

# Pride in Poland?

Friday 3 January 2020, by [BIELIK Stefan](#) (Date first published: 3 July 2019).

**Poland has the most interesting history regarding LGBT rights of any European nation - from the adoption of equal ages of consent for hetero- and homosexual sex in the 1920s, to the modern state where Pride marches are for respect, tolerance and legal equality as opposed to the more party atmosphere of those found in Berlin, London or San Francisco.**

Whilst campaigning for this year's parliamentary elections in Poland is not yet underway, we can already see the outlines of which fronts the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party will fight it on in their bid to retain power - a bid which, if current polling is accurate, will be won with ease. Worryingly for the nation's LGBT community, it seems clear that for various reasons this will be a homophobic campaign that will re-ignite fights not fought in earnest here since the 1980s, and aim to terrify voters who have rarely, if ever, encountered certain gender and sexuality concepts.

For the vast majority of modern leftists, of course, queer liberation is a non-negotiable tenet of any socialist victory worthy of the name. However, not so long ago this was much less the case, and we can view the modern queerphobia in Central and Eastern Europe as, in part, a direct legacy of the unwillingness or inability of 20<sup>th</sup> century communist governments in the region to deal with their contemporary social intolerance.

Let us use Poland as a primary example, as it arguably has the most interesting history regarding LGBT rights of any European nation - from the adoption of equal ages of consent for hetero- and homosexual sex in the 1920s, to the modern state where Pride marches are for respect, tolerance and legal equality as opposed to the more party atmosphere of those found in Berlin, London or San Francisco.

Mainland Europe, following the catastrophe of World War One, saw an explosion in sexual liberation both queer and otherwise, perhaps most familiar to modern Western audiences through Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin*, and its musical adaptation *Cabaret*. A narrative of libertines expressing their existential crises through sex is perhaps a simplification that ignores the politically charged atmosphere of inter-war Europe, but certainly as Kamil Janicki notes in *Epoka Hipokryzji* (Epoch of Hypocrisy, 2015), 'Sex in pre-war Warsaw or Kraków was everywhere. Polygamy, orgies, sex on a park bench and in train cars.' Against this backdrop, gay sex was formally decriminalized under Józef Piłsudski's rule in 1932, with the age of consent set at 15. Interestingly, unlike many countries now seen as more advanced in LGBT rights, there was never discrimination in regards to ages of consent, such as that relating to gender or orientation. An exception to this was the criminalization of same-sex prostitution, which was punishable by jail for men and women.

Unfortunately, these early advances for gay rights in Poland have proven themselves to be a positive blip in an otherwise difficult struggle for recognition, identity and freedom of self-expression. Of course, the country and its legal system essentially disappeared for 6 years of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and re-emerged as the Polish People's Republic (PRL) under strong influence from the USSR, where homosexuality had been re-criminalized in the 1930s. However, legally at least, as long as Poland has been in charge of its own laws, there was no discrimination on the basis of sexuality. This was

further enshrined by the legal reforms of 1969, which went further than those of 1932 by decriminalizing sex work in all forms.

This reform, now 50 years old and made under a system of government gone for 30 years, is as far as anything resembling gay liberation got in Poland (barring European Union statutes on discrimination, introduced more as a matter of compliance than true political will). To understand why things stalled after these early victories, we need to consider state attitudes towards homosexuality on a wider level than formal, legal recognition alone.

As early as the 1950s, there is evidence of the state, and specifically the *Śłużba Bezpieczeństwa* (SB, Security Service) using evidence of homosexuality as a weapon in blackmail, as is shown by the treatment of Michel Foucault when he was working in Warsaw. Viewed as a potentially subversive influence after he sided with protesting students following the 'October Thaw' reforms of 1956, the SB pressured a young man who had entered a relationship with Foucault to act as an informant, using the resulting innuendo about his active and open sex life to encourage the French Embassy to recall him. Despite the government's unwillingness to enact laws against homosexuality, it certainly wasn't above depicting it as a form of bourgeois degeneracy; and in public discourse male homosexuality was "usually represented in stereotypical ways, either in a criminal context, especially in newspapers, or in a comical" context (Transnational Homosexuals in Communist Poland, Szulc, 2018).

The law may not have actively discriminated, but certainly by the nadir of 1985's [Operation Hyacinth](#) (where the SB used the pretext of HIV to create a database of Polish gay men) it was clear that the leaders of the country were suspicious of homosexuality and happy to discriminate in practical ways. This was expressed by a variety of means, such as making it harder to obtain an apartment due to not having a family, or using a flimsy pretext to dismiss a gay employee, but Hyacinth was the clearest display of the government's mistrust of gay men in particular.

