



# The Upcoming Fascism

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## Le bourgeois fascist. With Rafał Pankowski about the fascism of the bourgeois

*Who is more dangerous – suits or bomber jackets?*

Of course, I understand what lies behind this symbolic dichotomy. However, it is false. If we are talking about neofascism, or even more broadly, about the extreme right, both of these models of ideological and political activity coexist. And in a complementary way. This dichotomy is an entirely conscious strategy that the protagonists of this movement have publicly talked about.

*Are you talking about the 1930s or today?*

Both. And both, no matter if we look at this matter historically or refer to the most contemporary neo-fascism. And nowadays, the recent leader of the English far right, Nick Griffin, wrote directly that both activity levels must coexist.

*What is this strategy?*

On the one hand, we are dealing with a model of radical militant activity, which essentially involves the use of physical violence. Such examples have been described

for years. Since the beginning of the 1990s, a wave of ideological and political violence has been visible, resulting from xenophobia, nationalism, and aggression against all minorities or people or groups associated with minorities. In contemporary Poland – until the arrival of large numbers of Ukrainian refugees – minorities were relatively small compared to many other countries, but xenophobic violence was very real. Often, it was violence not against representatives of minorities but against groups or people associated with their culture or with the fight for their rights against ideological enemies. This model of action goes back to the beginning of the fascist movement and to its Italian roots.

*And the second model that these “suits” symbolize?*

It is a model of institutional action, “march through institutions,” or legitimizing extremist ideologies through participation in the political process, e.g., electoral procedures. And this is nothing new either. This model has worked since the dawn of fascism. It is a bit of a cliché to say that Hitler came to power thanks to democratic elections, but it is not entirely true. The NSDAP never had a parliamentary majority under democratic conditions. Hitler came to power thanks to the decisions of the conservative political elite.

*But you said that this dichotomy is false. Could you explain what you meant?*

Maybe it's not that I completely disagree with it. Still, I think it may overemphasize the contrast between these two models because they have coexisted since the very begin-

ning, both in historical fascism and today in neo-fascism. Since I mentioned the NSDAP, it was evident to anyone interested in its path to power that the street, militant, and parliamentary “suit” strategies complemented each other. One didn’t work without the other. If we look at various contemporary nationalist groups, also in Poland, let’s say the All-Polish Youth, we see that, on the one hand, we are dealing with activities at the street level, demonstrations, counter-demonstrations, attacks on Pride marches, including acts of violence that have been repeatedly described. On the other hand, we consistently attempt to enter the world of political and parliamentary games. And yet, we are talking about the same people. Just a few years ago, this was brilliantly symbolized by the former neo-Nazi Piotr Farfał, who was the head of public television, and the then minister Rafał Wiechecki, who in just a few years had come a long way from a Widzew Łódź hooligan to the Minister of Maritime Economy on behalf of the League of Polish Families party. Of course, there have been dozens of such examples in Poland in recent decades. And not only in Poland. However, in Poland, it is easier for former militants to enter public institutions than, for example, in France. In our state, a long-standing problem has been the unclear situation when it comes to the line of demarcation between right-wing extremism and the right-wing mainstream. Today, it is entirely evident that Poland’s ruling Law and Justice party and its prominent representatives speak a language that is, in fact, often difficult to distinguish from the language of right-wing extremists. However, the problem is not new. Even in the 1990s, there were extreme right-wing groups, such as the National Right, very close to fascist ideas, which managed to penetrate the structures of the state with quite good results, considering

such a small political entity. The leader of this formation, Krzysztof Kawęcki, was the deputy minister of national education in Jerzy Buzek's center-right government and functioned in the same cabinet, or even ministry, with representatives of the liberal Freedom Union, which seemed shocking to us at Never Again. This situation blurs the difference between what is permissible and what is not in the so-called mainstream. It didn't happen after 2015, but it was a multi-year process. I think that the crisis, or even the breakdown of democratic values or democratic culture, which we have been dealing with spectacularly since 2015, began many years earlier, with a certain indifference of the mainstream of politics and public opinion throughout the years.

