

Right-wing Poles glorify Hani's killer

Polish anti-racism groups are growing more concerned as the image of Janusz Walus becomes normalised, with his likeness and name displayed on products for sale on a Naspers-owned website

Lester Kiewit

In 2013, Polish sociology professor Rafał Pankowski sat in front of his computer and watched a Europa League football game between Italian club Lazio and Warsaw-based Legia Warszawa.

During the game, fans of the current Polish champions unfurled a banner in the stands. Imprinted on the flag was the image of a man, stony-faced with chiselled features.

"At first I wasn't sure who it was. But I checked. And it was Janusz Walus," said Pankowski, who is a spokesperson for the Warsaw-based anti-racism movement Never Again.

Janusz Walus is the self-confessed killer of former South African Communist Party (SACP) secretary general Chris Hani.

Walus, together with Clive Derby-Lewis, a member of the now-defunct Conservative Party, plotted, planned and killed Hani outside his Boksburg home in 1993.

Hani's murder threatened to send South Africa down a spiral of possible civil war only 10 months before the country's first democratic elections in 1994.

During a Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearing in 1997, both men described in detail how they went about the murder. They were both denied amnesty.

Derby-Lewis died in 2016, while Walus continues to serve a life sentence in jail. In March, he was denied parole for the umpteenth time.

A symbol for the Polish right

Pankowski's revelation started a seven-year process of documenting the growing prominence of ultra-right-wing and racist groups in Poland and their connection to Walus.

"At the time when I first saw the banner during the game with Lazio, Legia was fined. But, Uefa [the Union of European Football Associations] didn't know who the person was and implemented a rule that no political symbols or images be shown in stadiums."

Pankowski said the fine was substantial, but that Legia was "lucky". This is because Uefa did not interpret the banner as a racist symbol, but as a political banner.

In a recent game on August 28 in Warsaw between Lechia and Raków Częstochowa, a banner with the image of Walus could be seen hanging behind the home team's goalposts.

Since then, the increasing presence of Walus's image and name, particularly at local football games, has become part of a growing right-wing call for his release on parole in South Africa and his return to Poland.

Pankowski is unclear how Walus became a symbol for the Polish right.

But he believes it's less to do with Hani being a communist, and more to do with him having been a black man.

"Yes, their message is based on anti-communist rhetoric, but that is artificial in a way. At the core of the pro-Walus movement is the glorification of racial violence. They also don't just say he should be released on parole on humanitarian grounds, which is a point we can debate, but they are glorifying what he did," Pankowski said.

"Support here for him is so big that there are even banners that read 'Janusz for President'. It will never happen. But just seeing that is scary."

Rise in commodification

Another worrying development for Pankowski is the growing commodification of Walus's name and image. T-shirts, buttons, and scarves with his likeness, name and messages of support are for sale on the internet.

One of the websites on which such paraphernalia is available is second-hand goods site OLX Poland. Technology-investment company Prosus owns OLX. Prosus is, in turn, owned by South African-based tech giant Naspers.

The *Mail & Guardian* has seen Janusz Walus-inspired scarves and clothing on the site. The text on one reads, "Anti-communism shooting club. Poland. South Africa. Tribute to Janusz Walus."

Naspers media relations director Shamiela Letsoalo said that the tech and media giant "unequivocally condemns racism, including racist content posted by external parties for sale on the trading platforms of our companies".

Letsoalo added that Naspers regards any content that incites violence, racism or discrimination as abhorrent and contrary to the values and beliefs of the organisation.

"OLX Poland has 20-million active user-generated listings and attracts and reviews 240 000 new listings every day – an average of 10 000 per hour. Our systems use technology automatically to identify and remove listings that violate OLX's policies," said Letsoalo.

She added that OLX systems automatically block problematic words if they are entered into the product description field. Inappropriate images are detected by image recognition programmes, but not with complete accuracy.

The company said its technology uses "a variety of techniques, including image recognition, and that it 'looks at as many data points as it possibly can, and we are constantly improving its accuracy'".

"Filters are in place at OLX Poland that prevents items from being listed that use the name Janusz Walus. The listing that you flagged on Sunday



Racist symbols: Fans of the Petrochemia Plock at a match in Wieden, Austria display a banner glorifying Janusz Walus (above). Scarves and T-shirts bearing Walus's name and image have been offered for sale on OLX Poland, as seen in the adverts below, and are increasingly common at local football matches (bottom)



evening, September 6, did not contain the name Janusz Walus and, as a result, it was not identified as a violation. Upon further investigation of the links you provided, our team confirmed that both came from a single listing, which has since been removed," Letsoalo said.

The example sent to Naspers by the *M&G* was a scarf with Walus's name surrounded by other right-wing paraphernalia. Naspers responded on Tuesday September 8. As of Tuesday night, the "anti-communism shooting club" T-shirt was still available on the website.

Growing racist sentiment

"It's not only Walus stuff but other racist stuff as well [on the website],"

"There are banners that read 'Janusz for President'. It will never happen. But just seeing that is scary"

Pankowski said. "It's difficult for me to explain, but why would a company with a complex history like Naspers condone something like that? It is careless and irresponsible," he added.

There are also Facebook pages calling for "freedom for Janusz Walus", labelling him as a "political prisoner" in South Africa.

The Never Again movement has been fighting growing right-wing and racist sentiment in Poland since 1996. Its work has intensified in recent years to counter growing anti-immigrant, xenophobic and racist populist political parties slowly making gains, electorally and in membership size.

Pankowski said that football clubs and stadiums appear to be fertile ground to convert Poles, particularly the young, to a nationalist, right-wing message.

"The irony is that Polish football teams are quite diverse. Players from other countries and continents are here. The teams are quite different from Polish culture in general. If you walk down the street, everyone looks the same. But our football teams are

racially diverse. It's disappointing because we see an increase in xenophobia and racism," Pankowski said.

The controversy surrounding Walus's growing appeal in Poland may be worlds apart from South Africa. But it also still reflects a country still struggling to find social cohesion 26 years after free and fair elections.

Approached for comment, the Hani family, through daughter Lindiwe Hani, said it "would not like to participate".

'Outrageous activities'

The SACP said it had been aware of the growing use of Walus's image in Poland for some time, adding that it is being kept informed of developments by the Communist Party of Poland.

"The SACP is aware of the outrageous activities of the racist right-wing elements in Poland. They have been using Janusz Walus for a while as the rallying symbol of their agenda. It is barbaric to celebrate an assassin and glorify his assassination deed," SACP spokesperson Alex Mashilo said.

Asked whether the SACP, as a member of the governing ANC tripartite alliance, would call for a diplomatic response by calling the Polish ambassador to answer for the growing use of Walus's image in that country, Mashilo said it continued to raise the development "internally".

The party is adamant that any applications by Walus's legal team that he be released on parole be rejected.

"We remain resolutely firm that the assassin must remain in prison, in orange overalls – he must not be released on parole. We want full disclosure of the truth and all the circumstances of the assassination that the assassin who pulled the trigger of the murder weapon committed," Mashilo said.