

One of Europe's Most Notorious Far-Right 'Hate Fests' Gets Official Backing

By Tim Hume
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Poland's government has given its blessing to an Independence Day march organised by far-right groups, despite it being banned by the courts.

Polish anti-racist groups have slammed the country's conservative government for officially sanctioning a major Independence Day march organised by far-right groups, allowing the routinely violent annual event to proceed on Thursday despite a court ban.

Over the past decade, a massive Independence Day march organised by far-right ultranationalist groups has brought central Warsaw to a standstill every 11th of November, drawing hooligan and neofascist groups alongside ordinary patriotic Poles. The event, described by Polish anti-racist activist Rafal Pankowski as an "annual hate-fest," features prevalent racist and homophobic slogans, and regularly results in violent clashes with police.

"It's hard to escape the antisemitic, white nationalist, and anti-LGBTQ hate spewed among the red clouds of smoke billowing from rockets and flares shot off by marchers," Wendy Via, co-founder of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism, said in a statement.

This year, Warsaw Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski – a leading opposition figure who narrowly lost to pro-government President Andrzej Duda in last year's presidential election – banned the march due to concerns over violence, in a ruling which was upheld by the courts. Instead, a rival demonstration organised by women activists, intended to signal support for democratic values and opposition to right-wing extremism, was permitted to be held along the proposed Independence Day march route on the same date.

But the far-right organisers of the Independence Day March insisted that their event would take place regardless. And on Tuesday, the conservative Polish government announced that the march would be granted official status, effectively overriding the ban on the event.

Pankowski, the head of Poland's anti-racist Never Again Association, said that the government's "extraordinary" decision – which would mean the Independence Day march will proceed with security provided by the police and army geendarmerie – represented an endorsement of the event by the state.

"It really demonstrates the plight of democratic values in Poland – in this case the government is protecting the rights of extremists," he told VICE World News.

“It goes to the heart of Polish identity. They’re saying this represents the official position of the Polish state, which is extraordinary.”

On Wednesday, the activist group “14 Women from the Bridge” – which had been planning to hold its rival demonstration along the Independence Day march route on Thursday – said it had no choice but to cancel its event, amid the likelihood of violence from ultranationalist marchers.

It said the government’s decision to grant the nationalist march official status represented “a spectacular confirmation of the cooperation” between the country’s ruling Law and Justice party and the far-right.

“The alliance between the ruling party and the neo-fascists is a fact,” the group said in a statement.

Pankowski said that despite calls from the government for marchers to behave in a dignified manner, there was a high likelihood of violence on Thursday.

Far-right groups from other countries, including a Polish nationalist group in the UK, were talking online about attending the event, and on Wednesday, the organisers of the march tweeted abuse to a journalist who had criticised them, writing that in war times, he would have had his head shaved, referring to a punishment meted out to traitors.

He said that the march would be taking out amid a volatile political climate, with tensions high around issues like reproductive rights and immigration, both hot-button issues for the far-right.

He knew of a number of Warsaw residents who were planning to leave the city on Thursday to avoid any potential trouble.

“The event remains what it has been for all these years. The organisers are right-wing extremists, and there’s been violence every year for the past decade,” said Pankowski.

“The whole atmosphere is very tense. I think the potential for violence is very high.”

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