



Jagiellonian University in Kraków  
Faculty of International and Political Studies  
Institute of European Studies

Nino Kvirikashvili

student ID number: 1180252

Field of study: European Studies

# Social Movements and Political Opportunities: A Comparative Study of 2016 and 2020 Women's Protests in Poland

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Dr. Joanna Orzechowska - Waclawska (Jagiellonian University in Krakow)  
Dr. Helen Hardman (University of Glasgow)

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to study the role of interplay between structural (objective) and perceived (subjective) political opportunities in the mobilisation and policy outcomes of the women's mass protests in Poland between the years of 2016 and 2021. The research primarily focuses on perceived opportunities and their role in the protest mobilisation and outcomes. However, it also maps out structural opportunities as they are closely connected to each other, and perceived opportunities cannot be fully understood without referring to the structural ones. The study employs a comparative case study design and explores the social phenomena of women's mass mobilisation in Poland between 2016-2021 using interpretive content analysis and visual thematic analysis methods.

To answer the abovementioned research question, this thesis argues that the structural opportunities are filtered through agents' perceptions, which in turn, contributes to the differences in organization and outcomes of social movements. Therefore, the differences in mobilisation and policy outcomes between the "Black Protests" in 2016 and "Women Strike" in 2020 can, in part, be attributed to the mismatch between the structural and perceived political opportunities in Poland between those years.

Theoretically, this thesis is situated within social movement literature, more specifically within the framework of objective and perceived opportunities, where it adds to the existing knowledge on the interplay between those two dimensions of the concept. Empirically, the study adds to the existing literature on women's mass mobilisation in Poland and contributes to the comparative studies between the two waves of protests (2016-2018 and 2020-2021). The research is socially relevant, since the issue is recent and increasingly important in Poland, attracting a lot of attention from public as well as from the elites and academia.

**Keywords:** political opportunity structure; social movements; social protests; structural opportunities; perceived opportunities; women's mass protests

## Abstrakcyjny

Niniejsza praca ma na celu zbadanie roli wzajemnego oddziaływania pomiędzy strukturalnymi (obiektywnymi) i postrzeganymi (subiektywnymi) możliwościami politycznymi w mobilizacji i wynikach politycznych masowych protestów kobiet w Polsce w latach 2016–2021. Badanie koncentruje się przede wszystkim na postrzeganych szansach i ich rolę w mobilizacji protestów i ich wynikach. Jednakże wyznacza również możliwości strukturalne, ponieważ są one ze sobą ściśle powiązane, a dostrzeganych szans nie można w pełni zrozumieć bez odniesienia się do szans strukturalnych. W opracowaniu zastosowano metodę porównawczą studium przypadku i zbadano społeczne zjawiska masowej mobilizacji kobiet w Polsce w latach 2016-2021, stosując metody interpretacyjnej analizy treści i wizualnej analizy tematycznej.

Aby odpowiedzieć na postawione powyżej pytanie badawcze, w niniejszej pracy założono, że możliwości strukturalne są filtrowane przez percepcję agentów, co z kolei przyczynia się do różnic w organizacji i wynikach ruchów społecznych. Dlatego różnice w mobilizacji i wynikach polityki między „Czarnymi Protestami” w 2016 r. a „Strajkiem Kobiet” w 2020 r. można częściowo przypisać niedopasowaniu strukturalnych i postrzeganych możliwości politycznych w Polsce w tych latach.

Teoretycznie teza ta sytuuje się w literaturze ruchów społecznych, a dokładniej w kontekście obiektywnych i dostrzeganych szans, gdzie uzupełnia istniejącą wiedzę na temat wzajemnego oddziaływania tych dwóch wymiarów koncepcji. Empirycznie badanie stanowi uzupełnienie istniejącej literatury na temat masowej mobilizacji kobiet w Polsce i stanowi wkład w badania porównawcze pomiędzy obiema falami protestów (2016-2018 i 2020-2021). Badania mają charakter społecznie istotny, gdyż problematyka jest nowa i zyskuje w Polsce coraz większe znaczenie, ciesząc się dużym zainteresowaniem zarówno opinii publicznej, jak i elit oraz środowiska akademickiego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** struktura możliwości politycznych; ruchy społeczne; protesty społeczne; możliwości strukturalne; postrzegane możliwości; masowe protesty kobiet

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Research Problem, Research Aim, and Research Question

Social movements and mass mobilisation have been a subject of academic interest for a long time, but the issue of social movements and social protests gained special momentum in light of the mass anti-government protests in Poland following the abortion ban pushed by the ruling Law and Justice ruling party (PiS). As the scale grew significantly between the years of 2016 and 2021, and public opinion polls shifted in favour to those protests, women's social movement gained resonance to wider public and have attracted a lot of attention both in local and international media as well as academia. The scale of the protests reached unprecedented levels in 2020 amid the pandemic and is famously referred to as the biggest mass mobilisation in independent Poland.

The research is socially relevant, since the issue is recent and increasingly important in Poland, attracting a lot of attention from public as well as from the elites and academia. There is a growing body of academic literature focusing on the role of perceptions as a medium to explain how political opportunity structures affect various dimensions of political opportunity (Kurzman, 1996; Suh, 2001; Giugni & Morariu, 2007; Alimi, 2007; Kadivar, 2013; Dyrstad and Hillesund, 2020; Blanc, 2020; De Moor and Wahlström, 2022). Both recent protests in Poland – “Black Protest” in 2016 and “Women's Strike” in 2020 – were organized around the same issue and under the same government. However, despite the fact that the recent anti-abortion protests in Poland (2020) were larger in scale and resonated more with the public compared to the “Black Protests” in 2016, it still failed to turn over the near-total abortion ban, making the abortion law in Poland one of the strictest in the EU (Neumeyer, 2021). Moreover, there is an increase in public support towards either maintaining status quo or further liberalizing abortions between the years of 2016 and 2020 (CBOS, 2020). This forms a contra expectation puzzle (Day & Koivu, 2018, p. 380) since two similar social protests produced different policy outcomes. Since outcomes can be conceptualized differently, in the capacity of this research, by outcomes I mean the minimal policy outcomes of the mass mobilisation, more specifically, halting further legislative restrictions to the abortion law.

To address the aforementioned puzzle, the research aims to study the role of interplay between structural (objective)<sup>1</sup> and perceived (subjective) political opportunities in the mobilisation and

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<sup>1</sup> Those two terms will be used interchangeably to designate the dimensions of existing political structures as opposed to the subjective perceptions of the protest participants.

policy outcomes of the women's mass protests in Poland between the years of 2016 and 2021. The research primarily focuses on perceived opportunities and their role in the protest mobilisation and outcomes. However, the study also maps out structural opportunities as they are closely connected to each other, and perceived opportunities cannot be fully understood without referring to the structural ones. Several protests were organized between 2016 and 2021 in Poland, but this research primarily focuses on the "Black Protests" in 2016 and "Women's Strike" in 2020<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, this thesis seeks to answer the following questions in order to achieve the research goals:

How does interplay between structural and perceived political opportunities affect the mobilization and outcomes of social movements?

- *What were the structural and perceived political opportunities during "Black protests" in Poland in 2016 and "Women Strike" in 2020?*
- *How did the interplay between structural and perceived opportunities affect mobilization and policy outcomes of the protests?*

To answer the abovementioned research question, this thesis argues that the structural opportunities are filtered through agents' perceptions, which in turn, contributes to the differences in organization and outcomes of social movements. Therefore, the differences in mobilisation and policy outcomes between the "Black Protests" in 2016 and "Women Strike" in 2020 can, in part, be attributed to the mismatch between the structural and perceived political opportunities in Poland between those years.

In this research, social movements are understood as "a distinct social process, consisting of the mechanisms through which actors engaged in collective action; are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents; are linked by dense informal networks; and share a distinct collective identity." (1992a; 2003a; 2004a; Diani and Bison 2004, as cited in (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p.20). The research will draw on the political opportunity structures that focuses on the external factors that influence social movements' ability to affect policies (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004, pp.1457-1458). Of course, political process theory in a way provides one-dimensional explanation, but I believe it is best fitted to provide the answers to the above stated research questions. The study makes distinction between the existing structural conditions and perceived conditions (McAdam,

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<sup>2</sup> The protests can also be categorized in two separate waves 2016-2018 protests and 2020-2021 protests, and where relevant, they will be referred according to those waves as well.

2013), which might contribute to explaining the differences between the outcomes of the similar protests since it includes the focus on both existing opportunities and the opportunities subjectively perceived by the protest organizers and participants. McAdam et al.'s (1996, p.10) proposed four dimensions of political opportunities is employed to map out the context in which women's mass mobilisation unfolded in Poland. When it comes to perceived opportunities, the study draws on Tarrow's (2011) definition, who argues that "contentious politics emerges when ordinary citizens, sometimes encouraged by leaders, perceive opportunities that lower the costs of collective action, reveal potential allies, show where elites and authorities are most vulnerable, and trigger social networks and collective identities into action around common themes." (p.33).

Considering the scope and nature of the methodological framework, the research will not be making any causal inferences. Instead, to answer the research questions, the study employs a comparative case study design and explores the social phenomena of women's mass mobilisation in Poland between 2016-2021 using interpretive content analysis and visual thematic analysis methods.

Theoretically, this thesis is situated within social movement literature, more specifically within the framework of objective and perceived opportunities, where it adds to the existing literature on the interplay between those two dimensions of the concept. Empirically, the study adds to the existing literature on women's mass mobilisation in Poland and contributes to the comparative studies between the two waves of protests (2016-2018 and 2020-2021).

## **1.2. Background**

The women's protests between the years of 2016 and 2021 are very interesting to study since there were various protests all over the country across those years, reaching unprecedented numbers and involving societal groups and individuals, who mostly distanced themselves from the political engagement before. Even though this thesis primarily focuses on the "Black Protests" that took place in 2016 and the "Women's Strike" in 2020-2021 since they were the largest in scale, other protests that took place between and after those years are also taken into consideration.

The protests were triggered by the Constitutional Court's ruling on October 22, which practically bans all abortions in Poland since for the last two decades, overwhelming majority of legal abortions (for the last decade, more than 95% of the legal abortions) were carried out due to the

prenatal tests and foetus abnormalities (Number of Legal Abortions in Poland 1994-2021, by Reason, 2023). The protests and public interest were sparked again recently following the death of a young woman who was denied abortion (BBC News, 2021). This is not the first time Polish women took to the streets for their reproductive rights, there were attempts to criminalize abortions in 2016, when the fundamentalist pro-life group submitted “Stop Abortion” citizen’s initiative bill to the Polish parliament (Davies, 2017). However, following mass protests, first of its kind in independent Poland, the ruling Law and Justice party distanced itself from the bill that it initially supported, and the bill was eventually dropped (Czarnačka, 2021, p.9). The bill was submitted again a year later, but other protests erupted, and status quo was maintained (Ibid).

