

PROPAGANDA THEN AND NOW

Asst. Prof. **Piotr Osęka** from the PAS Institute of Political Studies explains what groups are being depicted as enemies in the eyes of the Poles and what purposes such propaganda serves.

ACADEMIA: Your fields of study include the language of propaganda. Has it recently become more aggressive in Poland?

PIOTR OSĘKA: We've observed a rapid increase in social polarization, or the escalation of various conflicts. We can see a rift opening up in Poland, which is fragmenting into two warring nations. Simultaneously, the rules of political debate are changing. Reporters are stepping into the shoes of propagandists or campaigning for specific political parties. But that's actually nothing new. Back in the Second Polish Republic (between the world wars), the language used by politicians and journalists was incomparably more aggressive than it is now. In recent years, disputes have been at times vicious, but their language has been nonetheless milder. Likewise, newspapers have used a subtler language to write about one another and about their opponents. Comments that are currently being made by politicians, even compared to Piłsudski's pre-WWII statements, do not seem very strong, although some of them, like the phrase "second-rate Poles," are indeed hard to forget. Even so, any political dialogue takes place in an atmosphere of warfare: "It's either us or them. Take no prisoners."

Where does this come from?

We can witness an acute crisis of the traditional, opinion-leading press. Gradually replaced by new media, traditional newspapers are desperate to find a place for themselves. Today, there is no room for calm, reliable analyses in which you describe the actions of your political opponents, sometimes saying they are right, sometimes criticizing them, but you always try to remain calm and weigh all the arguments. Nowadays, grabbing attention and providing an outlet for emotions are highly sought-after, of course also in propaganda.

What is the purpose of propaganda?

Every government has always resorted to propaganda, which is inherent in political communication. In

a democracy, the purpose of propaganda is to manipulate voters, persuade them to take certain steps that they would not otherwise take. Nothing is said openly, everything is communicated with the help of suggestions and allusions.

In a non-democratic country, propaganda serves to create a world of illusion. That was the case back in the Polish People's Republic, where society had no say anyway. Elections were a farce, and the political camp controlled by Moscow decided about everything. At the same time, the purpose was to prevent people from communicating with one another using other channels. Every day, sheets and sheets of paper were printed with assurances that "the party is the leading force of the nation." Mass celebrations and events such as processions, marches, and school celebrations were organized, which was yet another form of propaganda.

Now we have the "Smolensk roll of honor," a list of victims of the 2010 presidential plane crash, which also serves to create a certain myth.

It follows from the need to invoke the most important myth, one of contestation. Law and Justice (PiS) won the elections by contesting the alleged falsification of the Smolensk investigation and stoking up a conspiracy theory. In state rituals and ceremonies, however, there are likewise extremely important efforts to invoke the concept of "the cursed soldiers," anti-communist partisans who kept fighting the new regime after 1945. By so doing, Law and Justice is attempting to impose its vision of history on others. This vision promotes taking uncompromising stances, as opposed to any kind of compromises, talks, and negotiations. It turns out that a true patriot does not engage in discussions, but rather shoots at the enemy.

The concept of an enemy was a basic propaganda tool used in Poland in the March 1968 events, which are your primary area of study. How is this concept being exploited now?

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STANISŁAW GAWIŃSKI/ŚRODEK KARTA

We can see both striking similarities and fundamental differences. The March 1968 discourse had very strong undercurrents of anti-Semitism. The enemies were “Zionists,” which means Jews. Today, if anti-Semitism emerges in discourse, it is a marginal issue. It is not the essence of the propaganda, political, and media messages of the ruling camp. The slogan “good change,” however, does bear many similarities to the March 1968 revolution within the ruling communist party, which was back then advertised chiefly in the press.

