

The State-Funded TV Channel That ‘Makes Fox News Look Moderate’

By Tim Hume
April 4, 2023



Media Narodowe, a Polish online news channel that’s published homophobic and anti-Semitic content, has been taken down by YouTube and is being investigated by Facebook.



A far-right online news channel that’s received funding from the Polish government has been banned from YouTube and is being investigated by Facebook following inquiries by VICE World News over its extremist content targeting Jews, refugees and the LGBTQ community.

But the Polish institute, which approved the nearly £40,000 government grant sees no problem with the channel’s content, and the head of the country’s National Broadcasting Commission has even appealed to YouTube to try to get its account reinstated.

The controversy over Media Narodowe (National Media) has shone a spotlight on the right-wing populist Polish government’s cosy relationship with far-right groups, which critics say is reflected in an alarming tolerance of extremist ideology by some officials and institutions, and, in some cases, outright financial support. Despite its extremist content, the channel has received 198,000 Polish zlotys (£37,022; \$46,200) in public funding from the National Freedom Institute, a state institution overseen by Poland’s Deputy Prime Minister.

Media Narodowe is an online news channel founded by the ultranationalist association that organises Poland’s Independence March, an event held in Warsaw every November that’s notorious for its right-wing extremist and hooligan elements. Despite opposition from liberals and Warsaw city authorities, the annual march has repeatedly been endorsed by the right-wing government, which critics say gives tacit support to the racist and homophobic messages that are on display every year.

The channel’s editor-in-chief Robert Bąkiewicz is a prominent far-right activist, and has carved out a sizable online audience by publishing news-magazine-style video content where

commentators promote anti-Semitic and anti-refugee conspiracy theories, along with anti-LGBTQ messaging.

“Any comparison to Fox News would be unfair to Fox News, which looks like a moderate liberal outlet in comparison,” said Rafal Pankowski, head of the Never Again Association, a Polish anti-racism organisation which recently published a report detailing dozens of examples of extremist content published on the platform.

“InfoWars would be a better analogy,” he said, referring to the far-right channel run by the disgraced conspiracy theorist Alex Jones.

Pankowski said Media Narodowe’s content was “extremist and dangerous,” and the government funding of the channel was “unacceptable by the standards of a modern democratic state.”

Until recently, Media Narodowe’s main audience was on YouTube, where its channel had more than 250,000 subscribers, making it one of the biggest players in the country’s active far-right digital-media landscape.

But in February, after the Never Again Association revealed that the channel was routinely publishing hate speech, YouTube shut the channel down. In response, Media Narodowe simply pivoted to Facebook as its preferred platform, publishing the same formula of far-right, conspiracy-addled video content to its page, while launching a replacement YouTube channel in an attempt to circumvent the ban there. While the Facebook page’s 26,000 followers are significantly fewer than subscribed to Media Narodowe’s banned YouTube channel, it has allowed the channel to continue reaching a substantial online audience.

Following inquiries by VICE World News to both social media giants about the channel’s content, YouTube removed Media Narodowe’s back-up account, while Facebook said it was investigating the channel’s content on its platform.

“Hate speech is unacceptable and we don’t want it on Facebook,” said a spokesperson for Meta, the site’s parent company. “We’ve always removed attacks against people based on their religion, ethnicity or sexuality, and we also remove more implicit hate speech, such as harmful stereotypes that Jewish people control the world.”

Among the extremist content broadcast on Media Narodowe – which did not respond to requests for comment by VICE World News – was a reiteration of the medieval “blood libel”: the centuries-old antisemitic myth that Jews murder Christian children to use their blood in religious rituals. “There is hard evidence that the Jews used the blood of humans and animals primarily for medical purposes, as well as for ritual purposes,” said writer Radoslaw Patlewicz in January 2022.

In January, in a discussion about the release of Prince Harry’s memoir “Spare,” a fringe far-right commentator on Media Narodowe made the false claim that Harry and his brother, Prince William, were Jewish – and used an anti-Semitic slur as he did so.

Other comments broadcast on the channel have included baseless suggestions that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was somehow being carried out to benefit Jewish interests, and that Jews were “mortal enemies” to Poles and Christians, as commentator Tadeusz Matuszyk stated in October.

Bąkiewicz – the channel’s editor-in-chief and also the leader of the Independence March Association – used an appearance last July to push myths about the Jedwabne pogrom, an infamous 1941 massacre of Polish Jews by ethnic Poles which is frequently discussed in revisionist terms on the channel.

“It can be clearly stated that the murder was not committed by the Poles,” Bąkiewicz said, in the face of overwhelming historical consensus, adding that claims by the “Jewish community” to the contrary were made to create the “myth” of criminality by Poles, and develop “this entire religion of the Holocaust.”

