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Political backlash in postcommunist Poland – the alliances between nationalist far right and working class 25 years after the decline of communism

The article describes the alliances between nationalist organisations and local branches of the Solidarity trade union in recent years. I frame this discussion by using the historical-political perspective of David Ost's "Defeat of Solidarity" and George's Sorel philosophical concept of revolutionary syndicalism.

Key words: Solidarity, Far Right, nationalism, trade unionism

Introduction

In the last few years controversies have arisen around several regional leaders of Solidarity trade union. The trade unionist circles have become connected with various far-right organizations, which have become more active since 2011. The first documented case comes from Gorzów Wielkopolski, where the local branch, led by 1980s oppositionist Jarosław Porwich, cooperated on numerous occasions with Stalowcy, a group closely related to nationalist organization National Re-birth of Poland and known for their anti-semitic and racist rhetoric, as well as their violent behavior. The cooperation involved mutual marches and demonstrations (Rosołowski 2014: 18). The gorzowian region of Solidarity also transported Stalowcy to the largest far-right related demonstration in Poland – the Independence March in 2011, held on the Independence Day in Warsaw by nationalist groups All-Polish Youth and National-Radical Camp. In the past three years the march has ended in riots. The leader of Gorzów's Solidarity has defended the nationalists after the riots in 2011 and explained his support for them by naming

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them “patriotic youth” (Siałkowski 2011). Porwich also defended the far-right football fans after the march in 2013, when participants attacked two anarchist squats and a Russian embassy, burned an art installation “Rainbow” and caused about 120.000 zlotys losses (Rosołowski 2014: 18). Stalowcy also participated in one of the anti-government demonstrations held by Solidarity in May 2011, where the gorzowian branch of the union provided firecrackers which were later thrown towards the provincial office (Siałkowski 2011).

The second case of cooperation between a local branch of Solidarity and the far-right took place in Rzeszów. The local branch of the trade union attended a march in memory of Cursed Soldiers, which was held by the far-right football fan group devoted to Resovia Rzeszów. Also the members of nationwide nationalist organizations such as National-Radical Camp and National Rebirth of Poland participated in the event. The leader of rzeszowian Solidarity, Roman Jakim, said that he’s sure that these young people do not entirely support nationalism (Kobiałka 2015).

There are also documented cases of cooperation between Solidarity’s branches and the far-right in Częstochowa, Lublin or Ciechanów in activities such as mutual pickets and demonstrations. Also, the union leaders support the nationalists by lending a place for a meeting with nationalist party National Movement (Rosołowski 2014: 18). Some may wonder how an organization which played the most important role in the democratic transformation in Poland in 1989 could cooperate with authoritarian nationalist groups. In my article I will present the common philosophical and social ground of trade unionism and nationalist far-right movements through the historical-political perspective of David Ost’s “Defeat of Solidarity” and George’s Sorel philosophical concept of revolutionary syndicalism.

Far-right – the definitions

First of all, I would like to narrow the definition of the far-right to make clear in which cases it will be used throughout the article. Before identifying the main characteristics of the far-right, let’s take a look at how political scientists define right-wing radicalism.

In Michael Minkenberg’s definition every authoritarian, ultranationalist and antidemocratic political being fits the definition of the far-right. The right-wing extremism stands against the values of liberal democracy, including liberty, equality, individualism and universalism. Instead, it strongly supports ethnic, religious and cultural homogeneity, which should be guarded by an authoritarian government. The definition applies not only to the political parties, but also to other political structures, as well as subcultures, media or even specific social environments (Minkenberg 2006: 15–16). The far-right also accepts violence (both verbal and physical) as a political mean. It is usually directed against everyone who does not fit the set of norms constituted by the far-right ideology, including sexual,

ethnic, religious minorities, ideological enemies or criminals. The right-wing extremism is also strongly connected with anti-semitism, ethnocentrism, xenophobia and radical nationalism (Jakubowska 2002: 43).

The most frequently occurring reason for the establishment of far-right ideologies is the modernization of the economy and the socioeconomic consequences following the abandonment of traditional industries (Lipset 1995: 146). Right wing extremist movements have gained popularity during economic crises because the anti-establishment groups present an alternative to the ruling parties which cannot cope with the crisis and stand in opposition to the far-left, which in the mainstream discourse is very often associated with the former soviet regimes. Also the influx of immigrants from different cultures is feared by the far-right as a threat to both the labour market and the cultural identity of the hosting country, which leads to increase of the support for the extremists (Paxton 2005: 232).

