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**Why Nationalism? Biographies and Motives of Participants  
in the Polish Nationalist Movement**

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### **Abstract**

The article is based on an analysis of four selected biographies of nationalist activists in Poland – taken from a larger sample of 30 biographical-narrative interviews conducted with members of organizations such as the All-Polish Youth, National Radical Camp, and National Rebirth of Poland (2011–2015). During the analysis of all of the collected interviews, three main biographical paths to the nationalist movement were distinguished: (a) an individual project (with two subtypes), (b) the influence of significant others, and (c) being ‘found’ by an organization. The paper explores four individuals’ life stories – each representing one of the paths – and takes a closer look at all three main paths, including the role of family political orientation, circle of friends, and interests. The analysis shows that the Polish nationalist movement can be seen as a space that allows individuals to meet their various needs (the need to resist the political and social situation in the country; to express their values, discontent, and opinions; to maintain a feeling of doing something valuable and important; to carry out social work, promote patriotism, and to engage in educational activities). Moreover, when it comes to explanations of the growing popularity of nationalism nowadays, it can be said that the nationalist movement involves people who are dissatisfied with politics and looking for grassroots alternatives; feel endangered by cultural (liberal) changes; are seeking a return to tradition and Catholicism; and who are looking for stronger narratives (those opposed to liberalism and postmodernism).

**Keywords:** *biographical-narrative interviews, biographical paths, the nationalist movement, Poland.*

## 1. Introduction

Public and academic discussions about young people's potential political choices and their disengagement from institutional politics are ongoing. On the one hand, younger generations are seen as the driving force behind change, and on the other, as some research shows, their political engagement, including voting, has declined (Henn and Weinstein, 2006; Zielińska, 2015; Pazderski, 2018). Some researchers argue that we need to take into consideration a broader understanding of political participation, including new channels of mobilization, and diversification of agencies, repertoires of actions, and targets whom participants seek to influence (Norris, 2002). This would allow us to produce another picture of young people's political engagement. The latter individuals would rather choose to become involved in alternative, more informal means of political engagement, like protesting, demonstrating, or online engagement (*ibid.*).

In the case of Poland, there are two main tendencies concerning young people and politics: decreasing interest in official politics, and an increase in support for right-wing and anti-system political parties (e.g. Messyasz, 2015; Mrozowicki, 2019). The discussion about this turn to the right emerged following the results of parliamentary elections in 2015. In this poll, young people (18–29) were more likely to vote for the Law and Justice party (26.6 per cent), the Kukiz 15' committee (20.6 per cent), KORWiN (16.8 per cent), and the Civic Platform (14.4 per cent). While Law and Justice is a right-wing, conservative party, Kukiz 15' committee gathers different anti-system supporters, including representatives of the National Movement, while KORWiN is a conservative and neoliberal party, which since December 2018 has been one of the main actors (together with the National Movement) in the new political coalition Confederation Liberty and Independence. In the most recent parliamentary elections (October 2019), young people voted a bit differently: the Law and Justice party (26.3 per cent) was still the most strongly supported choice, Civic Platform was placed second (24.3 per cent), followed by Confederation Liberty and Independence (19.7 per cent), and The Left (18.4 per cent). The results of the elections in 2015 were part of a more general increase in the presence of nationalist, conservative, and right-wing ideas and organizations that has been observed in the public sphere in Poland as well as in other European countries. The amount of nationalist demonstrations and events, as well as the number of people who join them, have been on the rise in Poland in recent years. The scale of the Independence Day March that is organized on November 11 by nationalist organizations has been surprisingly large since 2011, and was still huge in 2019. Moreover, the establishment of the National Movement in 2012 as a social-political movement and later on as a political party has resulted in the growing presence of representatives of nationalist organizations in the media and public discourse. In 2015, a few members of the National Movement got into parliament as well; this 'success' was repeated in the recent elections of 2019.

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Both the National Radical Camp and All-Polish Youth<sup>1</sup> played an important role in these processes. The organizations refer to their historical predecessors (from the interwar period) and present themselves as continuing the ideological and political activity of national democrats and national radicals. Taking into consideration the varieties of nationalism, the movement described in the paper represents radical nationalism, which – in contrast to banal or civic nationalism – is nativist, calls for the defense of an (ethnically, culturally, religiously) homogenous nation, refers to national pride, and opposes liberal democracy (seen as one of the threats to the desired vision of the nation). Radical nationalist movements can be seen as a part of the broader picture of the radical right, extreme right, or far right (see Minkenberg, 2017, Pirro, 2015; Félix 2015; Blee, 2007) – different scholars use these labels interchangeably to refer to the same organizations and movements. In order to define the researched organizations in the most adequate way and avoid the potential risk of blurring the differences between radical right-wing political parties and nationalist movements, the term radical nationalism is applied here. This is also based on the fact that the interviewees belong to those organizations for which nationalism is the most important component of identity, and they see themselves as nationalists rather than right-wingers.

The growing interest in nationalist discourses and movements has led to questions about the people who co-create and join these organizations. How and why do people decide to commit themselves to the nationalist movement? Do they reproduce their family's political views, or are they drawn in from outside family circles? Based on interviews with participants in the (radical) nationalist movement in Poland, this paper explores the biographical paths to nationalist organizations. The aim is to analyse both the trajectories and motives of young participants of the Polish radical nationalist movement, and hence to contribute to the literature and partially fill research gaps about radical nationalism. Despite the growing interest in these movements, relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to the biographical paths and motives that drive people to engage with radical nationalist milieus. Most studies focus on the results of elections or, in the case of extra-parliamentary nationalist organizations, discourse analysis of their speeches and online materials. The novelty of the paper lies in its combination of biographical method and its theoretical inspiration from social movement studies. It focuses on activists' biographies – four selected cases involving members of the All-Polish Youth and National Radical Camp.

