

Article

## Populist Skirmishers: Frontrunners of Populist Radical Right in Poland

Karolina Zbytniewska

Political Science and International Studies, University of Warsaw, Poland; [karolina.zbytniewska@uw.edu.pl](mailto:karolina.zbytniewska@uw.edu.pl)

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### Abstract

Mainstream parties, like PiS in Poland, have to cater to broad segments of society to sustain broad support. Cultivation of populist radical right ideologies of authoritarianism, traditionalism, religiosity, and nativism—all interlaced with gender as a nemesis and the nation as a deity—takes highly motivated, confrontational politicians who prepare the ground for radical populist ideas to take root in the electorate’s minds, who mobilize voters through radicalization. This article introduces the concept of “populist skirmishers” to the literature on populism, adding this to Cas Mudde’s basket of major mobilizing forces of populism, that is, a populist leader, a social movement, and a political party. Though it might be considered an unnecessary elevation of a profession that perverts the rules of civility in the public sphere, polarizes electorates, and does whatever it takes to derail the project of European integration, I argue that understanding the *modus operandi* and functions of populist skirmishers is indispensable to furthering our understanding of populism.

### Keywords

gender; populism; populist radical right; populist skirmishers; ultraconservatism

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

A strong charismatic leader is a *sine qua non* for a successful populist far-right movement (Canovan, 2005, p. 75; Kaltwasser & Mudde, 2017, p. 62). However, if success means coming into power, it takes more to tango. Governing parties and coalitions become molochs that need to cater to manifold segments of the electorate and sustain political mobilization within the party and its supporters.

Traditional and new media multiply and prompt democracy’s shift from citizenship to spectatorship (Cwalina et al., 2015, p. 50; Manin, 1997, p. 220). In that context, just as shepherds use shepherd dogs to herd their flocks, governing leaders use subsidiary frontrunners to cater to different audiences and by different media. The important mobilizing role within populist radical right parties belongs to politicians, publicists, and activists who ruthlessly fight tactical battles that suit the general party agenda while pursuing their own career schedules. I call them “skirmishers.”

Since ancient times, skirmishers were light infantry employed to secure the army by probing the enemy’s lines, by opening the military action as a part of the vanguard, but also engaging in side- and rear-guard battles against the enemies, reaching out more broadly than the general line of their army (Carey et al., 2013). Correspondingly, political skirmishers of today’s populist radical right in Poland secure and advance the party mass by engaging in vanguard scouting and screening missions and by engaging in harassing battles against political enemies.

Skirmishers constitute a new research sub-area within populist studies. They are typically politicians, but they can also recruit from media sympathizing or cooperating with populist right-wing politicians. In broader terms, radical parties and movements, church representatives, ultraconservative and/or ultranationalist NGOs, and activists also may offer their skirmishing services to the mainstream populist radical right parties.

Each country that hosts a mass populist radical right party sees examples of populist skirmishers—

predominantly men, but also equally confrontational women. In the political world, examples include the US Republican Governor of Florida Ron DeSantis and Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene; in Hungary, Justice Minister Judit Varga or mayor of Székesfehérvár András Cser-Palkovics, while some of the ultraradical skirmishing is outsourced to the radically far-right party Mi Hazánk.

In Poland, the most quintessential skirmishers are Janusz Kowalski from Solidary Poland, a more radical coalition partner of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS—Prawo i Sprawiedliwość), and Krystyna Pawłowicz, formerly PiS MP, today the Justice of the Constitutional Tribunal, embodying its politicization. Further outsourcing includes mainly radical right activists and NGOs like Ordo Iuris Institute, the Independence March Association, and the Kornice Foundation Nasze Dzieci (Our Children), which has covered Poland with thousands of billboards sporting pro-life and religious slogans (Ceglarsz, 2022).

In the media sphere, examples also abound, the most prominent being Tucker Carlson, the Fox News anchor in the US; the journalist and close ally of Viktor Orbán Zolt Bayer in Hungary; and Magdalena Ogórek and Michał Rachoń, anchors at the public broadcaster (TVP) in Poland that “peddles government hate speech” (“Polish public broadcaster,” 2020), along with PiS-devoted publicists Jacek and Michał Karnowski (Sajór, 2020).

Statements and activities of skirmishers amplify the main messages, agenda, and discursive style of party leaders. As a result, they are the avant-garde proxy cultural wars waged against “civilians,” i.e., groups of citizens that opinion polls, focus group surveys, consultants, and other decision-making party arrangements consider convenient targets. These groups differ by country, but LGBTQ people, women, and refugees recur as victimized groups.

What unites these victimized groups, while also uniting the Polish populist radical right, is the symbolic glue made of gender (Grzebalska et al., 2017). In Poland, this glue has a second major ingredient, and it is the nation. Gender is an enemy-in-itself that unifies negatively by epitomizing the rotten nature of Western liberalism that requires resistance, “uniting under one umbrella term various issues attributed to the liberal agenda, among them reproductive rights, rights of sexual minorities, gender studies and gender mainstreaming” (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018, p. 2).

