Conspiracy theories and the support of discriminatory policies – is there a social base for an extreme right wing party in Poland?

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During times of economic crisis, any given society has a proven tendency to radicalize – a scenario which could well turn out to provide a perfect breeding ground for the development of radical right wing organizations. That is why the question whether a potential social base for such a movement exists in Poland has become prominent for journalists, political commentators, and other professionals who are interested in the Polish political scene. Is the rise of a party similar to the Hungarian Jobbik - which, according to the Polish Press Association (PAP), has become the second strongest political force in the country - possible also in Poland?

At this moment in time, Poland can count herself among the few European countries that have not been all too badly affected by the economic downturn (see Figure 1). Real GDP is still growing steadily but there are predictions that the crisis prevalent in neighbouring countries will eventually take its toll and, as a result, the situation may deteriorate in Poland as well.
With this report we intend to show whether or not there is a potential for the development of an extreme right wing party in Poland. Our predictions are based on the results of a pre-election survey conducted by the Center for Research on Prejudice at the University of Warsaw in autumn 2011. A representative sample of Polish Internet users between the ages of 18 and 60 (n=812) was drawn from the ARIADNA Research Panel administered by GG Network S.A. At the time, the entire panel consisted of a grand total of 65,000 participants.

*Figure 1. Real GDP growth rate in Europe (Eurostat, 2012).*
Conspiracy thinking in politics

An increased readiness to accept conspiracy as a motivating force in politics comprises one of the observable symptoms of a society during such a shift to the right. We measured the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories with an 8-item Political Conspiracy Thinking Scale (see Figure 2 for a detailed list of items and their average scores) in order to identify the level to which our participants agreed with conspiracy theories. We understand the latter to hypothesize that world politics is shaped by secret associations and the hidden interests of powerful but unknown individuals. The mean score on the aggregated scale ($m=2.98$) ranked almost exactly at the mid-point of the rating scale (Likert style, ranging from 1 to 5). 42% of the participants scored above it which indicates that a fairly large part of Polish society tends to believe in conspiracy theories concerning high-level politics.

Figure 2. Mean scores on the Political Conspiracy Thinking Scale (1 = I do not agree, 3 = It’s hard to say; 5 = I strongly agree).
It is important to note here that the scores on the Political Conspiracy Thinking Scale varied across the electorates of different parties. Most of the participants happened to support the ruling party Platforma Obywatelska (PO, Civic Platform; n=278). The second largest group (n=144) constituting 18% of our sample claimed that they did not intend to vote for any party in the upcoming elections. Other parties with substantial support were Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej (SLD, Democratic Left Alliance; n=129), Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS, Law and Justice; n=90) and Ruch Palikota (Palikot’s Movement; n=63). The complete sample make-up is summarized in Figure 3.

![Percentage of different party supporters](image)

*Figure 3. Percentages of different party supporters. Other parties: Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (PSL, Polish People’s Party); Polska Jest Najważniejsza (PJN, Poland Comes First); Unia Polityki Realnej (UPR, Real Politics Union).*

Nonvoters most readily believed in conspiracy theories about politics. Their mean score was above the mid-point of the scale and was significantly higher than the score of people voting for PO, SLD and Palikot’s Movement. PiS voters turned out to be the second group most likely to believe in conspiracy theories.
Survey participants were also asked to indicate to what extent they supported conspiracy stereotypes of Jews, Germans, and Russians who are among the most disliked groups in Poland. Conspiracy stereotyping entails a particular set of attitudes, usually defined as the belief that a certain outgroup works secretly and deceitfully towards dominating the ingroup or its resources.

The level of conspiracy stereotyping of Jews was almost exactly at the mid-point of the rating scale (Likert style, ranging from 1 to 5). Stereotyping of Germans was a bit stronger and the conspiracy stereotype of Russians was by far the strongest. 34.9% of the sample believed or strongly believed in conspiracy stereotype of Jews, 42.7% believed the same about Germans and 60.5% about Russians. This very high level of anti-Russian attitudes may be caused in part by the extensive body of conspiracy theories that have been put forward by members of PiS and that were widely discussed in the media in the wake of the Smolensk plane catastrophe in 2010 in which Polish president Lech Kaczyński and many other state officials perished. Analog to our result from the analysis of conspiracy theories mentioned above, people who did not support any of the parties most readily believed in conspiracy stereotypes of the scrutinized outgroups.

**Discriminatory policies support**

Discrimination support was measured with two questions regarding the possibility of company ownership and land purchase by foreigners. Poles are generally hostile towards granting foreigners the right to purchase land or own companies in their country. More specifically, the mean scores on questions concerning potential Jewish, German, or Russian land ownership in Poland fell below the mid-point of the rating scale, which shows that Poles would like to see this possibility restricted. A similar pattern was found for the company
ownership question, although German ownership was considered somewhat more agreeable than Jewish or Russian. PiS and PJN voters as well as people without declared support for any party favored discrimination the most.

![Mean scores for discriminatory policies support (1= I do not agree, 3 = it’s hard to say; 5 = I strongly agree).](image)

*Figure 4.* Mean scores for discriminatory policies support (1= I do not agree, 3 = it’s hard to say; 5 = I strongly agree).

A very important finding of our study was that the readiness to accept discriminatory practices correlates with conspiracy thinking (see Table 1): if a person believed in conspiracy theories regarding politics they were also more likely to support discrimination against Jews, Germans, and Russians.
Table 1.

Correlations between conspiracy thinking and discriminatory policies support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conspiracy thinking</th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Discrimination towards Jews</td>
<td>0,36***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Discrimination towards Germans</td>
<td>0,32***</td>
<td>0,77***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Discrimination towards Russians</td>
<td>0,29***</td>
<td>0,76*** 0,77***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** p < 0.001

What does it all mean?

Our study brought us to two main conclusions: (1) There is a large group of people in Poland who do not support any political party. Most probably these people do not feel that their interests and needs are properly represented by any of the currently active parties which may be the reason why they do not want to take part in elections. While 62% of our survey participants declared their will to vote in the then upcoming general election (2011), only 24% among the non-supporters did the same (39% of the latter said they surely were not going to vote and 37% claimed they were undecided). The actual voter turn-out in the election stood at 48.92%. (2) People who do not support any party turned out to be the most radical in their political views. They believed in conspiracy theories regarding politics and other nations and readily supported discriminatory policies. Even though voters of PiS and PJN share similar opinions to a large extent, the two parties are for some reason still not attractive enough for non-voters.

The beliefs and characteristics of Polish non-voters seem to predestine them to possibly become a support group for a radical right wing party. If a political movement set out
to promote discrimination and offer explanations for the state of the global economy based on conspiracy theories, it could find eager followers in the aforementioned group.

Even though radical right wing organizations are still marginal in Poland, we should thus not feel compelled to dismiss the growing support for policies similar to the ones being employed by right wing parties in Western Europe. The current appeal of the True Finns, the French National Front, the Dutch Party for Freedom or the Freedom Party of Austria all bear witness of an increase in social support for radical right wing parties in Europe. Building their electorate on anti-European, anti-immigrant, and anti-Muslim slogans they manage to obtain up to twenty percent of the votes in their respective countries and secure a not insignificant number of seats in their respective national parliaments.