Further restrictions to already one of the strictest abortion laws in Europe is not supported by the majority of Poles, which became even more apparent in 2020. The Constitutional Court’s ruling was supported by only 13% of Poles, while 73% claimed that they do not support the decision (Opinion on the Constitutional Court Decision on Abortion in Poland 2020, 2020). The protests that followed the Constitutional ruling were organized amid the pandemic and were more anti-governmental in nature. At one point, protesters even started moving towards the home of Kaczyński, where police were mobilised (Deutsche Welle, 2020). Despite the unprecedented scale of the mobilisation in the autumn of 2020 and the initial delay of publishing the ruling, the legislative changes came into force in January, after months of protests. Abortion issue resurfaced again amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine and increase in Ukrainian refugees in Poland, some of whom might be in need of abortions and while human rights organisations support the victims in getting legal abortions in Poland, the “Ordo Iuris” actively “monitors” the health care providers to ensure that the law is not broken (Tilles, 2022). More detailed overview of the protests is discussed in the literature review section, since the existing literature is quite generous and comprehensively covers different layers of protests.

## **1.2. Structure**

The thesis is organized as follows: the following chapter examines existing literature on the women’s social movement in Poland over the years as well as the general context, in which the mass mobilisations took place. Since there is a large body of academic literature covering different dimensions of the mass mobilisation in Poland, sources in the chapter are organized thematically

and lay out the state of art in the field as well as identifies the existing research gap this thesis tries to address. The literature review is followed by theoretical framework, which discusses the structural and perceived opportunities in social movement literature and the application of the framework to the case. The next chapter introduces methodology, including the conceptualisation and operationalisation of variables, the logic behind case selection and employed methods. The chapter concludes with caveats and ethical considerations. The main body of the thesis discusses research findings and puts them in a wider academic context in the discussion chapter. In the analysis and discussion part, findings are organized thematically rather than according to the comparative units since I believe that systematic comparison of “Black Protests” and “Polish Women’s Strike” across the dynamics of structural and perceived opportunities makes more sense analytically. The first part of the analysis section is dedicated to the changes in structural opportunities in Poland between the years of 2016-2021, while the second part analyses perceived opportunities across the same years. Then, the discussion section puts those findings in a theoretical context, through which the research question is answered. The final chapter of the thesis concludes the research and identifies prospect of future studies in the field.

## **2. Literature Review**

Women’s protests in Poland have attracted a lot of academic interest, which grew further following the 2020 protests, often referred to as the largest mobilisation in post-Communist Poland. Since its formation and development, large body of literature emerged studying the Polish case through different theoretical lenses and with different methodological approaches, providing a very comprehensive and multi-layered picture of the phenomena. However, large portion of the existing literature studies the pro-choice protests in Poland between the years of 2015 and 2021 either separately, in a cross-country comparative study, or from the feminist theory perspective. The first part of this chapter reviews the literature around the abortion legislation and institutional and legal changes in Poland, which is followed by overviewing the sources studying nuanced aspects of recent mass mobilisations in Poland as well as the role of the Catholic Church in the processes. The last part of the subject analyses the framing of the protests, mostly through social media, and puts this research into broader academic context. Finally, the last part of this chapter once again identifies the research gap in the literature and discusses how it contributes to the identified gap.

## 2.1. Abortion Legislation

Abortion legislation and reproductive rights have been a part of political debates in Poland right from the beginning and changes in abortion legislations goes way back to the Polish history. Reproductive rights have always been a part of the broader political transformation in the country (Kościańska et al., 2021, p.17). During communism, abortions due to social reasons were first allowed in Poland in 1956 and then on request abortions were legalized three years after in 1959 (Nowicka, 2004, pp.169-170). The key development in the abortion legislation and the abortion debate in Poland has been the famously called “abortion compromise” reached in 1993, which was often referred to in mass protests as well and is essential for understanding the recent developments around the abortion issue in Poland. In the independent Poland, abortion debates have always focused on the needs rather than the rights of women to choose (Ibid, p.173).

While talking about the abortion laws in Poland, Kapelańska-pręgowska (2021) refers to the process as “one step forward and two steps back” (p.2014), which describes the controversy and complexity surrounding abortion debates in the country quite well. Abortions were legally allowed due to social and economic reasons in Poland starting from 1956 up until 1993, when the “Family Planning Act” was first introduced (Ibid). The product of the so-called “abortion compromise” - “The Family Planning, Human Embryo Protection and Conditions of Permissibility of Abortion Act of 7 January 1993” (n.d., article 4a) allows legal abortions under three conditions only: in case the mother’s life is under risk, “the pregnancy is a result of an unlawful act”, or there is a medically verified risk of “severe and irreversible fetal defect or incurable illness” (commonly referred as “eugenic”). The original version also included socio-economic problems as the ground for legal abortion, but it was later dropped (in 1997) by the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal (Amnesty International, 2009, p.6).

Nowicka (2004) offers an in-depth analysis of the abortion laws in Poland and attempts to study the key reasons behind restriction of abortion laws in the country. She proposes use of the momentum by the conservatives during the transformative period in Poland, the dominant role of the Catholic Church, societal perceptions of abortion as morally wrong, as well as the lack of mobilization of pro-choice actors as key drivers of introducing more restrictive abortion laws in the 90’s Poland (Ibid, pp.194-195).

## 2.2. Institutional and Legal Changes in Poland since 2015

Since assuming the office following the victory in 2015 parliamentary elections, the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) initiated number of institutional and legal changes. The party started by assuming control over the Constitutional court, public media channels as well as selection procedures of civil servants (Markowski, 2016, p.1319), which has laid grounds for the changes in abortion legislation five years after. Constitutional Court and public media channels were not sole targets of PiS policies. Civil society organizations in Poland also faced serious challenges following the changes in funding in 2017, during which the new institution “National Freedom Institute – Centre for the Development of Civil Society” was put in charge of the CSO funding (Szczygielska, 2019, p.130).

Kinowska-Mazaraki (2021) examines the transformation of Poland after the Law and Justice Party (PiS) came to power in 2015 and draws her attention to the growing social resistance and political participation in Poland in response to the recent developments and government’s controversial policies (Kinowska-Mazaraki, 2021, p.2). Kinowska-Mazaraki argues that Poland successfully transitioned into a democracy since 1989, but paradoxically, now the country is going backwards and is extremely polarized. A case study of Poland discusses the historical background of Poland’s fight for independence and freedom as well as the most recent developments, including anti-abortion protests in both 2020 and 2016, judiciary reform, the rise of far-right, election campaigns and increased tensions in a society amid Covid-19, among others. The article mostly analyses different reports, public opinion polls and government discourse through which it traces the recent developments in Poland and provides a clear understanding of the processes that took place since PiS first took office in 2015. The article provides important historical background as well as discussing major developments that took place recently. Like Kinowska-Mazaraki (2021), Szczygielska (2019) discusses the democratic backsliding in Poland starting from 2015 and the mobilisation of feminist actors. More specifically, the author focuses on the negative changes in terms of gender equality and gender policies (Ibid, p.124). The author systematically analyses the changes leading up to the mass protests as well as the dynamics of mass mobilisation in Poland (Szczygielska, 2019), which puts the 2016-2018 protests in a wider picture.

Gwiazda (2021) takes similar angle to studying the protests, but she exclusively focuses on the connection between women’s mass protests and democracy in Poland. The author refers to the

democratic backsliding in the country, with specific focus on the take-over of the courts by the ruling Law and Justice party following their electoral victory in 2015 (Ibid, p.130). Gwiazda also looks into the timing of the restriction of abortion laws and suggests that Kaczyński aimed at strengthening his position in the party through gaining stronger support from the Church and from more radically inclined electorate as well as stir up internal debates among the opposition parties over the abortion legislation (Ibid, 131). Besides some of the internal motivations, the author also expresses that the timing of the Constitutional ruling might have been a diversion tactic from the pandemic-related challenges (Ibid). Even though the author offers a very interesting insight into the rationale behind the timing of the changes in abortion laws in 2020, the article lacks depth in terms of protest's impact on democracy and does not go beyond the mention that the mass protests contributed to the increased participation element in Polish democratic development.

### **2.3. Women's Protests in Poland between the Years of 2016 and 2021**

The starting point of the pro-choice mass protests can be traced back to the "Stop Abortion" bill that demanded abortion bans and that was authored by the conservative "Ordo Iuris Institute" in 2016 and then year after as well (Szczygielska, 2019, p.125). In parallel, another civic initiative bill "Save the Women" was registered, which aimed to liberalize strict abortion laws in Poland (Czarnacka, 2021, p.9). After the Polish Parliament rejected the "Save the Women" bill, but at the same time proceeded working on the "Stop abortion initiative, large number of crowds took the streets in opposition (Ibid). 2016 protests in Poland in a way marks a beginning of women's social movement in the country. Of course, there were number of feminist groups and organizations in Poland prior to 2016 mass protests, but they never managed to reach broader audience and were mostly confined to bigger cities and smaller projects (Majewska, 2018). Therefore, mass street protests in 2016-2017 was a new phenomenon in the independent Poland and took everyone by surprise since it spread beyond urban areas and reached more than 140 cities and small rural settlements in the country involving more than 200 thousand protesters from the bottom-up (Szczygielska, 2019, p.139).

Gwiazda (2019) offers a very interesting insight into the "Black Protest" and the surrounding parliamentary debates and adds to the feminist literature on 2016 protests in Poland and substantive representation. The author employs the framework of substantive representation of women and

focuses on the Polish case (Ibid, p.264). Based on debate transcripts, interviews with the female Polish MPs and secondary data, Gwiazda identifies the interests of women, the agents/actors that represent those interests, and the sites where those interests are represented (Ibid, p.279). The study finds that even though women's interests are represented in the Polish parliament, conservative views are most influential and therefore, feminist views are represented beyond parliament as well, online and through mass street protests (Ibid).

Ostaszewska (2018) analyses women's protests in Poland between 2016 and 2018 and focuses on the impact of those protests on "women's subjectivity". Like many articles studying the Black Protests, Ostaszewska employs feminist lens and draws conclusions that the protests helped women take back the agency and gave them voice (Ibid, p.100).

