



A New Wave of Populist Feminism? Examining Identity Formation in the All Poland Women's Strike, 2016-2021

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Polish women protest 2020 Constitutional Tribunal ruling on abortion¹

¹ Photo by by Tomasz Pietrzyk / Agencja Gazeta in "POLAND – Women's Strike is backed by 69% of Polish people, survey shows" *International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.safeabortionwomensright.org/news/poland-womens-strike-is-backed-by-69-of-polish-people-survey-shows/>

Abstract

This thesis traces the development of identity in the All Poland Women's Strike (OSK), a feminist movement protesting abortion restrictions, between 2016 and 2021. Contrary to scholars who have emphasized the movement's horizontal power dynamics and 'connective' identity construction, this thesis argues that leadership played a significant role both in OSK's protest and its other forms of action. Employing a populist-securitization framework, this research focuses on Marta Lempart as the securitizing actor who was able to define the threats of the women's movement, while shaping its developing identity. Interview testimonies with Lempart indicate a strong anti-establishment identity, reflecting a continuity of distrust in the liberal establishment. Moreover, research highlights the signs of transnational populist-securitization in the movement's collaborative efforts with Argentinian feminists. While scholars have suggested national identity was of great significance to protesters, research based on Lempart's relations with the EU challenges this assumption. In addition to characterising the movement as more top-down in its identity formation than previously assumed, this study also locates many of the movement's core beliefs in the history of the Polish feminist movement and Poland's experience of Europeanization more generally.

List of Abbreviations

PiS = Prawo i Sprawiedliwość / Law and Justice Party

OSK = Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet / All Poland Women's Strike

CEE = Central Eastern Europe

EU = European Union

EP = European Parliament

EWL= European Women's Lobby

SMO = Social Movement Organization

ESF = European Social Fund

GM = Gender Mainstreaming

NGO = Non-governmental organization

IC = Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence)

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Introduction

On October 3, 2016, 150,000 people took to the streets across Poland to protest on what came to be known as ‘Black Monday.’ Draped in black to represent their collective mourning over the loss of reproductive rights, protests emerged in over 150 cities, with thousands demonstrating in the streets and refusing to go to work.² The trigger was a draft legislative bill, ‘Stop Abortion’ from the ruling party PiS, (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) which proposed outlawing abortion in the case of fetal defects along with imposing prison sentences for women who underwent illegal abortions.³ In addition to being some of the harshest penalties the country had ever seen for abortion, the law was in part drafted outside of government, with a heavy influence from the far-right conservative Christian think tank, *Ordo Iuris*.⁴ While the country is known to hold one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe, thousands of women access abortion services illegally each year through bribery, ‘abortion tourism,’ or through importing abortion pills from abroad.⁵

Despite its severity, the proposed bill was supported by the ruling party, the Prime Minister and the Polish Episcopate of the Catholic Church.⁶ Feminist groups had proposed a rival legislative initiative, ‘Save the Women’ but this was rejected without debate in September 2016 despite gaining 215,000 signatures in its support.⁷ After some initial activist mobilisation, Marta Lempart, a previously unknown figure involved in a Wroclaw rally, announced a countrywide strike for women set for Monday 3 October, initiating the formation of the All Poland Women Strike (OSK).⁸ Not only did thousands of women turn up to demonstrate, wearing black and carrying umbrellas, but many took part in protests despite lacking any history of social activism,

² Agnieszka Graff, "Angry women: Poland's black protests as 'populist feminism' in Gabriele Dietze and Julia Roth, *Right-Wing Populism and Gender: European Perspectives and Beyond*, (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020): 234.

³ Graff, "Angry women," 233.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Andrzej Kulczycki, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Abortion, Catholicism, the Populist Right and Public Health Threats in Poland." *Religions* 14, no. 10 1271(2023): 4.

⁶ Graff, "Angry Women," 233.

⁷ Ibid 234.

⁸ Ibid; Szczygielska records that it was actually Krystyna Janda, a famous actress who called for a strike based on the 1975 Icelandic Women's Strikes, see: Marianna Szczygielska, "'Good Change' and Better Activism: Feminist Responses to Backsliding Gender Policies in Poland." In *Gendering Democratic Backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe: A comparative agenda*, (Central European University Press, 2019) 141.; Hall Argues it was *Razem* that organized the first Black Protest, see: Bogumila Hall, "Gendering Resistance to Right-Wing Populism: Black Protest and a New Wave of Feminist Activism in Poland?" *American Behavioral Scientist* 63, no. 10 (2019): 1505.

risking reprisals from employers and the authorities.⁹ Consequently, the overwhelming backlash led to the ‘Stop Abortion’ law being rescinded.¹⁰

Following the successful halting of the bill, activism declined as protests entered ‘the submerged phase,’ re-emerging in smaller numbers for other abortion-related controversies.¹¹ Nevertheless, in 2017 and 2018 activists successfully linked their protests to international Women’s Day marches worldwide. In early 2018 when another Episcopate-supported restrictive abortion law was drafted, this time without prison sentences for women, protesters similarly descended on Warsaw for ‘Black Friday’ of March 23, resulting in the law once again being rejected.¹²

On October 22, 2020, four years after initial protests, the Constitutional Tribunal succeeded in outlawing abortion based on fetal defects.¹³ This time over 430,000 people attended protests across the country.¹⁴ The ruling attracted global news coverage with solidarity protests occurring worldwide.¹⁵ What began as a highly politicized debate around national values, escalated into an international debate as the ruling was increasingly regarded as a fundamental attack on the European rule of law. Immediately the EU issues statements condemning the ruling as an infringement of women’s rights and evidence of democratic backsliding.

For Polish activists, the attention garnered by international media thrust their protest movement into the international spotlight.¹⁶ Organizers of OSK announced that they were establishing a Consultative Council to organize on behalf of protesters, vowing to advocate for women’s rights, LGBTQ+ rights, secularism, workers’ rights and climate activism.¹⁷ Marta Lempart became increasingly recognised on a national and international level, featuring in global

⁹ Graff, "Angry women," 235.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Alberto Melucci quoted in Magdalena Muszel and Grzegorz Piotrowski, “What Comes after a Cycle of Protests,” *Monthly Review*, November 01, 2022. Accessed January 15, 2025.

<https://monthlyreview.org/2022/11/01/what-comes-after-a-cycle-of-protests-the-case-of-the-2020-womens-protests-in-poland/>

¹² Graff, "Angry women," 236.

¹³ “Family planning, the protection of foetuses, and grounds for permitting the termination of a pregnancy” trybunal.gov.pl *Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej*,

<https://trybunal.gov.pl/en/news/press-releases/after-the-hearing/art/11299-planowanie-rodziny-ochrona-plodu-ludzkiego-i-warunki-dopuszczalnosci-przerywania-ciazy>

¹⁴ Muszel and Piotrowski, “What Comes after a Cycle of Protests.”

¹⁵ Greta Gober and Justyna Struzik, “Feminist Transnational Diaspora in the Making. The Case of the #BlackProtest.” In: *Praktyka eoretyczna* 4 (30), (2018): 129-150.

¹⁶ Joanna Rak and Maciej Skrzypek, "Profile: why have social mobilizations for women’s reproductive rights in Poland failed?." *Social Movement Studies* 23, no. 5 (2024): 661.

¹⁷ Muszel and Grzegorz Piotrowski, “What Comes after a Cycle of Protests.”

headlines about Poland's political crisis and attending the European Parliament for special plenary hearings. While the group re-emphasized its claims to be merely a 'helpdesk' for protest movements rather than a formalized organization, scholars Muszel and Piotrowski described their formation of a Council as "the institutionalization of the protest" as OSK emerged from a social media network to a more organized political collective.¹⁸

The outbreak of the 2016 Black Strikes and the development of a broader anti-establishment feminist movement in Poland in this period are compelling for a numerous reasons. The upsurge in activism from so many citizens was unexpected in a country where political activism amongst the general population is somewhat less common.¹⁹ Moreover, the distinct feminist character surprised many who saw Poland as a conservative nation where traditional gender roles remain relatively strongly embedded and accepted. Finally, this movement was notable for its bottom-up, spontaneous and social media-driven character. Like other leftwing protest movements in Europe such as *Indignados* or the *Occupy* protests, activism coordinated online appeared to allow for more horizontal power dynamics and populist sentiments leading many to comment that activism had undergone a significant transformation.

This raises the question, How did identity form and develop in the All Poland Women's Strike, 2016-2021? To answer this question, research can be aided by the use of three sub-questions:

1. How did Marta Lempart come to shape the identity of the movement?
2. What were some of the movement's core facets of identity?
3. How did was this identity informed by Poland's history of feminist activism and Europeanization?

This topic has significant contemporary relevance not least because Poland continues to grapple with the legacy of the abortion ban which has led to numerous, tragically preventable, pregnancy-related deaths.²⁰ Moreover survey research testifies to the protests' significant cultural

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Magdalena Grabowska, "Bringing the Second World in: Conservative revolution (s), socialist legacies, and transnational silences in the trajectories of Polish feminism." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 37, no. 2 (2012): 385-411.

²⁰ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, "Inquiry concerning Poland conducted under article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention" *United Nations*, August 21, 2024, <https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6OkG1d%2FPPrICAqhKb7yhss1YTn0qfX85YJz37paIgUCcRtpoSeNsju%2FXShqXHvtB6cuTdiH5UzzeBzl1wLtwD2QH7LBKegErftPQGat1bVWwwyPoApR1osYdqiz8K5qJ>

impact. From 2019-2020 alone, there was a 66% increase in the amount of people supporting abortion up to the 12th week increased.²¹

Despite the successful defeat of PiS by a pro-EU coalition, abortion remains banned in the country unless in cases of risk to life, rape or incest.²² Beyond Poland, this research also provides an important understanding of the connection between gender politics, populism and Euroscepticism, offering significant insight into protest movements' identity formation.

Literature and Historiography

Despite its recency, a significant body of research on the feminist protests of 2016-2020 already exists, attesting to their significance.

Shortly after the 2016 strikes, initial scholarship focused on the inciting incident, PiS's proposed bill, examining how this proposal had sparked such outrage. Highlighting the radical nature of the policies enacted by the Law and Justice Party, scholars agreed that PiS had crossed a new boundary, moving the issue of abortion from the political periphery to the forefront of politics. PiS's religious-nationalist extremism essentially implied that 'pregnant women should sacrifice themselves for the survival of the unborn and the future nation.'²³ Thus protesters engaged themselves in a national struggle to challenge the state's Catholic characterisations of the state and redefine concepts of womanhood and citizenship.²⁴ While PiS has conceptualised 'ordinary women' based on adherence to Catholicism and motherhood, protesters defined ordinariness as rooted in heterogeneity and a lack of experience in activism.²⁵ Five years earlier, activists had completely failed to engage the public in widespread abortion activism, OSK

²¹ Magdalena Chrzczonowicz, "66 proc. Polaków za prawem do aborcji: Rekordowy wynik w sondażu Ipsos dla OKO.press." (OKO.Press, 2020) <https://oko.press/66-proc-za-prawem-do-aborcji/> quoted in Żuk and Paczeński, "They attack the family and order," 15.

²² Donald Tusk was elected Prime Minister and formed a coalition with Civic Coalition (KO), the Third Way and the Left: Ido Vock "Donald Tusk elected as Polish Prime Minister," *BBC*, December 11, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67681940>

²³ Jennifer Ramme, "Framing Solidarity. Feminist Patriots Opposing the Far Right in Contemporary Poland." *Open Cultural Studies* 3, no. 1 (2019): 475.

²⁴ Radosław Nawojski, Magdalena Pluta, and Katarzyna Zielińska. "The Black Protests: A Struggle for (Re) Definition of Intimate Citizenship." *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 30, no. 4 (2018): 51-74.

²⁵ Jennifer Ramme and Claudia Snochowska-Gonzalez. "The Ambivalence of the Ordinary: The Polish Women's Strike (OSK) and the Women's March 8th Alliance (PK8M) in a Comparative Perspective." *Gender and Power in Eastern Europe: Changing Concepts of Femininity and Masculinity in Power Relations* (2021): 123-142.

managed to mobilise thousands for the same cause, in large part, because public disillusionment with the PiS government was so high.²⁶

Social movement scholars have highlighted the importance of emotive messages and digital platforms in the transmission of the protests's key messages. Firstly, protesters successfully utilised numerous social media platforms, employing personable and often creative ways for individuals to join the protest in easily accessible formats such as getting people to post pictures wearing black and disseminating witty 'memes.'²⁷ Many scholars have also commented on the ability of OSK to arouse a powerful sense of fear and anger that spurred many to demonstrate a sense of urgency often lacking from online campaigns.²⁸

In order to understand its unique identity and success, scholars like Jennifer Ramme and Claudia have sought to compare the abortion protests with their feminist predecessors.²⁹ Most argued the protests constituted a 'new wave,' a complete 'refoundation' or even 'the birth of grassroots Polish feminism in its entirety.'³⁰ Many argued that the strike's ability to recruit women from such diverse backgrounds demonstrated its success in framing feminism in an inclusive, accessible manner; distinct from the civil society initiatives and street protests of the past which had a more academic focus.

While OSK activists occasionally indicated a sense of tension with older generations of activists and politicians, on the whole, their efforts were seen as benefitting considerably from pre-existing feminist networks that could respond to calls to action.³¹ Scholars argue that though their role may have been small, academics provided expert knowledge which was disseminated online.³² Similarly, political parties and strike coordinators displayed an effective degree of cooperation. Collaboration was a consequence of the movement's strong intersectional identity and horizontal approach to organizing that allowed all activists to shape the movement through

²⁶ Kasia Narkowicz, "Before the Czarny protest: feminist activism in Poland." *Cultivate: The Feminist Journal of the Centre for Women's Studies* (2018).

²⁷ Korolczuk, "Explaining mass protests against abortion ban in Poland," 102; Szczygielska, "Good Change and Better Activism," 143; Anna Nacher, #BlackProtest from the web to the streets and back: Feminist digital activism in Poland and narrative potential of the hashtag. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 28(2), (2021) 260-273.

