



## Fears as far right gains fresh foothold in Poland

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**Two decades after the fall of communism in Poland, extreme-right organizations have gained support, and violent attacks on minorities are not uncommon. Critics claim more needs to be done to tackle the threat.**

In the past three decades in Poland, there have been more than 50 murders committed against victims whose ethnicity, religion or sexuality made them different.

Particularly brutal however, was one incident in August 1999 when three Warsaw skinheads trampled to death a 25-year-old student, Piotr Wozniak, on a Baltic Sea beach.

The reason for the attack was the victim's appearance. Wozniak had dyed blond hair. This was not deemed manly enough by the attackers, who also disliked his alternative clothes.

This and other far-right motivated crimes carried out between 1987 and 2009 have been documented in the "Brown Book," by the "Never Again" organization, which campaigns against intolerance and xenophobia.

"We are continuing to collect information about crimes like this," says Never Again chairman Marcin Kornak. "Someone has to do it."

Existing institutions - the ones that should be doing something about the problem - are not doing as much as they should, according to Kornak.



Links with German neo-Nazis are less important than with groups from elsewhere

"Racist violence is a real phenomenon in Poland," claims sociologist Rafal Pankowski, who has examined the topic extensively in his book "The Populist Radical Right in Poland: The Patriots."

However, the victims are not only targeted for their ethnicity, religion or sexuality. Some have been targeted for political beliefs such as feminism, or even because they are homeless, says Pankowski.

**'Poland for the Polish'**

In Poland there is no precise definition for the notion of a far right, some experts complain. Often, it is fairly difficult to distinguish between parties on the right of social and political discourse in the country, and those on the extreme right, says Pankowski. The sociologist points to the participation of lawmakers from the Law and Justice Party of the opposition leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski in the latest "March of Independence" as indicative.

For years, the march has taken place on November 11, the Day of Polish Independence, organized by the National Radical Camp (ONR), a far-right party, and the All Polish Youth nationalist movement.

The pursuit of a "mono-ethnic society" is what unites the various right-wing extremist groups in Poland, Pankowski explains. Such ideas are propagated by members of groups like ONR, the All-Polish Youth, and the National Rebirth of Poland (NOP) - all of which have their foundations in the national radicalism movement of Poland in the 1920s and 1930s.

### **Members from many backgrounds**

The activists who are members of these groups are mainly young people. But they are not just the kind of young people who lack any perspective for the future - many are from wealthy backgrounds. "The members include the unemployed as well as students. One also finds there are militant football fans, and skinheads," adds Pankowski.



Kornak's Brown Book documents far-right attacks down through the years

There are no exact figures on how many members these groups have, although information is available on the internet as to their popularity. On Facebook for example, the NOP has several thousand sympathizers.

"The extreme right has clearly gained importance in recent years," says Pankowski. Alongside movements such as the NOP and ONR, with their pre-war history, there are an increasing number of groups with ideologies directly related to that of Nazism. These are mostly the Polish offshoots of foreign far-right groups such as the British "Combat 18" or "Blood and Honor."

Connections to German neo-Nazi organizations are not so strong, says Pankowski, with links to Italian and British groups seemingly more important. The Polish manifestations of Combat 18 or Blood and Honor are mostly active only in an underground capacity, says Kornak. "The biggest danger comes from parties such as the ONR," he explains, where the party is officially licensed and has an open membership.

### **Forbidden, but not pursued**

In recent years, a so-called "death list" was published on the internet site of one neo-Nazi group, with photos and addresses of alleged "enemies of the white race."

Included on the list were left-wing, anti-fascist and feminist activists. In spite of this very public incitement to violence, only a few people were ever sentenced to prison. The website was blocked, at least temporarily.



Kornak believes not enough is being done to take on the far-right

"This incident shows just how much the Polish judicial system is stalling. Neo-fascist groupings are difficult to control," says Pankowski. In fact, though, the activities of nationalist and fascist groups are prohibited by the constitution. The problem is putting the law into practice, claims the sociologist. The law has only ever been used on one occasion, when an ONR center was closed in 2009 for the distribution of fascist material.

### **A concern for the state**

Extreme right parties such as the ONR or the NOP are not mass organizations with widespread public support, explains Pankowski. "In spite of this, they should not be underestimated, because in recent years they have developed in a very dynamic way," said.

Apart from this, there is increasing aggression and violence at events such as football matches or at rock concerts.

However, some feel the far right is no real threat to the political order as a whole. Among them is Jan Zaryn, a historian from the Institute of National Remembrance. "There are no parties in Poland that would include terrorism as a form of struggle," said Zaryn.

In addition, he points out, no radical right-wing party has, so far, gained a seat in parliament.

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