Rak and Bäcker (2023) present one of the few comparative studies of pro-choice mobilisation between the years of 2016 and 2021. They rely on demobilization framework offered by Tilly and Tarrow's and adds the component emotions to the study (Ibid). Regarding the cross-country comparative studies, the authors study the reasons behind the differences between the women's movements in two countries from the Central and Eastern Europe: Poland and the Czech Republic (Korolczuk and Saxonberg 2015, 404). They attribute the differences to the institutional factors, namely women's organizations and political opportunity structures (Ibid). Therefore, it makes more sense to discuss the issue from the lens of social movement theories.

One more interesting paper, which takes a very interesting angle is conducted by Muszei and Piotrowski (2019) and study activism in rural areas, activists' motivations and challenges and try to add to the existing literature on social movements by presenting their findings on rural activism. The authors aim to fill the existing gap in social movement literature on "small town activism" and "rural activism" (Ibid, p.103).

A very interesting study by Narkowicz (2018) "Before the Czarny Protest: Feminist activism in Poland" studies pro-choice feminist movements before 2016 mass protests through focus groups and in-depth interviews with the activists as well as participant observations. The paper seeks to explore the reasons behind the unsuccessful attempts of mobilization before 2016 and tries to connect it with the success of the Black Protests (Ibid, pp.1-2). Since the pro-choice movement and activism attracted national and international attention only in 2016, most of the data covers the period onwards. Therefore, the aforementioned paper includes invaluable data and findings, which

makes it possible to compare the attitudes and perceptions of the pro-choice activists before and after the mass protests in Poland.

In their respective articles, Teresa Fazan (2023) and Courtney Blackington (2023) focus on the emotions as motivations behind mass mobilization on abortion issues. Fazan (2023) analyses 2020 protests from the perspective of the participants, draws on their emotions and offers an argument that the outcomes and impact of the protests cannot be assessed merely based on the direct results, but rather seen in a wider perspective (pp.12-13). The author employs mix of biopolitics and social movement theories to make sense of the participant observations and interviews (Ibid, p.13). While Fazan focuses exclusively on 2020 protests, Blackington (2023) looks at the emotional motivations of the protesters over time, starting from the 2016 protests. She finds that “anger” and “fear” are two key emotions behind the activists’ motivations to continuously engage in the street protests (Ibid, pp.13-14).

#### **2.4. Framing of the Women’s Mass Mobilisation and the Role of Social Media**

In her research, Korolczuk (2016) tries to explain reasons behind the mass protests in Poland in 2016 through referring to connective action. The author concludes that the protests used frames that resonated with the public and drew upon existing cultural narratives in the society (Ibid, p.91). Moreover, Korolczuk also refers to favourable opportunity structure as one of the reasons behind the mobilization and protest outcomes, but she argues that connective action was the most important (Ibid, p.93). Furthermore, the paper also examines the role of internet and technology in mass mobilization during the anti-abortion protests in 2016 (Ibid, p.102). As far as the methods are concerned, the paper is using methods of media analysis and participatory observations (Ibid, p.95).

Similar to Korolczuk’s (2016) research, Cullen and Korolczuk (2019) study abortion framing, but comparatively in Poland and Ireland, drawing their attention to the response of pro-choice actors to the stigmas surrounding reproductive health and rights in the respective countries (p.6). The authors are looking at the issue mainly from the feminist lens while also employing framing theory to better understand and explain the successful mobilizations in Poland and Ireland (Ibid, p.7). What makes the research even more significant is that one of the authors, Elzbieta Korolczuk, was an active participant in the protests herself and she includes her own observations and experiences in the analysis (Ibid, p.8). The analyses showed that the women who choose to go through the

abortion are labelled either as “deviant” or “murderers”, or as victims who are mistaken and need guidance (Ibid, p.12). In response to the aforementioned framing, pro-choice movements in both countries tried to fight against the stigma surrounding abortions using women’s personal stories and trying to normalize discussions around the topic (Ibid, p.16). However, framing was tailored to the national contexts and mostly focused on rare cases and women’s safety rather than normalization of all choices, which means that despite some success, women’s movements still have a long way to go in that direction (Ibid).

Nacher (2020) looks at the role of social media in creating narratives and argues that the “narrative potential of hashtag” played an important role in a large-scale mobilization in 2016 (p.261). Nacher draws on the work of Majewska and employs the term “weak resistance”, which is not used in a literal sense but rather refers to everyday actions that aids and contributes to the ongoing mass mobilization (Majewska, 2019, p.15 in Nacher, 2021, pp.264-265). At the same time, Nacher also points out that hashtags only reach to limited number of people, mostly youngsters, but in Polish case digital activism was complementary to the mass mobilization that took place across the entire country (Ibid, p.269). Another study authored by Paradowski (2021) also analyses the social media discourse of the 2020 protests, with the main focus on “#strajkkobiet” hashtag on Twitter. The study interestingly finds that the abortion-related hashtags were not used frequently when compared to the hashtags mentioning PiS and the government institutions (Ibid, p.253), which suggests that the 2020 protests were not as niche as 2016 protests and had broader frame. While Nacher (2020) and Paradowski (2021) focus on hashtags on Twitter, Chałupnik and Brookes (2022) study the social media dimension of the 2020 women’s protests and identify key “communicative acts” employed by the “All-Poland Women’s Strike on Facebook (p.308). The authors argue that the messages disseminated through social media had a significant impact on the protests and the discourse (Ibid).

Trzcińska (2022) studies key narratives and frames around the abortion issue in Poland disseminated on Twitter during the mass protests in 2020. Similar to Nacher’s argument, Trzcińska also uses feminist lens as well as framing as theoretical tools to study the digital dimension of the 2020 mass mobilization (Ibid, p.6). The analysis identified two umbrella themes: the “Constitutional Court’s ruling” and the “public policy” (Ibid, p.10). It is worth mentioning that abortions were not widely discussed in the analyzed tweets, while opposition towards the government and the Catholic church was intensely discussed (Ibid, pp.10-11).

Finally, Kampka (2022) takes a very interesting angle and based on visual data analysis compares 2020 protests against restricting abortion laws to the 2015 protests against the judicial reforms. He analyses visual materials used for online and offline protests and argues that protesters in 2015 and 2020 used different rhetoric, which can mainly be attributed to the differences between generations (Ibid, p.134). Protesters in 2015 mainly used communist history as a reference, while in 2020 pop culture references were dominant (Ibid, pp.126-127). Stępnik (2022) also analyses the visual identity of the women's protests in Poland and focuses on the works of the artists who contributed to the protests in their own creative way.

## **2.5. Catholic Church as a Key Actor in Abortion Debates**

Part of the academic literature about the women's mobilisation in Poland studies the role of Catholic Church and the role of Catholics in mass protests (Kościańska et al., 2021; Calkin and Kaminska, 2020), which is not surprising considering that the Catholic Church has always been one of the key actors in abortion debates in Poland right from the very beginning (Nowicka, 2004, p.183). Kościańska, Kosiorowska, and Pomian (2021) study the participation of the followers of the Polish Catholic church in the 2020 protests. The authors were present at the protests (Ibid, pp. 14-15), which adds to the value of their findings. The authors combine the framework of "unofficial biopolitics" and women's agency to explain the participation of Catholics in the mass protests against restriction of abortion laws (Ibid, p.19). The authors emphasize the distinction between Catholic church and Catholics, who were also participating in protests (Kościańska et al., 2021).

Calkin and Kaminska (2020) present comparative analysis of the Catholic Church as an actor in abortion policies in two different countries: Poland and Ireland and refer to the influence of the church as an explanatory factor behind the observed differences. The authors employ feminist perspective to analyse Polish and Irish cases and use the "morality policy" framework to make inferences (Ibid, pp.87-88).

Several academic articles studying the women's protests and changes in abortion legislation in Poland, look at the counter-movements and study right-wing actors rather than the protesters, which offers a very interesting and useful angle for the holistic analysis of the abortion debates and women's mass mobilisation. Koralewska and Zielińska (2021) analyse the right-wing discourse around abortion debates in different right-wing media outlets. The authors find that the

aforementioned discourse is focused on “foetus” and refers them as “unborn/conceived child”, usually in an emotional context (Ibid, p.5). Another dimension of the discourse focuses on women, but in a context that underlines the threat of abortions for women as well as the nation at large, framing abortions as a threat to the nation and community as well (Ibid, pp.8-9).

### *Summary*

As shown in the chapter, most of the literature studying the women’s protests in Poland focuses on either 2016-2018 or 2020-2021 protests, analysing them through various theoretical approaches. A large number of studies draw their attention to the digital aspect of mass mobilizations in 2016 and 2020 Women’s protests in Poland and study the role of social media and digital activism in mass mobilizations (Nacher, 2020; Trzcińska, 2022; Chałupnik and Brookes, 2022; Paradowski, 2021), while others conducting cross-country analysis focusing on different dimensions of mass mobilisation and reproductive rights (Korolczuk and Saxonberg 2015; Calkin and Kaminska, 2020; Cullen and Korolczuk, 2019; Kinowska-Mazaraki, 2021). Only handful of studies offer comparative analysis between those two waves of protests (Kampka, 2022; Rak & Bäcker, 2023), the same can be said about the studies that employ the frameworks of social movement theory to study women’s mass mobilisation in Poland (Muszei and Piotrowski, 2019; Korolczuk, 2016; Fazan, 2023; Courtney Blackington, 2023), since anti-abortion protests in Poland are mostly analysed through the lens of feminism and feminist theories. Moreover, the studies using social movement frameworks mostly focus either structural opportunities (Muszei and Piotrowski, 2019; Korolczuk, 2016) or the role of emotions (Fazan, 2023; Blackington, 2023). Therefore, to contribute to the existing gap in the literature, my thesis will conduct a comparative study of the 2016 and 2020 women’s protests using the social movement theoretical framework and looking at the interplay between structural and perceived opportunities and its role on the mobilisation and policy outcomes of the women’s mass protests in Poland between the years of 2016 and 2021.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

Even though there have been some changes in the political opportunities in Poland, traditional political opportunity approach explains differences in social movement mobilisation and outcomes only to some degree. Considering that social movements operate in specific contexts and interact with the structures around them, they cannot be overlooked in the social movement study. As McAdam put it "...a focus on changes in the structure of political opportunities can contribute to our understanding of the shifting fortunes of a single movement" (McAdam et al., 1996, p.12). However, due to the same reason, they are highly context-dependent (Meyer, 2004, p.125). Political opportunity structures lack the component of agency for better understanding of differences between mass mobilisations, especially when it comes to the new social movements that are deeply embedded in culture and context. Moreover, as shown in the literature review, most studies around the women's mobilisation in Poland employ feminist theories and only a handful of them study the case from the social movement perspective. To address this gap, in this paper, I rely on the social movement theories, in particular political process theory and interactions between objective (structural) and subjective (perceived) opportunities, to explain the similarities and differences between the mobilisation and outcomes of the Polish women's protests in 2016 and 2020. The study mostly relies on McAdam's (1996) and Tarrow's (2011) frameworks.

