



Weekly Briefing

Poland social briefing:

The Independence March and the matter of abortion polarize Poles

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Summary

In November, two events took place, which greatly heated the emotions of the Polish public opinion and provoked a heated discussion. These were the March of Independence, which has been organized on Nov 11 every year for several years on Polish Independence Day, and the case of the death of a 30-year-old pregnant woman in hospital. The March is organized in Warsaw by Polish nationalist circles and is extremely popular. However, it is criticized by people and groups with liberal and leftist views, who consider it an expression of Polish nationalism. The march also divides Polish politicians.

In turn, the death of a pregnant woman in a hospital in Pszczyna led to the return of the debate on the legality of abortion in Poland. The woman died of sepsis, which could have been the result of a failure to legally abort a dead baby. An abortion could have saved the woman's life. This situation is connected with last year's judgment of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal, which ruled that abortion for irreversible fetal defects is unconstitutional. According to some of the public opinion, this judgment could have influenced the decision of doctors in the hospital in Pszczyna not to perform an abortion.

Introduction

The Independence March was initiated by the Polish nationalist political organizations: All-Polish Youth and National-Radical Camp. Since 2011, it has been organized by the Independence March Association, which includes, among others, activists from these organizations. According to the declaration of the organizers, the Independence March is an element of the celebration of the National Independence Day and a demonstration of attachment to the Polish tradition and patriotism. Every year over 100 thousand people take part in it. The opponents of the march - left-liberal circles - accuse it of promoting fascism and anti-Semitism, as well as racism.

Incidents happen, this year is peaceful

During the march in previous years, there were cases of hooliganism (directed against the police) and the appearance of flags and inscriptions with fascist and racist accents, which is an argument of its critics demanding its banning. However, these were incidents, and the event is attended by various groups of Poles - including families with children. This year's march was peaceful. The March itself is also an element of political games in Poland. The ruling United Right in Poland unofficially supports the organizers of the march (by funding the organizers of the event), although officially its representatives do not participate in it. For banning the march is advocated by the main opposition party Koalicja Obywatelska led by the President of Warsaw Rafał Trzaskowski and leftist organizations, which consider the march a place of propagating fascism and "inciting to hatred".

This year, on the 103rd anniversary of Poland's regaining independence, after a long court battle (lack of permission to organize the march by two court instances and the mayor of Warsaw), the march finally gained the character of a state march under the patronage of the Office for War Veterans and Victims of Repression. The march was held under the slogan "Independence not for sale". According to the estimates of the organizers, the march was attended by about 150 thousand people. State services assessed the whole event as calm. Although the atmosphere of the march was quite peaceful, there were small incidents. Among others, a banner with a portrait of the opposition leader and former head of the European Council Donald Tusk and a German flag was burned. Some small groups of participants carried nationalist symbols, including Celtic crosses. Activists of the Italian extreme nationalist movement Forza Nuova also appeared on the march. Anti-immigrant and anti-LGBT slogans were heard. On the viaduct of one of the Warsaw bridges a small group of participants hung a poster with the image of the bald president of Warsaw Rafał Trzaskowski and the caption "So what? You' bald?".

The death of a 30-year-old pregnant woman in a hospital in Pszczyna. Controversy over abortion.

The 30-year-old was taken to the hospital in September. She was 22 weeks pregnant. According to tests, the baby could have multiple defects. At some point, the woman's water broke. The woman allegedly signaled to the staff that she felt unwell. The 30-year-old emphasized that no one monitored her health or the condition of the fetus, waiting until the fetus died. When an ultrasound showed this, the decision was made to perform a cesarean section. While the 30-year-old woman was being transported to the operating theatre, she went

into cardiac arrest. The woman died of sepsis. Before her death, she was said to have reported to her family that the doctors had taken a "wait-and-see attitude" towards her, which she related to the abortion ban legislation.

