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POLAND

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Introduction

Since the collapse of the communist regime, Poland has presented an unlikely case for the related afflictions of polarisation and violent extremism. The transformation towards democracy was not blighted by violence or intense contestation and was capped by smooth accession to the EU; the national economy developed well (though unequally) over the past three decades, including during the 2008–2009 economic crisis from which Poland emerged largely unscathed; and the ethnic and religious homogeneity of the population portended no danger of inter-group conflict. Yet Poland today is marked by strong polarisation and rising extremism (Cipek and Lacković 2019; Prentice 2020; Hrckova and Zeller 2021; Khmilevska 2021; Taylor and Prentice 2021).

Polarisation in contemporary Poland can arguably be traced back to 2005. Following a collapse in support for the incumbent government (due to high unemployment, spending cuts, and corruption scandals), there were elections in which two opposition parties were the primary contenders: the Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) party and Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*), later Civic Coalition (*Koalicja Obywatelska*). PiS won the 2005 elections. In the aftermath, Civic Platform seemingly decided to take a starkly, absolutely oppositional stance to PiS in all things. This sequence of events set a pattern that has continued since: harsh oppositional rhetoric and polarisation driven by these two major camps. The current PiS arguably represents the apotheosis of that development.

Within the context generated by the current PiS regime, tension between two broad sets of social forces is striking. On the one hand, variants of radicalism and extremism have proliferated and grown stronger in recent years. Though the PiS government has occasionally taken steps to distance itself from extremism, several far-right actors have taken encouragement or even received active support from PiS. On the other hand, actors that accumulate or enact liberal democratic-oriented social resilience seek to mitigate the effects of radical and extremist actors. This chapter dilates on these counterpoised social forces in Poland. First, it uses a conceptualisation of variants of radicalism and extremism to identify Poland's most prominent radical and extremist actors. This typological overview is complemented by a detailed examination of one violent extremist actor, the National Radical Camp (*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny*, ONR).

DOI: 10.4324/9781003267102-15

Yet the perils of polarisation and extremism have not gone unchallenged, so the next section examines actions affecting liberal democratic-oriented social resilience. We specify this form of resilience, which should be read alongside other conceptions. Broadly, resilience simply refers to an ability to cope with adversity and strains. Within social science, therefore, the concept has been used to refer to everything from institutional resilience (e.g., Merkel and Lührmann 2021) to individual resilience against radicalising pressures (e.g., Grossman et al. 2017). Within an illiberal regime like Poland, actions broadly accumulate, enact, or corrode this social resilience. To illustrate this conceptualisation, we look closely at the activity of *Fundacja Autonomia* (Autonomy Foundation). We posit that under the PiS regime, resilience-building activities are often organised *despite*, not *with*, the national government. This represents a unique shift within the region where, at least on a declaratory level, governments remain supportive of measures promoting equality and supporting societal acceptance. In Poland, this has ceased to be the case in several areas. We conclude with a synthesising discussion on the tension of opposed social forces in Poland, and what it suggests for the future of Polish socio-politics.

Polish variants of radicalism and extremism

Political extremism in Poland is marked by several right-wing variants and no major left-wing or Islamic actors. Two contextual factors help to account for this uneven distribution. First, as in most of the Eastern Bloc, Poland's transformation from socialism in the late 1980s and early 1990s coincided with reinvigorated nationalism in the public sphere; an unsurprising development since Soviet domination typically entailed repressing nationalism. The establishment of democracy also meant the restoration of national sovereignty and resurgence of institutions and actors closely connected with Polish national identity, not least the Catholic Church. It would be highly misleading to insinuate that resurgent nationalism was inherently menacing. Most of it was benign. However, swells within this wave represented more radical, extreme nationalism and related ideologies. The post-socialist era has witnessed the Catholic Church, confined to naves and pulpits during Soviet domination, intervening with great and growing frequency in politics. Promoting a radical social conservatism that relegates certain minorities has at times been the aim and effect of this political intervention. The early 1990s also saw the re-formation of extremist organisations, such as the fascist National Radical Camp. Thus, the origins of Poland's contemporary right-wing radicalism and extremism[1] is to be located in the years surrounding the transformation from socialism.