²⁸ Courtney Blackington, "Angry and afraid: emotional drivers of protest for abortion rights in Poland, East European Politics," 40:1, (2024): 1-20.

²⁹ Ramme and Claudia Snochowska-Gonzalez. "The Ambivalence of the Ordinary," 123-142.

³⁰ Natasza Quelvenec "Polish feminism in the (battle) field: resisting and building a new identity." *Analyze: Journal of Gender & Feminist Studies* 18 (2023): 31.

³¹ Hall, "Gendering Resistance," 1512; Marianna Szczygielska, "Good Change and Better Activism: Feminist Responses to Backsliding Gender Policies in Poland." In *Gendering Democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe: A comparative agenda*, Central European University Press, 2019. 141.

³² Korolczuk, "Explaining mass protests against abortion ban in Poland," 107.

‘connective action.’³³ While a deep engagement with feminist ideology or Polish history may have been lacking for many protesters, such fluid identity conceptions were beneficial to the transmission of slogans and the movement’s widespread success.³⁴

Honing in on the discursive tactics employed by protesters, Agnieszka Graff and others have described the 2016 Black Strikes and OSK as manifestations of ‘populist feminism.’³⁵ Considering the long-perceived incompatibility of populism and feminism - this conception denotes greater scholarly attention. Does feminism subsume populism, or vice versa? Moreover, since populism relies on the construction of an authentic ‘people’ against a corrupt ‘elite,’ it is unclear exactly what constitutes ‘the elite’ in contexts like Poland, where rightwing populists had already overtaken the halls of power. While many scholars describe OSK as ‘anti-establishment,’ it is unclear who exactly constituted ‘the establishment’ in a period where the liberal elite was already regarded as having been disempowered.

Another existing lacuna in the literature regards the movement’s relationship with ‘the national.’ While scholars acknowledge the movement’s transnational connections, both with the Polish diaspora and feminist movements abroad, there is a greater emphasis on feminists’ reclamation of national identity. As Jennifer Ramme argues, OSK’s success was a result not only of their ‘positioning themselves as ‘ordinary women’ but also because they frequently positioned themselves publicly as ‘Polish women’ (Polki).’³⁶ As such, OSK’s ‘feminist patriotism’ is given much more scholarly interrogation than its attempts to construct transnational feminist identities. Similarly, the movement’s later engagements with, and opinions on, the European Union remain to be analysed. In part, this absence is because the EU only became a more significant actor during the 2020 protests. Nonetheless, OSK’s pro-EU stance from its inception deserves discussion considering contemporary debates regarding Euroscepticism.

Finally, from a methodological standpoint, studies focusing on protest identity have thus far focused on interviews or survey questionnaires with participants to denote movement identity. While such research is highly valuable in attaining a range of perspectives it often offers

³³ Ibid 94-101.

³⁴ Agnieszka Graff, "Claiming the shipyard, the cowboy hat, and the anchor for women: Polish feminism’s dialogue and struggle with national symbolism." *East European Politics and Societies* 33, no. 2 (2019): 488-489.

³⁵ Aleksandra Reczuch, "Representing ‘ordinary women’: ‘feminist populism’ during the 2019 parliamentary elections in Poland." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 26, no. 4 (2024); Graff, "Angry women," 231-242; Jenny Gunnarsson Payne, and Sofie Tornhill, "The enemy’s enemy: feminism at the crossroads of neoliberal co-optation and anti-gender conservatism." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 28, no. 1 (2023): 62-82.

³⁶ Ramme, "Framing Solidarity," 475.

more short-term, momentary glimpses into protest identity and dynamics rather than the long-range, in-depth perspective of a protest held by protest organizer and spokespersons.

The following thesis therefore attempts to address the aforementioned absences in the scholarship. By engaging with contemporary debates on feminism, populism, nationalism and securitization, this thesis seeks to further understand the identity of the All Poland Women's Strike between 2016 and 2020, investigating how identity was initially formed, reinforced and expressed through activism.

Extensive scholarship exists already regarding the movement's perceptions of PiS as well as the Catholic Church. This thesis therefore focuses on the protest movement's relationship with other actors: liberal politicians, feminist civil society, foreign feminist groups and the European Union.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivism as a theoretical framework is best equipped to explain the formation of social movement identity. Constructivism refers to actors guiding their behaviour not by rationalist, geopolitical power dynamics, but through shared social structures, norms and identities.³⁷ Identity formation is a process in which beliefs about the world are developed through a process of interactions which come to create shared understandings and collective meanings.³⁸ Transforming post-Cold War security studies, the Constructivist approach proposed that security threats are not objective but socially constructed.³⁹ Securitization theory, which describes how groups define threats, allows insight into how movements form identity.

Coined by the Copenhagen School, Securitization theory is a model that describes how states interact with other states whom they deem to be threatening. The 'referent object' describes the object in need of protection, while the 'securitizing actor' articulates the nature of the threat, convincing the referent object that it is in need of protection. A 'securitizing move' describes how the securitizing actor articulates a given threat. Security threats are existential in nature and as such, they require extraordinary measures to be employed, outside the realm of

³⁷ Andrew Bradley Phillips, "Constructivism." In *International relations theory for the twenty-first century*, (Routledge, 2007): 70-84.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Brian Frederking, "Constructing Post-Cold War Collective Security," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 3 (2003): 363-78.

‘normal’ expected behaviour.⁴⁰ Proposing new definitions of ‘human security,’ scholars have since reconceptualised this framework, allowing the referent object of security to be reconceptualised to be expanded beyond the state, allowing individuals, even those who do not hold extensive power, to initiate securitizations.⁴¹

The question of *who* ‘speaks security’ is debated heavily across disciplines. While the securitizing actor can easily be framed as a leader exercising powerful influence, many social movement theorists contest this. Scholars propose that collective groups ‘speak security’ not always verbally, but through a common expression of identity.⁴² This is especially the case in decentralized movements, where ‘multimodal spectacles’ of protest can be used to express identity and action, in place of a formalized leader.⁴³ Bennet and Seggerborg similarly argue that digital technologies can replace organizational actors in the construction of collective identity.⁴⁴

Increasingly, securitization theory also overlaps with political science studies of populism. Bohdana Kurylo argues that populists' claims to defend ‘the people’ against elites’ inherently involves a repeated ‘articulation of a securitizing act that has staged the people as ‘endangered.’⁴⁵ In contrast to scientific and technocratic elites who ‘speak security’ in traditional securitization theory, ‘populists derive the authority to securitise from their status as political outsiders.’⁴⁶

Nevertheless, political scientists disagree about how this manifests differently across right and leftwing populism with studies of rightwing populism placing greater emphasis on concentrated leadership and leftwing populists focusing on grassroots groups as securitizing actors. This is explained by scholars such as Mouffe who argues leftwing populists are better at

⁴⁰ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 22–24.

⁴¹ Rita Floyd, "Human security and the Copenhagen School's securitization approach." *Human Security Journal* 5, no. 37 (2007): 40, 45.

⁴² Bohdana Kurylo, "Counter-populist performances of (in) security: Feminist resistance in the face of right-wing populism in Poland." *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 2 (2022): 5-6.

⁴³ Amir Keshtiban, Jamie L. Callahan, and Martin Harris. "Leaderlessness in social movements: Advancing space, symbols, and spectacle as modes of “Leadership”." *Human Resource Development Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2023): 19-43.

⁴⁴ Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg. "The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics." *Information, communication & society* 15, no. 5 (2012): 739-768.

⁴⁵ Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style and Representation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 113–32.

⁴⁶ Bohdana Kurylo, "The discourse and aesthetics of populism as securitisation style." *International Relations* 36, no. 1 (2022): 128.

constructing pluralistic, coalitional identities characterized by agonism, enhancing their capability at unitely expressing a common threat.⁴⁷

In contrast to Mouffe, Kurylo and others; this research supports Donatella Bonansinga's proposal that left and rightwing populism share more similarities than otherwise suggested. This research thus builds on the work of scholars sceptical of the new wave of 'leaderless' protest movements. Applying this to recent developments in Polish feminism, this thesis employs the concepts of 'networked microcelebrities' and 'digital vanguards.' Zeynep Tufekci proposes the concept of 'networked microcelebrities' as individuals who exercise significant influence on digital movements. Such individuals act as informal spokespersons, whose larger social media followings afford them greater legitimacy, allowing them to operate a status inbetween activist participant and leader.⁴⁸ Similarly, Paolo Gerbaudo describes 'digital vanguards' as individuals who operate in digitally-driven 'horizontal' social movements, but exercise greater control due to their possession of 'power accounts' which allow them to veto and post important campaign-related content.⁴⁹ Despite claiming to operate in leaderless movements, vanguards direct collective action through their monopoly on digital communication.⁵⁰

While this thesis acknowledges the potential of 'populist audiences' and non-verbal expressions as relevant in constructing (in)security, the following research treats identity construction as a more reciprocal relationship between follower and leader. Populist securitization is thus taken to be a 'two-way phenomenon' in which the leader must constantly reformulate and reinterpret the ongoing discourse and interpretations of their securitized threats.⁵¹

This study employs a populist-securitization framework to analyse the ways Marta Lempart, as the figurehead of the All Poland Women's strike engaged in this 'two-way process' with her audience, constructing the identity of movement from its inception and reinforcing this identity through subsequent strategies of activism.

⁴⁷ Mouffe, "For A Left Populism," (Verso, 2018)

⁴⁸ Zeynep Tufekci, "Not this one" social movements, the attention economy, and microcelebrity networked activism. *American behavioral scientist*, 57 (7), (2013) 848-870.

⁴⁹ Paolo Gerbaudo, "Social media teams as digital vanguards: the question of leadership in the management of key Facebook and Twitter accounts of Occupy Wall Street, Indignados and UK Uncut." *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 2 (2017): 7-9 (find right alignment of page numbers)

⁵⁰ Ibid 4.

⁵¹ Ibid 135.

Throughout the research, the term ‘movement’ is used to describe the broader range of activism enacted beyond street protests. The term is not used to encapsulate all actions, art, literature and speech that fall under the ‘feminist’ label in this time frame, but largely those actions enacted under the label of OSK which was the dominant banner under which many activists protested.

Methodology

Interview testimonies with OSK’s figurehead and leader, Marta Lempart make up the main base of source analysis for this research. Considering the theoretical approach employed by this research privileges the role of the leader and their verbal impact in constructing and communicating the movement’s identity, close textual analysis of Lempart’s speech will effectively highlight her strategies for framing.

Since the initial spotlight on her in October 2016, Lempart has given several interviews to both Polish and international media, the latter being the focus of this research. While they often reference the events of 2016 as well as 2020, most interviews took place in 2020-2021. NGOs advocating for democracy and citizenship like the Goethe Institute and European Civil Forum, tended to focus interviews and conversations around participatory democracy. While the International Planned Parenthood Federation, as an SRHR organization, had a more explicitly feminist focus. Similarly, Lempart’s interview with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation as part of the #FemaleChangeMaker project focused on her role as a champion of women’s rights.

One of the most insightful interviews was conducted earlier in OSK’s activism by the Turkish feminist media group, *Çatlak Zemin*.⁵² Published in 2020, the interview took place at the WAVE (Women Against Violence Europe) Conference in October 2019 in Tallinn. Despite the conference celebrating the achievements of feminist civil society in Europe, Lempart makes many of her most NGO-critical statements in this piece.⁵³ Perhaps because the outlet is less established internationally, Lempart’s statements appear particularly candid.

⁵² Marta Lempart “Background to the Istanbul Convention dispute in Poland / An interview with Marta Lempart on the Polish Women’s Strike,” interview by Feride Eralp, Filiz Karakuş, Hale Çelebi and Tuğçe Canbolat, *Catlak-Zemin*, September 21, 2020, accessed January 14, 2025. <https://en.catlakzemin.com/background-to-the-istanbul-convention-dispute-in-poland-an-interview-with-marta-lempart-on-the-polish-womens-strike/>

⁵³ ‘The 21st WAVE conference, “25 Years of Defending Women’s Human Rights: Milestones and Visions for the Future“ is a celebration of the work the WAVE Network has done over the last quarter century and will be taking place in Tallinn, Estonia from October 7-9, 2019’ *Wave Network*, September 4, 2019, <https://wave-network.org/2019-wave-conference-draft-programme-now-available/>

Beyond Marta Lempart, this research also draws on interviews with other activist coordinators as well as protest-participant interviews, recorded by other scholars. For OSK's involvement with the EU, the European parliament hearing conducted in February 2021 was consulted, which was jointly organized by the Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs and Women's Rights and Gender Committees.⁵⁴

The chosen period for this thesis begins with the outbreak of widespread protests in October 2016 when OSK, as a collective first emerged. 2021 was chosen as the endpoint as conversations around the movement's significance reached their peak in size, media coverage and interactions with the European parliament. This was followed by a 'submerged phase' where activism was less publicly visible, and there was less scope for research material in the form of interviews and press coverage.⁵⁵

The focus of this thesis was however, restricted by certain research limitations. Language barriers accessing Polish resources necessitated that all material was selected from English-language resources and translated material available online. While this did not significantly affect access to interview material with Marta Lempart due to her proficiency in English-language media, it may have indirectly concealed the dissenting voices of others active within OSK with lower English-language proficiency and international engagement.

Furthermore, given the recency of the events explored in this thesis, a further disadvantage may be the limited opportunity for academics to comment on the events involved. Many of the authors who initially branded OSK as a manifestation of 'leaderless' populist feminism, did so before Lempart's growing recognition in the media and the organization's 'institutionalization' in 2020 following even larger-scale protests. Nevertheless, this research examines her testimonies about the 2016 protests in depth, around which the scholarly categorizations were made.

