



THUNDERBOLT OF ANGER



During the communist era and for a while after the fall of communism in Poland, abortion was legal only upon receiving a favourable opinion from a medical committee. In reality, abortion was something common, and pregnant women often used the services of doctors (or other people) performing the procedure outside of the official practice in hospitals and medical institutions. However, it should be noted that between 1980 and 1987 the registered number of performed procedures did not fall below 100,000 per year. In 1993, the so-called abortion compromise was introduced, which allowed abortion in three cases: when the health and life of the mother was endangered, when the pregnancy was the result of an illegal act (rape, incest) or when prenatal tests showed a high probability of serious and irreversible damage to the foetus. In practice, the number of officially performed abortions has fallen to such a low level that often it does not exceed 1,000 procedures per year. The topic of abortion was not frequently discussed outside a narrow circle of feminist and pro-choice activists. One exception was the case of Alicja Tysiąc, who was denied abortion, which ultimately exacerbated her visual impairment, leading to a significant decrease in her day-to-day functioning. The European Court of Human Rights issued the ruling that ordered the Polish government to pay her compensation and cover the legal costs incurred.

The topic of abortion in Poland continued to be absent in public discourse until 2016 when demonstrations organised as part of the so-called Black Protest took place. The participants showed their opposition to the 'Stop Abortion' bill, which was supposed to make the legislation even stricter. The protesters showed up in surprisingly high numbers, given the lack of me-

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Poland's abortion law is among the most restrictive in Europe. The decision to tighten it up led to the largest protests since the fall of communism in 1989. It is impossible to offer a fair explanation of the so-called 'Women's Strike' without at least a brief description of how the abortion law in Poland has changed over the years.



Women's Strike demonstration in Warsaw in 2020 | Photo: Robert Kuszyński/Oko.press

dia coverage of the topic. According to police estimates, 98,000 people took part in 143 demonstrations, an overwhelming majority of which were held in towns with a population of less than 50,000. The protest received widespread media coverage, both in Poland and abroad, and a few days later the Polish Parliament rejected the bill.

But the real storm was yet to be unleashed. In 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal ruled that the termination of pregnancy due to severe and irreversible damage to the foetus or an incurable disease threatening its life is unconstitutional. This premise is the basis for 97% of legal abortions in Poland. Several months of protests began, with more than 400,000 demonstrators involved. The statistics show that more than half of Polish citizens were sympathetic to the protesters. This time, the rhetoric used at the protests took on a completely different tone than in 2016. 'Fuck off' (Polish: *wypierdalać*) became one of the main slogans of the protests, which unequivocally communicated the anger of the Polish society. Abortion was not the only topic raised at the protests (this time demanding liberalisation of the law). The ruling party, the influence of the Catholic Church and right-wing political parties, which strongly supported the Tribunal's decision, were also criticised.

Poland, previously associated with conservative values and adherence to religious traditions, became the centre stage for large demonstrations, which explicitly attacked the stereotypical image of the Polish society. The widespread use of profanities and verbal attacks on specific politicians, pro-life activists, and clergy showed not only an opposition to their ideas and the desire to resist them, but also a lack of trust in dialogue. Physical attacks by nationalist groups did not crush the pro-

testers' spirit either. The protests were publicised on social media by the participants themselves, and any articles present in the online space were flooded with comments from those opposed to stricter abortion laws. A red lightning bolt became the symbol of the protests and could be seen on clothing, shop windows, flat windows, and graffiti on the walls of buildings. Unusual banners were common among the protesters. Cardboard boxes with rhymes, memes, and pop culture references grew in popularity. Some of the banners became extremely popular and were copied numerous times. Slogans such as 'Mephedrone has a better composition than the Polish government' or 'You shouldn't have pissed us the fuck off' became increasingly common.

The phenomenon of the Women's Strike can be observed in many aspects of the protests, such as the use of vulgar language in official statements, the funny banners, or the instant and grassroots rallying of the participants. What seems most unusual, however, is the absolute reversal of the stereotypical image of the Polish society. In a country regarded as Catholic, the largest protest since the fall of communism was anticlerical in nature. Places seen as the hotbeds of conservatism were met with vulgarities shouted by angry women. In Poland, where the right wing is the dominant political force, the slogan 'I will birth you a leftist' stands as an outright proclamation of defiance. The protests died down, and neither the government nor the Tribunal changed their stance. The protesters have dispersed, but they have not ceased to function in social life. They will continue to study here, work, and raise their children, and perhaps this fact will bring about important changes in the Polish society.

