

## SOROS CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN POLAND

SOROS CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN POLAND:  
WHEN RECYCLED HATREDS MEET SOCIAL MEDIA  
AND GENERATIONAL POLITICS

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### **Lay Abstract**

Since the 2015 European refugee crisis the popularity of conspiracy theories in Poland has been on the rise, exemplified by the case of Hungarian-born Jewish-American billionaire, George Soros. The appeal of anti-Soros conspiracy theories in Poland is explained by his involvement in the 1989 transformation from communism to capitalism, centuries old Polish antisemitism, the unique role of *Radio Maryja*, as well as intergenerational dynamics. This work concludes that populist politicians blamed the refugee crisis on Soros by drawing on cultural repertoires of antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred, and national victimhood narratives that were disseminated through traditional and new media outlets and resulted in a kind of inter-generational solidarity around these issues. This strategy led to populist electoral victories and reshaped what it was possible to say in mainstream Polish media. Antisemitism was once again acceptable, and conspiracy theories moved from the margins to the center of Polish public discourse.

### **Abstract**

Since the 2015 European refugee crisis the popularity of conspiracy theories in Poland has been on the rise, exemplified by the case of Hungarian-born Jewish-American billionaire, George Soros. The appeal of anti-Soros conspiracy theories in Poland is explained by his involvement in the 1989 transformation from communism to capitalism, centuries old antisemitism in this country, the unique role of *Radio Maryja* as well as intergenerational dynamics that emerged between different cohorts of Poles who had suffered similar negative consequences from globalization. This dissertation stresses the central role of populist politicians who made scapegoating Soros an important part of their electoral strategy. They reframed aspects of his biography and historical role in the Polish transformation to articulate the refugee crisis in a way that brought together old and young generations by drawing on cultural repertoires of antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred, and national victimhood narratives that were in turn disseminated through traditional and new media outlets. This strategy translated into electoral victories for the populist Law and Justice party and reshaped what it was possible to say in mainstream Polish media.

This dissertation contributes to scholarship on the political uses of conspiracy theories in an often-overlooked part of the world in this research: Central and Eastern Europe. By concentrating on the dissemination of anti-Soros conspiracy theories circulating between different media outlets, including radio and the press, it fills a gap in the field which prioritizes studying the diffusion of these narratives on the Internet only. Furthermore, it adds to existing work on conspiracy theories and right-wing populism by

looking at it from a historical-comparative and global perspective. It takes the view that conspiracy theories about Soros are not a phenomenon that emerges in isolation, detached from narratives circulating in other places or in the past, but rather as being intimately connected to them.

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For my grandmother,  
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## **List of Abbreviations and Symbols**

GP- *Gazeta Polska* [Polish Daily]

IMF- The International Monetary Fund

PiS- *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* [Law and Justice]

PO- Platforma Obywatelska [Civic Platform]

RM- Radio Maryja

TVP- *Telewizja Polska Program 1* [Channel 1 of Polish Television]

YT- YouTube

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## **Declaration of Academic Achievement**

I, Iga Mergler, declare this thesis to be my own work. I am the sole author of this document. No part of this work has been submitted for publication or for a higher degree at another institution. To the best of my knowledge, the content of this document does not infringe on anyone's copyright.

My supervisor, Dr Neil McLaughlin, and the members of my supervisory committee, Dr Vic Satzewich and Dr Cyril Levitt, have provided guidance and support at all stages of this project. I completed all of the research work.

## **Introduction**

In 2015, Law and Justice, the Polish national conservative-populist party, won the parliamentary and presidential election. Their landslide victory was the result of a very effective, fear-based campaign that convinced voters of all ages that Law and Justice was the only political party that could stop the tidal wave of Muslim refugees coming to the shores of Europe from reaching Poland. Party members argued that only Poland, as the last bastion of authentic Christianity on the European continent and a former victim of various foreign occupiers, having experience in extended resistance could oppose the politically correct elements emerging in the West from letting potential terrorists take root in the country. A country that, with its long history of resistance and struggle against foreign influence,<sup>1</sup> could win this civilizational battle against powerful international actors that were seen as orchestrating the migration crisis. Law and Justice and other far-right politicians (such as Janusz Korwin-Mikke and Paweł Kukiz) positioned themselves as representatives of the “true Poles,” arguing that the ‘Islamization of Europe’ was part of a bigger plan concocted by the controversial and outspoken Jewish-American billionaire, George Soros. They claimed that his goal, shared by EU officials who were cooperating with him, was to weaken nation-states and create a borderless world ruled by the supra-national institutions controlled by wealthy Jews.

As the story went, their ambitions did not end there. Additional aims included diluting the national, religious, and even gender identities, of citizens in order to make

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1683 Battle of Vienna, Polish king Jan III Sobieski stopped Ottoman Turks from conquering territory in Europe (Topolski 2015, Chapter VII).

them more susceptible to manipulation. This ‘Soros-funded’ campaign to allow Muslim refugees into Europe under the banner of multiculturalism, was presented as being a means to an end in achieving total control over nations and their populaces. The Polish far-right mostly regurgitated the white replacement theory<sup>2</sup> (Uscinski 2020, 3) and effectively awakened powerful feelings of insecurity and collective victimhood that Poles have developed over the centuries (Bulska et al. 2021, 138). They contended that these people were comprised primarily of aggressive young men who would quickly alter the European landscape into one with more mosques, shariah law, and, ultimately, a larger population of brown and black faces. The only way to stop these so-called ‘invaders’ and put an end to their pouring into European countries, was by disempowering and delegitimising the person who was viewed not only in this country but also around the world, to be the main sponsor of their migration—George Soros.

The mainstream media entertaining conspiracy theories of this type would have been considered uncool (*obciach*) and embarrassing by younger Poles and liberal politicians only a few years prior to 2015—for years talk of this type was relegated to the margins of the political public discourse and to alternative right-wing media. They were either confined to the airwaves of the conservative radio station, *Radio Maryja*, where they were thought of as being heard only by the elderly, uneducated women from rural Poland, or relegated to dark corners of the Internet that were hospitable to political views that were less acceptable among the wider public. But the grossly exaggerated fear

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<sup>2</sup> According to this theory “governments and corporations are replacing whites with cheap foreign labor” (Uscinski 2020, 3).

of the refugee crisis overwhelmed the rationality (and plain decency) of elite discourse in Poland. Very quickly, anti-refugee/anti-Muslim statements became commonplace across much of the mainstream media. These were embraced in full force, surprisingly by some younger Poles whose views were impacted by the more anti-establishment content online which was beginning to align with what was presented in the mainstream media.

After the 2015 election, when Law and Justice gained control over state-owned media, their populist and national political agenda required conspiracy theories of the type about Soros to position themselves as the saviours of a besieged nation. These narratives were used by Kaczyński's party as tools to emphasize already existing social divisions stemming from economic inequalities and then frame them in terms of cultural warfare. Different age cohorts in Poland were convinced by messages disseminated by the state-funded evening news (watched by millions), where Soros was consistently framed as a major villain and embodiment of this foreign threat. His mission was thought to be to "build open societies without homogenous identities" (Diaz June 8, 2016, TVP1) by gradually "changing the views and attitudes of Poles" (Diaz August 17, 2016, TVP) with the help of his NGOS and allies in progressive media. Soros' alleged goal of the eradication of nation-states, as it was argued by pro-governmental journalists, became easier to achieve in 2015 through "funding Muslim refugee migration into Europe" (Diaz July 20, 2017, TVP1). These narratives were disseminated on public news, paid for by the taxpayers' money, and were interspersed with antisemitic tropes, imagery, and conspiracy theories. Normalized and legitimized in this manner their presence

in mainstream Polish discourse increased, fueling anti-refugee/anti-Muslim and antisemitic sentiment in the country.

### **0.1 Literature Review: Conspiracy Theories**

The rise in the popularity of conspiracy theories about Soros in Poland is a part of a larger trend. Even though conspiracy theories have been around for a very long time (Byford 2011, 23), scholars in this field have identified a significant move of conspiracy theories from the margins into “the center of politics, media and entertainment industry” in different countries (Ibid., 10, 17; Thalmann 2019, 4; Butter and Knight 2019, 40).

This noticeable shift has been documented by findings demonstrating that more and more people globally have embraced conspiracy theories (Langer 2021, 178; Bergmann 2021, 49). A decade ago, most Americans believed in the existence of UFOs and the associated US government cover up (Byford 2011, 7). The French were no different: in 2017, 70% of them admitted to endorsing “white replacement theory” (Uscinski 2020, 52).

Conspiracy theories have become such a regular part of our cultural landscape that an entire cottage industry of publishing houses, advertising agencies, and event organizers has sprung around them (Byford 2011, 7)—recently a dating platform was even set up as a ‘safe space’ said to be free of knee-jerk reactions and populated by interesting individuals of open minds and critical thinking” (quoted in Thalmann 2019, 192).

The growth of interest in conspiracy theories has led to a rapid expansion of research on this topic. Hence, before I discuss where this dissertation stands in relation to the theoretical debates taking place in the conspiracy theory research field, I want to map them out first. What do we know about the conspiratorial way of explaining world?

What are their defining characteristics? How have they been studied, and by whom, will be some of the questions I will attempt to answer next.

### **0.1.1 How Are Conspiracy Theories Defined?**

Even though conspiracy theories continue to be contested as a category by academics, journalists, and conspiracy theorists themselves (Byford 2011, 149), there is a consensus about their major characteristics (Aaronovitch 2011, 4; Byford 2011, 2; Thalmann 2019, 2; Usinski 2020, 22). Conspiracy theories are defined as aiming to explain major, often “distressing” events (Astapova, Onoriu, Corneliu and Scheibner 2021, 11) thought to be resulting from the secret meticulously planned actions of a group of influential and self-interested individuals who ignore the common good (Byford 2011, 2; Nefes and Romero-Reche 2020, 97; Strömbäck, Broda, Bouchafra, Johansson, Rettenegger, and Lindgren 2022, 2). What this general definition reveals, is that conspiracy theories provide simple answers to complex questions and in doing so provide people with a sense of safety (Aaronovitch 2011, 345; Byford 2011, 45; Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 10). In this way, fulfilling emotional needs explains why conspiracy theories are so popular (Önnerfors and Krouewl 2021, 254; Jolley, Mari and Douglas 2020, 231), as does their omnipresence (Uscinski 2019, 10) and extensive media coverage (Byford 2011, 10; Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 10). This, combined with the fact that conspiracy theories are endorsed by politicians (Bergmann, Dyrendal, Harambam and Thórisdóttir 2020, 259), celebrities, and numerous experts (Aaronovitch 2011, 11) makes escaping exposure to their narratives quite difficult. Finally, conspiracy theories appear familiar as they tend to rely on well-known tropes that circulate in culture

that are adjusted to account for new developments. This adaptability makes them durable and helps to explain why conspiracy theories persist over time (Byford 2011, 97).

The fact that they are ubiquitous, familiar, and long-lived does not, however, mean that they are passively accepted by the public at large (Byford 2011, 30). The reception of conspiracy theories is far from uncritical or straightforward (Fine 2007, 318; Byford 2011, 30; Uscinski 2019, 20; Bergmann and Butter 2020, 333) as the same narrative will be rejected by some while being accepted by others, and, as such, few clear patterns have been determined.<sup>3</sup>

### **0.1.2 Are Conspiracy Theories Mostly Bad?**

Discerning patterns in the way individuals approach conspiracy theories is a topic of a continuous debate amongst conspiracy theory scholars, as is the question of whether conspiracy theories should be seen as “a good or a bad thing” (Byford 2011, 4), since they “may be right,” as in the case of the Watergate scandal where the suspicion of wiretapping on the part of American politicians, labeled at the time as “conspiracy theories,” was proven to be an accurate explanation of what was really going on (Dentith 2021, 272). Nonetheless conspiracy theories might also be wrong, and are in many cases (Strömbäck et al. 2022, 2; Uscinski 2020, 22). Although scholars studying this topic recognize both possibilities, they tend to put more emphasis on one over the other.

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<sup>3</sup> Some studies have established a relationship between one’s education (Strömbäck et al. 2022, 8), political views (Soral, Cichocka, Bilewicz and Marchlewska 2019, 374), and employing conspiracy theories, but other research has refuted these findings (Harambam 2020, 279; Uscinski 2020, 13). The most agreed upon pattern has been recognized by Ted Groetzel who found that people who believe in one conspiracy theory are far more likely to believe in more (Butter and Knight 2019, 37).

Thus, some characterize conspiracy theories as “perfectly legitimate forms of enquiry” (Byford 2011, 23) that foster critical thinking, healthy skepticism, detect potential abuses of power (Dentith 2021, 272; Thórisdóttir, Mari, and Krouwel 2020, 305), challenge the hegemonic discourse (Hamerski and Hoffman 2016, 8) and push for more transparency (Uscinski 2019, 20; Jolley et al., 2020, 232). However, far more often, conspiratorial ways of explaining the world are stigmatized (Byford 2011, 20) in what has been identified as an “anti-conspiracy theory discourse” (Thalmann 2019, 5).

The strand of conspiracy theory research that emphasizes their unwarranted character views people who believe them as psychologically deficient (Byford 2011, 20), ignorant (Uscinski 2019, 444; Guzowski 2016, 94),<sup>4</sup> and “epistemologically crippled” (Butter and Knight 2019, 38) even though little evidence exists to support such claims (Uscinski 2020, 12). From this angle, conspiracy theories are discredited due to their engagement with one’s emotions more than one’s reason (Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 10; Byford 2011, 141; Önnersfors and Krouwel 2021, 257). Lacking internal logic, dismissing the complexity of phenomena, and offering simplistic accounts (Byford 2011, 132) that “explain everything” (Nefes and Romero-Reche 2020, 97) which rest on the assumption that “reality is the site of the battle between good and evil” (Byford 2011, 93; Strömbäck et al. 2022, 2) are the common critiques of conspiracy theories. However other unfavourable assessments of them focus on their content, “narrative structure” (Byford 2011, 18), and their negative “real-life” consequences (Aaranovitch 2011, 15)

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph E. Uscinski identifies a common trope in journalism and describes it as “look at the latest stupid conspiracy theory and the idiots who believe it” (2019, 444)



which are often cited as the top reasons for studying this mode of explanation (Uscinski 2019, 1).

Historians have documented how antisemitism has been an integral part of conspiratorial thinking (Byford 2011, 69, Bangerter, Wagner-Egger and Delouvee 2020; Langer 2021, 169), and how such reasoning found its most disturbing realization in the atrocities committed against the Jewish people during World War II (Byford 2011, 60; Nefes and Romero-Reche 2020, 103). Research investigating possible negative impacts of conspiracy theories have shown that attacking specific groups of people due to their alleged influence—one of the most distinct “narrative structures” of this mode of explanation—leads to prejudice, violence, and extremism (Jolley et al. 2020, 234-5, Uscinski 2020, 13; Byford 2011, 18). In fact, conspiracy theory adherents are more inclined to approve of large-scale violence. They do not shy away from actions directed toward destabilizing those who are in power (Bergmann et al., 2020, 260), including organizing direct action against governments (Uscinski 2020, 6, 9) and harassing elected politicians (Thórisdóttir et al. 2020, 305). According to research, this is where supporters of conspiracy theories intersect with populist politicians who also tend to instrumentalize conspiratorial narratives to vilify the corrupt elite and idealize the people (Uscinski 2020, 84; Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 9; Bergmann and Butter 2020, 331; Önnersfors and Krouewl 2021, 253, 257; Uscinski 2020, 7). The findings indicate that political polarization as a strategy might persuade conspiracy theory adherents to lend support to authoritarian leaders instead of trusting in the democratic process (Bergmann and Butter 2020, 331; Bergmann et al., 2020, 261). Experts in this field warn that if conspiracy

theories are institutionalized, whether by authoritarian or democratic political systems, they can drive dangerous policy (Uscinski 2020, 3; Önnnerfors and Krouewl 2021, 257) that is likely to lead to breaking the rule of law and the curtailment of democracy (Ibid., 253; Uscinski 2019, 10).

### **0.1.3 Conspiracy Theories as Multifaceted Phenomena**

Irrespective of the value judgments assigned to conspiracy theories, researchers agree that we must examine their impact on society in recognition of the fact that they are here to stay (Byford 2011, 97; Butter and Knight 2019, 38). As an object of study, the challenges they pose revolve around their multifaceted character (Butter and Knight 2020, 5; Uscinski 2019, ix; Todor, McKenzie-McHarg and Romero-Reche 2020, 11). Insights from various disciplines that examine conspiracy theories show that there is no single ‘correct’ way of studying them, and also that there is little dialogue between various conspiracy theory scholars (Byford 2011, 3; Dentith 2021, 268). Thus, a review of the development of this field is instructive and necessary in helping to lay the groundwork for this dissertation as it relies on a multidisciplinary approach to better understand anti-Soros conspiracy theories in Poland.

Conspiracy theory scholarship encompasses studies of various regions, languages, political traditions, and historical periods (Butter and Knight 2020, 5). Even though the development of this scholarship dates from the 1950s and is identified as stemming from work in psychology (Thalman 2019, 10), I will first turn to historians who captured the essence of conspiracy theories long before they were theorized by other disciplines, and even before they were given their common label. The rationale is that conspiracy

theories are constantly evolving; they feed off earlier versions of themselves (Byford 2011, 69). Thus, learning about this “tradition of explanation” (Ibid.), the important texts that shaped it, recurring tropes, and circumstances in which they came into being are essential to any study of specific conspiracy theories—including those about Soros.

#### 0.1.3.1 From Conspiracism to Modern Conspiracy Theories

##### 0.1.3.1.1 From Medieval Antisemitism to *Memoirs*

Modern conspiracy theories emerged after the French Revolution but were predated by “conspiracism” (Astapova, Onoriu, Corneliu and Scheibner 2021) based on medieval prejudice against the Jews identified as being “killers of Christ, sorcerers, poisoners of wells and murderers of children” (Trachtenberg in Byford 2011, 48). These antisemitic myths were used to justify the persecution of Jews that occurred in the Middle Ages and during the crusades (Duda 2020, 188). These tropes would later be recycled in modern conspiracy theories (Bangerter, Wagner-Egger and Delouvee 2020, 206) that began to emerge at the end of the eighteenth century (Byford 2011, 40) starting with the widely read *Memoirs*, written by the French Jesuit Augustin Barruel. In this four-volume work, Barruel argued that the French Revolution was the consequence of an anti-Catholic plot orchestrated by the Free Masons and the Illuminati (Ibid., Duda 2020, 190; Langer 2021, 170). *Memoirs* became famous, and as time passed other authors expanded on Barruel’s thesis by fabricating accusations that these two secret societies were puppets of the international Jewish elite ultimately responsible for European revolutions (Byford 2011, 46, Langer 2021, 170; Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 6). To put it simply, by the mid-nineteenth century medieval antisemitism that posited

Jews as Satan's pawns was replaced by a depiction as "a political force using money, influence, and arcane knowledge 'to conquer the world, to refashion it in its own craven image'" (Trachtenberg in Byford 2011, 48). Crafted in this manner, modern antisemitic conspiracy theories were used to explain major societal changes. From their onset during the French Revolution conspiracy theories were linked to "the attacks on modernity" (Simonsen 2020, 360), a recurring motif in this tradition of explanation, including anti-Soros conspiracy theories in Poland.

#### 0.1.3.1.2 From *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to Non-Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories

Another work that historians identify as essential source material for modern conspiracy theories is *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This fraudulent antisemitic text, created by Tsarist secret police and first published in Russia in 1905, exposed an alleged Jewish plan of world domination (Langer 2021, 170; Yablokov and Chatterjee-Doodly 2021, 7). This document was released by the authorities to legitimize pogroms in Russia (Byford 2011; 50). Between 1920-1945 *The Protocols* were republished numerous times and translated into most European languages. In the United States, pro-Tsarist emigres, American populist ideologues, and Henry Ford, popularized this pamphlet (Ibid., 52). In this North American rendition of *The Protocols* Jews were merged with Communists, which would in turn become another common trope that would reappear in future antisemitic conspiracy theories, including anti-Soros ones. Lastly, and most

tragically, *The Protocols* were the backbone of Nazi propaganda and formed, to quote the historian Norman Cohn, “a warrant for genocide” for the Holocaust (in Byford 2011, 55).

#### 0.1.3.1.3. Conspiracy Theories After WWII and the Politics of History

Since World War II, employing antisemitic conspiracy theories has been largely considered unacceptable (Byford 2011, 60, Bangerter, Wagner-Egger and Delouvee 2020). Conspiracies about a Jewish plot to take over of the world were replaced by similar conspiracies casting Communists, Americans, the architects of the New World Order, and members of secret societies such as the Bilderberg group, Soros among them, as villains (Byford 2011, 7, 62; Butter and Knight 2019, 40). These developments forced historians to ask if antisemitic conspiracy theories had run their course (Ibid.). They concluded that they had not disappeared, but rather morphed into contemporary non-antisemitic conspiracy theories that still tend to “operate in an ideological space with a long antisemitic tradition” (Byford 2011, 100). Thus, the investigation of narrative continuity between older and more recent conspiracy theories is essential as part of this dissertation. But looking at the past is additionally important because most conspiracy theories, similar to Barruel’s *Memoirs* and *the Protocols*, recognize Jews or “Judaized” groups as powerful agents of history (Byford 2011, 73); they rewrite the past as they provide alternative answers to the question of how we arrived at the present conjuncture. In other words, one of the important traits of conspiracy theories is that they are engaged in a politics of history, and they treat the past as a resource to be reframed in order to provide rival interpretations of events.

This short historical overview demonstrates that both historical and more recent antisemitism has informed contemporary conspiracy theories. I will demonstrate later how anti-Soros conspiracy theories in Poland are made up by tropes and themes that originate from and overlap with those from the *Memoirs* and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Furthermore, they are moulded by Polish antisemitism, especially the views of the nationalist thinker Roman Dmowski, who conveniently interpreted difficult periods of Polish history as allegedly resulting from Jewish hostility (Rae 2007, 223).

The summary of the development of conspiracy theory scholarship that follows will lay the ground for a discussion of the questions, assumptions, and conclusions generated by specific disciplines that are relevant in examining the rise of anti-Soros conspiracy theories in Poland.

#### 0.1.3.2. Pathologizing Conspiracy Theories

Early research on conspiracy theories tended towards stigmatization (Byford 2011, 120). In the 1940s and 1950s, Karl Popper was the first thinker to devote considerable attention to this topic (Thalman 2019, 5). He categorized conspiracy theories as “flawed science” because for him they were simplified explanations of complex phenomena that fail to provide adequate evidence to support their claims (Harambam 2020, 280; Butter and Knight 2019, 34; Byford 2011, 2; Coady 2019, 4). Popper set the tone for other scholars in the field such as Edward Shils and Seymour Martin Lipset, but his impact was especially relevant for Richard Hofstadter who is seen as the founder of the theoretical study of conspiracy theories. This historian agreed with

Popper's skepticism towards this "tradition of explanation," especially when in the course of his work he found that conspiracy theories attract alienated, powerless, and excessively mistrustful people (Byford 2011, 69, 122, 129) who engage in a "paranoid style" of thinking. Expanding on Popper's critique, Hofstadter concluded that conspiracy theories could potentially pose a threat to societal cohesion (Butter and Knight 2019, 35).

#### 0.1.3.3 Paranoia, Mistrust, Powerlessness, and Narcissism

Psychologists have primarily been interested in understanding what attracts people to conspiracy theories through a focus on analyzing individual aspects of personality (e.g., openness, agreeableness, dogmatism, obedience (Prooijen, Douglas, Cichocka and Bilewicz 2020, 152; Thórisdóttir et al., 2021, 318)), feelings, beliefs, and cognition (Uscinski 2020, 65), building on many of the assumptions in Hofstadter's approach (Butter and Knight 2019, 37). They list high levels of fear, paranoia, and mistrust as dominating the emotional dispositions of conspiracy theory believers (Byford 2011, 18; Önnarfors and Krouewl 2021, 254; Thórisdóttir et al., 2020, 305). Other common feelings include powerlessness, social exclusion, victimization, and loneliness (Uscinski 2020, 71; Strömbäck et al. 2022, 4; Aaronovitch 2011, 340). These emotions tend to arise during social crises (Astapova, Onoriu, Corneliu and Scheibner 2021, 11), and psychologists see the employment of conspiracy theories as helping individuals to regain a sense of control in an unpredictable world (Önnarfors and Krouewl 2021, 254). Conspiracy narratives achieve such goals by providing simple explanations and concrete solutions for complex phenomena (Byford 2011, 141; Uscinski 2020, 66), as well as by removing blame from the failures of oneself or one's group's and putting it elsewhere

through scapegoating (Bulska Haska, Winiewski and Bilewicz, et al. 2021, 135; Byford 2011, 141; Aaronovitch 2011, 333). Conspiracy theories protect the self-in-group by strengthening collective identity through promoting ego-inflating and community building narratives that tend to glorify “us” while diminishing “them” (Bergmann et al., 2020, 259; Jolley et al., 2020, 231; Astapova et al., 2021, 13; Giry and Gürpınar 2020, 318; Byford 2011, 141). Thus, psychologists have found that high levels of narcissism are tightly correlated with embracing conspiracy theories (Bulska, et al., 2021, 138; Uscinski 2020, 70).

#### 0.1.3.4. Evaluating the Evidence

In contrast to psychologists and to Popper, philosophers studying conspiracy theories have refused to pathologize them as unwarranted or irrational by default (Byford 2011, 20; Dentith 2021, 68; Butter and Knight 2019, 39). Rather, they point out that labelling a given explanation a “conspiracy theory” automatically carries pejorative connotations and automatically situates it in opposition to seemingly more reliable, rational accounts generated by a more appropriate epistemological authority—most commonly academics (Uscinski 2020, 23; Byford 2011, 20, see for comparison Douglas and van Prooijen 2022). To avoid this trap, philosophers who concentrate on conspiracy theories in their work focus on the criteria for assessing their validity (Uscinski 2020, 10) by examining whether presented explanations are true or false, logically follow, and through evaluating evidence (Byford 2011, 20; Coady 2019, 2; Dentith 2021, 270). To put it simply, philosophers who analyze conspiracy theories see them as “proposed explanations” (Dentith 2021, 270) which may be proven to be correct (or not) (Ibid), and



which thus must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis (Butter and Knight 2019, 39), that is, by considering broader context in which they are formed.

#### 0.1.3.5. Understanding the Context

Culture studies scholars and philosophers reject the stigmatization of conspiratorial narratives (Astapova et al., 2021, 4) Rather, they study conspiracy theories as types of knowledge “that are dismissed by experts and elites” (Butter and Knight 2019, 49) and that circulate outside of the mainstream media. From this perspective, in a world devoid of grand-narratives, conspiracy theories are only one of many—equally valid—disseminated truths (Nefes and Romero-Reche 2020, 102; Aaronovitch 2011, 336). Such a stance assumes that people engage with conspiratorial narratives in a self-conscious, playful manner, and that they do not take them too seriously (Butter and Knight 2019, 41, 52; Byford 2011, 146). However, some cultural theorists who pay attention to the broader context point out that irony is simply one way of expressing powerlessness in a world of mounting inequalities (Ibid., 147). This brings us to a second approach towards conspiracy theories, occurring within cultural studies scholarship, that appreciates the importance of understanding the distinct economic, historical, political, socio-cultural circumstances in which these narratives come into being (Butter and Knight 2019, 42; Dentith 2021, 68; Harambam 2020, 280). What scholars in this field agree on is that conspiracy theories are akin to “cognitive maps,” guiding people to make sense of life under late capitalism (Jameson in Byford 2011, 146; Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 1). They allow adherents to articulate the anxieties that characterize a

contemporary social reality plagued by economic instability, growing alienation, the disappearance of traditional forms of authority—to name just a few (Butter and Knight 2019, 41; Harambam 2020, 280; Nefes and Romero-Reche 2020, 100). Given this context, cultural theorists recognize that conspiratorial modes of explanation are most attractive to those who are struggling to adapt to the rapid changes of late modernity (Byford 2011, 129; Aaronovitch 2011, 331; Atkinson and Dewitt 2019, 122; Bergmann et al., 2020, 259), as they offer a semblance of stability through the building of communities and the strengthening local collective identities through a favourable re-writing of the past and the construction of common enemies (Thalmann 2019, 3; Önnarfors and Krouewl 2021, 262, Astapova et al. 2021, 21).

#### 0.1.3.6 Conspiracy Theories as Mediatized Phenomena

The media studies approach to conspiracy theories partially overlaps with that of cultural studies. It categorizes and catalogues conspiracy theories that appear in media texts and examines the linkages between media consumption and the propensity to employ them (Moreno and Vegetti 2021, 1205), while also establishing connections between conspiracy theories and the wider socio-cultural context they occur in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Aupers, Crăciun and Önnarfors 2020, 388). Media scholars acknowledge the relevance of advances in telecommunication technologies for the spread of conspiracy theories (Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 11) by documenting how the Internet has fostered an environment in which conspiratorial ideas are discussed, commented upon, and essentially co-produced by content creators and audiences (Byford 2011, 11; Aupers

2020, 474; Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 4). The process of conspiracy theory dissemination as resulting from the interaction between various media outlets in unique media ecologies is of interest for media scholars (Byford 2011, 12). From the point of view of this dissertation, what is especially relevant is their study of the consequences on the part of the news media of foregrounding extreme positions that are derived from the Internet (Önnerfors and Krouewl 2021, 255) as it contributes to the formation of the so-called 'post-truth' era when it becomes progressively more difficult to distinguish if information is real (Stano 2020, 493; Uscinski 2020, 36).

#### 0.1.3.7 Focusing on the Social Context

Sociologists have taken a similar approach to cultural theorists in their conceptualization of conspiracy theories (Dentith 2021, 268; Butter and Knight 2019, 34). Chiefly, they share the understanding that conspiracy theories are meaning making practices (Ibid) and narratives that stem from and are bound by specific historical contexts (Byford 2011, 121). Sociologists, however, put more emphasis on the social context in which conspiracy theories arise and the social aspects of their dissemination, transmission, and reception (Bergmann et al., 2020, 259)). In other words, the attention moves from an analysis of the tropes interspersing conspiracy theories to the examination of how people react to such narratives, the accompanying group dynamics, as well as to potential consequences of employing such beliefs (Uscinski 2020, 65, 72; Nefes and Romero-Reche 2020, 94,103; Atkinson and Dewitt 2019, 125). Some questions that sociologists pose include: do people tend to espouse, reject, change, recycle, repeat, or

transmit conspiracy theories “as they collaboratively make sense of the world around them” (Byford 2011, 121, 148)? And, if so, under what circumstances? Which groups are more likely to employ them and why? And what functions do they perform for these groups? (Nefes and Romero-Reche 2020, 103)?

Another angle from which sociologists conceptualize conspiracy theories has to do with seeing them as “rival explanations of social reality” or alternative “social theories” (Ibid., 94). Putting it differently, sociologists recognize that conspiracy theories are often dismissed as deviant knowledge (Nefes and Romero-Reche 2020, 97), and they analyze the role of “epistemic authorities” such as pundits, experts, academics, media institutions in establishing which beliefs and facts are considered as ‘true’ and which are not (Byford 2011, 30, 31; Tuters 2020, 220).

#### **0.1.3.8 Conspiracy Theories in a Political Context**

Conspiracy theories revolve around ideas about power and authority; blaming those who currently hold positions of power for secretly working together against the common good (Bergmann et al. 2020, 259, Uscinski 2020, 79). Political scientists identify factors that impact the reception and the dissemination of this mode of explanation (Strömbäck et al. 2022, 12, Uscinski 2020, 86). More precisely, they investigate the formation of public opinion, the role of the elites in this process, and broader political context in which these things occur (Uscinski 2020, 79), as well as study political positions and their relevance to conspiracy theories (Ibid., 103; Strömbäck et al. 2022, 12). They point out that conspiracy theories can themselves be thought of as

instances of a political stance taking (Uscinski 2020, 86), and that conspiratorial explanations of the world are created to engage people in a political struggle that might lead to a change (Bergmann et al. 2020, 259). One point of agreement among political scientists is that political ruptures might emerge from the upholding of conspiracy theories by primarily marginalized groups (Ibid.) and/or political losers of elections (Uscinski 2020, 20; Butter and Knight 2019, 38).

#### **0.1.4 Towards a Multi-Disciplinary Approach**

This literature review demonstrates that conspiracy theories have been studied from a variety of different angles (Byford 2011, 3; Dentith 2021, 268) and that reliance on only one theoretical framework to understand their growing popularity can only generate partial explanations. For this reason, conspiracy theory scholars have advocated for producing work that tries to bring together different disciplines (Nefes and Romero-Reche 2020, 103; Butter and Knight 2020, 6). This dissertation attempts to create a bridge between these areas of scholarship by presenting an analysis of anti-Soros conspiracy theories in Poland that draws upon findings and theories from various disciplines.

Conspiratorial narratives studied in this dissertation by and large fit the definition of conspiracy theories presented earlier, but this alone does not mean that they should be automatically condemned. One of the major assumptions this work shares with philosophers, cultural studies scholars, and sociologists is that we should reject default stigmatization (Byford 2011, 20; Coady 2019, 2; Dentith 2021, 270) and rather see conspiracy theories as “attempts to understand social reality” (Nefes and Romero-Reche

2020, 105). From this standpoint, believers of anti-Soros conspiracy theories in Poland can be seen as rational actors who “have reasons to believe in them” (Ibid.). To understand them in the spirit of the Weberian tradition, (Ibid. 98; Harambam 2020, 289), I limit pre-judgment in examining their reasons for embracing this particular set of conspiracy theories. If these include beliefs that have been formed based on “less common” interpretations of historical events, or details of Soros’ biography, I investigate the validity of these claims.

As in the sociological view, I am interested in finding causes for the growing popularity of conspiracy theories and identifying their diffusion patterns (Nefes and Romero-Reche 2020, 94). Media scholars argue that conspiracy theories are appealing because they challenge dominant or hegemonic discourses (Byford 2011, 75; Aupers 2020, 472; Bergmann and Butter 2020, 333), and the rise of digital and interactive media as accentuating this phenomenon as the Internet provides a platform for the development of non-dominant, including conspiratorial, discourses (Aupers 2020, 472; Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 11). My research documents the circulation of conspiracy theories about Soros online, and confirms their quicker spread, but it also finds that alternative and traditional outlets also play major role in disseminating conspiracy theories. Only through looking at the interaction between different types of media outlets can we accurately trace the transmission of conspiracy theories and appreciate how they are able to reach different age groups (Byford 2011, 12; Aupers, Crăciun and Önnersfors 2020, 387; Bangerter, Wagner-Egger and Delouvee 2020, 207). Existing literature on Soros

conspiracy theories (Pintilescu and Kustan Magyari 2021) has mostly excluded consideration of media dynamics and generational factors.

My understanding of conspiracy theories is that they are “social phenomena and an evolving set of historically bound discourses and stories” that people embrace, change, and resist—which is a definition that I adopt from sociologists (Byford 2011, 121). From this perspective, to understand the meaning of specific conspiracy theories for people who embrace and employ them, we first must study the broader socio-cultural, political, and historical context from which these conspiratorial narratives emerge (Byford 2011, 152; Onnerfors and Krouewl 2021, 260). Thus, I ground my investigation of anti-Soros conspiracy theories in Poland on the transition from socialism to capitalism that began in the late 1980s, and in studying the meaning and consequences of economic reforms that this country experienced since then. Here I draw on the work of cultural studies—which appreciates that changes in material conditions are invariably translated into changes in culture. Within this field, conceptualizations of processes that accompany globalization are applicable to the situation of Poland during transition and beyond and constitute an important part of the explanation for the formation of conspiracy theories about Soros in this country (Byford 2011, 129; Aaronovitch 2011, 331; Atkinson and Dewitt 2019, 122; Bergmann et al., 2020, 25).

This commitment to the examination of a wider context in relation to the conspiracy theories about Soros in Poland requires an appreciation of the specificity of Central and Eastern European context (Tlostanova 2012), i.e., that people from this region who spent decades living under oppressive communist regimes that misinformed

and often plotted against their own citizens and have good reason to be suspicious of politicians and those who are in power (Butter and Knight 2019, 39; Dentith 2021, 273; Astapova et al., 2021, 20). The findings of Polish social psychologists studying conspiracy theories, despite not being at the centre of this dissertation, are relevant to its examination. Soral and colleagues note that Poles have complex reactions towards unpredictability (Soral, Cichočka, Bilewicz and Marchlewska 2019, 374) since they have inhabited an area of the world that has historically dealt with many external threats (Gole de Zawala, Lantos and Keenan 2021; Bulska, Haska, Winiewski and Bilewicz 2021, 139). It is a view that is widely shared in this field that conspiracy theories in this context play the role of emotional stabilizers for powerless, distrustful, and threatened groups (Ucinski 2020, 71; Strömbäck et al. 2022, 4; Aaronovitch 2011, 340). Furthermore, they provide the sense of safety for adherents by strengthening their identity and favorably comparing themselves to outgroups, further feeding hostility towards others (Bergmann et al., 2020, 259; Jolley et al., 2020, 231). I have included the findings of social psychologists in my analysis of conspiracy theories about Soros in Poland in 2015 and found that the framing of the refugee crisis in Poland as an emergency, combined with promoting narratives that inflated the national ego, effectively re-awakened latent feelings of fear and mistrust towards refugees and outsiders and prepared a fertile ground for conspiracy theories about Soros to flourish.

To fully understand anti-Soros conspiracy theories in Poland, this dissertation also examines the wider historical context. I agree with historians that the hyper-referential nature of conspiracy theories, that is, the fact that they tend to build upon threads



contained in previous conspiracy theories, and the investigation of them as an evolving tradition of explanation with recurring themes, narratives, and tropes is necessary.

In other words, while documenting the development of anti-Soros conspiracy theories in Poland, I lean on the classification of conspiracy theories produced by historians, cultural studies scholars, and sociologists. As part of this picture, I discuss earlier conspiracy theories about Soros in Poland, as well as in other countries (Pintilescu and Kustan Magyari 2021; Plenta 2020; McLaughlin and Trilupaityte 2013). Most importantly, I recognize the significance of antisemitism in conspiratorial thinking about Soros, but I do not automatically assume it in all cases. Just because this philanthropist is Jewish, does not mean that anti-Soros conspiracy theories must be antisemitic. I refrain from labelling them as such, unless I have clear evidence that narrative structures and tropes that are characteristic of past antisemitic conspiracy theories are re-used.

Another reason for historical analysis of the context in which anti-Soros conspiracy theories emerged in Poland has to do with the fact that these theories are themselves an attempt to rewrite history, or, to put it differently, they engage in a politics of history. They treat both Polish history as well as the much “smaller” personal history of Soros’ biography as building blocks to be used in the weaving of conspiratorial narratives. I study these statements: their origin and their accuracy, as well as the role of pro and anti-governmental experts as “epistemic authorities” who influence which beliefs and facts are counted as true and which are not (Byford 2011, 30, 31; Tuters 2020, 220). But, in contrast to postmodernists, I see value in verifying the information that is presented as facts by conspiracy theorists and refute any potential misinformation (Butter

and Knight 2019, 41, 52; Byford 2011, 14). For this reason, I have devoted two chapters to discussion of both Soros' life and Polish history. In so doing, I admit that this billionaire's role in the country was unprecedented, even if it has been misconstrued by conspiracy theorists.

Following in the footsteps of sociologists who study the positive and negative impacts of conspiracy theories on societies (Önnerfors and Krouewl 2021, 26; Byford 2011, 156; Uscinski 2019, 1; Dentith 2021, 272), I do not shy away from seeing them as community building agents while describing conspiracy theories as antisemitic, racist, or homophobic if it is warranted (Önnerfors and Krouewl 2021, 260). In doing so, I endeavour to provide evidence to support my claims. Throughout, I acknowledge the fact that because bigotry is identified does not mean that we should ignore the legitimate criticisms of people who are at the centre of conspiracy theories (Langer 2021, 179). To put it differently, we must remain wary of circumstances in which the accusations of antisemitism can be instrumentalized to deflect from other types of criticism, e.g., that of the involvement of foreign money in local politics.

Finally, in investigating the Polish context for the growth of anti-Soros conspiracy theories, I acknowledge the role of political factors in the dissemination of conspiracy theories (Uscinski 2020, 79). To do so, I analyze the political landscape, including the relative instability of the political views of Polish voters (Szczegółą and Kwiatkowski 2017, 60), voting patterns among different age demographics (Narkowicz 2018, 336; Skarżyńska 2018, 114), as well as the reputation of political parties, and the rivalry between them, as creating a larger context in which anti-Soros conspiracy theories came

into being. This leads to questions regarding the ways conspiracy theories are instrumentalized by politicians and to what end. Political articulation theory (PAT), formulated by Cedric de Leon, Manali Desai and Cihan Tuğal (2009), offers a framework to best address this question. This approach recognizes that politicians, political parties, and charismatic leaders dabble in the business of generating social divisions to create rival political camps that are invested in achieving disparate political outcomes (de Leon, Desai and Tuğal 2009, 194). One of the means of reaching their goals in this regard is through the articulation and dissemination of narratives that stress, and even more so, construct, the difference between social groups (Eidlin 2016, 488). Thus, “Individuals or groups [that] do not possess clearly specified political issues or grievances” (de Leon et al. 2009, 198), are persuaded that a given issue concerns them. More specifically, “political articulators,” or as Jaron Harambam calls them, “conspiracy theory entrepreneurs,” (2020, 282) treat historical events, existing discourses, material conditions, ancient tropes, collective feelings, influential figures, and even folk villains as resources to be mined, reframed, and used to their advantage in political battles (Ibid. 283). In this way, they often bring together quite “disparate discursive elements” and activate them at the right time. Thus, political articulation theory as applied to conspiracy theories about Soros provides us with tools to examine how influential “political articulators” reframe discourses, reuse past conspiracy theories, and reinterpret broader conditions to persuade the public that Soros is bent on undermining Polish interests to wield political power for personal gain (de Leon et al., 2009). In doing so, this framework

allows us to build upon findings generated by several disciplines that study conspiracy theories.

This dissertation aims to present a nuanced understanding of the reception and dissemination of conspiracy theories about Soros in Poland. It does so through understanding of this phenomenon as immersed in specific contexts: the country's current political situation (young democracy), its cultural tensions, economic inequalities (reflected by the presence of a dual society), complex history (and Soros' role in this history), intergenerational dynamics, and unique media ecology are all discussed in the coming pages. I begin with detailed summaries of the chapters that follow to outline how I have tackled these topics.

## **0.2 Chapter Summaries**

In the first chapter, I examine Soros' life to provide context for why he was constructed as an object for numerous attacks, but also to debunk various myths that have arisen about him. In this way, I prepare the ground for reviewing his role in Polish history in Chapter 3, and then in Chapters 4 and 5 for examining the ways in which the Polish right distorted his biography and used it as a resource and as ammunition against him to reach their political goals.

First, I focus on Soros' childhood, the values instilled in him by his parents that would have an impact on the kind of entrepreneur, philanthropist, and a public figure he became. Following this, I depict his teenager years, where he experienced great adversity as a Jew living in Nazi-occupied Budapest- a period by his own accounting that immunized him from the fear of taking risks- Then, I discuss his time in London, where

he discovered the concept of “open society” while studying under Karl Popper at the LSE this concept would become the *raison d'être* behind his NGOs and philanthropic philosophy. After that, I address the milestones in his personal life, such as marriages, the birth of his children, divorces, and the passing of important relatives. My aim is to present Soros as a complex and self-reflexive human being, and to demonstrate how despite being so successful, his unfulfilled ambitions acted as his primary motivation.

Next, I devote attention to circumstances and realizations that led Soros to change his career path and become a philanthropist. Looking at this period, I summarize his growing involvement in world politics, and how being an outsider to this field as well as to philanthropy, made him an innovator who was equally admired and resented. I end this chapter by discussing Soros' political involvement in the United States, and how his relationships with politicians in Eastern Europe, made him enemies in these countries, mostly on the political right. This lays the groundwork for discussing in greater detail in chapters 4 and 5, the tensions that later arose between Soros and prominent politicians such as Trump, Orbán, and Farage, and the accusations that were fomented against him and how they reverberated in Poland.

In Chapter 2, I review the sources and methods used to answer posed research questions. The first question is a narrow empirical question: was there, in fact, a move of anti-Soros discourse from the margins to the centre of Polish politics and into the mainstream media? The second question is also empirical but moves beyond merely being a yes or no. Rather, it calls for detailed description, i.e., what did this move from

margin to centre look like in the Polish media and political discourse? And then, why did it happen?

To answer the first question, about the changing attention given to Soros in Poland on the margins and in the mainstream, I rely on quantitative methods. Combined findings from the Google Trends tool and coded and counted press articles, radio, and television programmes as well as YouTube videos that mentioned this billionaire confirmed that the interest in him accelerated around 2014, a year before the presidential and parliamentary election and reached a peak in 2016 when the conservative Law and Justice party got to power.

Next, relying on selected qualitative methods, I address the question of what the vilification of Soros looked like by focusing on one media institution that attacked Soros from early on- *Radio Maryja*. I describe the outcomes of conducting a long ethnographic study of this station's flagship programme "Rozmowy Niedokończone" [Unfinished Conversations] to become familiar with the frames, commonly shared narratives, and points of references. I repeat the same operation for YouTube. From there, I move to discourse analysis which found that there exists a discourse on the right pertaining to Soros that is characterized by recurring tropes that are transferred from one medium to another. Furthermore, it demonstrated how this subject is inevitably embedded in larger socio-cultural contexts and how studying it as linked to both complex distant and more recent history, old narratives, and ancient tropes, is crucial to answering the "why" question. Finally, I conclude that the quantitative and qualitative results

overlap and demonstrate that anti-Soros discourse moved from the margins to the centre of Polish politics—and into mainstream media.

Chapter 3 examines conspiracy theories about Soros in Poland prior to 2015. In doing so, it argues that over the years *Radio Maryja* was instrumental in the formulation and the dissemination of these narratives, which primarily revolved around the transformation out of socialism that took place in 1989, and Soros' involvement in it. It is for this reason that I inquire about the role Soros played in the transition to capitalism and how the alternative media and populist politicians blamed him for its consequences and framed him as a scapegoat. As I later demonstrate, this development had an impact on the direction of future attacks launched against this billionaire by Law and Justice and other populist politicians and their allies in mainstream media.

Next, I concentrate on the role of *Radio Maryja* in interpreting Soros' actions in Poland. To do this, I chronicle how it has shaped the views of millions of loyal listeners and guided their political choices, leading to the election of at least four different political parties between 2001-2015. I demonstrate that the consensus among the community of this station was that the economic reforms in 1989 were an instance of a betrayal by Polish elites in cooperation with communists and foreigners, George Soros the most prominent among them. I conclude that Soros functioned as a lightning rod for the many real frustrations that Poles have experienced over the past two decades. The presence of anti-Soros rhetoric on the airwaves of *Radio Maryja* ultimately led to him become one of the default villains of the Law and Justice administration when it came to power in 2015.

In the last part of Chapter 3, I show that to understand why the attacks on Soros were convincing to some Poles, we also must consider the history of Polish antisemitism, the cultural mistrust towards foreigners, as well the role of 19<sup>th</sup> century messianic ideology, in combination with anti-liberalism and anti-elitism. I demonstrate that after the country was partitioned in the 18<sup>th</sup> century a view was embraced that saw Poland as a country victimized by foreigners and Polish traitors, and even at that early time Jews were portrayed as being among the culprits. But a century later, antisemitism reached a new level when an influential politician—Roman Dmowski—mixed it with anti-elitism, anti-communism, anti-liberalism, and the Polish-Catholic nationalist tradition in a new brand of class-based, ethnic nationalism which went on to become popular with millions of Poles. His views had a long-lasting impact and influence on how Jews would be treated for decades to come, including in the Third Republic. I conclude that, from this perspective, it is not difficult to imagine why a person like Soros—a progressive Jewish billionaire financier—was a likely scapegoat for the Polish right.

In Chapter 4, I elaborate upon the factors that contributed to the move of the anti-Soros discourse from the margins to the centre of the Polish public discourse and into the mainstream media beginning in 2015. First, I analyze how the ability of Jarosław Kaczyński and other populist politicians such as Paweł Kukiz to reframe the arrival of refugees to Europe as an existential threat orchestrated by George Soros, paved the way for their parties to victory. After that, I detail reforms conducted by Law and Justice done in the name of a program of ‘moral revival’ which was implemented to move the country further to the right. I indicate that an important part of this shift was



constituted by state-sponsored conspiracy theories that went mainstream and regularly featured Soros as villain.

Next, I review the significance of internationally circulated attacks on Soros in Hungary, the United Kingdom, and the United States that occurred during the refugee crisis. I contend that the negative sentiment against this billionaire expressed by various politicians, but most importantly by Viktor Orbán, Donald Trump, and Nigel Farage served not only to legitimize attacks on him in Poland but also to legitimize the way they were conducted—using language and tropes that were often interpreted by commentators and scholars as antisemitic. I then show how growing anti-Muslim bigotry in the West emerging in the wake of 9/11 and terrorist attacks in Europe became a reality in Poland. I explain that the construction of Muslims as deviant was normalized and accepted cross-generationally and by different social strata.

Lastly, I chronicle how Soros was blamed for the refugee crisis by media outlets, mainstream politicians, and the pro-government evening news and how these discourses reverberated online in a more extreme form. Yet again, I argue that a decade long presence of anti-Soros and antisemitic conspiracy theories in *Radio Maryja* combined with anti-Muslim bigotry normalized hostility towards this billionaire, as well as other forms of hate speech.

I conclude that anti-Muslim bigotry became commonplace in the mainstream media, and that it allowed anti-Sorosism to thrive, which in turn was instrumental in paving the way for antisemitism to return to the centre of Polish discourse, even if in a less explicit way.

In Chapter 5, I undertake a dive deep into what the movement of anti-Sorosism from the margins to the centre of Polish political discourse and into the mainstream media looked like by focusing on a particular stage of this movement: the transmission of conspiracy theories about Soros from *Radio Maryja* to the Internet.

I begin by focusing on examining how *Radio Maryja's* experts successfully intertwined Soros' reputation with and evaluation of the negative effects of transformation and globalization on multiple generations of Poles. I stress that the persistence of material inequalities in Polish society cuts across age cohorts which means that some millennials, Gen X, baby boomers, and even their parents in the silent generation, share similar economic circumstances. This created a basis for forging intergenerational alliances which, as I document, *Radio Maryja's* contributors recognized and exploited. Through narratives that identified them on the one hand as casualties of transformation and globalization, and thus of Soros, and on the other hand as true patriots, thus exceptional Poles, they attempted to bring different age cohorts together. If segments of millennials (of Gen Y), Gen X, and baby boomers were all effectively convinced by the station's politics of recent history, and in turn self-identified as victims of globalization and of transformation, they became more susceptible to views scapegoating Soros. It is for this reason I devote most of my attention to millennials as a group of voters who, more than any other, elected political candidates that actively spread conspiracy theories about Soros. I contend that the voting choices of this generation could be mostly accounted for by their difficult economic situation which had forced millennials to emigrate from Poland in unprecedented numbers. In other words,

Gen Y have many reasons to be embittered by globalization, and anyone who came to symbolize it.

In the final section, I document the fact that despite *Radio Maryja*'s efforts to entice millennials to this station failed. The irreversible reputation of this radio as an "uncool" broadcaster, prevented Gen Y from tuning in and treating seriously its contributors' various claims, including conspiracy theories about Soros. But, as I describe, this rebranding took place primarily on YouTube and was quite popular.

## **Chapter 1. George Soros: The Life of an Outsider.**

### **1.1 Introduction**

George Soros is one of the most successful financial speculators and influential philanthropists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The exceptional performance of his hedge fund over decades allowed him to amass a fortune (the estimate is \$24.5 billion (Forbes 2015)),<sup>5</sup> and earned him considerable respect among elites within the financial sector. Wall Street investors and bankers have alternately referred to him as “a guru,” “an alchemist of finance,” “King Midas,” indicating the degree of his success as a businessperson and investor (Laing 2002, 15; Dovkants 2008, 18; Soros 2003, 5). In the environment of high finance, Soros was the embodiment of an insider which was not true for other areas in which he operated.

For Soros himself, however, his true life’s work has been his philanthropy. In the 1980s he established himself as a dedicated benefactor, providing funding for the spread of democracy, human rights, and the opening of “closed” societies, as well as promoting progressive causes in many countries around the world, most visibly in Eastern Europe (Fleishman 2007, 205). In recognition of his role in helping to advance democratization processes in that region, he was granted the highest orders from

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<sup>5</sup> In 2015, during the relevant time that was analyzed for this dissertation, *Forbes* magazine ranked Soros as the 16<sup>th</sup> wealthiest person on the planet. In 2021, however, after giving millions to charity his fortune was valued at “only” at 8.6 billion moving him down to 92<sup>nd</sup> on *Forbes*’ list (see also Palumbo 2022, 1).

Lithuania, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Ukraine,<sup>6</sup> and Mikhail Gorbachev recommended him for the Nobel Peace Prize in the nineties (Ibid.; Krastev in Porter 2015; Quandt 2002, 27; Sachs in Morris 2009, 124). But as time went by, Soros' philanthropic work also resulted in his making numerous enemies from different countries around the world, including Eastern Europe, as his foundations advocated for transparency and the strengthening of civil society—both presented as apolitical goals—many leaders saw as them as threatening their position, thus as explicitly political in their motivation.

In this chapter I will present Soros' life and career to provide a foundation for discussion in later chapters regarding how elements of his biography were selectively used by political actors as a resource for attacks on him (de Leon et al., 2009, 194). By looking at different stages of his life, I argue that Soros' unique trajectory and position as a *de facto* outsider<sup>7</sup>, someone who never fully fit into any of the social milieus that he inhabited, gave him a rare perspective which allowed him to see more, make unorthodox decisions, and be very successful in both his financial activities

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<sup>6</sup> In 1995, Soros was awarded the Lithuanian Presidential Award—the order of Grand Duke Gedimina (Tracevskis 2000). In 1998 he received the highest order in Estonia—the Order of the Cross of Terra Mariana by the Estonian president Lennart Meri for his philanthropic work (March 4, 1998). In 2002, in his country of origin, long before he was designated the *persona non grata* by Viktor Orbán, he was granted honorary citizenship of Budapest (Pivarnyik July 12, 2017). In Poland in 2000, he received Man of the Year award from *Gazeta Wyborcza* for his “support for civil society in Central and Eastern Europe” (April 27, 2016) from the hands of Jerzy Buzek of right-wing Solidarity Electoral Action party. In 2012, under the center-right Civic Platforms government, former president Bronisław Komorowski awarded Soros with one of the highest orders, the Commander's Cross with the Star of Merit of the Republic of Poland.

<sup>7</sup> The unique status of an outsider is discussed by various sociologists, e.g., George Simmel in his essay “Stranger” (1950). Most recent by Neil McLaughlin (2001) discusses “optimal marginality.”

and philanthropy. Alternately, these same qualities at times made him appear arrogant and played a role in creating his many enemies. This will lay the ground for studying his role in contemporary Polish history in Chapter 3, and in Chapters 4 and 5 it will help to better understand how Polish politicians misconstrued his biography to use it as a resource to make political gains (de Leon et al., 2009, 194).

## **1.2 Early Influences: Soros' Parents (1930-1947)**

George Soros was born in 1930 in Budapest into an assimilated Jewish-Hungarian bourgeois family (Guillhot 2007, 457).<sup>8</sup> Soros' father, Tivadar, was a well-connected attorney who prided himself on having mastered the art of survival (Kaufman 2002, 12, 75). As an officer during the Great War, he planned and successfully executed an elaborate escape from a Russian POW camp in Siberia (Ibid. 12; Soros 1995, 27). It involved a gruelling trek through the taiga and forests, travelling on foot, by train, raft, mule, building provisory bridges, interacting with "reindeer herders, goldminers, partisans," and avoiding the battles of White and Red militias during the Russian civil war. Before Tivadar managed to escape the camp, he spent more than two years in an over-crowded prison in inhumane conditions. This is when he learned that not drawing

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<sup>8</sup> The biographer of Soros explained that his father Tivadar was given a Hungarian, not a German name by his parents as a way "reflecting the respectful identification that many successful, rising, and assimilating Jews were showing for the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy" (Kaufman 2002, 6). Tivadar was born at a time when the numbers and the influence of Jews in Hungary grew rapidly. They occupied various position "in all levels of Hungarian society" and many were very successful in the fields of science, finance, commerce, and industry (Ibid. 7).

too much attention to oneself is an optimal strategy for survival. As he wrote in his diaries, most people who were prominent had to pay a high price for their ambitions (Ibid. 12). Then, during World War II, by acquiring forged papers and organizing hiding locations, Tivadar was able to keep his wife, children, and many other people, alive in the face of Nazi persecution (Ibid. 28; Guillhot 2007, 458). Experiences of the two world wars made Soros' father prioritize enjoying his life over striving for wealth or influence in his later years (Soros 1995, 27), but he never forgot the lessons of those times, and ensured that his two sons acquired the necessary survival skills that would help them in the future. They were encouraged to be competitive, to learn from their mistakes, and to take pride in their abilities. Simultaneously, they were taught not to be too ambitious or become too attached to people or things that might get lost in the vortex of history (Kaufman 2002, 4, 12, 23, 96). Years later Soros told his biographer that he had internalized many of his father's lessons (Porter 2015, loc.174, Soros 1995, 25, 36), and that they had played a role in his own life. In his career as a hedge fund manager, he was always able to remain calm in crises situations, easily identified errors, and while enjoying the competition, could stay emotionally detached from the ultimate goal of money making (Kaufman 2002, 75, 98; Soros 1995, 11; Porter 2015, loc.66).

Soros' mother Erzsebet was born into a wealthy family and was a homemaker who idealised her husband, often without reciprocation (Soros 1995, 26; Kaufman 2002, 19-20). She regretted that she did not have a career of her own which resulted in her having low self-esteem (Ibid. 26). What made this problem worse was surely the fact that her husband, whom she idealized and worshipped, flirted with other women as well as

occasionally humiliating her in other ways (Ibid. 20). She shared this pain with her son and expected him to carry burdens that should have been reserved for adults (Ibid. 155-156). Even though young George Soros saw her as too dependent on her husband (Ibid. 20), when he grew older, he realized that they had a lot in common (Soros 1995, 25). His mother was an abstract thinker; reflexive, self-critical, and an often-self-sabotaging person (Ibid. 26; Morris 2009, 3-4, Kaufmann 2002, 91). Soros believed he inherited this disquietude from his mother, leading him to wittily describe himself as being an “insecurity analyst instead of security analyst,” a characteristic which prevented him from resting on his laurels and which rendered him a much better investor (Soros 1995, 11). One might suspect that becoming accustomed to never feeling fully comfortable allowed him to take risks and venture into unknown fields, as he was familiar with the tension involved in such endeavours.

Soros was born at a time when the political climate in Hungary was changing and being Jewish was something one would hide rather than flaunt. Even though Jews significantly contributed to building the modern Hungarian nation-state (Guillhot 2007, 457; Kaufmann 2002, 7), they were subjected to frequent hate speech and scapegoating. To minimize the risk of discrimination at school for George and his brother Paul, their father Hungarianized the family name from Schwartz to Soros (Ibid. 6; Guillhot 2007, 457).<sup>9</sup> It seems that making such a decision was fairly easy for Tivadar Soros who grew

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<sup>9</sup> The tradition of changing names by members of minority groups to empower them and /or avoid discrimination is not uncommon, see Robert K. Merton (Meyer Robert Schkolnick). Erik Erikson (Erik Salomonsen), bell hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins). The name change is brought up here because Soros’ opponents constantly use this fact against him (Stelter 2010, Wolraich 2010a), claiming that he has tried to hide his ethnic origin, In fact, his father—Tivadar Soros—changed



up in a nearly secular home, and he fostered a similar environment for his sons. Soros' father was an Esperanto enthusiast which reflected his deep commitment to internationalism and anti-sectarianism (Kaufman 2002, 12), values that he passed on to his children (Ibid. 6-7, 96). Thus, despite identifying as Jewish, George Soros considered this identity peripheral to who he was individually (Kaufman 2002, Porter 2015, loc.187). What became more relevant to him was his attachment to the ideas of cosmopolitanism and living in an open world with open societies (Porter 2015, loc. 66). In the future, some critics would suggest that Soros was not Jewish enough because he was not actively religious and would criticize the state of Israel, making him an outsider even to "his own people" (Kaufman 2002, 155; Poe 2004, 23-24).

### **1.3 Formative Experiences: Immigration and the Philosophy of Karl Popper (1947-1956)**

In the period immediately following the war, between the withdrawal of the Nazis and Soviet takeover of Hungary, a seventeen-year-old George Soros decided to go to the United Kingdom (Morris 2009, 3-4; Kaufman 2002, 53). In moving, he followed his father's advice to avoid staying in Stalin-ruled Eastern Europe which could soon become impossible to leave. George arrived in London with very little money, and so worked several menial jobs to make ends meet. As an impoverished and socially isolated immigrant, it was a struggle. It was particularly painful to him that he was consistently

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the family name only to protect his sons. George Soros never obscured his Jewish background which would automatically disqualify him in antisemitic circles regardless.

made to feel unwelcome by the local population (Ibid. 54, 55, 56). Under these circumstances, Soros' strongly held beliefs about the exceptionalism of his family, linked to his idealization of his father and by extension concern about his own uniqueness, crumbled quickly (Ibid. 56). As his father's son young George felt pressured to impresses him (Ibid. 74) and make something of himself. The isolation and the social rejection he experienced made this very difficult. "Being excluded and trying to break into a closed society as an outsider" was one of the most difficult, yet formative, experiences in Soros' life. Later, as a billionaire, he would use his wealth and influence to help excluded and marginalized groups as he could empathize with their experience (Kaufman 2002, 56, 155, 166).

After taking English courses and passing entrance exams, Soros attended the seminars of famous Viennese philosopher Karl Popper, author of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) at the London School of Economics (LSE). Popper's ideas fell on very fertile ground with Soros (Soros in Sudetic 2011, 11). His newly acquired identity of an outsider, combined with his experiences living under the Nazi regime, made him extremely receptive to Popper's ideas of what an "open society" entailed, a concept that would become central to Soros' intellectual development. Popper recognized that the more effective social systems are the ones that assume people's inborn fallibility, and ones in which audit, self-evaluations, and corrections are the norm. He called them "open societies" because there was an openness to feedback, criticism, and to change. Open societies were contrasted with 'closed societies' that are dogmatic, often totalitarian (Kaufman 2002, 70; Porter 2015, loc.199), and wary of outsiders who,

through representing a different perspective, could potentially bring about regime change—exactly the types of societies that Soros would try to dismantle later in his life. It was quite ironic that British society fell under the open category in Popper's classification, but in Soros' experience it was the exact opposite.

Popper, however, was far more famous as a philosopher of science than a social scientist. His theory was rooted in the scientific method and the assessment of the validity of hypotheses, granting it the potential for wide application (Soros 1995, 33).

Popper proposed to test the robustness of even the boldest hypotheses through conducting empirical tests. If there was at least one case, or a counter-case, that would contradict a given hypothesis it meant that this hypothesis had to be rejected (2002, 86). This methodological approach was reflected in Popper's theoretical stance that claimed that scholars should never assume that the claims that were proven truthful in the past wouldn't be dismantled in the future. His theory of open societies, theory of falsifiability and critical rationalism profoundly impacted Soros and would influence his professional investing as well as in his philanthropic and intellectual life (Kaufman 2002, 74-75). As he stated, "the belief in [his] own fallibility has guided [him] both in making money and giving it away" (Ibid. 75).

In the early 1950s, however, before his success as a hedge-fund manager, Soros wanted to pursue a career in philosophy and work with Popper. Unfortunately, this was impossible because his grades were too low (Guillhot 2007, 463), leading to his rejection by a potential intellectual mentor whose theory of 'open societies' casts light on how it might be possible to improve the lives of millions of people on an international scale.

This unfulfilled dream would haunt Soros as well as motivate him throughout his life (Morris 2009, 5).