The two ideologies generally described as the far-right are nationalism and fascism. Nationalism in the far-right meaning is often described as the 'negative' nationalism to distinguish it from the 'positive' nationalism or civic nationalism, which is specific to autonomous regions and usually does not include ethnocentrism, xenophobia chauvinism (Grott 2006: 8–9). The far-right negative nationalism is rather specific to nation-states and it also implies a strong connection to traditional cultural and religious norms, social cohesion and public order (Heywood 2007: 182). Right-wing nationalism also opposes the parliamentary democracy, instead supporting authoritarian regime, monarchy or strong presidential system (Bartyzel 2010: 34–35).

The fascists draw a lot of ideological elements from right-wing nationalism to their political agenda, but with the addition of racism and social darwinism (Pankowski 1998: 85). Fascism also advocates for a strong state authority and national purity, as well as negation of both capitalism and socialism. Similarly to nationalists, fascist groups attach importance to traditional values, strongly opposing cultural liberalism, feminism and LGBT rights (Giddens 2004: 273–274). Despite obvious associations with interwar fascists and nazis, modern neofascists usually dissociate themselves from their precursors, which helps them in finding new supporters (Muszyński 1980: 22). Some of the neofascist organizations also disavowed antisemitism considering it an obsolete idea and replacing it with hatred against the immigrants from Asia or Africa (Pankowski 1998: 78–79).

Far-right organizations in Poland

At the moment, there are a number of active extreme right-wing groups in Poland. The largest number of nationalists can be found in organizations such as National Movement, All-Polish Youth, National-Radical Camp or National Rebirth of Poland, as well as in informal groups like Autonomous Nationalists or numerous local initiatives.

The most famous nationalist organization, All-Polish Youth (*Młodzież Wszechpolska*), started in 1922 as an academic youth group of the first nationalist party in independent Poland, Popular-National Union (PNU). The main theorist of the current national movement, Roman Dmowski, did not insist on running a political struggle, but instead he suggested grass root activism for the good of the nation (Kotowski 2007: 21). Despite this, their campaign against newly elected president Gabriel Narutowicz in 1922 led to a murder of the head of state committed by the party's supporter Eligiusz Niewiadomski (Waszkiewicz 2008: 637). Moreover, since the beginning of PNU's existence, the national-democratic theorists have not hidden their anti-semitism. However, in the early 1920s anti-semitism was not explicitly racist; instead – the aversion against Jewish people was constructed as a political and economic issue (Ryba 2010: 108–110). The younger generation of nationalists from All-Polish Youth moved their ideology closer to the christian nationalism focused on introducing religious beliefs to internal politics, which met with a positive response from the priesthood of Catholic Church (Kawęcki 2010: 289–290). After the May 1926 coup d'état the young nationalists parted ways with the national-democratic veterans due to their ineffectiveness and joined the Camp of Great Poland, a new organization created by Roman Dmowski, which was an emerging platform for organizing people with nationalist views (Meller, Tomaszewski 2009: 19). In the late 1920s the nationalist youth tightened their anti-semitic views, which were no longer only a matter of economy, but rather became a religious, cultural and even racial issue. The Camp of Great Poland expressed the desire to reduce the participation of Jews in social and political life, which included limitation of the number of Jewish students in Polish universities proportionate to their percentage in the general population. Jewish people became a scapegoat for nationalists; they blamed the Jews for every problem of the Polish society (Kornaś 2009: 31–32). This resulted in numerous acts of aggression towards the Jewish people and their property, including vandalism, boycotts or beatings (Rudnicki 1985: 149–150). The Camp also intensively planned a coup d'état to overthrow Józef Piłsudski and his supporters, what led to a ban on the organization in 1933 and dispersion of its members into other minor groups (Wapiński 1980: 299).