Structure

The thesis is subdivided into 3 chapters. Chapter 1 provides a historical overview of attitudes regarding feminism and abortion in Poland. This is then followed by an account of Marta

⁵⁴ "Attacks on abortion rights and breaches of the rule of law in Poland," Press Release, FEMM LIBE, *European Parliament*, February 23, 2021, accessed January 14, 2025.
<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20210219IPR98207/attacks-on-abortion-rights-and-breaches-of-the-rule-of-law-in-poland>

⁵⁵ Muszel and Piotrowski, "What Comes after a Cycle of Protests"

Lempart, providing a case for how she exercised considerable control and influence over the identity of the movement

Chapter 2 focuses on how an anti-establishment character formed in the protests' earliest days and came to shape OSK's ongoing relationships with political parties and civil society. Chapter 3 looks at the movement's attempts to construct a transnational identity, affecting subsequent collaborative activism with international feminist groups as well as advocacy efforts with the European Union. In conclusion, all chapters all synthesized together to present a clearer picture of the development of the All Poland Women's Strike's identity and its significance in reflecting shifting beliefs in wider Polish society,

Chapter 1: Foundations for Protest

To understand some of the facets of OSK as a movement, a historical account of the conflicts in Polish feminism is first provided. In this section, the role of liberal governments, civil society and the EU in perpetuating restrictions on abortion, are all outlined, laying the foundations for some of OSK's guiding beliefs. In contrast with more bottom-up conceptions of collective action and identity formation, this chapter provides evidence for how Marta Lempart exercised considerable influence over OSK as figurehead of the movement, from its inception to its later advocacy efforts.

The Issue of Abortion in Polish History

Catholicism had long been a mainstay of Polish cultural identity with significant consequences for the country's attitudes regarding abortion and gender roles. This is in large part due to the role played by the Church in aiding the Solidarity Party's (Solidarność) political efforts in the post-communist transition period.⁵⁶ The 1989 'abortion compromise' describes the agreement made between Church and State to outlaw abortion.⁵⁷ Such legislative changes also occurred in tandem with other religious efforts in the 1980s to re-emphasize Catholic teachings. Culturally, motherhood became increasingly glorified as Polish women became celebrated for being self-sacrificing.⁵⁸ The pro-life agenda of the 'Polish Pope' John Paul II, took on greater cultural significance both domestically and internationally.⁵⁹

In addition to the Catholic Church, the country's post-communist transition is also widely cited as responsible for the distinct trajectory of women's rights in the country. Scholars argue that the legacy of communism and its claims to represent women's interests left many older generations of women sceptical of the idea that the state could be a guarantor of equality. Moreover, at the same time that the Church was engaging in its campaign to establish a patriarchal order in the 1990s, gender equality was also becoming increasingly associated with

⁵⁶ Marta Warat, "For The Sake of Family And Religion. Nationalist-Religious Discourse On The Convention On Preventing And Combating Violence Against Women And Domestic Violence." *Studia Humanistyczne AGH* 15, no. 3 (2016). 108.

⁵⁷ Sabrina Ramet, "Thy will be done: the Catholic Church and politics in Poland since 1989." A Timothy and Peter J. Katzenstein, eds. *Religion in an expanding Europe*, (Cambridge University Press, 2006): 122.

⁵⁸ Graff, "Claiming the shipyard, the cowboy hat, and the anchor for women," 472-473.

⁵⁹ Joanna Sieracka, "The Church and Polish Feminism: Forever Enemies? A Secular Feminist Perspective." *Prace Kulturoznawcze* 21, no. 1 (2017): 127.

the West. As Western banks and corporations flocked to institute ‘capitalism by design’ in CEE nations, many Western-funded women’s NGOs simultaneously sprung up in an attempt to deliver feminism to the fledgling democracy in a process of ‘feminism-by-design’.⁶⁰ Feminists rushed to predict that women would be the ‘losers’ of Poland’s transition to capitalism, highlighting the gender inequality of previous decades and perpetuating victim narratives.⁶¹ Scholars argue that the cultural feminism exported by NGOs had little appreciation for the legacies of socialism in the country.⁶² CSOs often misunderstood that ‘women from Central and Eastern European countries always prioritized resistance against class oppression above agitations based on any specific form of gendered subjugation.’⁶³ Moreover, in Poland as in much of CEE, many of the NGOs that did emerge were disconnected from local communities, prioritising transnational networks and recreating the language of Western donors to attract funding.⁶⁴

Poland vs Europe

This dichotomy between the capitalist West and Poland as a country of deeper moral values was exacerbated during the country's debate to join the European Union between 1994-2004. Like other smaller states in Europe, Poland has grappled with the ‘integration dilemma,’ namely the fear that European integration threatened national sovereignty as greater powers would dominate EU decisions; whilst simultaneously fearing that opting out of EU integration might lead to geopolitical isolation.⁶⁵ Around this time the Church and numerous politicians repeatedly warned of the dangers Europeanization might have on Polish cultural ‘family values’.⁶⁶ John Paul II’s *Ecclesia in Europa* lamented the decline of religion in Europe and articulated his hopes for an expanded European Union connecting itself with the Church.⁶⁷ Consequently, some of those who were in favour of European integration, argued that Poland’s role in Europe lay within the sphere of religious influence.

⁶⁰ Kristen Ghodsee, "Feminism-by-design: emerging capitalisms, cultural feminism, and women’s nongovernmental organizations in postsocialist Eastern Europe." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 3 (2004): 727-753.

⁶¹ Grabowska, “Bringing the Second World In,” 733-736.

⁶² Ibid 727-728.

⁶³ Ibid 730.

⁶⁴ Ibid 738-739.

⁶⁵ Søren Riishøj, “Europeanization and Euroscepticism: Experiences from Poland and the Czech Republic,” Syddansk Universitet. Det Samfundsvideenskabelige Fakultet.Nr. 25 (Political Science Publications Bind 2010): 7.

⁶⁶ Warat, "For The Sake of Family And Religion," 110-111.

⁶⁷ Ramet, “Thy will be done,” 109-110.

Contrary to visions of Poland as a religious player, women's rights activists hoped that EU members would provide greater opportunities for feminist activism. However, feminist activists were presented as threatening the accession process by advocating for abortion with pro-choice protests seen as endangering negotiations.⁶⁸ Despite claims from the European Commission that gender equality and LGBTQ rights were essential priorities in the enlargement process, neither issue was allotted significant priority in accession negotiations.⁶⁹ To obtain the backing of Catholic voters, Polish parties reached an agreement with the Church to deprioritize reproductive rights and actively avoid abortion discussions which had become increasingly politicised.⁷⁰ Thus the country entered into its second 'abortion compromise' between Church and state. In a backlash effort, prominent women across the country wrote the '100 Women's Letter', addressed to the EU parliament in protest, calling for open debate on abortion in Poland.⁷¹ While this act helped keep the issue alive, abortion remained a taboo for years to come.

Feminism and the EU

Despite disappointments in the EU accession process, EU membership constituted allowed for the Polish women's movement to undergo a new era of institutionalization. For the first time, women's NGOs could gain access to the EU's structural funds to fund gender equality initiatives. Moreover, the 2007 Schengen agreement allowed Polish women to move across Europe freely and thereby access abortion services across Europe.⁷² Nevertheless, old power dynamics persisted. To gain funding for gender equality projects, feminist initiatives had to frame objectives in line with European values. For many NGOs, embracing European 'master frames' was a 'colossal undertaking.'⁷³ Furthermore, when Polish organizations did join European consortiums, they joined often at a more junior level, operating as partners rather than leaders.⁷⁴ Such practices therefore reinforced what feminist scholars emphasize as the West's enduring

⁶⁸ Gazeta Wyborcza, on 5 July 2002 ("Kłopot") found in Agnieszka Graff, "Lost between the waves? The paradoxes of feminist chronology and activism in contemporary Poland." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 4, no. 2 (2003): 109, 110.

⁶⁹ Fuchs, "Case study: Polish non-governmental women's organisations," 54-65.

⁷⁰ Warat, "For The Sake of Family And Religion," 109.

⁷¹ Graff, "Lost between the waves?" 110.

⁷² Ewelina Ciaputa, "Abortion and the Catholic Church in Poland," Sethna, Christabelle, and Gayle Davis, eds. *Abortion across Borders : Transnational Travel and Access to Abortion Services*. (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019)

⁷³ Gesine Fuchs, "Case study: Polish non-governmental women's organisations and the EU." *Participation of Civil Society in New Modes of Governance. The Case of the New EU Member States* (2006): 57.

⁷⁴ Magdalena Grabowska, "Gender equality in Poland after EU accession." *Expectations and reality. Berlin: Heinrich Böll Stiftung* (2014). 13-16.

characterisation of Polish civil society as forever ‘lagging behind’ and desiring to ‘catch up’ with more developed and experienced Western civil society.⁷⁵ In addition, Polish feminists did not enjoy the same level of representation as many of their Western counterparts as attempts to create a national body to represent Polish interests in the European Women’s Lobby repeatedly failed. While Polish feminists were intent on prioritising campaigns for abortion, the EWL’s focus was on economic empowerment.⁷⁶ While Europeanization did result in initiatives like workplace discrimination legislation coming into force, it simultaneously contributed to the ongoing “NGO-ization of resistance.”⁷⁷

Despite the Europeanization and institutionalization of gender politics, Polish feminist groups did show signs in the 2010s of reconnecting with grassroots organizing and re-establishing a sense of grounded Polish identity.⁷⁸ Established women’s organizations like the Congress of Women as well as protest movements like the 8th of March movement had already increasingly incorporated patriotic sentiments into their organizations.⁷⁹ Korolczuk highlights the significant progress Polish feminists made in critiquing neoliberalism resisting the ‘professionalization and depoliticization of civic activism’.⁸⁰ The Feminist Think Tank worked with women being threatened with eviction, whilst Warsaw feminists began coordinating initiatives with labour unions and networks supporting single mothers.⁸¹

PiS and the Anti-Gender Backlash

Despite feminists’ best efforts, an emerging transnational anti-gender movement increasingly took hold of Polish politics. Coined by the Vatican in the 1990s, transnational organizations protesting ‘gender ideology’ linked the rise of gender and sexuality equality movements with the breakdown of normative conceptions of masculinity and femininity and ‘traditional family

⁷⁵ Redi Koobak, and Raili Marling. "The decolonial challenge: Framing post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe within transnational feminist studies." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 21, no. 4 (2014): 333.

⁷⁶ Arundhati Roy argues that the NGOization of social movements results not only in professionalisation but deep depoliticization as NGOs become accountable to funders over the general public. See Roy, Arundhati. "The NGO-ization of Resistance." *Toward Freedom* 8, no. 2 (2014).

⁷⁷ Elzbieta Korolczuk, "Neoliberalism and feminist organizing: from “NGO-ization of resistance” to resistance against neoliberalism." *Solidarity in Struggle* 32 (2016). 34.

⁷⁸ Graff, "Claiming the shipyard, the cowboy hat, and the anchor for women," 484.

⁷⁹ Ramme, "Framing Solidarity," 473.

⁸⁰ Korolczuk, "Neoliberalism and feminist organizing," 32.

⁸¹ *Ibid* 36.

values.⁸² Abortion activism, feminism and LGBT rights were framed as threatening the hegemonic social order by confusing men and women about their real ‘roles’ in society. In Poland, controversy arose in 2013 over an initiative promoting gender equality in kindergartens. Right-wing groups attacked the programme for its promotion of ‘gender ideology,’ threatening ‘Polish family values.’ While the programme was funded by the ESF and partially the result of EU efforts to promote gender mainstreaming, critics presented the programme as a conspiratorial effort by the EU to undermine Polish family values, with feminist organizations acting as brainwashed collaborators.⁸³ Similarly, the EU’s Istanbul convention was attacked as promoting gender ideology under the guise of helping women.⁸⁴ Graff and Korolczuk describe how rightwing groups characterised gender ideology as “ebola from Brussels,” connecting gender with the language of colonialism.⁸⁵ While such politics was part of the discourse in Poland from 2011 onwards, PiS’s election allowed anti-gender ideology to become ‘the official political ideology of the state.’⁸⁶ In addition to restricting abortion, public funds for IVF schemes were cancelled, a transgender rights bill was vetoed, and funds were cut from the Ombudsman.⁸⁷ Feminist civil society organizations suffered significant cuts to funding as well as legal harassment and office raids.⁸⁸

Despite such controversies surrounding ‘gender ideology’ and its alleged links to malicious European agendas, political scientists argue the election of PiS had more to do with domestic politics than reflecting widespread Euroscepticism.⁸⁹ PiS’s rhetoric departed radically from previous EU-critical opposition parties, who had always adopted more accommodating rhetoric towards the EU after becoming established in government.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, attitudes amongst the population had always been mixed. On the positive side, Poles had long viewed

⁸² Roman Kuhar, and Mojca Pajnik. "Re-nationalizing Citizenship and Democratic Backsliding: Anti-gender Mobilizations in Central-Eastern Europe." In *The Palgrave handbook of gender and citizenship* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2024): 6-7.

⁸³ Marta Rawłuszko, "And if the opponents of gender ideology are right? Gender politics, Europeanization, and the democratic deficit." *Politics & Gender* 17, no. 2 (2021): 305-317

⁸⁴ Krizsán, and Conny Roggeband. "Resistance, Resilience and Resignation" 154.

⁸⁵ Elżbieta Korolczuk and Agnieszka Graff, "Gender as ‘Ebola from Brussels’: The Anticolonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism." *Signs* 43, no. 4 (2018): 797–821.

⁸⁶ "Kuhar and Pajnik. "Re-nationalizing Citizenship and Democratic Backsliding," 8.

⁸⁷ Joanna Sieracka, "The Church and Polish Feminism: Forever Enemies? A Secular Feminist Perspective." *Prace Kulturoznawcze* 21, no. 1 (2017) 131.

⁸⁸ Krizsán, and Conny Roggeband. "Resistance, Resilience and Resignation," 161-164.

⁸⁹ Riishøj, "Europeanization and Euroscepticism," 34.

⁹⁰ Krzysztof Zuba, "From the poster boy of Europeanization to the sick man of Europe: thirty years (1990–2019) of Poland’s European policy." *European Politics and Society* 22, no. 3 (2021): 394-409.

