

# Poland's Capital Erupts As Far-Right Take Over Streets For Annual Hate-Fest



By Tim Hume  
November 11, 2020

Violence broke out in Warsaw as hooligans trying to stir up anti-LGBTQ sentiment clashed with police.

Polish ultranationalist groups have adopted an aggressively homophobic theme for their annual Independence Day rally, sparking concerns the event could fuel even greater hostility towards the country's embattled LGBTQ community.

Despite authorities calling for this year's march to be cancelled because of the coronavirus pandemic, thousands joined the annual march through Warsaw, which Polish ultranationalist groups have organised each November 11 for the past decade to commemorate Poland's Independence Day.

The rally swiftly descended into violence, with hooligans clashing with riot police in confrontations around the city centre, amid clouds of choking smoke from the marchers' red flares. The marchers chanted far-right slogans and carried banners featuring the theme of the rally: "Our civilisation, our rules."

Police wrote on Twitter that they had come under attack by groups of hooligans, and several officers had been injured. Footage on social media showed hooligans storming buildings, lighting flares and hurling projectiles at police and buildings.

Footage on social media showed marchers hurling flares at an apartment building where banners supporting recent pro-choice protests and LGBTQ rights were on display, leading to a fire breaking out. A Warsaw fire brigade spokesperson said nobody was hurt in the incident.

Robert Bąkiewicz, head of the far-right Independence March Association which organises the rally, accused the police of provoking the marchers, and treating them more harshly than the left-wing and liberal protesters that have taken to the streets in anti-government protests in recent weeks.

"Today, Polish patriots were unfortunately gassed and battered by the police," he tweeted.

Warsaw police rejected the claims, calling the remarks an attempt to inflame the situation and "incite hooligans into attacking officers." "The behaviour of hooligans, their aggression and threats to the safety of other people required a strong reaction on our part," it tweeted.

The march typically draws tens of thousands of people, attracting both ordinary patriotic Poles as well as organised football hooligans and ultranationalist groups from across Europe, who travel especially for an event that has developed a reputation as one of the largest far-right gatherings in the world. Anti-immigrant and homophobic banners are a common sight among the red and white Polish flags at the rallies, which frequently descend into unrest and street violence.

This year's event is being promoted under the slogan "Our civilisation, our rules," with an official poster depicting a traditional Polish hussar warrior, dressed in armour, driving his sword into a rainbow star. Far-right experts fear the explicitly homophobic messaging, in the midst of a heated culture war playing out between conservatives and progressives over gay rights, abortion and other social issues — will drum up further hatred towards Poland's embattled LGBTQ community.

"We know this is an event which has always been organised by radical, far-right groups. But I think it's the first time that the official message of the event is so openly, blatantly directed against a specific minority with these violent overtones," Rafal Pankowski, head of Poland's anti-racist Never Again Association, told VICE News.

He said the symbol of the rainbow star, being attacked by the Polish warrior, was apparently intended to represent LGBTQ rights and left-wing ideology as a singular enemy of the Polish nation. "I think what they are trying to say is LGBT and Communism are the same thing," he said, describing the poster as a "vile message of discrimination and violence."

This year's march is being held amid extraordinary circumstances, with the country battling a worsening coronavirus pandemic and being buffeted by historic protests against the conservative Law and Justice government, triggered by a recent court ruling implementing an almost complete ban on abortions. The mass protests, led by women and backed by LGBTQ groups and other progressive factions, have highlighted the deepening cultural divide in Poland, with the conservative government, the Catholic church, and nationalists on one side, and liberal and progressive Poles on the other.

The organisers of the Independence Day March, who are drawn from three far-right and ultranationalist organisations, have been active participants in the recent clashes over the court's abortion ruling. Bąkiewicz, the chief organiser of the march, has called on so-called patriots to form patrols to "defend" churches from protesters, and has personally been on the frontlines of far-right counter-demonstrations.

The march also follows the sustained demonisation of the LGBTQ community by the ruling Law and Justice party in successive election campaigns in recent years, which LGBTQ groups say has unleashed new levels of hostility and violence towards their community.

Ola Kaczorek, co-president of Love Does Not Exclude, an organisation that campaigns for marriage equality, told VICE News that the hateful symbol used in the march's poster "weren't shocking any more."

"Are they outrageous, disgusting, and unacceptable? Sure. But they're not shocking. They're just a part of the wider propaganda that targets the LGBT+ community, and pushes us closer and closer to [becoming a] fascist state," Kaczorek said. "The attacks and assaults do happen more frequently. The right-wing extremists are bolder, less afraid of the consequences."

Wednesday's march didn't receive authorisation from Warsaw city authorities due to the country's worsening coronavirus outbreak, while Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki appealed to marchers not to take to the streets this year. Despite the ban, organisers said they intended to gather regardless, suggesting marchers attend in their vehicles instead, while hooligan groups from across the

country and from Hungary said they planned to attend. Thousands had gathered in central Warsaw by Wednesday afternoon, with many marching as usual rather than attending in their cars.

Polish media reported that many police officers in Warsaw were planning to call in sick Wednesday rather than work the event.

Pankowski said while many people opposed the march, they would likely be avoiding Warsaw city centre due to the threat of violence.

“You have to be quite brave to walk around Warsaw city centre on that day if you don’t look like the stereotype of a Polish nationalist — many people have been attacked over the years,” he said.

“It’s really a very sorry state of affairs — this is Poland’s main national holiday and people are afraid to walk around on the streets of the capital.”

*Additional reporting by Nina Žabicka.*

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/bvxx4v/poland-independence-day-march-far-right-lgbtq>