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FEATURE ARTICLE

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A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Robert Hannigan

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Poland's Evolving Violent Far-Right Landscape

By Michael Duffin

Since the fall of communism in 1989, violent far-right actors in Poland have not committed a mass-casualty attack in the country. But this fact belies the relevance of this Central European country of 38 million people as both a source of and destination for violent far-right groups. Along with Hungary and Serbia, Poland has become a point of interest for white supremacists globally for being a predominantly homogeneous country of white Christians led by a socially conservative government. One of the biggest draws for international violent far-right groups is the Independence Day march organized by Polish far-right groups in Warsaw every November 11. Since the early 1990s, Poland has also been a popular destination for a range of violent far-right activities, including neo-Nazi concerts, “whites only” mixed martial arts (MMA) tournaments, and paramilitary training. The hate these groups direct toward racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, members of the LGBTQI+ community, and other perceived enemies such as anti-fascists and liberal politicians is part of a growing trend of polarization across Poland. With the easing of travel restrictions related to COVID-19, violent far-right activities in Poland have the potential to match or even exceed pre-pandemic levels. This article provides an overview of violent far-right groups in Poland and outlines why international violent far-right actors find the country so appealing for their activities.

After more than two decades of countering Islamist terrorist groups such as al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, many counterterrorism policymakers, practitioners, and scholars have become accustomed to associating the threat level in a country with the number of mass-casualty terrorist plots that were successful, thwarted, or failed. Beyond some prominent examples of successful

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attacks perpetrated by violent far-right individuals in Canada, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, and the United States, a majority of violent far-right groups since 9/11 have perpetrated low-level attacks that either do not result in a significant loss of life (if any) or are not categorized as hate crimes and/or acts of terrorism.¹ This conundrum is best exemplified in Poland, which since the fall of communism in 1989 has been a source of and destination for violent far-right actors who are more likely to assault their victims with knives, clubs, and fists than with bombs or guns.

Despite extensive reporting about individual incidents, there has been little analysis published to date about the regional and global counterterrorism implications of a potentially growing violent far-right threat in Poland.^a This article, which is intended to encourage more scholarship on this topic, begins with an overview of the complex threat environment. It then outlines the connections some violent far-right individuals and groups in Poland have had to Russia. It will then look at two elements commonplace with most violent far-right ideologies in Poland: nationalism—including its role in stoking polarization^b—and anti-Semitism. Next, the article will explore how nationalism and anti-Semitism in Poland have contributed to violent far-right activities, including the murder of Gdansk Mayor Pawel Adamowicz in 2019 by a man inspired by a sustained campaign of hate against the mayor by violent far-right groups and ultra-nationalist commentators on Polish media; and the annual Independence Day march in Warsaw, which at its pre-pandemic peak attracted 200,000 people in 2019, including members of violent far-right groups outside of Poland. The article will then explain why violent far-right groups across Europe travel to Poland, including the perception that Poland is a more permissive environment for their activities than their home countries and the allure of Poland being a mostly homogeneous country of white Christians with a socially conservative government. Finally, the article will discuss information gaps and emerging challenges posed by violent far-right groups in Poland.

The description provided here of relevant violent far-right activities in a mostly racially and religiously homogeneous Central European country of 38 million people^c draws on an extensive review of open-source material and background interviews with dozens of researchers, journalists, and policy makers, and articulates

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- a The Berlin-based Counter Extremism Project has previously published reports on violent far-right groups in Central and Eastern Europe and has compiled an upcoming report on the Independence Day march in Warsaw.
 - b In her 2020 book, Anne Applebaum calls Poland “one of the most polarized societies in Europe.” See Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Doubleday, 2020).
 - c According to the CIA's World Factbook, ethnic Poles comprise 96.9 percent of the population in Poland, with 84.8 percent of the population belonging to the Roman Catholic Church (12.9 percent of Poles included in this data are listed as “unspecified”).

why violent far-right movements in Poland should garner more attention from the global counterterrorism community.

A Complex Threat Landscape

In Poland, violent far-right groups are disparate, including but not limited to neo-Nazis, neo-fascists, ultra-nationalists, and racist soccer hooligans.^d The first post-communist violent far-right attack occurred in 1989 against the Warsaw office of the Polish Socialist Party.² Restrictive gun laws have hampered the ability of violent far-right actors from Poland to carry out mass-casualty attacks, with the Polish government interdicting multiple plots over the past decade.³ In November 2012, for example, Polish security services arrested a man with links to Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik who planned to ram a vehicle with explosives into parliament; he was later sentenced to 13 years in prison for this plot.⁴ Donald Tusk, the prime minister at that time, said, “This is a new and dramatic experience. This should be a warning.”⁵ On November 10, 2019, Polish security services raided a Warsaw home and arrested two men who allegedly planned a “Christchurch-style”^e attack against a mosque.⁶