*Are you not concerned about transfers to the liberal camp of people like ex-nationalist leader Roman Giertych? Do you think they ever really change?*

It is difficult to imagine a more spectacular example of a transfer from the far right. Not so long ago, he was a symbol of nationalism in Poland. We are talking about the creator of this modern incarnation of the nationalistic youth organization: All-Polish Youth. Maybe I'll add a little tidbit here, which we wrote about in "Nigdy Więcej" magazine: a few years after Giertych allegedly withdrew from this far-right activity, he was still thanked in the nationalistic "Polityka National" magazine for financial support. This magazine promotes one of the most aggressive forms of Polish radical nationalism. It is not only an informal ideological magazine of the All-Polish Youth and the National Movement, but it also regularly features authors close to neofascism, such as Grzegorz Ćwik, editor-in-chief of the

neofascist magazine “Szturm,” and Tomasz Szczepański, leader of the neo-pagan Association for Tradition and Culture “Niklot.” In “Polityka Narodowa,” you may find an evident fascination with the most extreme right-wing ideas of the world. As for Giertych’s current popularity in the liberal spectrum, I am surprised that the Polish PM Donald Tusk has legitimized him for years. However, I would like to emphasize that I would not deprive anyone of the right to evolution or ideological change. Nevertheless, I have doubts about how fundamental this transformation is in the case of Roman Giertych. I read Giertych’s book pretty carefully; it was published already when this evolution allegedly occurred. And he says in this book that he has not changed his opinions. I also read a book and many different statements by Michał Kamiński, who started in the National Rebirth of Poland and went to Augusto Pinochet with a scapular with the Virgin Mary. And I admit that I perceive his change differently. He says directly: Yes, I was young and stupid. I was wrong about Jedwabne. I accept it and believe that this is a more authentic evolution. I say this as a person who caused a lot of problems for Kamiński, especially in the British media, when he became the head of the European Conservatives and Reformists group in the European Parliament. At that time, I was often quoted with opinions about him, very negative ones. At that time, I was very far from having any sympathy towards him. However, his gestures and statements prove this transformation is more authentic in his case. I see an evident difference between these two trajectories.

*Aren't you afraid that in the wake of the liberals' fight against "Kaczism," more and more people like Giertych will be brought on board liberal ships?*

The cordon sanitaire is often criticized, but in my opinion, it is quite a good concept, which allows us to protect what is essential in a democracy, i.e., not only the voting procedure itself but its essence, which also consists of recognizing equality between people and respect for minority rights. The cordon sanitaire strategy against the far right has practically never existed in Poland, which worries me greatly. Although in Poland it is better in this respect than in Hungary. I remember one of my last trips before the pandemic to Budapest, shortly before the local elections. There, I saw posters of the Hungarian united opposition with the logo of the Green Party next to Jobbik as part of one list, which moved me deeply at the time. And this shows what point we can reach, unfortunately, if polarization intensifies along only one dividing line. Hungary is another example of the legitimization of the far-right by the so-called democrats. This process is already happening here, as well as the courtship of some liberals toward supporters of Krzysztof Bosak and the far-right Confederation party.

*Who are you more afraid of, extremists like Wojciech Olszański or rather the radicalized petty bourgeoisie represented by the Confederation party?*

I admit that I don't see much difference between Olszański and Bosak. Of course, there is a difference in the form of expression, but it is not a massive difference in the foundation of what they have to say.

*And yet, one can gather a thousand people at a march, and the other gets 10% in the elections...*

We know that even more radical groups than Olszański appear at the Independence March, and the organizers have no problem with that. They are marching there with Krzysztof Bosak, and neither side nor the other is bothered by it. And in my opinion, in a sense, we are dealing with two faces of the same movement.

*However, as long as this movement has Olszański's face, it will be difficult for it to gain critical mass. However, when the petty bourgeoisie joins the extremists... This would be the crucial problem, in my opinion...*

I understand perfectly what you mean. And about the phenomenon of “bourgeois” fascism. Of course, this is nothing new either. The class base of the NSDAP consisted primarily of the lower middle class, not the proletariat of any kind. Of course, sometimes the example of the NSDAP may be invoked too often and too quickly when talking about the model of the new fascism because not every time we are dealing with a simple reproduction of the German model. Sometimes, such analogies can make it easier for us to understand contemporary emanations. Sometimes, they can make it more difficult. It is not the case that fascism always ends in the Holocaust within 15 years. Maybe “only” racial segregation, or “only” in different rights for different ethnic or religious groups, or “only” not allowing refugees into our country – which is still morally scandalous.

