

# How young people broke Poland's Grand Compromise with the Church

Monday 14 December 2020, by [GRAFF Agnieszka](#) (Date first published: 7 December 2020).

**In Poland, something has been broken, something has overflowed. It is the end of a certain compromise in Poland. It is not a question of a "compromise on abortion", because there never was one, but of a much broader systemic compromise : the Grand Compromise between the state and the Church on which the order of the Third Republic of Poland and the identity of Poland after 1989 was founded.**

Marta Lempart has the following formulation : "The revolution that has begun is not just a fight for abortion. It is a struggle for freedom, which has been very brutally challenged and abortion is the symbol of that."

What freedom are we talking about, of which abortion is the symbol? It concerns the right to choose in the private sphere - that is clear. It is about gender equality, of which the right of women to self-determination is an essential element - that is also evident. And also about freeing ourselves from the Law and Justice (PiS) party, which the demonstrators tell to go fuck itself elsewhere while the coordinators of the demonstrations politely suggest resignation.

But the real issue is our own perception of what we are as a society or, as President Kaczynski prefers, as a nation. The mobilizations will probably soon stop, the PiS will do what it wants in matters of abortion, but the cultural change will be irreversible.

"The subject does not accept the judgment of the complement of the object" [1] It is one of the slogans of the protests, a good joke and a brilliant diagnosis of the situation.

## **The grammar of the Grand Compromise**

The grammar on which the Polish social contract has been based for the last 25 years is in the process of collapsing before our eyes. This grammar of the Grand Compromise which has accompanied us for two decades, concluded at the threshold of the transformation between the power elites and the episcopate, made women the hostages of Polish modernization. The stability of relations between the state and the Church was based on the enormity of the state power and the privileges of the religious institution. The episcopate was supposed to stabilize the systemic transformation and the process of joining the European Union in exchange for a draconian reduction in women's rights and the rejection of LGBT rights.

Poland is a Catholic country - this phrase was repeated like a mantra. This was not a description of reality but a decree. Or an incantation ? The identification of the Polish character with Catholicism was to be our specificity in the Union. And depending on your vision of the world: the price or the reward for the "return to Europe".

For religious fundamentalists around the world, this meant that Poland would play the role of guinea pig for their worldview. It was to be a stronghold of Christianity in a Europe becoming more and

more secular, a battleground for “family values”. And our society had to accept this, because we assumed that it was our “cultural code”.

This grand compromise had two essential principles and several complementary provisions.

First principle: The Third Republic recognizes that the Church has an unquestionable monopoly with regard to values. This domain of values is largely limited to sexual ethics: from which flow the anti-abortion law, the presence of religious symbols in the public space and hostility with regard to LGBT communities - confirmed by the state. The Church also de facto decided to gradually restrict access to contraception ; its voice was decisive in disputes relating to reimbursement of in vitro fertilization.

By saying in his proclamation that “the moral guarantee that the Church holds is the only moral system known to everyone in Poland” and that “its rejection amounts to nihilism”, Jaroslaw Kaczynski perfectly summed up the conviction that there is no alternative to Catholicism as a source of morality for Poles. According to such logic, it is the Church that gives meaning to social reality. Outside the Church there is the void. Those who have attended religious instruction know that in Europe it is the dominant “civilization of death”.

And those who have not had this instruction must understand that something is wrong with them.

The second principle defines what the Church must do in return for its privileged position. Its role was to pacify the troubles and conflicts that accompanied the systemic transformations.

On the one hand, it had to alleviate nationalist sentiments, on the other to calm the social discontent resulting from the neoliberal transformation. The Church was to be a kind of buffer to make it possible for Poland to join the European Union and stay there.

Let us add that in the early 1990s there was good reason to believe that the Church would live up to this role. There was still the Pope who was the patron of the entry of Poland into the Union ; there was a fairly active liberal fraction in the ‘Church; the newly created Radio Maryja [2] had already received local authorizations’, but it did not receive a national one until 1994. The neofascists were marginal and crazy and hardly anyone in Poland challenged the neoliberal transformation, so the silence of the Church surprised no one.

