VEERING TOWARD RADICALISM:
A CASE STUDY ON THE INCREASE OF THE POPULAR SUPPORT FOR ORGANIZED RADICAL MOVEMENTS IN POLAND

Alexsandra Skalska
De Paul University

Introduction

After months of negotiations, which included some bittersweet coalition reshufflings, Poland formed a new government in 2005. The newly established coalition was set up among the conservative Law and Justice [PiS], the populist Self-Defense [SO], and the national conservative League of Polish Families [LPR]. Since 2001, the SO and LPR have been known for their radical rhetoric and confrontational direct acts. LPR's political agenda has emphasized strong opposition to abortion and gay marriages, while Self-Defense's lead efforts to maintain state-funded agriculture and increase in government social programs. Also, both at some point addressed their disapproval for Poland's entry to the European Union fueled by their hostility toward foreign investment and opposition to the selling of Polish land to foreign nationals.

Unsuccessful coalition talks between the Law and Justice and the liberal Civic Platform [PO], fueled by the discrepancies between the leaders of both parties, compelled the former to look for alternative coalition partners elsewhere. Possibilities included some choices that were quickly deterred or never looked into like the former communist and the Alliance of the Democratic Left (SLD), much despised by the PiS.

The two radical parties, representing different sides of the ideological spectrum -- LPR far right and SO populist left -- proved to be most compatible with PiS's political program. The three were already acquainted with each other when they signed the Stabilization Pact in 2006 to deter the Polish president from the possible dissolution of the parliament. Still, the newly established government alarmed the liberal circles in Poland and abroad. The media stormed with comments about how the new coalition is "sending the wrong message," or that the PiS is "playing with fire."

Was this coalition, after all, an unanticipated turn of events? Five years ago nobody expected that the radical parties would even manage to get into the parliament. But as the course of events has shown, to the astonishment of many, this is exactly what happened. Were there incentives behind the spur of popularity for the radical parties in Poland? Could one examine the rise to power of both parties through a prism of people's opinions and motivations?

I conducted five-month of field research on the increase of the popular support for the organized radical movement in Poland.[cv] I began with the hypothesis that the spur of popularity for the radical parties happened because of the EU accession. Both parties' adverse position on Poland's accession to the European Union and the increase in popularity of both during the final and most difficult stages of negotiations with the EU instigated my speculations about such possibility.

The results of my research refuted this hypothesis. I was quick to learn that the rationale behind people's voting for the radical parties went beyond a mere understanding of the accession process with the European Union. I also learned that ever since the collapse of communism the political system in Poland has experienced voter demobilization and institutional experimentation, which may partially explain why the political system in Poland has been so unpredictable.

Gauging the possibilities

Political party preferences in Poland change like a kaleidoscope. Nevertheless, both radical fractions relentlessly maintain a strong position, ranking in the top five of the most popular parties in Poland. In 2005 elections to the Polish parliament the radical parties gained a considerate number of seats (SO- 11.4% and LPR – 8 %), but lagged behind parties like the conservative Law and Justice -- PiS (27%), and the center-right Civic Platform -- PO (24.1%). Unlike the two leading right-wing groups, both radical parties rely on a distinctive electoral support, that of the villages and small towns (Self-Defense 35 % and LPR 38%).

According to public opinion research in 2004, the largest social group supporting the two radical parties are farmers (SO 44% and LPR 36%). They ardently sympathize with the populist, conservative, and the isolationist politics of both parties. Additional supporting groups for both parties include unskilled workers (SO 36%), people possessing elementary or middle-technical level of education, and those living in the rural areas. The declaration of support is also being widely heard among low-income people and among those who negatively rank their material status. The vast majority of enthusiasts of the LPR are seniors 65 and

up (27%) and people on welfare (20%). An important factor in support for the LPR is religiousness, which is measured by the frequency of religious practices. Consequently, practicing Catholics and people declaring right-wing orientation more likely express their support for the LPR (31%).[cvi]