Political rhetoric, particularly during the lead up to parliamentary elections, has contributed to a rise in support for violent far-right extremism since at least 2015—the next parliamentary elections are in fall 2023. With fewer than 10,000 Muslims living in Poland at that time,^f debate in July 2015 about the government potentially admitting tens of thousands of Syrian refugees shifted the focus of parliamentary elections that October to xenophobic hyperbole, which contributed to the election of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party on a socially conservative platform.⁷ In the lead-up to parliamentary elections in 2019, PiS officials depicted LGBTQI+ rights as a dangerous foreign idea that undermines traditional values—such rhetoric was blamed in part for violent counter-protestors at Pride parades across Poland.⁸ In July 2019, racist soccer hooligans and other violent far-right groups attacked marchers at a Pride parade in Bialystok, the largest city in northeastern Poland, with flash bombs, rocks, and bottles.⁹ In

d Racist incidents had been so ubiquitous at Polish soccer matches that UEFA provided funding for anti-racism campaigns targeting Polish soccer fans in the lead up to the 2012 European Football Championship co-hosted by Poland and Ukraine. In recent years, some Polish soccer supporters have displayed banners and scarves honoring Janusz Walus, a Polish national in prison in South Africa for the 1993 murder of a prominent Black anti-apartheid figure. “UEFA Demands Tough Stance on Racism,” CNN, June 11, 2012.

e In March 2019, a violent far-right extremist attacked two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing over 50 people. See Graham Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age,” *CTC Sentinel* 12:6 (2019).

f According to a survey by the Pew Research Center, Poland’s Muslim population was less than 10,000 in 2016. Some sources have estimated that as many as 38,000 Muslims live in Poland, including a 2019 paper by the Brookings Institution that used data from 2016, but two experts on Poland who reviewed this paper suggested that the Pew data was more likely to be accurate than higher estimates. A few weeks before the October 25, 2015, parliamentary elections, Politico reported that PiS head and former Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski told rally-goers that Poland could be forced to resettle more than 100,000 Muslim refugees, including those who carry “parasites” and other diseases. Jan Cienski, “Migrants Carry ‘Parasites’ and ‘Protozoa,’ Warns Polish Opposition Leader,” Politico, October 14, 2015.

September 2019, a man and woman were arrested at a pride parade in Lublin in southeastern Poland for possession of crudely made explosive devices they had planned to detonate at the event.⁸ The organizers of the event said they received death threats, and police arrested 30 counter-protestors before the parade even began.¹⁰

Russia: A Comrade for Segments of Poland’s Violent Far-Right

Unlike Hungary and Serbia, anti-Russia sentiment is rampant across Poland, including among PiS leadership, because of the historical legacy of Polish-Russia relations as well as accusations by some in the government and their allies that Russian officials played a role in the 2010 plane crash that killed President Lech Kaczynski and 95 others in Smolensk, Russia.¹¹ Despite widespread antipathy toward Russia, some violent far-right groups are pro-Kremlin. In February 2018, three Poles from the pro-Russia Falanga organization were arrested for firebombing a Hungarian cultural center in Ukraine.¹² Hired by a Kremlin-aligned member of Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party, the perpetrators were attempting a “false flag” operation to reinforce Russian claims that Ukraine had been overrun by violent far-right groups.¹³ Polish nationals have also sought training from the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), which the United States designated as Specially Designated Global Terrorists in 2020.^h In November 2017, an extreme far-right conference held the day before the annual Independence Day march in Warsaw featured Denis Nikitin, the Russian founder of the white nationalist clothing brand White Rex.¹⁴

Russian hostilities in Ukraine have led to divisions among violent far-right groups in Poland. Many of those who are pro-Russia believe President Vladimir Putin’s authoritarianism and far-right policies serve as a model for Poland.¹⁵ Russian propaganda and disinformation have also been credited for stoking anti-American and anti-E.U. sentiment among those Poles who feel like they have been excluded from the prosperity promised by E.U. membership.¹⁶ The first known formal engagements between Polish and Russian violent far-right actors occurred in August 2000 when neo-Nazis from Poland visited Russia.¹⁷ One member of this delegation, Mateusz Piskorski, was elected to parliament in 2005 and served a single term.¹⁸ He was arrested on espionage charges in May 2016 for his connections to Russia and was released on bail in 2019 pending trial, which remains in limbo awaiting a court review of the charges.¹⁹

The Intersection of Nationalism and Polarization

Beyond violent far-right groups, far-right political figures have contributed to polarization in Poland by demonizing religious and ethnic minorities, immigrants, and others they believe undermine their socially conservative agenda, such as those who support

g The man and woman were each sentenced to one year in prison. The short length of sentence and the fact that they were not charged with terrorism reportedly received some criticism. Daniel Tilles, “Polish Couple Who Took Homemade Explosives to Protest Against LGBT Parade Sentenced,” Notes from Poland, February 23, 2020.

h In announcing the Russian Imperial Movement as Specially Designated Global Terrorists, the U.S. State Department noted that the organization provided training to Polish nationals. See “United States Designates Russian Imperial Movement and Leaders as Global Terrorists,” U.S. Department of State, April 7, 2020.