*So, what does this “bourgeois fascism” look like?*

For a long time, it would be possible to discuss how the relationship between nationalism and liberalism has

developed, especially in German-speaking countries. In more modern times, Jörg Haider was a great example of a nationalist whose party was also part of the liberal international for a long time. Other cases include the Nigel Farage and the Geert Wilders – they preach a kind of liberalism but with an intensely xenophobic foundation. It's not an impossible connection. The Confederation party shows this once again by having its two wings. One, let's say liberal or libertarian, although these are not entirely adequate concepts here, and the other is nationalistic. Both are slightly different from each other, but as you can see, they can function relatively harmoniously together. It is possible. Again, you can refer to Poland's recent history, and you can find many other examples. Few people probably remember, but Korwin-Mikke was a candidate supported by the liberal Civic Platform (PO) in the Senate elections in Wrocław. Even Stanisław Michalkiewicz was a candidate from the PO list when the PO and UPR had a kind of electoral coalition. I must give credit to Civic Platform for removing him after media protests. But as you can see, there was still a time when various constellations were possible. Even less known is that there was a party called the Real Politics Party (SPR), which we described in *Never Again* in the 1990s, which was a splinter group of Korwin's party. They separated from the UPR because it decided Korwin-Mikke was not right-wing enough. The party's spokesman was Łukasz Warzecha. This party cooperated closely with the National Rebirth of Poland. The informal press organ of the SPR was Tomasz Gabiś's magazine "Stańczyk," which was one of the first platforms for Holocaust revisionism in Poland. But some SPR activists also joined the PO, e.g., Tomasz Tomczykiewicz, who later became an MP from Silesia, now deceased, and Arkadiusz

Karbowiak, a publicist for “Stańczyk” and NOP’s magazine “Szczerbiec,” who is now in charge of the construction of the “cursed soldiers” museum. Often, this line of demarcation between the fascist right and the non-fascist right is blurred. Yet this distinction is essential.

*And where do these alliances come from? Why does the center need these people?*

This type of alliance is sometimes about a misunderstood love for stability or social order. And these fascists are supposed to be a factor that will contribute to stabilizing the hierarchy and social order. What they have in common is admiration for strength and energy, contempt for the weaker, and social Darwinism.

*And isn't this also their anti-leftism?*

Yes, also. And this is also something known from history. The mistake made by German conservatives in the 1930s is a model example of how this mechanism works. I am afraid that similar mistakes are unfortunately repeated. However, I would not like our conversation to create the impression that the liberal center is the main problem because the problem lies primarily elsewhere, on the nationalist right.

*Through what channels does nationalist, xenophobic, or fascist content flow into the mainstream?*

Recently, I have often recalled one sentence that Jerzy Czech wrote many years ago in the “Nigdy Więcej” magazine, that building a right-wing, conservative, mass, popular formation in Poland must at some point end in

anti-Semitism. It was quite a provocative thesis, especially since it was written over 20 years ago, and back then, it did not seem obvious. Even today, it may not be obvious, but in retrospect, Czech may have been somewhat correct. It refers to the long duration of the identity formation, which is, to some extent, hegemonic in Poland. I am not talking only about the stereotype of a Pole but about everything that is connected with the National Democratic, ethno-nationalist understanding of national identity. And I guess in the end, these processes and examples that we can talk about come down to this cultural hegemony of the nationalist model of Polishness.

*So it turns out that Roman Dmowski is the central axis here, not only for nationalists but also for you (laughs).*

The paradox of the current Polish situation also lies in the fact that the ideological boundaries are moved mainly by people who do not necessarily come from the extreme right. And this is an additional aspect of this tragedy. Nationalist leader Robert Bąkiewicz is probably not a big-time star. The actual player is the ex-Minister of Culture, Piotr Gliński, whose ministry greatly sponsored Bąkiewicz. We could easily add him to our previous conversation about political transfers, because he started in the Environmental Forum of the liberal Freedom Union. Quite recently, I recommended his post-doctoral habilitation work on the green movement in Poland as a work containing an excellent outline of the theory of social movements. He is also the man with whom we, as a “Never Again” association, cooperated in combating the influence of the far right in the ecological movement in Poland. So, it is astonishing that a person with this type of worldview changed the front so dramatically.

