



POLICY BRIEF 2020/2021, December 15

# “Rainbow Plague”: A ‘New Threat’ to Polish Society and EU Cohesion

Alexandros Vasileiou

## *Key Points*

As of June 2020, nearly 100 regions and towns in Poland are officially “LGBT-free zones”. As statistically wrong as this may sound, these districts proudly claim that the LGBT “ideology” is not at all present within their borders, totally ignoring many gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) citizens. These resolutions, even though they are mostly symbolic, are providing fresh fuel in Poland’s cultural war and are keeping the fear of social exclusion very much alive for the EU’s sexual minorities. The head of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, spoke out against these zones, in her first ‘state of union’ speech, stating that “LGBTQI-free zones are humanity free zones. And they have no place in our union.” Although welcoming, these statements do little to ease the fear of LGBTQ people in Poland, who face continuous hatred by their fellow Poles. EU actions will be essential in bringing peace to Polish society and should focus on:

- Demonstrating the EU’s condemnation of such practices
- Supporting activist groups and LGBTQ-friendly businesses inside the country
- Utilizing the Union’s soft power to ensure a slow but sure change towards acceptance.

## *Introduction*

In a 2019 survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 42% of the respondents in Poland felt that, in the last 12 months, they have been discriminated against because of their sexual orientation. Also, 24% of the respondents have felt discriminated against at work for being LGBTQ. Both these rates are among the highest in the EU. Taking into account these newly set up “LGBT-free zones”, Polish authorities are only going to force these numbers to much higher levels. LGBTQ people in the country feel unsafe, as society’s homophobia is now sanctioned by political figures. Their right to equal opportunities in work and a safe life is being threatened.

The principles of equal treatment, freedom and respect for human rights are fundamental in the EU (Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union). Poland is guilty of violating core EU values and, after the police arrested peaceful LGBT protesters in August 2020, the Human’s Right Watch observed a “deterioration of the rule of law in Poland”. This has, of course, caused a judicial and cultural clash between the EU and Poland. A clash which affects not only the relationship between the EU and its member state but also the



Polish people's views on the EU. Conservative Poles (which take up a great part of Poland, a country where religion and nationalism play an important role) feel that the values of openness and acceptance are -much like communism- imposed on them by countries such as France and Germany and threaten traditional Polish families.

A relentless culture war is brewing in Poland, with implications for its position in the Union. For its LGBTQ people, EU citizens, hiding is no longer an option.

### *What is happening in Poland*

Decades before many European countries, in 1932, Poland decriminalized homosexuality and in the first years of the 21st century, there was hope that winds of change would bring in a new progressive Poland. All that hope was shattered when in 2015 the Law and Justice Party (PiS) won the elections. This conservative-nationalist party (which is still the ruling one), along with the country's Catholic Church, is promoting an agenda that is helping spread hatred against LGBTQ Poles. For them, this is the perfect way to defend the well-being of the traditional Polish family and society. Before that, conservative Poles would just ignore LGBTQ people and possibly insult them behind their backs, creating, nonetheless, a free space for slow but steady change for the best. Now, their extreme views are being supported by major political and religious figures.

In 2019, the ruling party's new education minister stated that "these (LGBTQ) people are not equal to normal people". Even the party's leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, has claimed that they "threaten the Polish state".

### 'LGBT-ideology-free' zones

September 2020



Source: atlasnienawisci.pl, OSM, GADM

Krakow's Archbishop also addressed the situation, arguing that Poland is under attack by a "rainbow plague".

It was during this political climate that the city council of Świdnik, a town in eastern Poland, declared itself free from the LGBTQ "ideology". Many regions and towns followed suit and, now, nearly 1/3 of Poland, a

place inhabited by up to 10 million people, is an "LGBT-free" zone.



(Source: Deutsche Welle, “*How the EU can stop Poland’s ‘LGBT-free zones’*”)

Many people in Poland are also comparing the promotion of LGBTQ rights to communism. A lot of them have lived through the country’s fight for democracy during the ‘80s when the Soviet Union was still imposing its will on much of Eastern Europe. As such, they feel like it is their duty to warn their fellow countrymen. Proudly waving their red flags, communists lead the country through dark times while claiming that they were here to help poor workers. In the same way, activists are waving their rainbow flags in a supposed effort to protect sexual minorities. For these conservative Poles, they are actually spreading a foreign concept imported from the West. In his summer reelection campaign for president, Andrzej Duda, an ally of the PiS, called the promotion of LGBTQ rights an “ideology” even more destructive than communism. His message was appealing. On June 28, he won reelection.

