

Zooming in on Poland

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Polarisation in Poland

In Poland, for several years now, there has been a strong polarisation between supporters of nationalism, who are convinced of their own (imagined) national exceptionalism and regard all minorities and social diversity as a threat, and open-minded people, who are able to look critically at the history of their own country, as well as convinced that equal treatment and listening to the voices of minority groups can lead to building a community based on values, such as respect for diversity and social justice. This division, which is, as it were, inscribed in Polish culture, was outlined in 1981 by Jan Jozef Lipski, a literary historian and democratic opposition activist, in an essay entitled “Two homelands, two patriotisms. Comments on Poles’ national megalomania and xenophobia”. His diagnoses remain relevant even in modern times. Lipski pointed out that, “In extreme cases – we actually belong to different homelands – if the homeland is primarily spiritual



goods and values, and not just the fact of being of one ethnicity as opposed to another”. Lipski recalled that Polish culture developed most momentarily when in contact with others. He warned that national megalomania and xenophobia lead to the weakening of social ties and facilitate political manipulation based on national phobias. The author of an essay published more than 40 years ago recognized that such attitudes could close Poland’s

“road to Western Europe”. Today, observing the rise of populism in our country and support for what the far right proclaims, it can be said that the division can be seen most clearly and, at the same time most dangerously, in alternative attitudes toward democratic values.

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Top hateful narratives in Poland

For three years now, Poland has been witnessing a kind of campaign of incitement, or even an organized campaign of hatred, against LGBT+ people. Homophobic and transphobic language is used by politicians of (far) right groups, especially during election campaigns: this kind of message dominated in the spring of 2019 before the elections to the European Parliament, then during the campaign for the parliamentary elections in the fall of 2019. In June 2020, Poland’s president – who was running for re-election – said at a rally: “They try to tell us that [LGBT] are people, but it is an ideology”. In June 2022, at a meeting with supporters of the ruling Law and Justice party, its leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski made comments attacking transgender people: “[...] some people with left-wing views think that anyone one of us may suddenly say that until half past five I was a man, but now I’m a woman. As the left-wing thinks that’s how it should be. It’s allowed to hold such weird views, but I would get it checked”. For political propaganda purposes, LGBT+ people are portrayed as a threat to the “traditional family” and even to the nation as a whole, and are scorned and stripped of their dignity. A significant role in promoting this message is played by some leading figures in the Catholic



Church. The most notable example was a statement by Marek Jedraszewski, the archbishop of Krakow, who in August 2019 during a homily to mark the anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising (1944) warned of a “rainbow plague” (rainbow flags are one of the best-known symbols of the LGBT community). Such a political and social climate consequently fosters increased acts of discrimination and violence against those considered non-heteronormative.

In mid-2015, the public debate in Poland was dominated by the issue of the humanitarian crisis related to the massive influx of migrants from Africa, the Middle East and Asia trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea into European Union countries. This issue was plugged into the campaign before the parliamentary elections and used for political purposes in a manipulative manner. Although Poland was not directly affected by this crisis (hardly any refugees were admitted at the time), an atmosphere of fear, resentment and hostility with Islamophobic undertones was effectively built. Indeed, in this propaganda, refugees (often referred to as “immigrants” without any knowledge of their real situation – in order not to present them as people trying to save themselves from war and thus diverting attention from the issue of humanitarian aid) were identified exclusively as Muslims (although there were people of various faiths among them, including Christians), and thus as terrorists. Therefore, this chain of associations, which was reproduced (mainly in far-right propaganda) from immigrant to Muslim to terrorist, led to the artificial creation in society of a negative attitude towards potential newcomers, but also much more broadly: towards followers of Islam. It is worth emphasising that the change in attitudes was caused by what happened at the level of the language of public debate (narrative), and not by actual events, such as the arrival of refugees. A consequence of the hysteria unleashed in 2015 was a radical increase in physical attacks on dark-skinned people, who were identified as Muslims/refugees, even though their identity or background was often quite different.

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According to the Office for Foreigners, the increase of Ukrainian immigration to Poland has continued since 2014, and was primarily related to the desire to take up employment. The main factors influencing this phenomenon were the economic and business situation in Ukraine, the introduction of visa-free travel and easier access to the Polish labor market. Unlike the imaginary refugees from the Middle East, Ukrainians actually came to Poland and became our neighbors. With their presence, the xenophobic narratives about them, spread by the far right, began to intensify. Historical themes dominated (blame for Ukrainian crimes in Volhynia from 1943-1944 was also extended to contemporary Ukrainians), as well as those related to labor market issues (false claims that Ukrainians would take jobs away from Poles were reproduced). As a result, acts of aggression and violence against people of Ukrainian origin were on the rise.

