

Trending conservative, Poland considers tighter abortion laws

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*(The Christian Science Monitor)* At first glance, Poland's heated debate over a proposed total ban on abortion may seem familiar. A religiously driven proposal to end the practice draws abortion rights activists to the streets to protest.

But the emergence of the fight, which is relatively new for Poles, obscures complicated and evolving views. Despite church attendance being down, as it is in much of the West, Poles have become more conservative on the issue over the last generation.

Poland already has some of the strictest rules on abortion in Europe. It is allowed only if a fetus has certain medical or genetic conditions, a mother's life is threatened, or in cases of rape or incest. And while the majority of Poles support the laws as they stand, often overwhelmingly, that support has been eaten away over the past two decades.

A recent poll by the Polish firm CBOS revealed that for all three cases in which abortion is allowed, support has dropped since 1992, falling to 53 percent from 71 percent two decades ago in cases in which the fetus has a medical or genetic condition. Support for abortion if a mother's life is threatened went from 88 to 80 percent, and in cases of rape or incest, from 80 to 73 percent.

Michał Łuczewski, a sociologist at the University of Warsaw and the Centre for Thought of John Paul II, said the attitudes reflect the ways laws shape culture, in this case a stricter law on abortion after the fall of communism.

"Polish law says that abortion is illegal and a crime," he said.

During Poland's communist era, up to half a million abortions were performed every year. That compares to 1,812 in 2014, according to the latest official figures, although activists say tens of thousands are obtained on the black market or in neighboring countries. While abortion was legal under a 1956 law only when a

woman's life was in danger, because of rape, or because of difficult life conditions, in practice doctors performed abortion on demand.

After communism fell—with the Roman Catholic Church playing a leading role in Poland's transition to democracy—a political fight for more restrictions emerged. In 1993 a bill was voted in—the one still standing—denying women the opportunity to have an abortion for social or economic reasons.

Some attribute the drop in acceptance to the success of the pro-life camp, borrowing tactics from those in the United States that rely on graphic imagery. Miroslawa Grabowska, a sociologist from CBOS Institute, attributed the polling results to legal awareness, church influence, and the use of ultrasound.

But views on abortion may be part of a growing conservatism in Polish society, which helped usher the ultraconservative Law and Justice (PiS) party to power in October elections.

Marcin Król, a philosopher and historian of ideas at the University of Warsaw, said he sees conservatism growing especially among young people who have grown up with pro-European Union leaders.

“Among young people, conservatism is a form of resistance,” he said. “Since 1989, the establishment in Poland was more or less liberal, so the revolt against it can't be liberal, too.”

Catholic bishops recently issued a public statement calling for a total ban on abortion. A pro-life group has been attempting to gather 100,000 signatures to force the issue onto the legislative agenda. It comes as PiS has moved to withdraw state support for in vitro fertilization and make it harder for women to get access to morning-after pills.

Jarosław Kaczyński, PiS leader, said that, as a Catholic, he supported the bishops' statement on abortion and that the parliament, where PiS has a majority, would likely feel the same way.

The government has since retreated from outright support, saying it will require more careful consideration, but the issue has exposed deep divides in society. PiS's leadership has provoked a series of protests over concerns that it is backsliding on democracy and forcing its traditional values on society.

While 90 percent of Poles call themselves Catholic, when the bishops' statement was read in churches, some Poles walked out. Pro-choice groups held rallies in big cities across the country in April.

Still, the pro-choice view in Poland often differs from that found in other countries in the West. Katarzyna Swiacka, an 18-year-old high school student in Warsaw, rues the influence of the church on the government. And she agrees with protesters that the law shouldn't be touched.

Still, except in the three cases allowed under current law, she categorizes herself clearly. "I'm against abortion," she said.

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