#### **3.1. Political Opportunity in Social Movement Theory**

Political opportunity sometimes also referred as political process approach is a well-established tradition in social movement theory and primarily focuses on the interplay between the social movements and the environment they operate in, in other words mobilisation and influence of the movements are contingent on the context (Meyer, 2004, p.125). Political opportunity approach is a useful analytical framework and has been used extensively by the social movement researchers for decades. However, considering its scope, so many elements have been added to the concept that it faces a challenge of turning into a "sponge that soaks up every aspect of the social movement environment (Gamson & Meyer, 1996, p.275, cited in Meyer, 2004, p.126).

Meyer & Minkoff (2004) try to address some of the major problems when it comes to conceptualizing political opportunities. They conclude that differences in results is best explained

through broadening the concept of political process and call for more systematic approach (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004, pp.1457-1458). The paper has a great theoretical and methodological value since it discusses different understandings of the concept as well as different variables and tries to come up with more practical conceptualization.

Meyer (2004) addresses those problems of conceptualization and operationalization of political opportunity/political process approach and offers three strategies that are supposed to help social movements researchers solve those problems and move forward towards more enhances theory of political opportunities. More specifically, in the first part of the article, the author maps political opportunity theory through discussing its origins and development, focusing on major works in the field as well as different conceptualization and operationalization employed by the researchers over the years. Then Meyer proceeds towards specific strategies to overcome the abovementioned challenges in the field. First, he suggests to clearly identify the outcomes that the researcher tries to explain through political opportunity structures. Moreover, the author suggests clearly expressed comparisons through changing and different environments. And finally, Meyer suggests taking a process-oriented approach to the research (Meyer, 2004, p.141).

Adding to the criticism and some of the gaps in social movement research, Kitschelt (1986) lays basis to his study by identifying the lack of cross-country comparative research in political opportunity structure literature and aims to fill the gap by providing a comparative study of social movements in four different countries organized around the anti-nuclear issues (p. 57). Political opportunity structure framework is often criticised for being too broad and vague and therefore, having a little explanatory power (Goodwin & Jasper, 2003, cited in Meyer, 2004, p.126). However, Kitschelt emphasizes that the framework can be analytically relevant and useful in deciphering differences when it comes to social movements and finds that mobilisation as well as the outcomes of social movements can largely be attributed to the structures of political opportunity (1986, pp.58,84).

In response to the criticism, McAdam et al. map the main theoretical approaches to the social movement studies and proposes a more synthetic and comparative approach towards the field in their book “Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framing”, which revolves around three major concepts in the social movements research: political opportunity structure, mobilizing structures and framing processes

(McAdam et al., 1996, p.2). The authors aim to analyse dynamics between the aforementioned three concepts and move towards creating more synthetic approach that will include elements and dynamics of all three of those factors (Ibid, p.6). Moreover, the authors focus on comparative and cross-country analysis of the dynamics of social movements both in terms of origin and development (Ibid, p.7). Even though the synthetic approach is very interesting, and the authors provide a well-structured argument in favour of it, using the combined approach would require a lot of theoretical and empirical work. Therefore, considering the scope of my thesis, I will be primarily focusing on structural and perceived political opportunity structures, however, I am going to briefly discuss the aforementioned approach as well.

In addition to the works of the aforementioned prominent scholars, Giugni (2011) discusses three correctives that makes the political opportunity approach more analytically relevant amid the criticism of the concept. The first corrective to the concept is focusing on discursive opportunities, which incorporates the element of culture (Ibid, p.274). Discursive opportunity approach still takes institutional condition into account, but at the same time also focuses on frames and identities (Koopmans et al. 2005, cited in Giugni, 2011, pp.274-275). Another corrective to the political opportunity narrows down the concept and rather focuses on context-specific opportunities (Ibid, p.276). The third corrective, and the one this thesis employs, adds perceptions as a medium since as famously put by Gamson and Meyer “[a]n opportunity not recognized is no opportunity at all.” (Gamson and Meyer, 1996, p.283, cited in Giugni, 2011, p.277). In his book “Power in Movement”, Sydney Tarrow (2011) links together contention and social mobilization and details the framework of perceived opportunities (pp.157-180), which adds the agency factor to the structural analysis. He offers conceptualization as well as detailed explanation of major factors of perceived opportunities (Ibid, pp.164-165), which is the key focus of my thesis and is discussed more extensively below in chapter 3.2.

### **3.2. Structural and Perceived Opportunities**

While political opportunities are largely used as an analytical tool in social movement studies, perceived opportunities are understudied and insufficiently explored. However, there are handful of studies in the field, which use perceived opportunities as an analytical tool to study contention. One of the most important studies on the relations between structural and perceived opportunities

is conducted by Charles Kurzman (1996), who uses the framework to study the case of 1979 Iranian Revolution. Kurzman explores the mismatch between structural (the state was strong and had coercive power) and perceived opportunities (the protesters believed in the strength of opposition forces and increasing numbers of protesters) in Iranian Revolution and the ways it affected the revolution outcomes (Ibid, p.153). Perceptions has a central role in the Kadivar's (2013) study of alliances in the "Iranian Reform Movement", in which the author employs the category of actors' perception as a medium to explain the relationship between alliances and political opportunities. In a very interesting approach, Kadivar forms "perception profiles", where agreement between the perceived opportunities increases, while disagreement decreases the chances of alliance formation (Kadivar, 2013, pp.1063, 1066). Another important study by Doowon Suh (2001) explores perceived opportunities and its effects on the mobilisation through longitudinal analysis of Korean labour movements. The author puts emphasis on perceived rather than structural opportunities and argues that the former plays the role of medium and is the key determinant of the dynamics of a given social movement (Ibid). However, Suh also maintains the significance of political opportunity by stating that "framing is a necessary and crucial modifier of social movements, as is political opportunity" (Ibid, p.444). Suh adds to the literature by offering framework of "success framing" and "failure framing" (referred to as "misframings" by the author), both of them encouraging continuous mobilisation in social movements – the former by attributing success to their efforts and the latter by blaming the failure on opposing actors (Ibid, p.444). Suh places his study in the political opportunity literature, but at the same time suggests that in order to understand the dynamics of a given movement, political opportunities need to be mediated through the perceptions of movement participants (2001, p.437). Giugni & Morariu (2007) recognize the existing gap in the literature when it comes to the study of perceived opportunities. To address the gap, the authors study political involvement of Italian and Kosovar immigrants in Geneva and focus on how perceived opportunities affect their political involvement (pp.1-2). One more study analysing relations between political opportunities and social movements focuses specifically on how the state repression relates to the contention (Alimi, 2007). The author presents a seemingly puzzling case, where the state repression proved to be counter-productive and instead of discouraging the contention, further motivated the activists in Palestine causing the first Intifada (Ibid, p.101). Alimi finds that the aforementioned puzzle can be explained through the perceived threats and opportunities since they are subjectively constructed by mobilisation actors (Ibid).

Dyrstad and Hillesund (2020) take different approach while incorporating perceptions in their study. The authors employ the term of “perceived political efficacy” and assert that it acts as a medium between grievances and support towards political violence (Ibid, p.1724). Blanc (2020) similar to Giugni & Morariu (2007) also recognizes that structural opportunities alone are insufficient in explaining the differences in mobilisations and studies the role of perceived opportunities in explaining the differences in groups strategies of Salafi groups in Tunisia following the Arab Revolutions. The author argues that the “structural opportunities were necessary but not sufficient for mobilisation to occur” (Ibid, p.15). One of the most recent studies that looks at perceived opportunity structures is conducted by De Moor and Wahlström (2022), who employ the concept of political opportunity structure, including perceived opportunities, to understand and explain environmental movements. The authors focus on input/output structures and conclude that narratives and perceptions play the role of the medium between the political opportunity structures and movement strategies, which aligns with the abovementioned research on perceived opportunities. It seems that the concept of perceived opportunities is getting more and more academic attention over the years, which is laying basis for the formation of more comprehensive frameworks in the future.

### **3.3. Mechanisms and Processes**

As a corrective to the aforementioned conceptualisation and methodological problems in the political process theory, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly offer more holistic approach towards social movements, where the focus is on the mechanisms and interactions between different variables (McAdam et al., 2001, p.43), which allows more flexibility while studying the research movements and accounts for the wider picture rather than the narrow focus on separate variables. The authors emphasize the importance of subjective factors and perception in the study of opportunities and state that “no opportunity, however objectively open, will invite mobilization unless it is a) visible to potential challengers and b) perceived as an opportunity.” (Ibid, p.43).

The sequence of mobilisation can also act as an important explanatory tool in social movement mobilisation and policy outcomes. In that regard, McAdam offers a very interesting observation that “early challengers who achieve success reveal the vulnerability of elites and institutions to weaker players, who may believe they will enjoy the same advantages as their predecessors”

(McAdam, 1995, cited in Tarrow, 2011, p.164). The aforementioned logic can in part explain the failure of some of the mobilisation attempts that had a successful start but did not enjoy the similar success later. Continuing the logic, Tarrow suggests that that kind of failure can either be attributed to the internal problems with the resources or can be external and be attributed to the awareness and better preparation of the authorities (Ibid). This is theoretically relevant for this thesis since the analytical puzzle presented above tries to explain the failure of women's mass mobilisation in 2020 in Poland to achieve minimal policy outcomes following successful mobilisations between 2016-2018 and despite the larger scale of the protest. Even though in-depth study of the mechanisms and processes goes beyond the scope of this study and requires more comprehensive study, the aforementioned premise will be discussed briefly in the discussion section of this thesis since it directly connects with the interplay between structures and perceptions.

### 3.4. Applying Theory to the Case

The theoretical framework of this thesis has already been laid out in this chapter, but this sub-chapter briefly discusses exactly how the theoretical framework is employed to explain the case and presents visualisation. The framework is adapted from Tarrow (2011), who argues that:

contentious politics emerges when **ordinary citizens**, sometimes **encouraged by leaders**, **perceive opportunities** that *lower the costs of collective action, reveal potential allies, show where elites and authorities are most vulnerable, and trigger social networks and collective identities into action around common themes* (p.33).

