

Poles to the right of Jarosław Kaczyński

The Law and Justice Party is nurturing right-wing movements it may not be able to control.

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WARSAW — Poland's youthful ultra-nationalists helped Law and Justice (PiS) take power last year. Their growing self-assurance and belligerence now threatens to turn them from useful allies to rivals.

PiS has turned a blind eye to the activities of the likes of the All-Polish Youth and the National Radical Camp (ONR) — which were banned for decades before the fall of communism in 1989 — to the dismay of mainstream parties like the Centrist opposition Civic Platform, which this week asked Poland's prosecutor general to outlaw the ONR for propagating fascism.

The complaint from opposition MPs came in response to incidents at the reburial on August 28 of two resistance fighters murdered by the communists after the war. At the funeral, attended by the president and prime minister, hundreds of young nationalists held up smoking flares — the traditional gesture of the soccer hooligans who form a key part of the nationalist base.

Green ONR flags rippled in the background as PiS-affiliated President Andrzej Duda made his way to a Gdańsk church for the reburial mass. Nationalists booed and harassed a handful of activists from the Committee for the Defense of Democracy (KOD), a Centrist grouping that has staged anti-government street protests in recent months.

In practical terms, too, the PiS government has made it easier for the ultra-nationalists to operate, like removing ONR's symbol from a guide to hate crimes.

Lech Wałęsa, the historic leader of the Solidarity labor union and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, was greeted with cries of "traitor" and "death to the country's enemies."

Paweł Olszewski, one of the opposition MPs who filed the complaint, said such incidents were not entirely new, but previously "the response of the authorities was much more severe."

"That changed after the [2015] parliamentary elections," he told Onet, a news portal. "Now the actions of the ONR are treated with a wink."

In response, Elżbieta Witek, chief of staff to Prime Minister Beata Szydło, told reporters, "Above all, I value those who are patriots."

In last October's parliamentary election, PiS had the support of a quarter of voters aged 18-29, much better than its past performance with that age bracket. Not all of those voters were nationalists or right-wingers, but those groupings have become part of PiS's support base.

At the funeral, Duda praised the ultras for honoring Poland's past, saying: "In order to be strong, in order to nurture a new generation, a country has to have heroes." Interior Minister Mariusz Błaszczak said the presence of activists from the KOD was a "provocation."

Polish nationalists, right wing supporters and ultra-catholic activists demonstrate to support the government | Wojtek Radwanski/AFP via Getty Images

In practical terms, too, the PiS government has made it easier for the ultra-nationalists to operate. In a review of police training materials conducted by the interior ministry in June, the ONR's symbol — a hand gripping a sword — was removed from a guide to hate crimes.

When the ONR announced its intention to patrol the streets of the city of Łódź to “protect the Polish people against migrants,” regional governor Zbigniew Rau from the PiS defended them, saying, “If young people want to do something for the common good and they are concerned that [public] safety could be in danger, then it is the kind of capital on which we can build.”

White Catholics

Nationalist sentiment in Poland has surged thanks to a perceived lack of economic opportunity at home, resentment at often menial and unfulfilling work abroad, and widespread rejection of European Union demands for Poland to take in asylum seekers during the refugee crisis.

In response, the PiS has cultivated new national heroes — in this case, the “cursed soldiers” who resisted the Soviet-backed communist regime after the war and who have been traditionally celebrated by the far-right as embodying a bloodier tradition of national resistance.

That helps PiS discredit the traditional historic narrative that Poland regained its independence in 1989 thanks to the Solidarity labor union and tedious talks with the communist government.

Now the “cursed soldiers” have gone mainstream. The PiS government has staged commemorations, granted state funerals to fighters whose remains have been identified, organized cursed soldier “fun runs” for young patriots, and used actors to re-stage the wedding of the executed army officer Witold Pilecki.

But that's created an opening for militant groups far to the right of PiS. It “allows the radical nationalists to present themselves as the representatives of all genuine Polish patriots,” said Rafał Wnuk, a historian at the Polish Academy of Humanities.

The problem for Jarosław Kaczyński, the 67-year-old leader of PiS, is that his party's core electorate is older, pious Catholics from the poorer reaches of eastern Poland, who may have been thankful for nationalist support in last year's parliamentary and presidential elections, but now struggle to keep up with them.

Radical young Poles embrace what Rafał Pankowski, a scholar and anti-racism campaigner based at Warsaw's Collegium Civitas, calls “the far-right's ethno-religious understanding of what it means to be Polish” — in other words, that true Poles are white Catholics.

OK to be different

“If you look at the football stadiums, if you look online, if you look at the streets, if you look at fashion, this kind of ‘new nationalism’ has been growing for some time,” said Pankowski.

He pointed out a sharp rise in attendance at the annual March for Independence organized by the ONR and All-Polish Youth, where marchers carried fascist symbols and demanded a “White, Catholic Europe.”

Roman Giertych, who rebuilt the All-Polish Youth in the 1990s and was an ally of PiS before breaking with the party's leader, said that “when it comes to the politics of the street, Kaczyński recognizes them, not the liberal opposition, as the most important danger.”

For the youthful nationalists, the question of whether the ruling party is encouraging them or trying to co-opt them is less important than their ability to take control of the national narrative.

That appears to chime with the nationalists' own view of their increasing importance. All-Polish Youth's leader Bartosz Berk called his movement "the only group in Poland that can be active both on the streets of Polish cities and in the parliament; at universities and in the stadiums."

Tomasz Kalinowski, a spokesman for the ONR, said "any insinuation that there is cooperation between the ONR and the government can only be treated ironically."

"Our actions and slogans also criticize PiS. For example, we don't like that party's approach to Catholicism," Kalinowski told the news portal WP.

For the youthful nationalists, the question of whether the ruling party is encouraging them or trying to co-opt them is less important than their ability to take control of the national narrative. That's represented by honoring the "cursed soldiers" of the 1940s, who were "fighting for a Catholic Poland, not a liberal democracy," said Krzysztof Bosak, vice president of the National Movement, a new nationalist coalition.

"We had a situation in Poland where for 20 years we were pushed to change the national culture to reach so-called 'European standards,'" said Bosak. "But this point of view has completely collapsed — people understand that we can be different, and that's OK."

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