

Ahead of elections, Poland's conservative media fires up anti-LGBTQ propaganda

Activists say scaremongering about LGBTQ communities has almost become official policy in Poland

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As Hubert Sobecki and about a thousand others marched through the streets of Bialystok for the city's first Pride March in late July, people shouted slurs and threw rocks. Others — hooligans, some in neo-fascist attire — attacked protesters with fists and kicks as they made their way through this conservative eastern city.



“It was a lynch-like situation,” said Sobecki, who is an LGBTQ activist from the organization Love Does Not Exclude.

At the nearby Branicki Palace, one of many protests against Pride took the form of a picnic that featured a bouncy castle for children, live music, and several local members of the Law and Justice party (PiS), which has been in power since 2015. The violence of Bialystok's Pride March, which resulted in dozens of injuries and at least 77 were fined or charged, has put rights organizations on high alert throughout Europe and the world. It ended that afternoon when police fired tear gas and used pepper spray to disperse the crowd of far-right protesters.

While homophobia is nothing new in Catholic and conservative Poland, an energized anti-LGBTQ narrative has emerged as the country prepares for the second of two major elections on Sunday. The source largely stems from the far-right government, whose leaders have made aggressive statements about the LGBTQ community. Recently, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the PiS leader, said Poland was being threatened by LGBTQ people and from Europe, where families can have “two mummies or two daddies.”

“Christianity is part of our national identity, the [Catholic] Church was and is the preacher and holder of the only commonly held system of values in Poland,” he continued, in the same speech. “Outside of it... we have only nihilism.”

PiS has been aided by Poland's leading conservative media outlets, at least two of which have direct links to the government. The negative media coverage, led by the conservative press has resulted in a full-fledged disinformation and hate campaign against Poland's LGBTQ community. According to Stanley Bill, Director of the Polish Studies Programme at the University of Cambridge, “Scaremongering about ‘LGBTQ ideology’ has almost become official policy in Poland with often nasty insinuations from members of the government and public media now the norm.”

That same week Pride took place in Bialystok, Gazeta Polska, a right-wing weekly founded in 1993 with sales of about 22,000 copies, distributed a sticker that featured a crossed-out rainbow flag and the words, “LGBTQ free zone.” Forum, which publishes Gazeta Polska, has on its board several people directly linked to Poland's de facto president Jaroslaw Kaczyński, including his cousin, a personal secretary, his driver, and a PiS MEP. Another right-wing weekly, wSieci, founded in 2012 with a circulation of about 37,000, ran a cover saying that the “LGBTQ ideology has totalitarian features” which is trying to “impose its vision on society by force.”

Over the better part of a decade, PiS has often deployed conspiracy theories to agitate its way into power. For a long time, it claimed its political opponents were involved or complicit in the 2010 Smolensk air disaster which killed 96 people, including Poland's President Lech Kaczyński. At other times, PiS has railed against the supposed “parasites” carried by refugees.

The men behind wSieci are the twin brothers Jacek and Michal Karnowski. The Karnowskis founded the weekly magazine in 2012 after being fired from the public television broadcaster, TVP. The publication — which Jacek Karnowski described to Coda as an independent magazine focused on political, social and international issues — is one of three Polish weeklies that have published anti-gay covers and articles.

In July, as Pride parades were organized in different Polish cities, one of wSieci's cover stories warned of the threat of LGBTQ ideology taking over Polish culture. “A powerful attack on Poland is taking place,” it read. Another cover of

wSieci featured an image of a crying young boy with a rainbow flag tied around his mouth. The headline said, “The dark side of the homo-rainbow.”

Poland’s ideological war

Poland’s LGBTQ population has been on a quest for recognition for decades. Even though independent Poland did not criminalize homosexuality, conservatism toward the LGBTQ community has permeated the country’s social tissue since independence and beyond. During the cold war, a government policy known as Operation Hyacinth mandated the creation of a national database of gay people. The operation, which has been described as the “Polish Stonewall”, sparked the birth of the country’s gay movement.

But the absence of laws protecting LGBTQ people from aggression and hate speech, together with widespread influence of the conservative Catholic church, have sidelined Poland’s path towards equality, seen in other countries in the past years. A homogenous country with few refugees and religious minorities, Poland has often been home to ideologies that aim to protect the country from Western influence. The rise of anti-LGBTQ rhetoric in Poland is rooted in this phenomenon, and is stoked further by current national politics.

According to Jacek Karnowski, wSieci’s editor in chief, the “totalitarian LGBTQ ideology has conquered and dominates western countries.” Poland still has room to save itself, he continued. “In Poland you can still oppose it, and that is what I do. That is why I don’t show respect for gay people,” he said in an interview.