Europeanization as a means of modernising the country, associated with a return to ‘normal order’ post-communism.⁹¹ In the 1990s and early 2000s Polish voters often expressed support for membership based on the EU’s strong institutions, while expressing low confidence in Polish institutions.⁹²

Nevertheless, the inverse of this framing was the sense that Poland was ‘catching up with the West’ and therefore inherently underdeveloped.⁹³ For the Polish government, Europeanization was therefore an asymmetrical process where the EU held leverage. For Polish citizens, they felt they were not perceived as equal members of the European community.⁹⁴ Opposition to EU membership therefore tended to take on an identity-based character related to the protection of Polish cultural values and the importance of the Catholic Church.⁹⁵ By the mid-2010s many Poles increasingly raised concerns about the potential threat of the EU toward Polish sovereignty.⁹⁶ While much of the right-wing rhetoric intentionally weaponized cultural anxieties and promoted misinformed conspiracies about the EU at this time, Marta Rawłuszko argues right-wing groups were correct in arguing that Poland’s gender equality initiatives were a result of Europeanization, marked by ‘elitist and technocratic tendencies’ as well as a ‘significant democratic deficit.’⁹⁷ According to the 2017 European Values Study, Polish society was almost equally split between those expressing trust and distrust in the EU.⁹⁸ Even for those parts of the population who had always been enthusiastic about European integration, support post-2015 was waning following the EU’s failure to address Poland’s rule of law crisis. Introducing the concept of the ‘Eurodisappointed,’ Markowski and Zagórski describe them as ‘hitherto strong supporters of integration who were disappointed with the lack of response of the EU to breaches of the rule of law of its member states.’⁹⁹

⁹¹ Riishøj, “Europeanization and Euroscepticism,” 9

⁹² Ibid 24.

⁹³ Ibid 9.

⁹⁴ Konieczna-Sałamatin and Sawicka describe a ‘Polishness complex’ whereby Poles feel they occupy a lower status in the hierarchy of how different European countries are perceived in Joanna Konieczna-Sałamatin, and Maja Sawicka. “The East of the West, or the West of the East? Attitudes toward the European Union and European Integration in Poland after 2008.” *East European Politics and Societies* 35, no. 2 (2021): 372.

⁹⁵ Søren. “Europeanization and Euroscepticism,” 25-26.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Rawłuszko, “And if the opponents of gender ideology are right?” 303.

⁹⁸ Konieczna-Sałamatin and Sawicka describe a ‘Polishness complex’ whereby Poles feel they occupy a lower status in the hierarchy of how different European countries are perceived. Konieczna-Sałamatin and Sawicka, “The East of the West, or the West of the East?” 372.

⁹⁹ Radosław Markowski and Piotr Zagórski. “The Eurodisappointed: On the disenchantment with the EU's limited response to democratic backsliding.” *European Union Politics* 25, no. 2 (2024): 223-244.

Therefore, historical developments between 1989 and 2015 demonstrate the interwoven politics of gender equality, the Catholic Church and Europeanization. PiS's abortion policies, can therefore not be considered a standalone issue but part of the border policy agenda to oppose 'gender ideology' associating such policies with capitalism, Western threats to Polish sovereignty and the breakdown of Polish cultural values regarding the family and respect for the Church.

Who defines the movement?

Having established the socio-political conditions preceding the outbreak of protests, the following section will discuss the movement's organizational dynamics. Despite arguments from scholars that the Black Strikes was decentralized and community-driven in its organization, the following research posits that some of the movement's identity formation can be attributed to its figurehead.¹⁰⁰

Elżbieta Korolczuk argues that individuals at the 2016 protests collectively formed a feminist identity based on the logic of 'connective action' rather than collective action.¹⁰¹ In the latter, protesters are guided by leading organizations, who mobilise resources, develop 'common action frames' and help smooth over 'organizational differences.'¹⁰² Alternatively, in connective action, organizational leadership plays a much smaller role. Online technologies like social media, and the use of 'personalized action themes' allow individuals to construct the protest identity without guidance from above.¹⁰³

While the overall wave of 2016 constituted 'organizationally enabled digitally networked action' in that it involved coordination and input from feminist experts, NGOs and political parties, The All-Poland Women's strike specifically was an example of a 'self-organizing network' where there was little or no organizational coordination.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Graff writes that "the movement spread quickly despite the lack of centralized top-down coordination." Graff, "Angry Women," 241.

¹⁰¹ Korolczuk, "Explaining mass protests against abortion ban in Poland," 91-113.

¹⁰² Bennett and Segerberg, "The logic of connective action," 751.

¹⁰³ Bennett and Segerberg, "The logic of connective action," 757. Korolczuk, "Explaining mass protests," 100-101.

¹⁰⁴ Bennett and Segerberg, "The logic of connective action," 756. Korolczuk, "Explaining mass protests," 100-101.

Pluralist vs Majoritarian Outlook

There is no doubt that OSK's organizational philosophy was pluralistic and celebratory of diversity. Nevertheless, a closer examination of the movement's operational approach reveals issues with this approach. When asked where the boundaries lay for who could join, Lempart argued that anyone could, joking that of course far right, fascists would be excluded.¹⁰⁵ While such loose identity frames were helpful for 'scaling up' protests, it appears to have led to difficulties for the collective's meetings. Lempart describes one example:

*"In the beginning we had to exclude men... when men would speak in meetings everybody would listen to them. This was a problem. It had to change in women themselves because they were the ones stopping and waiting for a man to say something. Eventually it changed, and now we have men working with us on a daily basis although not very many... Because, you see, they are the same people fighting for democracy, for judicial independence... It is always the same five people in a small city."*¹⁰⁶

While Lempart acknowledges these instances of entrenched patriarchal power dynamics, she attributes this issue to how women are socialised rather than establishing boundaries to limit male contribution. Rather than limiting male involvement in women's spaces, the change had to occur 'in women themselves'. The men were deemed essential because of their experience in democratic activism and yet it is this experience and their lack of appreciation for patriarchal power dynamics that allowed them to dominate, undermining OSK's core principles. As critics of horizontality have previously argued, 'If the movement continues deliberately to not select who shall exercise power, it does not thereby abolish power.'¹⁰⁷ This example therefore provides insight into how OSK's initial identity traits shaped the collective's behavior.

In her study of grassroots feminist and populist organizing, Akwugo Emejulu describes how progressive populists often advocate for a decentralization of power to enact more direct democracy.¹⁰⁸ Groups employ 'non-ideological majoritarian strategies' whereby organizing is

¹⁰⁵ Lempart, "#Changemaker," (34:00-37:00)

¹⁰⁶ Lempart, "Background to the Istanbul Convention dispute," *Catlak-Zemin*.

¹⁰⁷ Jo Freeman, "The tyranny of structurelessness." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 3/4 (2013): 243.

¹⁰⁸ In the US examples of past progressive populist movements include those in the 1980s campaigning around anti-nuclear issues, housing and factory closures such as 'Association of Community Organisations for Reform Now' (ACORN) For more see Akwugo Emejulu, "Can 'the people' be feminists? Analysing the fate of feminist

based on the ‘authentic’ interests of the community. In her studies of progressive populist movements from the 1980s, ideologies like feminism and anti-racism were not promoted for fear of disrupting the community’s sense of unity.¹⁰⁹ While such strategies promoted solidarity, ultimately, the desire for hegemonic unity inadvertently suppressed disagreements, marginalizing identities and preventing the development of ‘feminist consciousness.’¹¹⁰ More recently, Paloma Caravates came to a similar conclusion in her study of the Spanish populist party, *Podemos*. Despite their commitments to gender equality and egalitarian principles of organizing, the party still ended up concentrating power in a handful of individuals, reproducing gendered power dynamics and homogenising their idea of ‘the people.’¹¹¹ As such, OSK’s desire to refrain from strict adherence to ideology left both the scope and ‘house rules’ of the collective unclear. Much like other progressive populist movements, their desire to privilege majoritarian thinking appeared to limit the capacity for structural change.

The Importance of leadership

For many scholars, the lack of individual leadership constituted a unique achievement for OSK as a collective. In her populist feminist thesis, Agnieszka Graff does acknowledge that some protesters became nationally ‘well known’, however figures such as Marta Lempart did not reach the status of a ‘star.’¹¹² The idea of movement ‘starts’ first arose in US feminist movements, whereby scholars realised that despite movement attempts to remain leaderless without official spokespersons, invariably certain women are selected by the media as ‘stars’ to represent the cause.¹¹³ This dynamic occurred both as a result of the need of the press to query someone for comment in the absence of an official body and as a result of feminists’ refusal to acknowledge how leaders naturally emerge.¹¹⁴ In her seminal 1972 essay, Jo Freeman reigned against ‘the tyranny of the structureless; arguing that a commitment to horizontality does not ‘does not prevent the formation of informal structures, only formal ones.’¹¹⁵ She argues that in many ways,

justice claims in populist grassroots movements in the United States." *Interface: a journal for and about social movements* 3, no. 2 (2011): 131.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid 132.

¹¹⁰ Ibid 133-136.

¹¹¹ Paloma Caravantes, "Tensions between populist and feminist politics: The case of the Spanish left populist party Podemos." *International Political Science Review* 42, no. 5 (2021): 596-612.

¹¹² Graff, "Angry women," 240.

¹¹³ Freeman, "The tyranny of structurelessness." 238.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid 232

informal power structures concentrate power as many are not privy to the invisible rules of decision-making, and this power is limited to those who ‘know the rules.’¹¹⁶

This thesis promotes that Marta Lempart can be considered a ‘star’ of the Polish women’s movement, sharing many characteristics with populist leaders, and exercising a considerable degree of influence over the movement’s identity and the subsequent path of activism. Employing the concepts of ‘digital vanguard’ and ‘microcelebrity networked activism’ this research contests the idea that the digital nature of the movement prevented such leadership dynamics.

While social media-driven horizontal protest movements are often deemed to be more egalitarian in terms of power dynamics, Paolo Gerbuado points out that official protest social media ‘power accounts’ demonstrate the limits of horizontal activism. He argues that since only select individuals are responsible for vetting and posting content, specific activists can become ‘digital vanguards’ whilst others are not.¹¹⁷ While Lempart’s control over the protest movement’s social media content likely varied over the studied period, she does indicate at least in the earlier stages a greater degree of personal control:

“We have this national organization that does national mobilizations. So when someone puts a proposal on Facebook about something happening, I collect all the commentaries, put them in groups and edit them into the post until it is done. This way we don’t fight in the comments, instead everybody reads the post that has been changed accordingly.”¹¹⁸

“With this whole calling, you have to call yourself a feminist issue, there were the discussions so and I had to intervene, and we intervened a lot on that.”¹¹⁹

While Lempart’s actions no doubt helped address organizational conflicts, it is clear she held greater control over how opinions were expressed within the movement. Moreover, her huge

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Paolo Gerbuado, "Social media teams as digital vanguards: the question of leadership in the management of key Facebook and Twitter accounts of Occupy Wall Street, Indignados and UK Uncut." *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 2 (2017): 185-202.

¹¹⁸ Lempart, “Background to the Istanbul Convention dispute,” *Catlak-Zemin*.

¹¹⁹ Marta Lempart, “#femalechangemaker: Poland: Women’s rights under threat – Webtalk with activist Marta Lempart,” interview by Karoline Gil, *Friedrich-Naumann-stiftung*, June 17, 2021, audio 27:34- 28:00, <https://plus.freiheit.org/mediathek/femalechangemaker-poland> (Hereafter cited as Lempart, “#femalechangemaker”)

personal following on social media alongside official protest accounts signifies the widespread recognition of her as a figure of significance.¹²⁰ This aligns closely with Tufekci's concept of 'microcelebrity networked activism' referring to 'politically motivated non-institutional actors who use affordances of social media to engage in presentation of their political and personal selves to garner public attention to their cause.'¹²¹

In political science as well as social psychology, scholars argue that such figures are vital to engaging in identity entrepreneurship, shaping the norms and values of their followers.¹²² Despite the women's liberation movement long aspiring to rid itself of patriarchal conceptions of hierarchy and leadership, 'stars' of the women's movement, in the form of informal spokespeople have always emerged.¹²³

Furthermore, given the conceptions of the movement as populism, much of the political science literature suggests the necessity of a charismatic populist leader - one that both embodies their followers whilst also being perceived as exceptional in some way, possessing unique leadership qualities that make them appear more credible and influential.¹²⁴ In many ways, Lempart reflected the demographic of her followers. She was a woman from a lower-income background. She had no prior experience in feminist activism or academia. She was from Wrocław rather than the capital city.¹²⁵ Nevertheless, she possessed unique leadership qualities. From a personal standpoint, she has been described as 'relentless, focused, deadly logical and unflappable,' with a distinct ability to speak to people's emotions in a clear, emotive, concise manner.¹²⁶ On a practical level, Lempart also had experience in disabilities activism, had worked for the Ministry of Labour and had trained as a lawyer. In their study of social movements,

¹²⁰ As of January 2025, on the platform X (formerly known as Twitter) Marta Lempart has 36.6k followers, <https://x.com/martalempart>, whilst OSK co-founder has a following of 16.5k, <https://x.com/KSuchanow>

¹²¹ Tufekci, "Not this one" social movements, the attention economy, and microcelebrity networked activism," 850.

¹²² Mete Sefa, Uysal, Klara Jurstakova, and Yasemin Uluşahin, "An integrative social identity model of populist leadership." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 16, no. 12 : e12713. (2022) 7-8.

¹²³ Jo Freeman discusses the concept of how feminist 'stars' emerge in Freeman, "The tyranny of structurelessness." 231-246.

¹²⁴ Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, *Twenty First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

¹²⁵ Lempart, "Background to the Istanbul Convention dispute," *Catlak-Zemin*.

¹²⁶ Marta Lempart, "Marta: The Freedom Fighter – "The Only Thing I Have Left is to Keep Running," Interview by Dominika Kasprowicz, edited by Anna Michalowicz. *Defend the Defenders*, International Planned Parenthood Federation. Accessed January 13, 2025. <https://defendthedefenders.eu/marta-the-freedom-fighter/> (Hereafter cited as Lempart, "Marta: The Freedom Fighter.")