Second, whereas Western European countries typically face some difficulties from other ideological stripes of extremism, Poland is devoid of significant left-wing and Islamically justified extremism. For the absence of left-wing extremism, the cause is likely also rooted in the transformation from socialism. As nationalism and right-wing extremism advanced, left-wing extremism, often tarnished by ideological proximity to the socialist regime, receded. The absence of Islamically justified extremism is at least in part a factor of Poland's demographics: Muslims are a vanishingly small portion of Poland's religious adherents, with no signs of significant growth. The only significant extremism in Poland therefore emanates from the ideologically right wing – but there is variation within that set.

Before turning our attention to the varying stripes of Poland's right-wing radical and extremist scene, it is worth mentioning that Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism policy in Poland is in several instances shaped by diffusion from Western European policies (Levchuk 2021). Much of the Act on Anti-Terrorist Actions (enacted in 2016) and the PiS

government's National Anti-Terrorism Programme and National Security Strategy develop a framework lifted from other contexts for dealing with foreign-based, Islam-inspired terrorism – yet such threats are virtually non-existent in Poland. These policies could be applied to counter the existing right-wing extremism, however, the PiS government has not shown significant activity in this direction.

Right-wing extremism in Poland is diverse, so it helps to establish the different strains therein. Minkenberg (1998) identifies radicalisation of inclusionary and exclusionary criteria of belonging as the characteristic distinguishing variants of the radical right. Though all their redefinitions of belonging reject 'modernisation' or 'post-industrial society' (ibid., p. 29), right-wing radicals' priorities of inclusion and exclusion vary and reveal divisions within the right-wing scene. Based principally on the posture towards historical far-right movements and ideologies, engagement in violence, and, referring to Heitmeyer's (2002) theory of 'group-focused enmity', antagonism to particular groups, Minkenberg (2013, pp. 12–13) discerns four variants of the radical right:

(1) an *autocratic-fascist right*, usually involving racism or ethnocentrism and inspired by right-wing dictatorships of the interwar period;
(2) a *racist or ethno-centrist – but non-fascist – right*, usually employing 'ethnopluralist' arguments for the incompatibility of cultures and ethnicities while denying the existence of a 'natural hierarchy';
(3) a *populist-authoritarian right*, organised around a strong and charismatic leader, with an authoritarian structure and a diffuse nationalist or xenophobic ideology; and,
(4) a *religious-fundamentalist right*, in which nationalism or xenophobia merge with religious rigidity, resulting in the defence of a religiously framed conception of national 'purity'.

All four of these variants are present and active in Poland (see Table 13.1). Indeed, some of them wield state power or otherwise exercise considerable social influence.

The most conspicuous of these in Poland is the *populist-authoritarian right* epitomised by the ruling Law and Justice party (Mudde 2019). The party is still led – indeed, dominated – by one of its co-founders, Jarosław Kaczyński, who acts as an éminence grise within the government. PiS representatives have often given voice to nationalism and xenophobia, but their most consistent rhetoric excludes and dehumanises LGBTQ individuals. MPs like Przemysław Czarnek argue, 'Let's stop listening to these idiocies about human rights. These people are not equal with normal people' (Walker 2020). President Andrzej Duda referred to 'LGBT ideology' during his 2020 election campaign, asserting it was worse than communism (BBC 2020). And the Minister of Defence referred to equality marches as 'parades of sodomites' (Chrzczonowicz 2018). What is more, state action sometimes buttresses this political rhetoric. For example, for displaying an image of the Virgin Mary with a rainbow halo (the so-called Our Lady of Equality action) three activists were detained and charged with 'offending religious feelings' (i.e., Article 196 of the Polish Penal Code) by the Ministry of the Interior and Administration. Though the accused were found not guilty in March 2021, that charges were brought at all may have a deterring effect on LGBTQ advocates. PiS and its governmental partners embody the populist-authoritarian right variant. But it is striking that these actors are closely connected to and supportive of other strains of right-wing extremism.

