Polish journalists are more concerned about Poland's reputation abroad than the real problems facing the country. And these are legion: the far-right policies of newly appointed education minister Roman Giertych, for example, or the growing role of Catholic radio station Radio Maryja as government mouthpiece; the prospect of a spate of witch-hunts against former Communists, or the government's promise to introduce "moral censorship" to reflect the traditional Polish Catholic ethos.

Though always sensitive to what others might think, never have Poland’s press commentators suffered so acutely from brand anxiety. Not in terms of their image as tale-bearing media hacks, which might be the case elsewhere in Europe, but as intellectuals and literati delivering enlightening reports to Poles at home or abroad, and to anyone else who might be looking. The main worry for journalists seems to be that Poland’s reputation abroad is at its lowest for decades. Last November, Polish voters brought in a right-wing government that has since entered into a coalition with two extremist parties: the hard-line nationalist League of Polish Families and the populist Self-Defence, whose leader Andrzej Lepper has praised Hitler’s economic policies. Poles also elected a president, Lech Kaczynski, with an idiosyncratic idea of diplomatic protocol and a twin brother, Jaroslaw, who heads the majority Law and Justice party, dislikes debate and the media, says that he wants to create a strong state based on traditional, ‘authentic’ Polish values, and is widely regarded as the presidential power-broker. And this in a country of 40 million people – the largest EU entrant in 2004 – with ambitions to assert its presence and influence Europe not just economically and culturally, but now ‘morally’ and politically.
Well we all make mistakes, Polish liberals say, and others have their flaws too. Look at French anti-Semitism, Italian bureaucracy and years of Berlusconi, anti-immigration policies in Belgium and Holland, the rise of neo-fascism in the former GDR. Why blame us for a wider malaise? ‘The entry of Self-Defence and the League of Polish Families into the government has spoilt little,’ the popular liberal-conservative weekly *Wprost* wrote in June, ‘the Western press has a priori categorised the new Polish authorities as ultra-Catholic, ultra-nationalist and populist, homophobic and anti-Semitic. Our own politicians and journalists are largely to be thanked for this: the West bases its views uncritically on theirs ... The left-wing press in particular cannot forgive the Poles for electing the Kaczynskis. They describe Poland as a zoological curiosity, often alongside a thesis shaped by embittered Polish politicians on their pilgrimage to Brussels.’

The insensitivity of foreigners to Polish dilemmas is a long-standing perception: outsiders don’t know or care enough about Poland’s historical tragedies, its economic struggles, its social problems, its long-standing loyalties or its enemies. Even in liberal publications, you are likely to read far less about Jewish issues than about outside allegations of anti-Semitism; less about sexual minorities than about problems of perceived homophobia; less about minorities than the kindness of Poles towards newcomers struggling with a bureaucratic migration system; less about questions of religious belief than about the moral significance of the Catholic Church and the role it should play in politics.

Every Western allegation of anti-Semitism, homophobia, racism or religious prejudice adds fuel to the fire. It confirms in Polish eyes that nobody understands, and gives further excuse for the right to claim that Poland is being unfairly targeted from abroad. Was there ever a time in the past 200 years when Poland was not threatened from outside, people will ask, or ruled by puppet governments, or overrun by foreign incursion? And now look: the EU is threatening sanctions for a bit of political incorrectness and exuberant straight talking.

Liberal high-mindedness, like the ability to see things from a range of perspectives, demands a confidence most Polish readers and voters don’t have in terms of political trust, economic stature, social savoir-faire or education. Roughly 15 million Poles still live in the grubby countryside where houses are ramshackle, roads are tracks and horse-drawn carts are commonplace. They work in an unwieldy and inefficient farming sector with
little prospect of cashing in on the post-communist economic boom that has brought prosperity, top hotels, Western cars and the possibility of foreign travel to urban dwellers. In rural areas there is little to live for except the family, and television galls with images of highlife and happiness. Yet the countryside has always given, and continues to give, the Polish cultural tradition its core identity. Rural culture remains conservative, loyal, suspicious of difference, impatient with innovation, brash, intolerant, stolidly Catholic and insensitive to the political style that makes Europe tick. Until the early 1990s, it was geographically confined to the sticks and had virtually no direct voice in public life. Now it has its own significant media presence.