The current incarnation of All-Polish Youth has existed since 1989, when Roman Giertych, grandson of one of the original All-Polish Youth members Jędrzej Giertych, reactivated the organization (Zdulski 2011: 41). After 1989 the activity of the organization has focused mainly on demonstrations against abortion, LGBT rights, pornography, ethnic minorities, foreign capital and anti-catholic cultural events (C. Maj, E. Maj 2007: 132). It also gained considerable popularity among nationalist skinheads in the 1990s. In 2000s All-Polish Youth became affiliated with the nationalist party League of Polish Families (*Liga Polskich Rodzin*) as its youth wing. Members of this party have served in Polish parliament during the IVth and Vth cadency and won ten seats in European Parliament in the 2004 elections. Although the leadership of the youth organization has attempted

to improve its image, a lot of their supporters continue to act violently and disrupt various demonstrations (Wojdyła 2005: 58–59).

In 2009 All-Polish Youth, along with National-Radical Camp, organized the first Independence March in Warsaw on Independence Day, November 11th. Though it was ineffective in the beginning, it has become the largest far-right demonstration, gathering tens of thousands of people with all kinds of right-wing ideologies – from centre-right conservatives and supporters of the largest conservative opposition party Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) to nationalists to neofascists. It also gained the interest of right wing football fans from the whole country. Since 2011 the demonstration has ended in riots with numerous injured people and severe damage in the city. On the Independence March in 2012, the leader of All-Polish Youth Robert Winnicki announced the foundation of a political party called National Movement (Ruch Narodowy), which includes his own organization along with National-Radical Camp and several minor groups (Jurczyszyn 2015: 154–155). After several electoral failures, a populist coalition Kukiz'15 introduced 10 National Movement's members into Sejm in 2015 parliamentary elections.

The second most significant and at the same time more radical Polish far-right organization is the aforementioned National-Radical Camp (Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny), which also has its roots in the interwar. It drew its name and ideological program from an organization founded in 1934 by young radical nationalists after the break-up of the Camp of Great Poland. The new organization tightened its anti-semitic, anti-democratic and anti-communist views, moving its agenda towards more totalitarian positions (Rudnicki 1985: 239). The National-Radical Camp was banned in the same year it was established. Shortly after the break-up, two new groups were formed in 1935: National-Radical Camp-ABC, which included mostly nationalist intellectuals, and National-Radical Movement Falanga, which was more violent and ideologically closer to fascism (Kawęcki 2012: 185).

At the beginning of World War II the members of ABC founded a military organization called the Lizard Union (Związek Jaszczurczy), which later merged with numerous members of the post-national-democratic National Military Organization (Narodowa Organizacja Wojskowa) and transformed into National Armed Forces (Narodowe Siły Zbrojne) (Siemaszko 1982: 49). In spite of fighting the Nazi and Soviet invaders, the National Armed Forces continued the National Radical Camp's political struggle from the interwar by attacking Polish communist partisans from the People's Army, as well as socialists, liberals, democrats and ethnic minorities (Siemaszko 1982: 96). In the years following the end of World War II some members of National Armed Forces, together with the remaining units of the National Military Organization and Home Army (Armia Krajowa) have continued guerrilla struggle against the communist authorities. Many partisans were arrested and sentenced to death, as they were accused of fascist sympathies by the government of Polish People's Republic (Siemaszko 1982: 180–181). The anti-communist partisans, later called the Cursed Soldiers,

gained the status of heroes after the fall of the communist regime in Poland, which resulted in the establishment of the National Day of Remembrance of the Cursed Soldiers on 1st March.

The current incarnation of National-Radical Camp has existed since 1993, firstly only as a minor group. The organization has officially reactivated and gained notoriety in the last decade, when public opinion responded negatively to the Camp's commemoration of anti-semitic pogrom in Myślenice (Zdulski 2011: 54–55). As mentioned before, in last few years, the Camp, along with All-Polish Youth, has organized the Independence March and formed a political party called National Movement.