The *religious-fundamentalist right* in Poland consists of many members of the Catholic Church hierarchy and aligned advocacy groups like Ordo Iuris. Particularly on social policy, the Church hierarchy exercises considerable influence on political affairs (Żuk and Żuk

Table 13.1 Variants of right-wing radicalism/extremism and contemporary Polish examples

Right-wing variant	*Contemporary Polish examples*
autocratic-fascist right	• National Radical Camp (*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny*) • Pride and Modernity (*Duma i Nowoczesność*) • National Revival of Poland (*Narodowe Odrodzenie Polski*) • All-Polish Youth (*Młodzież Wszechpolska*)
racist/ethno-centrist right	• Zadruga & the Niklot Association for Tradition and Culture (*Stowarzyszenie na rzecz Tradycji i Kultury 'Niklot'*) • National Movement (*Ruch Narodowy*) • Independence March Association (*Stowarzyszenie Marsz Niepodległości*)
populist-authoritarian right	• Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) • Kukiz'15 party • United Poland party (*Solidarna Polska*)
religious-fundamentalist right	• Polish Episcopal Conference • Ordo Iuris • Fr Piotr Skarga Christian Culture Association (*Stowarzyszenie Kultury Chrześcijańskiej im. ks. Piotra Skargi*) • Centre of Life and Family (*Centrum Życia i Rodziny*)

2019). Most conspicuously, Church prelates insist on strict adherence to Catholic dogma on women's rights (especially abortion) and LGBTQ issues. Both are often lumped together as 'gender ideology', which, according to the Church, threatens to 'subordinate society to ideological postulates' (Polish Episcopal Conference 2020, p. 9, par. 33). Church opposition to women's rights protections has been matched by PiS governmental actions: instituting strict limitations on abortion and withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention that aims to reduce violence against women (Krizsán and Roggeband 2021). Concurrently, the Church hierarchy has given its official position on LGBTQ issues, declaring it unnatural and calling for 'clinics to help people wishing to regain their sexual health and natural sexual orientation' (Polish Episcopal Conference 2020, p. 11, par. 38). And while the Church explicitly rejects violence against LGBTQ individuals (ibid., p. 8, par. 29), the rhetoric of its conservative bishops has often stoked rather than stifled homophobic violence. For example, ahead of a 2019 equality march in the eastern city of Białystok, the resident bishop, Tadeusz Wojda, called such LGBTQ demonstrations a 'blasphemy against God' and a foreign imposition on the region (Santora and Berendt 2019). The demonstration was met by thousands of strident and violent counter-protesters (Hrckova and Zeller 2021), including many gathered on the steps of Białystok's cathedral. Moreover, beyond the actions of its episcopacy, the Church advances its fundamentalist agenda through advocacy groups, especially Ordo Iuris. This think tank produces draft legislation in an attempt to enshrine Church dogma in law. Ordo Iuris is responsible for several proposals on abortion restriction as well as the legislative template used by many local councils in 2019 and 2020 to declare 'LGBT-free zones'. Together, the populist-authoritarian right and religious-fundamentalist right are the most powerful variants of radicalism/extremism in Poland.

The variegated range of actors comprising the *racist/ethno-centrist right* and *autocratic-fascist right* typically embody the most violent variants of radicalism and extremism in Poland. As denoted in Minkenberg's classification, these two variants share characteristics of racism or

ethnocentrism. Unsurprisingly then, these types of groups often collaborate, as when marches are organised for Independence Day and sponsored by both the Independence March Association and the National Radical Camp. The distinguishing feature – though of little consequence – is affiliation with or endorsement of fascist movements and governance. In Poland, the National Radical Camp, the National Revival of Poland, and the All-Polish Youth take their names and foundational tenets from interwar fascist movements; and Pride and Modernity infamously celebrated Hitler's birthday in 2017 (for which it was dissolved by court order in 2019). The violent extremism manifested by these organisations deserves closer inspection, particularly because the PiS government has occasionally encouraged and elevated it. The next section therefore unpacks the case of the National Radical Camp.