The additional provisions ensured, on the one hand, social peace (and therefore the relative stability of successive governments) and on the other hand the security of the clergy. The crucial provision concerned the silence of women. We knew in advance that any manifestation of rebellion would be ridiculed or suppressed.

An important mechanism to “divert attention” was also put in place - the compromise concerned the law on abortion, but not the lived reality of abortions. At no time was clandestine abortion a subject of interest for the state apparatus.

And finally, there was a third additional provision , whose existence was recently revealed by the films of the Sekielski brothers [3]: impunity for priests responsible for sexual abuse and the bishops who covered them for many years. In short: the law of silence around paedophilia in the Church.

When I presented the main lines of the Grand Compromise during a public debate organized online by the Karol Modzelewski Open University, I was asked what evidence I had of its existence. Apparently young people had never heard of it. Because it was never written. It is not to be found in the history books. But to the generation of the transformation, especially women, its existence was evident. It was the air that we breathed, the limits of the reality in which we had to live. It was

covered by a shameful silence. By naming it, by trying to question its legitimacy, we risked being ridiculed. This compromise lasted more than a quarter of a century. It is a piece of Polish history - which is precisely coming to an end.

To find the sources of the Grand Compromise, we can refer to the book by Adam Michnik, *The Church, the Left, the Dialogue* (1977), which set the tone for relations between the Church and the democratic opposition in the 1980s. But it was in 1993 that the era that is ending today began. Because even if the Grand Compromise concerns the power in the broad sense of the Church in Poland, it was sealed by the ban on abortion. The Church was particularly concerned with this issue; it never gave up on it.

### **The 1993 law, or the limits of Polish democracy**

Let us remember that before that there was the law of 1956 : abortion was legal in case of malformation of the foetus, a threat to the health of a woman, when the pregnancy was the result of a crime and - a key question - because of the difficult living conditions of women.

In 1993, the ban on abortion - wrongly called "compromise" - was imposed. More than a million signatures for a national referendum, collected by the "Bujak committees", were ignored. Such are the facts.

And what is their deep meaning? Well, we learned then something fundamental: in free Poland, on intimate questions - related to human sexuality, fertility, reproduction - the decision will be up to the Catholic Church. This is where the limits of Polish democracy lie.

For many of those who had fought in the opposition, it was a cognitive shock. It concerned women's rights, but also, and perhaps above all, it put end to the fantasy of a modern secular state.

Let us repeat it : the founding gesture of the relationship between state and Church in the Third Republic was the pacification of a great social movement: the mobilization for a referendum on abortion.

To put it more bluntly, people who wanted to put the question to a vote were told: shut up! This was repeated hundreds of times over the next two decades: the subject of gender equality and sexual rights has been publicly derided, ignored, sidelined.

It was said - including in the liberal media - that it was a "substitute" question, a matter of "custom". We said ironically: women's rights are a kind of an abstraction which interests feminists, whereas "normal women" occupy themselves with "real life".

The subsequent clashes around abortion took place in this atmosphere. There were rebellious appeals, articles and books, but we knew in advance that they would not affect the course of history. However, this is our history - the history of which the present version is that of the mass demonstrations under the sign of the Women's Strike.

In 1996 the Diet attempted to make the law more flexible by adding the difficult personal situation of women. The amendment was contested by the Constitutional Court, whose president was then Professor Andrzej Zoll. This judgment was justified in a way that was curious and yet characteristic of this period : the ban on abortion was... necessary for the protection of maternity [4].

Motherhood was thus identified with pregnancy, legally and rhetorically depriving pregnant women of any personality. This was not the only procedure of this kind.

Since the mid-1990s, in the media, in popular culture and in public debate, women have been systematically excluded. Children's books and textbooks were invaded by "conceived children" - fetuses floating in cosmic limbo, detached from reality, the reality of pregnancy and of the woman who decides about her health and her life.

To use the slogan of today's demonstrations: the subject of then could not agree or disagree with the judgment, for she was effectively erased from the sentence in which her fate was decided. I followed this process with amazement. The result was the chapter "The woman who disappeared" in my 2001 book *Świat bez kobiet* (The world without women).

