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# **Poland: Demonstrating for Women's Rights and for an End to the Right-wing Government**

Tuesday 10 November 2020, by [ALCOY Philippe](#), [ZAWISTOWSKA-TOCZEK Dagmara](#) (Date first published: 9 November 2020).

**Poland has seen enormous demonstrations unfold since October 22 when the Constitutional Court decided to ban abortion in almost all cases. It has been a big movement launched by women and the youth, but which different sectors of society have joined. A movement that has also become a catalyst for the people's anger with the ultraconservative Law and Justice Party (PiS) government. Proof of that widespread anger came last Friday, when one demonstration gathered more than 80,000 people.**

We have interviewed Dagmara Zawistowska-Toczek, a teacher in the city of Gdansk who has actively participated in the movement, so as to get a good look at how things are on the ground.

**LeftEast (LE): For more than two weeks Poles have been demonstrating all across the country against additional restrictions to the right to abortion. How have these different actions been organized in each city and around the country? Are there committees or other grass-roots organizations in neighborhoods, in schools and universities, or workplaces?**

**Dagmara Zawistowska-Toczek (DZT) :** All of these demonstrations in Poland are spontaneous direct actions, coming from below, without any central coordination or leader. The protests emerged spontaneously upon the Constitution Court announcing its verdict on abortion on October 22. People just post events on Facebook, often young women, students, people in the neighborhood, artists, or social activists of a given location. For example, the Committee of Family Protests launched a demonstration in Sopot, and cultural organizations or even music groups announce waves of TechnoBlocks in different cities (that is, marches carried out to the beat of techno music).

Different groups of demonstrators get together, unite and march peaceably together. In Gdansk, for example, the youth strike was the idea of a teenage activist who urged pupils from the city's schools to demonstrate. They agreed on a starting time (at 4:00 in the afternoon because from 8:00 AM until then, minors younger than 16 cannot be on their own without parental permission) and a place (City Hall, across from the Kuratorium, the office that oversees teachers), they selected speakers and the itinerary for the procession, and informed the local media and elected officials.

The situation is similar in small towns and in the capital. An informal, non-partisan social movement called « National Women's Strike » is participating in the demonstrations ; it first emerged during the demonstrations of 2016, and its main activists are Marta Lempart and Natalia Pancewitz. We, women dressed in black, along with our husbands, sons, brothers and others, are demonstrating against the violations of women's rights and demanding the end of the Law and Justice government. It's a wonderful kind of direct democracy for a society shocked and aggrieved during this crisis.

**LE : Exactly, even though the matter that triggered the demonstrations was the attacks on abortion rights, how do you explain the fact that this movement has become a vehicle for**

## **rejecting the whole of this government's political agenda?**

**DZT** : There are many reasons for this forceful opposition to the Law and Justice government's politics, and the process that has led to this state of things is something you can observe going back many years. Yet the breadth of these demonstrations can be surprising. It's like a tsunami. The immediate factor is certainly the Polish people's disappointment after the presidential elections of this summer. The Poles finally mobilized: the opposition in the Senate stopped the elections because of the pandemic, and then we had a high turnout rate of over 68% in spite of the coronavirus. Kaczyński's opponent, the charismatic young governor of Warsaw, Rafał Trzaskowski (of the Civic Platform) had almost no chance but still obtained 48.97% of the vote (against Kaczyński's puppet Duda, who got 51.03%).

The second factor is the absurd policy of this government during the pandemic: the ministers and technocrats (Kaczyński) made stupid, economically and socially short-sighted decisions, and were generally incoherent. Today, dying Poles are paying the price and the anger is enormous.

The government wasted the summer months and instead of preparing the schools for online teaching and the health services for saving infected people, they spent all their time on the presidential election campaign. Teachers don't have computers at school, they have no uniform educational platform—they're still having to improvise—doctors don't have supplies or places to work in the hospitals, there aren't enough doctors and nurses to make the respirators work—people are asking why all this still hasn't been taken care of for several months.

