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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Dynamics of the Antifascist Movement in the Context of Illiberal Democracy in Poland

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ABSTRACT: The context of illiberal democracy since 2015 has re-designed the scene of Polish social movements, as Poland witnessed a democratic backslide. This has prompted a number of reactions, using either new or established forms of political resistance. The antifascist movement is one example of this shift. The former subcultural form of organized antifascist activism had to face new challenges – in particular, the institutionalization and normalization of xenophobic rhetoric and a growth of the far-right sector. This explores the role of changes in political and discursive opportunity structures for the reinvigoration of the antifascist movement in Poland, its (de)radicalization in some of its sectors, and changes in its priorities. Empirically, the paper is based on long-term qualitative research on the Polish antifascist movement as well as on the results of a protest survey conducted at the Warsaw Antifascist Street Party in 2021.

KEYWORDS: antifascism, democracy, illiberalism, Poland, protest

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1. Introduction

Antifascism is a movement with a long history originating in early twentieth-century Europe, with its own set of societal debates, contexts, cultures, and contestations. Although contemporary antifa activists are often portrayed by mainstream media as violent and dangerous extremists (Copsey 2018), they are actually part of a subcultural form of resistance emerging from a tradition of contesting (neo)-Nazism, white supremacy, white nationalist populism, and political violence against vulnerable populations. Following the introduction to this

special issue (Jones, Piotrowski and Schuhmacher 2024), we understand this antifascism 'from below' as the subcultural manifestation of resistance against neo-Fascism, which appeared in Poland in the second half of the 1980s. Especially with the rise of fascist street violence following the political transformation in 1989, antifascist self-help groups flourished. The connecting of the two groups to youth subcultures set a frame for interpreting antifascism in terms of subcultural struggles. However, the Polish far-right institutionalized between 2000 and 2010, with the number of violent acts significantly decreasing over the years (Platek and Płucienniczak 2017). Therefore, the militant faction of the antifascist movement deradicalized, and the broader movement shifted towards third-sector activism that followed the processes of NGO-ization accompanied by professionalization, dependency on public funding, and political deradicalization (Jacobsson 2015). Against this background, in 2009, Grażyna Kubarczyk posed in the Polish anarchist journal *Przegląd Anarchistyczny* a rather dramatic sounding call: 'we need political antifascism', referring to the de-politicized character of the movement now rooted in subculture. After leaving the path of contentious street politics, antifa had to re-politicize in order to broadly mobilize and meet the challenges of mainstreamed far-right ideologies. This became even more urgent after 2015 when the radicalized conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS) won both the presidential and parliamentary elections (on the concept of radicalized conservatism, see Strobl 2021).

This change of government was followed by an increasing number of hate speech incidents that were not only tolerated but also sometimes even organized by the state (Winiewski 2016). Furthermore, major changes in political and discursive opportunity structures appeared. A severe defunding of progressive NGOs was accompanied by a considerable flow of cash from the central budget to far-right groups, as well as increasing legal protection over those groups (Piotrowski 2023b). However, the state was not only removing resources and closing off progressive activism with hate speech campaigns, but also making legal changes aimed at shutting down anti-government contentious political activity (cf. increased use of police force, changes in the assembly right favoring right-wing street mobilizations, etc.). Furthermore, since 2015, there has been a deep change in power relations towards progressive activism in general and antifascism in particular. In sum, the establishment of an illiberal democracy based on the Hungarian model was intended, amongst other things, to marginalize the democratic civil society (for a detailed report on the civil society in Hungary under Fidesz, see Mikecz 2023).

Nevertheless, this narrowing of spaces for progressive civic engagement did not result solely in a shrinking of that civic engagement. On the contrary, Poland became an example of the consequential contestation of the public sphere (Piotrowski 2020). In 2019, after four years of not being represented in the Sejm, the Left party returned to parliament, with many of the new MPs having an activist background. Some of these former activists started using antifascist rhetoric in the public sphere, and appeared at demonstrations where they used their status to negotiate with the police to de-escalate restrictive policing (which regularly turned into violence). This, combined with a growing number of (especially young) Poles taking part in progressive protests, a general shift to the left of the youth, and growing intersectionality of activism (which includes pro-refugee, women's rights, and social issues into the scope of antifascist movement) results in a changing political picture (Piotrowski 2021).

Our main argument in this paper is that antifascism consequently became an issue in mainstream politics, with the state and government often being portrayed as becoming fascist or, at least, expressing sympathies with neo-fascist movements. As Piotrowski (2023a) writes: "The use of populist methods that are playing on societies' fears and low instincts allows for labeling the state as 'fascist' and in return the resurgence of antifascism." As a result, mainstream media abandoned the narrative of antifa as merely a 'violent youth subculture' and began incorporating antifascist arguments into public discourse (Piotrowski 2023a). This leads to the conclusion that antifascism in illiberal democracies takes not only a different shape but also serves a different function, namely one of reinforcing democracy.

