

Radical Nationalism in Poland: From Theory to Practice

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In the classic formulation of Ernest Gellner, “Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent. Nationalism as a sentiment, or as a movement, can best be defined in terms of this principle.”¹ Gellner contends that nationalism is “the organization of human groups into large, centrally educated, culturally homogeneous units.”² In practice, in Poland (and in the broader East-Central European region) the nationalist principle has expressed itself most often in the form of ethno-nationalism, where ethnic bonds of shared ancestry take priority over other affiliations.

The extreme right in Poland includes radical nationalist groups that subscribe to a strongly anti-pluralist, homogeneous vision of the national community and reject basic democratic values. Violence often accompanies extreme-right politics, either directly or implicitly. The “Brown Book,” published by the “Never Again” association, documented over 600 cases of hate crimes and hate speech in the period of 2011–2012. In Poland, the majority of the victims of right-wing extremist violence do not belong to ethnic minorities, but rather include political opponents, homosexuals, members of smaller religious groups, and the like.

Nationalist ideology here is often based on a belief that “Poles are Catholic” and its accompanying assumption that members of ethnic and religious minorities cannot be truly “Polish.” The founding father of modern

1 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 1.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

3 Roman Dmowski, *Kościół, naród i państwo* (Warsaw, 1927).

Polish nationalism, Roman Dmowski, famously argued in his 1927 book, “The Church, the Nation, and the State,” that “Catholicism is not an addition to Polishness, coloring it in some way, but is a part of its essence; in large measure it defines its essence. Any attempt to separate Catholicism from Polishness, to separate the nation from religion and from the Church, threatens to destroy the nation’s very essence.”³

Dmowski’s National Democrats (or the “Endeks” as they were known) developed as a movement in the first decades of the 20th century. They sought to prevent social revolution while redefining national political priorities. According to the Endeks, Polishness had to be defined in strictly ethnic terms, and thus they opposed not only the occupying powers, Germany and Russia, but also other groups, such as Jews. Gradually, anti-Semitism became a crucial part of the core message of the nationalist movement. Dmowski wrote, for example: “The struggle against the obstacles placed in the way of the Polish question by the Jews became henceforth the most difficult task of Polish politics.”⁴

Despite the fact the National Democrats did not hold power, by the late 1930s Dmowski’s ideas on nation and church became virtually hegemonic among Poles in general and university students in particular. As Szymon Rudnicki has said, “The general success of the nationalist movement owed to the indoctrination of a significant part of the society in the stereotype of ‘the Polish-Catholic’ as well as in extreme nationalism and anti-Semitism: three elements that crystallized into a specific mentality.”⁵

The National Democrats’ admiration for the Nazis was limited due to their deeply rooted anti-German stance. The political leadership of the Endek movement never condoned the genocide committed by the Nazis. However, it can be argued that the Endeks – through their anti-Semitic

4 Roman Dmowski, “The Jews and the War,” in Richard S. Levy, *Antisemitism in the Modern World: An Anthology of Texts* (Lexington, Massachusetts, and Toronto: DC Heath and Company, 1991), pp. 188 – 189.

5 Szymon Rudnicki, *Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny. Geneza i działalność* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1985), p. 333.

campaigns in the 1920s and 1930s – contributed to a social climate of hostility toward Jews.

The National Radical tradition on the Polish far right, which resulted from a split in the Endek movement in the mid-1930s, can be seen as the Polish equivalent of European fascism. Inspired directly by the Italian and German models of the mid-1930s, it has survived well into the 21st century and today serves as a lodestar for contemporary extremist movements. The violent National Radical Camp (Oboz Narodowo-Radykalny, or ONR) was banned by the Polish government shortly after its formation in 1934, and although that ban remained in place until the outbreak of World War II, ONR groups in practice continued their activities semi-legally throughout the late 1930s. It is noteworthy that despite the appeal of Nazi ideology, only a minority of the National Radical activists collaborated with the Germans during World War II; many of them actually joined underground groups fighting the occupation.

After the war, the leader of the ONT faction known as “Falanga”, Boleslaw Piasecki, was allowed to reconstitute that group, under the label “Pax.” Officially registered in 1952, Pax attracted former members of the ONR with its nationalist, Catholic, and socialist rhetoric. Pax operated legally until the end of communist rule in Poland, running its own publishing house and enjoying representation in parliament.