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A lot has changed after Russian aggression against Ukraine. According to the “NEVER AGAIN” Association (Poland’s leading anti-racist organization), in the first weeks after Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, Polish society – faced with a large number of war refugees – responded with a huge wave of solidarity, hospitality and aid. However, in addition to numerous gestures of support for Ukraine and its fight for freedom, there have also been attempts to inflame aversion to refugees and even to openly justify Putin’s invasion. The vast majority of such events are organised by extreme right-wing groups. Their activities stem from a combination of hostility towards Ukrainians, anti-Semitism and approval for the brutal Putin regime. These groups do not enjoy widespread public support, but they do their best to set Poles and Ukrainians against one another by spreading hateful ideas, conspiracy theories and false information, primarily on the Internet. In April 2022 “NEVER AGAIN” published a report entitled “Let’s Maintain Solidarity with Refugees” dealing with incidents

of discrimination and hate speech against Ukrainians, refugees and national minorities in Poland in the context of the ongoing war.

The topic of antisemitic discourse in Poland has its own history and rich literature. For the purpose of this article, it's worth reminding what happened in public debate in connection with the controversial amendment to the Law on the Institute of National Remembrance. On the eve of the Holocaust Remembrance Day on 27 January 2018 the lower house of the Polish parliament (Sejm) passed the so-called "memory law" radically restricting freedom of speech regarding the discussion of Polish complicity in historical crimes. Since that time, it has caused an array of diplomatic scandals between Poland, on the one side, and Israel and Ukraine, on the other. This flared up in public debate and reached what prof. Rafal Pankowski indicated in the title of his excellent article dedicated to this problem: "The Resurgence of Antisemitic Discourse in Poland". As the author points out, "What has been even more problematic and troubling than the wording of the legislation itself and the curious pace of its passage is the type and tone of discourse that has accompanied it. Until 2018, antisemitic hate speech had been largely confined to the far-right margins of Polish politics and was rarely heard in mainstream discourse. This changed very rapidly after January 26-27, and both the scale and wildfire-like spread of the phenomenon were truly astonishing. During the days and weeks that followed, literally hundreds of antisemitic statements were made in the Polish media, not only by fringe elements but also by mainstream actors, including parliamentarians (some were even well-known members of the ruling party) and staff commentators on major media channels, particularly those owned by the state".

Antisemitic hate speech returns in various forms, along with current events, but also as a continuous propaganda motif, utilised by some far right commentators. It could not remain idle with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

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The virus of hate

In May 2020 the "NEVER AGAIN" Association published its report "The Virus of Hate: Brown Book of the Epidemic". The report documented acts of racism, xenophobia and discrimination which have occurred in the context of the coronavirus in Poland during the first months of 2020. The authors of the report recorded cases of assaults on members of minorities who are unjustly blamed for spreading the virus, as well as numerous examples of hate speech and conspiracy theories about the pandemic spread by the far right. Rafal Pankowski, a co-author of the report of the "NEVER AGAIN" Association commented: "The global pandemic is also a global crisis of social trust and values amid confusion and anxiety. It is fertile ground for the dangerous growth of xenophobia and conspiracy theories. For the first time in Polish history we are dealing with such a wave of hatred against people of Asian origin, but the antisemitic stereotypes are also present, together with hostility and contempt for various other groups – for example Roma, Africans, Ukrainians, Americans, Russians, as well as Muslims, refugees, LGBT people, environmentalists, vegans, and others". It is worth mentioning that the media has been involved in promoting conspiracy theories about the coronavirus, often inviting people with extreme views as experts. These "experts" have been also gaining popularity on the web, where antisemitic and xenophobic content is distributed on a massive scale. Companies such as YouTube and Facebook, contrary to their formal announcements, often tolerate such content on their platforms. Conspiracy theories have been promoted by public figures: celebrities, artists, politicians, journalists and clergy.