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<sup>1</sup> These are the most known extra-parliamentary nationalist organizations with branches across Poland. It is hard to estimate the number of members. The Independence Day marches attract around 50,000–70,000 participants, but the event attracts various milieus and individuals. Despite some internal conflicts and (economic- and political-system-based) diversity, they share a vision of 'Great Poland' as an ethno-culturally homogenous nation based on conservative values, a family focus, and Catholicism.

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## ***2. Explaining support for and involvement in (radical) nationalism in Poland***

There are different ways to explain support for right-wing politics and the popularity of radical nationalism among young people. However, research has thus far focused on analyzing mostly passive support – e.g. voting (Winiewski et al., 2015; Messyasz, 2015) – rather than exploring active involvement in such movements. To simplify the existing approaches to explaining right-wing sympathies, we can divide them into three main types. First, there are socio-economic explanations that focus on economic deprivation and the results of processes of modernization. Contemporary nationalism constitutes here the answer to growing social and economic inequalities caused by neoliberal capitalism (Ost, 2007). However, other studies show that people who support (or are involved in) nationalist organizations do not necessarily evaluate their own economic situation as bad. Surveys conducted during Independence Day marches show that the participants are typically not economically disadvantaged: in 2015, the latter individuals tended to discern a worse economic situation for Poland in comparison to other nations, but – similarly to data from 2018 – did not report to feeling poorer than the average Pole (Malinowska et al., 2016: 5); in 2018, their average income was 5545 PLN/1237 EUR (more than 20 per cent higher than the national average wage), while 68,4 per cent of them had a university degree (Kocyba and Łukianow, 2019). As Krystyna Szafraniec states, young people may feel disappointed with the direction of transformation after 1989, as they were supposed to be its biggest beneficiaries. The author stresses the fertile context for young people's dissatisfaction in Poland – a situation that has been created by growing tensions. While new cultural options and ideologies have been accepted due to a trust surplus, economic development and changes in the social structure have not occurred quickly enough (2012: 11). Similarly, Adam Mrozowicki (2014: 71–72) focuses on the consequences of processes of precarization. He sees support for right-wing rhetoric as a way of mobilizing dissatisfaction outside the job market and as a response to local cultural resources (such as national pride, national identity, and religion). Second, there are socio-political explanations that point to a crisis of democracy and a feeling of detachment from politics (Messyasz, 2015; Mrozowicki, 2019). Despite the general increase in pro-democratic attitudes among Poles – from 65 per cent in 2011 to 71 per cent in 2017 (Feliksiak 2017) – young people are tired of long periods of political polarization (when two main political parties compete – in this case, the Law and Justice, and the Civic Platform), and do not feel represented in politics – in 2017, 31 per cent of young people (18–24 years old) stated that they felt a complete lack of political representation (Cybulska and Pankowski, 2017). They see politicians as self-interested people who do not represent the people's voice (Messyasz, 2015: 65). Third, there are cultural explanations that point to cultural changes in late modern societies and an identity crisis in postmodern life. The turn to contemporary nationalism can be seen as cultural backlash, a conservative reaction to the growing dominance of postmodern values and lifestyles (Inglehart and Norris,

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2016). It is also a reaction to the growing number of opportunities, choices, and potential identities. Postmodern reality is believed to be associated with emotions such as feelings of being endangered, lonely, or insecure, thus nationalism, as a popular ideology with its strong, black-and-white narrative, may be the answer to ontological uncertainty and identity confusion (Billig, 2008; Szafraniec, 2012). When we focus on the socio-cultural processes in Poland in the 2000s, we can observe growing cultural clashes between cultural liberalism and conservative Catholicism. The milieu associated with the latter helped (re)construct the notion of Polishness as inseparable from religion and traditional values (Kotwas and Kubik, 2019; Pankowski, 2010). Right-wing parties and organizations invoke this idea and offer a sense of belonging to the nationalist community – in opposition to cultural Others, and liberal and EU elites – and address feelings such as national pride and symbolic cultural significance (Gdula, 2018).

These three explanations should be seen as complementary rather than competing with each other. Generally speaking, all of them refer to feelings of relative deprivation, exclusion, and being not represented – in economic, political, and cultural senses. Different factors can be combined in an individuals' life. For instance, one survey conducted before the parliamentary elections in 2015 showed that the popularity of right-wing political parties in 2015 among young people (18–29) should be viewed in the light of relative deprivation (a subjective feeling of a worsening material situation among Poles), authoritarian tendencies (the need for strong leadership and a call for a unified worldview across society), and anti-immigrant prejudices (Winiewski et al., 2015: 10). The context of the refugee crisis in 2015 was reflected in young people's decisions. Those who supported right-wing, anti-system political parties more often emphasized their attachment to patriotic values and voiced support for a homogenous vision of the nation, as well as opposed homosexual relationships and agreed with the need for changes in the system and of elites (Winiewski et al., 2015: 5–6). The complex nature of individual motives also appears in the analysis of biographical-narrative interviews with young precarious right-wing supporters in Poland and Germany (Mrozowicki et al., 2019). There are two main paths to that support. The first one is connected with socio-economic insecurity and the precarious state of family relations. Right-wing ideas offer here 'some ready-made patterns for interpreting biographical predicaments and find favorable ground in the broader context of various biographical problems' (ibid.: 232). Others, such as refugees, become scapegoats: i.e. seen as potential competitors and a threat. The second path is rather tied to a more market-individualistic orientation, and involves anti-establishment views and criticism of the welfare state, including of 'undeserved' social support for disadvantaged groups, such as refugees and welfare claimants (ibid.).

