

A Sad Tale of Power, **MANIPULATION,** *and FEAR*

MONIKA PROŃCZUK

Following is a convincing story, stylistically told, about how our need for sharing in general as well as specific ideas for cooperatives and co-housing clashes drastically with the reality of today's Central and Eastern Europe.

It was October 2015, and the three of us were driving from Poland to Croatia in a van filled with the clothes and sleeping bags we had gathered from our friends to give to the refugees. Suddenly, something caught our eye: a new symbol of Europe, divided once again. It was at the same time terrifying and magnificent. It was something we recognized only from old movies: a barbed wire fence at the Hungarian border, protecting Central-Eastern European people from the "refugee threat"

A CAMPAIGN OF HATE BEGINS

Around the same time, Jaroslaw Kaczyński, leader of PiS (the ruling party in Poland) made the soon-to-be-famous speech in which he talked about "migrants carrying very dangerous diseases, which haven't been seen in Europe for a very long time" and about "parasites, protozoans, which might not be threatening for *those people* but might be for us."

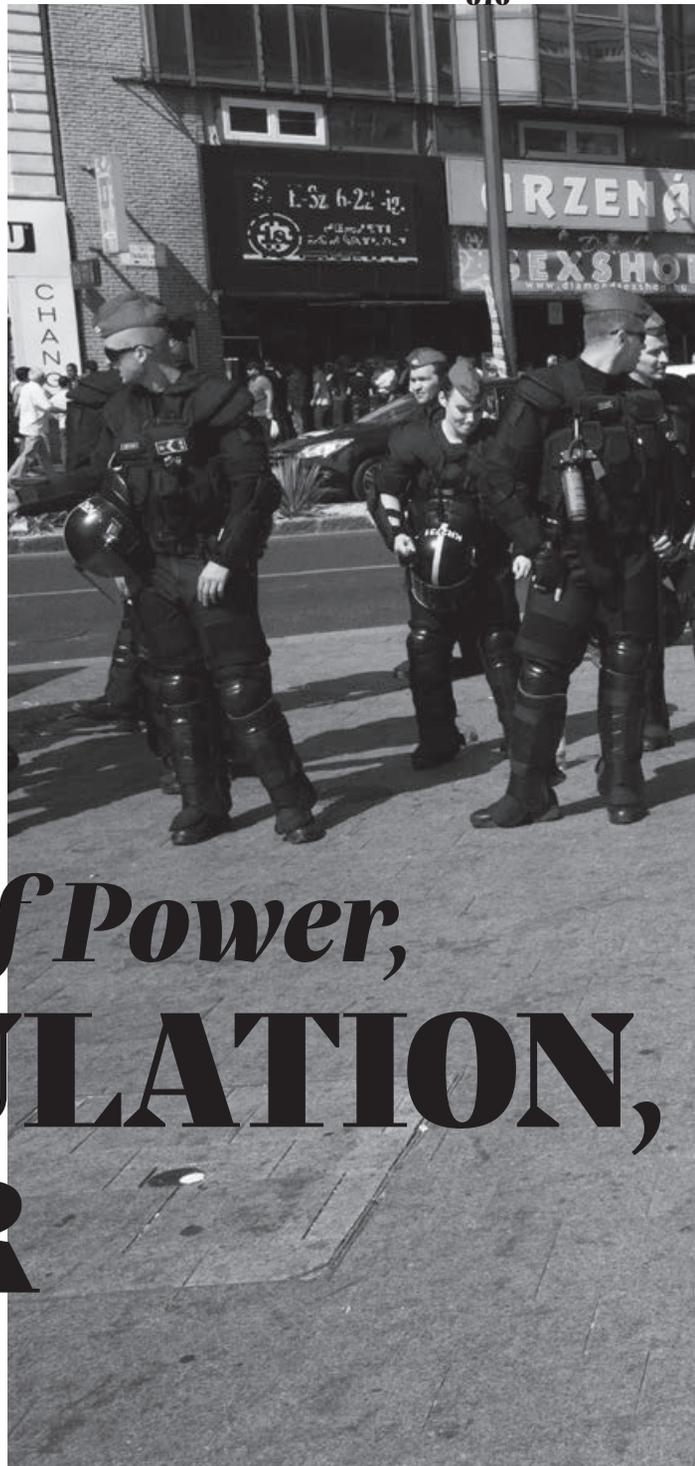




photo: Lubomír Šimek

Viktor Orbán did not lag far behind. Shortly after Kaczyński's remarks, Orbán said that the relocation policy of the European Union was threatening the "sovereignty and cultural identity of Hungary". In an interview for the German newspaper *Bild*, he said: "We don't see *those people* as refugees. We see them as Muslim invaders."

