

State-Sanctioned Independence Day March in Warsaw: War Rhetoric, Xenophobia, and Anti-EU Sentiment

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THERE IS NO FREEDOM WITHOUT SOLIDARITY

Despite having been initially banned by the court, the contentious Independence Day march went through Warsaw on Thursday after Poland's nationalist authorities gave it the status of an official state event. Under the government's patronage, far-right organizers of the rally used their platform to attack the EU, incite hostility against immigrants, and denounce independent media.

On Thursday, shortly before the Independence Day March officially began, about 100 members of the oppositional Obywatele RP (Citizens of Poland) group gathered in central Warsaw to protest against the nationalist and neo-fascist rhetoric that dominates the event every year. They were carrying signs with slogans such as "November 11 without fascism" and "Nationalism is not patriotism". However, even though their gathering has been registered and was completely legal, the police cordoned them off, carrying some of the activists out of the place where they had convened.

Two days before the November 11 national holiday, another anti-fascist demonstration, organized by a group calling itself "14 women from the bridge", has been called off. The organizers decided to cancel the protests out of concern for their safety.

A nationalist march sanctioned by the state

For a second consecutive time, the Independence Day March took place despite being declared illegal. This year, it was explicitly banned by a court. Yet, at the very last moment, the government decided to give it the status of an official state event, normally reserved for important anniversaries and holidays celebrations with the participation of top government authorities.

The organizer of the march and leader of a far-right organization that recently received multiple millions in funds from the Polish government, Robert Bąkiewicz, made sure to return the favor. In his opening speech before the November 11 march, he thanked the government and state institutions for their patronage. But the words of gratitude addressed to members of the ruling camp were just a warm-up before an attack on European institutions, government opponents, independent courts, and media. He also declared his support for the policies introduced by the Law and Justice party government.

Anti-EU sentiment, xenophobia, and flag burning

Using war-like rhetoric, Mr Bąkiewicz roared about an alleged attack on Poland. - Poland is being attacked by Moscow by means of weaponized immigration. And we are being attacked by Germany, too. It uses EU institutions to take away our sovereignty- he argued. The crowd reacted enthusiastically to his words about Germany, and a group of men felt encouraged to burn the German flag and a portrait of the Polish liberal opposition leader Donald Tusk. According to Mr Bąkiewicz, it was the Germans who came up with "multicolored ideologies that are supposed to lead to the cultural destruction of all Europe". - They want to destroy our energy resources, they want to make us a pariah, a satellite state, they want to shut down the Polish energy industry, make us kill unborn children. They want to take away our national, cultural, and even gender identity. There is no consent for this! - he called out.

He spoke about the war of civilizations, the collapse of the old world order with the United States as a hegemon, and about a new one taking shape. - It will depend on us what this new Poland will look like, whether we will be left with only the national anthem and the red and white flag, or if we will be ready to carry the torch of Christianity to the West - argued the leader of the nationalist march, adding that "the West no longer exists".

Finally, he defended Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, who recently took part in an EU debate on the rule of law in Poland. It was organized in response to the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling on the superiority of the Polish constitution over EU law. - The European scum spat on the Polish Prime Minister- Mr Bąkiewicz said. - And even more undignified was the Polish-speaking scum who spat on him. - Mr Prime Minister, they want to destroy us. No concessions! Not a single step back- he appealed.

But he did not end there. The leader of the march also spoke of "internal collaborators in Poland". According to Mr Bąkiewicz, these are "television stations that lie" and courts that "carry out political orders, just like in the 1950s".

Poland's Independence Day March draws far-right organizations from abroad

It was clear from the beginning that state institutions aligned themselves with the government's decision to support the contentious march. Military personnel, police, navy, and border guards walked in front wearing mess dress uniforms. Behind them walked veterans and historical reenactors on horseback. Further down was the Independence Day March guard.

According to unverified information provided by the organizers, the march was attended by some 100,000- 150,000 people. The rally began with singing Gregorian religious chants. However, while the front of the march was relatively calm and the participants could feel as if they were attending an ordinary parade, after a while, the tail of the march became increasingly loud. Some of the participants shouted xenophobic and homophobic slogans.

However, political views of the attendees were certainly mixed. Some nationalists chanted "F...ck TVN", while others, standing right next to them, shouted "F...ck PiS". There were also more and more flares and firecrackers. One exploded on the balcony of an apartment building passed by the marchers, where a man was standing with a national flag.

The march was also attended by far-right groups from Italy, Bulgaria, Hungary, and others. Among them, Forza Nuova- an openly neofascist organization that Italy's ruling coalition is now trying to ban.

Asked about the presence of foreign nationalist groups at the Warsaw Independence Day March, Rafal Pankowski, a professor at Collegium Civitas and member of the anti-racist Never Again Association, concluded: "It's sad that on November 11 Warsaw becomes the European capital of neofascism. It is terrible and puzzling. After so many years since regaining independence, as a society, as a nation, if I may use this word, we have become indifferent to what is the very core of Polish identity, the celebration of an important national holiday".

In the crowd, there were also prominent right-wing MPs from the ruling camp and the nationalist-libertarian Confederation. Members of the latter dominated the concluding speeches. Confederation MP Robert Winnicki argued that "if necessary, the Polish army should not hesitate to shoot illegal immigrants at the border". Referring to EU institutions, he said: "Stop blackmailing us with money, take your alms and f*ck off to Brussels!".