#### **1.4 Out of Place: A Hedge Fund Manager with the Ambitions of a Philosopher**

After graduating from LSE in 1952 (Ibid.), Soros continued doing odd jobs (Soros 1995, 36) until he landed a position at a small London brokerage firm. The sole reason he was hired was because the managing director of the firm was a fellow Hungarian. He became a trader, a job that he found boring. So, three years later, when he heard about a job opportunity in New York City, he decided to try his luck (Morris 2009, 5; Soros 1995, 40), moving there in 1956 to work as a securities analyst and trader on Wall Street (Soros 2006, 61; Freeland January 30, 2009; Kaufman 2002, 92-93).

His introduction into the world of finance thus began during a period of affluence and rapid social change. In the 1960s several mergers and acquisitions took place and Soros made a lot of money (Freeland January 30, 2009; Kaufman 2002, 92-93). After settling in America, he married German émigré Annaliese Witschak with whom he had three children (Ibid. 90). During this time, Soros continued climbing the ladder of the financial elite, making his name known among the denizens of Wall Street. Despite these successes, however, Soros missed philosophy, he started working on a philosophical essay during what spare time he could carve out in which he admittedly, “mainly regurgitated Karl Popper’s ideas” (Soros 1995, 43). When he realized his attempt at coming up with an original theory about reflexivity, or “the relationship between reality and attempts to perceive it,” (Kaufman 2002, 74) was unsuccessful though he was

following his mentor's method, he made a rational assessment: identify the problem and draw conclusions without sentimentality. In other words, Soros quickly shifted his attention back to the world of finance, even though he never truly felt that it *was* his world, putting his philosophical and intellectual ambitions on hold.

In 1969, he created the Double Eagle Fund—a precursor to the Quantum Fund (Soros 1995, 47)—an off-shore hedge fund with its headquarters in New York. Managing over the next quarter of a century, Soros made a fortune and so did his clients (Guillhot 2007, 463). On average, Soros' Quantum Fund investors could expect a return of 31 percent annually, making it the most consistently successful hedge fund in the world until the late nineties.<sup>10</sup> Despite a few hiccups<sup>11</sup>, Soros' reputation among the investors remained largely untarnished as he managed to bounce back very quickly from difficulty and generate high profits (Slater 1997, 226; Mallaby 2010, 101).<sup>12</sup>

Soros became a legend in the world of financial markets (Laing 2002, 15; Dovkants 2008, 18; Soros 2003, 5) when in 1992 he bet against the British pound in an event labelled “Black Wednesday”. At the time, the United Kingdom was sliding into recession and the exchange rate of the pound to German mark was kept artificially high

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<sup>10</sup> Customers who paid \$10,000 to Soros in 1969 saw their money grow to \$43 million in 2000 (Morris 2009, 3)

<sup>11</sup> Soros lost \$200 million in 1987 after being named in a class action suit for being involved in Treasury Auction Scandal at Salomon Brothers Inc) and facing conviction from a French court for insider trading (Norris 2005; Palumbo 2022, 13).

<sup>12</sup> This situation altered only in the mid-nineties when on Valentine's Day Quantum lost \$600 million (Slater 1997, 225). Later in 1998, during the Russian ruble and internet bubble crises, Soros lost another 5 billion. But, as matters got worse, the fund was transformed into less risky institution - the Quantum Endowment Fund (Crawshaw 2000, 6; Laing 2002, 15). In the end, in comparison with other high-level investors and currency speculators, Soros' funds setbacks were relatively minor.

to create a path for economic unification. Soros identified this situation as a market inefficiency which he leaned into by shorting the pound.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, despite the best attempts of the British government, the pound lost its value in a matter of hours (Morris 2009, 29-30; Slater 1997, 173). Even though he<sup>14</sup> earned one billion dollars in a day, and many in his position would become arrogant (Morris 2009, Kaufman 2002, York 2006), he did not take his success for granted (Soros 1995, 16, 20). This was due to his self-critical nature, in which he took after his mother, but also his commitment, even compulsion, to learn from his own mistakes. In his mind, there was always room for improvement. Finally, as Soros has candidly admitted, as an immigrant who had no symbolic or economic capital to fall back on, he was always an outsider on Wall Street, so he could never let his guard down, even when he was on top (Guillhot 2007, 463).

Soros was not a part of the corporate elite when he began his career in finance. The only profession that he could initially take on the Wall Street in those early years was in arbitrage (Guillhot 2007, 463), a field populated by people who lacked social standing and who used innovative tools, outside of the box thinking, and did not shy away from creative approaches in interpreting the rules to generate profits. Thus, they were comfortable experimenting, taking chances, and constantly operating in conditions of uncertainty. These outsiders were not liked by the establishment, and

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<sup>13</sup> This meant that his fund first bought up to \$10 billion in pound sterling and then sold it at once in exchange for German marks, only to eventually repurchase the former at a lower price. Such unprecedented wave of sales of the pound pushed world traders to do the same and led to the depreciation of the British currency.

<sup>14</sup> A person whose idea was to short the pound was not Soros, but Druckenmiller who managed Soros' fund in 1992 (Freeland January 30, 2009).

as they were undermining the existing rigid structures, they became the ones who disproportionately benefitted from neoliberal deregulation (Ibid. 448, 463). Soros was among their number. Being an outsider, a displaced, unrealized philosopher on Wall Street allowed him to see things from a different perspective. Even though he primarily made money from the market, he recognized that the markets are not always right, and thus was able to avoid falling into a conceit that often afflicted both economists and elite investors (Ibid. 455, 463).

### **1.5 Mid-life Crisis: From a Breakdown to a Breakthrough**

Despite being very successful as a hedge-fund manager, at the age of forty-eight George Soros experienced a midlife crisis. He admitted that he did not particularly like making money but was simply good at it (Kaufman 2002, 147-148). By late 1970s he earned billions but felt he couldn't fully appreciate his success. He remembered his father's message that money was supposed to be a means to something more meaningful and not an end in itself (Ibid. 147). So, using his father's criteria to self-evaluate, he concluded that he was actually a kind of loser (Ibid. 163). Once again, he was an outsider and an outlier— a billionaire who could not enjoy his own achievements. His discontent did not end there. From his own point of view, he had already failed on another front in not becoming who he had always dreamed of—a philosopher (Ibid. 154). It soon became clear to him that he had also failed as a husband and a father as he and his wife grew apart, eventually divorcing in 1981. On a few occasions, he admitted that he was not a good parent, emotionally unavailable and very critical (Ibid. 149).

His assumptions of people's fallibility made him question, and spare no-one, including himself, his employees, as well as his children (Ibid. 149, 150).

Soros had disciplined himself to look at markets without holding illusions, and he tried to apply the same method to his own life, turning this time to psychoanalysis. A therapist (Ibid. 153) helped Soros realize that guilt and shame were driving forces, pushing him to overcompensate and achieve great professional success while sacrificing his personal life (Ibid. 156; Soros 1995, 26). He traced back the roots of his problems to his relationship with his overbearing mother and the emotional logic of her own marriage, something that unfolded before modern feminism offered correctives to such dynamics (Ibid. 26, Kaufman 2002, 156). When mistreated by her husband she would turn to her young son for consolation, consequently rendering his own needs invisible (Ibid. 155-156).

During therapy, it also became clear, that the experiences of passing as a non-Jew as a teenager during the World War II did not, as he previously thought, leave Soros without scars (Ibid. 155). During the war he posed as a godson of a non-Jewish Hungarian official whose job was to confiscate Jewish properties and sometimes young George had to accompany him. Seeing what was happening to fellow Jews who were rendered helpless by this persecution was a very traumatic experience for Soros, even though for years he claimed otherwise, words which were purposefully misunderstood and unashamedly exploited by the American right (Ibid. 155, Soros 1995, 30; Kay 2010, A29,). With time, like many others, Soros realized that unconsciously he felt guilty and ashamed that he survived by pretending not to be Jewish (Kaufman 2002, 155).



What was more, as an atheist he considered himself a traitor “who broke solidarity with the millions who had died” (Ibid. 155), leading him to not acknowledging the horrors that he went through when the war ended, as well as not embracing his Jewishness (even if done by an atheist). Yet again, Soros self-identified as an outsider. In his book *Underwriting Democracy*, he wrote that his Jewishness “did not express itself in a sense of tribal loyalty that would have led [him] to support Israel...[He] took pride in being in the minority, an outsider who was capable of seeing the other point of view” (in Kaufman 2002, 155). Even though this self-perspective on himself would cause him emotional turmoil.

Recognizing some of the basis of his personal problems was a breakthrough that allowed Soros to let go of some of the shame and guilt he held, and improved relations with those closest to him (Kaufman 2002, 159). At the time, in the early 80s, Soros made a conscious decision to considerably lessen his workload and put his money to good use, or, as Anna Porter describes it in her book, somewhat more critically, to “buy a better world” (Porter 2015). This was the beginning of a new chapter in his life, which would see him become a philanthropist, an advocate for the open society and democracy, and an author of many books, essays, and op-eds (Kaufman 2002, 163).

### **1.6 Not a Traditional Philanthropist**

Though Soros wanted to become a philanthropist, he was an outsider to this field as well, and when he began his philanthropy, for many years, “people [took] his money seriously” but not him. Even though he was recognized as a big donor, he was refused to

be identified as “the major figure in human rights work” (Rieff 1994, 10). This perhaps can be explained by the fact that, at first, many did not understand his unorthodox style of managing his foundations that he ran against the grain of established philanthropy.

When George Soros founded Open Society in 1979, he was not a philanthropist in the traditional sense (1995, 112). He did not come from an influential, establishment family, in other words, an “Ivy League alumnus, appointed to the Executive Branch” (Guillhot 2007, 456) who simply had to passively follow the steps of predecessors to succeed. Soros, as a former student of Popper’s with huge ambitions, wanted to make a big difference, and he knew that to accomplish his goals he had to act more aggressively (Kaufman 2002, 185) and that it would take some experimentation and a willingness to make mistakes<sup>15</sup> in order to learn how to successfully run a foundation (Ibid. 178). He started small, by funding Central Park renovations, but soon moved to creating an apprenticeship at Helsinki Watch an NGO documenting human rights violations (Sudetic 2011, 12) and funding scholarships for students in South Africa in 1979. Eventually, in the late eighties, he was ready to set up his first foundations in his Hungarian homeland and in Eastern Europe.

The Soros Foundation was launched in Hungary along with the Stefan Batory Foundation in Poland, and the Cultural Initiative Foundation in Russia (Quandt 2002, 13). He gave scholarships to Polish and Hungarian students to study at Oxford, sponsored the operations of the underground press behind the Iron Curtain, and hired unemployed

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<sup>15</sup> For example, foundations in China and Russia (Soros 1995, 123; Serchuk 2003, 5).

dissidents, helping them make ends meet. In 1990, two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, he established the Central European University in Budapest which was aimed at training future local elites in the region (Quandt 2002, 13). Finally, he paid \$100 million to former Soviet Union scientists during the perestroika to encourage them to remain in newly free Republics during what he predicted would be an economic crisis. As the economies of some post socialist countries grew and some of them joined the EU and NATO, Soros shifted his attention to solving urgent problems emerging in other parts of the world.

His foundations have been focusing on alleviating poverty (setting up microfinance organizations in Albania and Haiti (Sudetic 2011, 128, 158)), helping to rebuild cities and countries after natural disasters (Ibid. 165) as in the United States after Hurricane Katrina decimated New Orleans (Ibid. 325)); developing housing in South Africa; tackling public health problems (fighting tuberculosis in Russia and Lesotho) and providing funding for basic health services (for the disabled in Croatia, Armenia, Macedonia, Hungary, and Serbia (Ibid. 224, 231)). Through his organizations Soros was also able to promote the Popperian idea of the open society in places where local grassroots organizations were fighting for democratic reforms, more transparent justice systems (Sudetic 2011, 63), and opposing the systemic exclusion of minorities. Special attention was devoted to the ongoing discrimination of the Roma in the areas of education, health, and media representation, in Eastern and Southern Europe with over \$300 million spent on this initiative alone.

It is additionally worth mentioning is the controversial involvement of his foundations in the United States. In 1996 Soros paid \$1 million to promote an initiative to legalize medicinal marijuana in California. Soros also supported the ending of mass incarceration of the prison industrial complex, which has led to the unprecedented imprisonment rates, particularly of African American men (Ibid. 294; Steinberger July 17, 2018). But perhaps most controversially from the point of view of the far right, Soros made it his goal to oppose George W. Bush re-election as president (Cassity 2005).<sup>16</sup>

Fast forward to 2019, when Soros spent \$32 billion on fighting for ‘free society’, and \$12 billion on philanthropy (Porter 2015, loc. 55) and, most recently, has committed to contributing \$1 billion to The Open Society University Network which would operate globally with an aim to restructure higher education (Fain January 24, 2020). The scale and efficiency of his philanthropic activities allows him to be categorized as a philanthro-capitalist: someone who uses his knowledge of high finance and applies it to philanthropy (Cluff and de Monthoux 2013, 308). His foundations fund projects that have an expiration date, at least until recently, based on Soros’ philosophy of “get in, get out,

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<sup>16</sup> As Anna Porter points out, Soros was a very vocal critique of Bush. This philanthropist considered the former president and the neoconservatives surrounding him “a group of extremists” (2015, loc. 277; York 2005, 70) who were “market and religious fundamentalists” (Porter 2015, loc. 2138). Soros criticized Bush for promoting a policy of American supremacy following 9/11 and exploiting the terrorist attack to orchestrate the invasion of Iraq (Ibid. loc. 213, Soros in Sudetic 2011, 50, York 205, 68) and begin the endless War on Terror. He opposed the Bush administration’s use of force and concomitant human rights violation (Porter 2015. loc. 660) instead of diplomacy and international cooperation (Ibid. loc. 2138). Prior to Bush’s election, the biggest single contribution to the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee Soros that made was \$100,000 (York 2005, 53). After Bush was elected, the philanthropist put up \$27 million to ensure that he wouldn’t be re-elected in 2004 (Porter 2015, loc. 278) and decided to redirect his focus from Eastern Europe to the United States (York 2005, 53).

and never overstay” (Porter 2015, loc. 2059). They are less formalized, and thus more flexible, able react quickly to changing circumstances (Anheier and List 2006, 186). Soros’ projects are also not as bound to borders as traditional foundations tend to be; though they do rely on local expertise in different countries they operate in (Quigley 1996, 112), they remain connected to a vast network of foundations (Fleishman 2007, 199) on a global level. In another unorthodox move, Soros decided to become a public figurehead for his philanthropy, adopting the role of political player to better represent his foundations and more effectively pressure governments to support the work they were doing (Soros 1995, 112; Soros 2003, 5).<sup>17</sup> “The best donors are silent donors; not talking is good” said Elaine Kamarck, a strategist for the Democratic Party. This was advice that George Soros did not intend to follow (Steinberger July 17, 2018).

### **1.7 A Contested Public Intellectual**

Soros, like many on Wall Street, first operated under the assumption that publicity was something undesirable (Kaufman 2002, 157; Slater 1997, 140). From time to time, *The Wall Street Journal* would run a story about him but these were rare instances (Slater 1997, 140).<sup>18</sup> He decided to step into the limelight only after 1989, when he recognized an added value of promoting the Popperian idea of the open society that serves as the intellectual rationale behind the work being done by his foundations (Fleishman 2007,

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<sup>17</sup> Earlier, before he became a public figure, he tried in vain to set up a meeting with George Bush, Margaret Thatcher, and Mikhail Gorbachev (Desai 2006, 34; Crawshaw 2000 6-8). After “breaking the Bank of England” in 1992, he became a private citizen with his own foreign policy who would meet “one president for breakfast and another for dinner” (Lewis 1994).

<sup>18</sup> In 1981, coincidentally the year when Soros’ fund reported losses, *Institutional Investor* called him “the world’s greatest money manager” (Deutschman 2001; Mallaby 2010, 87).

Clark 2003, Morris, 2009; Soros 1995, 145). In 1994, *Institutional Investor* wrote a six-page story on Soros, after which he began giving interviews, writing letters, and op-eds, that appeared in major newspapers all over the world (Soros 2000, 14). He also fulfilled one of his long-held dreams in writing books that have been widely read (Freeland January 30, 2009, January 30; Dovkants 2008, 18), cementing his transformation into an author and public figure.

Soros' first book *The Alchemy of Finance* left readers confused as many expected a typical "how to get rich" best-seller (Wien in Soros 1995, 65). Instead, Soros—ever the aspiring philosopher—provided a theory attempting to understand investor behavior. In *The Alchemy of Finance*, he spoke about a market-applied, two-way reflexive feedback mechanism (Soros 1996, 66) which states that how people perceive the situation on the market affects their behaviors, and in turn these behaviors influence the market. Despite the book receiving, at best, mixed reviews<sup>19</sup> (Scardino October 28, 1987; Lewis 1994, 14; Freeland January 30, 2009; Soros 2003, 9), it revealed that the adequate interpretation of historical and geo-political events was crucial to Soros' success; he had an uncanny ability to understand how a particular event would be understood by investors, predict how they would react to it, and then respond appropriately to generate the highest possible profit. Soros proved to have an insightful, and sharp sense of history and "the stunning performance of his mutual fund...gave Soros credibility far beyond that of other first authors" (Scardino October 28, 1987).

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<sup>19</sup> Soros Biographer Michael T. Kaufman disclosed that Soros let only a handful of trusted people provide feedback during the writing of *Alchemy of Finance*, and Soros himself later admitted the book suffers from imprecisions (Soros 1995, 66, 71).

Soros was asked to wear the hat of a public intellectual mainly when interpreting current events, as he was often seen as “being in tune with the zeitgeist” (Freeland January 30, 2009), and thus able to evaluate governments and investors reactions to them from an economic point of view (Soros 1995, 33). But with time, he went beyond this perspective and began to smuggle his philosophical ideas into his writing as well. Soros claimed that economic processes cannot be seen outside of the broader context of accelerating globalization, growing nationalism, and the development of technology (Kaufmann 2002, 294; Porter 2015). His views continued to evolve, contrary to what is sometimes claimed by his political opponents. During socialist countries’ period of transition to capitalism following the Cold War, like many intellectual defenders of the free market model—which at the time included Jeffrey Sachs<sup>20</sup> or Joseph Stiglitz—Soros was convinced that any type of regulation would impede economic growth (Bello 2003, 10). Yet, he soon revised his stance after testing it against emerging data. He rejected the dogma of the radical “free-market fundamentalists” of the Thatcher and Reagan-era whose belief was that markets would always return to equilibrium, and as such, need no regulation (Robinson 2005, 319). Today, Soros recognizes that removing existing restrictions created by the state or society (Bello 2003, 12) intensifies the globalization process, leading to an increase in global economic inequality of proportions heretofore unseen. His solution to this problem is to create a safety-net and an institutional global framework that is able to regulate and control markets, or, in short, to strive for

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<sup>20</sup> Sachs would likely disagree with being characterized in this way (see Kowalik 2012, 15; Feffer June 8, 2015).

“globalization with a human face” (Soros 1995, 196; Guillhot 2007, 460; Robinson 2005, 319).

Soros is not a public intellectual in the classical sense of the term. His first profession was not that of a “man of words” (like Sartre), an academic (like Ignatieff), or even an artist (Pete Seeger). He is an investor (Jacoby 2002, 106; Misztal 2007, 1), and an expert in high finance.<sup>21</sup> He has been called a public intellectual far more often in Eastern Europe than in the West (Ostrowski 2000, 32-33; Porter 2015; loc. 113; Mallaby 2010, 94). East of the Elbe River he has been portrayed as an intellectual who “could discuss finances in five languages while turning his clients’ investments into fortunes (Scardino October 28, 1987; Kaletsky 1992),” and who was asked for decades now to present his expert opinions on world affairs. And in this capacity, he managed to predict things like the rise of nationalism in Eastern Europe (Soros 1995, 169-170), and the breakdown of the international financial system in 2008 (Soros 1995, 192; Freeland January 30, 2009). But some still wonder if labelling him a public intellectual, or even an intellectual at all, is justified (Foster 2010, FP15; Story 2008, 1; Freeland January 30, 2009; Zanussi 1999, 81). His theories have been dismissed, his books criticized by winning economists (Robert Solow) for “[their] banality and impractical ideas” and (David Littmann), and for “abject economic and historical ignorance” (in

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<sup>21</sup> As *The Observer Magazine* article points out: “Soros is quietly mocked in the financial world for being an intellectual” (Rieff 1994, 10), and his theories are seen as “incomprehensible” (1997).



Smith 1999). As in other areas of his work, a unanimous verdict on George Soros as a public intellectual has not yet been reached.<sup>22</sup>

## 1.8 Criticism

As I have argued to this point, George Soros managed to be successful in the fields of finance, philanthropy, and as a public intellectual despite being, at least initially, an outsider in these fields (Freeland January 30, 2009; Rigby 2011, 205; Singleton 2010). Behaving often in atypical ways that led to the solidification of his reputation as a rule breaker resulted in his receiving an equal amount of recognition as well as criticism (Guillhot 2007, 456). These criticisms have often been unreasonable, especially as they often include conspiracy theories regarding his work and intentions, but some must certainly be taken into consideration.

While working as a financier, Soros was publicity shy (Rigby 2011, 207; Scardino October 28, 1987), and so his enemies were not as vocal in the press. It is with his increased stature and presence in the public sphere, that the rise in the intensity of attacks on him has occurred (Fine 2001), and he became a polarizing figure. Many politicians and commentators from all over the world were annoyed by Soros who appeared to—or so it seemed to them—to have decided to make the world a better place according to his own ideas on a whim, and, perhaps worse, by starting to give advice to the world on how to achieve that, at times directly addressing influential decision-makers, sometimes

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<sup>22</sup> He is seen as an outsider even among outsiders. As Lewis (1994, 24) writes in *the Guardian*, Soros is a “self-styled outsider,” not a real one. Freeland calls Soros an “arch outsider” (see also Rigby 2011, 205; Clark 2003)

behind the scenes (Lewis 1998, F2; Porter 2015, loc. 219). This happened after years of being a powerful part of a system that created poverty and inequality on a global scale (Žižek 2008, 20; Tamkin 2020), leading to easy accusations of hypocrisy from critics.

Attacks on Soros have come from both the left and the right, those in developed and developing countries, formulated by antisemites as well as Jews, by anti-communists and communists, by people on the margins of society as well as those in the major corridors of power (Porter 2015, loc. 219). While it is difficult to put these criticisms under one or two ideological umbrellas, a few recurring themes can be identified.

### **1.8.1 Self-interested Financial Speculator**

Soros was at the centre of the world of finance in the nineties. Since then, there have been at least two major economic crises where he was depicted, by both the left and the right, as a ruthless capitalist who used his knowledge of international financial markets and currency speculation to reap astronomical profits off the backs of rank-and-file citizens.

The first wave of attacks was launched in 1992. After Soros realized that the pound was over-valued, he bet against it, earning \$1 billion and forcing the British government to withdraw from the European Exchange Mechanism that stabilized European currencies forcing British taxpayers to cover these losses (Veneziani 2011, 87). Papers all over the world depicted Soros as a greedy speculator. London's *Daily Mail* featured a full-page photo of a content-looking Soros with the headline: "I Made a Billion

as the Pound Crashed” (Veneziani 2011, 100). The president of the European Union’s Council of Ministers Willy Claes pointed the finger at Soros for attempting to destroy European unity (Kleer 1998, 16; Paga 1998, 66-68; Slater 1997, 213), and that was not the end of it. Soros publicly scolded the major financial institutions, including the Bundesbank and the Bank of England, for their incompetence, antagonizing the global regulatory community (Slater 1997, 247) and numerous politicians on both sides of the Iron Curtain (Traynor 1997; Slater 1997, 211; Soros 1995, 86; Business Week 1993). The tendency to sometimes uninvitedly make his critical opinions known to those in charge made him an enemy of various people. What was seen by Soros as giving good advice to policy makers was instead interpreted by his opponents as arrogance, attempts to bypass democratic process or, in conspiratorial—and part of what many interpreted as antisemitic attacks, a part of a plot to interfere in internal affairs of foreign states (see Slater 1997, 211; Soros 1995, 86).

Four years later, in 1996, Soros repeated this operation when he “shorted” the Thai baht and the Malay ringgit (Dovkants 2008, 18), earning \$750 million dollars in the process. His moves created panic among investors who quickly started withdrawing their capital from five countries in the region (Bello et al. 2000, 15). This, what was known as the “Asian financial crisis.” Several other crises, including the devaluation of Russian ruble in 1998 and the Brazilian crisis in 1999, followed, at least in part shaped by his speculative actions (Kapoor 2013, 60).<sup>23</sup> In the press, politicians

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<sup>23</sup> Soros disagrees with this assessment (Thornton 2001, 19; Uchitelle August 2, 1993).

quickly reached a guilty verdict. The Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad called Soros a criminal, and named him as part of a Jewish anti-Muslim conspiracy, a clear example of global antisemitism that exists on the margins of the contemporary global economic order (Mydans October 16, 1997; Mizroch 2003).

Philanthropy studies scholars rightly reject those who would paint Soros as an alleged representative of “international Jewish capitalist conspiracy” who are trying to take over the world (Laing 2002, 15), but some found by analyzing outcomes of Soros’ speculative actions, that his activities forced the Thai government to spend billions to defend its currency in vain (in Kapoor 2012). The fallout required Thailand to tighten its belt and as a result all countries in the region experienced a dramatic rise in unemployment, malnutrition, and poverty (Hill and Chu 2001, 13–18; Bello et al. 2000, x). In the end, an estimated fifty million people were reported to have been forced below the poverty line because of this crisis (Aslanbeigui and Summerfield 2001, 9). In other words, conspiracy theories might have been correct in noting that Soros, as a very skilled financial speculator, could weaken the economies of various countries—but it had nothing to do with the fact that he was Jewish.

Other scholars see Soros’ work in a different light by evaluating him as a member of the billionaire class who donate vast amounts of money to charitable causes (together with Mark Zuckerberg and Bill Gates). These celebrity humanitarians, progressive philanthro-capitalists, or as Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek ironically calls them “liberal communists,” strive to maintain the liberal status quo through their charitable projects (in Upchurch and Weltman 2008, 319). Žižek criticizes Soros and Gates for

glossing over the fact that “in order to give, first [they had] to take” (2008a, 20), and notes that the manner of wealth accumulation has been socially unjust. Ilan Kapoor, furthering Žižek’s point, demonstrates that activities of hedge funds are difficult to regulate and scrutinize, which is dangerous and might lead to another economic crisis. Even if they were easily trackable, most hedge funds, including that of Soros, avoid paying capital-gain taxes and “escape oversight” by their being located in tax-havens (Veneziani 2011, 84; Steinberger July 17, 2018). In other words, Soros’ philanthropy is criticized as inherent part of the capitalist system; a cynical, cold strategy aimed at calming the anger of impoverished masses of people from whom billionaires like him expropriated money and resources in the first place (Upchurch and Weltman 2008, 319; Kapoor 2012; Žižek 2008, 20; Singleton 2010). From this perspective, he is not viewed as an outsider, but as a very skilled player expertly working a system where he is the one who calls the shots.

### **1.8.2 Not A Merely Disinterested Commentator**

After profiting from the destabilization of the British pound Soros was vociferously attacked by both the press and politicians. To fight against the reputation, he was earning of a ruthless speculator he started sharing his opinions on the condition of major European currencies, and more broadly on world finance, introducing supra-national institutions to transform globalization to decrease the inequalities it generates (Kaufman 2002, 157; Rigby 2011, 207 Scardino October 28,1987). The reaction in the mainstream press to his op-eds was generally critical, though often framed graciously.

Many knew that ignoring Soros was not an option as he was too influential, and he tended to be right on matters of finance. However, it was also argued that by “transforming [himself] from the most narrowly self-interested financial speculator into the most broadly disinterested commentator on global finance” (Lewis 1998, F2), he wanted to manipulate investors’ decisions to reap higher profits (Kleer 1998, 16; Paga 1998, 66-68; in Slater 1997, 210).

*The Economist* called Soros “talkative,” suggesting that “when Soros talked, money walked.” Any expert remark of Soros acquired a status of self-fulfilling prophecy (Honingsbaum 1993, 10) among the commentariat. When the Quantum group made it public that they were to invest in gold, the price of gold sky-rocketed (Soros 2003, 6). Then, when Soros wrote a letter to the *Financial Times* explaining that the ruble will collapse and that ruble devaluation could be the only way to rescue Russian economy, investor-readers only read the bold print, ignoring Soros’ intentions to ultimately save ruble rather than crater it. Consequently, ruble collapsed, and “Russia defaulted on its foreign debt” (Smith 1999, 1; Proser 2000, 4).

Not only was Soros accused of attempting to influence perceptions on the condition of economies of different countries, but also their politics to pursue his own business interests. An excerpt from *The Daily Telegraph’s* article from 1993 best summarizes the developing sentiment towards Soros (August 5, 1993).

When we read this week that Mr. Soros favors air attacks to raise the siege of Sarajevo we begin to think he needs a holiday. He may have come to believe that with a nod or a wink he can determine not only foreign exchanges but foreign policies... (quoted in Slater 1997, 210).

The perception of George Soros' arrogance and refusal to mind his own business when meddling in international affairs has circulated widely and persisted into today. It is hard to see it as entirely unfounded. During the Brexit debate, for example, Soros committed himself to assisting to overturn the results of the referendum by publishing a series of op-eds and helping to fund anti-Brexit efforts (Steinberger July 17, 2018; Soros December 17, 2015). He was then attacked by Nigel Farage in a series of interviews.

### **1.8.3 The Only Private Citizen with a Foreign Policy**

As the “only private citizen with foreign policy,” who was a foreigner in the United States, and everywhere outside of Hungary, Soros has been criticized for having too much unaccountable power and for meddling in the affairs of sovereign states through his foundations (Kaufman 2002). This was conducted, his opponents alleged, in the name of spreading democracy, liberalism, capitalism, economic, and social reforms (including press freedom, civil society, women's, and LGBT rights), all of which was seen as a smokescreen to achieve power and gain profit (Soros 1995, 38, Langer 2021, 164). Since the mid-nineties Soros has been the target of especially vicious attacks in the Balkans, Central-Eastern and Eastern Europe, and Russia, where he has engaged more than in any other region (Soros 1995, 239; Porter 2015, loc. 2117, Langer 2021, 164).

The press and local politicians have often questioned his true intentions. In Slovakia the minister of culture saw Soros as furthering Hungarian interests

by plotting “to dominate the country economically and exploit its cheap labour.”

In Romania, where 10% of the population is Hungarian, Soros, as a Hungarian born billionaire, was depicted by the local press as a foreign agent trying to return Transylvania, a territory populated primarily by Hungarians, to Hungarian hands (Slater 1997, 133), and an “evil Jew” conspiring to take power in the country. In Hungary, Soros’ initiatives funding emerging democratic and liberal forces (Wolraich 2010a, 145) were interpreted in a similar antisemitic manner as a part of the international Jewish plot to destabilize the country (Soros October 5, 1992). Considering this, Soros was not far from the truth when he said that: "In Slovakia I'm accused of being a Hungarian, in Hungary I'm accused of being a Jew, in Romania again I'm a Hungarian." But he forgot to mention that he was also seen in Russia as a CIA agent and was nicknamed “government toppler” by many Georgians, Russians, and Ukrainians <sup>24</sup>(Traynor 1997, 8).

For the Kremlin, Soros has been a suspect figure who, by financing civil society groups who organize anti-governmental protests aimed at restoration of freedom of speech, is seen as representing “Western” interests. Even in the mid-nineties, his foundations came under scrutiny when *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* published a report drawn by the Federal Counterintelligence Service who accused the Soros-funded International Science Fund of espionage (Babakian February 22, 1995). Moreover, he was seen as an emissary of American imperialism when he financially supported the “coloured revolutions” in post-Soviet states such as Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia (Freeland January

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<sup>24</sup> For more details on what he was accused of in Croatia, Serbia and Belarus see Peter Plenta’s article “Conspiracy theories as a political instrument: utilization of anti-Soros narratives in Central Europe” (2020).



30, 2009). Eventually, his foundations were put on a “patriotic stop list” as “undesirable organizations” working for “Western intelligence agencies” by President Vladimir Putin, which resulted in them being raided and closed (Luhn, July 22, 2015).

For a growing number of opinion makers in the region, Soros has become the preeminent representative of “foreign interests,” an agent of a Jewish international global conspiracy, trying to promote and spread Western style capitalism, and concomitant liberal and democratic values and lifestyles (such as drug legalization) to undermine national sovereignty (Krastev in Porter 2015, loc. Fleishman 2007, 205; Quandt 2002, 27). In the West, especially the United States, attacks on Soros have taken a slightly different shape (Laing 2002, 15).

#### **1.8.4 The Only Private Citizen with a Domestic Policy**

In the early years of his philanthropy, criticism of Soros in the United States was something one heard only from fringe actors, but in 2003 Soros became public enemy number one of the American right which shared some of the talking points with the far right. Soros expressed frustration and disappointment with their warmongering policies of President George W. Bush and was said to have spent \$27 million dollars during 2004 presidential campaign to block his re-election (Cassity August 1, 2005; Vogel, Shane and Kingsley October 31, 2018). In this period a network of liberal donors emerged (Ibid.), who the antagonized and threatened right reacted to instantaneously. Dennis Hastert on *Fox News* accused Soros of being involved with drug cartels (Steinberger July 17, 2018,

see Steinberg 1997). Richard Poe wrote a piece “George Soros’ Coup” (2004, 23) for a conservative *Newsmax Magazine* retelling a well-known story of a wealthy Jew, a puppet master plotting behind the scenes to become the next Commander in Chief. Even back in 1996 F. William Engdahl claimed that Soros was a part of a secret financial network together with the Rothschilds (1996, Wolraich 2010a, 155), though at the time very few took this seriously.<sup>25</sup> It does support the claim that the most conspiratorial discourse about Soros, containing antisemitic undertones, was very slowly starting to move out of margins, even prior to the second Bush era.

In 2005, *Fox News* anchor Bill O'Reilly presented Soros as the billionaire responsible for waging the “War on Christmas,” and financing a “secular progressive movement” that was fighting Christianity in the United States (Kay 2010, A29; Wolraich 2010a, 150). A year later, two books were published that capitalized on growing interest in Soros that made attacks on him go more mainstream. *The Shadow Party: How George Soros, Hillary Clinton, and Sixties Radicals Seized Control of the Democratic Party*, was an anti-Soros book written by Richard Poe and David Horowitz. In it, Horowitz, a former leftist in the 1960s, now the most visible transmitter of attacks on Soros, did so in ways that resonated with the Tea Party and the evangelical wing of the Republican Party. A second book, *The Vast Left-wing Conspiracy* by Byron York was less sensationalistic, but still attempted to demonstrate the concerted efforts of numerous left-

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<sup>25</sup> Armin Langer, in discussing the perception of Soros in Hungary and the United States, started by pointing out that “since the 1930s but definitely since the defeat of the Nazi enemy, antisemitism became disreputable in this country” (Langer 2021, 178).

leaning organizations to block the re-election of George W Bush (York 2005, 2), thus putting attacks on Soros in that broader context.

Things accelerated in 2010, when *Fox News* aired a programme called “The Puppet Master” in which Glenn Beck mounted accusations against Soros including: his taking over the media, destabilizing the country, and trying to overthrow the government (Stelter 2010, 22). Once again, Beck’s analysis was interpreted as parroting an all-too familiar antisemitic story (Eichler November 12, 2010; Wolraich November 13, 2010), but going a step further he accused Soros, a Holocaust survivor, of collaborating with the Nazis during World War II (Kay 2010, A29). This, in combination with the fact that Soros gave money to left-wing progressive think tanks like the Center for American Progress and moveon.org, which were fighting anti-abortion legislation and lobbying for the undoing of voter suppression laws, advocating for the legalization of assisted suicide and marijuana, made him an even more controversial figure, and a perfect scapegoat (Steinberger July 17, 2018; Wolraich 2010a, 150; Portnoy 2015; Plenta 2020). Still, in 2010, the conspiracy theories about Soros even if appearing in the mainstream from time to time were “considered a fringe” (Vogel et al. October 31, 2018). However, things in the USA and elsewhere were about to become far more polarized, with the election of Donald Trump, Brexit and the refugee crisis, creating a perfect storm for these attacks to return in force. This will be explored in the Chapters 4,5.

## **1.9 Conclusion**

This chapter argued that Soros, despite being a very powerful insider (a regular attendee of Davos meetings, an invited guest at royal ceremonies, and an influential donor), should be seen as an outsider as his life is characterized by a level of detachment and distance. Soros' biography reveals that some of this attitude may have originated from his family who believed that not being too connected to people, places, or possessions was an ideal survival strategy to avoid getting caught in the powerful currents of history and disappearing. Thus, already in the early days when he immigrated to the UK, Soros identified as an outsider and that feeling persisted throughout the greater part of his life.

While pursuing a career in finance, he did not believe that he belonged to that world since he was working in arbitrage, that is, a less revered aspect of the profession reserved for outsiders. Furthermore, even though Soros was making strides in this field, he still considered himself to be an unrealized philosopher and longed to be someone else. This feeling of disconnect stayed with him. When his career as a hedge fund manager took off, instead of enjoying the success, he underwent a mid-life crisis. This stemmed from a realization that he was alienated from who he had become, because many of the values instilled in him by his parents were absent from his life and thus, he could not consider himself to be a truly accomplished man. Consequently, he re-evaluated his goals which led him to changing his career to become a philanthropist and a public figure.

When Soros ventured down this new path, he was recognized as an outsider by others. He was a novice to at least two new fields which often resulted in him applying methods from the world of finance to philanthropy or to the public sphere. His directedness and pragmatism—the exact traits that made him excel in his original career—were now out of place and earned him many critics. Soros was seen as weighing in on matters that he was viewed as having no business commenting on—as in schooling foreign politicians on the way in which they should run their countries even though he was not an elected official nor a citizen. However, as this chapter has demonstrated, some of the most convincing criticisms of Soros concern his occupying positions in fields that are ruled by opposing logics, and he has remained caught up in these contradictions ever since.

In his role as an opinionated public intellectual, this billionaire was not afraid to voice as well as act on his political views (as was the case with his attempt to prevent the re-election of George W. Bush). An attitude that stands in contrast to his being the founder of one of this biggest NGOs in the world, one that has tried to present itself as nonpartisan. Similarly, as an expert on matters of finance, Soros was requested to share his views on economic affairs which meant that by making his statements publicly known he could, even if unintentionally, manipulate investor decisions. Finally, to reiterate the argument made by philanthropy studies scholars, Soros' goal as a philanthropist has been to give away money. However, he could only do that because earlier he was a hedge fund manager who did what everyone else did in this line of work, that is, contributing to the weakening of various economies through his speculative

actions and in turn impoverishing many people. These contradictions form the basis on which much of the criticism of this billionaire is formed.

One of the goals of conspiracy theory research is to identify and refute misinformation (Butter and Knight 2019, 41, 52; Byford 2011, 14). This, nonetheless, does not mean that parts of conspiracy theories which contain legitimate criticisms of people or events that are at their centre should be automatically dismissed as originating from flawed explanations (Langer 2021, 179). Rather, they should be investigated. One of the rationales behind this chapter was to outline the mostly uncontested and verified details of Soros' life as well as the well-known criticisms of him. Collected in this manner, information was presented to be later juxtaposed with the claims made by people accused of spreading "conspiracy theories" about Soros in order to understand to what extent these narratives might be founded in truth.

## Chapter 2 Methods

### 2.1 Introduction

My interest in the media coverage of George Soros in Poland was sparked by a series of articles in the foreign press describing an incident in which nationalist-activist Piotr Rybak burned an effigy of an Orthodox Jew meant to represent the Hungarian American billionaire (Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 651; Rybak December 3, 2016 YT). Even though his actions initially caused an outrage among the international community (Duval Smith December 23, 2015), as time passed, the case faded from public memory. Few media outlets reported that Poland's ruling populist conservative party<sup>26</sup>, Law and Justice, overturned the prison sentence that was handed to Rybak for the incident (Pytlakowski March 17, 2021). This decision coincided with what appeared to be a move of attacks on Soros from the marginal political fringe in Poland to state-funded, mainstream media (Szacki June 12, 2018; Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 631). On this basis, I wondered about what this event, and Soros more generally, meant for Poland and its politics (April 2, 2017, TVP1).

To investigate the details of how George Soros' position is viewed in Poland, I will answer four research questions: was there a move in attacks on Soros from the margins to the centre of Polish public discourse? If yes, what did it look like? Why did it happen? And what does it tell us about changes taking place in this country? This chapter

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<sup>26</sup> The division between left-wing and right-wing parties that exists in the West cannot be simply applied to the Polish context. For example, supporters of Law and Justice identify as culturally conservative, yet economically left as supporters of the welfare state (Śmiecińska 2021, 254).

will concentrate on presenting the methods and sources that enabled the answering of these questions in the core of the dissertation. But first, I will describe the ethical concerns I faced while conducting this research.

## 2.2 Remarks on Ethics

In this study, I relied on information that was created for the wider public. I draw on articles in the mainstream press and short segments on the national news for data, all which are publicly available as they were created with the intention of reaching an audience. Some programmes, like *Radio Maryja*'s late night "Rozmowy Niedokończone," [Unfinished Conversations] and other instances of discourse, such as comments under YouTube videos, included some politically incorrect statements, and even instances of hate speech that would negatively implicate their authors, but because they existed in the public sphere, I consider this data not to fall under the category of human subject research<sup>27</sup> (Kozinets 2010, 141; Pihlaja 2014, 27).

Therefore, assuming that YouTubers were aware of the public character of this video sharing platform, I did not seek informed consent (Ibid. 27). Additionally, the identity of most commenters was protected by their usage of online pseudonyms (Voss, Lvov and Day Thompson 2017, 174). For *Radio Maryja*'s phone-ins, as this station's practice dictates, most callers would introduce themselves giving their first name and location

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<sup>27</sup> More information can be found at the website of British Association of Applied Linguistics where the guidelines on good practice for using internet texts are outlined (Pihlaja 2014, 27).



they were calling from. Some provided their first and last names, but this was rare.

In most cases, the practice was upheld, and callers' anonymity was protected.

## **2.3 Types of Sources Used**

### **2.3.1 Alternative Versus Mainstream Media**

The first research question contains an assumption about the difference between alternative, media, and mainstream media. I will briefly elaborate on this distinction as a foundation to explain later the reasons behind the selection of sources. However, I first want to emphasize the relevance of media ecology for this research (Postman 2021).

Without mentioning how different media outlets interact with each other, and how they respond to the emergence of new outlets, to the digital media revolution, and to political reshuffling, we might run a risk of incorrectly assuming that the sources discussed here are, or have been, static (Trere and Mattoni 2016, 292; Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 8). In characterizing the media outlets selected for this study, I will stress the relationships between them, which will in turn allow me to show how their interaction may strengthen or weaken discourses about George Soros.

In democratic, pluralistic societies, different media sources frequently represent different voices (Lisowska-Magdziarz 2013, 32) and equip people with knowledge about politics (Lipiński and Stępińska 2019, 75) The function of the mainstream media is to document current events, comment on them, and function as a 'collective memory' generator (Mielczarek 2018, 12; Grotowska 2019, 97). The public in general trusts them

to collect, verify, and interpret information about the world, while also providing a cohesive narrative about what transpired (Mała-Malatyńska 2016, 112; Iosifidis 2007, 10; Sobczak 2016, 98). Additionally, mainstream media recognizes what most of the public, and those in power, are interested in. As such, only certain voices and “leading” values are given attention, and the likelihood of the reproduction of the *status quo* is high (Karasová 2018, 51; Maratea 2008, 141; Guedes Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier 2008, 16). Thus, the mainstream media “are carriers of dominant discourses and representations” (Ibid., 18), or the “common sense” (Ibid., 15) which delineate where “the centre” of contemporary political discourse falls, according to sociologists, as well as media and cultural studies scholars who study conspiracy theories (Bergmann 2021, 40; Önnorfors and Krouewl 2021, 256; Butter and Knight 2019, 40).

Alternative media, on the other hand, address politically, culturally, economically, and socially excluded groups that are often overlooked by their mainstream counterparts. They tend to be far more participatory and community oriented (Atton 2015, 6), and even if alternative media sources are less powerful, they can still play a vital role in bringing groups of like-minded people together who can then become politically mobilized (Guedes et al. 2008, 11). To put it differently, alternative media create counterpublics who go on to generate counter-narratives to mainstream discourses (Atton 2015, 6; Kristoffer 2018, 51) which frequently make their way into the mainstream and may bring about social change as a result (Ibid. 15, Dytman- Stasiński 2010, 33; Fraser 1992). In this way, they deliver diverse viewpoints that are so important in democratic societies

(Karasová 2018, 51).<sup>28</sup> Another way of explaining how alternative media differ from mainstream media is to see the former as propagating marginal views drawn from the fringes of public political discourse (Guedes Bailey et al., 2008, 18), using “language that challenges power structures or calls into question social roles” (Atkinson 2017, 176).

But the distinction between the mainstream and alternative media is quite difficult to sustain (Guedes Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier 2008, xii) because as alternative media gain popularity, political influence, and access to better funding, it often evolves in the direction of the mainstream media (Ibid., Atkinson 2017, 187). Thus, factors that could help us to distinguish between these two types of media would include who produces the content, how it is distributed, the sources of financing, and the size of the audience, which may vary significantly and in turn make establishing this distinction difficult. Nonetheless, what appears to remain unaltered is what attracted the viewers to different media outlets in the first place: their particular content (Guedes et al. 2008, xii). Hence, for purposes of this dissertation, the somewhat forced division between mainstream and alternative media is primarily based on the different content they offer (Atkinson 2017). On a few occasions, content type is considered together with other characteristics such as the popularity of a given source combined with its connections to influential politicians.

If we apply this distinction between alternative and mainstream media to the outlets that write about George Soros which were chosen for this research, most of them

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<sup>28</sup> Recently, however, some media scholars have refused to recognize that alternative right-wing media outlets also contribute to enriching public discourse by introducing new points of view. Instead, they were characterized as potentially “threat[ing] to the system” (Kristoffer 2018, 49).

largely fit into one of these two categories, except for *Radio Maryja*—an ambiguous case.

### **2.3.2 Radio Maryja: From Alternative to the Mainstream**

One media institution has been instrumental in keeping various conspiracy theories about George Soros alive, blaming him for the economic ruin of Poland after 1989, and for putting the country on a path to liberalization: *Radio Maryja*<sup>29</sup> ([Radio Mary]) (Karasová 2018. 52). This ostensibly religious broadcaster has attracted an audience counted in the millions and gained unprecedented power and influence across Poland. Its founder, the Catholic priest Tadeusz Rydzyk, has built a community around this radio station and created an associated social movement (Andrukiewicz 2013, 23). that had a considerable political power, that gathered money for charitable causes, and organized demonstrations (see Zubrzycki 2006, 10). Its influence suggests it is a mainstream outlet in Poland. Here, however, I wish to discuss the ‘alternative’ character of this station, as well as its role vis-à-vis other media in the Polish context, before I concentrate on *Radio Maryja* in more detail in Chapter 3 (Starnawski 2017, 82).

Under socialism, in the People’s Republic of Poland, the two available channels of public television that existed were propaganda outlets that spread lies (Szot 2020, 162; Mocek 2017, 36). Those who wanted to stay informed about what was really going on

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<sup>29</sup> The name of this station refers to the Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ. Its listeners interpret its mission as trying to emulate the service of Mary in supporting people in their struggles, moments of weakness, and in their loneliness (Komasa Jul. 11, 2011). The importance of the Mary for this station is reflected in the recurrent reciting of the rosary among other “traditional prayers of the Catholic Church (...), the daily mass (...) religious songs and catechesis” (Burdziej 2008b, 216; Grabowska 2008, 12; Crisell 1994, 9; Chignell 2009, 86).

in the world, and in the country, were forced to tune into *Radio Free Europe* to hear the uncensored, yet uncritically pro-American, news. Hence, radio as a medium has a very different meaning to Poles than it does to Westerners for whom it became a secondary medium after the emergence of television (Jauert 2018, 257). When the transition to capitalism took place in Poland starting in 1989, the '90s saw the mushrooming of satellite dishes on the rooftops and balconies of homes across the country, and most people enthusiastically tuned into to newly available tv channels (often Polish versions of Western stations, e.g., *RTL7- MTV Polska* etc.) (Dzierżyńska-Mielczarek 2012, 34). But a significant group of less financially fortunate people, largely outside of urban centres, remained glued to their radio sets.

In 1991, Father Tadeusz Rydzyk identified this niche and funded the religious radio station *Radio Maryja*, which offered itself as an alternative to the Polish mainstream media. (Burdziej 2008b, 216). In a period when most Poles were future-oriented, fantasizing about having the quality of life enjoyed by people in Western Europe and North America, and looking for “new” success stories disseminated by mainstream media, this religious broadcaster went in the totally opposite direction. *Radio Maryja* embraced the groups who were economically and culturally<sup>30</sup> marginalized in Polish society: the unemployed, the pensioners, the welfare recipients for whom the transition to capitalism was difficult (Crisell 1994, 189; Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 666; Bobrowska 2014, 458). Its audience instead of looking ahead turned towards

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<sup>30</sup> Their stories of struggles were not told in the mainstream media as they didn't fit the “official” narrative of transformation as success (Leder 2021b; Davies 2005, 513; Zamoyski 2009, 335),

the nostalgia of a glorious past, reminiscing about the times when Poland was ruled by powerful monarchs, reliving victorious battles, and celebrating various historical anniversaries. Simultaneously, explained through entertaining conspiracy theories, Polish failures were blamed on hostile foreign neighbours. Furthermore, through accounts of their listeners living abroad, *Radio Maryja* warned against the infatuation with the liberal West with its never-ending materialism and dissolution of the family that resulted from leading a faithless life. This type of content is very far removed from the dominant mainstream discourse and allows us to call *Radio Maryja* an alternative medium (Guedes Bailey et al. 2008, 18; Atkinson 2017, 176).

As an alternative, the station promoted tradition and the strengthening of the organic community, all to be achieved through Poles embracing patriotic, if not nationalistic, and Catholic identity. Unfortunately, lifting of listeners' spirits was often achieved by diminishing other nations, faiths, and ideologies, frequently designating them enemies of the nation (Maszkowski 2006, 679; Tomala- Kaźmierczak 2015, 69; Bobrowska 2007, 56).

*Radio Maryja* has functioned as an agora for counter-discourse, undermining the hegemonic narratives presented in mainstream media. As it started accruing more political power (more on that in the next chapter) by supporting right-wing, populist and even fascist-sympathizing parties, Rydzik's station underwent a transformation from an alternative and radical<sup>31</sup> broadcaster, to one that was much closer to the mainstream

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<sup>31</sup> In *Radio Maryja*'s best years, its messages reached the hearts, minds, and souls of 3 to 6 million Poles, so it is safe to say in terms of its audience size, it was a mainstream radio station, though in terms of its content, it was considered as belonging to the fringes (Burdziej 2008, 217). I argue

(Wiścicki and Borkowicz 2005, 7, Wysocka 2008, 72; Paluch 2007). Throughout this process, *Radio Maryja* slightly toned down its radical character, but the xenophobic rhetoric and conspiracy theories persists on its airwaves, even if in coded form, (from the station's early years, George Soros was one of the prime targets of Rydzyk's radio attacks)—in fact, it has caused them to seep into the mainstream. Given the persuasive nature of radio as a medium<sup>32</sup>, the problematic content and highly emotive format of *Radio Maryja* programmes, it becomes apparent why analyzing the coverage of George Soros by this station is pertinent.

### **2.3.3 The Heart of the Mainstream: Public Television and the Evening News Under Law and Justice**

In this section, I will focus on the second source selected for this study: the public evening news watched by millions of people which has disseminated conspiracy theories about George Soros shortly after the Law and Justice party came to power in 2015.<sup>33</sup>

Under socialism, many Poles felt that the media did not represent them, and after the 1989 transition, efforts were made to secure its role as guarding democracy

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that the *Radio Maryja* was sufficiently close to the political center so that under the right circumstances, its ideas could easily penetrate the mainstream. Moreover, this financially independent station with its own set of experts and alternative sources of cultural capital as well as wide support from its listeners was well prepared to make a huge impact on the Polish public sphere.

<sup>32</sup> Radio, through involving one's imagination in the listening process, results in the development of a strong emotional connection to what is being said and who says it without a lot of critical inquiry, is a very persuasive medium (Chignell 2009, 11).

<sup>33</sup> Broadcasting of skewed coverage of Soros on the national news started in 2016. There was a delay between politicians' statements, online videos as well as comments made on *Radio Maryja*'s shows criticizing this billionaire, and their appearance in the mainstream media.

(Jakubowicz 2008, 32). Freedom of the press and freedom of expression, as well as citizens' right to acquire and to disseminate information, were guaranteed by two articles of the new Polish constitution (14 and 54) (Szot 2020, 162, Mocek 2017, 36). In the '90s, the Polish media market opened and television became the medium that reached the largest numbers of Poles (Sobczak 2017, 153; Drozda 2013, 131).<sup>34</sup> This, however, did not mean that people necessarily tuned into the same programmes; commercial television stations tailored for niche publics fragmented the audience further, and the ensuing gradual disappearance of the "societal and cultural commons" alienated many viewers (Wilk April 6, 2021; Dzierżyńska-Mielczarek 2014, 101; Iosifidis 2007, 10; Maratea 2008, 142). Hence, a considerable number of Poles, if not the majority, still turn to public television for their news, especially about politics and elections<sup>35</sup> (Lipiński and Stępińska 2019, 76) making it the most mainstream channel available (Wilk April 6, 2021; Mocek 2017, 38; Szkudlarek- Śmiechowicz 2016, 98).<sup>36</sup> They do this despite plenty of evidence which suggests that the state-funded broadcaster has in fact struggled to serve the public interest (Mielczarek 2013, 462).

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<sup>34</sup> Similar trends have been documented in the West (Burgess and Green 2013, 44; Arthurs and Drakapolou 2018, 5). Poland is not an exception. A survey conducted in twelve different countries demonstrated that people are still more likely to watch television than go online (Dzierżyńska- Mielczarek 2014, 111).

<sup>35</sup> It is important to point out that still "almost half of the Polish population (49 percent) received information on the election via radio" (Lipiński and Stępińska 2019, 76)

<sup>36</sup> The audience consists primarily of women (72%), people above thirty-five years of age (79%), living in rural areas (77%), and the unemployed (91%). At the same time, 41% of millennials continue to declare opting for television, radio, or the printed press to get their news instead of the Internet (Ceglińska and Kopec- Ziemczyk 2016, 61).



For media scholars, the role of public media broadcasters is to make citizens interested in public affairs, strengthen their critical thinking skills, and foster a sense of belonging to a political and cultural community (Świerczyńska- Głownia 2018, 68). As well, they ought to be committed to nurturing diversity, and to giving airtime even to clashing points of view, encouraging social debate which is necessary to maintain a healthy democracy (Ibid. 69). What happens ‘in reality’ is quite different. The media are used as an extension of the political will of ruling politicians. In the past three decades, however, these state-funded media objectives have not been fulfilled, as the top Polish politicians who oversaw the state-funded media tried instead to shape the views of voters through subordinating public media to their political goals and through hiring pro-governmental employees (Mocek 2017, 34; Mních 2018, 313).

This was the case in 2015, after the victory of Law and Justice in both the parliamentary and the presidential elections. The new administration brought in its own loyalist-journalists (Mocek 2017, 34; Wnuk 2016, 78), and initiated the process of restructuring the public media in its favour, reaching levels not seen since communism (Meler, Sojak and Piechocka 2018, 257; Urbanek 2018, 229). A new media bill was passed in 2016 which omitted the social consultations and procedures for high-ranking positions and was replaced by arbitrary nominations by party officials (Ibid. 37). The content was changed to present a distinctly pro-governmental stance. Consequently, public television viewership dropped (Ibid. 38; Meler, et al. 2018, 259). At the same time,

the evening news—*Wiadomości* [News]— then became the most watched news programme.<sup>37</sup> (Szkudlarek- Śmiechowicz 2016, 98; Kaszewski 2020, 650).

The news helps to orient oneself in the world and is intended to leave little place for ambivalence and uncertainty (Ibid. 112). Public news constitutes the heart of the mainstream media because of its prescribed role and who it is supposed to represent. It promotes the view of whoever is in charge and is designed to assist in reaching political and social goals (Sobczak 2016, 151; also, Mąka-Malatyńska 2016, 101). When broadcast on television, a medium which tricks viewers into thinking that they are being presented an objective representation of the world because “seeing is believing” (Caumanns and Önnersfors 2020, 441), this effect is compounded (Urbanek 2018, 227). Numerous studies of public broadcast news in Poland after 2015 have found it to be highly propagandistic and politicized. a fact which is very concerning (Kamieniarz 2018, 12; Sobczak 2017, 136; Mielczarek 2018, 235). From this perspective, analyzing public news, including the recurring negative coverage of Soros, is crucial to understand what the Law and Justice party wants Polish citizens to think. When this is considered, one cannot find a more mainstream source of information.

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<sup>37</sup> Malatyńska disagrees, claiming that *Wiadomości* [the News] broadcasted by state-funded public media are less popular than *Fakty* [Facts], which is broadcast by private channel TVN (2016, 101). Irrespective of who is closer to the truth, the fact remains that *Wiadomości* are among most watched news programs. At the same time, I suspect that one’s political views aside, many Poles realized that they had to follow the national news to understand what the official party line was, because not knowing could have negative implications for them.

### 2.3.4 The Polish Press and the Alternative-Mainstream Continuum

After high-ranking politicians, started attacking Soros in 2015 and continued with subsequent attack<sup>38</sup>, state-funded news and various mainstream weeklies began devoting considerable negative attention to this philanthropist from 2016.<sup>39</sup> In this section, I will describe some of these outlets and provide an explanation for choosing them as sources for this study.

Despite the dropping sales of the large print titles, Poles still turn to them for information<sup>40</sup>, but, like elsewhere, these days they tend to read them online (Jupowicz-Ginialska 2017, 99).<sup>41</sup> Most prefer to purchase weeklies (Dobek-Ostrowska 2017, 226) because their focus is on providing commentary instead of merely relaying information about current events. Weeklies have a clearly defined, transparent political bent, and most

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<sup>38</sup> This is when Jarosław Kaczyński attacked Soros in June 2016 which was a game-changer (TVP1 June 8, 2016) as he was and still is the most powerful politician in the country.

<sup>39</sup> “Soros’ billions against Kaczyński” (June 18, 2016), read the cover of pro-Kaczyński *Sieci* [Networks]. Even a few years later, in 2019, after the government was criticized for promoting hate speech, the same weekly confidently stated “It is Soros who plans to split the country” (June 9, 2019). Two months later they released another issue with Soros on its cover with the text: “A real enemy of a strong Poland” (October 13, 2019).

<sup>40</sup> Most recently with proliferation of fake news and conspiracy theories circulating online (Rosińska and Brzóška 2020, 661; Arthurs and Drakopolou 2018, 7; Bell and Leonard 2016, 342; Matuszewski 2018, 4; Furman 2018, 206), the service of sifting information from misinformation became more important than ever before (Burgess and Green 2009; Brook 2013, 234; Singer 2011, 5; Marvasti 2003, 62, Pink 2013, 131). Without it, people would become lost and “culturally illiterate” (Martin and Copeland 2003, 5). This, however, does not mean that all the media narratives overlap. They often do not, but the journalists from various, even politically misaligned outlets following the rules of their trade (such as accountability, relying on verified sources) tend to arrive at an understanding of what constitutes the agreed upon truth.

<sup>41</sup> Millennials more than any other group read papers and magazines online (Feliksiak 2018, 12).

Poles prefer to know what they are getting before picking one up at the newsstand (Mielczarek 2018, 24)).<sup>42</sup>

Having this in mind, I focused on studying the mainstream press, as well as alternative weeklies (with the exceptions of two dailies). First, I analyzed the coverage of Soros in two, well-established mainstream titles *Polityka* (n= 246) and *Wprost* (n= 172). Furthermore, I evaluated several alternative right-wing papers that discussed Soros as a major evildoer,<sup>43 44</sup> such as: *Gazeta Polska* (n= 113) and the Rydzyk-funded daily, *Nasz Dziennik* (n= 102)—essentially, a print version of the content promoted on *Radio Maryja*. I also read the more recently established right-wing weeklies that received financial support after Law and Justice took power in 2015, *Sieci* (n=16), and *Do Rzeczy* (n=135). Lastly, a liberal daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, one of the most influential papers in Poland,<sup>45</sup> was added to the mix as a point of reference (n= 192), essentially as a ‘control’

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<sup>42</sup> This could be linked to decades long exposure of Poles to socialist propaganda and a recognition that if the media is inevitably biased and manipulative, perhaps reaching for clearly politically defined journals leads to greater honesty (Mielczarek 2018, 24).

<sup>43</sup> I omitted sensationalistic and extremist titles as they do not fulfill the condition of belonging to the mainstream and, as many media scholars note, most mainstream titles undergo a certain amount of tabloidization anyway (Szeligowska 2014, 488; Lasiuk 2018, 59).

<sup>44</sup> I did not study dailies, except for *Nasz Dziennik*, because similar to the French, Poles have always preferred to read weeklies instead of the daily press (Dobek-Ostrowska 2017, 226). The recorded 30% drop in dailies’ sales confirms this trend (Dzierżyńska-Mielczarek 2017, 44).

<sup>45</sup> This paper was excluded from the qualitative study. Its editor-in-chief, Adam Michnik, is a former Soros scholarship recipient, and as I will argue in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, has been a major enemy to the far-right, often mentioned together with Soros in one breath (Kaufman 2002, 237; Matecki 2018; June 16, 2008, RM; January 7, 2016, RM). Moreover, Michnik has defended Soros aggressively and promoted his ideas to such a point where his paper is too biased to include in this study (Kochanowicz 2014, 107; Rae 2008, 257). Moreover, in 2016 Soros invested in this daily by buying stocks of AGORA, the publisher of *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

that would indicate what was being said about him in the liberal-left end of the media (Lasiuk 2018, 59).<sup>46</sup>

#### **2.3.4.1 Polityka**

One of the most popular weeklies in Poland that covered Soros long before 2016 is *Polityka* [Politics] (n= 246) (Mielczarek 2018, 69). Established in 1957, this centre-left magazine has survived major political reshuffles, managing to keep its editorial board largely unchanged (Tiałka 2014, 95). Its success has been reflected in its sales levels<sup>47</sup> (Lipiński 2014, 775). In terms of politics, the journalists of *Polityka* are pro-EU, and support the protection of the rights of sexual, ethnic, and racialized minority groups. Despite this, the magazine tries to avoid open bias and propaganda (Dobek- Ostrowska 2017, 233), though on a few occasions it has endorsed a political candidate—as was the case in the 2007 election when it supported Donald Tusk (Mielczarek 2018, 100). What makes *Polityka* one of the most reliable sources of political commentary in Poland is the fact that it is the most cited source by other media outlets (Dobek-Ostrowska 2017, 234). Moreover, readers of this weekly consist of those who are middle-aged and retired, and the wealthy and educated, which creates a good counterbalance for other sources used in this study which are consumed by different audiences (Ibid. 234).

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<sup>46</sup> The first mention of Soros in this paper appeared in 1989, enabling it to provide historical context for how he has been covered. In the quantitative section of this paper, I do take the number of mentions of Soros in *Gazeta Wyborcza* into account to see if there has been an upward trend in referencing the billionaire (n=192).

<sup>47</sup> One hundred thirty-three thousand paper copies per week (Dobek-Ostrowska 2017, 230).

In terms of the content presented, *Polityka* does not deviate significantly from the liberal discourse that has dominated the Polish political scene since 1989 (more on this topic in Chapter 3), so we can label it as a mainstream media outlet.

#### **2.3.4.2 Wprost**

Another weekly which has referred to George Soros as a financial expert, philanthropist, and an important international player before 2016 is *Wprost* [Straightforward] (n= 172). (Lasiuk 2018, 57), the equivalent of *Polityka* on the centre-right. This magazine's history is quite different, however. The editorial board has changed quite significantly during its existence and this variability has been one of the reasons why *Wprost* has not been as successful as *Polityka*, especially in terms of sales (Tiałka 2014, 95; Lipiński 2014, 775). I am taking this title into account in this research, in addition to *Polityka*, because of its opinion-making value in Poland, seen in the number of citations it receives from other outlets (Dobek-Ostrowska 2017, 232). Like its centre-left competitor, *Polityka*, in the 2007 elections, *Wprost* lent support a political party—in this case to Law and Justice (Ibid. 239). As time passed and confused readers stopped buying *Wprost*, its content descended into tabloidization (Lasiuk 2018, 59). This trend has affected the coverage of Soros as he became discussed in a more sensationalistic manner than previously (see Memches November 27, 2016).

