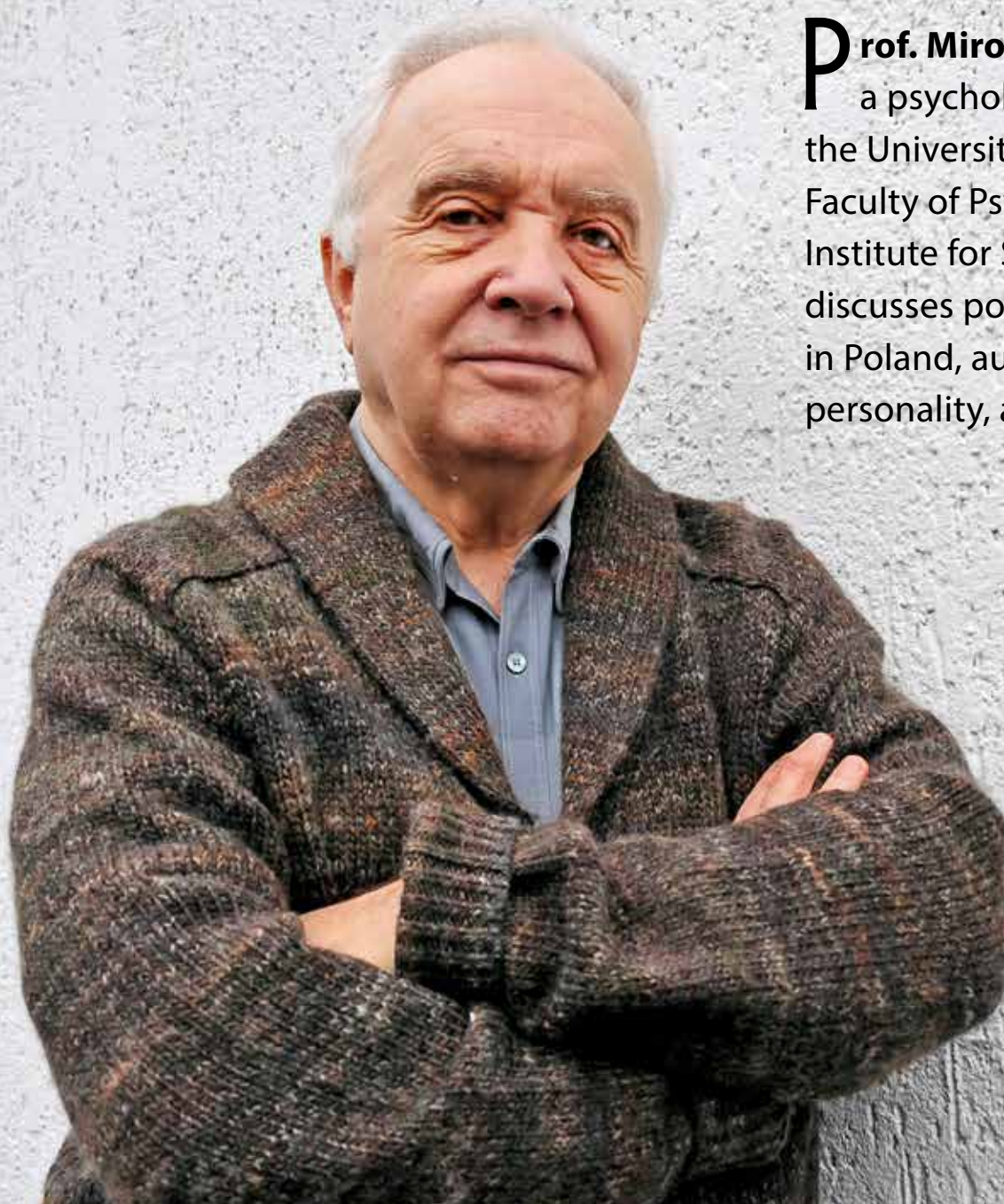


# DIFFERENCES IN MORAL FOUNDATIONS

**P**rof. Mirosław Kofta,  
a psychologist from  
the University of Warsaw's  
Faculty of Psychology and  
Institute for Social Studies,  
discusses political change  
in Poland, authoritarian  
personality, and civil society.



