

Queerhood VS Nationhood: the exclusion of LGBTQI+ community from Poland's national identity

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Every 11th of November, thousands of Poles march through the streets of Warsaw in celebration of Polish Independence Day. The march has a long-standing reputation for attracting Neo-Fascist and Far Right groups from all over Europe. This year, in addition to the usual chants of 'God, Honour, Fatherland', the marchers united under an overarching theme of 'our civilisation, our rules'. This very powerful rallying cry conveys a clear message. We, the Polish patriots, will defend our traditional values from any form of 'Otherness' threatening the Pole-Catholic identity that unites us.



Picture 1. 'Our civilisation, our rules' poster promoting the Independence March that took place on 11 November, 2020 in Poland.

In contemporary Poland, religion, historical narratives and conservative tradition came to solidify an exclusionary, gendered identity of 'Polish-ness' which legitimates and reproduces violences against the LGBTQI+ community, denying their right to nationhood. The violent symbolism of the poster above best portrays the discursive spaces in which the identity of a threatening, Queer 'Other' becomes constituted and fixed oppositionally to 'our values'.

Centrally positioned on the poster, and indeed central to the public debate, is the symbol of a rainbow, representing the LGBTQI+ community. What for the marginalised groups symbolises pride and liberation, under the discourse of Catholic conservatism comes to represent a deviation from moral standards and an existential threat to traditional family values. Traditional sexual and gender identities function as determinants of sovereignty, national culture and a source of national pride, thereby effectively delegitimising the Other's claims to full citizenship. To grant the 'Other' equal rights would be to extend normalcy to what is abnormal, and to choose complicity in a sexually perverse, foreign liberal project over one's own moral purity. The reactionary belief in patriarchal norms works as a basis for all anti-gender discourses; opposing abortion, radical feminism and Queer liberation. Nationalist claims to universality of conservative morals, and the dismissal of Queer identity as unnatural, automatically excludes it from the conception of a Pole-Catholic identity.

Ziemkiewicz, a leading Polish right-wing columnist, paints the destruction of conservative moral values and standards as a product of a radical LGBT ideology. Conceptualising 'Queer-ness' as a distinct ideology opens a possibility for an intriguing 'persuasive interference' by which parallels are drawn between two philosophies, while at the same time concealing some major irregularities between them. As highlighted by the use of a rainbow-red star in the poster, the right tends to draw comparisons between Communism and the fight for LGBTQI+ rights in Poland. Ironically, homosexuals were also heavily targeted by the Communist regime, as exemplified by the infamous operation 'Hyacinth' during which thousands of LGBT individuals had to fill in so-called 'homosexual identity cards'. Despite this paradox, the Catholic Church, which played a crucial role in dismantling Communism, still perceives the LGBTQI+ as Marxism in disguise, due to its strong secular undertones. In President Duda's own words: 'They [his parents] did not fight so that we would now accept that another ideology, even more destructive to man, would come along'. As the memories of Communist regime linger ever-fresh, public fears are systematically shifted away from authoritarian, economic leftism towards its cultural, liberal form.

Such a shift in discourse does not happen organically, it is actively produced by those who hold enough power to disseminate anti-LGBT sentiments. The poster analysed here works as a symbolic testament to the role that Kaczyński's Law and Justice Party (PiS) plays in delineating an exclusionary Pole-Catholic identity. Namely, the propaganda piece was designed by Wojciech Korcuć, ironically referred to as 'PiS's court artist', for he also designed President Duda's campaign posters. Hence, the conceptualisation of an exclusionary nationhood takes place both on the level of macro- and micro-politics, through divisive rhetoric of the ruling Law and Justice Party, enhanced by preachings of the Catholic Church and hateful acts of radical nationalist movements, like the All-Polish Youth. The populist-prone nature of PiS led to their political socialisation within extreme-right movements. By entering into coalitions with fiercely nationalist parties, PiS gave its full consent to the consolidation of anti-gender discourses within the public realm, leading to a complete exclusion of LGBTQI+ community from Polish national identity.

