

Brits are pissed that Polish hate preachers were invited to a far-right rally



By Tim Hume on Jun 23, 2017

Two of Poland's most notorious far-right hate preachers, one of them a Catholic priest, are scheduled to speak at a "rally against terrorism" in the U.K. Saturday as community tensions run high following a string of terror attacks.

Anti-racism campaigners say the attendance of Jacek Miedlar, a fiery speaker accused of spreading hatred against Jews and Muslims, and Piotr Rybak, once convicted of burning an effigy of an Orthodox Jew, shows the deepening links between European extremist networks – and the esteem with which Poland's thriving ultranationalist scene is held by the far-right around Europe.

Both men are scheduled to speak at a "rally against terrorism" organized by the fringe far-right group Britain First in the city of Birmingham, although there are question marks over whether they'll even make it. In February, when Miedlar was due to speak at a Britain First protest over child sex crimes committed by Muslim gangs, he was turned away at the border for hate speech. He later complained on his blog that he had been detained by the "Jewish secret service."

Rafal Pankowski, a member of the Polish anti-racism organization Never Again, told VICE News that Miedlar and Rybak were two of Poland's most notorious far-right firebrands – well known for their inflammatory statements against Muslims, Jews, and gay people. While Poland has a long history of anti-semitism, recent years have seen rising anxieties over terrorism and immigration, making Muslims the new target for Polish ultranationalists determined to prevent the spread of Islam in the predominantly Catholic country.

"There's quite a lot competition in terms of hateful preachers in Poland right now," said Pankowski. "But they're probably at the top in terms of the intensity of the hatred they spew out."

Who are the speakers?

Miedlar came to notoriety following an inflammatory speech in 2015 at the Polish Independence Day rally in Warsaw – an event that has become hijacked by the ultranationalist right, drawing crowds of up to 70,000 each year. The speech – in which he led the flagwaving crowd on a chant of "Always the gospel! Never the Koran!" – gained a wide audience among the far-right around the world, raising his status within the movement and leading to his suspension from the church.

Rybak came to prominence the same month, when he burned an effigy of an Orthodox Jew at a protest in the city of Wroclaw against accepting Syrian refugees into the country. He said the effigy was supposed to represent George Soros, the Jewish, Hungarian-American billionaire philanthropist who is a figure of hate for many on the right.

Britain First is a fringe anti-Islam political party which has an active online presence and a taste for "direct action" – "Christian patrols" and "mosque invasions" – that it has so far been unable to translate into large crowds at its rallies or any wins at the polls. A spokesman for British anti-racism group Hope not Hate described the party as a "rag-tag bag of ... thugs" that had "brought nothing but division in its wake." "The fact that it's inviting some of Europe's most notorious and vile extremists to the U.K. speaks volumes about where its true 'patriotism' lies," he told VICE News.

Pankowski said the party had been developing its links with Polish ultranationalists for some time. Earlier this month, Britain First leaders Paul Golding and Jayda Fransen appeared at a demonstration in Warsaw in support of Miedlar, who is facing trial for threats made on social media.

Pankowski said the growing ties were partly due to Britain First being inspired by the size of the far-right movement in Poland – something “they couldn’t dream of” – and partly out of their desire to build support among the estimated one million Poles in the UK.

Also scheduled to speak at the rally is Edwin Wagensveld, leader of the Dutch branch of the German anti-Islam movement PEGIDA, who made headlines last year when he joined a vigilante group hunting down migrants in Bulgaria.

Local MPs and community leaders have urged police to call off the demonstration in Birmingham, which is about one-fifth Muslim, for fear of aggravating community tensions in the wake of three terror attacks in the U.K.

But police say Britain First – which has previously been involved in confrontations in the city when Golding and Fransen marched through predominantly Muslim areas with large crosses – is entitled to peacefully protest. A counter-protest against the group is planned.

The rally in the city – which has developed a reputation as a breeding ground for jihadists having produced 39 convicted terrorists – was initially meant to be held weeks ago, but was postponed after Golding and Fransen were arrested last month for inciting religious hatred. In the wake of the terror attack at London’s Finsbury Park mosque Monday, Britain First were criticized when a number of their followers expressed support for the attack on the group’s Facebook page.

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