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Mapping the field of turbulent changes around the issue
of migration in Poland

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The issue of migration had become highly politicized in Poland already before the 2015 elections. The neoconservative Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS*) party made it one of the key topics in the electoral campaign both for the parliamentary and for the presidential elections, both of which the party won. Poland has switched from a country with the highest acceptance rate of refugees in the EU to the one with the lowest rate within about a year.¹ The narrative about masses of refugees in Poland and at its borders threatening Polish culture, civilization and identity started to gather momentum and has provoked numerous intended and unintended consequences, political and social.

On the one hand such statements and politics have sparked an increase in hate speech and incidents, and violent actions.² On the other, as a reaction, there is an observable awakening of the civil society in Poland through more intensified actions of various groups and organizations. Both are outcomes of the situation in which the government and the ruling party take a strong and negative stance on the issue of migrants and refugees. At the same time, anti-racist activism has been instrumentalized as a tool for anti-government struggles, involving new actors into the struggle. The new alliances forged after 2015 are more than interesting and will be described below, based on the empirical research conducted for a comparative research project on anti-racist contention in the Baltic Sea region.³ I will show particularly the nature of cooperation between grassroots groups (often radical) and the more moderate NGOs, activists (of both stripes) and civil servants as well as politicians; and here point to the specific role of municipalities and the city-level.

¹ See <http://uchodzcy.info/infos/stosunek-polakow-do-uchodzcow/> and <https://www.rp.pl/Uchodzcy/306289893-Sondaz-Czy-Polska-powinna-przyjac-uchodzcow.html> for an overview. Accessed: 10-03-2021.

² Cf. nigdywiecej.org/brunatna-ksiega – a compendium of racist and hate-motivated attacks in Poland compiled by one of the Polish anti-racist NGO, Nigdy Więcej.

³ Research project ‘Anti-racist contentions in the Baltic Sea region—a study of anti-racist activists’ interplay with politicians and civil servants’ conducted in the years 2017–2020 financed by The Baltic Sea Foundation.

1 The changes in the political system

In April 2016 Prime Minister Beata Szydło abolished the Council for the Prevention of Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, established in 2011 as a subsidiary body for the Council of Ministers, chaired by the Government Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment. Its work consisted primarily in planning, coordinating, and evaluating the activities of government administration bodies and ensuring their cooperation with local governments in the fight against racism, xenophobia, and intolerance.

In November 2016, Mariusz Błaszczak, minister of Interior Affairs in the government led by the Law and Justice party, disbanded the Team for the Protection of Human Rights previously functioning within the police structures. The government also decided to discontinue internal education of police forces on racism and discrimination, on the basis of 'negatively portraying patriotic groups and their emblems' when presenting symbols of far-right groups, such as the triskelion (a three-arm swastika, used by South African white supremacists), the Celtic cross, or the Black Sun (Nazi symbol, *Schwarze Sonne*).

Another structural context is the existence of movements' allies in mainstream politics. In the period 2015–2019 the cooperation between activists and politicians looked different than nowadays, as there was no left-wing party in the Polish parliament. The Left party – a natural ally of progressive grassroots groups – became an ally in extra-parliamentary politics. This allowed left-wing party members to remain active on the streets and in grassroots groups as well as include such actions in the programme of the Left party.

2 Anti-racist struggles in the cities

The politics of anti-racist struggles in Poland should be analysed on different levels, national and local. Big cities in Poland are the stronghold of the liberal and the left opposition. In the recent local elections, none of the major cities elected a right-wing president or mayor, and the migrant/refugee policies have been used as one of the tools of anti-government struggles of the local municipalities. Some—like the mayor of Gdańsk, Paweł Adamowicz—organized their own anti-racist and/or antifascist protests, others—like Poznań's mayor, Jacek Jaśkowiak—showed up at and joined an antiracist demonstration organized by anarchists. Both instances were criticized by the activists deeply rooted in antiracist activism. The second—national—level relates not only to the messages sent by the politicians of the ruling party. Because of the politicization of various aspects of public life and the way of functioning of agencies and state offices, result in structural changes that affect the activism of all types of actors.

In Gdańsk, the Immigrant Integration Model was established in May 2015 in order to assess the available resources and capabilities to support the immigrants in Gdansk, and to identify their key needs and problems. It concerned efforts in various areas of policy-making and social services, including education, healthcare, social security, public security, labour market, housing, culture, and sports.

'Gdańsk has always been a welcoming multicultural city. It has been a destination for immigrants and a home to people from all around the world who chose it as a place to pursue their dreams and aspirations. Gdansk is a proof that cities need migrants to develop.'

said the late Mayor of Gdańsk, Paweł Adamowicz in March 2016 during a conference inaugurating the Immigrant Integration Model (Muszel, forthcoming).

This shows that pro-migrant and anti-racist policies became a tool for local authorities to organize an anti-government struggles. However, grassroots activists see this shift with reservations. When Paweł Adamowicz organized an ‘antifascist demonstration’ in Gdańsk against the policies of the government, local antifascist activists openly ignored and criticized the event:

This is not true antifascism—they said—you cannot be an antifascist and do not care about the people with housing needs, with disabilities, the excluded ones. And the EU flags handed out there... what has that to do with antifascism? If you look at the border policies of the EU, it’s pretty far from antifascism.