Anti-LGBTQ violence and hate speech is an everyday experience for a big part of Poland’s queer community. A study conducted by the local organization KPH, or Campaign Against Homophobia, in cooperation with the Research Center on Prejudice at the University of Warsaw, revealed some alarming data. Almost 70% of the LGBTQ people interviewed in the survey reported experiencing at least one type of violence in their life (physical, verbal, sexual) and less than four percent of them reported the episode to the police. Depression is much more widespread within the LGBTQ community than it is in Polish society as a whole, the study shows, and most LGBTQ individuals opt for hiding their sexual orientation at school or in the workplace.

The Polish government doesn’t gather official statistics on discrimination or hate crimes against the queer community, but for activists and non-profit organizations, it is clear that Poland isn’t a great place to be gay. A study by Ilga Europe ranks European countries on a scale from 0% to 100% according to their respect for LGBTQ rights. According to Ilga, Poland scores 18%, just above Belarus (13%), Latvia (17%) and a little below Italy (22%.) Unlike many European countries, Poland has no laws that tackle hate crimes, hate speech or hatred against LGBTQ people in general. (They are in place in countries like Spain, Sweden, Luxembourg and Malta, on the other hand.)

Conspiracy theories

In the ideological war waged by government and the press, queer people and the left are often seen as being on the same side. Karnowski said the left has been stoking pro-LGBTQ sentiment to the detriment of the status quo.

Karnowski also said people who showed up at Pride parades this summer were just puppets in the hands of a left-wing lobby trying to dismantle Poland’s traditional values.

“They showed up at marches in small town pretending to be local, but in fact they came from big cities,” said Karnowski, suggesting the existence of an organized effort to stir up unrest among rural populations.

According to Michal Kuś, an assistant professor at the Institute of Political Science at the University of Wrocław, PiS has turned its attention to the LGBTQ rights movement mainly because the conspiracy theories about Smolensk and refugees no longer worked. “The anti-LGBTQ movement is not accidental,” Kuś said. “It’s not an overreaction to a specific event. It’s prepared as a part of pre-electoral agenda setting.”

“We’re the new scapegoat,” says Sobecki, of Love Does Not Exclude. Sobecki is worried that any constitutional majority for PiS would remove any remaining protections against the LGBTQ community. “Maybe [PiS] would make it illegal to be gay or accuse NGOs of spying, like Putin does.”

Indeed, even though PiS is anti-Russian, there are uncomfortable parallels between PiS's homophobic rhetoric and the Putin regime's years-long quest to scapegoat LGBTQ people not just in Russia but in other Eastern European countries — an issue Coda has covered extensively.

Real stakes

This homophobic rhetoric translates into real danger. Łukasz Warzecha, a well-known columnist for *Do Rzeczy*, another right-wing weekly magazine, which has also published anti-LGBTQ covers, says that the left-leaning media exaggerate the threat that the LGBTQ community faces. "Poland is, in fact, quite a tolerant and liberal country," Warzecha says. But this is not quite true.

Marzenna Latawiec is the founder of an organization of parents of homosexual children, called "My, Rodice." She has campaigned against homophobia since her gay son was physically assaulted on a street in central Warsaw on New Year's Eve in 2013.

He and his boyfriend were holding hands while walking, said Latawiec, when two strangers came from behind, forcefully separated them, shoved both of them to the side and beat them up. They both survived the attack, but Latawiec said that since then her son has known he can't be safe in Poland. He now lives in Germany, where he works as an architect.

This summer, Latawiec's organization took part in almost all pride parades across the country. She said she was shocked to see the conservative press' reaction to them.

"It's a dangerous situation," she said. "The public scene is polarized, there are more and more people who support the LGBTQ community, but there is a lot on the other side, too."

While Jacek Karnowski, the editor-in-chief of *wSieci*, believes that a powerful lobby congregated in small Polish towns in a bid to attack traditional values, Latawiec explained the involvement of non-local activists as a safety precaution.

"Some small organizations are half secret, their people aren't necessarily out on the scene, and that is why organizations from all of Poland come to support them. It's easier to go and march together, it's more dangerous when you go alone," said Latawiec.

When Sobecki, of *Love Does Not Exclude*, was growing up in the small town of Gostynin in the 1980s, being homosexual was far from being accepted. Even moving to Warsaw to attend high school didn't help, he said. It remained hard for him to come to terms with being gay, and the feeling that he couldn't count on Poland's institutions to protect him has accompanied him throughout his adult life.

"I don't feel safe at all, and I'm not alone in that sentiment. You learn how to blend in, how not to provoke—your very existence is a provocation. There are areas of the city you don't visit, places you don't go to. You can get beaten up at the very center of the city and no one will react and if you go to the police you will not be sure what the reaction will be," he said.

