

# LGBT Poles are the latest victims of nation's 'identity crisis'

by Ylenia Gostoli  
12 May 2019

As activist arrested for posters of Virgin Mary with a rainbow halo, experts fear 'crisis of democratic values'.

Warsaw, Poland - Last month, in the central Polish city of Plock, artist and activist Elzbieta Podlesna put up posters of the Virgin Mary against a rainbow-coloured halo, symbolising the LGBT flag.



Featuring the Black Madonna - a venerated painting housed at the Jasna Gora monastery in Czestochowa - Poland's interior minister Joachim Brudzinski called the images "cultural barbarism".

Last week, police held and questioned Podlesna over the stunt.

"Elzbieta now faces up to two years in prison if found guilty under these absurd charges," said Amnesty International. "She is being put through several legal proceedings and this is just another example of the constant harassment she faces simply for carrying out her peaceful activism."

The LGBT community has featured strongly in Poland's political debate ahead of the European Parliament elections, expected to take place between May 23 and 26, and with parliamentary elections scheduled for later this year.

The ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, led by Jaroslaw Kaczynski, has campaigned on the protection of the "Polish family" and national values against its "pro-European" opponents, the centrist European Coalition. Polls put the two parties neck and neck.

"We are dealing with a direct attack on the family and children - the sexualisation of children, that entire LGBT movement, gender," Kaczynski told supporters in April. "This is imported, but they today actually threaten our identity, our nation, its continuation and therefore the Polish state."

## Rising attacks

In 2017, Podlesna, 52, was one of 14 women attacked by far-right protesters during an Independence Day March in Warsaw, amid chants such as "Europe will be white or deserted."

According to the Campaign Against Homophobia, 12 percent of people who do not identify as heterosexual are victims of physical violence in Poland, while around half say they have been subjected to mental abuse. Ninety percent of incidents go unreported, according to the survey.

The government downplays hate crime and in 2016, an anti-discrimination council was abolished. The body, part of the interior ministry, had been responsible for monitoring hate crime among other tasks.

The LGBT community is excluded from hate crime legislation and police treat crimes motivated by the victim's sexual orientation as ordinary crimes.

The LGBT flag, meanwhile, has become the symbol of the struggle for liberal democracy in Poland.

"The rainbow is not offensive, hatred is offensive," a protester shouted at a solidarity demonstration in central Warsaw, after Podlesna's arrest.

About 300 people gathered around a giant rainbow flag, many holding copies of the incriminated picture.

"A very important social activist in Poland was arrested for an absurd thing," Piotr Laskowski, a professor at the University of Warsaw, told Al Jazeera, "which was of course a [protest] against the institutional homophobia of the Polish Catholic church, or the Catholic church as a whole.

"This kind of political and police repression is of course intolerable and has to be opposed. What they want to do is to intimidate people."

Sociologist Rafal Pankowski said Podlesna's arrest illustrates a broader trend.

"Political campaigns became focused on the construction of the enemy image. The groups that are targeted may change, but the mechanism is quite similar, and not very subtle," Pankowski, who runs an anti-racist organisation, Never Again, told Al Jazeera.

"In 2015 it was the refugees, despite the fact that the so-called refugee crisis did not affect Poland in any meaningful way," Pankowski said.

PiS won Poland's last general election with a landslide in 2015, at the height of the refugee crisis.

"It was framed in a very negative way as a threat to Polish identity. What we had during that campaign was different far-right groups competing with each other about who would be more anti-Muslim or anti-refugee," Pankowski said.

He fears Poland is going through an identity crisis that could reverberate through the rest of Europe, combined with the strong influence of the Polish Catholic church in political life.

"We are witnessing a very real crisis of democratic values that can have repercussions in the long-term," he said.

### **'There is a price for coming out'**

PiS leader Kaczynski is Eurosceptic, but his message is hard to sell - most Poles believe being part of the European Union has been good for the country.

To that end, alongside other European right-wing and far-right populist movements, even against the backdrop of Brexit, he has adapted his message to focus on protecting national sovereignty and identity, rather than advocating for leaving the EU.

According to LGBT activist Hubert Sobecki, co-president of Love Does Not Exclude, which campaigns for equal marriage rights, rising discrimination has altered how the community organises.

"The Pride season has started," he said. "There used to be a couple of Pride marches in Poland. Very small, always surrounded by police.

"Right now this is changing. People from small towns are self-organising, and that is a completely new thing.

"This is a country dominated by political inertia and by the church," Sobecki, continued. "There is very little room for [action] for us. But there is very positive social change going on."

One example of that change is Robert Biedron, Poland's first openly gay MP.

Biedron founded a new party, Wiosna ("spring"), in February which has attracted young, liberal left-leaning voters. It currently polls around 10 percent.

In another positive development in the same month, Warsaw's mayor Rafal Trzaskowski signed an anti-discrimination declaration pledging support for the city's LGBT community. The move led to a debate around the issue of sexual education in schools, one of the points in the declaration.

"Spin doctors took care of it and it was presented as deviants wanting to teach masturbation at school," Sobecki said.

However, he believes that this exposure had a positive impact on the LGBT community; it mobilised the mainstream opposition in support of LGBT rights, where in the past they had preferred skirting around the issue to avoid upsetting more conservative voters.

"It became impossible for them to again try to [avoid] the topic," Sobecki said, adding that his organisation, which is funded by the EU as well as private and corporate donors, helped write three drafts of a bill on same-sex partnerships.

According to a 2017 survey by CBOS, more than 50 percent of Poles think homosexuality is not normal but can be tolerated, while 25 percent believe it should not be tolerated at all.

Even so, an increasing number of people have been coming out in Poland in recent years, in some cases helping shift attitudes at the personal level.

"But of course there is a price for coming out," Sobecki said, "and one of the costs of this gesture is to become exposed to hate."

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/lgbt-roles-latest-victims-nation-identity-crisis-190511212951252.html>