Ima Polonia

How Recent Polish Politics Offer Abusive "Mothering" Instead of Feminist Care

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In Hebrew, there's a figure known as the *ima Polonia* – the "Polish mother" – a woman who offers love that feels more like emotional leverage than care. Her affection crosses boundaries, induces guilt, and centers her own needs, leaving you confused about her intentions. Ima Polonia is a frequent hero of bitter jokes, told in order to grapple with the experience.

Poland's recent politics have mirrored this dynamic. Between 2015 and 2023, under the alt-right Zjednoczona Prawica (ZP) government, the image of the woman, be it as judge, activist, or politician, was often instrumentalised to undermine progressive, pro-democratic causes. In these cases, the government framed its actions as caring rather than punishing (just like ima Polonia), using women not to promote their rights but to support anti-feminist changes. Although democratic forces won the 2023 parliamentary elections, this strategy persists and – albeit in a modified form – is still being employed by would-be autocrats. It also continues to be reliant on the instrumentalization of the feminist value of care. As in Poland anti-democrats are no longer in power, this strategy primarily aims to attract voters and mobilize support within their political base.

Abusive feminism

A strategy where anti-feminist, would-be autocrats seem to endorse some feminist ideas and forms to advance their anti-feminist, anti-democratic project is what Rosalind Dixon calls abusive feminism. While undermining the very substance of feminism's minimum core, authoritarian actors abduct the language of gender equality and support a descriptive representation, placing women in leadership roles, but only to enhance the centrally planned politics. Feminism's minimum core is defined as a shared commitment to equal freedom and dignity for all women, and a critical inquiry into the extent to which current legal, political, economic, and social structures promote (or obstruct) access to such freedom and dignity. In this way, Dixon places herself in the rich feminist discussion close to contemporary feminists such as Amia Srinivasan, who claims that feminism is a political practice, and further from some second-wave authors who claimed that feminism is a project open for any interpretation.

Why deploy this strategy? Because authoritarian regimes increasingly need to speak to both feminist and anti-feminist constituencies. Abusive feminism becomes a double-coded signal, allowing the regime to appear progressive to some and protective of tradition to others.

Abusive feminism à la Polonaise

To properly analyse abusive feminism in Poland, it is important to differentiate between four phases. The *anti-democratic government of Zjednoczona Prawica (2015-2023)* (phase I) provides classical examples of abusive feminism, which are well covered in Dixon's article. The three remaining phases reveal an extended form of abusive feminism: *the post-2023 landscape, shaped by the victory of the pro-democratic coalition* (II); *the EU parliamentary election and the practice in this institution (2024)* (III); and *the presidential election (2025)* (IV). This extended form of abusive feminism should be understood as a strategy where some anti-feminist, would-be autocrats seem to endorse at least some feminist ideas and forms to advance the anti-feminist, anti-democratic project *under the condition of being in the minority in the parliament with an active hope to win back power.* Additionally, each part reflects a different configuration of how gendered narratives

are mobilized – not to advance equality, but to either consolidate power or attract political support.

In her article, Rosalind Dixon offers a rich account of abusive feminism's tactics, including how they have played out in Poland's judiciary and political sphere between 2015 and 2023. Only one of them will be mentioned here to introduce the main actors around the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling that led to almost full ban on the abortion in Poland. The first actor is Julia Przyłębska, the President of the Constitutional Tribunal, who in 2020 joined the majority of judges in a decision that further restricted an already severe abortion law. Symbolically, she gave a female face to the anti-feminist ruling, the ruling that led later to the death of at least six women after doctors did not terminate their pregnancies. Anti-democratic politicians framed the judgment as an act of care for the fetus, rather than as a punitive measure against women.

Although the application to the Tribunal was formally submitted by a group of 119 members of the lower chamber of Parliament, the broader anti-abortion campaign was led by activist Kaja Godek and her organisation. Godek, the second actor here, framed her advocacy as a defence of women's and children's rights – a telling instance of how feminist language can be repurposed to advance anti-democratic aims.

The post-2023 political landscape

The Constitutional Tribunal's decision and its implementation led to the biggest protests in the last 30 years of Polish history and heavily supported the mobilisation of the voters in the parliamentary election of 2023 for the pro-democratic coalition. Nevertheless, the traces of abusive feminism did not disappear together with the former government (phase II). Julia Przyłębska served as the president of the Constitutional Tribunal until November 2024. Even after the end of her term, the Tribunal remains captured.