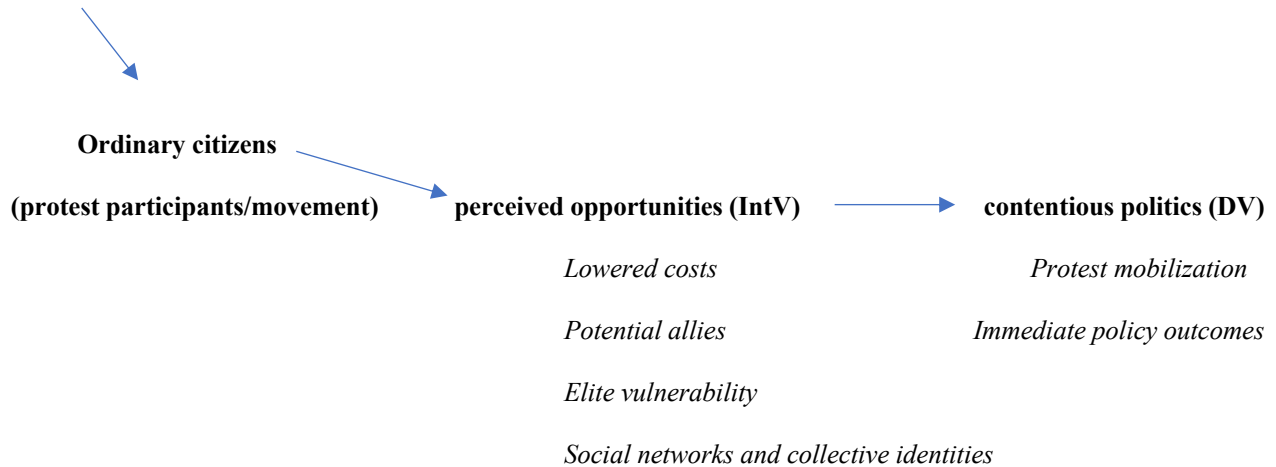
Based on the framework proposed above, this scheme visualises<sup>3</sup> theoretical promises, which informs the methodology of this thesis:

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<sup>3</sup> Author's own interpretation of the Tarrow's framework (2011, p.33).

Scheme 1.

**Leaders (trigger)/objective opportunities (IV)**



As shown in the scheme, in this research, perceived opportunities are treated as a medium between the triggers/objective opportunities and protest mobilization and outcomes. The framework is slightly adjusted to the case, but the key theoretical premises are maintained. Concepts and measures as well as case selection will be discussed more in depth-in the methodology chapter. Moreover, as already underlined, this thesis does not measure the structural opportunities, but rather maps them based on McAdam's condensed framework and puts emphasis on how those opportunities are filtered through protest participants' perceptions and, through that medium, affects mobilisation and outcomes.

## 4. Methodology

Since this research seeks to understand how social mobilisation and outcomes are affected by the interplay between the structural and perceived opportunities in Polish case and both the opportunity structures and the case itself are context-dependent, the study employs qualitative research mythology and uses in-depth comparative case study approach. Since case is conceptualized as “a phenomenon of some sort in a bounded concept (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p.28, cited in Schoch, 2020, p.245), and essentially is an in-depth study of a phenomena, I believe that the selected methodology is well suited with the presented research.

### 4.1. Case Selection

Women’s mobilisation in Poland in 2020 immediately sparked my protests since I first heard about it, and I started researching more since at that time I had very limited knowledge around the abortion laws and political situation in Poland. After initial research, I found it puzzling that after the initial success of women’s protests against the restrictions of abortion laws between 2016 and 2018, 2020 protests, despite the initial delay of publishing the legislative changes, failed to reach its initial aim and demobilised after several months of continuous protests. Even though the restrictions in abortion law were initiated through different channels in 2016, 2018 and then 2020 (in both cases, the Polish government used indirect channels to initiate changes in the abortion law), both waves of protests were organised under around the same issue, under the same government, and with the involvement of similar actors (the key organizer of both mass protests was grassroots movement “All-Poland Women’s Strike”. Moreover, at both times (in 2016 and 2020), changes in abortion laws were proposed around the same time, a year after the Law and Justice party secured victory in respective 2015 and 2019 parliamentary elections. Also, the “Women’s Strike” protests in 2020 were much larger in scale and there were established structures in place from the previous mobilisations, the international coverage was much broader as well. However, the second wave of mobilisation did not manage to halt further restrictions to the already strict abortion laws. As already mentioned in the literature review chapter, existing studies around the women’s mobilisation explains the mobilisation and outcomes (policy and cultural) for specific protests, but they are rarely explained in connection with each other. Driven from the described puzzle, this thesis seeks to understand why the first wave of women’s protests (2016-2018)

managed to reach its goals and halt further restrictions to the abortion laws, while the second wave of protests failed to do so. In order to explain the differences between those two protests, this thesis looks into the interplay between the structural (objective) and perceived (subjective) opportunities and their role in the differences between the mobilisation and outcomes of “Black Protests” and “Women’s Strike”.

## **4.2. Research Design**

As already established, this paper uses qualitative research design and conducts an interpretive comparative case study for more in-depth analysis of the protest cycles in Poland that drew exceptional attention both on national and international levels. This is factor-centric research, since it aims to study the causes behind the different outcomes of the two social protests that were organized around the same issue and under the same government, but in different periods of time. This is a single case study of social protests in Poland between the years of 2016-2020. Moreover, analysis of the existing literature favours case study design (Kurzman, 1996; Suh; 2001; Giugni & Morariu, 2007; Alimi, 2007; Kadivar, 2013; Dyrstad and Hillesund, 2020; Blanc, 2020; De Moor and Wahlström, 2022) while studying the relations between structural and perceived opportunities since the framework is highly context dependent.

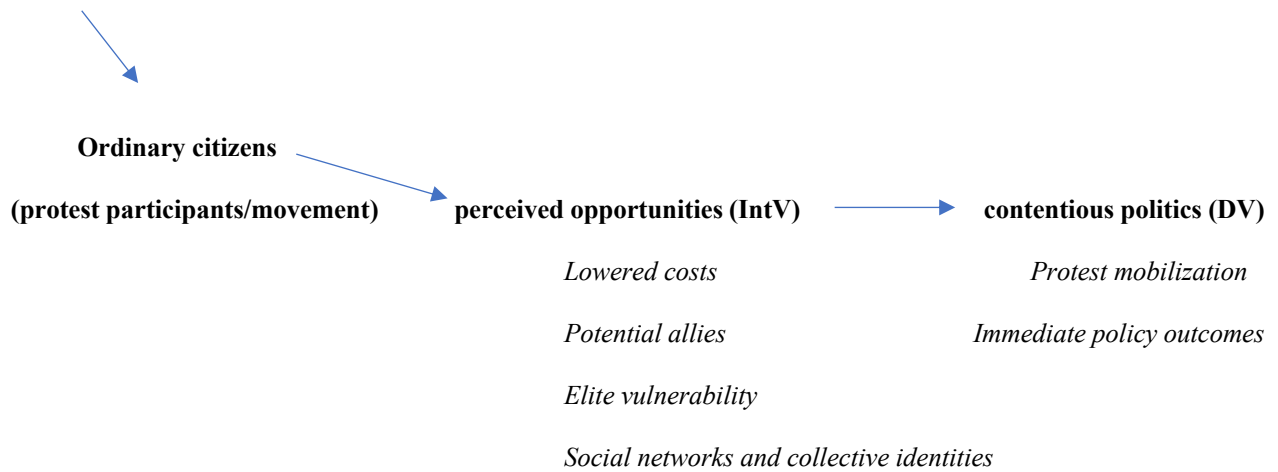
Even though I identify independent and dependent variables, I will not be using strong variable language since this is interpretive qualitative research and I am limited in making causal inferences. However, the research seeks to make an in-depth analysis of the interplay between the structural and perceived opportunities in a Polish context and the role of their interaction in the mobilization and policy outcomes of the women’s social movement in Poland between through a comparative analysis of the 2016-2018 and 2020-2021 mass protests. While not measuring the structural opportunities, the research still maps those opportunities using indexes, reports, and existing literature to observe how those opportunities changed in time and how those changes were perceived by the movement agents.

### 4.3. Concepts and Measures

In order to identify concepts and measure, I will once again refer to the Tarrow's (2011) framework adjusted to this particular case study design:

Scheme 1.

**Leaders (trigger)/objective opportunities (IV)**



As already mentioned, due to the scope and framework of the study, I will not be measuring the structural opportunities but rather map them out based on the dimensions condensed by McAdam (1996) in his seminal study.

#### ***IV: Structural/objective Opportunities***

In the scholarship of political opportunity structures, variables are usually case-specific and focused on the in-depth analysis of the case and social movement to identify the components of political opportunities and their potential influence on the various dimensions of the movement at hand, rather than testing the theory (Meyer, 2004, p.134). Since my thesis employs a case-study method, the conceptualisation and operationalisation will be adjusted to the Polish context, while at the same time relying on the existing theories and studies for validity and reliability. Theoretical chapter of this thesis already underlines that the concept of political opportunity structure can sometimes be too broad and include too much. In order to avoid the ambiguity, conceptualisation

of the “structure of political opportunities” is based on McAdam’s (1996) framework, who compiled existing studies and identified the four dimensions that are employed by most of the prominent scholars in their studies and therefore, grasp the concept quite well (pp.26-27).

1. Openness/closure of the political system
2. Stability/instability within the elites
3. Presence/absence of elite allies
4. State’s capacity/inclination for repression<sup>4</sup>

To determine the *relative openness/closure of the system*, firstly I will rely on Jami & Peoples’ (2022) quantitative research attempts to operationalize political opportunity variable. They choose to focus on measuring democracy and confirm that the increased level of protest activity can be tied to the transformative level of democracy (“middle-of-the-road” democracies” as the authors put it) (p.1440). For the measures, the authors are using V-Dem database. Therefore, for more validity, I am going to use V-Dem democracy indexes to assess the overall structural opportunities in Poland between the protest years. However, since this is a case study and I am interested in the in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, all four dimensions will be studied and analysed separately as well using various indexes and reports specified below. Moreover, Eisinger observes curvilinear relations between the system openness/closure and social mobilisations, stating that “neither full access nor its absence produces the greatest degree of protest... and the likelihood of contention increases “in systems characterized by a mix of open and closed factors” (1973, p.15, cited in Tarrow, 2011, p.165). Therefore, the Freedom House Index will also be discussed for Poland.

When it comes to *stability/instability within the elites*, the “shifting alignments”, it can usually be observed through elections in democracies, looking at coalitions and partnerships (Tarrow, 2011, 165). Therefore, to assess the elite stability, 2015 and 2019 parliamentary elections will be compared systematically using existing literature.

*Presence/absence of elite allies* is another important dimension of political opportunity since “challengers are encouraged to take collective action when they have allies who can act as friends in court, as guarantors against repression, or as acceptable negotiators on their behalf” (Tarrow,

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<sup>4</sup> Taken from McAdam (McAdam, 1996, p.27).

