

Rainbow Resistance: The Fight of LGBTQ Activists in Poland against Post-Election Repressions

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Only one day after the Polish National Electoral Commission announced the incumbent president Andrzej Duda as the winner of the close runoff elections, a queer activist was arrested in Warsaw. According to witnesses, Margot's arrest looked more like a kidnapping because ununiformed police officers handcuffed her with the use of force and dragged her out of her friend's flat. She is part of a queer collective "[Stop Bzdurom](#)" (Stop the Bullshit) that uses direct action to counter the persistent disinformation campaign targeting the LGBTQ community, sexual education, and reproductive justice. In the past few years, homophobic and transphobic hate speech became a standard political resource in a country that has gained the dishonorable status of [the most homophobic in the European Union](#). Queers have become public enemy number one in Poland.

Whereas Hungary's Victor Orbán mobilizes xenophobic sentiments against refugees and the Roma, Polish conservatives placed their bet on sexual minorities as [a perfect scapegoat](#) in times of social and economic uncertainty. With elections pushed to take place in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, Duda's presidential campaign was fraught with anti-LGBT rhetoric. He promised that he will prevent teaching about LGBT-related issues at schools and warned against the so-called LGBT "ideology" as more destructive than communism. His own words that "LGBT is an ideology, not people" were widely criticized as dehumanizing. However, taken at face value, they also reveal the high currency of the simplistic formulas offered by the widespread mobilization against the amorphous and multifunctional "gender ideology."

Weaponizing state-controlled public media for the presidential campaign, the ruling party consistently portrayed the LGBTQ community as an imminent and foreign threat to Polish traditional family values. Meanwhile, the Polish Catholic Church also demonized the ominous "LGBT ideology" to divert attention from the pedophilia scandal in its ranks. In August 2018, the Archbishop of Kraków, Marek Jędraszewski publicly denounced the "[rainbow plague](#)" afflicting the country: "not Marxist, Bolshevik, but born of the same spirit, neo-Marxist. Not red, but rainbow." The deep-seated anti-communism behind such statements made by public officials and Catholic Church representatives remains unchallenged in the Polish political context, polarized between liberal and conservative camps that both univocally condemn communism as a totalitarian regime. Before Law and Justice came to power, the centrist-liberal government of the Civic Platform focused on maintaining the status quo for the sake of neoliberal reforms, thus not troubling to contest the hegemony of the Catholic Church, family traditionalism, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia and providing a fertile ground for nationalist radicalization. Moreover, an anti-communist agenda serves as a red (sic!) thread connecting various local and international actors invested in the war against "gender ideology," an elusive enemy that when necessary easily morphs into "LGBT ideology."

Apart from the nationalist state and the Catholic Church, a network of ultraconservative

nongovernmental organizations became prominent in orchestrating attacks against the LGBTQ community in Poland. Charges against Margot were pressed by Fundacja PRO Prawo do życia (Foundation PRO Right to Life), a group active in [anti-abortion campaigning](#). Recently, this fundamentalist GONGO (government-organized non-governmental organization) was responsible for [drafting a bill](#) titled “Stop Pedophilia Act” that proposed criminalizing any form of sexual education (a subject practically inexistent in Polish schools). As part of their campaign to collect signatures under this sinister civic law project, one that has nothing to do with combating pedophilia, the Foundation sent out vans covered with homophobic slogans and armed with loudspeakers. The vans drive around several Polish cities and spread hateful and false messages about homosexuality. It is important to note that the legal path to combat such an obvious case of hate speech in a public space has been exhausted with [no success](#). On June 27th, one such “homophobus,” as activists have started calling them, stopped in front of the Warsaw “Syrena” squat, with a clear intention to disturb a gathering that was taking place there. In response to this provocation, several activists first tried to chase them away, and eventually spray-painted the car and slashed the tires. Since Margot’s arrest, members of the Foundation gather regularly in front of “Syrena” with their homophobic banners and rosaries to “pray the gay away.”

The Foundation PRO is one of several ultraconservative groups active in Polish public life. Moreover, it is part of a larger [transnational religious fundamentalist movement](#) gathered under the umbrella organization “Tradition, Family and Property” (TFP) that in the early 2000s started to treat [Eastern Europe as a new frontier](#) for building a new right-wing civil society. A proliferation of affiliated local groups and think tanks stands behind campaigning against the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention on gender-based violence in Hungary, the 2013 referendum on the constitutional definition of marriage in Croatia, a similar initiative to define family as a union between a man and a woman in the Romanian constitution in 2013, 2016, and 2018, and blocking the civil union law in Estonia until 2016, among many other examples.

In her latest book [*This is War. Women, Fundamentalists and the New Middle-Ages*](#), investigative journalist Klementyna Suchanow reveals the complex economic and institutional dependencies binding various right-wing and religious organizations, tracking their growing political influence from Brazil, through the U.S. and Russia, to Europe. In Poland one of the major players affiliated with TFP is a legal think tank, “Ordo Iuris”, which is part of the extremist-Catholic [Agenda Europe](#) advocacy network that seeks to “restore the natural order” by blocking or dismantling policy infrastructure on reproductive and sexual rights. Ordo Iuris is responsible for drafting the legislation to completely ban abortion that was eventually withdrawn after mass protests, and the Convention of the Rights of the Family that is supposed to be an alternative to the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention on gender-based violence. Apart from legislative campaigns and policy lobbying, they also represent individuals and groups such as Foundation PRO during litigations, providing legal support for religious extremists to safely test the limits of democratic freedoms. One of their strategies is to appropriate the human rights discourse and cover homophobic and transphobic goals under the guise of pro-family policies. In this spirit, the “Charter of Family Rights” was presented to [local governments](#) in late 2019 as a less controversial template for declaring themselves “[LGBT-free zones](#)” after the wave of anti-LGBT resolutions initiated by the Law and Justice councilors in March the same year.