The third largest and at the same time oldest existing nationalist organization in Poland is National Rebirth of Poland (Narodowe Odrodzenie Polski). It was founded in 1981, but did not solidify its structure until the late 1980s. The group has attracted many far-right skinheads, who crashed concerts and political meetings and introduced right-wing extremism into sport stadiums (Wojdyła 2005: 45). In 1992 National Rebirth of Poland registered as a legal political party, but their rhetoric still remained hateful and aggressive (C. Maj, E. Maj 2007: 67). Like the two aforementioned organizations, the National Rebirth of Poland is strongly attached to traditional, non-ecumenical catholicism. Moreover, the organization has radical anti-semitic views, which very often take racist and xenophobic form (Stępień 2004: 303–304). The National Rebirth of Poland has also cooperated with nationalists from other countries through an international forum called International Third Way (C. Maj, E. Maj 2007: 50). In last few years the National Rebirth of Poland has lost some of its supporters due to the rising popularity of All-Polish Youth and National-Radical Camp, partially because of its extremist rhetoric and quasi-fascist aesthetic (Zdulski 2011: 57–58).

It is also worth mentioning the Autonomous Nationalists (AN) or similar unstructured nationalist and neofascist groups, which use aesthetic and tactical elements specific for left-wing and anarchist counter-culture, such as black blocs or graffiti, among with abandonment of the skinhead aesthetic or uniformed chic of other nationalist groups (Schlembach 2013: 295–296). The ideological profile is also different from traditional nationalist organizations. The Autonomous Nationalists, along with radical nationalism, anti-semitism and xenophobia, strongly emphasize their anti-capitalist views, which are mostly inspired by strasserism, the idea of Otto and Georg Strasser, a representative of the “left wing” of NSDAP in the 1930s who merged economic socialism with extreme nationalism (Schlembach 2013: 301). The AN's denial of market economy is limited only to the exploitation of native workers and usually explained with anti-communist, anti-semitic and anti-multicultural resentiments, which may look interesting for trade unionists with conservative views on social and cultural issues (Schlembach 2013: 307).

Solidarity and nationalist rhetoric

The Independent Self-Governing Trade Union “Solidarity” was formed in the end of 1980 as a representative for the Polish employees and a product of the activity of various opposition organizations from the previous years. The formation as solidified with a season of strikes against the communist government’s labour policy in various workplaces across the country (Krzemiński 2013: 77–79). On the day of its founding, the union had about a million of disciplined supporters ready to participate in nationwide strike actions (Ost 2014: 174). Although some of the groups who participated in the social movement have had a conservative right-wing profile, like the Confederacy of Independent Poland (Ruch Polski Niepodległej) or the Movement of Young Poland (Ruch Młodej Polski), Solidarity in its first form has been considered left-wing by more contemporary political and social thinkers. Reasons for this designation usually include the union’s support for social self-organization, social-democratic workers self-management, participatory democracy and commitment to universal social justice (Ost 2014: 30).

Most far-right groups opposed the ideas of the two most significant organizations at the core of Solidarity social movement – Workers’ Defense Committee (Komitet Obrony Robotników) and the Movement for Defense of Human and Civic Rights (Ruch Obrony Praw Człowieka i Obywatela). The first nationalist opposition group founded in 1977, Polish Committee of Defense of Life, Family and the Nation (Polski Komitet Obrony Życia i Rodziny, later known as Polish Self-Defense Committee – Komitet Samoobrony Polskiej) was in conflict with most of the other opposition organizations, accusing them of leftist and masonic influences (Tomasiewicz 2003: 58). Also another nationalist group called Independent Political Group (Niezależna Grupa Polityczna) did not accepted the activity of democratic opposition, what resulted in interfering the meetings of centrist organisations Workers Defence Committee and Movement for the Defense of Human and Civic Rights (Tomasiewicz 2003: 60).

The introduction of the Martial Law in December 1981 led to critique of the left-wing tendencies of Solidarity. Since the mid-1980’s, many union activists and intellectuals have changed their agenda from social-democratic to more liberal and free-market oriented ideologies. The Solidarity’s program in 1987, which boldly postulated the privatization of the Polish economy, was really close to the one proposed by the ruling party, which became more free-market oriented at the end of the decade. The abandonment of social postulates undermined Solidarity’s position as a trade union (Ost 2014: 255–257). After the transformation in 1989, Solidarity as a social movement dispersed into numerous organizations with different political agendas, very often conflicted with each other. At that moment, the nationalist rhetoric became visible in the discourse of conservative post-Solidarity politicians.

After the fall of communism in Poland, the Polish economy faced many problems, which has resulted in major disappointment among the working masses.