The revisionist approach to Polish history – downplaying or denying any Polish role in the persecution of Jews during the Holocaust – echoes the controversial “Holocaust law” introduced by the right-wing populist Law and Justice government in 2018, which criminalised blaming Poland for Nazi-era crimes. Two years earlier, a government minister had sparked international outrage by refusing to acknowledge that Poles had carried out the Jedwabne pogrom.

Other frequent targets of the channel were Ukrainian refugees, who were described as posing a “biological” threat in the form of diseases they would supposedly carry, and the country’s embattled LGBTQ community. The community has been under attack in recent years as a result of sustained campaigns by Poland’s right-wing populist government against “LGBT ideology,” painting it as a menacing foreign import which threatens the traditional Polish family unit.

Media Narodowe’s public funding has come in the form of a grant through the National Freedom Institute, a body set up to promote “civic and patriotic attitudes” which is overseen by Piotr Gliński, Poland’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Culture and National Heritage.

A spokesperson for the institute told VICE World News that the subsidy, which was used to pay for staff and equipment at the channel and ran from 2021 to 2022, was made under a government programme for the development of “civil society organisations” under a funding criteria to support the development of “local watchdog organisations and civic media.”

The spokesperson said the application for funding for the channel, submitted by Bąkiewicz’s Independence March Association, was assessed by independent experts with “outstanding experience” in working with NGOs and evaluating funding bids.

Asked if the institute had concerns about extremist content being published on the channel, or whether it should disqualify Media Narodowe from receiving funding in the future, the spokesperson was non-committal.

“Any communications or publications issued by the beneficiaries, in any form and by any means, reflect only the opinion of their authors,” they said.

The grant to Media Narodowe accounts for only a small chunk of the nearly 5 million zlotys (£934,780; \$1,166,484) in government subsidies paid to Bąkiewicz’s far-right organisations since 2021 through bodies such as the National Freedom Institute and the Patriotic Fund, both of which are overseen by Gliński, Poland’s Deputy Prime Minister. Gliński did not respond to a request for comment on criticism that the public funding for the channel was inappropriate and amounted to supporting and legitimising extremism; a spokesperson for the Ministry for Culture and National Heritage instead referred questions to the National Freedom Institute.

Pankowski said the funding illustrated the troubling relationship Poland's right-wing populist Law and Justice government has cultivated with the ultranationalist far-right since it swept into power in 2015 and began remaking the country in line with its nationalist-conservative vision.

While the government has sometimes sought to distance itself from the radical right and its ugly, neo-fascist associations, critics say that its nationalist agenda has clearly emboldened and legitimised extremists. Its agenda is centred around defending a traditionalist vision of Polish Catholic identity, and critics say this has entailed mainstreaming far-right politics, including through election campaigns demonising migrants and the LGBTQ community; turning a blind eye to their excesses; and actively funding far-right groups.

In return, ultranationalists have proven strategically useful allies in the government's culture war against liberal, progressive forces. When the country was rocked by massive protests against draconian new abortion laws in 2020, ultranationalist groups acted as muscle on the streets roughing up protesters.

Amid raging protests in October 2020, Bąkiewicz called a press conference to announce that he was forming a "National Guard" to defend the country's churches from protesters, vowing that "we will turn them into dust and destroy this revolution." The following year, his newly formed National Guard Association was awarded 1.7 million zlotys (£320,000) in public funds for exhibiting "safety and professionalism during ... patriotic and religious events."

The overt state support for the far-right frequently isn't limited to funding. After YouTube removed Media Narodowe from its platform last month, the chairman of the National Broadcasting Council, a Law and Justice-aligned hardliner named Maciej Świrski, intervened by writing a letter to YouTube and its parent company, Google, asking why it had banned the legally existing organisation, and insisting that it had published nothing anti-Semitic.

The National Broadcasting Council did not respond to VICE World News' questions about Świrski's intervention in support of Media Narodowe, and whether its extremist content made it unsuitable to receive a broadcasting licence. The channel is reportedly in the process of applying for a licence to broadcast on cable television, a move that critics fear will allow it to reach new audiences and make its extremist content more mainstream.

It's a prospect that Pankowski sees as scandalous, and a further indictment of the Polish state's tolerance of right-wing extremism. Along with the government's populist scapegoating campaigns, this has created a society that's increasingly hostile to ethnic minorities and the LGBTQ community in recent years, with public expressions of hate often spilling over into outright violence.

"As a citizen and taxpayer, I am really sad and angry to see that my state ... is pouring all those funds into far-right groups," he said.

"It shows a high degree of acceptance of far-right nationalism."

T. Hume: "The State-Funded TV Channel That «Makes Fox News Look Moderate»". Vice.com, 4.04.2023.

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/ak3d45/media-narodowe-poland>