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## Poland's Tea Party Movement

**By embracing a neoliberal, pro-austerity agenda, Poland's mainstream left opened the way for a government of Polish Ted Cruzes.**

By John Feffer

February 24, 2016

On a rainy day in April 1990, I journeyed to the outskirts of Warsaw to one of those functional Communist-era apartment building complexes to meet with Antoni Macierewicz. The opposition leader's apartment contrasted sharply with its grim institutional surroundings. It was an aristocratic enclave full of books, antiques, and prints on the wall. Macierewicz himself exuded an Old World kind of charm that Polish intellectuals worked so hard to preserve during difficult times.

A long-time dissident, Macierewicz had been something of a leftist in the 1970s, supporting the Revolutionary Left Movement in Chile and protesting the U.S. war in Vietnam. He was a key figure, with Jacek Kuron and Adam Michnik, in the creation of the Committee for the Defense of Workers (KOR) in 1976 and then Solidarity in 1980.

Over the years, however, he'd moved steadily rightward until he'd become, by 1990, a leading figure in a coalition of conservative Christian groups. These groups had cooperated with Solidarity during the 1980s. But now that Poland had put the Communist era behind it,

Macierewicz was staking out a distinct political terrain for his version of clerical anti-Communism.

Government policy, he told me that afternoon in 1990, should follow Church teachings, and so should instruction in public schools. The economic reforms that Poland was then undertaking were not, he argued, sufficiently anti-state, for they did not guarantee access to capital and ownership to the largest number of Poles. And the new Polish state, stripped down to its minimal functions, should make a clean break with the past to eliminate any lingering influence from former Communist functionaries.

Perhaps naively, I didn't see much of a future for Macierewicz and his Catholic nationalists. The last thing I imagined Poles wanted after 1989 was to swap one variety of political intolerance for another. Poles were overwhelmingly Catholic, of course. But church attendance was far from universal — 53 percent in 1987 — and religious zealotry was a distinctly minority passion.

Meanwhile, most Polish voters were gravitating toward the middle of the political spectrum. Solidarity politicians were establishing a set of center-right parties, and the former Communists were struggling to rebrand themselves as a center-left party (though “left” and “right” meant something quite different in terms of actual policies in Poland at that time). And indeed, in the next parliamentary elections in 1991, Macierewicz's forces in Catholic Election Action managed a mere 8.7 percent of the vote for the Sejm (though the coalition captured a bit more, 17.4 percent, for the Senate).

But Macierewicz himself vaulted into the position of minister of internal affairs in 1991. The following year he released the infamous Macierewicz List, which identified 64 members of the Polish government and parliament as former secret Communist agents. Even more controversially, he accused then-president Lech Walesa of also being an informer.

These claims produced immediate outrage — from those who believed that the government was unacceptably compromised as well as those who were appalled that such unvetted accusations were made public. A successful no-confidence vote in parliament led to the resignation of the government and the abrupt end of Macierewicz's term in office. A subsequent parliamentary inquiry concluded that only six of the 64 had signed any agreements with the secret police, and Macierewicz also had to face charges of publishing state secrets.

Macierewicz had established a reputation as Poland's Ted Cruz — a firebrand willing to take down his political opponents even at the cost of his own position.

But it gets worse than that.

Macierewicz never met a conspiracy theory he didn't like. In the 2000s, he was still convinced that a majority of Polish diplomats were former Communist informers, earning him a skeptical appraisal in a U.S. diplomatic cable. He believed that the Russians were behind the 2010 airplane crash in Smolensk that killed then-Polish President Lech Kaczynski and many other prominent Poles on their way to a commemoration of the Katyn massacre. And, in an infamous interview with the right-wing Catholic Radio Maryja, he put in a good word for the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, adding that “Polish experience, especially in recent years, shows that there are such

groups in Jewish circles who think in a cunning way and act deliberately to the detriment of, for example, Poland.”

It would be nice to report that Macierewicz remains at the fringes of Polish politics, that his past actions and rhetoric have disqualified him from serving in high positions. But that would be wishful thinking.

As of last December, Antoni Macierewicz is Poland’s minister of defense.

