

# Poland: What went wrong?

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[17th November, 2017](#)

Condemnation and a few more EU aid payments will not fix Poland's resurgent xenophobia.

A week ago, Poland celebrated its independence. Nobody would have noticed, but then some people set Warsaw on fire. Or so I, and most of the rest of the world, assumed from the [shocking aerial shot](#) of the Palace of Culture and Science.

It looks like a revolution. But despite appearances, there was no fire and nobody died. There was, however, a metaphorical explosion. The picture captures a moment in Polish history, a time when Poland is celebrating its impressive success and long-sought independence by destroying itself in fires of its own making. It is a tragedy in live technicolour, perpetrated in part by a government whose bitter xenophobia means it prefers self-immolation to shared sovereignty with its EU partners.

The 'fires' were part of the so-called 'March of Independence', organised annually since 2010 by far-right groups including the National Radical Camp and the All-Polish Youth. This year they assembled about 60,000 Poles to celebrate independence in their own unique way. They chanted ethno-religious slogans such as 'we want God' or 'Poland for Poles', set off red flares, and threw smoke bombs. Even more radical groups then joined the fray with openly racist, anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic slogans.

Of course, every country has its hooligans. What makes Poland different is that the hooligans are a key element of the government's political base. Faced with this violence, most governments would have reacted quickly and unequivocally, not just condemning the violence, but perhaps banning the groups altogether. Instead, state-controlled media described the scenes as a '[great march of patriots](#)', while the leader of the governing Law and Justice Party, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, dismissed what he called marginal '[provocateurs](#)'.

The pictures from Poland, and the government's non-reaction, left other Europeans nonplussed and alarmed. Has Poland gone completely fascist? What *is* this country? What is their problem? Can I still travel there, or will someone punch me in the face? This is happening in the EU?

For a Pole abroad, this is painful to watch. To my European colleagues in London, Poland seems racist and xenophobic. But this is not the Poland I know, not the Poland I lived in. In the mid-00's I lived in a country that, after decades of communist

isolation, was awakening and opening. It saw Europe as a friend – indeed, a Promised Land. I left over 10 years ago, part of a wave of euro-enthusiastic young people keen to seize opportunities offered by EU membership. We were keen to prove that European values were our values, that we were open-minded and ready to work together for our common good and prosperity.

Perhaps we left too soon. Those we left behind now say that the post-communist governments did everything wrong. Communist and foreign elements are still supposedly in the system and need to be eradicated. Europe is an enemy, refugees a danger, Poland is for Poles and, by the way, Germany owes Poland huge reparations.

All of this is more than a little confusing. A trip to my hometown of Gdansk just before the independence march reminded me just what enormous progress Poland has made since it joined the EU. Post-communist transformation was a colossal, collective effort. In economic and security terms it worked. From an obscure, rather corrupt European periphery Poland became a prosperous, secure country, a major European player and a trusted partner.

Twenty years ago, the only foreigners you would meet in the streets of Gdansk were Germans on nostalgia trips. On a Sunday night, the beautiful old town was empty. Now Gdansk has established itself as ‘the city of freedom’, a proud birthplace of Solidarność, it is a charming and vibrant Baltic city and a major attraction for tourists and investors. But how long can it last in the current political climate? Poland is indeed on a path to [waste its potential](#).

What went wrong? Perhaps Poland transformed too fast. Losers from transformation were too many; a voracious capitalism overwhelmed them, culture shifts bewildered them. Or perhaps people like me never really understood Poland. Liberal elites thought they could lead Poland into a new era, but did not feel the pulse of their mostly conservative fellow citizens. We failed to appreciate just how conservative Poland is – not when it comes to economics, but when it comes to values. Religion and family truly are key for Polish national identity and are indeed the cornerstone of independence. You can transform the economy, but you cannot transform such values.

So if Poland is racist or xenophobic, we should not just condemn it, give it some more EU aid, and expect it to change. The lesson of the last twenty years is that we need to make a more serious effort to understand popular grievances instead of dismissing them.

Before World War II Poland was religiously and ethnically diverse. Since then it has become extremely homogenous – overwhelmingly Catholic and almost purely Polish. It was largely cut off from the world during the decades of communism, effectively isolated and dominated by its worst enemy. The idea that your neighbours can be

your friends and partners is thus rather novel and counterintuitive for Poland. Times have changed, but history matters, and it has made Poland very distrustful.

It is now becoming clear that what Europe sees as the successes of the last twenty years, have made many Poles feel distinctly insecure. True, a wise government would seek to address this before it spiralled out of control. But Poland does not have a wise government and it has chosen the fire that threatens Poland as fuel for its political dominance.

Jaroslaw Kaczynski is in denial when he says that the march was disturbed by 'provocateurs'. These were groups that have been allowed to thrive in his vindictive Poland. PiS should realise it is responsible for what we saw in the streets of Warsaw on 11<sup>th</sup> November. More importantly, it should care.

Next year, Poland will celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its independence. It has been a difficult century, but Poland can be proud of having survived and ultimately even thrived. Independence Day 2018 could and should be a beautiful day that would make Poles feel grateful and proud of their achievements. But the omens are not good. If Poland's current political and social trends go unchecked, the pictures of next year's march could be much worse.

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