3 Changing relations between activists

There is, however, an observable change in relations between grassroots activists and other types of actors. Previously there were numerous tensions between activists from grassroots groups (more often leaning to the radical side) and NGO activists (usually more moderate in their claims and repertoires of action). Grassroots activists accused the moderate NGO members of ‘not doing politics in a serious way’ and ‘becoming sell-outs for the system’ (for more, see Piotrowski, 2009), conversely, NGO members criticized radical activists for politicization of their claims.

The ‘true’ activists do not seem to appreciate the developments bringing various factions (radical and moderate) and different actors (grassroots activists and civil servants and politicians) together. As one of the activists I have spoken with, an anarchist and a squatter involved for many years in pro-migrant/refugee initiatives (even helped refugees on the ‘Balkan Trail’) said:

For me the people from NGOs are there, because for them it’s a job, like any other job. When the [political] climate is in favour of migrants, they support migrants, if the climate turns to kittens, they do things for and around kittens. For us, it’s a calling, we help the migrants, not because its popular, we’re helping them, because it’s our struggle to abolish borders, abolish power and authority and to change society.

Observing the recent changes in Polish civil society and social activism, sociologist and activist Elżbieta Korolczuk (2017, p. 4) writes: ‘The current situation can bring good results, because it makes us finally question the fiction of the existence of civil society, which operates in isolation from politics, has no political agenda and is ideologically homogeneous.’ In previous analyses, the majority of politically oriented actions were excluded from the civil society discourse as being actions of social movements, advocacy groups and the like. However, with the politicization of more and more areas of life and activities (such as the education system, environmental issues, and topics connected to identity), this juxtaposition fails to accurately describe the current state of affairs.

With the high politicization of the (occasionally often non-political) actions of grassroots activists and NGOs, the obvious question arising is how actors more involved in politics are reflecting upon these changes. The openness of the political system and the existence of potential allies within the system is a key to success of the activists, according

to the concept of political opportunity structures approach. The growing cooperation between the activists and politicians and the changes in the rules of this cooperation suggest that the root of the changing nature of anti-racist activism lies in the structural context in which the movements operate. This also suggests that in many cases anti-racism is not part of the groups' DNA but is used instrumentally to achieve other goals or in everyday political struggle. This resulted among others in withdrawing from the no-logo-rule (no party and group banners, flags or colours at demonstrations), previously a *sine qua non* condition for any movement-party cooperation.

Overall, the Polish activists are sceptical about co-operating with political parties during protests. In particular, they see a risk that the political parties gain further political capital from such co-organized events, while the activists end up doing a disproportionate amount of the grass-roots level work. As I wrote elsewhere (Piotrowski & Wennerhag, 2015), Paweł, an activist of the Anarchist Federation, recalls a meeting about such a cooperation on 'the People's March' (*Marsz Ludności*). It had been decided that a 'no logo' strategy should be employed, meaning that flags or banners of the co-operating groups should not be displayed during the demonstration, and instead only a common 'logo' for the event should be used:

And they resisted it all the time and said that they wanted banners [...]. Well, after discussing it at our meeting, next time we went, and I said, 'ok, let's do it "logo"'. They breathed a sigh of relief. But I said, 'there are a hundred of us and every one of us will take a flag.' And the reaction was 'Oh no!' [...] 'But if you come in your hundreds it's a problem!' That's when it turned out that in the end they wanted 'no logo,' and it was 'no logo.'

In Poland grassroots activists have enforced the 'no logo' rule both during smaller events and within broader coalitions as, for instance, happened during the anti-ACTA protests of early 2012. This approach limits the party access to the microphone during the protests because the activists suspect party members of using their presence at a street demonstration to promote their own party.

Such an approach of grassroots activists does not seem to change much over time, however, in the case of strong polarization of the political scene, certain topics, and growing repression from the police and counter-movements, members of political parties are more and more accepted at demonstrations organized by grassroots activists or—in particular, the Left party—organize their events and invite activists to join. This can be a result of a generational turnaround within the ranks of the Polish Left party, many of whose MPs have activist experience in grassroots groups.

However, on the other hand – politicians in this case – are not happy with the collaboration with grassroots activists either. As one of the former leaders of the Left party, a member of its National Council, told me:

We went to all of these demonstrations supporting the migrants, refugees, against racism and fascism. We co-organized many of them, we also had all the necessary equipment, like the megaphones. But sometimes the radicals—mostly anarchists—were pushing for the 'no logo' rule: no party colours, no party or group banners. And we agreed to that, because it was more important to do something together, so we agreed on those terms. From today's perspective I think we should have been more persuasive in promoting our position and to show up at the demonstrations with our

flags and banners. Especially that we incorporated policies against racism, prejudice, and pro-migrant and refugee points into our programme.

4 Conclusion

A few issues should emerge from this note that are worth stressing. Firstly, it is the instrumentalization of anti-racism as part of party-politics opposing the current regime in Poland and therefore adapting it to this purpose that includes other political parties but also municipal politicians and civil servants. Opposing the anti-immigrant and anti-refugee narrative and politics of the authorities brings issues of anti-racism into mainstream debates and internalises it within society and politics. Secondly, the observed reconfigurations within the civil society sector point to more intersections between civil society actors and state/municipal institutions, in particular when these are a self-positioned opposition to the current regime. There is an observable increase in cooperation between moderate and radical activists, but also between activists, (opposition) politicians and civil servants. Thirdly, the changes within the agenda of anti-racist organizations that are a reaction to the changing Political and Discursive Opportunity Structures result in processes observed in other movements in Poland: growing intersectionality of movements and issues and more inclusive programmes and claims.

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