Political and discursive opportunity structures in Poland created a shift in political representation that has influenced framing, particularly in diagnosing rising pro-fascist tendencies. Activists now emphasize state involvement, moving away from the 'war of subcultures' narrative. This shift enables the integration of antifascist themes into the political struggle against the Law and Justice government. The altered structural setting facilitates diverse mobilizing strategies derived from new frames. Identified fascist tendencies extend beyond traditional boundaries, linking with issues like patriarchy and social inequalities, fostering new coalitions, facilitating the deployment of diverse mobilizing strategies derived from new frames, addressing patriarchy, social, and economic inequalities, and initializing novel coalitions. We will elaborate on this argument in the paper by using qualitative and quantitative empirical material. In doing so, we will first introduce the two methodological approaches, then provide a brief theoretical reflection on the structural background for antifascist mobilization in Poland and a contextualization of Polish antifascism, before grounding our main argument regarding the changed antifascist mobilization basis and argumentative repertoire using the protest survey data. In the discussion, we move to the analysis of our data – with the aim of illustrating the contemporary state of the Polish antifascist movement.

2. Methodology and data

2.1 Protest Survey Data

The quantitative data – collected within the project 'Turmoil of Civil Society in Poland' financed by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research – is based on a survey of the Antifascist Street Party, the biggest counter-protest organized against the annual March of Independence. The 'Antifascist Coalition' (Koalicja Antyfaszystowska) organizing this event is an assembly of various groups, some of which include established organizations from the center of the political spectrum, such as 'All-Poland Women's Strike' (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet), 'Open Republic' (Otwarta Rzeczpospolita), 'Mermaid Collective' (Kolektyw Syrena), 'Citizens of the Republic of Poland' (Obywatele RP).

The protest survey was conducted on 11th November 2021 using the established "Caught in the Act of Protest: Contextualizing Contestation" (CCC) method (van Stekelenburg, Walgrave, Klandermans, and Verhulst 2012). While protestors marched the streets of Warsaw, 19 researchers distributed questionnaires among the several thousand participants. Teams of up to three interviewers worked together with a pointer. The latter counted rows and participants and selected those protesters to be invited to participate in the study (Andretta and della Porta 2014, 321). On the one hand, such an approach is intended to guarantee the representativeness of the data through the probabilistic selection of respondents since the population of a protest is unknown. On the other hand, the pointer minimizes the so-called selection bias because interviewers tend to target people with a similar sociodemographic background – despite instructions to identify potential responders by counting rows and protestors only (Walgrave, Wouters, and Ketelaars 2016, 85). Furthermore, to ensure the quality of the data, a short screener interview is conducted on-site with every fifth approached demonstrator. Since 15 to 40% of the questionnaires distributed during the protest are filled out and sent in afterward, it cannot be excluded that we are dealing with a systematic distortion. From experience, we can assume greater responsiveness among older and better-educated persons, and political involvement may also have an influence on a higher response rate (Walgrave and Verhulst 20122, 217). Screener interviews can measure this effect because, during a protest, the overwhelming majority of up to 95% of the addressed demonstrators are willing to cooperate with the interviewers (Wahlström, Kocyba, De Vydt, and de Moor 2019).

In the case of the Antifascist Street Party, our team approached 918 protestors. Because 79 were not eligible for our study (underage, not Polish speaking, etc.), 839 demonstrators were offered to participate in the survey. Within this sample, 143 participants were asked for a short on-spot screener interview, to which 134 respondents agreed. In total, we have spread 741 questionnaires – 457 via email and 284 as hard copy paper-and-pencil questionnaires. The on-spot cooperation rate is thus 88% for the spreading of questionnaires and 94% for the screener interviews. We received a total of 219 (at least half filled out) questionnaires, which equates to a response rate of 30 % percent (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Data overview

Offered study participation	839
Spread questionnaires	741
Immediate cooperation rate	**88%**
Completed questionnaires	219
Response rate	**30%**

Source: own data

For the aim of our study, we have mainly analyzed the three open questions: (1) why did you participate in the protests; (2) what should be done about government support for nationalist organizations; and (3) who is to blame for this situation. We received 205 answers for the first, 188 for the second, and 165 for the third question, with a total of slightly over 16,500 words. We coded the partly detailed answers for each of the three questions separately. In sum, a total of 944 passages were coded in the material.

2.2 Qualitative expert and movement intellectuals' interviews

The qualitative part of this paper is based on 21 in-depth interviews collected for the project 'Anti-racist contentions in the Baltic Sea region – a study of anti-racist activists' interaction with politicians and civil servants' financed by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies. With a long experience of activism within the movement context, the majority of interviewees could offer a perspective on various historical developments; however, a few less experienced activists were also interviewed as a way to observe changes happening within the movement and to include newly emerging groups in the studied sample. The interviews lasted from one to two and a half hours and were conducted following a standardized interview procedure. The covered topics included the interviewees' activist biography and their characterizations of the movement (main issues, collective action frames, organizational features, repertoires of action, allies, etc.). The interviewees presented their perceptions of the political and discursive opportunities as well as their reflections on the meaning of various central concepts.