The green flags of the National Radical Camp (ONR) were in evidence during the November 11, 2021, 'Independence Day March' in Warsaw, Poland, organized by far-right organizations. (Attila Husejnow/SOPA Images/Sipa USA via AP Images)

abortion, the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons, and Poland's membership in the European Union. Many followers of the country's far-right movement trace their roots back to the late Roman Dmowski, a politician and ideologue who in the interwar period argued that only Catholics make good Poles.²⁰ One of Dmowski's ideological heirs is Radio Maryja, a far-right Catholic media company founded in 1991 by Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, a Catholic priest who has pushed back against Vatican attempts to rein in his divisive and overtly political rhetoric.²¹ The U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report has cited instances of anti-Semitism featured on Radio Maryja programming several times, most recently in the 2017 report.²²

While far from monolithic, the base of support for nativist groups in Poland often comes from older, conservative Poles and those who live in economically depressed rural regions in the south and east.²³ Even before the massive influx of refugees from Ukraine as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine earlier this year, Poland had transitioned from "a country of emigration to a country of immigration."²⁴ As an E.U. member with a relatively low cost of living, Poland attracts workers and students from around the world. It is estimated that 10 percent of Poland's 300,000 tech sector jobs, for example, are occupied by foreigners.²⁵ The top source country for temporary stays in Poland from 2018-2020 was Ukraine, and other countries high up on the list included China, India, and Vietnam.²⁶

The League of Polish Families, while no longer attracting many voters, was instrumental in bringing xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and homophobia into Poland's mainstream political discourse in the 2000s.²⁷ In 2006, Polish media exposed senior party members' involvement in neo-Nazi activities, including the head of All Polish

Youth, its youth wing.²⁸ The ruling PiS party, which absorbed many of the League of Polish Families' voters, has been criticized by the opposition for allegedly trying to appease and even co-opt far-right groups.²⁹ On the centennial of Poland's independence in 2018, for example, President Andrzej Duda and high-ranking PiS members walked along the same march route in Warsaw as violent far-right organizations.³⁰ Pushing back against criticism that they were participating in an unsanctioned event organized by violent far-right activists, senior government officials marched a few hundred yards ahead of other marchers and claimed it was a separate event.³¹ PiS has also provided funding to Radio Maryja and other far-right organizations, including the organizers of the Independence Day march in Warsaw.³² In addition, there have been multiple examples of people with ties to violent far-right groups being appointed to senior government positions.³³

Anti-Semitism and the Legacy of the Holocaust

Anti-Semitism is a prevalent theme in violent far-right rhetoric in Poland, despite it being a mostly homogeneous country of ethnic Poles who are predominantly Roman Catholic. Prior to World War II, Poland, under its previous borders, was a multi-ethnic state with Europe's largest Jewish population, which had lived in this territory for about 1,000 years after fleeing religious persecution in Western

ⁱ In a 2010 book, the scholar Rafal Pankowski wrote that the frequency of appointments of members of the violent-far right to government positions "took on systemic dimensions." See Rafal Pankowski, *The Populist Radical Right in Poland: The patriots* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 181.

Europe.^{34j} Adolf Hitler's Third Reich and their collaborators killed 90 percent of Poland's Jews, about three million people.³⁵ Fewer than 10,000 Jews live in Poland today.³⁶ The Jews who remained in Poland after the war, including those who were resettled from the Soviet Union, were subjected to persecution by some ethnic Poles who accused them of blood libel—a debunked conspiracy theory that Jews ritualistically sacrificed Christian children—and collaboration with the ruling communist government.³⁷ These accusations resulted in several well-documented *pogroms*—a form of community-based ethnic cleansing—including the barbaric murder of dozens of Jewish men, women, and children by their neighbors in the town of Kielce on July 4, 1946.³⁸ As Polish-American scholar Jan Gross chronicled in his 2006 book *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz*, greed was likely a prevailing factor for many of the perpetrators of this violence as ethnic Poles had claimed property and other possessions of their Jewish neighbors.³⁹ The communist government in Warsaw, for its part, questioned Polish Jews' loyalty and implemented anti-Semitic policies. In 1968, for example, amidst student protests against state censorship and repression, Poland's communist government declared Polish Jews an "enemy of the state" and pressured thousands to leave under duress.⁴⁰ Israel received a majority of those who were expelled or fled, with others settling in the United States and other countries.⁴¹