2011, p.166). Therefore, again, based on existing academic literature, supporters of women's mass mobilization will be mapped out and assessed before analysing participants' perceptions and their relation to each other.

The last, and more dynamic dimension of the political opportunity is *state's capacity/inclination for repression*, which is again explained by Tarrow (2011) as "threats...but also the capacity of authorities to present a solid front to insurgents – that discourage contention." (p.32). This dimension will be assessed based on international human rights organizations' reports on state repression and limitations of human rights.

#### **4.3.1. Reliability and validity**

As already established, dimensions of perceived opportunities derived from Tarrow's (2011) framework, who argues that "contentious politics emerges when ordinary citizens, sometimes encouraged by leaders, *perceive opportunities that lower the costs of collective action, reveal potential allies, show where elites and authorities are most vulnerable, and trigger social networks and collective identities into action around common themes.*" (p.33).

Since perceived opportunities mostly follow the dimensions of structural/objective opportunities, I am not going to conceptualise them separately. Moreover, since this study conducts content analysis of the perceptions based on visual, written, and audio material, those dimensions will be adjusted according to the content analysis, while at the same time, maintaining the master frames for theoretical discussions.

When it comes to validity of the perceived opportunities variable, Kurzman (1996) identifies similar categories as Tarrow (2011) while studying the case of Iranian Revolution: "perception of the state's coercive power" that is aligned with the costs of collective action, "perception of the opposition's power" that can be aligned with the potential allies and vulnerability of elites (Kurzman, 1996, pp.161-162; Tarrow, 2011, p.33). The fourth dimension of perceived opportunities – construction of social networks and collective identities – is not used in Kurzman's framework but both social network and identity formation was a big part of the women's mass mobilisation in Poland and therefore, is used in identifying and analysing the perceptions of protests organizers and participants. Elements of the last dimension of perceived opportunities will

derive from the inductive content analysis of the participants' perceptions and will be analysed in the discussion chapter of this thesis.

Last but not the least, it is important to conceptualize what I mean by protest *mobilisation and outcomes*. **By mobilisation** I mean series of women's mass protests in Poland against the further restrictions of abortion laws that took place between the years of 2016 and 2020. As already established, the main focus will be on 2016 "Black Protests" and 2020 "Women's Strike" but since more protests took place before, in between, and after those protests, they will also be included in the analysis. **By outcomes**, I mean policy outcomes of the specific mobilisation since the protests primarily aimed to halt further restrictions towards already strict abortion laws in the country. Moreover, I am aware that outcomes also have social and cultural dimensions, but cultural changes are much more broad, vague, and challenging to measure and then connect to the specific variables within qualitative research. Moreover, since the declared aims of the second wave protests were too broad, I will focus on the initial aim of the protests, to halt Constitutional Tribunal's ruling since the declared postulates appeared at later stage of the protests and were far too broad to discuss any direct outcomes and their connections with the protest demands. Therefore, the research will focus on the minimal policy outcomes and briefly discuss other outcomes beyond that, especially in the context of participants' perceptions.

#### 4.4. Methods

Inspiration for the methodological framework of this thesis came from the Kurzman's (1996) study of Iranian Revolution, who uses participants' and journalists' accounts as well as interviews to study perceptions of Iranians in relation with the characteristics of the state structure at that time (p.156). Considering that the main focus of my study is perceived opportunities, seeking to understand how interplay between objective and perceived opportunities affect the mobilisation and outcomes of the women's protests in Poland between the years of 2016 and 2020, I primarily employ **interpretive content analysis**. Since content analysis identifies various textual elements and then also conducts comparative analysis, I believe that the method is well suited for my research design. (Boréus & Bergström, 2017). Moreover, there is a distinction between quantitative and qualitative content analysis (Ibid) and considering that my research is primarily focused on perceptions in the context of theoretical framework, this thesis employs quantitative

content analysis. The content analysis uses theoretical framework as a master frame for deductive content analysis, which is then completed by inductive categories to fully grasp participants' perceptions and relies on primary and secondary data.

The second part of the methods is the visual thematic analysis of the protest signs. Mass protests in Poland in 2020-2021 attracted tremendous attention nationally and internationally and had a very distinct visual identity. Since the visual forms of the protests was an important medium to convey messages of women's protests in Poland throughout the years, they formed "a unique visual sphere" (Małecki, 2020, para.1), which presents an invaluable data for studying the attitudes and perceptions of the protesters. Moreover, since those signs were created at the time of the protests, they accurately show the emotions and attitudes of the protest participants. Visual and textual materials were collected and archived digitally in the framework of several different projects (Manikowska, 2022), which will be used as primary sources of this research. "Linguistic and visual framing", especially in 2020, significantly contributed to the mobilisation and identity framing of the protests and the use of social media widened geographical area of the protests and made it more inclusive and widespread (Chałupnik & Brookes, 2022, pp.320, 330). Furthermore, banners used during the protests express the key objectives of the protest, describe the ongoing situation, and identify protesters as well as the opposition, they create "shared symbols" (Jenzen et al., 2021, cited in Kampka, 2022, p.126). Therefore, analysing those visual materials make the perceptions more nuanced and inclusive and allow identifying the general common frames.

Primary data includes, published interviews with the protests' organizers, participants, and supporters (both written and video interviews), protests signs (provided in public online archives), and transcripts of official statements and parliamentary debates. Secondary data includes reports, indexes, and existing academic literature, which will put the primary data findings into the context and add to the validity of the variables. The types of sources and rationale of their use is discussed in more details in the data collection and analysis section of this chapter.

Initially, I intended to conduct in-depth interviews with the participants and organizers of the protests that took place between the years of 2016 and 2021. However, analysis of the existing sources revealed that there is a large pool of media interviews as well as in-depth interviews and focus groups that have been conducted at the time of the protests or soon after. Therefore, I decided

that using the existing data and conducting content-analysis would be better suited for the interests of my research and would give me more unbiased results for several reasons:

Firstly, due to the high interest and coverage of the protests both nationally and internationally, there is an existing pool of data including the interviews with the protest organizers and participants conducted during or soon after the protests in question. Since the key focus of this research is perceived opportunities and perceptions change over time and can be adjusted or distorted, I believe that the data collected at the time or soon after the protests took place will be the most accurate, rather than the interviews and focus groups conducted years after the protests, where the probability of misperceptions or adjusted perceptions is quite high.

Secondly, due to the language barrier, I would have been able to conduct interviews with only those participants and organizers who speak good English. Using already existing interviews and research, some of which are conducted in Polish and then professionally translated in English, gives me access to more diverse group of participants. Moreover, it is usually quite challenging to arrange interviewees with high profile individuals, while their perceptions matter significantly since they are usually the ones setting the agenda. International attention the protests garnered from the beginning made it possible to accumulate the interviews with protests leaders as well as political party leaders in English language. This benefit is taken advantage of this research.

Finally, due to the shortage of time and resources, I would have been able to conduct only limited number of interviews, while using existing media interviews as well as the extensive research that draws on the data collected from in-depth interviews and focus groups provides me with much larger pool of data to analyse. And finally, since the issue is very sensitive and sometimes requires a very deep knowledge of the context to properly approach the respondents, there are less ethical concerns while using published interviews.

## **4.5. Data collection and Analysis**

### *Visual data analysis*

This sub-chapter details the process of data collection and analysis. For the protest signs used in 2020-2021 protests, I used the digital archive of the Lublin based institution „Brama Grodzka - Teatr NN” (Słowa Rewolucji - Opowiadanie Świata [Words of Revolution - Notifying the World],

n.d.) and the 2016-2018 protest signs are taken from another archive “Społeczne archiwum online” (Hasła Demonstracji [Demonstration Signs], 2019).

The signs were translated in English by myself (the author of this paper) since I have the basic knowledge of Poland. For the signs that needed more language skills I used online translation services. Since the signs used a lot of cultural references, I consulted online forums, visual materials, and existing academic literature for the references that were not understandable for me from the beginning. Finally, there were few signs, which I could not grasp and put into context, and I omitted them from the analysis. Since there were hundreds of signs in the archives, I have stopped searching once common new categories no longer appeared. Since the framework of this thesis does not look into individual perceptions, I have focused on common themes rather than individual deviant signs. After the collection part was done, I have created inductive categories with the signs and visualised them in a table presented in Appendix 4. The signs were initial part of the analysis, where I identified the common themes, which then were put into context with the content analysis of the interviews.

### *Interpretive content analysis*

Below, I will discuss the conducted content analysis of the interviews in detail. Before I started content analysis, I used a Google search engine with the key words “Poland”, “protest”, “interview” in English language. I have filtered the key words through time range of 2015-2023 and after skimming through them, manually selected those interviews that were relevant for my research. After selecting the interviews, I prepared a table with the list of the interviews indicating the name of the interviewee, their affiliation, the date of the interview, and direct link to the interview. I have assigned abbreviations to each individual interview for easier reference purposes. The table is included in the appendix 1 of this thesis. After the initial stage of categorization of the sources, I have read the interviews for understanding the whole picture, and only after that I started highlighting different parts of the interviews according to the dimensions of perceived opportunities from the Tarrow’s (2011) framework. Considering that the number of interviews were not too large, and that the context was of utmost importance, also because I employ qualitative content analysis, I relied on manual content analysis rather than the software. In total, I have included 40 interviews, 38 of them are in written form and 2 of them are video interviews, which I

have transcribed and included in the Appendix 3. Moreover, the interviews are organized according to the affiliations since they provide extra layer of information, especially when it comes to the categories of “potential allies” and “identity framing”. The interview transcripts presented in the Appendix 3 visualises the process of content analysis.

Based on the mix of deductive and inductive analysis, I have designed the codebook, which include both deductive and inductive categories, as well as examples of codes, and some of the excerpts from the interviews. The codebook is presented in Appendix 2 of this thesis. Moreover, where it is relevant, the codes also include the abbreviations to indicate the person and their affiliation since it adds to the relevance of perceptive categories and allows for more comprehensive and multi-layered analysis. Finally, since the perceptions are highly context-dependent, the last stage of the content analysis employs interpretive approach and puts the results in the context of theoretical framework as well as existing academic literature, which is analysed in depth in the discussion part of the thesis.