Nation—contrary to gender—is revered, but predominantly by taking the form of its lurking enemies, mostly Germans, Donald Tusk, the EU, or—previously—Muslim refugees. Populist skirmishers infuse the public discourse with gender-and-nation-thick themes, mobilizing PiS’ United Right coalition and satellites from within, and externally weaving relations with their voter base.

In this article, I analyze the phenomenon of skirmishers recruiting from the Polish populist radical right. Still, other political ideologies and political platforms theo-

retically may also employ skirmishers who mobilize citizens mostly by means of their populist use. On the contemporary political scene in Poland, also supporting politicians from opposition parties excel at charisma, preparation, and sometimes audacity, but few use other distinctive skirmishing qualities, i.e., outright hostility, ideological radicalism, or the tendency to spread disinformation and flip-flop. I argue that this is an effect of the non-radical nature of these parties but also of the electoral strategy of opposition parties to counterweight the polarizing, deadly serious radicalism of the government coalition with inviolable civility, moderateness, and a patronizing smile.

Though skirmishers can recruit from any political family, this article focuses solely on the populist radical right skirmishers, and where they are most prominent on today’s political scene of Poland. Nonetheless, the phenomenon of skirmishers and supporting frontline politicians deserves a broader monographic inquiry within the body of studies on populism.

## 2. Methodology and Terminology

This article seeks to demonstrate and analyze the phenomenon of populist radical right skirmishers, i.e., politicians and political ideologues who further the populist radical right agenda. Despite, as I argue, this being a universal phenomenon within mass radical right parties, this article uses the Polish example as an inductive case study to (a) understand a larger class of (similar) units (Gerring, 2004, p. 342) and (b) conceptualize the relationship between populist radical right skirmishers and parties that they support.

The article unpacks different elements of the mainstream populist far-right in Poland during the country’s “populist moment” (Krastev, 2007) that started in 2015—the year PiS came into power. In the Fall of 2022, PiS is still the governing power and remains well positioned in the electoral campaign for state parliamentary elections in the Fall of 2023.

### 2.1. Populist Radical Right in Poland

In Poland, as if following a populist textbook, the populist radical right from the United Right coalition led by PiS came into power in 2015, has hijacked the state apparatus, suppressed the media and civil society, as well as engaged citizens in mass clientelism by paying for votes with benefits (Müller, 2016, pp. 8–10). They cater to enthusiasts of patriarchy, church, nationalism, anti-liberalism, anti-progressivism, and xenophobia, tied together by shared ideas about gender and nation.

After Cas Mudde, I categorize PiS as a populist radical right party (Mudde, 2019a, p. 30; see also Santana et al., 2020). All three elements of the term “populist radical right” intimately complement and reinforce each other. “Populist” indicates the quality of considering society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous

and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite.”

Populism is reinforced by “radicalism,” which is defined ideationally as resistance to key features of liberal democracy, most notably political pluralism and the constitutional protection of minorities (Mudde, 2007, pp. 25–26). However, I also embrace the ancillary nature of radicalism understood as expressing amplification of a phenomenon that it determines, here of the right. Therefore, despite the constraints resulting from the relativist nature of the term, “radical rightwing parties are radical both with respect to the language they employ in confronting their political opponents and the political project they promote and defend” (Betz & Johnson, 2004, p. 312).

The Polish personification appears in the biography of Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of PiS, where he is said to have “a propensity to making unproven accusations, to Machiavellianism adjacent to a tendency to attack, with a predilection for going overboard” (Zaremba, 2010, p. 20). Still, Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk drop the term “radical,” choosing the term “populist right” instead (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). They explain this replacement by the mainstreaming of the populist radical right, despite acknowledging radicalization and resulting radicalism of PiS. I choose to retain the term “radical,” since—as Korolczuk and Graff admit—PiS radicalism has not diluted in the position of power but to the opposite; PiS actually radicalized itself to become a full-fledged populist far-right party while in government (see also Mudde, 2019b, p. 51).

In the context of PiS, the definition of the last module of the populist radical right—i.e., right—used here is different than one used by Mudde, who defined it as the belief that inequalities between people are natural and should be accepted (Mudde, 2007, p. 26). On socio-economic grounds, combatting inequalities has been one of the fundamental tenets of PiS (see PiS Statutes, 2021; Polski Ład, 2021), even if only on the declarative level.

On the socio-cultural and biological level, PiS believes in natural differences between men and women that should be valued and respected, preserved, and reinforced within the traditional family—meaning a heterosexual marriage that will produce children. However, the existence of natural diversity in sexual orientation and in understanding one’s gender identity beyond the binary man/woman divide or differently from one’s gender assigned at birth is denied or ridiculed.

Therefore, I prefer to understand the right in the Polish context as, above all, conservative, which has also been admitted in the most recent literature on the subject (Bluhm & Varga, 2019; Erel, 2018; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). But it was always compounded by its radical trait. I understand the radical conservatism of the Polish populist radical right in both relativist and absolute versions. Drawing from the archetype Burkeian tradition, Samuel Huntington saw conservatism as “a system of ideas employed to justify any established social order, no

matter where or when it exists, against any fundamental challenge to its nature or being, no matter from what quarter” (Huntington, 1957, p. 455).