We have had one scandal after another involving the purchase of masks and medical supplies—the government paid 200 million zlotys to a former arms dealer for 1200 respirators that were never delivered—we've had politicians ostentatiously violating the restrictions imposed on everyone else, we've had censorship of the media: this has become our everyday in Poland.

The third factor behind the protest movement is the way that doctors and medical services have been treated. In 2017, resident physicians went on strike—there was even a hunger strike—and then again in 2019, and they revealed the disastrous state of health care in Poland, since 10% of the doctors are over 70 and the young ones go abroad. Right now while doctors and nurses are fighting heroically for each life, while ambulances are waiting for six hours outside the hospitals and people are dying there, the assistant prime minister Sasin declares publicly that at the beginning of October that everything is the doctors' fault because some of them do not want to work during the epidemic.

The fourth factor is the treatment of women and minorities in this country, sexual minorities for example. When the Diet rejected the proposed "Law to Save Women" & instead took up once again the proposal to « Stop Abortion » we went out into the streets with umbrellas and coathangers in about 150 cities in Poland. We protested on a smaller scale when, in July of the same year, Justice Minister Ziobro declared that we are preparing to leave the Istanbul Convention on the prevention of, and struggle with, domestic violence and violence against women, and when Prime Minister Morawiecki submitted to the Constitutional Court a motion to examine the Convention's compatibility with the Polish constitution—a motion taken up by PiS judges.

**LE : One symbolic aspect of this movement that has gotten a lot of attention abroad is the fact that demonstrators have expressed lot of discontent toward the Catholic Church, Poland being one of the most heavily Catholic countries in the EU. Why is there such resistance to the Church?**

**DZT** : The claim that Poland is the most Catholic country is no longer valid. Statistics may show that about 39 million people here have been baptized, but that has nothing to do with real religious

practice ; Church reports record only 20%, that is to say around 7.8 million, being admitted to communion every year. On the one hand, more and more Poles are unbelievers or very critical toward the Church, while on the other hand, the wiser and more sensible priests also criticize the Church. Why? Poles have had enough of seeing the Church mix up politics, education, and the most important questions: the arrogance and hypocrisy of the pedophilia scandals.

Since the release of two important documentaries by the Siekielski brothers, “Don’t Tell Anyone” (2019), and “Playing Hide and Seek” (May 2020), the reaction of the Catholic Church in Poland has unfortunately been rather limited. The victims and society in general are still waiting for the criminals in clerical collars to be punished. Those priests who criticize the Church end up either quitting or being forbidden from preaching, while those who have molested children for years will go on working in schools, and in any case are still preaching to this day, leading children in prayer and so forth. Some have avowed that certain bishops were protecting pedophile priests and just shifting them to other parishes whenever their victims reported their crimes, and that there they were able to go on doing the same things to other children.

That is why for Poles today, the Church no longer symbolizes faith but rather falsehood and greed—buying up priceless real estate while charging money for priestly services—it also represents conservative indoctrination in the school system. Add to all that the Church’s fundamentalist views on the role of women and its attitude toward sexual minorities. No one destroys churches during these demonstrations, not one priest has been attacked, all that has happened is silent protest in church : people sitting on the altar, going to mass in a *Handmaid’s Tale* costume, or standing in front of the sign of the episcopal curia) and for the ultra-Catholics, that’s an attack. Since Kaczyński made his speech, demonstrators have even stayed away from churches and Christian symbols entirely, but the Church will still have to face this crisis.

**LE: Jarosław Kaczyński, assistant prime minister and the real strongman in the country, urged his followers to □protect the churches.□ To the point: what is the role of the extreme Right at present?**

**DZT :** Poles are interpreting Kaczyński’s speech as a sign of weakness and even desperation, something that the state of the right-wing political scene over the last few months confirms. Nevertheless, the Court’s verdict on abortion is perceived as an attempt on Kaczyński’s part to recapture the support of the conservative members of the PiS, and of the Church’s electorate, but that bomb has blown up in Kaczyński’s face. Today, the United Right has ranged against it, not only the opposition and the liberal and left-wing milieux, but also the doctors, the teachers, the youth and even the farmers.

