

PUNISHMENT is not enough – we need to COUNTERACT

Interview with Katarzyna PIEKARSKA, who was the chairwoman of the Commission of Justice and Human Rights in the Sejm of the fourth term.

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As the racist behaviours have recently intensified, e.g. in Białystok, I would like to ask about your opinion on the reasons of such situations and what kinds of actions the government undertakes to counteract incidents of this type.

I think that the lack of an explicit reaction is in favour of such behaviours to grow. In some environments, hate speech has been present for years especially towards people of foreign nationality or ethnicity. Sometimes such behaviours turn to outrageous acts. Unfortunately, the reaction, if any, of both the police and the prosecutor's office appears to be insufficient or even bizarre. Suffice it to recall the issue exposed recently by Gazeta Wyborcza, in which the prosecutor saw some resemblance of the happiness symbol in the swastika and, therefore, he decided that this symbol should not be removed. That is a perfect example of the attitude of the prosecutor's office towards this kind of incidents. Whereas, hate speech and inciting others to national hatred is a crime precisely defined in the Penal Code as liable to punishment. Football matches are yet another example. I do not know why you can often find racist banners on the stands and there is no reaction to this, even though everybody sees them. For me, this is enough to stop the match. After all, we have 24-hour courts and the perpetrators should be immediately punished.

However, this is just one side of the coin. In order to prevent such incidents it is not enough to punish, but we also need to counteract. Education is very important here because when a child learns at school to be open to other cultures and people, there will probably be no such incidents in the future. When I was the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration, I was in charge of all issues concerning foreigners. At that time, we changed the law on foreigners because Poland, the country from which people emigrated, became the target country. I also started saying that it is crucial to prepare people that their chil-

dren would attend schools with children of different skin colours, we would have neighbours of different nationalities and we would meet such people more often on the streets.

I know that in Białystok there has been an interdisciplinary team set up, which target is to prevent such threats and to engage not only the police and the prosecutor's office but also local governments and schools in its actions. I am glad about that. As for my part, I would like to establish a similar team at the regional council of Mazowieckie region because it seems to me that such groups should be organized and they should operate in every region in Poland. Perhaps in Białystok risks are higher than elsewhere or maybe they have been particularly publicized there. However, I am afraid that they happen everywhere.

Is it possible for the government to influence local policies or local authorities in such situations? Are the local authorities in charge of making decisions about such behaviours or is it rather the case of top-down decisions?

Local governments play a very important role here as they are in charge of local schools. The government manages the official educational policy. The activity of the police is also influenced by governmental decisions. However, I believe that the local authorities of all kinds should join in the common fight against social pathologies and excesses. This should be the common action for the common goal.

As far as human rights violation in refugee centres is concerned, what actions should we take to prevent strikes and general dissatisfaction in those centres? In addition, what we need to do to help better integration of that community with local people?

Sometimes the integration is difficult but definitely possible, and we should all



"Brownbook" [Brunatna Księga] contains descriptions of hate crime incidents in Poland

strive for it using similar methods. For example, schools should aim for familiarizing children with ethnical diversity and other cultures. If it comes to human rights violation in refugee centres, I believe that we should be sensitive to every incident and we should examine it carefully. However, current regulations are unsatisfactory. There have always been mistakes and law abuse, nonetheless we should be able to recognize and counteract such violations. Non-governmental organizations, which manage various programs for integration of refugees and local communities, play a crucial role in prevention of human rights violation. What is more, there should be also training courses for office workers who are responsible for refugee welfare.

Does the government have any plans for setting up new centres as the number of people, who try to get refugee status in Poland, has recently risen?

I am afraid that there is no immigration policy and, sadly, I have not heard of any changes to come in relation to this problem. You should better ask politicians who are in charge of this issue. Personally, I think that we need to discuss the immigration policy and the principles of a related act. Years ago, I prepared a draft of such a document but Poland, at that time, was about to enter the EU. Today, we live in a different reality but we

should keep on drawing up a suitable act. Moreover, it is worth to continue working on the initiatives, which could be managed by local governments.

And, according to what you have said, we should start proper education at school.

Certainly, we should because the level of education the youth receives in schools influences the shape and condition of our society in the future. It will be either a xenophobic or an open one. Our everyday life shows a perfect image of the amount of work that we still have to do in this respect. ■

Translation: Marta Dubiel