The relativism of this definition is exploited by the populist radical right in Poland to its advantage. It blurs the traditional with natural, simple, and “genuinely” Polish, expressing “not merely the respect of traditional values but—above all—the feeling of threat from the side of the modernization project related to the mainstream of the Polish political transformation” (Napiórkowski, 2019, p. 37). Therefore, simultaneously, the Polish radical right overlaps with the absolute meaning of conservatism (Layton-Henry, 1982, p. 1; see also Mudde, 2007, p. 27), using its complete toolkit including authoritarianism, traditionalism, religiosity, and nativism.

The thin ideology of populism is already by itself built on the polarizing divide of “us versus them,” but this dichotomy is furthered by thicker ideologies that also lay behind populist radical right in Poland, i.e., the above-mentioned nativism, authoritarianism (Mudde, 2007), and radical conservatism, all together contesting fundamental values of liberal democracy, such as the rule of law, minority rights, and press freedom. Accordingly, the political system that is built by the populist radical right in power is illiberal democracy. It is the term coined by Zakaria (1997) for “democratically elected regimes often re-elected or reinforced by referendums that ignored the constitutional limits of their power and deprived their citizens of basic rights and liberties,” or—in short—meaning “democracy without rights” (Mounk, 2018, p. 51).

The last ideology mentioned as quintessential to populist radical right—i.e., radical conservatism—does not belong to Mudde’s maximum definition of “populist radical right.” Still, conservatism, and especially its qualities of traditionalism and religiosity, are indispensable parts of the Polish version of populist radical right.

The corrupt elite is redefined by PiS leaders to fit given circumstances; however, it always denotes enemies—internal or external—of the state, nation, and “natural” way of life. When listening to PiS leaders and skirmishers, it is the category of enemies—enemies of Poland—that defines most of their discourse. Therefore, the chief statement of PiS’ successful electoral year in 2015 was “Poland in ruins” (*Polska w ruinie*), a condition allegedly left behind by the predecessors, i.e., the Civic Platform (PO—Platforma Obywatelska).

In 2022, after seven years in power, PiS still defines the PO as the archenemy of Poland and Polishness, with Donald Tusk, its leader, presented as the epitome of the state enemy working for foreign, evil powers. To illustrate this mindset, let me quote the interview with PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński from August 2022: “Our enemies have always wanted a Poland that was primitive, vulgar, denying culture. This is what Tusk is building on foreign order” (Karnowski, 2022, p. 22). When asked on whose order, Kaczyński replies: “German, but to be

specific, Germans fight for the German-Russian construction which would allow them a total power in Europe, with only slight participation of France.”

The PiS leader closely follows the populist “textbook” by Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser and Cas Mudde, observing that, according to populists in power, the real power lies “with some shadowy forces that continue to hold on to illegitimate powers,” associating it with “the paranoid style of politics” famously coined by Richard Hofstadter, to name “the sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” expressed by populists (Hofstadter, 1964; Kaltwasser & Mudde, 2017, p. 12).

Ideologies of the Polish populist radical right, i.e., nativism, authoritarianism, and radical conservatism are intrinsically united with the thin-centered ideology of populism, equipping it with ideological heft. At the same time, populism furnishes the radical right with a performative appeal.

Their leaders and parties, supporting social movements, and—as I argue—populist skirmishers, jointly engage in shifting Overton’s window of generally acceptable attitudes to embrace an ethically black and white dichotomy between the supremacy of patriarchy over gender equality, of marriage between a man and woman over other forms of relationships, of radical nationalism over openness and tolerance, of a national Church over other denominations and atheism, and as the blatant blindness towards the existence of the LGBTQ community.

## 2.2. Populist Skirmishers

Paranoid style has been regularly used by populists, left and right, to incite or fuel anger and fear, due to their mobilizing power. But even the scariest conspiracy theories told by the most charismatic populist leaders would not suffice in mainstream catch-all parties like PiS that cater to a third of the state population (as of September 2022 average support for PiS is between 33 and 37%; see Kondzińska, 2022, p. 1), with the ceiling of potential support surpassing 50% (Sadura & Sierakowski, 2019).

The origin of naming these sub- and side-leaders skirmishers is the ancient times when skirmishing was a custom of guerrilla battles at the front and the sides of the general military front. The ancient skirmishers’ scouting trips took place with the permission or at the order of the chief. Skirmishers were usually the youngest and poorest knights (Carey et al., 2013, p. 93), who wanted to gain military fame in this way.

In the reality of today’s permanent political campaign that can be represented metaphorically as the state of permanent political war, skirmishers are needed on the battlefield most of the time, serving numerous functions. At times of major electoral campaigns and major strategic challenges, the leader himself lands the major blows.