TVN's "Uwaga" program reached out to the woman's mother, who showed text messages from the 30-year-old. "The baby weighs 485 grams. For now, thanks to the abortion law, I have to lie down. And there is nothing they can do. They will wait until it dies or something starts, and if not, I can expect sepsis. They can't speed things up. He either has to stop beating his heart or something has to start," - Ms. Barbara quotes the news.

According to counsellor Jolanta Budzowska, the attorney for the family of the deceased, the patient, during her stay in hospital, in messages sent to her relatives, reported that "according to the information given to her by the doctors, they took a wait-and-see attitude, refraining from emptying the uterine cavity until the fetus died, which she associated with the current regulations limiting the possibility of legal abortion". In her opinion, the tragic event is a consequence of last year's judgment of the Constitutional Tribunal changing the abortion law.

Two doctors of the hospital in Pszczyna were suspended in connection with the case. The authorities of the hospital informed that the explanatory proceedings were carried out, the procedures were reviewed and the way the ward works was changed. The hospital declares its openness to cooperate "with all relevant authorities that undertake inspection and explanatory actions." The investigation into the death is being conducted by the Regional Prosecutor's Office in Katowice. The department intends to carry out additional investigations and to question witnesses, including the medical staff and people who were in the same room with the patient. After the death of the 30-year-old woman, the Minister of Health ordered an inspection to be carried out in the hospital in Pszczyna.

Constitutional Court verdict on abortion

The law regulations concerning abortion were changed as a result of the verdict of the Constitutional Tribunal on October 22, 2020. Previously in force in Poland since 1993, the Act on family planning, protection of human fetus and conditions of permissibility of abortion, called the "abortion compromise", allowed abortion in three cases: in a situation where pregnancy is a threat to woman's life or health, when pregnancy resulted from a prohibited act (rape, incest) and in the case of severe and irreversible fetal disability or an incurable disease threatening its life. Only the latter premise was deemed unconstitutional by the Constitutional

Tribunal. The law still allows for termination of pregnancy in the case when it poses a threat to the life and health of the woman and also when there is a justified suspicion that the pregnancy is the result of a prohibited act, e.g. rape.

Protests by opponents of changing abortion laws

Following the woman's death, protests involving hundreds of people were held in many Polish cities. The protesters, they said, were demanding "human rights and choice." The protest was also held in front of the Constitutional Court in Warsaw.

Liberal and left-wing opposition politicians also addressed the issue. - The death of a pregnant 30-year-old in a hospital in Pszczyna is caused by a political decision of the Constitutional Tribunal - said deputy speaker of the Sejm Włodzimierz Czarzasty from the Left. - Mrs. Przyłębska's tribunal has sown death. Now the harvest begins - he added. - If it were not for a political decision, such cases would not happen. And there will be more cases, because the consequences of this political decision are such that doctors are beginning to behave in this way. They look forward to what might happen. They often do not behave the way doctors should behave because they are afraid of the legal consequences that may affect them - he said.

According to Marcin Kierwiński, deputy from the Civic Coalition, the law on abortion, which was made stricter by the Constitutional Tribunal, is "barbaric and inhumane" and "will lead to tragedies". In his opinion, the abortion law tightened by the Constitutional Tribunal "is barbaric, inhuman, and will lead to tragedies. - It should be changed as soon as possible," he stressed.

In turn, deputy chairman of the ruling Law and Justice party Radosław Fogiel said on TVN24 that "the Court did not question the premise that the woman's health and life are at risk. - To my ignorant eye in medical matters, in this case we were clearly dealing with a situation of threat to the life and health of the mother, so it is a question for doctors why such a decision was made," he added.

Conclusion

Both the Independence March and the topic of abortion are topics that strongly polarize the Polish public opinion. These are the topics dividing left-liberal and national-Catholic Poland. These topics are often used instrumentally by both sides of ideological and world-view disputes in order to polarize the society and strengthen the attachment and engagement of their electorate.