There are many explanations in Polish popular discourse for the increase in popular support for parties of the radical right and left, such as the collective experience of stress, tension, and social/political crises.[cvii] Scholarly opinion takes a macro view of these politico-cultural trends. For example, Douglas Holmes, an anthropologist who has studied radical groups in UK and France, sees it as a result of two interrelated phenomena, that of the political and economic integration of the sovereign countries into the European Union project, and "fast capitalism."[cviii] In his essay, *Elections and Voting Behavior,* Krzysztof Jasiewicz, the Polish political scientist, says that the key concept remains in the "democratic consolidation" of the CEE where a rapid social economic change caused a rift in the society. He claims that the system changes produced societal divisions, which in turn generated the support for "political populism."[cix] Frances Millard, an American political scientist with long experience in Central Europe, says that specific voting behavior in Poles is an outcome of failures in government, which facilitated the initial breakthrough of the populist parties in 2001. [cx]

Because the region's ethnic and cultural diversification could also tell us something about political preferences, I decided to focus on the aspects of regionalism to gauge specific voting behaviors. Despite the assumptions made by journalists and political scientists about the rationale of peoples' voting, it is not certain that the full range of voting motivations has been described. In particular, Polish voters, like American voters, are broken down into very large and all encompassing subgroups according to age, education, income, etc. Missing from this equation is the heterogeneous provenance of the population of certain regions of Poland. It could be speculated that a region's reluctance or eagerness toward a specific political party may be influenced by that region's ethnic composition. For example, if the inhabitants of the region indicate separatist inclinations or if their cultural and national interests vary considerably from that of the mainstream, it is anticipated that their vote will go to the parties that hold similar beliefs. Moreover, the geographic location and the concomitant characteristics of a particular region could also determine the region's voting proclivities. For example, in Poland the predominantly agricultural regions in the east vote differently than the industrial regions in the west.

Given this complex and changing picture, it cannot be determined ahead of time that people of a particular provenance will vote one way or another. Instead, people must be allowed to give voice to their social and political experiences. Through my ethnographic fieldwork, I attempted to provide an outlet for the voters to tell their stories. I wanted to make sure that the voting voice of the people was not lost or neglected. It was an attempt to look at the phenomenon from the point of view of the voting population living in one particular region of Poland in which the participants were to describe their personal experiences with the two radical parties, the Self-Defense (SO) and League of Polish Families (LPR). By focusing on a single region and its case of enthusiasm toward the radical movement, I could establish a better knowledge and understanding of the emergence of this voting trend within other regions of Poland.

Sample and selection criteria

The subject region of this study -- *Silesia* -- unites the cultural heritage of numerous people and countries. Silesia is a metal and coal mining industrial region with a rich history of resistance and fight for independence before and during both world wars. The turbulent historical past plays well into the specific make up of the region. Based on the Silesian example, one may be able to understand how different cultures and ethnicities that managed to mix over years gave way to specific voting patterns.

For example, the three dominant groups in this region, the Silesians, Germans and *Kresowianie* have a different understanding of nationhood. To Silesians it is their own region. The Silesians want autonomy of their region. To Germans, Silesia is Germany. The Germans want Poland to be part of the European Union because it will help strengthened the connections with Germany. To Kresowianie – a population of Poles who were expelled from Eastern borderlands of Poland that were annexed by the Soviet Union after World War II -- it is first and foremost Poland. Kresowianie support a stronger Poland.

While proceeding with this research I took upon two objectives, the first was to discover the movement ideologies and internal processes of the two radical parties in Poland. For that I conducted interviews with Silesian activists from the two radical parties. The second objective was to identify the voting tendencies and rationale for people's support for the radical parties. This part of the research was based on open-ended interviews with private individuals who are members of specific community

groups and organizations in Silesia. These groups are organized around the regional origins of their members. All of the interviews were conducted in Polish.

The three community groups coincided with identifiable ethnic groups. These were 1) Federation of Expellees from the Eastern Borderlands of the Second Republic - Territorial Association of Silesia (*Związek Wypędzonych z Kresów II RP*), 2) Silesian Autonomy Movement -- RAŚ (*Ruch Autonomii Śląska*) and 3) The Social-Cultural Society of the Germans --DFK (*Towarzystwo Społeczno-Kulturalne Niemców*). My initial choice in selecting these particular organizations was based on their visibility in the community through services they have provided to their members and to Silesian society.