### *Secondary data analysis*

For the additional context, thesis uses a monograph that describes the 2020 protests from different perspectives, Zabrzewska & Dubrow (2021) gather the main demands of the Strajk Kobiet as well as their calls for action retrieved from the official website of the movement as well as their social media channels and OKO.press that provided the demands voiced by Strajk Kobiet on 27<sup>th</sup> of October (p.41). The source is invaluable to look into the perceptions of the protest organizers and the messages they disseminated during the mass mobilization translated in English language. The authors also include the English language transcripts of the parliamentary debates around the abortion issues conducted at the time of the 2020 mass protests. The source is used for identifying the positions and perceptions of the parliamentary actors, especially from the ruling party, since their extended interviews in English are very scarce. The aforementioned monograph fills that gap and add valuable dimension to the research.

Finally, the discussion chapter of the paper uses secondary data, mostly reports, public opinion polls and academic research based on participant interviews and focus groups, which puts the results of primary data into context and adds to the validity of the key findings.

## 4.6. Caveats

One of the most important caveats is the language barrier since I am not a native Polish speaker. However, considering the academic and journalistic interest the mass protests sparked, a large number of statements, interviews, reports, and events are available in English language and there is a large body of academic literature covering different dimensions of the women's social movement in Poland, including both waves of protests (2016-2018 and 2020-2021). I recognize that there will be some important data, which will still stay out of my reach due to the language barrier, but I believe that using specific theoretical and methodological framework will address most of the language-related caveats. Moreover, visual thematic analysis of the protest signs might include some translation errors due to the language barriers. However, considering the large number of signs I have analysed, the error is minimal and furthermore, I am more interested in the common themes. Therefore, minimal translation errors in individual signs will have a minimal effect on the thematic analysis. Also, since I assign specific texts to the thematic categories, there is a probability for the researcher bias. To address the aforementioned limitation as best as possible, I will refer to the theoretical framework constantly and put my findings in the context of existing research for increased reliability and validity.

One more important caveat is homogeneity of the interviews since I am using already published interviews. However, I conducted both deductive and inductive analysis and relied on pre-selected overarching themes based on theoretical framework, therefore the lack of homogeneity between the interviews did not act as a shortcoming for my research. Also, as explained in the methodology chapter, already conducted interviews at the time of the protest activity provided unbiased and unfiltered perceptions and included authentic emotions, which was a priority for my research.

Finally, this thesis does not explore alternative explanations behind the mass mobilisations between the years of 2016 and 2021, which might seem like a limitation of the research. However, the research delves into the in-depth analysis of the case and contributes to the literature in three ways. First, since most of the case-related sources is studying either one or the other waves of protests, this research studies both waves of protests comparatively. Secondly, it employs social movement theory perspective to the Polish mass protests in otherwise feminist theory dominated research. And finally, by employing not just political opportunity concept, but adding perceptions as a medium, the thesis offers more nuanced explanations of the phenomena.

## 4.7. Ethics

Since this research delves into quite sensitive issues, there are some ethical considerations, however, since my research methodology did not include any direct human interaction, those ethical considerations are minimal. Firstly, as a female researcher who has lived in Poland for more than a one year, I personally support the Polish women fighting for their reproductive rights and human rights in general. Moreover, as a Georgian, I understand the struggle of fighting for human rights and democracy in your own country and I have participated in number of social protests myself in Georgia over the years. Therefore, I am aware of my biases, and I tried to put aside my personal views and follow the framework and the data to make observations. Also, even though I am a woman, I am not Polish, and I am still an outsider, which helps me stay unbiased.

## 5. Research Findings and Discussion

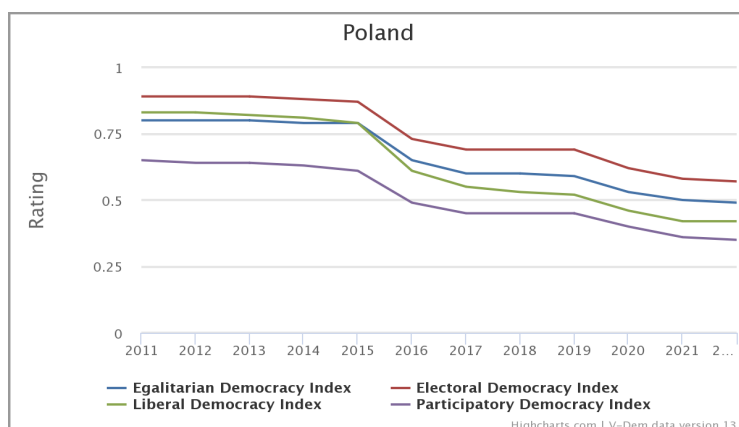
This chapter presents the research findings of the conducted qualitative content analysis and visual data analysis on the one hand (perceived opportunities) and analysis of statistics and secondary sources on the other hand (structural opportunities). Since this thesis seeks to analyse the interplay between structural and perceived opportunities, findings will be structured around the key dimensions of each and then analysed together in the discussion chapter. As already stated, this study mainly focuses on perceived opportunities and therefore, they will be analysed more thoroughly. However, dimensions of structural opportunities will also be assessed and analysed in relation with the perceived opportunities. More specifically, the structural/objective opportunities will be mapped out based on McAdam's framework and primary (indexes, statistics) and secondary sources (reports, academic literature), while perceived opportunities will be presented and analysed based on the results and finding of the qualitative content analysis and visual thematic analysis. I will refer to the interviews with the name of the respondent for easier comprehension. In case there are more than one interview associated with certain individuals, I will also include abbreviations that are depicted in the interview list in the appendices chapter to avoid misunderstandings (Appendix 1). Full citations of the interview sources can be found in the bibliography chapter under the "interviews for the content analysis" section. When needed, assigned codes will also be used for reference, and the codebook is included in the appendices of this paper. Additionally, thematic categories and texts of the signs are presented in the Appendix 4. Finally, while mapping out

structural opportunities, I will look at the indexes to measure the change in indicators, but I will also use the reports to put the numbers into context, which I believe will provide more validity as well as more context-specific analysis.

## 5.1. Structural Opportunities

### 5.1.1. Openness/closure of the political system

As stated in the methodology chapter, V-Dem democracy indices are used for the overall assessment of the dynamics of structural opportunities in Poland. Jami & Peoples' (2022) employ the index for the operationalisation of political opportunity in their cross-country large-N quantitative study. The dimensions of political opportunity structures are discussed more in-depth below separately. However, it is interesting to look at the overall trend of democracy in Poland. In the country graph given below, four different indexes are visualised in dynamics over the years between 2011 and 2021 (Graph 1). Graph 1 depicts the changes in four indexes: ***Egalitarian Democracy Index*** (individual freedoms and human rights, fair distribution of resources, and equal distribution of power); ***Electoral Democracy Index*** (free and competitive elections, also includes the freedom of civil society); ***Liberal Democracy Index*** (guaranteed individual rights as well as minority rights, also includes checks and balances system); and ***Participatory Democracy Index*** (citizen involvement in politics through elections as well as beyond elections) (Country Graph – V-Dem, n.d.).



Graph 1. V-Dem democracy indices for Poland between the years of 2011-2021<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The graph is created via the V-Dem graphing tool by the author.

The visual clearly shows decrease in all four indexes starting from 2015 and onwards, which coincides with the change of government in Poland after the ruling Law and Justice party won the 2015 parliamentary election. Of course, the political opportunity structures are much more layered and nuanced, but it still shows the overall trends over time. Additional variable would be needed to make more robust inferences, but the overall trend allows the assessment that since PiS assumed the office, access to institutions and level of certain freedoms decreased gradually.

Up until the change of the government in Poland in 2015, the country adopted several reforms aimed at improving gender equality, including quotas, and steps were taken towards battling domestic violence as well as the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (Szczygielska, 2019, p.121). Moreover, five years before the Law and Justice won the elections, Poland also passed the “anti-discrimination” law (Ibid), which can be seen as another important step towards equality. The aforementioned reforms could be assessed as facilitating force towards citizens access to the institutions. However, the trend has been slowly reversing, as visualised in the Graph 1 as well. Legal changes also align with the decrease in association/assembly rights indicator (Q2.3) in the BTI Transformation Index already in 2018 presented in Appendix 7 (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022).

When it comes to abortion regulations specifically, it is important to mention that a year before the 2016 protests, the Constitutional Court in Poland freed the doctors from the obligation to direct their patients to another doctor in case they were not willing to go through with the procedure due to their personal beliefs (Kapelańska-pręgowska, 2021, p.2015). The decision can be assessed as further restriction of legal abortions in Poland and further limitation for women to the access of already extremely narrow legal abortion.

Finally, Freedom house index also shows gradual decrease in overall scores starting from 2015 up until 2023 (from 80/100 in 2015 to 59/100 in 2023), turning Poland from “Consolidated” to “Semi-Consolidated” democracy (Freedom House, 2023). Judicial independence rating also decreased drastically from 5.50 to 5.25 in 2016, to further 4.75 in 2017, and from 3.75 to 3.50 in 2020 (Ibid), which does not come as a surprise considering the take-over of judiciary and further restriction of the abortion rights between those years. The very similar trend is presented in the BTI Transformation Index (Appendix 7), where “rule of law” indicator (Q3) decreased from 9,3 in 2016 to 6,8 in 2022 (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022), which shows sharp decrease.

Moreover, in Poland the citizens have direct access to the legislative procedures through citizen's initiatives, which allows citizens to submit the legislative proposal to the Polish parliament if they collect at least 100,000 signatures (European Commission, 2021). The very same right was used for registering the anti-abortion bill in the parliament in 2016 and a year later. While the right allows citizens to affect legislative process, it is still up to the parliament to decide which initiatives to proceed with and which ones to drop. That is why the anti-abortion bill proceeded with the second hearing while pro-abortion bill was dropped in 2016.

The assessment shows that pro-life protests over the years developed against the background of curtailing freedoms, independence of judiciary and access to state institutions.

### **5.1.2. Stability/instability within the elites**

#### *2015 and 2019 Parliamentary Elections*

Stability/instability within the elites can usually be observed through comparatively analysing the elections in democracies. Since this thesis aims to map out rather than thoroughly study structural opportunities, comparing 2015 and 2019 parliamentary elections should be sufficient to show general trends. 2015 parliamentary elections in Poland brought about important changes in the Polish government. The ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party won the elections, replacing 2011–2015 ruling Civic Platform (PO), and managed to form the government without coalition (Gwiazda, 2019, p.263; Markowski, 2016, p.1311), which, of course, provided more space for the government to act independently and push their own agenda. However, there is one important nuance to the results: even though the Law and Justice party were able to govern without coalition partners, it was not due to the very high percentage of votes (37%), but rather because of a very high percentage of wasted votes (16) due to electoral system changes (Markowski, 2016, p.1314). Also, already before the 2015 elections, it was apparent that the Catholic Church favoured Law and Justice party (Markowski, 2016, pp.1313-1314). "Polska Razem (PR)" and "Solidarna Polska (SP)" were also part of the electorate lists of PiS and later had an important role in parliament, where the leader of PR acted as a deputy PM and Zbigniew Ziobro was appointed a Justice Minister, who later played an important role in the abortion debates (Ibid, p.1316). What is noteworthy and probably had a significant effect on later dynamics of mass protests was the lack of presence of the left in the

parliament (Ibid). This is important since the left is one of the strongest supporters of abortion rights, meaning that the protesters lost an important parliamentary ally in the parliament in 2015.