Upon the request of some of the activists, all of the interviews were anonymized, and data potentially revealing their identities was removed. Some of the interviews were not even recorded due to the reservation of the informants towards academics and research on social movements. That was particularly an issue for activists, who rejected academia as being overly closely linked with the state or corporations in the case of research funded by some foundations connected to big business, but also with a long history of distrust towards academia and anti-intellectualism (Featherstone, Henwood, and Parenti 2004). Therefore, field notes were

made after meeting the respondents and conversing with them to remember the most important points of our conversations. With some respondents, the meeting or conversation was not planned beforehand, making recording not feasible, especially when these conversations broke out spontaneously.

3. Structural background for antifascist mobilization in Poland

The material presented in this paper is analyzed from the perspective of classical approaches developed within the paradigm of social movement studies The first is the concept of Political Opportunity Structures (POS), which focuses on how the shifts within the polity change the operational sphere of social movements and collective actors. In the studied case, the shift of most elements of the 'classical' POS approach are clearly visible after the change in the Polish political landscape in 2015. Firstly, there was a decrease in political pluralism, as the parliament in the years 2015-2019 was composed of right-wing, liberal, centrist, and farmers' parties without any representation of leftist groups, parties, or movements. Connected to that were the decreasing divisions among the elites, especially regarding issues labeled as antifascist. Furthermore, the political enfranchisement – sometimes interpreted as the 'openness' of the political system – has decreased as the PiS party has, after winning both the parliamentary elections (securing a majority in both chambers of the parliament) and presidential elections, narrowed the funding and the legal framework for progressive activism. When it comes to the level of repression, the antifascist movement has always been a target of state repression, in particular, repressive actions of the police. However, the change in government has resulted in weakening of the repressions against far-right and nationalist movements, which instead received more space for their activism, more resources, and, in consequence, flourished in the public, thus generating a stronger reaction from the antifascist movement.

The second theoretical foundation of this paper that looks at external, structural contexts is derived from the concept of discursive opportunity structures (Koopmans and Statham 1999), which emphasizes that the ideas that the broader political culture deems to be "sensible," "realistic," or "legitimate" significantly affect whether movements can get support for their "collective action framing." In summary, "discursive opportunity structures reveal that cultural elements in the broader environment facilitate and constrain successful social movement framing" (McCammon 2013). Regarding self-positioning within the political spectrum, discursive opportunities seem to have a pivotal role in the process and remain the core cultural challenge for social movements' ideological self-positioning. In the case of radical social movements, the cultural context, in particular the issue of movements whose radicalism is challenging common cultural codes or protest cultures, the structural approach seems to be prevailing when it comes to the influence on the movements. This seems to be a particularly important issue for social movements operating in a discursive field hostile to the movement (i.e., ideologically).

Both structural elements – political as well as discursive opportunity structures – cannot be seen as detached from human agency. Following Tarrow's (2007) understanding, it is the activists' perception of these structures that truly affects the choice of repertoires, etc., that connects these issues with the concepts of framing. The shift in political representation in Poland has mostly affected the diagnostic element of framing, claiming rising pro-fascist tendencies in Poland as portrayed by the activists. Numerous analyses conducted by the activists have pointed out the growing involvement and responsibility of the state in the diagnosed problem, shifting away from the previously used narrative of 'war of subcultures', etc. The new understanding of the issue allowed the activists to try to include antifascist themes into the everyday political struggle against the PiS government. The new structural setting also allowed the use of different mobilizing strategies derived from mobilizing elements of the new frames. Similarly, the issues of identified and portrayed new fascist tendencies

within the society and the state have allowed for new kinds of frame alignments, extensions, and bridging, expanding the usual Polish understanding of fascism to new areas of patriarchy, social and economic inequalities, etc., allowing for new coalitions to be formed.

Against this backdrop, the aforementioned shift, which enabled the perception of antifascism to move from being perceived as a violent, left-wing extremist subculture towards being a pivotal part of a broad movement critical of the state and government, has to do, above all, with the political and discursive change in Poland, which begun to move towards an illiberal democracy since the PiS came to power. For this reason, the often pejorative term "illiberalism," widely used in public debates, will be briefly introduced before focusing on the structural contexts for contemporary antifascism in Poland.

4. Illiberal democracy

The category of 'illiberal democracy' was coined by Fareed Zakaria (1997) and initially was meant to describe failed attempts at the democratization of transitioning countries (e.g., in the Balkans). It is now also used to describe countries with established democratic systems that – due to the electoral choices of their citizens – are withdrawing from the rule of law and other pillars of contemporary liberal democratic systems (Mueller 2017). Such states still hold elections, have elements of democratic systems, etc., but these elements are more and more often 'empty.' As a consequence, political changes are not a result of democratic procedures and/or choices but rather a result of populist pressure exemplified by the ruling party. Furthermore, illiberal democracy is not a descriptive term any longer as some politicians (for instance, Viktor Orban) take pride in changing their countries' regimes towards this illiberal category (Kołtan and Piotrowski 2020). In many cases, illiberal democracies are a result of populist politics and agendas. As per this understanding, populism is considered a particular political program in which the political will of the 'people' (Populus) is implemented directly by the party in power, even if it is against the current rule of law and/or legal system in a particular country (Mueller 2017).