Anti-Semitism in modern-day Poland is symptomatic of general antipathy toward diversity and democracy.⁴² Rarely does this hatred result in physical attacks on Polish Jews—partly due to their small numbers—but instead is manifested through neo-Nazi and neo-fascist marches and rallies and other forms of harassment.⁴³ A 2018 survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights found that only seven percent of Polish respondents said their government combats anti-Semitism effectively.⁴⁴ There has been an uptick in anti-Semitic vandalism at Jewish cemeteries and even some of the historic Holocaust sites in Poland, including former Nazi concentration and extermination camps such as Auschwitz, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. These crimes are frequently committed by foreign violent far-right individuals, including a renown American white supremacist who was reportedly arrested in August for violating Article 13 of the Polish Constitution, which bans "racial or national hatred."⁴⁵

Discussion about Poland's role in the Holocaust has become a politicized topic in recent years. PiS declarations about World War II often focus on the six million Polish nationals killed during the conflict, deemphasizing that three million of them were Jews.⁴⁶ The Polish government is still seeking compensation from Germany for the damage the Third Reich caused Poland, including Polish Jews' deaths and the destruction of their property.⁴⁷ Poland, however, passed a law in 2021 restricting restitution or compensation for private property seized by Nazi Germany and communist

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authorities, including property of Holocaust victims.^{48 k} This law was preceded by another law in February 2018 that criminalized any assertion of the complicity of the Polish nation or state in the Holocaust.⁴⁹ Debate about this bill prompted members of the violent far-right group National Radical Camp (ONR) to rally outside of the presidential palace in Warsaw in support of the legislation.⁵⁰ Discussion of this controversial law was also believed to have contributed to an uptick in harassment of Polish Jews, particularly online.⁵¹ After significant international outcry, the law was downgraded from a criminal to a civil offense, but not rescinded.⁵² In February 2021, a district court in Warsaw ordered two historians to issue an apology to the descendants of a deceased mayor for writing critically about his actions during the Holocaust, though the sentence was later overturned.⁵³

Discussion about the complicity of some Poles in the Holocaust, which had been suppressed by communist leaders, increased as a result of the publication of the book *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* by Jan Gross. This book discussed how ethnic Poles in a village in northeastern Poland murdered dozens of their Jewish neighbors following the invasion of the Third Reich. At the time of publication in 2000, this book provoked debate and renewed scholarship in Poland about the Holocaust. Laws adopted since then have made it harder to have such open conversations. There have even been attempts to pass laws giving government-appointed authorities the ability to restrict NGOs from speaking at public schools about issues deemed controversial, such as gender; such laws would have potentially also limited NGOs' ability to conduct educational programs about the Holocaust at Polish schools.⁵⁴

The 2019 Murder of Gdansk's Liberal Mayor

Like many cities across Poland, the port city of Gdansk on the Baltic coast has a complicated history. Often mentioned in history books by its German name (*Danzig*), Gdansk was one of the territories Germany ceded under the Treaty of Versailles following the end of World War I. Comprised mostly of ethnic Germans, the "Free City

j Poland's borders have been dramatically altered over the centuries through war and political alliances. For a comprehensive overview of these dynamics from 1939-1945, see Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

k "Poland is the only European Union nation that has not established formal procedures to resolve claims made by people whose property was seized during the Holocaust, according to a new report by the European Shoah Legacy Institute, based in Prague." Nina Siegal, "Holocaust Survivors in Poland Find Restitution Claims 'Like a Carousel,'" *New York Times*, May 10, 2017.

of Danzig,” as it was called during the interwar period, was one of the first territories the Third Reich seized when it invaded Poland in 1939. After World War II, Poland reclaimed Gdansk, and most of the ethnic Germans fled or were expelled. In August 1980, Polish shipbuilders and other trade workers from Gdansk formed the Solidarity trade union, which would play a leading role in Poland’s peaceful overthrow of communism in 1989.⁵⁵ This symbolism factored into the violent far-right Polish group ONR’s decision to march through Gdansk’s historic old town on April 14, 2018, to celebrate the 84th anniversary of the founding of the original ONR, which was an interwar fascist party.⁵⁶ The organizers of this rally were also sending a message to Gdansk Mayor Pawel Adamowicz, who along with other liberal mayors in Poland was lobbying for the banning of ONR and other violent far-right groups.⁵⁷ A week after the rally, Adamowicz organized a counter-rally that attracted about 1,500 people.⁵⁸ At this event, he admonished Poles who admired Nazis in spite of the destruction the Third Reich waged upon Poland.¹ That event, along with Adamowicz’s opposition to the ruling PiS party’s policies, led to a sustained campaign of hate against him and other liberal politicians by ultra-nationalist commentators on government-run media.⁵⁹ Even before then, the violent far-right group All Polish Youth issued a fake death certificate for Adamowicz.⁶⁰ Violent far-right groups in Poland had been issuing hitlists for decades, including by the local chapters of the international violent far-right organizations Blood & Honor and Combat 18.⁶¹