Hate speech online in Poland

When it comes to the specifics of online hate speech in Poland, interesting data can be found in reports published under the auspices of the Open Code for Hate-Free Communication (OpCode) project. The “NEVER AGAIN” Association participated in it together with partners from Romania, Slovakia, Estonia and Spain. This project was aimed at countering online hate speech using a multidimensional approach consisting of monitoring, analysis, taking action, developing free and open software solutions for moderating user generated content, and by engaging in advocacy and network consolidation (International Network Against Cyber Hate). Within this project we reported hateful content and checked the reaction of social media platforms.

In Poland the most popular platforms are Facebook and YouTube, followed by Instagram and Twitter. Twitter is used mainly by politicians and journalists. All of these platforms are facing problems like the rising amount of hateful content. According to OpCode reports, in Poland most of the reported content consisted in degrading and dehumanizing hateful speech against various groups and minorities. Antisemitic messages have dominated within the social platforms and most of them were identified on Facebook. Hateful content includes also comments (homophobic, Islamophobic, racist, sexist, inciting to violence), posts written by public figures that also include severe hate speech, pictures and graphics (including memes) that also carry hateful ideology. What distinguished Poland in a negative way in comparison with other EU countries participating in this project, is the fact that social media platforms (especially Facebook) mostly fail at removing hateful content. In an overwhelming majority of cases such platforms do not react to hate speech reported by users and when they do – most often they do not remove the reported content.

Far-Right propaganda spread on YouTube

Among the profiles promoting hate speech in Poland with particular intensity is the wRealu24 YouTube channel. It is a far-right Internet TV channel run as a YouTube channel. Its popularity cannot be ignored. This channel is led by Marcin Rola, a former spokesman for the populist movement Kukiz’15 and a candidate on that group’s list for the Sejm in the 2015 parliamentary elections (Rola did not win a seat). The wRealu24 channel is known for spreading antisemitic, xenophobic and offensive content against sexual minorities, as well as promoting conspiracy theories about coronavirus. Since the outbreak of Russia’s war against Ukraine, the channel has been dominated by broadcasts fueling prejudice and hostility against refugees from Ukraine, reproducing conspiracy theories and false information about them. In early May 2022, it was reported in the media that two websites of the wRealu24 website owned by Marcin Rola (Wrealu24.pl and Wrealu24.tv) were blocked by the Internal Security Agency. The reason given was that the channels were spreading pro-Russian propaganda. The wRealu24 channel was launched on YouTube in 2016 and after six years of operation has gained more than 534,000 subscribers, with the materials posted on the channel having nearly 83 million views. The channel has been blocked several times by YouTube for promoting hatred, but the blocks were only temporary. In protest against such actions, Marcin Rola founded the “BanBye.com” platform, which is supposed to be a competitor to the YouTube platform, but, for now, its popularity is incomparably lower. It is worth mentioning that since December of 2018, internet TV programmes on wRealu24 have been broadcast from a studio located in the historic building of PAST (the Polish Telecoms company), a symbol of one of the greatest victories of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. The “NEVER AGAIN” Association attempted to intervene in the matter of renting PAST premises to an internet television channel known for the regular spreading of hatred, but the capital authorities neglected to take any action in this matter.

A good practice: A cleanup of hateful propaganda online

As a reminder, an example of positive activity against hate online can be seen with the cooperation of the “NEVER AGAIN” Association with Allegro (the biggest online e-commerce platform in East-Central Europe) and with OLX (Poland’s largest ad platform). This cooperation has effected the

removal of thousands of sale offers of racist, fascist and antisemitic propaganda items. Among those offers were contemporary imitations of Nazi military decorations, flags of the Third Reich, necklaces, signet rings and badges with Nazi swastikas, watches, lighters and flasks with emblems of the Third Reich, Hitler Youth pocket knives, mugs with images of Hitler, as well as CDs with music by the leading neo-fascist bands and books promoting antisemitism and Holocaust denial. These included numerous copies of contemporary editions of Hitler's "Mein Kampf" without critical commentary as well as books by David Irving, a rabidly antisemitic pseudo-historian who has denied the existence of gas chambers in Auschwitz and the extermination of six million Jews during World War II. Some of the deleted offers also featured extremely antisemitic books such as the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" – the most popular antisemitic pamphlet of the 20th century, and "The Controversy of Zion" (Strategy of Zion in Polish) by Douglas Reed, a Holocaust denier. As a result of the partnership with Allegro, since 2018 the platform deleted 99 percent of items identified by "NEVER AGAIN", which was almost 20 thousand offers in total. Since 2021 OLX has removed more than 2800 offers (the final decision to delete an offer is taken by Allegro and OLX based on their terms and conditions).