To advance the understanding of the populist radical right and its modus operandi, this article introduces the phenomenon of populist skirmishers, when the liter-

ature on populist actors concentrates on political leaders. I present an inductive case study of the Polish political context and initial conceptualization of populist skirmishers, which is a part of the wider effort of unpacking the populist far-right ideology in Poland. The case study analysis is enriched with a hands-on perspective of a wide-ranging panel of 10 insiders (Table 1), active in Poland’s political scene: politicians and political consultants who have been interviewed at length by the author.

Individual direct interviews are used to better define and conceptualize the research problem introduced in this article and develop a detailed description that integrates various perspectives (Angrosino, 2008, pp. 20–21; Weiss, 1995, pp. 9–10). Ten knowledgeable informants may not sound numerous. However, taking their high quality in terms of knowledge, experience, and variety, further inquiry would add relatively little to the understanding of the phenomenon of populist skirmishers in proportion to the professional and loyalty constraints (fear of identification) of speakers, mostly those from the government or advising government officials.

However, I consider insider interviews as an invaluable way of informing the research on the subject further, especially in terms of mechanisms of cooperation between party leadership and skirmishers, and therefore individual direct interviews should be pursued for the sake of future studies on the topic.

Finally, I acknowledge facing the name challenge, since “skirmishers” are not a self-evident choice that is universally understandable (neither is the Polish *harcownicy*). At the same time, this term—with its historical, battlefield import—perfectly explains the type of activity that political skirmishers undertake on the political battlefield.

An alternative term that has been considered by the author is “pistols” (*pistolety*), as it is already exploited by Polish politicians with regard to such politicians. However, the term “pistols” mistakenly identifies rudeness or apparent paranoia with thoughtless, automatic impulsiveness. Based on the author’s analysis and observations of her speakers, skirmishing tactics are most of the time either planned or at least allowed—due to their substantial value—within a broader party communication and mobilization strategy.

Also, the term “pistols” in English is solidly earmarked for its original meaning of a gun—due to the wartime reality, excess of firearm violence, and the gun control battle in the US—so this term would be difficult to attribute to the novel, political realm. On the same note, I chose not to use the term “pistols” in order not to further the saturation with outright attributes of violence in the political discourse.

## 3. Modus Operandi of Populist Radical Right Skirmishers in Poland

For the last seven years, PiS has successfully led in the polls and won elections in Poland, securing the support

**Table 1.** List of incognito knowledgeable insiders (politicians, political careermen, and political advisors) who took part in qualitative individual direct interviews.

	Profession	Institution	Position versus government	Party alignment
Speaker 1	Frontline politician	Member of Parliament	Opposition	Polish People Party (PSL—Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe): center-right opposition party
Speaker 2	Politician	Member of Parliament 2015–2019, now local government	Opposition	Civic Coalition (KO—Koalicja Obywatelska): center, main opposition party
Speaker 3	Politician	Local government	Ruling party	PiS: ruling populist far-right party
Speaker 4	Politician, top-level political businessman	Regional and national level institutions	Ruling coalition member 2017–2021	Jarosław Gowin’s Agreement (Porozumienie)
Speaker 5	Political PR advisor	Independent/national level	Ruling party	Close to PiS
Speaker 6	Political scientist, politically engaged thinker	Think tanks, academia, political organizations/national level	Opposition	Close to the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD—Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej)
Speaker 7	Politician, political advisor	Advisor to top government politicians/national level	Ruling party	Close to PiS
Speaker 8	Political marketing expert and advisor	Campaign advisor/national level	Neutral	Neutral
Speaker 9	Lobbyist	Influencing politics and policy/national level	Neutral	Neutral
Speaker 10	Political advisor	Political advisor	Close to the ruling party	Close to PiS

of between 30% and 47% of Poles (Politico, 2022). Thirty-six percent supported PiS’ United Right coalition as of the beginning of October 2022 (Politico, 2022). While I admit the indispensable mobilizing powers of a charismatic populist leader, along with the support of political parties and social movements—as enumerated by Kaltwasser and Mudde (2017, pp. 42–61)—hereby I draw attention to as indispensable an institution of populist skirmishers who support a leader and the party, catering to various, often more radical electorates, fueling mobilization in between and during electoral campaigns.

### 3.1. Gender and Europe as Archenemies

Shifting citizens’ attention away from nepotism, political corruption, and demolishing democratic checks and balances or the scandals orchestrated by the Church,

state officials capture attention with eye-popping, radically conservative theories construed around gender and nation—the glue that interweaves the ideological amalgam that is the populist radical right in Poland.

Gender started inflaming the Polish political scene around 2012 (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022), demonized first by church-related actors under the intellectual leadership of Redemptorist priest Tadeusz Rydzyk, the head of a media empire, reaching 9% of Poles (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022, p. 69), and by the ultra-conservative Ordo Iuris Institute and Kaja Godek from the Life and Family Foundation (Fundacja Życie i Rodzina). Political skirmishers mainstreamed the anti-gender agenda before it was embraced by top leadership.

