

If Poland's government believes in ending discrimination, it should reassess its conception of Polish identity



In recent years, a march has been held in Poland to mark the country's independence. While the event is viewed as an opportunity to remember those who died in the process of establishing the Polish state, it has also faced allegations of racism and xenophobia. [Bolaji Balogun](#) argues that in light of these debates, it is worth examining how ethnic minorities in modern Poland frequently find themselves at odds with traditional conceptions of Polish identity.

On 27 January, world leaders, including the President of Poland, who is backed by the current ruling party (Law and Justice – PiS), gathered at the site of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Nazi death camp for the commemoration of Holocaust Memorial Day. During the event, they all called for the [defeat of anti-Semitism, racism and discrimination](#). While this stance is a welcome one, the occasion nevertheless offers an opportunity to shine a light on how ethnic minorities living in modern Poland feel at odds with traditional conceptions of Polish identity.

This is evident in recent celebrations of Polish independence. Poland started celebrating its independence with an annual march in 2008. The main focus of the march has been the historical re-establishment of the Polish state after 123 years. The half a million Poles who died in the processes of state creation have been at the centre of the celebration. However, in 2017, Poland's march of independence was marred by allegations of racism, with [messages](#) such as "pure blood, clear mind" and "Europe will be white or uninhabited" present. This fuelled concerns about the [rise of xenophobia in Poland](#) at a time when other European countries are coming to terms with ideologies of white supremacy.

In 2018, the leaders of Law and Justice, the current ruling party, celebrated the country's independence with about 200,000 people, in the process [marching alongside far-right groups](#). Again, this raised concerns about Law and Justice implicitly encouraging neo-fascist groups, particularly given the open invitation to neo-fascist activists from Italy to participate in what was supposed to be a celebration of the glorious dead. In the end, the celebration ultimately appeared as a protest against the European Union for its role in the migrant crisis.

The 2019 march of independence was described as a '[hub for far-right groups](#)', with messages about the protection of Catholic nationalism, [the isolation of LGBT communities](#), and a strong stance [against mass migration on display](#). Given all these controversies, many have discussed whether it is time for Poland's march of independence to move away from the kind of anti-immigrant and 'anti-Other' rhetoric that seems to have been revived under the current Polish government.



The 2017 independence march in Warsaw, Credit: [TG Sokół Lublin \(CC BY-NC-SA 2.0\)](#)

This rhetoric may appear to be expressed via one-off slogans during Poland's celebration of independence, but it has much deeper racial and discriminatory implications. It has been reported to be [an endemic everyday struggle](#) for many non-white people living in Poland. Whilst Poland's celebration of independence is exhilarating for many white Poles, the same cannot be said for foreigners, LGBT groups and ethnic minorities – the black and brown people – who are assumed by some citizens not to belong in Poland, and are therefore seen as unable to fit into Poland's celebration of independence. In all this, nationalism may appear to be a problem of the minority in Poland, but there are indications that the current Polish government's actions have provided a vehicle for these sentiments to re-enter the mainstream.

Since PiS came to power in 2015, Poland has been isolated in Europe for what its critics view as authoritarian tendencies, its [purging of the judiciary](#) and its anti-immigration stance. The rhetoric has been claimed to be a way for the Polish state to protect its citizens and culture, but for the most part, such rhetoric forms part of [the subtle reminder to citizens of their national identity](#) – one that is assumed to be based on Catholic nationalism and racialised primordial ties.

To be a national is to be situated physically, legally, and socially. Such emotional attachment seems to unleash the boundaries between the nationals and the racialised 'Other'. This has led some Polish nationalists to argue for purification of Polish culture and society. The process of purification entails purging Poland of all kinds of foreign influences and would be founded on racial differentiation. To be clear, there is a limited understanding of race and racism in Poland. Comments that are perceived as racist by black and brown people in Poland are often not seen as racist in the popular imagination. It is commonly assumed that someone could only be a racist when directly involved in a ['violent encounter' with a person of another 'race'](#). Therefore, racism in Poland is often reduced to the behaviour of hooliganism or pathologised individuals.

However, [my research in the country](#) found that racism is not only an individual phenomenon, but a structural ideology that is sustained largely through discrimination; self-identification; and the [identification of the 'other' people](#). This was evident in the stories shared by many [non-white Poles living in Poland](#). For example, Sophia, a mixed-race Pole with a white Polish mother and black Cameroonian father, told me how she often felt about not being seen as Polish:

“...they don't think that a Polish person can be black. If you ask anybody on the street — who's a Polish person to you... they would say a Polish person is a white person. They just don't see me as much Polish as they are...this is the crazy part of everything for me...”

The idea of purification has a layer of complexity that cannot be reduced simply to politics. The complexity of purification is deep-seated within the notion that difference threatens, contaminates and dilutes purities that Poland is assumed to stand for. Protesting against the influence of 'non-Latin civilisations', which have been viewed as threats to Polish culture, some among the Polish extreme groups [believe it is necessary](#) “to cooperate with Catholics and Latinists from all western regions in a sort of 'white international'”. This sense of exclusion has served as a driver for contemporary discrimination and the events witnessed in the celebration of Poland's independence since 2017. Yet, there is no evidence that the collective glorious dead that gave up their lives in 1918 and 1945 did so against black and brown people. They died because of the same racism and xenophobia that have been revived today.

What history tells us

The significance of the above experiences lies in the histories that produced them. Such histories must begin with a recent comment by the Polish President Andrzej Duda, where he cited a distasteful, racist joke about [Equatorial African cannibals](#). Yet, Africa was a continent that provided refuge for thousands of Poles during the Second World War. The migration to Africa was in addition to the [colossal Polish emigration to the Americas](#), after the Franco-Prussian War, with about 300,000 Polish colonists' settlement in Brazil, as part of the peripheral European populations. These populations were by no means seen as migrants, they were understood as colonial settlers and benefited from white/European privilege.

Poland's migration continues with the recent migration of [Poles to the United Kingdom](#) and elsewhere in Europe. This particular migration has transformed many Polish lives from restricted people to "free movers" with opportunities to travel, live and work in all other European Union states. This may offer an indication of why over three-quarters of CBOS Polish respondents (78%) agreed that [Poland's membership of the EU brings the country more benefits than costs](#).

Indeed, there is a sense of amnesia here – one that is not the unconscious loss of memory, but consciously dotted by a state's system of inclusion and exclusion. This was evident in PiS accounts of foreigners threatening and attempting to breach the borders and [unsettling what is assumed to be authentic Polish culture and society](#). These accounts not only reinforce a feeling of their specific otherness, but also reinforce the otherness of black and brown identities. Consequently, black and brown people remain viewed as threats to Polish homogeneity.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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