*I thought you would mention ONR or a nationalist magazine like "Polityka Narodowa."*

I understand what you mean: what the late prof. Aldona Jawłowska called "pattern-creating centers." They can also be called ideology incubators. And, of course, they exist, including the ones you mentioned. There are many of them, but I think Radio Maryja was the key. Probably, no one has done more to shift Polish political discourse so far to the right. It was no coincidence that Jarosław Kaczyński's first party was called the Alliance of the Center because it wanted to distance itself from this type of right-wing party. And where this entire formation is today is very far from this original idea. After all, even under the banner of PiS, this group was once the most pro-refugee party in Poland. About ten years ago, the future prime minister of Poland, Beata Szydło, wrote parliamentary interpellations in their defense. So this is not in the distant past. But over these past twenty years, this party's point of gravity has moved very far to the right. It's a real paradox that it happened thanks to people who were once in a very different place. So this "Polityka Narodowa," which has existed for over ten years, is not very influential. Still, the people in power speak a language similar to these nationalists.

*I thought more about introducing ideology into the mainstream, not precisely about specific politicians.*

The goal of these centers of idea production is not to win elections, as seen in the following decades, but instead, they want to achieve Gramscian cultural hegemony. Because what they write in "Polityka Narodowa," through columnists of the right-wing media such as Stanisław

Michalkiewicz, Wojciech Cejrowski, or Rafał Ziemkiewicz in magazines such as “Do Rzeczy” reaches the mass audience. These publicists are not independent thinkers or producers of ideas. And that’s the crux of the matter. There is no deep ideological center in the populist right-wing parties like the Law and Justice party. There is an ideological void there. What is essential is the pop culture stuff propagated by such people, and this seems to be the mechanism of the xenophobic political hegemony. Or mainstream journalist Monika Jaruzelska – some completely crazy, marginal, extreme right-wing figures and ideas appear on her YouTube channel. Yet she is a very well-known figure in the mainstream, regularly appearing in tabloids and reaching hundreds of thousands of viewers. She is also a councilor of the City of Warsaw, elected from the left-wing list. In her channel, there are mainly guests from the far right, and not only very famous ones like Rafał Ziemkiewicz, who has visited her many times but also such exotic ones as Sebastian Pitoń or Jakub Zgierski, creator of the blog “Hammer on Marxism,” who thanks to this have mass audience. Moreover, in the postmodern media landscape, it is no longer clear who is marginal and who is mainstream. You don’t have to be on TV at all. YouTube is enough. Marcin Rola probably has more influence today than Tomasz Lis, and his viewer-supporter is often more passionate. This situation is, of course, an opportunity for these various dangerous groups and activists that we are talking about here.

*You mentioned pop culture. There also seems to be an open transmission belt here...*

Paweł Kukiz is a vital name here. He is also an interesting example showing how pop culture intertwines with ideology, politics, and xenophobia. Someone recently recalled Kukiz's online entry from 2016, on the anniversary of September 11. He then wrote that September 11 was another example of an "immigrant invasion," and this is just one of his many texts of this type. All we need to do is remember back to that terrible year of 2015. I'm not talking about that year because someone won or lost the elections, but about what happened in the summer in response to the so-called refugee crisis in the Mediterranean Sea. It was indeed a turning point in Poland's modern history. It is a reversal of values and even a revaluation of the categories of good and evil. Hatred and xenophobia became the dominant emotion, not only but also the ideology, for many years. I think that Paweł Kukiz played an essential role in all this. Of course, he perceived social sentiments more or less cynically, but he also amplified and intensified them. And Paweł Kukiz is not a politician. He is a pop culture figure, just like Donald Trump, who gained fame thanks to his participation in a television show. So, I think separating pop culture from broader ideological processes is impossible. Another example from Poland – is the De Press band. Formerly avant-garde-punk, today considered very right-wing. It is a bit like in politics: something that once seemed like a niche phenomenon suddenly appears in unexpected places. It turns out again that those who change the front are key in all these ideological processes because all these Nazi-skinhead rock bands did not achieve great popularity. But who among us would have predicted that Edyta Górniak would appear on Marcin Rola's program and condemn globalist conspiracies? Or Ivan Komarenko, who became the voice of anti-vaxxers.

*So, to summarize these threads, if you were to create a 21st-century model of fascism, what elements would you add to it?*

In my book “Neofascism in Western Europe,” a quarter of a century ago, I coined the definition of fascism as an ideology of total cultural uniformity. And it seems to me that the fascism of the 21st century is also like that. It is a vision of a society hostile to difference – refugees, gays, trans people, and various others who are currently declared public enemy.

