

Poland's abortion ban protests are a harbinger of a wider social movement

Since 22 October, protests have taken place across Poland against a court ruling which established a near-total ban on abortion. Helena Chmielewska-Szlajfer and Roch Dunin-Wąsowicz argue that the protests are the beginning of a wider social movement channelling the grievances of women and the LGBTQ community, as well as other marginalised groups.

Until recently, women in Poland had the right to legally terminate pregnancies in three cases – if the pregnancy was the result of a crime, if it threatened the life of the mother, or if the pregnancy wasn't viable. On 22 October, Poland's contested and controversial Constitutional Court [deemed the last case](#) (the so-called embryo-pathological reason) unconstitutional. In practice, this means that only a handful of abortions will now be performed legally, a drop from a mere thousand cases a year.

It is estimated that Polish women have tens of thousands of abortions every year, either illegally in Poland, or elsewhere in the European Union or the United Kingdom. This turn of events in the legal domain, instigated by the leader of the ruling party and Deputy Prime Minister, Jarosław Kaczyński, has prompted an unprecedented backlash from civil society groups and ordinary citizens. This can now be witnessed daily throughout metropolitan and provincial Poland amid a global pandemic. What is, however, special about this outburst of discontent is that it is a space where a new coalition of civil society is forming, at the forefront of which are women's rights activists and the LGBTQ community.

Poland's protests

This isn't the first time that Poland's disenfranchised groups have risen up in protest against the encroachment of the state into their private lives, or against being pushed out of the public sphere. The LGBTQ community, which comprises up to 5-10% of society, and women, who are more than half of the population, have been at the forefront of this battle, though never really together.

It is near impossible to decipher whether in this moment we have reached the tipping point in the battle for the rights of women and the LGBTQ community – those realisations usually come with hindsight. Today, however, we are witnessing not only an unprecedented social upheaval on the streets of Poland – from small towns to medium and large cities – but also the formation of a new coalition against creeping authoritarianism, in all walks of life. This alliance is led by the tandem of women's rights and LGBTQ activists, constituting a new social movement.



Banner at a demonstration on 29 October 2020 against the Polish Constitutional Court's ruling on abortion, Credit: Sabrina Gröschke (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Since 22 October, people have been coming out onto the streets throughout Poland in unprecedented numbers. Within a week, by police estimates alone, almost half a million people took part in demonstrations in almost 150 locations, making them [possibly the largest protests in Polish history](#). The protests were first organised by the Women's Strike (*#StrajkKobiet*), which dates back to 2016 when the Law and Justice government first pondered restricting women's right to choose. Subsequently a great deal of them began to be organised spontaneously by people frustrated at the contested Constitutional Court ruling and by the government's approach towards women.

The *#StrajkKobiet* hashtag and the red lightning bolt sign have become [symbols of the protests](#). Moreover, while in recent years the Polish flag has been all but hijacked by right-wing nationalists, now the protesters are taking it back by deliberately putting the white-and-red banner on display. On 30 October, 100-150,000 people converged in Warsaw for the largest anti-government demonstration since the 1980s, which was saturated with national symbols – from flags to slogans, from chants to dances.

The end of the contentious consensus

Poland's abortion law, which is one of the most restrictive on the continent, has been in place since 1993 – an emblematic example of a perversely regressive policy brought about by democratisation that led to the subordination of women in Polish society. Dubbed as “the abortion consensus”, the bill was meant to appease both the Catholic Church and liberals. And so it did, for almost three decades. In many respects, women were economically enfranchised under communism. Still, women's rights have progressed in Poland since 1989 in politics, as well as in business, often to a degree beyond western standards, and this had been the public consensus before Poland joined the EU.

Since 2004, the disparities between women in Poland and their counterparts across Europe have become glaring, especially when it comes to reproductive rights. Until recently, in the public's perception women's liberation was an (almost) done deal. The word “feminism” has often been used as a derogatory term restricted to fringe groups who have been demanding unrestricted access to abortion, better child support, and gender parity in politics and business. Feminists have been portrayed as fanatics on the margins of society, which has otherwise reached a consensus. Jarosław Kaczyński's decision to put abortion back on the public agenda, through the intermediary of the politically-controlled Constitutional Court, has upset the apple cart.

LGBTQ community mobilisation

The LGBTQ community in Poland is one of [the most discriminated against and least legally protected](#) in the EU. The aims of the movement – to ban hate speech, to legislate hate crimes, to introduce marriage equality, and to recognise the rights of trans and nonbinary individuals – have been painted as extremist, not only by the ruling radical right but also by liberal forces.

At the same time, the LGBTQ community has a good track record of demanding recognition. The first case of civic disobedience took place in 2005, when the then Mayor of Warsaw – Lech Kaczyński (Jarosław's late twin brother) – banned that year's Pride march, which did in the end take place. For a decade after that, the plight of the LGBTQ community did not change much, before deteriorating in the period after Law and Justice took power in 2015.

During the subsequent local (2018), European and general elections (2019), as well as during the presidential campaign of 2020, LGBTQ communities have become a scapegoat for the ruling party and portrayed as the enemy from within. Poland's current president, Andrzej Duda, [infamously claimed](#) that “LGBT is not people, it's an ideology” that threatens the national body and is “worse than communism”. That kind of publicly sanctioned symbolic violence was replicated by some eager local authorities who [proclaimed themselves](#) to be “LGBT ideology-free zones”. All this culminated in a brutal [police crackdown on LGBTQ activists](#) in the summer of 2020, who yet again have taken to civil disobedience in self-defence.

Women and queers under the white-and-red banner

The protests that began in Poland in late October are different because we are witnessing an alliance between different groups disenfranchised by the current government, particularly women and queers – or “*pedały*”, an all-encompassing highly derogatory word for the entire LGBTQ community, which is now being reclaimed by activists.

In sociological terms, a social movement emerges when diverse groups of people realise that they share a common goal which cannot be achieved by legal-institutional means, and that the state either does not work at all, or is working against them. This is the situation we are currently facing in Poland. With the collapse of the rule of law, people have come to understand that women's rights and the rights of the LGBTQ community can only be won when demands are made directly by citizens on the streets. What's more, historically, social movements have succeeded – and that is only in the long term – when they have built broader coalitions that include many groups, initially with separate aims, social sensibilities, and methods of action.

The large representation of LGBTQ people and symbols at the protests initiated by *#StrajkKobiet* is proof that such a coalition is being formed in front of our eyes. At the same time, social movements are often decentralised, comprising many ideological offshoots, using different strategies for their fight, hence the visible eclecticism of the ongoing protests both in content and form. The Polish government recently banned demonstrations because of the pandemic, so people claim to be going for “walks” instead. They have been doing so throughout local Poland, where such civic activity was previously unheard of.

The majority of protests against the central government since 2015 have been restricted to protesters in big cities, or solitary acts of defiance elsewhere... until now. Since 22 October, provincial Poland, too, has been engulfed by social discontent. Equally, the participation of the LGBTQ community shows that the current protests are a critical moment in the shaping of a broad grassroots social movement with potential for making real social change. This decentralised, localised revolution, led by the alliance of women and queers, is a chance to truly introduce equality in Poland.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Sabrina Gröschke \(CC BY-NC-SA 2.0\)](#)