On the evening of January 13, 2019, Adamowicz was accosted onstage at a televised charity concert in Gdansk by a man recently released from prison who had obsessively followed the negative media coverage of the mayor.⁶² Armed with a military-grade knife, the attacker stabbed Adamowicz several times. He then grabbed a microphone and told the crowd that he committed this act of violence because of the role the mayor’s former party had allegedly played in his imprisonment for armed robbery.⁶³ The 53-year-old Adamowicz, who had been Gdansk’s mayor for more than two decades, died from his injuries the next day. Many details about the incident remain unresolved—specifically the attacker’s mental health and his motivation—due in part to delays in the trial, which began in March.⁶⁴ While it is unclear if the attacker held sympathies for violent far-right groups, the assassination highlighted the nebulous nature between societal polarization and violent far-right movements in Poland.^m Magdalena Adamowicz, the mayor’s widow, said the government-controlled media’s “hate speech influenced the killer to choose (him) as a victim.”⁶⁵ In the wake of Adamowicz’s murder, *The New York Times* editorial board criticized PiS for contributing to polarization that has separated “liberal cities like Warsaw and Gdansk from the conservative countryside and generating a climate of vicious hatred across the land.”⁶⁶ Adamowicz’s murder drew parallels with the 1922 assassination of Gabriel Narutowicz, the Polish Republic’s first president, who was shot at an art exhibition in Warsaw following anti-Semitic allegations by nationalists that he was controlled by Jews.⁶⁷

l Adamowicz was also responding to media reports of Poles in another part of the country celebrating Adolf Hitler’s birthday the previous day.

m The alleged murderer’s trial is ongoing, but there are reports that he became obsessed with media coverage of Adamowicz. Author interview, Katarzyna Wlodkowska, March 2022.

“Many violent far-right groups across Europe travel to Poland because it is a predominantly homogeneous country of white Christians, and because they perceive it to be a more permissive environment for their activities than their home countries.”

The Far-Right Independence Day March in Warsaw

As the scholar Cas Mudde has noted, marches and protests serve a critical function in helping far-right groups organize, educate, and indoctrinate their followers.⁶⁸ Since 2009, far-right groups have organized an unsanctioned march in Warsaw every November 11 to commemorate Poland’s Independence Day.⁶⁹ By appropriating this national holiday—there had been no large government-sanctioned event in Warsaw before then—march organizers have acquired a prominent platform for their ultra-nationalist agenda, drawing families and other peaceful Poles who simply want to display their patriotism. According to a statement by the violent far-right Polish group ONR: “the March for Independence wants to unite all those people who do not agree with the current situation, but want the creation of a greater Poland.”⁷⁰ Despite efforts by Warsaw Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski to ban the march, it has only been canceled once—in 2020, due to COVID-19—and even then a group of dedicated marchers gathered along the route.⁷¹ Described by one Polish researcher as an “annual hate-fest,” the march has attracted as many as 200,000 people, with fights breaking out some years between a small but prominent number of hard-core marchers on one side and police and counter-protestors on the other.⁷² In 2020, a building caught fire when marchers threw a flare at an apartment displaying a pride flag.⁷³ The 2021 march included marchers chanting xenophobic and homophobic rhetoric.⁷⁴

Organized by ONR, All Polish Youth, and the far-right party National Movement, the march has helped Poland’s violent far-right groups establish contacts and credibility with counterparts around the world. In 2019, representatives of violent far-right groups across Europe and the United States attended the march, including Patriot Front and the American Identity Movement.⁷⁵ The Italian neo-fascist group Forza Nuova (New Force) has attended the march multiple times, including in 2021.⁷⁶ Warsaw is not the only Polish city where violent far-right groups march on Independence Day. On November 11, 2021, hundreds of people marched through the city of Kalisz in central Poland, some of them chanting “Death to Jews.”⁷⁷ Marchers also burned a copy of the Treaty of Kalisz, which was the medieval document welcoming Jews to Poland.⁷⁸