Content-wise, like *Polityka*, *Wprost* does not fall far from what is considered to be the dominant mainstream discourse. Thus, it can be categorized as another mainstream outlet studied here.

### 2.3.4.3 *Sieci*<sup>48</sup> and *Do Rzeczy*

Two other weeklies, *Sieci* [Networks] and *Do Rzeczy* [To the Point], devoted a lot of attention to George Soros. *Sieci* placed this Hungarian philanthropist on the front cover several times, and both journals devoted entire segments to him (see Table 1 and Figure 5) (n=135). These press titles will be considered together as they came into existence around the same time, between 2012-2013, and involved collaborations amongst the same journalists (Dobek-Ostrowska 2017, 235; Mielczarek 2018, 179,180),<sup>49</sup> with both playing the role of mediators between the public and right-wing political elites. As soon as Law and Justice came to power, it channeled public money into *Sieci* and *Do Rzeczy* making them tubes of this government. Consequently, these weeklies recorded higher sales, becoming recognized by media scholars as opinion forming, and were frequently quoted,<sup>50</sup> as such I treat both sources as mainstream media outlets (Lasiuk 2018, 57; see Kurdupski 2018). The similarities do not end there.

*Sieci* and *Do Rzeczy* address a similar audience. *Do Rzeczy* targets better educated conservatives who appreciate occasional criticism of the Law and Justice party (Ibid. 235). *Sieci*, on other hand, is far less likely to point out errors made by Kaczyński's party (Ibid. 236). In the previous presidential election, *Sieci* supported at the time a little-known candidate for Law and Justice, Andrzej Duda, against the liberal Civic Platform

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<sup>48</sup> The weekly *Sieci* changed its name a number of times. For consistency purposes, I will refer to this weekly in the way most media scholars do, as *Sieci* (Kurdupski 2018)

<sup>49</sup> For example, Jacek Karnowski, the editor in chief of *Sieci*, was earlier the editor of the public television news program, *Wiadomości*, when it was controlled by Law and Justice (Ibid. 235).

<sup>50</sup> Before Law and Justice's 2015 victory, journalists of *Sieci* and *Do Rzeczy* claimed that they were "alternative" to the mainstream media (Starnawski 2017, 82). This would have changed shortly thereafter, and these weeklies would go on to become the epitome of mainstream.

party incumbent Bronisław Komorowski. In terms of content, an analysis of *Sieci* as well as *Do Rzeczy* demonstrates progressive tabloidization, and a reliance on scandal to provoke emotional reactions based on fear rather than providing verified information (Lasiuk 2018, 59; Malatyńska 2016, 101).<sup>51</sup>

#### 2.3.4.4 Gazeta Polska

Another journal that featured Soros on its cover on a few occasions and devoted lengthy articles to him is *Gazeta Polska* [Polish Newspaper] (n=113). In comparison to *Sieci* and *Do Rzeczy*, this populist, far-right weekly is far more independent from the ruling party. It is also less popular. One of the reasons for selecting this title is its alternative character. *Gazeta Polska* has a stable niche position in the print market. The ideas presented in it, like *Radio Maryja*, started on the margins of mainstream politics but were attractive enough to allow them to move into the centre under the right circumstances.<sup>52</sup>

Over the years *Gazeta Polska* has had an opinion-forming impact on the Polish far-right (Lasiuk 2018, 57; Kurdupski 2018).<sup>53</sup> Its controversial journalists (e.g., Andrzej Gwiazda, Tomasz Terlikowski, and Rafał Ziemkiewicz) have expressed antisemitic, anti-

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<sup>51</sup> One infamous cover photoshopped the editor-in-chief of the anti-Law and Justice publication, *Newsweek Polska*, in a gestapo uniform with the title “Nearly like Goebbels” (Mielczarek 2018, 194). Another one equated the refugee crisis and potential arrival of asylum seekers to Poland with the 1939 September Campaign when the Nazis invaded Poland (Żuk and Żuk 2018, 139).

<sup>52</sup> When the plane catastrophe in April of 2010 took place and the Polish president together with other dignitaries died, the readership of this weekly spiked. It resulted from editors vigorously promotion of conspiracy theories about the crash. In time sales dropped again, but irrespective of that, *Gazeta Polska* is a permanent part of Polish media landscape.

<sup>53</sup> A loyal group of readers would meet around the country in *Gazeta Polska*'s four hundred clubs to discuss matters of national relevance (Mielczarek 2018, 66, 69).



Russian, and anti-German views, as well as opposing abortion, and the protection of human rights for sexual and ethnic minorities. Their arguments are often conspiratorial in their bent and are presented in a tabloid-like manner (Mielczarek 2018, 238; Lasiuk 2018, 59). Prior to the election of Law and Justice in 2015, they would not have been allowed into mainstream media, as the former government, ruled by Civic Platform, represented western liberal consensus which they were considered far too radical to participate in (Ibid. 66). The tone of this weekly, its content in combination with its alternative character, create a good counterbalance regarding the other titles chosen for this analysis.

#### **2.3.4.5 Nasz Dziennik**

*Nasz Dziennik* is another daily, an arm of Rydzyk's media empire, and does not fail to devote ample attention to George Soros (n= 102). This source differs from other dailies studied in this dissertation as it presents a very dogmatic point of view that can be described as white supremacist, homophobic, and antisemitic, and focuses on commentary and its own interpretation of facts and events, (Dobek-Ostrowska 2017, 226; Lindner 2012, 98). From this angle, on the mainstream/alternative continuum (Atkinson 2017, 180) *Nasz Dziennik* is situated closer to *Gazeta Polska*. Its alternative character is different from other dubious far-right periodicals such as *Nasza Polska* [Our Poland] and *Tylko Polska* [Only Poland], as its rhetoric is borrowed from by the mainstream whenever a suitable occasion presents itself (Starnawski 2003, 67). The fact that this daily provides support to a sizeable political movement gathered around *Radio Maryja*

and *Nasz Dziennik*, known as *Rodzina Radia Maryja* [*Radio Maryja* Family], makes the movement from margins to the centre that much easier (Ibid. 67).

I do not pay special attention to *Nasz Dziennik*, because it has already been studied extensively and previous research concluded that this title reiterates discourses from *Radio Maryja*, which I analyze elsewhere in this paper. Hence, I include this source in the quantitative part of this research and in doing so rely on the results of content analysis conducted by media scholars (Starnawski 2003, Bobrowska 2007).

### **2.3.5 Change is Not Always for the Best: Polish YouTube as an Alternative**

In this dissertation I will investigate reasons behind a noticeable rise in the number of mentions of George Soros in the Polish mainstream media and press which started in 2015 and accelerated in years 2016-2017, but in addition to this, I will also analyze similar tendencies emerging online.

The Internet is a very participatory medium, one that fosters connection and communication across communities that have common interests (Swigger 2013, 590). The greater sense of anonymity granted by it allows for the most politically incorrect, as well as the most alternative or marginal, voices to be heard without any fear of repercussions (Poynter 2010, 113; Dziwak 2019, 116). It is thus unsurprising that the Internet has been recognized as a hotbed of free expression; an independent and an alternative medium providing spaces from which social change can originate,

for better or for worse (Juza 2013, 104, 109; Marcinkiewicz 2018, 826; Nocuń 2016, 63; Starnawski 2017, 75; see Byford 2011, 10).<sup>54</sup>

Without the Internet, the growth of the Me Too, Black Lives Matter, and in Poland, the *#CzarnaProtest* [Black Protests] movements would not have been possible. Neither would, the mobilization of Donald Trump supporters, the recruitment of Islamic State soldiers, and the spread of Q-Anon conspiracy theories have been possible<sup>55</sup> (Arthurs and Drakopolou 2018, 6). But at the same time the Web 2.0<sup>56</sup> revolution empowered minority groups, it also helped fake news to flourish since as users' interests drive algorithms and expand the scope of what is seen (Poell and Borra 2011, 698, Bell and Leonard 2016, 349). This suggests that what is most popular is often the most shocking, or provocative content, including that which falls under the category of hate-speech (Rosińska and Brzóska 2020, 661; Jaskiernia 2019, 384; Matuszewski 2018, 4).

Media scholars explain the phenomenon of online hate speech stemming from the impersonal character of the Internet and the detachment this generates (Strangelove 2010, 148). Users rarely feel responsibility for their words, and it is easy not to empathize with whoever is on the receiving end of them (Szpunar 2018, 119). Anyone (groups or

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<sup>54</sup> Many authoritarian countries (China, Iran etc.) have recognized the emancipatory potential of the Internet and blocked some sites in order to control the revolutionary tendencies, often unsuccessfully (Ruijgrok 2017, 514). On the other hand, online activism can very easily turn into slacktivism, i.e., supporting initiatives by sharing links, signing petitions on Facebook in acts of virtue signaling, done without leaving one's home, in the end putting insufficient pressure on those in power and leading to limited or no change (Popiołek 2015, 69).

<sup>55</sup> "Some conspiracy theory theorists argue that evidence is not clear whether the Internet drives conspiracy theorizing" (Uscinski 2019, 446)

<sup>56</sup> The Web 2.0 era of the Internet is characterized by a larger involvement of users in content creation. Previously, in the Web 1.0 era web users would only receive messages from television, or the press consumed online (Burgess and Green 2009; Singer 2011, 5; Marvasti 2003, 62, Pink 2013, 131; Strangelove 2010, 6).

individuals, public or private figures) can become targets of online hate (Dziwak 2019, 113; Stasiewicz 2017, 19). The Polish Internet is no different; one finds that hate speech is ubiquitous there (Baider and Kopytkowska 2017, 24). According to the head of the marketing department of the biggest Polish online platform, *Interia* (Widera 2017, 207), among the most popular topics online are: Jews, abortion, roundtable,<sup>57</sup> and the founder of *Radio Maryja*- Tadeusz Rydzyk (Miecik March 19, 2005). From this vantage point, it is clear why Soros has become an object of so much hate on the Polish Internet, and why this medium is necessarily used as a source in this study.

Of all Internet users, millennials' activities generate the most traffic on the Polish web (Felixiak 2018). Habit-wise, two thirds of them consider the Internet a crucial source of information (Ibid. 12; Batorski 2015, 43).<sup>58</sup> Because this group has been voting for quite some time, it seems especially prudent now to study what content they are exposed to and what they themselves generate when online. This gains even more urgency if we are reminded that not so long ago many millennials elected to office anti-establishment politicians like Paweł Kukiz, or Janusz Korwin-Mikke, individuals who have made comments bordering on hate speech (Narkowicz 2018, 336), including ones targeting Soros (June 30, 2016, YT; Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 798). Being the populists that they were (Schroeder 2018, 60), Kukiz and Korwin-Mikke effectively

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<sup>57</sup> Talks that took place in 1989 during which communists and leaders from the worker's-initiated movement "Solidarity" reached a compromise and Poland began transition from socialism to capitalism (Friszke 1990, 309; Grabowski 1996, 237).

<sup>58</sup> More precisely, 40% of people use social media alone to follow and discuss developments in politics, as well as social and economic matters. According to the Pew Global Attitudes Project research, these are the second most popular topics after celebrity gossip (Jurczyszyn, Kołtan, Kuczyński and Rakusa-Szuszczewski. 2014, 161, 33; see also Bendyk 2016, 26-28).

used digital media to bypass mainstream media (Ibid., 80). Similarly, Law and Justice took power after a successful anti-refugee and anti-Muslim political marketing campaign on social media that was directed at millennials, and which managed to deliver politically incorrect content that the Civic Platform-ruled public media would not have allowed broadcasted (Nowina-Konopka 2015, 96; Marcinkiewicz 2018, 826).

With this in mind, I have studied how George Soros has been discussed on Polish YouTube. I chose this video-sharing platform first because in comparison with Facebook or Twitter, it interferes least with what users post and upload (Urbanek 2018, 225; van Dijck 2013, 114; Arthurs and Drakopolou 2018, 6; Burgess and Green 2018, 58)<sup>59</sup> and it has “emerged as a ‘primary’ source for alternative views on politics” (Tuters 2020, 217). YouTube does not claim any responsibility for the content posted on its platform as part of its policy (Ibid. 936; Fortuna 2019, 16). Thus, a great majority of offensive and untruthful content continues to circulate via this video platform, especially due to its algorithms that have been criticized for “recommending more extreme content” (Tuters 2020, 218); in this manner YouTube contributes to ‘the creation of post-truth politics’ (Arthurs and Drakopolou 2018, 7). Second, from its beginnings the platform was made to be an alternative, democratic space, intended for amateur users to generate authentic content that could compete with one-sided mainstream media messages and entertainment (Strangelove 2010, 7, 9; Erhart 2014, 179; Burgess and Green 2009, 5; Byford 2011, 11). In other words, YouTube functions as an alternative media space.

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<sup>59</sup> Even though users can flag it as inappropriate and report it to YouTube administrators (Strangelove 2010, 19), those who disagree with them go to great lengths to keep the offending content up, often reposting banned videos by tweaking their parameters (Strangelove 2010, 109).

Third, various analyses demonstrate that political content remains extremely popular on this platform, followed closely by educational content and comedic videos (Drozda 2013, 131; see Byford 2011, 11). Lastly, this platform allows its users to “express and share the social imagery about the power elite and the social systems they represent” (Aupers 2020, 475).

On Polish YouTube, politics has been among the topics that generate a lot of traffic, and more controversially, far-right content associated with conspiracy theories has rarely been blocked (Juhasz 2013, 16; Drozda 2013, 132). This is because the platform relies on the free labour of its users to report harmful or misinforming content before it deletes it. The Internet in Poland has been reported to be far more right-wing and male-dominated<sup>60</sup> (Iwanowska, Bitowt, Czarnowska, Damaske, Jurczyk and Kraczek 2017, 128; Szpunar 2018, 196;), as well as frequented by younger people who tend to be behind most of the disturbing content<sup>61</sup> posted on YouTube. As a result, it is understandable why so much of the offensive as well as misinforming material might not be flagged. Those who oversee these processes might simply not recognize it as such (Porter 2014, 1031).<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> This is true for the Internet internationally (Joiner, Gavin, Duffield, Brosnan, Crook, Durndell, Maras, Miller Scott, and Lovatt 2005). This also appears to be true for YouTube. Users who participate and/or follow “the new antagonistic culture of debate” on this platform consist mostly of right-wing men (Tuters 2020, 218).

<sup>61</sup> This is also true for men who are much “higher on the anti-social behaviour online” (Zweig, Dank, Yahner and Lachman, 2013).

<sup>62</sup> If reading thousands of comments under the videos (the majority of which were one-liners) could confirm one thing, it would be that commenters usually responded positively to the content presented. Following the echo chamber rule (Strangelove 2010, 167; Szpunar 2018, 196), most people watched videos that represented their political views. In joining any conversation, they merely wanted to reaffirm their identity and solidify their opinions, rather than report anyone whose views aligned with their own (see Chatterje-Doody and Crilley 2019, 174; Porter 2014, 1031’).

Attacks on Soros fit into this category (Ibid. 936; Fortuna 2019, 16). Since the demonization of this philanthro-capitalist was among the recurring topics on Polish YouTube both before and after 2015, and because this is the most popular social media site, attracting some 16.4 million Poles, most of whom are young people and new voters, studying this platform is especially relevant (Nowina-Konopka 2015, 95).

## **2.4 Methods:**

The explanation of methodological procedure requires not only a justification of the choice of sources but also an outline of the systematic approach taken to answer the research questions posed. In this study, I will rely on a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to answer the four research questions posed in the introduction to this thesis<sup>63</sup>.

To investigate the details of how George Soros' position is viewed in Poland, I will answer four research questions: was there a move in attacks on Soros from the margins to the centre of Polish public discourse, if yes, what did it look like, why it happened and what does it tell us about changes taking place in this country.

The first question regarding the changing attention given to Soros in Poland would be most accurately answered by conducting a quantitative study; the rise in anti-Sorosism could be discerned by measuring how often he was referred to in the mainstream and alternative media in the past, and by then comparing that with the frequency of mentions of him made in the present. This would, however, be insufficient in as a complete answer to the whole question concerning the move

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<sup>63</sup> See page 51.

of rhetoric about Soros from the margins to the centre of political and mainstream media discourse. To do that, qualitative analysis documenting the emerging themes and repeated narratives in the coverage of Soros in different media outlets was used. Additionally, I turned to qualitative and historical methods as they are best tailored to answer the “how” and “why” questions in this study. They allow for devoting ample attention to describing and categorizing studied objects (texts, photo, videos, and comments), as well as interpreting them (in the tradition of Weberian *verstehende Soziologie*) (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor 2012, 20) by situating them in a larger social, cultural, and historical context.

#### **2.4.1 Quantitative Methods and Summary of Results**

For the first part of quantitative analysis, I used the Google Trends tool which allows for determining if there has been an increase in searches for a given keyword in a particular location and language (after Bilewicz and Krzemiński 2010, 237). I selected “Poland” for location and “Polish” for the language option and then entered the keyword “Soros.” The results exhibited a rise of interest in the billionaire among users across two periods, one in 2004, and another in the period between 2015-2017 (see Figure 1). In 2004 Poland was in the process of joining the EU, and in response, a very intense Eurosceptic campaign from more conservative and right-wing media outlets was underway (Guerra 2017, 57; Kornak 2009, 239; see Kofta and Sędek 2005, 61).

Around that time, Law and Justice and other populist right-wing parties began an offensive to get themselves into parliament. Part of their platform was a promise to Poles



that they would be protected from foreigners, whether they were European MPs or people supporting them, like Soros, who were said to want to exploit the country and weaken the national identity of its inhabitants. In 2015 a similar political campaign took place; this time the Law and Justice party used the refugee crisis<sup>64</sup> and Soros' alleged involvement with it to make a similar point about defending the country from oppressive, European multiculturalism that was being forced upon homogenous, Catholic Poland (Grotowska 2019, 101). Lastly, during the 2019 election cycle which was followed soon after by the global COVID-19 pandemic, searches of the keyword "Soros" went up again. This could be linked to the US presidential election results and Donald Trump's attempts at spreading conspiracy theories along side the growing popularity of claims made about Bill Gates, and also George Soros (in Polish right-wing media), as being key players in orchestrating the health crisis (Żuraw 2020, 56- 58 June 10, 2020, GP).

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<sup>64</sup> Krzysztof Jaskułowski (as well as many others Klaus 2017, 523, Piela and Łujkanowicz 2017, 466, see also Krzyżanowska and Krzyżanowski 2018, 612) argues that describing the rising number of refugees to Europe in 2015 as 'crisis' is far from neutral (2019,32) and suggests using term refugee crisis in quotation marks. Even though I recognize that the Polish right weaponized the term 'refugee crisis' to make political gains, it cannot be ignored that those who supported the arrival of newcomers to Poland, from the other side of the political aisle, used this term as well. In other words, by using the term refugee crisis without quotation marks, I oppose the Polish right's monopoly on its intended meaning and overtones. Moreover, I believe that using quotation marks while talking about the "refugee crisis" in this way suggests that the number of refugees coming to the European shores in 2015 was overstated, when the opposite has been true (see Jaskułowski 2019, 33).

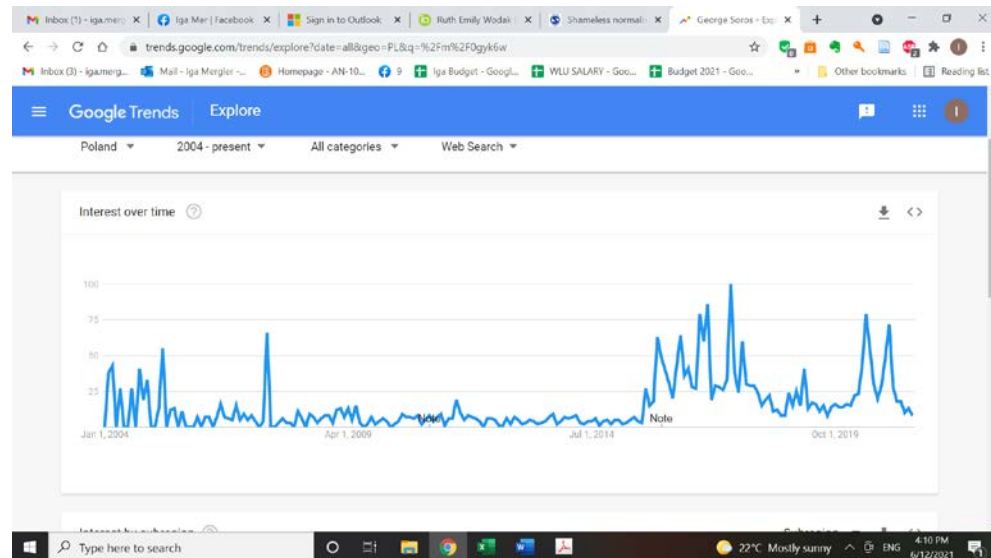


Figure 1. Google Trends Results for “Soros” Web Search in Poland, 2004-2019

Google Trends analyzes a sample of Google searches to calculate how many times a given term has been entered into the search engine. It is a good tool to understand the magnitude of events by seeing how people reacted to them, as it shows what users were interested in “as a proportion of all searches on all topics on Google at that time and location” (Rogers July 1, 2016).

Data generated by Google Trends comes from the following sources: Web Search, Image Search, News Search, Google Shopping, and YouTube Search (engaiodigital.com). Data from 2004 onwards can only be accessed through choosing Web Search, which is what I selected to focus on the interest in Soros during Poland’s EU accession. This data can be filtered in real-time and non-real time (support.google.com). A score of 1 means the point when the popularity of a given search was the lowest, while a score of 100 marks the highest point of popularity.

Google Trends is a useful tool for researchers, but it has limitations. Even though it is updated daily, Google makes a disclaimer that states “the data Trends produces may contain inaccuracies for a number of reasons, including data sampling issues and a variety of approximations that are used to compute results” (support.google.com). So, it is important to remember that Google Trends’ graphs do not provide a mirror image of key search terms generated by users. Thus, to verify Google Trends results for the search term “Soros” in Poland between 2004-2019 further, I counted and coded press articles, radio and television programs, as well as YouTube videos that mentioned him. Far from the centre of public discourse, I analyzed *Radio Maryja*’s flagship political program “Rozmowy Niedokończone,” which is popular among middle-aged and older viewers. I listened to its 441 episodes, amounting to a total of 764 hours.<sup>65</sup> Whenever George Soros was mentioned, I recorded the general topic of each program, its recurring themes, and who the program’s guests were. I transcribed the specific fragments discussing Soros verbatim. I then counted references to Soros, including any mentions of him by his first name, last name, or those using an unambiguous description that to refer to him.<sup>66</sup> Instances of merely hinting at Soros by referring to this billionaire as “a person who funds Sierakowski<sup>67</sup>” (November 25, 2016, TVP1), or “the man who was given ‘the Man

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<sup>65</sup> Because posted radio programs were originally not created to be disseminated online, and many were thus of lower audio quality, speech recognition technology which would have saved a lot of time could not be used. Similarly, because the episodes of this program were not divided into parts (a common feature of podcasts), or tagged with keywords; only by listening to the entire length of each show could I identify and mark references to Soros.

<sup>66</sup> For example, “the major donor of the Stefan Batory Foundation” (Józef from Poznań, June 16, 2008, RM).

<sup>67</sup> Sławomir Sierakowski is a journalist, sociologist, and political commentator who is the head of an influential left-wing journal *Krytyka Polityczna*. He made it clear in his TOK FM interview (Nov 24, 2016, YT) that 90% of funds that his organization receives come from abroad. The

of the Year' award by *Gazeta Wyborcza*<sup>68</sup> (Ziemkiewicz Feb 12, 2016, YT), which far outnumbers direct mentions, were not taken into account for the quantitative part of this study.<sup>69</sup> This is because his last name is often omitted as any criticism of Soros allegedly leads to accusations of antisemitism (Feb 12, 2016, YT), a conviction that appears to be popular among YouTubers.<sup>70</sup>

Figure 5 shows that the number of references to Soros on the *Radio Maryja's* airwaves started accelerating around 2014, one year before the presidential and parliamentary election, and peaked in 2016.

Similar trends can be discerned in the Polish press. Since 2015, most titles in Poland have become progressively more politicized (Dobek- Ostrowska 2017, 225), and to answer my research questions, I conducted discourse analysis of news content by systematically reviewing weeklies and dailies that differed in their political orientation. In doing so I followed a path frequently taken by Polish media scholars (Polkowska 2016, 46; Mielczarek 2018, 11). I focused on articles that were published after 2007 the

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evening news re-broadcasted this interview stressing *Krytyka Polityczna* was co-sponsored by the Batory Foundation, founded by George Soros (Nov 25, 2016, TVP1)

<sup>68</sup> In 2000, Soros received the Man of the Year award, issued by *Gazeta Wyborcza* (April 27, 2016).

<sup>69</sup> They were, however, salient for the qualitative section as they provided context.

<sup>70</sup> It seems that knowledge of removal instances by YouTube for content pertaining to Soros is quite widespread among YouTubers (see Jul 29, 2015, YT, May 23, 2016, YT; Jun 22, 2016, YT; Aug 23, 2016, YT; Oct 18, 2016, YT). They also seem be aware of the fact that this media platform relies on the work of people and machine learning AI to detect "potentially problematic content" 24/7 (YouTube Jun 5, 2019), since YouTube continuously updates its mechanisms for identifying harmful videos and comments based on previously existing patterns emerging from news, social media, and user reports. Since anti-Soros conspiracy theories are a global phenomenon" (Plenta 2020, 2), it is only logical that Soros' critics (Brzeski (Feb 2, 2016, YT); Ziemkiewicz (Feb 12, 2016, YT)) are cautious when referring to this billionaire if they do not want to risk their work being removed from the platform.

liberal Civic Platform took power, and Law and Justice lost an election for the first time since its victory in 2005. By concentrating on articles from the period between 2007-2019, I was able to study discourses which emerged under two different administrations, making comparisons in approaches toward Soros easier. Most articles were drawn from online electronic archives, using the keyword “Soros” entered into their search engines (Grotowska 2019, 101). Compiled databases of articles were screened for duplicates and articles produced by wire services (for example, by the Polish Press Agency), and such articles were removed (as in Derek 2015, 7). I kept articles that mentioned Soros in passing (e.g., “most of these [NGOs] are sponsored by a very well-known person in Poland - George Soros” (Łysiak Tomasz GP August 23, 2017)), or in which he was not the central figure of the article (“puppets, but not of Soros!” (Lisiewicz Piotr, May 24, GP 2017)), because even the slightest reference to him reflected the shifts in discourse about Soros taking place in Poland So. In the end, n= 1042 articles were read (Table 1), and an increase of interest in Soros starting from 2016 was documented.<sup>71</sup>

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>07</b>	<b>08</b>	<b>09</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>Sum</b>
<i>Polityka</i>	8	17	23	5	4	5	6	9	6	<b>19</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>37</b>	246
<i>Wprost</i>	4	8	11	12	18	7	4	4	4	<b>15</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>19</b>	172
<i>Nasz Dziennik</i>						6	7	6	2	<b>14</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>19</b>	9	12	102
<i>Rzecz- Pospolita</i>		7	8	7	7	4	2	1	2	8	5	2	2	4	59
<i>Gazeta. Polska</i>							1	2	4	<b>15</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>29</b>	17	120
<i>Do Rzeczy</i>							2			10	<b>39</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>35</b>	135

<sup>71</sup> The press had a delay in comparison to the Internet which was able to react instantaneously and nearly without oversight to what was going on in the country. For this reason, the rise in interest in Soros was noticeable on the Internet already in 2015, but in the press only in 2016.

<i>Sieci</i>										7	5		4		16
<i>Gazeta. Wyborcza</i>	6	21	21	11	14	11	1	6	4	18	23	28	17	11	192
<b>Sum</b>	18	53	63	35	43	33	23	28	22	106	203	151	129	135	<b><u>1042</u></b>

Table 1. Soros Mentions in the Polish Press, 2007-2020

In recognition of the relevance of the Internet for younger news consumers, I analyzed discourses on Soros appearing on Polish YouTube (more on that in Chapters 4 and 5). After restricting the YouTube search engine to comb through Polish language YouTube channels and playlists only, as well as any other data generated in this country, I identified 630 videos that mentioned Soros. After coding, n=291 were left (Figure 2).<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, I removed from my database videos that were no longer available,<sup>73</sup> but I kept them for qualitative analysis if I was able to jot down notes (quotes, mentions) on their content (see Pihlaja 2014, 28).<sup>74 75</sup> Viewing numbers spread from 320 (the least watched video) up to 1,377, 216 (the most). The length of the videos ranged from less than a minute to more than two hours. I categorized them based on their origin, using the classification introduced by Burgess and Green (2013, 38). Accordingly, there were three types of videos about Soros on YouTube: those uploaded by amateurs that were

<sup>72</sup> Less than half of the videos were kept because it is common for identical videos to be reposted under a slightly different title (Strangelove 2010, 21).

<sup>73</sup> As the announcement under the broken link indicated, “the account associated with this video has been terminated”.

<sup>74</sup> Very often such videos were not playable, but their titles remained visible (e.g., “What types of Jews rule the world—Bolesław Szenicer on George Soros and burnt effigy”- March 5, 2018, YT). The most likely explanation for the removal of this content is the offensive nature of a video that was reported and subsequently deleted by YouTube administrators.

<sup>75</sup> Much as I wanted to, I did not store the 291 selected videos due to YouTube’s “Terms of Service” from 2019 preventing me from doing so (Burno-Kaliszuk 2020, 584 and <https://www.youtube.com/static?gl=GB&template=terms>).

often recorded in home settings, those that were independently produced and released by established ‘vloggers,’ and lastly political shows produced by traditional media companies which had news-like character, scenography, lighting, and setting (Ibid.; Grochowski 2017). In analyzed YouTube videos pertaining to Soros, from the middle of 2014 onwards, corresponding with the beginning of the political campaign that started in earnest in 2015, there was a notable increase in attention devoted to the billionaire.

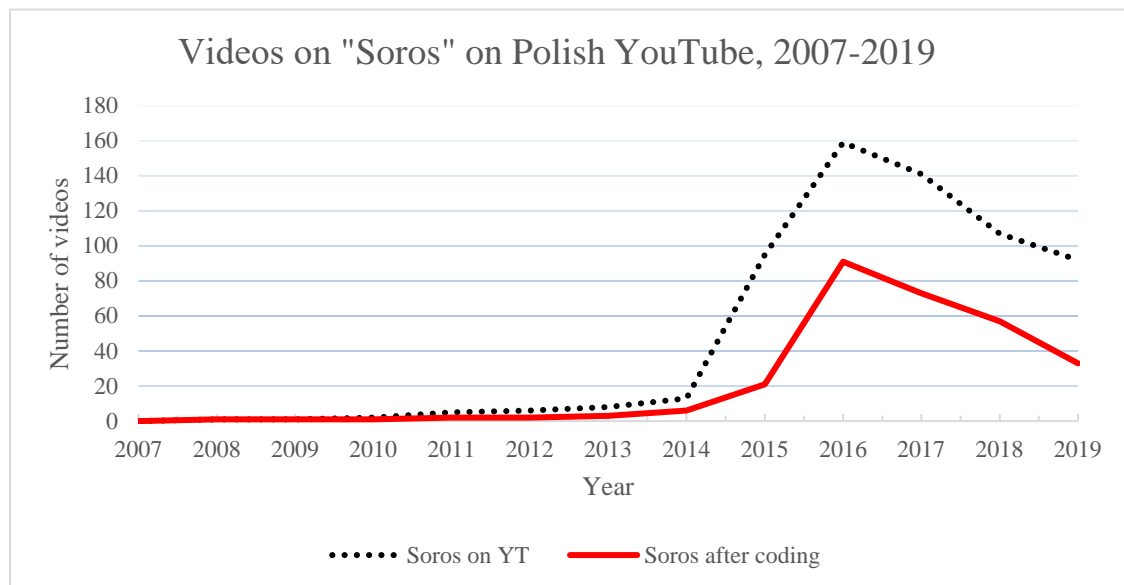


Figure 2. Videos on "Soros" on Polish YouTube, 2007-2019

The plotting of view counts demonstrates a similar trend (Figure 3). Caution needs to be exercised, because view counts merely demonstrate the number of times a particular video was watched (Strangelove 2010, 106). In other words, one person could have watched one video a thousand times, for instance, to boost its viewing count which would then force the algorithm to display it more often (Burgess and Green 2009, 8; van Dijck 2013, 124). The total viewing count does not represent the number of separate IP addresses, thus separate people, who have watched a particular video. So, from an

analytical point of view, there is a huge difference between one user playing a video on a loop one thousand times and one thousand viewers watching one video once (Sloan and Quan- Hasse 2017, 174; Christensen 2008, 162).

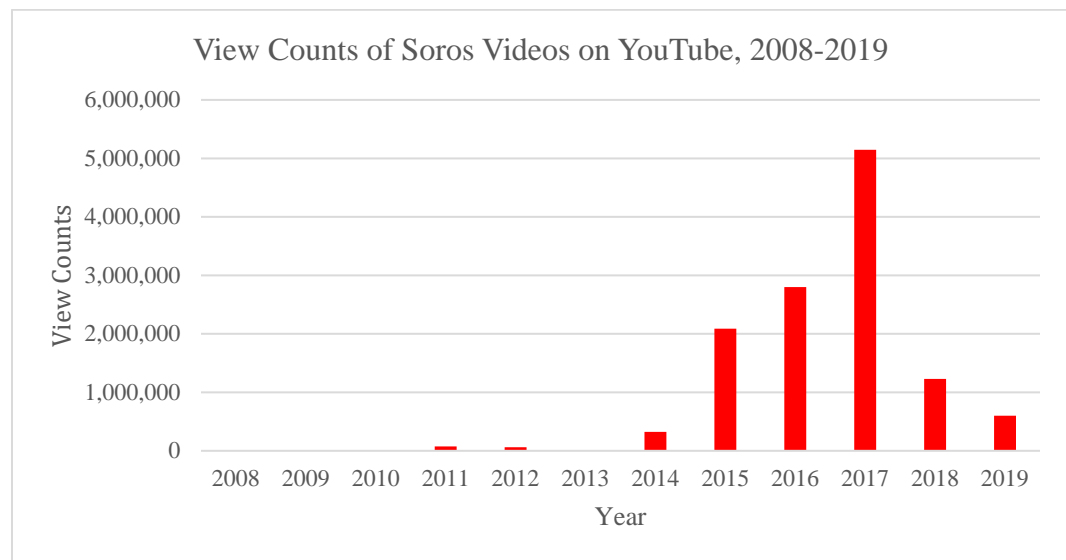


Figure 3. View Counts of Soros Videos on YouTube, 2008-2019

To verify previous data, I used another measure; graphing the number of comments under the videos about George Soros (Figure 4) which confirm an increase of interest in him. The most commented upon video sported 7,643 comments, but again, caution is required as many comments might have been deleted due to their offensive character. But because it is the commenters themselves who are most likely to alert administrators if they stumble upon an instance of hate speech<sup>76</sup>, I hypothesize that not many reports were filed (see Strangelove 2010, 19).

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<sup>76</sup> What is understood as a hate speech and how its uses are moderated varies from country to country. In Poland, article 256 of the Penal Code penalizes hate speech that targets national, racial, ethnic, or religious background. There is no law that protects the LGBTQ+ community (Pen Code, art. 256, §§1-4). Furthermore, article 54 of Polish constitution from 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 1997, protects freedom of speech (Polish Const., art. 54, §§1-2). Article 13 outlaws forming political



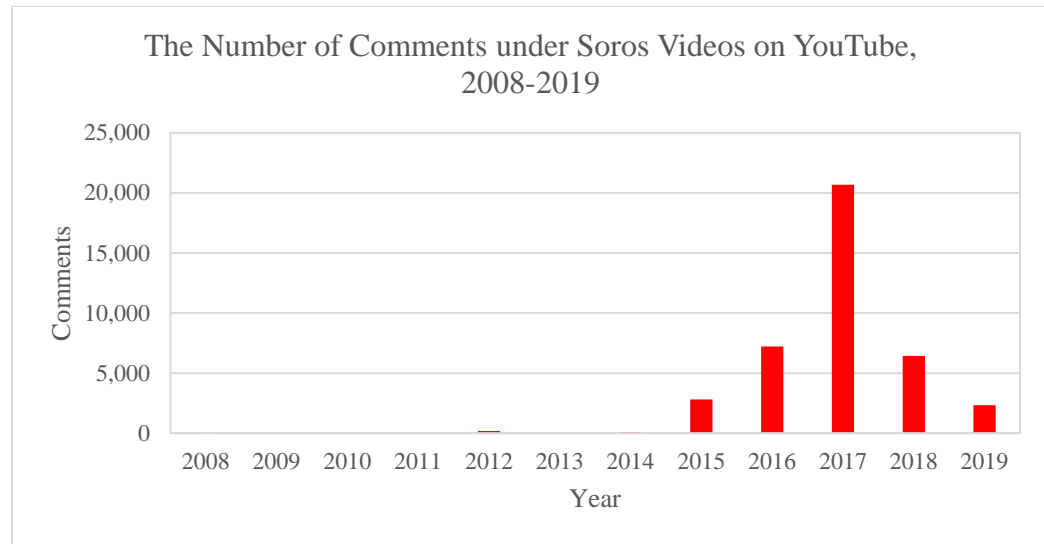


Figure 4. The Number of Comments under Soros Videos on YouTube, 2008-2019

Lastly, I turned to public television, to one of the most often watched evening news programmes, *Wiadomości*, to determine if a particular discourse on George Soros moved from the margins and into the centre of Polish politics and the mainstream media.<sup>77</sup> Using the broadcaster’s search engine, eight episodes were analyzed. In each of them, Soros was at the centre of at least one segment, most of which can be interpreted as deploying varying degrees of antisemitic rhetoric. One of the segments was titled “Soros’s Networks Entwine the EU,” (October 29, 2017, TVP1) which apart from criticizing powerful actors and supranational institutions of the globalized world also

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parties or other organizations whose mission supports totalitarian methods or actions that follow Nazi, communist, or fascistic ideologies (Polish Const., art. 13, §1). Article 35 of the Polish constitution guarantees the protection of national and ethnic minorities (Polish Const., art. 35, §§1-2).

<sup>77</sup> Even though I did not determine if there was an increase in coverage of Soros in *Wiadomości* under the Law and Justice government, in comparison with this show under Civic Platform rule (different media outlets reported that trend Szacki 2018; Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 631)), I bring this qualitative data to bear to help analyze the aggregate quantitative results from all of the studied outlets.

invoke age-old stereotyping imagery depicting Jews as the secret rulers of the world (Byford 2011, 77, 95). In another instance, journalists at *Wiadomości* stated that with “money earned on the stock market Soros decided to build the New World Order” (July 20, 2017 TVP). The existence of episodes which made use of such rhetoric confirms that the way Soros was talked about in the past on the margins had indeed moved into the centre of mainstream politics and media.

If we combine the data gathered from all the above-mentioned sources and plot them on one graph (Figure 5), several trends become apparent. Around 2008, at the time of the economic crisis, Soros was mentioned positively as an expert by centre-left *Polityka*, and similarly in the centre-right publication *Wprost*. Four years later, shortly before the 2015 election campaigns, Rydzyk- founded media outlets *Radio Maryja* and *Nasz Dziennik*, started devoting more attention to Soros. Very quickly other mainstream right-wing weeklies such as *Gazeta Polska*, *Sieci*, and *Do Rzeczy* picked up the topic as well. This had a ripple effect on more moderate papers and weeklies—*Rzeczpospolita*<sup>78</sup>, *Wprost*, and *Polityka*—all began to devote space to discussing anti-Sorosism, at times debunking it (Baczyński August 24, 2021), while on other occasions strengthening it (Memches November 27, 2016). But the fact that in 2016 national news journalists devoted entire segments to George Soros, in the aftermath of a speech by

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<sup>78</sup> *Rzeczpospolita* is another mainstream Polish daily of conservative provenience. I have explained elsewhere why dailies were not preferred sources for this analysis. Additionally, studies by Płatek and Plucienniczak find that *Rzeczpospolita* reports only 20% of incidents involving the far right in comparison with other dailies (2017, 86). Thus, I excluded this source from the qualitative study, but included articles mentioning Soros in the quantitative analysis to see if there has been a rising trend in the coverage of this billionaire.

the leader of Law and Justice, Jarosław Kaczyński, at a party gathering that was broadcasted on the national news in June (June 8, 2016, TVP1). This gave the green light to other, especially pro-government magazines such as *Do Rzeczy* and *Sieci*, to cast the “Man who broke the Bank of England” in the role of scapegoat.

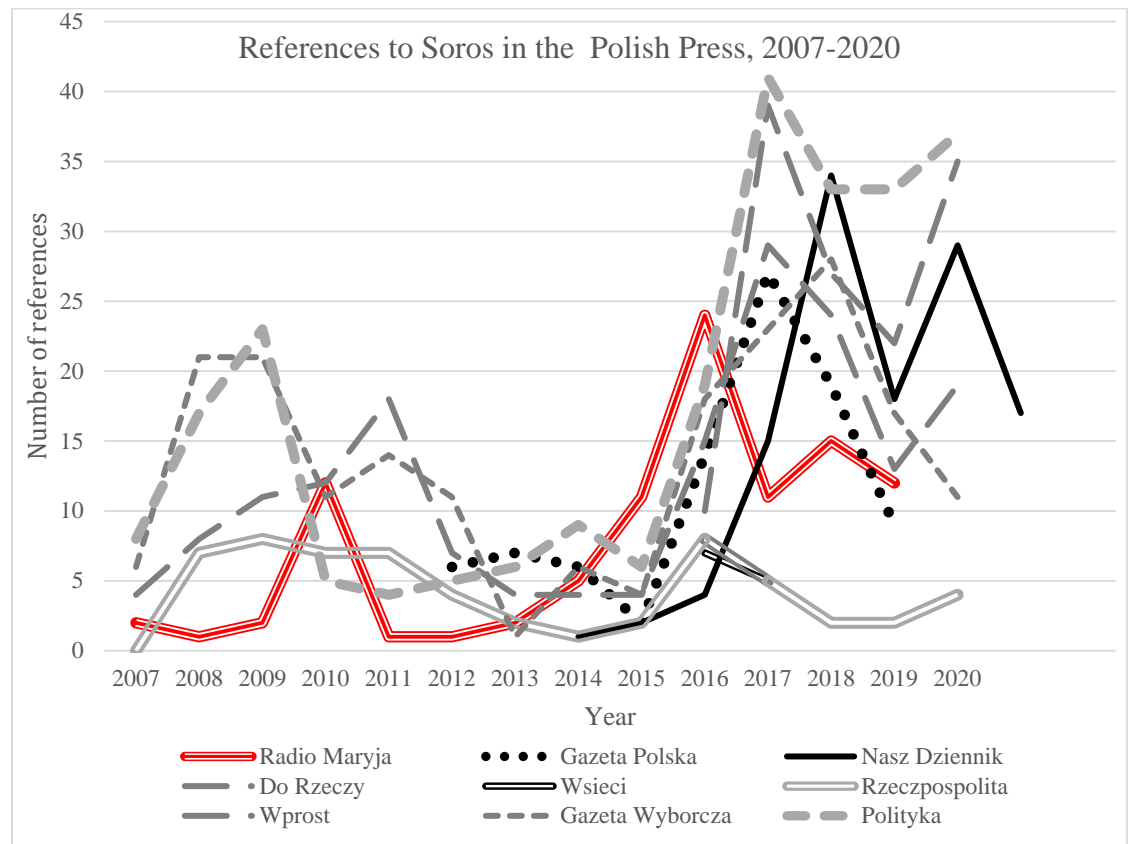


Figure 5. References to Soros in the Polish Press, 2007-2020

### 2.4.2 Qualitative Methods: What Did the Move from the Margins to Centre Look Like?

After answering the question as to whether there was a migration of negative coverage of George Soros from the margins into the centre of political discourse, the rest of this dissertation will focus on the two remaining questions. First, what this move

looked like, that is, what was the importance of political battles occurring in the country, and the role of the international circulation of attacks on this billionaire, as well as Poland's unique media ecology, and the relevance of intergenerational dynamics in this process. And then secondly, why it happened. In this section, I will explain how I approached answering them. First, I will elaborate my choice of methods. Then I will review the methodological procedures I followed. Lastly, I will briefly summarize my findings that will in turn be discussed in greater detail in later chapters.

Far from idealizing the quantitative method as giving access to the 'objective social reality' (Rasmussen 2017, 200), my quantification outcomes confirmed the abundant qualitative results. It was also reassuring to find that the results I arrived at were not merely outcomes that I was unconsciously looking for (Ibid. 237; Maćkiewicz 2020, 625).

"How" and "why" questions are better answered using qualitative methods because they are designed to deal with phenomena that are not easily quantifiable. These methods capture emotions, intentions, value systems, and nuances that can only be

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comprehended when identified in wider, non-data-driven, contexts (Kozinets 2010, 55; Latzko- Toth, Bonneau and Millette in Sloan et al. 2017, 202). For this analysis, I utilized four qualitative methods that I believe fit best in answering these research questions. I relied on ethnographic, netnographic, and visual-focused methods to provide data for answers to “how” questions. Responding to the “why” question directed me towards discourse analysis and historical research.<sup>79</sup>

#### **2.4.2.1 Ethnography and Netnography**

According to my hypothesis, *Radio Maryja* has served as a repository of negative discourse about George Soros in Poland. Answering the question as to how the movement of discourse on Soros to the centre of electoral politics and into the mainstream media appeared, required a full description of data, and the production of an ethnography of *Radio Maryja*—methods that were best suited to the task. Staying immersed in the material drawn from *Radio Maryja* for months allowed for the collection of a rich quantity of data on the shared values, code talk, rituals, and symbols (Latzko-Toth et al. 2017, 204; Kozinets 2010, 55). In this way, I became intimately acquainted with “dynamic webs of meaning” (Harambam 2020, 288), the contexts, frames, commonly shared narratives, and points of reference known only to those long-time listeners of this station who form a ‘community of discourse’ (Mamul and Krakowiak 2008, 242). This enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the points of view of

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<sup>79</sup> I complemented this with statistical data and country-wide survey results (Delanty and Isin 2003).

*Radio Maryja's* community, and of the meanings attached to words that are uttered on the air and their accompanying emotions. I concentrated my analysis on this community's perception and assessment of Soros (Ibid. 202; Boellstorff, Nardi and Pearce 2012, 20; Meler et al. 2018, 249-50).

After verifying my hypothesis that YouTube shows an increase in interest in Soros with the quantitative method discussed above, I wished to better understand what such an increase means.<sup>81 82</sup> To answer this question, I applied the ethnographic method to YouTube which allowed me to grasp the narratives about this philanthro-capitalist circulating on this platform. As a method, netnography means observing what users do on social media, or collecting "extant data," as it is called by researchers of online milieus (Sloan and Quan- Hasse 2017, 182; Poynter 2010, 108). Since the form 'doing' acquires online differs from that of "real life," I primarily relied on comments (often chains of comments that led to 'sparring' between commenters) posted in response to videos pertaining to Soros, and analyzed other reactions as well as, including channel subscriptions, video posts, video-responses, likes, dislikes, and other 'digital traces' (Latzko-Toth et al. 2017, 200). I considered this data particularly worthy of investigation because it was unobtrusively obtained, and less likely to be manipulated than,

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<sup>81</sup> It could mean different things. As Łukasz Drozda argues, some far-right channels, like that of Eugeniusz Sandecki, are watched by bored left-wing users who watch it ironically and just for laughs (2013, 131).

<sup>82</sup> During my YouTube analysis, it became clear that vloggers realized that mentioning "Soros" in their tags or in the titles of their videos increased their revenue because they drew more eyeballs as people were particularly interested in the billionaire. These vloggers get a detailed, second by second report outlining what their audience finds interesting (Fortuna 2019, 9). Thus, the original interest in Soros could have been driven by users' curiosity, but it could have also been the case that as time passed it was artificially bolstered by vloggers' financial incentives.

for example, the phone-ins of listeners to *Radio Maryja*, who may have never made it to air if the content of their messages had not fit the stations' agenda (Kozinets 2010, 56). Furthermore, by studying comments I was able to observe how the language used by the elites to talk about Soros affected the citizens (see Tymińska 2020, 2).

#### **2.4.2.2 Visual Sociology and Multimedia Ethnography**

The bulk of data collected in this study was visual. This is not a consequence of a belief that visual phenomena are more tangible, objective, and less ambivalent than other types of information (Latzko-Toth et al. 2017, 217). If anything, the opposite is true in the Web 2.0 era, which has made the constructed nature of the visual medium even clearer (Ibid.; Marvasti 2003, 63). Visual data does not exist outside of the social context from which it originates and which it co-creates; it always carries meaning about the culture of which it is a product (Rasmussen 2017, 239) and attracts sociologists' attention (Zubrzycki 2017, 3). The access to audience's reactions to the visual by YouTube's comments section makes deciphering of that meaning easier through capturing their reaction to the visual material commented on and their interpretative processing of that material (Marvasti 2003, 64). Following a well-established tradition in sociology, the visual, and responses to it, could not have been ignored in this analysis (Ibid. 2003, 70; Pink 2013, 131,).

In this research, not only did I include YouTube videos about Soros circulating online but also photographs, and Polish memes/posters. Associated descriptions, tags, and captions related to this visual material were also considered, as they all contribute

to meaning making (Rasmussen 2017, 234). I found these images through a Google search, restricted only to Polish, using the keyword “Soros,” and then restricting the search field to “images,” that is, only to the visual search outcomes (Rasmussen 2017, 236). I selected ones that had captions photoshopped onto them only in Polish, a choice motivated by the desire to single out visual objects that required more effort to create beyond copying foreign (mostly American) anti-Soros posters and memes. Other visual categories placed under the magnifying glass were press covers, headlines, and segments of papers and magazines where Soros’ image or his name was placed to attract reader attention (see Appendix I) (Maćkiewicz 2020, 624; Kaszewski 2012, 33). Lastly, eight segments pertaining to Soros from the public broadcast of the evening news were studied.

### **2.4.2.3 Discourse Analysis**

Discourses construct social reality rather than just describe it (Marvasti 2003, 107). Any medium that uses language, whether consisting of words, images, videos, or sounds, creates meanings that can later acquire a life of their own. Any medium that includes and moderates human conversations, whether taking place in YouTube comments or radio phone-in programs, does the same; shared values are expressed, and social worlds are co-created across these interactions (Strangelove 2010, 145; Rasmussen 2017, 24). For that reason, I have used discourse analysis to assist in answering the question of “how,” and perhaps even more so, “why,” the move from margins to the centre of anti-Soros discourse took place to better comprehend it.

While conducting discourse analysis I devoted equal attention to written texts, images, as well as to transcribed *Radio Maryja* conversations, and comment thread on



YouTube. I treated audio-visual and textual materials as equally important because they co-exist in the media ecosystem. They are not closed containers of meaning, but rather invariably interact with other media through sharing, citing, and referencing. Through this process they evolve. From this perspective, studying the construction of narratives about Soros and their move from the margins to the centre required an inter-textual analysis. Thus, I looked for emerging key themes, arguments, and tropes linked to Soros that appeared across *Radio Maryja*, the Polish press, YouTube, public television, and memes (Rasmussen 2017, 244), and studied how they were repeated by or reverberated in other media outlets.

Discourses are inherently embedded in larger socio-cultural contexts (Maćkiewicz 2020, 624), and so it is crucial to study them as linked to the complexity of both distant and more recent history, old narratives, and ancient tropes, as well as ideologies of the past and present (Żuk and Żuk 2018, 136; Derek 2016, 6; Shibata 2009, 258). With that in mind, I investigated the coverage of Soros as a phenomenon linked to the past, in particular in Poland in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Calhoun in Delanty and Isin 2003, 384).

#### **2.4.2.4 Historical Methods**

In Chapter 1, I explained why George Soros became a likely object of attack around the world and how his occupying positions in fields ruled by opposing logics made the basis for criticism of him justified. Then, in my quantitative analysis I demonstrated that in 2015 after the Law and Justice party won the Polish elections, he became a default scapegoat in the eyes of this party. I did not, however, outline the

specificities of the Polish context in which the vilification of Soros took place—that will take place in Chapter 3 where I will investigate the negative coverage of this billionaire as a phenomenon that is informed by the past in the tradition of historical sociology (Smith 1991). To this end, I will apply the rationale and methods of historical ethnography, anthropology, and sociology, looking at aspects of Polish history, including that of antisemitism, transformation, and the persistent fear of foreign occupation as holding pieces of the puzzle that help to explain the rise in anti-Soros sentiment in 2015-2017 (Ibid. 3; Vaughan 1996, 61, see Zubrzycki 2006, 17).

By studying Soros' unprecedented involvement in Poland during the transition to capitalism in 1989, I will establish the fact that his actions, interpreted in a hostile environment, could have been read as instances of interference by a self-interested foreigner in the affairs of a sovereign nation. I will document how such a hostile environment was gradually built on the margins of Polish media landscape—in particular by *Radio Maryja*. Simultaneously, I will recognize the attempts to repeatedly discredit Soros' initiatives by comparing them to the actions of “Poland's past enemies” (see Calhoun in Delanty and Isin 2003, 385) presented on the airwaves of this station as instances of engagement in doing the politics of history. By using the past to imbue the present with desired meaning and frame it to their liking, the hosts and guests on *Radio Maryja* have treated it as a resource to be used. Thus, in Chapter 3 I will revisit aspects of Polish history that could help to better understand the emergence of anti-Sorosism in 2015 (see Vaughan 1996, 61; Delanty and Isin 2003, 2). Moreover, throughout this entire dissertation, I engage with classical themes of historical sociology

such as modernization, the dichotomy of tradition versus modernity, and nationalism which are essential for the presented case study (Delanty and Isin 2003, 205-6).

## **2.5. Summary**

In this chapter, I reviewed the sources I have used for analyzing the coverage of George Soros in Poland and provided explanations for their inclusion. The goal of this study is to capture the change in the representation of this billionaire across different media outlets over the span of a decade. Chosen sources vary in several ways; some are alternative or even marginal (*Gazeta Polska*), others mainstream (*Wiadomości*), and still others are intermediate (*Radio Maryja*). Irrespective of their position on the market as defined by sales, whether they are consumed by millions or thousands, they are significant to the local mediascape as they have an opinion-forming influence on the Polish public sphere. In terms of political orientation, the sources analyzed cater primarily to conservative and right-wing audiences. An exception was made for two left-leaning press titles (the daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* and weekly *Polityka*) that were used as points of comparison to grasp the qualitative difference in coverage of this philanthropist across the political spectrum. Engaging with different senses was another element considered while selecting sources. Data extracted for this study was auditory, textual, and visual in character. This variability of sources also guaranteed including diverse audiences (i.e., age, gender, and class) through their preferred modes of acquiring information, which assisted in comprehending how coverage on Soros was presented to them and deducting its potential effect.

Quantitative research found a considerable increase of interest in Soros in 2015 and beyond, a time that coincided with the political campaign of the Law and Justice party, which ran on an anti-refugee platform negatively implicating “The Man Who Broke the Bank of England” In this period, the name of this billionaire was typed into the Google search browser as a keyword more often than ever before. Viewer counts and comments for YouTube videos pertaining to him also significantly went up. Parallel to this was the growth of attention devoted to Soros by the Polish press and public television which started with a delay in 2016.

A discourse analysis of images, radio, and public television programs demonstrated that callers, vloggers, journalists, and hosts all used very similar arguments in discrediting Soros. The narratives presented repeatedly blamed him for the refugee crisis, the economic transformation of 1989, purposefully weakening the national and religious identity of Poles by promoting liberal ideologies, and most recently, of orchestrating the COVID-19 pandemic. Just a few years ago, such rhetoric would have been restricted to the margins<sup>83</sup> due to its inflammatory and conspiratorial character. After 2015, however, it could be seen openly in the mainstream media as pundits, politicians, and journalists shared their unflattering views of Soros. All of this suggests

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<sup>83</sup> However, already in 1989 there were signals that such inflammatory language could easily enter the mainstream if certain conditions were met. An event that demonstrated that very well, was the conflict over the papal cross that was erected in the vicinity of the Auschwitz death camp which completely disregarded the symbolism of this place for Jews which resulted in a strong reaction from the international community. In turn, Poles who historically have been resistant to receiving instruction responded with even more hostility (Zubrzycki 2006, 11). Consequently, far-right radical rhetoric entered the mainstream (Ibid, 14).

that there has been a transfer of ideas about Soros between different media outlets, much of which can be traced back to *Radio Maryja*, the radio station where they first emerged. A historical analysis of discourses that are inevitably embedded in larger socio-cultural contexts (Maćkiewicz 2020, 624) can give us clues as to why the negative coverage of Soros gained traction in Poland in 2015. In short, it can help to answer the “why” question regarding the growth of anti-Soros rhetoric. Historically oriented study demonstrates that Poland’s history, both recent and distant, contains prejudiced ancient tropes, hatreds, and ideologies that have informed the ways in which George Soros was discussed, first on *Radio Maryja’s* airwaves, and then during the election of 2015 when segments of the population began to respond more positively to its presence. In-depth answers to the “why” and “how” questions of this dynamic will be presented in Chapters 3,4, and 5.

## **Chapter 3 The Scapegoating of George Soros in Poland Before 2015 3**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In Chapter 1, I explained why George Soros became a controversial figure around the world, and how this made him an easy target for various egregious attacks as well as justified critiques. In this chapter I will explain which periods of Polish history were relevant to the formation and positive reception of anti-Soros conspiracy theories. First, I will focus on the specificities surrounding Soros controversies in Poland by examining in detail his role in the economic transition of 1989 which became known as “shock therapy”. Before doing that, however, I will summarize the situation in Poland after World War II to situate the later transformation, in a broader historical context. Using this as a basis, I will sketch a historical backdrop against which the scapegoating of this billionaire emerged. In doing so, I will take my cue from conspiracy theory scholarship which stresses the importance of outlining larger historical and ideological contexts to better understand the appeal of conspiratorial narratives and how they came into being (Astapova et al. 2021, 20; Dentith 2021, 268; Harambam 2020, 280; Butter and Knight 2019, 42). As I explained in the introduction, I will follow this path because the propagators of conspiracy theories promote less popular or “alternative” (Moreno and Vegetti 2021) interpretations of the past events to attract people to their political agenda (Thalmann 2019, 3; Önnarfors and Krouewl 2021, 262).

Thus, after sketching out the historical context, I will demonstrate that for years Soros was attacked for his involvement in “shock therapy,” and for his progressive views—highlighted primarily on the margins of the mediasphere and political discourse,

such as on the airwaves of *Radio Maryja*. I will characterize this radio station, including its highly antisemitic programming and describe how, despite promoting divisive views over the course of decades, it gained popularity in Poland that counted millions of listeners, allowing it to move into the mainstream while amassing unparalleled political power in the process. Lastly, I will discuss the vilification of Soros through referring to Poland's past on Rydzyk's station, which will direct me to the analysis of elements of country's history mattered for the development of attacks on him (Vaughan 1996, 59, 61). This will allow me to tackle the "why" question, that is, why the targeting of this philanthropist in Poland was possible and successful. I will conclude that his involvement in the economic transition from 1989 compounded by the influence of *Radio Maryja*, which designated him as one of the major enemies of the country, in combination with centuries-old veins of xenophobia, antisemitism, and anti-elitism, made him an ideal scapegoat for political attacks.

### **3.1.1 A Snapshot of Polish History after the WWII**

The Second World War brought massive and brutal damage to Poland. Millions of people died, and even more were imprisoned, enslaved, and dehumanized; families were broken, lives shattered, and the country was left in rubble (Snyder 2010, 9, 68, 153). Even though the killing machine of war stopped in 1945, the following years in Poland were still filled with chaos, anarchy, and persecutions (Koczanowicz 2012, 815, see also Prażmowska 2004, 192).

In a turn of events resented by many citizens, the Second Republic of Poland was replaced by the People's Republic of Poland; a client state of the Soviet Union. Those who were defiant in the face of this change became targets of the new regime and were declared enemies of the system, ending up jailed, killed, or forced to leave the country (Ibid. 191; Ögelman 1995, 168; Ost 1989, 162, 163). When Stalin died in 1953, the situation improved somewhat as the worst of the repression halted and authorities began to modernize the country (Prażmowska 2004, 195, 199).

Even though many people's lives changed for the better,<sup>84</sup> the system of rule after 1956 was arguably still totalitarian (Kula 1993, 189). Things became much harder again in the mid '60s, as the price of basic goods climbed, workers and students expressed their disappointment with the communist authorities through a series of strikes and protests that continued to break out in, 1968, 1970, 1976, and 1980 (Holc 1992, 127; Ost 1989, 163). Hundreds were wounded and imprisoned (Topolski 2015, Ch XII). The fact that a new, more reconciliatory First Secretary, Edward Gierek, was appointed in the meantime did not resolve the situation. He created an illusion of prosperity in Poland by borrowing heavily from the West, a move which, in the end, only made matters worse as Poles' hopes and dreams were lifted in the seventies before quickly crashing down a decade later when they had to pay off the mounting foreign debt (Kowalik 2011, 81; Kemp-Welch 2008, 243, 187).

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<sup>84</sup> Among the achievements of that period were: increased urbanization and industrialization, the development of infrastructure, village-town migration, the upward social mobility of peasants and the working-class, as well as increased life expectancy and decreased rates of illiteracy (Mokrzycki 1997, 200).



### 3.1.2 Not a Revolution: The Gradual Transition of Power in Poland

A decade later, in the '80s, circumstances would change yet again following a series of events that took place. First, in 1978, the election of Pole Karol Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II provided some hope for people that there might be a better future ahead. During this period, the Church took the side of *Solidarność* [Solidarity], an emerging social movement that opposed the communist party. In doing so, the clergy lifted spirits and stoked an enthusiasm that translated into more resistance and political action (Kemp-Welch 2008, 228, 205; Marody 1997, 309). The movement culminated in 1980, when workers from the Gdańsk shipyard began their protests<sup>85</sup> (Mokrzycki 1997, 233; Walicki 2000, 239). Their major demands included stopping wage stagnation, food price hikes, the extension of working hours, and censorship (Kemp-Welch 2008, 86, 149, 207; Prażmowska 2004, 200). From this period, the myth of Solidarity as a political movement transcending social divisions, uniting both workers and the members of intelligentsia to fight the communist system was born (Mason, Nelson and Szklarski. 1991, 209, 211). But the energy and enthusiasm of these protests of the early '80s did not last long,<sup>86</sup> and soon Solidarity lost its impetus (Rae 2008, 255) and some amount of its popular appeal (Curry 1988, 494). As ideological differences resurfaced and conflicting

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<sup>85</sup> Among its leaders was Lech Wałęsa, who made use of Catholic religious symbols to stress the inseparability of the Polish national struggle from religion. In doing so he continued the 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition of positioning the Church as the protector of national identity.

<sup>86</sup> The protests led to the 1981 proclamation of martial law by the last communist leader, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, who feared involvement on the part of the Soviet military to quell the unrest and the consequent potential for bloodshed. For these and other reasons, he put an end to the protests in Gdańsk (Rae 2008, 255).

interests became more pronounced, Lech Wałęsa<sup>87</sup> took a leadership role in the Solidarity movement (Ost 1989, 169). He wanted to change the system through negotiation with the communist authorities, an approach that went against the wishes of the more radical factions of the movement who considered reaching any compromise with the communists as treason (Friszke, 1990, 310; Grabowski 1996, 237; Rae 2008, 255). However, contrary to the popular misconception of Solidarity members as never yielding to the authoritarian regime, nor reaching compromise with them, the reality was quite different. Up until 1981 Solidarity co-governed with the communist elite (Prażmowska 2004, 207, Ost 1989, 167), leading many communists to realize that fundamental economic reforms were long overdue (Grudzińska-Gross 1992, 142; Kula 1993, 190; Poznański 1993, 396).<sup>88</sup>

Consequently, the revolution that took place in Poland that was admired around the world for its unprecedented peaceful character was in actuality not all that unprecedented (Miształ 1995, 19). It was a “political transition,” and an economic “administrative imposition” rather than a revolution or a coup (Tymowski 1993, 200). In the end, opposition leaders together with the Warsaw intellectuals who wanted to lead the masses to independence, sat down with the communist authorities at a roundtable in April 1989 and reached an agreement (Friszke 1990, 309; Grabowski 1996, 237-8).