In many ways, the notorious Catholic radio station, Radio Maryja, is the voice of Poland’s grass roots, its excluded rural population, and a response to the post-communist economic drive that has left so many people struggling. To the embarrassment of Europeanised urban intellectuals, since 1991 the people of the countryside have been able to have their say on lengthy phone-ins broadcast from Torun by a radio station run by the Redemptorist Order and, in particular, Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, whose influence is thought by some to exceed the Catholic primate’s. The phone-ins revealed attitudes that surprised no one: but their public airing and the encouragement given them by Rydzyk’s media, which now include the daily *Nasz Dziennik* and a television station, Trwam, has caused controversy and serious concern.

Amid the prayers, meditations, and domestic tips, conversation on *Radio Maryja* is coloured by fundamentalist religious perceptions, anti-Jewish attitudes, xenophobia, homophobia, extreme nationalism and staggering moral complacency. The channel is variously estimated as having between 1 million and 4 million listeners. Its supporters say it airs vital social issues and attitudes that would otherwise remain suppressed, and that it is an outcry against the immorality of fast-track capitalism. Critics argue that it exploits low levels of education and encourages the growth of dangerous or divisive social and political attitudes. Terrorism, for example, generated a remark that ‘from one point of view, Israel, which destroys all its enemies using the hand of America, is the principal beneficiary’; the South Asian Tsunami prompted the comment: ‘Is it not revealing that this event should have taken place on the Day of the Holy Family?’; gay rights have been said to reflect the ‘rising terror imposed by the homosexual minority’.

Such remarks, along with the public image of Radio Maryja’s supporters as
stuffy older women in mohair berets, might relegate things to the absurd if the channel had not proved so influential in bringing the Kaczynski brothers to power last October. Law and Justice won the election unexpectedly on the back of their rural vote and widespread resentment against the corruption of successive post-communist administrations. Jaroslaw Kaczynski was a vocal critic of Radio Maryja in the 1990s but appears to have undergone a remarkable change of heart. Rydzyk’s media now have exclusive rights to official government announcements, while Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz and his cabinet ministers regularly appear on live broadcasts. When Law and Justice signed a stabilisation pact with its coalition partners in February, only journalists from Rydzyk’s empire were permitted to witness the event.

Since then, things have moved on apace. The nationalist League of Polish Families may have gleaned just 8 per cent of the election vote, but its leader, Roman Giertych, is now deputy prime minister and holds special responsibility for education. Giertych was formerly the leader of All Polish Youth, a vocal far-right youth organisation believed to have recruited members from skinhead groups. His appointment caused a furore in liberal circles and spontaneous protests from students. In response, Giertych’s colleague from the League of Polish families, Wojciech Wierzejski, suggested that criticisms had been provoked by the hidden agendas of gay groups linked to paedophile rings.

Rafal Pankowski from the anti-fascist organisation Nigdy Wiecej (Never Again) says Giertych’s appointment was a cynical step. ‘I think even people in Law and Justice are somewhat scared by his ideas now, even if they share some of his patriotic instincts.’

Since his appointment, Giertych has proposed the electronic monitoring of all schools, suggested the introduction of patriotic education in classrooms, announced the introduction of Catholicism as a Polish Baccalaureat subject, dismissed the innovative, pro-European director of the Centre for the Improvement of Teaching and promoted the tougher screening or lustration of people suspected of cooperating with the communist secret services before 1989. The prospect of a spate of McCarthy-style witch-hunts may be looming. The number of people exposed as former security service informers grows weekly.

The magazine Polityka has called them ‘a new social category: ‘the exposed’
and expressed concern over ‘the scale of what may await us’. The presumption of innocence does not appear to feature in the allegations. Jerzy Nowacki, a TV presenter from Poznan recently ‘exposed’ and suspended from his job, has said that he feels helpless and has no legal redress because he has no right to see the documents on the basis of which the revelations have been made. One of the latest allegations has been that a liberal priest, Michal Czajkowski, collaborated for 24 years and informed on his colleague, Father Jerzy Popieluszko, who was murdered by the security services in 1984. Although Czajkowski denies the allegations, to many people the documentary evidence published in newspapers looks conclusive, and he has been lambasted by the right-wing press for his reforming stance, his position as co-chair of the Polish Council of Christians and Jews, and his appeals to the Church to be open about the anti-Semitism in its ranks. ‘If a disagreement arose between Poles or Christians and Jews, he always defended the Jewish position,’ Nasza Polska wrote, ‘Whether the row concerned a cross in the former Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, libellous remarks in Gazeta Wyborcza, [a prominent liberal daily employing a number of Jewish journalists Ed], alleging that fighters in the Warsaw Uprising murdered Jews, tsarist pogrom spun on the Poles, or accusations that Radio Maryja is anti-Semitic.’