Hostility in the streets of Poland is becoming ever more intense and is forcing many LGBTQ people back “into the closet”.

### *What has the EU done so far*

The EU did not remain idle. One of its biggest member states has been proudly ignoring a fundamental European value by simply denying the existence of a certain group of people. In doing so, it’s also making the EU appear as the new enemy of the Polish state.

Ursula von der Leyen stated that “Being yourself is not an ideology. It’s your identity” and made it clear that she would not accept practices that facilitate discrimination against EU citizens.

Soon, these words evolved into action. The EU ceased the funding of several Polish towns that passed these anti-LGBTQ resolutions and made it impossible for them to “twin” with other EU towns, making it hard for them to cooperate with the rest of the EU. Many EU towns annulled their already existing partnerships with Polish towns, to showcase their support. The European Commission also sent formal letters to the leaderships of the Polish towns, warning that such violations of the Treaty on European Union could lead to legal action.

It should be mentioned here that another important step has already been taken through the first-ever EU strategy on LGBTIQ equality (Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025) which offers concrete measures towards tackling discrimination against LGBTQ people.

But the people in Poland, rightfully so, believe that this is not enough to halt the government’s growing habit of targeting and violating their rights.

### *Recommendations*



Indeed, the EU should act efficiently before it's too late and the issue reappears with even stronger momentum. The measures the Union should take could include 3 major axes:

### **1. A condemnation of these violations.**

The EU should showcase that it fulfills its obligation to ensure a safe society for its citizens so that they don't lose their trust towards the Union's hand of aid. The permanent withholding of funds and condemnation from every relevant EU institution are a great step to ensure this trust. Consequently, they must continue. Of course, such actions will probably not change the practices of Polish politicians. But it is important to show that the EU will not remain indifferent when its citizens are being threatened with social exclusion by a member-state. Surprisingly, the European Committee of the Regions has not taken any action, despite the European Parliament's invitation to do so. Only the Group of the Party of European Socialists (PES Group) in the Committee has published an article on the issue. This must change. The EU must appear united in combating discrimination and human rights violations.

### **2. Direct support towards LGBT activist groups inside Poland and everywhere in the EU and towards LGBTQ-friendly businesses**

Many Polish LGBT activists believe that to solve the problem, they must come together. It is essential that the EU facilitates the work of activist groups by giving them a platform where they can come together and collectively work towards their goals. This EU platform would help create a network of social movements that have an ideal space for meeting, discussing common plans of action, and building up their capabilities, under the auspices of the EU. This could be implemented by creating a program similar to the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights which promotes the role of civil society in promoting human rights and democracy in non-EU countries. The issue in Poland highlights that such an initiative, focusing however more on human rights, would be helpful for EU countries as well.

Apart from that, the EU should support businesses in Poland that promote an LGBTQ-friendly work environment through funds coming from the new European Social Fund Plus and the EU Platform of Diversity Charters that provides access to a network of peers in exchange for diversity in the workplace.

The EU should not move towards more drastic measures of this kind. Many, for example, proposed the use of article 7 of the Treaty on European Union which expels certain rights of a member-state that violates EU values. But this will only help by building up animosity between Poland and the EU. More importantly, it will provide fresh ammunition for conservative Polish politicians and will reinforce their claims that an intrusive Union of Western countries is attacking Polish society and values. Because of this, fearful Poles will rally around them, creating an even wider die-hard base of





conservatives. The EU should, instead, focus on the use of its immense soft power, focusing especially on how art and culture can tackle a nation's social issues.

### **3. The Utilization of EU programs to promote LGBTQ Polish art**

Whether it is a poem, a film or a novel, art can make us understand something that would sound indifferent through bare words. It can create discussion, make us share our opinions, and cultivate tolerance. As such, the EU should aid the work of Polish artists, screenwriters, poets, authors that are willing to address especially LGBTQ issues in order to share experiences, spread awareness, aestheticize the need for change and sensitize Polish society. In that way, they will create the necessary environment for slow but sure change, an up-and-coming LGBTQ culture that is Polish and Polish alone. Such a feature can be achieved through the Commission's program "Creative Europe" that supports the EU's cultural sector through funding artist's projects, which enables them to develop their work.

### *Conclusion*

History has proven time and again that no true social change comes from punitive methods and force. That is exactly why the EU should, firstly, offer some support to LGBTQ-friendly efforts inside Poland. But the real change will come through nurturing a Polish LGBTQ-friendly culture that will help in shaping the nation's mentality.

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