

# Poles protest plan to ban abortion of unviable fetuses

October 24 2016, by Vanessa Gera

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Polish women protest in Warsaw, Poland, on Monday Oct. 24, 2016. Polish women are gathering in the streets of several cities across the country to protest a proposal for a new abortion law that would ban abortions in cases where fetuses are badly damaged or even have no chance of survival after birth. AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski)

Polish women gathered Monday in cities across the country to protest a proposal to ban abortions in cases where fetuses are badly damaged or even have no chance of survival after birth.

Many wore black, a symbol of mourning for the feared loss of reproductive rights, as they took to the streets of Warsaw, Gdansk, Lodz, Wroclaw, Poznan and other cities and towns across the predominantly Roman Catholic nation of 38 million.

"Girls just want to have fundamental rights," one banner proclaimed.

The Monday protests follow a similar round of street demonstrations in early October, reaction to a proposal for an even more restrictive law which would have banned abortion in all cases, including rape, and imposed prison sentences of up to five years on women and doctors involved in terminating pregnancies. Massive so-called "Black Protests" forced lawmakers to abandon that proposal.

The women, joined by many men, have returned to the streets in response to a new proposal by Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the head of the ruling Law and Justice party. Earlier this month, he said his party wants to ensure that even pregnancies involving a child "certain to die, very deformed, still end up in a birth, so that the child can be baptized, buried, have a name."



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That proposal has infuriated Helene Nabli, a retired math teacher. "Kaczynski, you adopt a disabled child!" she said into a microphone, taking part in a "Hyde Park" style event where people were free to take the microphone and address passers-by in central Warsaw.

In the weeks since the first round of protests, the grassroots movement advocating abortion rights has increased its demands. Those who turned out Monday also called for better sex education and easier access to birth control while also demanding that the influential Roman Catholic church end its "interference" in political life and public education. Clashes

broke out between abortion rights supporters and anti-abortion activists outside a metro station in central Warsaw where demands were laid out in a petition that a steady stream of people lined up to sign.

"We want to live in a secular society," said Agata Rybka, a 24-year-old student of bio-technology at Warsaw University who had volunteered to oversee the petition signing. "Right now religious issues dominate public discourse and we don't like it."

Poland already has one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe, with abortion only allowed in cases of rape, when the fetus is irreparably damaged and when the woman's life or health is in peril.



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Photo/Czarek Sokolowski)

The new proposal would not amount to a total ban, and would still allow abortion in cases of rape or if the woman's life or health is in danger.

Dorota Szumilak, a 44-year-old financial analyst, signed the petition, explaining that she did so because she sees in the abortion ban proposal as an attempt to "restrict women's rights" more broadly. A Lutheran, she said she feels discriminated against in a society where the Catholic church runs religion classes in the schools and is now supporting further restrictions on abortion.

"The role of the church is now too strong," she said.

She was with a friend, Malgorzata Brendel, 53, who said the attempts to tighten the abortion law had prompted her to become one in a growing number of Poles who are now formally leaving the Catholic church.

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