

Unsympathetic people: the overwhelming success of Poland's exclusionary agenda

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Adam J Chmielewski 23 April 2018 (2018-04-23T08:35:35+01:00)

Three elements seem to have played a decisive role in this: voluntary servitude, the Polish brand of inferiority complex, and a deep-seated Polish anti-Semitism and more general exclusivism.



Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Chairman of the Law and Justice political party, during The Patriotic Meeting of Independence Day, November 11, 2017, Kracow, Poland. NurPhoto/Press Association. All rights reserved. According to a recent poll, the attitude of the Polish people towards other nationals changed dramatically over the period of just one year. Compared with 2017, Polish approval rates of many nations took a deep plunge. Sympathy towards Jews and Arabs, already low, dropped in 2018 by 13 and 6 percent, respectively. Given the persistent anti-Jewish and anti-Islamic propaganda in the Polish media, this is rather unsurprising. Approval of the Germans dropped by 16 percent, as if the difficult and protracted process of the reconciliation between Poland and its “eternal enemy” had never happened.

What is really puzzling is that Polish approval of their southern neighbours, the Czechs, took a nosedive by 15 percent; Italians, Russians, Vietnamese and Japanese by 13 percent, and the British by 8 percent. Even the Hungarians and Americans are liked less among Poles by 14 and 11 percent, respectively.

To complete the picture one should also mention that the Poles never liked each other very much. According to a recently published book, they were particularly disliked by their own political and intellectual leaders^[1]. This abrupt change in Polish sentiment requires some

explanation.

This abrupt change in Polish sentiment requires some explanation. Taking a longer perspective, one may say that in the past, when the Poles were cordoned off by the Iron Curtain and unable to travel, they viewed all western, nay, all other countries as lands of happiness and extended their hospitality to all rarely-seen foreigners. Nowadays, thanks to the European Union and its Schengen Treaty, the Poles move freely a lot in great numbers to all destinations. And they emigrate: according to official statistics (real numbers are likely to be higher) in 2016 there were more than 2.5 million Poles living abroad, the majority of them (2.1 million) in European Union countries. Nearly 790 thousand of them took up residence in Great Britain, almost 700 thousand in Germany, while in the Netherlands and Ireland, about 115 thousand.

No conclusive explanation can be inferred from these facts and numbers, though. First-hand acquaintance with foreigners might have helped to dispel any fears and thus potential animosities towards them. But in that case Polish sympathies towards them should be rising rather than dropping.

On the other hand, a direct acquaintance with other peoples may have dispelled the last vestiges of the past allure felt by Poles to everything foreign, with the exception of foreign currencies, that is. This would explain the sudden souring of their attitudes. Nevertheless, even if true, this still does not account for the fact that Polish approval of other nationals has swayed so dramatically within just one year. The explanation must be sought elsewhere.

The company of strangers

Before attempting to provide one, we should note that while the rapid change in the attitude of Poles towards other nationalities is puzzling, we – the Polish people – are not alone in this. The public attitude towards other nationals nowadays is noticeably swinging in Hungary, Austria, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Italy, as well as in the USA and Great Britain. We – the Polish people – are not alone in this.

Abrupt changes in public mood are not confined to our post-national and multicultural condition. According to a well-researched historical example, in 1933 nearly 30 per cent of the Jewish population in Germany, 503 thousand strong, which accounted for only 0.76 percent of the German population, were in marital ties with native Germans. Niall Ferguson writes that the cities of Hamburg and Munich saw the highest rates of Jewish-German intermarriage, and that the figures were well above average in Berlin, Cologne, Dresden, Leipzig, and even Breslau, the present Wrocław^[2], my home town. Bearing in mind the principle that it takes two to tango, these numbers cannot but reflect at least some level of mutual Jewish-German sympathy, not just one-sided sentiment. And yet soon thereafter, with the rise of the Nazi party to power, these sentiments were rapidly reversed.