However perilous the social situation may have seemed in the 1980s, according to surveys carried out by the Eastern European Information Pool and *Homosexuelle Initiative Wien*, Poland's gay population was fairly content with its level of freedom, at least up until Hyacinth. But by the mid 1990s, the country's political atmosphere took a determinately more socially conservative turn, as evidenced by 1993's severe restrictions on abortion rights, and this wave of conservatism also meant Poland refuses to this day to recognise same sex partnerships in law, or provide other civic rights. So, what caused this shift from a relatively tolerant, indifferent, if uneasy relationship between the state and its gay citizens, to the present situation where the ruling party's re-election campaign can cynically weaponise LGBT issues as a scapegoat, and will probably succeed?

Certainly, this path was not repeated in, for instance, the German Democratic Republic or Czechoslovakia, both of which saw relative increases in sexual freedom as the 80s rolled around, the former even establishing state-funded gay organisations and in some instances, bars. In comparison, It is hard to ignore the far stronger presence of religion in Poland, so let us briefly examine how the Catholic Church managed to cement itself as an essential component in Polish political life, to better understand its consequences.

Much like the state's attitude to sexual freedom, the Polish United Workers Party (PZPR) seemed unsure to what extent they wanted to balance liberty and repression with regard to religious freedom. Unwilling to severely limit religious expression but simultaneously wary of the reach and power of the Church (particularly following the appointment of Karol Wojtyła as Pope), an uneasy compromise existed for most of the PRL's lifespan. Indeed, by the time the Solidarity union was formed in 1980, the Church positioned itself as an intermediary negotiator between the workers and the government - partly thanks to the devout Catholicism of many leading figures in the union. The

imposition of martial law in 1981 further strengthened this bond, as the now-outlawed group was able to conceal itself within the Church, which remained the only institution to be truly free of state interference.

Therefore, we see that both the government and the main opposition in the country were both fairly traditionalist, pro-‘family’ in their outlook and deeply suspicious of gay people to the extent they viewed them as potentially subversive, foreign influences. Against this backdrop, it is easier to understand why 1989 and the end of the PRL saw the Church in a prime position to fill the newly-created power vacuum, and establish itself as the moral foundation of the nation. Lech Wałęsa in particular, the first president of ‘free’ Poland, has never made a secret of the influence of religion on his political outlook, nor of his discomfort at LGBT visibility in public life.

Solidarity continues to this day to have a deep influence on politics in Poland – many of the post-89 presidents and prime ministers were active in the union, and both of the main parties in the modern parliament (Civic Platform as well as PiS) were the product of splits in the union’s political wing. Therefore, the vast majority of modern Polish politicians can be considered to have cut their teeth in a group influenced by the borderline-fundamentalist outlook of Pope John Paul II, which perhaps helps explain the perilous state of sexual health rights from abortion to recognition of partnerships.

There is a depressing familiarity, then, to the rhetoric employed by a wide swathe of parties standing in this year’s elections – though more extreme than before, gay Poles find themselves again accused of acting to undermine the social order. There are, however, extra dimensions which may explain the increased intensity of the attacks. Recently, a documentary and a fictional film (*Tylko nie mów nikomu* [Just Don’t Tell Anyone] and *Kler* [The Clergy]) were released, both to wide attention, examining the Church’s issues with child abuse. The response, alongside the now-familiar ineffective investigations by the church hierarchy, seems to be a campaign of misinformation. Most bizarrely, this includes accusations that the World Health Organisation is working with some nebulous LGBT lobby to corrupt children through safe sex education programmes.

As for the state, the Minister for Interior [welcomed the arrest of Elżbieta Podlesna](#), an Amnesty International activist who is accused of breaking profanity laws by printing images of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa icon with a rainbow halo. Profanity laws exist and are actively enforced in Poland, alongside laws against defaming the nation and its symbols – the latter being used to prosecute women who had adopted a World War II resistance symbol for pro-choice activism during the [Black Protests of 2016](#). At best, this is evidence of the state working to serve the church in a manner ill-befitting a legally secular place ([surreal coronations of messiahs apart](#)), and at worst it is intimidation of parts of society the ruling party’s ideology simply doesn’t include in Poland’s future. It is surely depressingly familiar for those old enough to remember the 80s – laws of equality in theory, but a potential for discrimination using fairly spurious and cynical application of statutes.