The 2015 elections created a political cleavage within the society. Political elites have started making claims against immigrants and refugees during the so-called refugee crisis and, in particular, in the context of EU relocation plans. Also, the use of anti-immigrant rhetoric overlapped with electoral campaigns (presidential and parliamentary), during which some politicians (Jarosław Kaczyński, head of the PiS party) were using anti-refugee rhetoric. This resulted in two things: first, the increased hostility within the society (towards migrants and all 'others': LGBTQI+, leftists, etc.). Second, after the elections in 2015, state institutions became far more liberal towards the far-right, with, for instance, prosecutors withdrawing cases against far-right activists. The dismantling of the judicial system, undermining the rule of law and the tri-partition of powers in Poland, undertaken as a reform of the courts, fits into this line of thinking (Podemski 2020). The deep polarization of society and politics in Poland has sparked an unprecedented wave of pro-democracy protests and other forms of public engagement, such as an increase in voluntary engagement and deeper involvement in politics (Muszel and Piotrowski 2022).

Law and Justice's government has decided to subordinate numerous areas of the society and its institutions. One such area is the civil society sector. On the one hand, there are attempts to control this sphere by establishing a government-controlled agency that distributes funds among NGOs and that realizes the shift from financing progressive activism to supporting far-right organizations ('National Fund for the Development of Civil Society' – Narodowy Fundusz Rozwoju Społeczeństwa Obywatelskiego). Also, there are attempts to control external funding sources (such as the Norwegian Fund). At the same time, due to the involvement of state-owned companies, numerous NGOs and associations that are functioning within the party line (for

instance, that are dealing with historical themes or reinforcing conservative values and beliefs) are experiencing a considerable growth in funding.

Besides changes within the institutional structure, there is also an observable decline of the narrative of state antifascism. Tomasz Rawski (2019) shows the development and discussions around parliamentary declarations accompanying major anniversaries of the Victory Day (end of WWI) in 1995, 2005, and 2015 and how the antifascist narrative from communist times was dismantled and replaced with a martyrdom narrative of Poland being a victim of 'two totalitarianisms' – fascism and communism, as Charvat (2024) explains in his paper in this special issue. This has changed the dominant narrative and associating Poland with antifascist struggle during WWII had begun to be interpreted as siding with the USSR (as one of the key allies in antifascist military struggles), thus the embodiment of one of the totalitarian regimes that Poland fell victim to. Simultaneously, the state-controlled historical narrative has expanded the meaning of communism (understood as a totalitarian ideology) to a broad range of left-wing oriented or inspired movements. In a very similar manner, one of the activists and an influential Polish leftist writer interviewed summarized the situation as follows:

> Something else appeared, which was the result of historical policy pursued by Tomasz Nałęcz. It was an alignment of two totalitarianisms – fascist and communist. At the same time, all possible left-wing, grassroots, proletarian antifascist uprisings were included in the second category. Because leftist forces constituted the core of resistance to fascism in Italy, France, Greece, Yugoslavia, Albania […]. And this was crossed out by this liberal approach to historical politics. Perhaps this is the result of an endemic or broad-right thought of the students of history and law faculties in the early nineties.

The 'second wave of anti-communism' that arrived in the mid-2010s (after the first one that emerged around 1989 accompanying the regime's transformation) has resulted in attempts to 'de-communize' names of streets commemorating XIX century socialist independence fighters, for example.[1] This also expanded the totalitarian image attributed to the wide range of leftist struggles, including antifascist ones, such as, for instance, the Republican fighters in the Spanish Civil War, whose monuments were torn down and streets renamed.

5. The Changing contexts for Polish antifascism – from fighting violent skinheads to contesting a 'fascist state'

As mentioned before, Polish antifascism was reestablished in the late communist period as a reaction to neo-fascist violence. Initial attempts to self-organize were made in the second half of the 1980s – with the aim of providing security for punk and reggae concerts. Some events – like the Róbreggae festival – were even canceled due to the intensity of skinhead violence. Militant antifa activists were mostly active during physical clashes with skinheads, who were the main current at the far-right end of the political spectrum at the time.

