

Cultural Clash in the Midst of Pandemic

Essay on protests in Poland

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Introduction

On March 11th, 2020 COVID-19 outbreak was recognized as an international pandemic by WHO. The following day a state of epidemic was introduced in Poland (Golec de Zavala, Bierwiazzonek, Baran, Keenan, & Hase, 2020). Hence, at the cusp of winter, Poland is now in a nation-wide lockdown yet again.¹ Restaurants and pubs are open only for take away, pupils and students are being taught online, gyms and swimming pools are closed, and masks are required in all public places (Gov.pl, 2020). However, with Poland's healthcare system underfunded and understaffed, the death toll is hitting new records and the economy is struggling (Politico, 2020). Last month Poland saw mass protests flooding the streets of villages, towns and cities unseen since the uprising of the 1980s.

The protests are, however, not about the (lack of) government response to the pandemic. Rather, the protests are the culmination of years of growing dissatisfaction with the right-wing Polish government's attempts to fundamentally reshape the country.

Most recently, a ruling from the constitutional court (which has been stacked by the government) strengthening Poland's already draconian abortion laws (Desperak, 2003) to also forbid abortion in case of severe fetal impairment caused thousands of Poles to take to the streets all over the country. Women are fighting for their right to abortion, and the ruling has become the rallying cry for the widespread discontent with the ruling government. International media has dubbed these protests "a fight for democracy" (Al Jazeera, 2020) and "a feminist revolution" (The New Yorker, 2020), that cannot be stopped (France 24, 2020). The recent protests are not the first, but the circumstances surrounding them are special. Since 2015 there

¹ This essay was written in December 2020.

have been many protests in Poland regarding abortion laws, court reform, the transformation of the public broadcaster into a government mouthpiece (Archiwum Osiatyńskiego, n.d.), as well as LGBTQ rights, which just happened in May and June, but none of them became the sustained mass movement we can see today on the streets of many Polish cities and towns.

In the following, I will try to develop a condensed snapshot of Women's Strikes as a social movement in Poland. This will be followed by pointing out some differences between protests in 2016 to 2018, and the current ones.

The Topic of Abortion in Poland

Following the fall of the Soviet bloc, Poland adopted one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe in 1993 (Gov.pl, n.d.b). As of November 28th, 2020 abortion in Poland is legal only in three cases: when it is endangering health or life of the woman, when there is a justified suspicion that the pregnancy resulted from a prohibited act like rape or incest, or when there is an indication of a high probability of severe and irreversible fetal impairment or an incurable life-threatening disease. This has largely been attributed to the role of the Catholic Church in the fall of communism in the second half of the 1980s. Agnieszka Graff, Polish feminist and scholar, said in an Interview with the New Yorker (2020): "The Church went along with Europe-ization and democratization [of Poland] in exchange for having its way on the things they feel strongly about. And, of course, the things they feel most strongly about are women's reproductive rights."

Since 2015, this delicate balance between liberal elites and the influential Catholic Church has been falling apart. After eight years of being in opposition, the right-wing political party Law and Justice (Polish: Prawo i Sprawiedliwość; from hereafter PiS) is back in power. While in power, PiS has championed themselves as the spearhead in the fight for a 'Christian Europe' and so-called traditional values, and against what they dubbed 'western gender ideology'. Party leaders mingle with and enjoy the explicit support of the hierarchs of the Catholic Church in Poland.

"In Poland, national identity constructed around the notions of endangered exceptionalism has been linked to the defense of gender hierarchy and heteronormativity rooted in traditional "family values" based on the teachings of the Catholic Church" (Golec de Zavala, et al, 2020, p. 2). This perceived threat to the notion of a traditional Polish family is so foundational that

the definition of a family as a man and a woman was written into the Polish constitution from 1997.² In recent years, this threat has been defined as LGBTQ rights, gender studies, and women's reproductive rights. Hence, supported by Catholic Church and christian organisations, PiS has been seeking to change the abortion laws.

