

Polish Far-Right Forming 'National Guard' to Protect Churches Following Abortion Protests



By Tim Hume
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Robert Bąkiewicz tells reporters that his group “will defend every church, every district, every town, every village”.

Polish ultranationalist networks vowed to form a militia to “defend” the country’s Catholic churches from pro-choice protesters today, after far-right activists brutally broke up demonstrations against the church over draconian new abortion laws.

Robert Bąkiewicz, the far-right leader of a group who roughed up women protesters at Warsaw’s Church of the Holy Cross Sunday, told reporters he was forming a “National Guard” to protect the country’s churches from pro-choice demonstrations.

“We will defend every church, every district, every town, every village,” he said, describing the protesters as part of a “neo-Bolshevik revolution” waged by “anti-civilisation groups” to attack Polish Catholics.

“I can say that a sword of justice is hanging upon them, and if necessary, we will turn them into dust and destroy this revolution. If the Polish nation isn’t able to give us this security, we will take action.”

Major protests have broken out across Poland since the country’s top court ruled last week that abortion in the case of severe foetal defects was unconstitutional. The ruling removed the most common of the few existing grounds for legal termination in the staunchly Catholic country, whose abortion laws, already among the strictest in Europe, result in an estimated 100,000 women travelling overseas for terminations each year.

In unprecedented scenes on Sunday, thousands of pro-choice protesters targeted Catholic services across the country, chanting, brandishing protest signs, and spraying slogans such as “abortion without borders” and “you have blood on your hands” on church walls. In at least three cities, far-right groups mobilised to “defend” the churches from protests.

In the capital, Bąkiewicz and members of his ultranationalist Independence March Association brutally cleared protesters from the Church of the Holy Cross in central Warsaw, while police turned a blind eye. One woman protester was thrown down the stairs leading into the church by far-right activists and taken away in a hospital, while others were forcefully hauled out of the building.

One woman told Polish news site OKO.press that she was insulted and manhandled out of the church after placing a poster reading “My body, my business” under the altar. “A man walked up to it and tore it up and a few men started to yank me and tug me outside,” she said. “They put their hand on my mouth and said ‘Shut up you slut’ and they took me outside.”

Rafal Pankowski, an associate professor at Warsaw university Collegium Civitas and an expert on the Polish far-right, said the intervention into the country’s abortion debate by the ultranationalist far-right was troubling, but unsurprising.

“I think it’s very worrying on many different levels,” he told VICE News. “I think it increases the potential for more violence. These are strong-arm, violent men preparing and looking for violent confrontations.”

He said while the ultranationalist scene would appear to hold little in common with the values of mainstream Catholics, in Poland, the radical right and the church had increasingly become political bedfellows, as the church became “more and more hardline and more and more open to such alliances.”

With Polish society becoming increasingly polarised under the ruling nationalist Law and Justice party, amid a culture war raging over issues like immigration, LGBTQ rights, and now abortion, the far-right had positioned itself as a staunch defender of a traditionalist Polish Catholic identity.

“These extremist groups are quite happy to step in and act as defenders of the faith — for them, it’s an opportunity to gain a foothold in terms of respectability and legitimacy,” said Pankowski.

“Guys who might be violent football hooligans suddenly feel they’re defenders of the cross, Catholic tradition and identity, and the church is enabling them to do it,” he said, adding that far-right groups had also shown up in response to protests at churches in the cities of Katowice and Łódź on Sunday.

“It’s clear those groups did not just turn up uninvited. In each case they actively cooperated with the parish priest,” he said. “This increases their standing in society, their respectability and self-confidence.” While the far-right is vowing further mobilisation, so too are those protesting the crackdown on abortion. On Monday, protesters carried out a “block” demonstration, occupying streets with their cars and spamming the email accounts of politicians who supported the abortion restrictions. They’re calling for a strike on Wednesday, and a mass protest in Warsaw Friday.

Pankowski said that with ultranationalist groups, many of whose members were drawn from the violent football hooligan scene, increasingly emboldened over the issue, there was potential for things to take a dark turn.

“The intensity of social conflict in Poland right now is beyond anything we’ve witnessed before,” he said.

Additional reporting by Nina Żabicka.

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/v7mgp3/polish-far-right-robert-bakiemicz-national-guard>