This accord resulted in the legalization of unions, a division of power between Solidarity

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<sup>87</sup>As David Ost stresses, at the National Congress in September 1981 Lech Wałęsa made it clear what the three “pillars of the existing political establishment were: workers councils, Solidarity, and the party-state administration.” He then assigned a role to each of them. “Workers councils would ensure continuing factory representation for workers, Solidarity would promote particular societal interests on a national level, while the party (which Wałęsa significantly called the “party-state”) would keep its formal control of the state” (Ost 1989, 167).

<sup>88</sup>They began experimenting with a gradual introduction of capitalist economic elements (Ibid. 171; Kula 1993, 190; Kiss 1994, 132; Poznański 1993, 396; Millard 1996, 209).

leaders and the old elites, as well as an agreement on radical economic reforms—reforms instituted in consultation with Jeffrey Sachs and George Soros (Topolski 2015, Ch. XII; Tymowski 1993, 188). Soon, new elections were held, and the democratization of Poland began (Ibid. 188).

### **3.1.3 Solidarity's Project of Transcending Social Divisions and How it Failed**

Many argued, and continue to do so,<sup>89</sup> that the political change of 1989 was superficial, largely accomplished under colonial conditions,<sup>90</sup> and meant little more than an extension of the collaboration between the newly emerging post-Solidarity elites and the old communist establishment<sup>91 92</sup>(Friszke 1990, 310; Jasiewicz 2008, 13).

The accusations of alleged treason related to national emancipation directed at Wałęsa's realist camp and the roundtable signatories (including the Warsaw intelligentsia) intensified when the dramatic consequences of economic reform surfaced, eventually

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<sup>89</sup> Especially the leader of the ruling Law and Justice party, Jarosław Kaczyński who played a role in the transition but lost in various power struggles against the leader of Solidarity, Lech Wałęsa.

<sup>90</sup> A very popular view, especially among Law and Justice supporters and *Radio Maryja* listeners, was expressed by Polish sociologist Jadwiga Staniszkis. She argued that the smooth transition was possible due to the communist elites' desire to secure their political as well as economic position in a newly democratic Poland (Staniszkis 1990, 136-137). Kiss and Hanley claimed that "nomenclature privatization," or the privatization of state assets that ended up in the hands of the former communist elite, as well as "the grand embourgeoisement of former nomenklatura members, never took plac" (2000, 177).

<sup>91</sup> Soltan demonstrates that the process of "recycling elites" (Lubecki and Szczegółka 2007, 19) did not take place. Instead, the mid-level management of the communist era together with the intelligentsia who were connected to Solidarity, simply replaced the old ruling elites (2000, 118, 134)

<sup>92</sup> Such a reading of the political reshuffling that accompanied regime change was not unique to Poland. In other countries that underwent transition in the region, similar accusations were mounted towards elites (Dentith 2021, 281; Astapova, Onoriu, Corneliu and Scheibner 2021).

becoming a consistent presence in Polish society (Grabowski 1996, 241; Brier 2009, 80, Kulas 2018, 25).<sup>93</sup> In the early years of economic restructuring, a period that became known as “shock therapy,” rates of suicide and crime rose, wages stagnated or decreased, and thousands of jobs were eliminated. Unemployment hit a record high, as did child poverty, working conditions deteriorated, trade unions weakened, and economic disparities soared (Czapiński 1995, 290; Kowalik 2011, 267, 148; Poznański 2001, 207; Paczyńska 2005, 573; Ziółkowski 1994, 306). The segments of Polish society hit hardest by these reforms were the workers and peasants (Kwaśniewicz 2003, 388).

A question arises: how did it happen that Solidarity, as a social movement that was formed by workers for workers, essentially supported reforms that acted against their own interests (Ibid., 394)? The answer lies in an ideological shift that was taking place. Workers wanted a quality of life that they saw represented in Western media (Western soap operas had become popular in Poland at the time), and for them Solidarity represented a means to that end. As a result, they uncritically entrusted Solidarity’s intelligentsia and economic experts with implementing reforms (Kojder 1998, 260),<sup>94</sup> leading to inadequate representation of the interests of rank-and-file members of Solidarity (Sztompka 1998, 52). Consequently, the inter-class solidarity between workers and the intelligentsia that had emerged in the early ‘80s during Gdańsk strikes, crumbled (Kula 1993, 195). Eventually, new elites were formed from at least two very different

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<sup>93</sup> Interestingly, scholars “who provide the most powerful accounts of the outcomes of the transformation” are from the West (e.g., David Ost, Elizabeth Dunn and Jane Hardy; (Woźniak 2014, 178)).

<sup>94</sup> Or as Ost and Weinstein put it, alternately “beliefs shaped the outcome, not interests” (1998, 29; see also Pinior 2007, 271).

former ideological groups: mid-level communist bureaucrats<sup>95</sup> and intelligentsia linked to the Solidarity movement (Soltan 2000, 118, 134). The former group was made up by post-peasant intelligentsia, that is, people who were socially upwardly mobile during communism and who would be most accurately described through categories of “economic class” (Ibid; see also Eyal, Szelenyi and Townsley 2001). The latter originated from the gentry and could be well characterized by the traditional Weberian concept of “rank” (Zarycki 2015, 713).). A large number of these elites underwent an ideological transformation themselves, embracing a consumer lifestyle and materialistic orientation to form a new, largely urban, middle class who forgot about their less fortunate compatriots and simply abandoned the masses (Mokrzycki 1997, 2006; Curry 1988, 494; Firkowska-Mankiewicz 1997, 382; Grudzińska-Gross 1992, 151).

### **3.2 ‘The Soros’ Plan’ and Its Discontents**

The trauma of transition was significant enough that since the nineties, the members of Solidarity’s radical camp, seconded by various political parties (such as Solidarity Electoral Action, Self-Defense, and The League of Polish Families) have continued to argue that the economic transition of 1989 was an act of treason against Poland. From their perspective, the opposition leaders and their advisors acted without social consultations and proposed radical reforms that impoverished millions of Poles (Tymowski 1993, 200; Misztal 1995, 19, 26; Koryś 2015, 334; Leder 2021b). Today,

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<sup>95</sup> Many party members quickly rebranded themselves as “aspiring capitalists, entrepreneurs, avid nationalists, populists, bodyguards, devoted public servants” (Porter 2010, 39; Soltan 2000, 118, 134).

after many of the Solidarity's radicals are gone, different political parties (most notably the ruling Law and Justice, KORWIN, and Kukiz'15) returned to this period in Polish history and pinpoint it as the cause of the many of the ills which the country later experienced. In doing so, however, they do not devote attention to economic inequality, an inherent part of the capitalist system that requires addressing on its own through policy changes, and without a focus on identifying historical culprits who are seen responsible for the situation. Instead, they perceive it as resulting solely from the actions of the country's alleged traitors. Political parties entertain conspiracy theories which identify the foreign advisors to whom the Solidarity leaders turned to for help as emissaries of Western interests whose only goal was to exploit the country and its population. One individual has consistently been singled out as the most ruthless and dangerous villain in this scenario: George Soros—the Jewish billionaire who is painted as being behind “shock therapy,” even though the ideas of another Jew—economist Jeffrey Sachs- proven to be far more important for Polish decision makers.

Is it possible there is some truth to their claims, or have these politicians overstated Soros' role in the 1989 economic reforms? Did the so-called “Soros' Plan” exist? And if so, was it realized?

### **3.2.1 Well-Connected from the Start: Soros' Involvement in Poland in the 80s**

George Soros' involvement in Poland dates to the early 1980s, a period in his life when he realized that he could use his fortune and influence to make a difference in the world (Fetterman 1991). A seasoned interpreter of political situations, he looked

at the changes taking place in Central and Eastern Europe with a lot of hope (Scardino October 28, 1987, Kaletsky October 26, 1992; Soros 1995, 33; Freeland January 30, 2009). In the intensifying strikes and the emergence of the Solidarity movement,<sup>96</sup> he recognized a historically unprecedented situation was percolating in Poland, one that carried the potential for significant social change (Kaufman 2002, 282; Porter 2015, 82, 83). When General Wojciech Jaruzelski declared martial law on December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1981, and Soros read about the union busting and imprisonment of Polish activists that was taking place, he decided to get involved. In the early '80s Soros began sending money to Poland<sup>97</sup> (Porter 2015, 46) and financially supported a cultural branch of Solidarity (Soros 1995, 125). He paid for photocopiers, fax machines, and computers, as well as for the printing of samizdat newspapers, including *Tygodnik Mazowsze* [Mazovian Weekly]—a precursor to the very influential broadsheet, *Gazeta Wyborcza*—and books to introduce Polish readers to Western literature (Sachs 2005, 111; Porter 2015).

In 1988 Soros received a green light from the communist authorities to establish the Stefan Batory Foundation, which went on to become the largest NGO in Poland (Quandt 2002, 13).<sup>98</sup> Its first board meeting was held on the last day of the Gdańsk

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<sup>96</sup> Solidarity's predecessor, *Komitet Obrony Robotników* [the Committee to Defend Workers], was formed in 1977.

<sup>97</sup> With the help of New York-based political scientist, Irena Lasota, who established the Committee in Support of Solidarity and was well-connected with Polish dissidents.

<sup>98</sup> By that point, the party's leaders and upper management were very aware of the fact that economic and perhaps even political reforms were necessary if the worsening quality of life for millions of workers and the resultant mass strikes were to be stopped (Grudzińska-Gross 1992, 142; Kula 1993, 190; Poznański 1993, 396). For this reason, the communists started implementing small changes that would move the country closer to capitalist economies (Kula 1993, 190; Millard 1996, 209). Soros, having contacts in Polish civil society, and thus a nuanced

shipyard strike, which signaled Soros' deep understanding of local political context (see Zyzak 2016a, 259). He recognized that the historical change of an agreement between the communists and the dissidents in Poland was around the corner and knew that for his organization to be successful, he had to distance himself from the opposition's most radical pro-worker faction because they were seen as uncompromising and thus unsuitable to negotiate with party officials (see Zyzak 2016a 260). For this reason, he started funding more moderate dissidents and appointed one of them as the head of the Stefan Batory Foundation (Ibid.).<sup>99</sup>

Since 1988 the Stefan Batory foundation has been financially supporting promising "individuals, institution, and NGOs" (Porter 2015, 86) to promote the idea of an open, pluralistic, and democratic society (Ibid. 87). This goal was to be achieved by organizing conferences and debates, as well as offering scholarships. By 2014 the foundation had sponsored nearly 6000 individuals through its scholarship program, organized 140 debates, and 64 conferences (Leszczyński June 14, 2014, 6). Though the foundation awarded deserving people in art, culture, and science from all sides of political spectrum,<sup>100</sup> Soros' opponents characterized the organization as only

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understanding of the situation in the country, saw this approach as signaling new opportunities. He asked Zbigniew Pelczyński, who ran a program for visiting Polish academics at Oxford University to obtain the permission to set up this NGO (Sudetic 2011, 18). This was just the beginning, as he realized there was a will among the top management in the party to consider preparing ground for bigger changes which he later helped to broker (Kaufman 2002, 231; Porter 2015, loc. 1275).

<sup>99</sup> The leadership of the foundation was first given to Marcin Król, and was later passed on to Aleksander Smolar, who was recommended by Adam Michnik, *Gazeta Wyborcza's* editor in chief (Kaufman 2002, 237).

<sup>100</sup> Including the conservative think tank The Center for Political Thought, as well as right-leaning individuals Jarosław Gowin, Ryszard Legutko, Wojciech Cejrowski, and Adam Glapiński (Leszczyński June 14, 2014).



sponsoring progressive goals (Lizut May 14, 1997). This happened primarily because among the high-profile recipients of Soros' funds were people like Adam Michnik, one of the roundtable signatories, and the future editor-in-chief of *Gazeta Wyborcza*—the most popular liberal daily newspaper in Poland.

In sum, Soros created the biggest NGO in Poland with the support of the communists—no small feat. Moreover, he funded the precursor to the biggest daily newspaper in the country, which would come to shape the views of millions of Poles, as well as providing a scholarship for its editor. He also partially paid for the education of other figures who were to become the country's future elites. It was through actions such as these that he became a significant political player in Poland.

### **3.2.2 Soros' Role in the Economic Reforms**

In the late '80s, the situation in Poland was worsening and the communists knew that economic reforms were necessary if they wanted to keep power (Ost 1989, 169; 171; Kula 1993, 190; 132; Poznański 1993, 396). They began to introduce aspects of capitalist economics into the country, and in doing so did not shy away from receiving advice from the outside—e.g., from London School of Economics professor, Stanisław Gomułka (see Kowalik 2011, 84), and from George Soros, who had expressed an interest in discussing how the situation in the Poland might be improved. He went on to play a significant role in convincing the last communist leader, General Jaruzelski, to negotiate with the Solidarity movement during the 1989 roundtable talks. In the future these talks would be interpreted by the Polish right as *the* moment of betrayal by

the dissidents and intelligentsia, as it was where they made a deal with communist elites and the West's foreign advisor representatives (Kaufman 2002, 296; Porter 2015, 85). Undoubtedly, these assessments were quite accurate in the eyes of some scholars, like sociologist Jadwiga Staniszkis (1990, 136-137) who was supportive at the time of Law and Justice, sociologist, as well as a left-wing economist Tadeusz Kowalik (2011, 84) or an American political scientist David Ost (2005). It is beyond the focus of this dissertation to assess who is closer to truth, especially since there is no consensus on this highly politicized topic. It is important, however, to recognize that Soros was actively involved in the Polish transition, he did leave a mark and from the point of view of conspiracy theorists, this fact alone made him a very likely object of attacks.

Between March and December of 1989, Soros presented five different economic plans for Poland. In March, he also approached then American President George H.W. Bush with a plan to save Poland from economic collapse. It was called "International Economic Assistance for Poland" (Zyzak 2016a, 319), and suggested a reorganization of the debt incurred by state-owned enterprises through setting up an independent agency that would reallocate it, or, alternatively, oversee the process of selling these companies to interested Polish or foreign buyers (Kowalik 2011, 89). This plan also included managing the central bank with the help of foreign advisors<sup>101</sup> (Ibid. 89). Soros declared that together with David Rockefeller, he would finance a team of experts assigned with the task of implementing economic reforms. He was confident that the opposition leaders

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<sup>101</sup> This was a part of a bigger trend. To cite Anna Porter, many foreign experts had little "knowledge of local issues and tended to move on after a few weeks to the next victims of their expertise" (2010, 4).

in Poland would support this plan (Zyzak 2016a, 319), but he did not expect for members of the American National Security Council not to back him. They advised President Bush to refrain from buying shares of the indebted state-owned Polish companies,<sup>102</sup> a development which forced Soros to rethink his approach.

Consequently, the founder of the Open Society Foundation sent out another draft of his plan, this time to Bronisław Geremek, advisor to Lech Wałęsa, and to

the communist Deputy Prime Minister, Ireneusz Sekuła and Finance Minister, Andrzej Wróblewski, both of whom reacted positively, informing Soros that their plans overlapped (Kowalik 2011, 99; Zyzak 2016a, 319). Following this, a series of meetings took place where the details of Soros' plans were discussed. Among the attendees were: Stanisław Gomułka, Harvard economist Jeffery Sachs (who at the time was thought to have been somewhat successful<sup>103</sup> with economic restructuring in Latin America (Sachs 2005)), and his colleague David Lipton (Kowalik 2011, Porter 2015, 85). Soros' plan suggested gradual solutions, such as a "three-year moratorium on debt, a low interest rate," with the help of the IMF. He also wanted the shares of state-owned enterprises to be distributed among different institutions and he advocated for the government

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<sup>102</sup> The review read: "we cannot imagine that any Polish government, even one led by Solidarity, would accept the loss of sovereignty which Soros' plan assumes" (Zyzak 2016a, 319). To be historically accurate, however, it needs to be stated, that Soros did take Polish sovereignty seriously, writing in his program that:

"The [liquidating] agency would be established by the agreement between the Polish government and the governments represented by the Paris Club, subject to the approval of the Polish Parliament, so that it would not infringe on Polish sovereignty (in Kowalik 2011, 99).

<sup>103</sup> Many scholars disagree with such an assessment arguing instead that Jeffrey Sachs proposed a "one-size-fit-all approach to economic growth". One of the countries in Latin America that followed his advice was Bolivia (Broad and Cavanagh 2006, 21). Here, Sachs' "shock therapy" managed to help curb inflation, but it did nothing to eliminate poverty (Henwood 2006, 198).

to decide what percentage could be foreign owned (Kowalik 2011, 98). The plan that emerged, however, dated June 8, 1989, entitled “A Plan for Poland,” was far more radical than what Soros had proposed (Ibid. 98; Mujzel in Tymowski 1993, 188). What he had wanted were gradual changes that consider the role of the markets, quite the reverse of what his opponents accused him of, and what the accepted plan ultimately contained. How did this come to be?

Four days earlier, on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989, partially-free elections were held in Poland and Solidarity won all the seats where it put up candidates (Sachs 2005, 111). Due to this victory, more changes were possible than what Soros had initially suggested in his plan. Jeffrey Sachs in particular, had experience with radical, “‘big bang’ approach[es] to economic reform” (Porter 2015, 85). Two months after the election, Sachs spoke not only to communists, but also to the leaders of the Solidarity movement, Bronisław Geremek and Jacek Kuroń. They told him they wanted to “return to Europe”<sup>104</sup> (Sachs 2005, 114), which would mean introducing far more changes than initially anticipated. The Solidarity leaders were not economists, and thus were simply unaware of the high price Polish society would have to pay in order to get there. Jacek Kuroń asked Sachs to write an economic reform plan, and in a few hours he produced a 15-page strategy for Poland that went far beyond what Soros had in mind. The plan was altered several times, making it less moderate. In the end, the authorship of “shock therapy” was attributed to Leszek Balcerowicz, even though Stanisław Gomułka was his major

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<sup>104</sup> Sachs responded that it would require “trading on a market basis with Europe,” (Sachs 2005, 113; Guerra 2017, 54), the adoption of legal frameworks from Western Europe, and “jumping into the market” (Kowalik 2011, 15).

advisor, and they took Jeffrey Sachs' input under advisement when drawing up the details (Kowalik 2011, 43, 79; Rek- Woźniak and Woźniak 2017).

What happened to George Soros' plan? The matter has not yet been settled. Soros' biographer, Michael T. Kaufman wrote that "[Soros] collaborated in drawing up the highly successful conversion plan of Leszek Balcerowicz" (Kaufman 2002, 297). Famous Polish economist, Tadeusz Kowalik, on the other hand, argues that Soros' plan was never realized (2011, 93, 164; Chomicz 1989).<sup>105</sup> Finally, Anna Porter writes that Soros "prepared outlines of economic reform for Poland" (Porter 2015, 86). Regardless of who is closest to the truth, it seems clear that Soros was at the centre of the decision-making process about the economic future of Poland. His plans for economic reform were seriously considered by the communist authorities as well as Solidarity leaders, and he communicated with all the major economists working on reform throughout.

Moreover, Soros was clearly playing indirectly intellectual leadership role in all this. For example, he financed the work of Jeffrey Sachs<sup>106</sup> and David Lipton in Poland during this period. He also wrote several op-eds discussing the situation in the country and arguing on the country's behalf. One piece, "How to help Poland," published in

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<sup>105</sup> Paweł Zyzak would strongly disagree with this assessment (2016, 377), as he argues in his book *Domino Effect* that Soros' plan differed minimally from the Sachs-Lipton plan, which would later transmute into Balcerowicz plan (Zyzak 2016a, 319).

<sup>106</sup> This perhaps explains why the data studied does not demonstrate that Jeffrey Sachs has been attacked to the same extent as George Soros for his involvement in "shock therapy." Even though both men are of Jewish background and played an important role in transition to capitalism in Poland, this Harvard-educated economist was not depicted by conspiracy theorists as the mastermind behind these economic reforms, nor as their "major sponsor." He was viewed as merely a hired expert or Soros' disciple (Pac November 20, 2015, RM).

the *Washington Post*, addressed an international audience, advocating support for political and economic changes (Kaufman 2002, 374). In an interview that he gave a couple months after the elections, “The Choice Must Belong to Society,” he stressed it was the Polish people who should oversee making final decisions regarding the economy (1989; Kowalik 2011, 165). So, contrary to the claims of his opponents and conspiracy theorists who would later attack him, he emphasized the significance of receiving a mandate from Poles regarding changes in their country and it was mostly out in the open and transparent. Yet his critics are correct in pointing out that he was neither an elected official, nor a citizen of the country.

### **3.2.3 Attacked on the Margins**

When the negative consequences of the economic transformation of 1989 became clear and societal frustration reached its peak in the mid ‘90s (Koryś 2015, 328; Kabaj in Kowalik 2011,10; Paczyńska 2005, 573; Lukowski and Zawadzki 2019, 411; Brier 2009, 80), Soros appeared to be a perfect scapegoat for the problems facing Poland; a figure who could be used to divide society.<sup>107</sup> Accusations of him being the person responsible for the country’s economic ruin were already circulating in the media in the early ‘90s (Rychard, Wnuk- Lipiński, Kłoskowska and Kozek1993). Initially, they were not as conspiratorial in character as they would later become; because the accusations

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<sup>107</sup> On the topic of construction of social division rather than their expression by political parties see Cedric de Leon, Manali Desai, and Cihan Tuğal (2009, 193).

were made in reference to events that were still fresh in people's minds and—rhetorically speaking—only a subtle distortion of the truth could be effective.

In 1990, the conservative daily newspaper, *Nowy Świat* [New World], published Aleksander Jędraszczak's commentary in which he wrote that “losing economic sovereignty by Poland was prepared and designed by Soros and Sachs and executed by Leszek Balcerowicz”<sup>108</sup> (Gadomski December 27, 1997). Even though the language used to describe the situation in Poland was hyperbolic, it was not entirely inaccurate. At the time, the economic independence of the country was at stake, though neither Soros, Sachs, nor Balcerowicz purposefully tried to weaken it, or at least no evidence exists to substantiate such claims. Though these initial attacks on Soros contained some elements of truth, they soon merged with conspiracy theories,<sup>109</sup> a type of rhetoric that would become far more common, especially on the media fringes in alternative outlets. This process was conducted by various lesser-known experts, media personalities, and politicians (who, following Matthew Atkinson and Darin Dewitt, I will call “political entrepreneurs” (2019)) who began to disseminate these narratives further to attract people to their agenda. For example, Andrzej Lepper, the leader of the at-the-time marginal, populist Self-Defense party, argued in a campaign spot that the “Batory Foundation and its founder and donor George Soros have been working for global financiers who plot

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<sup>108</sup> He was seconded by Jerzy Grohman, Lech Wałęsa's proxy who was responsible for managing privatization (Gadomski December 27, 1997).

<sup>109</sup> One conspiracy theory disseminated by the Catholic monthly, *W Drodze* [On the Road], presented Soros as a criminal, publishing that he was suspected of “money laundering connected to drug trafficking (Ibid.; March 3, 1997).” In this way another defamatory low was reached.

to destroy Poland” (Rychard et al. 1993). This was one of the first instances<sup>110</sup> when “rhetorical tropes” and “narrative themes” (Byford 2011, 40) that reoccur in most conspiracy theories were used to describe the role George Soros was playing in Poland.<sup>111</sup> The resulting account of his involvement was devoid of any nuance or complexity (Uscinski 2020, 66). Instead, Lepper offered a dualistic, Manichean view of history (Giry and Gürpınar 2020, 319) in which Soros was cast as an unquestionable villain (Atkinson 2017, 191). Not only was he identified as working for a group of very powerful and wealthy individuals (Byford 2011, 37) who secretly plotted to ruin Poland, but also as belonging to a “broader conspiratorial network” (Ibid., 70). By employing these “narrative structures” (Byford 2011, 4), Lepper mostly regurgitated modern antisemitic conspiracy theories of a type exemplified by *the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Langer 2021, 170) rather than engaged in a meaningful critique of this billionaire’s role in Polish history.

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<sup>110</sup> Another example appeared in an article published in the fringe right-wing weekly, *Nasza Polska* [Our Poland], titled “Soros’ Snake,” in which Wiesław Mazur used what was interpreted as antisemitic and conspiratorial rhetoric to talk about the billionaire creating a vast surveillance network to gather information on all Polish citizens (Osęka 1997).

<sup>111</sup> Another type of anti-Soros conspiracy theory that fits the genre of classical anti-Jewish conspiracy theories that depicted Jews as hostile to Christians (Simonsen 2020, 360; Bangerter, Wagner-Egger and Delouvee 2020, 206) accused this billionaire of undermining the Christian family. In 1996, the Catholic weekly newspaper, *Niedziela* [Sunday], attacked this billionaire on such a basis, writing that among the goals of the Batory Foundation was to lessen parental authority by raising awareness about domestic violence, which would serve the purpose of undermining traditional hierarchies and conditioning parents and their children “to accept and embrace [a] more liberal lifestyle” (Ibid.). In some of these attacks, antisemitic tropes are hard to separate from the broader conspiratorial tone though both are there— and spreading.



### 3.2.4 Defending George Soros and the Economic Transformation

Even though George Soros bashing accelerated in 1997, when the right-wing party Solidarity Electoral Action won the election, it was still primarily confined to the margins as the reach of the above-mentioned media outlets was limited and the visibility of marginal and radical parties—such as Self-Defense—in that period was low (Pankowski 2016, 81; Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 643). Anti-Soros discourse that was critical of the transformation was relegated to the fringes also because the majority of post-communist (e.g., politicians from the Democratic Left Alliance) and post-solidarity elites that ruled the Poland from 1989 had in the end agreed about the country's direction (Rae 2008, 86). They wanted to defend the achievements of the transformation because it made joining NATO and becoming a member of the European Union possible, goals that very few politicians opposed<sup>112</sup> (Davies 2005, 513; Zamoyski 2009, 335). Moreover, most of them<sup>113</sup> enthusiastically participated in the quickly-conducted neoliberal experiment of moving the Polish economy to capitalism and shared an understanding that “shock therapy”—and what came with it, including receiving advice from foreigners like Soros—was necessary if Poland was to have economic success after the transition (Lubczyński 2006, 2; Gwiazda 2008, 809; Krupa October 26, 2016; Woźniak 2014, 178).

Many of the key figures in Polish politics at the time were far more inclined to agree with Soros, and recognize his input in Polish transition as positive, at least until

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<sup>112</sup> Except for the League of Polish Families and a few other at-the-time marginal parties.

<sup>113</sup> Including left-wing parties such as the Democratic Left Alliance.

2015. This was reflected in Soros being given numerous awards and in politicians from both sides of the political spectrum naming him to boards and councils. In 2000, he received the “Man of the Year” award from *Gazeta Wyborcza* for his “support for the civil society in Central and Eastern Europe” (May 9, 2000). It was presented to him by Jerzy Buzek of the right-wing party, Solidarity Electoral Action; the very same party that would later depict Soros as a major villain (Domosławski and Kurski October 24, 1997). In 2007, Bronisław Geremek, one of the leaders of the opposition and advisor to Lech Wałęsa, and former Prime Minister of Poland, Marek Belka, were founding members of the European Council of Foreign Affairs, an influential think-tank funded by George Soros (Pszczółkowska October 1, 2007). Five years later, in 2012, under the centre-right Civic Platform government, former president Bronisław Komorowski awarded Soros with one of the country’s highest orders, the Commander’s Cross with Star of Merit of the Republic of Poland. For a long time, very few establishment politicians accepted the conspiratorial interpretations of Soros’ activity in Poland. But for politicians who saw the outcomes of the roundtable talks as a failure, Soros was to become the major target of their ire.

In 1997, one of the MPs from Solidarity Electoral Action told reporters at *Gazeta Wyborcza*:

Such people as Balcerowicz, Soros, Sachs, and [the] Batory Foundation and your newspaper, see the economy only through the lenses of profit, cost, budget, and inflation. We, however, think that in the centre there is a human being, that the market is for a human being—not only for those who are strong, resourceful, smart and fluent in foreign languages. For us a human being is the key, also a poor man, and the family.” (Domosławski and Kurski October 24, 1997)

The transition to a capitalism was going to have costs and it makes sense that politicians would seek to position themselves on the side of the people against impersonal market forces but referencing Soros so prominently was playing with fire. Even though at the time anti-Soroism was mostly ridiculed (especially by *Gazeta Wyborcza*), marginal right-wing politicians from time-to-time repeated similar narratives throughout late '90s and early 2000s.<sup>114</sup> These themes were borrowed partly from the pages of skinhead zines, low-circulation religious newspapers but their influence was growing. For this conspiracy theory to crest as it would in 2015 after the election victory of Law and Justice, with Soros appearing on public television depicted as a sinister puppet master, it needed to move from the fringes to the centre of Polish politics. Radio, as we shall see, played an important role in that process.

### **3.3 Radio Maryja: An Agora for Conspiracy Theories**

#### **3.3.1 Radio Like No Other**

After decades of communist censorship, Polish media became pluralistic in the early '90s, though the content and format mostly mimicked their Western counterparts (Szot 2020, 162; Mocek 2017, 36; Dzierżyńska-Mielczarek 2012b, 34).

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<sup>114</sup> Criticism of Soros on the left mostly pertained to economic reforms in 1989 (Karbowska August 6, 2014; Kowalik February 15, 2010), and his NGOs as being emissaries of the American government and helpers in securing the latter's interests abroad (Ciszewski March 14, 2014)). Additionally, he was criticized (alongside other billionaires) for paying laughably low taxes (Szewczuk July 25, 2021) and for not recognizing that philanthrocapitalism does not offer long-term solutions to systemic problems that must be tackled first and foremost by the state (Bessner July 16, 2020).

An exception was *Radio Maryja*—an independent, listener-funded broadcaster that embraced Polish nationalism<sup>115</sup> and a traditional Catholic value system, presenting a very different worldview from the mainstream media (Lindner 2011, 98). This radio station and its other associated media<sup>116</sup> became an agora for conspiracy theories, many of which cast George Soros as the central villain.

In the first decade of its existence<sup>117</sup>, *Radio Maryja* was quite a marginal— an alternative broadcaster, so whatever negative coverage there was of Soros on its airwaves made little impact on public discourse. With time, however, *Radio Maryja* gained popularity<sup>118</sup> and unmatched political power<sup>119</sup> (Burdziej 2008b, 217). Its founder, Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, acquired the status of a celebrity, if not a cult leader (Bobrowska 2007, 53) and the radio station was perceived by many Catholics as a sect (Zubrzycki 2006; xii). Through informing the political views of his audience— some 3 million disciplined

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<sup>115</sup> Here I understand the social reality as structured along the logic of national division and individuals living in them as *homo nationalis* (see Jaskułowski 2019, 16).

<sup>116</sup> Most listeners of *Radio Maryja* admit to reading and watching other media associated with the station such as *Nasz Dziennik*, and *Telewizja Trwam*, also founded by Tadeusz Rydzyk, and abstaining from consuming more mainstream content (Bobrowska 2014, 459). Consequently, when I refer to *Radio Maryja*, its audience, modus operandi, content, and more, it can also be applied to these two other outlets as well.

<sup>117</sup> This station was established in 1991 (Szot 2020, 162).

<sup>118</sup> Rydzyk's radio station has been ranked the fifth most listened radio station in the country (Burdziej 2008b, 217) but according to Kasia Narkowicz the number went from 2-4% of Poles to 15% tuning into this station in 2011 (2018, 362).

<sup>119</sup> The influence of *Radio Maryja* has been so large that in the spring of 2018 Donald Trump's former advisor, Steve Bannon, while visiting Europe, went straight to Rydzyk (Wójcik October 16, 2018, 47). He was on a mission to form a coalition of right-wing populists in European Parliament, and recognized Poland as leading the way in terms of outcomes he wished to see for the entire continent (Ibid.), and he knew that *Radio Maryja* was at the forefront of this political movement.

voters<sup>120</sup>—he managed to influence elections, party coalitions, and individuals (Burdziej 2008, 24; Wysocka 2008, 72; Paluch 2007).<sup>121</sup> Consequently, key figures in Polish political life feared indifference, or worse, the wrath of the founder of this station. They regularly traveled to the headquarters of *Radio Maryja* to participate in late-night shows and pay their respects (Pankowski 2010, 174; Burdziej 2008b, 211).<sup>122</sup> He would also determine for this audience who Poland's enemies were, and if Soros became an object of *Radio Maryja*'s attacks, the mainstream media would pick up on this, depending on which political party was in charge. One of the reasons Rydzyk's messages were so convincing to people was because he sensed their needs during a time of traumatic societal change—the transformation. This is when Polish capitalism reality started to emerge and many of the listeners felt redundant, sidelined, and lost.

*Radio Maryja* was able to change that.

How was this initially marginal radio station able to move toward the mainstream despite subscribing to controversial ideologies and regularly disseminating conspiracy theories? And what were the consequences of this movement? These are the two questions that I will now tackle.

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<sup>120</sup> Listeners of *Radio Maryja* vote more often than the rest of the country according to the Center for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) (August 26, 2008).

<sup>121</sup> In 1997, Rydzyk endorsed politicians from Solidarity Electoral Action, then in 2001, the far-right League of Polish Families, and then the Self-Defense and the Law and Justice in 2005 (Guerra 2017, 59; Burdziej 2008b, 212). He supported conservative and right-wing political parties generally, usually focusing on specific topics such as: the pro-life agenda, the inclusion of God in the constitution, and the refusal to accept legislation aimed at protecting LGBTQ+ people and survivors of domestic violence.

<sup>122</sup> He was the de facto leader of a strong political movement (Bobrowska 2014, 458; Pankowski 2010).

### 3.3.2 Welcomed with Opened Arms

*Radio Maryja's* success can be traced back to the economic transition of 1989 when over the course of a matter of months, Poland was turned upside down. Those who were thought of as the nation's enemies, the communists, were no longer<sup>123</sup> the main actors; the old rules no longer applied and the citizenry felt lost as a result (Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 667; Bilewicz and Krzemiński 2010, 234). This period following the transition was marked by self-interested elites (post-communist and post-solidarity leaders) abandoning the masses, who consequently became unemployed and impoverished (Paczyńska 2005, 573; Ziółkowski 1994, 306). Those in power, the mainstream media, scholars (Piotr Sztompka, Leszek Balcerowicz), and public intellectuals (Witold Gadomski, Adam Michnik, Józef Tischner), promoted the neoliberal concept of individual responsibility<sup>124</sup>, which shamed ordinary citizens into refraining from blaming the state for their dire situation (Leder 2021b).<sup>125</sup> Beneath the surface, however, feelings of resentment, anger, and fear percolated (Pankowski 2016, 81; Budyta-Budzyńska 2018, 290). Rydzyk's genius lay in recognizing the emotional needs<sup>126</sup> of millions of Poles and establishing a forum where they would be acknowledged; he welcomed his listeners with open arms when no one else would.

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<sup>123</sup> This was a larger trend taking place in numerous countries (see Furedi 2017, 7).

<sup>124</sup> Social psychologists interpret the transformation as the radical shift towards individualism in a culture that previously valued community (Leder 2021b).

<sup>125</sup> Similar rhetoric was used in the West where, as Dorit Geva states "soft neoliberalism came in the guise of neoliberal morality through state policies aimed at 'helping people help themselves'" (2021,73).

<sup>126</sup> For years, *Radio Maryja* was a platform for the socially excluded, such as pensioners, the unemployed, the differently abled, and the losers of transformation (Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 666). Throughout the years listeners have consisted of women (64%), those above the age of 55 (61%), living in the countryside (49%), and often widowed (27%), as well as pensioners (66%),

Firstly, Rydzyk provided his audience a platform to share their opinions, allowing oft-marginalized people opportunities to be heard, and thus, to no longer feel alone or forgotten to belong to a community (Andrukiewicz 2013, 236). Conspiratorial narratives were perfect tools to help achieve these goals, because, as conspiracy theory research reveals, they are effective in connecting with “dispossessed, alienated” groups (Byford 2011, 129; Butter and Knight 2019, 38; Aaronovitch 2011 346).

Secondly, Rydzyk legitimized his listeners’ pain, and the trials that accompanied economic transition, by validating their narratives. Stories from Poles living in small, deindustrialized, and depopulated towns ravaged by the economic transition in 1989 would appear on the air and they continue today. One of them, Marian, from the Świętokrzyskie voivodeship (province) bitterly asked:

Where is all this Polish money? The sugar factory has been closed, so was fruit factory. Two brickyards were shut down. People are jobless, in poverty, and sugar is imported from Brazil... Mrs. Balcerowicz (who introduced economic reforms) gave me C\$30 for 43 years of work... during socialism I had free healthcare” (January 4, 2016, RM).

Furthermore, Rydzyk absolved them of the guilt of failing in a new economic and social reality which liberal politicians instilled in them by providing other culprits for their struggles, arguing that they in fact were victims of sophisticated international conspiracies directed by powerful actors (like Soros), and even supernatural forces

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those with basic education (49%) (August 26, 2008). A portion of the audience have been farmers (21%), laborers (19%), and low-level office workers (19%). Many of them poor, though not the poorest in Polish society (August 26, 2008). Audiences of *Radio Maryja*’s sister television station, *Telewizja Trwam* were similar: 75% were above 55 years of age, 35% above 65 years of age (Lubelska April 15, 2006).

(Wiścicki and Borkowicz 2005, 7). In other words, *Radio Maryja*'s founder and his contributors identified who the enemies were. As I will show later, repetitive articulation of divisive rhetoric of this type would lead to the strengthening of social divisions in the country.

### 3.3.3 Transformation from the Perspective of Radio Maryja

Conspiracy theories presented on *Radio Maryja* are usually confined to its flagship programme, *Rozmowy Niedokończone* [Unfinished Conversations],<sup>127</sup> whose invited guests<sup>128</sup> and listeners discuss and comment on current socio-political and cultural phenomena. Despite its popularity, “Unfinished Conversations” has been riddled with misinformation (Winnicka 2005) and disinformation, as well as misquotation of public figures, whose statements are torqued to fit the station's agenda. Untrue statements very often acquire a more sophisticated form when they turn into conspiracy theories which contain narratives that aim to explain the world through over-simplification and the scapegoating of various minority groups (Aaronovitch 2011, 333) During this show many such theories, especially pertaining to “shock therapy” in Poland, were born and regurgitated.

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<sup>127</sup> The duration of the show (from 6pm to midnight) allows it to be heard by the Polish diaspora in North America Bobrowska 2007, 42). The reach of “Unfinished Conversations” is even bigger as *Telewizja Trwam* transmits it as well, and some of the remarks once made on the air go on to acquire life of their own online (Tomala-Kaźmierczak 2015, 80).

<sup>128</sup> Among them university professors, influential members of the nationalist Catholic clergy, journalists, and politicians.



*Radio Maryja's* interpretation of the 1989 economic transition that was promoted to its listeners consisted of (as Jovan Byford calls them) the “narrative themes” of classical conspiracy theory (Byford 2011, 40) that can be summarized in the following way. All those who participated in the roundtable talks are presented as being responsible for the economic ruin of the country. Post-communists are guilty of selling out Poland to enrich themselves, while post-solidarity leaders are guilty of “betraying the cause” by cooperating with the post-communists and refusing to properly de-communize the country.<sup>129</sup> Statements made during “Unfinished Conversations” by Antoni Macierewicz—Former Minister of Defense under Law and Justice—were examples of that.<sup>130</sup> He said that the roundtable talks were a part of a bigger plan<sup>131</sup> to transition from communism to capitalism with the cooperation of communist elites who would then in fact remain in power under the new system (January 26, 2009, RM). This scenario, according to Macierewicz, took place in Poland as though torn right from the pages of a KGB. His authority as a former dissident and a high-ranking official added weight and credibility to his words<sup>132</sup>. When Law and Justice came to power in 2005—and then again in 2015 and 2019—conspiracy theories about transition were repeatedly asserted

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<sup>129</sup>Even though some scholars (David Ost, Tadeusz Kowalik and Jadwiga Staniszkis) essentially agreed with such diagnosis, many others vehemently opposed it (Kiss and Hanley, Sachs, Balcerowicz, Zyta-Gilowska, Janusz Lewandowski, Andrzej Rzońca, and Waldemar Kuczyński).

<sup>130</sup> This genre of conspiracy theory was quite common in post-Communist countries (Astapova et al. 2021, 12).

<sup>131</sup> His views were based upon revelations from a former KGB operative and Soviet defector turned author, Anatoli Golitsyn (January 26, 2009, RM). This reliance on “the figure of the renegade from the enemy cause” is identified as one of the oldest tricks used by conspiracy theorists to “prove” that a conspiracy was taking place (Byford 2011, 83).

<sup>132</sup> Interestingly, Antoni Macierewicz was accused of cooperating with Russia in a widely read and book *Macierewicz i jego Tajemnice* [Macierewicz and His Secrets] by Tomasz Piątek.

on the station's airwaves and were treated by its listeners as an open secret. See for example the words of Anna from Żarki:

The roundtable was a big lie.... Years have proved... that transformation was an act of national betrayal where all the assets, factories, banks, industries were privatized without the consent of the workers. Unemployment followed and people were forced to look for jobs outside of their country. The indebtedness of the country grew... the liberals and the left got richer. (February 14, 2009, RM).

Many listeners added an antisemitic twist to the theories pertaining to transformation. Jan from Łódź said with annoyance:

Obviously, this government is not Polish. For the past 20 years this has been a Jewish government of German minority (March 29, 2014, RM).

### **3.3.4 The Euroscepticism and Anti-Liberalism of Radio Maryja**

The world seen through the eyes of *Radio Maryja* is polarized and Manichean filled with seemingly unbridgeable social divisions that this station naturalizes. In other words, this stations' default position is a conspiratorial one, and from its perspective, the world is a hostile place inhabited by two camps: "us" and "them." The "us" camp lives in constant fear of the enemy, and of the outside world, as they are continually reminded that, historically speaking, foreigners have always betrayed the country (Bobrowska 2014, 59; Tyszka 2008, 303) and consequently they develop "a strong sense of national victimhood" (Bulska et al., 2021 138) and high levels of mistrust. This explains why *Radio Maryja* has viewed the EU for years, as yet another occupying power,<sup>133</sup> akin to

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<sup>133</sup> Even though the circumstances in which accession to this supra-national body took place could not have been more different from ones that led Poland to become a Soviet satellite state behind the Iron Curtain (Hołub and Głuchowski 2019).

the Soviet Union, and has taken a very Eurosceptic stance (Jasiewicz 2008, 15, see Astapova et al. 2021, 13). Euroscepticism is strong on this radio station. Rydzyk's frequent assessments of the EU are exemplified in this quote:

Brussels is the place where Europe unites, but not in the Christian spirit (...) it unites in the liberal, Masonic spirit... the Soros Foundation financially supports persons who have either leftist or anti-church views. (...) This is a conspiracy (...) a pro-Masonic activity of semi-secret or secret character (in Buchowski 2004, 899).<sup>134</sup>

“Them” consists of the Polish political elites (Gressgård and Smoczyński 2020, 14), whether post-communist or post-solidarity, as well foreigners and other “external forces;”<sup>135</sup> these include EU officials and influential public figures, who are often presented as being of Jewish background<sup>136</sup> and who promote progressive causes. Ideals of multiculturalism, gender equality (see Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 811), and an open society disseminated via European institutions and Soros' NGOs are alleged to lead to a new “godless totalitarianism,” one designed to destroy communities (Szostkiewicz 2002; Wysocka 2008, 69). In this manner, yet again, well known antisemitic conspiracy theory themes were recycled (see Bulska et al. 2021, 126).

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<sup>134</sup> Misrepresentations of what the EU stands for have gone a long way in reaching the desired fearmongering. Typical for *Radio Maryja* was the use of hyperbolic language to achieve this (Kulas 2018, 35; Szczegółą and Kwiatkowski 2017, 60)/ Rydzyk himself has said on-air that the EU is “like Hitler” (November 25, 2009, YT).

<sup>135</sup> Radio's guest, professor Artur Śliwiński has argued that we are witnessing “religious war not among Poles but with external forces” (August 5, 2012, RM).

<sup>136</sup> Connecting EU officials with Jewishness was not without consequences. Research showed that antisemitic attitudes in Poland doubled in the period from 1999 to 2002, that is shortly before the EU accession and accompanied a significant rise of such discourse in the media (specifically *Radio Maryja*), and among politicians (especially the League of Polish families) (Guerra 2017, 57).

Numerous surveys show that most Poles (81%) are pro-European—a view attributed mostly to years of subsidies coming from Brussels as well as to open labour markets—so the blatant Euroscepticism peddled by *Radio Maryja* needed to be toned down (Piechocki 2016, 305; Kościańska 2009, 163; Guerra 2017, 57) as it was simply no longer politically wise (Piechocki 2016, 305). Thus, Euroscepticism was replaced by an anti-liberalism. As Rafał Maszkowski demonstrates, “liberal” was an umbrella term used to describe Jews, Masons, foreigners, and the EU generally (Maszkowski 2006, 67). This was shown in one exchange in which a caller said:

Politicians from Civic Platform, ...and the Democratic Left Alliance, let's not hide it, are Jews.

The response of one of the most popular hosts of “Unfinished Conversations,” Father Cydzik, was to regurgitate all too familiar antisemitic tropes conflating Jews with Communists ((in Byford 2011, 55) when he said:

I would bracket one's background, what matters more here are the convictions, as you said...ultraliberal ones, so Jews are not only communists but also liberals (Maszkowski 2006, 676).

This worked to disguise the deep-seated antisemitism present on the airwaves of *Radio Maryja* (Maszkowski 2006, 67).

### **3.3.5 Overt and Covert Antisemitism on Radio Maryja'**

Right from its establishment in 1991, antisemitism has permeated nearly all of aspects of *Radio Maryja* existence and activities (Maszkowski 2006; Kornak 2009; Prażmowska 2011; Burdziej 2008; Żuk 2017). Politically speaking, its promotional

efforts helped the far-right party, the League of Polish Families, who counted among its ranks, former Nazi sympathizers and fascists, to get into parliament (Guerra 2017, 59; Burdziej 2008, 212; Pankowski 2016, 97). In financial terms, *Radio Maryja* has been dependent on generous, though very controversial, donors who are notorious antisemites (Kornak 2009, 280; Pankowski 2010, 95), including the former chairperson of the American Polish Congress, Edward Moskal, and a Polish-born millionaire from Uruguay, Jan Kobylański, who was tried for turning over Jews to the Gestapo during World War II (Kornak 2009, 280; Pankowski 2010, 95). Content wise, the station's guests have been linked to ultranationalist and neo-Nazi skinhead movements, and it has invited commentators such as university professors Father Jerzy Bajda, Czesław Bartnik, Jerzy Robert Nowak, Mira Modelska-Creech and Bogusław Wolniewicz who express views that make use of antisemitic imagery. For example, Professor Artur Śliwiński said on air that:

Dark networks that are difficult to study...these networks have often unclear financial component. They are funded by the NGOs. Bill Gates funds pro-abortion NGOs, our well-known George Soros also funds them.... According to some this network is run by the world government (December 13, 2014, RM)

*Radio Maryja*'s hosts have fuelled hostility toward Jews by reading out highly antisemitic articles on the air,<sup>137</sup> and by promoting conspiratorial books which blame them for what is deemed bad in the country (Pankowski 2010; Maszkowski 2006, 684).

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<sup>137</sup> In a disturbing case of media cross-pollination, articles published by *Nasz Dziennik* were read on air—usually well after midnight. In one such article, priest Czesław Bartnik, repeated the conspiracy theory that holds Jews responsible for 9/11 (Pankowski 2010; Maszkowski 2006, 684). He also argued that the Third Reich was the result of a Jewish conspiracy (Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 344-5).

To put it simply: scholars researching *Radio Maryja* agree that antisemitic statements have been a regular occurrence on this station (Wysocka 2008; Zamoyski 2009; Prażmowska 2011, 255; Maszkowski 2006, 687).<sup>138</sup> This was such a well-known phenomenon that in the mid 1990s, that when readers of the daily newspaper, *Życie Warszawy* [Life of Warsaw], were asked in a survey about *Radio Maryja*, most stated that it promoted antisemitic views (Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 42). In general, they have tended to revolve around popular stereotypes and make liberal use of modern antisemitic conspiracy theories (see Simonsen 2020, 360): accusing Jews of being greedy rulers of the world, attempting to destroy the Catholic church, and promoting atheism by creating alternative and alluring ideologies such as liberalism, globalism, and social democracy (Maszkowski 2006, 679; Tomala- Kaźmierczak 2015, 69; Bobrowska 2007, 56).

It is thus unsurprising that in 2002, Polish antisemitism scholar, Ireneusz Krzemiński concluded that outright antisemitism was two to three times more likely to be expressed among *Radio Maryja*'s audience than among the rest of the population (Krzemiński 2009). Already in 2002, the negative impact of this station on people's attitudes towards Jews was well known. Moreover, in June 2003 *Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji* [the National Broadcasting Council], drew up a document that concluded based on collected evidence that the content broadcast by *Radio Maryja* included antisemitic remarks (Kornak 2009, 239), though very little has been done to stop

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<sup>138</sup> They were often made by members of the audience who called in to *Radio Maryja*, generating minimal or no reaction on the part of the program's hosts (Burdziej 2008, 209). One explanation for this situation is the fact that listeners are often simply repeating statements presented earlier on the air by station's founder or invited panelists (Ibid. 676, Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 342; Cieśla 18 Sep 2004).

such hate speech from making it on air.<sup>139</sup> <sup>140</sup> External observers have reached similar conclusions: in 2008 a report titled “Global Antisemitism,” prepared by the American Department of State for the American Congress, named *Radio Maryja* as “one of the most antisemitic stations in Europe” (Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 644).

In 2015, after *Radio Maryja*'s political ally, the conservative Law and Justice party, won the election, station founder Tadeusz Rydzyk realized that he could no longer afford to be labeled as an antisemite<sup>141</sup> if he wanted to grow his media empire, and if the new Polish government were to function as ally of the United States (Głuchowski and Hołub 2019, 493). As a result, he began limiting open antisemitism on the station (Ibid. 501, 645, 653, 654). Certain regular commentators such as Stanisław Michalkiewicz and Jerzy Robert Nowak were not re-invited (Głuchowski and Hołub 2019, 501, 645, 653), and Rydzyk himself began visiting Israeli diplomats. Finally, he began stressing the stories of Poles who had saved Jews during the Second World War (Maszkowski 2006, 673). In this manner, the proverbial “evil Jew” was humanized and transformed

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<sup>139</sup> In fact, already in 2006, Stanisław Michalkiewicz, a journalist from *Nasz Dziennik*, said that reparations to Polish Jews were part of a larger conspiracy (Kornak 2009, 324; Burdziej 2008, 209). While doing so, he used the offensive term *Judajczykwie* [the Hebes], which led to 37 complains submitted to National Broadcasting Council and forced Rydzyk to offer vague apologies to anyone who “might have been offended by the article” (Burdziej 2008, 209, Lubelska 2006).

<sup>140</sup> Over the years, *Radio Maryja* has been accused of spewing hatred, promoting xenophobic, antisemitic, anti-democratic, populist, homophobic, anti-refugee, and nationalistic views, most conspicuously during “Unfinished Conversations” (December 22, 2019; Zamoyski 2009, 342; Wysocka 2008, 61; Prazmowska 2011, 254). Just how far *Radio Maryja*'s programmes go to incite hate, is shown by a disconcerting demonstration organized in front of one of Warsaw's churches by a group of listeners who wanted to celebrate the death of one of leaders of Polish transition, Bronisław Geremek (Szostkiewicz 2015; Kornak 2009, 444).

<sup>141</sup> This was a part of a bigger trend among right-wing European parties, politicians (e.g., Marine Le Pen) and their allies to “rid themselves of the historical stench of their antisemitism” (Hafez 2014, 483).

into a victim, while the Polish rescuer was elevated to the status of hero (Ibid. 654; Narkowisz 2017, 448). This strategy was an instance of “philosemitic violence,” to use a term borrowed from Elżbieta Janicka and Tomasz Żukowski, as none of the 20,000 collected statements regarding the rescuing of Jews have been verified by historians (Ibid. 646). However, even though *Radio Maryja*’s founder’s attitude toward Jewish-Polish relations changed, or were forced to change, this did not mean that the station in general followed suit.<sup>142</sup> When *Radio Maryja*’s invited guests state that Poland is not governed by Poles, or is ruled by George Soros, for anyone who has listened to *Radio Maryja* in the past, it is clear that this is code for speaking about Jews (Król 2011).<sup>143</sup>

### **3.3.6 “What a Discovery! Soros Wants to Destroy Poland!”<sup>144</sup> Anti-Sorosism on Radio Maryja**

In the late ‘80s and the early ‘90s, mixing nationalism and antisemitism with religious values became common among Solidarity trade union members and the rest of Polish society<sup>145</sup> (Grabowska 2008, 10-16). One of Solidarity’s priests, Henryk

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<sup>142</sup> Stanisław Obirek, a former priest and distinguished theologian, concluded that, Rydzyk’s sudden philosemitism is a lie (Głuchowski and Hołub 2019, 645), as both he and his collaborators continue to use coded language regarding Jews, and that this messaging is not lost on the station’s audience.

<sup>143</sup> The tactics of using camouflaged discourse which does not make inflammatory comments directly and which consequently evades accusations of racism is called a dog-whistle politics (Starnawski 2017, 71).

<sup>144</sup> Quote from listener Ewa Zalewska on a *Radio Maryja* call-in segment (June 26, 2018).

<sup>145</sup> Lech Wałęsa and several influential politicians from the post-Solidarity camp played their part in this process. During the presidential campaign in 1990, Wałęsa attacked his opponent—Tadeusz Mazowiecki—by “accusing” him of being Jewish. This information was supposed to have provided a good enough reason for Wałęsa’s rival to be disqualified as a candidate for the highest office in the country. The rationale was that Mazowiecki’s alleged Jewishness



Jankowski, identified the negative outcome of roundtable talks with the interests of *żydokomuna* [“Judeo-commies”], which, in his opinion, compromised national sovereignty for Poland putting a new, local twist on an old antisemitic conspiracy theory (see (Byford 2011, 55; Wysocka 2008, 69; Lubelska 1999; Prażmowska 2011, 255; Żuk 2017, 17; Astapova et al. 2021, 10). In the same period, Bishop Edward Frankowski, during a sermon in 1996 accused the Stefan Batory Foundation (an NGO funded by Soros) of undermining the Polish family and consequently weakening the nation (Lizut December 10, 1997). *Radio Maryja* has subscribed to both narratives.

Initial criticisms of George Soros made by Rydzyk largely reiterated arguments from the work of Henryk Pająk, *Piąty Rozbiór Polski* [The Fifth Partition of Poland] (1998) in which he claimed that this allegedly power-hungry and greedy billionaire was the mastermind behind the 1989 transition and its aftermath in Poland afterwards. His book was widely recognized as conspiratorial and antisemitic, but this didn't stop Rydzyk from promoting it to his students and listeners (Osęka 2000; Jastrun 1998).

On one occasion, he was secretly recorded in his media school, the College of Social and Media Culture, repeating to students the gist of Pająk's book:

Who rules in Poland? They are like horses, but there are different horses, and they take part in races. But all these horses belong to one person...Isn't it Soros? What role does he play in Poland? I am looking at this, and this is what I see. Who is the president, who are his advisors, prime minister, who is in a given party? All these people are Soros' people. (Hołub 2007)

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undermined his Polishness and as a result he could not be trusted. The response of Mazowiecki made matters far worse. Instead of dismantling Wałęsa's logic he provided a series of documents verifying his non-Jewish background, in this way confirming that he agreed with the original statement that Poles of Jewish background are not fit for the position of the president of Poland (Dudek 2013, 124).

Soon this thesis, as repeated by Rydzyk, became a dogma among the station's listeners; something that was no longer questioned as demonstrated by a phone-in segment featuring a caller named Krzysztof from Scandinavia who remarked:

We know who "the fathers of our sovereignty" are. On the one hand, Brzeziński, Soros, Sachs, and *Radio Free Europe*. On the other hand, ..., Michnik... and Balcerowicz. ...I do not think anyone consulted us on this... we know who rules Poland [typical omission which is a code word for Jews] (January 29, 2007, RM).

In other words, conspiratorial and oftentimes antisemitic narratives about Soros were legitimized by *Radio Maryja* and then periodically repeated (Lizut May 14, 1997, Osęka 1997, Śliwinski July 22, 2010, RM, Modelska-Creech December 17, 2009, RM). In 1997, the station devoted an entire program to the Batory Foundation. In it an invited guest, professor of forestry and far-right politician, Maciej Giertych, claimed that Soros had been a member of the Bilderberg Club; a group of powerful men who make up a shadow world government that decides the fate of countries around the world, including Poland. In October another program's hosts regurgitated these views (Lizut December 10, 1997, Osęka 1997).

The second type of attacks on George Soros that take place on *Radio Maryja* are more ideological in nature and focus not only on Poland. According to the station's "experts,<sup>146</sup>" even though the people who manufactured economic reforms, social

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<sup>146</sup> Radio's hosts tend to overemphasize the competence of the invited panelists by mentioning all their academic titles omitting a crucial piece of information that these contributors often are not experts on the topics discussed. Psychology professor Mira Modelska- Creech (December 17, 2009, RM), or professor of forestry Maciej Giertych both commented on Soros' role in globalization (Lizut 1997b, Osęka 1997). Both strategies are commonly used by conspiracy

revolutions (e.g., introducing pro-choice legislation in Ireland, or encouraging demonstrations in Ukraine or Georgia), were linked to “big money” coming from people such as Soros, deep down they were ideologically aligned with the 60s counterculture and with Marxism (January 29, 2007, RM; Oko April 29, 2015, RM). They allegedly wanted to create societies that were removed from old hierarchies and expectations, and thus easy to manipulate. When the economic changes in Poland began, the country opened its borders to the West, the cultural transformation that followed (including slow-yet-steady secularization) was seen as nothing else but a part of a larger conspiracy (Kościańska 2009, 63). *Radio Maryja*'s hosts and contributors (e.g., Dariusz Oko) blamed the progressing modernization of Polish society following transition on Soros who promoted an open society and countercultural ideals (Szostkiewicz December 14, 2002).

Any initiatives that strived to empower marginalized groups (e.g., women, LGBTQ+ people, refugees)—so most campaigns funded by Soros—were interpreted as undermining centuries old social institutions (like the gender roles and the family), in an attempt to weaken the largely imagined, homogenous national community of Poles. So, apart from being discredited due to his role in the transition, Soros was most often attacked for promoting so-called “gender ideology”<sup>147</sup> (Kuby November 29, 2007;

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theorists so that they might legitimize their view via the opinions of “experts” (Byford 2011, 89; Aaronovitch 2011, 11).

<sup>147</sup> The term “gender ideology” is very popular on *Radio Maryja* and amongst Law and Justice politicians (Graff 2014, 433). It refers to any organization, institution, or initiative that embraces non-normative ways of raising a family, forming intimate relationships, and that supports women’s reproductive rights. Thus, all progressive views pertaining to gender and sexuality are conflated under this one umbrella term. “In some contexts, “gender ideology” is also interpreted as imposed by the West on the rest of world” (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018, 9).

Korolczuk 2020, 165) , and the “civilization of death” (i.e., abortion, IVF) (Graff 2014, 431; Radkowska- Walkowicz 2014, 407; Lindner 2012).<sup>148</sup> He was seen not only as responsible for the economic destruction of Poland, but also for the destruction of the nation in biopolitical and ideological terms.

Since 2015, when Law and Justice took power in Poland, as I will demonstrate in Chapters 4 and 5, Soros scapegoating became habitual on *Radio Maryja*. If any undesirable process was taking place, from the point of view of its listeners, he was very likely to be behind it. As one of the station’s callers put it:

What a discovery! Soros wants to destroy Poland. That was obvious tens of years ago (Ewa Zalewska, June 26, 2018, RM).

From this research I infer that this had been made “obvious” by *Radio Maryja* much earlier.

### **3.3.7 No Longer Uncool?**

Conspiracy theories were present on *Radio Maryja* airwaves since its early days which—was one of the reasons for its initial marginal status (Friszke February 21, 2017). Rydzyk’s opponents, in their short-sightedness, ridiculed his station, his listeners, and guests, describing them as juvenile and “uncool” (*obciachowe*) (June 14, 2009, RM;

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<sup>148</sup> Initially, Soros was not the only one blamed. *Radio Maryja*’s expert on “gender ideology,” professor Dariusz Oko, stated that those responsible for “gender ideology”—which he termed the “modern Marxism,”—were “atheists from the Frankfurt School; Adorno, Marcuse (April 29, 2015, RM).” In 2013 he added Bill Gates, J.D Rockefeller, and George Soros, though he did not single out any one of them. However, in 2015, in very changed political circumstances he singled out Soros as the major sponsor of “gender ideology” (May 28, 2014, RM).

Pęczak August 15, 2017; Żakowski November 13, 2007. Obirek in Podgórska September 12, 2021). Little did they know that constructing something or someone as “uncool” tends to lead to backlash. This is because most people like to be labelled as “cool” (Pountain and Robins 2000, 9) as it means that they are “in the know” (Beer 2009, 1157) and that others will want to follow their lead (Warren and Campbell 2014, 544). Hence, being cool comes with power and influence, and explains why various actors clash over the meaning of this word. Following from this, labelling someone or something as “uncool” would likely result in a reaction that would turn what is cool and what is not on their head (Warren and Campbell 2014, 543). This is exactly what happened in the case described.

The person who tried to stabilize the reputation of *Radio Maryja* as an “uncool” (*obciachowe*) station was Donald Tusk. The leader of centrist Civic Platform who shortly before the 2005 election, contemptibly characterized *Radio Maryja*’s audience as “mohair berets,” from the type of inexpensive hats many of them wore. This phrase came to symbolize the views<sup>149</sup> of his electorate—urbanites—regarding the station’s audience, who allegedly consisted of “only” the undereducated, unemployed, and devout women from small towns who voted for the Law and Justice party (Radiukiewicz 2018, 130; Burdziej 2008b, 21). But, like Hillary Clinton’s “basket of deplorables” term (used to describe Trump’s base during the 2016 election), the use of “mohair berets” quickly backfired<sup>150</sup> as Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of Law and Justice, together with Rydzyk

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<sup>149</sup> Need I add unapologetically ageist, classist, and misogynist (Radiukiewicz 2018, 130).

<sup>150</sup> Political opponents of Civic Platform and politicians from Law and Justice worked to undo the negative meaning of “mohair berets.” Beata Szydło, Polish Prime Minister, greeted mohair berets

skillfully used it to mobilize feelings of victimization<sup>151</sup> among their supporters.

This helped them to defeat Tusk's party in the 2005 elections.

*Radio Maryja's* audience supported the conservative Law and Justice party in the elections not only in 2005, but also in 2015, and 2019—each time in competition with the liberal Civic Platform party. Through this process, Rydzyk's radio station became far more powerful and influential and almost mainstream. Interestingly, its listeners were convinced by regular contributors, and the founder himself that they were the true rebels and non-conformists who fight the establishment (Cieśla March 1, 2008; Mazuś and Wilk December 30, 2020; Żakowski November 13, 2007; Kempa 17 June 2015, RM: May 6, 2009, RM; Nykiel May 24, 2014, RM, Kruk September 19, 2015 RM; Modzelewski October 25, 2015, RM), that is, truly “cool” people (Warren and Campbell 2014). Thus, as years passed, the political movement that Rydzyk created was no longer ostensibly “uncool” and the conspiracy theories his radio promoted (including ones about Soros) started to circulate more widely (Kucharczyk in Siedlecka 2017).

### **3.4 History as a Repository of Resentment**

The origins of attacks on Soros and their persistence in Poland can be accounted for by his playing a significant role in the transition to capitalism as well as the degree

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during an appearance on *Radio Maryja* (RM 2016 “Sto dni rządów”), and so did Andrzej Duda (Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 673). Even a song defending this group was written and promoted by the station. Soon, being labeled as “mohair berets” became a source of pride for many *Radio Maryja* listeners (Kuligowski 2019, 135; Budyta-Budzyńska 2018, 295).

