

How did Putin-empathiser “anti-war” arguments become mainstream in Poland of all places?

Wednesday 15 May 2024, by [MAZZINI Mateusz](#) (Date first published: 1 February 2024).

After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, to some commentators’ surprise Poland became Kyiv’s closest ally in Europe. But as parliamentary elections loomed closer, support began to waver. This is mostly because of the efforts of those who labeled the conflict ‘not our war’.

Very little could break the lethargic monotony of a hot August afternoon in Warsaw city centre last year. Not even the thousands of far-right nationalists, marching through the city’s most iconic avenues managed to distract the plentiful tourists from sipping their iced coffees in air-conditioned comfort.

In many respects this was a big change. For over a decade, August 1, the anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising, a heroic mobilisation of the capital’s population against Nazi occupation in 1944, has been a focal point of the far right’s annual calendar. These extremists would steadfastly fill up Jerusalem Avenue, the main axis of the city, and march through it chanting “death to the enemies of the motherland”, “one German, one bullet”, and “we will hang the Communists”, occasionally going as far as to burn the rainbow flag and clash with police.

This year, however, was different. The crowds were slimmer than previous years, decimated by internal quarrels between various far-right groups. The gravity of the event was also diminished, as only a handful of high-profile political figures made an appearance. The then-ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) was applying its human resources elsewhere, putting more effort into campaigning in the countryside and on the country’s eastern flank – both bastions of support during its two terms in office that ended in December.

Deprived of political fuel and unable to confront the absent counter-protesters, the crowd sluggishly proceeded forward to the tune of pre-recorded songs and occasional chants shouted into the microphone on the organisers’ truck. Most of the familiar slogans were not followed by a reprise, not even the most radical ones – but only up to a point.

When the crowd reached the main gate of the University of Warsaw campus, the moment coincided with the chant “down with communism”. A woman in her 50s, wearing a red-and-white armband and carrying a Polish flag, spotted a Ukrainian flag on the campus and added “... and down with the Ukrainians!”. Many followed suit, echoing her words. Young men in shorts and patriotic-themed t-shirts exchanged comments about “ending welfare for the parasites”, while an older couple explained to their daughter that “this is not our conflict”.

The march had turned from a commemoration of Polish war heroes to a manifestation of anti-war sentiments.

Russian ‘agent of influence’

“I hold a very deep conviction that such powerful, unconditional military support for Ukraine that the government in Warsaw continues to provide since February 24 [2022] contradicts the Polish national interest. It’s against our *raison d’etat*. In international politics there are no friends or foes. There are potential allies and potential enemies. But it is all transactional – if you think otherwise, you’re a dreamer, a romantic, you believe in illusions.”

So said Leszek Sykulski, the founder and public face of the Polish Anti-war Movement (Polski Ruch Antywojenny, or PRA), the country’s largest and arguably most controversial organisation advocating for the cessation of Polish support to Kyiv.

Sykulski holds a PhD in political science, though he prefers to go by “geostrategist” or “expert on geopolitics”. Professionally, there are so many hats he wears that it’s easy to get lost in his multiplicity of identities: academic, private sector adviser, current affairs commentator, YouTuber, activist and, most recently, founder of a brand-new political party called Secure Poland. For his followers – a few hundred active PRA members, over 5,500 in a Facebook gated community and 105,000 YouTube subscribers – he is the voice of reason in the public discourse concerning the war, one that cuts through the propaganda and political correctness.

For many others, however, he is a Kremlin “[agent of influence](#)”, obscuring the picture that they believe is clear-cut: Ukraine is not only fighting for its own survival, but also for that of the future of the West and the rules-based liberal world order is at stake just few hundred kilometres from the Polish border. It is a moral obligation inasmuch as a strategic choice to continue supporting Kyiv, because should it fail, Poland could – and for many it surely will be – next.

In international politics, this interpretation enjoys a broad consensus from Washington to the Baltic states. Even PiS, Poland’s former populist-nationalist government, subscribed to it for the most part since the invasion. Sykulski, however, does not buy into it.

