

# Poland's Far Right Used Independence Day to Rally Against LGBTQ Rights

By Tim Hume  
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The "annual hate-fest" took place as Poland is in the middle of a raging culture war over gay rights.

Marching under the symbol of a fist clutching a rosary that some have compared to a white power icon, tens of thousands of Poles showed up for an annual Independence Day rally convened by far-right groups in Warsaw Monday.

Organizers described this year's march through the Polish capital as defending traditional Catholic values, amid a raging culture war over gay rights in Poland.

The annual march, organized by two Polish far-right groups, the National Radical Camp and the All-Polish Youth, has been held since 2010, and attracts ordinary patriotic Poles as well as ultranationalist groups. The rallies, where racist and xenophobic slogans and symbols are often seen among the mass of red and white Polish flags, have become a flashpoint between nationalists and liberals.

Organizers called for Poles to hold on to traditional Catholic values and reject the liberal worldviews of their neighbors in Western Europe.

"We have to return to our roots. Our world has abandoned God and Christianity," Robert Bakiewicz, head of the Independence March Association, told the crowd. "We will die as the nations of Western Europe are dying."

In an open letter published before the march, Bakiewicz wrote of an "ongoing fierce fight against our faith and our sacred values" as progressives pushed for "the promotion of an unnatural family model" and "the right to live in sin against nature."

He was referring to the fierce battle that has raged in Poland over the issue of gay rights this year. Poland's LGBTQ community has pushed for greater visibility, holding a record number of Pride rallies, and the conservative government, backed by hard-line factions of the Catholic Church, has responded by scapegoating sexual minorities, painting gay rights as a dangerous, alien ideology that threatens the traditional Catholic family.

Observers say the government's vilification campaign, which is blamed for fueling homophobic attacks on marchers at Pride rallies, was part of a bid by the ruling Law and Justice party to whip up support ahead of October's parliamentary elections. Law and Justice was returned to power comfortably last month with 44 percent of the vote.

Rafal Pankowski, head of Poland's anti-racist Never Again Association, told VICE News that there was noticeable anti-LGBTQ sentiment on display at Monday's march.

"Anti-gay slogans were more visible this year, but there were also many anti-Semitic and Islamophobic slogans and banners," he said. "It's an annual hate-fest."

Local officials said that this year's Independence Day march, held under the slogan "Take Care of the Whole Nation," drew about 47,000 people, while organizers put the number at 150,000.

The march's symbol also drew critics within the Catholic Church. Archbishop Wlodek Giedyczynski of Czestochowa said last month he would prefer to see the rosary in "open hands ready for prayer, rather than a fist calling for a fight," and added that "the rosary is never a prayer against someone."

The march also included slogans against immigration and abortion, as well as a far-right campaign in support of a bill to stop Jewish organizations seeking restitution for property appropriated by the Nazis during World War II. Members of Italian and Hungarian far-right groups joined the march, while counter-demonstrators also turned out to show their opposition. One group unfurled a Polish flag emblazoned with symbols of various faiths along the march route.

Another Independence Day march, in the city of Wrocław, was halted by police after 25 minutes due to anti-Semitic hate speech, with police using water cannon to disperse the crowds, local authorities said.

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