Morris and Steggenborg highlight that leadership often requires a degree of intellectualism to perform tasks like coalition-building, orating, strategising and engaging with the media.¹²⁷

Despite her repeated resistance to the label, many journalists in their coverage and a smaller number of academics refer to Marta Lempart as the movement's de facto leader.¹²⁸ Moreover, she has been individually awarded by several media outlets in 2020 for her leadership and nationwide impact.¹²⁹ The most profound evidence however comes from a story produced by the International Planned Parenthood Federation.¹³⁰ Labelling her as “irreplaceable,” the authors describe Lempart as the “engine” who “sets the tone and gives a face to the social movement.” Referring to her directly as the “movement’s leader”, they argue her “charisma drives activists across the country.”¹³¹

Furthermore, Lempart’s influence can be seen as expanding as the movement grew. In November 2020 following their biggest yet wave of protests, OSK announced the formation of an ‘advisory council’. Following in the footsteps of Belarussian democracy activists (another originally ‘leaderless’ movement), OSK coordinators decided to create a more formal group to collate their now wide-ranging demands.¹³² Quelvenec describes the formation of the OSK Advisory Council as the ‘crystallization of the movement.’¹³³ Despite Lempart’s recommendation to other social movements to “Get rid of the management board” the council appears to signify a degree of formalization.¹³⁴ The creation of an official website, a headquarters

¹²⁷ Aldon Morris and Suzanne Staggborg, “Leadership in social movements,” *The Blackwell companion to social movements* (2004): 171-196.

¹²⁸ Quelvenec, “Polish feminism in the (battle) field,” 18; Muszel and Piotrowski, “What Comes after a Cycle of Protests”; Marta Lempart, “Marta Lempart on leading Poland’s abortion rights protests.” Interview by *The Financial Times*, December 2, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/b6012449-0c11-419a-b439-6e3320f47e86>

¹²⁹ Lempart was voted Superheroine of 2020 by *High Heels*, a magazine connected with *Gazeta Wyborcza*, “Lempart, Traczyk-Stawska i Rudzińska-Bluszcz nagrodzone w plebiscycie Superbohaterka WO. Relacja z gali,” May, 24, 2021, <https://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/akcje-specjalne/7.156847.27122728.traczyk-stawska-rudzinska-bluszcz-i-marta-lempart-nagrodzone.html?disableRedirects=true>; Forbes Poland names her one of its top influential women of 2020, “Kobiety Roku 2020 Forbes Women,” *Forbes*, May 8, 2021. <https://www.forbes.pl/forbeswomen/lista-kobiety-roku-2020-forbes-women-zobacz-liste-stu-wybitnych-kobiet-mijajacego/0ehy80g>

¹³⁰ Lempart, “Marta: The Freedom Fighter.”

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Masha Gessen, “The Abortion Protests are starting to feel like a revolution,” *The New Yorker*, November 17, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-abortion-protests-in-poland-are-starting-to-feel-like-a-revolution>

¹³³ Quelvenec, “Polish feminism in the (battle) field,” 25.

¹³⁴ “The Polish Women's Strike: getting small-town women into the fight for women's rights,” EESC info - SPECIAL - Civil Society Prize 2019, *The European Economic and Social Committee* <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/eesc-info/022020/articles/76096>

office, as well as the organization's accrual of funds all suggest a concentration of power. Moreover, Lempart's rising status domestically and internationally as an activist denotes an expansion of power in her role as spokesperson.

That said, Lempart did not assume direct control over the movement's character or plans of action. The above examples, however, demonstrate that she held more power than her fellow activists. This research simply suggests that Lempart exercised a greater influence on the developing identity of the movement than has previously been argued. Lempart can be considered a leader, but one who enjoyed much greater accountability to her peers.

A fragile two-way relationship

An incident that highlights the fragile, reciprocal relationship between protest followers and founders is described by Joanna Rak. In 2018, the founder of another Polish feminist collective, Gals for Gals (*Dziewuchy Dziewuchom*) Agata Maciejewska, decided to register the movement's name as patent, two years after the group's establishment.¹³⁵ Similar to OSK, the online group had been established around the time of the abortion restrictions in 2016 to coordinate protest activism and engage in feminist discussion. However, her decision to trademark the name meant online activists were barred from mobilizing around the moniker as Facebook administrators required that local groups establish new names.¹³⁶ This act shattered many activists' perception of collective identity as they felt the movement had become possessed and commercialized by a leader who didn't bother to explain her decision, highlighting the fragility of leader-follower dynamics.¹³⁷

Marta Lempart's role was therefore not incontestable. She exercised a strong influence on the group and by association, the movement's collective identity; however, this still needed to be sanctioned by those who participated in protest activism. As Kurylo argues in her populist securitization framework, populist figures must constantly engage in a dialogue with their audience and gain approval for their securitizing moves.¹³⁸ Lempart's influence was in part contingent on her success in embodying 'the people' and her presentation of the events at hand. As Gunnarsson-Payne argues, feminist issues have acted as triggers for mass-mobilization, not

¹³⁵ Joanna Rak, "The impact of morally injurious events on the dynamics of mobilization for women's rights in Poland." *Przegląd Politologiczny* 3 (2022): 36.

¹³⁶ *Ibid* 40.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*.

¹³⁸ Kurylo, "The discourse and aesthetics of populism," 135.

because the issues are new, but because movements have ‘managed to effectively ‘frame’, narrate, and symbolize experiences of frustration, and even despair, already present the lives of many, in a way which could not be captured within hegemonic discourses.’¹³⁹

Conclusion

Accordingly, this thesis posits that the All Poland Women’s Strike (OSK), the Black strikes of October 2016 and the overall movement of abortion activism between 2016 and 2021 cannot be considered ‘leaderless.’ Lempart’s personal and professional capabilities, as outlined by colleagues demonstrate her ability to sway public opinion. Using a populist-feminist securitization framework, this research suggests Lempart defined the identity of the strikes and as a result the movement. This is not intended as a direct contradiction of the arguments made by Korolczuk, Graff and others; rather it seeks to propose that this activism may not have been as self-organizing and unmediated as some scholars have suggested.

¹³⁹ Jenny Gunnarsson Payne, "Feminism and Populism: Strange Bedfellows or a Perfect Match?." *Etica & Politica* 25, no. 2 (2023): 276.

Chapter 2: All Poland Women's Strike vs 'the Establishment'

Scholars describe the All Poland Women's strike as being an anti-establishment movement, celebrated for its inclusive rhetoric and diverse participation of 'ordinary' women from all walks of life.¹⁴⁰ Using a populist-securitization framework this chapter will delve deeper into OSK's anti-establishment identity and debate the extent to which the movement can be considered pluralistic and successful in its coalition-building between disparate groups. Research will then trace the formation of anti-establishment identity from the earliest days of the strikes, and how this was reinforced by Lempart throughout the protest movement's duration. Finally, this chapter will conclude with what the desire to erase hierarchy reveals about broader Polish feminist trends and Polish society in general.

The first days of the strike: An inclusive approach

From its very inception, OSK was devised to be a movement for every type of Polish woman. Modelled on the 1975 Icelandic Women's Strike, the protest was envisioned to involve women from towns and cities nationwide.¹⁴¹ To successfully protest the PiS government's plans across 400 Polish towns and cities, one had to be familiar with the environment in which they were demonstrating. Consequently, Lempart's founding principle was that mutual trust and local knowledge should govern mobilization, rather than appointing roles based on a deep feminist understanding:

*"We didn't have any rules or procedures for what people could or couldn't do. I trust that everybody knows what they are doing, especially in small and medium-sized cities, because they put their face and their names on it, they work there and they live there, and everybody knows them. They wouldn't do anything to hurt themselves in public in their local communities, so they make their own decisions."*¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Gunnarsson-Paine, "Feminism and Populism," 2. ; Ramme and Claudia Snochowska-Gonzalez, "The Ambivalence of the Ordinary," 123-142.

¹⁴¹ Graff, "Angry Women," 238.

¹⁴² Lempart, "Background to the Istanbul Convention dispute," *Catlak-Zemin*.

Lempart's argument, that participatory democracy was best exemplified at the local community level, is an idea that has long inspired social justice movements to do away with restrictive hierarchies and ideologies.¹⁴³ For Lempart, this trust and respect was given to participants on the basis that they were courageous enough to demonstrate in their communities, risking reprisal. Decrying 'couch activism,' Lempart continuously reiterated the importance of street activism and individual action.¹⁴⁴

Agnieszka Graff argues the Black Strikes can be seen as manifestations of 'populist feminism,' an example of Chantal Mouffe's theory, that leftwing populism is more inclusive and multifaceted than its rightwing counterparts.¹⁴⁵ According to Mouffe, left populists resist the exclusionary prejudices and nativism that right-wing populists encourage. Instead, they encourage political relationships characterized by healthy agonism, rather than hostility and divisiveness.¹⁴⁶ For Graff, this inclusive ethos (albeit simplistic) was what allowed OSK to mobilize such diverse demographics of women, including the most marginalized.¹⁴⁷

Bohdana Kurylo paints a similar picture of the protests as manifestations of inclusive populism. Unlike 'antagonistic' rightwing populists, protesters united to voice insecurity as 'the feminist people' in a 'shared condition of vulnerability and exposure.'¹⁴⁸ While populists usually try to 'discredit rationality and expert knowledge' from liberal elites, the Polish context in 2020 was 'distinct' as 'the elite... was already from the register of right-wing populism.'¹⁴⁹ As such, feminists did not engage in the typical political playbook of trying to discredit experts. 'Far from trying to discredit scientific knowledge, pro-choice groups actively appealed to science when explaining why a pharmacological abortion is safe.'¹⁵⁰ 'The populist feminist aesthetic of

¹⁴³ There is a long history of attempting to enact leaderless community activism within the feminist movement. This has also become more of a trend in 21st century protests where social media plays a role for example in the case of the 'Occupy London' and 'Occupy Wall Street Protests.' See Keshtiban et al, "Leaderlessness in social movements:," 19-43.

¹⁴⁴ Marta Lempart, "What frightens them is that people in small cities are protesting," interview by Marta Krus, trans. Eileen Flügel, *Goethe-Institut*, March 2022. <https://www.goethe.de/ins/us/en/kul/wir/22801705.html>

¹⁴⁵ Graff, "Angry Women," 232.

¹⁴⁶ Chantal Mouffe, "For A Left Populism," (Verso, 2018); Donatella Bonansinga, "'A threat to us': The interplay of insecurity and enmity narratives in left-wing populism." *The British journal of politics and international relations* 24, no. 3 (2022): 513.

¹⁴⁷ Graff, "Angry Women," 248.

¹⁴⁸ Kurylo, "Counter-populist performances of (in) security," 5, 28.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid 27.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

security was directly aimed at destabilising the representations of (in)security associated with the Polish right.¹⁵¹

While this approach to organizing was certainly inclusive, scholars have inflated the extent to which OSK encouraged participation from all demographics of society. A minority of academics have acknowledged protesters' tensions with older activists and feminist professionals, however, the overall picture is one of effective collaboration. Marianna Szczygielska describes how 'the already existing dense network of women's and feminist groups, that were able to quickly respond to potentially divisive debates and support the movement with their expertise and know-how, allowed for the feminist pro-choice trajectory to be set out.'¹⁵² Similarly, Koroculk maintains that protesters worked cooperatively with political parties and feminist organizations and provided important 'expert knowledge.'¹⁵³

Coalitional Divisions: Politicians

While OSK's conception of 'ordinary women' certainly was multi-faceted, and their coalition-building certainly impressive, interviews with Marta Lempart indicate a more antagonistic relationship with liberal politicians, academics and feminist civil society.

From the outset, OSK attempted to avoid associations with the political establishment. While scholars vary in the importance they ascribe to politicians' role in the 2016 October protests, they generally argue there was a degree of effective coordination between strike leaders and political party representatives. Left-wing parties like *Razem* (Together) and *Zieloni* (Green party) both attended, while MPs, Agnieszka Dziemianowicz-Bąkand and Barbara Nowacka, both addressed crowds, urging women to unite against such unprecedented governmental interference.¹⁵⁴ Korolczuk argues this signalled flexibility in the protest movement's identity: 'Such cooperation required relaxing collective identification requirements on the part of the feminist movement, because most of those politicians did not identify openly as feminists and

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Marianna Szczygielska, "'Good Change'and Better Activism: Feminist Responses to Backsliding Gender Policies in Poland." In *Gendering Democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe: A comparative agenda*, Central European University Press, 2019. 141.

¹⁵³ Elzbieta Korolczuk, "Explaining mass protests against abortion ban in Poland: the power of connective action." *Zoon politikon* 7, no. 7 (2016): 106-107.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid 106.; Lise Van Laere, Lise van Laere, "Rethinking Matka Polka, Fourth-wave feminism emerging in Eurosceptic context: the case of Czarny protests" (MA diss, KU Leuven, 2017): 53, 54.

some were openly against the proposition to ensure access to abortion for all women up until the 12th week of pregnancy advocated by the women's movement.¹⁵⁵

Despite this flexible identity, OSK still established certain boundaries between the movement and the political establishment. Moreover, interviews with Lempart and *Razem*, highlight a sense of friction.¹⁵⁶ In the early days of the October 2016 strikes, OSK requested that protesters not affiliate with political parties or display political logos. *Razem* member, Ewa Majewska recalled the tensions this sparked amongst their members:

*“The Women’s Strike openly demanded a no-party line, so our members were there, but not as official co-organizers. I think it was not the happiest decision, because Razem has great campaign makers and we would probably have made the March 8 strike in 2017 a much better event, but we still were there and we used all the means we had to support the protests”*¹⁵⁷

Majewska highlights what she sees as a strategic disadvantage of OSK's decision to remain politically unaffiliated. While this decision was in part tactical, it is clear this also came from a more deep-seated belief in distancing the movement from the political establishment. Detailing her fervent dislike of politicians, Lempart explains:

*“It was about emphasising the inequalities and showing people that rich people and politicians have no problems getting abortions [...]The vulnerable are always left behind.”*¹⁵⁸

“You know there are these jobs in protests where you have to carry the batteries, the megaphones, the phones [...]Then you turn on TV and see Barbara Nowacka or some other politician speaking about why we protest [...] Many are liars and thieves, these

¹⁵⁵ Korolczuk, "Explaining mass protests against abortion ban in Poland," 107.

¹⁵⁶ *Razem* ('Together'), also known as *Lewica Razem* is a leftwing / centre-left political party, established in 2015.