### **Reading the Tea Leaves**

Poland is frequently held up as the success story of Central Europe’s transition from Communism. It has experienced relatively steady economic growth, even during the financial crisis of 2007-8. It has implemented a successful political decentralization plan. It continues to boast a thriving civil society.

But in the parliamentary elections last year, the right-wing Law and Justice Party (PiS) capitalized on widespread resentment and anger not only to come in first, but also to secure the country’s first parliamentary majority in the democratic era. As with the victory of Viktor Orban’s right-wing Fidesz party in Hungary, PiS has set about to transform the country into what Orban has famously called an “illiberal democracy.”

The appointment of Macierewicz as defense minister is only the tip of the spear. Poland expert David Ost, writing in *The Nation*, argues that Poland’s PiS is pursuing

*an uncompromising revolution from above that abandons the institutions of liberal democracy and any ethos of compromise in favor of an unchallenged monopoly of power. The new authorities call for a “strong” state instead of a “lawful” state, to be guided by “Polish values” and “Christian traditions,” deeply hostile to any political opposition, and imagining itself in a historic battle with a Europe committed to “totalitarian” ideas like gender equality and resettling refugees.*

Jaroslav Kaczynski, the twin brother of Lech who died in the Smolensk air disaster, is the force behind PiS. He has remained in parliament to control the party while elevating the more diplomatic Beata Szydlo as prime minister and getting his attack dog, the Cruz-like Macierewicz, appointed as defense minister. Together, they are presiding over a transformation in Poland not unlike what the Tea Party would dearly like to accomplish in the United States.

Let’s begin with Macierewicz and his obsessions. As an opposition politician, Macierewicz refused to accept the official version of the Smolensk air disaster, holding hearings in parliament that featured “experts” who relied on Internet photos rather than site visits. Macierewicz rejected the notion that some combination of fog and pilot error caused the Tupolev 154 plane to crash, the conclusion of the official investigations of *both* Poland and Russia. Instead, like something out of *House of Cards* or *Madame Secretary*, he has insisted that an explosion caused the crash and the Russians were behind it.

Macierewicz’s determination to reopen an official inquiry into Smolensk is sure to aggravate the already dicey relations between Moscow and Warsaw. As importantly, it will polarize what is

already a deeply divided Polish society. “Smolensk” has all the hallmarks of the “birther” movement in which facts count for a lot less than insinuation. Just as only one-third of Republican voters believe that President Obama was born in the United States, nearly one-third of Poles believe that Lech Kaczynski was assassinated. The Russians are not the only evil-doers in this drama. If the official Polish inquiry was flawed, the previous government of Donald Tusk and the Civic Platform (PO) — the chief political opposition to PiS — emerge as dangerous co-conspirators.

The enemy within is the real focus of Poland’s Tea Party. For instance, Macierewicz has undertaken a purge of the military as if it were populated by Communist-era appointees rather than officials designated by the previous center-right government. The purge included the rector of the National Defense University. The new government even went so far as to conduct a raid on NATO’s Counter-Intelligence Center of Excellence, which is based in Warsaw, to replace its head. This is how coup leaders, not democratically elected governments, go about the business of cleaning house.

On military issues more generally, Macierewicz wants to nearly double the size of the Polish army, and he’d trade participation in the coalition bombings in Syria for the stationing of NATO units in Poland. If the reopening of the Smolensk inquiry doesn’t deepsix relations with Moscow, this buildup on Poland’s eastern borders will do the trick. After seething over various official efforts over the last couple decades to repair relations with Russia, Macierewicz is after nothing less than a revival of the age-old hostility between the two countries.

### **Kaczynski Settles Scores**

In the early 1990s, the politics of revenge in Central Europe were clear-cut. The new political elite took aim at the former Communists, lustrating them out of government, stripping the party of its assets, and throwing a couple of the top leaders in jail (or attempting to). But as opposition coalitions fragmented into a kaleidoscope of parties, the politics of revenge in the region became increasingly complicated.

Jaroslav Kaczynski and PiS have broadened their campaign of revenge far beyond Communism. They have scores to settle with former allies as well.