It is interesting to note that the young leaders of the extreme Right are now subject to the same general hostility and in parliament they have had to separate themselves from the government’s policies in order to retain a remnant of their support. This is even after the recent success of their candidate Bosak, of the Confederation, getting increased support in the first round of the elections.

**RP :** The last time we talked to you, it was about the enormous teacher’s strike in 2019. What is the situation of teachers today ? Are they participating in the mobilizations for abortion rights, making their own demands as a distinct and important segment of society ?

**DZT :** Our teachers’ strike was formally suspended but has not yet come to an end, because unfortunately our demands have not been met. In September 2019, the strike turned into an ongoing act of protest (the Italian strike and the accomplishment of the sole duties prescribed by law). Today the teachers are participating en masse in the demonstrations against the violation of women’s rights and against the PiS government and for numerous reasons.

The educational crisis that followed the reforms got even worse because the schools are doubly subscribed and we are working by shifts in overcrowded buildings. We teach according to two different « basic curricula », the old one neutral and the new one, very ideological. Meanwhile, thousands of teachers have left the profession, taking either their pensions or loans earmarked for early retirement and there is just no one left teaching (in Warsaw, there were 1,300 teachers at the beginning of the school year), because young people don't want to look for work at school for 2 2166 PLN (about 470 EUR).

We still do not know what is going to become of the baccalaureat exam of 2023, and this chaos brings together teachers, young people and parents in protest. School today is an ideological battlefield increasingly under the control of the Superintendants (Kuratorów) : bureaucrats charged with supervising the schools, appointed by the Minister of Education.

In June 2020, the baccalaureat exam was not cancelled, but underfinanced schools had to buy the material needed for protective measures out of their own pockets. Experts recommended not opening schools in the autumn or at least testing the teachers—but the government ignored that recommendation. Once the first infections began to appear, chaos settled in at school, people just did not have the means to carry on instruction normally. At the end of September, a single teacher transmitted the disease to numerous pupils, but the government insisted that the situation was under control, and that the problem was just teachers not wanting to work.

Teachers perceived the selection of a new Minister of Education as a slap in the face. It was a primitive right-wing populist, who not only knows nothing about education but also thinks that women who don't want to become mothers just because they want to keep working andn who demand the same rights men enjoy are mad. He wants to fight the supposed propagation of gender and LGBT ideology in schools where young people are committing suicide due to their sexual orientation.

Unfortunately we're not formulating separate demands, even though the union of Polish teachers ZNP criticized the appointment of the new minister, there's no official participation in the women's strike and the demonstrations. No one is surprised that teachers have joined the protests, and we support the youth, of whom we're proud, spontaneously, not according to the union's recommendations. also, our school principals, who are under the control of the ministry's superintendents, support us only perfunctorily, giving us unpaid leave for going to demonstrations. You can put up crosses at school, but not posters for the women's strike—the superintendent of Mazovia intervened when nursery school teachers put them up. So we went out into the streets to cry out with our students in impotent rage.

### **LE : What can you tell us about the role that the youth has played in this movement?**

**DZT** : Women and the youth may well be the two groups in Polish society most wounded right now by the policies of the right-wing government. Teenagers born in the years 2003-5 have fallen victim to an educational reform policy that is worth than useless to them. I've been working at different schools for 20 years and I've never seen teenagers so politically conscious and prepared for action. After the parliamentary elections of 2019, when the PiS won once again, they now longer shy away from the political parties' declarations, they have been working to help teachers on strike.

They are not passively awaiting change but acting. Take my son for example : instead of internalizing ideological formulas and out-of-date, overpriced textbooks, he's involved in autonomous learning activities, volunteer work in local communities, in the work of activist foundations, in climate strikes. He's very conscious & critical of the policy of the right-wing government, and of the youth who want to live in a free and democratic country but are now being systematically deprived

of that freedom. These young people have naturally become the motive force behind these protests.

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**P.S.**

*Interview conducted by Philippe Alcoy. Translated from the French by William Coker.*

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