Mood swings

Here is another vivid example. Bertrand Russell remembered the outbreak of the First World War in the following way: “At the end of July [1914], I was at Cambridge, discussing

the situation with all and sundry. I found it impossible to believe that Europe would be so mad as to plunge into war, but I was persuaded that, if there was war, England would be involved. I collected signatures of a large number of professors and Fellows to a statement in favour of neutrality which appeared in the Manchester Guardian. The day war was declared, almost all of them changed their minds. Looking back, it seems extraordinary that one did not realize more clearly what was coming. I spent the evening of August 4 walking round the streets, especially in the neighbourhood of Trafalgar Square, noticing cheering crowds, and making myself sensitive to the emotions of passers-by. During this and the following days I discovered to my amazement that average men and women were delighted at the prospect of war. I had fondly imagined, what most Pacifists contended, that wars were forced upon a reluctant population by despotic and Machiavellian governments.”[3]

Four years later he made the following observation: “The end of the war was so swift and dramatic that no one had time to adjust feelings to changed circumstances. I learned on the morning of November 11 [1918], a few hours in advance of the general public, that the armistice was coming. I went out into the street, and told a Belgian soldier, who said: ‘*Tiens, c’est chic!*’ I went into a tobacconist’s and told the lady who served me. ‘I am glad of that,’ she said, ‘because now we shall be able to get rid of the interned Germans.’ At eleven o’clock, when the armistice was announced, I was in Tottenham Court Road. Within two minutes, everybody in all the shops and offices had come into the street. They commandeered the buses, and made them go where they liked. I saw a man and woman, complete strangers to each other, meet in the middle of the road and kiss as they passed. The crowd rejoiced and I also rejoiced”[4].

These and numerous other examples, both historical and contemporaneous, testify to the essential volatility of public sentiment among all nations. Whatever their ethnicity and culture, people are not always kind-hearted to each other. These examples also suggest that an explanation of these phenomena will have something to do with the political mechanics.

Neo-nationalism and neo-authoritarianism

Since 1989, Poland has been presented as a role-model of transition from communism to liberal democracy. However, following the decisive electoral victory of the party Law and Justice in 2015, Poland has experienced not only the above-described volatility of the attitudes towards foreigners, but has also become a seedbed of more serious xenophobic phenomena.

As far as the reversal in the Polish attitudes towards their neighbours is concerned, I would like to suggest that its explanation is to be sought in the fact that, ever since the peaceful “Solidarity” revolution in 1989, Polish politics has been fuelled by the struggle over who truly takes credit for the successful overthrow of Communism. Driven by this, Polish politics became the arena for a struggle of personalities between its main actors, with ideology and political agendas playing an important, but ultimately secondary and instrumental role. Ever since the peaceful “Solidarity” revolution in 1989, Polish politics has been fuelled by the struggle over who truly takes credit for the successful overthrow of Communism.

This struggle has been going on, and continues to do so, between the champions of the

idea of the open society and the advocates of a more tight, self-enclosed community. The former, among which I include centrist and liberal parties, as well as those calling themselves social democratic, successfully worked for the transformation of the Polish economy, the accession of Poland to NATO and the European Union, and, with two interruptions, have managed the country from 1989 until 2015. Donald Tusk, former Polish PM and present President of the EU, has been a leader of these liberal forces for more than a decade.

Amongst the latter are the right-wing, conservative and nationalist parties. The central figure in this nationalist part of the political spectrum is Jarosław Kaczyński, chairman of Law and Justice and the surviving twin brother of the former president who died in the airplane crash in Smolensk in 2010. For decades Kaczyński has led his party unchallenged, despite a number of consecutive electoral defeats.

Liberal arrogance

The tables were turned when in 2015 the candidate supported by Kaczyński won the presidential elections, his party soon thereafter securing for itself an overwhelming parliamentary majority. Several factors contributed to this.

On the part of the liberals, three factors played a crucial role. First of all, there was the liberal disregard for the significant social costs of the transformation. According to Eurostat, in 2008 out of 23.5 million Europeans with an income smaller than 10 euro per day, 10.5 million were Polish citizens. 44 per cent of Europeans with incomes below €5 a day, lived in Poland. No less significant was the arrogance demonstrated by members of the liberal parties. Thirdly, their past successes lulled the liberals into excessive confidence. They had come to believe that their rule would be secured indefinitely. Two examples will serve. Shortly before the presidential elections in 2015 Adam Michnik, editor-in-chief of the liberal newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*, said that the liberal incumbent, Bronisław Komorowski, could only be defeated if he ran over a pregnant nun on the zebra while drunk-driving. In the run-up to the general elections in 2015, Donald Tusk quipped that there was no one he could lose the elections to. It turned out that both were hopelessly wrong – a text-book example of Arnold Toynbee's "resting upon one's oars"[\[5\]](#).