This consolidation of violent anti-gender discourses comes in various shapes and forms but perhaps one particularly striking in regards to the above poster is the nationalist appeal to a shared community of memory and historical pride. The red-rainbow star is being destroyed by none other than a hussar warrior; the ultimate symbol of Polish military might and masculine power. Just like the hussars bravely defended Europe from Islam during the Battle of Vienna, Poland can now, in the words of one conservative MP, 'lead a positive counter-revolution in our part of Europe, and then in the whole

Western world'. Through politics of history, the past is constantly recontextualised in order to awaken nationalist sentiments and play into discourses that legitimise violence against the 'Other'.

It is in fact not all that difficult to discern an analogy between the anti-LGBTQI+ nationalist rhetoric of today and the Polish antisemitism of the interwar period. Today anti-Jewish discourses retain their relevance but do not resonate that strongly with the Polish society since very few Jewish communities survived in Poland post-1945. While anti-semitism and homophobia run somewhat parallel in political discourses of the Polish Right, it would appear that the LGBTQI+ community has come to replace Jews as the primeval, threatening 'Other'. According to Pankowski, this replacement is largely attributable to the fact that in an ethnically homogenous society historically fuelled prejudice frames a wider hostility to diversity and liberal democracy. As Ostolski explains, the Jewish 'Other' was necessarily foreign, disloyal, treacherous and deceitful, representing a moral and cultural threat from within. The Queer 'Other' retains a similar function – posing an existential threat to the Polish identity and family only in a now more relevant context of post-modern identity politics and cultural wars.

A contention that the anti-LGBTQI+ discourse and meanings it confers upon the figure of a homosexual 'Other' remain static or embedded solely in historical narratives, however, would constitute a rather perfunctory portrayal of the phenomenon. No other point illustrates its 'modern' dimensions better than the poster and centrality of the star conjuring up a reference, other than to Communism, to the EU flag. As Kulpa observes, bio-discourse on sovereignty in the EU context dates back to the accession period when prospects of joining the Union incited a paranoiac fear of loss of cultural sovereignty. Homophobia of that period was hence political and reactionary, and focused on retaining cultural separateness. Queer-ness became inextricably linked to Europe, inscribed into an oppositional relation of Europeanised sexual openness and Polish sexual repressiveness – to be sustained or eradicated, but a national feature nonetheless. Graff makes an interesting point noting the role mainstream media played in discursively constituting and fixing that relation. Unwilling to address matters of greater concern to many Poles prior to accession in fear of exacerbating nationalist grievances which could greatly impede the process, the media steered public discourse towards 'European moral and sexual decay'. By presenting Europe as perverse and effeminate the narrative was laying the grounds for optimism – tradition and a healthy family model would allow Poland to withstand these pressures and not succumb to immoral practices of Europe.

When one scrutinises the aforementioned anti-Queer narratives, one discerns a logic of societal self-purification operating as an overarching discursive rationale for violence. Society has to be protected against the deviant 'Other' who invades with the excess of perversion, dislocating fixed gender and sexual identities. Homosexual 'Other' blurs the distinction between male-ness and female-ness effeminating men who will no longer exercise their duty of defending the nation and corrupting women – who will no longer bear children. Hence, the impure 'Other' inspires a moral decay and instills a fear of extinction by destabilizing reproductive cycles which guarantee nation's meta-temporal existence. Some of the arguments of the nationalist right posit that homosexuality is a result of improper upbringing, weak character and bad habits. Perception of homosexuality as 'acquired' and hence curable constructs Queer-ness as an even more dangerous form of a spreadable disease which threatens a healthy, national organism. The second threat from within is the ideological one – as the Polish President ascertained: 'We are being told that the LGBT are humans. And they are simply an ideology'. Ascribing an ideological character to the 'Other' requires 'de-ideologisation' of the society. The 'Other' is now fully dehumanised – not only threatening and morally corrupt but also ideologically hegemonic and totalitarian, and, having been deprived of agency, has to be opposed as a phenomenon.

All of the exclusionary discourses we analysed continuously reinvent and reinforce one another legitimising verbal, physical and structural violence against members of the LGBTQI+ community and cementing their 'outsideness' to the nationhood.

<https://identityhunters.org/2020/12/19/queerhood-vs-nationhood-the-exclusion-of-lgbtqi-community-from-polands-national-identity>

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