

Racist anti-immigrant riots in Poland

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Racist clashes broke out in the northeastern Polish town of Ełk at the New Year, following the murder of a 21-year-old Polish man. Several other cities in Poland have since also witnessed racist attacks. The riots are a result of the racist agitation fomented by the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS), and an expression of growing social and political tensions in the country.

The clashes in Ełk began on New Year's Day, after 21-year-old Daniel R. was apparently stabbed on New Year's Eve by a Tunisian cook from a kebab restaurant. According to media reports, Daniel R. and a friend took two bottles of coke from the restaurant and left without paying. The cook and the restaurant owner, who comes from Algeria, then followed the pair. In the ensuing scuffle, the cook reportedly stabbed Daniel with a kitchen knife, and the young man died at the scene. To what extent alcohol and racism were involved in the confrontation is unclear in light of conflicting media reports.

Later on, a mob of 100 to 200 people gathered in front of the restaurant. Both the kebab restaurant and another stall belonging to the same owner were demolished. The mob bawled anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant slogans. Bottles and stones were thrown at the police during the confrontation. For hours, there was not a single policeman in sight, according to a report by the liberal *Polityka*. When the police came, a violent clash with the rioters occurred and the police used pepper spray and arrested 28 people. Thirty-four people were injured in the clashes. The cook suspected of the killing was arrested by the police and charged with murder. The sister of the dead man spoke out against the riots.

According to a report by *Gazeta Wyborcza*, members of the fascist organization ONR (Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny, National-Radical Camp), wearing the Falanga on their sleeves, the symbol of Polish fascists, participated in the service for the dead and subsequent funeral. On Facebook, right-wing extremists called for lynch-mob justice. On Saturday, 7 January, the ONR and Młodzież Wszechpolska (All-Polish Youth) organized a march in

Ełk under the banner of the fight against "Islamic aggression." According to press reports, only a few dozen people took part in the march, several of whom are likely to have travelled from outside the region.

The far-right has turned Daniel R. into a "Polish martyr," who, like the Polish driver of the truck in the Berlin terrorist attack of December 2015, was "murdered by an Islamist."

Although there were no further riots in Ełk, media reports suggested that the mood remains tense. Increased police patrols was still operating for days on the town's streets. A report in the liberal magazine *Newsweek Polska* said residents and witnesses to the confrontation in the kebab restaurant were afraid to talk openly to reporters about what they had seen. The sociologist Stefan Marcinkiewicz, from the University of Warmia-Masuria, told the magazine, "People are afraid. There is a pogrom atmosphere."

Since the riots in Ełk, there have been a number of attacks on kebab stalls and immigrants in other cities. In the small town of Ozorków near the industrial city of Łódź in central Poland, a 44-year-old man from Pakistan was attacked by a group of right-wing extremists who severely beat him. In Wrocław on January 2, the window of a kebab restaurant was smashed. On January 3, a man from Bangladesh was attacked on the way to work by masked men and had to be hospitalized in Legnica. On January 5, a restaurant in Wrocław, which is run by an Egyptian woman, was attacked. An unknown attacker threw a lighted bottle of gasoline into the restaurant. Fortunately, however, the fire was quickly extinguished.

All these incidents are fueled by the xenophobic and right-wing atmosphere systematically encouraged by the government of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) to channel social discontent in the working class and sections of the rural population in a right-wing direction.

Polish Interior Minister Mariusz Blaszak implicitly supported the racist riots by blaming "the many years of multicultural politics, political correctness and open borders" for the excesses. He also stated, "We do not

have the social problems with which you have to contend in Western Europe, where we have sizable enclaves of Muslim immigrants, who are not integrated into the rest of society.” Blaszk reiterated that the PiS will not allow any Muslim refugees into the country.

A council member of PiS in E?k, Micha? Tyszkiewicz, had already whipped up the atmosphere before the riots with a post about the “murder” on Twitter, to which he added the hashtags “New Year’s Eve, shock, immigrants, scythe in the back.”

The PiS has been systematically stoking racist resentments for years to poison the political climate and to boost right-wing forces. In their one-year reign, the PiS has strengthened ultra-right forces and worked closely with the Catholic Church, a traditional bastion of the radical right and fascist tendencies. This went so far that Polish president Andrzej Duda, together with the Polish Bishops, officially declared Jesus Christ “King of Poland” in a church ceremony in November. The PiS government has also deliberately encouraged anti-Semitic historical falsifications and resentments.

It is no coincidence that this nationalist and racist propaganda led to riots in E?k. The medium-sized town with its 60,000 inhabitants stands at the centre of the social and political crisis in Poland. E?k is located in the northeastern region of Warmia-Masuria, by far the poorest region of the country, which is also most affected by the massive military build-up and war preparations against Russia.

According to official figures, far more people live in extreme and relative poverty in Warmia-Masuria than the national average. The National Statistics Office (GUS) reports that, nationwide, about 7.4 percent of the population live in extreme poverty, i.e. they have an income of less than 545 zlotys (approximately \$132). By contrast, the percentage is 14.8 percent in Warmia-Masuria. A further 26 percent in the province live in relative poverty, having less than 2056 zlotys (around \$500) a month, compared to a national average of 16.2 percent. Moreover, the poverty rate has risen significantly in previous years, although the national average was declining.

E?k is one of the larger towns in the rural region. It lies near one of 14 special economic zones—the Suwalska Specjalna Strefa Ekonomiczna—established in Poland since the 1990s. About 10,000 workers are employed in the Special Economic Zone, most of them at starvation wages.

Social tensions are being exacerbated by the war

preparations against Russia, causing much nervousness. The region borders on Kaliningrad, a Russian enclave in Eastern Europe, which is a focal point of confrontation between NATO and Russia due to its strategic location and the stationing of Russian troops there. Under the PiS government, Poland has become even more of an outpost of NATO re-armament against Russia than under the previous government of the liberal Civic Platform (PO).

Last summer, on the eve of the NATO summit in Warsaw in June, the Polish government ended visa-free travel between the Polish border regions and Kaliningrad, which had been introduced in 2012. Last autumn, the Polish interior minister rejected the repeal of the measure, although it was deeply unpopular among the population from the beginning. Many people living in the Polish border region have relatives and friends in Kaliningrad, and were able to travel repeatedly to the Russian enclave under the visa-free rules. The region also benefited economically from the visa-free border traffic, since many Russians came across the border to shop in Poland.

Moreover, the province of Warmia-Masuria, like the rest of northeastern Poland, is the main focus of paramilitary, right-wing units, whose build-up Polish Defence Minister Antoni Macierewicz has systematically encouraged over the last year. In November, the Sejm (parliament) agreed the creation of a territorial defence unit (WOT), comprising 53,000 men and to be concentrated mostly in the northeast and southeast of the country. Paramilitary organizations belonging to the radical right were explicitly encouraged to join the WOT. Among the forces the PiS wants to integrate into the state apparatus as part of this is the fascist ONR, which has sought to exploit the violence in E?k.



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