Politics as extermination

On the nationalist side of the spectrum, scarred by numerous past defeats, which only propelled his political ambitions, Kaczyński resorted to the populist redistributive agenda on the one hand, and on the other, to nationalist propaganda. The political efficacy of redistributionist promises in the electoral process does not need much by way of explanation. What calls for an explanation is the overwhelming success of his exclusionary agenda.

Three elements seem to have played a decisive role in this. The first may be encapsulated in the concept of voluntary servitude; the second refers to the Polish brand of inferiority complex, while the third has to do with a deep-seated Polish anti-Semitism, and more generally, exclusivism.

As for the first factor, one should say that Kaczynski has managed to secure for himself the position of an unquestioned authority by surrounding himself with faithful acolytes, mostly amateurs-turned-politicians, whose behaviour may be perfectly summed up by the 'voluntary servitude' diagnosed by Etienne de la Boetie[6]. They have returned his favours by a staunch and blind obedience towards him, and a ferocious, contemptuous and indeed exterminating attitude towards the political opposition. Personal subservience towards Kaczyński pushed his acolytes into scenes of mutual rivalry that have erupted into all sorts of exclusionary ideas, policies and bills which they hoped would please their party chief, prompting him in return, to reward them with more favours and stronger positionings within his neo-authoritarian party. Another way to describe the internal dynamics of the party might be found in Friedrich von Hayek's reply to the question "why the worst get on top" in totalitarian regimes. As he wrote, an aspiring dictator will be able to obtain the support:

"of all the docile and gullible, who have no strong convictions of their own but are prepared to accept a ready-made system of values if it is only drummed into their ears sufficiently loudly and frequently. It will be those whose vague and imperfectly formed ideas are easily swayed and whose passions and emotions are readily aroused who will thus swell the ranks of the totalitarian party"[7].

Playthings of history

As for the Polish inferiority complex; for more than two centuries, Poland has been a plaything of history, not its agent. Ever since the first partition of Poland in 1772, and especially the third one in 1795, when it ceased to exist as an independent state, the fate of the Polish territory and population was decided by its powerful neighbours, Germany, Austria and Russia.

During that period, Polish culture and language was preserved by the thin layer of intelligentsia and by the Roman Catholic Church. Re-established as a state in 1918, after barely 21 years Poland fell victim to the invasion of the Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. In the period of 1945-1989 it existed as a crippled and inefficient state within the orbit of the Soviet Union. The Poles as a nation fully realised the efficacy of their regained collective agency only in 1980, when the "Solidarity" movement was born in the Gdańsk Shipyard, and again in 1989 when a revived "Solidarity" led the successful opposition to communist rule. Polish culture and language was preserved by the thin layer of intelligentsia and by the Roman Catholic Church.

Due to these all too rare opportunities for collectively exercised agency, there is among Poles a powerful longing for dignity, recognition and respect, both internally and internationally, coupled with an acute collective inferiority complex.

Kaczyński has found a way to satisfy this deep-felt need for recognition. He did so by breathing new life into the concept of sovereignty, and by reviving and fostering those exclusionary sentiments.

Games of altar and throne

As far as Polish anti-Semitism is concerned, over the centuries the Roman Catholic Church

in Poland has worked on and consistently upheld an exclusionary stereotype of a “Pole-the-catholic”. This stereotype was also useful to the Church during Communist rule. The stereotype was especially directed, and recurrently used, against Jews living in the Polish territories, infrequently leading to violent bouts of rabid anti-Semitism.

Nowadays, the stereotype continues to function in the public consciousness. During the long pontificate of John Paul II, the bishops of the Church displayed self-assuredness and arrogance as they capitalized, personally and institutionally, on the “Polish Pope”, while neglecting and violating his teachings, most especially those regarding the Jews, “older brothers in faith”.

Nowadays a majority of the bishops are influenced by the radical nationalist ideology propagated by an enterprising Redemptorist friar, Tadeusz Rydzyk, who has built a powerful media-and-business empire, becoming a mentor to and sponsor of various of his chosen right-wing parties. Ever since the inception of his business career, he has been the main supporter of Law and Justice. It was not the bishops, but this friar, who engineered the present alliance between the Altar and the Throne in Poland.

