



Poland's Far-Right Has a Big Target in Its Sights: Britain

By Tim Hume
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The latest “freedom picnic” held by a Polish far-right party in the UK has fuelled concerns that extremists are trying to court support and stoke tensions.

A group of far-right Polish politicians and activists held an event at a Polish community centre in Bury, England, on Sunday, sparking protests from demonstrators concerned that visiting agitators are stoking extremism.

The so-called “freedom picnic” at the Polish Social Centre in Bury, a town in Greater Manchester, was headlined by Janusz Korwin-Mikke, a veteran far-right leader and current Polish MP, who was joined by three other figures from the far-right Konfederacja (Confederation) party. Korwin-Mikke co-founded Konfederacja ahead of Poland’s most recent parliamentary elections in 2019, in which the party won just under 7 percent of the vote. The radical right-wing party’s politics is best summed up in an infamous slogan from its now-leader Sławomir Mentzen: “We don’t want the Jews, the homosexuals, abortion, taxes and the European Union.”



The event was just the latest in a string of appearances by Polish far-right figures in the UK over the past decade, leading to concerns in both countries that these attempts to court support among the UK’s large Polish community is fuelling intolerance and sowing division. In recent years, Polish far-right groups have become an increasingly active presence on the UK extremist scene, forging links with UK groups like Britain First, while concerns have been raised about an extremist influence in some “Saturday schools” and cultural centres for the UK Polish community.

Korwin-Mikke is a controversial figure who has repeatedly run, unsuccessfully, for president of Poland, and has routinely made headlines over the years for his sexist, racist, anti-Semitic and homophobic comments. These include stating that women do not deserve equal pay with men due to being “smaller, weaker and less intelligent,” inflammatory comments about Muslim immigration into Europe, and railing against so-called LGBTQ “propaganda” in schools.

Pictures on social media showed a group of protesters outside the venue, but the “freedom picnic” was able to continue regardless.

On Sunday, Korwin-Mikke tweeted a picture of the panel of four speakers at the event, saying: “Despite many obstacles, we managed to reach the meeting.” The tweet also showed what appeared to be a watch that he said he had been presented as a gift by the local Polish community, which had an inscription saying it was “a father’s duty” to “fucking kill these people.”

The inscription was a reference to a comment made by Korwin-Mikke in 2014, outlining what he felt was the correct response to people who taught sex education, including about LGBTQ identities, in schools.

The “freedom picnic” was just the latest UK event held by Polish far-right activists, in what observers say has been a sustained campaign in recent years to court support from the UK’s million-strong Polish community. Last year, Korwin-Mikke and other Konfederacja figures held an identical “freedom picnic” event at the same venue, while Korwin-Mikke has made previous visits over the years. Before a packed audience in London in 2015, he railed against Muslim immigration and the European Union, and claimed: “If I were Jewish, I would have made a much better career in government circles.”

It’s a trend that has worried anti-extremism groups in both countries. They have repeatedly called for the UK government to prevent far-right speakers from entering the country, as they’ve occasionally done in the past. In February 2017, Jacek Miedlar, a Polish Catholic priest who is known as a hate preacher, was detained at Stansted airport and prevented from entering the UK, hours before he was due to speak at an event organised by the far-right group Britain First.

Faith Matters, a UK-based interfaith organisation, has repeatedly raised concerns about activity by Polish far-right groups in the UK, calling last year for the Home Office to prevent Korwin-Mikke from entering the UK to attend the event in Bury.

“Community spaces for Poles in Bury or elsewhere should not accept bookings nor host speakers whose far-right views are at odds with a clear majority of Polish communities,” the group said in a statement to VICE News. “Cultural and community hubs should not legitimise such movements, no matter how small or large the turnout for such events proves.”

VICE News contacted the Home Office before and after Sunday’s event to ask if it had any concerns about the visit by the Konfederacja delegation, or planned to take any action to prevent the speakers entering the UK. It declined to comment, saying it did not routinely comment on individual cases.

Rafal Pankowski, the head of Never Again, a Polish anti-racism organisation, said that the far-right overtures to the UK’s Polish community were intended to drum up political support, as Polish nationals overseas were eligible to vote in Polish elections, and potentially had a fundraising element as well. Poland is due to hold parliamentary elections later this year.

Pankowski said while Konfederacja’s politics was rejected by the majority of the UK Polish community, as it was in Poland, there were signs that it was finding a receptive audience among a minority. Polish far-right groups are winning greater support from UK-based voters than from the general electorate in recent elections, and he points to signs of growing ties between British far-right groups and Polish ultranationalists in recent years.

“If these types of people are getting any influence on Polish people in the UK, it’s alarming,” he said.

Konfederacja did not respond to VICE News requests for comment, while calls to the Polish Social Centre in Bury went unanswered.

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