Until then, contemporary Poland and Hungary did not have that much in common. We have shared two kings and a dynasty, but that was a very long time ago. Finally, however, the current Polish-Hungarian alliance had a concrete policy to build on. Not long after, Slovakia and Czechia both joined the anti-immigrant axis, and the Visegrad countries found a cause that could unite them once more.

The truth is, we probably borrowed my parents' van and packed it with clothes for refugees for the same reason that people felt the need to vote for Kaczyński and Orbán. Faced with the so-called "refugee

crisis", we were feeling helpless; the actions of the international organizations and governments left us feeling ashamed. And – even though I don't like to admit it – when I looked at the pictures in the press and listened to Polish politicians, there was this tiny voice inside my head, whispering: "And what if they are right about *those people*? After all, I have not met them in person." The difference was we choose not to build a wall, but instead to go to the Balkans and confront our fear, our shame, and our prejudice.

Since 2015, PiS and Orbán have managed the seemingly impossible: they convinced their respective societies, where foreigners comprise less than 1% of the population, that "the other" is a mortal danger for them. They incited xenophobia, islamophobia, and more recently even anti-Semitism. They also presented themselves as the only protectors of collective security, and of "the European values and the European way of living".



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How did they do this? Easy – they implemented the same method which has been used for centuries. First, create an atmosphere of fear and insecurity. Second, dehumanize “the other”. Third, even if all the facts prove the contrary, just stick to your version of reality, and repeat it until everybody (or at least a voting majority) believes that it is true.

STEP ONE: FEAR AND INSECURITY

In July 2017, Kaczyński stated during a party convention: “If *those people* are let in, a huge security problem would appear – and I don’t refer only to terrorism. I mean everyday, ordinary security. There is no reason to radically decrease the quality of life of the Polish people.” By that time, the majority of Poles already believed him.

When asked in May 2015, 58% of Polish people said that we should “allow refugees to stay in Poland until they can go back to their own countries,” and 14% said that we should allow them to come and stay indefinitely. Only 21% said that we shouldn’t allow them to come at all. In October 2017, after over two years of an aggressive and repetitive hate campaign, the proportions were reversed: 63% of Poles were decisively against letting refugees into Poland, and only 29% think we should let them in for a short period of time. It is the highest percentage of Poles opposing letting in refugees in the history of opinion polls.

One of the turning points has been the Paris terrorist attacks in November 2015. At that time, I was still in the Balkans, managing a small aid center for refugees. When the news about Paris reached our tiny village of Miratovac, all of the refugees held their breath. They knew what was going to happen: how the attack

would be manipulated to put the blame on them. It didn’t matter that the attack had been claimed by ISIS, from whom the majority of refugees were running away from. It was a strange, surreal sensation; for weeks I had been listening to their stories of death and despair, of running away from ISIS, the Taliban, war, torture, and military conscription. At the same time, I was following the discourse of Central-Eastern European politicians, who were putting all the blame on refugees, and on Germany opening their doors and inviting *them* in.

Of course, faced with such a tragedy, it is natural to look for someone to blame. But Kaczyński and Orbán were blaming the victims, people who – just like the Parisians – had their houses and favorite bars blown up, and their loved ones killed by bullets as well as bombs. But unlike the Parisians, they didn’t have governments strong enough to protect them from the danger and death which followed. A responsible politician would try to calm the situation by rationalizing the events and avoiding collective hysteria. But instead, the political leaders of Visegrad countries chose to do exactly what the terrorists wanted: to spread fear, hatred, and radicalization.

I was conscious of all of this because I had met *those people* – or at least enough of them to realize that *those people* is an artificial category, used to simplistically gather all sorts of human beings. But how could Polish people know that if the politicians were constantly telling them that Poland will never accept refugees – even though since the 1990s we have had consistently helped refugees, mostly from ex-Soviet countries (including Muslims from Chechnya)? How could they make the connection between their nice Chechen neighbors and *those people*, often described in overgeneralized and degrading terms?



STEP TWO: DEHUMANIZE “THE OTHER”

Well, the bad thing is that after a while some of them did – and the number of hate crimes in Poland started to rise. Ahmed Salujew came to Poland in early 2016 with this wife, daughter, and three sons. Not long after they moved from the reception center to a rented flat in Łódź, somebody threw a pig’s head on their balcony, and wrote on their car vulgar, offensive statements, telling them to go home. A group of students from Berlin were harassed, offended, and attacked on the streets of Lublin because some of them were wearing hijabs. A man forbade a dark-skinned woman and her daughter to enter a church. A Polish university professor was beaten up in a tram because he was speaking German. A Ukrainian couple was attacked with tear gas for speaking Ukrainian in a shop.

