

Far-right nationalists congregate on Polish Independence day

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By VANESSA GERA

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WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Tens of thousands of far-right nationalists, burning flares and carrying Polish flags, marched peacefully through the streets of Warsaw on Friday to mark Poland's Independence Day.

In a yearly ritual that has become one of the largest far-right gatherings in Europe, they marched under the slogan "Poland the Bastion of Europe."

The nationalists are strongly opposed to accepting refugees from the Middle East. Some of them carried banners depicting a falanga, which is a far-right symbol dating to the 1930s of a stylized hand with a sword.

The Interior Ministry estimated that 75,000 people joined the march, while Warsaw town hall estimated the number at 60,000. It proceeded peacefully, in contrast to violence of several marches in the past.

One huge banner read "God, Honor, Fatherland," a patriotic slogan. Others read: "Death to the enemies of the fatherland" and "To be a Pole, to be a Catholic is a privilege and honor."

Some participants burned a Ukrainian flag at the march, which comes amid increased strains between Poland and Ukraine because of renewed discussions of a wartime massacre of Poles by Ukrainians.

The main organizers were the National Radical Camp and the All-Polish Youth, groups which take their names from radical nationalistic groups of the 1930s that pushed a virulently anti-Semitic ideology.

"This movement promotes the exclusion of all minorities and of everyone who isn't Polish enough," said Rafal Pankowski, the head of Never Again, an organization that monitors and fights racism and extremism. "This year and last year, the anti-Muslim message has been emphasized and it is an extreme and violent message."

Pankowski said skinheads and other extremists held their first, small march on Independence Day in 2009 and that the yearly event has grown in number each year. It now draws extremists from Hungary, Germany, Sweden and the U.K., becoming what Pankowski believes is the largest such far-right gathering in Europe.

"They hijacked this holiday, which I think is sad," Pankowski said.

Other groups held their own events in an effort to reclaim the day from the right-wing radicals, including one organized by the Committee for the Defense of Democracy, an organization founded last year to fight the centralization of power by Poland's right-wing government, and joined by political opposition leaders.

“The Nov. 11 holiday is our holiday and nobody will take it away from us. We will not allow it,” said Grzegorz Schetyna, leader of the Civic Platform party.

The Interior Ministry said some 10,000 joined that march, though city hall said 27,000.

Separately, hundreds of left-wing activists held what they called an “anti-fascist” march elsewhere in the capital.

Across the country, official parades and other events were also held to mark 98 years since Poland regained its independence at the end of World War I after 123 years of foreign rule.

Early in the day, President Andrzej Duda, Prime Minister Beata Szydlo and other leaders attended the opening ceremony of Warsaw’s Temple of Divine Providence, a church the Polish parliament first planned to build in 1791, but which got delayed because of centuries of occupation, war and communism.

The construction finally began in 2002, after the fall of communism.

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