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Meet the Polish Activists on the Cutting Edge of a Possible Left Resurgence in Eastern Europe

By John Feffer

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Its corner location was unbeatable. But Brave New World cafe faced steep competition on Warsaw's most fashionable thoroughfare: a pricey French bakery, a trendy sushi restaurant and the famous Café Blickle, which began serving coffee and pastries long before World War I.

Moreover, as even its passionate defenders would admit, the food at Brave New World, though relatively cheap, was not exactly destination dining.

The thousands of customers who flocked to the cafe after its opening in 2009 did so for a different reason: first-rate conversation and events. The fabulously successful cafe and cultural center was an intellectual magnet. And the brains behind Poland's equivalent of Les Deux Magots were neither hipster entrepreneurs nor savvy expats. Instead, the proprietors were unabashedly devoted to critical theory and left-wing politics, all wrapped in a mordant sense of humor. The cafe's dystopian name, itself a critique of Poland's post-Communist "Eden," was also a play on its location on New World Street.

Such a combination of caffeine, critique and sly comedy would certainly attract crowds in the East Village or the Left Bank. But this was Poland, where the official left had at least two historical strikes against it: an association with Communism before 1989, and an embrace of austerity capitalism in the go-go years afterward.

The proprietors of the cafe, a cadre of activist-intellectuals that call themselves [Krytyka Polityczna \(Political Critique\)](#) represent a new left generation in Poland. Krytyka is uncompromised by any connection to Stalinism and uninterested in forming a political party to challenge the country's post-Communist party. Poland's new left has much larger ambitions. From the debut of its eponymous journal in 2002 to its collaboration on Poland's controversial offering in the 2011 Venice Biennale, Krytyka has somehow made the left sexy in Poland. It has also inspired activists elsewhere in the region to take up its call.

The time for an independent left has certainly arrived in East-Central Europe. Voters have revolted against successive waves of austerity measures by electing social democratic leadership in several countries, including the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Croatia and Slovenia. Last year, students, environmentalists, and other civil society activists kept Bulgaria in a near-constant state of protest against political and economic corruption. Progressives from around the region have been gathering annually since 2008 at Croatia's Subversive Festival to discuss the revival of a robust independent left.

Unfortunately, the same disillusionment with neoliberal economics and political corruption that has made Krytyka and its regional cousins popular has also swelled the ranks of the extreme right. Far-right-wing parties like Jobbik in Hungary and Ataka in Bulgaria have surged into parliaments with their anti-elite economics and racist populism. Skinheads and disciplined paramilitaries have targeted Roma, ethnic Turks and other minorities. A little further to the east, Svoboda and the Right Sector served as the shock troops for the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine.

As nationalist extremism gains popularity throughout East-Central Europe, can Krytyka's message of hope in hard times steal the thunder from the right and appeal to millions of Europeans orphaned by the economic crisis?

Critics are not sure Krytyka is what everyone has been waiting for. They argue that the movement missed its opportunity to translate its visibility into real political influence. The Brave New World cafe closed in 2012—thanks to a much-lamented decision of the municipal

authorities—and some of the smaller clubs around Poland have evaporated. And the young man whose name is so intertwined with the short history of Krytyka is no longer at the center of the organization's life.

Even intellectuals skeptical of the Great Man theory of history acknowledge the outsized role played by Krytyka's founder, Slawomir Sierakowski. In the course of a decade, Sierakowski leapfrogged to prominence as an intellectual, activist and public figure. He's an early thirty-something, still boyish with his short blond hair and glasses: a Polish Harry Potter who uses the language of critical theory for his spells.

And Sierakowski insists that the magic is still there. Krytyka, he argues, continues to go from strength to strength and has never been more vital. In 2012, for instance, the organization opened a high-profile Institute for Advanced Studies in its new office a couple blocks away from the shuttered cafe. It continues to dominate the intellectual scene in Poland with a slew of publications and its organizing in and around Ukraine.

"The golden era is not dead," Sierakowski proclaims. "The golden era is ahead."