## POLITICAL CHANGE IN POLAND

**ACADEMIA: A significant shift has taken place in Poland: right-wing and conservative parties now hold a majority in parliament. How would social psychologists describe what has happened?**

MIROSLAW KOFTA: As a social psychologist, I look at these changes from a different perspective than political scientists, sociologists, or historians. I'm interested not so much in the social system as in what people think and feel, what attitudes they have, and what ideologies they hold.

**Does this also include the concept of authoritarian personality, developed by Theodor Adorno on the basis of Erich Fromm's earlier writings?**

Yes. Shortly after World War II, the German philosopher and sociologist Theodor Adorno, together with a group of researchers, sought to explore the psychological determinants of tendencies to accept non-democratic regimes. Their efforts led to the discovery of a set of traits that make up what is referred to as authoritarian personality. The most important of these is authoritarian submission, but there is also anti-intraception, or reluctance to explore one's own or other people's motivations, a pessimistic vision of human nature, and contempt for ethnic minorities. Else Frenkel-Brunswik, a member of Adorno's team, also discovered that those traits were accompanied by intolerance of ambiguity as a characteristic of the mind that strives to form fast, simple, and unambiguous judgements of the world, people, and objects.

In the 1970s, however, researchers realized that the concept was too broad. That was when Robert Altemeyer postulated the concept of right-wing authoritarianism as a personality trait and proposed a popular questionnaire to measure it. Somewhat later, Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto pointed out that there was yet another aspect of "old" authoritarianism that this new notion failed to embrace, namely social dominance orientation. In an attempt to link together these two theoretical constructs, John Duckitt, a psychologist from New Zealand, proposed a dual-process theory that saw authoritarianism and social dominance orientation as two complementary yet distinct dimensions of socio-political attitudes.

How do they differ from each other? Social dominance orientation is a way of thinking typical of people who see the world as a Darwinian jungle where each group and each person fights for survival and superiority over others. Such individuals believe that hierarchies are natural ways to organize life in society: some people are at the top, others at the bottom, and that is a good thing. Right-wing authoritarianism, in turn, is a combination of three attitudes: authoritarian submission (the tendency to demonstrate mindless, mechanical obedience to those regarded as authorities – individuals who hold higher positions in a hierarchy, leaders), authoritarian aggression (aversion and hostility towards outgroups or those who violate the ingroup rules),

and conventionalism (strong adherence to conventional rules, principles, forms of social life, and moral standards as well as resistance to change). In this context, some researchers refer to authoritarian individuals as "watchdogs of morality."

**What do you mean by that?**

Psychologists once thought of authoritarians as terrible people who hated everyone and everything. As Piotr Radkiewicz from the PAS Institute of Psychology wrote in his monograph *Autorytaryzm a brzytwa Ockhama* ["Authoritarianism and Ockham's Scissor"], today they are starting to see them as "individuals with good intentions," as watchdogs of the stability of the system and adherence to the rules of social coexistence. Importantly, authoritarians perceive almost everything as a moral issue. That's why they are averse and hostile towards outgroups – those whose behavior is somehow different from what they expect to be "normal," because they come from different cultures. Authoritarians also have a very negative attitude towards members of their own group who break conventional rules: those who undermine the immutable nature of the world, its order and predictability, thus threatening their sense of security. Chaos and unpredictability are exactly what authoritarians fear most. Individuals who score high in social dominance orientation also demonstrate a greater sensitivity to threats yet the source of these threats lies elsewhere, namely in competition from others who are also struggling for survival, position, authority, and power. For that reason, people with high social dominance orientation are constantly caught in the crossfire of tensions and conflicts. The psychological roots of the latter attitude are likewise different than those of authoritarianism: according to Duckitt, they are linked in particular to a lack of empathy, to what is referred to as tough-minded personality.