Alongside this campaign, this year’s Pride marches have struggled with city administrators for the right to organize, with several cities’ mayors initially rejecting applications – although fortunately many of these decisions have been overturned on appeal. On top of that, there have been anti-LGBT resolutions fielded, and in at least one case passed, by PiS-led councils across Poland. A brief anecdote to underline what we are up against: the council leader in Kraśnik, while passing its own anti-LGBT resolution, had to pause mid-session to ask his deputy to look up online what ‘LGBT’ actually meant. And there’s the rub – as touched on earlier, the sexual revolutions of the 1960s were not really felt in Poland and much of socialist Europe, so many concepts quite easily understood in Britain, the US or France have simply never been encountered in the villages of Podkarpackie.

Encouraging queer people to keep their identity a secret means that such issues simply never entered public discourse before now, and therefore many people are encountering them for the first

time as presented by their priest – apparently often under the umbrella loanword of ‘gender’ (hard g). This is why you will see otherwise incomprehensible banners at far right marches in Poland demanding ‘STOP GENDER’. Gender has come to be used as a euphemism for sexual ‘deviancy’, the foreign-ness of the word in Polish allowing an inherent sense of that Western degeneration which homosexuality was presented as being in a different time, under a different system, so many years ago. A depressing red thread running through Polish politics from left to right. If one has never (knowingly) met a gay or trans person, the job of someone wishing to present them as a threat to morality is obviously much easier, and this is where many people in Poland find themselves.

Another reason for the current prominence of LGBT issues in public discourse is the current front-runner among potential opposition candidates in next year’s presidential elections, Robert Biedroń. An openly gay man, who could be lazily summarized as a less disappointing Pete Buttigieg, he has built a solid reputation as a progressive mayor in the northern town of Ślupsk, and although his party *Wiosna* [Spring] did slightly worse than expected at the European elections in May, he is charismatic and energetic enough to have taken ground from the more left-wing *Razem* [Together]. Biedroń is certainly not a determinedly left option - his party have affiliated with the PES in the European Parliament, placing them alongside Britain’s Labour Party and France’s Socialists - but they have quickly become the most coherent option for Poland’s left with the greatest potential to improve not only LGBT rights, but women’s rights, green issues, and a return of true secularism to parliament.

It would be cynical to suggest the mobile billboards warning of ‘the LGBT lobby’s plans for sexualising children’, or the rise in marches ‘for Life and Family’ are a direct result of the emergence of a popular, gay, opposition politician. But Poland has become a deeply cynical place. However, the existence of Biedroń as, even if he never achieves the presidency, a figure of hope and the acceptance of gay men in public life after decades of pseudo-tolerance, shows that not everybody here believes the relentless propaganda, and there is potential for a brighter future. This year’s Warsaw’s *Marsz Równości* [Equality March] was the largest ever (and larger than [the nationalist parades that drew so much attention](#)), and the marches themselves even had a sense of celebration about them, more so than in previous years. About that name, too – in the past we had Marches of Tolerance. Currently, we have Marches of Equality. Maybe soon we will have Marches of Pride.

*This piece, as you will have noted, focuses almost exclusively on the history of gay men in Poland. Partly this is because I feel unqualified to tell a similar history of trans or lesbian rights here, and partly because the literature devoted to both is much lesser in volume. Some links for further reading on LGBT issues and histories in Poland follow:*

- A [post by Mallory Moore](#) examining the right’s fight with ‘Gender Ideology’, with a great selection of linked articles specifically examining the Catholic Church and gender
- The resource section of Lukasz Szulc’s website, [Transnational Homosexuals](#), to accompany his excellent book detailing the birth of gay rights organisations in 1980s Poland

*I would like to thank Lukasz Szulc and Dr Catherine Baker for their invaluable assistance in compiling this article, and recommend work by both to learn more on the state of the LGBT communities in Central and Eastern Europe.*

If you would like to support LGBT projects in Poland, a small amount in donation to one of the following organisations will go a long way:

- [Love Does Not Exclude](#) - an NGO dedicated to introducing marriage equality in Poland
- [Trans-Fuzja](#) - an organization providing legal, psychological and general support to trans people in Poland

- [Iris Foundation](#) - legal and psychological help for the LGBT community
  - If you would like to buy a t-shirt with the Rainbow Black Madonna design, you can support the artist and do so [here](#). I would advise against taking it on your weekend trip to Kraków though.
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