<sup>151</sup> Kaczyński stated “mohair berets...are not supposed to have rights and are not supposed to vote” addressing his constituency suggesting what people from the opposing political camp think of them (January 8, 2015, RM). Rydzyk, on the other hand, suggested that term “mohair beret” is an instance of hate speech (26 March 2015, RM).

to which *Radio Maryja* spread conspiracy theories about him. But an analysis of statements targeting this billionaire made during “Unfinished Conversations” also points in the direction of the distant past as holding explanations for why the (rarely accurate) vilification of him by the Polish right was uncritically accepted by segments of Polish population. As I will argue next, the history of Polish antisemitism (especially linked to Dmowski), combined with a mistrust of foreign interference, 19<sup>th</sup> century messianic ideology, anti-liberalism, and anti-elitism, created a context, or “a resource” of sorts in which people like Soros were positioned a likely scapegoat for various resentments.

### **3.4.1 The Failure of Messianism and Polish Exceptionalism**

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, stemming from a collaboration between Polish elites and foreign powers,<sup>152</sup> Poland<sup>153</sup> was divided up between Prussia, Austria, and Russia,<sup>154</sup> and erased from the map of Europe (Snochowska-Gonzalez 2012, 710, Ascherson 2016).

The resulting occupation lasted 123 years and made a mark on Polish national identity, which ever since has been imbued with strong feelings of victimization (Topolski 2015, Ch. IX; Zubrzycki 2006, 17) that have persisted into the present day (Bulska et al., 2021, 138).

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<sup>152</sup> Specifically, Catherine the Great (Ögelman 1995, 162).

<sup>153</sup> More precisely, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

<sup>154</sup> This dismemberment of the country had consequences for future generations as the three parts of Poland developed at different paces, with the Prussian region becoming the most economically advanced (Prażmowska 2004, 131, Kwaśniewicz 2003, 389). The resulting division between the wealthy, urban, modern, tolerant, educated West- also known as Poland A, and the poor, rural, backward, nationalist East- Poland B has existed in Poland ever since (Kozak and Pyszkowski 2001; Marody 1997, 17; Bukraba-Rylska 2009, 590; Fleming 2006, 97; Kochanowicz and Marody 2003, 361).

During the partition period, the intelligentsia and the church took over the task of nurturing Polish culture and language,<sup>155</sup> and in doing so hoped to guide the masses toward regaining independence (Zarycki 2015, 712; Zubrzycki 2006, 204; Millard 1996, 206; Tymowski 1993, 198; Grudzińska-Gross 1992, 147). They developed and embraced an identity of martyrdom and victimhood that was informed by nationalism, romanticism, and Catholicism. On the one hand, it stressed the relevance of sacrifice (Zarycki 2004, 624; Prażmowska 2004, 142; Niżyńska 2010, 468). From this perspective, men were supposed to be heroic martyrs who had to give up their lives for their country, and women as the mothers of the nation (*Matka Polka*) were expected to devote themselves to producing new generations of warriors (Porter- Szücs 2014,382; Tymowski 1993, 198). On the other hand, this identity was centred on Poland's perceived victim status which was very vividly expressed in a messianic view of the country as a suffering, stateless nation—a “Christ of Nations,” that would one day be resurrected (Topolski 2015, Ch. IX, Astapova et al. 2021, 7). This pain was caused by external and internal threats. As Maria Janion argues, during this period constructing Polish national identity could only be done dialectically through simultaneously imagining the other/stranger, most often - the uncanny Jew (2004, 141-151).

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<sup>155</sup> The Catholic Church was elevated to the status the guardian of Polish language, which at the time was prohibited in all state institutions and could only be used legally during liturgy (Prażmowska 2004, 149).



The martyrological and nationalistic discourse, however, tended to be elitist and antisemitic, which meant that peasants<sup>156</sup> or Jews<sup>157</sup> were perceived as rarely interested in the cause of national liberation (Wesołowski 1996, 79; Zarycki 2015, 713).

Thus, the messianic message was attractive primarily to the Polish nobility and inspired a chain of bloody, largely unsuccessful<sup>158</sup> national insurrections (Prażmowska 2004, 141; Walicki 1997, 245). What remained from that era was the conflation of religious and nationalist discourses which meant that being a Pole more and more meant being a Catholic first and foremost (Zarycki 2004, 624, see Zubrzycki 2006, 22-23).<sup>159</sup>

### **3.4.2 Populist Nationalism and the Anti-Liberalism of Dmowski**

After the heroic, romantic ideals were killed (quite literally) during consecutive uprisings in 1794, 1830, 1846, and 1848, and led to the emigration of cultural and political elites, mass deaths and the loss of whatever autonomy remained (Prażmowska 2004:141; Topolski 2015: Ch. X), the intelligentsia attempted to build the nation in

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<sup>156</sup> As Jerzy Topolski (2004: Ch. IX) points out, peasants often carried the burden of the uprisings but rarely benefited from them, as the gentry did not want to give them rights to the lands they farmed on. As a result, many peasants murdered the gentry, robbed and demolished their palaces, or if they were able to capture them, gave them away to occupiers during different uprisings in 1794, in 1846, then 1848.

<sup>157</sup> Jews were initially involved in the fight for independence, and the Warsaw intelligentsia wanted to fight for the emancipation of Jews, but the eventual growth of nationalism changed this (Lukowski and Zawadzki 2006, 197. 174).

<sup>158</sup> The only successful insurrection was the Greater Poland Uprising in 1948 in which the peasantry took up arms together with both the nobility and the city dwellers (Zdrada 2005, 268).

<sup>159</sup> Such a view is rejected by Lubecki and Szczegóła (2007, 13). Andrzej Walicki claims that the notion of Polish nationalism was originally inclusive. According to him, Polish writers would stress a similarity between Polish Catholic and Jewish faith. Moreover, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the Warsaw Jews attended patriotic demonstrations and expressed pro-Polish feelings (1997, 245).

a more systematic manner by accelerating social and economic progress in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Walicki 1997, 246, Lukowski and Zawadzki 2006, 167-8).<sup>160</sup>

This period coincided with national awakenings, and a broader politicization of the masses that was experienced by Polish, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian peasants and the working class respectively (Ibid. 246, 248; Topolski 2015, Ch X).

Around this time, conservative thinkers and the nationalist Catholic clergy began stressing that Poland should become an ethnically and religiously homogenous country (consisting of Polish Roman Catholics) (Rae 2007, 223; Prazmowska 2004, 164).<sup>161</sup>

Among them, most notably, was Roman Dmowski, a nationalist thinker who was a major ideologue of the *Narodowa Demokracja*<sup>162</sup> [National Democracy] (Wandycz 1990, 454), who believed that Polish interests were being undermined by Jews, and pro multi-cultural nobles who favored the Jews and exploited peasants as well as by communists, liberals, and cosmopolitans (Ibid. 454; Rae 2007, 223). He embraced a Catholic, Polish nationalist tradition, set against communist and liberal thinking, leading to a rejection of “the project of modernity itself” (Rae 2007, 223). His populist nationalism won the hearts of the “hard-working lower classes” in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century because it addressed their growing frustration with social and economic inequality (Ibid. 247; Walicki 2000, 32, 14,

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<sup>160</sup> The ensuing development and modernization were accompanied by a rise of prosperity among the Jewish and German bourgeoisie which did not go unnoticed, ending in an all too familiar pattern of pogroms and the emigration of Polish Jews to the United States and Palestine (Kofta and Sędek 2005, 42; Prazmowska 2004, 151; Walicki 1997, 246, 247; Cała 1989, 27).

<sup>161</sup> In reality, up until the end of WWII, it was anything but homogenous; it consisted of Poles, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Jews, Orthodox Christians, and Armenians (Walicki 1997, 246; Lukowski and Zawadzki 2006, 9, 16; Frost 1993, 10; Frost 2015, 2-3). In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Poland and Lithuania unified and formed a multiethnic and religiously tolerant state (Ibid. 165; Prazmowska 2004, 77-78; Ögelman 1995, 161, 165; Davies 1984, 440, 444).

<sup>162</sup> This was a nationalist conservative political movement.

15, 32, Wandycz 1990, 454). By following a centuries-old “tradition” of Polish antisemitism<sup>163</sup> and identifying culprits who could be blamed for their difficult situation, Dmowski gave the lower- and working-class population a sense of safety. He provided them with black-and-white explanations which made the world a less hostile and uncertain place for masses of people (Ibid. 247; Walicki 2000, 32, 14, 15, 2, Wandycz 1990, 454). Once again, conspiracy theories have proven to be a very useful tool in helping to achieve these goals (see Soral et al, 2019, 373; Bulska et al. 2021, 135).

Dmowski, however, was not alone in this project. Fearing the loss of its unique role as the defender of national identity which it played throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the church became openly hostile to Jews in this period<sup>164</sup>, and was indirectly complicit in their persecution (Ibid.).<sup>165</sup> <sup>166</sup> As Dominika Bulska and colleagues argue, such “traditional antisemitism,” based as it is on “Christian anti-Judaic motives,” played a role in triggering the pogroms after The Great War (Bulska, Halska, Winiewski and Bilewicz 2021, 126).

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<sup>163</sup>Anti-Semitism in this area has been present for the past 700 years (Ögelman 1995, 165; Lukowski and Zawadzki 2006, 31, 68). It dates to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when a large number of Jews were escaping persecution in Western Europe (Ögelman 1995, 162). They were welcomed by the kings because they were considered agents of modernization (Ibid. 127). Little did they know that the pogroms, prejudice, exclusion, and segregation that they were subjected to in the West would continue in the newly adopted country and extend far into the future making persecution of Jews a recurring theme in Polish history (Ibid. 165; Lukowski and Zawadzki 2006, 31, 68; Davies 1984, 440, 444)

<sup>164</sup> Janusz Tazbir argues that the consequence of counterreformation was the idea of fusing Polish identity with Catholicism, which in the eighteenth century led to the strengthening of the representation of Jews as enemies of the nation (in Żuk 2017, 82).

<sup>165</sup> Through this approach the church was able to secure its position, as right-wing, nationalistic, and antisemitic sentiments became strongly entrenched in Polish identity (Topolski 2015, Ch. X; Prażmowska 2004, 167).

<sup>166</sup> This might partially explain why in Poland one’s religiosity (church attendance, listening to *Radio Maryja*) is correlated with antisemitism (Żuk 2017, 86).

The ethnic nationalism that emerged in this manner redefined Polish nationalism more broadly and set an antisemitic and xenophobic standard for the oncoming 20<sup>th</sup> century (Walicki 1997, 248; Walicki 2000, 35; Bilewicz and Krzemiński 2010, 242) during which Polish antisemitism became even stronger than before.

### **3.4.3 The Persistence of Antisemitism during the Interwar Period and World War II**

Even before Poland<sup>167</sup> regained its independence in 1918, some two million Jews had little choice but to emigrate from Poland due to the increasing atmosphere of hostility towards them (Narkowicz 2018, 358). And a year after the World War I, at least eight anti-Jewish pogroms took place, with one of them seeing 150 Jews murdered (Prażmowska 2004, 150; Topolski 2015, Ch. X). Three years later, in 1922, Gabriel Narutowicz, the first president of Second Republic of Poland was assassinated by a nationalist fanatic who was convinced that his presidential victory was a result of Jewish conspiracy—a view promoted by Dmowski’s National Democracy Party (Walicki 1997, 30; Brykczyński 2014, 435). This tragic event was not the end of Polish antisemitism which persisted throughout the darkest moment in the worlds’ history when more than 3 million Polish Jews perished in the Holocaust under the Nazis.<sup>168</sup> Some<sup>169</sup>, however, were also murdered by Poles who tried to repress this memory (Zubrzycki 200,6, xiii),

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<sup>167</sup> To be precise, the Second Republic of Poland.

<sup>168</sup> Poland was no longer “Europe’s most important Jewish sanctuary.” Before the war began a third of the country’s population was not ethnically Polish (Prażmowska 2004, 177), and out of that, 3.35 million identified as Jewish, and of those, only 30,000 survived the Holocaust (Ibid. 84; Ögelman 1995, 167; Kemp-Welch 2008, 157).

<sup>169</sup> It is estimated that “1500 to 2000 Jews were killed between 1945 and 1947” (Simonsen 2020, 364).

especially between 1945-47, for example, during the Kielce pogrom,<sup>170</sup> but also when they refused to give back Jewish property that had been appropriated during the war (Ögelman 1995, 167; Prażmowska 2004, 191; Kemp-Welch 2008, 157; Śpiewak 2019).

The seeds sown by Dmowski in the twenties had grown, and many of those who admired him believed that the systemic extermination of Jews during the war was desirable (Prażmowska 2004, 183; Sutowski 2017; Stone 2018, 235).

### **3.4.4 Antisemitism After the Second World War**

The years immediately following the war were filled with the chaos, anarchy, persecution (including of the clergy) of the Stalinist period and many people left the country fearing for their lives (Prażmowska 2004: 191; Ögelman 1995: 168; Ost 1988: 162, 163). Even though Dmowski's ideal was unexpectedly achieved and Poland became an ethnically and politically homogenous country,<sup>171</sup> discrimination against the remaining Jewish population continued.<sup>172</sup> This was a no small feat given that only a handful of

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<sup>170</sup> The most "well-known" pogrom occurred as a reaction to the disappearance of eight-year-old Henryk Błaszczyn. The local mob espoused traditional antisemitic conspiracy theories blaming Jews for kidnapping Christian children and accused the local Jewish population of doing the same. Consequently, the mob murdered 36 Jews (Bulska et al. 2021, 126)

<sup>171</sup> This homogenization resulted from: the Holocaust; the redrawing of borders at the Yalta Conference during which the eastern borderlands of Poland were lost to the Ukrainian and Belorussian minorities inhabiting them; the expulsion of five million Germans. Another dramatic change that took place was social stratification; the genocide of the Jews had eliminated the only strong middle-class that Poland had, a stratum that supported democracy, pluralism, and helped to modernize the country (Mokrzycki 1995, 296).

<sup>172</sup> Some have argued that the Jews collaborated with the Soviets during the war, which then 'justified' the hostility toward them (Maszkowski 2006, 672). *Radio Maryja's* founder appears to have been in this camp. According to Hołub and Głuchowski, in the past two decades Rydzyk has allowed many antisemitic statements to be made on the air, not because he believes in the racial inferiority of Jews, but because he thinks they have been hostile to the Polish nation due to what

them remained in the country,<sup>173</sup> a phenomenon labelled as “antisemitism without Jews” (Brumberg 1992, 423; Mokrzycki 1997, 199-200; Kofta and Sędek 2005, 61; Hunter and Ryan 2008, 185; Bilewicz and Krzemiński 2010; Byford 2011, 95; Zubrzycki 2017, 94).

The situation would improve after Stalin’s death when the communist authorities started modernizing the country and the repressions were halted during the thaw (Prażmowska 2004: 195, 199, Topolski 2015: Ch. XII). But it remained a totalitarian country (Kula 1993:189), and when competition at the top of the Polish United Workers’ Party became too intense some 20,000 influential party members of Jewish origin<sup>174</sup> lost their jobs and were removed from the universities under false pretenses. Fearing for their lives, they eventually emigrated (Ögelman 1995, 168; Ost 1989, 162-3; Astapova et al. 2021, 9), as they were accused of participating in the repressions of the Stalinist period (Ibid. 85. Prażmowska 2004: 201, Langer 2021: 173).

A similar story was repeated in 1968.<sup>175</sup> The situation changed somewhat in the ’90s, after the transition of 1989 antisemitism no longer led to deaths or expulsions and

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happened before, during, and after the Second World War (2019, 339). In this view, he has been influenced by the work of Henryk Pająk and Krzysztof Kąkolewski, who have argued that Jews ruled Poland after World War II (Ibid. 684; Pankowski 2010).

<sup>173</sup> Michał Bilewicz and Ireneusz Krzemiński estimate Jewish population to be between 1,000 to 50,000 people (2010, 236), but the 2011 census data indicates slightly above 7,000 (see also Bulska et al., 2021, 130).

<sup>174</sup> Jews who survived the Holocaust were crucial in the early years of building People’s Republic, but later were seen as too powerful and threatening the party (Judt 1988: 216; Kula 1993: 189).

<sup>175</sup> When Polish First Secretary Władysław Gomułka attacked Polish Jews for being on the side of Israeli and American Imperialism during the Six-Day War (Kemp-Welch 2008, 158), perceiving this alleged dual loyalty as a threat to national security. As well, some of the leaders of student strikes in March of 1968 were Jewish (Topolski 2015, Ch. XII), all of which gave Gomułka a pretext to weed out the remaining handful of influential Jews from party ranks, universities, and important cultural institutions (Judt 1988, 215; Kemp-Welch 2008, 158). Consequently, another 13,000 Jews were expelled from the country (Topolski 2015, Ch XII). In the end, the communists

instead was replaced by “milder” antisemitic conspiracy theories disseminated by the likes of *Radio Maryja* and other alternative media outlets.<sup>176</sup> Shortly before Poland’s EU accession in 2004, there was an increase in antisemitic sentiment that accompanied the Eurosceptic campaigns of some of the political parties who identified the EU as a Jewish institution and warned against joining it. But as years passed, and many Poles benefited financially from EU membership several renowned specialists on the topic of antisemitism argued that as a social phenomenon, antisemitism was a thing of the past (Krzemiński 2001, see Narkowicz 2017, 448)<sup>177</sup> and even some scholars talked about “the resurrection of Jewish culture” (Zubrzycki 2017, 194). However, the tide was to change yet again in 2015, when Law and Justice won the elections running on fear mongering campaign blaming Soros for the refugee crisis. This led experts to raise the alarm again, largely in response to an increase in hate crimes that took place (Pankowski 2016, 85, Duval Smith 2016; Piechocki 2016).

### **3.4.5 Soros as a Likely Scapegoat**

Contributors, panelists and listeners of *Radio Maryja*’s “Unfinished Conversations” present Soros as belonging to “dark networks” (Śliwiński December 13,

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issued a statement ordering Jewish Poles to give up their citizenship (Narkowicz 2018, 358, see Stola 2000).

<sup>176</sup> The acceptance of antisemitism at the time was far more common than it is now (Porter-Szücs 2014, 362). During the transition, that is during the major crisis, the belief in conspiracy theories about Jews went up (Bilewicz and Krzemiński 2010, 234).

<sup>177</sup> At the same time, a year later, in 2002, Ireneusz Krzemiński found that in comparison to 1992, the number of Poles who believe that Jews are secretly ruling the world did not drop, in fact it started growing (Kofta and Sędek 2005, 61).

2014, RM) of Jews who run the country through buying politicians (Rydzik in Hołub 2007), and whose aim is to weaken the core of the country—the family—by “promoting gender ideology” (Oko July 25, 2013, RM)). In so doing, they recycle antisemitic conspiracy theories which use the past as a repository of resentment and fear that provide justifications for their attacks. I argue, however, that the importance of history in constructing attacks on Soros should not be discounted and dismissed as being merely a part of conspiracy theories.<sup>178</sup> More than a century of foreign occupation, combined with anti-elitism, anti-liberalism, antisemitism, and deep Catholicism, provide a context, but do not provide a justification, for the attitudes towards this billionaire. To put it differently, in knowing Polish history one might be able to see how some would be skeptical of Soros’ role in transition and its aftermath.

George Soros is a foreigner who played a role in shaping the history of Poland, a country which for centuries was subjugated by external powers, and which consequently developed a culture of mistrust towards the outsiders (Tyszka 2008, 304; see Kofta and Sędek 2005, 60). By putting so much effort into the Polish transition (drawing up 5 different economic plans, meeting influential politicians, writing op-eds), he opened himself up to accusations of interfering in the country’s internal affairs as his motivations were questioned (Soros 1989; Kaufman 2002, 374; Kowalik 2011, 165). Additionally, for many Poles who were socialized in a culture of antisemitism and exposed to decades

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<sup>178</sup> I believe that even though conspiracy theories distort reality (past or present) to fit a particular political agenda, they should not be dismissed, but rather understood as a communiqué from society’s most vulnerable groups. In this case, they can perhaps be read as signs of desperation coming from marginalized people who simply turn the volume of radicalization up to finally be heard.



of anti-capitalist communist propaganda, the fact that the person working on economic reforms in their country is a Jewish, financial speculator, was reason for a concern, if not outright suspicion. Lastly, Soros' foundations promoted socially progressive causes that stood in stark contrast to the traditional family values which the Catholic church lionized in Poland (Zaborowski February 20, 2016). Taking this historical context into account, it is unsurprising that Soros became a major target for scapegoating by the Polish right.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

This chapter examined conspiracy theories about Soros in Poland prior to 2015. It argued that over the years, *Radio Maryja* was instrumental in the formulation and the dissemination of these narratives which primarily focused on the billionaire's role in the 1989 economic reforms that resulted in the transition from communism to capitalism. The radio station's guests and its founder claimed that this period in Polish history resulted from a secret plot carried out by local liberal elites together with wealthy foreigners of Jewish background, best symbolized by Soros.

In asking if these claims were legitimate, I revisited Soros' role in the 1989 transformation. I found that even though Soros was asked during the roundtable talks to lend his expertise and help the country to transition to capitalism, his involvement in the 1989 reforms was undoubtedly unprecedented for a person who was not an elected official—or even a citizen of Poland. Not only did he draw up several different economic plans for Poland, but when these were rejected for being too moderate, he continued to involve himself by covering the expenses of Jeffrey Sachs, an American economist whose more radical approach was ultimately implemented in this country. Nor did it

prevent him from writing op-eds addressing the international community, requesting aid for Poland, and communicating with economists who in the end were credited as the architects of the transition reforms. In this manner, Soros was actively engaged in shaping modern Polish history by supporting liberal elites that, in retrospect, would go on to leave masses of underprivileged Poles behind.

Despite this, conspiracy theories about Soros promoted by *Radio Maryja* inaccurately described his role in the 1989 reforms. Instead of offering a legitimate criticism of this billionaire's extraordinary involvement in Polish history, this station simply blamed the negative consequences of transition on him, thereby providing a simplified answer to a complex question about why the transformation left so many Poles impoverished and alienated. In doing so, *Radio Maryja* relied on predictable "sets of arguments, narrative themes and rhetorical tropes" (see Byford 2011, 40) common to conspiracy theories which made use of hyperbolic and polarizing language and subscribed to a Manichean view about the battle between good and evil while recycling ancient antisemitic tropes.

*Radio Maryja's* rewritten history, nonetheless, did not end with the 1989 transition. After conducting a detailed content analysis of "Unfinished Conversations," a popular nighttime show on *Radio Maryja*, I realized that the conspiracy theories put forward about Soros were imbued with references to more distant Polish distant history, which I will unpack in more detail in the two final chapters. But this served to underline how the history of Poland, penetrated by antisemitism, xenophobia, anti-liberalism,

and mistrust towards elites created a context in which targeting people like George Soros (a foreign-born Jewish billionaire who was involved in major economic reforms in the country), was very likely to happen. By mid-way through the second decade of the 21st century, the resulting political context would bring this messaging into the centre of Polish politics, the topic of our next chapter.

In other words, by formulating and disseminating conspiracy theories about Soros that reframed both recent and distant Polish history, *Radio Maryja* created “community of discourse” on the Polish far right (Mamul and Krakowiak 2008, 242). Many of the ideas that would later end up in the mainstream would emerge from this discursive space. Moreover, this station helped to build a community of people who felt that they were negatively affected by transition. As I have argued in this chapter, they went on to gain unprecedented political influence and were able to shape Polish politics for decades to come.

## **Chapter 4. The Scapegoating of George Soros After 2015**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how *Radio Maryja* instrumentalized conspiracy theories about the 1989 transition, including ones about Soros, to reach the hearts and souls of millions of Poles, achieving great political influence in the process. Furthermore, I examined a broader historical context as playing a significant role in explaining why this billionaire was a likely target of attack in Poland (Byford 2011, 152; Önnarfors and Krouewl 2021, 260). Nonetheless, the conditions described in the previous chapter existed for a long time before the movement of conspiracy theories about Soros from the margins to the center of public discourse in the period between 1994-2015, which means that other factors must have been at play in this shift. In this chapter, I will review how powerful domestic as well as international political actors and particular world-historical junctures impacted this move of negative rhetoric about Soros from the fringes into the mainstream of Polish public discourse.

First, following the suggestions of scholars who stress the need to study the link between conspiracy theories and politics (see Uscinski 2020, 20; Butter and Knight 2019, 38), I will outline the political landscape that served as the context in which conspiracy theories about Soros were able to flourish. I will summarize the twenty-year-old rivalry between two of the major political parties in Poland, the liberal Civic Platform, and the increasingly illiberal, conservative Law and Justice. I will examine how this competition not only reflected but also articulated and strengthened the growing

economic— and perhaps even more so— the cultural polarization of Polish society and prepared the ground for the development of anti-Soros phenomena. Then, I will explain how Law and Justice leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, allied with the founder of *Radio Maryja*, Tadeusz Rydzyk, to help him win elections in 2005, 2015, and 2019. In this manner, I agree with Barry Eidlin (2016, 505) who contends that to understand political divisions we need to study the context in which they emerge, i.e., prior structural arrangements (including that of political identities), formed alliances, culture, and cultural institutions. Following this, I will discuss the role conspiratorial framing of the European refugee crisis by Law and Justice played in their 2015 victory and argue how such framing provided an opportunity for this party to articulate social and political divisions.

In the second part of the chapter, I will detail the circumstances that enabled the popularization of conspiracy theories pertaining to George Soros in Poland as well as their consequences. I will establish why Law and Justice identified this philanthropist as its major enemy; the role of internationally circulated attacks that originated in the West; and lastly, how they too were linked to the refugee crisis and to growing anti-Muslim bigotry<sup>179</sup> in that region. Furthermore, I will point out how the continuous exposure to

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<sup>179</sup> Nearly all Polish scholars studying the refugee crisis in 2015 (see Starnawski 2017, 4) use the term “Islamophobia” to describe this phenomenon (Jaskułowski 2019. 38, Narkowicz 2018). That is why while citing or referring to their work I use this term, however, in other cases I will talk about “anti-Muslim bigotry.” I argue that the term “Islamophobia” ignores the fact that anti-refugee/ anti-Muslim climate in Europe was not only about the rejection of Islam as a religion or a culture, but also the fear that limited material resources would have to be shared by an increasing number of people if a large number of refugees were able to enter Poland (Karas 2016/2017).

conspiracy theories about Soros on *Radio Maryja*'s airwaves, in addition to the antisemitic and anti-refugee content, led to the uncritical acceptance of his antagonistic portrayal on the part of the station's listeners. Then, I will characterize the role politicians, other media outlets, and the Internet played in perpetuating these narratives about Soros, cultivating further mistrust toward him, and moving them increasingly into the mainstream. Additionally, I will show that the conspiracy theories about Soros coalesced around various anti-refugee and antisemitic discourses, and demonstrate that they were not exceptions, but rather part of a larger trend arising in the Polish public domain. Following this, I will review studies which suggest that antisemitism has been on the rise in Poland since 2015, and that previous progress made in this area has been eroding.

## **4.2 The Progressive Polarization of Polish Society**

### **4.2.1 The Early Years of Law and Justice and Its Alliance with Radio Maryja**

Law and Justice was established in 2001 by twin brothers, Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński, (Gwiazda 2008, 814) as a centrist, right-wing, yet pro-democratic party. In the early days the party distanced itself from *Radio Maryja*, as well as from the legacy of Roman Dmowski (Porter- Szücs 2014, 356; Gwiazda 2008, 814). Nonetheless, Jarosław Kaczyński quickly realized that to win elections he would have to politically and ideologically<sup>180</sup> align with the station's listeners. Thus, under his leadership the party

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<sup>180</sup> Already in 2004, Jarosław Kaczyński admitted that the National Democratic tradition should not be completely dismissed, and the ideas of Roman Dmowski had some merit (Lubczyński 2006, 1).

shifted to the right<sup>181</sup> and promised to create a morally renewed republic built upon Catholic values if the party was to win power (Leder 2018, 2; Hinsey 2016, 82).

The party's manifesto read that its goal was to "ensure that Christian principles ha[d] a proper place in social life as a necessary component of the moral reform of the state" (Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 365). Rydzyk, the founder of the radio station, appreciated the change of course, and forged an alliance with Kaczyński that has lasted until today. Over the span of three elections Rydzyk gave airtime to Law and Justice's ministers to discuss their plans, initiatives, and assessment of the situation in Poland (Burdziej 2008, 211) helping the party to win elections in 2005,<sup>182</sup> 2015 and 2019 (Wysocka 2008, 68; Jasiewicz 2008, 23).

During their first term in 2005, Law and Justice subscribed to the narratives that were being disseminated by *Radio Maryja*, most notably those pertaining to economic transition. As the story went, when the post-communists ruled the country throughout the nineties, Poland was under de facto occupation, and only by undergoing an ideological makeover through clearing the country of communists and returning to more Catholic and patriotic roots would a return to normalcy be possible (Brier 2009, 64; Rae 2007, 222; Gwiazda 2008; 814, Kozłowski 2006, 4). But Kaczyński's obsession with using

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<sup>181</sup> In 2005, Jarosław Kaczyński said:

I reached a conviction that Father Rydzyk is a positive figure, even though I do not identify with many views promoted in *Radio Maryja*. (...) He strengthened the right wing in Poland and (...) he has sought to revive (...) national values, which are crucial for the construction of the state (Pankowski 2010, 15).

<sup>182</sup> In 2005, in quite a bizarre circumstance, Jarosław Kaczyński became the Prime Minister of Poland, while his twin brother- Lech Kaczyński became the president of Poland (Kulas 2018, 30; Brier 2009, 64;)

conspiracy theories to rewrite history to identify<sup>183</sup> alleged traitors of the national cause from the communist period backfired at the time. As older voters grew fed up with the exploitation of the past for political purposes (Pankowski 2010, 162; Wysocka 2008), his party lost two elections, first in 2007, and then again in 2011—both to the centre-right Civic Platform. Nonetheless, the ideas articulated by Rydzyk and Kaczyński would continue to gain a following and eventually shift the political landscape in Poland in their direction (Ost 2015, 618; Brier 2009, 64; Jasiewicz 2008, 12).

#### **4.2.2 Things Could Not Have Been Better: Poland under Civic Platform**

Law and Justice's competitor, Civic Platform, led by Donald Tusk, was in power between 2007- 2015.<sup>184</sup> It was elected mainly by well-off urbanites who felt embarrassed before the rest of Europe by the rhetoric used by Kaczyński's party and *Radio Maryja* between 2005 and 2007 (Pankowski 2016, 82; Jasiewicz 2008: 23). Hence, during Tusk's two terms in government leading Civic Platform, the conspiratorial discourses of *Radio Maryja* returned to far right, nationalistic alternative media and moved largely online. Meanwhile, the mainstream media,<sup>185</sup> promoted the official narrative of the governing class; a conservative-liberal consensus which claimed that the situation in Poland could

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<sup>183</sup> Kaczyński's party created new institutions such as the Institute of National Remembrance: Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (Pankowski 2010, 162) to identify communist regime collaborators, and promote a conservative-nationalist reading of historical events. (Kulas 2018, 30; Gwiazda 2008, 814; see also Porter 2010, 39).

<sup>184</sup> Civic Platform formed a coalition with the Polish People's Party at this time (Jaskułowski 2019: 36).

<sup>185</sup> Especially *Gazeta Wyborcza*, which in 2007 was already closely associated with Civic Platform.



not have been better (Leder 2018, 20; Rae 2008, 257). According to their account, the dire economic conditions following transition had improved (Czapiński 1995, 295). GDP went up, and so did incomes, as well as life satisfaction and duration (Walker 2019). Poland eventually joined NATO in 1999, and the EU in 2004.<sup>186</sup> Despite the growing economy, Civic Platform's success did not last long. The loss of the 2015 election was attributed to the persistence of material inequalities and Civic Platform's<sup>187</sup> inability to close these economic gaps (Sierakowski 2020; Skarżyńska 2018, 95). The weakness of Civic Platform in this regard is underlined by the number of young Poles, approximately 2 million, who emigrated to Western Europe in search of a better life (Connolly 2015).<sup>188</sup> However, there were other reasons for Civic Platform's defeat; its leaders failed to appreciate the powerful cultural narratives that were articulated by their political opponents and how they fed into the construction of social divisions in Poland—a common tactic among political parties trying to distinguish themselves from their opponents, as argued by Cedric de Leon, Manali Desai, and Cihan Tuğal (2009, 195), which was perfected by the Law and Justice Party.

#### **4.2.3 A Poland of Two Truths**

Under Civic Platform, the culture wars appeared to have been officially won by the modern, Euro-enthusiastic camp, but a parallel cultural universe spreading alternative

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<sup>186</sup> Poland became the poster child for a successful transition to capitalism in Central Europe (Markowski and Kwiatkowska 2018, 253; Paczyńska 2005, 573).

<sup>187</sup> Admittedly, all governments after 1989, whether right or left wing, supported neoliberal policies in the end which widened economic inequalities (Kotnarowski 2018, 37; Leder. 2018, 20).

<sup>188</sup> Similar trend was observed in Hungary (Geva 2021, 82).

narratives, including conspiracy theories about Soros, never disappeared; it was just removed from mainstream liberal discourse, albeit temporarily (Żakowski 2015; see Wenzel and Żerkowska- Balas 2019, 44). Not unlike in the United States, Polish politics began to revolve around symbolic and cultural differences rather than economic ones (Ziółkowski 1998, 37; see Frank 2004).<sup>189</sup>

Two events that took place, the death of John Paul II in 2005,<sup>190</sup> and the Smoleńsk air disaster in 2010 (which claimed many lives, including those of Polish president, Jarosław Kaczyński's twin brother),<sup>191</sup> presented an opportunity conducive to the reawakening of the dark side of the Polish patriotic spirit, which was effectively used by Law and Justice to exacerbate political and social polarization in the country (Śmiecińska 2020, 263; Koncewicz 2019, 508; Włodek-Biernat 2010). The deep politicization of history on the part of Law and Justice and *Radio Maryja*, as well as conspiratorial readings of the Smoleńsk crash as having been orchestrated by the Civic Platform in cooperation with Vladimir Putin, were repeated by numerous Law and Justice

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<sup>189</sup> When Law and Justice won the 2005 elections, it did not address more salient economic inequalities and instead emphasized cultural differences between what some have referred to as two tribes of Poles: “liberal Poland” and “united Poland” (Kalukin 2017).

<sup>190</sup> Which, John Paul II having been Polish, awakened their national and religious identity (Pankowski 2010, 161).

<sup>191</sup> They were on their way to commemorate the Katyń massacre, thus giving the crash a symbolic meaning as this was the first time that the execution of 40,000 Polish soldiers by the Soviet secret police in 1940 was being acknowledged by the Russian Federation (Davis September 18, 2010). The narrative promoted by the leader of Law and Justice – Jarosław Kaczyński- his late twin brother— Lech was a martyr and a hero who died, allegedly, at the conspiring hands of Russian operatives (Szeligowska 2014, 468).

politicians<sup>192</sup> (Niżyńska 2010, 467; Koczanowicz 2012, 827), intensifying this process (Ibid.). In this manner, the notion of a foreign threat, the fear of colonization, and suspicions of international conspiracies against the country, combined with a reawakening of the victimhood narrative that has haunted Poles since the 1795 partition, returned in full force fuelled by conspiracy theories.

Consequently, in 2010, the political distance between supporters of Civic Platform and Law and Justice increased, and the notion of Poland as a place of “two worlds, two discourses and two truths” solidified (Sierakowski 2017). Polish society did not become bifurcated through economic divisions alone (Łuczewski 2018, 17; Woźniak 2014, 178; Kowalik 2011), but also through Kaczyński’s party articulation of the events of through the lens of conspiracy theories to help split the country culturally. On the one hand, there is a wealthy, liberal, urban, cosmopolitan, and educated middle class who has been frequently hired by national corporations, primarily living in the Western part of the country, or “Poland A.” On the other hand, there are the poor,<sup>193</sup> conservative, and often unemployed residents of small towns and rural areas located mostly in the East, referred to as “Poland B” (Radiukiewicz 2018; 123; Skarżyńska 2018, 93; Fleming 2006, 97; Paczyńska 2005, 573). These so-called “winners and losers of transformation” respectively differ in their approaches toward democracy, modernity, globalization,

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<sup>192</sup> At the time of the disaster Civic Platform was the elected government in Poland, and thus in charge of “official” narratives, Law and Justice remained the second strongest force in the country and its interpretation of events won the hearts and minds of the less fortunate population of “Poland B.”

<sup>193</sup> Many of them, relatively speaking, are not poor, but their subjective experience is that they are worse off than their neighbours (see Golec de Zawala, Lantos and Keenan 2021, 108).

the assessment of transition, acceptance of the EU enlargement, NATO membership, the state role of the Catholic church, ethnic and sexual minorities, refugees; and, last but not least, George Soros himself (Piniór 2007, 271; Paczyńska 2005, 575).<sup>194</sup> Points of connection and commonality between these two Polands have become few and far between, leaving the country deeply divided along particular lines (Żakowski 2015; Ziemkiewicz September 27, 2012). In 2015, this fault line exposed itself when more Poles than ever before voted for Law and Justice.<sup>195</sup>

#### 4.3 The Reign of Law and Justice

In 2015, Law and Justice<sup>196</sup> won both the presidential and parliamentary elections<sup>197</sup> marking the beginning of a new era where the Polish right began to hold a hegemonic position on the political scene. What was unusual was the fact that in both cases Kaczyński's party managed to attract not only its traditional base—i.e., pensioners who listened to *Radio Maryja*—but also younger Poles<sup>198</sup> as well as some of the

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<sup>194</sup> Not unlike in the United States, Polish politics began to revolve around symbolic and cultural differences rather than economic ones (Ziółkowski 1998, 37; Frank 2004).

<sup>195</sup> This development was long in the making, and while it was the result of many economic and cultural issues, voter turnout was much higher in the 2015 election also because of enraging revelations about backdoor deals done by Civic Platform politicians (Lukowski 2019, 440; Skarżyńska 2018, 95; Kulas 2018, 25; Garton Ash 2015).

<sup>196</sup> With “United Right”: an informal alliance between right-wing parties.

<sup>197</sup> In May of 2015, Andrzej Duda—a candidate affiliated with Law and Justice—won the presidential race, receiving 60% of all the votes from people between the ages of 18 and 29. Then, in October that year, his party won a majority government in the parliamentary election (Lukowski and Zawadzki 2019, 444; Skarżyńska 2018, 113; Bierzyński 2016).

<sup>198</sup> In fact, many unemployed and disillusioned youth voted for a far more radical, anti-establishment, anti-democratic, and Eurosceptic party: Paweł Kukiz (Kukiz'15) and Janusz Korwin-Mikke's KORWiN (Skarżyńska 2018, 113). The same was true for the 2019 elections, when 25% of people between the ages of 18-25 voted for this party (Śmiecińska 2020, 251; Stanley and Cześniak 2019: 83).

beneficiaries of transition (Lukowski 2019, 444; Stanley and Czeńnik 2019, 83; Skarżyńska 2018, 113). This happened despite the deepening polarization of society around other factors and was made possible by articulating the management of the 2015 refugee crisis by the EU as an emergency, which swayed undecided voters in Kaczyński's favour.

In 2015, the number of people fleeing the wars in Syria and Yemen<sup>199</sup> heading for Europe, reached its peak. The EU asked its member countries, to the dislike of many voters and leaders in Central Eastern Europe (Markowski and Kwiatkowska 2018, 252),<sup>200</sup> to equally share the responsibility of accepting the refugees. Polish authorities, then under Civic Platform leadership, agreed (Jaskółowski 2019, 37),<sup>201</sup> but balanced discussions of the real challenges and opportunities that different countries faced by letting in refugees (Karas 2016, 55) were few and far between. The two narratives that dominated the discussion were devoid of nuance and strictly depicted refugees as either the oppressed or the oppressors. Political activists from Law and Justice drummed up fears of a Muslim cultural takeover by constructing a narrative that was very seductive to young voters about the growing victimization of Poles by EU elites who were cooperating with both Civic Platform and George Soros (Grzebalska and Petó 2018, 166; Kulas 2018, 22; Klaus 2017, 523; Pielą and Łujkanowicz 2017, 466). Running on an anti-

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<sup>199</sup> The rise in refugee arrivals to Europe in 2015 broadly refers to Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis coming through Greece (Jaskółowski 2019, 33).

<sup>200</sup> I agree with Kasia Narkowicz (2018, 357) and Ivan Kalmar (2018, 408) that CEE countries were not alone in their anti-refugee sentiment but rather were part of a larger emerging trend.

<sup>201</sup> In July 2015, the Civic Platform government reluctantly agreed to accept 2000 and then 5000 refugees to meet its international commitment (Narkowicz 2018, 336; Krzyżanowski 2018, 81).

refugee/ anti-Muslim<sup>202</sup> and anti-elitist platform and promising to protect country from the “Islamization” (Rydzik January 20, 2016, RM; Majewski 2017, 109), Kaczyński’s party achieved the biggest electoral victory any party has seen since the transition to capitalism in 1989 (Kulas 2018, 25; Piechocki 2015, 312).<sup>203</sup>

#### 4.3.1 The Program of “Moral Revival”

With victories in the 2015 and 2019 elections, Law and Justice politicians worked hard to deliver on the party’s promise to prevent Muslim refugees from entering the country,<sup>204</sup> as merely one aspect of the bigger program to morally renew the country.<sup>205</sup> Alterations were made in different spheres of public life including the economy, judiciary, media, cultural institutions, or language rules (Szczegółą and Kwiatkowski 2017, 59; Friszke February 21, 2017; Leftwich Curry 2017, 303; Kalmar 2022, 28). Many

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<sup>202</sup> It is worth pointing out that during 2015 refugee crisis the term “refugee” was synonymous with “a Muslim refugee” and the term “Muslim” was also used synonymously for “a refugee.”

<sup>203</sup> This win was, nonetheless, quite complex. Law and Justice learned its lesson from 2005, and knew that getting to power required a very difficult dance that involved tapping into the already existing cultural narrative provided by *Radio Maryja*—which, through identifying common enemies of the nation, reinforced a national identity for millions of listeners from Poland B—while simultaneously hiding the most radical rhetoric from potential voters from Poland A, all while also tackling significant economic issues (Szczegółą and Kwiatkowski 2017, 60). The effective mobilization of the fears of a Muslim takeover tipped the balance in favour of Kaczyński’s party.

<sup>204</sup> More than twelve thousand people applied for refugee status in 2015, which was ultimately granted to 203 Syrians and 24 Iraqis (Jaskułowski 2019, 39). In contrast to Civic Platform who agreed to accept 7000 refugees, Law and Justice decreased this number to 400, and later cut it to 0 after the 2017 Brussels terrorist attack (Narkowicz 2018, 336; Krzyżanowski 2018, 81). Furthermore, the new administration introduced legislation that reduced immigrants’ rights, as well as the so-called Antiterrorist Act which allowed for the surveillance of any foreign national residing on Polish territory (Klaus 2017, 523). Similar steps were taken in Hungary (Geva 2021, 82).

<sup>205</sup> The reaction of the Polish government and society towards the Ukrainian refugees escaping the Russian invasion was very different. The Law and Justice administration took unprecedented action, and in a matter of weeks managed to secure access to healthcare, education, and the labour market for the refugees (Strzelecki September 6, 2022).

of the changes, such as providing an extra monthly payment to pensioners (Śmiecińska 2020, 265), and lowering the retirement age, as well as introducing child benefits, lifted thousands of people out of poverty and were welcomed by segments of the population.<sup>206</sup> However, the vast majority of reforms broke both the law and the standards of good morals;<sup>207</sup> they were designed to make Kaczyński's hold on power permanent.

The Law and Justice-dominated parliament passed laws that subjugated the Constitutional Tribunal,<sup>208</sup> the highest court in the country, to the government.<sup>209</sup> In so doing, they mimicked what Viktor Orbán did in 2010 Hungary when he neutered the Constitutional Tribunal (see Geva 2021, 72). Moreover, Kaczyński's party seized control of the public media, removing any dissenting voices (Szczegółą and Kwiatkowski 2017, 63), as well as attempting to limit academic freedom<sup>210</sup> (Hinsey 2016, 85).

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<sup>206</sup> This explains why, despite introducing other, more controversial bills and conducting some unpopular reforms, Law and Justice has remained strong in the polls (Bendyk 2018, Mudde 2019). Some voters who were previously skeptical of Kaczyński's party, and who rejected his conspiracy theories, voted for Law and Justice simply with their household budgets in mind (Lukowski and Zawadzki 2019, 449; Kotnarowski 2011, 157), and some of these voters certainly used to vote for left-wing parties (Śmiecińska 2020, 263).

<sup>207</sup> For example, the budget was passed illegally after the vote was moved outside of the main chamber. The media were banned from recording it (December 2016).

<sup>208</sup> This court decided on the validity of the elections and was the last body to deal with appeals in criminal and civil cases (Szczegółą, Kwiatkowski 2017, 59; Friszke February 21, 2017; Curry 2017, 303).

<sup>209</sup> Even though the international community condemned the new administration and the EU threatened sanctions while enraged citizens protested on the streets (Radiukiewicz 2018, 124), the government did not waver.

<sup>210</sup> Law and Justice tried to limit the work of historians who did not want to forget darker moments from Poland's past (Szczegółą and Kwiatkowski 2017, 61). One of them was Jan Tomasz Gross, whose book *Neighbours* was written about Poles murdering Jews in Jedwabne (see Zubrzycki 2006, xiii; Kalmar 2022, 23). Its publication propelled the Law and Justice administration to draft a bill against "defamation of the Polish nation" (Hinsey 2016, 85) to penalize Gross and deter other scholars from undertaking similar projects. The new law, passed by parliament in January 2018, set fines and potential imprisonment (for up to three years) for "attributing to the Polish Nation or to the Polish State responsibility or co-responsibility for the Nazi crimes committed by the German Third Reich" (in Bulska et al 2021, 130). But the uproar

Furthermore, to keep its word to the religious portion of its electorate that was associated with *Radio Maryja*, Law and Justice proposed bills that would follow the teachings of the Catholic Church on matters related to gender and the family.<sup>211</sup> All of these reforms amounted to moving the country in the direction of authoritarianism<sup>212</sup> and were met with mass protests<sup>213</sup> (Skarżyńska 2018, 93). Unfortunately, even if protesters could slow down some of these reforms, they could not undo the cultural shift that Law and Justice had orchestrated in Poland.

#### 4.3.2 State-Sponsored Conspiracy Theories

From 2005 onward Law and Justice worked hard to normalize, polarizing and hyperbolic language<sup>214</sup> while frequently reiterating the victimhood narrative that Poles have proven to be very responsive to (see Bulska et al. 2021, 138) about voter manipulation on the part of Civic Platform and EU elites. Kaczyński's party, like Rydzyk (see Chapter 3), embraced Dmowski's nationalism, which used xenophobic rhetoric to

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from the international community and international political pressure was able to retract “some of the new provisions” of this so-called “Holocaust law” in June 2018 (Ibid).

<sup>211</sup> The administration ended subsidies for IVF, further restricted already draconian abortion laws, and the Polish president blocked a law that would have recognized the legal rights of trans people (Duval Smith February 6, 2016).

<sup>212</sup> Here I model my understanding of authoritarianism on the work of Krystyna Skarżyńska. According to her an authoritarian system is one which attempts to limit the powers of the lower and upper chambers of the parliament which serve to curtail the influence of parties and social organizations, as well as the elites. Additionally, it seeks to threaten the opposition and seizes control of the media (Skarżyńska 2018, 93)— precisely what Law and Justice has been doing (Neal 2016).

<sup>213</sup> During which the Committee for the Defense of Democracy was formed (Radiukiewicz 2018, 124); an organization that was linked to George Soros by the right.

<sup>214</sup> Good examples include referring to refugees as “economic migrants” (Krzyżanowski 2018, 87; Sadurska November 19, 2015, RM), calling their arrival an “invasion” (Baider and Kopytkowska 2017, 219); their political opponents as “gangsters” (Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 798; Buchowski 2017, 520).



uplift millions of marginalized poles by returning a sense of pride and self-worth to them (see Golec de Zavala, Lantos and Keenan 2021, 107). This was achieved by politicians feeding into the collective narcissism of the nation,<sup>215</sup> sanitizing Polish history through the repetition of conspiracy theories that favourably compared Poland with the demonized “other”; in this case, Muslim refugees (in 2015) (Pędziwiatr and Narkowicz 2017, 447), and LGBTQ+ people (in 2019)<sup>216</sup> (Korolczuk 2020, 166; Kaszewski 2020, 650). In other words, with these practices Law and Justice strived to naturalize some identities (Catholics, heterosexuals, patriots), and suppress others (Muslims, gays, globalists) all serving to strengthen, if not construct, social divisions (see de Leon, et al., 2009).

The strategy was successful and helped to secure victory for Kaczyński’s party in 2015, and then again in 2019. With Law and Justice coming to power using such an approach, their anti-refugee/ anti-Muslim and homophobic rhetoric formally moved to the center of Polish discourse (Jaskułowski 2019, 40; Patek and Płucienniczak 2017, 99; Konopczyński 2016), and conspiracy theories accusing George Soros of orchestrating the

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<sup>215</sup> As demonstrated by social psychologists; in Hungary (Forgas and Lantos in Forgas, Crano and Fiedler 2020) and in Poland, collective narcissism makes voters more likely to support populist governments. Moreover, they are prone to be sexist, discriminate against women (Ibid.), the LGBTQ+ community (Golec de Zavala and Keenan 2020, 118), Poles of Jewish origin (Ibid. 111-112), and believe in gender-related conspiracies (Marchlewska et al. 2019, 776).

<sup>216</sup> In 2019, the fear of losing an established child benefit coupled with an anti-LGBTQ+ campaign launched by Law and Justice, helped the party secure a second straight term (Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 802).

refugee crisis (Starnawski 2017, 71) and promoting of ‘gender ideology’<sup>217</sup> soon followed (Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 808).

#### **4.3.3 Soros’ Initiatives in Poland After 1989**

Even though the anti-Soros conspiracy theories were unsubstantiated, for Polish NGOs funded by him, mostly philanthropic in character, it was impossible to avoid being entangled in political battles. Because these organizations were created to support people on the ground who fought for political and social change, their founder and their agenda, which I will discuss next, made them likely objects for attacks.

Soros had set up the Stefan Batory Foundation in 1988, the first NGO in Poland to foster an intellectual exchange of scholars, journalists, and institutions representing diverse views (Kokot November 26, 2016). Despite that, he made it clear, however, that the goal of the organization was to ensure that the transformation in Eastern Europe would not go in the direction of nationalism (Ibid.). Thus, for several years, the activity of this Soros-funded organization largely overlapped with the rationale of consecutive liberal governments and included the fight for various progressive causes (Pszczółkowska 2007). For example, the Open Society Foundation co-founded *Federacja na rzecz Kobiet i Planowania Rodziny* [Federation for Women and Planned Parenthood], whose goal has been to protect, expand, and monitor women’s rights in Poland, as well as supporting initiatives advocating for sexual education in schools and more (<https://federa.org.pl/o->

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<sup>217</sup> “Gender ideology” is supposedly used by Soros to undermine the family and hence undermine and weaken the Polish nation. (e.g., Guz December 22, 2018, RM; Oko July 25, 2013, RM; Rydzik April 10, 2010, RM; Kuby November 29, 2007, RM).

nas/). But in 2015, after Law and Justice came to power and began introducing anti-democratic reforms, NGOs partially funded by Soros such as *HejtSTOP* [HateSTOP], *Stwarzyszenie 61* [Association 61], *Nigdy Więcej* [Never Again] and *Otwarty Dialog* [Open Dialogue] <sup>218</sup> started to have their hands full concentrating on the protection of democracy, freedom of speech, and the fight against the discrimination of minority groups. They were quickly identified<sup>219</sup> as powerful political actors, able to shape public opinion in such a way that could disrupt the plan of moral revival and lead to the eventual ousting of Law and Justice (Dobski 2016; October 29, 2017, TVP1). <sup>220</sup> They were thus deemed adversaries of the current administration of “Polish patriots” (May 29, 2016, YT; May 14, 2016, YT).

The hostile approach of Law and Justice towards George Soros has only grown over the past six years. In April of 2016, *Fox News* acquired access to documents—the so called, “Panama Papers”—which leaked the names of 226 European MPs who were

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<sup>218</sup> These four organizations came under increasing attacks from Law and Justice because they all have been fighting for a more inclusive and open society, which was interfering with this administration’s goals.

<sup>219</sup> This idea was picked up from politics in Hungary (Bielecki 2017). Poles were able to hear about Orbán’s criticisms of Soros’ NGOs on the national news (July 20, 2017, TVP1; June 2, 2017, TVP1), which then began to circulate on the Polish internet (Pochylski February 16, 2016).

<sup>220</sup> A spokesperson for the Open Society Foundation told *the New Yorker* that “the foundation has supported any organization in Poland that fights for the protection of human and civil rights which are threatened at present in this country [Poland]” (June 8, 2016, TVP1). This statement was picked up by the state-funded news who presented it as a proof that Soros was trying to undermine the government. In one short segment, a journalist stated that Soros is “busy attacking Polish government with the help of his NGOs and the press” (Diaz June 8, 2016, TVP1). Such rhetoric did not fall on deaf ears; YouTube users would echo similar statements “there is only one occupant of Poland, neocolonialism à la Soros (Qwardian December 17, 2016). During a July 2017 rally organized by the National Radical Camp, attendees chanted slogans like, “Poland is us, not Soros and his dogs” and *Radio Maryja* expert on Hungary Jerzy Robert Nowak said the event: “Soros, Schulz, Merkel we warn you, we won’t give up our sovereignty,” which the crowd repeated after him (July 29, 2017; Buklaha 2017).

identified as supporting Soros' open societies, six of whom were Polish. This information was seen as confirming the most conspiratorial narratives about Soros and was reported on the national news (1 June 8, 2016, TVP; April 12, 2017, TVP1; March 1, 2017, TVP1), *Radio Maryja*, and debated online <sup>221</sup> (Piotrowski October 28, 2018, RM; August 19, 2016). In this manner, negative information about Soros, originating from abroad, was able to reach millions of Poles. Two months later, in June 2016, another event took place which infuriated Law and Justice and increased the frequency of their attacks on Soros, i.e., when he purchased shares in AGORA, the publisher of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the biggest, pro-Civic Platform daily in Poland.<sup>222</sup> For Kaczyński's supporters, both events only solidified their previous conviction dating back to Soros' involvement in transformation, that he had a very clear political agenda. Starting in 2015, the moment the Law and Justice ascended to power, attacks on Soros for meddling in the internal affairs of Poland, often framed through conspiracy theories, accelerated. This time, however, he was allegedly trying to get rid of the governing party through his various NGOs and befriending politicians, due to the governments' refusal to accept refugees and, on a more general level, to transform Poland into an "open society." And they were not entirely

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<sup>221</sup> Panama Papers-related news yet again acquired a life of its own online when Witold Gadowski argued that Soros was linked to arms deals (May 21, 2016, June 7, 2016). A rather marginal and an alternative media outlet, *Gość Niedzielny* [Sunday Guest], picked up this "story" (Dziedzina 2016), followed by YouTubers who circulated it widely. Eventually it ended up on public news (Korab July 31, 2018).

<sup>222</sup> Soros bought an 11% share in AGORA after Law and Justice cut the government cashflow to this paper (Dąbrowska October 13, 2015.). To make the matter worse and more personal, the editor-in-chief of this daily—Solidarity political dissident, Adam Michnik—was a Soros scholarship receiver, mortal enemy of *Radio Maryja*, and a political opponent of Law and Justice. Rydzyk's station depicted Michnik as one of the "foreign"—code-word for "Jewish"—evildoers who sold out the country during the 1989 roundtable talks. If Soros was seen as an evil international Jew, Michnik was his local equivalent (Passent 2016).

wrong; Soros pressured the Polish administration by embarrassing them to persuade them to reconsider their decision. However, it was not a part of an elaborate plot orchestrated by EU politicians together with Jewish financial elites as the conspiracy theories about him purported. Not to mention, Soros's actions had hardly any impact on the Law and Justice's popularity in Poland. In fact, their approval ratings were highest in 2015.

#### 4.4 "All this is done by Soros"<sup>223</sup> **The Populist Exploitation of the Refugee Crisis**

The remaining parts of this chapter will be devoted to discussing the factors which helped the Polish anti-Soros phenomenon emerge in 2015, the forms it took, its potential consequences and the role of various political actors and media outlets in helping to move it to the center of Polish discourse and debate.

##### **4.4.1 Soros and the Refugee Crisis: The International Circulation of Attacks in 2015**

As the 2015 refugee crisis deepened, George Soros advocated for and began financially supporting<sup>224</sup> the asylum seekers. Simultaneously, he chastised countries that were reluctant to share the burden of caring for the refugees with other EU states as well as for their refusal to cooperate on the matter with the broader European community. The context of the refugee crisis provided a good opportunity for amplification of various criticism of Soros to other heads of state. This was likely translated into an increased

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<sup>223</sup> These are the words *Radio Maryja* founder, Tadeusz Rydzyk (January 7, 2016, RM).

<sup>224</sup> Soros offered \$500 million to help asylum seekers (Beck Staff, September 20, 2016) and provided financial assistance to refugees trying to cross the Hungarian border (Steinberger 2018). He also advocated for the creation of a unified and efficient European system that would process refugee claims quickly, bypassing state-level bureaucracies (Soros July 27, 2015).

interest in this billionaire online in Hungary and the United States, as well as in Germany and Russia (see Kalmar 2020, 192); an increase which also had much to do with his stance on the Brexit referendum and election results in America and Hungary (Vogel et al. 2018; Narkowicz 2018, 357; Rachman 2017). Consequently, the shapes that anti-Sorosism took in the West and in Hungary served to lower the bar of what was acceptable in the public domain and normalized inflammatory rhetoric for the rest of the world, including Poland.<sup>225</sup>

#### **4.4.1.1 The Poster Smear Campaign, “Stop Soros Law” and National Consultations in Hungary**

Starting in July of 2015, Soros wrote a series of op-eds<sup>226</sup> in which he scolded the European Union for failing to share appropriate responsibility for the plight of the refugees (Soros July 27, 2015; Steinberg 2018). He singled out Hungary and Poland (Walker 2017) as the most vocal<sup>227</sup> opponents of a refugee quota system (see Kalmar 2018, 406; Narkowicz 2018, 367), and made a plea to the European Commission to penalize both countries for not complying with the new European law.<sup>228</sup> This provided even more fuel for conspiracy theorists and would only lead to more attacks.

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<sup>225</sup> Polish politicians carefully followed what their Western counterparts were saying and doing to know how far they could push their anti-refugee rhetoric (Guerra 2017).

<sup>226</sup> The first was published in the *Financial Times* (Soros, July 26, 2015), the second in *Project Syndicate* (Soros, September 25, 2015), and the final one in the *New York Review of Books*.

<sup>227</sup> The United Kingdom was not far behind them (Matzke 2015).

<sup>228</sup> The European Union’s Justice and Home Affairs Council agreed to transfer 120,000 asylum seekers from states that were accepting disproportionately large numbers of refugees to other EU countries (Kanter September 22, 2015).

Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, and the chairman of Polish ruling party, Jarosław Kaczyński, responded to Soros' criticism by launching a negative campaign against him; in Hungary, his country of origin, the attacks on him were extraordinary (Plenta 2020). They began in November 2015 when he was blamed for orchestrating a "Muslim invasion" (Jordan 2020, 36; Starnawski 2017, 71), and funding the spread of "gender ideology" (Wojkowska December 22, 2018, RM). Two years later, during an election, Orbán organized a smear campaign that involved posters which bore a resemblance to antisemitic posters from the Second World War era (Langer 2021, 169; Steinberg 2018).<sup>229</sup> Then, he introduced legislation called the "Stop Soros Law" which delegatized providing help to asylum seekers by any organizations or individuals (Mischke 2018). Finally,<sup>230</sup> Orbán's government organized a national consultation, in which eligible citizens were asked to support or reject statements pertaining to Soros (Langer 2021, 166).<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> All over the country billboards that read "Stop Soros" went up, which showed the billionaire smiling over a caption that read "Let's not let Soros have the last laugh" (Lusher 2018), invoking an old antisemitic trope of the "laughing Jew" that dates to 14<sup>th</sup> century to suggest that he was behind the refugee crisis (Langer 2021, 169). Many of these billboards were later defaced with spray painted messages reading "You, lousy Jew," proving that even if, as this administration claimed, the intent of this message was not antisemitic, the outcome and interpretation of it was. As well, it is worth pointing out that this campaign was launched in the country whose authorities sent 430,000 Jews to Auschwitz (Bielecki September 23, 2017). Needless to say, by creating a fake enemy and promising to defend Hungary from Soros, Orbán won the election.

<sup>230</sup> In April 2017 Orbán passed a law intended to close the Central European University, a school funded by Soros (Tamkin April 24, 2017).

<sup>231</sup> 8 million voters received letters from the government asking for their opinion on Soros. The authorities implied through these letters that the billionaire had a plan to weaken their nation through supporting the refugees. One of them read: "Another goal of George Soros is to make sure that migrants receive milder criminal sentences for the crimes they commit" (Kalmar 2020, 193; Tamkin April 24, 2017; Byrne 2017, Bielecki 2017).

Even though, anti-Sorosism did not go as far in Poland as it did in Hungary, many observers have pointed out that Orbán inspired Kaczyński, with the latter praising him for his tough stance on immigrants and who then “brought Budapest to Warsaw” (Brzeski February 2, 2016, YT; Panowski 2016, 85; Langer 2021, 174). Orbán’s words were not only uncritically repeated by the leader of Law and Justice and political parties Kukiz’15 and KORWiN, but also by Polish right-wing vloggers (Ator May 15, 2018), pro-governmental journalists, academics (Michalkiewicz October 31, 2019; Brzeski February 2, 2016, YT) and *Radio Maryja*’s hosts (October 28, 2018; June 17, 2017, RM; January 7, 2016). They were also reiterated by journalists on the national news (October 29, 2017, TVP1; July 20, 2017, TVP1; August 30, 2016, TVP1; June 18, 2016, TVP1). Public television devoted time to highlighting the achievements and struggles of Orbán’s administration to establish “self-described ‘illiberal democracy’ (Geva 2021, 71), as well as to drawing parallels between Poland and Hungary. On April 2nd, 2017, Jarosław Olechowski and Dorota Choma in a segment on Soros said, “According to Hungarians the billionaire meddles in their politics and tries to influence public opinion, but this problem does not only apply to Hungary.”

#### **4.4.1.2 “The Biggest Danger to the Entire Western World”**

Similar accusations were directed at Soros in the United Kingdom during the Brexit referendum in June of 2016. “Leave” voters were often among those who espoused conspiracy theories (Uscinski 2020, 113). It was primarily the response of



small-town dwellers<sup>232</sup> to the consequences of accelerating globalization with its open borders and labour markets<sup>233</sup>. These processes had altered familiar landscapes as well as the ethnic composition of the country (Rachman 2018), which were blamed by pro-Brexit politicians on bureaucrats in Brussels, multinational corporations, and billionaires—particularly George Soros, who considered Brexit a mistake and frequently made his views on the matter publicly known.<sup>234</sup> In light of this, he put his money where his mouth was by donating funds<sup>235</sup> to reversing Brexit (Faulconbridge June 20, 2016; Delves Broughton February 9, 2018).

His efforts did not go unnoticed by the far-right. Brexit party leader, Nigel Farage, in an interview given to the American far-right conspiracy theorist, Alex Jones, on his show *Infowars*, called Soros “the biggest danger to the entire western world” and regurgitated a well-known litany of Soros’ various sins (Walker 2019). In doing so, Farage employed what some commentators interpreted as antisemitic themes, and though he was widely criticized for this (Rosenberg November 1, 2017; Walker 2019a, 2019b, 2019c), the presence of such discourse in the public sphere added to the atmosphere of hostility towards minorities. The sentiment that his speech reflected correlated with the rise in hate crimes by 42% during the Brexit referendum (Siddique September 4, 2016).

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<sup>232</sup> Support for Brexit was largest among this group (Beckett December 12, 2016).

<sup>233</sup> Mass economic immigration of Eastern Europeans to the United Kingdom played an important role in Brexit (Weaver 2016; Reuters June 27, 2016; compare Kalmar 2022, 11).

