

Poland's populist government let far-right extremism explode into the mainstream



By **Tim Hume** on May 9, 2017

GORZÓW WIELKOPOLSKI, Poland – Staszek Czerczak's face wrinkled in disgust as he flicked through the racks of "patriotic" streetwear on display at a market in his Polish hometown. The T-shirts and hoodies emblazoned with nationalist and far-right symbols (Polish eagles, Iron Crosses) and slogans ("Stop the Islamization of Europe") have become a uniform of sorts for a growing segment of Polish youth.

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"When I was young, this used to be something underground," he said, eyeing the clothes. "Now it's become mainstream."

Czerczak has a better understanding than most of the decadeslong grip the far right has had on young people in Gorzów Wielkopolski, this down-at-the-heels industrial city in western Poland. In the 1990s, seeking to rebel against his parents and fit in with the hooligans in his neighborhood, Czerczak joined a local gang of skinheads. They held racist, neo-Nazi views, blaming their problems on "the Jews or the Communists," and they had a reputation for violence. Considering themselves stalwart Polish patriots, they would travel hundreds of miles every November to the capital, Warsaw, to join a rabble of a few hundred other skinheads on a march to observe Poland's Independence Day.

"Being a part of this group of strong guys, I felt strong myself," he said.

Czerczak realized that the hatred at the gang's core was ultimately self-destructive, and he has long since turned his back on the gang and its neo-fascist politics. Now a clean-cut father of two, he speaks in schools as an activist for Never Again, a Polish anti-racism association.

But to his dismay, the far-right ideology he rejected has insinuated itself even more deeply into the politics and society of Europe's most homogenous country, leaping from the fringes into the mainstream to an extent that would have been unthinkable two decades ago.

Today, ultranationalist politics has a pronounced influence on Polish youth culture, from football stadiums to music to streetwear. Openly xenophobic far-right politicians have seats in Parliament, and the populist

government of the conservative Law and Justice party has adopted a nationalist, anti-immigrant platform that shares much ground with the far right. The annual Independence Day demonstration in Warsaw, organized by far-right nationalist groups, now draws estimated crowds of up to 70,000 people, marching under the slogan “Poland for the Poles.”

Poland’s young ultranationalists have largely abandoned the skinhead subculture of the 1990s for more mainstream, “patriotic” apparel. One popular streetwear brand, “Red Is Bad,” describes itself as clothing for people who “are proud of Polish history.” One of its T-shirt designs depicts Karl Marx’s head being blown up like a space invader.

They’ve also left behind the white-power punk music of Czerczak’s youth in favor of nationalist hip-hop, whose lyrics can read like a far-right manifesto.

Czerczak says the new nationalists may look different, but their xenophobia is only growing more dangerous. “They only changed their clothes; they didn’t change their thinking,” he said.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, the prevailing wisdom was that the generations that grew up in a democratic, post-Communist Poland would eventually share the liberal values of their peers in Western Europe. Instead, young Poles have been the driving force behind the rise of a radical far-right nationalism that in recent years has manifested in street-level political movements and across youth culture. Public rallies by youth-heavy far-right organizations such as the National Radical Camp (ONR) and the National Movement are now common in Polish cities.

Critics say the country’s government has harnessed, legitimized, and emboldened this ultranationalist politics, allowing it to spread from the margins into mainstream political discourse, shattering civic norms along the way.

The ruling right-wing Law and Justice party has adopted a nationalist agenda as central to its populist platform, and emboldened extremists by turning a blind eye to their abuses. The result has been an explosion of xenophobia that in the past two years has led to a surge of racially motivated attacks, public and online hate speech, and harassment, much of it targeted at the country’s tiny Muslim minority.

Rafal Pankowski, a sociologist at Warsaw’s Collegium Civitas university and an expert on the Polish far right, said it’s become difficult to distinguish between the mainstream conservative right and what he calls the “anti-democratic, radically xenophobic” far right. Both project themselves as patriots, vigorously defending a narrowly defined Catholic Polish nation that is threatened on two fronts – by the corrupting influence of Western liberal elites, and by a wave of Islamic migrants and terrorists from the East.

“Many of the extreme-right groups feel very much empowered by the current climate,” said Pankowski, who is also a member of Never Again. “They feel there is a new space available to them in political discourse. The social norm has shifted, and it’s much more acceptable to express racist views.”

Even though Poland has experienced steady economic growth since joining the EU in 2004, the benefits of EU membership have not flowed to everyone. In overlooked cities like Gorzów Wielkopolski, which never recovered from the shuttering of the city’s factories in the post-Communist era, the sources of disenchantment are obvious. Many of those who can leave, do leave — either to larger Polish cities or to join the estimated 1.3 million to 2 million Poles seeking economic opportunities in other EU countries.

“After Communism, things weren’t divided fairly. People see on TV everything that is available, but it is not available to them,” Czerczak said. “The borders are open, but if you’re on 300 euros (\$326) a month, what use is that? Maybe you just leave.”