Contagious examples

All the above, though important, still does not explain the exclusionary drive in Poland under the present regime. Searching for clues, I would like to invoke one of the maxims of Francois de la Rochefoucauld, who wrote: “Nothing is so contagious as example, and we never do very good deeds or very evil ones without producing imitations. We copy the good deeds in a spirit of emulation, and the bad ones because of the malignity of our nature – which shame used to hold under lock and key, but an example sets free”[8].

To put it concisely: shame inhibits human wickedness, while a wicked example encourages it. The example is especially powerful, both in its beneficial as well as its evil impact, when given by a figure of authority. There cannot be any doubt that the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church, by virtue of their very status, are perceived in Polish society as persons of great authority. Kaczyński likewise, has been fashioned into a person of supreme political authority by his devotees and their insistent propaganda. It cannot be denied that the new wave of exclusionary attitudes in Poland, working on the old anti-Semitism and a new anti-Islamism, has been activated by the example given personally by Kaczyński as a public authority, assisted, as he was, by the authorities of the Catholic Church.

Rewriting history

Learning from past mistakes and capitalizing on liberal blunders, Kaczyński has barefacedly resorted to xenophobic rhetoric, encouraging exclusionary attitudes on a number of occasions. For example, he has legitimized the activities of football hooligan groupings by calling them genuine patriots[9]. Upon receiving such a political umbrella, they have instantly adopted the nationalist ideology of Kaczyński’s party, especially the myth of the “cursed soldiers”, and proceeded to propagate this ideology in public places, churches and even public schools, with impunity. They have been key organizers of the infamous Marches of Independence during which neo-Nazi symbols are openly displayed.

Since 2015 he has sought to strengthen his rule by exciting fears of an alien invasion and otherwise dividing Polish society by selecting various groups as objects of public hatred. Deploying the slogan “ulica i zagranica” (“the street and abroad”, ironically first uttered by a 1960’s anti-Semitic communist leader), his party faithful relentlessly try to shame and silence those who venture any public criticism of his policies.

His comprehensive rewriting of history assumes the form of renaming streets named after various figures of the communist past and pulling down monuments symbolizing people and events related to that period. He has also proposed a number of policies to deprive some citizens, especially “the communists”, of some of their public rights, and drastically reduced their pensions.

Finally, he objected to the EU programme offering shelter to refugees coming to the EU by infamously claiming: “There are already symptoms of very dangerous diseases, long unseen in Europe. Cholera on the Greek Islands, dysentery in Vienna. Different types of parasites, protozoa that are not dangerous in the bodies of these people but may be dangerous here. This does not mean we should discriminate against anyone, but we need to check it”.

Politics as personal

Ever since his liberal arch-enemy Donald Tusk became the President of the European Union, Kaczynski, never an enthusiast of the European Union, has spread and encouraged mendacious propaganda about the evils of “Brussels”, viewed with particular suspicion. He has demanded reparations from Germany, and instigated fear of an imminent Russian aggression. His anti-Russian propaganda was chiefly based upon unfounded allegations of conspiracy between Vladimir Putin and Donald Tusk in bringing down the plane with his twin brother, the Polish president, and 95 other officials, headed for Katyń for a celebration of the memory of the Polish citizens murdered by Soviets in 1940^[10]. Kaczynski, never an enthusiast of the European Union, has spread and encouraged mendacious propaganda about the evils of “Brussels”, viewed with particular suspicion.

His latest initiatives include the “anti-defamation” amendment of the Institute of National Remembrance law, apparently aimed at protecting the Polish nation from being accused of perpetrating crimes against the Jews^[11], though allegedly aimed at silencing Jan Tomasz Gross, the Polish historian of the Holocaust who was the first to publish an account of the massacre of the Jews by the Poles in Jedwabne on July 10, 1941^[12]. Another initiative was the “demotion bill” allowing the current administration to deprive generals responsible for declaring martial law in 1981, especially Wojciech Jaruzelski, of their ranks. Allegedly the bill, vetoed by the president, was motivated by the fact that the generals to be demoted did not arrest Kaczyński during martial law in 1981, in the stark contrast to the treatment of Adam Michnik, Karol Modzelewski, Jacek Kuroń and other figures of the anti-communist opposition who were immediately arrested and spent long years in prison.