However, Jews were not the only enemy in 1968. This was also a fight against the elite. Back then, it was argued that ordinary people would be no longer denied justice, and the self-important elite would be duly punished. The country would be no longer ruled by members of the arrogant elite, who enjoyed better standards of living, bathed in wealth, and had nothing

but scorn for the common people. The time was coming for the real Poles, those who knew firsthand what manual labor meant, were devoted to what was good for their nation and their country, and valued the concept of patriotism. Members of the dethroned elite, in turn, were accused of having nothing to do with Polish national traditions and perceived as cosmopolitan, drawn away from their roots, and fixated on Western fads. In addition, they would listen to the radio in foreign languages and actually spoke foreign languages. In other words, they were not the salt of this earth, they had no familiar characteristics, they were not rooted in our reality. Poland, as the argument went, might not be a country of brilliant inventors, and people might not speak foreign languages or pay attention to intellectual subtleties, but their families had lived there for centuries and they were deeply engrained in that land by

A gathering of Lenin Steelworks workers in the Garage Hall, held to condemn the events of March 1968.

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Troublemakers. The Concept of an Enemy in the Propaganda of March 1968"] was published by the Jewish Historical Institute in 1999. He is the author of such books as *"Mydlenie*

oczcu. Przypadki propagandy w Polsce (zbiór artykułów prasowych z lat 2002–2009)" ["Window Dressing: Cases of Propaganda in Poland (Collection of Press Articles From 2002–2009)"], and *"My, ludzie z Marca. Autoportret pokolenia '68"* ["We, the People of March: Self-Portrait of Generation 1968"].

In 2013, he was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta for his contribution to the study, documentation, and commemoration of the history of the March 1968 events in Poland.

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the traditional heritage of their ancestors, so all those things were theirs to take. Having been forced into silence and marginalized, they felt their time was about to come. They would be allowed to speak in a loud voice. Members of the elite were described as cliquish and arrogant, as those who had taken over the country but finally took a beating from the real Poles who would show them no mercy.

This depiction of the enemy reverberated throughout the year 1968 and remains clearly visible also today. However, a similar narrative of the country being recaptured from the hands of the non-Polish elite and the conniving upper class was also employed by the National Radical Camp (ONR). In that narrative, oligarchy and plutocracy had to end, to be replaced by rule by the people and its representatives. The coming of a national revolution was heralded. That happened both before war and in 1968, and that is also happening today. The only things that have changed are certain decorative elements, with some symbols disappearing and other coming into existence.

No references are now being made to the symbol of a Zionist Jew.

Jews are absent from the rhetoric, but there are "cosmopolitans" with longstanding family connections stretching back to the communist-era ministries. The similarities are evident. Members of today's elite are accused of having "bad" parents. Such accusations are in fact racist, because you can't change your parents, much in the same way as you can't change your nationality. You can't stop being a Jew, and you can't stop being a "ministerial child." Despite the fact that this concept is artificial and finds no confirmation in the reality, it has been nonetheless created according to the rules of racism.

Another phrase that springs to mind is "the false elite," which was coined even earlier. Whence this rabid aversion?

The terms in current use are "lumpen elite," "so-called elite," and "self-declared elite." They are preferred by those who use the word "elite" as an insult. This means turning a blind eye to the sociological meaning of the concept, because you are either inside or outside the elite. It's like being tall – either you are tall or you are not tall. You can't be pseudo-tall or consider yourself tall. Society is always characterized by the presence of one or more groups described as the elite. It is a descriptive concept. The concept of an enemy that is currently being used corresponds to the logic behind an internal conflict. That is how the political class that won the last election reacts to the feeling of alienation and marginalization that it was stuck with for over a decade. One only needs to read PiS Chairman Jarosław Kaczyński's autobiography to find out how painfully he recalls the fact that people turned their back on him or that he was denied permanent access to the Office of the Council of Ministers. He describes such situations in great detail. There is no doubt that Jarosław Kaczyński is the source of the propaganda message transmitted in the media and the final authority on this issue. It reflects the personal prejudices held by him and his comrades-in-arms. They remember that their earlier position was not as prestigious as they wanted. They felt not as good as others, so they want to take revenge for that. Their army of acolytes must condemn their predecessors. Such a mechanism of retaliation for personal failures, whether real or imaginary, was also typical of March 1968. Back then, it applied to the Union of Polish Youth (ZMP), the forty-year-olds who were staging

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the anti-Semitic revolution, because this was their only chance to seize power. When analyzing the propaganda of the year 1968, the historian Jerzy Jedlicki stated that it had been used to justify moral filth, and even the dumbest doctors could say that they had not become professors, simply because the clique led by Bauman and Baczek had cut off their road to academic careers and honors. People resort to such concepts as the false elite, the pseudo-elite, the lumpen elite, and the elite of ministerial children to rationalize their own failures, because they're not who they wanted to be in their lives.