Recommendations for Polish authorities and public institutions

In January 2022, during a seminar for experts and for a press briefing held in the Polish Academy of Sciences, a list of recommendations on the subject of combatting anti-Semitism was presented. The recommendations were prepared by a team of experts on the subject, representing, among other, the "NEVER AGAIN" Association and the American Jewish Committee Central Europe, under the patronage of the Commissioner for Human Rights (Ombudsman). The starting point for these recommendations was the recently proclaimed European Union "Strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life" and related to, among other, counteracting anti-Semitism and xenophobia, using legal and educational tools, as well as the elimination of antisemitic content at stadiums, in media and in the Internet. These recommendations provide many valuable solutions in the field of counteracting hate speech generally.

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The authors of the recommendations appealed to, among other, "Polish authorities, especially the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, as well as to subservient institutions to immediately stop funding radical nationalistic groups which presently and in the past have promoted antisemitic content. The National Council for Radio and Television, the National Media Council, the Council of Media Ethics and other institutions responsible for democratic media order should unambiguously react and condemn any signs of antisemitic propaganda and stereotyping in mass media, especially in public media, financed by Polish taxpayers. In recent years, similar incidents have occurred extremely often and were left without adequate reaction by the abovementioned institutions". The authors of the document also recommend intensified public campaigns, including those in the Internet, serving to combat hate speech, incitement of hate and hate-motivated crime, as well as raising public awareness about public access to legal aid and legal means and ensuring effective investigation, prosecution and punishment of perpetrator, which would constitute encouragement for citizens to report incidents of hate speech and hate crimes. They emphasise also the significance of public condemnation and distancing from such perpetrators by public figures, including politicians and journalists and sending an unambiguous signal to journalists and broadcasters that they bear responsibility to avoid using hate speech and stereotyping against any minorities, as well as to undertake actions against the owners of Internet websites which promote racist hate.

Appeals to big technology companies

On 28 February 2022 the "NEVER AGAIN" Association and Global Project Against Hate and Extremism (GPAHE) issued the following media statement: "As the world watches Putin's brutal and deadly invasion of Ukraine in horror, tech companies must decide immediately which side of history

they are on. They can fulfill their responsibilities as global corporations, on which billions depend, and do all they can to avoid more death and destruction, or they can remain complicit in an illegal act of war that has already led to many deaths, hundreds of thousands of refugees, and massive destruction of cities and towns. The choice should be an easy one. Tech companies must deplatform Russian propaganda outlets including RT and Sputnik News and key political figures who are spreading hate and disinformation, helping to fuel this war. And search engines need to derank unauthoritative content and disinformation in favor of legitimate sources”.

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In April 2022 the Global Alliance Against Digital Hate and Extremism held its inaugural event and sent a letter to major tech companies demanding they take action to protect their users and inclusive democracies around the globe. The event, entitled “The Urgent Need for Action Against Online Harms: Global Stories From Frontline Activists”, was held virtually. Speakers included Alliance members, researchers, and people directly harmed by online hate from Iraq, Poland, Myanmar, and the United States. A letter laying out demands to tech companies was sent to Meta (Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp), Twitter, TikTok, Google, and YouTube. The letter asked tech companies to ensure that their policies, community standards, and algorithms are designed to minimize harm and that those policies are appropriately and globally enforced. According to the letter, “real-world, systemic issues – from far-right extremism to genocide to caste and religious discrimination to gender bias and racism – are made worse by the business practices of major internet and social media companies. We cannot strengthen democracies and protect human rights while companies amplify and reward hate and extremism”. Among Steering Committee members of the Global Alliance Against Digital Hate and Extremism is the “NEVER AGAIN” Association.

The author is a representative of the anti-racist “NEVER AGAIN” Association. It is an independent organization founded in Warsaw in 1996. Since 2005, it has led the “Racism-Delete” campaign, which has the objective of removing antisemitic and racist content from the internet. The “NEVER AGAIN” Association is a member of the International Network Against Cyber Hate (INACH). The Association also takes part in projects to counteract online hate speech such as “Get the Trolls Out” and “Open Code for Hate-Free Communication”. One of main components of “NEVER AGAIN” activity is monitoring and reporting of hate crimes and hate speech cases. The “Brown Book” published by “NEVER AGAIN” since mid-1990 is the most comprehensive and reliable summary of information about racist violence and xenophobia in Poland.

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