Both the surveys and the analysis of the interviews show the complexity of motives and help us better understand the turn to the right in 2015. However, the increase in the popularity of nationalism began at least a few years earlier. To get a wider perspective and foster understanding of this increase in nationalist attitudes, it is necessary to focus on the individual experiences of young nationalists.

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The present research is anchored in the cultural perspective of social movement theories, and, more specifically, in a socio-psychological approach (Jasper, 2007a; Klandermans and Mayer, 2009) which suggests that it is relevant to concentrate on the values, beliefs, and motivations of individuals. Focusing on individuals' biographies and categories such as identity, morality, and emotions lets us understand why people join and actively participate in social movements (Jasper, 2007a). In reference to James Jasper's approach, as well as other scholars' calls for a more internalist perspective to radical right studies (Goodwin, 2006; Blee, 2007), the research involved the biographical method (Schütze, 1992), which is a new approach in studies of Polish radical nationalism. Biographical-narrative interviews let us 'reconstruct the path of involvement in specific forms of political participation, the role of networks in socialization, the continuities, but also the turning points at the intersections between individual experiences and environmental transformations' (Della Porta, 2014: 266). They allow us to learn more about individuals' understanding of their biographical paths to the movement, their motives, emotions, and the biographical consequences of their involvement, as well as to locate the former within broader social, political, and cultural contexts. Similarly to identity, biography is reconstructed and reinterpreted. In the framework of the biographical method, the category of biographical identity was invented to refer to individualized self-perceptions and the idea of 'who we think we are.' The other important category here is biographical work, which means the effort an individual makes to (re)construct and interpret his/her biographical experiences in relation to identity, decisions, and actions (Strauss, 1984: 99). Biographical work allows the individual to maintain his/her integrity and continuity, especially at biographical turning points.

There are some examples of research conducted from an internalist perspective (focused on intra-organizational dynamics and the movements in participants' activity and discourses), including the biographical method (Blee, 1996; Fangen, 1999; Félix, 2015; Goodwin, 2010; Klandermans and Mayer, 2009), but none of these have focused on the Polish case. Although they constitute a point of reference for the analysis described in this paper, it is necessary to be aware of the role of the type of researched group, as well as the national context. What is common to similar research is the search for the main types of motives and routes to the movement. Interestingly, in all studies the most important reasons for joining the movement involve a complex interplay of motives, as proposed by Bert Klandermans and Nonna Mayer (2009): these include instrumentality (a willingness to change and influence social and political circumstances); ideology (the need to make one's own life more meaningful and express one's own feelings) and identity (the need for belonging, and a desire to meet like-minded others) (*ibid.*: 8). In research on the Norwegian skinhead milieu, the most important motive is 'the need to be noticed by others, to feel important and to belong somewhere' (Fangen, 1999: 367). In the case of research on the British National Party, ideological factors were discovered to be the most relevant: ethnic nationalist beliefs and the need to defend the dominant national group from

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threats caused by immigration, minority ethnic groups, and more general democratic change (Goodwin, 2010: 45).

Regarding the routes to the movement, the abovementioned studies find different answers. While in the case of research on the Ku Klux Klan most female activists interviewed by Kathleen Blee were recruited by friends, acquaintances, and family (Blee, 1996: 689), family was not found to play such an important role in British (Goodwin, 2010) and Norwegian (Fangen, 1999) studies, where activism was seen as more individualized and rarely a consequence of family socialization. Annette Linden and Bert Klandermans distinguished three main trajectories of involvement: continuity, conversion, and compliance: *continuity* refers to life histories wherein movement membership and participation are a natural consequence of prior political socialization; *conversion* refers to trajectories wherein movement membership and participation involve breaking with the past; and *compliance* is when people enter a movement because of circumstances that they do not always control (2007: 185). A similar typology is proposed by Matthew J. Goodwin, who writes about longer-term old guard activists, new recruits, and political wanderers (2010: 43).

### 3. Methodological note

The empirical part of the paper is based on the analysis of four biographical narrative interviews (Schütze, 1992). They are taken from a larger sample of 30 interviews<sup>2</sup> which were carried out in the framework of the author's research project between 2011 and 2015 among members of three Polish nationalist organizations: the All-Polish Youth (*Młodzież Wszechpolska*), the National Rebirth of Poland (*Narodowe Odrodzenie Polski*), and the National Radical Camp (*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny*). The narrators were 27 men and 3 women, aged between 18 and 29 years, mainly university students or graduates.

Interviews were designed according to Fritz Schütze's (1992) method and had three parts: the first, narrative part started with an open question designed to help reveal the entire life history of the interviewee; the second part included additional biographical questions about issues not covered in the first part; and the third part was dedicated to topics such as involvement in the related organization, cooperation with other nationalist organizations, political views, notions of nationalism, nation and patriotism, and values and counter-values. The analysis followed grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006), with open and selective coding.