<sup>234</sup> In the *Financial Times* op-ed, Soros warned about the consequences of Brexit for Europe and the UK in terms of their security (Soros, December 17, 2015). A year later in *The Guardian* he argued that the Brexit vote to leave the EU would have bad consequences for the value of pound sterling (Elliot and Treanor 2016).

<sup>235</sup> First £400,000, and then £987,000 to Best Britain—a group that advocated for a reversal of Brexit (Faulconbridge June 20, 2016; Delves Broughton February 9, 2018).

The message that this Jewish billionaire was conspiring to destroy nation-states was broadcast to the world and was repeated internationally, including in Poland (Rosenberg November 1, 2017; August 19, 2016, YT; July 1, 2016, YT). As we will see, the situation across the pond was not so different.

#### 4.4.1.3 “Inspiration Comes from the United States”

Soros has been the enemy of the American far-right due to his unwavering<sup>236</sup> electoral support for Democratic candidates (Jordan 2020, 36; Kalmar 2018, 410; Welch 2018)<sup>237</sup> which began in earnest when George W. Bush started the war on terror in 2001. But in 2016, in a manner unprecedented for American mainstream media in the post-war period, a pro-Trump campaign ad presented Soros as an influential Jewish figure who runs the country—echoing antisemitic conspiracy theories<sup>238</sup> (Steinberger July 17, 2018; Jordan 2020, 36; see Langer 2021, 179). Dissemination of such rhetoric would have negative consequences. After the victory of Donald Trump, hate crimes increased (Sidahmed November 10, 2016). The Anti-Defamation League pointed out that the 2018

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<sup>236</sup> Over the years Soros has spent \$39 million on Democratic Party super PACs (Kranish June 9, 2018), and in 2016 he supported Hillary Clinton’s campaign to the tune of \$15 million (Steinberger July 17, 2018). It was made possible by a 2010 Supreme Court Ruling in favour of Citizens United which allowed anyone to spend an unlimited amount of money on political campaigns through indirect means while maintaining individual limits on campaign donations (Ibid.).

<sup>237</sup> Steve Bannon, who was behind Trump’s anti-Soros election campaign, was clearly inspired by Viktor Orbán. The two met in March 2016 and Bannon called him a “hero,” referring to him as “the most significant guy on the scene today” (Steinberger July 17, 2018, see Kalmar 2022, 2).

<sup>238</sup> Having seen this and predicting the rise of nationalism and the curtailment of human rights under the Trump administration, in the fall 2017 Soros announced he would donate \$18 billion to the Open Society Foundation. In this way he essentially transferred his personal wealth and made his NGOs one of the largest philanthropic organizations in America (Steinberger 2018).

Pittsburgh synagogue attack and an incident involving pipe bombs sent by a Trump supporter were connected to a high presence of far-right conspiracy theories featuring Soros (DeBonis October 28, 2018).

Such rhetoric continued throughout the Trump presidency, as the Hungarian billionaire became a boogeyman whom Trump attacked in tweets and during rallies (Kranish June 9, 2018; see Langer 2021, 178).<sup>239</sup> Soros, yet again was made responsible for “the Muslim takeover of the West,” according to Alex Jones (Hellinger 2019) who accused him of orchestrating “the immigrant caravan” at the Mexican border (Steinberger 2018; Vogel et al. 2018) and the destruction of the traditional, heterosexual, and Christian family.<sup>240 241</sup>

Trump’s victory legitimized anti-Soros speech further and the attacks he made on the Hungarian philanthropist were taken up and repeated by various European politicians (Krastev 2017).<sup>242</sup> For example, Cvetin Chilimanov, a Macedonian journalist, who started an anti-Soros campaign in his country, admitted that “inspiration [came] from the United States, from the American conservative organizations, media and congressmen

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<sup>239</sup> From Trump it spread further. Various public figures attacked Soros using socially irresponsible language; Comedian Roseanne Barr called him a Nazi (Chokshi May 29, 2018; Seik 2018;), and Rudolph Giuliani, the lawyer for Donald Trump, tweeted that “Soros is the Antichrist” (Vogel et al. Kingsley 2018).

<sup>240</sup> He allegedly tried to do this in the United States by contributing financially to Planned Parenthood and the American Civil Liberties Union while supporting same-sex marriage legislation (Wilson 2017).

<sup>241</sup> He was also blamed for the NFL national anthem protests, the tragedy in Charlottesville, and the demonstrations against the supreme court nominee Brett M. Kavanaugh (Vogel et al. 2018).

<sup>242</sup> Political scientist and expert on the region, Ivan Krastev, concluded that the “major change” toward right-wing politics around the world, originated in the US. It was made possible, however, by the Internet and talk radio, which played a crucial role in putting the message out (Vogel et al. 2018). As I will argue in Chapter 5, the role of the new media cannot be ignored.

with the same views, especially the new administration of President Trump” (Lusher February 8, 2018).<sup>243</sup> In Poland, which has been the biggest ally of the United States in the EU since 1989 (Dunn 2004, Sztompka 2005; Kuźniar 2004), the opinions and strategies of American Trumpists were also looked up to by the far-right,<sup>244</sup> if not fetishized (Woźniak 2014).<sup>245</sup> <sup>246</sup>Thus, the 45<sup>th</sup> American president was hardly ever criticized by the Polish politicians who admired him (Dunn 2009, Sztompka 2005; Kuźniar 2004). The choice of Poland as Trump’s first destination for his European visit, spoke volumes.

And it was appreciated by Polish diaspora in the United States (*Polonia*) (August 18, 2018).

One Polish American YouTuber wrote:

IF it was NOT for the Polish people....All of Europe today would be speaking either a Muslim language, Russian or German...Poles today still retain the Christian spirit of King John Sobieski and are still on guard against the Muslim threat to Europe and are one of the few European nations that have adopted Mr. Trump's immigration policies....As a Polish American I think t’s really nice that

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<sup>243</sup> The Prime Minister of Macedonia talked about the de-Soroization of society and began a “Stop Operation Soros” action in January. Similar discourses appeared in Romania when people took to the street to protest corruption in the country and authorities accused Soros of funding them (Lyman March 1, 2017).

<sup>244</sup> Over the years, the public debate in Poland emulated the American debate during the ascent of neo-conservatism (Woźniak 2014).

<sup>245</sup> According to Polish sociologist, Piotr Sztompka, there are numerous “cultural” reasons for the fetishization of the United States (2005, see Staniszki 2004). Among the most relevant ones are the closeness of the two societies in terms of the level of patriotism and religiosity: similarity of views on abortion, LGBTQ rights, divorce, and the death penalty. Left and right-wing commentators pointed out that recently the affinity between Poland and the US has become even more palpable and more political (Żakowski March 9, 2016). Liberal journalist, Jacek Żakowski noticed that Chris Hedges’ essay “The Revenge of the Lower Classes and the Rise of American Fascism,” written in response to Trump’s election victory, would perfectly fit the Polish case if minor details were changed (Ibid.). And in fact, it was true, in Poland as well as in the United States, that many people had lost faith in the political elite and instead turned to conspiracy theories and anti-establishment solutions (Krastev 2017).

<sup>246</sup> However, when the U.S. is associated with rapid globalization, imperialism, consumer culture, materialism, modernisation, and the dissolution of family values America is vehemently criticized, especially by the far-right (Rupnik 2005).

our great president Donald Trump visited Poland and showed Poland support. Poland's history of fighting for Liberty shows that Poland is indeed a natural ally of America. God Bless Poland and God Bless Trump America! (Harris May 26, 2017, YT).

And for the section of the Polish population who supported the politics of Law and Justice, this was an important event.<sup>247</sup> The president of the United States, who fought the entire—Republican and Democrat—American establishment to reach that position (see Flis 2019), talked to them in the same way Rydzyk and Kaczyński did.<sup>248</sup> Needless to say, both men saw Trump as an ally (Sutowski 2018). The founder of *Radio Maryja* said: “I spent a few days in Canada, and it is terrifying what people are doing there. But Trump gives me hope, he seems to be trying to introduce some normalcy” (June 16, 2018, RM).<sup>249</sup>

Both the right-wing media together and Law and Justice have praised Trump and frequently quoted him at length even before his visit (Tyrmand May 30, 2016, YT).

Thus, when Trump regurgitated conspiracy theories about Soros,<sup>250</sup> for Poles, who were

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<sup>247</sup> Even though from the perspective of Western journalists, Trump's visit was “cringe worthy” because he shared chauvinistic views with a crowd who had been bussed into Warsaw from smaller towns and villages by Law and Justice, as many people who lived in the capital city wouldn't attend (Adekoya July 5, 2017; July 23, 2017; July 18, 2017).

<sup>248</sup> This is an excerpt from his speech:

Do we have confidence in our values to defend them at any cost? Do we have enough respect for our citizens to protect our borders? Do we have the desire and the courage to preserve our civilization in the face of those who would subvert and destroy it?...

Just as Poland could not be broken, I declare today for the world to hear that the west will never, ever be broken. Our values will prevail. Our people will thrive.

And our civilization will triumph. (July 18, 2017).

<sup>249</sup> Trump's policies were used to legitimize domestic political decisions, such as the dismantling of independent Polish institutions (Krastev 2017).

<sup>250</sup> Which was supported by the American people as pro-governmental weeklies were quick to point out. In September 2017, the centre-right mainstream weekly *Wprost* repeated the far-right *Gazeta Polska* in stating that 130.000 people signed a petition to the American Department of

familiar with years of negative Soros coverage from *Radio Maryja*, his words only confirmed what was already known: that Soros was suspect. To them, Trump merely stated the obvious. As Ator, a popular political vlogger of the younger generation put it:

Soros said that the US administration threatens the world... he uses his money....to change the world and given what he has been doing in Europe and how Indigenous Europeans will lose as a result of this, this means... Trump is a cool guy! From who hates you, one can tell what kind of a guy you are (January 26, 2016).

To conclude, the anti-Soros phenomenon in Poland intensified during the refugee crisis and was closely connected to the significant rise of international attacks on this billionaire in Hungary, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These attacks, on the one hand, stemmed from major philosophical differences (on the position of nation-states vis-à-vis the EU, the family, the national community etc.), but were always amplified during political campaigns and presented both Soros- funded NGOs and the billionaire himself as political actors who planned to set the direction these countries were to go and— to a certain extent, Soros’ opponents were not entirely wrong. Among the objectives of various organization co-funded by this philanthropist were to document refusals to honour international agreements, not to follow the rule of law, to transgress democratic principles, and to break human rights legislation, thus holding to account decision-makers, which in turn jeopardized the plans of many illiberal-inclined politicians in the West and Central Eastern Europe. Thus, Soros by commenting on the mishandling of the refugee crisis in Europe and on the plight of immigrants coming to the

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State that urged the government to recognize Soros as a terrorist (Krawiec Feb. 19, 2017, Langer 2021, 179).

US as well as waying in on reversing Brexit on top of funding progressive causes, created additional reasons for his opponents to attack him. Even if Soros's power as a political actor with a voice was waning, he could have been situated as a perfect scapegoat. In the end, the refugee crisis was merely an excuse to turn up the volume on the traditional attacks on him in which he was accused of interfering with the internal affairs of sovereign countries and spreading value systems seemingly foreign to them.

Now I will turn to analyzing the various forms of this phenomenon in and after 2015, and its connections to anti-Muslim bigotry and antisemitism.

#### **4.4.2 The Construction of the Refugee Crisis in Poland**

##### **4.4.2.1 Anti-Muslim bigotry Abroad and in Poland**

Soros was blamed for plotting to bring refugee to Europe, a charge which was not substantiated. This accusation was associated with a growing anti-refugee/anti-Muslim sentiment emerging on the continent generally and not unique to Visegrád countries. On the contrary, such trends first began in Western Europe (Kalmar 2018) to which growing numbers of Muslims were migrating prior to the 2015 refugee crisis. Furthermore, after 9/11 it developed in parallel in the United States where the rhetoric of the so-called War on Terror became commonplace (Buchowski 2017, 520; see Bergmann 2021, 41). Thus, long before the refugee crisis reached its apex, anti-Muslim bigotry<sup>251</sup> was becoming an

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<sup>251</sup> Cited scholars refer to it as "Islamophobia" (Stone 2018, 241; Hafez 2014, 484; see Bobako 2018, 187).

“accepted racism,” and a hegemonic discourse<sup>252</sup> in the West (Stone 2018, 241; Hafez 2014, 484; see Bobako 2018, 187).<sup>253</sup> Two narratives dominated this discourse. The first saw Islam as incompatible with European values linked to Christianity, seeing this incongruence as leading to an inevitable clash of civilizations (Hafez 2014, 498; Huntington, 2007). The second, characterized this religion as standing in stark contrast with post-Enlightenment European ideals (Bobako, 2018, 19). Both narratives were incorporated into conspiracy theories and had caught on in Poland to a degree, but they truly gained ground in the Polish imagination during the refugee crisis, this in stark contrast with a long tradition of Muslim acceptance in the past (Pędziwiatr and Narkowicz 2017, 448).<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Here I use “hegemonic” after Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who demonstrate the unique flexibility of hegemonic discourses in marrying contradictory arguments and subordinating them to an overarching ideological construct which aims to marginalize and exclude certain social actors (1985).

<sup>253</sup> The Norwegian Progress Party, the French National Front, the Finns Party, and the Swiss People’s Party all agree on taking a hostile approach toward Muslims. Even the EU itself paid 2 billion Euros to build fences to prevent refugees from entering its territory (Stone 2018, 240-241).

<sup>254</sup> Even though Poland has been a very homogenous country since WWII (Zubrzycki 2006, 29), and quite mistrustful of other ethnicities and religions, a small population of Muslim Tatars has been included in the Polish community since they settled there in the 14th century (Pędziwiatr and Narkowicz 2017, 444). They acquired this special status because they proved to be very loyal to Polish national causes (Ibid. 443). Most famously, they helped Polish King Sobieski to win the Battle of Vienna against the Ottoman Empire in 1683 choosing to ally themselves with Christian Poland over the Muslim Ottomans. Hence, the presence of mosques in the 18th century did not bother anyone and Tatars were not persecuted after the country gained independence in 1918 and in the following years (Pędziwiatr and Narkowicz 2017, 448). The situation changed only after September 11th, 2001 (Buchowski 2017, 520), when the American rhetoric of War on Terror was readily picked up by some Polish media outlets (Starnawski 2017, 68). Poles started linking Islam with “violence, Osama bin Laden, fundamentalism, and fanaticism” (Buchowski 2017, 52), which soon resulted in the rise in anti-Muslim and anti-Arab hate crimes (Narkowicz 2018, 360). These incidents, however, were still infrequent in comparison with what would happen from 2015 on (Jaskułowski, 2019, 40 Starnawski 2017, 68; Kornak 2009, 197–201).



In September 2015, in a changing international context, Jarosław Kaczyński addressed the Polish parliament and urged MPs to stop the influx of refugees (Krzyżanowski 2018, 84).<sup>255</sup> He did not talk, nonetheless, about the serious challenges that accompanied the arrival of a large number of refugees that are well-recognized by scholars and cannot be ignored. These challenges include a strain on the welfare system which is especially difficult to manage in poorer countries (Le Gloanec 2016), the potential for burdening the national budget in periods of stagnation or high unemployment (Karas 2016; Kofta 2005, 61), safety concerns (Ifantis and Triantaphyllou 2018; Pantucci 2022) and finally, the rise of xenophobia and populism (Le Gloanec 2016). Kaczyński neglected to present a more nuanced argument about why sovereign states should maintain their right to exert control over the cross-border mobility (Bauder 2016; Dauvergne 2007). In his speech, he drew upon a very simplistic anti-refugee/anti-Muslim rhetoric commonly used abroad by the far- right, about the dangers accompanying such immigration (Ibid. 85). From this point forward, anti- Muslim bigotry <sup>256</sup>officially entered the Polish public sphere and became a hegemonic discourse (Jaskułowski 2019, 32; Starnawski 2017, 69).

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<sup>255</sup> He misinformed the public claiming that there are 54 no-go zones in Sweden, an assertion which was immediately refuted by the Swedish Embassy (Jaskułowski 2019, 89; see Bergmann 2021, 43)

<sup>256</sup> Cited sources use the term “Islamophobia” (Jaskułowski 2019, 32; Starnawski 2017, 69).

#### 4.4.2.2 The Construction of Muslims as Deviant in Poland

Kaczyński's September speech inspired the politicians in his party. In October 2015, Law and Justice MP, Patryk Jaki, on *Radio Maryja*, reiterated that Western countries fail to control their Muslims populations. He made unsupported and unchallenged statements including that “[when] Sweden implemented ‘multi-culti’ [*multikulti*]<sup>257</sup> policies, the crime rate increased 300%, rape and sexual assault rate by 700% and in Switzerland 90% (October 25, 2015, RM). Kaczyński's address had thus influenced his colleagues by also shifting the boundaries of what was publicly acceptable to say (Żuk and Żuk 2018, 140)—he infamously stated that refugees from the Middle East carried “various parasites and protozoa” (Jaskułowski 2019, 41; Duval Smith February 6, 2016).<sup>258</sup> This amounted to the Law and Justice politicians stirring up a moral panic via naturalizing “phantom” anti-Muslim bigotry in Poland—a country with hardly any Muslims (see Jaskułowski 2019, 32, 39). The production of deviant representations of Muslims as embodiments of the Other followed.

*Radio Maryja* played an important role in amplifying anti-Muslim and anti-refugee sentiment (see Pędziwiatr 2018, 477), depicting Islam as a very dangerous religion long before 2015 (Nowak June 16, 2008, RM). Invited historians, Islam scholars, philosophers and journalists would make the argument on air that in civilizational terms, Islam is not reconcilable with a European culture that is founded upon Christian values.

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<sup>257</sup> This is a derogatory term used by the right.

<sup>258</sup> In a similar way, Polish right-wing populists compared the attempts to introduce more gender equality, which was mandated by the European Union, to bringing “ebola” into the country (see Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 811).

Refugees were characterized as sexual deviants<sup>259</sup> who posed a threat to European women, and as potential terrorists (Grysa March 9, 2017, RM; Oko September 16, 2017, RM; see Pędziwiatr and Narkowicz 2017, 448; Sadurska November 19, 2015, RM).

*Radio Maryja's* listeners heard this narrative that Muslims are dangerous not only from the founder of the station<sup>260</sup> but also from callers who either worked, lived, or had relatives abroad.<sup>261</sup> They were identified as a threat due to their alleged high birth-rate and the resulting potential for them to one day become the religious majority in Europe (March 24, 2011, RM; see Starnawski 2017, 71). In fact, this station's hosts repeated a well-known Eurabia conspiracy theory which claimed that this was a deliberate strategy to colonize the Old Continent<sup>262</sup> (see Astapova et al. 2021, 14; Bergmann 2021, 37).

The extent to which anti-refugee/ anti-Muslim discourse on *Radio Maryja* became apparent in 2015 when on one program, in a seeming act of self-reflection, the priest hosting the show said, “we do not want to spread resentment or hostility towards anyone,

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<sup>259</sup> Their culture and implied biological difference allegedly made it impossible for Muslim men to behave differently. In this way cultural factors were naturalized and the boundary between biological and cultural racism was blurred (Jaskułowski 2019, 97). A good example of such a conflation could be found on the cover of the weekly, *Sieci* [Network], which depicted a light skinned European woman whose body was covered by the EU flag being torn off by brown hands. The title read “Islamic Rape of Europe” (Narkowicz 2018: 361). Polish women are here represented as the “embodiment of ‘our’ Christian civilization” (Pępiak 2019, 66).

<sup>260</sup> As Rydzyk said:

Yesterday there was a conversation on our TV [*TV Trwam*] of [Witold] Gadowski [right-wing journalist also a YouTuber] with a jihadist, his mother was Polish, his father was Palestinian the title was something like ‘You will all die as pagans or like pagans’ it is on our *Radio Maryja* portal, you can download it, since yesterday evening we had 140,000 portal visits (Rydzyk November 19, 2015).

<sup>261</sup> More on this topic in Chapter 5.

<sup>262</sup> A famous saying of one of the Ayatollahs was repeated in *Radio Maryja* that Islam will win not through atomic bombs but through the wombs of its women (Brudzinski in Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 567).

even towards Muslims.” This statement leaves little doubt about radio station’s attitude toward Islam, and by extension toward Muslim refugees (see March 9, 2017, RM).

#### 4.4.2.3 The Banalization of Anti-Muslim Bigotry and Its Consequences

*Radio Maryja*, however, was not alone in its attacks on Muslims in Poland. Catholic publishing houses<sup>263</sup> printed books on how this religion threatened Europe (Terlikowski 2016), with some repeating conspiracy theories that suggested Soros played a significant role in this process<sup>264</sup> released “Islamophobic books by foreign authors” (Pepiak 2019, 66).<sup>265</sup> Guests (e.g., Bogusław Wolniewicz, and Henryk Kiereś) made their unfavorable opinions about Islam widely known in the pro-government media (Jaskułowski 2019, 43); they provided reasons for why being suspicious of Muslims was justified, and their views were repeated by the mainstream press, in churches, as well as in Internet chat rooms, during soccer games, and in rap songs (Jaskułowski 2019, 32, 40, 45, 98; Cekiera 2018, 138; Żuk and Żuk 2018, 139; Buchowski 2017, 521; Pielą and Łujkanowicz 2017, 466; Majewski 2017, 114). For example, the cover of *W Sieci* read, “September 2015: they are coming!” and depicted three threatening and armed men looking like ISIS terrorists standing at a Polish border, destroying the coat of arms. The title was a reference to the September Campaign when Nazi Germany attacked

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<sup>263</sup> Such as Bernardinum, Aetos and AA,

<sup>264</sup> Most notably, Stanisław Krajski’s book *Masoneria, Islam, Uchodźcy. Czy Czeka Nas Wielka Apokalipsa?* [Masonry, Islam and the Refugees, Are We Facing A New Apocalypse?]

<sup>265</sup> Among them were Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s, *The Heretic* or Tass Saada’s, *The Mind of a Terrorist* and books on jihadi wives.

Poland. The photoshopped cover evoked a famous picture taken in 1939 when German soldiers dismantled the coat of arms while illegally crossing the Polish border to mark the beginning of the World War II. Thus, the refugee crisis was presented as an “Islamic invasion of Poland,” and was compared to one of the most painful periods in Polish history (Żuk and Żuk 2018, 139, see also Narkowicz 2018, 351).

In other words, anti-refugee/anti-Muslim sentiment became a common part of public and private discourse, and was so widely shared across all social groups, irrespective of age and education, that social scientists labeled this process “the banalization of Islamophobia” (Pędziwiatr 2020, 90; Pędziwiatr and Narkowicz 2017, 415; Majewski 2017, 109), as hateful sentiments had trickled down to such a degree that<sup>266</sup> they were no longer frowned upon (Pędziwiatr 2017, 32). I label this phenomenon as the banalization of anti-Muslim bigotry because, as I stated previously, the rejection of refugees goes far beyond the rejection of Islam as a religion and culture and can be best described using a broader term that reflects complex fears pertaining also to demography<sup>267</sup> and economy.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Krzysztof Jaskułowski presents opinions of young Polish men on Muslims as constituting a threat to white European women (2019, 18; 23 Dep 2014, YT). Katarzyna Dębska’s qualitative study on Poles’ reception of the refugee crisis, reveals that the anti-refugee/ anti-Muslim language of “Islamic invasion” disseminated by the media re-appeared in the statements of her interviewees, irrespective of their class background (Dębska 2019, see also Pędziwiatr 2017, 421). Maja, an educated woman in her thirties, disclosed to Dębska that “if Civic Platform still ruled, we would have Jihad on the streets” (Ibid. 103).

<sup>267</sup> Muslim women living on the “old continent” are understood to have far more children than their European counterparts which is equated with Muslims posing a demographic threat to Europe (March 24, 2011, RM; see Starnawski 2017, 71)

<sup>268</sup> Ada Tymińska describes how her interviewees reiterated stories they had read online in which the refugees were said to want to take European money through receiving welfare (2020).

The presence of anti-Muslim bigotry in the public discourse came at a high price. The previous willingness of most Poles (72%) to provide refugees with asylum dwindled (Jaskułowski 2019, 38; Dębska 2019, 110; Pędziwiatr and Narkowicz 2017, 447).<sup>269 270</sup>

<sup>271</sup> Furthermore, far-right ideas disseminated through conspiracy theories have seeped into the mainstream and fueled a culture of hate (Davies 2019). Consequently, hate crimes in Poland have been on the rise in recent years, reaching the highest levels in two decades (Pędziwiatr 2020, 100; Piela 2019, 611; Narkowicz 2018, 360; Pędziwiatr 2017b, 415; Buchowski 2017, 519-520).<sup>272 273</sup> Muslims were the most targeted group, constituting one fifth of all cases (Piela and Łujkanowicz 2017, 466).

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<sup>269</sup> According to Public Opinion Research Center, the percentage of Poles who declared that they would deny entry to refugees grew from 21 % in May 2015, to 61 % 11 months later (CBOS 2015, 1). Additionally, the support for refugees significantly fell, to 40 % from 72 % (Buchowski 2017, 521).

<sup>270</sup> The prevalence of anti-Muslim bigotry or what most scholars call “Islamophobia” led to a situation where most Poles overestimated the numbers of Muslims in Poland. Muslims were thought to have comprised 7% of Polish population, whereas in reality they made up of less than 0.1%. (Pędziwiatr 2017b, 415).

<sup>271</sup> Poles were not alone. The European report, *Intolerance, Prejudice and Discrimination* found that most Germans, British, French, Dutch, Italian, Portuguese, and Hungarians considered Islam to be a religion that spreads intolerance (Kalmar 2018; Narkowicz 2018, 357; see Stone 2018, 241; Hafez 2014, 479).

<sup>272</sup> In 2015 in particular, the number of incidents doubled in comparison to the previous year (Pankowski 2016, 85;). After 2015, the officials appointed by Law and Justice to tackle hate crimes refused to recognize anti-Muslim bigotry and other instances of xenophobia as an issue (Pędziwiatr 2017, 415; Piela and Łujkanowicz 2017, 466).

<sup>273</sup> The most tragic culmination of this troubling trend was the assassination of the mayor of Gdańsk, Piotr Adamowicz, who self-identified as a progressive Catholic and was committed to supporting refugees, LGBTQ+ people, and sex education. He embodied an impossible contradiction for the right who dared to break through the country’s polarization. Because Adamowicz stood for all that Law and Justice and *Radio Maryja* resented, he was regularly attacked by them or their allies. The All-Polish Youth, an ultranationalist youth organization, even issued a “political death certificate” to Adamowicz, which in retrospect can be read as a warning sign. They have done the same for a few other figures, including Soros and Michnik (Davies 2019; Duval Smith 2015).

#### 4.4.3 Blaming Soros for the Refugee Crisis

The rise in hate-based attacks in Poland was undoubtedly connected to the increased circulation of negative representations of Muslims in the public sphere. Even though many of them were able to make a treacherous and logistically challenging journey to Europe successfully, they were represented as lacking agency and intelligence.<sup>274</sup> In fact, a plethora of conspiracy theories argued that Muslims were in fact controlled by Jews (Piechocki 2016, 305), specifically by George Soros, and merely followed his orders (Grzebalska and Pető 2018, 166; Starnawski 2017, 72).

The supposed risk to Western civilization posed by Islam and its worshippers—who were described as savages set to destroy Europe in a brutal conquest (see Jaskułowski 2019, 79; Narkowicz 2018, 369; Bobako 2017, 168-178; Piela and Łujkanowicz 2017, 466)—meant that the so-called rules of the “civilized world” did not apply to them. Thus, in a world in which anti-Muslim bigotry was normalized, the relaxation of anti-hate speech rules towards Muslims and anyone who supported them became justified. Consequently, Soros, as an advocate for the refugees, became a target of attacks which began to circulate more widely both abroad and in Poland, mostly in the form of conspiracy theories.

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<sup>274</sup> Their misrepresentations resemble those attached to the Roma but differ from antisemitic stereotypes about Jews who are perceived as intelligent, calculated, and well-connected in the world of politics and economy (Jaskułowski 2019, 91).

#### 4.4.3.1 Radio Maryja

The hostility toward Soros in Poland played out not only against the backdrop of international attacks on him and polarized debate about the EU and immigration but also in the context of the decades-old conspiratorial and antisemitic coverage of him that was broadcast on *Radio Maryja*. For years this radio station had spread conspiracy theories about Soros and the 1989 Polish transition to capitalism (see Chapter 3). This was a part of a larger narrative that was spun which blamed Jews for attempting to dismantle nation states, weaken religious and national identities, the family as traditionally understood<sup>275</sup> (Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 811; Starnawski 2017, 73; Warat 2016, 116; Nykiel May 28, 2014, RM). Typically for the use of antisemitic conspiracy theories, the objective was allegedly to confuse the masses and then brainwash them into submission (Zaborowski 2016). According to *Radio Maryja*'s befriended panelists this is exactly what Soros' various foundations had been doing in Poland since 1989 (March 4, 2011, RM) and advocating for accepting refugees was simply a new means of achieving these goals (Rydzik January 7, 2016, RM).<sup>276</sup> One caller to *Radio Maryja* repeated this popular narrative:

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<sup>275</sup> Through the promotion of “ideologies” such as “genderism,” “cultural Marxism,” and “multiculturalism” (Guz December 22, 2018, RM; Kiereś March 24, 2011, RM; Kuby November 29, 2007, RM).

<sup>276</sup> It was supposedly only possible thanks to Soros' political connections. *Radio Maryja*'s go-to historian Mirosław Piotrowski said:

Many claim that Soros has an enormous influence on the EU decision-makers... people who hold the highest positions in the EU [who are against anti-refugee MPs] are strong, and who designates them? Here the name of Soros is mentioned (October 28, 2018, RM, see also September 25, 2016, RM).



Who is behind this [refugee] crisis? The Jews, because George Soros finances smuggling of these people to this continent so that Muslims and Christians mix... he can get a homogenous, stupefied mass without any identity and even better without any sex (in Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 654).

The ground was prepared early to link Soros to the refugee crisis, and the crisis served to reinforce the other narratives about him and make them more believable.

Polish professor of philosophy, and frequent contributor on *Radio Maryja*, Stanisław Krajski, played a significant role in both legitimizing and conflating anti-refugee, anti-Muslim, and antisemitic rhetoric in conspiracy theories that he promoted. These also contained his explanations regarding Soros' role in the refugee crisis. Before Kaczyński's anti-refugee speech in Polish parliament in the fall of 2015, Krajski said on the air that "all Masonic lodges released statements about the refugees that they are an opportunity for the future of Europe," and that "Soros has a direct influence on what Masons are doing" (Krajski January 7, 2016, RM). For *Radio Maryja*'s long-term listeners who were familiar with Krajski's views, the term "Masons" was a code word for "Jews." They remembered that he had linked "Masons to Kabbalah and Judaism" long before 2015 (e.g., December 2, 2009, RM; April 28, 2008, RM).<sup>277</sup> In this way, Krajski connected Jews to the refugee crisis via Masons and Soros.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> But also, in 2018, he said that this Hungarian billionaire was "one of the major Masons" (Krajski June 4, 2018, YT). Krajski cannily avoided directly linking Jews to refugees, because, as I argued in Chapter 3, after Law and Justice won the 2015 election, the reputation of *Radio Maryja* as an antisemitic broadcaster (Zamoyski 2009, 342; Wysocka 2008, 61; Prażmowska 2011, 254; Żuk 2017, 86) became a liability for them as the ruling party (Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 42).

<sup>278</sup> To add more complexity to his convoluted conspiracy theories, Krajski disclosed that in the course of his studies he realized that Masonic and Islamic texts reveal the similarity between these two groups, and that in the end they subscribe to the same ideas. Additionally, he revealed

In January of 2016, Rydzyk followed suit and accused Soros of orchestrating asylum seekers' arrival in Europe in language that combined anti-Muslim bigotry with tropes traditionally reserved for antisemitic conspiracy theories. He said:

...this [the refugee crisis] is a civilizational war... these are mad engineers of this world, they play with this world... see what Soros is doing... this is planned, this is not a coincidence" (January 7, 2016, RM).

*Radio Maryja*'s hosts, panelists and audience amplified this rhetoric (Father Grzegorz Górny May 17, 2018, RM). On one occasion, when a caller accused a "wealthy billionaire" of funding refugees, the hosting priest causally clarified "you meant [by that] George Soros, well anything is possible" (November 14, 2018). This rhetoric was quickly picked up by politicians, the mainstream media, and online communities.

#### **4.4.3.2 Mainstream Politicians**

In November 2015, shortly after the parliamentary elections were held in Poland, in an interview given to *Radio Zet*, former rock star turned anti-establishment politician, Paweł Kukiz, became the first mainstream politician who linked Soros to refugees. His words spread online like wildfire (i.e., December 27, 2015, YT; see Jaskułowski 2019: 45). The same month, this rhetoric culminated with a far-right nationalist activist, Piotr Rybak, making worldwide headlines by burning an effigy of an Orthodox Jew holding a EU flag in the Wrocław city square (Narkowicz 2018, 369; Pankowski 2016,

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that when Masons reach the 32<sup>nd</sup> degree in the organization, they convert to Islam. In other words, for Krajski, the difference between Masons, Jews, and Muslims is superficial and is maintained in order to hide the sinister motives of these groups (January 7, 2016, RM).

85). Rybak claimed that this was an effigy not of just any Jew, but of George Soros, who he said was behind the “Islamization of Poland,” reciting a script that could have been written by *Radio Maryja*’s founder (Narkowicz 2018, 369; December 3, 2016; Duval Smith December 23, 2015).

A few months later, at the annual party address in June of 2016, Jarosław Kaczyński explained the reasons for not accepting refugees. They were like those he gave in September 2015, but this time— encouraged by the anti-Soros rhetoric coming out of the UK, the US, and the rest of Europe (see Langer 2021, 174)—he linked the arrival of asylum seekers to Soros’ idea of the open society, which he called dangerous<sup>279</sup> (see Grzebalska and Pető 2018, 160). He also reused arguments heard on *Radio Maryja* (Nykiel May 28, 2014, RM), stating that Soros’ support for refugees and his embrace of multicultural policies were creating societies devoid of national identity, and that could be easily manipulated<sup>280</sup> (July 20, 2017, TVP1; August 31, 2016, TVP1). His speech was re-broadcast on the national news two days later and seen by an average viewership of 2.8 million people, cited by different media outlets, and reposted online (Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 769; June 8, 2016, TVP; Mazur June 14, 2016, YT). Henceforth, it

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<sup>279</sup> Kaczyński said:

It is about sovereignty. If we keep it, we will defend ourselves (...) the ideas of Mr. Soros, ideas of societies which do not have an identity, are ideas beneficial for those who own billions, because such societies are easy to manipulate. When there are no strong identities, one can do anything with a society (June 8, 2016, TVP1; Grzebalska and Pető 2018, 166).

<sup>280</sup> The idea that diverse societies produce more “confused” people (without clear national, gender, religious identity and ability to distinguish right from wrong), who thus can be easily persuaded and shaped was recycled by *Radio Maryja*’s guests, also frequently in reference to gender (Oko September 16, 2017, RM; March 26, 2015, RM; May 28, 2014, RM Pawłowicz July 20, 2013 RM; March 4, 2011, RM; Rydzyk April 10, 2010, RM).

became open season for attacking George Soros, as the various conspiracy theories about him had entered the mainstream.

#### 4.4.3.3 The Pro-Government<sup>281</sup> Evening News

From the moment Law and Justice took control over the public media, it became subordinated to the party's own political interests. Under its administration, a series of laws were passed that allowed the government to exercise greater control over the public media so that it would better represent "Polish patriotism" (Leftwich Curry 2017, 304). The new administration replaced most public media journalists with their own people in a phenomenon labelled by media scholars "systemic parallelism" (Mocek 2017, 34; Dobek-Ostrowska 2018, 226; Wnuk 2016, Jakubowicz in Jakubowicz and Sukosd 2008, 108). Consequently, most, if not all, of the reporting on Soros was presented through a very negative lens that echoed Kaczynski's words from June of 2016 (Diaz June 8, 2016, TVP1; July 20, 2017, TVP1; August 31, 2016, TVP1; see Jaskułowski 2019, 43). But this new mainstream media reporting also regurgitated the years of negative coverage of Soros heard on *Radio Maryja*.

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<sup>281</sup> Content discourse analysis of the evening news program *Wiadomości* [the News] showed that it either ignored or misrepresented the stance of the opposition politicians and other influential actors, including Soros, critical of the current administration (Kamieniarz 2018, 17, 21). Polish media scholars concluded that state-funded media under the Law and Justice failed to meet the goals assigned to the public broadcaster in democratic countries to foster pluralism of opinion (Mnich 2018, 313; Mocek 2017, 34) but instead were used for propagandistic purposes, in their strategy reminiscent of socialist times (Bradshaw March 2, 2020; Friszke February 21, 48, 2017, Leftwich Curry 2017, 303). Thus, I believe using term "pro-governmental" is justified.

The message broadcasted by pro-governmental stations had become very clear: “Soros gave half a billion dollars to support Muslim refugees arriving to Europe” (Diaz July 20, 2017, TVP1). His actions were said to be motivated by the desire to create a borderless Europe in which distinct nations would gradually become obsolete (Gerhardt July 20, 2017, TVP1); a stance that was rejected by the far right and ultranationalists, as both groups are naturally Eurosceptic. According to journalists on the evening news, when Soros could not realize his plan to “build open societies without homogenous identities” (Diaz June 8, 2016, TVP1) due to politicians’ refusal to accept refugees, he “asked [the EU] for the cutting of funds for Poland.”<sup>282</sup> In other words, he could achieve his objectives using different means; political pressure was one of them. Another one was donating money to the network of locally embedded organizations to push his agenda. Soros-run Polish NGOs, viewers were told, “have a very strong ideological goal”, and those who opposed his vision would face relentless attacks (July 31, 2018, TVP1; July 20, 2017; June 2, 2017).

After Kaczyński’s party prevented refugees from entering Poland, Soros’ alleged purpose according to Cezary Krysztopa, a journalist on the evening news, was clear: “to overthrow the government of Law and Justice” (November 25, 2016, TVP1). How this would be accomplished was a question answered by numerous guests invited onto the program in the role of experts on the topic.<sup>283</sup> One of them, Marcin Makowski, of the

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<sup>282</sup> Which purportedly demonstrated how power hungry and arrogant Soros is and explained why he has so many enemies (August 31, 2016, TVP1).

<sup>283</sup> Bogdan Pliszke, PhD from Silesian Polytechnics stated: When election results are not going his [Soros] way (...) he tries to undermine these results (...), Brussels elites tried numerous times to intimidate and threaten Poland and Hungary for their

pro-governmental weekly, *Do Rzeczy*, said that Soros pays people off and that his NGOs spread “money (...) throughout different organizations (...) [and in this way he] is trying to manipulate the election results” (July 20, 2017, TVP1). In this way, typical antisemitic conspiracy tropes that describe Jews as secretly planning to subordinate countries with their unlimited power were invoked.

Polish state television providing airtime to these conspiracy theories legitimized them for other right-wing media outlets, and for the Internet as well, where they were widely cited and circulated. Many YouTube users began to note that content on state television was finally reliable, enthusiastically reacting to these new circumstances.

One person wrote: “God, I never suspected that after a year [of Law and Justice in power], one will be able to watch *Wiadomości* [the News].” <sup>284 285 286</sup>

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leading independent sovereign migration policy and for the refusal to accept Muslim immigrants’ (October 29, 2017, TVP1).

<sup>284</sup> The information transfer also happened in the opposite direction: from the Internet to the state news. In an instance of astroturfing, two hashtags, #StopAstroTurfing and #StopSoros, began trending on Twitter in July 2017, reaching a speed of 200 posts per minute and resulting in 16000 total posts. The original post read, “I am against using the mechanism of #Astroturfing to manipulate Poland,” and “these are not real protests [against judiciary reforms] but a coordinated and sponsored action of political marketing” (Krawiec Feb. 19, 2017). In fact, a large group of bots, or automated robots, were programmed to create a fake trend. Even though this attempt was unsuccessful, and the untrue character of this misinformation campaign uncovered by analysts from the Digital Forensic Research Lab, the Polish state news, and the Internet portal *wPolityce.pl*, still repeated that the thought that the protests against the Polish equivalent of the supreme court were opposed by Poles online as being true (Mejer 2017).

<sup>285</sup> As illustrated in Chapter 3, *Radio Maryja* used the tactic of supporting its preferred reading of world events by referring to the statements of authority figures, seemingly experts on the topic, who often commented on the matters outside of their areas of expertise (Sobczak 2017, 146; Starnawski 2017, 17; Wiatr June 23, 2019, RM). For example, Bogusław Wolniewicz, a philosopher, specializing in Wittgenstein and Stanisław Krajski, an expert on Thomas Aquinas, both made seemingly informed comments on Islam (Jaskułowski 2019, 4; January 7, 2016, RM).

<sup>286</sup> Another user wrote, “Finally, a grain of truth is presented on the news!” (Right-Wing Internet November 26, 2016). This opinion was shared online by many journalists in addition to YouTubers (Rola July 31, 2017, YT).

#### 4.4.3.4 Online

The Internet has provided ample opportunities for users to repeat, reframe, and tweak conspiracy theories about Soros and his supposed orchestration of the refugee crisis and this was undoubtedly supported by Russian trolls (Nestoras 2019). Most videos simply regurgitated what *Radio Maryja* said about Soros' plan to "Islamize Europe" (February 7, 2016, YT; see Starnawski 2017, 71; Astapova et al. 2021, 14). But alternative reasons behind Soros' alleged actions were also discussed. Journalist, Stanisław Michalkiewicz, on his YouTube channel contended that by exporting "Islamic terrorism" to Europe Soros helped Israel to get a respite from similar attacks on their own territory (Michalkiewicz November 16, 2016).<sup>287</sup> Libertarian politician, Janusz Korwin-Mikke, in a widely circulated video, claimed that by forcing European countries to accept refugees and spend money on them, they would become more indebted which would in turn benefit people like Soros (January 22, 2017; 30 June 2016, YT). Other vloggers and commenters concentrated on the details of how Soros supposedly managed to orchestrate this influx of people.<sup>288</sup> One popular narrative from 2016 argued that, "three years ago his foundations published brochures in Arabic showing how to arrange practical things during their excursion to Europe" (Konowalek 14 June 2016) or, as another commenter

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<sup>287</sup> Glossing over the fact that the relationship between Soros and the Israeli government was far from friendly.

<sup>288</sup> This theme was explored by many YouTubers (December 12, 2015; December 27, 2015; January 26, 2016, YT; February 16, 2016, YT; June 14, 2016, YT) and was later picked up by the national news (July 20, 2017, TVP1).

put it, “to know what privileges paid for by European taxpayers they are entitled to” (May 29, 2016).

Due to its affordances <sup>289</sup>, specifically its anonymity and limited accountability (Strangelove 2010, 148), the Internet, with its predilection for online hate (Demczuk 2018, 104, Dziwak 2019, 117; Aronson 2012), allowed anti-Sorosism to go far beyond what was acceptable in the mainstream—I will discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 5 (see Krzyżanowski 2018, 93). Given that the new baseline created by politicians and *Radio Maryja* deviated considerably from the previous norm, the response from the Internet to this development was predictably even more vigorous (Ibid. 93). Consequently, anti-Sorosism online openly mixed anti-Muslim bigotry or anti-refugee sentiment with antisemitism, other racism, white supremacy, homophobia, misogyny, and more.

#### **4.4.4 The Conflation of Anti-refugee/ Anti-Muslim and Antisemitic Discourses**

The rise of international and domestic attacks on Soros were linked to anti-Muslim bigotry and the antisemitic coverage of him of the type heard on *Radio Maryja*. The entry of these into the mainstream media, along with their presence on the Internet which facilitated the rapid circulation of information, created new circumstances in which these discourses started to coalesce (Majewski 2017, 113). This tendency became part of

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<sup>289</sup> Term used by the Internet scholars, stands for “possibilities” (Burgess and Green 2009; Castells 2012, 15)



a larger trend developing in the Polish public sphere in which Muslims were described using language that had in the past been reserved for Jews (Jaskułowski 2019, 39; Narkowicz 2018, 369; Pędziwiatr and Narkowicz 2017, 448).<sup>290</sup> For example, in a speech from October 2015 warning against the coming asylum seekers, Jarosław Kaczyński came close to espousing antisemitic Nazi propaganda from the '30s when he described the biological deficiency of the refugees, and accused them of carrying diseases (Żuk and Żuk 2018, 140; Krzyżanowski 2018, 90). Kaczyński, one of the most influential Polish politicians and a role model for many people, by using this description to deliver his anti-refugee and anti-Muslim message, normalized employing antisemitic tropes to amplify the message.<sup>291</sup> He did this knowing full well that the refugees did not want to settle in Poland, but this strategy allowed him to fake a state of emergency that helped to persuade voters to elect his party (Żuk and Żuk 2018, 138).<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Krzysztof Jaskułowski identifies similarities between the representation of Muslims and Jews in Poland. Both groups are exoticized, criminalized, and sexualized (2019, 93). As Piotr Majewski adds, they are perceived as threatening European identity and the European way of life by undermining economic and political interests (2017, 107).

<sup>291</sup> A quick look at the signs carried during anti-refugee demonstrations in Poland that were attended by Kaczyński's supporters, reveals that this tactic of discursive construction of a refugee crisis as a threat to the nation worked. Furthermore, it shows that, at many of these rallies, anti-refugee/ anti-Muslim slogans appeared alongside antisemitic ones. Among them were signs advocating for a "Holocaust for Muslims." The Warsaw Independence March in 2017 gathered 60,000 people, some of whom were carrying signs of this type (Davies November 18, 2017). Online, memes in which users recommended "perfect spots," such as Auschwitz, for these Muslim asylum seekers coming to Poland were not rare (Jaskułowski 2019, 45; Ibid. 368). All this suggests that the merging of these discourses had caught on (see Narkowicz 2018, 369) in not just the virtual world, but the real one as well (Piechocki 2016, 305).

<sup>292</sup> This example reveals the similarity between Polish anti-Muslim bigotry and antisemitism. Both discourses concentrate on groups that are hardly present in the country, a phenomenon some scholars call "phantom Islamophobia" or "platonic antisemitism" (see Jaskułowski 2019, 32, 39; Majewski 2017, 110).

The media similarly began combining anti-refugee/ anti-Muslim and antisemitic discourses. As I argued in Chapter 3, a significant proportion of *Radio Maryja*'s content was antisemitic, so when the refugee crisis happened, and the linkage between Islam and Jews was established via Soros, the connection appealed to their audience's imagination; both guests and listeners were likely to couple mistrust towards refugees and Muslims with suspicion of Jews. Jadwiga, a caller from Warsaw, said that "it is impossible to assess Islam without assessing its older sister – Judaism," and went on to say that "in the Talmud a gentile is not even considered a human" (March 27, 2017, RM). Along these lines, she tried to strengthen her point that Judaism is a far more violent religion than people are led to believe, implying that it is in fact a precursor to Islam and hence it is the real reason why Muslims are allegedly so aggressive. Even though she was eventually reprimanded by the priest hosting the show, it took him a long time to intervene.

Does this mean that the antipathy towards Soros, whether originating from *Radio Maryja*, politicians (both foreign and Polish), or the Internet (Langer 2021, 174) caused the merging of anti-refugee/ anti-Muslim and antisemitic discourses in Poland? The answer is negative: for centuries prejudice against Jews in Poland operated as the default setting for thinking about the Other, and the vocabulary of antisemitism came to be used to describe any culturally different, minority group (Dębska 2019, 97; Narkowicz 2018, 368; Krzyżanowski 2018, 80; Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 804; Żuk 2017, 81; Shibata 2009, 252).<sup>293</sup> Even though these centuries-old exclusions come together in narratives

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<sup>293</sup>As Irena Grudzińska-Gross claims, anyone in power who does not share a conservative outlook might become an "honorary Jew," and thus might also become the target of an antisemitic, anti-

about Soros, he functions merely as a lightning rod for what is happening in Poland more broadly.<sup>294</sup> These ancient hatreds were recycled and rearticulated in the hostile approach toward Soros (Krzyżanowski 2018, 77), and can quickly spin out of control (Kozłowski 2017, 246), potentially leading to the full return of antisemitism in the public sphere, reversing many years of progress.

#### **4.4.4.1 The Return of Antisemitism**

Several scholars of antisemitism have argued that significant positive changes in Polish-Jewish relations took place over the past decade (Kalmar 2018, 448; Pędziwiatr and Narkowicz 2017, 447; see also Hafez 2014, 498). Considerable efforts have been made to include the perspective of Polish Jews into the country's history (Stone 2018, 236), and to ensure that the hostility towards this group is weakening among Poles (Kalmar 2018, 448; Narkowicz 2017, 447; Bobako 2017, 202), or at least is seen as a source of shame for those that maintain this prejudice (Jaskułowski 2019, 39. Hafez 2014. 480, 498). However, even though progress has been made, I argue that it cannot be taken for granted, as it might very quickly be squandered in these new circumstances where anti-refugee and anti-Muslim messaging get combined with traditional antisemitic tropes. In such a way, through gradual unchallenged exposure, xenophobic discourses

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intellectual, or an illiberal attack (1992, 147). I would add, this applies to anyone who is different (see Shibata 2009, 264).

<sup>294</sup> Following the line of thinking that prejudice reveals more about those holding it than it does about those toward whom it is directed (Hafez 2014, 480; Kořta and Sędek 2005, 358; Jaskułowski 2019, 16).

pave the way for antisemitism to return, and all indications are that this is what has been happening since 2015 (Hartman October 25, 2019).

Even if discrimination against Jews decelerated prior to 2015, it was never truly gone (hence “return”) and thus can always be rebuilt. Studies done in 1992, shortly after transition, indicated that for many Poles, Jews were perceived as having conspired against their country (Kofta and Sędek 2005, 60), and this trend did not change for over a decade following transition (Maszkowski 2006, 675; Bilewicz and Krzemiński 2010, 237). Then, when the Law and Justice came to power briefly in 2005, antisemitism again resurfaced when the party’s top members did not hide hostile attitudes toward Jews (January 26, 2009, RM). After Civic Platform won elections in 2007 and 2011, antisemitism disappeared from the mainstream, but as researchers have pointed out, it continued to exist (Bilewicz and Krzemiński 2010, 80) in the parallel cultural universe of *Radio Maryja*.

In 2015, after Kaczyński’s party won that year’s election and began its “cultural revolution,” the situation shifted yet again. From that moment on, many politicians from Law and Justice and loyalist academics, historians, theologians, philosophers who were criticized for making overt antisemitic statements in the past began expressing this sentiment indirectly, often using George Soros as a proxy, often in reference to the refugee crisis (Krzyżanowski 2018, 87).

Different tactics were used to smuggle in antisemitic rhetoric through references to this billionaire. These strategies often consisted of a problematic statement immediately followed by a response to an anticipated accusation of antisemitism from

invisible enemies and political opponents. Soros was described as plotting against nation states, accusations which included references to his ethnicity often given out of the blue (November 23, 2010, RM; March 29, 2014, RM). On other occasions, his Jewishness was referenced in an apophatic way by saying “we would be accused of antisemitism if we said he is Jewish,” which did the same thing, drawing more attention to his background, albeit using a negative formulation to do so (March 31, 2019, RM; Rydzyk October 28, 2018, RM; see also Jabłonowski December 3, 2016, YT; Oko April 29, 2015, RM).

In the end, 41% of supporters of the Law and Justice party, as well as 32% of the Polish Peasant Party admitted to holding antisemitic views (Żuk 2017, 85).<sup>295</sup> In 2016, 67% of Poles declared an aversion towards Jews, and only 8% admitted feeling sympathy (Majewski 2017, 109). A year later, in 2017, the Jewish Community of Warsaw released a statement noting that antisemitic and anti-Jewish statements had become a regular occurrence (Davies February 10, 2018).<sup>296</sup> In 2019, Soral and colleagues found that “Jewish conspiracy theories .... are still endorsed by almost half of Polish society” (2019, 378).

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<sup>295</sup> Interestingly, some studies demonstrate that antisemitism in Poland correlates with hostility towards refugees, sexual minorities, and other ethnicities (Żuk 2017, 86). Other research, however, claims the opposite, that “high levels of antisemitism does not predict a high level of Islamophobia” (Kalmar 2018, 413).

<sup>296</sup> The Anti-Defamation League’s Global 100 survey found that antisemitic views in Poland rose from 37% in 2015 to 48% in 2019, making the country, along with Ukraine, the most antisemitic country in Europe (<https://global100.adl.org/country/poland/2019>).

#### 4.4.4.2 Antisemitism in the Mainstream: Scapegoating of Soros

After the Law and Justice election victory of 2015, the national news began to regularly mention Soros, and most of the segments pertaining to him made use of recycled antisemitic imagery, tropes, and concepts (Beller 2007; Langer 2021). As noted in Chapter 2 one of its headlines on the evening news read “Soros’ Networks Entwine the EU” (October 29, 2017, TVP1), implying that the “tentacles” of this influential Jewish billionaire reached everywhere.<sup>297</sup> His goal, viewers were told, was either “pure destruction” (Krysiak July 20, 2017, TVP1), or the building of the New World Order (Diaz July 20, 2017, TVP 1), which, in the latter case, was necessarily linked to undermining the sovereignty of Poland. This was said to be possible for Soros, because he allegedly had the necessary means to secure the loyalty of those in power, and so possessed unprecedented influence— this was also one of the titles of a program devoted to him (“Soros and his Influence”) (April 2, 2017, TVP1)). Audiences were promised that his supporters would be unearthed in a “Who Does Soros Sponsor?” segment (September 2016, TVP1).<sup>298</sup> Many of these programs (July 31, 2018, TVP1; October 29, 2017, TVP1) were accompanied by an infamous infographic (see Appendix 3) depicting Soros as the person behind all major Polish NGOs, painting him as a grand puppet master.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Depicting Jews as “universally disparaged animals” including octopuses or spiders that can encircle or caught the enemy in their web belongs to a traditional repertoire of antisemitic tropes (Giry and Gürpınar 2020, 318).

<sup>298</sup> However, it seems that the question should rather have been rephrased as: “Is There Anyone Whom Soros Does Not Sponsor?” as the creator’s intention was to suggest that this philanthropist funds nearly everyone (August 18, 2016, TVP1).

<sup>299</sup> This infographic resembled one drawn by the American media personality, Glenn Beck, in his infamous, and widely interpreted as antisemitic, 2010 program on Soros that was broadcast on *Fox News* (Zawadzki February 7, 2016). But more importantly, it recycled an ancient motif of a

Last but not least, Soros was depicted as actively trying to undermine Christianity<sup>300</sup> which could be interpreted as another attempt to awaken antisemitic sentiment—presenting Jews as attacking Christians is a very old antisemitic theme (see Beller 2007; Goldberg, Ury and Weiser 2020; Shibata 2009, 264). Finally, Soros was described as promoting liberalism, “moral relativism,” and nihilism as a part of a grand plan to confuse the Polish masses,<sup>301</sup> another variation on the old antisemitic trope present in most conspiracy theories that depicts Jews as ethically compromised people who cannot distinguish right from wrong (Beller 2007; Goldberg, Ury and Weiser 2020, see Oișteanu 2009).<sup>302</sup>

Even though narratives and imagery regarding Soros that made use of antisemitic tropes were toned down on the national news—when compared with the likes of *Radio Maryja*'s programming—to appear less conspiratorial, they were still very easy to decipher. In this fashion, antisemitic narratives had returned to the mainstream through an anti-refugee/ anti-Muslim framing of the refugee crisis.

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Jewish individual as the ultimate “wire-puller, the mastermind, holding the strings” (Caumanns and Önerfors 2020. 446; see Byford 2011, 73).

<sup>300</sup> Economist, Stanislaw Gebhardt, interviewed on the state news channel concluded that, “he [Soros] unnecessarily... fights Christianity” (July 20, 2017, TVP1).

<sup>301</sup> One YouTube commenter summarized it well:

Is Soros good? Or is he bad? Who will tell our children what is right and wrong? Will there exist behavioural norms? Where does the money come from that Soros gives away? Does not he get it from those who with steal with their one hand hard-earned money accumulated over generations, and with their other hand give it away to those who are a part of their circle? September 2, 2019, YT)

<sup>302</sup> Viewers could also hear from public relations expert, Zbigniew Lazar, that “under the disguise of philanthropy, Soros supports organizations whose final goal is to overthrow [the] traditionally understood values of social order” (July 31, 2018, TVP1).

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

This chapter found that contrary to a popular belief, antisemitism in Poland had not vanished from public life. In 2015 it was smuggled back into the mainstream discourse during the European refugee crisis through widely accepted anti-refugee/anti-Muslim rhetoric. Conspiracy theories about Soros that employed such rhetoric, as well as repackaged old antisemitic tropes, moved to the center of the Polish political discourse and contributed to this “return” of antisemitism. I concluded that the mainstreaming of conspiratorial narratives in Poland about Soros created conditions in which the rise of antisemitic and anti-refugee/anti-Muslim sentiment, as well as in hate crimes, was more likely to occur.

To explain how and why this happened, I first looked at the Polish political context. I demonstrated that two decades of cultural warring between political parties—the liberal Civic Platform and conservative Law and Justice—reflected strong economic and societal divisions within Poland, and that articulating these divides in terms of identity politics enabled the development of anti-Sorosism.

Another source of fuel for attacks on this billionaire, was his recent activity in Poland and abroad. Soros’ international activity positioned him as a major enemy of local and foreign politicians, though not because his organizations were secretly plotting to subjugate entire nations, as conspiracy theorist purported. Instead, I argued it had more to do with Soros’ NGOs fighting for causes that his political opponents disagreed with.

A changing international political climate in which attacks on this billionaire intensified was another factor crucial in the scapegoating of Soros—especially in Poland.



Viktor Orbán, Nigel Farage, and Donald Trump used the various refugee and the migrant crises as justifications to employ conspiratorial narratives targeting Soros, which in turn merged with anti-Muslim bigotry/anti-refugee messaging and subtle antisemitic rhetoric. I demonstrated that, similar to their Western counterparts, Law and Justice reframed attacks on Soros, taking advantage of the refugee crisis and concomitant anti-Muslim bigotry/anti-refugee sentiment. This helped Kaczyński's party to win the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2015.

What was different in the Polish context vis-à-vis the West, however, was the decades-long existence of conspiracy theories about Soros, and antisemitic, anti-refugee, and anti-Muslim content on the airwaves of alternative broadcaster, *Radio Maryja* which, as I argued, in combination with politicians, state-funded media outlets, and the Internet helped to solidify the hostility a hostility-generating narrative toward this billionaire in Poland. In fact, they did far more: they habituated the Polish public to anti-Soros conspiracy theories that normalized anti-Muslim bigotry within mainstream discourse, and which became an avenue for antisemitic rhetoric to “return” to the center. This contributed to the development of anti-refugee/anti-Muslim sentiment and antisemitic attitudes that were reported to be on the rise in Poland.

In the next chapter, I will describe how the movement of anti-Soros conspiracy theories to the centre of political discourse was prepared by transmedia and intergenerational interaction initiated by *Radio Maryja* and facilitated by YouTube.

## **Chapter 5. The Construction of a Cool Anti-Sorosism**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I will elaborate on the nuances of the movement of anti-Sorosism from the margins to the centre of Polish public discourse by studying an important stage of this shift: the transfer of ideas about this philanthropist from *Radio Maryja* to the Internet as a part of a larger universe of ideas vigorously promoted by Rydzyk's station. I will demonstrate that this process of making the views espoused on the station, including ones about Soros, "cool" for younger generations who spent much of their time online and who stood outside of *Radio Maryja's* traditional audience, which was not easy to achieve. This included engaging in a politics of media ecology and recent history, as well as the construction of a narrative of victimhood and intergenerational solidarity attractive to millennials. This approach, however, was only partially successful. The station did not manage to draw a Gen Y audience to its "uncool" programs; its ideas were recycled, repackaged and "made cool" in YouTube videos and comments, and thus, in the end, the views presented on the station eventually found their way to this age cohort.

I will start by arguing that the unfavourable coverage of Soros by *Radio Maryja* is connected to the strongly held conviction that a colonial takeover of the Polish media by foreigners had taken place. I will explain why the fact that Soros purchased shares in the most widely read progressive daily in the country could only be interpreted by *Radio Maryja's* supporters as a hostile act, with the goal of subjecting Poles to liberal propaganda. Following from this, I will reiterate that, from the perspective of its listeners

and contributors, only this station and the Internet are the true grassroots, independent media organizations, free from Western censorship pressures in the form of “political correctness.”

Next, I will demonstrate how the salience of the negative assessment of transformation and globalization by different generations of Poles contributed to the fomentation of Soros’ negative reputation by *Radio Maryja*. I will show that the division in Polish society between have and have nots cuts across all age groups, and that sharing a similar economic predicament created conditions for the development of intergenerational solidarity. Applied to this case, it means that if segments of baby boomers, Generation X, and millennials were made to believe that they are victims of transformation and globalization, and they came to self-identify as such, they were more susceptible to views scapegoating Soros-

I concentrate on millennials as the group who elected political candidates that subscribed to conspiracy theories about this billionaire. Making the point that such voting choices could be accounted for by the fact that many people from this age cohort are less economically fortunate than their parents (Gen X) and grandparents (boomers), and so have many reasons to be disillusioned with globalization and anyone seen to personify it. Following from this, I will show how *Radio Maryja*’s attempt to attract millennials by recycling the 1989 victimization narrative in conspiracy theories that were promoted on its airwaves, applying it to the reality of a hyper-globalized economy mixed with stressing their exceptionalism failed insofar as increasing the number of its listeners was the goal. But, as I will document, the ideas presented on air by *Radio Maryja* were

nonetheless picked up, repackaged, and made cool online where they reached segments of Gen Y.

## **5.2 The Movement of Anti-Sorosism from Radio Maryja to the Internet**

### **5.2.1 The Universe of Radio Maryja's Ideas and Their Impact on Representations of George Soros**

Earlier, I recounted the influence of *Radio Maryja's* ideas on Islam, Jews, and Soros among Poles by the way this Hungarian billionaire came to be depicted mostly through conspiracy theories by politicians and mainstream media. Nonetheless, I did not explain how the negative coverage of him was enmeshed in this radio station's narrative about the structure of media ownership in Poland, the significance of foreign capital in censorship in Polish media, and the role of the Internet in keeping alternative points of views alive.

#### **5.2.1.1 Radio Maryja as Its Own Medium**

In Chapter 3, I argued that *Radio Maryja* offered programming unlike other stations by meeting audience demand for nationalistic and patriotic content (Woźniak 2017, 192; Kurski August 2, 2016). What also makes this broadcaster unique, according to its founder and his supporters, is the fact that it is the “only independent medium that is funded by one-time, small-sum contributors, primarily widows,” and also one “that doesn't have a global sponsor; Soros is not paying, nor is Rockefeller” (Gadowski October 21, 2018, RM; see also Lindner 2012). According to this narrative, a number of major Polish media outlets are mostly Western and Jewish owned and so cannot be free

because they are constrained by the various demands of political correctness, which was deemed a new type of censorship (Nykiel May 24, 2014, RM, Kruk September 19, 2015, RM; Modzelewski October 25, 2015, RM). This claim was mostly incorrect, as Radoslaw Markowski and Agnieszka Kwiatkowska suggest. By the 2008 financial crisis, de-westernization of the media in Poland was already taking place (2014, 62). But it is true that *Radio Maryja* has ignored the demands of so-called PC culture, which is exemplified by the fact that it uses typical antisemitic conspiracy theory motifs about Jews controlling the media (Byford 2011, 95) to present itself as defender of freedom of speech.

