

QUEER POLAND'S STRUGGLE AGAINST THE FAR RIGHT

An explainer

Background

Even without criminalisation, the situation for non-heteronormative people in Poland has remained difficult for decades due to the domination of the Catholic Church. Attempts to adopt civil partnership failed, opponents relying on a conservative interpretation of Article 18 of the Constitution, defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Circumstances improved slightly in recent years thanks to increased efforts by LGBTQIA+ organizations and wider social acceptance of same-sex relationships. This started to change in 2015, when the right-wing Law & Justice party (PiS) came to power, winning both parliamentary and presidential elections.

Marking the territory

A July 2019 issue of conservative newspaper "Gazeta Polska", whose circulation is c.110,000, came with free stickers featuring a crossed-out rainbow and the inscription "LGBT-free zone". Warsaw's district court ordered the suspension of the distribution of the stickers - the publisher saw this as an attempt to censor and restrict freedom of expression, and continued.

Separation of Church and State?

Despite an official Church/State separation in Poland, ties between the religious hierarchy and right-wing politicians are very strong. In 2019, decades of sexual offences by priests against children were unmasked. In response, the Church pursued a homophobic narrative, blaming homosexuality as responsible for paedophilia. The Bishop of Kraków said Poland was under attack from a "rainbow plague" that "wants to control our souls, hearts, and minds". Such rhetoric was accompanied by calls to limit the EU's influence on Polish politics and to defend Catholic values. The right-wing political class, hand-in-hand with the Church, launched a massive homo, bi- and transphobic ultraconservative campaign based on manipulation and false stereotypes.



Education

Government-controlled media disseminated false information alleging gay activists threatened public order and morality by sexualizing and indoctrinating children with so-called gender ideology. This came as a reaction to the Mayor of Warsaw signing a LGBT+ Declaration which aimed to add gender identity and sexual orientation awareness to the school curriculum, in accordance with WHO guidelines. The campaign resulted in a bill providing for up to three years imprisonment for sex educators. The proposed law provoked protests in major Polish cities, and triggered a European Parliament resolution condemning the criminalisation of sexual education. Similar attempts were made to introduce an even stricter ban on abortion and restrict access to IVF.

“LGBT-free zones”

Unlike officially LGBT-friendly Warsaw, almost a third of the country's territories, especially in the South-East, declared themselves “LGBT-free zones”. In practice, it means that local governments adopted an act pledging allegiance to Catholic values, rejecting the influence of so-called gender ideology. This was a counterattack to mitigate the declining role of the Catholic Church, seen in declining Mass attendance and progressive secularization. Such homophobic measures mostly affect the youth living in such zones, indeed, around 70% of Polish LGBTQIA+ youth suffer from suicidal thoughts, compared to 5% for the general population, clearly showing the destructive effects of such discrimination.

Far-Right Revival – Repression of Civil Rights Activists

Human rights activists have also been repressed to discourage acting against the government's agenda. Social activist Elżbieta Podleśna erected posters of a famous Polish religious painting - the Holy Mary of Częstochowa - with a rainbow halo over her head. She was arrested and prosecuted for an offence against religious feelings, the case is still pending.

Police even detained a 16-year-old for posting his small southern town's coat of arms on a rainbow background on Facebook. Police investigated him under Article 137 of the Penal Code - potential insult to an emblem. The boy was told that he could go to a juvenile detention centre. Fortunately, the case was dropped after gaining nationwide attention, and social media flooded with hundreds of municipal coats-of-arms combined with rainbow colours in solidarity, but the officers suffered no consequences.

Acts of Solidarity

When foreign partner towns and regions were notified that their Polish counterparts had declared themselves “LGBT-free zones”, some immediately terminated cooperation, while others called for an immediate withdrawal of homophobic declarations. To point the finger at these municipalities, and to collect the life stories of non-heteronormative inhabitants, Polish artist Bart Staszewski published moving pictures - LGBT people standing next to their municipality's city-limit signs, to which additional fake “LGBT-free zone” road signs were attached in four languages - drawing attention to the problem.

Despite the ruling party's unfettered homophobia, a large part of society resists this propaganda, with 24 pride parades organised in Poland in 2019, many - especially in small cities - for the first time. Therefore, even as a lot of young Poles migrate abroad in search of freedom, Polish civil society will certainly keep fighting against far-right radicalization.