PiS politician and Constitutional Court Justice Krystyna Pawłowicz, who is one of the most recognized skirmishers on the Polish political scene, explained how the populist radical right in Poland understands

gender. She wrote in March 2019, right after the LGBT+ Declaration (City of Warsaw, 2019) was announced:

Well, it's WAR! For Polish children, Polish families. For Polish villages and cities. FOR POLAND AND EUROPE, which is WAITING for our HELP! For Polish identity and culture...We HAVE TO win this culture WAR! Advocates of Soros and leftist pathological ways—HANDS OFF POLAND AND THE EU! (Pawłowicz, 2019)

The plethora of ultra-conservative statements like one that girls should be “grounded in female virtues” at schools (“Grounding girls in female virtues,” 2021) keeps the electorate prepared for ideological blows by major political actors during electoral campaigns or at times of major political crises. So, already at the outset of the pre-2023 electoral campaign, PiS President Jarosław Kaczyński joked about transsexual people who, in his words, “believe that anyone can say that, now, until now—it is about 5:30—I was a man, but now I am a woman. Well, one can have such views. Strange, to say the least. I would have examined it, but well” (Kołodziej, 2022). In his 2020 presidential campaign, re-elected President Andrzej Duda said that LGBT “is simply an ideology,” not the people (Gwiazda, 2020).

As of September 2022, understood as an ideology, LGBTQ has received scientific endorsement in the official schoolbook for high schools for the subject of history and contemporaneity, as promoted by the Minister of Education and Science Przemysław Czarnek. Its chapter entitled “Ideologies and Nazism” explains that an ideology is “a simplified version of philosophy supporting different political programs,” being used by “social engineering and sociotechnic to transform societies in order to win and possess power” (Roszkowski, 2022, p. 19). Then, the book informs that “feminism and *gender* ideology” are, along with socialism, liberalism, and modern Christian democracy, “among the most popular ideologies today” (Roszkowski, 2022, p. 19). Without a word of justification, the author smoothly transitions to explaining communist and nazi ideologies (Roszkowski, 2022, pp. 19–23).

Along with “gender ideology,” the EU makes up for a standard enemy enlisting from the nationalist basket of the Polish populist radical right's enemies. It serves its skirmishers as one of the major topics, synonymous with Germany and their political opposition embodied by Donald Tusk. PiS, with its allies, incite Eurorejectionist tempers (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002, p. 302) presenting the EU as a Germany-governed tyranny oppressing the sovereignty and freedom of its member states and blackmailing Poland with funds. I prefer Eurorejectionism to Szczerbiak and Taggart's (2008, p. 7) hard Euroscepticism because despite their and Mudde's terms expressing a similar level of critique and opposition to the EU, “rejection” better illustrates the level of Polish populist radical right's opposition than just “skepticism.”

As an example, professor Zdzisław Krasnodębski, i.e., European MP and one of the major PiS experts on the EU,

said that “the threat to our sovereignty from the West is greater than from the East,” understanding the West as the EU and East as Russia (Domański, 2022).

Zbigniew Ziobro, the leader of Solidary Poland (PiS coalition partner) and the Minister of Justice, said that the EU elites are “so rotten that we cannot expect any good on their part. We have to re-evaluate our policy towards the EU. The Union gradually transforms into a diabolic caricature of the union of equal and independent states that we entered” (“Zbigniew Ziobro,” 2022).

Paradoxically, Poles continue to be a Euroenthusiastic nation, although the most recent Spring Eurobarometer shows that this enthusiasm—at the level of 72% versus EU's average of 65%—is not as extraordinary as in earlier decades when it used to firmly surpass 80% (Balcer et al., 2017; Kantar Public, 2022). However, the June 2022 opinion poll by the Centre for Public Opinion Research Center shows still astonishing 92% support for EU membership (Public Opinion Research Center, 2022). Even though PiS voters predominantly feel European and support staying in the EU, they also feel detached from Europe and Euroscepticism is one of the major forces driving them to vote for PiS (Santana et al., 2020, pp. 11–12). Germany belongs to the same nationalism-driven group of enemies used to undermine most initiatives in opposition to PiS, with Donald Tusk as its most diabolic personalization and the EU as its gargantuan evil emanation.

### 3.2. Specializations

Cultivation of electoral majority requires from the populist radical right a united communication campaign led by the party leadership and its loyal skirmishers who herd the most radical electorate back to the flock, safeguarding the mass character of the party and preventing sidelining by political opponents from the right.

Skirmishers principally recruit from among politicians but also activists and the media. In Poland, major skirmishers of the ruling PiS party—deputy Agriculture Minister Janusz Kowalski, former Justice Minister and now European MP Patryk Jaki, and Justice Minister and Prosecutor General Zbigniew Ziobro—are all front-line lawmakers of Solidary Poland. The coalition was founded in 2012 by former PiS politicians, becoming a handy tool in outsourcing skirmishing, with hard-line nationalism-driven Eurorejectionism as its brand of political specialization.