**Do politicians have this?**

I suppose so. Politicians who try to introduce authoritarian social solutions usually cynically play upon people's feelings, take advantage of the public moods – they will promise the earth just to come to power or acquire a greater share of it. If we would try to describe their personality preference, it would be social dominance orientation rather than authoritarianism. The people I talked about earlier – ordinary people with conservative and authoritarian tendencies – find certain slogans and promises appealing. They want a return to traditional values and social forms. They fear change, because it brings uncertainty, which they find painful. They dislike not only violations of the law but also behavior that is at odds with the rules accepted in traditional society (including religious norms). They come up against some "very strange things" like feminists, homosexuals, environmentalists, vegetarians, and other groups behaving in a bizarre way, which may cause a sense of fear. They find such behavior indeed very odd.

**Prof. Mirosław Kofta**

is head of the Department of the Psychology of Personality and director of the Center for Research on Prejudice at the University of Warsaw's Faculty of Psychology. His research examines stereotypes and prejudice in intergroup relations (including conspiracy theories and antisemitism). He has authored and coauthored numerous publications, including *Poza stereotypy. Dehumanizacja i esencjalizm w postrzeganiu grup społecznych* ["Beyond Stereotypes: Dehumanization and Essentialism in Group Perception"] (Scholar, 2016).





#### Is that why they have the tendency to moralize?

Yes. Such tendencies were observed in studies in the psychology of morality conducted by Jonathan Haidt, who studied political liberalism and conservatism. He described a set of basic moral foundations, guiding principles for people in various cultures. These foundations include fairness, care (for others), liberty, authority, loyalty (or ingroup), and sanctity. Haidt's studies revealed that people with liberal and conservative views fundamentally differ in one respect. Liberals found three of these foundations important (fairness, care, and liberty); however, they believe that other issues should be left to individual preferences. In other words, if someone believes in God, this is his or her business. In contrast, for those with conservative and rightist political leanings, all the foundations appear to be important. To make a long story short, the latter live in a world in which they are inclined to moralize almost any behavior.

Conservatives can be found everywhere in the world. In Poland, however, there are additional factors that make conservatism take on strongly authoritarian undertones: in my opinion, freedom is no longer valued by a majority of the conservatives in our country, for two reasons. First of all, today's Poland is still a culturally closed country, probably one of the ethnically most homogenous countries in the EU. For that, we have very little experience with cultural diversity (the level of xenophobia is rather high) and with new cultural trends from the West, stressing individual freedom of choice as a fundamental value, as well. Secondly, Poland's democratic traditions are young and fragile: the most prominent figure in the modern history of Poland, Józef Piłsudski, who is greatly admired by almost everyone, was an autocrat who staged a coup d'état to abolish democracy.

#### Does this mean that the scenario that materialized after the October 2015 elections was par for the course?

To a certain degree, yes. Aside from certain special events, such as the ineptitude of the left wing, as a result of which no left-wing party made it into parliament, the crucial issue here is the rather high initial level of xenophobia and cultural autarkia. In addition, politicians from Law and Justice (PiS) skillfully took advantage of the difficult situation with refugees and job migrants in Western Europe and managed to persuade some voters that such people posed a real threat to our existence, security, and ethnic identity, maybe even sovereignty, because Brussels was trying to impose certain quotas on us that we didn't want. All these things led to growing support for PiS, especially as many people in Poland are not very well-versed in what is happening in the world. People read very few books; we are at the tail end of Europe in this respect. This fact may play a certain additional role, because people who read very little and look for simple messages on the Internet may be more susceptible to populist propaganda and may fail to notice some of its primitive aspects or the simple tricks it uses. Other important factor of our "authoritarian political shift" seems to be the emergence of the "Smolensk religion," the movement that Jarosław Kaczyński has formed around that tragic event, which has emerged to be the ideological core of the PiS's new political strategy. As it turned out, that worked, because some people, maybe not too many, do believe that was an assassination. As we know, Defense Minister Macierewicz is continually rehearsing this issue and recent surveys show that belief in the Smolensk conspiracy is again on the rise.

#### The conjunction fallacy

occurs when people estimate the odds of two uncertain events happening together as greater than the probability of either event happening alone, despite the former being in reality lower (the result of the multiplication of probabilities). This frequent fallacy was discovered by Daniel Kahneman 40 years ago.