With the highest voter turnout since 1995 at 68,18%, the runoff elections left the country polarized. On the election night Duda made a clumsy [attempt](#) to cool down the destructive emotions he has mobilized during his campaign. He apologized to those who felt offended by his words during the past five years of his [presidency](#) and in the recent months. Later, when asked if he regrets his attacks on the LGBTQ community, he replied that he stands by his earlier statements. Although this apparent cease-fire declaration has been read as a sign of a possible suspension of the anti-gender

rhetoric in the aftermath of the victory, the campaign of hate continues. On July 25th the minister of justice, Zbigniew Ziobro announced that Poland is [withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention](#) because the document carries “elements of an ideological nature,” referring to its definition of gender as socially constructed. At the same time, his ministry is financing a [project](#) by another fundamentalist GONGO titled “Combating crimes against freedom of conscience under the influence of LGBT ideology.” Planned for years 2020-2023, it aims at eliminating “new leftist ideologies” from Polish public space by utilizing the existing legal provisions on offending religious feelings. This new project is a perfect example of how quickly the network of religious fundamentalist groups responds to artistic and activist actions and how well connected they are to the governmental structures.

It seems that the arrest of a young queer activist was purposefully postponed for after the election results. After intervention of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Margot was [released](#) after spending the night in detention with charges of hooliganism. On July 30th queer activists followed up with an [action](#) of mounting rainbow flags and pink face masks on several iconic statues across Warsaw as a call for greater mobilization against the rising tide of homophobia and transphobia. A few days later Margot and two more activists were [arrested](#) in relation to this action. From repressions against queer activists, cities and counties declaring themselves free from “LGBT ideology,” repeated [attacks](#) on the headquarters of LGBTQ NGOs, to brutal attacks on pride marches, including a failed [bombing attempt](#) in Lublin last year, this has never been a war only about symbols. When the infamous “homophobuses” announce from the loudspeakers that “homosexuals live twenty years shorter,” this is not even another pseudo-scientific fact, but something that becomes a grim reality in a country where [suicide rates](#) among queer youth are rising. Meanwhile, putting a symbol of love and tolerance on the statue of Jesus Christ on Krakowskie Przedmieście street in Warsaw was commented as a “barbarity” and “profanation” by the Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, and as an “unnecessary provocation” by the opposition presidential candidate Rafał Trzaskowski. While Polish liberals condemn the crudest forms of homophobia, they exercise its “light” version in the name of pluralism and balanced dialogue and by treating the massive attack on LGBTQ community merely as a red herring. In other words, homophobia and transphobia permeate both sides of this highly polarized political scene.

During the march commemorating the Warsaw Uprising organized by a coalition of fascist and nationalist groups, any trace of LGBTQ symbolism was being quickly detected and destroyed. Among several incidents, the participants took down a rainbow flag with the emblem of the Polish Underground State from the façade of one of the buildings and burnt it. In [Eastern Europe the rainbow flag](#) has become an important tool for queer resistance, as a way of marking lives that are being constantly attacked and erased. There are subversive ways of using this symbol in public spaces, but also some “mainstreaming” strategies that flirt with the idea of assimilating to the majority. The ongoing conflict around the rainbow flag exposes the deep flaws and paradoxes of reclaiming religious and national symbols for leftist politics. It is not about proving that Virgin Mary with a rainbow halo or a colorful national emblem should not be [an offence](#), but rather about finding ways of doing queer politics without assimilating the nationalist-patriotic discourse. A “queered” national flag is still a strong symbol of national belonging. The fight is uneven, but new strategies and new forms of coalition building are urgently needed.

Recent [news](#) about the European Union withholding grants for six Polish cities due to their anti-LGBT declarations might suggest that paying the price for discriminatory practices will change the hostile attitudes. At the same time, this punishment inscribes into the well-rehearsed discourse on “LGBT ideology” being a foreign threat imposed by “degenerate” West. It is unclear whether this will bring a sobering effect, or will consolidate the twisted anti-LGBT rhetoric. The TFP satellites already portray European institutions as the source of “gender ideology” smuggled in treaties such as the Istanbul Convention. With the police repressions against activists intensifying rapidly

[international solidarity](#) with queer persons in Poland is extremely important. Much work needs to be done on the ground for building local solidarity networks with marginalized groups, including migrant workers and those who are most affected by austerity measures. If there is anything that these recent elections show very clearly, it is that queer and leftist activism has to find a way to reach beyond the metropolitan areas.

Marianna Szczygielska is a gender studies scholar and a queer-feminist activist. She has authored a chapter on feminist responses to backsliding gender policies in Poland for the book [Gendering Democratic Backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe. A Comparative Agenda](#) (CEU Press, 2019). Marianna's research focus is on environmental humanities and feminist science and technology studies. Currently, she is Postdoctoral Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin.

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