A Hub for Violent-Far Right Groups

Many violent far-right groups across Europe travel to Poland because it is a predominantly homogeneous country of white Christians, and because they perceive it to be a more permissive environment for their activities than their home countries.⁷⁹ These groups often fall under three general categories: pan-Slavic, pro-German, and/or white identity.⁸⁰ Since the 1990s, violent far-right actors from the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Slovakia,

and other nearby countries have traveled to Poland for neo-Nazi concerts (including neo-Nazi skinhead rock and National Socialist Black Metal), “whites only” mixed martial arts (MMA) tournaments, and paramilitary training.⁸¹ Neo-Nazi music festivals, once held at state-owned cultural centers, served as some of the first post-communism violent far-right events held in Poland to attract an international audience.⁸² A series of events in 2014–2015 led to Poland’s elevated stature among far-right groups globally: the European migration crisis that led Poland and Hungary to reject “refugee quotas” recommended by the European Union; the formation of a socially conservative government led by PiS; and the growth of paramilitary activities in response to the conflict in neighboring Ukraine.⁸³ The first two events also contributed to the rise in prominence of the Independence Day march in Warsaw, with the most fervent marchers’ nativist and xenophobic messaging amplified by international press coverage.⁸⁴ A recent report alleged that a security training facility in Wrocław in southwestern Poland has provided weapons training to members of violent far-right groups from Poland and other countries, despite pledges from company officials that they vet all their clients.⁸⁵ This report followed another report from 2018 about the same facility, which allegedly trained members of a violent far-right group from Ukraine.⁸⁶ Commercial gun ranges in Poland and Slovakia have come under criticism for reportedly having lax security procedures, with the racially motivated murder of 10 people in Hanau, Germany, in February 2020 perpetrated by a German man who obtained firearm training at a facility in Slovakia.⁸⁷ Since Russia’s invasion of neighboring Ukraine in February, interest in weapons training has soared in Poland, with the government contributing funds to encourage more Poles to participate in shooting sports as a way of boosting national defense.⁸⁸

While the Polish government has been hesitant to rein in the nefarious elements of the Independence Day march in Warsaw, they have not hesitated to arrest violent far-right actors who pose an imminent threat. In 2019, Poland expelled Swedish national Anton Thulin (previously affiliated with the Nordic Resistance Movement) who attempted to obtain weapons training.⁸⁹ In 2020, Polish authorities arrested a German man suspected of being a member of a violent far-right group for possession of firearms, a grenade, and 2.6 pounds of explosive material.⁹⁰ While not arrested or detained in Poland, Brenton Tarrant, who murdered 51 Muslim worshippers in Christchurch, New Zealand, on March 15, 2019, visited the country in December 2018 and mentioned Poland twice in his 87-page manifesto.⁹¹ Claims by Tarrant that he met with the “Knights Templar Order International” group in Poland were deemed by New Zealand’s official investigation to be false.⁹² Many

violent far-right actors from Western countries find Poland and other countries in the region attractive destinations because they are predominantly white and Christian, and they perceive that their racist and xenophobic views are more tolerated there than their home countries.⁹³

Information Gaps and Emerging Challenges

There is no reliable data from the Polish government on the number of people injured and killed by violent far-right actors in Poland. An article from Vice News in 2012 reported that at least 40 people had been killed “over the past few years.”⁹⁴ Never Again, a Warsaw-based NGO that tracks anti-Semitism and other forms of hate across Poland and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, has attempted to provide an overview of significant violent far-right incidents in its “Brown Book.”⁹⁵ More research is also needed, including how violent far-right groups in Poland have evolved since 1989 and the nature of their ties to similar groups in neighboring countries and the global Polish diaspora.⁹ The ideology that underpins this movement existed before 1989, but the fall of communism in Poland, Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic), the German Democratic Republic (pre-reunification), and Hungary created greater opportunities for transnational connectivity. It remains to be seen how these transnational connections among violent far-right groups and actors will impact security in Poland and beyond.

Several veterans of Poland’s neo-Nazi scene have formed political parties, run for office, and/or have been appointed to prominent government positions. This includes the appointment of a representative of the League of Polish Families with an anti-Semitic past to be Minister of Education in 2006; the appointment of a former editor of a neo-Nazi magazine to be deputy chairman of Poland’s public television network in 2006; and the appointment of a former ONR member to a senior position in the state historical research institution in 2019.⁹⁶ More research is needed concerning the correlation between these far-right political groups and actors and violent far-right groups.