The first major organization was the Polish section of the international 'Radical Antifascist Action' (RAAF), recruited mainly from members of anarchist organizations. With its acceptance of violent action, RAAF was, however, on the fringes of the Polish antifascist movement, which mainly focused on legal actions such as pickets, counter-demonstrations, lectures, and conferences. The 'Anti-Nazi Group' (Grupa Anty-Nazistowska, GAN) was formed in 1992 in response to the arson of a student dormitory in Bydgoszcz, which housed students

[1] The Institute for National Remembrance has the right to call for a change of name of a street or remove a monument that 'commemorates the totalitarian regime of communist Poland or its perpetrators' and the final decision is in the hands of the head of voivodship, which is nominated by the government.

from Africa and Asia. At that time, fascists attacked concerts and people whose looks or views did not match the chauvinistic image of a 'real Pole.' Over time, tensions between antifascist grassroots initiatives and NGOs emerged, with the main line of conflict being the question of cooperation with the police (as most of the grassroots groups were dominated by state-critical anarchists and punks). The largest antifascist organizations included the 'Never Again' (Nigdy Więcej) association (organizing actions such as Music Against Racism or Kicking Racism Out of Stadiums but also being a watchdog observing far-right public activities). One of the founders of GAN, Marcin Kornak, explained in an interview:

> NW was founded in 1996. It started with GAN, which did not agree with racist, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic violence that was quite dominant on Polish streets. We decided to do something about it and improve the situation. And NW was established, in the beginning, a magazine was created, which is the only one in Poland describing these phenomena, then, the biggest NW campaigns were born: Music Against Racism, Kick Racism Out of Stadiums, Delete Racism. At that time, the idea of monitoring the phenomenon of neo-fascism in Poland was also created. In the 1990s, the situation at Polish stadiums was a nightmare. There were a gigantic number of incidents, racist incidents, and racist symbolism was omnipresent while the society […] was not aware of these phenomena. To the extent that in high-circulation media photo reports from matches, they were accompanied by photographs of neofascist symbols. We decided to oppose it (Stowarzyszenie NIGDY WIĘCEJ 2012)

Interviewees we have reached also stressed the self-defensive nature of the first antifa organizations in Poland. Many of them described the situation on Polish streets as 'tough' and hazardous, which created a need for self-help groups. The emergence of the first squatted social centers in the early 1990s helped to cement the movement. As one ex-squatter explained, through concerts, they met groups from smaller cities in the region, creating networks that helped in self-organization. He recalled:

> For instance, we have organized ourselves and went to concerts in small regional towns like Gorzów or Jarocin. In Jarocin, when you organized a punk concert, one could be sure that the local Nazis would show up and try to attack it. So, we were going for these gigs, like 40 or 50 of us, guys with already developed skills [in martial arts and self-defense – authors]. And sometimes, after the gig, we went out to the town to hunt down some skinheads.

In sum, the re-emergence of the Polish antifa movement in the second half of the 1980s was a reaction to violent far-right activism on the streets in Poland. However, over the years, as violent skinhead activities were losing intensity, there was less and less space for militant antifascists, as one interviewee suggests:

> The violent core of the antifascist movement is not accepted by the majority of the population because of their practices, which are not that different from the neofascists […].

The criticism of Grażyna Kubarczyk, that Polish antifascism is not political enough, is not an isolated phenomenon. As she noted: "it has no social context, nor does it seriously analyze the problems of the development of the extreme right in contemporary societies" (Kubarczyk 2009, 68). Another leftist commentator, Oskar Szwabowski, observed a similar situation a few years later: "Antifascism [...] is blind to recognizing the nature of fascism and consequently becomes helpless towards it (unless it repeats the fascist gesture towards fascists). The relationship between the state, capitalism and the fascist movement is not addressed. Consequently, [...] the narrative of the 'antifascists' also does not lead to real changes or at all to

putting the problem in perspective, which would make it possible to solve it" (Szwabowski 2012). As one of the activists summarized being antifascist at those times:

> There are plenty of negative associations with antifascism, connecting it with something very aggressive and with something that does not match the vision that there should be a balance (even an artificial one) between fascism and antifascism.

In the mid-2000s, the modus operandi of antifascist groups changed, and they began to be organized as a loose network of antifa groups. New NGOs were established to work against hate speech (HejtStop!) and discrimination ('Open Republic' – Otwarta Rzeczpospolita). They report selected incidents to the prosecutors' offices and do media campaigns. The repertoire in use ranges from legal solutions and litigation, to publicly outing authors of racist or xenophobic internet comments (as it is done by 'Monitoring Center for Racist and Xenophobic Behavior' – Ośrodek Monitorowania Zachowań Rasistowskich i Ksenofobicznych), or to preventing racist meetings from happening (by pressuring owners of the locations or by generating black PR against those events). Other organizations placed their focus on educational programs, however, with the dependency of school principals upon politically-appointed officials, equality-oriented educational projects have been in less demand since PiS took power in 2015. What is more common is the publicizing of incidents of hate speech or hate crimes, in order to force public officials to act (e.g., Pankowski et al. 2020). This resulted in an internal split between the 'moderate' and 'radical' flanks of the movement, as described elsewhere (Piotrowski 2021).