Those left behind “need an enemy to blame,” he said, and the far right gives them one. In Poland, a country that is nearly 98 percent ethnically Polish, that “enemy” has traditionally been Jews or Communists; occasionally it has been gay people. Now, overwhelmingly, it’s Muslims.

That's despite Muslims numbering only an estimated 20,000 to 40,000 people out of Poland's population of 38 million, a share unlikely to grow given the government's adamant refusal to accept an EU plan to resettle refugees among member states.

"They used to say Poland had anti-Semitism without Jews; now we have Islamophobia without Muslims," said Pankowski, whose organization monitors reports of racist attacks and hate crimes. A recent Chatham House survey of attitudes to Muslim immigration in 10 European countries found that opposition was highest in Poland, where 71 percent said immigration from mainly Muslim countries should be stopped, compared with the 55 percent average across all countries surveyed. Only 9 percent disagreed.

The current nationalist zeitgeist took hold in 2015, when the parliamentary election campaign coincided with the height of the migration crisis convulsing Europe.

Law and Justice, then in opposition, campaigned on a strident anti-immigration platform, competing with minor parties on the far right to position itself as the staunchest defender of Poland from a wave of Muslim immigration, a wave it argued was partly due to the misguided policies of liberal leaders to the West. Although Poland wasn't on the migration route, the rhetoric was intemperate; at one rally, Law and Justice's leader, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, warned that refugees from the Middle East could bring "parasites" and diseases. Law and Justice stormed to victory with an outright majority, the first time since the fall of Communism that a party had done so, and significantly boosted its support among young voters.

Law and Justice has proven itself unlike any previous Polish government, rapidly remaking the country in line with its nationalist conservative vision and in a way that critics — including former prime minister and European Council President Donald Tusk and three former Polish presidents — say imperils the country's democratic order.

As in Hungary, where the government is engaged in building an "illiberal" democracy, Law and Justice's populist agenda includes toppling the perceived dominance of a Western-leaning liberal elite, rolling back socially liberal values to align with the country's conservative roots, and wresting power from Brussels to restore national control over the country's affairs. According to a recent report by the pro-democracy think tank Freedom House, the biggest difference between the Hungarian and Polish contexts is that Law and Justice has transformed the Polish landscape "at breakneck speed, and in violation of the country's own laws."

This erosion of democratic checks and balances has included moves to neuter the Constitutional Tribunal, the country's highest court, earning the government a rebuke from the European Commission. The government has tightened its grip on the media, turning it into what critics say is a propaganda arm, and moved to restrict demonstrations and pass a raft of measures rolling back liberal advances on social issues.

But the nationalist agenda isn't the government's only selling point to Polish voters. Its populist platform combines right-wing positions on immigration and social issues with leftist economic policies, most notably the "Family 500+" initiative. Under this popular program — designed to boost the country's birth rate, one of the lowest in the European Union, and encourage Poles thinking of emigrating to stay — all Polish families are paid a monthly subsidy of 500 zlotys (\$126) for each second and subsequent child. About 3.7 million children benefit from the program, according to government estimates.

Initiatives like these have helped Law and Justice maintain strong public support. Nearly halfway into its four-year term, it remains the most popular party.

Perhaps the country's most high-profile far-right politician is Robert Winnicki, the leader of the National Movement, a party that hopes to translate the power of Poland's street-based far-right movements into even more parliamentary seats. He unabashedly describes his party as xenophobic and far right, although he claims that, from a Western point of view, "half the Polish political scene is far right."

"To us, even the National Front in France seems quite liberal when it comes to traditional values," he said.

I met Winnicki in the National Movement's sparsely furnished Warsaw offices, where the walls are decorated with vintage photos of the marching, uniformed nationalist militias of the 1930s the party sees as its ideological forebears. The ONR and All-Polish Youth, fellow far-right organizations opposed to liberalism, tolerance, multiculturalism, and gay rights, also meet here on a weekly basis. The three closely linked groups are key players in organizing the annual Independence March, now such a key fixture in Europe's far-right scene that it draws ultranationalist groups and hooligan firms from across the continent to Warsaw.

Winnicki made headlines in 2014 for his role in a rally in the town of Andrychow against the Roma — an ethnic minority who have long been a target of the Polish far-right. With the support of a mob of football fans, Winnicki called for the town's 100 or so Roma to be expelled. These days, the party's prime target is Muslims, whom it wants banned from immigrating to the country. But while he acknowledges that the new environment under a Law and Justice government has helped the far-right's cause, Winnicki rejects any suggestion that anti-immigration rhetoric has contributed to recent attacks on foreigners, and he downplays the reports of violence.

"We don't want to [encourage attacks]. And even if we wanted to, we don't need to, because when people are watching the news from Western Europe, this anger — when it comes to Muslims, for example — rises from itself, just watching TV," he said. "If you want to search for who is responsible for the rising of fear and anger toward Muslims, you have to look to Western European politicians like Angela Merkel."

