

POLISH FAR RIGHT EMBOLDENED BY RULING PARTY PROPAGANDA



Claudia Ciobanu | Warsaw | July 31 2019

Violent scenes like those seen at the Bialystok equality parade are more common in Poland as far-right extremism enters the mainstream, emboldened by government rhetoric.

The selfie he posted on Facebook showed his face drenched in blood.

Przemyslaw Witkowski, a 37-year-old journalist and poet, had been cycling with his girlfriend in the southwestern Polish city of Wroclaw when he spotted homophobic graffiti on a wall along with Celtic crosses, often used as symbols of white nationalism. A group of men standing nearby overheard him expressing his disgust. The couple rode on, but one of the men later caught up with them and asked Witkowski whether he liked the graffiti. He said no. The man broke his nose.

Witkowski sees the July 25 attack as a sign of the times given a steady drumbeat of anti-LGBT propaganda from Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party in recent months.

"What happened to me is because the Polish government — following in the footsteps of Russia — is trying to focus the attention of people on this artificial and completely idiotic idea that LGBT people are predators, likely paedophiles and posing a threat to the traditional family," he said.

"This kind of language, like on the graffiti, is officially accepted in Poland and it is used by people in the governing party."

Rights activists agree that a growing chorus of inflammatory rhetoric from PiS has helped fuel homophobic violence across Poland, including scenes of mayhem during the first-ever equality parade in the northeastern city of Bialystok earlier this month. In Bialystok, around 1,000 marchers faced hundreds of protestors chanting homophobic slogans and throwing firecrackers, rocks and bottles. Police fired tear gas and arrested 77 people. Jacek Dehnel, a 39-year-old poet, recalled how he took refuge in a pharmacy to escape the melee.

"Outside the windows, we see bandits running all the time," he wrote in a Facebook post that was widely quoted by local and international media.

"Someone is being beaten again. Another bandit passes by holding a burning rainbow flag [...] Everybody is trying to camouflage themselves, taking off rainbow accessories, packing away flags, hiding them in backpacks, putting on dark clothes.

"Somehow, you have to get out of this place. You have to live in this place."

Anti-LGBT activists had announced they were organising more than 40 counter-demonstrations on the day of the parade — a tactic used across Poland to intimidate equality marchers and create a sense of danger that might lead authorities to ban parades on safety grounds. One counter-protest in Bialystok was organised by Kamil Sienicki — a member of an ultra-right youth group known as Młodzież Wszechpolska (All Polish Youth) — and promoted on Twitter by Sebastian Lukaszewicz, a PiS councilor

in the Podlaskie voivodeship, the administrative region where Bialystok is located. Sienicki was formerly an assistant to former All Polish Youth leader Adam Andruszkiewicz, who in 2018 was appointed Secretary of State in the Ministry of Digital Affairs by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki. Fans of local football club Jagiellonia Bialystok also called on peers across Poland to come to Bialystok, to prevent “dressed-up clowns” from “desecrating Christian values”, as they wrote in an online call to arms. (After Saturday’s violence, police arrested several people sporting Jagiellonia emblems). Meanwhile, the Podlaskie voivodeship, under the leadership of PiS politician Artur Kosicki, organised a “family picnic” and “pre-march” on the day of the parade. The picnic was officially supported by Tadeusz Wojdy, the Catholic archbishop of Bialystok, and a local branch of state television TVP. Wojdy said the equality parade discriminated against those who hold Christian values.

“This initiative is foreign to our lands and society, which is deeply rooted in God and cares for the well-being of all society and especially children,” he said in a “declaration to inhabitants of Bialystok” that was read in Catholic churches on July 7.

PiS ambivalence

Right after the violence in Bialystok, Education Minister Dariusz Piontkowski, a PiS lawmaker, told local media “the equality parades are causing an enormous resistance. Because of that, it is worth deciding whether in future such parades should be organised at all”.

PiS members have come out strongly against LGBT rights in recent months, especially in the run-up to European Parliament elections in May. They argue that the LGBT movement is an imported ideology that threatens the Polish nation. PiS leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski has famously warned: “Hands off our children!” And across the country, PiS councilors have pushed for declarations stating that towns are “free of LGBT ideology”.

In July, Polish daily Gazeta Polska, seen as friendly to the government, announced it would include “LGBT-free zone” stickers with its paper, an initiative applauded by other conservative media. (It distributed the stickers during the second half of the month before a court ordered them to be withdrawn from sale).

As police announced arrests following the Bialystok march, PiS leaders started distancing the party from the violence. Prime Minister Morawiecki condemned “the hooligan, aggressive behaviour” and Interior Minister Elzbieta Witek said that “in Poland there is no consent for conduct that harms the rights of other people”. But critics say PiS’ anti-LGBT rhetoric has emboldened individuals and groups to act on their homophobic impulses.

