

Polish government cracks down on culture

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The deputy prime minister and minister of culture, Piotr Gliński, in the newly formed right-wing government in Poland led by PiS (Law and Justice) Premier Beata Szydło has immediately gone on the offensive with blatant attacks on the constitutional right to freedom of expression. Gliński has demanded the banning of a play by a Nobel-winning author and threatened to cut public spending for “alternative and leftist” art projects.

Based on the measure of “preventive censorship”, banned since the dissolution of the Polish People’s Republic in 1989, Gliński appealed to the governor of the Lower Silesia region to “immediately prohibit staging the play *Death and the Maiden* before it premiered at the Polish Theatre in Wrocław” on November 21. The reason given for the ban was the fact that the play’s director, Ewelina Marciniak, had hired several guest porn stars.

“There will be no pornography in Polish theatres funded with public money”, stated Gliński, who had not seen the play himself. According to TV Kultura, the sex scene in the play lasted around 60 seconds in a two-and-a-half-hour production. The culture minister then went to note that the 5 million złoty (about €1.2 million) annual contract to subsidise the Polish Theatre in Wrocław is about to expire at the end of the year—a statement clearly implying financial blackmail.

In response, the governor of Lower Silesia, Cezary Przybylski, stated merely that the play should be evaluated after its premiere, not before it. “We cannot rule out that the media frenzy around the play is a planned marketing campaign aiming at increasing interest in the premiere”, he said.

The opening night of *Death and the Maiden* had a full house, with the public providing a standing ovation. All the tickets for this year’s performances are sold out.

The play was written by the Austrian playwright and novelist Elfriede Jelinek (*Lust, The Piano Teacher,*

Illness or Modern Women). Jelinek is feted in postmodernist, pseudo-radical circles for her advocacy of feminism and identity politics, and received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2004. *Death and the Maiden*, first published in 2000, is described on the Polish Theatre’s web site as “a spectacle on how to inflict torture in the most efficient way”, with a warning that the play is suitable for “very adult audiences only” as it contains sex scenes.

The protest arranged in front of the theatre on the night of the premiere was organised by the religious group Rosary Crusade for the Fatherland. About a dozen nationalists tried to block the entrance to the building, among them individuals from the neo-fascistic National Radical Camp (ONR). ONR members are notorious for burning an effigy of an Orthodox Jew holding an EU flag during anti-refugee demonstrations at the Wrocław Market Square on November 18. The next day, the home of the theatre’s artistic director’s 82-year-old mother was pelted with eggs and tomatoes. According to the theatre’s director, his employees have received threats.

The Rosary Crusade called for the ban of the “pornographic” *Death and the Maiden* on their web site: “We will not allow this profanation and Bolshevik chutzpa in the Polish Theatre!” Jelinek was a member of the Austrian Communist Party from 1974 to 1991.

The Rosary Crusade also picketed the play *Golgotha Picnic* by the Argentine Rodrigo Garcia in several Polish cities last year and the removal of the play from the programme of the Malta Festival in Poznań in 2014.

The protest against Jelinek’s play was supported by the daughter of late president and PiS leader Lech Kaczyński, Marta Kaczyńska. She wrote in the far-right weekly paper *wSieci* (*inTheNet*) that “porn in the Polish Theatre without a doubt automatically degraded the institution.”

One day after the premiere, during an interview with

the “Past 8 p.m.” show, minister Gliński turned on the Polish media and accused the news channel TVP Info of being responsible for “manipulation and propaganda” in recent years. In the course of the interview, talk show host Karolina Lewicka reminded her guest of article 73 of the constitution that guarantees the freedom of artistic expression. This was enough to prompt Gliński to demand her suspension from her job for “unethical behaviour.”

The journalist has been defended by her colleagues, who released a statement protesting the threats issued by representatives of the new government and calling them an attack on basic democratic rights. Gliński, on the other hand, received full support from the head of government, Beata Szydło, who agreed that the public funding for culture should go to projects abiding by “certain cultural norms”.

Immediately after entering office, Gliński had already indicated that the ruling PiS would reallocate funds for culture. “The division of the public cake will certainly be different than up to now”, he told the Polish Press Agency (PAP).

Making clear that the priority of the government would be the promotion of extreme nationalism, Gliński stressed the importance of a revival of “cultural snobbism” and declared that the government would favour institutions and projects based on national identity, pride and history, such as the Museum of Polish History and the Polish Army, as well as the Hollywood-style film productions promoting Polish national heroes. He also revealed government plans to transform public media such as TV, radio and the Polish Press Agency into “missionary” tools of the nation state.

The artistic director of the Polish Theatre in Wrocław, Krzysztof Mieszkowski, also a new member of parliament on behalf of Nowoczesna (Modern), a pro-business opposition party, called on Gliński to resign from office. “So far I don’t think we had a case where the prime minister of the Polish government openly tries to break the constitutional law”, he said. Mieszkowski himself has in the past been a target of criticism from the former neo-liberal PO (Civic Platform) government.

In its previous period of rule between 2005 and 2007, the PiS already made a major change in the country’s broadcasting law that allowed the government

increasing control of the media. The current initiatives of the PiS threaten the autonomy of all art and cultural institutions, which may soon be subjected to blatant censorship and checked for the proper “level of their patriotism or religious morality”.

Sections of the country’s liberal intelligentsia that support PO are now hypocritically crying foul. But the PO was also responsible in government for turning the mainstream media into a nationalistic and religious propaganda machine, promoting war and privatisation, and justification for social and economical inequality, while distorting the harsh reality of life for the majority of the population. In so doing, PO, whose former leader Donald Tusk is current president of the European Council, paved the way for the even more authoritarian methods favoured by PiS.

The PiS leadership is evidently drawing from the example of the far-right government of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, which has been able to erect an authoritarian, racist regime under the nose of the European Union and with the support of leading European political parties. Orbán was recently guest of honour at a conference of the Christian Social Union (CSU), one of Germany’s ruling coalition parties.



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