A total of forty-four private individuals cooperated with my research. For each organization studied there were approximately fifteen participants. Only ten of them were women. From among the three organizations, one (Silesian Autonomy Movement) had no female participants. For the other two, the number of female participants was five.

In terms of age, the oldest participant was 78 years old, while the youngest was 33. The average age for the group of 44 participants was 55 years old. The Society of the Germans (DFK) had the oldest participants with the average age of 62. The youngest participants were in the Silesian Autonomy Movement where the typical age was 44. The Association of Expellees fell right in the middle, but closely followed the Society of the Germans. There, the average participant was 60 years old.

When recruiting my partners in research I paid attention to their place of origin. Silesia is divided into 36 administrative districts, which are spread over 12 thousand square kilometers.[cxi] Since the members of the organizations were not located in one particular district, I decided to limit myself to the four administrative districts: *Katowice, Gliwice, Tarnowskie Góry,* and *Bytom*. Even though this put some limitations on the number of the actual participants in this research, the criteria I used when picking my districts were based on high condensation of members of the three studied organizations and the proximity and accessibility to the sites.

Results

Political Vacillation

The results of this research demonstrated the respondents' inability to clearly state their political preferences, and their lack of pre-determinated ideology or principled conviction for Polish politics. Supporting this point was evidence of a lack of coherence in responses to the questions that concerned the voting choices and the factors underlying these choices. The most viable distinction in political preferences was that between the supporters and adversaries of radicalism. But even these two groups experienced some incoherencies of their own. For example, respondents who did not support the tactics and practices of the radical parties nevertheless supported the parties' political programs and vice versa. The respondents who condemned the acts of Self-Defense (SO), like the grain-dumping protest, found the SO reliable and trustworthy.

The same discrepancies existed in the views of political trustworthiness of the leaders of both radical parties. There were respondents who despised both Roman Giertych (LPR) and Andrzej Lepper (SO), and those who liked one but not necessarily the other. Among all of the respondents, no one declared their support for both politicians. Still, preferences about political figures did not necessarily correspond with the political party preferences. Even people who strongly disliked both politicians declared their support for radical practices. Some people who displayed liberal proclivities also admitted that Giertych and Lepper are the only politicians who might be able to tackle the challenges of Polish politics.

Another factor in determining people's indecisiveness about the political scene in Poland was the prevailing attitude among respondents that neither radicals nor liberals are fit to govern. Almost 60% of respondents thought that the liberal parties did not measure up to people's expectations. Some respondents admitted that liberalism had too many failures in the past and that it had worked better in other countries, but not necessarily in Poland. A number of respondents thought that liberals are characterized by too much leniency, which makes them unreliable as political players. There were also those who brought up the positive sides of liberalism, such as that liberals have more political experience and are better educated.

The majority of respondents asserted that the liberals are supported by the wealthy and educated, while the radicals by the poor and uneducated (63%). The arguments used by these respondents pertained to the fact that radicals are more appealing to the common people because they use simple language and populist slogans. Also, poverty and lack of education compels people to look for easy solutions, and in the opinion of many respondents, this is what the radicals have to offer. Some of the interviewees thought that the liberals are supported by the wealthy and educated since liberal ideologies were created by political and financial elites.

Social denunciation of radicalism

The social trends and the outcomes of this research show that there exists a general discontent with radicalism in Poland. Precisely, the society and politicians despise "radicalism" because of the stigma attached to this word. The scope of this repugnance is even seen among the radical activists who view the word as derogatory and offensive. In their opinion, people overuse the term to an extent when they begin to confuse it with words like patriotism.

The radical party activists blame such perception on the media, which in their opinion portrays them in a negative light. An enduring activist and a senatorial candidate from Lower Silesia in 2005 parliamentary elections, Bolesław Grabowski said, "LPR is not a radical party. It has become a trend that everything that does not fall into the mainstream preached by the media is considered as radical."

