

Is Poland Becoming the European Capital of Xenophobia?

Frida Ghitis | Thursday, Nov. 16, 2017

On Nov. 11, the anniversary of the end of World War I, Poland celebrates its national Independence Day. This year, the most popular of the many events held that day took on a shocking tone, capturing the world's attention and raising a sense of alarm.

While most of the observances unfolded as one would expect in a standard patriotic event, the biggest of all was the one sponsored by extremist right-wing groups, including the heirs to Nazi organizations. Their rally, with some 60,000 marchers parading through the streets of Warsaw, featured brazenly racist, Islamophobic, anti-Semitic and homophobic banners and chants.

This annual march has become a magnet for ultranationalists from across Europe and beyond, some coming at the invitation of organizers, others attracted by the rally's growing reputation among extremist circles. It has grown even more popular since the nationalist Law and Justice party, or PiS, took power two years ago.

The march, and the Polish reaction to it, suggest that unless Poland, its government and its people make a forcefully deliberate decision to counteract tolerance for right-wing radicals, the country is on its way to becoming the European capital of xenophobia—a place where neo-fascist activists will feel free expressing their ideas, intimidating their critics and repelling those who embrace liberal views. If a major European country becomes a hub of far-right radicalism, the ramifications for Europe and the West would be damaging. But the consequences for Poland could be much worse if it finds itself shunned by the West.

We have not reached that point yet, but the events of last Saturday provide reason for concern.

Under the slogan “We Want God,” the throngs of marchers in Warsaw paraded under a cloud of red fog from flares in the national colors. The men—it was mostly men—carried signs reading “White Europe,” “Clean Blood” and “Europe will be White or Deserted” amid a raucous river of neo-fascist propaganda. The



Nationalists burn flares during a march to mark Poland's Independence Day, Warsaw, Poland, Nov. 11, 2017 (AP photo by Czarek Sokolowski).

marchers' chants included an endless stream of anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, anti-refugee and homophobic calls for ethnic purity with repeated references to blood, God and country. Foreign observers reported hearing chants of "F--- off with the refugees," "Jews out of Poland" and "No to Islam," and marchers gave startling comments (<https://twitter.com/anneapplebaum/status/929646345518010368>) to journalists.

A small counter-demonstration, numbering a few thousand people, raised banners opposing xenophobia, such as "Stop Fascism" and "Rainbow is the New Black." Police arrested 50 people, all pro-democracy demonstrators denouncing the neo-fascist rally.

The events are even more striking because they occurred in Poland, site of the Auschwitz death camp, and a country where some 3 million Jews—90 percent of Poland's pre-war Jewish population—were killed in the Holocaust. The PiS and its backers have been purposely recasting (<https://www.politico.eu/article/duda-poland-holocaust-history-walesa-gross/>) the story of the Holocaust in recent years, to match their nationalist narrative.

But there's another reason why this particular march is more troubling than others. Right-wing extremism is on the rise across many countries, including in Eastern Europe. Ultra-nationalist, neo-fascist activists have been emboldened across the continent in recent years. Far-right marches and ugly slogans are nothing new in countries that allow free speech. Even the United States has seen white nationalist demonstrations in recent months, which have dwarfed any seen in decades.

And yet, when neo-Nazis have spoken up (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/germany-elections-alternative-fur-deutschland-far-right-afd-bundestag-parliament-angela-merkel-a7965041.html>) just about everywhere else (<http://www.euronews.com/2017/02/04/austria-protesters-in-vienna-rally-against-fight-right-ball>), they have been met with a decisive and overwhelming response (<http://time.com/4907681/boston-free-speech-rally-protests-charlottesville/>) that makes clear the population, and usually the government, reject those views. That did not happen in Poland—at least not until officials started seeing the depth of international revulsion with what happened in Warsaw.

There was every reason to expect the march would become a festival of xenophobia. After all, it was organized by militantly racist and homophobic groups (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/11/world/europe/poland-nationalist-march.html>) including the All Polish Youth, the National Movement and the National Radical Camp, heirs to anti-Semitic organizations of the same name from the 1930s, espousing neo-fascist, neo-Nazi ideologies.

Poland's government knew precisely who organized the Independence Day march, and it knew what to expect. The only thing that came as a surprise was the global backlash.

The annual march began in 2009 and has become a go-to event for Europe's far right. This year, organizers invited Richard Spencer, the American white supremacist. Authorities refused to grant Spencer a visa (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/27/poland-to-richard-spencer-keep-out>) and used that as proof that they were not party to the display of xenophobia.

But that makes for a weak case.

State television, a mouthpiece for the government, called the rally a "great march of patriots" (http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2017/11/12/tens_of_thousands_join_polish_white_supremacist_march_europe_must_be_white.html), and Interior Minister Mariusz Blaszczak called it "a beautiful sight" (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/12/white-europe-60000-nationalists-march-on-polands-independence-day>). Officials denied there were signs of extremism.

When journalist Piotr Stasinski of the newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza went on a television program and told viewers that the march had been "dominated by neo-fascists and racist symbols and slogans," quoting some of the racist epithets he heard and the neo-fascist signs he read, the speaker of the Polish Senate responded by announcing that he would file a complaint with prosecutors (<https://www.ft.com/content/db4b4258-c869-11e7-aa33-c63fdc9b8c6c>) accusing Stasinski of using vulgar language.

Perhaps Polish authorities did not expect the kind of international attention drawn by the rally. The images went viral around the world, and the government's refusal to acknowledge there was anything unusual, let alone troubling, about what occurred drew even more condemnation.

Of course, not all who participated in the march were racists. But the government knew precisely who organized the event, and it knew what to expect. The only thing that came as a surprise was the global backlash.

The condemnations were so severe and so widespread that former Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, a pro-Europe liberal, said the event destroyed 25 years of work (<http://www.tokfm.pl/Tokfm/7,103454,22637330,sikorski-udalo-sie-potwierdzic-najgorsze-stereotypy-o-polsce.html>) to erase the stereotype of the anti-Semitic, racist Pole.

It also added to the growing tensions between Poland and the European Union over concerns that Poland is moving away from democracy. On Wednesday, citing a “clear risk of a serious breach” of EU values, partly over government interference with judicial independence, the European Parliament voted overwhelmingly for a resolution that is the first step in a so-called rule-of-law procedure against the Polish government. It could result in the suspension (<https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2017/11/15/world/europe/ap-eu-europe-poland-the-latest.html>) of Poland’s EU voting rights. Poland’s government was furious (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/the-latest-eu-parliament-launches-action-against-poland/2017/11/15/46206b84-ca0f-11e7-b506-8a10ed11ecf5_story.html).

It all adds to a picture of a country that is not just moving away from democratic norms, but is openly embracing the worst traits of xenophobic populism.

The powerful head of the PiS, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, said there had been scattered incidents carried out by provocateurs, calling it “disgraceful rubbish (<https://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKBN1DD2LU>).” President Andrzej Duda, who left the party when he was elected in 2015 but remains a PiS ally, said there is no place in Poland for xenophobia and anti-Semitism.

For the rest of the world, that remains an open question.

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