¹⁵⁷ Ewa Majewska, "Migrating Tactics," interview by Marianne Kaletzky, Ramsey McGlazer, *Critical Times*, April 1, 2018; 1 (1): 235, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/26410478-1.1.226>

¹⁵⁸ Marta Lempart, "Marta: People are moving more towards love and not hate despite the erosion of democracy," Interview by Dominika Kasproicz, edited by Anna Michalowicz. *Defend the Defenders*, International Planned Parenthood Federation. Accessed January 14, 2025, <https://defendthedefenders.eu/marta-updates-people-moving-more-towards-love-and-not-hate/>

politicians, who say that they came up with the idea and that they did this thing [...]They ask politicians from Warsaw to speak about how women feel, and they don't know anything about anything"¹⁵⁹

Lempart's distrust in the political establishment seems to reflect both her experience as a voter but also her belief that money and power remove politicians from being in touch with 'normal people.' By emphasizing their financial power, Lempart distinguishes politicians from the wider movement, demonstrating that they do not face the same existential threats as ordinary women. Moreover, she implies that their class and living conditions negate their ability to authentically speak to the needs of the 'people'. Her description of political figures as 'liars and thieves' demonstrates a deep hostility, meanwhile, she challenges those who claim to speak on behalf of the movement without engaging themselves in the mundane responsibilities of street activism. While some scholars suggest the movement was more sympathetic to politicians on the leftwing side of the political spectrum, Lempart challenges this:

*"We have these new parties appearing that within 3 months, are the same, marketing horrible products that don't change anything and they don't care about the people. And it happens to every new party that is there to change the politics into more open to citizens and so on and it never happens"*¹⁶⁰

Thus Lempart's views reflect a more general mood of disillusionment amongst Poles about the state of party politics, indicating the historic roots at the heart of some of these beliefs. While some academics and *Razem* continued to claim that they were responsible for the outbreak of protests, Lempart contested this, repeatedly claiming personal responsibility for triggering the protests.¹⁶¹ By repeatedly challenging politicians' claims to have contributed to the Black Strikes, she publicly challenged their ability to speak for ordinary women, indicating that she personally, was better suited.

¹⁵⁹ Lempart, "Background to the Istanbul Convention dispute," *Catlak-Zemin*.

¹⁶⁰ Lempart, "#femalechangemaker," 1:25:12 - 1:25:34.

¹⁶¹ Marta Lempart, "We are Governed by Morons," interview by Paweł Mączewski, *VICE news*, January 25, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/we-are-governed-by-morons-polands-leading-pro-choice-activist/>

Coalitional Divisions: Feminists

Interviews with Lempart similarly suggest OSK's relationship with feminist civil society was fraught with tensions, unlike what some scholars have suggested. Recalling her attempts to reach out to NGOs in the early days of the protests, Lempart takes a hostile tone describing her initial experiences working with feminist civil society:

*"We also asked some feminist organizations, and they said 'No, you cannot do it in a week, you have to cancel.' They were pressuring us to make it on Sunday, at least, and not Monday because they kept saying that on Monday, you know, nobody will come[....] This is the difference between being a professional NGO and a person fighting for life. For them it was a power struggle, and they didn't think they were fighting for life, but rather for their own field."*¹⁶²

*"They were afraid that we are not going to "look good" if it doesn't work, while I was thinking if it doesn't work women will die"*¹⁶³

Lempart makes a clear distinction between 'professional' feminist activists and the ordinary 'person fighting for life.' Highlighting the contrasting priorities of ordinary women and career feminists, she again alludes to the educational-class barrier that segregates women's priorities. Such sentiments reflect the "Ngoization of civil society," whereby NGOs' focus on socio-cultural aspects often allows middle-class feminists to become more concerned with the career dimensions of their feminist activism than the communities they purportedly support.¹⁶⁴ Aligning closely with the populist tradition of rejecting civil society's claims of expertise, she repeatedly argues that these women's earnings insulate them from feeling the urgency of the abortion issue. Consequently, their failure to act is not just ineffective but is a direct and existential threat to women's lives.

Such a sentiment aligns closely with the theory outlined by Donatella Bonansinga in her descriptions of leftwing populism. Left populists accuse liberal elites of generating insecurity, as

¹⁶² Lempart, "Background to the Istanbul Convention dispute," *Catlak-Zemin*.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ James Petras, "NGOs: In the service of imperialism." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 29, no. 4 (1999): 429-440.

they have failed to protect the people from society's dangers.¹⁶⁵ Bonansinga explains 'By projecting an idea of elites in power as working intentionally against the people's security interests, left populists can further feed the existing climate of division and affective polarisation.'¹⁶⁶ In the case of OSK, liberal elites' failure to protect women, both historically, and in the immediate environment of the protests, is thus presented as an existential threat.

In addition to their different approaches to protest activism, Lempart also underlines how feminist civil society enjoyed greater privileges during the government's crackdowns on activism:

*"When I found out[...] that various NGOs had received bomb threats for 'supporting the Women's Strike', I just wrote back that, yes, it keeps happening to us too. I kind of shrugged my shoulders and got on with my work. In the meantime, they called the police and reported the matter to the media. Whose reaction was right? Mine or the people from these other organisations? I took it a bit as something that is part of the job. Something normal. Because I've been functioning in wartime conditions for months, for years, and my boundaries have shifted."*¹⁶⁷

While NGOs had higher hopes of gaining the support of the media and the authorities, Lempart repeatedly emphasizes that she did not have this privilege, having had her address exposed and her house raided by police.¹⁶⁸ For her, the threat of death rather than career aspirations, defined the limits of her activism.

*"I'm fucking scared of being killed. I'm scared for the people in the streets. I'm not afraid of anything else."*¹⁶⁹

Thus, like 'ordinary women' whose lives are at risk because of restricted access to life-saving abortion healthcare, protesters face the threat of death through their activism. Insecurity is based

¹⁶⁵ Donatella Bonansinga, "'A threat to us': The interplay of insecurity and enmity narratives in left-wing populism." *The British journal of politics and international relations* 24, no. 3 (2022): 514-515.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid 512, 515.

¹⁶⁷ Lempart, "Marta: The Freedom Fighter."

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Marta Lempart quoted in Gazeta Wyborcza interview, found in Lempart, "Marta: The Freedom Fighter.."

on class but also through exposure to violence. This linguistic framing is significant as it demonstrates how OSK viewed protesters, and women seeking abortions, as connected by a position of shared, existential vulnerability that civil society feminists critically did not share.

OSK's populist-securitization rhetoric is also significant in that it shares similarities with the right-wing rhetoric of the mid-2000s. Analysing rightwing media portrayals of feminism, Zuk and Paczesniak describe how many commentators classified feminists as the opposite of ordinary, painting them as individualistic, wealthy and pompous.¹⁷⁰ One journalist complained that women's rights had become "sushi-feminism, that is, into a coarse ideology, through which all currently top media stars can ennoble themselves and give themselves the status of authorities."¹⁷¹ [Career] feminists are merely "fighting for their positions and grants, generously paid by the 'elites' of political correctness."¹⁷² Lempart appears to share this view, indicating her disdain for the condescending intellectual requirements of feminist experts.

*"We would be a movement that doesn't have the checklist that, of things that you have to do or say and look to be a member of the movement"*¹⁷³

Maintaining her belief that the protesting 'people' were not defined by feminist intellect or education, Lempart argues that there were almost no ideological, feminist requirements for joining the movement. Even those against abortion were accepted.

*"We have women, even in the movement, who don't call themselves feminists [...] Of course it was weird, but it was OK [...] The same goes for the pro-abortion vs. pro-choice argument. It really doesn't mean anything"*¹⁷⁴

In the aftermath of the protests and their coverage in the media and academia, Lempart was also critical of the ways some academics depicted the movement. She felt many had over-optimistically celebrated the protests as evidence of a complete reversal of Polish attitudes

¹⁷⁰ Piotr Żuk and Anna Pacześniak, "They attack the family and order": Right-wing media about feminists and the political consequences of the women's strike in Poland." *Frontiers in Sociology* 7 (2023): 8-9.

¹⁷¹ D Wildstein, "Sushi-feminizm, czyli lewicowo'sc dla celebrytów" *Gazeta Polska*. (2011): 35. Found in Ibid 8.

¹⁷² K Grzybowska, Szmata by'c nie jest juz wstyd. *Gazeta Polska*, 46. 2013. Accessed October 8, 2022.

<https://www.gazetapolska.pl/29656-szmata-byc-nie-jest-juz-wstyd> Found in Ibid 6.

¹⁷³ Lempart, "#femalechangemaker," 27:34- 28:00.

¹⁷⁴ Lempart, "Background to the Istanbul Convention dispute," *Catlak-Zemin*.

to women's rights.

*"In spite of all the academic feminists, the big city feminists with their wishful thinking saying that the fight was for legal abortion, it was not. It was just to stop the ban."*¹⁷⁵

Lempart's statements thus contrast directly with those that describe the protests as a 'feminist pro-choice movement.'¹⁷⁶ She consistently highlights that not all protesters and women actually desired 'abortion on demand,' but simply wanted to prevent increasing government restrictions. While the 2020 protests appeared to reflect a more widespread attitude in favour of greater liberalization, Lempart remains cautious not to frame the objectives of OSK as too distinct from the more moderate beliefs of some of their followers. For Lempart, a willingness to protest outweighed a deep academic grounding. Her reference to Netflix and crime novels indicate this through the shared 'aesthetics of populism.'¹⁷⁷

*"I think, I of course can educate, I can read more books, I can do many things but I can also not do that, I can decide to watch netflix until the day I die, I can read just crime novels I don't have to do anything, I put my body on the line, I put my life on the line. I can stay the way I am and that's that. I don't accept demands [...] I think that's the time for some of the big establishment organisations to understand that and we don't have to change. We sacrifice enough."*¹⁷⁸

As before, Lempart distinguishes between feminist experts and feminist protesters by highlighting how the latter put their lives at risk.¹⁷⁹ Having demonstrated a deeper commitment to feminist justice, she is resolute in her belief that ordinary women deserve to be exempt from intellectual feminist scrutiny.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Kurylo described the 2020 protests as 'pro-choice' in Kurylo, "Counter-populist performances of (in) security," 3. Rak and Skrzypek describe OSK in 2016 as a 'pro-choice social movement,' Joanna Rak, and Maciej Skrzypek. "Profile: why have social mobilizations for women's reproductive rights in Poland failed?." *Social Movement Studies* 23, no. 5 (2024). 661.

¹⁷⁷ Mudde, "Studying populism in comparative perspective," 1678; Kurylo, "The discourse and aesthetics of populism," 139-140.

¹⁷⁸ Lempart, "#femalechangemaker," 54:32- 55:26.

¹⁷⁹ Mudde, "Studying populism in comparative perspective," 1678.

In her paper on the 2020 feminist protests, Kurylo argues Polish women came together as a ‘feminist people’ and articulated insecurity collectively through ‘embodied performances,’ reclaiming the language of security from the far-right.¹⁸⁰ Contrary to her other theoretical work focusing on rightwing populist leadership, Kurylo argues the 2020 protests distinguished themselves from rightwing trends through ‘inclusionary articulation of collective identity’ promoting ‘expert knowledge.’¹⁸¹ While this study supports Kurylo’s assertion that Polish women reclaimed the language of security from the far-right, it contests the extent to which protesters exhibited a unified feminist identity. Based on Lempart’s testimonies, politicians, civil society and academics appear excluded from OSK’s conceptions of the ‘people,’ their inaction constituted them an existential threat to ‘ordinary’ women and thus they are not the referent object of security. Lempart, through her speech acts, becomes an important securitizing actor. Moreover her vision of security was not just freedom from PiS, but a fundamental reformulation of the way in which women’s rights is protected by the state. Consequently, this research proposes Kurylo’s writings on the aesthetics of (rightwing) populism as a style of securitization, are more applicable to the case of Polish protests than she assumes.¹⁸²

The Ramifications of Anti-Establishment Ideals

Understanding OSK’s commitment to anti-establishment principles is essential in understanding the collective’s ongoing strategies for activism. The following section outlines two key outcomes of this identity approach: alliances with labour movements and reduced political agency.

Social Justice Alliances

One notable impact of this approach was OSK’s decision to ally with other labour movements. Numerous academics have described how the Black strikes and the 2020 protests expanded into broader political demonstrations against far-right populism, the judiciary and the Church. However, OSK’s anti-establishment ideals meant they extended their support to an entirely distinct social justice campaign. Just as miners, farmers, and taxi drivers lent their support to protests, OSK elected to provide support for their campaigns ranging from taxi drivers’ protests

¹⁸⁰ Kurylo, "Counter-populist performances of (in) security," 22.

¹⁸¹ Ibid 21-27.

¹⁸² Kurylo outlines her conception of rightwing populist aesthetics in Kurylo, "The discourse and aesthetics of populism,".

against Uber to climate activism to animal rights welfare.¹⁸³ Asked whether the breadth of issues they embraced threatened to weaken their feminist campaign or reduce support, Lempart responded:

*“I can’t imagine telling people what we were told for 30 years, that your issue has to wait... that you have to make place for more important things”*¹⁸⁴

As such, Lempart highlights the role of feminist history in guiding OSK’s majoritarian decisions. Having expressed being ‘sold out’ so many times before, she opts for OSK to act differently. This decision had the effect of influencing the perception of protests, especially by 2020 the movement was seen as moving beyond ‘women’s protests’ to something much broader.¹⁸⁵ While this mostly expanded the base of support, some deemed coalition with LGBT groups, for example, to be too radical.¹⁸⁶

Party Politics

One of the most significant ways in which this anti-establishment identity had an effect was on OSK’s position during the next election cycle. Three years after the initial demonstrations, parliamentary elections took place in October 2019. OSK did not opt to form any sort of political party or official alliance. However, they did produce a declaration of protest demands for political candidates to sign, called ‘Poland for Everyone.’¹⁸⁷ Accordingly, they contributed to the ‘feminization of politics’ by endorsing specific candidates without supporting particular political parties¹⁸⁸ The wider atmosphere of populist feminism also allowed female MPs to articulate their

¹⁸³ Maria Wilczek, “Farmers, taxi drivers and miners show support for abortion protests in Poland,” Oct 26, 2020. *Notes From Poland*,

<https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/10/26/farmers-taxi-drivers-and-miners-show-support-for-abortion-protests-in-poland/>; “ŻADAMY!” Strajk Kobiet. Accessed January 13, 2025, <https://strajkkobiet.eu/o-nas/>

¹⁸⁴ Lempart, “#femalechangemaker,” 34:00.