Two relevant points should be noted here. First, one needs to be aware that the results of qualitative research cannot be generalized in a statistical sense, and that such analysis increases knowledge of only some part of the nationalist movement. Second, since the fieldwork was conducted (2011–2015), the socio-political context in Poland has changed: the right-wing party Law and Justice has been in power since 2015 and the dark – illiberal – side of civil society, including

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<sup>2</sup> An overview of the narrators is presented in Appendix 1.

nationalists, has had wider political and discursive opportunities (Ekiert, 2019; Płatek and Płucienniczak, 2017). Additionally, interviews were conducted before Brexit and the refugee crisis, which influenced both nationalist and public discourse and (re)created new enemies for nationalists. However, despite the changing repertoire of action and enemies (Płatek and Płucienniczak, 2017) nationalists' biographical paths, motives, and movement-related values do not change so much. Moreover, even if joining a nationalist organization is more popular now than at the time of the research, the participants still see themselves as a part of an anti-system movement and do not support the governing party.

The presentation of selected cases enables us to show possible paths to organizational support in a more detailed way – through the individuals' experiences of becoming nationalist activists. As the same time, the narrators exemplify the types of paths which were distinguished based on the analysis of all 30 cases (Kajta, 2020). The particular cases were chosen in order to present (a) cases that are as representative as possible of a given path, but also (b) the activists' trajectories within the movement, and (c) the heterogeneous character of the movement. It can be argued that the selected interviews illustrate not only distinguishable biographical paths but also a more general picture of the collected material.

#### ***4. Biographical paths to the nationalist movement***

Based on the analysis of 30 biographical-narrative interviews, three main patterns of becoming involved in the movement have been distinguished: individual projects (with two subtypes: enhanced by significant others, or not), the influence of significant others, and being 'found' by the organization. While Linden and Klandermans (2007) and Goodwin (2010) based their typologies more on the level of fluidity between life before and after joining the movement, this study focused more on the circumstances in which individuals met with nationalist ideas and organizations. It should be noted that, regardless of the type of pattern, joining the movement was not completely random – it was connected with particular interests and activities that made meeting with such organizations more probable. The paths are presented below through the stories of the narrators.

#### ***5. Individual project: The cases of Wiktoria and Radomir***

In the case of an individual project, joining a movement is usually a consequence of previously acquired knowledge about – and hence awareness of – the concept of nationalism, although sometimes the activists considered themselves to be nationalists before their official involvement. However, the first meetings were not always preceded by obtaining a lot of knowledge about the movement or by sharing a nationalist worldview. To some extent, all members' histories constitute individual projects, as it was always the individual's decision to join an organization. What is different in the case of the 'biographical project' path is that it involves the individual's search (which sometimes lasts a few years) for



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ideological belonging, which results in their independently finding nationalism and/or specific nationalist organizations. We can talk about two subtypes of the latter path: some narrators (Wiktorja) stress their complete independence, but most of them (Radomir) highlight the role of significant others (family and friends) in shaping their worldview.

### 5.1 Wiktorja

Wiktorja grew up in a big city where she was still living (with mother and sister) at the time of the research. She had generally negative memories of her childhood: her father spent most of the time abroad (where he works), and her mother and grandmother had serious illnesses. The experience of taking care of ill relatives has made her very tough and self-reliant. Her mother is described as a friend, but her father seems to be a more influential figure: her way of talking about him combines anger and a desire for his appreciation. She is a dissenter – even her descriptions of school experiences refer to pupil-teacher conflicts and criticism of the education system (too little history at school). Because of truancy from her gymnasium (secondary school) she was transferred by her father to a private school. This was a turning point in her life: she started to think about her life more seriously and volunteered at a hospice. She also started to work. At the time of the interview, she was working as a babysitter and cleaner. She also was a candidate for membership of the All-Polish Youth. To be a regular member, she had to pass an exam about the movement's ideology.

Wiktorja started the narrative by making reference to her field of study (pedagogy), which is the opportunity to *influence the new generation and its moral backbone*. The notion of being a living role model arose a few times: Wiktorja believes that by demonstrating some specific (moral and applied) rules and behaviors, she can influence other people to do the same. She is especially committed to anti-abortion activity (an activity shared by other female activists):

I think that my decision to join the nationalist movement was caused by... the political debate about abortion, and it made me think that it [the topic] needs to be shown [publicized], taken to the streets... to resist and openly talk about it, even though they will call you a fascist later on.

Her political views began to be shaped even earlier: their emergence was connected with her boyfriend going away on a military mission. Wiktorja sought out people with political opinions, as well as a space for young, like-minded people, which is how she found All-Polish Youth, applied to it, and started to get invitations to meetings. She was driven by two main types of motivation: personal-based, and instrumental. Activism represents to her an opportunity to change the world (according to her values), but also a kind of personal strategy and therapy, as she has not overcome her family problems yet:

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I have been trying to show my father that everything I do has a goal, all the more so because I was always told that pedagogy is nothing, that I won't achieve anything [...] that I won't even be able to rent a flat. But doing such work for people is important for me, because when I take to the streets and show that it is possible to resist, maybe other people can follow it [copy my behavior]. That is why I do what I do now.

Wiktoria even described how she had looked for some connections between the history of her family and the scope of her current activity, but her involvement was rather the result of rebelliousness than continuity. She referred to the sins of her grandfather, who was involved in the Red Army, and the fact that her father was part of a Polish paramilitary police formation during communist times (ZOMO). Her political involvement does not meet with her parents' approval, as she calls them 'leftists'. However, participation in nationalist movement gives her space to express her views and shape the desired changes:

We have to show through our lives that we can change something in the country, because I do not like the direction Poland has been going in. I do not want my kid to be raised in such a country [...] If we can help one person not to have an abortion, the issue is worth it, worth that one candle.