The impact on Poland’s violent far-right from Russia’s war of aggression against neighboring Ukraine is another gap: Will concerns about the threat of Russia invading Poland lead to a significant uptick in paramilitarism in the country?⁷ While there is no authoritative data on the overall number of Polish nationals fighting in Ukraine, the documented number of violent far-right actors who have traveled to the conflict zone to date is relatively small.⁹⁷ Further, what impact will the millions of refugees from Ukraine now residing in Poland have on the violent far-right and vice versa?⁹⁸ Even before the current conflict, tensions were high between some ethnic Poles and Ukrainian nationals who came to

n Poles who want to partake in weapons training or purchase a firearm must obtain a police-issued permit, with the annual number of such licenses more than doubling since 2014 (7,110 in 2014 and 19,939 in 2021). Natalia Parzygnat, “Gun Ranges in Poland Report Boom in Interest Amid War in Ukraine,” Notes from Poland, March 25, 2022.

o The State Department designated Anton Thulin as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist on June 15, 2022.

p According to the “Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Masjidain on 15 March 2019,” when Brenton Tarrant arrived in New Zealand on December 28, 2018, he told immigration officials that Poland was the country that he had spent the most time visiting during his recent travels.

q Research by the Anti-Defamation League has documented the spread of anti-Semitism between violent far-right groups in Poland and the Polish diaspora in the United States. “Hate Group Symbols/Logos: National Rebirth of Poland,” Anti-Defamation League.

r This topic was explored in the Counter Extremism Project’s June 2021 report “Looks can be Deceiving: Extremism Meets Paramilitarism in Central and Eastern Europe” in which author Kacper Rekawek argued that the growing support of paramilitary activities in Poland did not necessarily overlap with support for violent far-right groups. He stated that while such groups organize summer camps for its younger members, these activities focused more on fitness and ideology than weapons training.

“Poland is not unique in its challenges with far-right violence ... But unlike countries such as Canada, Germany, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States, there is far less research and data about the nature of this threat, especially the unique drivers that contribute to radicalization, recruitment, and mobilization in specific regions, cities, towns, and villages where far-right violence has occurred.”

Poland as economic migrants.⁹⁹

Once faced with a labor shortage due to emigration, unskilled Polish laborers now must compete with economic migrants from nearby countries for low-paying jobs.¹⁰⁰ While an overwhelming number of Poles support providing refuge to those fleeing Russia's war against Ukraine, far-right groups have tried to stoke tensions by blaming Ukrainians on overcrowding and rising prices.¹⁰¹ The northern border has also been a focus of the violent far-right, with Belarus attempting to sow discord in Poland and the European Union writ large by pushing refugees and migrants from Afghanistan, Syria, and other Muslim-majority countries into Poland.¹⁰² With the easing of travel restrictions related to COVID-19, it is possible that violent far-right activities in Poland will return to or exceed pre-pandemic levels.

There is a dearth of data about the online activity of violent far-right actors in the Polish language.^s Those who track racism and anti-Semitism in Poland have reported online harassment, including being placed on violent far-right groups' hitlists.¹⁰³ One Polish researcher also said social media companies have been unresponsive when hateful and threatening postings are reported that violate the terms of service for their platforms.¹⁰⁴ Some experts interviewed for this article mentioned difficulty distinguishing between hate and anti-Semitism from authentic users based in Poland and Russian propaganda. This observation was affirmed by a report released in June by the NGO Moonshot, which analyzed anti-Ukrainian and anti-refugee sentiment in Polish-language spaces online in the first month of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (February 24 to March 23), finding significant examples of “inauthentic and Russian-linked activity on Polish-language pages or accounts, including” narratives such as “Poles are struggling to access affordable housing, while Ukrainians are being ‘given places to stay’ and ‘government subsidies;” that “Hospital beds are available to Ukrainians but ‘none were free’ for Poles;” and that “those fleeing Ukraine were not refugees, but instead that the

s This observation is based on email exchanges the author had with representatives of the NGOs Moonshot and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue in late August 2022; both organizations specialize in tracking online hate and violent extremism.

influx of Ukrainians to Poland was part of an ongoing ‘demographic replacement’ or ‘Ukrainisation’ of Poland.”¹⁰⁵

Beyond misinformation and disinformation, there are reports of “a growing antisemitic narrative appearing in the public sphere,” including online.¹⁰⁶ A 2018 report by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights included an interview with a Polish Jew who provided the anecdotal view that “(anti-Semitism) has grown a lot over the last two years” and that “People have stopped being ashamed that they are racists and antisemites.”¹⁰⁷ A survey from this same report found that 84 percent of Polish respondents consider anti-Semitism in political life to be a problem.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