One major event that formed the contemporary Polish antifascist movement was the opposition to the Independence March – a public gathering organized by the Polish far-right aiming at celebrating the Polish Independence Day (11th November). Established in 2009 and including street riots and clashes with the police in its first years, the March regularly attracts tens of thousands of participants, and is supported directly and indirectly by representatives of Law and Justice (discursively, during their time in government, financially, etc.) (Kocyba and Łukianow 2020). This is why attempts to block the March, undertaken since the beginning, changed in character between 2015 and 2023. For example, in 2017, 14 women, of whom eight belonged to the group Obywatele RP and five to the Warsaw's Women's Strike, tried to block the event before it entered a bridge – a location well suited for a blockade since there would have been no alternative route available for the marchers. All of these women were forcefully pushed out by demonstration security and later faced charges of 'interrupting a legal demonstration,' but finally were acquitted by the court. Other attempts by Obywatele RP to block the March were conducted legally (e.g., registering other protests on the same path as the March). However, their more direct tactics were interrupted by the police, who kettled counter-protesters for hours, thus insulating the March from them. These practices were later declared illegal by the court, and the Ombudsman for Human Rights (one of the few agencies still independent from the state authorities at that time) intervened in the case.

These new critical civil society groups linked the antifascists with a political struggle against the current government. However, the rise of hate speech in public space and the growing strength of far-right groups have also resulted in the resurgence of antifascist groups, which had been previously unseen since the early 1990s (Piotrowski 2021). In sum, antifascism has become more visible in public spaces and mainstream discourse. This has been echoed by the increased alliances of antifascist groups with various other groups, as well as more political intersectionality within social movements and mobilizations – for example, the inclusion of women's, LGBTQI+, workers' rights, etc., in antifascist claims and narratives. Antifascist symbols – like the three arrows of the Iron Front – also became more visible in public spaces and were even featured on alternative merchandise. What is especially remarkable about the political context in Poland is that antifascism has also appeared in the program of the Left party.

At the same time, there is a visible revival of militant antifa groups. Network analysis based on social media demonstrates that there are numerous antifascist groups emerging throughout Poland, often in smaller cities such as Jaworzno or Krotoszyn (Piotrowski 2021). Some of these groups are connected to antifascist or 'progressive' martial arts clubs; annually, there are at least three (publicized) antifascist martial arts tournaments: 'We Play Football, Even When It's Raining' (Gramy w Piłkę Nawet w Deszcz), 'Without Loosers' (Bez Przegranych), and 'Freedom Fighters.' These groups – similarly to their predecessors in the early 1990s – provide security and protection for other events that are at risk of being attacked by right-wingers, as was the case when the 2020 women's protests were attacked by groups of nationalists. Video recordings from protests on 30th October show that after the initial havoc of the attack conducted by the far-right, a group of around 80-100 black-clad persons ran towards the attackers and pushed them back. According to the interviewees, these were the 'exercise sports groups' of the antifascist movement.

There is also a football club (AKS Zły) that openly promotes antifascism: a rare situation in the far-right-leaning Polish football world (Kossakowski 2021). These were joined by people from outside of the anarchist movement and politicized subcultures. Some football hooligans joined (such as the Black Rebels of Polonia Warszawa who withdrew from public activities in 2011 after losing a fight with other hooligans), as well as many people with no political connections. Militant antifascist groups are focused on direct and militant actions, mostly physical confrontations with neo-Nazis (skinheads, Autonomous Nationalists), and they established closed discussion groups for exchanging experiences and reporting their actions. The most well-known groups currently active are '161 Crew' (Warsaw), 'Barricade 161' (Barykada 161, Białystok), 'Antifa Jaworzno,' 'Antifascist Konin' (Antyfaszystowski Konin), 'Radical Silesia' (Radykalny Śląsk) but a number of local initiatives do not even have a social media profile.

Attempts by the far right, especially 'National Radical Camp' (Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny), to enter schools and universities with their propaganda resulted in the establishment of two student groups ('Student Antifascist Committees' – Studenckie Komitety Antyfaszystowskie, SKA – in Warsaw and Gdańsk), and a number of local one-issue coalitions. What is significant for the last wave of engagement and activism is that these groups do not stem from the usual environment of radical libertarian left-wing movements (a term used to capture the broad and anti-hierarchical left) in Poland, but rather involve and engage different social groups: including former dissidents and people over the age of 50+, as well as students, many of whom are without prior experience in activism. One event that also seems to play an important role in this new kind of antifascist activism was the new wave of Polish feminism established after October 2016, when massive women's protests took place. This new wave of feminist activists that emerged began to interpret feminism as part of a broader struggle against exclusion and oppression, and many activists got engaged antifascist activities (Piotrowski 2021; Muszel and Piotrowski 2022). Antifascist claims and actions began to be forwarded by feminist social media profiles, and the antifascist movement openly supported the 2016 and 2020 women's strikes.

All these changes affected the antifascist movement, shifting the focus of their struggles toward the political mainstream. As a result, the antifascist activists who began to point out the role of the state in the introduction of a pro-fascist trend underlined the structural context rather than the agency of the far-right activists themselves. This meant moving away from the practices of street politics towards the inclusion of the phenomenon of fascism into regular political discussions. These recent developments, especially those taking place after 2015, seem to support the thesis of increasing intersectionality of the antifascist movement. Also, the growing attention given to other forms of discrimination (of women, workers, people on temporary employment contracts, and parents of people with disabilities, to name just a few) during campaigns in which antifascists are involved supports this claim.

