



Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.



Fred Apke at the premiere of one of his plays in Silesia, Poland

Last October, Polish voters ousted a two-term liberal-conservative government that was roundly despised for being arrogant, technocratic and obsessed with power and little else.

Hoping for something better, voters handed a parliamentary majority to the main opposition party, the national conservative Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc or PiS) party.

With a two-pronged strategy – nationalist value conservative and left-wing social policy – it appealed to all sectors of society in securing an absolute majority in parliament. Combined with the newly appointed PiS president months earlier, the new administration got straight to work.

The first opportunity was handed to it by the outgoing Civic Platform (PO) government which, sensing its days were numbered, made five judicial appointments to Poland's powerful constitutional tribunal – two of which were later found to be illegal.

Instead of appointing the other three and two new candidates, President Andrzej Duda swore in five new judges

– a move condemned as illegal by experts, including Duda's old constitutional law professor in Krakow.

Shrugging off that criticism, PiS passed a new bill changing how the tribunal operates. PiS said the new bill – like its judicial appointments – was necessary to rebalance the court and end undue judicial interference in legislation. It accused the tribunal of putting itself above the country's parliament.

On a cultural level, this new government switched from promoting modernity, pluralism and tolerance to old-fashioned and reactionary ideas. An open-minded approach, both to the contemporary world and to Poland's difficult historical heritage (including the painful traumas from World War II), has been left behind in favour of one point of view that is based on traditional values and concentrates on Catholicism and chauvinism. Most people I spoke to said that it feels 'as oppressive as in the old communist times.'

Many famous artists didn't hesitate to pronounce themselves against this new government. Even if the PiS party controls the national media, there are private television channels, the leading newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza* and, of course, not to forget the increasing role of social

media. Famed Polish poet, Adam Zagajewski published a long sarcastic poem in *Gazeta Wyborcza* about the new government. Krystyna Janda, a prominent Polish actress known for her appearances in Andrzej Wajda's films, wrote an open letter to the Minister of the Culture and published it on her Facebook page. Julian Kornhauser, a fine Polish poet, expressed his dissent by signing a letter protesting the dismissal of Grzegorz Gauden, director of the famous and influential Book Institute, which has been promoting the best contemporary Polish literature all around the globe. The new director has already promised to promote the classics of the 19th century, which is both anachronistic and a major setback.

The Polish art scene has always been very cosmopolitan. Polish poet, Adam Zagajewski (perceived as a potential candidate for the Nobel Prize), or painter, Wilhelm Sasnal (one of the most influential modern artists) are only two of the artists who are absolutely against the 'good change'; most consider it a dangerous move back to the darkest times of the 20th century, when the arts were controlled and censored, and all various forms of nationalism flourished. Everyone who knows the history of the 20th century is aware of possible analogies to the 1930s, and the dangers of nationalism. On a practical level, some artists and a number of renowned festivals have not received any subsidies, while more and more money has been given to Catholic initiatives, festivals or publishing houses. Polish cultural institutions abroad were given very clear instructions as to how the 'true' Polish culture should be promoted – and by the end of this summer, most of the directors are expected to lose their jobs. 'Good change' is coming.

I spoke with Krakow-based poet and Hispanist, Marta Eloy Cichocka about her concerns with this political landslide: 'Oh, I'm a poet, and my poetry is a rather contemplative one; I don't react immediately to something, even if it's bothering me. For the moment, I watch, I read a lot (in as many languages as I can) and I try to understand what's really going on in Poland, but also in Europe, and I never forget about the bigger picture. Especially because the so-called "good change" is not only about Poland: I guess Donald Trump's voters would agree with PiS party voters in many aspects. Europe is changing, the world is changing, there's a huge economic crisis but also an ecological one, and people's values must change as well. I only hope that we learn to be more tolerant and helpful as human beings, and not to be more aggressive and chauvinist: I would hate to live in a world like that...'

PiS critics argue that since Poland's ruling party came to power, it has adopted methods that are neither lawful nor just. PiS says it has been handed a mandate to redefine law

and justice and that this is within legal norms – in line with the growing populist zeitgeist across Europe.

The saddest moment of my recent trip to Poland came late one night as my German friend, Fred, who lives with his Polish wife in Warsaw and works as a playwright, described the creeping changes to his working life. Those who question PiS's methods are denounced as traitors, he said, while others keep their heads down. Meanwhile, the careerists, to get ahead, make mental compromises and throw in their lot with the new regime.

This is the Poland that Czesław Miłosz warned of in his powerful 1953 denunciation of Stalinism, *The Captive Mind*. 'When people are divided into "loyalists" and "criminals",' he said, 'a premium is placed on every type of conformist, coward, and hireling.'

Polish voters made their choice last October. And it is for them to decide whether what they have now is what they thought they voted for then. For now, though, Poland's captive minds are back.

And it remains to be seen how active the art scene can fight for a new dawn. **CF**

in town

*Those who forgot me
would make a city*
(Josif Brodski)

even from here our city still looks as if on the palm of your hand
if you tighten-up your fingers you can squeeze it into your pocket

I am actually from here yet I often alter the coordinates
beds' width relationships' length temperature of emotions

it is how I know our city can fit everywhere
and nowhere can it be abandoned

*everyone carries their city in their heart
even when your eyes are tightly closed*
even in the heart of another city

even then think about me
though I am not to be found
on any map

Marta Eloy Cichocka