PiS has its wordy skirmishers at hand too, like Education Minister Przemysław Czarnek or Ryszard Terlecki from the PiS old guard. Both of them have a reputation for making headlines with outrageous radical right statements. Czarnek focuses on the anti-gender agenda, and correspondingly he infamously said that “women should have babies, as it's why God created them” (“PiS MP Przemysław Czarnek,” 2019). He also provided a lengthy explanation of the major tenets of how he, Poland's Minister of Education and Science, representing PiS, sees gender ideology:

If sex is treated solely as pleasure, and there is talk of the right to have children, including by groups that do not constitute a family even informally, then we are dealing with the collapse of values that for centuries allowed us to function. (Kozłowski, 2022)

Terlecki's *emploi* combines gender with nation, so that he claimed that LGBT people "are not equal to normal people" but also, like politicians from Solidary Poland, loudly mused about Poles in the reality of a "Brussels dictatorship." Both politicians, however, express the brand ideological focus of the PiS itself, i.e., radical conservatism in defense of the sovereign nation and the Polish "traditional" family, "seen as the last bastion to be defended against the onslaught of modernity," that is in opposition with LGBTQ rights or women's freedom of choice (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022, p. 15).

PiS politician (Speaker 3) told me that when "a politician like Terlecki says something, I wish the ground would swallow me up. But it's clear he's not doing it because he's slipped his tongue, he's doing it on order."

Currently, no gender-related specializations among Polish skirmishers are to be seen. Major Polish female skirmishers in the political realm—Krystyna Pawłowicz and Olga Semeniuk—have gender-blind skirmishing *emploi*, both in terms of form and content.

### 3.3. Tactical Dormancy

Skirmishers usually tend to be seen as ambitious political newcomers who build their own name while pleasing the leader with their daring and devotion. However, according to my speakers—and the biographer of Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader, but also an archetype skirmisher on the Polish political scene—political impudence is not an artificial, opportunistic mask, but an expression of a natural, characterological predisposition that is fostered, instead of being restrained (Speakers 1, 2, 3, and 4; see also Zaremba, 2010, p. 20).

Most skirmishers continue their political careers with resumptions of valued skirmishing episodes at times of need. Therefore, they emerge and then deradicalize or temporarily disappear. A famous example is PiS politician Antoni Macierewicz, who at one time is "omnipresent and electrifies public opinion with his unceremoniousness, and at other times he disappears":

Once he deals the cards in the political game on behalf of the president [i.e., PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński] (at whose side he likes to appear), the president hides him under the table. This regularity has proven right since the 2015 elections. (Pawlicka, 2021)

Another example is Olga Semeniuk who used to call for the dissolution of the EU (Wróblewski, 2017) and was infamous for her textbook crudeness. However, afterward—despite her signature arrogance—Semeniuk

deradicalized in her public appearances, corresponding with her finding a partner in government. So, she hit the headlines again but with a brand new, softer image, and in a positive, familial context.

The question remains why a skirmisher tempers or changes his/her tactics at a particular time. Is it due to a decision to live a quiet life of a rank-and-file politician? Is it a tactical dormancy at a time when his/her skirmishing becomes uncomfortable for the party or not fitting a current political communication strategy? Or is there a window of opportunity to receive a more serious job, which requires voters not to dislike them? Each answer is possible, depending on whether the skirmisher's tactics meet party strategy.

Being a populist skirmisher, i.e., pushing controversial themes in a radical, if not repulsive way, is the ultimate proof of loyalty to the party but also a risk they take for their party and their careers. They can win ministerial posts and lucrative contracts for themselves, their families, and their cronies (Mikołajewska, 2022).

Therefore, despite their ideological saturation in politics, most speakers agree that—to quote the PiS politician (Speaker 3): "You go to business for the money. You go to politics for the big money." Accordingly, the latest media investigation by WP.pl in Poland shows that Janusz Kowalski earned over half a million euros in state companies after 2015 (Gotowska, 2022).

If one opts for a skirmisher's agenda, there's a chance for a fast-track career and riches but also a risk of being made to disappear from the political scene for good: "These are usually intelligent people; they know the rules of the game," a political advisor close to the ruling party (Speaker 10) told me.

### 3.4. Roles

Skirmishers pioneer, drive, enhance, and support the populist radical right agenda and a high mobilization level in the electorate. They serve the leader and the party by pushing selected aspects—formal and substantive—of their political program to the limits. Uncompromising attacks on political enemies stand as their major *modus operandi*; therefore, they are mainly responsible for the performative aspect of populist radical right politics.

Though I follow Mudde's definition of populism as a thin-centered ideology attached to the core, thick ideologies of the populist radical right, following Moffit (2016) I acknowledge the fundamental function of populism's performative role that is construed to fit the overall spectacle of the populist radical right in Poland. This approach is in my view not only reconcilable with Mudde's, but it also enriches it with a prospective descriptive toolkit.

Skirmishers wind up the populist agenda of fueling the unceasing "us versus them" conflict, applying a rhetoric of crudeness and vulgarity. This role and performative style are associated in the literature predominantly with populist leaders (Canovan, 2005, p. 82;

Kaltwasser & Mudde, 2017, p. 64; Moffit, 2016; Mudde, 2019b, p. 135). However, they portray a larger array of political faces, including that of a sage statesman, the nation's defender, or an expert.