On July 5, 2016 the legislative initiative "Stop Abortion" (Polish: "Stop Aborcji") attempted to add protection of life from conception to the death (Gazeta Wyborcza, 2016). The same night, the Facebook group "Girls For Girls" (Polish: Dziewuchy Dziewuchom) was created, and allowed thousands of women from across the country to organize protests both on the internet and in the public space among themselves (Urzędowska & Suchomska, 2020). About a month later the legislative initiative "Save the Woman" (Polish: "Ratujmy Kobiety") was filled in Sejm (the Polish lower house), which wanted among others unlimited access to abortion until the end of the 12th week (Protest Kobiet, 2016). Sejm controlled by PiS decided to continue the work on the project "Stop Abortion" and immediately discarded "Save the Women". This led to the Black Protest (Polish: Czarny Protest) and the All-Poland Women's Strike (Polish: Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet) during which between 98.000 and 200.000 people joined the protests (WP Wiadomości, 2016). Women took days off from work and wore black clothes as a symbol of grief. On the streets we could see slogans like "Dead I will not give birth" (Polish: "Martwa nie urodzę"), "I think, I feel, I decide" (Polish: "Myślę, Czuję, Decyduję"), "We want children out of love and choice, not rape and terror" (Polish: "Dzieci chcemy z miłości i wyboru, a nie gwałtu i terroru"), and "My uterus, my business" (Polish: "Moja macica, moja sprawa") (Archiwum Osiatyńskiego, 2018). Ultimately Sejm rejected both projects.

In 2017, a revamped version of "Save the Women" was submitted to Sejm (OKO.Press, 2017a), but it was rejected again (Rzeczpospolita, 2018). Project "Stop Abortions" (Polish: "Zatrzymaj Aborcje"), this time trying to ban abortion in the case of high severe fetal impairment or an incurable life-threatening disease, was submitted to the Parliament, and accepted for further consideration (Rzeczpospolita, 2018), but did not make to the second reading. On November 27, 2017, a group of MPs, mostly affiliated with PiS, filed a motion with the Constitutional Tribunal for a ruling that the provisions of the 1993 Act authorizing abortion in the event of a high probability of severe and irreversible fetal impairment or an incurable life-threatening

² Paragraph 18 of the Polish Constitution: "Marriage as a union of a man and a woman, family, motherhood and parenthood are under the protection and care of the Republic of Poland". (Gov.pl, n.d.a)

disease are inconsistent with the Polish Constitution (OKO.Press, 2017b; Gov.pl, 2017; RMF 24, 2017).

Three years later, on October 22, 2020 the Constitutional Tribunal gave a positive opinion on the motion, only two judges were against it. This has sparked nation-wide protests in Poland, which have been continuing through the month of November 2020. The protests have caused the implementation of the decision to be delayed, but the protests have not abated. Rather they have become the rallying cry of a variety of anti-PiS sentiments and have pivoted to become an attempt to make the PiS government resign.

Protests During Pandemic

The constitutional tribunal's ruling was the spark that ignited a series of protests for reproductive rights, but soon the "Women's Strike" moved far beyond simply fighting for the right to abortion. Protest organizers made a survey among protesters recognizing thirteen issues important to all protesters concerning, among others: education, women's reproductive rights, health care, climate change, and separation of state and church (Polityka, 2020). They continued to create expert groups to work on the issues.

Current protests are no doubt built on the backbone of years of work of groups of women, who created a huge online community, as well as experiences from previous years from Black Protest and All-Poland Women's Strike (Urzędowska & Suchomska, 2020). However, the rhetoric of protests became much more aggressive and forms of protest more untraditional. The main motto of protest have become the crude, but succinct, "Fuck PiS" (Polish: "Jebać PiS" or "***** ***) and "Get the Fuck Out" (Polish "Wypierdalać!"), and have been heavily criticised by liberal politicians and celebrities for being vulgar and emotional.³ Polish novelist and activist, Olga Tokarczuk, who last year was awarded Literary Nobel Prize, told the New Yorker (2020):

The first time I saw a banner on the screen that read 'Get the fuck out,' I was shocked by the word, so clearly painted in red letters in public space, but I got used to it quickly and decided that this anger couldn't be expressed any better. That when in society communication between two sides breaks down, when people do not hear and understand

³ Check here for photos online from the protests (2020, October 20) [found in OKO.Press] <https://www.facebook.com/oko.press/photos/pcb.2788767098051489/2788763134718552/>

each other, when their words come from entirely different idiolects, then only the curse words remain. It is a radical, instantaneous language that will change as things move to the next stage: negotiation, new order making, and new rules.

What mostly shocked public opinion was protests in churches and in front of residences of Polish Catholic hierarchs. Protests spilled into masses, protesters wrote slogans on walls of churches. It is hard to overstate the importance and inviolable status of the Catholic Church in Polish society and any of these behaviors would be unimaginable during previous protests. The influence of the Church on Polish politics combined with recent pedofiliac scandals and campaign of hate against LGBTQ people fueled by the Church left many (especially young) people angry at the institution. Many people, even some supporters, spoke out criticising this perceived attack on churches.