The Rydzyk media and publications like Nasza Polska or Mysl Polska now reflect the government line, and bizarre associations linking notions of betrayal, anti-Catholicism, Jewishness, disloyalty to the Polish idea, accumulated capital, communism and liberalism are no longer on the fringe. They have been permitted to flow freely into the mainstream.

Listening to the chatter of quirky and hospitable people with a good sense of fun and fast-flowing conversation, it can be tempting to feel that, in the Polish environment, ideas are so fluid that resentments must soon be forgotten. But sensibilities linked to patriotism and religion have a particular tenacity, linked to a sense of fractured history. Twenty years ago, it was still being said that Poland was less a state than a state of mind. Today, the government is making it clear that Poland is, let there be no doubt, a player in its own right, an independent state intent on coordinating the needs of day-to-day politics with the same moral vision that saw it through three partitions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a century of imperial occupation, two world wars, and an imposed communist order. In terms of home-grown political ideas, all that has been historically tested is patriotism. And the bonds this has wrought have been proved – in the sense that,
against all the odds, the Polish state still exists. Now the Kaczyński brothers want to make it work.

The coalition is promising a ‘civilisational leap’ for Poland in a language reminiscent of the 1970s when, under communist leader Edward Gierek, phrases like ‘the political and moral unity of the nation’ were bandied about to ward off questions about human rights. Jaroslaw Kaczyński is proposing the introduction of a form of ‘moral censorship’ to reflect the traditional Polish Catholic ethos.

In an interview with the weekly Przekroj the philosopher Jacek Holowka has commented on the need ‘to ensure that the authorities do not intend to impose a form of unofficial martial law by releasing agents of intimidation into the community. They could be pseudo-journalists, trainees, students collecting information for a thesis, the envoys of Radio Maryja or some other right wing organisation. We must be vigilant and denounce them when they appear.’

The fact that such anxieties should be seriously expressed in an EU country seems astonishing. But Wprost argues that the coalition is neither radical nor extremist. Kaczyński, Giertych and Lepper are genuinely ‘nice boys’ in comparison with other world leaders. Only those with little idea of how Putin, Chirac, Berlusconi or Schroder lead or have led could possibly call them ‘cranky’ or ‘despotic’. ‘But when Western citizens hear from their correspondents in Poland – usually inspired by Poles – what despots Kaczyński or Giertych are, they imagine a Polish version of Castro or Pol Pot, which is absurd.’

Perhaps: but even in this liberal conservative view there is the implicit hint of an unidentified ‘presence’, a subliminal conspiracy out to persuade the West that Poland has a problem with right-wing radicalism. Meanwhile, Jaroslaw Kaczyński reportedly likes to talk about uklad – the ‘system’ – that old communist/collaborator network that has sucked the country dry for 15 years and sullied its institutions. The government’s job, as Law and Justice sees it, is to ‘clean up’.

The difficulty is that there can be a fine line between a clean-up and a purge and, if cleansing is what we are about to witness, who will tell us what is really happening? For the present, laws against deriding the nation and the political system are still in force. With the notable exception of the satirical
weekly *NIE*, the media are cautious about talking down the mother country. People are prepared to joke and be critical of anything except the idea of independent Poland, its tradition and its leaders. In their approach to written texts, many people still expect to be edified. Poles have been educated to respect authority and on the whole to take things literally, even naively.

*Newsweek Polska*, introduced into Poland in 2001 by the German publishing group Axel Springer, recently published an article by its editor-in-chief Tomasz Wroblewski arguing that if communist Poland was plagued by the ‘Captive Mind’ in Czeslaw Milosz’s phrase, today intellectuals suffer from the ‘Naive Mind’. Media commentators feel obliged, in public, to justify the behaviour of politicians. ‘Convinced that the intentions of the Kaczynski brothers are noble, they perform all but absurd verbal acrobatics to neutralise the effect of the Kaczynskis’ far from noble resolutions,’ Wroblewski writes. ‘The Kaczynskis’ aversion to independent media is explained away by servile journalists intendentious articles about the twins and their past ... A distinguished commentator who supports Law and Justice has called a criminal attack on an unarmed anarchist the straightforward settling of old scores between young extremists – apparently for fear that the stabbing might be linked to the coalition’s xenophobic attack on opposition youth groups.’