The narrator criticized abortion, in vitro fertilization, the public visibility of homosexuals, as well as the EU's economic influence and the condition of historical politics in Poland. She held some of these opinions prior to her involvement (although the organization gave her space to express them more openly), but some seem to be a consequence of political socialization within the movement. Interestingly, she appears to have 'selectively adopted' the nationalist agenda (Blee 1996: 693), as she dissociates herself from anti-Semitic attitudes. Wiktoria's doubts about her commitment dissipated after a 'winter school' organized by the movement – this represented an opportunity to obtain a lot of knowledge, as well as become integrated with other members. The organization gives her a sense of belonging and safety, a social network and satisfaction – her friends from the organization constitute an important, trust-based circle for her. Wiktoria is a type of revolutionary, and the movement is an instrument for changing the world as well as for meeting like-minded people (Linden and Klandermans, 2007: 199). Despite the fact that instrumentality dominates her narrative, the narrator's history also combines two other motives: identity and ideology (Klandermans and Meyer, 2009).

## *5.2 Radomir*

Radomir grew up in a working-class area in one of the biggest cities in Poland. From the very beginning he presented himself as an independent outsider. He was brought up by his mother (his father had left and was living abroad with a new wife). There were other important male role models in his life: his grandfather, and

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uncles. As army officers, they transmitted to him anti-communist and anti-system values. Despite his distance from his father, he stressed that he grew up in a decent family in a favorable economic situation. Initially, he decided to move away to start studying (medical sciences) and settled in a bigger city. Because of the high cost of living, he went back to his home city after two years and continued his studies there.

Attachment to values such as God, honor, and homeland (some of the slogans of the nationalist milieu in Poland) are presented as a *natural resource*, obtainable from the family home and traditional society. In this sense, his history is different to Wiktor's and is more based on continuity (Linden and Klandermans, 2007: 184). In the course of his involvement in nationalism, these values became well thought out and more internalized:

[My lack of interest in football] somehow made me stand out from the others, I was not interested in that, I adhered to some ideals... all the more so because my family, especially my uncles, they fought against communism in its time... so maybe I had always been turning somehow against that system... what else... I was 16 years old and I could see that the world was incomplete... that people around me did not follow any ideals [...] not even those three basic words which we believe in – God, honor, homeland.

His contact with the National Radical Camp started when he was 16 years old as the result of his reflexive search for an ideological path. In contrast to his schoolmates, he felt the need to have some ideological points of reference. What made him different from others was also his reflexivity and interest in the world. During his search, he met with different authors and ideas (Nietzsche, Hitler's national socialism, Dmowski's national democracy, and finally, national radicalism). As he did not have like-minded friends, he looked on the internet and read books. Hence, he presented himself as an ideological *pioneer* among his friends, who, according to him *were strongly attached to the attitudes imposed by society*. He joined the National Radical Camp in 2006 and was impressed with their way of thinking:

I found myself on a good track with national democracy, but it was not exactly what was I was looking for, because I did not get on very well with democracy then or now... I found the National Radical Camp as a young person because I decided that I wanted to see what it looked like... I met people who surely impressed me somehow with their... not even worldview, but rather their refinement, with what they presented... it was a harmonious group of people adhering to some values and somehow, over time, I started to adapt it to some extent.

As he states, the reaction of his mother was negative. She was afraid for his safety and potential legal problems. In contrast to most of the individual cases, the destigmatization Radomir underwent did not help much. Interestingly, Radomir

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often referred to the associations many members of society have about nationalists – connections with Nazis and fascists, as well as the notion of the ‘stupid skinhead’. Being a nationalist can be felt as a stigma (Goffman, 2005), which is connected with social disapproval and potential exclusion from social interaction (Fangen, 1999: 358). The sources of such stigmatization are the whole of society, the state, and counter-movements (Klandermans and Mayer, 2008: 272) as well as the media (Kajta, 2017). Destigmatization in this case involved the biographically important process of becoming a member of a nationalist organization: it involved a (self-reflexive) taking over of the narrative of the organization, and a reconfiguration of the individual’s own identity, while also negotiating an unwanted identity imposed by others.

At the time of the interview, Radomir was the vice-coordinator of a brigade, and was dedicating a lot of his time to his organizational work. The organization seems to be a safe space that can, taking into consideration its reach throughout Poland, make changes in life easier to manage. For instance, moving to another city was easier for the narrator because he contacted people from a brigade there:

I found my feet pretty fast, also because of the brigade there... I found a handful of people with similar views with whom I started to do something... of course, our worldview is to some extent... to some extent it makes us excluded from society... let’s not delude ourselves... everyone has... when somebody hears [the word] nationalist... [...] he sees... thinks of some dimwit skinhead with whom you cannot talk about anything... that a nationalist is just out of touch with social life, is someone from outer space... that is what everyone thinks... at least I’ve met such images of us... that we just, I do not know, walk and salute, right.

The brigade is presented as a family, with strong bonds and a shared ideological understanding among its participants. It is also space where he can feel like a socially and politically active person. Radomir’s story also shows how the organization changed – when he started there were just a few people – into a much more hermetic circle. Their activity was originally (in hindsight) irrelevant. Since then, the repertoire of action has changed: from putting up posters to more influential educational and ideological work. The narrator does not see himself as entering politics; his life plans are focused on graduating, applying for a Ph.D., getting a job, having a family, and continuing to participate in the organization.