## POLITICAL CHANGE IN POLAND

### Is belief in conspiracy theories linked to authoritarianism?

Research done by Dr. Monika Grzesiak-Feldman from the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Warsaw supports this view. She examined what personality traits make people more prone to accept conspiracy theories by measuring the level of approval for the conspiracy explanation of the Smolensk air crash, the conspiracy theory of Jews, and the conspiracy mentality (the tendency to view the whole social world in conspiracy terms). A series of surveys on various samples (students as well as a nationwide representative sample of the Polish population) revealed that right-wing authoritarianism was a powerful personality predictor of conspiracy-minded thinking. As it turned out, paranoid tendencies, or tendencies to have delusional thoughts, were yet another predictor of conspiracy-minded thinking that was independent of authoritarianism.

There are also other interesting studies. In 2013, for example, British psychologist Viren Swami examined links between the degree of rational thinking and acceptance of conspiracy theories. In Swami's studies, one indicator of rationality was resistance to the conjunction fallacy (see sidebar on previous page). He demonstrated that those more inclined to commit the fallacy, or those who think less rationally, are more likely to believe in various conspiracy theories.

### Some members of society believe in the "Smolensk conspiracy," others argue that we are witnessing an attack on democracy.

What we are witnessing is not merely the seizure of power by a conservative, right-wing camp. It is a seizure of power that is accompanied by attempts to stage a conservative revolution involving elements of both symbolical and institutional violence. This ruling camp has no respect for existing democratic institutions or the democratic order. Its consecutive actions demonstrate that it wants to change the system of government using force, without amending the Constitution. Many people support that; they relinquish control of their lives to a charismatic leader who knows better, thinks 20 years ahead, and is seen as the embodiment of wisdom, even ascribed with the attributes of a higher being.

### Does this mean that we are witnessing what Erich Fromm described as an escape from freedom?

Yes, this is very likely. Of course, it is hard to understand how an authoritarian about-face has been possible in a country that has been developing liberal democracy for 25 years. The way I see this is that first of all, this modern democracy was introduced in Poland top-down by intellectual, social, and political elites, whose members took ready models from the Western political culture. Its critical ingredient is the division of powers, which means the checks and balances of the judicial branch, for example the Constitutional Tribunal, over the leg-

islative and the executive. My feeling is that these ideas were not fully understood and assimilated by the "ordinary people." Secondly, sociologists repeatedly warn that the level of civic engagement in Poland remains very low, there are very few grassroots initiatives, and non-governmental organizations are relatively poorly developed. Even participation in political life looks bad in Poland: there is a striking difference between the number of party members in Poland and in the social democratic or Christian democratic parties in Germany. The Civic Platform (PO) has around 60,000 members, around half of which are active, compared to the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), which has several hundred thousand activists. In Poland, parties are more comprised of core personnel, whereas most people are not directly involved in any public activity, maybe except for the rapidly growing demonstrations organized by the Committee for the Defense of Democracy (KOD), which proved a very interesting and popular idea. Certainly, the Poles can organize themselves, take steps together to the benefit of the whole of the group, but only in response

Conservatism in Poland has taken on strongly authoritarian undertones: **freedom is no longer a value** to most of the conservatives in our country.

to a serious threat to their collective existence. Thirdly and finally, modern democracy is not fully understandable to broad groups of people. I think a lot of people did not even know the Constitutional Tribunal existed until the conflict broke out, whereas others could not differentiate it from the Supreme Court or the State Tribunal. Even so, I have the impression that recent events have offered us a crash course in civic education: people are increasingly aware of how the political system operates in Poland, what it depends on, and what significance the Constitutional Tribunal has. That's because it is hard to overlook the fact that unconstitutional acts of legislation are being enacted at a very rapid pace. Such laws give practically unlimited power to one person, for example in the context of the prosecution apparatus. No one in Europe has such power. This is dictatorship.

