WARSAW SEES THOUSANDS MARCH AGAINST POPULIST RULING PARTY

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Thousands of people have taken to the streets in the Polish capital to protest the ruling Law and Justice party. Critics fear the government is eroding the country's democracy.

The "March of Freedom" rally took place in Warsaw on Saturday to protest what its speakers called anti-democratic measures being implemented by the Law and Justice party (PiS) under its chairman Jaroslaw Kaczynski.

Local government officials put the number of protesters at around 90,000, while police said the march drew 12,000. In either case, the number is significantly smaller than the 240,000 who took to the streets to protest the government in May 2016.

Thousands gathered in Warsaw as part of a rally dubbed the "March of Freedom"

Leaders of the rally accused the PiS of weakening the independence of Polish institutions, to the point where the country wouldn't be allowed to be a part of the EU or NATO were it not already.

"We will not allow Kaczynski to take us out of Western Europe. Together we will defend freedom," said Jacek Jaskowiak, the mayor of the city of Poznan, according to The Associated Press.

Various opposition parties and civic organizations took part in the rally, which was organized by the opposition Civic Platform party.

A man holds a puppet of Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the perceived de facto leader of Poland

Kaczynski, who's widely considered to be Poland's de facto leader even though he doesn't hold a senior government post, for his part criticized the protests. "Freedom exists in Poland and only those who do not perceive reality can question that," he said on Saturday.

The PiS had been out of power for almost a decade before it rose to victory on a wave of anti-foreigner sentiment at the height of Europe's refugee crisis. Kaczynski once said that refugees bring "cholera to the Greek islands, dysentery to Vienna, various types of parasites."

blc/se (AFP, AP)

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