National Radical Camp

The National Radical Camp (*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny*, ONR) is an avowedly fascist organisation. If some members or even leading activists have trepidation about openly admitting it, no matter: a four-year defamation lawsuit concluded in early 2021 confirming the accuracy of that label. The judge in the initial 2019 decision, upheld in subsequent appeals, said matter-of-factly, if somewhat wryly, 'you only have yourself to blame. You refer to the pre-war organisation, which was an openly fascist organisation; you use the same symbols and names' (Dembińska 2019). ONR's contemporary expression dates to the early 1990s, when it reappeared with roughly the same ideology as its predecessor – ethnonationalist, authoritarian, fiercely Catholic – combined with distinct antipathy to the EU and NATO. Its membership is disproportionately young, often casting themselves as dutiful patriots working to preserve Poland's traditional culture (Kajta 2017). And whereas right-wing extremist movements in other countries are frequently stimulated by dissatisfaction, in Poland ONR members and other young nationalists more often become engaged as part of 'their search for what they see as more solid, clear, and unambiguous foundations of social order' (Mrozowicki and Kajta 2021).

Like many social movement organisations, the ONR's activities are diverse. It produces and disseminates ideological tracts and promotional materials, organises summer camps and educational activities, and sporadically performs volunteer community service. Yet, as with many right-wing extremist groups, its most conspicuous collective actions are demonstrations (Płatek and Płucienniczak 2016). Two campaigns are particularly noteworthy: firstly, in the mid-2000s the ONR mobilised a series of demonstrations in the southern town of Myślenice commemorating a 1936 antisemitic insurrection, akin to the Kristallnacht (Wyborcza.pl 2008). Secondly, since 2005 – and in coordination with other nationalist groups since 2008 – the ONR organises Independence Day marches in Warsaw on 11 November. In recent years it has become known as the largest far-right gathering in Europe, with participation at times exceeding 100,000. Participants, prominently including ONR members, shout racist slogans (Pankowski and Kormak 2013; Wiącek 2019), maraud and vandalise, and attack LGBTQ and other oppositional symbols (BBC 2013; Ciobanu 2020; Pankowski and Kormak 2013, p. 166).

For existing theory on social movements and the far right, the current circumstances of the ONR are somewhat puzzling. Typically, as several cross-national studies have found (Koopmans and Rucht 1995; Minkenberg 2019), where radical right parties are strong, movement mobilisation is correspondingly weak. Right-wing governments or even merely prominent political representation, so the thinking goes, mollifies right-wing social forces. Not so in Poland, where far-right movement strength has grown in parallel with

the ascendancy of PiS. Minkenberg (2019) identifies this complementarity as distinctive of Eastern Europe – though right-wing party and movement strength is perhaps nowhere greater than in Poland.

Furthermore, the ONR thrives in Poland without a major ethnic scapegoat (Bustikova and Kitschelt 2010, p. 40). Poland is an overwhelmingly homogenous society; ethnic Poles comprise upwards of 95 per cent of the population. Yet anti-immigration messages and opposition to 'Islamisation' have been recurrent themes at ONR protests, not least at the Independence Day marches where chants ring out about keeping Poland 'all White' (Taylor 2017).

The PiS regime has created an environment that by turns condones and encourages right-wing extremism, fortifying the ONR. At the most basic level, the ONR remains a lawful entity; it is not banned. There have been numerous attempts to ban the ONR – in fact, one local ban was applied in 2009 (Zeller and Vaughan 2021), but was easily circumvented – yet PiS representatives have repeatedly stymied these efforts. The latest application, filed in 2018, was rejected by the state prosecutor's office, which asserted after four years of gathering evidence that none of the ONR's activities promoted fascism or totalitarianism, nor incited nationality-based hatred (Drożdżak 2022). Thus, there are no grounds to ban it. This outcome is clearly in line with the expressed preference of the PiS government (Uhlig 2018).

Yet the leeway granted the ONR goes further than allowing it to operate. Several court rulings and law enforcement (in)action suggest permissiveness towards right-wing extremism. For example, in 2017, amid ongoing disputes about PiS's judiciary reforms, six Polish MEPs (from the PO party) voted in favour of a European Parliament resolution that declared the changes to the judiciary violated the fundamental values of the EU. In response, the ONR, along with two other right-wing extremist organisations, organised a symbolic protest in Katowice: they declared the six MPs 'traitors' and hung their portraits from gallows. Though the Minister of Justice announced an inquiry (Gotev 2017), ultimately no charges were brought against the protesters.