The communist system enshrined the ethno-nationalist principle in the legal and political frameworks of each country in which it operated. Across Eastern Europe, communist institutional practice inscribed each territory and even each individual with an ethno-national essence, and ethnic homogeneity was positively celebrated. These measures generated an overall atmosphere of intimidation that culminated in the forced emigration of about 15–20,000 Jews from Poland in 1968 and 1969. Far from being an isolated episode, this was an element of “the long-term strategy of Polish communists seeking a nationalist legitimization.”⁶ The

6 Jan Skórzyński, *Od Solidarności do wolności* (Warsaw: Trio, 2005), p. 195.

anti-Jewish and nationalist discourse employed by the communist authorities had become a permanent feature of political life in Poland, one that would be echoed later by the nationalist and populist extreme right.

After 1989, national and ethnic minorities operated often with financial support from the state, to revive their cultures and traditions. However, as Michael Fleming argues, “the marginalization of minority communities continues to be the case despite the advent of the new minority rights regime, the entry of Poland into the European Union and the passing of a law on national and ethnic minorities.”⁷

The social and economic grievances that resulted from the transition to capitalism have rarely been framed in left-wing or progressive terms. In contrast, a nationalist and populist discourse is often invoked. In 2008, Naomi Klein observed: “If the left did not seek the votes of the socially excluded in Poland, the extreme right did.”⁸ According to Jacek Kuron, a leading politician who helped shape the Polish transition but grew increasingly critical of its outcome, “The shock had to lead to a rebellion. Perhaps that rebellion was largely irrational. Perhaps it was absurd and even dysfunctional from the point of view of those who rebelled.”⁹ “Unhappy people” fell prey to political manipulation; “their bad fortune was politically interpreted by someone, their frustration was politically explained, their aggressiveness politically channeled.”¹⁰ As David Ost notes, “Hatreds were a way to explain economic problems.”¹¹ Equally important, however, has been the further development of a nationalist culture that channelled social anger toward nationalist discourses.

7 Michael Fleming, “The Political Economy of Marginalization: The Belorussian minority in Podlaskie,” in *Annus Albaruthenicus* (2008), p. 45.

8 Naomi Klein, ‘Dlaczego wierzyacie neoliberalom?’ in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, November 29, 2008, available online at <http://wyborcza.pl/1,76498,6004534,Dlaczego_wierzycie_neoliberalom_.html> (last accessed November 30, 2008).

9 Jacek Kuroń and Jacek Żakowski, *Siedmiolatka czyli kto ukradła Polskę?* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1997), p. 79.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

11 David Ost, “The Radical Right in Poland: Rationality of the Irrational,” in Sabrina P. Ramet (ed.), *The Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe Since 1989* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), p. 88.

Politically, the Polish extreme right remained almost completely insignificant prior to the early 2000s. By that time, however, it had established sizeable cultural bases, pockets of social legitimacy which political organizations could build on. These cultural resources proved highly useful in helping the extreme right to enter the political mainstream around the middle of that decade.

The radical nationalist groups that emerged after 1989 have many things in common. First, they share a vision of national renewal that is predicated upon purging all alien influences, especially Jewish ones. Second, they are hostile toward both communism and liberal capitalism, which they identify with Jews and Freemasons. Third, their central political category is “the nation, understood as an unchanging and eternal entity”; they regard the nation “as the optimal form of community, one that therefore imposes deep obligations upon the individual.”¹² Finally, they are united by a violent rejection of pluralism and democratic values.

The number of Jews in Poland today is very small, estimated at about 10,000. Nevertheless, anti-Semitism still plays an important role in contemporary Polish far-right discourse. Ireneusz Krzemiński notes that “since 1992, social centers have appeared which can strengthen and conserve such attitudes – for example Radio Maryja, known for the public promotion of decidedly anti-Semitic views and opinions.”¹³ According to David Ost, “In Poland, the radical right’s hatred of choice has been the hatred of Jews.”¹⁴ Anti-Semitism can be seen as an “attack on the universal (that is, democracy) through an attack on a particular (an ethnic group),” and the relative absence of actual Jews does not seem to pose an obstacle to that sort of scapegoating. In the words of Konstanty Gebert, “Anti-Semitism without Jews must not necessarily fade away. It may also become fixed and permanent – and this is what happened in Poland.”¹⁵

12 Czesław Maj and Ewa Maj, *Narodowe ugrupowania polityczne w Polsce 1989–2001* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2007), p. 272.