6. Analysis of the protest survey data

The development of the antifascist movement within the illiberal political context just described is largely confirmed by the protest survey data collected 2021. The participants of the Antifascist Street Party, an event explicitly organized as a counter-protest against the March of Independence, most often pointed to the Polish government when asked for their motive for joining the protest. With 97 references, 26% of all the codes within the answers to the motivation question referred (critically) to the Polish government. Such statements typically sound like this: "Because I am terrified that the government preaches fascist slogans and supports fascist organizations and events." The second part of the sentence already indicates that this criticism of the government was often mentioned in the same sentence as the organizers of the March: "To express my opposition to the organization of the Independence March, which in my opinion spreads fascism, racism, and anti-Semitism, with the total support of the authorities." Thus, statements emphasizing the respondents' aim to protest the Independence March and the far-right organizations running and supporting it often expressed their protest of the government's support as well. But even if we count these declarations, critics of the organizers of the March were mentioned less frequently than critical statements about the government – despite the fact that the Antifascist Street Party is the official counterprotest of the March: we coded 91 answers here. This makes it quite evident that the participants in the antifascist counter-protest also saw an opponent in the government and its actions. But the respondents also named other reasons for participation, albeit rarer. Those motives included: an antifascist identity (62), criticism of a general shift to the right, resp. of normalization of right-wing thinking in Poland (52) and the support of minorities discriminated against by the Polish government (42).

The latter response category also confirms the trend assumed in our introduction, according to which Polish antifascism, like the pro-democracy grassroots movement as a whole, places great value on intersectionality, especially since PiS took power in 2015. The following statement shows the extent to which antifascism seems to be associated with ideals that are generally progressive in character: "The antifascist initiative is close to my heart, as is the idea of free courts, accepting refugees or abortion freedom." The intersectionality can also be seen in ten references to the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border, where a wide variety of democratic organizations are engaged in providing aid to refugees stranded in no man's land – a topic prominently raised in the opening speeches of the protest. But there were also participants who joined the antifascist event because of its explicit character as a party. 16 respondents pointed out the good music and atmosphere – and indeed, similar to a Pride parade, there were vehicles with sound systems and musicians around which protestors danced. After all, the protest was organized as a street party, a mode of action being explicitly inclusive and attractive for young persons beyond the hard core of antifascist activists. Table 2 provides an overview of the responses to the open question on the respondents' motivation to participate.

Table 2 – Coded answers – Why did you participate in the protest?

	N codes (=370)	Percentage
Opposing government	97	26%
Opposing the March of Independence and its organizers	91	25%
Antifascist identity	62	17%
Against a general shift to the right/ normalization of the far right	52	14%
Intersectionality	42	11%
Music and atmosphere	16	4%
The humanitarian situation at the border	10	3%

Source: own data

When asked what could be done against the government's support of nationalist organizations, an absolute majority – unusual for antifascist discourse and more typical for moderate debates – spoke out in favor of legal measures. This relates directly to the aforementioned 'moderate' vs. 'radical' divide within the Polish antifascist movement. In 64 cases, the de-legalization of right-wing organizations was advocated for, while 61 responses demanded the initiation of legal proceedings or a judicial punishment. Overall, more than every second demand called for legal consequences – a surprising result for an antifascist protest. Such an almost legalistic perception sounds like this: "If they do not violate the law, then they should be treated like any other organization. However, when, for example, the Association of the March for Independence, from its beginning, promotes content and supports behavior that is incompatible with Polish law (such as incitement to hatred), this should be grounds for banning."

But here, too, there were 48 calls for the government to be removed from office, often – again, more typical of the moderate center – through democratic elections. The following statement could serve as a motif for such a (again, not very classically antifascist) perception: "The way to cut the ties between the state and the fascists is through elections." Demands for an education and public awareness campaign (17), the wish for the involvement of international organizations (11), here especially with reference to the EU, or the exclusion of nationalists from public discourse (6) also followed a 'moderate' line of claims within an illiberal context. Protest, which is more in line with antifascist traditions, was pleaded for 25 times. But again, quite unusually for classical antifascism, within the category of protest, the participants advocated for civil disobedience or even violent forms of action only seven times. The following statement sounds more typical of militant antifascism: "We must hammer both the government and the fascists like a drum, with all the means at our disposal." For detailed responses, see Table 3.

Table 3 – Coded answers – What should be done about government support for nationalist organizations?

