

The CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

Nationalists, arson, and rioting: Another dark Independence Day in Poland

21 November 2013

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Warsaw

For the third straight year, the Polish holiday was marred by far-right protesters torching cars and fighting cops.



Far-right protesters light flares during their annual march on Poland's national Independence Day, Nov. 11, in Warsaw. Polish riot police used rubber bullets to break up groups of masked far-right youths who threw firecrackers and set fire to parked cars during a march through the center of the capital. (Kacper Pempel / Reuters)

It was another tumultuous [Independence Day](#) in [Poland](#).

For the third consecutive year, Nov. 11 ended in clashes between rioters and police as nationalist hooligans torched cars, threw firecrackers, and set fire to a guard's booth in front of the Russian Embassy – resulting in a diplomatic scandal between [Warsaw](#) and Moscow. And less than a mile down the road from the embassy, far-right protesters torched an 80-foot rainbow art installation made of flowers that many in the city had regarded as a symbol of gay rights and tolerance.

Such events are becoming more common in Poland, where the far right is gaining strength. After a long history of being dominated by neighbors in [Europe](#) – [Russia](#) and Germany in particular – nationalist groups are taking advantage of Poland's

young democracy to flex their muscles and dream of creating a powerful social and political movement.

"Radical movements have been on the rise, due to national identity problems," says Ireneusz Krzeminski, a sociologist at the University of Warsaw. "This is a side effect of the democratic transformation process" – one that's visible in many Central and Eastern European countries. The far right is on the rise in Ukraine, [Hungary](#), Lithuania, and Latvia too.

The National Movement, the biggest far-right organization in Poland, is becoming more and more popular, especially with young people. Now, it has over 46,000 likes on Facebook – more than Civil Platform, Poland's ruling party, which has around 42,000.

And that rising popularity coincides with an increase in hate crimes, Rafal Pankowski of the anti-racist association "Never Again" notes. "We documented over 600 hate crimes in Poland during the years 2011 to [2012](#). It meant that the number of such crimes rose 25 percent in comparison to 2009 to 2010," Mr. Pankowski says.

The march

But the Independence Day showing offered a more immediate sense of Polish nationalism's growing numbers, as tens of thousands of Poles took to the streets in Warsaw.

"Our march was a big success, from the both, organizational and ideological perspectives, according to different statistics around 100,000 people took part in it," says Witold Tumanowicz, president of the society "Independence March," which organized the event. Police estimated a lower turnout, however: about 50,000 in the Independence March alone, and around 66,000 total across the city on Nov. 11.

Nonetheless, it was a large showing – and one that even non-Poles were involved in, according to Krzysztof Bosak, a leader of The National Movement.

"It was an international event. Representatives from national movements from Hungary, Spain, Italy, [France](#), Sweden, and even the [US](#), came to Warsaw," Mr. Bosak says.

Mr. Tumanowicz says his society doesn't condone the attack on the Russian embassy, though he declined to apologize. "It wasn't our fault," he says, noting that Russia "is not a very friendly country to Poland."

Nationalism on the rise

Indeed, right-wing groups and nationalism have risen [all across Europe](#) in recent years. Just days after the riots in Warsaw, for example, France's Marine Le Pen, leader of the right-wing Nationalist Front, visited Dutch nationalist politician Geert Wilders to discuss [launching a "historic" alliance](#) for next year's European elections.

Many sociologists point to Europe's economic crisis, and the woes it has inflicted on the public, as a major factor.

The eurocrisis didn't hit Poland as much as it did the rest of Europe, though some economic analysts warn it's still knocking at Poland's door. "If we let it in, it will add fuel to the far-right's fire," says Professor Krzeminski.

But Edmund Wnuk-Lipinski, a sociologist at Collegium Civitas in Warsaw, thinks that the major reason for the nationalist surge is the political 'civil war' climate in Poland. He notes that the biggest opposition party, Law and Justice, and its leader and former Polish prime minister, [Jaroslaw Kaczynski](#), have echoed far-right rhetoric, including accusations that Poland is not a fully independent country.

"In Mr. Kaczynski's vision, Poland is only free and independent when he is in power, when he's not, the country becomes 'a German-Russian condominium,'" says Professor Lipinski. "These kinds of words, which came from the former prime minister, have in some way legitimized young people's fights and riots."

And Lipinski notes that the fall of communism gave nationalists more room to maneuver. "Polish society is more divided today than it was in 1989. In the '80s, Poles were united because they had a common enemy – the Communists. It's much harder to unite around positive things," he says.

'National identity'

Bosak says the right's rise is indicative of Polish youth looking for a new identity. "It's been more than 20 years after the fall of the USSR. The young generation in Poland doesn't remember communism and is not fascinated with the West and consumptionism. Young people want to discover their national identity and tradition," he says.

The far-right has many complaints about the side effects of democracy.

"We support the idea of mono-ethnic country, with very small numbers of immigrants," says Tumanowicz.

"We are against feminism, abortion, gay marriages, democracy in every institution. Ideologically, we can be compared to the paleoconservatism represented by [US conservative] Patrick J. Buchanan," says Bosak, adding that "We don't want to start a new party, but a social movement."

Krzeminski notes that forming a new party might not be realistic anyway. "The reason for starting a social movement and not a party could be that they would have problems registering, because of the fascist slogans they promote."

Tumanowicz says his group will soon start preparations for next year's march. Banners with slogans like "Independence is not for idiots" or "Disgrace to traitors who are selling Poland now" will be unfurled again.

But Lipinski points out the irony. "If these kinds of slogans were shouted by Russians or Germans, people in Poland would have been outraged," he says. But that hasn't stopped them from calling out their own government. "No one holds Poland in contempt as much as Poles themselves."