13 Ireneusz Krzemiński, “O Żydach i antysemityzmie po 10 latach,” in Ireneusz Krzemiński (ed.), *Antysemityzm w Polsce i na Ukrainie. Raport z badań* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2004), p. 33.

14 David Ost, “The Radical Right in Poland,” *op cit.*, p. 89.

15 Konstanty Gebert, *Living in the Land of Ashes* (Kraków-Budapest: Austeria, 2008), p. 82.

In the period 2001–2007, the nationalist far right had its parliamentary representation in the form of the League of Polish Families (Liga Polskich Rodzin, or LPR), which garnered 8.4% of the vote in 2001 and 7.97% in 2005. In 2006–2007, the LPR entered a coalition government with the populist Self-Defense Party and the national-conservative Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, or PiS). The government used hardline nationalist language, while Radio Maryja, led by Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, provided the coalition with its main symbolic framework. The LPR head, Roman Giertych, held the post of the minister of education, and his controversial policies in particular led to a wave of civil society protests. In the autumn 2007 election, Giertych's party polled a mere 1.3% of the vote. Since then the far right has lost its parliamentary outpost.

The PiS has managed to seize the political terrain occupied by the LPR, replacing it as the chief advocate of right-wing views. Since 2007 it has been the main party of the opposition. According to Aleksander Smolar, the “vision of the state [held by the PiS leadership] is hierarchical, [revolving around] the nation, community, patriotism, traditionally-interpreted values, state paternalism, and social solidarity.”¹⁶ Thus, the ideology of the PiS could be characterized as national-conservative populism. The PiS absorbed the far-right surge through its appeal to illiberal democracy. In both 2007 and 2011, a number of activists with known far-right views were elected to parliament on the PiS ticket, and the PiS again drew a major part of its support from a strategic alliance with Radio Maryja. The xenophobic populist mentality represented by organizations such as Radio Maryja looks set to remain a significant factor in Polish politics in the foreseeable future.

Since 2007, extreme-right groups have re-focused their activity on the street level, and the November 11th Independence Day marches in 2011 and 2012 gave them a special opportunity to demonstrate their new

16 Kamil Durczok and Piotr Mucharski, *Krótki kurs IV RP* (Kraków: Znak, 2007), p. 30.

strength and presence in that arena. In what follows, we will attempt to describe some aspects of these important events, drawing information from eye-witness accounts and other reports.

On November 11, 2011, participants in the so-called Independence March organized in Warsaw by the All-Polish Youth (*Młodzież Wszechpolska*, or MW) and National-Radical Camp (*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny*, or ONR) triggered riots in the streets, attacking police officers and causing considerable damage to property. About 10,000 people took part in the demonstration, including far-right hooligans supporting various Polish football clubs. Other participants included nationalists from Italy (*Forza Nuova*), Spain (*Democracia Nacional*), Sweden (*Nordisk Ungdom*), Hungary (*Jobbik*, *Hatvannégy Vármegye Ifjúsági Mozgalom*), Serbia (*Srpski Narodni Pokret 1389*), Slovakia (*Slovenské Hnutie Obrody*), Czech Republic (*Autonomous Nationalists*), Ukraine (*UNA-UNSO*), Belarus, and Lithuania (*Autonomous Nationalists*). In the city center, radical nationalists used force in an effort to confront anti-fascist demonstrators. Marching nationalists threw stones, trash bins, and flares at the police, and hurled various objects at the Russian Embassy while chanting offensive slogans. Damage was also inflicted on vehicles of media outlets that were reporting the event. A television camera recorded a masked man hitting a photojournalist in the face. A group of masked men destroyed a van belonging to the TV channel, TVN, and a mobile TV studio was set on fire. Other damaged media vehicles belonged to Polsat News, Polish Radio, and Superstacja TV. During the Independence March, participants chanted “Whole Poland, all white”; “Roman Dmowski, liberator of Poland”; “Tomorrow belongs to us – the nationalists”; and “Down with Brussels.” Some displayed Celtic crosses (an international racist symbol of “white power”), some wore clothes with a “Combat 18” logo, and others carried a banner which read, “Will Poland be the new Palestine?” On that day the police detained 210 people, including 92 citizens of Germany (participating in the counter-protests), as well as citizens of Britain, Belgium, Denmark, Spain and Hungary. Twenty-nine people were taken to hospital and 40 police officers were injured. Damage was