Since 2023, politicians of the formerly ruling ZP have abused the value of care in order to target the new government, undermine its efforts to restore the rule of law and deal with the potential crimes committed by members of ZP. A good example to illustrate these efforts is the campaign launched by the wives of former Polish Interior Minister Mariusz Kamiński and his deputy Maciej Wąsik. In December 2023, Kamiński and Wąsik were sentenced to two years in prison for abuse of power during their tenure at the Central Anti-Corruption Bureau (CBA) in 2007. Their convictions stemmed from orchestrating a sting operation known as the "land scandal", which involved using entrapment tactics against political opponents.

Following their imprisonment, their wives, Barbara Kamińska and Romualda Wąsik, launched a public campaign advocating for their release. Both women, with backgrounds in law and public service, actively participated in protests and media engagements. They framed their husbands' incarceration as unjust and politically motivated, appealing to emotions and family values to garner public support. Their efforts included attending parliamentary sessions and meeting with President Andrzej Duda, who subsequently initiated pardon proceedings for the two men. For their public appearances, both women wear black, the colour worn in the past to express the feeling of national mourning during the time of the partitions. Using fashion to express political affiliation and patriotic sentiment remains a powerful tool in Polish public discourse and was also used by the pro-abortion black protests. As Ewa Korolczuk underlines:

> *"in the case of Black Protest it was the choice of the color that carried deep cultural significance, referencing the tradition of Polish women publicly wearing black to mourn the loss of the country's independence during the XIX century, when Poland lost its independence."*

Wąsik and Kamińska, by using the color of black protest and narratives of care and protection, aimed to challenge legal decisions and undermine the rule of law.

The European Parliament campaigns 2024

The campaign for the European Parliament in 2024 and its aftermath also show extended abusive feminism (phase III). This time it served to win the office for extreme candidates. During their European Parliament campaigns, Anna Bryłka and Ewa Zajączkowska-

Hernik of the Confederation party (the party that is more right-wing in views than Zjednoczona Prawica) emphasised national sovereignty and opposition to EU migration policies. Bryłka criticised the EU's migration framework, highlighting the low enforcement rate of return decisions for illegal migrants and advocating for stricter deportation policies. Zajączkowska-Hernik focused on defending Poland's sovereignty against external EU influences, criticising the EU's Green Deal and migration pact.

MEP Ewa Zajączkowska-Hernik has publicly linked migration policies to threats against women. In a speech at the European Parliament in July 2024, she addressed European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, stating:

> *"I address you as a woman to a woman, as a mother to a mother: how can you not be ashamed to promote the migration pact, which leads to millions of women and children in Europe feeling threatened on the streets of their own cities?"*

She further asserted that von der Leyen bears responsibility for every assault and tragedy resulting from illegal migration, accusing her of inviting such individuals into Europe. Zajączkowska-Hernik concluded by suggesting that von der Leyen should be imprisoned rather than serving as the head of the European Commission.

The presidential campaign 2025

The recent presidential campaign in Poland also follows some tactics of abusive feminism. The need to appeal to female voters was great, as according to reports, women were more interested in the presidential campaign than men. Even though the anti-democratic parties did not present female candidates, their need to show the support of women for their candidates led to even fabricating it. In March 2025, a photograph began circulating on social media purporting to show a group of smiling young women dressed in pastel dresses and holding parasols, enthusiastically supporting Karol Nawrocki's presidential campaign (the candidate of Law and Justice (PiS) party). Shared by PiS politicians such as Agnieszka Soin under captions like "Polish girls for @Nawrocki2025", the image quickly went viral, garnering thousands of reactions and comments praising the women's patriotism, beauty, and political awareness.

However, according to different media reports, the image was entirely fabricated and generated by artificial intelligence. The incident not only revealed the ease with which AI-generated visuals can be used for political manipulation but also how gendered imagery continues to be weaponised to signal moral legitimacy and emotional appeal, especially within populist narratives.

Conclusions

Even though jokes about the *ima Polonia* – the mother who loves by suffocating and abusing – can help make sense of emotional entanglement through comic relief, Poland's abusive feminism is no laughing matter. The instrumentalisation of female figures, care-driven language, and gendered symbolism to soften or shield illiberal practices has become a persistent feature of the political landscape. From judges and activists to wives and artificially generated supporters, the anti-democrats offer to "mother" citizens – not to empower them, but to disarm critique and consolidate control. There is urgent work to be done to make this performative and manipulative form of political mothering less palatable, less persuasive, and, most importantly, less effective at the ballot box.

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