

Special Report: Why Poland fell out of step with Europe

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WARSAW - Last winter, Monika Pawlik spent her days crawling through mud and digging trenches in frozen ground, training for Poland's home guard. Her daughter, Helena, hadn't yet turned 2 years old.

The town hall clerk is under no illusions about the potential risks of serving in the volunteer army, saying she is ready to die for the homeland. "I understand that if there is a war, formations such as ours are sent to their death," she says. "I think that I mainly did it for myself and probably from feeling a patriotic duty."

PRESENT ARMS: Monika Pawlik stands in line with volunteers training to defend the homeland. According to an opinion poll, 88 percent of the population believe patriotism means being willing to fight and die for the country. REUTERS/Kacper Pempel

Pawlik is a citizen of the European Union, but the 24-year-old's commitment to defend her nation reflects a mounting unease throughout Poland and elsewhere in the EU. Nearly 15,000 Poles have joined the country's volunteer forces since their inception in 2017, a number that Poland's military planners hope will reach 53,000 in the coming years.

Poland is a fully paid-up member of NATO. As the biggest state to join the EU from the former Soviet bloc, it has received more EU support than any other member - over 100 billion euros (\$115 billion), according to the Polish finance ministry. EU membership is popular. But many Poles - alongside Hungarians and Czechs in eastern Europe - are voicing discontent over foreign influence in their internal affairs. For instance, Poland and Hungary have defied an EU request to accept a quota of asylum-seekers. Parties like Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) are winning support by beating a patriotic drum, and the EU is among the targets.

This trend has deepened fractures across the Union, which commentators widely believe are rooted in financial crisis and the subsequent arrival of hundreds of thousands of migrants from Syria and Africa. In Poland and other European countries that broke free from Soviet domination in 1989, however, the misgivings have long run far deeper.

Pawlik lives in a village of only several dozen people about 150 km (90 miles) from the eastern border with Russia's ally Belarus. Her small house, inherited from her

grandmother, is adorned with pots of white and red flowers in the windows. She planted them with her husband as a tribute to Poland's white-and-red flag, to honor the centenary of Polish independence this year.

"I remember my grandmother telling me how the Germans used to pass through these forests and then the Russians," said Pawlik. "She would tell me how a Russian would sometimes just go over and shoot your head off and a German would shrug, pretend not to see you and walk away."

Many Poles recall bitter experiences in World War Two when Western allies failed to save the country from a Nazi German invasion and, later, allowed it to fester under Soviet domination. The PiS party, which won 37.6 percent of the vote and secured a parliamentary majority in 2015, is appealing mainly to rural, less educated and poorer voters who feel that while Europe's liberal ways may have made some people richer, they have not made anyone safer.

TARGET VOTER: Pawlik in the garden of the home she inherited from her grandmother. She remembers her relative's stories of invasion and occupation.
REUTERS/Kacper Pempel

Poland's government has allied with Hungary, whose prime minister, Viktor Orban, has courted confrontation with Brussels as part of what he calls a "national liberation struggle" against globalization and the liberal ideas of the EU. PiS leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski has said Poland is following Orban's example. Both states have railed against internationalist left-wingers and courted nationalist leaders such as Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan and U.S. President Donald Trump.

"We renounce this sack of stones we have been carrying on our backs as a nation since 1989," Kaczynski told crowds celebrating Polish Independence Day last Nov. 11. "A sack of corruption, abuse, theft, dishonesty, immorality and destruction of Polish patriotism, Poland's sense of community."

Many of Poland's EU allies are angry that its government is playing a leading role in fuelling a rift between ex-Communist and Western members of the bloc, at a time when the EU is grappling with Britain's decision to leave. They have accused Warsaw of a tilt toward authoritarianism, as the state increases its control of the judiciary, public media and parts of the economy.

"Patriotism is a virtue. Unchecked nationalism is riddled with both poison and deceit."

In Brussels, senior EU officials say parties like PiS create a false distinction between patriotism and a sense of European community. "Patriotism is a virtue," European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said in a speech in September. "Unchecked nationalism is riddled with both poison and deceit."

Finding itself increasingly isolated within the bloc, the PiS government has also been more combative with Berlin, once a leading champion of Poland's EU membership aspirations. Warsaw says Germany still owes it billions of euros in World War Two reparations, and has told Poles that Berlin should pay the money back.

A German government spokeswoman said: "The federal government currently has no official request from Poland in relation to reparations claims on which it could comment."

PATRIOT POWER: Jaroslaw Kaczynski, who believes Polish patriotism needs to be resurrected after years of centrist rule, addresses the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) in September 2018. REUTERS/Kacper Pempel

INSECURITY

Pawlik says she has no political views, but she is part of the core electorate for the PiS government. Its bedrock of support is rural communities, especially in the country's east.