Take, for instance, the campaign against Lech Walesa. The august Polish leader has always been firmly on the right side of the political spectrum. But he and the Kaczynski brothers crossed swords in the 1990s. It’s no surprise, then, that new charges of Walesa as a Communist collaborator surfaced just this month. Kaczynski and company maintain that the Solidarity movement unnecessarily compromised with the Communist Party during the transition period — keeping General Wojciech Jaruzelski as president rather than throwing him in prison, for instance, and allowing the *nomenklatura* to cash in on the new capitalist economy. Walesa’s collaboration in the 1970s is supposed to represent the fatal flaw of the accommodationist wing of Solidarity.

The historical revisionism of PiS is part of what the Germans call *kulturkampf*, or cultural struggle. Their goal is to “purify” the country of Poles of the “worst sort,” as Kaczynski has described his opponents.

In uglier days, the “worst sort” of Poles might have been Jews, who were accused of being Communists or rapacious capitalists or simply disloyal “outsiders.” Today, the enemy is a motley collection of liberals, secularists, critical intellectuals, and cosmopolitans. Poland’s Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski has warned against “a new mixing of cultures and races, a world made up of bicyclists and vegetarians, who ... fight all forms of religion.” With the Communist bogeyman gone, the best that PiS can come up with is bicyclists and vegetarians?

To combat these threats to Polish society, PiS began to ram through legislation in a top-down effort to remake Polish society. Like Fidesz in Hungary, PiS has first targeted the constitutional court, which represented an obstacle to its revolutionary program. PiS doesn’t have a large enough parliamentary majority to easily change the Polish constitution. So it pursued two strategies — to pack the court with its appointees and slow down its functioning by requiring two-thirds majority rulings rather than a simple majority as before.

Other legislation has included a law giving the government greater surveillance powers as well as the authority to appoint the heads of public media. It’s as if Viktor Orban and Fidesz have served as unofficial advisors because PiS is following virtually the same playbook. No surprise, then, that Kaczynski met with Orban for six hours in January. And five years ago, the Polish politician declared: “Viktor Orban gave us an example of how we can win. The day will come when we will succeed, and we will have Budapest in Warsaw.”

That day has come. And this time the European Union is reacting. Writes Jan-Werner Muller in *The New York Review of Books*:

*Unlike in the case of Hungary, the European Union has reacted quickly. Leading EU figures declared that fundamental democratic values were threatened by Warsaw. And on January 13, the European Commission was sufficiently concerned to open a “probe” into the workings of the rule of law in Poland, a step that is unprecedented in EU history.*

It’s not just Poland’s internal politics that worries the EU. The Union has encountered considerable pushback from Central European countries, including Poland, about accepting their fair share of refugees coming from the Middle East. Poland, with a miniscule immigrant population, has also seen a large outflow of population over the last two decades. In other words, there’s plenty of room for newcomers.

But Kaczynski has made clear that refugees are not welcome. “There are already signs of emergence of diseases that are highly dangerous and have not been seen in Europe for a long time: cholera on the Greek islands, dysentery in Vienna,” he said during the 2015 election campaign. “There is also talk about other, even more severe diseases.” This rhetoric echoes Nazi descriptions of Jews as carriers to disease. The more moderate of the anti-refugee politicians in Poland have, like Donald Trump, argued that only the Christians among the asylum-seekers should be allowed in.

The success of PiS is not simply a function of the failures of the previous center-right government of Donald Tusk, who decamped in late 2014 to become the president of the European Council. Rather, as in Hungary, the Kaczynski crowd has benefited from the collapse of the left in Poland.

When it was in charge, the left embraced a pro-West platform of austerity economic reforms, accession to NATO and the EU, and a (relatively) tolerant set of cultural policies. The support for “shock therapy” cost the mainstream left its base among those who have not benefitted from economic reforms. This opened up a vast opportunity for right-wing parties that have fed on anger and resentment of the “losers of transition” — farmers, industrial workers, pensioners — by offering, like the Tea Party, vaguely populist economic policies.

In this Polish culture war, however, the “worst sort” of Poles are fighting back. Demonstrations have again become commonplace in Warsaw, and the liberal left is banding together in the face of the new threat.

Macierewicz and the other Mad Hatters of the Polish “Tea Party” movement will no doubt do a lot of damage during their tenure in power. But perhaps, as in 1992, they will overreach and be overwhelmed by a backlash that will prove powerful enough, finally, to push Poland kicking and screaming into 21<sup>st</sup>-century Europe.