Even during elections, PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński predominantly wears his skirmishing face by delivering blows against enemies of Poland and Polishness (primarily Donald Tusk, refugees, LGBTQ people, the EU, and Germany), but he still retains a face of a stately guru.

At the same time, outside of the electoral period, a populist radical right leader would often either avoid a given topic or resort to insinuations, while the skirmishers would test or prompt certain ideas and approaches like calling the EU “bandits” or “the Brussels occupant.”

Skirmishers have just one face—they create and maintain the mood of hatred and conflict against the enemy (e.g., Donald Tusk) and of a permanent threat to the nation from the side of that enemy and their treacherous allies (e.g., Germany, the EU). In that way, populist skirmishers are then more “populist” than populist radical right leaders, as they just put on a populist show, nothing else.

Skirmishers speak to that quarter of Poles who think that homosexuality is not normal and should not be tolerated, whose majority are those in favor of a total ban or strict limits on abortion. Both overlapping groups are mostly people supporting the ruling coalition (ca. half of them; see “Poll: How many Poles,” 2021). A quarter of a country of 38 million people is not a fringe perspective and skirmishers are there to make this quarter feel that its voice is being heard (Müller, 2016, p. 14), despite the fact that they take an active part in creating the lyrics for that voice.

As the political advisor (Speaker 9) explained to me:

Politicians within a party are serving different segments of society and different preferences. If you want to have a third of popular support, you need a diverse offer for a diverse society, also on the level of expressiveness—some prefer stately, balanced politicians, some prefer Janusz Kowalski.

“Is this not democracy?” he asks rhetorically afterward. Kowalski entered Polish politics in 1997 and has ever since been a populist skirmisher.

Cynicism may be reflected in his party-to-party pilgrimage, including PiS, its oppositional Civic Platform, and PiS' radical coalition partner Solidary Poland since 2019. However, Janusz Kowalski has remained coherent as regards his political style, which has always been offensive, presenting the world in black and white colors (Klauziński, 2020). Already in 2002, one year after PiS was founded, Lech Kaczyński, who was then chairing the party, described Kowalski as “very talented, very impulsive, and confrontational. While we would like PiS to be a party of civil people” (Klauziński, 2020).

Populist skirmishers like Kowalski play the major role in advancing an ultraconservative, i.e., often xenopho-

bic agenda. As the Hungarian sociologist Bálint Magyar points out regarding the similar Hungarian case:

You have to give something to people with a sense of failure in life. That's why a sizeable list of common enemies has already [been] gathered since 2010: liberal intellectuals, Roma, the unemployed, the homeless....The fear campaign overshadows any real domestic problems because what are mistakes in tax reform when you fear for your family's life? (Zbytniewska, 2018)

Since PiS came to power in 2015, women, LGBTQ people, and refugees of non-European-descent have been discriminated against and victimized under the pretext of preserving the triad of nature, nation, and normality (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, p. 36).

The “dirtiest” and most radical topics are outsourced to skirmishers to make leaders look more statesmanlike and wiser, while they can wash their hands off topics too controversial for the central electorate. As a result, a less popular ban on abortion and raids on LGBTQ people have been used most vociferously by populist skirmishers from the ruling coalition, as well as from external organizations and activists such as the Ordo Iuris Institute, the Mother and Father Foundation, and the “No to Gender!” group. Another example is Krzysztof Kasprzak, the author of the 2021 “StopLGBT” motion who compared LGBTQ people to Nazis during the parliamentary debate.

Crises are the times when populist skirmishers come in handy. “At non-crisis times they pursue their own career agenda, waging their own skirmishing tactics. At crisis times they play the role assigned to them by party leadership,” a political advisor (Speaker 7) tells me. Their role is to cover up the real problems and scandals.

The three groups victimized by the Polish populist radical right, in the name of the national socio-cultural and physical safety as well as of opposition to “gender”—i.e., opposition to the rights of women, refugees, and LGBTQ people—are instrumentalized when legitimate allegations for the government's incompetence, failure, or abuse appear.

Populist skirmishers are deployed to help the populist party redirect public frustration. A political advisor cooperating with major government politicians (Speaker 7) explains the tactics:

We observe ongoing scandals within the ruling coalition—raging inflation, nepotism, failures, Covid consequences. Always when there's a problem, PiS inserts some topic that has a good social absorption. Today inflation is high? Then tomorrow there's a bill on limiting abortion to cover it up.

Populist skirmishers have been a vanguard of inciting anti-LGBTQ hatred, first testing the Polish public before major state politicians decided to use homophobic discourse. Skirmishers that were most blatantly and actively



promoting this mindset soon received top government jobs (ministerial/secretary-of-state), despite the fact that this correlation does not imply causation.

However, some anti-LGBTQ motions have been introduced by activists not directly related to the ruling party. This indicates that there is an ambivalence in the target electorate that sometimes makes the engagement of a career politician too risky for his/her career, although in the time of an electoral campaign all forces—leadership and skirmishers—are mobilized. At the same time, the redirecting of attention from a crisis being caused by PiS becomes even more natural when skirmishers are from outside the ruling party, be it from Solidary Poland or nationalist or ultraconservative organizations.