	N codes (=237)	Percentage
Delegalization of far-right organizations	64	27%
Legal Procedures / Judicial Sanctioning	61	26%
Change of Government	48	20%
Stop of Financing	30	13%
Public awareness campaign	17	7%
Involvement of international Organisations	11	5%
Exclusion from public debate	6	3%

Source: own data

The picture of participants of an antifascist street protest no longer primarily focusing on their far-right counterparts or even on violent forms of contentious politics, but rather on the government, is most clear when it comes to the question of whom to blame for the situation. Here, the ruling PiS party was referred to by a wide majority: 118, and thus more than every third coded passage represented this category. Interestingly, the explanation for the government's responsibility again contains legalistic interpretations: "The ruling party is able to do anything to stay on top of the political system by exploiting legal loopholes and using the law in a very cynical way." 54 (and therefore far fewer) references were made to politicians in general as being responsible for the rise of the far right in Poland. It is particularly striking that the whole political class was referred to most often within this category (39). And even politicians of the party governing before Law and Justice took power in 2015, the conservative PO, were mentioned ten times, while those of the far-right Confederation

were mentioned only twice. Responsibility is least often assigned to those politicians who – at least in part – can be considered the political arm of the Polish fascist movement.

Other responses also blame the situation on society (39), which, for example, allows fascism to grow stronger because of its passivity and indifference: "society – lazy, passive, apathetic, uncritical, with poor historical memory, and full of complexes." Frequently – and more typically for antifascism – reference is made to capitalism (38), i.e., to the experience of the system transformation at the beginning of the 1990s or to poverty: "The first to be blamed are Balcerowicz and his plan, which, because of its assumptions that are detached from reality, drove Polish society into poverty, where it still is for the most part." In addition, the responsibility of the media is criticized for giving too much space in the public debate to the far right (28) – social media are also regularly mentioned here. Moreover, the role of the Catholic Church seems to be important to the respondents (24), as well as the failure of the school system (18) to sensibilize Poles to fascist ideologies and – on top – to perpetuate the historical image of Poland as solely a victim of foreign powers (and not a perpetrator against its minorities or neighbors). Even social polarization was referred to regularly (10) – which is quite surprising for antifascism, being more an expression of a centrist sentiment for social harmony, at least when it is formulated like this: "Politicians pushing for conflict. For the last 14 years, we have been dealing with enormous tensions. This is the result of this conflict. People from the opposition as well as the power camp are burdened." It is also particularly striking that nationalist organizations, the 'natural enemy of antifascists,' are mentioned comparatively rarely, only seven times while racism was referred to only once. For an overview of the response to the question of who is responsible for the negative developments, see Table 4.

Table 4 - Coded answers - Who is to blame for this situation?

	N codes (=337)	Percentage
Government	118	35%
Politicians	54	16%
Society	39	12%
Capitalism	38	11%
Media	28	8%
Church	24	7%
Education system	18	5%
Polarization	10	3%
Nationalist organizations	7	2%

Source: own data

7. Summary and conclusions

The emergence of illiberal democracy has a significant impact on the societies where it takes root. It not only influences the realm of politics and public conversations but also shapes the character and methods of grassroots initiatives. The notable surge in hate speech employed by politicians and the exclusion of various societal groups from what is considered 'normal' becomes entangled in a dynamic between the state and fascist/antifascist tendencies. For a long time, in Poland (and many other nations), antifascism was viewed as a confrontation between two subcultures, symbolized by conflicts between punks and skinheads. However, when the state becomes a part of this equation by supporting far-right groups and restricting resources for

progressive movements and NGOs, it transforms the landscape of fascist/antifascist dynamics. This leads to the formation of new alliances and necessitates fresh strategies for activism that are adapted to this evolving context. The current status and upswing of antifascist rhetoric and actions in Poland, the growing presence of antifascist arguments in public discourse, and the increasing interconnectedness within the antifascist movement serve as evidence to support this perspective, indicating a mainstreaming of antifascism within an illiberal environment.

All of these changes are a result of the challenge posed to the antifascist movement from the context of illiberal democracy that has shifted activists' main adversary from their counter-movements (as was the case in Poland during the 1990s) to a state that is more often described as 'fascist' and its institutions that are occupied by the ruling party. This not only changes the dynamics and arguments used but also attracts new people to join the movement and its manifestations. In this sense, antifascism can be interpreted as a common platform for anti-governmental activism and claims, bridging various initiatives and increasing the observed intersectionality of social movements in Poland.

Because of the new common ground found in anti-state politics, contemporary antifascism has become more intersectional and inclusive, offering a common platform for anti-state actions. Moreover, it has become included in political programs and agendas. Being antifascist in contemporary Poland also means being in support of other more mainstream, left-liberal, or progressive claims. The notion of antifascism was also taken up by some unexpected actors as a result of the current political conflict in Poland. As Piotrowski (2023a) writes: "Because of common ground for anti-state politics, contemporary antifascism becomes more intersectional and inclusive, becomes a common platform for anti-state actions, becomes included in political programs and agendas. Being antifascist in contemporary Poland means also to be pro-refugee, pro-abortion and alike. The notion of antifascism was also used by some unexpected actors as a result of the political conflict in Poland today. This applies often to local politics, as many local authorities are the stronghold of the liberal opposition to the current government."

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