Based on the number of responses, the people I interviewed were not fond of the practices and tactics of the radical parties, like the road blockades or grain-dumping protest organized by Self-Defense. Nearly 77% of respondents thought that the dumping of grain by Self-Defense was not done in Poland's best interest. Nearly 23% called the practices "unethical" and "barbaric." Fifteen percent said that such event should have not taken place in the situation when so many people in Poland struggle with hunger and poverty. Those who said that the dumping of grain did in fact represent a protectionist act said that the grain should had not been imported to Poland in the first place. They also said that Poland has an adequate supply of grain. They saw importing grain from abroad as a loss of profits to the local farmers (14 %).

Additional evidence of the negative attitude toward radicalism is that 66% of respondents thought that Andrzej Lepper and Roman Giertych, the radical leaders, are not trustworthy. The respondents perceived them as xenophobic nationalists who use national sentiments and demagogy for their own political gains. Almost 45 % of respondents believed that both politicians lack appropriate political conduct. Those who approved of Lepper and Giertych said that what they admire in both are their candidness and bravery in speaking up about corruption in politics.

Even though the majority of respondents disapproved of radicalism, there were several individuals with liberal viewpoints who unconsciously approved of radical ideologies. These unwittingly expressed opinions produced a pattern I called the *latent radicalism*. I determined the nature of latent radicals based on the existing contradictions provided by the interviewees themselves. The latent radicals were a group of respondents who openly declared their disapproval of the radical parties but at the same time abided by the radical way of thinking. They supported liberal parties or any other parties different from the radical ones, but adopted and supported the radical ideals. For example, they were quick to make judgments about the political conduct of the individual members of the radical parties but admitted that, "Poland needs to be ruled with an iron first." The underlying nature of latent radicals was revealed in their own contradictions. Thus, they could have supported the liberal parties and disapproved of LPR and SO but were also for the restoration of capital punishment and for the condemnation of gay marriages and women's rights to abortion.

To gauge the respondent's enthusiasm for radicalism, I asked them whether they would link the EU skepticism of the radical parties with patriotism. Seventy percent of the respondents thought that the link did not exist. Some compared the radicals' skepticism with nationalism, xenophobia, or even fascism. Others said that EU skepticism signifies the parties' nearsightedness or even hypocrisy. A group of respondents who thought that the EU skepticism is in fact a patriotic act used arguments that spoke of the hurtful outcomes of the EU accession and the necessity to prevent similar impairments in the future. They also spoke about the role the radical parties play as the defenders of the national interests.

In a notable contrast, almost 33 % of the Kresowianie thought that EU skepticism could be compared to a patriotic act. The other groups of respondents were not as sympathetic to Euroskeptics. For example, the Silesians, besides two undecided voices, stated that EU skepticism is not in itself a patriotic act. The Germans, while also voicing their disapproval, had only three positive responses.

An interesting thing to note is that each group displayed its own political preferences. The Kresowianie were more likely to lean toward the radical parties, although liberal voices were predominant. This group had the most supporters for the radical parties among the three studied groups. The Germans, with a lot of voices leaning toward the former Communists, had also few enthusiasts of Self-Defense. Nevertheless, the Silesians displayed the most homogeneous political proclivities that were evidently liberal.

The role of the EU in the support for the radicals

Seventy five percent of respondents were thrown off guard when I asked them to comment on whether the EU had something to do with Poland's political and economic failures, or that in fact,

Poland's accession to the EU might have lead to the increase of support for the radical parties. Rather, a lot of people transferred all their frustrations concerning the malfunctioning of the political and economic systems from the EU to the Polish government. They blamed the government for the lack of incentive in implementing and creating the necessary reforms and changes.

Despite a gloomy panorama of issues ranging from politicians to economy to radical parties, the European Union was, in fact, the only thing that kept most respondents optimistic. People kept referring back to the technological innovations, developments in infrastructure, and the economy. The respondents believed that the European Union will create opportunities for Poland and will restrain the Polish government from further misappropriations of public goods. Others held high hopes for developments in job sectors.

A considerable number of respondents believed that the situation would change for the better after EU accession; however, the changes will not happen instantly (45%). Twenty-seven percent of respondents thought that despite the many opportunities the EU will create, it should take at least one generation for those opportunities to realize. There were also people who did not hold the same extent of optimism about the EU as the rest of the respondents. They believed that the situation would change for the worse (25%).