Radomir is an example of a revolutionary who found his ideological path and organization at a relatively young age. Since then he has just developed and enhanced his commitment to the radical nationalist world. His contestation is value driven, since he has a very specific worldview. Although he mentions family influences, he presents himself as a very individualistic outsider who found his path on his own. What is more, he diminishes the role of his absent father, but his very conservative, religious, and radical statements may be a kind of rebellion against his father’s life choices. The hidden nature of the organization may have meant that at the beginning of the research Radomir avoided elaborating on

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internal organizational issues, and he was also quite suspicious. He made some anti-Semitic statements, but also tried to mitigate them and to destigmatize the image of nationalists.

### **6. *The influence of significant others: Ireneusz***

The second path, the influence of significant others, refers to histories in which first meetings with an organization happened at others' (family members', friends') prompting and invitation. Such meetings were more likely to happen with history students, historical reconstruction groups, or, as in the case of Ireneusz, football supporters' clubs.

At the time of the interview Ireneusz was a student who lived in a dormitory in a big Polish city. He grew up in a working-class family in another part of Poland and moved to the bigger city to study. The beginning of Ireneusz's involvement was related to his commitment to a club of football supporters. As such milieus are often connected with nationalist ideas, one of his friends started to think about becoming involved in the National Radical Camp, and later persuaded others to do the same. As Ireneusz had not heard of the National Radical Camp before, he started to search for information. At first, his interest was aroused by his friend, but after making contact with the organization, a new acquaintance started to be a relevant figure in terms of his commitment. Besides his new interest, the narrator wanted to do something meaningful:

I don't remember well. What was interesting to me? I think that... I don't know, I have no idea what it was. I don't know, in the beginning, I wanted to do something because I was already keen, frankly speaking [...] I just knew that I wanted to do something. I was young and didn't know how to start, so I put a question to Marcin [member of the National Radical Camp] about how to start. I guess it was that I started to put up some posters in the street or something? Any kind of activity satisfied me.

Participation in his first demonstration – an anti-feminist picket on March 8 in 2008 – made him feel accepted and he was invited to other meetings. The need to belong to a strong group and to make his life more meaningful were important factors. Ireneusz also received a list of ideological reading, which was supposed to make his embedding into the organization easier. Based on some parts of the interview, it can be said that Ireneusz's worldview is still not well-grounded. For example, he presented opinions about economics with hesitation, based on the book he was reading at the time. Similarly to Wiktorja, he did not accept the whole discourse connected with nationalist milieus – for instance, he refused to listen to some skinhead musicians who, according to him, are not only anti-Semitic but also anti-Catholic.

His case – similarly to that of others which represent this path – shows that the nationalist worldview and calling oneself a nationalist can be a secondary factor compared to the phase of initial involvement – which may encompass

obtaining knowledge, reading specific literature, and participating in meetings. It seems that what connects Ireneusz most with the organization is social networks and the kind of appreciation that makes it possible for him to feel active, needed, and safe. Although he has rather good relations with his family, the organization is perceived as the milieu in which he has been brought up:

[The organization] has raised me in a national spirit, polished my ideas, and I am thankful that now I know what I could fight for if needed. What else does it give to me? What? A feeling of safety. I'm sure that if at any time I had a problem, someone from ONR [...] would help me [...] What else? Actually, [it gave me] an upbringing [...] I'm trying to not drink alcohol, thanks to that idea... because there is a movement [a straight edge] – at the beginning, it was leftist, now it's been overtaken by the nationalist milieu.

Similarly to the case of Radomir, being in the organization also helped Ireneusz when he moved to another city. Since he was already involved in the National Radical Camp in his home city, moving to continue his studies was followed by changing his brigade. Hence, he was able to meet new people very quickly. Turning to the 'straight-edge' movement has increased his critique of football supporters' groups – as pathological and alcoholic. This does not mean breaking up with the football milieu, but the nationalist organization now seems to have taken first place, not only as an ideological point of reference, but also as a behavioral lodestar. Since religion plays an important role in nationalist discourse and is seen as an integral part of Polish national identity, he is even trying to find his position in that sphere of life.

Taking into consideration his biographical path, he appears to have been prone to the influence of others, but family was not such an important factor in his political socialization. His parents do not have a specific worldview, and we may observe here a kind of reversal of the typical direction of transmission of political views. After initially working on destigmatization, including presenting a counter-narrative about the organization (i.e. opposing the image presented by the media), he started to convince his parents and sisters to support the National Movement, a political party:

Generally, I had to explain it to them. Now they obviously see the differences between fascism and national radicalism, but I had to fight with that label a few times – 'fascist organization' – and I fought with that at home as well [...] I had to explain to them, from the beginning to the end, what ONR [the National Radical Camp] was before the war. I left them, I don't know, I'm still leaving them [literature and newspapers] to read. Everything is explained in them. The whole story of ONR is there, so I think they read about it.

Similarly to some other cases, Ireneusz's path was enhanced by his commitment to the milieu associated with football supporters. As the other research shows, in the

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Polish case this may be characterized by the following factors: a lack of left-wing alternatives in the football stadium, references to history – including the anti-communist fight – conservative values, Catholicism, xenophobia, anti-establishment attitudes, and a lack of trust in politicians (Woźniak et al., 2019). Similar issues co-create (radical) nationalist discourse, thus these two social worlds are linked, and being a football supporter may be one of the first stages in the biographical path to nationalism.

