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# Inside Poland's 'LGBT-free zones'

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**By Lucy Ash**

BBC News

**In Poland, dozens of small towns have declared themselves free of "LGBT ideology". Politicians' hostility to gay rights has become a flashpoint, pitting the religious right against more liberal-minded Poles. And gay people living**

**in these areas are faced with a choice: emigrate, keep their heads down - or fight back.**

Magazine editor Tomasz Sakiewicz shows me into his Warsaw office. To my surprise, he takes my hand - which I've just rubbed with the regulation disinfectant gel - and kisses it like an 18th-Century Polish nobleman.

Then he passes me a sticker that came free with his magazine, the right-wing weekly Gazeta Polska. It shows a rainbow flag with a black cross through it. "We gave out 70,000 of these," says Sakiewicz. "And people congratulated us because we Poles love freedom."



Around 100 towns and regions across Poland, nearly a third of the country, have passed resolutions declaring themselves free of "LGBT ideology". These resolutions are essentially symbolic and unenforceable but they have provided fresh ammunition in Poland's increasingly bitter culture war.

Sakiewicz tells me people should be able to have sex with whoever they choose and boasts that in some respects, Poland is progressive. It decriminalised homosexuality in 1932, decades before most European countries.

But he is against what he describes as "aggressive ideology promoting homosexuality". The struggle for gay rights is a foreign concept imported from the US and Western Europe, he adds, and it threatens the traditional heterosexual Polish family.

Now in his 50s, Sakiewicz grew up in a Poland controlled by the Soviet Union when the government told people how to think, rejected Church influence and

tolerated no dissent. Bizarrely, he now accuses LGBT campaigners of behaving in the same way.



| Tomasz Sakiewicz

"Communists used to wave the red flag and told people they were fighting for the poor, for the workers, for the peasants," he says. "Now these activists hold up the rainbow flag and say they are fighting for sexual minorities. It was not true and it is not true. And since we lived through communist times we have a duty to tell others how dangerous such ideas can be."

However far-fetched Sakiewicz's ideas may seem, they are echoed by senior politicians and figures in Poland's influential Catholic Church. In a campaign speech when he stood for re-election, President Andrzej Duda called the promotion of LGBT rights an ideology "even more destructive" than communism. The Archbishop of Krakow recently warned of a neo-Marxist "rainbow plague".

## Find out more

- Listen to [Poland's Gay Pride and Prejudice](#) on BBC Radio 4 at 20:30 on Monday 21 September

- [Click here to listen online](#)

With state-sanctioned homophobia and a largely hostile media, Polish gay people risk being pushed back into the closet, especially in small towns.

Swidnik, a couple of hours south-east of Warsaw, was the first municipality to adopt a resolution against "LGBT ideology".



| Bart Staszewski in Swidnik

When I arrive on a Saturday morning, half a dozen gay activists are in the main square handing out leaflets, "love is love" stickers and iced doughnuts with multi-coloured sprinkles. Their spokesman, Bart Staszewski, has organised what he called a queer tour of Poland's east to show people that gay people are "normal citizens".

He adds: "We are the rainbow myth-busters. We are not aggressive. Our balloons are not provocative, our flags are not provocative. Our doughnuts are not provocative!"



But on the other side of the street, there is a group of about 30 young men shouting themselves hoarse. "Swidnik free of rainbow propaganda," they yell, trying to drown out the sound of the breezy pop music coming from the speakers of the gay rights activists.

One man, with a shaved head, tells me he doesn't like the LGBT group's message. "They don't want to fit into our society," he says. "And we don't want them in this town."

"They are weakening the nation," says another. "And that's the goal of Poland's enemies. War's no longer about tanks and missiles. You destroy a country by making chaos. And that's what these gays are trying to do."