“In 2015, during the campaign for general elections, for the first time in recent Polish history, the hostility towards an imagined enemy group entered the mainstream — and stayed there — which of course legitimises the far right,” said Rafal Pankowski, a Polish sociologist who leads the anti-racist organisation Never Again.

“The targets vary and are interchangeable: in 2015, different right-wing and far-right groups were competing over who is more radical in anti-migrant, anti-Muslim and anti-refugee positions. In 2018, it was about the Jews. Now, it is about LGBT people.”

Pankowski thinks a key player in this shift was musician-turned-politician Pawel Kukiz, whose Kukiz’15 movement positioned itself to the right of PiS in 2015 general elections, much as the far-right Jobbik

party in Hungary has tried to outflank that country's ruling Fidesz party. To compete, PiS "started saying things that the far-right had been saying", Pankowski said.

In the run-up to general elections set for this autumn, analysts say a far-right alliance known as Konfederacja is playing a similar role in making PiS more radical. Konfederacja polled well in the run-up to the EU elections but failed to make the five per cent threshold to win any seats. Janusz Korwin-Mikke, a far-right politician from Konfederacja, told Rzeczpospolita newspaper this week that "if the homo propaganda is happening, there will be pogroms". He continued: "It was already happening in Bialystok, but this is a foretaste of what will happen."

Pankowski said a fundamental shift towards hate speech in public discourse was a boon to the far right.

"Certainly not everyone in the governing party has extremist views, but the party is trying to play two pianos at the same time," he said. "We'll have to see if they can put the genie they unleashed back in the bottle."

Witkowski, the journalist who was attacked after complaining about homophobic graffiti, said that while the right wing of PiS may hold extremist views sincerely, most party members are more cynical in their support for the anti-LGBT cause.

"They know that family, religion and the nation are the last things left for free in a capitalist society where people feel threatened and precarious all the time," he said.

"The government, then, is simply shaping the flow of fear in society and channeling it in the direction they want, making people believe this is the problem, when the things that actually change people's lives are elsewhere: the prices of commodities, taxes, retirement age.

"The far-right, the nationalists, neo-fascists and others, they are like bull terriers on a leash. They are self-made crusaders for Christianity or for the nation. They are not formally connected to the government. But the government does give them a description of reality, which they act upon."

Resisting the far right

Zofia Marcinek, a feminist and anti-fascist activist from Warsaw, said extremists were already on the ascent in Poland during the decade before PiS came to power in 2015.

"So the far-right groups emerged as very strong and very well organised when PiS came to power and nationalist feelings moved into the mainstream," she said. "The rhetoric of PiS — that the Polish nation is like a castle under attack from various foreign threats — is very much feeding these far-right circles."

Marcinek is one of 13 women who in 2017 formed a human chain across the route of the Independence Day march in Warsaw, a yearly parade initiated by far-right groups All Polish Youth and the National Radical Camp, to protest against extremism. The women were attacked by marchers, but they today face charges of disrupting a legal gathering. Marcinek recalls that a decade ago, anti-fascists could realistically hope to blockade the nationalist march (in 2011, they succeeded) — something unthinkable today given the 80,000 or so people who turn up.

"Every year, when we look at the nationalist marches on November 11, it is pretty clear they are protected by the airbag of the national media, the police and the government," she said. "The message is that this is a patriotic march and any attempt to claim this is not a peaceful patriotic expression is dismissed as political paranoia."

Last weekend, people in around 30 places across Poland organised events to show solidarity with the victims of the Bialystok violence — from big cities Warsaw, Krakow and Wroclaw to small towns like Zgorzelec or Nowy Sacz and even the village of Bialowieza. Sociologist Pankowski said that while the far right has moved into the mainstream, so has the opposition to it.

“The anti-fascist movement used to be made up mostly of young people from the alternative culture,” he said. “But now we have a lot of older people, for example from the Solidarity generation who despair about their life’s achievement being ruined. We have the middle class, we have people across Poland protesting against the far right.”

Towards the end of July, in an attempt to cut through stereotyping of LGBT people, social media users across Poland have been Tweeting using the hashtag #jestemLGBT (#IamLGBT) and adding a few words about themselves.

“#IamLGBT and I will treat you in ER,” reads one. “#IamLGBT and I am the kind lady from the bookshop,” says another. And a third: “#IamLGBT and I love you all anyway.”

<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/31/polish-far-right-emboldened/?fbclid=IwAR19sZINi3nEO4cxSEf4rYLw-wBabqoROBf2Rtx3rLPWLzLeBuizlaoz3lk>