

# Poland's abortion debate back in parliament

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Poland's abortion debate was back on the agenda on Wednesday, more than a year after tens of thousands of black-clad women successfully took to the streets in the Catholic country to stop the tightening of a law that is already one of the most restrictive in Europe.

The Polish [parliament](#), which is controlled by the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party, is due to begin discussing two competing draft laws: one that aims to liberalise the law and another that seeks to ban abortion when the foetus is deformed.

The first citizen's initiative, tabled late November by the "Zatrzymaj aborcje" (Stop Abortion) committee, has a good chance of passing and would amount to what critics call a total abortion ban.

Current legislation, passed in 1993, bans all abortions except in cases of rape or incest, if the pregnancy poses a health risk to the mother or if the foetus is severely deformed.

There are around 1,000 legally performed abortions a year in the country of 38 million people, though [women](#)'s groups estimate that 100,000 to 150,000 procedures are performed illegally or abroad.

A deformed foetus was the reason behind 96 percent of the legal abortions carried out in Poland in 2016, according to Kaja Godek, one of the initiators of the Stop Abortion proposal.

"The initiative provides for the removal from current law of the

possibility to kill handicapped children or children who run the risk of it," she told AFP.

"There's broad consensus" on that point, she said, adding that "in two months, the initiative was signed by a record 830,000 people."

President Andrzej Duda, who is close to the Catholic Church, vowed in November to sign the initiative into law if it is adopted "in order to abolish the right to kill children with Down Syndrome".

The proposal is less restrictive than the one that set off the protest of tens of thousands of women dressed in black across the country in 2016, ultimately leading the parliament to scrap it.

The rejected initiative, which had been tabled by the ultra-conservative Ordo Iuris association, called for jail sentences of up to five years for doctors and others taking part in the abortion, including the women themselves—though judges could waive the punishment in their case.

## Conscience clause

Since coming to power in 2015, the PiS government has put an end to public funding for in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) and made the [morning-after pill](#) prescription-only.

Women's rights groups also point to the fact that many doctors and even entire hospitals use the conscience clause to avoid carrying out legal abortions.

According to the Federation for Women and Family Planning, only 47 Polish hospitals carried out legal abortions in 2016, or 10 percent of all of the authorised establishments.

The Constitutional Court, whose make-up was modified by the PiS, is due to rule on the constitutionality of the right to an abortion in the case of a deformed foetus, in response to a call from lawmakers.

On Wednesday, parliament will also discuss the "Let's Save Women 2017" citizen's initiative to liberalise the abortion law, which has almost no chance of passing.

The initiative calls for allowing [abortion](#) until the 12th week of pregnancy for psychological and social reasons, as well as for over-the-counter access to the morning-after pill.

"Women's rights have been drastically curbed over the last year. We've seen access to contraception and to reproductive rights reduced," said Barbara Nowacka, a left-wing politician and women's rights activist who will present the pro-choice initiative in parliament.

"We came here to parliament to speak of women's rights but also to find out who the state is supposed to serve. Does the state only serve the clergy and religious fanatics or is it for the majority of society who want to feel free and decide for themselves?" she asked parliament.

"Poland can't live with a hypocritical law that discriminates against women and takes away their right to dignity and privacy. We want a normal, European Poland."

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