He said in some ways things are getting worse.

"Something has changed. And it begins with words. It starts with what you hear in the media."

The media landscape in Poland

One of the main obstacles of challenging the publication of anti-gay propaganda by conservative magazines is the absence of hate speech laws specifically protecting the LGBTQ community. Last July, a court ruled that *Gazeta Polska* should stop distributing anti-gay stickers with the magazine — a decision that was hailed as victory by rights activists, despite the fact that violation of "personal rights" and not homophobia, was named as grounds for the ruling. *Gazeta Polska* dismissed the ruling.

When *Gazeta Polska* published its stickers, the weekly *Do Rzeczy* suggested in a controversial cover that if the opposition were to win the upcoming elections, Poland would end up being run by the LGBTQ community.

“If those opposing PiS win,” read the cover of the magazine. “This is what Poland would look like in 2021 if the anti-PiS party wins,” it read below. The cover showed a man on a podium wearing sunglasses – supposedly an example of gay attire – with rainbow flags behind him.

When PiS took over the government after the 2015 elections, it quickly began a systematic attack on Poland’s free press. It purged TVP and Polskie Radio — Poland’s influential public broadcasters — firing hundreds of experienced journalists without cause and replacing them with party loyalists regardless of their media experience.

At the helm of TVP, PiS installed Jacek Kurski, a former member of the European Parliament. Under Kurski’s leadership, TVP was quickly transformed into a mouthpiece for the government where conspiracy theories and disinformation ran rampant.

“TVP has been transformed into a tool of crude political propaganda, and it’s unlike anything you see anywhere in Europe,” says Rafal Pankowski, a professor of sociology at Collegium Civitas in Warsaw.

Earlier this year, TVP broadcast a segment that included a photo of President of the European Council Donald Tusk next to pictures of Hitler and Stalin. In May 2018, TVP published a story with the headline: “Homosexuality: A sin repulsive even for Satan.”

PiS, which controls huge state companies, has also sought to silence oppositional private media by cutting advertising from critical publishers. For many center and center-left publications, the cut in ads meant a significant reduction of revenue.

Gazeta Wyborcza is one of Poland’s most important daily newspapers and a critic of the government. According to data released by Kantar Media, a British research firm, during the first seven months of 2017, the paper received around \$500,000 in revenue from state companies and several Polish ministries. One year later, the number had fallen to about \$53,000.

For the three right-wing weekly magazines, ad purchases skyrocketed. In the year after PiS came to power, for example, Do Rzeczy received a 700% increase in state ad revenue, even though circulation is falling.

Local fights

But the media isn’t the only place where Poland’s gay rights fight is occurring.

In February of this year, Rafal Trzaskowski, the mayor of Warsaw and member of the opposition party Civic Platform, issued a 12-point pro-LGBTQ declaration with the intent of helping the local queer population feel safer and to signal that Poland, too, was evolving on the issue.

The declaration, whose funding was eventually turned down by the mayor’s office after pressure by conservative councilmembers, included a pledge to introduce sex education in schools compliant with World Health Organization standards. The declaration provoked a backlash among PiS members, the catholic church, and conservative organizations, who worried that “LGBTQ ideology” would corrupt Polish children.

The argument linking LGBTQ rights and pedophilia or corruption of the youth isn’t new, explains Magdalena Świder of the local organization Campaign Against Homophobia (KPH). Swider has worked as a gay-rights activists in Poland for eight years and has noticed a mounting polarization in Polish public discourse as the gay rights movement picked up. “In eight years, I haven’t seen so many people coming out, going to Pride parades. But there also never been as much polarization.”

Her organization, KPH, was impacted by the worsening media discourse last year when the magazine Do Rzeczy sued it for leading an initiative in 200 schools called “Rainbow Fridays, demanding to know which schools took part in it.” The lawsuit was dismissed because the list of schools had been destroyed.

Pawel Lisicki, editor-in-chief of Do Rzeczy, doesn't believe the situation of LGBTQ individuals in Poland to be so serious. "We criticize this kind of activity," he said, referring to 'Rainbow Fridays.' "We think that the present situation of gay rights is completely just and normal, nobody is really attacked. I'm against new privileges for these groups and this minority because I think it's mostly ideologically motivated," he said.

If PiS wins Sunday's elections, as they are expected to, the attacks against the LGBTQ community will likely not stop. For Sobecki, of Love Does Not Exclude, the violence of the Bialystok march represented the true threat they face. "Some compared it to a pogrom, which didn't happen, but the atmosphere could be described as a pogrom situation," he said.

<https://codastory.com/disinformation/poland-elections-lgbtq>