The first decade of the 2000s was a period when women's organizations (the Federation for Women and Family Planning were key) and feminist street initiatives (I mean, of course, the Demo) attempted to challenge the Grand Compromise.

It is interesting to note that the first Demo was a reaction to an event which could be considered as a temporary challenge to one of the additional provisions of the Grand Compromise - that of ignoring the question of clandestine abortion. In December 1999, police raided a cabinet of gynecology in Lubliniec. It was said that the woman's body had been "confiscated" as proof. It was terrifying, we took to the streets.

The simple fact of the existence of the law probably would not have been enough, because we had memorized the decision of the court.

In 2002, feminists decided to reveal the existence of the Grand Compromise on the international forum. The Women's Entente of 8 March addressed a letter of one hundred women to the European Parliament asking for support for a democratic debate on the situation of women in Poland, informing about the fact that a "specific agreement had been concluded between the Catholic Church and the government about the accession of Poland to the European Union. Thus, the Church would support European integration and in exchange the government would abandon the debate on amending the anti-abortion law." And also: "Behind the scenes of the integration of Poland into the European Union, there is therefore a kind of trade in women's rights."

Signed by eminent women in the fields of science, culture and art the letter received no response from the European institutions - the EU avoided debates on questions of society, it was therefore de facto favourable to the Grand Compromise. Besides, both sides of the conspiracy described in the letter reacted with a mixture of paternalism, mockery and threats.

Bishop Zycinski declared that it was "the least serious letter of protest that he had read recently," adding with a knowing wink that the bishops could also renounce their support for European integration.

The editor-in-chief of the national section of the (liberal) daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Rafał Zakrzewski, confirmed the existence of the compromise: "The Church is a strong ally for integration into the EU. And I am convinced that it is more important for us to find ourselves as soon as possible in a common Europe than to start a heated argument now."

The following scenes of this drama were more or less successful attempts to get women's voices to reach the media and public opinion (action on the ship *Langenort* in 2003, the subsequent demonstrations in 2003 [5], the European institutions (the case of Alicja Tysiąc in Strasbourg in 2007) and public consciousness, effectively put to sleep by the newspeak of the Church and untouchable legality (in 2011 Katarzyna Bratkowska publicly declared that she had had an abortion).

I will talk about the 2016 protests a little further on, because they are another chapter in this story -

the beginning of the end of the Grand Compromise.

### **Don't irritate the Church, or everything will collapse ...**

When we speak of the Grand Compromise, it is not a matter of an open conflict over the conception of society, which can be won or lost, nor of a debate on a controversial subject in a democratic country. We are talking about a conspiracy of silence, of the absence of debate. We are talking about a state which has given an anti-democratic institution the right to decide on the private lives of its citizens (women and men), while ordering them to keep a shameful silence.

This is the history of a country in the centre of Europe whose political elites have yielded to the power of the Church in the field of values. The Grand Compromise was unstable, it had to be constantly reaffirmed by politicians. This was done on different occasions and for different reasons : by the Right, because 'it shared these values, by the liberals and the Left, because they were convinced that the Church was a power that should not be irritated.

Let us try to reproduce the motivations of those who have been the guardians of the Compromise. We were returning to Europe; it was a great historical process. There was a deep conviction that without the support of the Church, it might not work. Europe, on the other hand, was ready to consider the hostility to women's rights as our "cultural exception".

Furthermore, we were promised that after joining the EU things would be better - that the time of equality would come. But when we found ourselves in this much desired Union, it turned out that the Grand Compromise was still in force. Why ? Because the Church - it and only it - can prevent the entry on to the political scene of the nationalist far Right. Otherwise, the dream of Europe and a democratic Poland would be closed, definitively.

The theme of gender - not only women's reproductive rights, but also domestic violence, sex education and the rights of sexual minorities - has been hushed up for many years so as not to irritate the Church.

It was believed that without the Church, everything would collapse. It was so in the days of the governments of the Freedom Union (UW), then of the Alliance of the Democratic Left (SLD) and even the first PiS government. Eight years of Civic Platform (PO) governments were eight years of dodges and concessions.

Today, we know these calculations were wrong. It did not work, precisely because they trusted too much the Church.