The most symbolic permissiveness is in allowing the ONR's symbols. In 2010, Polish police began using a handbook that identified symbols associated with hate crimes ('Hate Crimes: Supporting Material for Training'). Included was the ONR's '*falanga*' (meaning 'phalanx') symbol: a stylised arm holding a sword, typically in white on a green field. It is omnipresent at ONR demonstrations, where protesters often wear distinctive green armbands and form phalanxes of ONR flag-bearers. However, following complaints from a right-wing MP (Andruszkiewicz 2016), the Ministry of the Interior and Administration withdrew the handbook from its training materials. These and a spate of other judicial and law enforcement episodes give credence to the notion that the ONR, despite its transparent antipathy to the constitutional order, is a legitimate civil society actor.

At times, PiS has gone beyond permissiveness, actively encouraging ONR activism and enrolling it in positions of authority. Three instances exemplify this worrying practice. First, PiS representatives actively support the ONR's ultra-nationalist Independence Day demonstrations. Three PiS MPs were represented on the organising committee for the 2012 event (Pankowski and Kormak 2013, p. 165). While the government has sometimes distanced itself from the excesses of the demonstrations, such as when participants clashed with police and counter-protesters, PiS has in the main defended the annual event as an admirable expression of patriotism.

Second, PiS has shown its willingness to elevate leaders from the ONR. Consider the case of Tomasz Greniuch, ONR leader in Opole throughout the 2000s. He initiated the Myślenice demonstration campaign mentioned above. Naturally, ascent to this leadership

position came only after many years of activism in Poland's right-wing extremist scene (Witkowski 2019). In 2019, PiS named Greniuch the head of the Opole office of the Institute of National Remembrance (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej*, IPN), an institution tasked with investigating Nazi and communist crimes in Poland. In early February 2021, he was promoted to the head of the IPN's Wrocław office. Renewed complaints within Poland and criticism from Israel and other foreign representatives, especially after pictures emerged of him giving fascist salutes during ONR demonstrations, forced Greniuch to resign his post (Day 2021). Given his long activism with the ONR, that Greniuch rose to that position – that he was even hired by the IPN – attests to the PiS regime's endorsement of right-wing extremism.

Third, PiS indulges ONR militancy. Government representatives mooted the idea of incorporating the ONR into the Territorial Defence Force, making it part of Poland's official armed forces. When it was re-formed in 2016, both the PiS spokesman for the Ministry of National Defence, Bartłomiej Misiewicz, and a PiS senator on the parliament's defence committee, Michał Wojtkiewicz, suggested ONR members could enlist in the armed forces – despite prohibitions against political activism by members of the military (Kuraś 2016). Furthermore, in response to a series of women's rights protests in 2020, the ONR announced through its website (on 27 October 2020) the creation of 'national brigades' to protect Polish society and religious facilities. These units explicitly aimed to create 'political soldiers' to 'defend national and Catholic values through direct action'.

Its origins and history, its avowed ideology, its members and activities all attest to the right-wing extremism represented by the ONR. Support from PiS has imbued the ONR with unprecedented vitality, making it a more menacing social force. In part, this is the result of direct support, but more commonly it is indirect permissiveness that allows the ONR to operate freely despite its contravention of constitutional and criminal laws. The ONR and other right-wing groups comprise, along with Poland's Catholic institutions, the pillars of right-wing civil society. Notwithstanding tensions between the ONR and the Church (e.g., PolsatNews 2016), and ONR members' occasional criticism of PiS, the communion between nationalism and conservative Catholicism is the ideological core of the PiS regime (Kotwas and Kubik 2019). It embodies the PiS agenda of regime change and new elite formation (Pobłocki 2021).