Vengefulness can't make it far in politics. Does the current ruling camp not know that?

Resentment is never rational. The March 1968 propaganda essentially comprised several conflicting threads. It condemned Jewish nationalists on the one hand, and uprooted cosmopolitans on the other. Such discrepancies were meant to appeal to a broader group of recipients. In today's government propaganda, we are "regaining our memories" and holding the anti-patriotic elite accountable, in addition to rejecting the Third Polish Republic, which attached no importance to traditions. Simultaneously, entire fields of Poland's history, chiefly the history of the democratic opposition, are being erased, forced into oblivion. Everyone takes something from this message for himself or herself. Some people truly believe that things have been bad in recent years, because the elite in power was bad. Once we get rid of them, everything will be fine.

How powerful is that message?

Over time, its influence will lessen. Today, however, this message is still appealing. It is linked to specific concessions of an economic nature. The Program 500+, offering a subsidy to every family with two or more children – which surely has many advantages, despite the fact that maybe we can't afford it – fits today's propaganda perfectly. It reinforces the message that things were bad, because the elite stole everything, and the Polish families can now receive what is rightfully theirs. The year 1968 was meant as a revolution of the common people. Today, we can witness a revolution staged on their behalf against people that we could describe using the numerous insults aimed against the existing political, financial, scientific, and cultural elite. The fight against the elite and the depiction of the uprooted elite as an enemy form the whole of the history of the anti-opposition propaganda after 1968. Both the Workers' Defense Committee (KOR) and the underground movement of the 1980s have always been pictured as a cosmopolitan elite whose members had sold their country for dirty dollars, felt nothing but scorn for the common Poles, and cared not about Polish traditions but about what popular philosophers claimed – Russell, Kołakowski, Bauman.

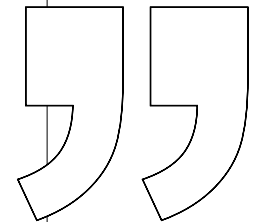
Some people in today's Poland are also eyeing the West with aversion.

The West is perceived as the source of moral corruption, which the ruling PiS calls "postmodernity," completely in defiance of the primary meaning of the word. The national revolution that is taking place in Poland is hostile to the liberal freedoms of the individual. It argues that these values must be sacrificed for the welfare of the community. Social systems that rely on tolerance and respect for personal liberty are perceived as sources of threats. Attitudes to the West are ambivalent. On the one hand, Western Europe should be our natural homeland, because Russia is the enemy. We, as the bulwark of Christianity, are fighting against Russia. On the other hand, Europe has forgotten about its Christian roots. We must remind it of them to put an end to Sodom and Gomorrah – abortion, lesbians, euthanasia, human rights, and the spread of immigrants, all of which meet with no resistance. Hence the Polish right wing's completely incomprehensible joy with Donald Trump's win. It turns out that America is ours, not only as a military ally but also as an ally in the conservative revolution we are fighting. We deny the existence of any threats that it may bring. Although Trump's public statements have exposed him as licentious and vile, he is perceived in Poland as our ally in the fight for the return of moral and religious puritanism. Of course, such behavior is not rational.

The rhetoric of 1968 maintained that Poland would be no longer ruled by those who felt nothing but scorn for the common people, that the time of the real Poles was coming.

Is conservatism deeply valued by the Polish public?