### ***7. Being ‘found’ by an organization: Cezary***

The third type of path involves being ‘found’ by an organization. However, this is not due to coincidence – it becomes possible because of the narrators’ previous interests and activities. What is important here is that they are invited to meetings by unknown people: through internet forums or during chance meetings on the street.

Cezary grew up in a small-sized city and moved to a bigger one because of his studies. He was always focused on school and education and graduated with a degree in European studies (this choice he explained as being related to job opportunities). At the time of the interview he was working as an educator in a Catholic association, where he could combine his interests with his professional life. He also was married and living in a village close to the big town in which he works. His relations with his family he defined as ‘fine’, but not close. Although the narrator referred to his parents’ patriotism, he was not able to define their political views.

Meeting with the organization happened at a crucial point in Cezary’s life. After receiving a bachelor’s degree, he took a gap year. He spent it working, reading, and thinking about his future life. As a result, he decided to become more active in terms of his studies and socio-political life. Additionally, during that year he also experienced a religious conversion, and returned to the Catholic Church. These two biographical processes, which both happened within the same year, seemed to be crucial in terms of his path. They influenced his interest in patriotism and history, as well as his turn to religion and traditional values. Eventually, through his interest in the Independence Day march, it brought him to the nationalist organization. He met the representatives of All-Polish Youth in the street, in front of a church, and congratulated them:

By chance, I met people from the All-Polish Youth, I recognized them because it was shortly after the Independence Day march in 2010, and I saw their faces and recognized them because I had watched some movie [about the march]. I started talking to them and somehow I wormed my way in. I was kind of doing things before, reading about National Democracy politicians, but here [in the organization] I was polished up, let’s say.

The representatives of the organization took his phone number and he started to receive information about the meetings. What made Cezary ready to get more

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involved was his participation in a winter school organized by the group. He was impressed with the merit-based discussions and level of historical, political, and ideological knowledge:

There was a little bit of euphoria. I mean, during that gap year, when I used to work, I decided to be more socially active. There was a kind of euphoria, actually, this is a good term. After that winter school, when I started to be active for good [...] And that excitement (laugh), [I was] a little bit excited because that was it, that was exactly it [what I was looking for] and I was happy that it was easy, that I didn't have to get my fingers burnt, I didn't have to search for different... Actually, the first organization I met, and it turned out that it was that one.

Similarly to Ireneusz, Cezary wanted to do something with his life (this was one of his resolutions) but he also made some calculations about the profitability of such engagement. With time, Cezary became more and more involved. He was made responsible for the educational department of the organization and for conducting the exams which candidates need to pass. It seems that the narrator's scope of interest in the organization shaped the image he has of All-Polish Youth as a space of political and historical education aimed at the formative education of new generations; a school of social activity. His activity in the organization can be seen as an opening point: he also began to become more involved in other organizations, including a Catholic association and patriotic associations. An important part of this activity was connected with history and working with veterans. The more involved in this other work he became, the less time he had for All-Polish Youth. Additionally, he got married and got a job. Hence, at the time of the interview (2013) Cezary was in a phase of more passive activity – he was still a member, but without any specific function, and he even distanced himself by calling members 'them', not 'us'. He admitted a few times that he was not interested in becoming actively involved in some of the internal conflicts within the right-wing milieu, and also wanted to distance himself from official politics. He was seeking calm, local, grassroots work in favor of historical, patriotic, and Catholic education. He also seems to have developed a more strategic, instrumentalized way of thinking, thus the organization constituted for him a phase and point of departure for other more professional activity and personal development. His case represents one of the potential trajectories of participants in the nationalist movement – from full enthusiasm and organizational engagement at the beginning to more specific and calmer forms of 'national activity' later on. This is a trajectory of transfer, whereby people change organizations but remain politically engaged (Corrigall-Brown, 2012: 67).

## **8. Conclusions**

The paper has explored the routes of participants towards the nationalist movement; it looked at biographical paths to nationalist organizations and



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individual motives. The four selected cases represent various biographical paths to the movement which were distinguished on the basis of the analysis of 30 biographical narrative interviews with activists. The individuals underwent different political socialization processes at home: in one case (Radomir), family was seen as a very important source of the protagonist's worldview and political engagement. In three others, similarly to Goodwin's (2010) and Fangen's (1999) findings, family socialization did not occupy a central role in the activists' pathways. However, regardless of the family's political orientation, becoming an activist involved the need for the development of destigmatization strategies.

Interestingly, no stories of converts who had completely changed their views were identified in the sample: regardless of path, joining the movement was rather a consequence of previous interests, worldviews, and activity, or perhaps the slightly coincidental result of looking for spaces of belonging, social engagement, role models, and a more meaningful life. Therefore, we may talk about value-oriented (illustrated by the stories of Wiktoria and Radomir) and action-oriented (Ireneusz, Cezary) paths to an organization. While nationalism was connected with a prior worldview at least in one case, it can also be a space which allows participants to meet their various needs (the need to resist the political and social situation in a country; to express their values, discontent and opinions; to maintain a feeling of doing something valuable and important; to undertake social work and promote patriotism, and to engage in educational activities). While for some of the participants (such as Radomir) activism was an ideological way of life, for others it was an instrument with which to change the world and deal with personal problems (Wiktoria). For some it was more of a phase and educational tool (Cezary), but it also represented a safe space of belonging that offered an opportunity to be active and do something meaningful (Ireneusz). In fact, a desire to make one's life feel more meaningful and to belong to a like-minded group of people was something shared by most of the narrators, but not always a key source of motivation for their involvement.

