

He Compared Gay Marriage to Bestiality. Now He's in Charge of His Country's Schools

By Tim Hume
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Tomasz Rzymkowski, an MP with a long track record of far-right activism, has been promoted to a senior role in the heart of Poland's government.

Poland's conservative ruling party is under fire for promoting an MP with a far-right background as the country's new deputy minister for education.

Tomasz Rzymkowski is known for homophobic statements, his campaigning against what he calls the "powerful Jewish lobby," and for his efforts to repatriate the racist killer of a Black anti-apartheid leader.

Critics say that his record of peddling divisive and harmful rhetoric makes him an "outrageous" choice to be deputy minister at the Ministry for Education and Science, a post he was appointed to last week. Some fear for the future of the country's education system under his influence.

"Rzymkowski represents a very dangerous mix of extreme, almost fascist, right with religious fundamentalism, that concentrates most of his public activity on turning people against Jews, foreigners, LGBT, women and the Left," Paulina Matysiak, an MP for the left-wing Left Together party told VICE World News via email.

She said that Rzymkowski would work under Education Minister Przemysław Czarnek, whose own appointment in October sparked a wave of criticism from academics who accused him of holding homophobic, xenophobic and misogynistic views. Czarnek previously taught Rzymkowski at university, and she said she feared that together they would prove a "lethal mixture" for the country's education system.

"There is a serious threat that they could censor educational materials, repress teachers, and try to form pupils in their image and likeness," she said.

"Fascism, racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia and male chauvinism wouldn't be a problem of a tiny margin, but an element of the official doctrine in Polish schools."

Rzymkowski, a 34-year-old lawyer by training, first entered Poland's lower house of parliament, the Sejm, in 2015, representing the ultranationalist National Movement within a wider right-wing populist coalition, Kukiz'15. Formed following a huge Independence Day March by ultranationalists in 2012, the National Movement is an explicitly xenophobic organisation that has sought to translate the strength of Poland's radical right street-based movements into parliamentary seats.

In 2016, Rzymkowski used his position to unsuccessfully lobby the Polish Ministry of Justice to seek the extradition of Janusz Waluś, a Polish-born far-right convicted murderer who is serving a life sentence in South Africa for killing an anti-apartheid leader. The 1993 assassination of Chris Hani, head of the South African Communist Party and chief of staff of the African National Congress's armed wing, sparked fears it could trigger a race war, but has made Waluś an icon of Poland's far-right and

hooligan scenes, to whom he is seen as a hero in the fight against communism, and a defender of the white race.

The same year, Rzymkowski left the National Movement and bounced around various other far-right projects before joining the ruling Law and Justice party in 2019, being elected on their ticket a few months later.

But critics say that his shift in affiliation from the radical-right margins to Poland's ruling party hasn't been accompanied by any apparent moderation in his political activity, and that they are not aware of any public renunciation of his former extremist affiliations or views.

Rather, Rzymkowski has been a key player in a nationalist campaign in recent years protesting Washington's calls for compensation for Jews whose families lost property during the Holocaust. The Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today Act, signed into law in 2018, requires the U.S. State Department to provide status updates to Congress on the situation regarding the restitution of property stolen during the Holocaust in dozens of countries.

The move sparked a furious reaction by Poland's far-right, whose agitation over the issue has been linked to a surge in anti-Semitic hate speech in Poland. In his campaigning over the issue, Rzymkowski has publicly railed against the "powerful Jewish lobby in the USA" and what he described as "the Holocaust industry," which he painted as threats to Polish people.

Rzymkowski spoke at a Warsaw rally in May 2019 which was described at the time by Rafal Pankowski, head of Polish anti-racism group Never Again, as "probably the biggest openly anti-Jewish street demonstration in Europe in recent years."

Sebastian Rejak, acting director of the Central Europe Office of AJC, a global Jewish advocacy organisation, told VICE World News via email that Rzymkowski's campaigning over the compensation issue had seen the MP use offensive phrases and peddle antisemitic tropes.

Rzymkowski had also made headlines for his homophobic remarks, he said. In June, amid a culture war over LGBTQ rights stoked by the Law and Justice party, Rzymkowski drew outrage for tweeting a cartoon that equated same-sex marriage to a man marrying a goat. He has previously described homosexuality as "harmful, both morally and socially."

"Some of that is simply wrong, some of that is ignorance, while some of his opinions are offensive and unacceptable, specifically if shared by a member of parliament," said Rejak.

"If you are entrusted with making decisions pertaining to the Polish education system, you should be careful in making public statements and your views should not hurt others."

He said that Rzymkowski's appointment was a sign of the creep of far-right viewpoints into Poland's political mainstream.

"I have to say more and more politicians who hold extreme opinions on society, human rights, minorities, are being accepted into what used to be mainstream politics," Rejak said.

"Tolerance for far-right views is becoming ever more visible and is a huge concern."

Pankowski, head of the anti-racism group Never Again, agreed, telling VICE World News that Rzymkowski's appointment vividly illustrated the growing tolerance of far-right ideology in Poland's

political mainstream. But “even under the current low standards,” he said, Rzymkowski’s appointment had raised eyebrows.

Rzymkowski’s office said the deputy minister was too busy to respond to questions from VICE World News personally, but his office director, Marcin Motylewski, made a statement on his behalf.

In an email, he said that the criticism did “not come from individuals or entities whose opinion [Rzymkowski] would particularly care about.”

“The political and media mainstream has long disapproved of criticism of the activities of the LGBT movement and the claims of the Jewish community, and has publicised the opinions of those authors who express disapproval of politicians with strongly right-wing views,” he said.

“Also, the position of the AJC is an easily predictable reaction to the resistance to the interests of Jewish communities.”

Motylewski didn’t respond to a question on whether Rzymkowski renounced his affiliation with far-right groups. The Ministry for Education and Science and the Office of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki did not respond to requests for comment from VICE World News.

Since his promotion, Rzymkowski hasn’t been attempting to soften or hide his politics at all. An interview he gave to Polish Catholic broadcaster Radio Maryja Friday generated its own headlines, after Rzymkowski weighed in on new U.S. President Joe Biden’s appointments to his administration.

He said that while Biden himself was a product of the political establishment, those around him, particularly Vice President Kamala Harris, were “the ideological children of Generation '68 – Marxists who will stop at nothing.”

He also expressed skepticism over Biden’s nomination of Rachel Levine as Assistant Secretary for Health, questioning whether she had been chosen for her health credentials or her gender identity. Levine is transgender.

“Health should not be part of promoting some ideology that is fundamentally a dehumanised ideology,” he said.

For the record, Levine is a paediatrician who has served as Pennsylvania’s Physician General until 2017, then as the state’s Secretary of Health. For critics like Matysiak, the Left Together MP, Rzymkowski’s criticism of Levine is especially rich, given his own lack of credentials in his new ministerial portfolio.

“Rzymkowski has never worked in the field of education,” she said.

— *Additional reporting by Nina Żabicka*

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/xgzmx3/he-compared-gay-marriage-to-bestiality-now-hes-in-charge-of-his-countrys-schools>