

# Are Poles racist?

**bigmouth**

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Muslims and Africans are the most frequent targets of racially motivated attacks. Anti-German sentiment is also playing a role.

Three students from Turkey and Bulgaria were cursed at by young men on a tram in Bydgoszcz, a city of nearly a half-million people in northern Poland. They were told to get out of the country because Poland is for Poles.

Instances like these are on the rise. Foreign exchange students in Toruń, a student city also in Poland's north, have come under increasing threat. A young Turk was recently cursed at and badly beaten. Two other students were forced to their knees in a bar at the behest of the owner. They had to "apologize" for being Muslim and not Christian. Patrons encircled the students — not to help but to laugh at their humiliating position.



## 'Guardian angels' for exchange students

"I am shocked by the lynch atmosphere of this incident," said Ewa Walusiak-Bednarek, a spokeswoman for the University in Torun. "We have had exchange students for 10 years and this has never happened. Now it's happened twice this year."

The University of 20,000 students has a tradition of pairing exchange students with their Polish peers, who are known as guardian angels, to "help students from abroad get used

to everyday life and understand the country better,” Walusiak-Bednarek said. “The number of Polish guardian angels has increased from 30 to 110 since these attacks. Nearly all of our 130 foreign exchange students are able to have their own.”

Elsewhere, a Nigerian doctoral candidate at the University of Warsaw suffered injuries after he was attacked in the street. A Polish professor and a visiting German researcher were verbally and physically assaulted while conversing on a Warsaw tram in German. The attack made headlines, but there was no condemnation made by public officials. The attacker was released after three months.



### Racially motivated attacks 10 times higher than in 2000

Anna Tatar keeps track of racist attacks around Poland in her “brown book” for the association, which is called [“Never Again.”](#) She recorded 400 cases in 2009-2010 and 600 two years later. The count rose to 850 in 2013, according to Police statistics, and it more than doubled by 2019.

“We have observed a further rise, higher than the official numbers suggest,” she told DW. The racially charged atmosphere stems from the refugee debate during the parliamentary election campaign in fall 2015, she said. Poland has not taken in any refugees, but the numbers entering Europe overall has incensed many Poles, causing it to become a major campaign issue.

“The media have painted the refugees with one, broad brush,” Tatar said.

The number of recorded attacks since 2000 has gone up by a factor of 10, although the percentage of foreigners living in Poland is low in comparison to other European countries. Jews and Roma were once the main targets of violence. Now it is Muslims and Africans.

Attacks are rarely investigated – there were over 150 cases in 2019 – due to “limited harm to society.” There are exceptions, such as a man in Wrocław who was sentenced to 10 months in prison without parole for burning a puppet of a Jew in the city’s main square in fall 2015.

### **Tolerance for hate**

Government officials have been noticeably quiet following racially motivated attacks. At times, it plays down the racial motivations that may be behind them. A right-wing demonstration in Białystok last April called to “hang Jews.” The public prosecutor concluded the incident was repugnant, but not racist.

The organization behind the demonstration, National Radical Camp, is one of the largest far-right movements in Poland. Its symbol – a hand holding a knife reminiscent of a swastika – is included in a police handbook about explicitly racist symbols. The Interior Ministry pulled the book from circulation after MP Adam Andruszkiewicz, known for his close connections to the far-right scene, criticized the conflation of the symbol with the swastika and those of the Ku Klux Klan, also included in the handbook.

A government council on combating discrimination was established in 2013 to analyze racially motivated attacks and regularly publish its findings, but it was abolished in 2016. So far, nothing has taken its place and a concrete strategy to counter the rise of xenophobia remains to be seen.

On a personal level, being an ex-pat in Poland of Spanish origin, I haven’t been targeted at all. But, I have heard many of my African friends have. What do you think?

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