The Left's Rollercoaster Ride

When the Communist governments in Eastern Europe collapsed one after another in 1989, the official left went into eclipse, nowhere more so than in Poland. Given a chance to vote in semi-free elections in June 1989, Poles elected Solidarity-affiliated candidates almost without exception. Throughout the region, Communist parties attempted a radical makeover. In Poland, the newly redesigned Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) bided its time.

Meanwhile, the Solidarity-supported government's "shock therapy" economic reforms hit the Polish population hard in the 1990s, particularly the farmers and industrial workers that formed the core of Solidarity's support. Jacek Zakowski was working at the time as the spokesman for the Solidarity-affiliated parliamentary faction. "One had to be very stupid to believe that society would say, 'This is fantastic! We lost our savings. We are four times poorer than we were before you came to power. We love you!'" he told me. "No, they had to hate us. And we had to pay this price. The revolution must eat its children, and this is universal."

The independent left at this time was what Sierakowski calls mere "plankton," a thin soup of "three-member groups." The re-established Polish Socialist Party (PPS) failed to rebrand socialism in a voter-friendly way. Left economist Ryszard Bugaj established a Labor Party that faded. A radical movement called Samoobrona (Self-Defense) capitalized on discontent in the countryside, but after a strong showing in the 2001 elections, it drifted rightward.

"If we had had more technical power—money, structures, people—we could have appealed to all the people who, year by year during the 1990s, were more disappointed by what was going on in Poland, who lost their health, their money, their livelihoods during the transition period," says Zuzanna Dabrowska, an organizer in the 1990s with the Democratic Revolution faction of PPS. "But to find these people and unite them, you had to have much greater organizational power."

The former Communists of the SLD were the only force with that organizational power. “They have resources,” explains Zakowski. “They have people. They have political stars like Aleksander Kwasniewski and Leszek Miller. They are supported by public money, which is granted to parliamentary political parties. So they very easily prevail over any new initiatives. And, of course, they have experience.”

Poland’s economic crisis propelled the SLD to power. Particularly in its second tenure, under President Kwasniewski and Prime Minister Miller from 2001 to 2004, the SLD governed like neoconservatives. It supported austerity economics, US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and even a secret CIA interrogation site on Polish soil. It also guided Poland into the European Union, but only after securing the support of the Catholic Church in return for preserving the country’s anti-abortion laws.

It was the debate over EU accession that first brought Krytyka Polityczna to prominence. It achieved notoriety not through a strike, as Solidarity did in 1980, but with the tools of the intelligentsia.

The Letter

When barely out of his teens, Slawomir Sierakowski published a piece in Poland’s most prominent newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*. “It was a naïve article, a teenage article about how we were unhappy with what was going on in Poland,” he admits. “It’s nothing I would sign today.” Veteran oppositionist and sociologist Kinga Dunin, herself a *Gazeta* columnist, took the young Sierakowski to task in print. Out of this critique, the older woman and the younger man developed a close working relationship.

“Krytyka Polityczna, the leftishness, the idea that you have to combine the cultural left with the economic left and that neoliberalism is not the freshest cake in our national bakery—that came from the feminist analysis of Kinga,” American studies professor and Krytyka associate Agnieszka Graff says.

In 2002, Krytyka made its mark in intellectual circles through the traditional tactic of a quarterly journal. But for their next trick, the duo of Sierakowski and Dunin, the yin and yang of the new Polish left, tried something a little different. Their call to arms, in the form of a 2003 open letter, catapulted Krytyka Polityczna not only to domestic fame but international acclaim. Their letter, which ultimately attracted the signatures of 250 top Polish intellectuals, weighed in on the most pressing issue of the day: membership in the European Union. It supported membership but urged that the EU move in a more progressive direction. After its publication in major European newspapers, Polish public opinion began to swing in favor of the letter’s arguments.

“It was a very important lesson for us,” Sierakowski remembers. “You can enter big politics with just a good idea, a pencil and sheet of paper.”

