



Poland: how, in spite of their anti-Russian rhetoric, PiS directed money to pro-Russians

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During PiS' years in power, public money were funneled to the party, the Church, and various far-right groups. Some of those that benefited were openly pro-Russian.

Millions of euros were awarded as grants awarded by a number of public institutions through the funds they managed: the Patriotic Fund, the Justice Fund, and the National Freedom Institute. Public money was also spent on wiretapping and the fight against LGBT. Half a year after Donald Tusk formed the government, Poles are slowly learning who Kaczyński's camp supported and for what purpose. One thing is certain: PiS treated state money like party money - funds for crime victims went to the election campaign, and research grants went to far-right, nationalist, anti-EU organizations to buy their support and favor.



From bankrupt to candidate for MP - how a hate speech specialist became PiS's ward

Documents are slowly being discovered proving the existence of a system of support for nationalist circles during the PiS rule by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and institutions related to it, in particular the Patriotic Fund and the National Freedom Institute.

During the PiS government, a river of public funds flowed to far-right organizations. Additionally, in the state institutions that awarded these grants and subsidies, there were people linked to nationalist organizations, and taxpayers' money went to people who published articles praising the fascist far-right and anti-Semites. Some of the most generous beneficiaries were organizations related to Robert Bąkiewicz, which received at least EUR 4 million.

Bąkiewicz was once one of the leading leaders of the National Radical Camp, ONR (in 2021, the Supreme Court found that ONR could be called a "fascist" organization), organizing, among others, activities against refugees and LGBT groups, and since 2016 the face of the Independence March (organized yearly on November 11th by far-right and ultra-nationalist parties and groups). The emotional states he publicly displays include rage (against leftism), hatred (against the enemies of the homeland) and contempt (against those who think differently). He denies climate change, and the main objective of his new party called Niepodległość (Independence) is to take Poland out of the EU.

He says of democracy that it is "one of the stupidest systems ever created by man." Of course, he is a devout Catholic - during the Women's Strike, which protested against the tightening of abortion law by PiS, he created the National Guard, to defend churches against possible attacks by women.

In the past, he ran a construction company that went bankrupt in 2011. So that the court would write off his seven million zloty debt (EUR 1.6 million), he separated from his wife (the divorce was only formal because they still lived together) and he testified in court that his wife asked for a divorce after he closed the business and accused him of "incompetence in running the business". Playing the loser businessman who lives with his parents and takes odd jobs has paid off for him - in 2016, the court wrote off the entire debt owed by the company. In 2021, he became a journalist of Media Narodowe (National Media), and then the editor-in-chief of the website - he created an online TV Media Narodowe, which started broadcasting on November 11, 2022. Three months later, the "Never Again" Association published a report on hate speech, as well as anti-Semitic and anti-Ukrainian conspiracy theories propagated on Bąkiewicz's Media Narodowe channel. After the publication of the report, the Media Narodowe channel was removed from the YouTube platform in February 2023 due to violation of the regulations. In September of the same year, he became PiS's candidate in parliamentary elections.

Millions of euros for supporting Andrzej Duda

Robert Bąkiewicz was not elected as an MP, but received generous subsidies during the PiS government.

On July 5, 2020, just before the second round of the presidential elections, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki announced the establishment of the Patriotic Fund, operated by the Institute of the Heritage of National Thought. "It will serve education, build patriotic attitudes, and support history enthusiasts," announced the head of government.

The real purpose of this announcement was political: to mobilize far-right circles to vote for Andrzej Duda in the clash with Rafał Trzaskowski from the Civic Platform. Duda won, and the government fulfilled its commitment: in 2021, the Patriotic Fund had as much as EUR 7 million in grants at its disposal. Andrzej Turkowski - former member of the board of the association organizing the Independence March - became the deputy director of the Heritage Institute, responsible for the operation of the Fund.

The regulations of the grant competition (today the websites regarding the competition are inactive) stipulate that experts may be persons "whose knowledge and professional experience guarantee proper performance of the entrusted task." They should also be impartial. Meanwhile, the list of experts included: Tomasz Panfil, a historian at the Institute of National Remembrance, who claimed that during World War II "the situation of Jews was not very bad" and they had more freedom than Poles. He was also an honorary member of the British association Ogniwo, accused of promoting neo-Nazi content. The group of experts deciding who to grant the money also included members of the All-Polish Youth (Młodzież Wszechpolska), a youth organization of a nationalist, Eurosceptic and extreme right-wing nature, which is also a co-organizer of the Independence March, as well as members of right-wing parties (PiS, Confederation, League of Polish Families) and employees of PiS-related media.

The grants were awarded to affiliated far-right organizations - here are some examples:

- The Andegavenum Institute of European Heritage Foundation received EUR 900,000. Bąkiewicz founded it in mid-June 2020, at a time when nationalists were reaching an agreement with the PiS camp regarding support for Andrzej Duda. Wojciech Golonka, Confederation's candidate in the 2019 parliamentary elections, became the president of the foundation. He calls homosexuals "deviants", the rainbow flag "a banner from hell", and the

Equality Parade a sight of "a gang of perverts pretending to be dogs or deviants dressed as women". Money from the Patriotic Fund was allocated to the publication of scientific works (including "Catholic Tradition for All: Monuments of Thought and Living Examples"), the Ministry of Culture supported the publication of books (mainly the works of the Lefebvrists: they praise the medieval crusades, criticize universal education, etc.). Andegavenum allocated funds for a series of lectures devoted to "Europe's identity and its intellectual heritage" on YouTube, among others, on the doctrine of the dictator António de Oliveira Salazar. The most frequently invited experts included Jacek Bartyzel, an anti-democratic monarchist and anti-Semite, and Adam Wielomski, a monarchist who calls Vladimir Putin a catechon, a defender of Christianity against the Antichrist.

