

The Women Were Prepared

When Poland's Constitutional Tribunal announced an extreme new anti-abortion ruling, protesters immediately hit the streets

WHEN THOUSANDS OF people swarmed the streets of Poland this past October and November to protest the right-wing government's moves to further restrict abortion access, they marched in a country already wielding one of Europe's most draconian abortion laws and despite a devastating pandemic—defying curfews, far-right violence and threat of arrest.

"I was fully prepared for anything," says Maja Majer, a Warsaw protester. "In my backpack I had water, cold milk and Maalox to counter the pepper spray, and I wrote my lawyer's and husband's phone numbers on my leg."

The protests may have appeared spontaneous but were disciplined and organized, with social media voices warning protesters in real time about police barricades and opposition marchers, and providing details on what to do if arrested. It seems to have worked, for now: The government has delayed enacting the Constitutional Tribunal's October ruling, which would outlaw abortions even for severe fetal abnormalities. Presently, pregnancies in Poland may be terminated legally in those cases, or when there's a threat to a woman's life or if the pregnancy has resulted from rape or incest. And yet even in these situations, abortion is difficult to access. Gynecologists and hospital directors, citing conscience clauses, are often resistant and reluctant to offer referrals, according to a report that includes the Federation for Women and Family Planning in Poland.

The protests are a continuation of demonstrations in 2016 and 2017, when the government last proposed tightening abortion laws. Those protests drew around 100,000 demonstrators in more than 140 cities. The current Strajk Kobiet (Women's Strike) is believed to be the largest protest since Poland's solidarity marches in 1989. The first demonstration on Oct. 22 spread across 60 cities; four days later, marches were taking place in 150 cities; by Oct. 28, 430,000 Poles were participating in 410 protests across the country, according to Poland's chief of police.

"I think [the Polish government is] scared," says Magda Grabowska, a sociologist who teaches gender studies and the history of reproductive rights at the Polish Academy of Sciences. "They [government leaders] opened a can of worms. The protests have a lot of support across Polish society

and have been effective, most notably since the ruling has not been enacted. I've been pessimistic—until now." That the tribunal ruling was proposed during the pandemic, she notes, reveals it to be a desperate political tactic.

"What prompted me to join in was my own pregnancy," says Adelina Zielińska, who marched in Gdańsk. When she learned she was pregnant, Zielińska initially considered abortion. "I imagined what it would be like if I lived in a small town, didn't speak English, couldn't search for options on international websites, didn't have the money to pay for the pills or a procedure ... or didn't have my husband's support," she says. "My first weeks of pregnancy were the time during which I felt the most vulnerable, lost and scared. ... It could get even worse [for] my daughter."

—ELIZABETH ZACH



Crowds of protesters march to the ▶ prime minister's office in Warsaw.