It turns out – surprise, surprise – that implementing a hate campaign is a gamble. And that the effects have started to be visible not only in the opinion polls, but also in the acts of physical and verbal violence. The Polish Interior Minister Mariusz Blaszczak kept claiming that “this kind of violence is a margin of the margins” – but according to the official statistics of the Public Prosecutor’s office, there has been a record number of hate crimes in the first half-year of 2017 (the statistics for the whole year have not been released yet). On top of this, the Public Prosecutor’s office decided to discontinue the proceedings of 76% of these cases (data from 2016).

STEP THREE: DENY THE OBVIOUS, AND KEEP DENYING, UNTIL IT BECOMES TRUE

None of the political leaders of Central-Eastern Europe are willing to start a genuine, honest debate about the refugee crisis. Not after they so carefully constructed a narrative filled with terrorism, threats, and diseases.

What has been the result? Politicians are ignoring the reality as well as the tangible problems that need to be addressed. Those problems have nothing to do with the threat of terrorism, and everything to do with the refugees that already are in Central-Eastern Europe – mostly from ex-Soviet republics – and who have been abandoned and forgotten by the state. The integration policies are non-existent; the benefits are miniscule and hard to attain. Migrants and refugees in Poland can only rely on help provided by NGOs, which have been severely hit, when in 2015 the Polish government sealed off European funds intended for migration and integration policies. Since then, instead of going to NGOs, the funds have been given to the heads of local administration.

In the beginning of 2018, the regional media were shocked by the Hungarian statistics; despite their rhetoric, Orbán’s government had granted asylum to 1300 people, a number that was the highest in over a decade.

Another story is the current situation in Poland. PiS is doing whatever they can not to accept refugees, willing to break Polish and international law, and to risk trial in the European Court of Justice. Partially, they succeeded: the number of asylum application in 2017 decreased over 60%, compared with the previous year. But in 2017, the Polish government granted different forms of asylum to 742 people, including Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans.

This makes the main argument opposing the European procedure of relocation – threat to national security – utterly absurd. Refugees arriving in Poland and Hungary on the basis of relocation procedure are verified twice, first by European authorities, and then by the national government. Refugees, who have been

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accepted on the basis of Geneva Convention – applying for asylum directly to national authorities – have been verified only once.

The stubbornness of Orbán and Kaczyński might turn out very costly for Polish and Hungarian taxpayers. While Slovakia and Czechia took in a handful of refugees from the relocation procedure to avoid the so-called infringement procedure for breaking European law, Hungary and Poland resisted until the end. They were sued before the European Court of Justice, which has the power to impose high financial fines for refusing to participate in the relocation procedure.

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

This story ends the same way it has begun: with me feeling ashamed and helpless. Recently I went to the Polish-Belarusian border, the main entry point into Europe for refugees from the ex-Soviet republics. The Polish government has not built a barbed wire fence, but it has given a very explicit order to the border guards: do not let *those people* in.

So, in breach of the Geneva Convention and Polish law, Polish authorities are not allowing desperate people fleeing Chechnya, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan (to name just a few) to even apply for asylum. Border guards call them economic immigrants and terrorists; those with financial means stay in Brest, on the Belarusian side of the border, and try as many times as they can to cross the border. Even if the Polish government suspects *those people* of being a security threat, there are rules and procedures to follow. The point is, if we start to pick and choose which laws to apply and which to ignore, we cannot claim anymore we live in a democracy governed by the rule of law.

Asylum-seekers in Brest had the same look in their eyes that I have already seen in the eyes of Syrians in the Balkans: disbelief and disappointment. *After all, we have reached the border of Europe, haven't we? So why is Europe not following the rules?* I couldn't find an answer.

Not long ago in London, I met an Iranian man married to a Polish woman. They live together in the UK, but they often come back to her native town in Poland. He asked me how I could be Polish and yet so nice to him.





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Explaining, he said that whenever he goes to Poland, he cannot even ride a tram without being harassed by young men trying to pick a fight. I couldn't find an answer to that either.

But now, a couple of weeks later, here is my attempt at an answer. All of you are the collateral damage of the hate campaign that has been waged against "the other". Appeasing Central-Eastern European governments' stance on relocation or admitting that there already are refugees amongst us – and have been for many years – would be too risky. It would be a signal that not all refugees are terrorists.

What's even worse, it could mean that the term "refugee" describes merely a legal category, which contains people of different religions, different nationalities, and different values. People who have nothing in common with each other – except for the legal predicament they find themselves in. But that would mean that they, too, are human. And this is too much of a political risk for Orbán and Kaczyński.

Monika Prończuk – a member of OKO.press, a Polish independent journalist platform where she writes about health care and migrants. A co-founder of Dobrowolki, a Polish bottom-up initiative helping refugees in the Balkans and Refugees Welcome, an integrational program for refugees in Poland.