Polish social resilience practices

Defined as 'the ability of people to face and respond to adversity, and the capacity to draw on various sources of strength and social resources to adapt and cope with challenges and situations of strain, stress, or trauma' (McNeil-Willson et al. 2019, p. 19), resilience is, many in Poland would claim, a national characteristic. A commonplace saying, *Polak potrafi*, could be translated as 'Poles can do' or 'Poles will find a way/find a solution', used both in a positive and a negative sense, and is an inherent part of the country's auto-stereotype. And while the saying often refers to hustling or bricolage activities, it also alludes to the nation's collective ability to cope with larger historical shifts, be it years under socialism or turbulent times of post-socialist transformation. Here, too, we focus on resilience as a collective capacity – 'social resilience', not a characteristic ascribed to an individual (Ungar 2013).

In this manner, it is possible to trace larger processes that shape responses to radicalism and violent extremism in the society as a whole. And just as importantly, resilience and resilience-building can be presented as ever-changing and historically grounded processes, not just reactions to the recent developments in the country. This section examines the various

resilience-building practices responding to societal polarisation and violent extremism. It refers to the broad categorisation of actions affecting liberal democratic-oriented social resilience within illiberal regimes, namely *accumulating*, *enacting*, and *corroding* (Zeller and Vidra 2021). Moving from the gloomy picture painted by the preceding sections, our focus on resilience should raise hopes that 'Poles finding a way' extends even to meeting the challenges posed by the ONR and other variants of radicalism and extremism.

Comprehending social resilience involves appreciating a vast array of practices that defy neat categorisation. Actions beyond numbering are dynamic and multifaceted in their enhancement of resilience within the society, stretching from societal infrastructure such as accessible education and local community communication all the way to specific interventions in the field of inclusion and anti-discrimination. In practice, some of these paradoxically may fuel both resilience and polarisation, depending on the context (Bonanno 2005). For example, active membership in a religious community – in Poland, predominantly in the Catholic Church – can foster greater solidarity and interconnectedness; at the same time, Polish clerical rhetoric can be exclusionary and oftentimes harmful. Similarly, a sense of belonging may be crucial for building an open, rooted community (be it in a region or at a football stadium) but may also become a vehicle of hate towards outsiders who do not belong to the given group. And just as importantly, there is a range of factors that may play a role in the processes of accumulating, enacting, or corroding social resilience: equality of opportunity, supportive environment, sufficient resources, a sense of belonging, social cohesion, democratic media reporting, and pro-social messaging (McNeil-Willson et al. 2019, p. 22).

Here, we approach the conundrum of conceptualising social resilience by referring to the impact of practices within an illiberal regime. Poland, governed by a coalition of populist-authoritarian right parties (see Table 13.1), fits the bill of a country facing the polarising throes of illiberalisation. In this context, practices may accumulate or enact a social resilience that is liberal-democratic in orientation – or corrode it.

Practices help to *accumulate* social resilience when they 'enhance the liberal democratic esprit of a group and enhance its ability to cope with illiberal attacks' (Zeller and Vidra 2021, p. 6). A range of collective actions and shared activities may become a vital capacity-building mechanism. In particular, groups stigmatised by illiberal rhetoric and policy are in the greatest need of social resilience. The PiS regime routinely targets the LGBTQ community, which has had to rely on certain ameliorative practices. For example, the LGBTQ 'equality marches' have become a means for protesters to replenish a sense of social resilience: by participating – reaffirming their connection to a community and openly expressing their identity – protesters are more capable of withstanding the intermittent pressures of growing illiberalism (Hrckova and Zeller 2021). Such practices build up reserves of social resilience that enable groups to absorb shocks and strains without despairing.

Social resilience is *enacted* when actions directly counter illiberal attacks, drawing on the accumulated resources and oftentimes hidden capacities. The most striking examples in Poland are recent waves of counter-mobilisation against government actions to limit abortion. During a series of so-called Black Protests, hundreds of thousands of people marched in the streets in support of reproductive rights, generating immense (if for now ineffectual) pressure on the government, while creating a strong sense of togetherness among the protesters. Enacting social resilience – 'putting up a good fight' as in the case of the Black Protests – thus does not necessarily lead to immediate changes. Nevertheless, direct actions such as protests, litigation, and electoral politics activities show that standing up to the illiberal challenges is possible using all the social resources available.

