

How some Polish far-right nationalists went from setting their hopes on Trump to rallying against him

By Rick Noack
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BERLIN — When President Trump addressed the Polish people during a key speech in Warsaw on July 6, 2017, his remarks ticked all the boxes the country’s right-wing government and some members of the far right deemed important.

“The fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive. Do we have the confidence in our values to defend them at any cost? Do we have enough respect for our citizens to protect our borders? Do we have the desire and the courage to preserve our civilization in the face of those who would subvert and destroy it?” Trump said in the Polish capital.

During his speech, the crowd cheered while waving U.S. and Polish flags, and a live TV camera panned onto a Confederate flag.

By the time Trump was done, supporters of Poland’s government were ecstatic, and some far-right nationalists, who had remained skeptical, started to have higher hopes for him.

Within days of Trump’s speech, Poland’s far-right National Movement party demanded that the U.S. ambassador to Poland drop his support for an LGBTQ Pride march, citing Trump’s remarks that suggested Christian identity needed to be defended across the Western world.

Two years on, agreement with Trump on some issues has turned into outright anger among these same nationalists.

Trump’s election and subsequent remarks, said Rafal Pankowski, a social sciences researcher and advocate with the anti-extremism group Never Again, had initially appeared to prove and legitimize “their take on national identity.

“Now, the disappointment is quite striking.”

“Some of those people who were initially very enthusiastic about Trump,” said Pankowski, have now come “to see Trump as a link to Jewish and Israeli interests, and they are much more against the U.S.”

On Saturday, thousands of far-right activists and supporters marched to the U.S. Embassy in Warsaw to protest a law signed by Trump last year — the Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today Act — that aims to help Jews seek compensation for property lost during the Holocaust.

The law only requires State Department officials to provide updates on restitution and does not punish failure by foreign officials to facilitate such compensation. But Poland’s governing right-wing Law and Justice party has long argued that the country was a victim of the Nazis, that Poles bear no responsibility for the Holocaust, and that Poland should be compensated itself instead of having to compensate others.

For Trump, who has portrayed himself as a friend of Israel and of the Polish government, the Polish anti-U.S. protests could become a case study on the risks of global collaboration between nationalist movements. Whereas Trump’s 2017 Warsaw speech was seen as symbolizing the ascent of “nationalist internationalism” at the time, Saturday’s mass rally in the same city proved its limits.

One of the politicians who participated in the march, Janusz Korwin-Mikke, has links to the same party that used to cite Trump only two years ago, the National Movement.

Historians agree that Poland — one of Europe’s centers of Jewish life before the Holocaust — suffered immensely under Nazi occupation and that Nazi killing campaigns also targeted millions of Christians and other opponents. Even though many Poles argue that their ancestors’ suffering was never sufficiently acknowledged or compensated, researchers have also maintained that some Poles collaborated with the Nazis.

While differing takes on history explain recent Israeli-Polish confrontations on a diplomatic level, human rights advocates fear that the tensions may have resulted in an increase in anti-Semitic hate speech, too. They say that far-right nationalist groups are exploiting the historic dispute to stir tensions against Jews, which have persisted among some Poles.

Over Easter, for instance, children in the Polish town of Pruchnik were encouraged by their parents to beat and burn a “Judas” effigy, with features that bore strong similarities to stereotypes about Jews, including Orthodox Jewish sidelocks and a large nose.

While the Polish interior minister called the incident “idiotic,” government critics say that top officials are indirectly fueling such sentiments. Many others, Pankowski said, had remained silent.

“I can’t see a big change in the overall attitude,” he said.

Over the weekend, Polish government officials also appeared to side with nationalist protesters when they canceled an Israeli delegation visit planned for Monday, amid speculations that Jewish restitution claims would come up during the talks.

“Americans only think about Jewish and not Polish interests,” 22-year-old protester Kamil Wencwel told the Associated Press.

Another protester, according to the AP, wore a shirt that read: “I will not apologize for Jedwabne.” The town of Jedwabne was the site of a massacre in 1941, in which Jews were killed by their Polish neighbors.

The slayings have remained a dark stain on Polish history and a point of contention whenever claims of Polish involvement in Nazi crimes are raised. Poles from across the political spectrum condemned President Barack Obama after he spoke of a “Polish death camp” in 2012, instead of the wording strongly encouraged by Polish officials: “Nazi camp.”

Obama’s rhetoric and other similar examples resulted in a law passed by the Polish Parliament last year that criminalized references to Polish guilt in Nazi atrocities in certain cases.

But the populist move soon turned out to be an obstacle to another populist promise of Poland’s far right: to persuade the U.S. government to open a military base in the country and to counter Russia.

The State Department soon afterward emerged as a powerful critic of the new legislation, siding with the fierce criticism coming out of Israel.

“One cannot change history, and the Holocaust cannot be denied,” Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said early last year.

After months of gradual backtracking, the law was largely walked back in the summer, and the Polish government later reconciled with Trump when it offered to name a possible U.S. military base after him.

But the backtracking infuriated some far-right voters, who perceived the U.S. and Israeli pressure as meddling in domestic politics. Its lasting impact — combined with long-held skepticism against the United States among some of Poland’s far-right groups — was on display Saturday in what Pankowski called “probably the biggest such rally in my memory in the last years” with an anti-Jewish message.

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