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The future of Poland's defence is female

The changing security situation has motivated more Polish women to participate in defence. While PiS can profit from this, the liberal left is mute

Today in Poland, the realm of defence is undergoing a silent gender transformation. So far, the illiberal government has harnessed its momentum. To overcome irrelevance, the liberal left urgently needs to catch up.

When swaths of youth took to the streets in 2020 to protest against the Law and Justice (PiS) government over its abortion ban, analysts proclaimed an emergence of a social revolution. Led by young women, and with gender equality at its forefront, this generational rebellion showed that paternalist norms and prior political arrangements no longer matched the ways young people actually lived their lives.

Yet far from happening solely on the streets, this transformation has long been taking place too in less obvious sites — ones the liberal left have failed to acknowledge, leaving scope for illiberal forces to capitalise on them. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in citizens' volunteer engagement in defence.

A changing security landscape

The overall sense of geopolitical stability after 1989 saw the reduction and professionalisation of the Polish army, and the gradual detachment of citizens from the realm of defence. This professionalised defence has long remained a 'man's business', despite military careers being open to women following the accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In 2016, women constituted fewer than 5 per cent of army personnel and existing regulations engendered military service as a male civic duty.

This state of affairs created pertinent gender gaps in defence-related

knowledge and skills in Polish society. In 2014 the Public Opinion Research Centre reported that only 6 per cent of women recalled undergoing military training and 22 per cent training in civil defence (as opposed to 45 per cent and 61 per cent of men respectively).

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With the continuing conflict in eastern Ukraine, authoritarian violence in Belarus, the Covid-19 pandemic and oncoming climate change, the issue of citizens' preparedness for hybrid challenges has made a potent comeback in central and eastern Europe, after decades of its deprioritisation. In Poland, this changing security environment has brought more people into defence through volunteer channels — among them paramilitary and pro-defence organisations, defence-education programmes in schools and universities, and the Territorial Defence Forces.

A new opportunity for women

While emphasising military elements, these volunteer channels significantly shift the focus towards societal resilience, human security and non-military challenges. This paradigm shift has provided an unexpected opening for women.

Young women in particular have increasingly been flocking to defence-related activities, such as Rifleman Associations or volunteer-defence programmes in schools. As one senior expert told me, 'judging by women's participation, they are the first to do it — one doesn't need to encourage them at all'. By 2020, women constituted 43 per cent of students in the Certified Military Classes, and over 16 per cent of the Territorial Defence Forces, with both proportions expected to grow.

These developments highlight that gender norms around security in Poland are shifting, not only among the usual suspects — the metropolitan middle class — but also in provincial areas routinely depicted as gender-conservative. There, too, many younger women no longer want to comply with the notion of female citizens as motherly objects of male protection.

In a recent survey commissioned by the Polish portal Defence24, 41 per cent of women declared interest in undergoing basic military training if available. This percentage could have been much higher had respondents been questioned also about civil-defence training. And it is these on-the-

ground sentiments which the illiberal right has effectively tapped.

Tolerating female involvement

Since coming to power in 2015, the PiS has granted more support to defence-related activities, while funnelling them into state-led channels such as its flagship project — the Territorial Defence Forces, formed in 2016. This led to legitimate concerns on the side of the opposition about the ideological slant of these developments, given that the government pursues widescale mainstreaming of religious and illiberal-nationalist values into state policy, while rolling back gender-equality provisions and liberal-democratic standards.

In fact, the Territorial Defence Forces promote their activities as 'in line with modern femininity', and the Ministry of Defence has organised female-only self-defence courses in military bases across the country, as well as strengthening its Women's Council.

So far, the government's radical platform has not however led to a backlash against women in defence. In fact, the Territorial Defence Forces promote their activities as 'in line with modern femininity', and the Ministry of Defence has organised female-only self-defence courses in military bases across the country, as well as strengthening its Women's Council. While working towards withdrawing from the Council of Europe Istanbul convention on violence against women, the illiberal government has also smoothly created the National Action Plan around the United Nations 'women, peace and security' agenda, committing to increase the number of women in peace missions and provide equality training to personnel involved.

Make no mistake: just as the PiS could wave 'family values' on its banners only to freeze the value of welfare benefits for the most vulnerable families amid the pandemic-induced recession, it can also abandon supporting women's inclusion in resilience-building once that no longer serves its immediate policy interests. Which is where the liberal left can step in.

The left's rejection of defence

The problem is that the Polish liberal left has no autonomous voice on hybrid security challenges in central and eastern Europe. Nor has it elaborated any alternative proposals for engaging civil society in security, in a more civic-minded and democracy-enhancing way. So far, the opposition has been largely reactive, criticising defence-related developments as dangerous and party-driven — evidently unaware that

similar changes are also occurring in more stable liberal democracies in the Baltic Sea region.

Pacifist stances on the left do not fully explain this inaction, given that societal resilience can take many forms, including the non-violent, civic and civilian-based. In Poland, however, the liberal left is still held captive by its uncritical belief in the ostensible 'end of history' marked by European integration and accession to the NATO alliance, despite the rapidly changing security environment in the region.

This has not only led to the demise of strategic thinking among younger social democrats but has also made them deeply distrustful of security-related concerns and activities among their own constituency, routinely seen as unenlightened and potentially 'uncivil'. This lack of security strategising on the Polish left also explains why gender equality in the realm of volunteer defence has been largely left out of Polish feminism. Unaware of the potential of societal resilience for the re-gendering and civilianising of national security, feminists have abdicated from crafting effective advocacy in this realm.

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Luckily, the Polish liberal left has ample resources on which to build its programmatic interventions. One is provided by the Nordic states, where the doctrine of 'total defence', recently revived for uncertain times, has been closely tied to the idea of a solidaristic welfare state. This has not hindered these countries from excelling in democracy, peace and gender-equality indexes.

Another is comparative scholarship on non-military societal resilience. This is a particularly effective means to address hybrid challenges in a democratic way — enhancing social cohesion, presenting fewer obstacles to involvement and harnessing more international support.

While strengthening allied defence and deterrence is rightfully supported by voters in Poland, the left can still intervene in this momentum. To break right-wing hegemony, it can advocate the rebuilding of civil defence around local citizens' groups and work towards embedding civic, egalitarian and democratic values in military volunteer-defence channels.

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