The conservative part of post-Solidarity gathered around Lech Wałęsa and a political party called Centre Agreement (Porozumienie Centrum). The major purpose of this fraction was to end the policies of the liberal post-Solidarity government of Tadeusz Mazowiecki from the Democratic Union (Unia Demokratyczna). At the same time the conservative politicians did not want to expose the disadvantages of free-market economy. In a short period of time they have started to organize their agenda using the figure of the “other” – the communists and the possibility of their return (Ost 2007: 155). Though conservative coalition has won in 1991 parliamentary elections, the condition of economy had not improved, so the communists as an “other” in right-wing discourse were replaced by atheists or non-catholics, who could be easily identified with post-Solidarity left and liberals. By that means the new elites have avoided a critique of the new economic system and turned the anger of the masses towards their political opponents (Ost 2007: 158–159). Inner conflicts and ineffectiveness of post-Solidarity politicians have caused their defeat in the elections in 1993, which were won by post-communist party Alliance of Democratic Left. However, even when the free-market economy has been run by former communists, the conservatives from Solidarity have not criticized the capitalist economy itself, but only the people who have run it. As a result, the conservative fraction of Solidarity’s politicians and union leaders changed the ideological course of the organization – they decided to put aside the economic problems and struggle for workers’ rights and focus more on political and cultural issues: anti-communism, support for the active presence of Roman Catholic Church on the political scene and anti-abortion laws (Ost 2007: 178–179). After 1993 even more radical tendencies have been shown by Solidarity’s members – like in the xenophobic and anti-semitic fraction led by Zygmunt Wrzodak, later one of the founding members of nationalist party League of Polish Families (Ost 2007: 182).

In 1996 the conservative fraction of Solidarity under the aegis of its new leader Marian Krzaklewski formed a political coalition called Solidarity Electoral Action (Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność), which gathered most of the post-Solidarity political organizations into an electoral committee. The party has described itself as loyal to Christian, right-wing, and patriotic values, right-wing and patriotic and oppositional to communism. Although the coalition’s economic program was strongly focused on increasing the privatization of the state-owned enterprises, the strong emphasis on anti-communism and christianity led to success in the 1997 elections by Solidarity Electoral Action (Ost 2007: 180–181). Four years under the rule of its coalition with the successors of the Democratic Union, the Union of Freedom (Unia Wolności) deepened the social-economic problems in Poland including increasing unemployment and contributing to collapses of many state-owned companies (Mażewski 2014: 316). The coalition dispersed into numerous different organizations, including the two most important centre-right parties today: liberal Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska) and conservative Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość). In the following elections in 2001 it

was defeated by the post-communist Alliance of Democratic Left, which was supported by about 34% of Solidarity's workers (Gardawski 2001: 81).

In the late 1990s, the extreme right-wing Solidarity union leaders gained much more attention from the working class. Wrzodak built a strong electorate by using radical catholic, anti-semitic, anti-liberal and xenophobic slogans. As a result, his party League of Polish Families entered the parliament in 2001 as a first party, which referred to the ideology of Polish nationalists from the interwar (C. Maj, E. Maj 2007: 242–243). The nationalist party has gathered the most conservative post-Solidarity politicians, as well as nationalists unrelated to the union. It has repeated its success in 2004 European Parliament elections and in Polish parliamentary elections in 2005 and entered a coalition with Law Justice and an agrarian populist party Self-Defence (Samoobrona) (Tomczak 2008: 859). Although the League of Polish Families did not last the whole cadency and lost in the anticipatory elections in 2007, the nationalist rhetoric and far-right sympathies remained among the trade union workers.

Revolutionary syndicalism – the ideological link between the trade unions and the history of radical nationalism and fascism

Some may wonder why the workers gathered in trade unions adopt far-right ideologies when their major objective is (or should be) the improvement of their working and living conditions. The explanation is found in the history of both trade unionism and fascism (or other historical nationalist movements). They are connected by the ideological tendency called 'revolutionary syndicalism.'

The idea of revolutionary syndicalism was a product of George Sorel's dissatisfaction with early 20th century anarchism. He has criticized traditional anarchists for being ineffective and focused only on the theory. Though he was not a theoretician nor a movement organizer, he did connect his ideas of an effective revolution with currently existing movements – he has appreciated the anarchists, who have become syndicalists by considering them as being able to separate from the theory, provide a real-life revolutionary action and pick violence as an instrument of revolution. The violence is – in Sorel's theory – the instrument of working class rebellion against the force used by ruling bourgeoisie and government to maintain the imposed social order. The heroic aspect of violence plays an important role in Sorel's theory, as he believed that the anarchists' accession in the syndicates is one of the most important historical events of his times (Laskowski 2007: 397–399).

