

## 'More girls, fewer skinheads': Poland's far right wrestles with changing image

March for Independence may signal not a surge in support for far right but the seeping of its ideas into the mainstream

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The presence of Islamophobic, homophobic, antisemitic and white supremacist chants and banners at last weekend's March of Independence in Warsaw raised fears about the rise of the far right in Poland.

But interviews with nationalist and far-right leaders and their opponents reveal a more nuanced picture of a relatively marginal movement wrestling with its public image while hoping to seize the opportunities afforded to it by the success of the ruling rightwing Law and Justice party (PiS) and popular opposition to immigration from Muslim-majority countries.

Far-right insiders described a movement that has changed substantially in recent years – “more girls, fewer skinheads,” said one – with a marked increase in middle-aged and highly educated recruits. “A decade ago if you saw us in a bar you would know we were from the far right, but if you saw us now you would have no idea,” said one insider.

One factor in this change, they noted, was the influence on Polish society of young people returning from working in countries such as Britain. “So many young people travelled to work in western countries, and then came back and told their friends and families what was going on in western Europe,” said Krzysztof Bosak, of the ultra-nationalist organisation National Movement.

“They told them about the process of exchange of population, by which people of European origin are replaced by people from Africa and Asia, and about Islamisation.”

Aleks Szczerbiak, a professor of politics at the University of Sussex, said: “It was long assumed that young Poles would come to the west and become more secular, multicultural and liberal, and that they would re-export those things back to Poland. But instead their experience of the west seems to have reinforced their social conservatism and traditionalism in many ways.”

The march's organisers included the National-Radical Camp (ONR), the successor to a pre-war Polish fascist movement; All-Polish Youth, a far-right youth organisation that has run social media campaigns condemned as racist; and the National Movement.

Despite their involvement, and the participation in the march of even more hardline white supremacist groups such as the National-Socialist Congress and the so-called Szturmowcy (Stormtroopers), the march also attracted thousands of people with little to no affiliation to nationalist or far-right groups.

To the march's defenders, including the Polish National Foundation, a body with strong ties to Law and Justice that was set up by the government last year to “promote Poland abroad”, the international media's focus on racist slogans and banners amounted to “slandering the good name of Poland and an insult to the Polish people”.

“Waving the white-red national flags, the supporters of Poland’s independence, veterans, Warsaw’s inhabitants and visiting guests all marched together. As in the past, a large percentage of the 60,000-strong crowd were families with children,” read a statement from the foundation, which described some of the media coverage as a “defamation”.

Critics argued that the presence of people with a range of political views at last weekend’s march was precisely the problem, because it amounted to a tacit acceptance of far-right extremism. “They may not all identify as nationalists, but they are being united by the language of nationalism” said Rafał Pankowski, a professor at Collegium Civitas in Warsaw and director of the Never Again association, an anti-racism campaign group.

“The fact there were families with children there doesn’t mean the march was OK, it means there is something wrong when people think there’s no problem with bringing their children to a far-right rally.”

Speaking to the Guardian, nationalist and far-right leaders distanced themselves from charges of racism, insisting their movements were dedicated to the preservation of Polish-Catholic culture and moral values, and not white supremacy.

“Faith is very important to us, the Catholic religion is part of Polish national identity,” said Bosak, who served as an MP between 2005 and 2007. “We want Catholic morality and the social teachings of the church to be the base for the state policy, for the law, for a new constitution.”

Tomasz Kalinowski, a spokesman for the ONR, said: “We have much more in common with Cardinal Robert Sarah, an African conservative traditionalist Catholic from Guinea, than we do with a pro-EU, liberal, secular politician like Emmanuel Macron or a Polish Bolshevik like Feliks Dzierzhinsky.”

Observers argue it is hostility towards perceived western models of multiculturalism that binds the far right to the anti-immigrant populism represented by the ruling Law and Justice party – an alliance consummated each year by the March for Independence.

“The problem is not that there is a huge amount of support for far-right movements, the problem is that there is a lack of distinction between the conservative right and the far right, and that is very dangerous in a democratic society,” said Pankowski.

Seen this way, the March for Independence signals not a surge in support for far-right movements but the seeping of far-right ideas into Polish mainstream discourse. The far right is not leading from the front but being left behind.

“The far right is not able to build a party, an institution, that can get even 2% of public support, said Sławomir Sierakowski, of Krytyka Polityczna, a left-leaning thinktank. “The march is a sign of frustration, an alibi for their weakness, their opportunity to get some attention once a year. Without the media, they would be nothing.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/18/more-girls-fewer-skinheads-polands-far-right-wrestles-with-changing-image>