### Let's pause for a brief moment and discuss the KOD. What is the public support for this movement indicative of?

I believe the KOD is an echo of the first Solidarity movement. I can see that when I watch people who take part in the demonstrations, they are the old guard. We can see a snowball effect, with young people joining in and the movement developing, not only in re-

sponse to a serious threat to our future, but also in order to advance pro-social goals, to notice the common good, to do something for others, although such involvement in Poland is relatively low. Even in Church. American parishes are supported by a huge number of non-government organizations that engage people in various sports, development, cultural, and welfare activities or the promotion of health.

## Poland's liberal democracy has pushed young people to the margin, turning them into **pariahs of the new order.**

### **Older generations may fail to understand democracy, because they lived in communist-era Poland for a long time, but the young voted for the PiS and Kukiz'15, too.**

One of the factors behind that was undoubtedly disappointment with the PO government, which did ensure economic growth and was excellent at absorbing the EU funds to develop infrastructure, but in a sense forgot about young people who worked under so-called "junk contracts," which offer little job security. Charitably put, it made a very serious political mistake by marginalizing a very large group of people who not only earned very little and couldn't save for their retirement or take mortgage loans but also couldn't form or join trade unions and fight for their interests. Marginalized by Poland's liberal democracy, these people were undoubtedly made pariahs of the new order, the new, ideal world created by the PO. Also, its politicians failed to notice the fact that over 90% of men don't pay child support. In Germany, this rate stands at 20%, in Sweden at 10%. We've been told recently that the PiS intends to address this issue. Admittedly, the PiS notices certain real problems that people have, also such issues as the very low income tax threshold, which virtually pushes low-income workers into poverty. Consequently, the party's success is a result of not only what is primitive (yet effective) political propaganda but also a certain actual pro-social orientation that attracts voters.

### **But a pro-social orientation is the domain of the left wing.**

It is indeed. But where was the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD)? Its leader Leszek Miller once supported the idea of a flat tax rate, but never managed to put it into effect. No left-wing party in the world promotes the introduction of the flat tax rate, because this runs fundamentally against left-wing ideals. This may be why we are in this curious situation in which only right-wing and centrist groups are represented in Poland's parliament. Such

a situation would be impossible in any mature democracy. But it has nevertheless happened in Poland.

### **Things appeared to be heading in a decent direction.**

In a sense, you are right, because the approval ratings of ruling parties were patchy. Of course, there was mass support for the general change of the system of government in 1989. The Freedom Union (UW) and its different variants ruled for many years, although support for the party never exceeded 15%. Then, suddenly, the SLD took 41% of the vote. The PO had similar ratings, too, which was largely because of Donald Tusk's exceptional political talent. He left the UW as a dissident, taking a small group of people with him, and founded a party that eventually won over 40% of the vote in the elections. But what we are witnessing now may be...

### **... a political talent of a different sort.**

I fear it may be rather a dark force.

### **The Constitutional Tribunal has been paralyzed and the ruling party controls the public media...**

That's true, but we should pay attention to the Venice Commission's clearly negative opinion about the changes in the Constitutional Tribunal proposed by the PiS. Despite what representatives of the ruling camp are saying, this opinion cannot be ignored. The only member-country of the Council of Europe to have done so was Putin's Russia. What happens next? If the ruling politicians insist that this is just an opinion that has no significance, they will be surprised to see further consequences. That decision was forwarded to the European Parliament and to the European Commission, which launched the first step of the rule of law procedure against Poland. Step two involves writing recommendations. That has not happened, but this possibility is being considered. Step three means excluding the country from voting in the European Council, which in fact means sending us to the sin bin. Aside from that, the Americans are making more and more forceful comments on Polish issues. Apparently, we care about the Americans, NATO and its defense system, and we want the NATO summit to proceed without interruption, which should help us obtain something for us in the negotiations.

Aside from all that, the EU can impose certain financial sanctions, which may affect Poland very severely, if the ruling camp insists that these are our internal issues, we are sovereign, and we can do what we want. That is a wrong diagnosis. As members of the European Union, we are not a lone island surrounded by a barbed wire fence and located in the middle of a strange ocean. It seems to me that if this government wants to remain in office, it will have to yield at least partially and find a compromise.

INTERVIEW BY ANNA ZAWADZKA,  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAKUB OSTAŁOWSKI