The respondents' most often quoted concern about the European Union involved the allocation of the EU funds. The respondents feared that only particular sectors of the economy would profit from the EU accession. Thirty-eight percent of respondents believed that it is in Poland's own competency to take care of things without constantly looking up to the EU. A group of respondents also believed that the EU cares only about the most powerful countries and their own interests. These respondents asserted that in order to fix the problems Poland faces today, people's mentality must change and Poland must face possible changes in the government rather than rely on the EU. Also, they stressed that Poland needs the resources to conduct the required changes. Nevertheless, the radicals lack a political plan to effectively carry out these changes.

One of the guiding principles of this research was to discover the movement ideologies and internal processes of the two radical parties in Poland. Based on the conducted interviews with the Silesian activists from the two radical parties LPR and SO, the EU accession was not a determinant factor in the increase of the popular support for their parties. The representatives from Self-Defense claimed that the gain of popularity for their party happened because the party's program aimed at solving the most troubling issues of the society. The second reason given had to do with the fact that the party abstained from supporting the unfavorable terms and conditions of Poland's entry to the EU. One activist admitted that people's anxieties about problems with the social safety net, in which the fear was one of the essential elements, generated the support for the party.

The party activists from LPR thought otherwise. In their opinion, other essential factors, such as political intricacies, aversion toward past governments, and a necessity for other alternatives, spurred the growth of the party's support base. Marek Kawa, LPR's deputy to the Polish Parliament said that the support for LPR happened because the party is acting naturally, and does not play the political games with the potential electorate.

> Our party is talking about things that hurt, this is why the League is paying for it, by being referred to or thought of as radical. We talk about how the protectionism of our country is necessary. You can't just sell out the nation's most precious assets. To build a working economy, we cannot be stripped of national funds.

When asked to comment on the issue concerned with the role the radical slogans played in generating the support for their parties, the activists of the SO and LPR also provided different responses.

The activists of Self-Defense acknowledged that their program aims at all social strata of the Polish society, not only the poor and disadvantaged. Although, one respondent admitted that it is true that the party targets the poor, because the poor react more spontaneously. "This is true, poor and unemployed people accept outrageous acts. They are tired of empty slogans and they want to see some action."

On the other hand, the representatives from LPR said that they simply strife for as many votes as possible. The party however wants to draw a distinction from other parties, because, in the opinion of their activists, the electorate of LPR encompasses people from different parts of Poland, different social strata, drawing an immense interest of a young population. The activists from LPR also stressed that the party maintains its distinction based on the pre-World War II national movement, which was then supported by the aristocracy and intelligentsia.

Recognizing the factors for radical enthusiasm

The underlying causes for the social support of the two radical parties became clearer to me as I begun exploring the topics on the economy,

specifically the questions that asked the participants to describe the relationship between the worsening of the economic situation and the increase of support for the radical parties. 77% of the respondents linked the two. What I found interesting is that people did not link the deterioration of the Polish economy with Poland's accession to the EU. Again, they blamed it on the ruling elites and their faulty governance.

The respondents took two different approaches when explaining the support for the radicals. One group blamed the populist character of both parties and the heavy usage of demagogy to stir the emotions of the impoverished part of the population. Another group predicted the external forces to be the agents behind the spur of popularity, such as people's disappointment with the past governments. In the opinion of the first group, the radical slogans propagated by both parties are aimed at the poor and socially disadvantaged. The slogans appeal to basic human needs like hunger, and offer quick fixes to problems like unemployment and corrupted government. The second group thought that those who vote for the radical parties do it in an act of desperation. Since there are no legitimate candidates to vote for, people vote for the parties that sound most appealing to them.

Some respondents argued that since there are no legitimate candidates, people look for a strong leader, someone they can look up to. In their opinion, the radical parties offer an appealing political program even though their solutions tend to be extreme at times. The potential voters then notice the ability of the radicals to be reliable advocates of the economically and socially disadvantaged. Symbolism plays an immense role in framing the political preferences among different groups of individuals. The evident role in framing these preferences is played by the Catholic Church, which also remains to be an important political agent.