The PiS won the elections with the support of the Church. The gains of the Third Republic were destroyed with its full agreement. Was it possible to predict this in the early 1990s, when the bases for the Grand Compromise were built? Probably not entirely. The Church has shifted gradually to the right. Tadeusz Rydzyk took some time to build his media empire.

In the meantime, powerful ultra-conservative international movements, which few people have noticed, have been developing. Their local branches are Ordo Iuris, Kaja Godek and many organizations working for "family values" and de facto against gender equality. [6] They are strongly linked to international networks: the World Congress of Families, "Tradition, Family and Property", Citizen Go - none of which existed when the Compromise was being built in Poland.

All of these changes have put an end to the Grand Compromise before our eyes, as its violent nature has become evident to all.

## Do you remember Black Monday?

The present upheaval is not the product of Julia Przyłębska, but that of the Black Protests of the years 2016-2018. [7] The coordinators are partly the same : Marta Lempart and the National Women's Strike, the local groups of the Strike and the *Dziewuchy dziewczuchom*. [8].

The emotions are also to a large extent a continuation of the rebellion of that time, But the language has changed a lot. Four years ago, we discovered the true intentions of the religious fundamentalists of Ordo Iuris, the ruthlessness of the episcopate and the government and - most important, perhaps - our own strength and anger.

Do you remember Black Monday ? On 3 October 2016, protests took place in 200 cities, thousands of women went to work dressed in black. So in the rain, under umbrellas, in a crowd of thousands on Zamkowy Square (Castle Square, in Warsaw) and in other squares of Polish cities, a new political entity was formed : angry women.

Many women screaming today in the street "Go fuck yourselves somewhere else" and "This is war" started their rebellion in 2016. They were there as girls and very young girls, with their mothers, grandmothers, older sisters. Now they are back with lots of company and with much more radical slogans.

There are no longer references to the tradition of Solidarnosc, there is no longer the symbolism of the Warsaw Uprising transformed into a feminist prayer - there is blasphemy, irony and black humour. " Mummy allowed me to say dirty words today"- this sign in the hands of 'a young girl says a lot about the atmosphere of these events and the intergenerational feminine bond from which they emerge.

The Grand Compromise is irrevocably terminated. It was falling apart bit by bit. About ten years ago, the Church itself abdicated its role of ally of democracy and modernization (or perhaps it just stopped pretending), then women refused to obey - 2016 will remain in history as the birth of the mass women's movement in Poland.

A month ago, Kaczyński put his cards on the table to outbid Ziobro [9] and divert attention from the inability of the government to cope with the pandemic - this was the decision of the pseudo-Tribunal. And there a new uncompromising player appeared : generation Z, born after 1995.

- Twenty-year-olds behave as if they have never heard of the Grand Compromise.
- They do not consider Europe as the civilization of death.
- They do not have the reflex to say "God be praised" when passing a priest.
- For them, John Paul II is a historical figure, not a saint.

And these young people consider the symbols of Solidarnosc as a source of ideas for internet memes.

This is the rebellion of the smartphone generation: individualism, network and a specific sense of humour reign supreme. They all express themselves personally and in their own way. Together, they are making history and they are aware of it.

It is likely that soon someone will count the acts of apostasy (public abandonment of the Catholic religion) and will find that they number in the thousands. However, the key to a powerful cultural change lies in the images - memes, videos, photos, clips.

- A group of young girls in Szczecinek surrounds a priest, shouting, forcing him to go inside the church.



- Ten people stand under the windows of Archbishop Jędraszewski with a big placard: “The house of Satan”.
- High school girls from Warsaw act like potential victims of a pope who is throwing stones into a pond in front of the National Museum.

There are also changes in the landscape and photos of these changes : lightning (red lightning is one of the symbols adopted by the rebels) on the walls, inscriptions “You have blood on your hands ”, hangers and posters on the fences around churches. These images are ephemeral, but together they constitute a new deal in the collective memory of this society. And this will inevitably be taken up by the history books

The Right insists that the bad guys, the troublemakers, the barbarians have taken to the streets. Kaczyński has seen them as children manipulated by adults. In reality, we are dealing with young people who have refused to participate in a game that adults are trying to force on them.