The schism in Polish society revealed by the protests can be best presented in the governmental statement presented by Vice Minister and de facto leader of Poland, Jarosław Kaczyński. On the 27th of October on the Facebook page of the party PiS Jarosław Kaczyński said:

This is a completely new event in the history of Poland, at least on this scale. A fatal event, because [...] the moral deposit held by the Church is the only moral system that is commonly known in Poland. Its rejection is nihilism. And nihilism is what we see in these demonstrations and in these attacks on the Church, but also in the way of expressing those who demonstrate incredible vulgarity. All this shows the very bad sides of a certain part of our society.

(PiS, 2020)

This part of Jarosław Kaczyński's speech perfectly represents increase of "the desire for national cohesion (i.e., the need to see the nation as of the same mind, tightly knit, and highly similar; Waytz & Young, 2012)" (Golec de Zavala, et al, 2020, p. 2) induced by the outbreak of infectious disease COVID-19. The safety of Poland hinges on its status as a united Catholic country with shared values, traditions and culture. Anyone who stands against those common ideas becomes an enemy. Golec de Zavala, et al, (2020) have demonstrated how the outbreak of a disease has helped activate feelings of threat associated with metaphor of external enemy, which in turn has been identified as among other LGBTQ communities and feminists. This

explains PiS' attacks on LGBTQ community during the summer election, and current attacks on women's rights, as well as the excessive use of force by the police towards protestors.

The police response to the most recent round of protests has been particularly brutal. Even journalists and MPs have become victims of unlawful arrests and pepper spray. The government's response to the protests even included incitement of violence against protestors by public officials (Amnesty International, 2020). Jarosław Kaczyński called PiS supporters to defend the churches:

It is necessary, I repeat it again, to oppose [the nihilism of protestors]. It is the duty of the state, but also our duty, the duty of citizens. In particular, we must defend Polish churches. We must defend them at any cost. I call on all members of Law and Justice and all those who support us to take part in the defense of the Church, in defense of what is being attacked today. [...] Very often, elements of preparation, perhaps even training, are apparent in these attacks. This attack is intended to destroy Poland. It is to lead to the triumph of the forces whose power, in fact, will end the history of the Polish nation, as we have seen it so far.

(PiS, 2020)

The following Sunday groups of nationalists, and football fans organised themselves together with police to protect churches from "leftists" (Gazeta Wyborcza, 2020). However, on that day no one came to attack the churches.

The aggression and incitement of violence of public authorities hidden under the guise of disease prevention was supposed to deter protestors from showing up, but instead led to immense expressions of solidarity. As this is being written at the end of November 2020, Facebook posts with advice on how to deal with the effects of pepper spray, how to dress and prepare for protests, as well as explaining one's rights when withheld by the police are going viral. Every time a person is arrested, loud solidarity manifestations are organized in front of the police stations to show them that they are not alone. Free legal and psychological services are being provided to the victims of police overreach. As one of the slogans of the protests says: "When the state does not protect me, I will defend my sister!" (Polish: "Kiedy państwo mnie nie chroni, mojej siostry będę bronić!").

Conclusion

The recent surge in protests in Poland stems from a sustained and deep-seeded dissatisfaction among a big part of the population with the PiS governance over the last five years. The protests are an attempt to bring women's rights into the spotlight and away from its status as a political bargaining chip in the recent history of Poland. During the last 30 years, women's rights have been left to be dealt with in an undefined future. Meanwhile, there are not enough daycares, perinatal care is insufficient, and now women's lives are being put in danger. Women are angry at the state and at the church. Women are angry, and they are done being told how they should behave. As Polish journalist, Katarzyna Wężyk (2020), wrote in her Facebook manifesto:

Get the fuck out means we hit the wall. It means that this ruling regime, who are in bed with the Church, deserves nothing else. It means that we have been kicked, punched and spat on one time too many. It means that this time too many rights have been taken from us in the name of political games. It means that the consent to torture, the order to give birth to deformed children, the acknowledgment of our suffering and our will as invalid is finally too much. This pussy bites back.

Under her post women write that she hit the nail on the head and expressed the demands and emotions of thousands, if not tens or hundreds of thousands of Polish women.

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