*So, it will be xenophobic, homophobic, and racist. What's next?*

This base is the foundation, and everything else follows from this foundation. Homogeneity also requires a guardian. What is needed is some authoritarian or totalitarian system that guards this purity. It seems that this kind of neo-fascism can do just fine without the swastika or a portrait of Hitler. Although, you may remember the sentence said by one of the characters in the “Superwizjer” reportage: “We honor Adolf Hitler and our homeland, our beloved Poland.” Such symbolism may sometimes come back in their actions, but it is not necessary. What was also crucial in this reportage, and was much more important than Hitler’s birthday, which could just as easily have been cut out of this reportage and would still be shocking, is the fascist music festival “Orle Gniazdo” and the fact that the main character of this material is an assistant of a Member of Parliament, Robert Winnicki. That was important, not what was happening in that forest under the swastika. The ideology of total cultural homogeneity

is the foundation, the core, and the basis for them. The slogan “Poland for Poles” is, in this sense, a fascist slogan because it contains a specific version of the idea of Polishness: an ethnonationalist, racist version. Once the enemy is a refugee. Another time, a Jew. Another time, an LGBT community. Such rhetoric and beliefs are also present at Poland’s highest levels of politics.

*What about things like ecology?*

Objectively, this is an essential topic for everyone living on this planet. And one way or another, the far right and neo-fascists must also face this. Some people cope by denying climate change. Others can adopt the ecological discourse and the so-called ecofascism, which, after all, dates back to the times of the NSDAP and even earlier, when the myth of purity of blood and soil appeared. Even recently, the All-Polish Youth carried out some ecological actions in Pomerania. The stormtroopers movement, in turn, carried out anti-circus actions in defense of animals. Marcin Kornak wrote a lot about this topic, the appropriation of green ideas by neofascists and nationalists, e.g., in polemics in Zielone Brygady. And then Gliński was definitely on our side. But there have also been fusions of extreme ideas in Poland, symbolized by, for example, Remigiusz Okraska, who combines ecology with sympathy for the extreme right. I suspect you’re right that this may be one of the more important topics for the future. We can also add neo-pagan ethnoreligions that are developing in the face of the disintegration of the Catholic Church. And again, we have blood and soil because ethnoreligions have this element of worshiping pure-blooded ancestors and hostility towards migrants. In addition, there is Pan-Slavism and

the cult of ancient Slavs, often combined with sympathy for Putin's Russia. Let us add to this the "Europe of 100 Flags." Ethnoregionalism is not always an innocent civic Scottish or even Catalan nationalism, but something that may have a much more racist face, à la the Vlaams Belang. In Poland, this is looking too far ahead, but, for example, it may happen that some xenophobic or racist threads will appear within the framework of Silesian or Kashubian regionalism. After all, there was once a Goralenevolk. An activist of the neo-fascist music scene and an MMA fighter, Bujak, calls for the revival of the Yotvingian ethnos in Masuria, but these are pretty crazy ideas.

*Do you think these are real visions? Do we have anything to fear?*

Fascism can mutate and re-emerge in new forms. Fascists do not always have to exercise power to influence it directly. They take advantage of the confusion of values in the world and the sense of loss and fear in the modern world. In this sense, the threat is still real. The words "Never Again" do not lose their relevance.

Rafał Pankowski (born 1976) – cultural sociologist, political scientist, professor at Collegium Civitas. He was the first Pole to receive a scholarship from Eton College. He studied at the University of Oxford and the University of Warsaw. He is the author of the books: *Neofascism in Western Europe. Outline of the Ideology* (1998), *Racism and Popular Culture* (2006), and *The Populist Radical Right in Poland: The Patriots* (2010), as well as numerous articles published in Poland and abroad. Since 1996, deputy editor-in-chief of "Nigdy Więcej" magazine, co-founder of

the “Nigdy Więcej” Association, and coordinator of the UEFA Euro 2012 RESPECT Diversity educational program. He worked, among others, as an expert consultant in the OSCE Department of Tolerance and Non-Discrimination. He cooperated with many expert organizations and academic institutions, including: London’s Chatham House, the Vienna Institute of Human Sciences, and the Center for European Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.