- After Jarosław Kaczyński's call to defend churches, when protests against the tightening of abortion rights broke out in the fall of 2020, Robert Bąkiewicz founded the National Guard. Interestingly, this happened three weeks before the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling on abortion, which brought hundreds of thousands of women to the streets. And shortly before the Patriotic Fund received a 30 million zloty budget (EUR 7 million).
- The Fund awarded the Guard a grant of EUR 400,000 for "Safety and professionalism during the organization and conduct of patriotic and religious events - a necessary condition for consolidating cultural identity." Of this amount, a plot of land, a house, a farm building and several wooden camping houses near Warsaw were purchased. EUR 110,000 went to modernize this center. Additionally, EUR 50,000 was donated to the National Guard by the Prime Minister's Office.
- The Independence March Association, which Bąkiewicz led from 2017 to 2023, received EUR 400,000 for organizing the March.
- The organization uniting nationalist groups in the Siedlce region (in eastern Poland) received money from the National Freedom Institute and the Patriotic Fund - a total of over EUR 200,000. The Siedlce Patriotic Association was managed by Jacek Kamiński, a member of the Independence March Association.
- Other organizations, foundations and associations created by Bąkiewicz or run by his close associates received an additional one million euros. Among them, the National Media (Bąkiewicz was then the editor-in-chief), the Advocata Nostra Foundation (it was managed by the spokesman of the Independence March Association), the Milites Invictissimi Foundation (it was run by Bąkiewicz's collaborator Michał Piendyk), the "Faith and Tradition" association (founded by Mariusz Sarol, called Bąkiewicz's "right hand"), Good Council Foundation (Jerzy Wasiukiewicz, also a member of the management board of the Independence March Association, is a member of the foundation's management board) and Zabuże Foundation (founded by Paweł Kryszczak, member of the supervisory board of the National Media and electoral representative of Bąkiewicz's new Independent party).

Did PiS consciously supported openly pro-Russian organizations?

The new head of the Institute of the Heritage of National Thought, journalist and historian associated with the leftist (author of the best-selling book "People's History of Poland"), Adam Leszczyński, in an interview for OKO.press said that the audit of the Supreme Audit Office (NIK), which examined the Patriotic Fund, revealed a number of shortcomings, irregularities and abuse. "According to the Audit Office not only the procedures used by the Institute were defective, but they were even violated. (...) As much as 60% of the grants were allocated incorrectly. It is striking that the Institute did not require declarations of no conflict of interest from those awarding grants and grants were allocated by experts associated with the beneficiaries. A group of organizations associated with Robert Bąkiewicz was particularly privileged. They were allowed, for example, to correct already submitted applications," said Leszczyński. "The NIK's audit shows that experts were selected according to political and ideological criteria. Some grants were awarded simply by a single decision of the Institute's director. The regulations gave director such an emergency option, but according to the auditors, it happened far too often.

The institute was headed by former PiS senator Jan Żaryn. He is a eulogist of pre-war Polish nationalism and national radicalism. He published, among others, interviews with soldiers of the Świętokrzyska Brigade accused of collaboration with the Third Reich and articles whitewashing it. The head of the publishing department at the Institute was Jakub Siemiątkowski, the founder and editor of the neofascist magazine "Szturm". On the program council, alongside people once associated with PiS (Marek Jurek, Mieczysław Ryba), there was a nationalist and anti-Semite, co-author of the Christians letter to Putin, Marian Barański. "The entire imperialist West, headed by the American administration, the Kiev junta and political puppets from Poland, has Ukrainian blood on its hands," Barański wrote.

Can we therefore assume that PiS consciously supported not only anti-democratic, anti-EU, anti-Semitic, homophobic, neo-Nazi and anti-Ukrainian organizations, but also openly pro-Russian ones? We have to be careful here (many investigations are still ongoing), but certainly some of the money from the state flowed to organizations in which people (e.g. from the circle of MP Grzegorz Braun) operated and held managerial positions, and who do not hide their pro-Russian views, blaming Ukraine and NATO for Russia's aggression. Dr. Łukasz Drozda, political scientist from the University of Warsaw, author of the book "Urban fears. 15-minute city, 5G and other monsters" notes that "not every person who says things consistent with the propaganda of the Russian Federation is its agent." They may simply want to use it cynically - it simply pays off to scare people with the EU, homosexuals, war and various conspiracy theories. And it's not always about political capital, but more and more often about purely economic capital. In just three years (four editions of grant competitions), the Patriotic Fund spent EUR 23.5 million and most of this money went to dozens of interconnected far-right organizations, some openly pro-Russian (60% of the applications that received funding were unfairly assessed for their formal and substantive aspects; 40% of the funds transferred from the Fund were allocated to the purchase of real estate).

This story reveals two issues: on the one hand, it shows how the right-wing PiS government has been trying hard in recent years to exploit the radical electorate, regardless of the consequences. On the other hand, it shows the huge risk of such action – because it allows us to easily associate leading mainstream politicians with pro-Russian slogans of the far-right. Which in itself is valuable information for observers of Polish politics, because as it turns out once again, pro-Kremlin sympathies are quite often verbalized in public.

M. Kukawski: "Poland: how, in spite of their anti-Russian rhetoric, PiS directed money to pro-Russians". Veridica.ro, 24.06.2024.

<https://www.veridica.ro/en/editorials/poland-how-in-spite-of-their-anti-russian-rhetoric-pis-directed-money-to-pro-russians>