In Sorel's theory, the general strike should be the main instrument of political struggle. He has considered the myth of a general strike as an ideological point of condensation for proletarian identity (Laclau, Mouffe 1985: 39–40). Despite it, the revolution in Sorel's vision is not based on the traditional definition of classes derived from their position in capitalist production, but on the subject's attitude towards the ruling elites. The general strike could also apply to any other social

structure. In *Reflections on violence* Sorel provided historical examples of cooperation beyond class divisions – peasants slaughtering each other for the legitimization of the authorities, as well as liberals supporting the 1905 proletarian revolution in Russia as a threat for tsarist government (Sorel 2014: 166).

However, the anti-economism of Sorel's ideological discourse created a visible void, which had been hitherto filled with a myth of class conflict between the working class and bourgeoisie. The abandonment of the economic character of a general strike had led some of Sorel's followers to search for another myth to fill the void, which led them to nationalism (Laclau, Mouffe 1985: 41). The first marriage of Sorelian theory and nationalism took place in 1909, when Sorel showed his support to french integral nationalists Action Francaise, naming them 'anti-parliamentary socialists' in the leading revolutionary syndicalist journal, "Dive-nire Sociale" (Asheri, Sznajder, Sternhell 1994: 79). In the following years Sorel's ideas gained popularity among revolutionary conservatives and nationalists, accompanied by mutual appreciation between the philosopher and his right-wing followers. Sorel was mostly impressed by the methods and radical character of those movements more than their actual beliefs – he acknowledged royalist Action Francaise, as the only real opposition movement in France before World War I, as well as Bolsheviks in tsarist Russia. Their common ground was primarily the rejection of liberal democracy under the bourgeoisie's rules (Asheri, Sznajder, Sternhell 1994: 81). Finally, the revolutionary syndicalist ideas became the foundation for the rise of fascism in interwar Italy, as it was the main ideological influence for Mussolini's thought and hence also his movement. These ideas united most of the anti-government revolutionary forces, including syndicalists, regardless of their class position (Asheri, Sznajder, Sternhell 1994: 195–196).

The history of Solidarity as a social movement shows a significant resemblance to the idea of general strike, with the communist party in the role of bourgeoisie versus the revolutionary bloc including the trade unionists as the mythical heroes, as well as intellectuals, students, clergy, etc instead of economic classes.

Summary

The history is full of examples of trade unions' involvement in the formation of radical right movements. For decades, the economic and political crises have been a perfect background for the right-wing extremists to turn various social groups against the scapegoats of their ideologies. Moreover, the abandonment of the discourse of a class conflict leads more and more workers to identify themselves with different values, such as religion or nationality. Although some cooperation between european union workers and nationalist organizations are focused on economic causes [for example, Jobbik's (Hungarian radical nationalist party) support for trade unions' referendum on allowing men to retire after 40 years – see (*Radical Jobbik, socialist party support referendum initiative on men's retirement*, 2015)],

most of them are dictated by an opportunity of a political career in increasingly popular parties. Depending on the country, the reactions for such moves may vary. Trade union leaders and members in France, who have stood for elections from the anti-immigrant nationalist Front National's list, have been usually excluded from french unions CFDT, Force ouvrière, CGT, SUD and CFTC (Wieviorka 2013). But in Hungary for example, the union leader and Jobbik's member Lajos Rig defeated his rivals from the centre-right ruling party Fidesz and opposition Socialists in 2015 by-elections without losing the support of his union (Thorpe 2015). This may lead to the conclusion that positive approach of some trade unionist circles for involvement in nationalist politics occur more often in post-communist countries, where the leading trade unions have anti-communist backgrounds.

According to the trade unionist press, Solidarity's members collaborating with far-right organizations are only a minority in the union, which consists of more than 700.000 members. Yet still, a support given to the extremists from the historical and commonly respected organization seems dangerous and leads to legitimization of ideologies which promote violence, authoritarianism and prejudice.

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