The National Movement entered Parliament with five MPs for the first time in 2015 as part of a deal with Kukiz '15, a new, big-tent populist party led by the popular rock singer Pawel Kukiz. After defecting from Kukiz '15, Winnicki is now the National Movement's sole MP.

He told me that his party's goal for the next election is to enter Parliament under its own steam. "And by the next election after that, we want to rule the country."

Dressed conservatively in a suit and tie, the 32-year-old and his party represent the far-right's attempt to present an acceptable face to the public as it seeks to capitalize on the growing right-wing climate and cement its presence in the political mainstream.

Winnicki says about three-quarters of the National Movement's membership is under 30. Increasingly, they are middle-class students, not the skinhead and hooligan types who were once the dominant face of the Polish far right.

"The skinhead element is something that passes from the '90s and is decreasing," said Winnicki. "Now, if I go to liberal high schools, even in Warsaw, the most cosmopolitan city in Poland, I would find people sympathizing and active in nationalist values."

The new breed are people like Mateusz Marzoch, a 23-year-old political science student from the University of Warsaw. "Polish people see what's happening in the West, in Sweden, for example," Marzoch said, referring to the recent terror attack in Stockholm carried out by an ISIS-sympathizing failed asylum seeker from Uzbekistan. "Most Polish people are turning to the right."

By Winnicki's reckoning, there's nothing surprising about young Poles foregoing liberal values to hold more right-wing views than their Western European counterparts. He argues Poles have a different political makeup: Polish society remains strongly influenced by the Catholic Church and is inherently more conservative, never having undergone the postwar sexual and social revolutions experienced in the West.

"From our point of view, it looks that Western Europe since the '60s and '70s has gone far from traditional Western culture, become decadent and betrayed what Europe really is," he said. "We think of ourselves as defenders of Western culture. We think that *this* is Europe — not Paris, not London, not Madrid anymore." There is no shortage of examples of the Law and Justice government's accommodation of far-right groups and xenophobia since coming to power.

Last May, as Adam Bodnar, Poland's human rights commissioner, said his office was receiving increasing reports of attacks on minorities, the government abolished a state council tasked with fighting racism. In April, the Polish Border Guard posted on social media that it did "not agree to the influx of Muslim immigrants," before swiftly deleting the post.

Government-organized patriotic events have become rallying points for the far right, where activists from the ONR, Poland's strongest ultranationalist movement, proudly wave their banners. Critics describe the ONR as a fascist organization; the centrist opposition Civic Platform has called for the group to be banned.

But rather than condemning the ONR, the government has effectively helped clear space for it to operate. Last year it scrapped a police training manual on hate-crime symbols at the request of a nationalist MP because it featured the ONR's symbol, a hand gripping a sword. When the ONR announced plans to patrol the streets of Lodz to "protect" locals from migrants, the Law and Justice-affiliated regional governor welcomed the initiative, saying it was "the kind of capital on which we can build." Official photos of Poland's president, Andrzej Duda, show him at patriotic events with ONR flags in the background.

When ultranationalists do overstep the line, the response from authorities is now silence, and sometimes accommodation. In one infamous 2015 episode, a man who burned an effigy of an Orthodox Jew at an ONR-organized anti-refugee rally in Wroclaw was sentenced to 10 months in jail; in a rare move, prosecutors said the sentence was too harsh, and the man eventually received a lighter sentence.

"You can feel in the air the sense of indifference," said Bodnar, who said the new government does not support his office's work. "Whenever I have a situation where somebody is beaten because of their race, I make a statement. But you cannot expect any minister from the government to make a statement in solidarity. The only thing they would do is say, 'Let's not exaggerate; it was just an individual attack or an act of hooliganism'."

Poland's National Police Headquarters would only provide figures for hate crimes committed over the past three years. The numbers have remained relatively steady: 727 in 2014, 791 in 2015, and 765 last year.

But Bodnar and Pankowski say these do not reflect the growing frequency and severity of incidents they deal with. "Every week now we have a situation where somebody is beaten up," said Bodnar. "Two years ago it would not happen that often." In the current climate, he said, "many attacks are not reported, especially verbal attacks, because people don't expect any kind of response." They also question the way attacks are being categorized, citing the example of a professor who was beaten up on a tram in Warsaw for speaking German, an incident that was not classified a hate crime.

Polish police did not respond to further questions about crime figures, and Law and Justice did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Bodnar believes that the government's apparent tolerance of such attacks is a calculated decision so as not to alienate the far-right portion of its base.

"I think they feel that if they started chasing the authors of those racist crimes, then a serious competitor could appear on the right of the political scene. It seems to me that Law and Justice wants to have control over the whole spectrum of right-wing ideas — their strategy is to have everyone from the center to the right."

Critics fear that Law and Justice's decision to instrumentalize the far right will prove a dangerous miscalculation for the country, with lasting consequences that will not simply be corrected in the pendulum swing of parliamentary politics. "I'm afraid something fundamental has changed in terms of Poland's democratic culture," Pankowski said.

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