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‘The calm after the shock doesn’t last long’

In Poland, a discussion about hate speech has arisen after the murder of mayor Paweł Adamowicz

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After the assassination of Paweł Adamowicz there is now much discussion about the rough political and media debate in Poland. Observers see this as a cause of the murder of the Gdansk mayor. What’s your take on this?

Over the past few years, both Paweł Adamowicz and the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity, who organised the event in Gdansk where the assassination took place, have repeatedly been the target of verbal attacks from politicians, journalists and sympathisers on the right-wing populist to extreme right-wing side of Poland’s political spectrum. The public television channel turned government mouthpiece TVP, print and online editions of right-wing nationalist newspapers and magazines, as well as Twitter and Facebook, have served as vehicles for these attacks. It therefore seems logical to see the action as having been at least encouraged by the toxic climate of political debate.

At the same time, more and more details about the psychological state of the perpetrator are coming to light. So it appears that the perpetrator, a convicted bank robber, suffers from a psychological disorder, considers himself a victim of the previous governing party Civic Platform (PO) and therefore chose Paweł Adamowicz, a former PO member, as the target of his attack. The police are currently investigating the connection between the perpetrator’s mental condition and political motivation. However, it’s true that this has now triggered a new debate about hate speech in Poland’s political discourse.

Will this change anything in Poland, whose politics and media are marked by enormous polarisation?

I doubt it. What we are observing with Poland's political elite at the moment is more of a pause, be it out of genuine concern or calculated reverence. The majority of experts are extremely sceptical that there will be a change in politics and the media. I would agree with them. For one thing, the experience of the Smolensk airplane crash in April 2010 teaches us that the calm after the shock doesn't last long and that the subsequent debate is conducted in an increasingly emotional way.

On the other side, current developments give us little cause for hope that the murder of Paweł Adamowicz might lead to a more moderate tone in the political and media debate. Already today, just days after the attack and death of Adamowicz, numerous hateful remarks can be found on the internet explicitly endorsing the offence. At least Interior Minister Joachim Brudziński has announced that he wants to take tough police action against hateful remarks.

Who could play a part in a verbal disarmament?

You are unlikely to find hardly any politicians playing such a part at the moment. The friend-foe mindset seems too deeply rooted in Poland's political discourse. The two main political sides in Poland see one another less as opponents in a disagreement than as enemies. From this perspective, it's also not a matter of different, equally legitimate political convictions opposing one another in debate, but rather truth and lies. This means that the democratic idea of a legitimate exchange between government and opposition quickly becomes a rhetorical fight between good and evil.

In addition, there are two important upcoming elections: the European elections in May and the parliamentary elections this autumn. If anything, there's reason to fear a ramping up of the rhetorical weaponry in politics for the coming election campaign period.

The interview was conducted by Joanna Itzek.



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