Swaying the crowd

Kaczyński has won his position of authority by brazenly resorting to radical exclusionary ideas which very few dared to invoke in the past three decades. By doing so, he has awakened spectres which seemed to have been buried forever. This has brought immediate fruits in the shape of a steep rise in xenophobic incidents across Poland. According to the independent Monitoring Center on Racist and Xenophobic Behavior, since 2010 the number of racist attacks has risen in Poland six times over. The example he has set was the call to his party faithful to follow suit.

The example he has set was the call to his party faithful to follow suit. According to the bulletin published by the Never Again Association, whose aim is to fight xenophobia in Poland,^[13] after the harsh criticism of the anti-defamation bill by the state of Israel and the Jewish communities across the world, "the deputy Speaker of the Parliament and spokesperson of the ruling party tweeted: 'From now on it will be difficult to look at Jews with sympathy and friendship'". Also, a deputy chairman of the Law and Justice faction in the Parliament has claimed that "if Poles are held responsible for the 1941 Jedwabne pogrom 'then one might as well conclude that if Jewish police were responsible for leading Jews to the gas chambers, Jews themselves created their own Holocaust.'" A Law and Justice MP has proposed a revisionary interpretation of the Holocaust: "'Do you know who chased the Jews away to the Warsaw Ghetto? The Germans, you think? No. The Jews themselves went because they were told that there would be an enclave, that they would not have to deal with those nasty Poles.'"^[14] Rafał Pankowski, a professor of sociology in Warsaw and activist of the "Never Again", was smeared by government officials after his speech at the Global Forum for Combatting Antisemitism held on 19-21 March 2018 in Jerusalem.

Enthusiasm, fear and loathing

All this generates a variety of reactions in society: enthusiasm and satisfaction on the one hand, and public agoraphobia and fear, on the other. Beneficiaries of the new social policies support the new regime enthusiastically; the xenophobes rejoice in the exclusionary rhetoric. This is duly reflected in the polls: despite understandable aesthetic reservations and a number of blunders, Law and Justice still enjoys the greatest popularity among the electorate.

Those, however, who do not take active part in public life anyway, are withdrawing into their seclusion even more, giving vent to their disgust and anger in private and in social media. Fear is the common condition of those occupying middle-rank public positions, and, as always in the case of fear, it has a paralyzing effect: they act in such a way as to avoid attracting excessive attention, and steer away from any decisions which they think may be seen as controversial by the eager supporters of the new regime. Once again social mimicry assumes the form of mediocrity and cowardice.

Having engineered xenophobic practices and attitudes in order to secure his victory, Kaczyński and his party have become prisoners of their own exclusionary rhetoric. In order to uphold their now weakening position, he and his successors will have to continue to

resort to the same rhetoric in the future. What is most worrying is that the awoken spectres of exclusivism turn out to be very much alive in Polish society and, in any foreseeable future, will not be readily dispelled.

Notes and references

[1] Adam Leszczyński, *No dno po prostu jest Polska. Dlaczego Polacy tak bardzo nie lubią swojego kraju i innych Polaków*, Wydawnictwo WAB, Warszawa 2017; the title of the book may be roughly translated as: “But it is just a hopeless pit, Poland. Why the Poles dislike so much their own country and themselves”.)

[2] Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World. Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West*, Penguin, London 2006, p. 249-250.

[3] Bertrand Russell, *Portraits from Memory and other Essays*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1951, p. 27.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 31. More recently the attitudes of the British public have been engineered into volatility again. This time it has led to a decision to part company with the European Union, and in view of its uncertain consequences, has generated even more instability across the globe.

[5] Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Vol. IV, Fifth Impression, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1951, p. 265.

[6] Etienne de la Boetie, *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, trans. Harry Kurz, The Mises Institute, Auburn, Alabama, 1975.

[7] Friedrich August von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1944 (2006), p.143.

[8] François de la Rochefoucauld, *Collected Maxims and Other Reflections*, transl. by E. H. and A. M. Blackmore and Francine Giguère, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, 230.

[9] I have dealt with this issue in [the paper Academies of Hatred](#).

[10] Adam Chmielewski and Denis Dutton, [Poland's tragedy: sorrow, and anger](#).

[11] Adam Chmielewski, [The guilt, dignity and pedagogy of shamelessness](#).

[12] Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001.

[13] <http://www.nigdywiecej.org/en/>.

[14] “Never Again” Targeted for Speaking against Antisemitism [here](#).

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