

Poland's Antisemitic Firebrand Exposes Ugly Side of Economic Boom



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He sees Jews, Ukrainians and the EU as Poland's enemies in a range of conspiracy theories. Yet Grzegorz Braun is emerging as a key political force.

(Bloomberg) — The crowd of about 30 loyalists, one dressed as a clown, waited eagerly for their hero to arrive at the Warsaw court. To the waving of red-and-white Polish flags and the sound of patriotic music, Grzegorz Braun emerged from a black Volkswagen van.

The far-right former presidential candidate faces about a dozen charges against him involving acts of antisemitism, public disorder and allegations of abuse. On May 28, it was Braun's eighth appearance in a case that includes an offence where he snuffed out a menorah with a fire extinguisher during a Hanukkah ceremony in the Polish Parliament.

"This case is much bigger, it's not about me," declared Braun, his black eye patch for a detached retina giving him the air of a villain to his detractors, a fighter to his supporters. "It's about whether we can regain our independence," he said before rattling off a list of potential threats from "Jews, Ukrainians, Eurofederalists, climatists or warmongers."

What might look like a scene from the fringes of politics is a warning sign for anyone thinking Poland's return to the European Union mainstream is safe. The \$1 trillion economy is booming and the government of the NATO state is rearming to stand up to Russia. But what Prime Minister Donald Tusk called Poland's "dark side" is threatening to pull the country down a different path.

A 59-year-old former film director turned far-right firebrand, Braun has enjoyed a surge in support since he ran for president last year with a campaign underpinned by what his opponents branded as conspiracy theories.

What makes his growing popularity even more surprising is that Braun has also been calling for the "normalization" of relations with Russia, a kiss of death for any politician in a country with a long history of uneasy relations with Moscow.

Opinion polls show his party, Confederation of the Polish Crown, could be handed a role as kingmaker in parliamentary elections next year. It's one of the key contests facing Europe amid a splintering of the political landscape, and a vital test for the east of the continent following the ouster of Viktor Orban in Hungary a few weeks ago.

Braun has likened the EU to a Soviet-style dictatorship. He also wants Poland to leave the bloc, while at the same time attacking Ukraine.

He triggered American anger by offering condolences for the death of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, with the US ambassador warning against Braun joining any potential government. A European diplomat also expressed concern that Braun and his party's "antisemitic stance" will end up in a coalition should his support keep growing.

Rather than dismiss him, his political opponents appear to be trying to outflank him, according to political analyst Marcin Duma, founder of IBRiS pollster. He pointed to how the largest opposition party, Law & Justice, and its leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski picked one of its most nationalist politicians as their candidate for prime minister ahead of the 2027 election.

"Today, Grzegorz Braun has taken on the role that Kaczynski held for 20 years — Jaroslaw Kaczynski used to set the agenda for debate and political fight, and he no longer does that," Duma said. "Braun is the one promoting Polesxit, he is the one stoking anti-Ukrainian sentiment, and he is the one effectively promoting antisemitism."

Braun expounds a strain of pro-Catholic, male-dominated nationalism that feeds off the fear of migration, perceived threats to sovereignty and open antisemitism. He's tapped into frustration among the swathe of the electorate that feels left behind by Poland's transformation from poor post-communist backwater to a country seeking G20 membership, especially in Poland's east.

As a Polish parliamentarian, Braun rose to prominence by opposing Covid-19 vaccinations, spreading anti-Ukrainian sentiment and calling for Poland to exit the EU. Other legal cases against him include destroying an LGBTQ display, denying the existence of Nazi gas chambers at Auschwitz and abusing a doctor who carried out a legal abortion.

The extinguishing of the Jewish candles in 2023 made global headlines and gave Braun a bigger platform to run in the presidential race last year, where he placed fourth with 6.3% of the vote. The extinguisher became a symbol for his supporters on T-shirts and badges.

The most recent poll put backing for his party at just above 8%. That compared with about 12% for Confederation, a far-right party seen as a potential partner for Law & Justice, which was on 22%.

"I used to support Confederation, but when they became too politically correct, I felt that it's Braun with whom I identify the most," said Piotr, a 37-year-old salesman. "And to be clear, I don't support him in everything he says. He puts too much stress on Catholicism and I think that we're not ready to leave the EU yet."

While a member of the European Parliament since 2024, Braun and his party play up their anti-establishment credentials.

Piotr was attending the Uncensored Book Fair last month at a restaurant in Kielce, a city of 175,000 people south of Warsaw. The small event only had about 10 stands, but they displayed books by Braun and other authors, including conspiracy theories about Jewish influence.

Another visitor said Braun's popularity comes from the fact that he talks about things of which others are afraid to speak, such as Poland's "servility" to Ukraine as its neighbor fights against Russia's invasion.

"No community center would ever agree to host the kind of fair we're here for today," Michal Gwadera, the regional chief for Braun's party, said when asked about the event. "They refuse to rent us their halls. We have to rely on private venues because they view our movement as fascist and antisemitic. Which is, of course, untrue and utter nonsense."

Support for Ukraine has turned into a divisive electoral issue across the region. In Hungary, the pro-Russian Orban portrayed President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as the bogeyman during his unsuccessful campaign to extend his 16 years in power. Slovakia, too, has opposed aid to Kyiv and Prime Minister Robert Fico has forged closer links with Moscow.

Cozying up to the Kremlin, though, has been a political red line in Poland, and even more so since Vladimir Putin's full-scale invasion in February 2022. Yet Braun has chosen some openly pro-Russian politicians to represent his party in next year's vote. One remains on trial accused of spying for Russia, something he denies.

"Braun was already promoting the slogan 'Stop the Ukrainization of Poland' in the summer of 2022 and then it became his trademark," said Rafal Pankowski, a sociologist and head of the Never Again Association that monitors the far right and hate crimes. "But he didn't dare, and his Confederation didn't at that time, say they were openly pro-Putin. That's changing this year for Braun's group."

Indeed, anything perceived as pro-Russian could be an obstacle for Law & Justice to bring Braun's party into any potential coalition. Another is that it would jeopardize support from the US, whose ambassador Tom Rose earlier this year called Braun "very anti-American" and unacceptable.

Donald Trump's administration endorsed Polish President Karol Nawrocki, the Law & Justice candidate, while Poland has been one of the strongest US allies in Europe, buying defense equipment, signing business contracts for nuclear energy and entering long-term deals with tech companies.

Back at the court in the Warsaw district of Praga, a 67-year-old pensioner was among the group waiting to welcome Braun for his latest appearance. Declining to give his name, he said Braun doesn't "suck up" to anybody and isn't like all the other politicians with empty promises.

And Braun knows what the polls show: Right now, Tusk's opponents don't have the numbers to form a government next year without him. "The Confederation of the Polish Crown is coming for power, for its share in the government," he told the small crowd. "So that Polish patriots, freedom seekers, nationalists, conservatists and realists have their own representation."

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