inflicted on 14 police cars, as well as to cobbled pavements, bus stops and random vehicles. In the evening of November 11th, President Bronisław Komorowski condemned the riots and discussed the necessity for legislative changes concerning the safety of public gatherings.

Two days later, the Warsaw Prosecutor's Office charged 46 people who were detained during the Independence March, including 35 individuals charged with aggravated assault on police officers. On November 15th, the police detained the man who had attacked the photo-journalist. The perpetrator turned out to be a football hooligan who had been detained previously in May of 2011 during riots that occurred after the final game of the Polish Cup in Bydgoszcz.

A parallel demonstration in Wrocław – the “March of Patriots” – was organized by the National Rebirth of Poland (Narodowe Odrodzenie Polski, or NOP). On November 5, an invitation to participate in that march had been posted on the website of Dawid Jackiewicz, an MP from the Law and Justice party (PiS). In attendance at the march were hooligans belonging to such clubs as Śląsk Wrocław, Sparta Wrocław, Promień Żary, Miedź Legnica, Gryf Słupsk, and Górnik Wałbrzych i Chrobry Głogów. Other participants included nationalists from Spain (representatives of Movimiento Social Republicano), Flanders (Nieuw-Solidaristisch Alternatif), Sweden (Svenskarnas parti), Italy (Forza Nuova), Ireland, and the Czech Republic. The radical nationalists threw firecrackers, torches, and rocks at the participants of an anti-fascist counter-demonstration. They also attacked the police, who wielded tear gas and batons. Meanwhile, they chanted: “Great nationalist Poland”; “Beat the red scum!”; and “Roman Dmowski – the liberator of Poland.” The hooligans of Śląsk Wrocław carried a banner stylized as the logo of Blood and Honor (an international neo-Nazi organization) and flags with Celtic crosses, while NOP members displayed a banner inscribed with the words, “Great Catholic Poland.” The day after the march, to celebrate the party's anniversary, the NOP held a congress under the slogan, “30 years of struggle.” Racist and neo-fascist leaders from many countries attended, among

them Roberto Fiore (head of Forza Nuova), Stefan Jacobsson (Svenskarnas parti), José Luis Vázquez (Movimiento Social Republicano), Kris Roman (Nieuw-Solidaristisch Alternatif), Robert Lane (Thought and Action, from Ireland).

One year later, on November 11, 2012, Warsaw was the site of the so-called Independence March, organized by All-Polish Youth (MW) and the National-Radical Camp (ONR). The Independence March committee included Jan Kobyłański, the notoriously anti-Semitic chairman of the Union of Polish Associations in Latin America; right wing journalists Rafał Ziemkiewicz and Jan Pospieszalski; Roman Catholic Bishop Antoni Dydycz; and Law and Justice MPs Prof. Krystyna Pawłowicz, Artur Górski, and Stanisław Pięta. The event – which led to clashes that injured 22 police officers and caused 176 people to be detained – attracted about 30,000 participants, including members of other far-right organizations from Poland and members of the Hungarian neo-fascist party *Jobbik* (the Movement for Better Hungary) as well as football hooligans supporting Legia Warszawa, Jagiellonia Białystok, Wisła Płock, Lech Poznań, Resovia Rzeszów, Lechia Gdańsk and Zagłębie Sosnowiec. Several times, demonstrators clashed with the police, who deployed pepper spray launchers and water cannons. Nationalists chanted “Beat red scum!”, “Poland for Polish People, foreigners out!”, “Lvov and Vilnius we remember!”, “Neither red, nor rainbow, but rational”; and “Poland for the Polish, not for lefties.” They carried banners with Celtic crosses and the phalanx, a symbol used by inter-war fascist organizations. At a rally that took place at the end of the march in Agrykola Park, All-Polish Youth leader Robert Winnicki called for an “overthrow of the republic,” explaining that “we want to create power that lefties, liberals, and faggots are afraid of. We want to create the power of the Polish nation.” National-Radical Camp leader Przemysław Holocher said that people currently in power will be held responsible for all their deeds and will not be forgiven, to which the crowd responded by shouting, “Hang them!” Nationalists announced their intention to form the so-called National Movement (modelled after Hungary’s *Jobbik*) and recruit members of the Independence Guard (hit

