

NewStatesman

Faith, flag and football: how the Polish game developed a white supremacist fringe

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6 MARCH 2017

Among the colours and badges of Polish football clubs is a banner declaring, “Death to the enemies of the fatherland”.

Poland’s Catholic churches rarely want for colour, but even the gaudiest frescoes and stained-glass windows struggled to compete with the sea of striped hats and scarves on show at the 14th-century Jasna Góra Monastery, as fans of football teams from across Poland gathered there in January. This is Poland’s holiest shrine, and the crowds were here to celebrate faith, family and football.

As in other European countries, pockets of nationalist and white-supremacist football fans have long been a presence on the margins of Polish society. In recent years, they have grown in number, as many Poles turn their backs on what they regard as the unfulfilled promises of a liberal European future.

Although much international attention has been given to Poland’s authoritarian turn since the election of the populist-nationalist Law and Justice (PiS) party in 2015, nationalist and xenophobic sentiment had been on the rise for some time. It was accelerated by a frustration with Poland’s uneven economic growth and fears relating to the refugee crisis and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

As nativist sentiment has risen, so have the fortunes of the parties to the right of PiS. This poses a dilemma for a party that styles itself as the natural home for Polish “patriots”, in contrast to its pro-European rival, Civic Platform.

In the run-up to the Uefa European Championship in Poland and Ukraine in 2012, Poland’s then Civic Platform-led government (which was headed by Donald Tusk before he became president of the European Council in 2014) clamped down on organised hooliganism. It was feared that violence or instances of racism could disrupt the tournament and damage the country’s reputation abroad.

That provided an opening for far-right and right-wing politicians to adopt the nationalist fans’ cause, portraying them as ordinary patriots enduring harassment from a liberal government hostile to “traditional” cultural values. Their cause has also been adopted by hardliners within the Polish Catholic Church, who share PiS’s view that the country’s values and identity are under sustained attack by decadent, Western cosmopolitanism and the racial diversity imposed from above by Brussels.

This alliance is cemented each year by the “Fans’ Patriotic Pilgrimage” to Jasna Góra. At the latest meeting in January, Holy Mass in the Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary was presided over by Father Jaroslaw Wasowicz, a cleric with connections to the fanatical supporters of the Ekstraklasa league team Lechia Gdansk.

After the Mass, the fans lined the streets of the monastery compound, waiting in temperatures of -15°C to be blessed by priests wearing football scarves over their cassocks. Among the colours and badges of Polish football clubs were a wide array of nationalist slogans, ranging from garden-variety patriotism to radical right-wing and white-supremacist symbols. They included banners demanding the restoration to Poland of lands now in Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine, and the ubiquitous slogan of “Death to the enemies of the fatherland”.

“This bizarre ceremony is encouraged by the Church and illustrates the increasingly xenophobic climate in Poland, especially among young people,” said Rafał Pankowski, a scholar and anti-racism campaigner based at the Collegium Civitas in Warsaw.

In his sermon, Father Wasowicz told the fans that PiS had ensured that the “shining light of hope is never extinguished in our country”. “We want a Christian Europe, because only by appealing to fundamental values can we defend the continent against annihilation,” he declared.

A theme of the sermon was that the fans embodied the spirit of the so-called Cursed Soldiers, Polish fighters who died resisting the imposition of communism in the 1940s.

An increasingly mainstream belief on the Polish right is that Poland, its culture and traditions are threatened by the “leftist” notions of multiculturalism, in much the same way that they were once threatened by Soviet domination. That argument has given many young nationalists the impression that they represent a new generation of Cursed Soldiers. They are, they claim, the vanguard of a new movement to defend Poland from foreign invasions of a different kind, whether it be godless liberalism, the “Muslim terror” imposed by refugee quotas from Brussels, or even the hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians who have sought economic opportunities in Poland.

“We are inspired by the values of those who defended our homeland,” one fan said, his arms crossed and his face hidden from the cold. “For eight years, under the previous government, us patriots were provoked by the authorities. But now things are more comfortable.”

The right-wing fans’ self-confidence is reflected in the rise in popularity of “patriotic street wear”: clothing brands with names such as “Red Is Bad” (the “Red” apparently stands for communism) or “Patriots” (sic), which combines love for the homeland with an enthusiasm for the art of rioting. These brands specialise in tracksuits, caps and hoodies bearing patriotic slogans and gruesome depictions of foreign occupations.

As the sun went down, fans gathered in front of the monastery for a display of fireworks launched from the walls, which were covered from top to bottom with red and white banners. They joined in by firing red flares that lit up the winter night’s sky, as they broke into smaller groups, chanting nationalist slogans.

“White Uni(a)ted” declared a banner hung on the side of the monastery by the self-described “skinheads” of Unia Tarnów. While under the protection of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, a revered Byzantine icon, this place is said to have withstood a 17th-century siege by Swedish invaders. Now, an invocation of white supremacy hangs outside the home of what can be seen, in essence, as Poland’s only symbol of black power.

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