¹⁸⁵ Marta Du Vall, “Polish in the October of 2020. Evolution of forms of expressing civic dissatisfaction and indignation.” *Państwo i Społeczeństwo* 24, no. 1 (2024): 65.

¹⁸⁶ Van Laere, “Rethinking Matka Polka,” 69.; Rak, and Skrzypek, “Profile: why have social mobilizations for women’s reproductive rights in Poland failed?” 661.

¹⁸⁷ Aleksandra Reczuch, “Representing “ordinary women”: “feminist populism” during the 2019 parliamentary elections in Poland.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 26, no. 4 (2024): 819.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid* 820.

own experiences of gender discrimination, making women's issues a 'counter-hegemonic movement.'¹⁸⁹

Despite this, their feminist impact on party politics was limited. Attempts during the 2019 elections by the left-wing alliance, *Lewica*, to get other parties to sign its 'pact for women' failed.¹⁹⁰ Moreover, OSK failed to get much traction in the press, while several female MPs opted out of signing their declaration.¹⁹¹ During the 2020 protests, Lempart's refusal to discuss establishing a political party was frequently ridiculed in right-wing Polish media and often presented as evidence that the movement was lacking political pragmatism.¹⁹² While the groups did receive some practical support during the 2020 demonstrations from newly elected leftwing MPs, it is difficult to know whether this support could have been greater, had more attempts at forming political alliances been made.¹⁹³

Lempart's influence on OSK and her strong commitment to an anti-establishment identity did not exist in a vacuum. Her repeated lack of faith in political institutions, leftwing politicians and civil society appears in many ways reflective of broader sentiments. The idea that liberal groups might abandon feminist causes once in power had a strong precedent in Polish history following Solidarity's abortion compromise in 1993 and its repetition in the early 2000s concerning EU accession. Moreover her visceral hostility to 'career feminists' signifies a continuity of attitudes with populist views of the past that saw intellectual feminism as exclusive, capitalist and out of touch with ordinary Polish women's interests. Lempart did not see feminist civil society as threatening to the social fabric of the Polish nation in the same way that PiS did, nevertheless, her class-based hostility to hierarchical institutions appears strong enough to have prevented OSK's pathway into mainstream politics. Consequently, class appears to have featured more heavily in OSK's conceptualization of 'ordinary women' than previously thought.¹⁹⁴

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how anti-establishment beliefs were cemented as part of OSK's core principles from the earliest days of the strike, in large part due to Marta Lempart. Despite

¹⁸⁹ Ibid 818.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid 824.

¹⁹¹ Ibid 820, 822.

¹⁹² Joanna Rak, "Generating Public Engagement to Control Protests: State-managed Vigilantism in Poland." *Javnost-The Public* 30, no. 3 (2023): 331.

¹⁹³ Muszel and Piotrowski, "What Comes after a Cycle of Protests,"

¹⁹⁴ One key exception is Ewa Majewska who places a strong emphasis on the class dimensions of the strikes.

some scholars' characterization of the relationship between OSK and politicians and civil society as successfully collaborative; this chapter has utilised a populist-securitization framework to demonstrate how OSK demonized the liberal elites in addition to the ruling elite. Critically, the liberal elite was not just politicians but included feminist civil society, undermining the assertion that protests reflected a united 'feminist people' fighting only the far-right. Furthermore, identifying this anti-establishment identity is significant as it helps to explain OSK's decision to join with other labour groups whilst refraining from the 2019 parliamentary elections.

Chapter 3: Towards a Transnational Identity?

Scholars have argued that OSK's success from 2016 to 2021 relied heavily on the movement's reclaiming of nationalism. While the movement embraced a multitude of patriotic sentiments, it also aimed to cultivate a feminist identity that was transnational. This chapter will have three key components. Firstly, it will outline why scholars have focused on the patriotic dimensions of the strikes. Secondly, it will examine OSK's collaborative initiatives with feminists abroad, arguing that OSK extended its populist-securitization framework to include women internationally. Finally, Marta Lempart's statements on OSK's relations with the EU will be examined, indicating their collective opposition to defining the 'people' along national boundaries. In addition to being rooted in anti-establishment ideals, this chapter suggests such sentiments had roots in Poland's history of Europeanization.

The Importance of 'Polishness'

Scholars agree that the patriotic dimensions of OSK's activism were central to their protest success and crucial to their identity formation as a movement. Although feminist reclaiming of national symbols was not a new occurrence, the 2016 strikes engaged heavily with national references providing a clear 'challenge to right-wing populism.'¹⁹⁵ Scholars have highlighted that protesters' attempts to subvert PiS's monopoly on 'Polish values' were a flashpoint in a much longer struggle by feminists to 'renegotiate the place of women in national mythologies.'¹⁹⁶ Before OSK Polish feminists had been attempting to address this question for years, moving toward 'feminist patriotism' and increasingly utilising Polish history and paraphernalia in their activism.¹⁹⁷ Ramme argues that after the 2016 protests, an increasing number of individuals self-identified as 'Polish women' in the following years.¹⁹⁸

While OSK's transnational feminist initiatives have been recognized, scholars place much greater emphasis on OSK's patriotic roots. Ramme argues their efforts, while significant, were not comparable to the truly transnational 'feminism without borders' campaigns of the 1990s.¹⁹⁹ Patriotic symbols, the use of Polish historical references, the national flag and the

¹⁹⁵ Ramme "Framing solidarity," 475.

¹⁹⁶ Agnieszka Graff, *Magma*, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, (2010) quoted in Ibid 476.

¹⁹⁷ Ramme "Framing solidarity," 479.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid 475-476.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid 471.

self-identification of Polish protesters as proud ‘Polish women’ led Ramme to argue that the ‘International Women's Strike cannot be described as having transcended ‘the national.’”²⁰⁰

Furthermore, some scholars have argued that OSK’s identity outside of Poland was more European than truly transnational. Korolczuk highlights an example in which protesters carried banners referring to a recent case in El Salvador where a woman had been sentenced to 30 years in prison for having an abortion.²⁰¹ EU flags and chants like “We are in Poland, not in El Salvador,” invoked a sense of Western superiority that encapsulated Poland over ‘barbaric’ developing countries.²⁰² Similarly, Polish protesters in Berlin implied that PiS had behaved outside the realm of acceptable European political behaviour, chanting “Kaczyński is not a European politician!”, “Shame on you! Europe is watching!”²⁰³ In interviews with younger participants of the strikes, Bogumila Hall argued that many expressed a belief that Poland was lagging behind the rest of the progressive European community and that the country should look to the EU as its saviour.²⁰⁴

Although these examples effectively indicate a degree of euro-enthusiasm, this thesis posits that they do not reflect the prevailing views of OSK, nor do they accurately encapsulate the nuances of the collective’s positions around national and international identity.

Connecting with Argentina

OSK’s attempts to construct a transnational feminist identity message with Argentinian activists were evident in the earliest days of the October 2016 strikes. Three days after the Black protests, Argentinian feminists protested the rape and murder of a 16-year-old girl, culminating in the largest demonstration on violence against women in the country’s history, #NiUnaMenos (‘Not one Less’).²⁰⁵ Thousands protested in Argentina, with numerous other protests spreading across the region. Like OSK, it sought to celebrate diversity and grassroots organizing with an emphasis

²⁰⁰ Ibid 476.

²⁰¹ Elżbieta Korolczuk, "Counteracting challenges to gender equality in the era of anti-gender campaigns: Competing gender knowledges and affective solidarity." *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 27, no. 4 (2020): 706-707.

²⁰² Ibid “Note 6,” 713.

²⁰³ “N. N. statements during protests of Dziewuchy-Dziewuchom Berlin in Berlin,” audio recordings, 23 October 2016, quoted in Jennifer Ramme, "Women's Uprising in Poland: Embodied Claims between the Nation and Europe," *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 28, no. 1 (2019): 86.

²⁰⁴ Hall, “Gendering Resistance to Right-Wing Populism,” 1500, 1510.

²⁰⁵ Almudena Cabezas González and Gabriela Pinheiro Machado Brochner, "The new cycle of women’s mobilizations between Latin America and Europe: a feminist geopolitical perspective on interregionalism." *Critical geopolitics and regional (re) configurations*, (Routledge, 2019): 178.

on keeping a distance from the State and political parties.²⁰⁶ OSK coordinators contacted Argentinian activists and established a basis of mutual support, mobilizing activists to expand their feminist demands into calls for ‘international feminism.’²⁰⁷ Activists exchanged protest symbols in solidarity: Argentinian women adopted the Polish red lightning bolt while Polish women adopted Argentinian green head scarves.²⁰⁸ Despite protesting separate issues, both movements were able to effectively link their struggles through a shared sense of identity. While OSK’s decision to coordinate with a Latin feminist movement was in part due to timing, their collaboration can also be attributed to the movement’s geopolitical position outside of Europe. Explaining why OSK chose to coordinate with Latin feminist movements rather than women’s groups closer to home, Lempart stated:

*“We are connected with Argentina very much and with Latin America. Both because the situation is very similar there and also because in Europe nobody cared about what we were doing in the beginning. First because people, in general, don’t want to know; and second because people in Western Europe think that they are better than us. You know, because we are a post-communist country, so maybe we did something wrong to bring it on ourselves”*²⁰⁹

Scholars have touched on the idea that Polish feminists felt ignored within the international community. Graff writes about Poles long being seen as a ‘special case viewed as hopeless by women from the West.’²¹⁰ Nevertheless, Lempart’s jaded tone implies a greater sense of resentment towards her European counterparts. Arguing that Western European feminists felt a sense of superiority to activists in post-communist countries, Lempart highlights the issue of feminism as a movement being defined by Western institutions, aligning heavily with the arguments made by scholars and activists alike to reconceptualize feminism internationally by reconsidering the ‘Second World.’²¹¹

²⁰⁶ “Quiénes Somos,” Ni Una Menos. Accessed January 13, 2025, <https://niunamenos.org.ar/quienes-somos/>

²⁰⁷ González and Brochner, “The new cycle of women’s mobilizations between Latin America and Europe,” 184.

²⁰⁸ Adriana Gonfroid, “The Marea Verde in Argentina and Strajk Kobiet in Poland: Mass Protests, Common Symbols and the Building of a Global Feminist Movement” August 1 2023. Accessed January 24, 2025. <https://igg-geo.org/en/2023/01/08/the-marea-verde-in-argentina-and-strajk-kobiet-in-poland-mass-protests-common-symbols-and-the-building-of-a-global-feminist-movement/>

²⁰⁹ Lempart, “Background to the Istanbul Convention dispute,” *Catlak-Zemin*.

²¹⁰ Graff, “Angry Women,” 239.

²¹¹ Koobak, and Marling. “The decolonial challenge,” 330-343.

In this way, Argentinian feminists, despite their geographical distance, were connected with Polish feminists through a shared position of disadvantage. However, by protesting in solidarity, according to self-governed principles, activists were able to construct feminist imaginaries which replaced white Western models as their role models.²¹² Despite this, scholars and journalists placed greater emphasis on seeing both protests as manifestations of ‘fourth wave’ feminism following their reliance on social media and digital activism.²¹³ While celebrating the power of the internet as a tool, both leaders appeared reluctant to engage in conversations about what this meant for the trajectory of ‘Feminism’ throughout history. The founder of the Argentinian #NiUnaMenos movement, Cecilia Palmeiro, stated:

“We don’t want to call it the fourth wave because the scheme of the wave comes from the north and ignores many other movements that happened.”²¹⁴

Similarly, Lempart recalls her reluctance to give an opinion on how OSK fit into the global chronology of feminist activism:

“I always say that, I start that, at some conferences, that I don’t know which wave of feminism I am, and I don’t care, and [laughs] ... Imagine the eyes.”²¹⁵

Polish feminists preceding Lempart have highlighted the incompatibility of the wave analogy with Poland.²¹⁶ Nevertheless, her statements reflect a deeper desire to disassociate from intellectual feminist conversations and align with populist-feminist groups that share OSK’s ideology.

Ongoing coordination between Argentinian and Polish feminists also highlights their shared populist-feminist securitization rhetoric. In a 2018 letter to the Argentine senate before a vote on the country’s abortion laws, OSK coordinators along with several other Polish groups, wrote the following:

²¹² González and Brochner, "The new cycle of women’s mobilizations between Latin America and Europe," 191.

²¹³ Lidia Rodak, "Sisterhood and the 4th wave of feminism: An analysis of circles of women in Poland." *Oñati Socio-Legal Series* 10, no. 1 (2020); Van Laere, "Rethinking Matka Polka," 72.

²¹⁴ Cecilia Palmeiro, June 6, 2021. Quoted in in Gonfroid, "The Marea Verde in Argentina and Strajk Kobiet"

²¹⁵ Lempart, "#femalechangemaker," 54:32- 55:45.

²¹⁶ Agnieszka Graff, "Lost between the waves? The paradoxes of feminist chronology and activism in contemporary Poland." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 4, no. 2 (2003): 100-116.