squads modelled after the Hungarian Guard, a paramilitary organization established by *Jobbik* whose members wear black uniforms identical to the ones worn by Hungarian Nazis during World War II).

Football hooligans who took part in the Independence March battered a videographer with Polish Television and damaged his camera. According to his testimony, “I saw that the hooligans were beating a young man who was holding a tiny camera in his hands. So I began to film it. Once they were done with him, they went after me... I was hit at the back of my head and fell to the ground. Someone kept beating me, and then then took my camera and smashed it.”

In addition, participants of the Independence March attacked the office of “Lambda,” an LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans) welfare NGO. The perpetrators threw stones and bottles at the building and smashed three windows. Although several people were inside, no one was injured. The District Police Headquarters was notified about the attack, and when the incident was investigated the next day, a duty sergeant told one Lambda member that it would not have happened if LGBT people did not “flaunt their sexuality.” The organization filed a complaint about the policeman’s behavior.

In Wrocław, a parallel march occurred on November 11, 2012, organized by National Rebirth of Poland (NOP). Other groups that took part in the event included Autonomous Nationalists, Falangists, delegates from the Italian neo-fascist organisation Forza Nuova, nationalists from Belgium and the Czech Republic, and hooligan football fans of Śląsk Wrocław, Sparta Wrocław, Promień Żary, Chrobry Głogów, Lechia Zielona Góra and Miedź Legnica. During the march they chanted, “No to corporations, no to Eurocrats, Poland only for the Poles”; “No Union, no NATO, Poland only for the Poles”; “End the Jewish occupation”; “USA, empire of evil”; “National Radicalism”; and “Hit the red scum!” They brandished flags sporting the Celtic cross and the phalanx as well as a banner with the name of the Śląsk Wrocław football team written in the characteristic style used by Blood and Honor. Although several nationalists threw rocks

at policemen and firecrackers as passers-by, the police did not intervene. At the end of the demonstration, they burned the EU flag. After the march, dozens of men armed with sticks and bats attacked a building occupied by squatters, the Wagenburg Cultural Center. One of the victims said: "When the first car came near the building, two bald thugs came out of it and asked if there's anyone from Antifa here and whether we want a fight." Shortly thereafter, a group of men crossed over the fence and entered the premises. They threw Molotov cocktails and rocks at the building, broke windows, demolished equipment left outside, and vandalized parked cars. One of the squatters was severely injured with bats and brass knuckles, which left him with broken legs and head wounds. An ambulance took him to the hospital in critical condition. Two other persons also needed hospitalization. On November 13, the head of National Rebirth of Poland, Adam Gmurczyk, published a thank you note to the men responsible for the attack. He posted a picture on his Facebook account under the caption, "This is war. Our country, our rules," along with the following remark: "The media reported that after the Patriot's March a group of volunteers from Wrocław went to the local squat and helped renovate the place... I thank them for that. Do not stop!" On December 16th, police arrested five perpetrators of the assault: residents of Wrocław, aged 18 to 29, who were associated with football hooliganism. All were charged with active participation in violence against a person or property.

Examination of the Independence Day marches of 2011 and 2012 reveals an increase in the numbers of participants and a growing potential for mobilizing of extra-parliamentary far-right groups on the street level, amplified by their alliances with right-wing hooligans and football fans. The radical nationalist ideology promoted at the marches led to numerous conflicts and violent incidents. At the same time, support of right-wing parliamentarians and public figures for these marches underscores the highly problematic relationship between the anti-democratic extreme right and elements of the parliamentary conservative right. This relationship may aid the far right in further regaining its political legitimacy and influence.

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