“This is incredible, the narrative simply does not add up. It’s absurd, just look at the map. Poland shares 600 kilometres of a border with the Russian Federation and Belarus, where Russian troops are stationed as well. Kaliningrad, the Russian enclave on the Baltic Sea, hosts missiles with a range covering the whole Polish territory,” he told BIRN in an interview in December last year. “If the Russian Federation and Belarus really wanted to carry out such an attack, it would not have to start hundreds of kilometres away from our borders and engage in a proxy war.”

Although the PRA only peaked at 4,000-5,000 members, according to Sykulski’s own count, the movement proved to reflect a broader sentiment brewing in Polish society.

Already in October 2022, Przemyslaw Sadura and Slawomir Sierakowski, sociologists associated with Political Critique, a left-wing outlet and think tank, published a report titled “Poles in favour of Ukraine, but against Ukrainians”. Via a series of indepth interviews, particularly among the less-affluent parts of Polish society, they found support waning for the presence of Ukrainian refugees in the country.

Sierakowski and Sadura stressed that whilst Ukrainians were still not subject to dehumanisation and hate crimes, Poles were growing increasingly weary of the financial burden that helping the refugees entailed. Distrust was also fuelled by a widespread conviction that no other country in Europe – particularly Germany – would ever help the Polish people should they find themselves in similar circumstances, as well as by the fact that by sending military equipment to Ukraine, PiS was drawing the conflict closer to Polish territory, risking possible open confrontation with Russia and

mass conscription.

Similar thinking was starting to flourish across Poland.

Around the same time as Sierakowski and Sadura's research was published, the Warsaw Enterprise Institute – a conservative, market-friendly think tank – undertook a representative sample of Polish society, asking about the financial aspects of Poland's supportive position towards Kyiv. It found that by the autumn of 2022, a third of Poles (31 per cent) agreed with the statement the war in Ukraine is a result of a global liberal conspiracy, the exact same one that caused the COVID-19 pandemic. A similar percentage (35 per cent) believed Ukrainians residing in Poland were not refugees but economic migrants. Most importantly, as many as six in ten respondents agreed the Polish state "cannot afford" the presence of war exiles.

Researchers revisited the sample in January 2023 and found that almost all indicators of anti-Ukrainian sentiment had gone up, some even by 5-6 percentage points.

Reflected in politics

It was only a matter of time before politics began to capitalise on those sentiments.

2023, the year of pivotal parliamentary elections in Poland, began with a steady rise in the polls of Konfederacja (Confederation), a far-right grouping where Christian fundamentalists, nationalists and libertarians joined forces to, as they themselves declared, "flip the table" and usher in a new era in Polish politics: one of economic protectionism, a tougher stance vis-a-vis the EU, and opposition to mass migration.

Although its leaders, Slawomir Mentzen and Krzysztof Bosak, put considerable effort into building up support on a comprehensive anti-system platform, the coalition boomed in the polls mainly because they were the first to publicly declare that support for Ukraine needs to stop.

That proved to be fertile ground; by late July, Konfederacja was polling at 16.9 per cent and in the eyes of many would be [Poland's future kingmaker](#) following the October 15 general election. PiS was looking increasingly likely to fall short of the votes to continue ruling without a coalition partner and, even though Mentzen and Bosak swore they wouldn't open talks about a possible alliance, speculation was rife that a post-election pact – not necessarily a formal coalition – between PiS and Konfederacja with the government was actually secretly being negotiated.

Ideally, however, the ruling party surmised there would be no need for that, concluding the best way to avoid it was to tap into Konfederacja's anti-Ukrainian crusade. The rest is history: then-prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki announced in September that Poland would cease arms deliveries to Ukraine and promised to defend Poland's economic sovereignty by removing Ukrainian grain from the Polish market.