In the Polish media, conformism is scarcely new. Not so long ago, an interviewer was caught on television enquiring of former President Kwasniewski what questions he should be asking. Now the newly appointed authorities of public TV have introduced the concept of something called ‘journalism in partnership’. The idea is that a journalist does not attack a politician or ask difficult questions, but encourages a cosy chat and, in effect, lets the politician direct the interview. Under this ‘facade of free speech and integrity’, Wroblewski comments in *Newsweek*, ‘both free speech and integrity are trampled’.

*Newsweek Polska* vies with two other quality weeklies – *Polityka* and *Wprost* – for the position of best-selling news magazine in the country. Its circulation is in the region of 174,000 but it is thought to reach about 2.5 million people. Its presence has refreshed a market in which less than 30 per cent of the population read any kind of newspaper, even though many of the 300 or so papers available are well designed, lively, stimulating and varied.

Springer, a presence in Polish journalism since 1993, also owns the
new national quality daily Dziennik, launched in April, for educated young readers interested in European and international issues. Its arrival forced Gazeta Wyborcza, until recently Poland’s best-selling newspaper, to cut its price by nearly half. The company also publishes three women’s magazines, a number of specialist titles including business, car and computer journals, and Fakt, Poland’s biggest and snappiest tabloid which pulled in more readers than Gazeta Wyborcza within two months of its launch in October 2003. Fakt is an aggressive, hard-hitting and conservative presence. It alleged directly on the front page, for example, that the ‘exposed’ priest Father Czajkowski had been instrumental in the murder of his colleague Father Jerzy Popieluszko – a bold claim made before any kind of investigation has taken place.

But then the Polish style is often bold and bumptious, and directness is viewed as an indication of resistance to hypocrisy, circumspection or political correctness. The Kaczyński brothers and their team arrived on the scene brandishing an honesty ticket made credible to voters by their Catholic credentials and their unglamorous flats, cars and wives. But moral righteousness, stroppiness, and selective courtesy apart, how dangerous is Poland’s new coalition, the yes-tradition towards accepted authority, the suspicion of external agendas, the homophobia, the anti-Semitism?

In April, Marek Edelman, at 87 the last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943, wrote an open letter published in Gazeta Wyborcza, protesting against a broadcast on Radio Maryja alleging that Jewish groups were profiteering from the Holocaust. The letter attracted considerable attention in Poland and abroad, and Edelman’s warning that persecution begins with words that can lead seamlessly to deeds has been widely quoted. The Vatican also sent a reproof indicating that Radio Maryja was failing to respect the Church’s political neutrality.

The day before Pope Benedict XVI arrived in Poland for his first visit, the Jewish Rabbi, Michael Schudrich, was attacked with a can of what he called ‘pepper spray’ in central Warsaw. A spokesman for the ministry of internal affairs subsequently speculated in the daily Rzeczpospolita that the attack might have been intended mischievously to provoke the impression that Poland was an anti-Semitic country. Members of the Union of Jewish Students have also received threatening phone calls.

A detailed investigative report in Polityka has shown that, supported by
The political climate, neo-Nazism is growing: its membership in Poland is though it to be around 25,000 and European neo-Nazi groups are training their ranks here. How far this might take Poles, and for that matter other Europeans, down the road of neo-fascism is anybody’s guess. There have been disturbing reports that the deputy chief of state television, Piotr Farfal, has published a neo-Nazi magazine calling for the expulsion of Jews from Poland. Remarks such as those made by MP Wojciech Wierzejski that any ‘deviants’ wanting to take part in Warsaw’s 2006 gay parade ‘should be given a good hiding’ are also troubling. But though banned in 2005, this year the parade took place on 10 June without disruption. It was widely reported, with predictable expressions of criticism or approval, and about 3,500 people marched.

For Poland to take the authoritarian Belarusian route – a possibility of which Wojciech Olejniczak, leader of the Democratic-Left Alliance, has warned – the clampdown on the media, satellite TV and the Internet would have to be unprecedentedly severe and brutal. What bodes most immediately and visibly, though, is an intellectually straitjacketed, isolated European province, abandoned by its brightest and best. With 18 per cent unemployment among people of working age – 40 per cent among the young – the most enterprising are voting with their feet. According to Gazeta Wyborcza up to 2 million have left to work abroad since Poland joined the EU in May 2004. The vast majority are under 35, and the signs are that for the present they are no longer inclined to think of rushing home.