*“Femicide is not only killing with a knife or a gun. Please consider this when you vote. We write these words on the eve of yet another mass protest of Polish women, who have been deprived of the right to decide on their bodies and their fates... We appeal to you to listen to the Argentine women’s voice. To your sovereign’s voice. To use your power to execute the decision that is already out there. We wait with hope for your vote that can bring a positive change in lives of women not only in Argentine and in the region but also in Poland.”*²¹⁷

The first sentence is striking in the connection it draws between femicide and abortion access. Despite abortion restrictions being presented as less malicious or violent than gun violence, it highlights how gender increases women’s risk of death, constituting the existential securitized ‘threat’. Coordinators’ emphasis on Argentine women as the ‘sovereign voice’ of the nation, framed ordinary Argentinian women as the true ‘people’ to which governments are accountable. Such rhetoric displays key similarities with the phenomenon of ‘transnational populism’ described by Moffit, DeCleen and others.²¹⁸ Argentinian and Polish women were framed as being connected on one level by their gender, but also through their lack of privilege and outsider status from professionalized feminist institutions. It is no coincidence that these movements first connected online. As Moffit argues, social media is well suited for transnational populist claims as the internet has ‘no set jurisdiction and no particular national boundaries.’²¹⁹ Building on the work of Judith Butler, Bohdana Kurylo argues Polish protesters articulated insecurity through ‘embodied performances and public assembly.’ She argues protesters performed insecurity by physically exposing themselves to violence. Nevertheless, social media and the digital world may also be considered a ‘public assembly’ within which OSK’s transnational securitization framing takes place. To define the referent object of security only as ‘Polish’ women thus ignores how OSK framed abortion restrictions as an international, existential threat that is most threatening to marginalized, poorer women. Thus the referent object of security becomes women

²¹⁷ Dziejuchy Berlin et al., "In Solidarity with Women of Argentina," Dziejuchy Berlin, July 1, 2018. Accessed January 14, 2025. <https://www.dziejuchyberlin.org/in-solidarity-with-women-of-argentina/>

²¹⁸ Benjamin Moffitt, "Transnational populism? Representative claims, media and the difficulty of constructing a transnational “people”." *Javnost-The Public* 24, no. 4 (2017): 1-17.

²¹⁹ Moffit, “Transnational populism?”

threatened by abortion restrictions or femicide anywhere in the world, negating the importance of national categories of belonging.

Ongoing International Feminist Collaboration

The significance of OSK's transnational securitization framework is demonstrated by their later experiences of activism outside of protests. Having been invited to coordinate increasingly with feminist groups across Europe, Lempart expressed a conflict between OSK and how most feminist groups opted to organize, attributing strong importance to ideology and hierarchy.

*"I was giving training in one of the Western countries on how to organize, how to provide people with tools they need so they can do what they want. And after I was done somebody asked me, 'But how can we control who is joining the movement or not?' I felt that my time had been totally wasted...This is the problem with international feminism, which we consider highly professionalized, that according to it we are not good enough to be taken into account. It is different in Latin America, because there it is much more grassroots, and they are very well organized on the basis of different people actively doing things."*²²⁰

Thus it appears that OSK's experiences of feminist collaboration reinforced the feeling that their approach was distinct from normative feminist organizing practices. 'Professionalized' feminism made OSK feel inadequate while feminist efforts in Latin America emphasized action. Consequently, following successful domestic protests in Poland and Argentina, both movements took part in planning the international strike for women on March 8, 2017.²²¹ Thousands of women took part in over 50 countries organized parallel protests with demonstrations for International Women's Day through 'Paro Internacional de Mujeres/International Women's Strike (PIM)' on Facebook.²²² Ramme argues contribution to the international strikes and march on Washington became 'grounds for national pride' and thus still contributed to reinforcing of

²²⁰ Lempart, "Background to the Istanbul Convention dispute," Catlak-Zemin.

²²¹ Gonfroid, "The Marea Verde in Argentina and Strajk Kobiet"

²²² NiUnaMenos Collective, "How Was the March 8 International Women's Strike Woven Together?" trans. Liz Mason-Deese, *Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt*, March 16, 2017. Access January 14, 2025.

<https://www.cadtm.org/How-Was-the-March-8-International>; "'We are international, we are everywhere': women unite in global strike," *The Guardian*. Accessed January 14, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/08/international-womens-day-political-global-strike>

national boundaries.²²³ However, such an argument undermines OSK’s genuine expressions of grassroots solidarity.

Europe Takes an Interest

While European leaders had refrained from making direct comments beforehand, once the abortion ban was finalized, the EU felt compelled to issue statements of condemnation.²²⁴ As a result, in November 2020 a remote plenary session of the European Parliament on abortion in Poland was organized. Countless MEPs stood to express support, with some wearing Strajk Kobiet t-shirts.²²⁵ Danish MEP, Karen Melchior exclaimed “I am not free in Denmark until all the women in Poland are free, because we all have to be free in Europe.”²²⁶ Evelyn Regner, chair of Parliament’s Women’s Rights and Gender Equality Committee, thanked protesters, arguing their actions mattered “Not only in Poland, [but] all over Europe.”²²⁷ MEPs repeatedly drew links between bodily autonomy and their conception of Europe, expressing commitments to solidarity across the continent.

OSK elected not to partake in the ‘European solidarity’ rhetoric signifying their belief that MEP’s statements were not reflective of the institution’s capacities to help women. Explaining why she remained unmoved by this wave of European support, Lempart stated:

“Of course, it's so easy for the European commentators and politicians to swipe into this populist adrenaline rush protest and women's rights issue but it doesn't give us anything.... When it's just the talk about human rights, then the answer from the EU institutions is that they have no say in that, they have no say in abortion rights, in reproductive rights”²²⁸

²²³ Ramme, “Framing Solidarity,” 475.

²²⁴ “Polish court allows stricter abortion law, sparking outcry” *Al Jazeera*. October 22, 2020. Accessed January 14, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/22/polish-court-allows-stricter-abortion-law-sparking-outcry>

²²⁵ Lorna Hutchinson, “The Poland of 2020 is a hell for Women,” *The Parliament Magazine*, November 26, 2020. Accessed January 14, 2024, <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/the-poland-of-2020-is-a-hell-for-women-meps-slam-polish-abortion-ban>

²²⁶ Karen Melchior, MEP for Danish Renew Europe quoted in Ibid.

²²⁷ Evelyn Regner, chair of Parliament’s Women’s Rights and Gender Equality Committee quoted in Ibid.

²²⁸ Lempart, “#femalechangemaker,” 49:05-50:30.

While Lempart acknowledges the supportive nature of the EP, she emphasizes the inability of such rhetoric to make real change. Acknowledging the ‘populist adrenaline rush’ that protest activism inspired, Lempart underlines how there was a need for active legislative change. Despite the EU’s rush to publicly support values of sexual and reproductive quality, Lempart highlights how such rhetoric is meaningless if abortion remains confined to member states’ mandates. Thus Lempart alludes to a dichotomy long highlighted by scholars, ‘the European project relies on selective endorsement of a limited set of sexual rights, not the overall erasure of sex from the realm of European citizenship.’²²⁹ Given the history of the EU’s abandonment of Polish feminists’ calls for reproductive rights related to EU policy, it is not surprising Lempart remains sceptical.

In addition to being rooted in Polish feminist civil society’s historic experiences, OSK’s reluctance to embrace such regional solidarity also reflected deeper underlying emotions regarding the place of Poland in Europe. Like the feminist sphere of (Western) Europe where ‘nobody cared,’ Lempart describes her feeling that Polish citizens were a lesser priority to politicians in Brussels:

“I have a sad reflection that many European politicians don’t consider us European, so we’re still some people from some country in the East, we’re some people that you can lean over and help them, and give them this helping hand. We’re not European for them, but we are, and I am really angry. Because I believe that every European politician is there to protect me and should stand for me, and their first duty is to me because I am European, not because I’m Polish, but because I’m European and that’s that.”²³⁰

Lempart highlights how Brussels’ conception of Poland and Poland’s sense of European belonging, were in conflict. Such tensions stand in stark contrast to the declarations of unity between women in Poland and Argentina. Moreover, Lempart’s reluctance to identify with European identity reflects broader Polish sentiments that were suspicious of ‘European values’. Reflecting her greater support for the EU’s institutional strength over its claimed normative influence, she states:

²²⁹ David Paternotte, "EUrope: The Ups and Downs of Sexual Exceptionalism." *SexPolitics: Trends and Tensions in the 21st Century-Contextual Undercurrents-Volume 2* (2019): 77.

²³⁰ Lempart, “#femalechangemaker,” 50:51- 51:38.

“I grow when I hear about democracy, I am happy when I hear about the rule of law because these are things that bring us to the core, the values that the European Union was built on, and to the tools that the European Commission should use.”²³¹

Like Poles of the early 2000s, Lempart demonstrates her confidence in European institutions and the idea of the rule of law being part of the EU’s foundational values. Nevertheless, she does not attempt to connect Polish feminism with the EU’s gender equality project. She sees the European Union primarily as a vehicle for legal advocacy rather than an institution in which to gain support for the feminist cause. Such beliefs appear to closely reflect those of the ‘Eurodisappointed,’ those who supported European integration but were disappointed by the EU’s ongoing inaction.

Conclusion

Contrary to scholars who characterize OSK as overly concerned with the ‘national,’ this chapter has examined OSK’s international relationships to suggest they marked important influences on, and reflections of, the movement’s burgeoning identity. Interviews with Lempart indicate that collaboration with Argentinian feminists was vital in cementing a feeling that activists operating outside the traditional European and civil society frames, better encapsulated OSK’s anti-establishment values. This belief was reinforced as Lempart continued to interact with feminist groups internationally. In addition to reflecting class-based feminist solidarity, such views were also rooted in historic experiences of Poles feeling excluded from the European community.

²³¹ Ibid 49:05-50:30.

Conclusion

To understand the formation of identity in OSK between 2016 and 2021, this thesis has sought to address three central questions: How did Marta Lempart come to shape the identity of the movement? What were some of the core facets of OSK's identity? Finally, how was this identity informed by Poland's history of feminist activism and Europeanization?

The first key contribution of this was to contest scholars' characterizations of OSK as a 'leaderless movement.' While prevailing research has accepted protester's claims to be unguided, authentic and spontaneous in their activism, this thesis proposes activism was not as 'self-organizing' as previously claimed. Weighing in evidence from Lempart's testimonies in addition to the accounts made by colleagues and journalists, it is clear Marta Lempart was a defining influence on OSK's emerging identity and protesters' understanding of unfolding events, both at the start of the movement in October 2016 to the aftermath of the 2020 protests.

This research does not attempt to completely refute the arguments made by Graff, Korolczuk and others regarding the bottom-up construction of OSK's identity. Individual protesters were undoubtedly important in helping to share the identity of OSK at protests and through other activist initiatives. Rather, it has provided an alternative model of identity formation, which sees the movement as a more reciprocal relationship between protesters and followers. Employing the concepts of 'digital vanguard' and 'networked microcelebrity activism', research suggests Lempart regulated the movement's message and evolving values through her press exposure, protest leadership and online presence. Following populist leadership theories, this research alleges she exemplified the necessary competencies to exert leadership, whilst simultaneously being deemed an authentic representation of Polish women's interests. Many of her beliefs both reflected as well as influenced views of the unfolding feminist struggle. Academics have highlighted the motivating power of emotions, yet have overlooked the importance of seeing one person reflect these feelings in the public eye. Lempart gave a voice to public anger at PiS and the Church, but also toward mainstream politics and the European Union.

Delving into OSK's core tenets of identity: this research examined two key dimensions, namely its anti-establishment character and its attempts to form a transnational feminist identity. While scholars have characterized the strikes and OSK itself as overwhelmingly inclusive and coalitional in its approach, such conclusions underestimated the degree of class-based hostility present in movement coordinators and its ripple effects on the movement's activism. Research

suggests that its anti-establishment identity superseded its commitment to traditional Western-oriented feminist principles. Indeed, this appears to have been a core part of OSK's decision to collaborate with Argentinian feminists. Utilizing a populist-securitization framework, both groups established their connection as transnational people (vulnerable women), facing an existential threat. In turn, this collaboration explained OSK's unwillingness to emphasize its 'European' identity, seeing the EU primarily as a forum for legal and political change rather than a regional community of values.

In addition, this thesis situated many of OSK's beliefs within a broader Polish historical context. By tracing the experiences of Polish feminists from 1989 to 2015, the research highlighted the key historical events in which feminists' objectives were weakened by politicians, civil society and the EU. Moreover, Poles' experiences of Europeanization explain why OSK privileged their political beliefs over national or European solidarity.

Furthermore, this thesis has contributed significantly to theoretical political science debates about the differences between left and right-wing populism. Building on the theoretical scholarship of Bonansinga, this research challenges the assumption that leftwing populists' construction of more pluralistic identities naturally reduced the capacity for antagonism. Moreover, it has contributed to debates in both feminist and digital movement literature, by providing evidence for how 'leaderless' remains a difficult objective for social movements to achieve.

Despite the contributions of this study, some research limitations must be considered. While research posited how Lempart exercised control over the movement, an examination of how protesters responded to her as an individual was beyond the scope of this study. This research assumes followers internalized much of her messages but further investigation could compound this argument with research into the more minute details of digital activism, tracing her rising influence online as well as the reactions of followers. An account of how Lempart's visits to the European Parliament and advocacy work have been received would aid conclusions made regarding OSK's attachment to European identity. Considering Donald Tusk's return from the EU to domestic Polish politics, such research is highly relevant.

Moreover, there are multiple facets of identity within the OSK movement that remain ripe for study; as such, this thesis could only focus on two particular dimensions. One core theme

unexplored in this research was a deeper examination of the movement's relationship with the Catholic Church and Catholic identity.

Finally, a more in-depth account of the collaboration between NiUnaMenos and OSK developed was constrained by source limitations surrounding the cooperation between OSK and Latin American feminist movements. Further research could develop this to investigate the changing nature of transnational feminism.

Nevertheless, this study has provided valuable insight into Polish feminism as well as identity formation in 'leaderless movements'. At the time of writing, severe abortion restrictions remain in place in Poland, despite promises over a year ago from the Prime Minister and former European Council president, Donald Tusk, to provide free, safe and legal abortion in his first 100 days.²³² OSK's target has thus shifted from a rightwing populist government to a more traditionally established one. Significantly, this research has highlighted the power of populist-style rhetoric and the depth of anti-establishment feeling, underlining the obstacles the present government must yet face.

²³² Anna Błuś, "A year after Tusk came to power, why is access to safe and legal abortion still a distant dream in Poland?" *Amnesty International*, October 15, 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/10/a-year-after-tusk-came-to-power-why-is-access-to-safe-and-legal-abortion-still-a-distant-dream-in-poland/>

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