A leading politician of Konfederacja, now an MP, spoke with BIRN on condition of anonymity in September, when PiS was still in power. Asked about the party's stance on Ukraine and Polish strategic interests in the conflict, he largely echoed Sykulski's position: "It is not our war to fight. We are not opposed to helping Ukraine, but this relationship needs to be transactional. Morawiecki's government is too weak on that. We should promise to help them in exchange for tangible benefits, like contracts for rebuilding after the war."

And what about Russia? "We cannot forget Russia is still our neighbour. I think Law and Justice

made a massive mistake here, they jumped the gun too quickly, leading the offensive on sanctions. We are losing money, we cannot trade with them now, and that should not be forgotten.”

The final weeks of the election campaign turned into a literal shouting match between Konfederacja and PiS, fighting to be the prime defenders of Polish sovereignty. Former parliamentary speaker Ryszard Terlecki said at a rally that, “the needs of Polish citizens need to come first”, whilst Konfederacja’s Mentzen toured the country with the slogan of “no more welfare for Ukrainians”.

Yet even though its thinking entered mainstream Polish politics, Konfederacja underperformed in the election compared to the summer polling, increasing their presence from 11 to 18 MPs, though not by enough to help keep PiS in power.

Experts – and Konfederacja members themselves – differ on the diagnosis as well as the interpretation of this result. BIRN’s source inside the group argue they were overhyped in polls and the final result was actually a loyal reflection of their potential, at least for now. Other commentators, including Sykulski, believe they simply did not go far enough in their arguments about bolstering Poland’s sovereignty.

“Konfederacja disappointed me, they committed treason. Some of the statements made by its politicians killed their ideas. Mentzen declared we needed to restore conscription to be ready for a war with Russia. Bosak went on to publicly declare support for Ukraine, carried a Ukrainian flag pin in his lapel. They made numerous anti-Russian statements, they lost all credibility,” Sykulski told BIRN.

‘Multi-vector’ foreign policy

For Sykulski, Poland should pursue what he defines as a “multi-vector” foreign policy. In other words, aligning with one specific political orientation and anchoring that in international institutions is counter-productive.

Yet leaving these international institutions entirely isn’t reasonable either, especially without a ‘plan B’. Getting out of NATO? Only militarily, Sykulski says, to mimic the French position in the alliance. “Polexit”? Only when Poland will be economically stable and self-sufficient. Getting there through partnership with Vladimir Putin’s Russia, which he terms a “normalisation of relations”, would not be a problem at all.

This is, broadly speaking, the manifesto of his newest political party, Secure Poland. Registered in November, it advocates for a complete overhaul of Poland’s foreign policy. “We say it straight away. First, multi-vector policy, normalisation with Russia and Belarus, and accession to BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Close cooperation on multiple fronts, so Poland becomes an economic powerhouse, and only then we say: ‘it’s time to consider Polexit’,” Sykulski told BIRN.

What for Sykulski and his supporters is an outline of a new and better strategy for Poland, for others is clear evidence that the Russians are active here, spreading anti-Western propaganda and planting seeds of division between Poland and Ukraine.

One of these critics is Anna Mierzynska, a social media analyst and leading Polish expert on fake news and Russian disinformation. When Sykulski registered his new party, she wrote in an analysis for liberal outlet OKO.Press that Secure Poland is a pro-Russian party, pointing out that Sykulski wants Poland to leave Western-oriented institutions and align itself with countries like Russia, Iran or the Central Asian autocracies.

"Sykulski's message is not aimed at the war in Ukraine as such, but it is more oriented towards discouraging [Poles] towards the US. It is a very intense narrative, hence his slogans of 'putting an end to the Americanisation of Poland'. You can see how American crimes are presented through centuries, in order to prove that, may I say, America is a worse country than Russia. But of course the very word 'Russia' does not appear there, it's just implied," she told BIRN in an interview.

According to Mierzynska, the Polish Anti-War Movement – and more broadly speaking every actor in the public debate that uses the same categories to describe the events in Ukraine – fits into the Kremlin's overall narrative aimed at foreign audiences. There, the war is not being fought by Russians against Ukrainians, but against Americans, who are portrayed as the main enemy, main strategist, main weapons provider and, most importantly, the main culprit in the conflict.