Yet the accumulation and enaction of liberal democratic social resilience exists in dynamic tension with actions that *corrode* it, often perpetrated by radical or extremist actors. Zeller and Vidra (2021, p. 6) write, 'For many institutions and vulnerable communities, illiberal regimes are a threat, straining the resiliencies to cope with non-recognition or vilification by governing actors and their supporters'. The PiS regime's policies have consistently eroded judicial independence and constraints on governmental power. Obviously, this corrodes Poland's institutional resilience to illiberalism, but it also strips away judicial protections to vulnerable groups. Grabowska-Moroz and Wójcik (2021) chart how the deteriorating rule of law in Poland parallels vilification of the LGBTQ community; the former enables the latter. At the same time, the corrosive actions rarely remain without a response and often provoke robust counter-movements.

To illustrate the empirical manifestations of practices that accumulate social resilience, the following section looks closely at the work of the Autonomy Foundation.

Fundacja Autonomia

Fundacja Autonomia (Autonomy Foundation) is a Polish non-governmental organisation that focuses on activities fighting against violence and discrimination, with special emphasis on women's and gender issues: 'Autonomia is active so that every girl and every woman can be safe, brave, can decide about herself, develop and shape the world together with others'. *Fundacja Autonomia*'s activities combat systemic causes of inequalities, discrimination, and violence; in recent years, its work has been forced to cope with PiS policies promoting traditional gender patterns and relations and which reject efforts to reduce gender- and sexuality-based violence.

The 'Girls' Power Centres' project exemplifies the organisation's work to accumulate social resilience. The centres aim to create a safe space for girls and women to explore their skills, power, enhance their 'courage', set their own boundaries, learn how to cooperate with others, and how to get rid of feelings of shame and hopelessness. Participation in the activities of the centre is free, guided by the principle of solidarity and sharing within the community. It is ensured that the women have a say in the centre and that all can take part in it regardless of their socio-economic situation.

The centres' activities must be understood in the context of recent backsliding in women's rights in Poland. The attack on reproductive rights followed by a further expansion of what was already one of the strictest abortion bans in Europe has been accompanied by controversial statements on the role of women in the Polish society. For example, the Minister of Science and Education expressed his disapproval of women who prioritise their career and postpone having children until a later age, as they cannot have that many when older, 'as destined by the Lord' (Piekarczyk 2020). Similarly, the education reforms prepared by his Ministry set out a goal to shape 'womanly virtues' in schoolgirls (Sitnicka 2021). Amid the conservative shift that openly nudges women to take on their traditional role as mothers, ideally focusing on family life, the Girls' Power Centres aspire to provide space for women's development. Through activities linked to sexual education, no-means-no campaigns, and violence-prevention programmes, the centres also step in to fill the gaps within the national education system and provide a counterbalance to the government's messaging.

However, it is exactly the encounters with the national education system that have proven tricky under the PiS government. *Fundacja Autonomia* experienced this first-hand in 2016, when the Ministry of Family and Social Policy suddenly and unilaterally decided to cancel a citizen initiative contract with the organisation, citing irregularities in the project's

facilitation. The project in question was focused on prevention of gender-based violence and consisted of a series of workshops (including at schools). The decision was announced after a wave of attacks from the right-wing media that accused the *Fundacja Autonomia* of promoting a 'LGBTQ subculture' followed by a sudden and highly irregular 'monitoring' action taken by the Ministry. Eventually, the proceedings were halted, which importantly meant that the organisers did not need to refund the money already spent; however, the organisation has never been officially cleared of wrongdoing and the unusual steps taken by the Ministry have not been subject to investigation.

The actions against *Fundacja Autonomia* stoked concerns within the NGO sector, especially among initiatives dealing with gender-related issues. Many interpreted the Ministry decision as a thinly veiled attempt to intimidate the NGOs dealing with topics that do not chime with the PiS agenda. One of the characteristics of the non-governmental sector in the region is that the organisations often heavily rely on state and state-governed funding (Guasti 2016, p. 9). Without dwelling on the reasons for such an arrangement, it is evident that one of its implications is that non-state actors and their programming can be vulnerable to the whims of the ruling power; many organisations have already experienced difficulties in obtaining government grants. Additionally, as organisations often rely on a project-based funding calendar, sudden withdrawals of sponsor-funding can lead to serious financial problems and even to their complete shutdown. Experience from other fields suggests this approach might have become the go-to play of the government: in 2018, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage decided not to provide funding for a range of cultural and political journals/platforms that have often been critical of PiS.

