

Poland's Massive Pro-Choice Protests Can Change the Whole Political Agenda

Thursday 5 November 2020, by [BRODER David](#), [DZIEMIANOWICZ-BAK Agnieszka](#) (Date first published: 3 November 2020).

In recent days, Poland has seen its biggest protests in decades, with strikes and demonstrations against the harshened abortion ban. As MP Agnieszka Dziemianowicz-Bak tells Jacobin, the movement is a lightning rod for frustrations at the country's hard-right government — and can finally put women's hardships at the center of the political agenda.

Recent days have seen Poland's biggest social movement in decades, as [hundreds of thousands protest](#) a court ruling that imposes a near-total ban on abortion. Since the 1990s, Poland has been one of the European countries with the strictest anti-abortion measures; on October 22, the Constitutional Court tightened this regime yet further, as it ruled that severe fetal abnormalities were no longer grounds for seeking a termination.

Reproductive rights have been a key political battleground in Poland in recent years. Already back in 2016, the hard-right Law and Justice (PiS) government tried to pass a bill further restricting abortion, only to retreat in the face of the so-called "[Black Protests](#)." The days following this latest ruling have seen an even more powerful wave of demonstrations, including strikes at workplaces up and down the country.

Agnieszka Dziemianowicz-Bak is a feminist activist prominent in 2016's "[Black Protests](#)" as well as the current movement. Since the October 2019 election, she has also been a member of the Sejm (parliament) as part of the left-wing coalition Lewica. She spoke to *Jacobin's* David Broder about the offensive against reproductive rights, Poles' frustrations with the PiS government, and what the protest movement has already achieved.

DB | Over the last week or so, there has been a massive response to the Constitutional Court ruling. But also remarkable is that it has mobilized such a great variety of groups, including protests even by farmers and taxi drivers. What explains the strength of this movement?

ADB | The ruling itself was about reproductive rights. Poland's anti-abortion laws had already been restrictive, but the ruling by the Constitutional Court amounts to a total ban. This caused mass protests, at first by women. But then other groups — workers, trade unionists, farmers, entrepreneurs — quickly joined in.

This is a mass protest of Polish society — still centered on a feminist agenda, but which is not only about that. It also expresses popular frustration at the government's failure to take responsibility faced with the pandemic, and with the rising numbers of deaths in Poland.

So, the court's ruling was the trigger that prompted the expression of this mass frustration. As compared to the Black Protests in 2016, this time the signs and slogans are more radical, even

vulgar — the main slogan is “Get the Fuck Out!” This, too, shows that the protests aren’t just *for* something, but mainly about the current political situation.

This is both a good and a bad thing. The bad side is the ongoing risk is that the central, women’s agenda will be absorbed into the liberal center and its generic opposition to the ruling PiS. But what we also see is a solidarity between different groups in Polish society, trade unionists and so on, and feminists. This may be normal in Western countries, but not so in Poland, where after thirty years of “shock doctrine” neoliberalism, there is a pervasive individualism.

DB | Earlier this week, you made a speech in parliament while holding up a clothes hanger — symbolizing the reality that, even before this current ruling, many Polish women had to pay for clandestine abortions. If it is often said in Anglophone media that PiS is a “socially conservative” party that also stands up for welfare, this shows how its policies also impose massive financial costs on women who need a termination.

ADB | Yes, the idea that PiS stands for welfare is good PR for that party. But while it is, indeed, not a liberal party, it is neoliberal in economic terms.

And a total ban on abortion has very grave economic consequences. Each year, 120,000 women in Poland have an abortion. Mainly, they are either illegally conducted in Poland, or else you can travel abroad for one, depending on how able you are to afford it.

The clothes hanger is a symbol — of course, even illegal abortion isn’t done with these tools anymore. But we really are afraid that this ban will cause both further economic exclusion and health risks for those who can’t go abroad.

There is also frustration that this total ban was imposed not by parliament but by a court ruling. PiS has a majority in parliament and could easily have passed a bill to this effect — but that would mean having to make the decision openly, in front of all society.

They are too cowardly to do so, also because polls show that society doesn’t support their position. A full 80 percent of people are against the ruling, and 60 percent are in favor of liberalizing abortion law. Given such large majorities, even a part of PiS’s own electorate must be against it, even though, of course, people who vote for that party are generally more conservative.

DB | There has been some suggestion that president Andrzej Duda — [reelected in July](#) as a PiS-backed independent — may seek to push back against the ruling slightly with what is said to be a “compromise” solution — allowing abortion in some very limited circumstances. How do you think protestors will see this?