Mierzynska stresses, however, that the Polish internet did not explode with such sentiments, as Poles continue to be among the most Russian-sceptic nations in Europe and, as the conflict is close enough to home, they can assess the situation as it really is, as opposed to, for instance, in Asian societies, where Russian propaganda proved particularly effective.

"There is a common basis in these narratives, centred on slogans such as 'it is not our war' and 'stop the war'. That, and disseminating fears that soon enough it will be necessary for us to get involved in that war on a physical level – to send troops from all these countries, our people who will go there and die on the front lines. In Poland, the message was even more emotional, that our 'kids' will die in Ukraine, so it was directed at the parents of adult citizens. You could see that in their banners, in the entire visual identification of such actions: displaying children looking at a wartime landscape, children dying or slogans referring to it," she said.

Everything Mierzynska mentions can be readily found in PRA communication. In January 2023, it began a billboard campaign under the slogan, "let's not go to this war", next to a picture of a child holding a fluffy toy and looking at nuclear fallout. Other graphics distributed included a soldier kneeling on a field of white crosses, and another of a soldier marching with a prosthetic leg over a clashing Ukrainian and Russian flag.

When confronted with accusations of being a Russian agent of influence, Sykulski shrugs and paints himself as a free speech martyr, a victim of political correctness and censorship. "What can I say? Labelling somebody a Russian agent became part of the Polish public discourse at the expense of its quality. Today, anyone who disagrees with the government's narrative is accused of that. When I interviewed Sergey Andreyev, Russia's ambassador to Poland, hatred towards me peaked, but I believe that Poland's unconditional help for Ukraine is a mistake, just as breaking ties with Russia was one," he said.

The public criticism has certainly not deterred him. The PRA evolved into Secure Poland and Sykulski expanded his anti-war message, telling BIRN, among others, that Poland should stay out of the Israel-Hamas conflict as well. Even the fall of the PiS government and the formation of a progressive, pro-Western government led by the former European Council chief, Donald Tusk, has not clipped his wings.

As our interview concludes, he advertises the first congress of the party, to be held in March. Asked about his party's strategic goals, Sykulski doesn't hide his ambitions. As Poles are set to go to the polls twice this year, Secure Poland wants to run independently in the council elections, while in June's elections for the European Parliament Sykulski is hoping to form a broader coalition, united under the theme "Time to consider Polexit".

But independent of the powerful social media following, extreme banners and brash self-confidence,

a question looms over the entire anti-war effort: did it actually change anything?

“It’s difficult to assess, because there is no way to do it, really,” said Mierzynska. “It’s like measuring the efficiency of online ads during an election campaign – you cannot separate that from other factors, and it’s the same here. Sykulski’s movement remains a small, niche community – most people probably don’t know about his existence.

“But when you ponder actions of that sort, it’s worth remembering that Russians always carry them out with a long-term goal in mind. They are intended for their consequences to show much later, sometimes years later. It’s like building strongholds, planting seeds in different places. They planted three, four anti-war movements in Poland – one sprang and it’s being watered, nourished. And even though from Russia’s point of view it is still a small thing, it’s worth preserving nonetheless – it’s a basis to be developed further,” she explained

On October 15, Poland elected a new parliament of five parties, with Konfederacja and PiS left out of the three-party ruling coalition. Yet Konfederacja’s votes could still prove important, for instance to counter the veto power of the PiS-backed president, Andrzej Duda.

Before the first sitting of the new parliament, Konfederacja leader Mentzen delivered his first TV interview as an MP in November. Asked about the current state of international affairs, including the conflict between Israel and Hamas, he concluded: “The Polish state should not get involved at all in this, absolutely. It is not our war.”

Mateusz Mazzini

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French.

P.S.

Balkan Insight

<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/02/01/how-the-polish-anti-war-movements-message-entered-mainstream-politics/>