Since Poland joined the EU in 2004, a large part of the cash it received has been devoted to big projects like roads and bridges. But under PiS, individual incomes in rural areas have also been helped by government programs to give new child benefits and increase the minimum wage.

[Graphic](#)

[Wars and PiS Support for Poland's law and justice party \(PiS\) is strong in rural areas. It also correlates to past occupations of Poland.](#)

For Pawlik and others, Brussels has disappointed at a more basic level. Since Moscow's military intervention in Ukraine in 2014, many people in Poland say they have been nervous of Russian aggression. Before Russia annexed Crimea four years ago, just 15 percent of Poles worried that their country's independence may be under threat. That jumped after Russia intervened in Ukraine, and the number runs at 40 percent now.

There has recently been a massive build-up of Russian conventional forces on the borders of the Baltic states. But the EU has very limited joint defense capabilities.

This is why people like Pawlik joined the Territorial Defence Forces (WOT) - a formation that requires recruits to spend four months over three years in training. The force, modeled on America's National Guard, is an integral part of Poland's defense and deterrence potential alongside land, air, navy and special operations,

the defense ministry says. Poland's military budget for 2018 envisages spending \$153 million on the territorial defense forces, similar to the amount earmarked for the navy.

Poland's government has been spending around 2 percent of GDP on defense, as recommended by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, and is planning to gradually raise this amount to 2.5 percent of GDP.

"Military treaties are important but they can give an often illusory sense of power. We need to be ready to defend ourselves ... until our allies arrive with help," Tadeusz Cymanski, a senior PiS lawmaker, said in an interview. "If we want to preserve our independence, the current generation ought to have a sense of national pride, a sense of community and a willingness to sacrifice."

PAST TO PRESENT: The Home Army is a powerful symbol in Poland with its tradition of a struggle for independence during World War Two. Here, Pawlik and comrades take a break. REUTERS/Kacper Pempel

A volunteer army is an important symbol. Poland has for centuries been invaded or carved up by its neighbors - Austria, Germany and Russia until 1918, and later, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. In World War Two, hundreds of thousands of Poles joined an underground Home Army to defend the country after its government was forced into exile.

A poll by the state-controlled polling agency CBOS showed in August that 88 percent of the population today believes being patriotic means being willing to fight and die for the country.

"TOWARDS MATURITY"

Being in the EU has disappointed Poles in other ways. After Poland joined, labor markets opened up abroad. Poles left in droves to seek work, dividing families and draining local labor.

More than 2 million, out of a population of over 38 million Poles, recently moved to live abroad, drawn out of important services such as healthcare to countries including Britain and Germany. The population of Pawlik's county, Ostrow Mazowiecka, has fallen by almost three percent since 2004 and she worries there may not be enough people to help defend those who stayed behind.

"I hope Helena never moves abroad," said Pawlik, playing with her daughter in her garden. "I hope she has a better sense of what her ancestors have done for her. And I think her children will not have to leave for abroad. I am not a supporter of finding work away from home."

While EU membership has allowed large numbers of Poles to seek work abroad under free movement rules, the EU says the long-term thrust of its policy is to help narrow the gaps between living standards across the continent.

Overall, Poland's population has nudged up 0.7 percent, but the government is trying to encourage more growth, primarily by paying out generous child subsidies, promising pensions for women who have at least four children but have not worked enough to earn a pension, and offering cheaper public housing.

The health ministry has also sponsored a booklet called "Towards maturity" for school instructors on family and reproductive health, with a stated aim of "preventing a tendency to postpone procreation." Included in it is a statement that promiscuity "changes a woman's psyche," because "a woman's nature is to devote herself entirely to a beloved man."

Wider Image

[In training with Poland's volunteer militia](#) Poles are training in all weathers for a part-time force to help defend the state.

NOT GERMANY

For Pawlik, there has also been a hollowness in EU membership. She says she once did an internship in her local town hall that was funded by the European Union. It paid better than a regular internship, but she had to display a poster saying who paid for her work. She felt it was like a plaque saying, "This hinge has been oiled with EU funds."

A European Commission official said such a poster is not an EU requirement.

Przemyslaw Sadura, a sociologist of education from the Warsaw University Institute of Sociology, says national governments such as Poland's are filling a void left by Brussels in telling people stories that can motivate them and make sense of life.

"The EU was not able to forge its own story, its own myth; it couldn't weave together national stories into a single tale," he said. PiS, he said, "has a vision. It encompasses patriotism, a vision for the modernization of Poland, a national engagement, a national economy. It's about ethnic community."