ADB | The majority of the protestors don’t just want things to stay as they have been for the last thirty years — most favor liberalization, even if some part of the movement does want the status quo.

I don’t think that people would be satisfied with this plan — indeed, it is not even a “compromise” so much as a way of making the ruling sound softer. What Andrzej Duda proposes is based on imprecise terms, open to wide interpretation but that cannot be defined medically. If abortion is allowed only if the fetus is severely damaged and would “without doubt” die immediately after the birth, then does it mean it is not allowed if the fetus would survive for a couple of days?

DB | The PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński has taken a hard line, including through a televised address, against the backdrop of several Polish flags, condemning the protests as an attack on Catholic national values. We have also seen a far-right group calling itself the “national guard,” claiming to defend church buildings from attack. Is Kaczyński encouraging them,

and how do they relate to the actual police?

ADB | At first, the police's reaction to the demonstrations showed the same brutality and excessive force we had seen them use against the LGBT protests this summer. But tellingly, one week later — after Kaczyński's address — their role shifted, as they began having to defend protestors against far-right vigilantes.

Kaczyński is also the minister responsible for internal security. So, now we see an absurd situation where the leading figure in the government appeals for militias and far-right fighters to take to the streets, and these groups respond to his call, fighting with the police as well as with protestors.

A lot of commentators say he is mad and has lost control of the situation. I don't really agree: he wants this chaos and the escalation of conflict, which is functional to both the government and Kaczyński personally. He has had internal problems with his smaller government partners and justice minister Zbigniew Ziobro. But he is using this situation, irresponsibly, to divert attention from the pandemic and the growing numbers of the infected, and toward a story of escalating social conflict.

As for the guards outside churches, it is not true that the churches are under attack. Last Sunday, on one day alone, there were some demonstrations with banners inside churches, but that was it. They did not "attack" the churches, and no one today addresses the churches at all. But now we have these funny pictures of soldiers, police, and far-right groups all "guarding" churches no one else is even paying attention to.

DB | **The 2016 protests in Poland, which thwarted a previous bid to further restrict abortion, had some resonance also in Ireland, whose [Repeal the 8th movement](#) forced the successful 2018 referendum to overturn the constitutional ban on abortion. There, the reproductive rights movement scored a great victory, even faced with the weakness of the parliamentary left and the narrow range of mainstream political choice. In Poland's presidential election twelve months ago, we saw a binary contest between PiS and the more centrist opposition, which isn't all that "liberal" itself. Can the current protests help break open Polish politics?**

ADB | I think we are at the point that things can go either way. From the beginning of the protests, it has been clear that, even as compared to 2016, this is much more leftist and radical and defined by progressive politics.

Right now, we face the danger that the movement will be absorbed by Civic Platform, which, as you say, is barely even a liberal party, but it's still the biggest opposition in parliament. The effect may be just to strengthen the polarization between PiS and anti-PiS parts of society. But our hope is that it will change the political scenery, by turning the debate in a more progressive direction and pushing forth the younger generations and their demands.

The vast majority of the protestors are there in a spontaneous and not organized way. But the central organizing group is the All-Poland Women's Strike (OSK), which emerged during 2016. Their work is about organizing activists and the protests more than political leadership as such — and politically, it is diverse, with many different figures, some closer to Civic Platform and others closer to the Left.

DB | **And what hope is there of forcing a defeat on the government? Do we see similar signs to those in 2016?**

ADB | The situation is complicated by the fact that in 2016, when faced with protests, the government just had to withdraw its bill, while now, by using the Constitutional Court to make the decision, they closed that door. So, the government's options are more limited, and it's hard to bet on it collapsing.

What the government could do is pass the bill the Left presented — an emergency text for decriminalization. It's not the pregnant women who face criminal charges for abortion, but those who provide them one, like doctors. So, such a bill could help the women already in the hospital waiting for a procedure to have one; it would be a very simple step, without even broadly changing the current law, showing a will for dialogue, and putting the debate about reproductive rights back before parliament.

If I were pessimistic, I'd think they'd try and do Duda's "presidential compromise" and then use the public broadcaster and propaganda machinery to paint the protestors as protesting pointlessly and unwilling to help fight against the pandemic.

So, a lot will also depend on how strongly the protests can be politicized and brought into the institutions and the debate in parliament. But the movement in recent years has had what I — as a feminist and a politician — already see as a positive effect. For now, women are becoming seen in the public space, and more movement journalists are being invited onto debates. Now, there is a feminist presence in Polish politics — and that is something that'll stay with us.

David Broder is *Jacobin's* Europe editor and a historian of French and Italian communism.

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