

## **Foreign Affairs Committee on May 2nd, 2019, The Parliament of Canada**

Evidence of meeting #138 for Foreign Affairs and International Development in the 42nd Parliament, 1st Session.

### **Dr. Rafal Pankowski Co-Founder, Never Again Association:**

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for your invitation. I am really honoured, and I am especially honoured to be invited alongside Anne Applebaum today.

During your discussions over the last weeks, there is one term that has come up, and for good reason. It's a colourful term that has been making a revival in both academic and non-academic discourses in the last couple of years, namely, fascism.

Some years ago, I wrote a book trying to propose my own definition, present my own understanding of the essence of fascist ideology. I would argue that fascism is the politics of total cultural homogeneity. Of course, Poland suffered enormously from fascism through the Nazi occupation, and the name of my civil society organization in Poland, "Never Again", is not accidental, but it is good to mention that Poland also had its own fascist movement, which is now experiencing a kind of revival.

While historically Poland used to be one of the most diverse, multicultural societies, if not the most diverse society in the whole of Europe, today, due to those tragic events of the 20th century, Poland is one of the most mono-ethnic, homogeneous societies in the whole of Europe. There is a certain paradox in that, and I would say that a return to diversity, a return to multiculturalism in the case of Poland especially, would be a return to normality.

Unfortunately, what we witness is currently a move away from the appreciation of diversity as a value, a move away from the liberal democratic consensus. That worries me as a citizen of Poland, but I think it is not just Poland that is important here. Why Poland matters, and I hope it doesn't sound arrogant on my part, is that the democratic transformation of Poland in 1989 and in the 1990s was a watershed event, not just in Polish history but in global history. In a certain way, the democratic transformation of Poland symbolized the legitimacy of the post-Cold War international order based on the predominance of the idea of human rights and liberal democracy. In my view, the current crisis of the liberal democratic consensus in Poland symbolizes the much broader crisis of the post-Cold War international order.

Two main ideological drivers of this move away from the idea of diversity in Poland are known in other countries too: Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. Islamophobia on that scale is a relatively new phenomenon in Poland. We can literally point to a moment in time when it skyrocketed. That was in the summer of 2015 during the so-called European refugee crisis. As we well know, it didn't really affect Poland in any meaningful, direct way, but it coincided with the electoral campaign in Poland where different right-wing and far-right groups competed amongst each other for who would present their group as more anti-migrant, anti-refugee and anti-Muslim.

I believe the repercussions of that wave of Islamophobia are still with us today, despite the fact that the Muslim community in Poland is very small. We are talking about maybe 20,000 or 30,000 people in a country of almost 40 million.

The second type of hateful discourse that is important here is anti-Semitism. That, of course, has a much longer history in Poland and the region of central and eastern Europe. Importantly, the language of hatred against the Jews is also, traditionally, the language of hatred against liberal democracy as such and against the very idea of a diverse society.

On a personal note, I can tell you that I have dealt with the topic of anti-Semitism for almost 25 years now, so I knew it existed. In a way, it is really difficult to shock me in this field, but I didn't think I would live to see the kind of explosion of anti-Semitic discourse in the Polish media and politics on the scale we experienced in Poland last year, when anti-Semitic discourse really became very widespread, especially in the state-owned, state-controlled mass media, on a scale that didn't happen in many, many years in Poland.

The crisis of liberal democracy in Poland has many different dimensions. You are aware of many of them: the rule of law, media freedom, artistic freedom, etc. But what I think is possibly one of the most serious aspects of the crisis of liberal democracy in Poland is visible on the level of social values and the level of culture. Possibly the single most alarming aspect of this breakdown of liberal democratic values is the breakdown of democratic and humanist values among the younger generation.

There is another paradox here, because that goes against the perceived wisdom on the part of what you may call the liberal elite, which assumes that the new generation of people who are born and socialized in a new democratic society would automatically become more progressive, tolerant and open-minded than the generation of their parents and grandparents. What happened is actually something opposite. Radical nationalist and xenophobic ideologies were successfully transmitted to the younger generation.

As a social scientist, I can give you one or two figures showing this. For example, 82% of young people between 18 and 24 years of age are against accepting any non-European refugees in Poland—82%. The figure for the general population is 70%.

As another example, there is a new political bloc in Poland that is going to participate in the European Parliament election later this month. It is called Konfederacja—confederation. The ideology of this new bloc is summed up by one of its leaders officially. I quote, “We don't want Jews, homosexuals, abortion, taxes and the European Union.”

This new group got 31% of the vote among young men between 18 and 30 years old. Actually, it's the most popular electoral option among young men of this age. The next party is Law and Justice, the Polish ruling party, which is also right wing in many ways. It has 23% of the support among this group.

There are many more examples showing the explosion of xenophobic attitudes and far-right sympathies especially among the younger people in Poland. I think that tells us that we are going to have a much longer-term problem than is normally assumed or accepted.

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