Krytyka began to attract a generation of young activists who’d been born after the Solidarity period and only dimly remembered the transition period of the 1990s. There was a romance to Krytyka, an almost nineteenth-century fusion of politics and poetry that was so lacking in

Poland's new market-driven life. With its combination of top-flight discussion and hard-nosed activism, Krytyka mobilized political romantics, budding academics and the "third sector" of NGO activists. The first two set off the intellectual fireworks; the latter built the organization.

"We are a very professional and very competent organization," Sierakowski says with pride. "A lot of people hate us because we are always winning. It's because of the women of the third sector." Indeed, Krytyka is remarkable for the number of female staffers and for its engagement on gender issues.

Krytyka has successfully launched new ventures at a rate of nearly one a year. It has established a foothold on the web with its Opinion Daily. Its publishing arm now puts out dozens of books a year, including translations of such titles as *What's the Matter with Kansas?* and the more abstruse works of Zizek and Agamben. It has established clubs across Poland, satellite ventures in Ukraine and Russia, and outposts in Berlin and London. Major figures like filmmaker Agnieszka Holland have burnished the organization's reputation by publishing with Krytyka and serving on its advisory board. On the activist front, Krytyka has organized to stop evictions, promote LGBT rights and support protesting nurses.

Krytyka's success in some sense is tied to Poland's shortcomings. True, the Polish economy recovered enough from the near-collapse of the 1990s to produce talk of a "green island" of growth in the midst of a continent in the red. But young people, the ones so interested in Krytyka's combination of economic and cultural left messages, have not benefited from this growth. Unemployment remains high among youth—over 25 percent. Even those with jobs must deal with short-term "trash contracts" that come with few if any benefits.

"People emigrate, to find jobs or, if they have bigger aspirations, to educate themselves," Krytyka staffer Michal Sutowski says. "Over 1.5 million people have emigrated from Poland" since EU accession in 2004, the largest number of people to emigrate during peacetime in modern Polish history.

Krytyka offered something new: a young leader who could rally his generation. "The way these kids worked, sixteen hours a day without pay, it had to do with his charisma," Graff explains. "Getting a word of praise from Slawek was worth collapse."

"Without his determination," adds sociologist and Krytyka associate Maciej Gdula, "we would have many small initiatives, but we wouldn't have people coming together to act." Without Sierakowski, in other words, the independent Polish left would remain little more than plankton.

And Europe Will Be Stunned

Slawomir Sierakowski stands alone in an empty stadium speechifying about Jews. In the film trilogy *And Europe Will Be Stunned*, Sierakowski plays a leader of a movement to bring Jews back to Poland. Directed by Israeli artist Yael Bartana, the films were Poland's official entry to the 2011 Venice Biennale and subsequently packed them in at major museums around the world.

The films can also be read as an allegory for *Krytyka Polityczna*. Calling for the revival of the Jewish community in Poland in an empty stadium—in the first film of the trilogy—might seem as quixotic as reconstructing an independent Left. In the second installment, young people heed the call of the movement's leader and begin to construct a kibbutz in Warsaw, breathing new life into a nearly vanished community. In the final episode, they attend the leader's funeral, after he has been assassinated by an unknown assailant. In real life, Sierakowski is alive and well and writing [occasional columns in *The New York Times*](#). But his recent sojourns outside of Poland, including a fellowship at Harvard during the last academic year, represent a kind of disappearance.

For some, *Krytyka*'s reach exceeds its grasp. "They started out with extraordinary success," journalist Konstanty Gebert recalls. "No one expected it was possible. *Krytyka Polityczna* clubs were mushrooming. Forget Warsaw—in Warsaw the left is trendy and chic. Clubs were appearing in the boondocks like Konin. A normal left-wing movement would have cherished those clubs. They would have sent good organizers there to support these clubs, nurture them, feed them, for years if need be. But no, *Krytyka Polityczna* was looking for a quick fix. It was interested in selling more copies of their journal *Krytyka*. And those clubs disappeared. It breaks my heart."