It seems that the narrators, in representing biographical, individual paths, tended to think more about their organization in ideological terms – their values emerged prior to their organizational work. However, while Radomir was focused on nationalist ideology itself, Wiktoria's priority was anti-abortion activity. The two other narrators could probably have ended up in other, non-nationalist organizations if these had been capable of giving them an opportunity for fulfilment and activism. Nevertheless, as the result of their interests and others' influences, they had become involved in the nationalist milieu.

While in Norwegian (Fangen, 1999) and British (Goodwin, 2010) cases activists referred strongly to their working-class backgrounds, the Polish narrators did not present an awareness of such class (self-)consciousness and saw themselves as Poles, Catholics, and patriotic social activists. Economically driven arguments were not presented as a source of motivation for their activity either – confirming the survey results mentioned above (Malinowska et al., 2016) and showing that the nationalist movement in Poland appeals rather to cultural repertoires and political dissatisfaction rather than class- and economic-based factors. The four young

nationalists – similarly to the most of the narrators in the wider sample – avoided defining their activity in politicized terms. They rather framed it as grassroots social work, and a kind of educational, moral mission. Being in a nationalist organization seems to be part of the spectrum of broader social processes of political disengagement (involving anti-establishment attitudes), the cultural backlash (calling for a return to tradition and Catholicism), and the search for stronger, concrete narratives (those which oppose liberalism and postmodernism). Interestingly, the initial analysis of newer interviews (conducted since 2019)<sup>3</sup> with members of the nationalist milieu in Poland confirms the cultural- and political-based character of such movements. What is more, even if people spoke more openly about their commitment to a nationalist organization, this did not necessarily change the movements' identity – with participants still seeing themselves as excluded from public discourse, stigmatized, not represented in official politics, or even intimidated by the currently governing party. The image of the 'unfairly excluded' is thus a relevant strategic resource of such movements' identity. Regardless of changes on the political scene, this position allows them to maintain the favored element of identity construction in social movements (Jasper, 2007b): the image of participants as victims of the system, and as heroes who struggle for truth and real values.

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<sup>3</sup> The new biographical-narrative interviews are being collected in the framework of project 'Right-wing populism among young Germans and Poles: the analysis of biographical motives of support for right-wing parties and organizations', financed by the Polish-German Foundation for Science (2019–13). Project leaders: Mateusz Karolak (University of Wrocław), Katharina Bluhm (Freie Universität in Berlin). Project co-leaders: Adam Mrozowicki (University of Wrocław), Vera Trappmann (University of Leeds).

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### *Appendix: Details of narrators*

<b>No.</b>	<b>Narrator's name</b>	<b>Field of study/occupation</b>	<b>Type of path to the organization</b>
1	Krzysztof (ONR)	history/casual job as bodyguard	individual project enhanced by significant others (friends)
2	Andrzej (ONR)	European studies /casual job at his father's company	individual project enhanced by significant others (schoolmate)
3	Edward (ONR)	graduate of political science/looking for a job	individual project enhanced by significant others (family)
4	Eryk (ONR)	history	influence of significant others' (schoolmate)
5	Dominik (ONR)	interrupted studies in history/uniformed services' course attendant	individual project enhanced by significant others (football fans)
6	Radomir (ONR)	medical sciences	individual project enhanced by significant others (family)
7	Ireneusz (ONR)	environmental protection	significant others' influence (football fans)
8	Marian (ONR)	graduate with history/electrician	individual project
9	Artur (MW)	European studies/casual jobs	being 'found' by the organization
10	Ilona (ONR)	graduate of Polish philology/internship in cultural institution	individual project enhanced by significant others (family and schoolmates)
11	Alicja (MW)	history	significant others' influence (family)
12	Wiktoria (MW)	pedagogy/casual job as babysitter	individual project

No.	Narrator's name	Field of study/occupation	Type of path to the organization
13	Bartosz (MW)	history	influence of significant others (fellow students)
14	Robert (MW)	history	influence of significant others (fellow students)
15	Piotr (MW)	technical college student	individual project
16	Tadeusz (MW)	history, law	individual project
17	Grzegorz (MW)	PhD studies in law/casual job at hotel	individual project enhanced by significant others (family)
18	Wojciech (MW)	information technology/casual jobs	individual project enhanced by significant others (family)
19	Patryk (MW)	law/own small company	individual project enhanced by significant others (family and friends)
20	Henryk (MW/NB)	graduate of mechanical engineering/professional job	influence of significant others (friends)
21	Jan (MW)	international relations	individual project enhanced by significant others (schoolmate)
22	Krystian (ONR)	graduate of mathematics/journalist	individual project enhanced by significant others (family)
23	Ryszard (MW)	interrupted studies in political science/administrative work in private sector	individual project enhanced by significant others (family)
24	Filip (MW)	history	influence of significant others (fellow student)
25	Jerzy (MW)	history	influence of significant others (fellow student)
26	Tomasz (MW)	history	individual project

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<b>No.</b>	<b>Narrator's name</b>	<b>Field of study/occupation</b>	<b>Type of path to the organization</b>
27	Cezary (MW)	European science/ job in Catholic association	being 'found' by the organization
28	Michał (MW)	history	being 'found' by the organization
29	Waldemar (ZZNSZ)	post-secondary school/security manager	individual project
30	Dariusz (NOP)	national security	individual project enhanced by significant others (family)