Another role of skirmishers is to energize the political scene and entertain society, to offer “circuses,” especially if there are food shortages. It is particularly important due to the contemporary reality of the “permanent campaign” (Blumenthal, 1980), which makes “scandals and extremisms quickly become commonplace,” a main opposition party politician (Speaker 2) tells me. Populist skirmishers are there not to allow battlefield lethargy, always pushing the political competition and by the same means keeping citizens engaged.

The battlefield metaphor reflects the polarized reality characterizing societies with a populist radical right rule. It is a handy context for populists, since “in war, you always have to take sides,” a main opposition party politician (Speaker 2) explains. Accordingly, skirmishers upkeep the war atmosphere, mobilizing the radicals and preventing them from drifting away to a fundamentalist party (“just” means that they don’t have a political offer to reach a mass audience, as the ruling PiS does; see “Kto głosował na Konfederację,” 2019).

A more fundamentalist, ultranationalist party (Konfederacja) is a specialized grouping for which the nativist agenda is the *raison d’être*, while for PiS and its more radical coalition partner Solidary Poland, the ultraright agenda is just a mobilizing, winning, and tactical tool.

Stephan C. M. Henneberg points to two approaches to party extremism. One, he claims, is a “leading approach (the convinced ideologist)” and the other one is “a following mentality (the tactical populist)” (Henneberg, 2006, p. 36).

The political aim of the Convinced Ideologist approach is to pursue a certain cultural agenda, regardless of voters’ preferences. Again, this is an authoritarian, closed-binary approach of “one who’s not with us is against us” (Henneberg, 2006, p. 37). In Poland, this attitude seems to be noticeable in organizations cooperating with the ruling party, while the politics of the governing PiS “is built on the basis of analysis of the public mood, on market research, what pays and what does not pay with the electorate”:

If—for instance—refugees were profitable for PiS, they would have been highly empathetic, but Poles

didn’t want it. What counts is the calculation of the political target—of whom there is more, so that we adapt our policy to win them. (Speaker 3)

Therefore, PiS suits the second type of Henneberg’s extremist grouping, i.e., “tactical populists” for whom “feeling the political pulse of the electorate is its most important strategic aim” (Henneberg, 2006, p. 17). Accordingly, a former ruling coalition politician and beneficiary of political engagement (Speaker 4) admits concerns that PiS “will do just anything, including abortion or to the opposite—festering relations with the church if the polls show that they will rack up 2% of the electorate with that.”

Certainly, some of the skirmishers’ views align with their discourse, but oftentimes they are inclined to use more radical language than they would do naturally, a political analyst (Speaker 6) explains to me. In the end, concludes a PiS politician (Speaker 3), commenting on skirmishers, they will do whatever it takes, since “once you’ve entered politics, you will do anything to stay...To do that, they certainly follow party orders.”

#### 4. Conclusion

The populist radical right has huge power for mobilizing electorates. Therefore, mass populist radical right parties—like PiS in Poland—pursue this political strategy. To maintain a broad electorate extending from a center-right to radical right voters, such parties use populist skirmishers, recruiting them from both inside and outside of a party. Even if they are not liked, they stand out and are remembered.

Populist skirmishers perform multiple functions ranging from catering to fringe electorates, covering up uncomfortable topics, and energizing the political scene. This article has identified a wide collection of their functions:

1. Pioneering, driving, enhancing, and supporting the radical agenda;
2. Winding up the populist agenda of fuelling the unceasing “us versus them” conflict;
3. Serving different segments of society;
4. Advancing ultra-conservative, i.e., often xenophobic agendas;
5. Outsourcing the “dirtiest” and most radical topics, so that the party can focus on more moderate voters;
6. Covering up actual problems and scandals;
7. Redirecting public frustrations;
8. Energizing the political scene and entertaining society;
9. Mobilizing the radicals and preventing them from drifting away to more fundamentalist parties.

Skirmishers are often either pioneers or conspicuous users of fear and war-mongering tactics, weaving gender

and nation-driven anxieties deeply into the ideological fabric of the electorate. The major victims of their discourse are women, refugees, and LGBTQ people. However, more fatalities include respectful communication, national unity, relations with the EU, rationality, and truth.

Populist skirmishers still constitute a novel territory for political science. This article only opens the process of conceptualization of this political category. Skirmishers certainly serve more functions than the ones presented in this article. Therefore, there is a need for their identification and analysis. They can also represent other political families than the populist radical right and they are certainly a global phenomenon, transcending Poland.

This article focuses only on skirmishers from Poland's political scene. Political parties are effectively supported by skirmishing activists and journalists who play the same basket of roles. Consequently, the phenomenon of populist skirmishers deserves to be further explored.

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## About the Author



**Karolina Zbytniewska** is editor-in-chief at EURACTIV Poland, the major Polish media reporting on European and international affairs. Karolina teaches an original course “Shades of Populism in Europe and the World” at the University of Warsaw.