As discussed earlier, even though *Radio Maryja* opened new avenues for hate speech to proliferate in the Polish mediasphere, the station has itself remained unscathed because of its political influence. This has allowed it to become a safe haven for pundits, including some from the West,<sup>303</sup> whose views are considered unpublishable in foreign as well as Polish media due to their inflammatory character—they are welcomed by Rydzyk with open arms. Similarly, many callers, also from abroad, are given a chance to share controversial opinions on the air, which might not be possible in the newly adopted countries from which they are. Jacek from Germany, for example, said that Muslim men are treated like “sacred cows” and “no-one can say anything bad about them... one cannot express their opinion,” to which Father Dariusz Oko responded, “many people

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<sup>303</sup> For example, Dr. Bill Warner, an American physicist and self-proclaimed expert on Islam with no formal education in religious studies, stated:

I assert that our civilization is better, and Islamic civilization is worse, can you see why I am not liked, in America you say all cultures are equally valid (... ) we have two enemies(...)we have Islam who is distant enemy, and we have the near enemy who are the leftists and the apologists for the Islam, we will defeat the Islam by defeating the apologists for Islam” (March 27, 2017, RM).

who migrated share your experiences and we are so lucky to have *Radio Maryja* to be able to talk about them, in the West this conversation would not have been able to take place” (September 16, 2017, RM). Numerous callers from the Polish diaspora reiterated this narrative, pointing out how fundamental *Radio Maryja* is in keeping them informed, because the censored news in the West cannot be trusted.<sup>304</sup> An argument repeatedly made by guests on *Radio Maryja* is that freedom of speech is not only curtailed in the West, but also for domestic Western-owned Polish language media.<sup>305</sup> This begs the question: according to *Radio Maryja*, what is the apparent agenda of these other media outlets?

### **5.2.1.2 Mainstream Media, the West, and George Soros According to Radio Maryja**

Rydzik has claimed that the foreign-owned, Polish language mainstream media lies about the position of Poland in the world, representing it as being far worse than it is (Rydzik, July 24, 2010; March 27, 2017; Bartosz Jankowski May 2, 2018). Furthermore, he has contended that these media outlets undervalue the popularity of the political parties supported by *Radio Maryja* and ridicule that station’s significance for its listeners and their beliefs (Kowalewska January 29, 2019, RM; Bubula September 19, 2015, RM, Bubula November 29, 2015, RM). Their actions in this way were supposedly

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<sup>304</sup> Dawid from England admitted as much:

I started listening to *Radio Maryja*, *Telewizja Republika* and the independent media and I found out what this is all about” (October 12, 2016, RM).

<sup>305</sup> If they were not, they would presumably be pro-Catholic and pro-Polish (Rydzik June 10, 2007; July 20, 2013, RM; July 24, 2010, RM, March 27, 2017, RM). This narrative was perpetuated online (Janowski May 2, 2018: Ator January 29, 2018, YT).

implemented to swing audience opinion toward Western political interests, and emulate Western consumer choices and aspirations, to undermine Polish geopolitical ambitions and devalue the traditional, family-oriented lifestyle. From father Rydzyk's standpoint, the actors who popularized such discourses were "foreign secret service, multinational corporations and George Soros" (March 27, 2017, RM; Kruk January 12, 2013, RM), because they directly benefit from promoting these ideas. After the revelations of Russian intelligence meddling in American elections through disinformation campaigns, Rydzyk's statements did not appear entirely unfounded—was Soros secretly plotting to influence Poles' opinions?

In 2015 when Law and Justice came to power, the situation changed. The party cut funding to the liberal and pro-Civic Platform daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Many Law and Justice supporters of this move felt the hegemony of this foreign-owned paper had ended and that they were triumphant. However, they did not expect that George Soros would come to the rescue of this daily, buying shares in the paper's publisher. By doing so, he secured *Gazeta Wyborcza's* funding, making it more independent from the government and causing panic among its opponents, who increased attacks on Soros (Ryszczyński April 21, 2016, RM; Kowalewska January 29, 2019, RM, February 20, 2019; January 26, 2019, RM). To put it differently, Soros appears to have been committed to keeping his liberal views, represented by *Gazeta Wyborcza*, alive in Poland. This could have been interpreted as wanting to sway Poles' opinions in a particular

direction. Consequently, this move confirmed *Radio Maryja*'s reading of the situation<sup>306</sup> that liberal media in Poland could not have been financially starved, because the West, personified by this billionaire, would not allow this to happen. This prompted Rydzyk's station to react. However, instead of initiating fact-based debate about the challenges facing Polish media, this radio disseminated more conspiracy theories about Soros arguing, quite correctly, that he was actively engaged in steering the minds of Poles away from nationalistic/patriotic viewpoints and toward liberal values but adding that it was a part of a bigger plan secretly orchestrated by a small group of influential billionaires and politicians (Ryszczński April 21, 2016, RM; January 26, 2019, RM).

### 5.2.1.3 The Internet according to Radio Maryja

Even though *Radio Maryja* listeners seem to have no doubt that “the truth [has been] present[ed] only here” (March 4, 2013, RM), guests and invited panelists also point to another seemingly independent source of information—the Internet. According to *Radio Maryja*'s panelists, this medium is free because of its inherent participatory and democratic character;<sup>307</sup> the Internet fosters grassroots journalism and builds an authentic

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<sup>306</sup> In one of *Radio Maryja*'s shows, the hosting priest informed the audience that he “found this information on one of the right-wing platforms that George Soros wants to acquire, *Euro Zet* [which consists of one of the most popular radio stations in the country- *Radio Zet*], because he knows that those who own media hold the power” (January 26, 2019, RM), adding that “Foreign decision-makers are doing everything to stop media reforms in Poland... we know that you can do a lot if you have money (...) we should be following Hungarians who say they need to have national media” (Ibid.).

<sup>307</sup> Voices that raise concerns about the potentially deleterious effects of the Internet are less common, but they sometimes appear. *Radio Maryja*'s expert on technical sciences, Professor Kazimierz Wiatr said:

if we are not strong informationally speaking then indeed computers or the Internet can



civil society (Bubuła Ibid.; Nowak June 14, 2009, RM; Ryba March 21, 2010, RM).

It lets ordinary citizens get in touch with politicians, ask them challenging questions (Kosowski June 23, 2015, RM), comment on their campaigns, criticize their decisions, and ultimately, hold them accountable (Kacprzak June 23, 2015, RM). Furthermore, because of its reach, the Internet strengthens transnational communities of Poles spread across the world, which is especially important for this radio station because it relies on financial contributions from the Polish diaspora.

The benefits of using the Internet, nonetheless, do not end with the strengthening of civil society and the interconnection of like-minded people (September 30, 2010, RM).<sup>308</sup> This medium is depicted by *Radio Maryja* as able to evade government's attempts to control the flow of information because it does not depend on the government for funding, and hence it is seen as more reliable due to this independence (Kruk September 19, 2015, RM, Talarko June 23, 2015, RM). Not only is the Internet able to bypass censorship, but it can also help with identifying misinformation in the mainstream media (Starnawski 2017, 75; see also Jaskułowski 2019, 95). The words of Teresa, interviewed by Polish scholar of Islamophobia, Krzysztof Jaskułowski, confirm that this view is popular among Poles. She admitted:

Can't trust it [mainstream media] 100%, (...) the Internet and videos on YouTube, showed it well (...) I watched on YouTube just a fragment of Fakty [Polish liberal

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manage us, tell us what to think...this is the civilizational coercion...on the other hand we have globalism which is connected with social engineering, and we know that Mr. Soros spends large sums of money on that and on changing people's mentality (June23, 2019, RM)

<sup>308</sup> A listener, Idalia from the Austrian Alps, addressing Jarosław Kaczyński said:

I am a blogger for *salon24* [popular right-wing website] where you gave an interview... I am sure many people will be happy to hear that I can tell you personally that you connect people, we gather, we write, we observe" (September 30, 2010, RM).

newscast] with a journalist, who was just there at the time they [refugees] were coming out of these pontoons, (...) he showed adult men and then said that they were children (...) the Internet doesn't forget, they found it, and right away there's an analysis (...) (Jaskułowski 2019, 95).

Beyond this, it allows people to access otherwise allegedly unobtainable information (Kacprzak June 23, 2015, RM; Jaki June 17, 2015, RM; Wędrowska October 14, 2015, RM), and Soros' initiatives and motives were among the top subjects that *Radio Maryja* listeners were repeatedly advised to research online.<sup>309</sup> It was made explicit that only the Internet, not the politically correct mainstream media, could provide truthful information about the involvement of people like this philanthropist in Poland (Starnawski 2017, 75).

In conclusion, in *Radio Maryja*'s politics of media ecology, this radio station and the Internet are portrayed as being very similar, in terms of their independence from powerful actors, their grassroots character, and their attachment to freedom of speech—they are positioned opposite to the mainstream media. This is why, when bringing up Soros, *Radio Maryja* refers to the Internet as the only other reliable source of information on him, but also wants to gain credibility in the eyes of younger audience by doing so.

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<sup>309</sup> One caller said:

Balcerowicz, all these people... have one boss... global player and a financier- George Soros.... Where do you think all this money come from?

And the invited guest, sociologist, politician Jacek Kurzępa answered in a manner typical to this radio station by saying

who is behind it (...) I cannot answer at present, anyone can surf the web and find answer to these questions.” (March 6, 2016, RM).

#### **5.2.1.4 Building Intergenerational Solidarity**

The negative coverage of George Soros on *Radio Maryja* is intertwined with other ideas it has disseminated about foreign-owned media in Poland, their role in limiting freedom of speech, and the emancipatory nature of the Internet. However, equally important for this negative depiction of Soros by *Radio Maryja* has been the assessment of the effects of transformation and globalization on multiple generations of Poles (Jaki 17 June 2015, RM).

In Chapter 3, I argued that already in the '90s *Radio Maryja*'s pundits claimed that out of all foreign advisors providing expertise regarding transformation in 1989, the opinions of George Soros were the most harmful and led directly to the negative consequences of transition, including pushing millions of Poles into poverty. Nonetheless, I devoted little space to studying how, according to pundits associated with this station, Soros' actions affected the next generations of Poles, and how the narrative about transformation was merged with one about globalization to link the life experiences of older adults with the younger generation.

##### **5.2.1.4.1 Victims of Transformation and Globalization**

The 1989 transformation split Poland into haves and have nots, which has been expressed through spatial divisions ("Poland A" versus "Poland B," rural versus urban), but which also cuts across three generations (Rogalińska and Szałtys 2017, 12; Sowa, Jedziniak and Josko 2013, 20-23; Czapiński 2008, 40). In what follows, I will discuss

what the Polish silent generation, baby boomers, and millennials have in common,<sup>310</sup> which will in turn lay the groundwork for explaining why anti-Soros rhetoric was well-received not only by older Poles and their children, but also by their grandchildren.

During the transition to capitalism, elites consisting of former Communist party members, intelligentsia linked to the Solidarity as well as stemming from gentry, (Soltan 2000, 118, 134; see also Eyal, Szelenyi and Townsley 2001), entrepreneurs (Porter 2010, 39) and their offspring were far more likely to benefit from the reforms that were brought in; most of the country was not in this group, regardless of their age. As state-owned enterprises (SOE) were closed, many people from the middle generation (a baby boomer equivalent) lost their jobs and were forced to live on the margins, trying to survive by doing odd, precarious jobs, working in the grey economy, or emigrating. The same was true for the older generation (the Polish silent generation), who were forced into early retirement without a chance to earn higher pensions. But the children and grandchildren of these two groups, millennials (or Generation Y), also experienced negative and long-lasting consequences of neoliberal policies that began with the transition, and these changes continue to affect them into the present (Wrzesień 2007, 134).”

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<sup>310</sup> The challenges that millennials’ parents – Gen X— faced were discussed in Chapter 3 as well as are mentioned in Chapter 5. To reiterate, people from this age cohort entered adulthood and thus were largely shaped by the ideas of neoliberalism, free market capitalism and democracy that were promoted by liberal politicians, and the mainstream media. A big portion of Gen X, focused on improving their material conditions (*dorobić się*) to erase the memory of poverty, the lack of opportunities, and the limited consumption that characterized the reality of socialism in Poland (Zmarz-Koczanowicz 2002). But they also remembered authoritarianism of the previous regime. Thus, they were sceptical of the narratives of victimhood promoted by *Radio Maryja* amplified by illiberal, neo-authoritarian politicians (see Śmiećinska 2020).

Apart from the have-nots sharing marginalization and the experience of financial hardship across generations, these groups were also ignored by liberal politicians (Komorowski, May 2015) and the media. Their lack of economic success didn't reflect well on liberal claims that the transition was a success for most Poles. Hence, the first two groups were often treated as collateral damage from the process; disposable people mentally stuck in the old socialist system (Woźniak 2014, 180; Tischner 2005, 141).<sup>311</sup> At the same time, boomer's children, Generation X, and even more so their grandchildren, the millennials, or Generation Y, were characterized as entitled<sup>312</sup> useless individuals raised by overprotective parents (Solska 2008, 40-45).<sup>313</sup> The unfairness of such an assessment of the first two groups was debunked in Chapter 3, in which I also outlined the role *Radio Maryja* played in returning dignity to these generations. The situation for millennials, however, was slightly different (Czapiński 2008, 40).

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<sup>311</sup> Sociologist Piotr Sztompka, as well as public intellectual and priest Józef Tischner, who supported the neoliberal transition came up with the concept of *homo sovieticus*: “spiritually enslaved” people who have no ability to take responsibility for their own lives. These are thought to be trying to “escape from freedom” (Woźniak 2014, 180) by finding either a strong leader, an organization, or an ideology, that would present a simple framework, and which could deliver easy answers (Tischner 2005, 141).

<sup>312</sup> Millennials were depicted mostly as a sheltered, spoiled, and narcissistic group, hence the label: “The Me Generation” (Twenge and Campbell 2009, 33, Patten 2013, 30-39, Green 2017, 128). The blame was usually put on their over-worked parents trying to make ends meet in a cut-throat economy, who provided them digital pacifiers—social media (Frimston 2013, 35, Serres 2015, 5; Solska 2008, 40-45).

<sup>313</sup> Some argue that all these groups developed similar strategies to cope with a feeling of being redundant (*zbędni*) (Sutowski 2017). The first group, made up of *Radio Maryja*'s older demographic, was trained during socialism in what has been called “going on the internal migration,” referring to a withdrawal into private lives due to the inability to deal with a hopeless, unchanging reality (Kalukin 2006, 24, Mason 1991, 213, 221). In the case of some members of the second group, consisting of young and middle-aged adults (some Gen Xers and some millennials), they decided to leave the country because life was unsatisfactory, and they knew they couldn't change it. The last group, for the same reason, to compensate for their frustration and lack of horizons, “escaped” reality by putting on headphones and going online in an act of digital migration (Szutowicz 2016, 21; Feliksiak 2018, 2).

#### **5.2.1.4.2 Not All Millennials Are Made Equal**

The term millennial typically refers to people who are between eighteen and thirty-eight years old (Berger 2018, 1, Taylor and Keeter 2001). Because of such a big age range, and the fact that there are ten million representatives of this cohort in Poland, this group is anything but homogenous. One could argue that the less well to do in this generation have more in common with people from older generations who share their economic predicament than with their peers from wealthier backgrounds (Rogalińska and Szałtys 2017, 12; Sowa et al. 2013, 20-23; Czapiński 2008, 40, Szafraniec 2012, 332). It is true that a segment of Polish millennials was brought up by helicopter parents who groomed them into thinking that they deserve the best from life (Wrzesień 2007, 139),<sup>314</sup> but far more millennials, despite achieving higher levels of education, could not get ahead in a new, very competitive globalized economy (Kalukin 2006, 24, Wrzesień 2007, 134). This was not merely their subjective impression; according to the Central Statistical Office (GUS), “unemployment affects primarily young Poles”<sup>315</sup> (Pasierowska, Strużyńska and Cendrowska 2015, 17), nearly half of them (40%) live with their parents (Szutowicz 2016, Chehab 2013, 58-61) not merely out of comfort, as some suggest (Bielik-Robson 2018, 35-37), but rather because they cannot afford to live on their own

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<sup>314</sup> This group, consequently, is said to have a far more materialistic, pro-market, and pro-democratic orientation than previous generations (Pączyńska 2005, 573).

<sup>315</sup> In 2014, the highest unemployment rate in the country was among Poles between ages 25 and 34. This group constituted 28% of total unemployment (Pasierowska, Strużyńska and Cendrowska, 2015). Anthropologist Anna Maria Szutowicz claims that unemployment rate reaches 80% among Poles in the 18-24-year age range (2016).

or provide for dependents (Chebab 2013, 28). Most representatives of Generation Y have part-time, precarious, jobs (Szafraniec 2012, 30-31), and are three times more likely to fall below the poverty line than people above 65 years of age (Woźniak 2014, 187). Many of them, recognizing that they cannot improve their living conditions, have simply left the country.

#### 5.2.1.4.3 Attracting Millennials to Radio Maryja

The difficult plight of millennials was dismissed by liberal politicians, who instead blamed them on the psychological traits of this generation (Komorowski 2015). Yet again, *Radio Maryja* came to the rescue. Father Rydzyk recognized the struggles of this generation<sup>316</sup> and to attract them to his station, he brought in younger voices with whom millennials might better identify.<sup>317</sup> This was a difficult task because of the reputation of *Radio Maryja* as an “uncool” (*obciachowe*) broadcaster offering outdated content and form, one to which younger generation was allegedly “allergic,” and so “would have never admitted to tuning in” (Host 14 June, 2009, RM).

One way of attracting millennials to *Radio Maryja* has involved the construction of a compelling narrative that recycled the victimization narrative used in reference to the

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<sup>316</sup> But even more so, he understood that without the support of this group, the political influence of his station would have an expiration date corresponding with the age of many of its listeners.

<sup>317</sup> In fact, *Radio Maryja*'s regular contributors (Jerzy Robert Nowak, Monika Kacprzak, Andrzej Zybortowicz) have all weighed in on how young listeners should be reached, calling upon older listeners to convince their grandkids to listen to this station (September 23, 2012, RM).

1989 transition and applying it to the situation for millennials, using the reality of a 21<sup>st</sup> century hyper-globalized economy to underpin this revision.<sup>318</sup>

#### 5.2.1.4.3.1 The New Victims in Town

*Radio Maryja* articulated and disseminated a stance that millennials had been betrayed by older generations,<sup>319</sup> and especially by liberal politicians who turned Poland into a country in which most young people could not make ends meet (Rydzik May 3, 2010, RM, Duda April 25, 2015, RM; Poręba December 21, 2012, RM; Jaki June 17, 2015, RM). The audience was told that the representatives of this generation had three options: they could either live crammed in with their parents, never to start their own families; they could rent which would force them into an existence below the poverty line; or they could emigrate (Śliwiński August 5, 2012, RM; Chrynkiewicz June 16, 2012, RM; Sadurska January 17, 2013, RM). Large numbers of young Poles chose the last option (Szafraniec 2009, 131);<sup>320</sup> out of the 2 million Poles who emigrated over the past fifteen years, 1.4 million were born between 1977 and 1986 (Sowa et al. 2013, 20-23; Kalukin 2006, 24), predominantly millennials.

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<sup>318</sup> Another way was through rejuvenating this station. Founding the College of Social and Media Culture in 2001, whose major purpose was to bring up a generation of young, right-wing journalists, was a step in this direction (Burdziej 2008, 216). Since this school's establishment, *Radio Maryja* has promoted its students by giving them an opportunity to learn the trade and share their experiences on the air (Talarko June 23, 2015, RM).

<sup>319</sup> Many scholars and left-leaning journalists recognize that Poland's population is best represented by an upside-down demographic pyramid where young people are in the minority and are ruled by older generations (Skarżyńska 2018, 113).

<sup>320</sup> At present, most Polish families have at least one person working in the UK (Pidd October 25, 2016) or are otherwise affected by emigration (Porter-Szücs 2014, 339). This is the case in my own family: on my mother's side out of six cousins, four (all women) live abroad in the UK, Canada, and Germany—only two male cousins stayed in Poland. On my father's side two cousins, both women, moved to Germany.



The unprecedented scale of the migration of young Poles was one of the major talking points during the 2015 political campaign, and conspiracy theories were often used to explain this phenomenon. Many of station's priests, guests, and political allies espoused white supremacist and nationalist conspiracy theories that suggested that emigration was planned by the country's enemies with the purpose of causing Poland to gradually die out (Mech March 29, 2014, RM: Korolczuk, and Graff 2018, 811). Even though such explanations were conspiratorial and sensationalistic at best, they accurately recognize the demographic crisis that the country is facing due to low birth rates as well as depopulation caused by other factors such as emigration. Young people have in many cases left their towns and villages to live in the cities or abroad, which has weakened and aged many communities, particularly in the country's East (Krastev and Holmes October 24, 2019).

The roots of this difficult situation for many young Poles were traced back to the transition period when the forces of global capitalism, personified by George Soros, allegedly robbed Poland of its wealth and left it in ruins (see Kalukin 2006, 24, Wrzesień 2007, 134). Soros' fault lay in putting the country onto the path of integrating into the world economy, which was presented as a path of no return. Radio Maryja's contributing psychologist, Mira Modelska-Creech, claimed that this Hungarian billionaire was "among the top few Jews who decided in which direction globalization would go," betraying a limited understanding of the array of complex processes that were involved in integrating with the world economy (March 10, 2010, RM). Her narrative was only

strengthened over the following decade. Seven years later, in 2017, Law and Justice MP,

Krystyna Pawłowicz asked rhetorically:

how does it happen that someone like Soros (...) runs over the Polish state (...) he is not a global citizen, next to a small group of others, in fact, he owns the world (May 19, 2017, YT).

The hosts and guests on *Radio Maryja* were eager to “remind the younger generation who George Soros [was]” (January 7, 2016, RM), suggesting that the impoverishment of the country he had caused decreased their life chances and increased the likelihood of their emigrating. Patryk Jaki, politician from the Law and Justice party, shortly before the election in 2015, made this link very clear. He asked:

Why is there emigration? Because if Mr. Balcerowicz and Soros decided to sell Polish wealth ... the result is that young people are leaving (17 June 2015, RM).

According to *Radio Maryja*, the negative consequences of globalization on the country’s economy were far outweighed by its detrimental effects on the national culture. In typical fashion for conspiracy theories, a simplified explanation was offered, and one person—George Soros—was blamed for this development and said to have played a crucial role in this process. *Radio Maryja*’s panelists argued that globalization was easier when accompanied by multiculturalism;<sup>321</sup> an “ideology” that was seen to devalue centuries-old affiliations of people to land, language, religion, family, and nation in

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<sup>321</sup> Without the internalization of the ideas of multiculturalism by people, globalization cannot accelerate because it needs compliant and vulnerable workers living away from their communities, and who ready to relocate at moment’s notice in order to participate in global economy (Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 811; Kiereś September 14, 2016, RM; Brudziński, May 6, 2015, RM).

favour of open borders and fluid identities (Szostkiewicz 2002).<sup>322 323</sup> By aggressively promoting the open society and multiculturalism, for instance through advocating for the refugees in 2015, Soros' actions were seen to amount to a direct attack on state sovereignty, and yet another attempt to weaken national identity, because open borders let far too many foreigners into the country who were said to undermine the job market (see Chapter 4; Kiereś March 24, 2011, RM; Modelska- Creech December 27, 2009, RM). Listeners were told that such "ideologies" forced decisions about leaving the country on young Poles, who would perhaps never return (Górny May 17, 2018, RM November Rogacki 29, 2009, RM). *Radio Maryja's* contributors concluded that this could only lead to Poland being colonized by multicultural thinking, weakening national ties, breaking apart families, and leading to an unhealthy society of a type that could be observed in the West. To put it differently, the message sent to millennials was that they would end up becoming victims of this new way of life regardless, whether they stayed in liberal-ruled Poland or emigrated to the West.

#### **5.2.1.4.3.2 Cautionary Tales from the West**

In Chapter 3, I demonstrated that *Radio Maryja* is a quintessentially alternative medium and created a space for many disadvantaged groups (Burdziej 2008b, 217; Hołub

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<sup>322</sup> Multiculturalism as an ideal was understood as false consciousness; disarming potential discontent of people entangled in globalization processes which is propagated by the wealthy as yet another tool in helping them to generate higher profits (Kiereś, March 24, 2011, RM).

<sup>323</sup> In the eyes of *Radio Maryja's* guests, such changes gradually began happening in Poland in 2004 when the country joined the EU, and then intensified most recently during the refugee crisis (see Chapter 4; Górny May 17, 2018, RM; Kiereś March 24, 2011, RM).

and Głuchowski 2019, 666; Bobrowska 2014, 459). It quickly turned out, however, that Father Rydzyk's message was not only popular among pensioners, the unemployed, the widowed, but that it also appealed to their compatriots living abroad who left the country between the end of the WWII and the 1990s.<sup>324</sup> Right from the early years of the station, Polish migrants were given a lot of airtime, especially if they were critical of their new countries of residence (Burdziej 2008b, 28, 2008, 217). Father Rydzyk, who spent many years in Germany, described the West as "morally and spiritually broken" (Boniecki 2002; November 19, 2015, RM; see also Górny May 17, 2018, RM), a place with empty churches and filled shopping malls, where, in his view, people led meaningless lives subordinated to the demands of a consumer culture (Rydzyk March 18, 2016, RM). He was convinced that these developments were the outcomes of a global Jewish conspiracy of international billionaires who have been able to manipulate people's desires through controlling the media. This opinion has never been supported by verifiable evidence but appeared far more reliable when it was reiterated by listeners based outside of the country.

The callers who either worked, lived, or had relatives living abroad confirmed Rydzyk's assessment by sharing their personal cautionary tales from the West.

They talked of the dissolution of families (November 28, 2016, RM), the devaluation of religion, and the disappearance of national cultures, as well as a general demoralization.

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<sup>324</sup> Many members of the Polish diaspora (especially in the United States who migrated in the 1980s, the so-called *Polonia*) found comfort in staying in touch with their country through tuning into this station and becoming a part of a global community of the "*Radio Maryja Family*" (Starnawski 2003, 67; Andrukiewicz 2013, 33). Interestingly enough, some emigrants convinced their kids to listen to *Radio Maryja* too (Szulak March 18, 2015, RM).

As depicted on this station, most Polish migrants considered these phenomena as stemming from the world's wealthiest who were subjecting the masses to the "ideologies" of multiculturalism, globalism, and gender—that is, they subscribed to conspiracy theories. One caller, Andrzej from Cologne, said: "we are attacked in the West by gender and the refugees, so Poland is in a double bind, who does this serve, I ask?" (March 27, 2017, RM). Jacek from Germany admitted:

I have been living here for over 27 years and I have been watching this. This is very serious matter. All this has been orchestrated from the top. I blame Soros (July 3, 2017, RM).

Such claims were reinforced by *Radio Maryja's* invited guests (Oko October 29, 2017, RM)<sup>325</sup> and further legitimized through carefully selected quotes drawn from foreign authors and scholar, including Canadian scholar Eric McLuhan (son of Marshall (March 6, 2011, RM)), French journalist Marguerite Peeters (April 10, 2010 RM), and German author Gabriela Kuby (November 29, 2007, RM). They were trotted out to warn Poles away from following a Western style of globalization that would lead to nihilism, "anti-culture," which they linked to multiculturalism and so-called "cultural Marxism" (Kiereś March 24, 2011, RM; Peeters November 23, 2010, RM).<sup>326</sup> These problems were

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<sup>325</sup> As father Dariusz Oko stated in a rather self-congratulatory tone:

We are so happy that we have such smart listeners who thanks to their experiences from travelling in the West and working there... they take good things from the West and resist the bad ones... when we are in the West we see all these absurd theories like gender that kill these countries" (October 29, 2017, RM).

<sup>326</sup> The alleged absence of culture in the West was demonstrated by stories about how Western parents try to kick their young adult children out of their homes when they turn 18, so they can be unburdened and free to lead a more comfortable life of leisure (Father Dyrek November 28, 2016, RM).

inevitably blamed on Soros<sup>327</sup> (Guz December 22, 2018, RM; Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 811; Starnawski 2017, 73).

When Poland joined the EU in 2004 and many young Poles began leaving the country, *Radio Maryja*'s hosts started paying special attention to this group. They characterized them as the cream of the crop; educated<sup>328</sup> and resourceful people who the West would beg to have. In 2010, Rydzyk proudly stated that Germans prefer to convince educated, young Poles to move to Germany instead of letting in Turks as now Germany has "problems with Turkish people" (December 7, 2010, see also Jaskułowski 2019, 83). In a similar tone, Witold Modzelewski, legal scholar often consulted by Radio Maryja, claimed that:

The West would be happy to accept an unlimited number of young, educated Poles because they want to create a counterbalance to growing Muslim, Asian, and African elements which begin to dominate in cities (October 25, 2015, RM).

At the same time, *Radio Maryja*'s guests reminded the audience that as victims of both liberal politicians and the 1989 reforms, they had no other choice but to leave. This station devoted ample airtime to discussing the costs of emigration widely acknowledged by migration scholars, such as the loss of identity, working below their qualifications, family disillusionment, and humiliation that led to substance abuse and health issues (Kurzępa January 6, 2015, RM; Rydzyk May 3, 2010, RM). Rydzyk would often

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<sup>327</sup> This narrative was so popular that, as I argued in Chapter 4, Jarosław Kaczyński repeated it in June of 2016 during Law and Justice's annual party address, which was regurgitated by the national evening news (Diaz June 8, 2016, TVP1; July 20, 2017, TVP1; August 31, 2016, TVP1; see Jaskułowski 2019, 43).

<sup>328</sup> In fact, out of all young migrants, 35% of them have higher education; it is true that only 10% of migrants are employed in a line of work at or above their qualifications (Szafraniec 2009, 131).

comment on the fact that well-educated Polish migrants who earned their MBAs back home (a very popular major at the turn of the century), instead of managing companies, “manage cleaning rags [as cleaners] in the UK or Ireland” (April 10, 2010, RM). He even gave airtime to Jarosław Kaczyński shortly before the elections to convince younger people to elect his party and to dissuade them from emigrating through pointing out that they will be exploited and humiliated. His way of convincing them spoke volumes, he said:

Poles are paid less in London than anyone else including people from African countries. Why? Because Poles are told they are worthless, so they are not confident, they do not fight for themselves (...) it cannot be the case that the highest ambition of Poles is to wash dishes” (March 26, 2015, RM).

Moreover, listeners were told that what awaited Polish migrants in the West, was far from the dream it was depicted as being. On top of being subjected to various types of liberal “propaganda,” which forced many Poles to hide their Catholic roots and to send their children to schools with curricula spiked with “gender ideology,” they had to live side by side with Muslims and compete with them for jobs (see Starnawski 2017, 70-71; Dębska 2019, 107). As Kasia Narkowicz and Konrad Pędziwiatr demonstrate, some of this tension pushed young Poles living abroad to engage in anti-Muslim activism in their new countries as well as to spread this message to their families back home, in an instance of a what Benedict Anderson calls “long-distance nationalism” (2017, 70). While doing this, they often refer to foreign conspiracy theorists such as Kevin MacDonald and Andreas

von Retyi (February 7, 2016, YT; see Starnawski 2017, 71), or Western pseudo-journalists such as Alex Jones and Canadian Lauren Southern (July 12, 2017).<sup>329 330</sup>

In sum, *Radio Maryja* on the one hand provided an agora to acknowledge the difficult experiences of Polish emigrants to the West, allowing words of support and solidarity to be exchanged. For example, between older and younger immigrants as the words of Natalia from Italy, demonstrate. She said:

we are those exiles who wander for years, and now all these fantastic young people also leave... It is difficult for me to connect with people in Poland after 30 years [of emigration] ... I can have a great dialogue but only with people who tune in *Radio Maryja*. I am so happy you have existed for 25 years. What would have happened to Poland, what would we, the emigres have done? You speak the truth and that unites Poles (September 14, 2016, RM).

On the other hand, Rydzyk did much to convince this young group of migrants that the conspiratorial narratives about the betrayal of Poles of all ages dating back to the transformation, and thus to Soros, were true (Rydzyk March 18, 2015, RM). As time

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<sup>329</sup> Incidentally, some scholars of Islamophobia in Poland argue that from 2004 and later, the hostility towards Islam increased following a loss of momentum post 9/11 (Starnawski 2017, 70).

<sup>330</sup> Voting outcomes seem to reflect the popularity of such views among young Polish emigrants. Even though they are not a homogenous group, their consistent voting patterns suggest where they stand politically. In the US, where most migrants are older, they voted for Law and Justice (72%) (tvn24.pl). In the UK and Ireland, where most recent emigrants live, most elected Paweł Kukiz (24% and 26%), followed by Law and Justice (23% and 21%), and KORWIN (20% and 17%). The fact that they voted Kukiz means that its leader must have struck a chord with them with his anti-multiculturalist views, anti-refugee, anti-Semitic, and anti-Soros views (Wigura 2015, 8). If we consider that these voting results are largely from emigrant millennials, and only 27% of them want to apply for permanent status in the UK, we can suspect that their experiences of multiculturalism and migration have not been seen as positive (Marsh September 18, 2019; Davies November 18, 2017). Aleks Szczerbiak, a professor of politics at the University of Sussex, pointed out that immigration often fosters openness and acceptance toward other ethnic, religious, and national groups, but that in the case of Polish immigrants to the UK, the opposite seems to be true (Davies November 18, 2017).



passed, the general victimization of the younger generation of Poles was conflated with this narrative regarding the victimization of Polish emigrants.

#### **5.2.1.4.3.3 An Alternative Narrative of Intergenerational Solidarity**

*Radio Maryja*'s pundits seemed to intuitively know the limitations of the victimization narrative for the younger generation, who were brought up on an up-beat "you can do it" approach which devalued victimhood narratives. The station's allies started adapting Generation Y's language, and so, next to the victimhood discourse, *Radio Maryja* put forward a more positive and empowering story that characterized Poland, and by extension this generation of Poles, as exceptional (Skarżyńska 2018, 111). Representatives of Generation Y could hear about their country's glorious past, the special "role [it played] in Europe" (March 18, 2015; Radkowska- Walkowicz 2014) as the lone defender of Christianity against Muslims and the spoiled West (Szaniawski June 10, 2007, RM; Zbigniew August 1, 2016, RM), and themselves as the true heirs of this legacy.

Father Rydzyk painted them as true patriots, idealists, and religious Catholics,<sup>331</sup> who could not be bought or manipulated by politicians and the media (Rydzyk 17 June 2015, RM), or lured by the superficial consumerism of the West, which many of them were exposed to and rejected while they lived and worked abroad (Pawłowicz July 20,

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<sup>331</sup> Defining them as "religious Catholics" seems to be an instance of a wishful thinking as most studies demonstrate the opposite trend; that more young people are secularizing (Lukowski and Zawadzki 2019; Coman October 5, 2019, Pew Research Center 2018)

2013, RM; Kurzępa January 6, 2015; Wiatr June 21, 2015, RM). They were favourably juxtaposed to their parents who were allegedly an apathetic, not politically conscious, consumption-oriented group (Kurzępa March 6, 2016, RM, Wolniewicz March 11, 2007, RM; repeated on YT Knap June 14, 2016). In contrast, millennials' political views (Kempa 17 June 2015, RM, Zofia May 21, 2015, RM), along with their activism (Ryba March 21, 2010, RM), historical consciousness,<sup>332</sup> and unmatched pride in their country (Rydzik June 17, 2015, RM; Kempa; Jach July 13, 2017, RM), rendered them the only generation capable of carrying the torch of future changes.

Why were these young people depicted as so different from their parents? *Radio Maryja* hosts, on-air guest academics, as well as callers claimed that the younger generation was far more patriotic, because of the work done by their grandmothers “who, over schnitzel,” passed on to their grandkids the significance of family values, and the love of one's country, language and religion (Kempa 17 June 2015, RM: May 6, 2009, RM). Krystyna Pawłowicz, a Law and Justice politician maintained that “without the generation over sixty, without those grandmothers, this younger generation would not be like that” (July 20, 2013, RM).<sup>333</sup> And since many of these “grandmothers” supposedly got their ideas from Rydzik's station, it became only logical to state that the

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<sup>332</sup> Which is reflected in the mushrooming of survival skills schools, martial art schools, and other paramilitary organizations re-enacting past battles, conducting military training etc. Some are said to have nationalistic sympathies, and links to organized crime, business, the state apparatus as well as the nationalist branch of the Catholic church (Majewski 2017, 111).

<sup>333</sup> Why are grandmothers the ones who talk to their grandkids? According to the station's panelists, many parents simply work abroad and so their kids stay with grandparents (Kurzępa March 18, 2015; Kurzępa January 6, 2015, RM; Connolly Mar 5, 2015). Another explanation is that parents work long hours, leaving the grandmothers to help with childrearing and thus play a role in shaping the views of their grandkids.

“young generation [was] brought up on *Radio Maryja*” (Kurzępa March 6, 2016, RM).

To put it differently, *Radio Maryja* came up with a self-serving story about intergenerational solidarity between the silent generation, baby boomers, and millennials which flattered all these groups. But a question arises, was this narrative compelling enough to actually attract younger people as listeners?

#### **5.2.1.4.3.4 Reputations Are Hard to Change**

I demonstrated earlier that for years *Radio Maryja* has acted as a platform for excluded and marginalized groups (Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 666), but most recently, the composition of its listeners has been changing to a slightly younger, pre-retirement audience (Czaczkowska December 3, 2011; Kochanowicz-Mańk October 21, 2018, RM).<sup>334</sup> Today, 41% are people are above 60 years of age, but another 40% are between the ages of 40 and 59, 14% of are in 25-39 age group, and only 5.6% are between 15-24 years of age (Czaczkowska 2011). Thus, the audience is far from consisting of “only” pensioners (Kochanowicz-Mańk October 21, 2018, RM; Radiukiewicz 2018, 135; Lubelska 1999; Zagner 2000), and more and more young callers contact the studio to speak on air about their experiences of navigating life in Poland or abroad (June 14, 2009, RM). But, despite these changes and the fact that *Radio Maryja*'s hosts, and contributors have worked hard to undo years of negative reputation surrounding this

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<sup>334</sup> Furthermore, a more educated audience. Today, three times more people with degrees listen to the station than ten years ago. About 25% of people who now tune in to *Radio Maryja* are university graduates, and, as Polish sociologist Maciej Gdula indicated, a significant segment of current listeners consists of low-level office workers (Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 666).

station, most millennials do not tune into this broadcaster—they prefer to go online (Kuligowski 2019, 135; Budyta-Budzyńska 2018, 295).

Chapter 3 described how *Radio Maryja*, apart from being characterized by liberal media and politicians as xenophobic, antisemitic, was also described as “uncool” (Burdziej 2008b, 21; Kucharczyk in Siedlecka 2017; Radiukiewicz 2018, 130; Kuligowski 2019, 135; Budyta-Budzyńska 2018, 295). It was dismissed as being listened to only by elderly, uneducated women, which, in a society desperately trying to catch up with the West and prove itself to be modern and progressive, amounted to a reputational disaster. But it seems that the far bigger issue was the format, content, and the aesthetics of *Radio Maryja*'s programs, as well as the guest selection, all of which were geared toward an older audience. The content created by this broadcaster ignored the fact that millennials were brought up in a media ecology that offered numerous alternatives that were far more compatible with this generation's needs and habits, i.e., their shorter attention span (Feliksiak 2018, 12). As one of the young, well-intentioned, and perhaps a tad too honest, callers put it, the content from *Radio Maryja* could only reach younger people if it was perhaps repackaged to be shared online (June 14, 2009, RM)<sup>335</sup>.

That is exactly what happened over time as *Radio Maryja*'s content ended up more often on the Internet. The station's hosts skillfully stirred narratives about the Internet as the only independent source of information apart from *Radio Maryja*,

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<sup>335</sup> See also June 23, 2015, RM; September 23, 2012, RM; Marcin and Natalia Dąbrowska June 14, 2009.

and young people as too smart to be fooled by mainstream media (June 23, 2015, RM).<sup>336</sup>

Whether this information was correct or not was less important than the fact that *Radio Maryja* and its political allies acknowledged that Generation Y would not choose this station en masse, and that its members spend most of their time online (Feliksiak 2018, 12). Meeting millennials in their preferred informational environment was the next step, and it would yield huge political results.

#### **5.2.1.5 “I Am Not Worried About Who the Youth Will Vote For”**

The Internet changed the rules of the political game during the 2015 election campaign (Marcinkiewicz 2018, 826; Kacprzak June 23, 2015, RM). Millennials became one of the biggest voting groups and were primarily reached through online channels (Jaki June 17, 2015, RM; Kuligowski 2019, 135).<sup>337 338</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 2, 40% of them admitted to using this medium to follow and discuss developments in political, social, and economic matters (Jurczyszyn et al. 2015, 161, 33; Liu and Bilewicz 2020, 10; see also Bendyk 2016, 26- 28), and so it was crucial to connect with them online (Westlake 2008, Berger 2018, 52).

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<sup>336</sup> The audience was told that millennials knew how to use the Internet to find the information that was hidden from the general public (Kacprzak June 23, 2015, RM, Jaki June 17, 2015, RM; Kruk September 19, 2015, RM).

<sup>337</sup> One explanation from *Radio Maryja*'s on-air guests as to why the largely unknown Law and Justice candidate, Andrzej Duda, won the presidential election in 2015 was because he visited small towns while also being very active online. Suddenly, candidates that had the biggest online following on social media were acting politely on the campaign trail, gaining the most trust, because they appeared as more honest and authentic (Kossowski June 23, 2015, RM).

<sup>338</sup> Methods of communicating with millennials became progressively more sophisticated. The biggest media portal in Poland, *Wirtualna Polska* [Virtual Poland], presented politicians from Law and Justice mainly in a positive light, but did it very subtly, to convince younger and more skeptical audiences to lend support to this party (Rojewski January 23, 2020).

Shortly before the 2015 elections, frustrations ran high among Polish Millennials who had become aware of the fact that the Polish equivalent of the “American Dream” was unattainable for most of them (Szutowicz 2016, 21). This frustration was exacerbated by the Law and Justice politicians’ articulation of the Polish national situation as being king to “country in ruins” (Lipiński and Stępińska 2019, 77). Furthermore, politically reframing the refugee crisis as being orchestrated by Soros and the EU, leading to the destruction of the nation, echoing conspiracy theories drawn from *Radio Maryja*, also caught the imagination of some millennials’ as it played out online (Jaskułowski 2019, 45; Starnawski 2017, 69; Narkowicz 2018, 366). Their apathy quite quickly transformed into negative feelings toward outsiders—especially the refugees<sup>339</sup> (Starnawski 2017, 64; Jaskułowski 2019, 45)—as well as an unexpected embrace of Polish national identity (Ibid.). Starting from 2014, 12% of young Poles declared themselves to share radical right-wing views, which was historically unprecedented (Kazanecki 2015, 3); soon after they were reported to “express the highest level of support for authoritarian governments among all social groups” (Skarżyńska 2018, 113). This change, and the ensuing patriotic revival, affected millennial voting patterns. Consequently, during the 2015 parliamentary and presidential elections, most<sup>340</sup> young Poles voted for right-wing anti-establishment

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<sup>339</sup> 76% of young adults in the 18–24 age range and 56% of those between 25–34 years old “were reluctant” to welcome refugees in Poland (Lipiński and Stępińska 2019, 714).

<sup>340</sup> In the presidential elections, 46% of Poles in the 18-24 age range and 45% of those between 25-34 years old voted for Paweł Kukiz (Boguszewski, July 2015). Interestingly, as the report “Following Politics and Political Views between 1989-2015 period: The Declaration of Young Adults” demonstrated. Millennial voters (5%) as opposed to other age groups (1%) disproportionately cast ballots for Janusz Korwin Mikke (Kazanecki 2015, 13; see Lipiński and Stępińska 2019, 72). According to IPSOS, in the 2015 parliamentary elections, 20% and 17% of voters below the age of 30 cast ballots for Kukiz’15 and KORWiN respectively (Interia October 25, 2015).

politicians such as Paweł Kukiz (Boguszewski, July 2015), Janusz Korwin-Mikke (October 25, 2015 Interia), and Law and Justice presidential candidate, Andrzej Duda<sup>341</sup> (Narkowicz 2018, 336; Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 557; Skarżyńska 2018, 114; Talarko June 23, 2015, RM).

Janusz Korwin-Mikke, leader of the right-wing libertarian and Eurosceptic Liberty Party, became one of the two most popular politicians among members of Generation Y. In general, he repeated many of *Radio Maryja's* talking points, including conspiracy theories which claimed the West, together with Soros, plotted to force Poland into accepting refugees (Narkowicz 2018, 366). During the presidential elections in 2015, more than 480,000 people voted for Korwin-Mikke—most of them millennials (Kazanecki 2015, 13).

The views of another party leader, Paweł Kukiz, were even more appealing to millennials. A former punk-rock singer turned politician; he became known for his anti-refugee views. As pointed out in Chapter 4, he was the first mainstream politician who blamed the arrival of asylum-seekers from the Middle East and North Africa on George Soros (Wigura 2015, 8). Many commentators recognized that he stood for values that which many millennials subscribed. For example, he ran on a platform that stressed his party's anti-establishment and outsider character. His brand was a “telling it how it is

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<sup>341</sup> Young women, however, were far less likely to grant their support to this candidate. This group was recorded to be far more left-wing than men and as such also translated to higher declarations of support for refugees (Pacewicz August 19, 2019, GW). Similar results came back from the national survey, which found that Polish men are far more conservative than Polish women (CBOS 2020).

and damn the consequences” approach<sup>342</sup> that resembled that of Donald Trump<sup>343</sup>. This identity allowed him to share controversial, politically incorrect views, e.g., conflating refugees with terrorists (Narkowicz 2018, 366), and in so doing, he appeared more honest and authentic than any other mainstream politician (Krupa October 16, 2016; Duval Smith February 6, 2016). He repeated conspiracy theories that pitted EU officials, Soros, and other Jews, against the Polish nation (Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 811; Wigura 2015, 8), theories which were frequently picked up online. Ultimately, during the 2015 presidential election, his party attracted the largest number of young voters (41%) (Urbański 2015). As Ms. Zofia, calling in to *Radio Maryja*, summed it up:

My 19-year-old son will vote for Kukiz, he doesn't see any other alternative. ... Mr. Komorowski [candidate of the Civic Platform and a former president of Poland] is UNCOOL /[her emphasis]! They are ashamed of this president... I am not worried about who the youth will vote for” (May 21, 2015, RM).

Put briefly, millennials voted in large numbers for politician<sup>344</sup>s who espoused and endorsed conspiracy theories that had previously been unacceptable in the mainstream, and this was part of their appeal (Lipiński 2021). As well, these ideas could reach a wider audience thanks to the Internet, a large portion of which were repackaged content from *Radio Maryja* (Nowina- Konopka 2015, 96; Kacprzak June 23, 2015, RM,

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<sup>342</sup> Populist politicians, whether male or female, use “straight talk” to enact hegemonic masculinity which helps them to represent “the people” vis-à-vis the elites (see Geva 2020, 6, 17).

<sup>343</sup> This approach has been extensively documented and studied by conspiracy theory researchers who label it as “heroic truth-telling” (Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 8)

<sup>344</sup> Paweł Kukiz and Janusz Korwin-Mikke at first did not introduce conspiracy theories into the mainstream, though Law and Justice did radicalize its message to outperform its political opponents on the far right—a process dating back to 2005. Since Kaczyński's party was identified with the establishment, most young ideologically confused people (Lipińska and Stępińska 2019, 73) voted for Kukiz' 15 and KORWiN in 2015. In 2019, however, the vast majority of them cast their ballots for Law and Justice (Zaborowska October 13, 2019).



Jaki June 17, 2015, RM). Suddenly, similar messages, including ones about Soros, were not uncool anymore, but actually popular on platforms such as *YouTube*. This leads us to ask the question: how did this happen?

### 5.2.2 Soros on Polish YouTube

In Chapter 2, I explained why I chose *YouTube* to study the perception of George Soros online. I mentioned this platform's limited oversight, stemming from its original commitment to authenticity,<sup>345</sup> its higher propensity to attract people with more radical views, and the fact that in Poland it is primarily frequented by the millennials and is more likely to be chosen for the purpose of discussing politics.<sup>346</sup> I also summarized the conclusions of my quantitative and qualitative analysis of images, including comments and videos on Soros that were posted to Polish *YouTube* and confirmed that there was a significant increase in interest in this billionaire among the platform's users. Since Generation Y relies on *YouTube* to communicate their opinions and political affiliations as part of their identity (Berger 2018, 142), learning more about the reception of anti-Soros discourse on this platform could help us better understand the role of this particular group in the movement of negative rhetoric about Soros into mainstream media. This will

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<sup>345</sup> At first, the slogan of YouTube was "Broadcast Yourself," meaning that amateur users were expected to be the co-creators of platform content (Strangelove 2010, 7, 9; see Byford 2011, 11).

<sup>346</sup> 99 percent of those who watch videos pertaining politics respond, comment, or otherwise engage in interaction with other users (Thelwall, Sud and Vis 2012, 618). Perhaps in the spirit of keeping YouTube community independent, as Rieder, Fernández, and Coromina have found, the algorithm used by this site prioritizes videos from amateur (perceived as more authentic) YouTubers above those from commercial news outlets (in Burgess and Green 2013, 21; Arthurs and Drakopolou 2018, 6).

cast more light on what such a process means, given the fact that millennials are becoming the largest voting group in Poland and will decide on the future direction of Polish politics.

### **5.2.2.1 “Is George Soros a Demon?”<sup>347</sup>**

In 2015, the moment “the refugee crisis” was identified as leading to the potential dissolution of Polish state, and with Soros as its major culprit, all bets were off when it came to attacking him. A quick glance at what was being said about Soros across different media outlets (with the exclusion of *Gazeta Wyborcza* that presented a very one-sided, positive view of this billionaire) reveals a repetition of form and content.

The language used to talk about him was full of hyperbole, omissions, minimizations, and other rhetorical strategies that distort reality to induce stronger emotions (Ibid.; Lasiuk 2018, 56; Lipiński 2014, 774). For example, code-words were used (e.g. “the sponsor” for Soros; “people like Michnik, Geremek and Soros,” for Jews or traitors), and language hijacked so that the original meaning of words was reversed, e.g. openness or tolerance became disliked terms, and were directly linked to the idea of the ‘open society’ promoted by Soros (see Polkowska 2020, 631; Lasiuk 2018, 59; Polkowska 2016, 57; Gwiazda 2008, 814)

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<sup>347</sup> One right-wing YouTube political show, *Gorące Pytania* [Burning Questions], asked two invited guests, a journalist, Viktor Orbán expert, Igor Janke, and theatre director, Wojciech Biedroń, to seriously consider answering the tongue-in-cheek question: “George Soros- Is He Really a Demon?” (April 29, 2019, YT). They concluded that Soros was not a demon, but he was close to having a similar level of influence.

The Internet, then, out of all media spaces, created conditions for anti-Sorosism to reach new heights and spin out of control (see Demczuk 2018, 104, Aronson 2012; Dziwak 2019, 117). Offensive or otherwise negative comments about the refugees, often blaming Soros as part of a conspiracy to support their cause in Poland and in Europe, increasingly appeared across Polish social media (Piechocki 2016, 305; Korolczuk 2020, 165).<sup>348</sup> As well, the number of violent posts wishing Soros death or portraying him as the devil himself, for “bringing refugees” was staggering. However, given what is known about the dehumanizing nature of online content and commentary, antisemitic imagery misrepresenting Jews (Simonsen 2020, 358; Bangerter, Wagner-Egger and Delouvee 2020, 206) and what we know about *YouTube* (Strangelove 2010, 147; Dziwak 2019, 113; Bangerter et al. 2020, 206), this is unsurprising, perhaps especially when it came to anti-refugee/ anti-Muslim (Soral, Liu and Bilewicz 2020: 2) and antisemitic discourses (Poynter 2010, 113; Dziwak 2019, 116).<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> People who frequented them display “higher levels of Islamo-prejudice” in comparison to those who turn to traditional mass media (Soral et al., 2020, 2). Conspiracy theories gained popularity on social media because they are controversial, emotional, and biased (Rosińska and Brzóška 2020, 661). They appeal to people who share similar sets of values and are more likely to accept misinformation which conforms to these values, which in turn leads to the creation of fragmented publics and “echo chambers” (Strangelove 2010, 167). Such virtual spaces come to function like “digital ghettos” (Szpunar 2018, 196) that welcome only carefully selected content. In these so-called “filter bubbles,” unverified and often radical information thrives (Pariser in Stelmach 2014, 416).

<sup>349</sup> The limited oversight on YouTube means that racist, violent, pornographic, and otherwise offensive images are ubiquitous on this platform, and so are conspiracy theories and “fake news.” (Arthurs and Drakopolou 2018, 6; Strangelove 2010, 106, 147).

In this conspiratorial, Manichean vision of the world, devoid of any nuance or complexity, Soros was the bad guy<sup>350</sup> who awakened strong negative emotions (see Lasiuk 2018, 59), to such a degree that some users wished him dead, sometimes in disturbingly creative comments. One person wrote: “Mr. Soros, I hope you will die in pain, I wish you that from the bottom of my heart” (June 4, 2018, YT). Another was far more inventive “I wish you would walk on water and died of thirst, rot!” (September 18, 2015, YT). Surprisingly, many negative opinions about Soros were shared not only by anonymous commenters, but also by journalists and *Radio Maryja* guest academics whose lectures were posted on *YouTube*. Stanislaw Krajski, the station’s expert on Masonry, argued that Soros played the role of Satan, wanting to destroy both Christianity and Poland itself (January 7, 2016, RM),<sup>351</sup> recycling medieval anti-Jewish conspiracy theories (Simonsen 2020, 358).

#### 5.2.2.2 ‘Coolified’ George

*YouTube* provides its users with a space to be content creators. This translates into the platform being filled with amateur videos—including ones starring George Soros.

What distinguishes these videos from those conspiracy theories disseminated by *Radio*

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<sup>350</sup> He was compared to Hitler (August 2, 2017, YT; March 18, 2017, YT) and the devil (December 4, 2016, see Narkowicz 2018, 369), as well as having been described as “the ‘Judeosatanist’- referencing Alex Jones as their source (26 January 2016, YT).

<sup>351</sup> One of the stark cases of vilification of Soros, for no specific reason, was a statement made by Janusz Sytnik-Czetwertyński who said: “during my lecture, the spirit of George Soros will be with us, but in a sense, I will not say a word about him, even though I will be talking about him all the time” (September 2, 2019, YT). Then his lecture proceeded to discuss how “Soros’ ideas were filled with extreme reverse racism towards white, heterosexual men” (September 2, 2019, YT).

*Maryja*, which apart from their different form (to be discussed later), is the fact that they are mostly tongue-in-cheek, making them appear cool for some users of this platform. However, this does not mean that they will be perceived as cool by everyone. What is cool for one group will not be for another but will also change over time and differ from place to place (Pountain and Robins 2000, 10, 21; Warren and Campbell 2014, 543,544). Thus, anti-Soros videos on *YouTube* probably will not influence liberal millennials coming from a big city in “Poland A” who use this platform and who differ from their counterparts. Nonetheless, it may find traction among members of this age cohort who are, politically speaking, sitting on the fence. It is possible that watching ironic *YouTube* videos about Soros was one of the factors contributing to them changing their opinions and casting ballots for someone new.

Why might anti-Soros videos on *YouTube* appear cool? Despite the lack of agreement on what constitutes coolness, it is often understood as a mixture of nonconformity, individualism, defiance, or an unwillingness to follow trends packaged in rebellious stance—all seen as attitudes expressed by underdogs (Ibid., 544; Pountain and Robins 2000, 19). These are the traits that adequately describe many of the amateur videos about Soros as they defy expectations in terms of content and form. Not only do they break the rules of PC culture, but they also mix genres that traditionally do not go together.

Let’s look at some of the examples of “cool” videos with high viewership that centre on this billionaire (Pęczak Aug 15, 2017; Mazuś and Wilk December 30, 2020). In one such video, Soros is inserted into the final scenes of the Stanley Kubrick film,

*The Shining*, to illustrate how he has been destroying Europe through his foundations and pro-refugee lobby.<sup>352</sup> Another instance of creativity are various versions of movie *Downfall*, which focuses on the Third Reich's final hours when Hitler finds out he will lose the war. He is furious and he yells at his generals, telling them what to do and griping about who failed him. In this amateur rendition of this scene, Hitler subtitled is speaking as though he is Soros. Different case scenarios are played out, all of which refer us back to the Polish political context.<sup>353</sup> All this demonstrates that the creativity of YouTubers as applied to the topic of Soros is extensive and that rules of good taste do not apply since, as a Holocaust survivor, Soros can be represented as Hitler. But it also shows that the medium itself gives them more playful options to express their opinions than would, for example, a phone call to *Radio Maryja*. That is to say, these videos could be labelled as cool by some, because they make people feel uneasy and uncomfortable as they break rules of acceptable public discourse while challenging the boundaries of genres.

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<sup>352</sup> Soros's head is photoshopped onto the face of the major character, played in the movie by Jack Nicholson. In the original film, he chased his wife into the bathroom where he began to destroy the door with an axe to kill her. In this "remixed" scene, George Soros is trying to force his way to the bathroom, and through the crack in the door he screams: "Little Pig, let in the immigrants!" The wife is replaced by an image of a terrified Viktor Orbán who shouts toward anti-refugee Polish president, Andrzej Duda, "Andrzejku! I won't escape Soros." Soros screams back: "In this case, I am implementing Soros' plan. The immigrants will eat you up from the inside." The axe that is destroying the door is covered by inserted images of refugees to Europe from North Africa. When "George Soros" finally cuts through the door and reaches toward the handle, the sign "Batory Foundation" can be seen on it (July 20, 2019, YT).

<sup>353</sup> Soros-Hitler finds out that his plans regarding the new Polish government did not work as he planned, and he loses his temper because he is disappointed with those who failed him—Polish politicians, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, The Committee for the Defense of Democracy—that are implied to have been paid off by him.

*YouTube* gives its customers the space and tools to participate in a conversation. If we look at comment exchanges below videos about Soros alone, we find that many users frequenting far-right channels criticize and vociferously oppose his alleged actions, and some go to great lengths to communicate that. One genre of commentary attacking the billionaire could be labelled “direct messages to George Soros,” in which anonymous users, as well as vloggers and journalists personally address him. A far-right journalist, Witold Gadowski, said: “Mr. Soros maybe at this point prayer and tea would suffice and not telling others how to live... please do not teach us how to live” (October 12, 2017). A similar thing was said by two journalists from the online show, *Mam Prawo Wiedzieć* [I have a right to know]: “Mr. Soros, if we want to, we will remove our government in a democratic manner, if its members steal too much, we will get rid of them, without your interference, please relax” (October 29, 2016). By addressing this billionaire in a slightly patronizing as well as ironic manner, as if they were equal in terms of power and influence, they express an oppositional, nonconforming stance which could be interpreted by some similarly politically aligned viewers as “cool”.

The popularity of Soros as a topic on *YouTube* did not escape the content creators who quickly realized that they could capitalize on the trend. Consequently, they routinely began mentioning the billionaire on their channels,<sup>354</sup> even just in passing (see Janusz

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<sup>354</sup> Among them are the popular right-wing channels *Telewizja Republika* and *Telewizja Narodowa*, as well as those created by well-known vloggers Dariusz Matecki, Ator, and journalists from *Mam Prawo Wiedzieć* [I have the right to know]. Furthermore, there are channels by former *Radio Maryja* panelists (including Stanisław Krajski, Jerzy Robert Nowak, and Stanisław Michalkiewicz), and mainstream journalists (such as Mariusz Max Kolonko, Witold Gadowski), in addition to amateur channels with negligible viewership, all of whom devote much attention to Soros (e.g., created by Bartłomiej Karzej, Michał Wałach, Piotr Pawelec, and Andrzej Pochylski).

Sytnik- Czetwertyński September 2, 2019, YT). This created a vicious cycle, as one of the reasons Soros was attracting attention on this platform was because vloggers knew that tagging him or putting his last name in their controversially titled videos<sup>355</sup> would attract more eyeballs<sup>356</sup> generate more traffic, and thus increase revenue from viewership (Demczuk 2018, 104; Dziwak 2019, 117). As a result, they would put out even more sensationalistic and conspiratorial content pertaining to him, which, in addition to stoking anti-Sorosism, was also far more entertaining for the average *YouTube* user.<sup>357</sup> What is troubling in the case of *YouTube* content, vis-à-vis that of *Radio Maryja*, is the speed with which the normalization of hateful rhetoric occurs, and how quickly these discourses are exchanged within and between online echo chambers (Ibid.). Through this process such messages are transformed into something far more sinister, and quickly find their way into the offline world, often with unpredictable consequences.

Online depictions of Soros as embodying “pure evil” (July 2, 2016, YT; April 29, 2019, YT), and refugees as “rapists (Narkowicz 2018, 369; Piela and Łujkanowicz 2017, 466), dehumanizes them and makes them vulnerable to real-life attacks (see Soral, Liu and Bilewicz 2020, 3). These should be seen as incitement to real-life violence. This was

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<sup>355</sup> They did so by coming up with attention-grabbing titles. One read “Is the influx of Muslims to Europe a revenge of Soros for the Holocaust?” Another: “Soros: A troublemaker!” (February 16, 2016) And then: “HIT: How Putin Screwed Soros and Other Jews Over” (March 7, 2017), “George Soros wants to Destroy Poland (June 26, 2016)” etc.

<sup>356</sup> The more sensational the video is, the more emotional the reaction it generates, which then increases the speed in which it is disseminated (Demczuk 2018, 104, Dziwak 2019, 117).

<sup>357</sup> One of the unintended consequences of the participatory aspect of the Internet is that users select which content they find interesting. Commonly, sensation, scandal, conspiracies, and fake news attract people’s attention more often because they are considered more entertaining (Dziwak 2019, 115, 104; Rosińska and Brzóška 2020, 661). Some scholars talk about the virus-replication-like pace, others about “emotional contagion” (Demczuk 2018, 104; Dziwak 2019, 117).



the case in the US when Soros became the target of a mail bomb that was sent to his suburban home in New York by a Trump supporter (Steinberger 2018; Vogel et al. 2018).<sup>358</sup> The same may be true for the increase in attacks on racialized people in Poland seen from 2015 onwards. From this angle, it is fair to say that in terms of form and content, anti-Sorosims on *YouTube* went a few steps further than it did on *Radio Maryja*<sup>359</sup> or other mainstream media outlets.

In sum, the creativity of millennial Internet users seems limitless.<sup>360</sup> And the form that anti-Soros discourse acquires on *YouTube* is, on the one hand, shamelessly profit-oriented, hateful, and socially irresponsible, but on the other, also more participatory, and tongue-in-cheek, making it far more attractive to millennials and, one could argue, made cool as subject matter. The seriousness of the messages on *Radio Maryja*, which stood in stark contrast to what was posted online by the millennials, was one of the flaws that Andrzej Zybertowicz, the station's featured sociologist, identified as an obstacle in the station reaching a younger audience (September 23, 2012, RM).

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<sup>358</sup> Moreover, conspiratorial ideas involving this billionaire, e.g., about a caravan of migrants "led Robert Gregory Bowers to murder eleven innocents at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh." (Uscinski 2020, 3)

<sup>359</sup> Even though Father Rydzyk's socially irresponsible statements, such as one that compared emigration to "a special type of Holocaust in Poland" (Hołub and Głuchowski 2019, 537; Rydzyk May 3, 2010, RM), would still appear on the air, they were less common (for details see Chapter 3).

<sup>360</sup> In one video discussing Soros, even a clairvoyant was asked about the billionaire. He "revealed" that a popular centre-left politician, Robert Biedroń, had taken money from Soros (February 8, 2019, YT).

### 5.2.2.3 The Transfer of Ideas from Radio Maryja to YouTube

Even though *Radio Maryja* didn't go as far with its attacks on George Soros as many YouTubers did, a qualitative analysis<sup>361</sup> of the content videos and comments posted on this platform, as well as the articles published by other media outlets, reveal that there “exists a discourse community on the Polish right” (Mamul and Krakowiak 2008, 242) pertaining to the billionaire. In other words, the right's discourse on Soros repeats across multiple media platforms and can be traced back to Rydzyk's station.<sup>362</sup>

Many of the comments and videos published on YouTube reiterated antisemitic conspiracy theories about Soros disseminated by the priests and panelists on *Radio Maryja*, yet in a far less acceptable form. Standard accusations from this station which are repeated online boil down to: he is an evil Jew<sup>363</sup> who tried to undermine Polish sovereignty during the transformation<sup>364</sup> and continues to do so today, and not only at

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<sup>361</sup> I read, watched, or listened to the collected data several times (see Chapter 2 for details). I jotted down the themes, what language used (expert versus vernacular), metaphors, similar symbols, foreign sources referenced (e.g., one of the most repeated was *Info Wars* from Alex Jones) (see Derek 2016, 6).

<sup>362</sup> In fact, the content repetition appeared across all the analyzed media channels, but, because in this chapter I focus on millennials, I devoted most of my analysis to YouTube videos since this platform is a go-to space for younger demographics.