Poland is not unique in its challenges with violent far-right extremism, with the obvious exception of the annual Independence Day march, which has grown in size since 2009 from a small local gathering to an international spectacle attracting violent far-right groups and far-right politicians from around the world.^t But unlike countries such as Canada, Germany, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States, there is far less research and data about the nature of this threat, especially the unique drivers that contribute to radicalization, recruitment, and mobilization in specific regions, cities, towns, and villages where far-right violence has occurred. Support for violent far-right groups in Poland appears on the surface to be more pervasive than those countries, but Poland has conversely not seen the shootings and bombings from such individuals and groups that other Western countries have.^u This is also true of many of the formerly communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Czech Republic, Hungary, Serbia, and Slovakia.¹⁰⁹ Similar to Poland, there is evidence of support for violent far-right groups in each of these countries, but they have not experienced mass-casualty far-right attacks in the past decades. The difference between Poland and these countries, however, had been the lack of a significant minority population in Poland,^v although that has now changed with millions of Ukrainians residing in Poland following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Instead of lumping all of Poland's violent far-right groups together, it is important to recognize that there are factions within

t The most comparable, albeit smaller, event in the region has been the “Day of Honor” march, which had been held in Budapest, Hungary, every February 12. This event, which had been organized by Hungarian violent far-right groups, commemorated the Nazi-aligned soldiers from Germany and Hungary who fought in the “Siege of Budapest” in 1945. The march was banned this year by the Budapest Police Department following a ruling by the Hungarian Supreme Court, which cited concerns for violence. Dan Verbin, “Hungary Bans Annual Neo-Nazi Parade in Budapest,” *Israel National News*, February 2, 2022.

u In his June 2021 Counter Extremism Project report, “Looks Can Be Deceiving: Extremism Meets Paramilitarism in Central and Eastern Europe,” Kacper Rekawek argues that Polish violent far-right militant groups are less likely to commit violence than their European counterparts as they are “more ideological and less violent militant in nature.” Kacper Rekawek, “Looks Can Be Deceiving: Extremism Meets Paramilitarism in Central and Eastern Europe,” Counter Extremism Project, June 2021.

v According to the CIA's World Factbook, ethnic Poles comprise 96.9 percent of the population in Poland; ethnic Czechs comprise 57.3 percent of the population in the Czech Republic; ethnic Hungarians comprise 85.6 percent of the population in Hungary; ethnic Serbs comprise 83.3 percent of the population in Serbia; and ethnic Slovaks comprise 83.8 percent of the population in Slovakia.

this milieu that are staunchly independent and ideologically opposed to joining forces with others, including political parties that would want to co-opt their movement.¹¹⁰ On the surface, language would appear to be a barrier to in-depth research on violent far-right movements in Poland, particularly for Western counterterrorism analysts who do not speak Polish, but the number of knowledgeable and dedicated Polish scholars and journalists consulted for this article, as well as others who were sourced here, indicates that there is a dedicated and underutilized community of experts who want to conduct additional research and collaborate with counterparts outside of Poland.

One issue not fully discussed here is the societal polarization that has essentially divided Poland between those who are socially conservative, inward looking, and anti-European Union, and those who are liberal, outward looking, and pro-European Union. It is this divide—similar to the one currently faced by the United States—which has helped to swell the ranks of the annual Independence Day march in Warsaw and provides fertile ground for far-right violence. Socially conservative political parties in Poland recognize that it is easier to co-opt participants of the annual Independence Day march in Warsaw and other similar events than it is to rein them in. These political parties have also promoted polarizing narratives in the lead up to parliamentary elections in 2015 (Muslim refugees) and 2019 (anti-LGBTQI+), with the next one scheduled for fall 2023.

Beyond Poland, the larger question is how to approach the challenge posed by far-right extremism given that it is often a political issue as much as a national security issue; this grey area has impeded efforts in several countries with far-right violence

to meaningfully understand, track, and evaluate the evolution of the political and security challenges. It is easier to crack down on groups that condone violence when they are not aligned to a viable political movement, after all.

Another challenge in articulating why extremist dynamics in Poland merit more attention than they have received to this point is the lack of a successfully perpetrated mass-casualty attack by violent far-right actors in Poland. However, it is arguably appropriate to compare violent far-right groups in Poland with, for example, the Proud Boys and the Ku Klux Klan in the United States. While both groups spread hate and intimidate their adversaries, neither officially sanctions violence. Several of the Polish researchers who track far-right extremism in their home country interviewed for this article argued that violent far-right groups in Poland have simply lacked targets, especially with a socially conservative government in power on the national level and so few racial, ethnic, and religious minorities.¹¹¹ But with more than three millions Ukrainians now residing in Poland and parliamentary elections scheduled for fall 2023, which could lead to a liberal government taking power, it is possible that far-right violence could become more profound or increase.^w These factors, combined with international far-right groups' fascination with Poland, indicate that the global counterterrorism community should pay more attention to this Central European country of 38 million people. **CTC**

w There are already reports in Germany of violent far-right extremism committed against refugees from Ukraine. "German Police Investigate Attempted Arson at Nursery Hosting Ukrainian Refugees," Euronews, August 31, 2022.

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