News



A woman holds a banner in protest against the Polish Parliament to debate new limits on abortion and sexual education in Warsaw, Poland, Tuesday, April 14, 2020. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death.(AP/Czarek Sokolowski)

Vanessa Gera

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Warsaw, Poland — April 15, 2020
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Polish lawmakers began debating draft laws April 15 that would impose a near-total ban on abortion, criminalize sex education in schools and equate homosexuality with pedophilia, revisiting proposals backed by a Catholic group that were shelved after a popular outcry.

Domestic critics and international human rights organizations say Poland's conservative government is playing foul by bringing the controversial proposals to parliament during the coronavirus pandemic. Mass demonstrations thwarted the bills in the past but would be illegal under a current lockdown that limits gatherings to five people.

The ruling Law and Justice party cited procedural reasons for the timing of the reintroduced measures. Parliament speaker Elzbieta Witek noted that the two bills are citizens' initiatives and said that by examining them, the national legislature is fulfilling its democratic mandate.

"I know that they are controversial," Witek said. "But in a democratic state — and Poland is such a state — citizens' projects must be subjected to proceedings in the Polish parliament, because that's the law."

Law and Justice spokesman Radoslaw Fogiel said he could not predict how the party's lawmakers would vote because they are divided and there was no party discipline on such ideological matters. Voting was scheduled for April 16.

Poland already has some of Europe's strictest anti-abortion laws, and a society deeply divided between traditionalists loyal to the powerful Catholic Church and secular Poles who seek greater liberalization.

The leader of the anti-abortion initiative, Kaja Godek, argued during the parliamentary debate that the defense of life is enshrined in the constitution and described any abortion as "torture."

"Abortion is a pandemic that is far worse than the coronavirus," Godek said. "It produces more victims and all of them die."

Wanda Nowicka, a left-wing opposition lawmaker, called the proposed abortion restrictions "barbaric" and accused Godek of "hating women."

Scores of women protested the bills in Warsaw on April 14, observing social distancing by driving singly in cars or by riding bicycles.

Poland now allows abortion after rape or incest, if the woman's life is threatened or if there is a fetal abnormality. The proposed law would remove the last provision — even for fetuses with no chance of survival — which is the most common reason for legal abortion in the nation of 38 million.

The other bill would criminalize sex education in schools. Its backers say that will fight pedophilia and discourage early promiscuity. Critics say it would create a legal tool to persecute gay people.

The director of Amnesty International in Poland, Draginja Nadazdin, called both bills "draconian."



Women, self isolated in their cars to protect against coronavirus, take part in a protest against plans for the parliament to debate a draft law tightening Poland's ban on most abortions this week, in Warsaw, Poland, Tuesday, April 14, 2020. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death.(AP/Czarek Sokolowski)

"Attempting to pass these recklessly retrogressive laws at any time would be shameful, but to rush them through under the cover of the COVID-19 crisis is unconscionable," Nadazdin said.

Dunja Mijatović, the human rights commissioner for Europe's top rights body, the Council of Europe, said that "in this extraordinary time of the COVID-19 pandemic, politicians and decision-makers must resist the temptation to push through

measures that are incompatible with human rights."

Law and Justice has so far tried to please the conservative Church, which wants greater restrictions on abortion. But it doesn't want to alienate large sections of the secular population, and bowed to protests over the previous bills — again brought by a Catholic group. Several party officials stress that these are not the party's proposals, although others back them.

Some believe the ruling party doesn't really want the laws approved, and might mothball them by referring them to committee for further work. Law and Justice spokesman Fogiel said he personally is against "ideological wars" and favors the status quo.

The party would still gain by having made a show of support for conservative issues ahead of the May presidential election, which will be held by mail due to the coronavirus lockdown. The fact that the election is still taking place has drawn the ire of opposition parties, who say that with campaigning ruled out by the lockdown, the conservative incumbent who is seeking re-election will have an unfair advantage.

Pawel Lisiewicz, a political analyst at the Civil Development Forum think tank, commented on Twitter that Law and Justice "is in favor of full protection of life, from conception to the presidential election."

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