<sup>363</sup> The anonymity granted by the Internet allowed for some users to make antisemitic comments (Sandecki December 2016). The comment below is just one example of hundreds of similar posts. Many of which could have been deleted if they were reported as instances of hate speech.

In 1989 they conducted the Holocaust on the Polish nation as a result of a decision of the Jewish government (... ) IMF destroyed the country through privatization and indebtedness conducted by Jews Sachs and Soros” (March 18, 2017).

<sup>364</sup> Dara ironically stated: “Soros never let Poland down in tough times, because he caused them. With the current access to the Internet ... people know who our enemy is” (~dara1903 June 14, 201,6 YT).

home,<sup>365</sup> but also abroad,<sup>366</sup> using means such as the media<sup>367</sup> the economy,<sup>368</sup> and by promoting progressive ideologies (Shibata 2009, 257). The Internet is the last bastion of freedom of speech that still stores uncensored information about Soros online,<sup>369</sup> but even this is supposedly changing, in part due to the initiative of Soros himself who funds institutions supporting political correctness.<sup>370</sup> The repetition in this content is impossible to miss, and the following thematic clusters are easily discernable: 1) “Soros and refugees,” 2) “Soros-the-evil-Jew,” 3) “Soros and gender,” 4) “Soros and

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<sup>365</sup> Another series of attacks on Soros was launched a grass-root movement, the Committee for the Defense of Democracy (Komitet Obrony Demokracji, KOD for short) which began opposing the anti-democratic changes introduced by Law and Justice in a series of mass protests. The narrative that Soros paid the protesters off through his foundations was borrowed from the United States, (July 16, 2016; February 15, 2017, YT; July 12, 2017, YT) and he was alleged to have done the same in Poland.

<sup>366</sup> Allegedly, Soros paid off protesters in the US (Michalkiewicz, November 16, 2016, YT; February 15, 2017, YT) and in France (Sytnik- Czetwertyński September 2, 2019).

<sup>367</sup> We find that Soros, through his foundation *HejtSTOP* [Stop Hate], and the co-funded Center for Monitoring Racist and Xenophobic Activities, supports the censorship of social media so that patriotic, nationalistic, or anti-refugee content, is removed or demonetized by the platform (Jankowski May 2, 2018, YT; Rola July 31, 2017, YT; March 2017 YT; July 22, 2018, YT).

<sup>368</sup> Soros is allegedly behind the globalization processes which have impoverished and consequently subordinated millions of Poles; an example of such an opinion is shared by Spartacus Slaves who wrote: “trained Jewish mongrel Soros lured potential sheep into submission. Constant indebtedness of countries is their [Jews] goal. In this manner they will enslave people” (June 30, 2016, YT).

<sup>369</sup> An interview Soros gave to “60 Minutes” in 1998 in which he allegedly admitted to collaborating with the Nazis during WWII (November 22, 2016, YT) was unearthed and posted online only for it to be later deleted by his defenders, only to resurface once again (July 12, 2017, YT). We also find that only right-wing, fringe media keep on providing information that reflects negatively on the billionaire, e.g., *Telewizja Pod Prąd* [Against the Grain Television] reported that the new board member of the Polish Financial Supervision Authority graduated from an institution managed by Soros, which seems to be sufficient proof of corrupt intentions (November 27, 2016, YT). Or *Telewizja Narodowa* [National Television], the only medium that reported on the court’s decision to disallow amateur, grassroots journalists from this YouTube channel to report on the plight of Adam Czaczkowicz, a far-right activist who had been opposing activities of Soros by making controversial posts and videos online (Sandecki February 16, 2018, YT).

<sup>370</sup> Popular videoblogger Ator complained:

they all want us to like each other... he [Soros] wants to introduce totalitarianism... so Soros is not liked on the Internet, at least not on the Polish internet (January 29, 2018, YT).

transformation,” and 5) “Soros and the nation-states” (see Grotowska 2019, 102).<sup>371</sup> The information generated about Soros also overlaps in terms of its temporal characteristics, as the content posted on YouTube, can be divided into the following categories: 1) what Soros did in the past in other countries and in Poland, 2) what he is doing now in Poland and elsewhere,<sup>372</sup> 3) what will he do in the future, and, ominously, 4) what could be done about it.

Most YouTube videos regurgitate *Radio Maryja* talking points about Soros. One of the ways this happens is through the reliance on opinions of the very same people who have been guests on Rydzyk’s station (Wolniewicz July 29, 2015, YT; Kieżun January 1, 2016, YT; Nowak February 7, 2016, YT, Gadowski May 19, 2016, YT; Ryba June 10, 2016, YT). Right-wing political YouTube channels mushroomed after 2015,<sup>373</sup> inviting onto their shows so-called experts on topics ranging from politics, ethics, history, and foreign affairs, many of them familiar from *Radio Maryja*. Among them were politicians

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<sup>371</sup> Each topic was divided into subtopics, but many of these sub-topics overlap, e.g., 1) Soros as the evil Jew was divided into subcategories a) Soros against any religion, b) Soros against Christianity, b) Soros the capitalist, etc.

<sup>372</sup> According to some YouTubers, as well as former *Radio Maryja* commentators who are now active on this platform, Euromaidan, or as they saw it, a coup d’état in Ukraine that was orchestrated by Soros, was just the practice run for another in Poland which was already underway ( December 27, 2015, YT; February 16, 2016, YT; March 29, 2016, YT; October 20, 2016, YT; November 16, 2016, YT; July 22, 2017, YT).

<sup>373</sup> Several channels were created by *Radio Maryja*’s panelists themselves, such as Bogusław Wolniewicz, Stanisław Michalkiewicz, Jerzy Robert Nowak, Gadowski, and Krajski. In the case of some of them (Michalkiewicz and J.R. Nowak), it happened after they were banned from appearing on *Radio Maryja* due to a previously mentioned attempt by Rydzyk to change the station’s reputation as an antisemitic broadcaster (Zamoyski 2009, 342; Wysocka 2008, 61; Prażmowska 2011, 254; Żuk 2017, 86). The Internet became their “safe space” and Rydzyk could rest assured that his message would reach younger people, though through a different route.

(Kukiz, Korwin-Mikke, Kaczyński, Jaki, Pawłowicz), academics (Kieżun,<sup>374</sup> Ryba, Krasnodębski, Targalski), commentators (Michalkiewicz March 23, 2016, YT; November 16, 2016 YT; November, 23 2017), and journalists<sup>375</sup> (Gadowski September 4, 2016, YT, Mariusz Max Kolonko July 26, 2017, YT, Ziemkiewicz, Tyrmand), all of whom were asked to comment on current affairs, and if Soros was on the agenda in a given day, to discuss his activity (June 14, 2009, RM; June 23, 2015, RM; September 23, 2012, RM). Most of these experts would repeat the same conspiracy theories about him that they formulated on *Radio Maryja*.

The transfer of ideas about Soros from *Radio Maryja* to YouTube, apart from being passed on by the radio's panelists, was also done by private users who would repost excerpts from *Radio Maryja*'s flagship program "Unfinished Conversations" on this platform. They suggested this was done both in order to archive this content and make it widely available (June 10, 2016, YT; August 19, 2016, YT; November 25, 2016, YT; March 31, 2017, YT; May 29, 2017, YT).<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> YouTube videos of a *Radio Maryja* regular contributor, Witold Kieżun, an economist who previously worked for the World Bank, discussing what Soros did in 1989 in Poland has proven to be quite popular on YouTube. Originally posted in May of 2012, it has been reposted by users many times (September 23, 2014; January 1, 2016, August 25, 2016; August 17, 2017; August 29, 2017). From his perspective, the transformation of 1989 was arranged by Soros to undermine Polish sovereignty and exploit the country economically.

<sup>375</sup> Many of whom cited foreign sources, including *Info Wars*, *Fox News*, *CNN*, *PBS*, *NRF*, and *CBS* in order to make the information presented appear as more reliable (June 1, 2016, YT, June 7, 2016, YT; June 16, 2016, YT; October 20, 2016, YT).

<sup>376</sup> After Law and Justice came to power in 2015, the same was done to state-funded programs that, in the eyes of some YouTubers, unmask secret networks and connections between Soros and various politicians (May 24, 2018, YT; June 2, 2018, YT).

#### 5.2.2.4 “Poland is Paradise”<sup>377</sup>

Anti-Soros content published on YouTube<sup>378</sup> relies heavily on the ideas of *Radio Maryja*'s hosts, guests, and listeners (Górny May 17, 2018, RM), but it is also underpinned by two dialectically linked concepts: that of de-fetishization of the West, and Polish exceptionalism.<sup>379</sup> These concepts imbue most, if not all, of the programs produced by the station. For this reason, while discussing the role of Soros on YouTube in the context of the “refugee crisis,” or of sponsoring progressive causes, Poland is set apart from Europe and glorified, while the West is devalued, in exactly the same way it is done by *Radio Maryja*.

Fantasies of Polish greatness goes quite far on YouTube. Poles are depicted as the last “real men” remaining in Europe (Majewski, 2017; Jaskułowski 2019, 47; Starnawski 2017, 81). As it demonstrated by the words of (username) Dollars to Donuts who wrote: “Sobieski [the Polish king who stopped the Ottoman Empire in Vienna in 1683] is screaming “*Deus Vult*” from his grave. God Bless the Poles. They are the testicles of

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<sup>377</sup> This is quote from Stanisław Krajski, an expert on Masons frequently invited onto *Radio Maryja* who while discussing on YouTube the consequences of Soros' actions, he argued that the billionaire wants to destroy Israel. This, in his mind, would mean that “80% of Jews [from Israel], who received a message from their grandparents and great-grandparents that **Poland is a paradise** [my emphasis], would want to return to Poland” (April 1, 2018, YT; see April 29, 2018, YT).

<sup>378</sup> It is also true for pro-governmental weeklies and dailies. Research conducted, for example by Krzysztof Jaskułowski, who inquired with his interviewees about the position of Poland in Europe, confirmed the prevalence of opinions among younger people who see the country as exceptional. Many respondents stated: “We try to convince ourselves that Europe is better and that we're worse (...) if anyone looked into our history, let Europe be ashamed (...) There are a few things they could learn from us” (2019, 60).

<sup>379</sup> Both also have their roots in Polish history. Polish exceptionalism goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century concept of messianism. While defetishization of the West dates to socialism, though was later replaced by fetishization of the West (for details see Chapter 3).

Europe” (May 26, 2017, YT). Another commenter added: “Polish people today are not afraid to speak out against the Muslim migrant invasion of Europe, unlike weak and foolish Germans and other Western Europeans. Because Polish people have intelligence and BALLS [original emphasis]” (May 26, 2017, YT). Only Polish men can stop the Muslim invaders, because, as the heirs to the 19<sup>th</sup> century traditions of messianism they have no choice but to lose their lives in the fight for this national and religious cause (Starnawski 2017, 81). At the same time, underneath the contempt and hatred towards Muslim men a dose of respect towards them seeps through (see Bobako 2018); the devotion of Muslims to their faith is feared by Rydzyk, who sees Islam as so strong that it can easily overpower morally corrupt Europe (November 19, 2015, RM).<sup>380</sup> The pro-family orientation, and the ability to render Muslim women submissive to discourage them from entertaining feminist ideas is admired (Maszkowski 2006, 684), as is the resistance to secularization and the individualism of Western culture, which is envied (2017, 242).

As mentioned in chapter 3, Polish women, meanwhile, are constructed as being eager to realize the myth of *Matka Polka* [Mother Poland]; the archetypal woman who sacrifices herself to produce new generations of warriors (Porter- Szücs 2014, 382). They are also favorably compared to Muslim women. We hear that: “only Pakistani women want to have more kids than Polish women” (Wiplera August 29, 2012, RM) (for more see Chapter 3), a statement that conveys a level of respect toward Muslim

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<sup>380</sup> Similar statements are made by *Radio Maryja* callers. Krzysztof from Toronto said: “the Muslim youth are far more disciplined in comparison to Canadian, Catholic, and secular youth. Europe will lose to Islam, because it is not Orthodox enough” (March 27, 2017).

women. The reality, however, is quite the opposite. The birthrate in Poland is historically low and women are far more progressive than men, preferring a “family model based on partnership” (Siemieńska 2005, 14; see Radkowska- Walkowicz 2014, 9). Furthermore, if evaluated from the perspective of patriarchal norms, many Polish men would themselves not be considered “manly enough” by the virtue of their struggling to be effective providers (see Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 803). This is confirmed by woeful comments like this one: “Christian men cannot afford to have kids and are forced to emigrate” (Sendeki December 3, 2016, YT).

From this perspective, Poland is not only the last line of defense against “Islamization” (Narkowicz 2017, 448), but also more generally against the “moral collapse” plaguing secular Europe that was brought about by liberalism (Radkowska- Walkowicz 2014, 407). Moreover, this country is thought of as an oasis on the continent because of the “general absence of Muslim immigrants” (Jaskułowski 2019, 97, 81), making it a popular destination for Westerners. A comment from one YouTuber expressed this sentiment: “Soon Poland will have migrants and refugees from France and England and Germany” (~Housewife May 26, 2017), implying that it would be the only country in Europe free of refugees. The state-funded evening news seemed to agree with this assessment, reinforcing the narrative further when an anti-immigration speech from Polish Prime Minister, Beata Szydło, from May 24, 2017, was reported to have received a very warm reaction from Western YouTube users when it was translated and published



on the platform (May 29, 2017, TVP1).<sup>381</sup> Quotes from the video’s comments were repeated on the air, one of which read: “Looks like I am moving to Poland” (Ibid.).<sup>382</sup> In this fantasy where “Poland is a paradise,” the flow of people is in the opposite direction from what it is in reality (Jaskułowski 2019, 81).<sup>383</sup> and implies the rejection of the West by Westerners themselves.

In conclusion, the attacks on Soros posted on YouTube are not considerably different from those disseminated by *Radio Maryja*—what sets them apart is their form; their presence online serves to make them cooler. In other words, the old anti-Soros narratives are recycled, repackaged, and presented by and to a younger audience not by *Radio Maryja* itself but are disseminated by vloggers, journalists, and people politically aligning with the right, making use of the familiar rhetoric of Polish exceptionalism and of the defetishization of the West in doing so.

### 5.3 Summary

In the previous chapter, I explained what the movement of anti-Soros discourse from the margins to the centre of the Polish public sphere looked like and what its

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<sup>381</sup> Ivan Kalmar points out that many indeed white racists in the West romanticize Central Europe as one of those few places that are “still almost entirely white” (2022,3).

<sup>382</sup> A far more explicit comment was made, originally in English, by another non-Polish speaking YouTuber which was not repeated on the news:

... **Thank You Poland, the Rock of Europe** [my emphasis] ... Poland never gets attacked by terrorism where Poland has no Islamic extremist problem ... Poland has had no terror attacks since 9/11 ... by this point obviously leaders in the EU are feeling pretty embarrassed because this awesome little country is just firing them at every turn. (May 26, 2017, YT)

<sup>383</sup> Krzysztof Jaskułowski, in his qualitative study on Islamophobia in Poland, interviewed another person regarding her opinions about living in France, and she disclosed that while her family member is planning on coming back to Poland, even the French themselves buy properties in Poland, because the country is seen as safe (Jaskułowski 2019, 81).

consequences were. In this chapter, I demonstrated the role the Internet played in further spreading disdain for Soros, especially among younger audiences. Also noting that without the reliance created by *Radio Maryja's* “community of discourse” on the Polish right, with its extensive cultural capital that provided the language, rhetoric, and academic veneer to articulate grievances towards George Soros, conspiracy theories about him online would not have been as popular as they were.

I have analyzed the factors leading up to George Soros becoming a polarizing figure, not only for the listeners of *Radio Maryja*, but also for millennials who spend more time on *YouTube* than listening to the radio. I have demonstrated how *Radio Maryja*, despite devising a sophisticated strategy of forging an intergenerational alliance, failed to connect with this age group on its own territory—the airwaves —mainly due to its reputation of being “uncool.” I then exhibited that, in the end, the views, opinions and theories presented on *Radio Maryja* were effectively transferred to the Internet by the station’s contributors, after which various vloggers and anonymous users were able to repackage them for online consumption. As a result of this process, anti-Sorosism on *YouTube* was able to go much further in terms of spewing hatred and breaking the rules of good taste than on *Radio Maryja*.

Eventually, these ideas were rebranded in a way that made them cool and succeeded in reaching younger audiences, who were quite responsive to their repackaged form. This, I have maintained, was not that surprising, if we consider that Civic Platform did not provide an attractive narrative for Generation Y. Furthermore, large segments of millennials faced similar, if not worse, economic challenges than their parents and

grandparents, the two groups who were traditionally most receptive to conspiracy theories about Soros.

Painting a more complex picture of anti-Sorosism that included *Radio Maryja*'s intergenerational dynamics, the lived experience of globalization, and the realities of content cross-pollination within the contemporary media ecology is necessary to help us better understand the different layers of meaning emerging from the movement of this phenomenon from the margins to the centre of Polish public discourse. It is precisely this that I will explore in the conclusion that follows.

## **Chapter 6 Conclusion**

### **6.1 Findings: When Recycling Hatreds Meet Social Media and Generational Politics**

Conspiracy theories about Soros are present in many areas of the world, though their content and intended purpose differ (Plenta 2020). This dissertation examined historical, socio-cultural, economic, and political factors that led to a rise in the popularity of conspiracy theories about this Hungarian- American billionaire in Poland, and their move to the centre of Polish public discourse in 2015. It analyzed their production, evolution, international circulation, and transmedia transmission as well as their reception among different generations of Poles. I concluded that populist politicians awakened the fear of the Other on the part of Poles through rearticulating the refugee crisis in a fashion that put the blame for it on Soros as part of a successful tactic to breed fear. This strategy worked well and played a role in tipping the electoral balance in

favour of the right-wing Law and Justice party, which won the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2015 and 2019.

I demonstrated how in a post 9/11 landscape, Western anti-Muslim bigotry in Poland was unapologetically used as a vehicle to express the societal and economic frustrations of various segments of the population. Populist politicians reinforced this phenomenon by consciously making use of different media outlets to promote anti-refugee conspiracy theories, and by adjusting their message to make it cooler to reach younger audiences. This led to the building of temporary generational alliances between previously distant age cohorts: millennials on the Internet and older generations tuning in to *Radio Maryja*. Ergo, I documented how conspiracy theories about Soros and refugees reused ancient prejudicial tropes about Jews, and eventually smuggled antisemitism back into the mainstream of Polish political discourse.

## **6.2 One Explanation Won't Do: Multi-Disciplinary Approaches to Anti-Soros Conspiracy Theories**

As I argued in the Introduction, analyzing conspiratorial narratives from one theoretical perspective can at best produce only partial explanations (Byford 2011, 3; Dentith 2021, 268; Uscinski 2019, 21). Hence, in this dissertation, I laid the groundwork for bringing together findings from several disciplines to propose a multidimensional account (see for comparison Lamont 2016, 46) of the rise in popularity of anti-Soros conspiracy theories in Poland.

### **6.2.1 The Historical Explanation**

Considering history is necessary to answer the question of why anti-Soros conspiracy theories gained traction in Poland. As historical sociologists remind us, the appreciation of the interpenetration of the past and present is necessary to provide nuanced accounts of societal phenomena (see Smith 1991, 3). This is especially true in the case of conspiracy theories that rewrite and creatively interpret history to suit their purposes (Byford 2011, 37).

Anti-Soros conspiracy theories are no different. They reconstruct modern Polish history to cast this billionaire as one of its major villains, and in so doing, locate his actions in a larger historical context. By linking the post-1989 situation in Poland with alleged historical treason on the part of Jews and consequent Polish victimhood (Topolski 2015, Ch. IX, see Bulska et al., 2021, 138), they argue for Soros' role in a bigger historical pattern of oppression. Hence, history is used to convince people of the merit of anti-Soros conspiracy theories, and for this reason it must be treated as holding part of the explanation for their growing popularity. This is even more relevant if we recognize after Astapova and colleagues that “the centrality that history occupies in the consciousness of even the less educated Eastern Europeans is unusual in a large segment of the West” (2021, 21). History, thus, is one of “the main background elements” (Lamont 2016, 52, 60), or contexts (Butter and Knight 2019, 42), that shapes the content of and responses to anti-Soros conspiracy theories and, thus, can help to explain them.

From this point of view, the 800-year-old history of antisemitism and of modern antisemitic conspiratorial thinking linking Jews to major social changes in Poland

(Bulska et al. 2021, 138, see Astapova et al. 2021, 80) sheds light on why anti-Soros conspiracy theories would come to have many enthusiasts in this country (see for comparison Lamont 2016, 60). Another piece of the puzzle for the explanation of their popularity lies in the history of the occupation and partition of Poland by neighbouring empires that shaped the national identity, creating hostility towards foreigners, including Jews, and positioning martyrdom and victimhood as its salient aspects (Astapova et al. 2021, 7; Zubrzycki 2006, xiii; compare Soral 2019, 380). Without taking these historical contexts into account, explaining why Soros, a Jewish Hungarian- American billionaire, became a major target of conspiracy theorists would be challenging. Soros was involved in one of the most contested events in recent Polish history, one that altered the country's trajectory fundamentally, and then more recently advocated for the arrival of the refugees to Poland from countries considered as culturally different. These actions, when placed in the historical context I have outlined, helps to explain the positive reception of anti-Soros conspiracy theories in Poland.

The historical contexts of antisemitism and occupation generated powerful narratives which functioned as cultural repertoires (“defined as a set of tools available to individuals to make sense of the reality they experience” (Lamont 2016, 60)) that conspiracy theorists draw upon. Cultural repertoires in the case of anti-Soros conspiracy theories included an array of historically-rooted conspiratorial narratives (e.g., Jews plotting to undermine nation states), national myths (Poland as a besieged nation), tropes, and themes (e.g., Jews undermining Christianity), passed from generation to generation (see Byford 2011, 151, 40, Astapova et al. 2021, 171) while developing prejudice against

Jews, Muslims, and foreigners based on pre-existing stereotypes (see Plenta 2020, Byford 2011, 9). Studying them allows us to better understand that Poland was a likely incubator for anti-Soros conspiracy theories because there was a long tradition of conspiratorial thinking in this country.

*Radio Maryja* played a vital role in extending this tradition as the main platform for the dissemination of conspiratorial ideas to reach millions of people, shape their opinions and in turn change the course of Polish history. Given that conspiracy theories are all interconnected because they all “feed off each other” (Byford 2011, 69) and build upon their previous versions, the explanation of anti-Soros conspiracy theories must consider a broader history of such narratives on the airwaves of *Radio Maryja*.

### **6.2.2 The Economic Explanation**

The anti-Soros conspiracy theories that emerged in Poland during the refugee crisis reused earlier conspiratorial narratives about the billionaire that first surfaced in 1989 during the transition period. These early conspiracy theories saw Soros as responsible for the impoverishment of Poland’s population, and thus Poles as his victims, following economic reforms that he was alleged to have put in place. In Chapter 3, I demonstrated that despite the unquestionable involvement of Soros in Poland at this time, and his close ties to Polish politicians, these claims were incorrect. In fact, his plans for the country were rejected for being too moderate. However, as Astapova and colleagues have found, the difficult economic situation of many people in Central and Eastern Europe around 1989, concomitant to the countries of this region joining

the global economy, might be an important part of explanation for the rise in the popularity of conspiracy theories, especially about Soros (2021, 13). From this perspective, Poland was not an outlier.

When the new economic reality went into high gear after 1989, many Poles felt they were being left behind (Śmiecińska 2020, 254; see Kalmar 2018, 416). Given the fact that all post-transition governments adopted neoliberal economic policies that resulted in widening disparities, the situation did not improve for over two decades and (Kotnarowski. 2018, 37; Leder 2018, 20). Within such an economic context (see Lamont 2016, 52), different segments of the Polish population—including younger people—became quite receptive to populist discourse and conspiratorial narratives (Leder May 31, 2021; Starnawski 2017; Albertazzi and McDonell 2008. 219; see Jordan 2020, 36). As in many other places around the world, a high percentage of young adults were predicted to earn less money than their parents and found themselves unable to afford a home and start families (Wasilewski November 4, 2006). And, as research suggests, economic grievances of this type often lead to the election of populist parties who rely on conspiracy theories for their explanatory power, and as inexpensive means of persuading the public to cast ballots in their favour (Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 12). Thus, facing miserable economic prospects the youth of Poland elected populist parties: Kukiz'15 and KORWiN (Lukowski 2019, 444; Skarżyńska 2018, 113).

Even though the context for various antagonisms and grievances in Poland are economic and cut across various generations, I demonstrated that in 2015 the discourse used by right-wing populist politicians and the media sympathetic to them still favoured



the language of the contemporary culture wars rather than traditional economic class war subject matter (Ibid.; Śmiecińska 2020; Frank 2004). The findings of Artur Lipiński and Agnieszka Stępińska cast light on why this may have been the case. On the one hand, the “socioeconomic situation of the country in 2015 was remarkably healthy,” with a record low unemployment rate of 10 percent and one third of Poles declaring themselves satisfied with their economic situation (2019, 74). On the other hand, more than 35 percent of Poles reported dissatisfaction with their personal finances.

We can hypothesize many of those dissatisfied respondents as coming from the ranks of millennials. As a result, politicians made a safe bet and using the context of the European refugee crisis, prioritized the language of culture wars which was expressed through anti-Soros conspiracy theories related to the crisis. However, they simultaneously did not abandon economic rhetoric and continued to depict Poland as a country in ruins (Ibid., 74), tracing the origins of this situation back to the transition of 1989 and blaming it on Soros. These arguments spoke across generational lines but were found surprisingly attractive by younger Poles who were facing an uncertain economic future (Lipiński and Stępińska 2019, 77). This dissertation, thus, analyzed how culture-centered conspiratorial narratives were intertwined with ones that promised to protect the rapidly disappearing privileges of these economically disadvantaged groups. Privileges associated with whiteness<sup>384</sup>, heterosexuality, patriarchy, and national belonging, which were becoming gradually devalued in a globalized world.

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<sup>384</sup> In *White but Not Quite* Ivan Kalmar discusses the disappointment experienced by some Central Europeans for not enjoying the full white privilege (2022, 6).

### **6.2.3 The Social Psychological Explanation**

The historic and economic explanations presented in this work must be seen as complementary and should not be studied from the point of view of one discipline if we want to accurately capture the complexity of the subject. When I started interpreting the data I had gathered, I realized that the explanation for anti-Soros conspiracies in Poland would benefit from the insights of social psychology as this discipline considers the historically-rooted collective feelings of Poles developing in relation to out-groups with whom they compete for resources, power, and recognition (Uscinski 2020, 72), looking at their importance for identity formation (see Bulska et al. 2021, 139, Soral et al. 2019, 380, 372). Mobilizing emotions (i.e., mistrust, insecurity, and exaggerated pride) that are classified as relatively stable components of Polish national identity and which developed over the centuries in the context of antisemitism (Bulska et al. 2021, 138, see Astapova et al. 2021, 80), major social changes, and occupation by foreign powers (Soral et al. 2019, 372) has been found to be among the main reasons for the success of conspiratorial narratives (Bulska et al. 2021, 139; Soral et al. 2019, 374). From this standpoint, anti-Soros conspiracy theorist succeeded by drawing parallels between the recent refugee crisis and a Polish past that was presented as marred by both external threats and attacks from “enemies within” (see Astapova et al. 2021, 7). Charges of treason would thus reawaken feelings of fear, insecurity, mistrust, and hostility both towards Jews and the Other, reactivating “identity structures” (Soral et al, 2019, 378) as in a collective conspiracy mentality (Bulska et al. 2021, 138), collective narcissism (Ibid., 138),

and collective victimhood (Ibid., 129) that were strongly entrenched in Polish national identity.

An example of such a strategy was conspiracy theorists' claims in 2015 that by advocating for the acceptance of refugees in Poland, Soros was interfering in the internal affairs of the country just as he did in 1989 when the country transitioned to capitalism. During this period, the economic situation of millions of Poles and their children deteriorated which had long-term emotional consequences for different generations. Many people lost their self-confidence and became desperate to regain their sense of dignity and pride (Leder June 5, 2021). Conspiracy theories, including those that are anti-Soros, selectively remembered a triumphant past and intentionally forgot shameful moments in Polish history in order to argue for the superiority of Poles vis-à-vis other groups, and by blaming the country's problems on Jews and foreigners helped them to achieve that goal. The collective narcissism that resulted (Fromm 1964), coupled with the dissemination of conspiracy theories by *Radio Maryja* furthered exacerbated this belief in the ill intent of out-groups (see Golec de Zavala et al. 2012, 107; Bulska et al. 2021, 13, Winiecki June 2021; Marchlewska et al. 2019, 776). Thus, it was unsurprising that twenty years later during the refugee crisis (that was articulated as a major threat), the losers of transformation and their frustrated and disillusioned children were seduced by conspiratorial narratives promoted by the likes of Rydzyk, Kaczyński, and Kukiz. The comparison to the past trauma of transition was used to amplify the fear mongering message that the direction in which Poland was heading (as with letting in refugees),

would only victimize this younger generation further and create an irreparable damage to the country—it was quite effective.

Social psychologists also help us to better understand the appeal of anti-Soros conspiracy theories in Poland through recognizing how globalization—which began with the 1989 transition and which in 2015 was embodied by the refugee crisis—both linked to conspiratorial narratives about Soros and changed the way Poles felt about their community. As Andrzej Leder argues, beginning in 1989 the ideology of individualism concomitant to neoliberal capitalism was pushed by the country’s elites (June 5, 2021) and led to a confrontation between two very different worldviews and essentially to two separate Polands (see also Kofta and Sędek 2005, 61). One of them was represented by the elites and the future-oriented winners of transformation, who as a group were unlikely to empathize with the plight of their less fortunate compatriots (Leder June 5, 2021). The other group, the so-called losers of transformation were taken care of by Father Rydzyk and the Internet. This latter group consisted largely of conservatives, nationalist sympathizers, and traditionalist Catholics, both young and old, who yearned for the community that was disappearing in a globalized world (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008). This process, according to various conspiracy theories, reached its peak in 2015 when the refugees were about to “flood” the country and further destroy the homogenous national community. Tuning into *Radio Maryja* or going online to find like-minded people with whom to unite against common enemies (this see Coser 1956, 87) relieved loneliness and addressed a crisis of meaning (Urbanowicz 2016) via creating

opportunities for belonging (Wilk April 6, 2021). In this way, anti-Soros conspiracy theories both met and addressed the neglected emotional needs of some Poles.

#### **6.2.4 Towards Bridging Different Approaches**

By presenting historical, economic, and social psychological explanations for the rise in popularity of conspiracy theories about Soros in tandem, I have embraced the perspective of political sociology that recognizes that we live in an increasingly complex world defined by rapid social and technological change, and which advocates for multicausal explanations to reflect this new reality (Taylor 2010). Additionally, my work demonstrates that conspiracy theories are themselves a multi-layered phenomenon and to fully comprehend them we must rely on analytical tools from various disciplines (Hristov et al 2020). Only in this manner, can we fully understand the functions that conspiracy theories fulfill in societies (see Astapova et al. 2021, 4), what their appeal is, who endorses them, how they spread, and finally, how these characteristics change depending on the context (see Byford 2011, 155).

The three explanations discussed, however, are insufficient to account for the rise of conspiracy theories of Soros in Poland in 2015 on their own.-Taken alone, the historical explanation does not address the specific trajectory of anti-Soros conspiracy theories in 2015. That is, it fails to provide a solid account for why this narrative resonated so well with younger people. Despite the country's long history of antisemitism and xenophobia, millennials are assumed to be the least likely group to be impacted by this dangerous legacy. After all, most of their youth was spent studying curricula

designed to reflect the mostly pro-democratic, pro-Western, orientation of country's consecutive post-1989 governments, likely leaving some mark on them.

Similarly, economic explanations do not shed sufficient light on why and how material discrepancies that were one of the most important reasons for the growing dissatisfaction of people were translated and expressed through the rhetoric of culture wars rather than class conflict. Furthermore, it does not satisfactorily account for why anti-Soros conspiracy theories that are seen “merely” as expression of economic inequality gained so much traction in 2015—one of the most economically prosperous periods in Poland, even if not for everyone.

Finally, a social psychological approach intends to how conspiracy theories met emotional needs of Poles and recognizes that given the historical context, the framing of the refugee crisis by drawing a parallel to the post-communist transition could be an effective strategy. However, this explanation still does not deliver adequate insight on why these conspiracy theories went mainstream in 2015 and not in 1989 when an allegedly comparable emotional landscape appeared to have been in place.

### **6.2.5 Insights from Political Articulation Theory**

An account that carries considerable explanatory potential is one that recognizes the context-specific political motives behind promoting conspiracy theories. Political articulation theory (PAT) is one such framework, and aids in explaining why anti-Soros sentiment moved from the margins to the center of the Polish political discourse in 2015. In short, from this vantage point the “stickiness” (Bangerter et al. 2020, 206) of conspiracy theories targeting Soros increased in 2015 because of the articulation efforts

of politicians from Law and Justice as well as Kukiz' 15, who instrumentalized the refugee crisis to achieve their political goals (see Astapova et al. 2021, 20, 11).

These parties would not have been able to succeed without treating history as a reservoir of ancient prejudices to be drawn from, as well as without the discursive opportunity (see Byford 2011, 45; Lipiński and Stępińska 2019, 77) created by the *Radio Maryja* and the international circulation of attacks on Soros (McLaughlin and Trilupaityte 2013), all of which coupled with the political opportunity structure provided by voter volatility (Lipiński and Stępińska 2019, 79).

If any of the three explanations mentioned earlier were considered on their own, the role of the political actors in disseminating anti-Soros conspiracy theories would not be sufficiently recognized. On their own, the historical, economic, and social psychological accounts demonstrate that the three contexts (historical, economic, and emotional) in Poland had not drastically changed over the past three decades. And only a major shift could account for why a significant number of Poles suddenly bought into antisemitic conspiracy theories and acted on them by voting the ruling Civic Platform out of office. Starting from the nineties there would always be a group of disenfranchised Poles who would subscribe to anti-Soros conspiracy theories and embrace alternative interpretations of history that legitimized these narratives. In doing so, they were likely to reinforce their collective victim identity and/or feed their collective narcissism. But what changed in 2015 was that in the context of the refugee crisis, which was deliberately framed as a threat orchestrated by Soros, more people than ever before became receptive

to this narrative. Political articulation theory appreciates the crucial role of self-interested political actors in this process.

As argued in the Introduction, political articulation theory identifies the mechanisms and strategies utilized by political actors (politicians, cultural elites, and other charismatic leaders) in their attempts to gain advantage (de Leon, Desai and Tuğal 2009, 194). It recognizes that one of the most effective tactics of winning political battles is to accentuate, if not construct, social divisions in order to form competing political camps that have dissimilar political objectives (Ibid). Reaching political goals is attained through the dissemination and articulation of messages that stress as well as create distinctions between social groups (Ibid., 198). Consequently, groups or individuals that previously did not see themselves as defined by their position on certain issues, suddenly develop a political identity linked to their particular stance (de Leon et al. 2009, 198). Furthermore, political articulation theory sees political actors as “conspiracy theory entrepreneurs,” (Harambam 2020, 282) who treat the unravelling current events, material conditions (such as the dual society), existing discourses (like “the community of discourse” created by *Radio Maryja*), ancient prejudice (antisemitism), collective feelings (victimhood), role models (Rydzik, Kaczynski, and Kukiz), and villains (Soros) as resources to utilize in political battles (Ibid., 283).

From this theoretical perspective, conspiracy theories about Soros gained popularity in 2015 in Poland because opposition politicians (mostly from Law and Justice and Kukiz’15) identified an opportunity to articulate the international refugee crisis in a manner that would help them alter domestic power structures. Additionally, they



understood that specific political, media and discursive context defined by “prior structural arrangements” such as the political landscape, identities, formed alliances, and cultural institutions in which they operated, if strategically mobilized (see Byford 2011, 45) could present opportunities for initiating a major political change (see Eidlin 2016, 505).

Since 1989, the political landscape in Poland has such that nearly each parliamentary election ended with a win for the opposition party (Lipiński and Stępińska 2019, 73). This means that the Polish political system has been characterized by an unpredictable voter behaviour leading to a “high level of volatility and a low level of party loyalty” (Ibid. 73). As a result, it has been quite open to not only to replacing ruling parties by the opposition parties, but also lending support to new parties (Ibid, 74). Such openness has equated to political opportunism (Ibid., 79), a lack of stability in the party system, and fierce competition. The opposition and new parties in Poland have taken note that voters are “ideologically flexible,” and can be convinced to support them in the next round of the elections if they are given a good enough reason to do so. That reason came in the guise of a fear-mongering articulation of the refugee crisis through anti-Soros conspiracy theories by both the opposition (Law and Justice and Kukiz’ 15) and newly established parties. The message of “Islamic takeover” was so compelling that for the first time since the 1990s one third of Poles declared right-wing opinions (Ibid. 74). Even a group that has been least likely to participate in elections— young Poles between the ages 18-24—voted for parties that promised the protection of

the nation. Millennials voted for anti-establishment Kukiz'15 and KORWiN, and everyone else who was convinced by this narrative chose Law and Justice.

Discursive opportunity is understood as “the aspects of the public discourse that determine a message’s chances of diffusion in the public sphere” (Koopmans and Olzak in Lipiński and Stępińska 2019, 75). In Poland, this was first created by decades of *Radio Maryja* broadcasting anti-Soros conspiracy theories. Additionally, Kaczyński’s vision for the future of Poland—moving it further to the right—normalized populist right-wing discourse and the presence of conspiracy theories within it. Moreover, the gradual radicalization of the Law and Justice party “provided fertile ground for more radical or credible players in the future” (Lipiński and Stępińska 2019, 77) such as Kukiz'15 and KORWiN—parties that were very active in transmitting anti-Soros conspiracy narratives

Thus, over the years Kaczyński’s party colleagues along with sympathetic media and political allies, piggybacking on the work of *Radio Maryja*, amplified messages that framed Poles as victims of transformation, globalization, and of Soros in addition to views that embraced Polish exceptionalism and rejected many of the values held by Western societies (Wiścicki and Borkowicz 2005). By 2015, the political opposition was actively building upon these discourses. With the help of both old and new media outlets (such as YouTube in the latter case), and various “experts” (Starnawski 2017, 76), they repackaged ancient tropes (Bulska et al. 2021, 138) via a more acceptable anti-Muslim bigotry and other anti-modernity discourses. And through anti-Soros conspiracy theories, they smuggled antisemitism back to the mainstream.

Another layer of discursive opportunity which legitimized and further accelerated the dissemination of anti-Soros conspiracy via digital media (Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 10) was the international circulation of attacks on this billionaire by Western politicians. Their opinions about the Muslim take over of the continent orchestrated by Soros were well received not only in Poland, but across Eastern Europe, (Astapova et al. 2021, 13). In fact, as Astapova and colleagues argue, conspiratorial ideas have flowed in various directions, not just from the West to the East. In the end, conspiracy theories were “co-created by American, Western, and Eastern European actors” (2021, 2).

All these factors taken together created the context for larger receptivity to claims made by conspiracy theories in 2015 (see Nefes and Romero-Reche 2020, 100; Bangerter 2020, 209; Buford 2011, 136), including anti-refugee anti-Soros conspiracy theories. In the words of political articulation theory, in a favourable international political climate, opposition politicians together with *Radio Maryja* successfully managed to discursively articulate and naturalize divisions in Poland (De Leon et al. 2019; Szczegółka and Kwiatkowski 2017, 60), affirming some social identities (conservative Poles, religious Europeans) while dismissing others (Muslim, Jews, progressive Europeans). Thus, the opposition parties led by Law and Justice were able to bring disparate groups of voters together by skillfully convincing them to believe in conspiracy theories that predicted the Soros-ordered Islamization of Poland, and that only by electing them could this process be stopped (for comparison for the failure of similar theories in Slovenia (I think) see Plenta 2020).

### 6.2.6 Conclusion

Anti-Soros conspiracy theories in Poland are a part of larger trend—a global surge in populism and nationalism taking place around the world (Jordan 2020, 36). This can be understood as a negative evaluation of globalization, and a demonstration of resistance to its cultural, economic, and affective aspects (Ifantis and Triantaphyllou 2018), as well as a more general disappointment with liberal democracy (Śmiecińska 2020, 251). Or to simplify, anti-Sorosism is a *version* of anti-globalism and anti-liberalism. From this angle, globalization is seen as threatening traditional identities, resulting in uneven global development, uprootedness, and the weakening of the nation states by supranational institutions. Liberal democracy has been viewed as responsible for strengthening the individual at the expense of community, leading to the creation of an atomized, modern, and secular society (Rae 2007, 228; Walicki 1999, 43; Judt 1988, 217). Because conspiracy theories about Soros positioned him as a symbol for globalism, multiculturalism, the destruction of families, opposition to the nation-state, and ruthless capitalism, the formation of his reputation is hard to separate out from broader debates about globalization and liberalism.

Even though many authors stress the relevance of economic issues in the growth and popularity of conspiracy theories and populism ( Buchowski 2017), data gathered in this research suggests that deteriorating material conditions provide only a partial explanation. The narratives of YouTube users, *Radio Maryja* callers, and also from the press and politicians point towards equally important cultural,

emotional, and political reasons. Conspiratorial narratives about Soros express a yearning for a return to the “heartland” to rediscover cultural pride, and for the feeling of security that stems from the sense of belonging (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, 222). This also serves as a rejection of liberalism and proposes an alternative ideology that reorients the place of Poland in a globalized world. They represent the country as no longer a passive receptacle for Western capital and modern ideas, but rather as a sovereign trailblazer of the coming deglobalized world. This involves undoing the identity of losers in the processes of transformation and globalization and remaking them as heroic trailblazers. Debunking beneficent liberal myths about Soros and repositioning him as the major Jewish globalist-in-chief responsible for transformation and for destruction of national identity through bringing refugees, plays an important role in this process.

Political articulation theory forces us to inquire about the sources of these conspiracy theories, who they benefitted, and who was invested in popularizing them. More importantly, it pushes us to think beyond the questions posed in this dissertation. It helps us to realize that it is not only important to know how and why anti-Soros conspiracy theories moved to the center of public discourse in Poland, but equally important is that the consequence of the move was the redefinition of the center itself initiated by skilled politicians, their allies, and clientelist media.

### **6.3 Contributions**

This dissertation contributes to helping to gain greater insight into the mechanisms of the growth and dissemination of conspiracy theories.

The multidisciplinary character of this research allows us to appreciate the complexity of this phenomenon and aims to add to several of the fields that study it, including conspiracy theory studies, populism studies, media studies, multimedia ethnography, and political sociology.

First, this dissertation contributes to the conspiracy theory field by “identifying major patterns” of conspiratorial modes of thinking emerging in Poland—a semi-peripheral country. This is salient because as Jovan Byford argued, for a long-time researcher in this field associated conspiracy theories with “Western political culture” and identified them as primarily originating from the United States (Byford 2011, 2). A decade later, Astapova and colleagues contended that despite an undeniable importance of conspiracy theories produced in Central and Eastern Europe for the rest of the world, still insufficient attention has been paid to examining them ((2021, 3). This dissertation aims to fill this gap.

Second, the existing literature on the rise of the populist right in Poland (Stanley and Cześnik 2019) and in Eastern Europe more broadly, has either not placed Soros at the center of analysis (Pintilescu and Kustan Magyari 2021) or has mostly concentrated on political analysis to the exclusion of media dynamics and generational factors.

This dissertation, then, is the first major study on the rise of anti-Soros conspiracy theories in Poland during the period of a major political reshuffling through presidential and parliamentary elections. By drawing on literature on Soros in other countries (Pintilescu and Kustan Magyari 2021; Plenta 2020; McLaughlin and Trilupaityte 2013), as well as historical sociological work that helps us understand why Poland was fertile

ground for discourse of this type (Vaughan 1996; Śmiecińska 2020; Koncewicz 2019), I contribute to broader debates about right-wing populism in this country (Stanley and Cześniak 2019; Narkowicz 2018).

Third, the originality of this work lies in the fact that it empirically examines the surge of conspiracy theories from two directions. It follows the path laid by other media and conspiracy theory scholars (Tymińska 2020, 2) in recognizing the role of political elites, authority figures, charismatic leaders, and experts (Pasięka 2017, 20) in promoting ideas pertaining to the nation, the Other, history, gender (Krzyżanowski 2018,79; Jaskułowski 2019, 16), and more generally in defining and articulating social reality for others (Ibid. 17). Also, it takes a unique path in investigating how “ordinary citizens” at the bottom respond to ideas trickling down from the top (Harambam 2020, 280, see Lamont 2016,9) and how they “spread among the public” (see Moreno and Vegetti 2021, 1204). This discrepancy requires further research (Strangelove 2010, 45), a gap which this work aims to partially fill through its study of YouTube comments (Arthurs and Drakopolou 2018; Porter 2014,1031), as well as users’ uploaded videos, photos, (Pink 2013, 135), and *Radio Maryja* listeners’ phone-ins.

As the mediatization of conspiracy theories (Aupers et al., 2020, 390, see Stano 2020, 483) and the influence of politics on media becomes more appreciated, this work identifies the media as intermediaries that participate in an exchange of ideas taking place between voters and politicians and meticulously analyses media content from this perspective (Marcinkiewicz 2018, 826; Krzyżanowski 2018, 79). It also goes a step further in attempting to do multimedia ethnography through examining interactions and

information flow, including the dissemination of conspiracy theories emerging on various new media platforms and in traditional media (Heo and Park 2014, 2911; Rasmussen 2017, 24). Such an analysis helps to capture the cross-generational dynamics as different age cohorts tend to gravitate towards different informational mediums (Starnawski 2017).

Studying the political attitudes of various age groups also contributes to the sociology of generations (Twenge and Campbell 2009) and to political sociology. Contrary to traditional scholarship in this field which stresses antagonisms between generations, the data presented reveals (Starnawski 2017) the similarity of political views and attitudes between segments of millennials, Gen X, and the baby boomers. These cohorts may differ in age, but they have endured similar hardships, think alike, and vote for the same political parties (Ibid.).

Another contribution of this dissertation lies in its approach to studying conspiracy theories and right-wing populism from a transtemporal and global perspective (Taylor 2010, 3; Uscinski 2019, 21). In other words, conspiracy theories about Soros cannot be studied as isolated phenomena that are detached from other places and from the past (see Kalmar 2018, 417; Smith 1991, 184), nor can they be analyzed as confined to a single state or region (Taylor 2010, 3). They are impacted by the “rapid globalization of the conspiracy landscape” (Astapova et al., 2021, 14). Thus, this work pays special attention to the influence of the international circulation of ideas for the formation of anti-Soros conspiracy theories on Polish politicians, voters, and the media while treating local history as repository of resentment. Finally, it points towards the necessity of conducting



cross-cultural and transtemporal comparative studies of these narratives (see Uscinski 2019, 43)

#### **6.4. Limitations**

The case study of conspiracy theories about Soros in Poland that is presented here allows for observing a few social processes including inter-generational dynamics, media ecology, the mediatization of politics, the return of antisemitism, and anti-Muslim bigotry. This work contributes to expanding our knowledge of conspiracy theories, but its very nature—that of a case study—has limitations.

First, the findings of a single country study are likely to be “geographically and theoretically limited” (Plenta, 2020). Thus, more research is needed to assess if the construction of Soros’ negative reputation (or that of other public figures), and its instrumentalization for political purposes, translates to other spatial and temporal contexts (Fine 2001, Smith 1991, 184). It is important to inquire why political actors in other countries did not employ conspiracy theories despite facing similar challenges to Polish politicians (Plenta, 2020), or if they did, how their approach differed.

Second, like many political sociological studies (Taylor 2010, 4), this work favors the analysis of identity over class, which is largely driven by data that revealed a much bigger weight placed on cultural rather than economic aspects by politicians, journalists, and YouTube commenters (Frank, 2004). More analysis is required to determine why the language of the culture wars and not that of class struggle seems to be more appealing to people, and what the consequences of such development could be.

Third, given what we know about the uneven regional development of Poland in relation to its political choices (Radiukiewicz 2018; 123; Fleming 2006, 97), this work does not sufficiently shed light on how locations within Poland (the sub-national and rural-urban divide) impact whether someone is or is not more or less likely to fall prey to conspiracy theories.

Fourth, Generation X, despite being “in charge” of the press and behind much of the YouTube content analyzed in this dissertation, has limited attention devoted to it in this analysis. Yet again, this decision was driven by the data, as it exhibited that mostly younger groups—millennials and Gen Z—were targeted by *Radio Maryja* and various YouTubers. Finally, this case study has limited predictive potential; it is hard to assess whether these narratives will remain popular in Poland for years to come or whether they will wither under different influences.

## **6.5 Should We Be Concerned?**

### **6.5.1 Conspiracy Theories, the Pandemic, and the Invasion of Ukraine**

From the perspective of 2023, should we be concerned about Soros conspiracy theories? Some commentators argue that the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia is likely to dampen their popularity, especially in Eastern Europe. This is because their rise is seen as influenced by pro-Russian politicians, journalists, and a Kremlin-backed trolling agenda to weaken the European Union and shift the loyalty of post-socialist countries back to Moscow (Nestoras 2019, 5; Sierakowski September 6, 2021). The thinking here is that since it was artificially induced in the first place, it would decline following

the start of the war and the conclusion of the pandemic. Reacting to the invasion of Ukraine, most European governments and their constituents have declared their solidarity and responded in unison to offer aid to the Ukrainian people. Moreover, in the past few months a discursive counter-offensive (also applied to Eurosceptic conspiracy theories) that has stressed the common commitment to European values vis-à-vis Putin's authoritarianism has been launched—it has been predicted that anti-EU conspiracy theories will be less appealing to people in these circumstances (Winiecki June 1, 2021). Similarly, pandemic conspiracy theories might become discredited as the efficacy of vaccination becomes clear and conspiracy theories about COVID-19 slowly started to wane along with the danger of the pandemic. Even though 18% of Poles declared themselves as believing that this health crisis was a result of secret plans hatched by various actors and states, this number halved by April 2021 (Winiecki June 1, 2021). But are these more optimistic predictions realistic? Should we assume that conspiracy theories will have a weaker hold on people's imagination in the future?

If conspiracy narratives about Soros were a barometer for their more general popularity, Google Trend results for searches of this billionaire indicate a spike of interest in him in 2020 (see Figure 1), reinforcing the claim that conspiracy theories are not going anywhere, especially following the pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine (Yablokov April 25, 2022; Dacombe November 24, 2021). From the beginning, information about both events has been riddled with false claims that have impacted public opinion and, by proxy, people's behaviours. Propaganda machines that were put in place long before Putin ordered his so-called "military operation" in Ukraine (Moskalenko April 20, 2022)

managed to successfully convince most Russians that this assault on their neighbours was justified (Yaffa March 29, 2022). Presenting conspiracy theories as facts in clientelist Russian media played a crucial role in that process. Similarly, belief in conspiracy theories was one of the major factors in determining vaccination rates. In Central and Eastern Europe, where their popularity has been high (in Poland some 50% admits being inclined to believe in conspiracy theories (Winiecki June 1, 2021), an additional general mistrust toward the medical establishment has led to the lowest reported levels of inoculation in the EU. Many people paid with their lives for these scientifically unfounded beliefs and compounded a public health crisis. Conspiracy theories pertaining to the pandemic tend to recycle narratives about Jews and globalists as being responsible for the pandemic (Krasnowska and Frątczak August 11, 2021). I contend that the ground for this was prepared during the refugee crisis in 2015 when simplistic, black-and-white accounts of events entered the mainstream and were never fully refuted. The circulation of conspiracy theories also accelerated further during the presidency of Donald Trump, where, once again, Russian troll farms also played a significant role in spreading them among the US population (Volchek January 29, 2021). One could argue that without the new digital media platforms their dissemination would have been limited.

### **6.5.2 Where Are We Heading?**

The Internet is the environment in which most young people—who will be the future of Poland—spend their time, and it is a space where new political sensibilities are being formed (Starnawski 2017, 76). Chapters 2 and 5 discussed how this medium is a breeding ground for conspiracy theories and hate speech, as well as how it locks people

into echo chambers that prevent them from exercising critical thinking (Wenzel and Żerkowska- Balas 2019, 44). Taking these two issues together should make us worried about the future of the country and the continued significance and impact of conspiracy theories in general. The election results from 2019 show that young people re-elected Law and Justice—a party that uses misinformation daily (Mazuś and Wilk December 29, 2020). Members of Gen Y and Gen Z who buy into conspiracy theories (Winięcki June 1, 2021) are more likely to belong to nationalist organizations (Starnawski 2017, 74) and to oppose the acceptance of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa (Ibid. 64). This in combination with the fact that young Poles live in a far more polarized political reality that is cultivated by politicians spreading divisive narratives presents mounting reasons for concern (Śmiecińska 2020, 251).

The negative consequences of the spread of anti-refugee conspiracy theories about Soros, namely the “return” of antisemitism and the resultant increase in hate crimes that I have discussed above, continue to proliferate and are translated into negative attitudes towards asylum-seekers on the part of Poles. This has been demonstrated by the reaction of the Polish public to more recent events taking place on the border with Belarus. A small number of people fleeing from several war-torn countries (e.g., Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria) were led by Belarussian president, Alexander Lukashenko, to think that they would be given asylum by the EU. Instead, they were trapped between Poland and Belarus when Polish authorities refused to let them in and Belarus would not take them back. These asylum seekers ended up squatting for weeks on a bare patch of ground cordoned off by Polish and Belarussian border patrol agents (Mazzini August 20, 2021).

This weaponization of refugees by Lukashenko was appalling, but so was the violation of human rights by the Polish government who refused to deliver food, water, and tents to the refugees while breaking international law by not letting them into the country so that they could apply for asylum status (Hartman September 1, 2021). Despite this, the reaction of Poles to this deadlock has been disappointing: over 50% of them have supported the government's treatment of these refugees. It is not difficult to imagine that this response would have been different had there not been a major anti-refugee campaign in 2015 (Sierakowski September 6, 2021; Kozłowski 2017, 246). It is also not difficult to wonder if there will be a ripple effect of such rhetoric impacting refugees from Ukraine arriving in Poland. Early media reports shows that the treatment of white Ukrainians has differed from that of racialized seasonal workers or international students who also lived in this country at the time of the Russian invasion (Bayoumi March 2, 2022).

Finally, the Russian invasion of Ukraine further could only strengthen conspiracy theories in the region. The war has left many Poles shocked into a state of disbelief. More than 43% of them declared being afraid, and expressed worry about the territorial integrity and safety of their country as well as the possibility of economic collapse and supply chain disruptions (Kalukin March 8, 2022). Such circumstances tend to breed mistrust, suspicion of the world, and paranoia—the perfect environment for conspiracy theories to flourish (Byford 2011, 69). Thus, the need to study conspiracy theories today, during the biggest military crises in Europe since the Balkan Wars, cannot be understated if we wish to stop their dissemination. To do that, we must monitor media discourses

(Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 104) and examine the instrumentalization of history in order to identify and deconstruct false narratives, debunk myths, and fact-check claims (Byford 2011, 152). Additionally, we must devote time to digital media education (Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021, 104) since future voters will be increasingly immersed in an online environment, and in years to come, quite likely in virtual reality environments as well (Jaskułowski 2019, 133). Only in this manner, will we be able to contain the hate which the dissemination of conspiracy theories aids in generating. The goal of this study has been to play a small part in this process.

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## Appendix I: Depictions of Soros Online and in the Polish Press

1. "Soros' emissaries"



2. "Double rate for the night and bank holiday, anyone is interested?"



3. "It is Soros who is behind the plan to split Poland"



4. "Soros' Plan"

”



5. “Europe in a nutshell... the defense of Soros’ interests”



6. “Soros: Michnik’s and Civic Platform’s final hope”

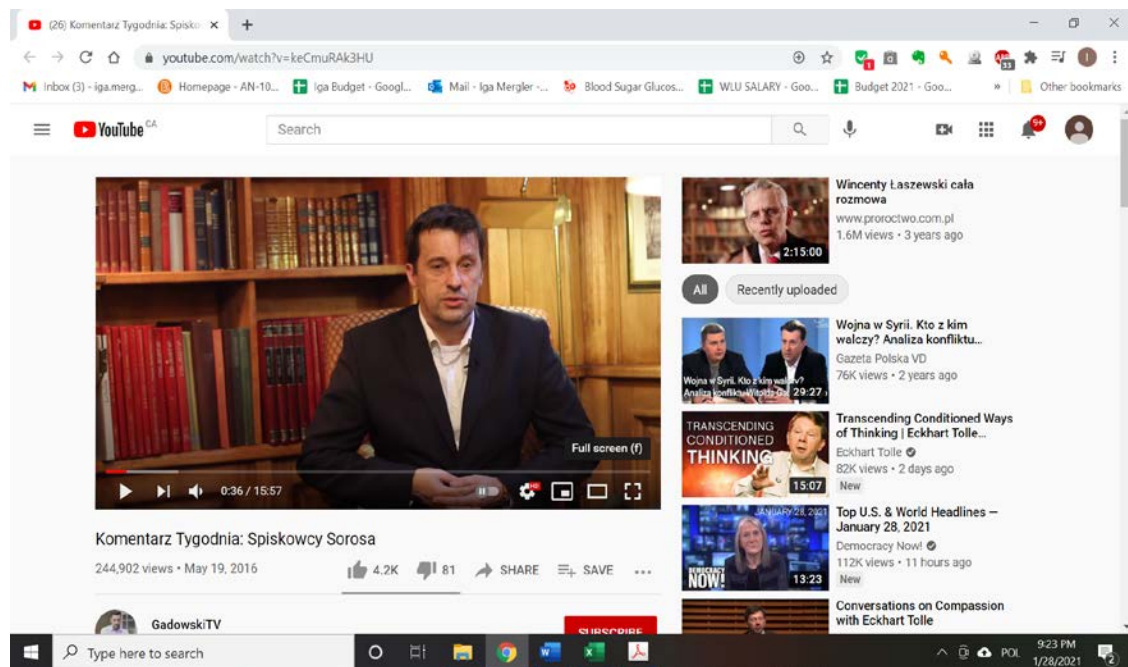


7 “Who will get Soros’ billions

## Appendix 2: Misrepresentations of Soros on Polish YouTube

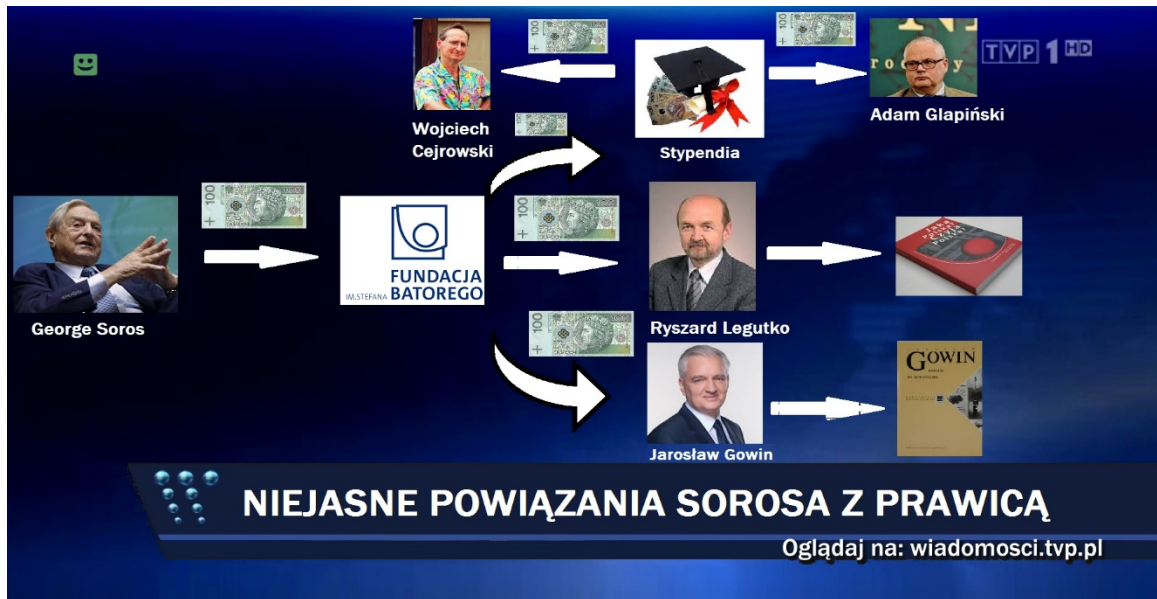


8. “Hit! George Soros wants to destroy Poland- Michalkiewicz about Jewish plans”



9. “Weekly commentary: Soros’ conspirators” 244, 902 views

### Appendix 3. Soros on the State-Funded Evening News



### 10. “Soros’ Alleged Connections with the Right”



### 11. Untitled.

Infographic depicting that Soros’ money goes to progressive journalists and NGOs.

## Appendix 4. Selected Radio Programmes and Videos Referenced

### Radio Maryja Programmes (Organized by date)

*Unfinished Conversations*. 2007. „W rodzinie Radia Maryja.” [In the Family of Radio Maryja] featuring Father Tadeusz Rydzyk. Aired January 28 on *Radio Maryja*. Accessed on December 26, 2022.

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## **YouTube Videos (Organized by date)**

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaXI0aW3vqY&list=PLivQAPXDE8CfKHaZN6EcVzBsWbtgOwJMo>

2016. „Telewizja Republika- Rafał Brzeski- Polska na Dzień Dobry” [Telewizja Republika- Rafał Brzeski- Good Morning Poland]. Published by Telewizja Republika. Featuring Rafał Brzeski. Aired on February 2 on YouTube. Video removed from YouTube. Accessed on July 24, 2022.  
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2016. “Profesor Robert Jerzy Nowak o kłamstwach amerykańskich Żydów na temat Polski” [Professor Robert Jerzy Nowak Commenting on Lies Produced by American Jews about Poland]. Published by PrawicowyInternet. Featuring Robert Jerzy Nowak. Aired on May 23, on YouTube. Duration 9: 01. Accessed on August 15, 2022.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xgw2X496GHc>

2016 “Prof Wolniewicz: każą warczeć na rasistów i kochać uchodźców, tak nas ogłupiają nasi treserzy” [Prof Wolniewicz: They Ask Us to Growl at Racists, and Love the Refugees—This Is How Our Trainers Fool Us]. Video removed from YouTube. Accessed on May 5, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EKwjKxCMrI>

2016. “Tyrmand on KOD, Soros, Clinton and Trump and Presidential Election” Published by TVP INFO. Featuring Matthew Tyrmand. Aired May 30 on YouTube. Video removed from YouTube. Accessed on December 13, 2017.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t12\\_Qj79n2A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t12_Qj79n2A)

2016. “George Soros wspiera KOD?” [Does George Soros Support the Committee for the Defence of Democracy?]. Aired June 1 on YouTube. Video removed from YouTube. Accessed on February 8, 2018.

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[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zF4USD\\_WkBU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zF4USD_WkBU)

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMQ1iqWWPzk>

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2016. “Materiał TVP o finansowaniu Krytyki Politycznej Sierakowskiego przez Geoga Sorosa” [Segment from TVP About the Funding of Sierakowski’s *Krytyka Polityczna* by George Soros]. Published by PolandBall. Aired on Nov 25 on YouTube. Duration 2:31. Accessed on August 15, 2022.

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Segment prepared by: Damian Diaz. Featuring Aneta Szydlik, Wojciech Surmacz, Mieczysław Ryba, Marcin Makowski, Waldemar Paruch. Accessed on July 24, 2022.

<https://wiadomosci.tvp.pl/25700896/soros-inwestuje-w-wyborcza>

2016. “Lista Soros” [Soros’ List] Published August 18 by TVP1. Featuring Damian Diaz Marcin Wikło, Kozłowska-Rajewicz Róża Grafin von Thun und Hohenstein. Accessed on July 24, 2022.

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2016. “Kogo finansuje George Soros” [Who Does George Soros Sponsor?]. Published August 31 by TVP1. Accessed on July 24, 2022.

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2017. „George Soros i jego wpływy” [George Soros and his Influence]. Published April 2 by TVP1. Featuring Jarosław Olechowski, Dorota Choma, Laszlo Palkovics, Waldemar Paruch, Eli Bartłomiej Zolkos. Accessed on July 24. 2022.

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