Conclusion

Nearing the end of this research, I realized that my initial speculations -- that the increase of support for radical right- and left-wing parties in Poland was related to the bargaining processes to enter the European Union (EU) and the efforts to streamline Polish infrastructure with the EU values and standards -- were wrong. On the contrary, this research shows that people in Silesia remain highly optimistic about the EU independent of their support for or opposition to the radical parties.

I was able to confirm the claim that people's diminished enthusiasm about political and economic reforms account for the radical voting inclinations of the electorate. Fifteen years of reign by ineffective governments have increased public apprehension and social uneasiness with politics. This also led to the particular voting trends and provided incentives for the emergence and growth of the organized populist and radical formations.

The results of this research confirmed that the increase of popular support for the radical parties in particular in Poland related to the parties' adherence to national and Catholic symbols. During the electoral campaign to the Polish Parliament in 2005, the radical parties utilized national symbols like the flag, traditions of the Solidarity movement, and the Catholic Church. Some say that the parties' appeal to these national symbols was motivated by other key events of 2005, such as the death of Pope John Paul II or the 60-year anniversary of the end of WWII.[cxii]

However, these national sentiments have remained at the core of Polishness for years or even generations. The radicals appeal succeeded at a time when the national culture and identity were being jeopardized. In times when the outside agents, like foreign economic expansion, threaten national culture and identity, the electorate could be motivated to protect itself by voting for parties that adhere to similar sentiments and beliefs. They would do so out of the fear of being stripped of what remains to be the foundation of their sense of coherence for the national imaginary.

Another vital factor is the role political elites have played in shaping the popular perception about politics in general. People's pessimism about the economic system transition has trickled down to the actions of individual political figures and their political parties. The slogans of the two radical parties, the Self-Defense and League of Polish Families, linked people's desperate economic situation with the failed economic programs. Some voters found the slogans a satisfying vent for their anger and frustration. They made retribution seem plausible by promising to hold the fraudulent politicians accountable. The people sought compensation for these embezzlements, believing that these perpetrations had a direct influence on their domestic economic situation. People embraced the radical programs because they sought quick solutions to intractable problems.

Ever since the infamous parliamentary elections of 2001, Polish politics has fashioned a new outlook, one seen as more conservative and radical in its undertone. The defining characteristics of radicalism in Poland are both cultural and political. It is a reemerging phenomenon that combines the distinct features of the old radical school with some new radical initiatives. Polish radicalism transforms society's sense of betrayal by the political elites by

offering the hope of societal integration in the fight for a common cause. This trend is likely to continue, considering people's frustrations and growing insecurities with unemployment, public debt, inflation, and increasing taxes. Nonetheless, the last seventeen years prove that the much despised and feared rise of the radicals could be one of many passageways through which Poland travels in its transition to a more democratic consolidation.

Notes

[1] This research was conducted between July and December 2005, shortly before and after the elections to the Polish parliament.

[2] Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej (Public Opinion Research Center) –CBOS. "Report on the Decrease in Perceived Representativeness of Political Parties," (January 2004) http://www.cbos.com.pl/Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej (Public Opinion Research Center) –CBOS. "Report on the Political Party Preferences," (September 2004) http://www.cbos.com.pl/

[3] Wolf, Eric. R. "Envisioning Power -- Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis." Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999 (p. 274).

[4] Homes, Douglas,R. Integral Europe. Fast-Capitalism, Multiculturalism, Neofascism. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000 (p. 5).

[5] Jasiewicz, Krzysztof. "Elections and Voting Behavior." Edited by White, Stephen, Batt, Judy, Lewis, Paul G. Developments in Central and East European Politics 3, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003 (p.183-184).

[6] Millard, Frances. "Elections in Poland 2001: Electoral Manipulation and Party

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[7] Dziennik Zachodni, Wydanie Specjalne (Silesian Daily – Special Edition) Bezpłatny dodatek specjalny gmin, powiatów i miast, no. 7531 (March 2005).

[8] Perzyna, Łukasz. "Z czym do wladzy startuje kampania wyborcza opozycji?" (What is the campaign strategy of the opposition?). *Tygodnik Solidarnosc.* May 2005.

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