For others, *Krytyka*'s failure to create a political party to capitalize on its visibility was a major strike against it. "They're nice guys," Zuzanna Dabrowska says. "But I think they suffer from the same problem as the East Coast in the States. They are organized around their own discussions. Of course it's very important to discuss and to know what to think and to have a strong point of view. But if you don't do any more than that, it's a problem, for the left especially."

Sierakowski dismisses talk of political parties. He is after something more transformative. "I can't do that in party politics," he says. "It would just be stupid quarrels. You might say: you can be more honest, more substantial. But no, if I did that, I would lose! Put Vaclav Havel into an election today and he would lose."

And *Krytyka* is not just a talking shop, he insists. "We've changed many things in Poland," he points out. "For instance, we changed the laws on narcotics. We had a very conservative law in Poland that automatically put people in prison if anything was found on them. It was the criminalization of the young generation. Then, when they were released from prison, they were real bandits. Now the law is different. Did any political party change this? No! It was a coalition of NGOs that changed it."

Furthermore, changing the discourse in Poland is no small thing. "It's no longer crazy to say you're a leftist here in Poland, or that you're against war, or that you don't consider nationalism to be a natural perspective, or that you are for taxes and against inequality," Maciej Gdula argues. "You can use class language overtly and not be considered someone from the past. We really did introduce critical language and left-wing perspectives into public debate."

Left Again?

Eastern Europe was once the poster child for a particular kind of liberalism that combined laissez-faire capitalism with parliamentary democracy. The reformers who took office in the early 1990s echoed Margaret Thatcher's famous dictum that their countries basically had no alternative. Even the former Communist parties that took over when support for the reformers bottomed out implemented policies from the same playbook.

As a result, it's hard to find enthusiastic supporters for liberalism these days in the region. Some of those early reformers have moved to the far right, like Volen Siderov of Bulgaria's nationalist party Ataka, while many liberals have moved left, reflecting the influence of Occupy and other movements.

Robert Braun focused on human rights in the 1980s, when he helped found Hungary's Raoul Wallenberg Association. He ran for parliament in the April 6 elections – and ultimately lost — on a different platform: social justice. “Twenty years ago, it was human rights and civil liberties that mattered. But now, it's social rights and social liberties,” he says. “The 1 percent that has made it into Europe, myself included, we're living the life of mainstream Europe—the same cars, the same lifestyle—but we are living that life on the shoulders of the 99 percent.”

The politics of inequality has motivated NGO activists in the region to work with those living precarious lives: refugees, the homeless, the unemployed. A new generation of young intellectuals has formed groups like the Student Network in Hungary, CriticAtac in Romania, and New Left Perspectives in Bulgaria. New left-leaning parties, such as LMP in Hungary (Politics Can Be Different) and the Initiative for Democratic Socialism in Slovenia, have promised a brand new type of politics, even if they've ultimately succumbed to all-too-familiar compromises and infighting.

Out of this mixture of efforts has emerged a New Left. “We use this term to try to carve out space between the old left—what we call the hardline communist left, which is nostalgic about socialism in a conservative, nationalist way,” Bulgarian activist Georgi Medarov says, “and Bulgaria's Social Democratic party, which became quite neoliberal and quite conservative at the same time.”

Virtually every left-leaning political movement in the region has similarly navigated between Communism and neoliberalism. But only in Poland has the New Left successfully reached beyond academia and organizing on the margins without being tempted into the (so far) dead-end of party politics. Moreover, Krytyka Polityczna has survived as a transplant in other cultures and prospered even when its charismatic founder has decamped for other opportunities.

But perhaps the true source of its success is that, in a region currently focused only on entrepreneurial risk, Krytyka Polityczna has made its mark by taking political and intellectual risks.

“Only action produces togetherness,” Sierakowski says, as though he were once again in a vast stadium urging his followers to attempt the improbable. “If you and I cooperate to do something, in time it will produce enough trust so that we will risk something together.”

It's a message with deep resonance in a country where millions once risked their lives many years ago to create a mass movement called Solidarity.