliefs do German and Polish right-wing extremists share?**

Most recently, they have found a common denominator in anti-Muslim campaigns. Three or four years ago, Pegida became interesting for the Polish right. The former Pegida frontwoman Tatjana Festerling gave a speech in German at a rally against Muslims and refugees in the centre of Warsaw, which was translated. That was unusual. The rally was organised by the National Movement party, which has several members of parliament. Robert Winnicki, its leader, was also at a Pegida rally in Dresden. He ended his speech there with the Nazi slogan “Deutschland erwache!” And the right-wing political parties are also cooperating: The Polish ruling party PiS, which demands reparations from Germany for the Second World War, belongs to the same group in the Council of Europe as the AfD. What a paradox! It is difficult to explain, but obviously it is not impossible for them to work together. In a discussion in the Assembly about the rule of law in Poland, the AfD defended the PiS. There is also ongoing speculation about a new group in the European Parliament that would unite PiS, Hungary's Fidesz, Salvini's party in Italy and perhaps the AfD.

**What is the reason for nationalists to cooperate with other nationalists?**

One incentive is their desire to legitimise their own position. Some of these groups are marginalised in their own national context and therefore want to cooperate with like-minded groups abroad. Despite all these differences, and especially when it comes to national history, they share a similar ideological vision: the rejection of liberal democracy and the rights of minorities - and a similar enemy image towards migrants, Muslims and Jews.

### **Does the corona pandemic favour these attitudes and cooperation?**

I think so. The pandemic creates a lot of confusion, fear and insecurity in society. This increases the space for far-right movements that want to scapegoat certain groups. The conspiracy theory around the pandemic is strongly anti-Semitic and the arguments these people use are similar everywhere. There is an international exchange of ideas at this level. In Poland, the channel for this kind of propaganda is mainly YouTube. We have recently documented that some far-right YouTube channels have a larger audience than traditional media. And there are also new examples of transnational exchange: Grzegorz Braun, one of the leaders of the far-right coalition “Konfederacja”, took part in the demonstration of Reich citizens and right-wing extremists in front of the Reichstag in Berlin in August 2020. He also crossed the barrier in front of the Reichstag building that day.

### **How do you think this exchange will develop?**

With the result of the last US election, the international right-wing movement has experienced a big setback. Before, it got a lot of encouragement and inspiration from the US. It is different now. Here in Poland, the Independence Day “march” on 11 November will be interesting to watch again - one of the biggest right-wing extremist events in the world and a particularly good example of the growing international cooperation of this scene. There are about 200,000 participants from all over Europe. If you walk through the Warsaw city centre afterwards, you will see the stickers of the different groups: Swedes, Hungarians, French, Italians. I'm sure there are also participants from Germany, but they are less visible. In 2018, Polish President Andrzej Duda also took part and gave a speech. For me, that was the most spectacular expression of the crisis of our democratic culture.

### **How does your association try to counter this right-wing movement?**

If right-wing extremists cooperate, then of course we should also cooperate with anti-racist groups abroad. That is what we are doing. In cooperation with groups in Germany, for example, we have conducted studies on hate crime. But not only observation and analysis are important, but above all education. Music and sport, for example, are important areas for us in which we can provide informal, anti-racist education.

### **So the answer is international cooperation?**

Yes, I am convinced of that. Sometimes I even have the feeling that the far-right is one step ahead of us when it comes to international cooperation. We as an international movement should improve. Of course, every national context is different. But many challenges and problems are similar or even the same. In the context of the pandemic, we heard many people argue that only the nation state can protect us. The borders were closed, the end of globalization was announced. In the meantime, we have realized that such an approach is nonsense.

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