It is a collective entity conscious of itself that is writing history today, that is saying “I am checking on you” to the generations of the transformation. It is emerging before our eyes, calling into question the foundations of the social contract that it has found. Abortion was the trigger, and the slogan “Fuck the PiS” obliges us to pose the question of the future of the ruling party.

In the long run, it is a much more complex question than the law on abortion and the career of President Kaczynski : young people have rejected the cultural hegemony of the Church in Poland. It is amusing to note that the conclusions of previous generations in this matter have been rejected by the young people who are sometimes called the JP2 generation [10], young people who in school had more catechism than lessons of computer science.

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## **Agnieszka Graff**

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## **P.S.**

International Viewpoint

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## **Footnotes**

[1] “*Podmiot nie zgadza się z orzeczeniem*” is a pun on the words “grammar” and “justice”; the term “*orzeczenie*” means in grammar “complement of the object” and in legal parlance “judgment”.

[2] Radio Maryja, a conservative Catholic radio station, was created in 1991, broadcasting first in Torun and Bydgoszcz, then obtaining in 1994 national authorization. Its founder and still director, Tadeusz Rydzyk, a Redemptorist priest, is known for his defence of creationist theses, his fight against Freemasonry, his nationalism and his anti-Semitic remarks. This radio, also broadcasting

by satellite in Europe and North America, is part - with the far-right daily *Nasz Dziennik* , the television channel *Trwam* , the Higher School of Social and Media Culture of Torun, as well as the Lux Veritas Foundation - of a media empire of the Catholic far-right.

[3] These documentary films are available on YouTube, *Game of hide and seek* ( *Zabawa w chowanego* , 2020) and *Don't tell anyone Tylko nie mownikomu*

[4] Extracts from the judgment of the Constitutional Court of May 28, 1997: According to the applicant, there was also a violation of the article 79-1 of the constitutional provisions providing for maternity protection. Motherhood, by its very nature, should be a relationship between mother and child. Legal provisions cannot either aim to break this relationship or stimulate such a break(...). Due to the aforementioned function of motherhood, the constitutional protection of this value is not undertaken in the sole interest of the mother. The foetus and its good development must be an equal subject of this protection. This clearly includes protecting the health of the conceived child and prohibition of causing health problems to the foetus or harming it.

[5] the Federation of Women invited Women on Waves to Poland. Their ship, the *Langenort*, arrived at Wladyslawowoon on the Polish coast, to stay there for two weeks. They organized, together with Polish activists, actions aimed at raising public awareness about the anti-abortion law and performed abortions in extraterritorial waters. These actions were fiercely attacked by far-right groups like All-Poland Youth and the League of Polish Families, who seriously intimidated women in order to prevent them from boarding.

[6] Ordo Iuris is a Catholic fundamentalist far-right NGO which funds lobbying for “traditional values” and was at the origin of the draft law aiming at an absolute ban on abortion, rejected in 2016 by the Diet under pressure from women’s mobilization. This NGO is associated with the Brazilian far-right NGO “Tradition, family and property” (TFP), considered as a heretical sect by the Bishop of Campos in Brazil. Kaja Godek is an anti-abortion and homophobic activist who runs the Pro Foundation. She was a candidate for the coalition of far-right organizations in the 2019 European elections.

[7] Julia Przylebska was elected president of the Constitutional Court on the initiative of the PiS in 2015. This court ruled unconstitutional voluntary termination of pregnancy (abortion) for women pregnant with foetuses suffering from malformations, even “serious and irreversible”.

[8] *Dziewuchy dziewczuchom* (girls for girls) is a feminist movement bringing together about fifty local groups which was initiated by the creation of a Facebook page on April 1, 2016 against the draft anti-abortion law: [facebook.com/ dziewczuchydziewuchom /](https://facebook.com/dziewuchydziewuchom/)

[9] Zbigniew Ziobro, initially a member of the PiS, created an even more conservative party in 2012, under the name of “Solidarity Poland” which is part of the Union of the Right along with the PiS. He has been Minister of Justice since 2015.

[10] Abbreviation for John Paul II, pope.