

'Great Poland': Thousands attend Independence March in Warsaw

by Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska
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Patriots and hardliners attend annual rally with a focus this year on protecting 'traditional values' and shunning LGBT.

Warsaw, Poland - A raised fist holding a rosary in a gesture of resistance has become the symbol of this year's Independence March - an annual nationalist event in the capital to celebrate Polish independence.

On Monday, thousands marched under the slogan: "Take care of the whole nation" - an excerpt from a Polish Catholic song calling on the Virgin Mary to protect the country.

At least 47,000 people attended the annual rally, according to local officials, but the spokesperson for the Independence March Association put the number at 150,000.

The event started at 1:30pm local time (12:30GMT) with organisers chanting from the stage: "Glory to great Poland and God, honour and homeland."

After a concert with bands playing patriotic songs in a festival-like atmosphere, the march kicked off drawing families, average patriots, as well as far-right groups, many with covered faces.

"The march is not apolitical, it is non-partisan, but we do care about the common good," Ziemowit Przebitkowski from the group All-Polish Youth said in a speech against mass immigration.

"From the beginning we have been marching under the slogan of stopping mass migration. This is very good because we care about the well-being of the nation and we have to issue postulates that foster national morals," he said.

Natalia, 19, said the march was a "great way to celebrate" Polish independence.

"The whole nation is united," she told Al Jazeera. "There are many people, the atmosphere is great. I expected something different, but everything is normal."

'Hub for far-right groups'

Attendees lit flares and chanted a mix of slogans: "Not Islamic or secular but Catholic Poland", "No to abortion", "Great Poland is our goal", and "Death to the enemies of the homeland".

In past years, the march has drawn thousands of nationalists from Poland and abroad and featured racist and anti-immigrant chants.

Nationalists who attended the march were focused on external "threats", such as migrants and refugees, Islam, Jews, as well as internal "enemies"- liberal media, "communists", and "cultural Marxists".

This year's main threat, as perceived by hardliners, comes from those aiming to destroy a "Catholic Polish" identity and traditional family values - namely the LGBT community and activists promoting sexual education.

"The Independence March is a sad event as it shows that Poland has a huge problem with national identity, especially the youth, who are looking for answers in ethno-nationalism," said Rafal Pankowski, sociologist and political scientist at Collegium Civitas, and the head of the anti-racist Never Again Association.

"This event has also ceased to be only a day for Polish nationalism. It's become a hub for far-right groups from around the world."



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People lit flares and prayed ahead of the march [Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska/Al Jazeera]

In 2018, the centenary of Poland's independence, about 200,000 participated in the event, which was attended by President Andrzej Duda.

"The participation of the president in the march last year was symbolic as it was an extreme form of legitimisation of the movement. And it was a great mistake. The president showed that radical nationalists are legitimate hosts of a national celebration.

"This is one of the elements which contributed to what happened in the election - a legitimisation of radical groups, which for years were at the fringes of politics," Pankowski said, referring to recent gains by the far-right.

'Fight against our faith'

While a raised fist has long been used as a symbol of solidarity and resistance by oppressed groups around the world, in the latter half of the 20th century white nationalists adopted it - the so-called Aryan or White Power fist.

"There is an ongoing fierce fight against our faith and our sacred values," wrote Robert Bakiewicz, head of the Independence March Association, in an open letter published on its website in October.

"It is happening through the profanation of the holy cross, a blasphemous portrayal of Virgin Mary, promotion of unnatural family model, demands of the right to live in sin against the nature, and the right to kill unborn children. And finally, there is an intensification of attacks against bishops calling these ideologies by their name and dubbing them as a plague."

Tomasz Kalinowski, an association board member, added: "We want to invoke a patriotic, national slogan, but at the same time a Catholic and Christian one and, with the march, we want to highlight that national identity is inseparable from our Catholic faith."

The march reflects an ongoing schism between nationalist conservatives and church groups and the liberal sections of Polish society.

The conflict has intensified as LGBT marches have been violently attacked by far-right demonstrators, who accuse members of the sexual minority of being perverts and paedophiles.

More hardline nationalist elements, however, think differently.

"Above all, the Independence March is a political and not a religious event," said Tomasz Szczepanski, head of the far-right Niklot association. "Secondly, if we are to politically interpret it, it refers to the idea of a Pole-Catholic and the church as a national institution. This could have been defensible in the 19th century, but not today."

A poster reading 'Polish Intifada' refers to an anti-restitution bill [Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska/Al Jazeera]
During the march on Monday, nationalist activists gathered signatures to support a bill against property restitution.

The bill is designed to target the heirless properties that belonged to Jews and were appropriated by the Nazis during World War II.

While by law such property becomes a state asset, nationalists fear Jewish restitution organisations, with support from the US government, could try to reclaim them.

In October's parliamentary elections, Konfederacja, a party of hardline free-market groups and far-right nationalists close to the Independence March circles, received 6.8 percent of the vote - bringing their representatives into parliament for the first time.

Other groups, including left-wing Antifa, were also to hold demonstrations on Monday in Warsaw, although far fewer participants were expected than the nationalists.

