

POLAND'S INDEPENDENCE MARCH A 'LITMUS TEST' OF FAR-RIGHT SUPPORT

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Every November 11, tens of thousands of Poles march in Warsaw to celebrate Independence Day — but the event is increasingly a show of far-right extremism, a prominent anti-fascist campaigner says.

For Rafal Pankowski, head of the Never Again anti-fascist association in Poland, the huge nationalist march that takes place in Warsaw on Polish Independence Day every November 11 is a litmus test of the strength of the far right.

“It was one of the worst days of my life,” said Pankowski of last year’s march, which was attended by Poland’s president and drew a crowd of 250,000 people, according to police estimates.

This year’s event on Monday follows a general election in October that handed the nationalist Law and Justice party (PiS) a second term in power. Meanwhile, 11 candidates from a far-right alliance won seats in parliament. Rights groups say the political climate has never been more friendly to far-right extremism.

On November 9, the anniversary of the 1938 anti-Jewish pogrom in Nazi Germany dubbed “Kristallnacht”, Never Again published its annual compilation (in Polish) of hate crimes committed in Poland.

Pankowski said hate crimes jumped in 2015 — the year PiS first came to power — and show no sign of falling.

The Independence March has been getting bigger every year since 2010. It was initiated by two far-right groups, All Polish Youth and the National Radical Camp, both descendants of ultranationalist organisations active in the 1930s.

Billed as a gathering of Polish patriots celebrating the reemergence of Poland in 1918 after more than a century of partition, the march has increasingly attracted people carrying racist banners and symbols. It has also featured speakers who self-identify as fascists — such as Roberto Fiore, leader of Italy’s Forza Nuova party, in 2017.

In past marches, the city’s main arteries have filled with ever louder crowds — mostly men — dressed in dark clothes and carrying red-white flags and burning flares.

This year, the logo of the march is a raised fist clenching a rosary, which some commentators have said resembles a white pride symbol. A video clip promoting the march featured soldiers dressing up for combat, waving swords and gripping guns.

Many, including Pankowski, were shocked last year when Polish President Andrzej Duda invited people to attend. After some toing and froing, he eventually took part himself, giving the opening speech and marching alongside members of the government.

“It’s really painful to remember,” Pankowski told BIRN in an interview on the sidelines of an art exhibition on war and fascism in the 20th and 21st Centuries, hosted by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.

“The president and the other members of the political elite legitimised the far right as the host of Poland’s national day celebrations. By now, the radical nationalists have completely taken over Independence Day and they dominate the patriotic discourse.”



Rafal Pankowski, head of the Never Again anti-fascist and anti-racism association. Photo: Jaap Arriens

‘To the right, only the wall’

Analysts say initial hesitancy over Duda’s participation last year was telling of PiS’s ambivalent relationship with the far right. To keep votes that might otherwise trickle to far-right parties, PiS politicians have taken up elements of the extremists’ rhetoric.

“To the right of us, only the wall,” PiS leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski famously said when describing the party’s goal of rallying all conservative voters in Poland.

In its 2015 general election campaign, PiS ran on a staunch anti-migrant platform. Before this year’s general election in October, the party ramped up anti-LGBT rhetoric.

Critics say such hate-mongering helped increase the legitimacy of far-right groups as mainstream politicians and media started echoing extremist sentiment across the country.

In this climate, a newly formed far-right alliance called Confederation (Konfederacja) won seven per cent of votes and 11 seats in parliament in the October 13 poll.

Confederation is made up of two main factions: radical nationalists around the National Movement (Ruch Narodowy, which brings together All Polish Youth and former members of The National Radical Camp) and right-wing libertarians mostly from the party of former MEP Janusz Korwin-Mikke.

This is a watershed moment for Poland. This is the first time an extreme-right political force has got into parliament as a result of getting votes for precisely this kind of extremist agenda.

Robert Winnicki and Krzysztof Bosak, both from the National Movement and former organisers of the Independence March, now have seats in parliament.

“This is a watershed moment for Poland,” Pankowski said. “This is the first time an extreme-right political force has got into parliament as a result of getting votes for precisely this kind of extremist agenda.”

Pankowski noted that prominent individuals from far-right movements have won seats in the past but usually as representatives of political forces with more ambiguous platforms, such as the maverick Kukiz '15 party.

“This November 11 march will be a celebration of getting into parliament,” he said.



Pankowski art attends an exhibition on war and fascism in the 20th and 21st Centuries, hosted by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Photo: Jaap Arriens

‘Powerful political force’

During a debate of Confederation lawmakers broadcast on November 9 by wRealu24, a YouTube channel popular in nationalist circles, the mood was indeed celebratory.

Winnicki, newly elected to parliament on the Confederation list, noted during the debate that the far-right alliance got the most votes in any election since 1989 — around 1.25 million.

The five new lawmakers on the panel — all male, all in their 30s — adopted a hawkish tone. They spoke about using the financial allocation received by each party entering parliament to build up local organisations and win even more seats four years from now.

The main goals of this group of 11 lawmakers, said Winnicki, was “to defend the norms of Latin civilisation”, “to free the energy of Polish people”, to deal with the country’s demographic and immigration crises and combat the “rainbow ideology attack”.

“We are a powerful political force now; we have parliamentary representation,” Jakub Kulesza, another Confederation lawmaker, said. “We are finally being recognised by the mainstream as a political option that deserves to be allowed into the political debate.”

Kulesza added that the key to the victory was the ability of several groupings to form an alliance and work together, but also their success in mobilising “the revolt electorate” — anti-establishment voters — including those coming from all over Poland to march in Warsaw on November 11.

“Confederation translated the relative success of the Independence March into electoral success,” Pankowski said. “The march provided the impulse for the regeneration of the political far right in Poland.”

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At the exhibition of anti-fascist artworks, Pankowski browsed the exhibits, some comprising materials lent to the curators by Never Again.

The artworks, including a replica of Pablo Picasso’s Guernica painted by Polish artist Wojciech Fangor in the 1950s, are described as acts of resistance to or reflection on fascist tendencies from the 1930s, 1950s and today.

“The riots in Chemnitz, the rally of Unite the Right in Charlottesville, the National Radical Camp marching hand-in-hand with Forza Nuova on Independence Day in Warsaw — is this already fascism?” ask the curators in a text piece on the wall of the exhibition.

“The contemporary artists who engage with these issues are unanimous: when this question can be answered with absolute certainty, it will already be too late.”

One of the installations probes the death of Maxwell Itoya, a Nigerian textile trader who was shot by police in Warsaw in 2010, incorporating information provided by Never Again. For this, Pankowski was attacked on Polish state television.

“Mr Pankowski’s flyers are no art at all, and I will repeat that,” prominent right-wing commentator Rafal Ziemkiewicz said during a talk show on TVP Info in August. “It is pure, stupid political propaganda.”

Pankowski said that was one of at least six occasions he was personally attacked on state television this year for the work he does. He receives many more verbal attacks and threats on social media and by phone.

“We’re being attacked because we’re known as outspoken critics of racism in Poland,” he said. “Just the fact that we are an independent organisation reporting on racism is enough.”

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