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Immigrants pay for Poland's fiery rhetoric

Politicians accused as Islamophobia sparks rise in hate crimes

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by: Zosia Wasik and Henry Foy in Warsaw

A Syrian man is beaten on the streets of Warsaw. A black child is expelled from a playground in a town in south-east Poland. Volunteers form patrol groups to guard against possible illegal immigrants in the central city of Lodz.

Poland's Never Again Association, which tracks racist and xenophobic incidents in the country, used to record between five and 10 such events each week. For the past year, they say they have been reaching that level daily.

"Recently we have had problems keeping up with gathering and registering all the information that we get because there is so much of it," said Rafal Pankowski, its co-founder.

While official statistics from 2016 are not yet available, Mr Pankowski says he has seen a substantial increase from last year when, according to government data, 962 hate crimes were investigated in Poland, 38 per cent more than in 2014.

Poland's battle with a rise in hate crimes comes as Polish immigrants face increased attacks in the UK since its vote to leave the EU.

Rights groups say the rise in attacks in the country reflects an increase in Islamophobia that shows no sign of abating. Muslims were the group most targeted by hate speech in Poland in 2015, replacing LGBT and Roma communities as the country's most affected minority.

"This aggression mainly affects people with different looks, those who have different skin colour," said Tomasz Miśkiewicz of Poland's Muslim Religious Association. Mr Miśkiewicz believes that Europe's "migration problem" has inflamed attitudes and called for Polish children to be better educated about cultural differences.

Poland's 20,000 Muslims account for about 0.05 per cent of a population that is overwhelmingly Catholic and the EU's most homogenous.

While neighbouring Germany has seen a big influx of Muslim refugees, Poland accepted only 206 from Syria last year, and has rejected an EU plan to play a role in resettling migrants across the bloc.

Nevertheless, Polish political rhetoric increasingly depicts a society threatened, a theme common to other countries in central and eastern Europe. Nationalist and populist politicians have told citizens that their safety, security and identity are endangered by immigrants.

Jaroslav Kaczynski, leader of the ruling conservative Law and Justice party and the country's most powerful politician warned before last year's elections that immigrants could bring "parasites . . . and diseases" to Poland.

That has led some human rights groups to suggest political rhetoric is partly to blame for the increased violence.

"Everything started with the electoral campaign," said Adam Bodnar, Poland's commissioner for human rights, an office independent from the government, referring to last year's parliamentary elections. "At that time those were not only [political] statements but also demonstrations, hate speech, increase of hate in the internet . . . It became simply enormous."

Andrzej Duda, the Polish president, in July used the commemoration of the Kielce Pogrom, an outbreak of violence against Poland's Jewish community in 1946, to say that in Poland "there is no place for any kind of prejudice, no place for racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism".

At the same time, Mr Kaczynski warned that accepting Muslim refugees would "threaten Poland's security", while Zbigniew Ziobro, the country's justice minister, has said the ruling party is the only defence against "Islamic districts in Poland."

The government has closed down the country's Council Against Racial Discrimination, xenophobia and Intolerance, withdrawn a textbook issued to police for the past decade to differentiate between normal crimes and hate crimes, and passed anti-terror legislation that allows it to spy on foreign nationals and detain them without court approval - all in the past six months.

The moves have drawn attention from abroad. Before Pope Francis's visit to the country in July, a Vatican statement criticised "an artificially created fear of Muslims" in Poland. "Unfortunately these fears are fuelled by some political parties, and inappropriate statements made by politicians," said Pawel Rytel-Andrianik, a spokesman for Polish bishops.

Mr Pankowski agrees. "A correlation is very clear . . . between what we can call hate speech of the political class and those assaults," he said. "It creates certain social climate, certain ambience, and certain legitimisation of xenophobic behaviour."

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