Different groups and social strata have seen it differently in different periods. If we analyzed the results of such public opinion polls since they were first conducted, back in 1956, we would see that we have wanted things in Poland to be as they are in Western Europe. This was expected to free us from Russia's control. Poles have always emigrated westward, not to the Soviet Union. We desired American jeans, not the ugly toys brought from Moscow. We valued not only the products of material culture but also human rights. However, that started to crumble in the Third Republic. Today's degradation of the values of liberal democracy and disregard for the rights of minorities are related to a variety of phenomena. They are not limited to



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a single nation. They apply not only to Poland but also to Western Europe. For example, the British voted in favor of Brexit, the Americans elected Donald Trump as their president, and the French voted Marine Le Pen into a runoff round...

What is happening?

We can witness a brutal and radical offensive of what we can refer to as new conservatism, for lack of a better word. There are various explanations of its causes, for example the circumstances similar to those that brought fascists to power in the 1930s, which means the global financial crisis from 2008. Back then, it was essentially unclear what had happened. Major social disparities began to rise to the surface. Those living in Western societies no longer felt safe. They expected that the world of their parents, which remained unchanged throughout the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s, and the 1990s, would be the world of their children, that after the horrible war ended in 1945, they would no longer face the threat of a similar conflict on a global

then collectively blow themselves up, or the upper class unwilling to share its wealth.

Could all these things threaten the stability of the European Union?

I believe that they might enforce self-correction. Such situations occurred in the past, for example in 1968 under the influence of a powerful wave of revolutions staged under various slogans. The system proved flexible. Under pressure, it adjusted itself to public expectations. Unlike communism, it did not fall apart. That is the optimistic scenario. In the pessimistic one, we will witness revolutions and war.

To quote your own words, “the need for war is inherent in the nature of civilization.”

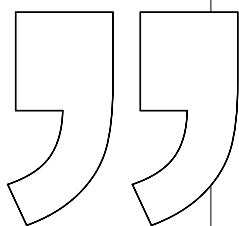
Mankind has reached the end of technological progress in one field, namely military technology. The presence of the ultimate weapon, namely a thermonuclear bomb that makes a victory impossible, has rendered warfare unprofitable. We are not threatened by any conflict between superpowers. However, we may witness various civil wars, revolutions, riots, and dictatorships, all of which require the military to secure order on the streets.

Could a dictatorship be established in Poland?

Such a threat always exists. However, we have yet to reach any point of no return. The PiS government means a turn away from the values of liberal democracy, but the opposition and the parliament do still exist. It's difficult to say when a dictatorship starts. I would advise caution in invoking historical analogies, which are misleading. It seems to me that Europe is now faced with an unprecedented situation. Any attempts to automatically compare it to what happened in the 1930s are unfounded, chiefly because there is no violence on the streets. The conflicts are indeed very brutal, yet only in the verbal sphere. Both the actions of the protesters and the police operations are very peaceful and calm. I hear comparisons being made to the Weimar Republic, when Hitler rose to power in a democratic way, but they are only partly true. In the Weimar Republic, the streets of cities literally ran red with blood. The SA fought against communist paramilitary organizations, and hundreds of people were killed, tens of thousands were left injured. Such a picture is completely different from what is happening in Poland. However, I am worried, because political culture rots easily, but is much more difficult to fix.

INTERVIEW BY ANNA KILIAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAKUB OSTAŁOWSKI



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scale. We were supposed to live better lives and accumulate wealth. However, that story of a wonderful life was suddenly disrupted. It turned out that our children will be worse off than us, there was no stability of employment, and the unemployment rate was on the raise. A new story emerged about the banking elite that conducted some strange transactions on the top floors of high-rise office buildings, remained unscathed by troubles, and granted themselves hefty severance payments, all of which resulted in entire countries going bankrupt. That narrative reflected the old Marxist slogan “social being determines consciousness,” which has been sociologically confirmed in many cases. Societies whose sense of everyday justice and economic rationality has been disrupted begin to reject the philosophical and ideological rationale behind the existing system and cease to believe in democracy in its current shape. They lean towards the movements that promise to restore their sense of security and expose those who are to blame for their situation, which usually means political cliques, millions of immigrants who come to Europe from the Middle East to impose Sharia and

This is the English translation of an interview that was approved by the author in its Polish version.