The state thus not only vacated space in anti-discrimination and violence prevention education, but actively participates in limiting the scope of the activities of those NGOs that take on such topics. This constitutes a crucial shift in the Polish landscape. It would be wrong to claim that gender-based violence or discriminatory practices were not an issue under the series of liberal governments preceding the current PiS regime. However, the 'division of labour' with the government providing funding to a range of non-state actors and giving them a free hand in their activities seems to have reached its end. In order to continue in their activities, *Fundacja Autonomia* and other NGOs need to learn how to operate without relying on any kind of state support.

Concluding remarks

This chapter portrays Poland as a country gripped by illiberalisation, both spurred by and providing further encouragement of radical and extremist actors, but also possessed of sources of social resilience. After years of the populist-authoritarian Law and Justice government, Polish society seems to be as polarised as ever, witnessing rising right-wing extremism with a quiet nod from the powerful Catholic Church. Laws and policies to counter violent extremism are often configured around foreign and Islam-inspired terrorist threats; they are seldom applied to curb and reduce far-right threats. At the same time, the presence of resilience-building actors and practices is strong, challenging the status quo and acting as a counterpart to insurgent right-wing extremism. The chapter provides two main contributions: a classification and an analysis of the extremist variants in Poland with a deep dive on ONR, an autocratic-fascist right-wing group, and an analysis of social resilience practices with a special focus on *Fundacja Autonomia*, an organisation combatting discrimination.

Following Minkenberg (2013), right-wing radicalism and extremism in Poland can be divided into four variants: autocratic-fascist right, racist or ethnocentrist right,

Table 13.2 Social resilience processes

Type of processes	*Examples*
Accumulating social resilience	LGBTQ parades and equality marches, women's empowerment trainings
Enacting social resilience	Black Protests, political organising, litigation
Corroding social resilience	Hate speech, attacks on independent judiciary

populist-authoritarian right, and religious-fundamentalist right. Using the ONR as a case study of the autocratic-fascist right, the chapter demonstrates how the PiS government not only tolerates but also directly and indirectly supports extremist groups. The government's support is evidenced by participation in some of ONR's activities and militaristic performances as well as willingness to nominate ONR activists into official positions.

The chapter further uses the concept of social resilience to examine practices resisting the extremist right in Poland. Taking on Zeller and Vidra's (2021) proposal to analyse resilience through the lens of whether processes contribute to accumulating and enacting resilience or, on the contrary, work towards corroding it, the section provides examples of the various social resilience activities in Poland (see Table 13.2). *Fundacja Autonomia* is used as a case study here, illustrating that accumulating resilience is a long and situated process. The Foundation's activities are not only a response to recent developments in the country, but also a long-term project aimed at empowering inhabitants in a conservative society – and building capacities that can be drawn upon when needed. Such projects become all the more important when state-based initiatives to counter extremism and support liberal democratic society are (at best) lacking or (at worst) intentionally undermined.

Polarisation within Polish society has grown in recent years. Yet, as we have shown elsewhere using the example of the LGBTQ marches, the stark divides and accompanying conflict can eventually deliver growing levels of acceptance of differences within the society (Hrckova and Zeller 2021). Countering the rise of right-wing extremism and illiberalisation through oftentimes slow and painstaking resilience-building can feel like an uphill battle; yet, just as polarising topics revealed and fostered some extremist undercurrents in Polish society, so too have they spurred mobilisations of civic and democratic forces.

Note

1 Here and below – as with our invocation of Minkenberg's variants – we refer to radicalism and extremism together. Research on the far-right generally makes a conceptual distinction between these two, but the empirical manifestations are often less clear. So it is, we assert, in contemporary Poland. Given the sometimes anti-democratic and universally illiberal postures of actors discussed in this section, it is appropriate to label these groups extreme.

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