EU Commission officials say they have no simple answers to what they view as a global trend, of politicians who exploit people's unease with change by appealing to nostalgia for a national past. But such attitudes generate frustration that Brussels officials rarely voice in public. "Central Europe loves a sense of victimization," one

senior EU official told Reuters privately, acknowledging the difficulty institutions have in responding to complaints from Warsaw and Budapest.

CULTURAL IDENTITY: Schoolchildren at a parade to commemorate 100 years of Polish independence in Warsaw in June. The country celebrates Nov. 11, 1918, as Independence Day, marking the reestablishment of statehood after more than a century of partition. REUTERS/Kacper Pempel

As it builds its nostalgic story, PiS has introduced a sweeping reform of school programs, focusing in particular on history, literature, civics and geography. From now, school children will be taught about the “benefits and costs” of EU membership, according to education ministry documents. The ministry mandated the added word, “costs.”

The new core curriculum says that “the aim of schooling is to strengthen the sense of national identity, connection to history and national traditions.”

That includes Poland’s status as a victim of Nazi Germany. Many Poles feel the West has failed to acknowledge the depth of the nation’s suffering under the occupation, focusing instead only on the Jewish Holocaust. The government says some Poles have been unjustly vilified as perpetrators of atrocities against the Jews. In fact, some sheltered Jews. And Poles themselves were deemed “sub-human” by the Nazis.

Earlier this year, Poland’s government passed a law that would allow the courts to jail anyone suggesting the Polish nation was complicit in the Holocaust. Under pressure from the United States, it later watered that down to remove jail terms.

At the same time, the education ministry has canceled an obligation for schools to give anti-discrimination workshops. A school superintendent, appointed by PiS, recently urged teenagers to follow the example of a 17th-century king who fought against the Ottoman empire. The superintendent was quoted in the media as saying the great king “managed to defend the whole of Europe against Islam.”

In the fourth grade, when history is introduced as a subject, children aged 9 to 10 are presented with vignettes of around two dozen historic figures designed to promote a sense of national pride. These characters are described by the education ministry as having “a momentous impact on the formation of the Polish cultural identity.”

They include Christian kings, a Polish-born Pope (John Paul II) who inspired the nation to stand up to communism, Marie Skłodowska-Curie, who won the Nobel Prize for her research on radioactivity, and the Solidarity movement which spearheaded the end of Communist rule in Europe.

"Our history is grand ... We were exceptional in Europe."

"History should arouse pride," said Włodzimierz Suleja, the historian who developed the new programs. "Our history is grand ... We were exceptional in Europe." He says he is referring to the fact Poles were able to sustain a sense of nationhood when the country was overrun by others.

To many in Poland, which has for centuries embraced Catholicism as a way to distinguish its culture from Protestant Germany and Orthodox Russia, religious values are fundamental. One town has engraved marble tablets with the Ten Commandments to be hung at the entrances to local schools.

Pawlik says when she was at school, the system failed to teach her an appreciation of her own heritage. "Our system tends to focus on teaching the history of Germany, its kings, Russia. We didn't learn much about Poland," she said. "We need to focus on what happened here."

"WHAT HAPPENED HERE:" School children at a ceremony in Warsaw commemorating the Soviet invasion of Poland. REUTERS/Kacper Pempel

SACRIFICE

At the heart of the PiS story is a group of fighters who kept an underground resistance going even after the end of World War Two, turning against the Communist authorities.

PiS holds up the fighters, known as the Doomed or Cursed Soldiers, as a model for youth, praising them for being uncompromising, unyielding and willing to be martyred despite having the odds stacked against them.

Controversy surrounds them. Several have been accused of killing civilian villagers, often Jews, Slovaks and Belarusians, as they sought to resist Soviet authorities setting up a Communist state in Poland.

But they are the example for Pawlik and other fighters in the territorial defense forces. In a ceremony in 2016, President Andrzej Duda called them "the last of the great heroes" who sacrificed their lives for the country.

One of the Doomed Soldiers is a woman known by her nom de guerre, Inka. A 17-year-old medic and member of the Home Army in World War Two, she was sentenced to death by the Communist authorities and refused to sign a plea for clemency. Before her death, she wrote a note to relatives, saying, "I am sad that I have to die. Please tell my grandmother that I behaved as one should."

When Pawlik was doing her training, she says, she learned how to fire weapons and was surprised to find she was no weaker than the men. She wants to be a professional soldier.

“If I go for something, I take it to the end,” she said. “But I’m not doing it all for myself. I’m also doing this for the baby.”

DEVOTED DAUGHTER: Pawlik and her daughter, Helena, at home in front of a mural of Pope John Paul II. The text says: "It will still be beautiful, after all. Just put on comfortable shoes, because you have to walk through your entire life."

REUTERS/Kacper Pempel

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