Markowski (2020) also assesses 2019 parliamentary elections and I believe that using the works of the same author for the comparison makes it much more consistent. Even though the Law and Justice party (PiS) lost the senate in 2019, nothing much has changed since PiS managed to get majority of seats in the Sejm (Markowski, 2020, p.1519). “Solidarna Polska (SP)” and “Porozumienie (Agreement)” both increased their representation in 2019 parliament compared to 2015 and both are part of the PiS coalition, blocking the ruling party from gaining the constitutional majority for decision making (Ibid). One more important feature of the parliament was pre-election cooperation between the opposition forces – KO (Civic Coalition), the Left (post-communist SLD, the progressive left – Razem, and Wiosna), and PSL (Polish Peoples Party), which won them the majority in Senate (Ibid, pp.1519-1520). Also, the left returned back to the parliament in 2019, with one of the organizers and vigorous supporters of the women’s movement – Razem party – now represented in the legislative body.

The comparative analysis show that in terms of the government and the government coalitions, nothing much changed between 2015 and 2019 parliaments. Even though there were some notable changes, in terms of elite alignments, we can assess that it remained somewhat stable. The only important change is the presence of the left in the 2019 parliament, which was not represented in previously.

### **5.1.3. Presence/absence of elite allies**

When it comes to the elite allies, this sub-chapter will look at the potential allies of the women’s movement among the elites and in the institutions. In 2016, Majewska (2018) draws attention to the lack of political allies to the women’s movement. While initially, it was assumed that the opposition would offer support to the protests, the support was not as significant as initially thought and most of the liberal parliamentary parties were in favour of maintaining the status quo rather than the liberalization of abortion laws (ibid). “The Razem Party”, which was actively involved in the protests right from its emergence, was the only ally that expressed full support to the protests as well as the cause (ibid), and at that time, the party did not have parliamentary representation. Parliamentary debates around the two citizen’s initiatives regarding the abortions in the Sejm in

2016 offers an important insight into the positions of parliamentary parties towards the legal changes in abortion laws prior to the mass protests. Most representatives of the Law and Justice party, Polish Peasant Party and Kukiz' 15 voted in favour of proceeding with the "Stop Abortion" bill, while Modern and Civic Platform voted against it (Gwiazda, 2019, p.272). When it comes to "Save the Women", the voting results was the exact opposite, the former three parties voting against it and the latter two were in favour of proceeding with the bill (Ibid).

In 2019 parliament, previously extra-parliamentary Razem party and the left coalition managed to enter the parliament. October 2020 parliamentary meeting of the "Committee on Social Policy and Family" discussed the mass protests, which were taking place at the time of the meeting (Zabrzewska & Dubrow, 2021). Analysis of the transcript shows the positions of different parliamentary parties on the abortion rights as well as the mass protests. Several deputies from the Civic Coalition (KO) and the left express their full support towards the protesters as well as minority rights (Ibid, pp.63,67), The PiS is referring to the family values and condemns violence and attacks towards the Catholic Church (Ibid, p.75), however one deputy from the PiS while condemning the form of the protests, still opposes the decision of the Constitutional Court (Ibid, p.68).

The analysis show that in 2019 parliament, the women's movement had more allies, the left alliance, which was heavily involved in the protests right from the beginning but was participating in the processes outside of the parliament, and the Civic Coalition, which appeared to be more vocal with the support towards the mass protests.

#### **5.1.4. State's capacity/inclination for repression**

Between the years of 2015 and 2016, the Polish government made number of legislative changes that undermined democratic progress Poland has reached over the years before. One of the legislative changes was directed towards limiting freedom of assembly. More specifically, the changes were made to the act regulating public assemblies in December 2016, according to which the regular cyclical assemblies and celebrations were prioritized (Amnesty International Poland, 2020). The aforementioned legislative change affected dozens of assemblies in Warsaw alone in one year between 2017 and 2018 (Ibid). If we look at the timing of the changes, they came soon after the "Black Protests" in October 2016, which was preceded by mass demonstrations in April

and both of those protests took the Polish streets in big and small cities across the country. Therefore, this particular change can be assessed as an increase in state's inclination for repression since it placed additional barrier and control mechanism on free assemblies in the country.

The repressions and state violence as well as violence from the far-right groups grew further over the time and peaked during the 2020-2021 protest.

CIVICUS monitor that assesses the civic space and civic freedoms around the world also shows deterioration in Poland, which now is place in the category of "obstructed" civic space with the score of 51/100 (CIVICUS Monitor: Tracking Civic Space, n.d.). Comparison between the CIVICUS reports during the 2016 protests and 2020 protests show drastic differences in terms of repression. While it was reported during the 2016 protests that the rights of freedom of assembly and protests were respected during the "Black Protests" (Protest Rights Well-respected During Large Abortion Demonstrations - Civicus Monitor, n.d.), during the "Women's Strike" in 2020 the situation changed drastically and the protestants faced fines, tear-gas, and kettles (Civic Space Under Threat: Protesters Intimidated, Journalists Attacked, LGBTI Rights Targeted - Civicus Monitor, n.d.). Some of the protesters were even physically attacked, while others were arrested (Ibid). The increase in both in state's capacity and willingness to repress the protest participants was apparent between the period of 2016 and 2021.

### *Covid-19 restrictions*

The Constitutional Court's ruling took place in the middle of the global pandemic in October 2020, which further restricted the rights of the protesters and increased state's capacity of repression. The European Commission report includes critical assessment of the Covid-19 related measure put in place indefinitely by the government in March 2020 (European Commission, 2021, pp.20-21). The measures were deemed unlawful and various actors expressed their concerns (Ibid). The restrictions did not manage to stop the mass protests and the mobilisation reached unprecedented scale. However, emergency measures further restricted the citizen's freedom of expression and assembly and increased the state's repression power towards the citizens.

## **Summary**

This sub-chapter mapped the dynamics of structural/objective opportunities in Poland in the context of abortion rights debate and mass mobilisations against further restrictions of the abortion laws between the years of 2016 and 2021. Assessment based on indices, reports, and existing academic literature shows that the access to the state institutions was reduced, elite alignments mostly stayed the same, while the number of potential elite allies to the women's movement increased in the parliament in 2019, mostly due to the representation of the left. Finally, the state's capacity and willingness to use repression measures grew exponentially between those years. The next sub-chapter presents the findings of visual thematic analysis and content analysis and presents perceived opportunities among the protesters, which then will be discussed in relation with the structural opportunities.

## **5.2. Perceived opportunities**

Considering that "...framing is a necessary and crucial modifier of social movements, as is political opportunity." (Suh, 2001, p.444), after mapping out the structural/objective opportunities, this sub-chapter presents findings of the visual thematic analysis of the protest signs and the content analysis of the interviews with the protest organizers, participant, and supporters. Findings include comparative frames and categories of the protesters' perceptions, which will be discussed in relation with the mapped out structural opportunities in the discussion chapter. As already stated in the methodological chapter, content analysis was conducted based on Tarrow's (2011) frame. However, inductive categories were also identified in the data analysis process. All of those categories and frames are discussed below.

### **5.2.1. Deductive Categories**

The dimensions of the Tarrow's (2011) framework (costs of collective action; potential allies, and vulnerability of the elites, social networks, and collective identities around common themes) were used as deductive frames and then, sub-categories were identified inductively based on the interviews. Considering that the perceptions are always context-dependent, in addition to the deductive categories, inductive categories and sub-categories were also identified. Finally, all the data is categorized in two different timeframe (2016-2018 and 2020-2021). In case of the

interviews that included accounts of both protests, the data was still categorized in respective timeframes for the methodological purposes. Key findings are presented comprehensively below. Additionally, all the identified categories and sub-categories are visualized in a codebook, which is included in the Appendix 2. Also, assigned abbreviations are used for referencing relevant interviews in the text, all the assigned abbreviations with the interviewee description and direct links to the interviews can be found in the interview table in Appendix 1.

### *Costs of collective action*

Costs of collective action appeared to be an important category since it showed a great variation across time frames. Four sub-categories were identified under this particular label: “disapproval”, “criminal case”, “physical threat”, and “psychological terror”. The last three categories were not identified in any of the interviews referring to the 2016-2018 time period, the interviews only talked about disapproval from the colleagues and general public, or disciplinary cases at work. One of the interviewees, an opposition Razem party member, talks about disciplinary cases for not providing documents before organizing the protests, but underlines that there was “nothing serious” (O2). Marta Lempart, Co-initiator of the All-Poland Women's Strike also talks about media propaganda and repressions towards the female protest participants (OSK6). While in 2016-2018 period the protest participants talk mostly talk about social exclusion and smear campaigns, in the 2020-2021 the situation changed drastically, and repressions and violence took serious form. Some of the participants were detained and faced criminal charges, while others were attacked physically by either the police or far-right group members. The journalists were talking about restrictions on freedom of speech (O2), while activists mostly mentioned physical violence cases (A6). Marta Lempart openly talked about psychological consequences as well for the protest participants, especially the ones who are public figures (OSK 8). All in all, the content analysis show that the cost of protest participation grew immensely between the years of 2016 and 2021.

### *Potential allies*

While identifying allies, in 2016-2018 period, the interviewees mostly mentioned “Razem party”, “Girls for Girls” and “Abortion Dream Team”. All of those actors were actively involved in organizing the first waves of protests. In 2020-2021 environmentalists, LGBTQ+ community,

representatives of culture were also mentioned together with the left parties in the parliament. The content analysis reflects the growth of the movement between those years, since along the time, more and more groups expressed support towards the movement. It is also noteworthy that in the 2016 context the “Razem” party is mentioned by itself, while in 2020-2021 they are mentioned with the other left parties. That can be a reflection of the fact that the party was not a part of the parliament in 2015 and was actively involved in the organization of the protests, while by 2020 they managed to enter the parliament within the left coalition.

Another important sub-category inside the allies is the divisions between the allies. It was quite apparent in both time frames. In 2016, some of the criticism was mostly voiced from the opposition parties who criticized liberal-right because of their inaction and support of the “abortion compromise”. KOD was also criticized for affiliating with the liberal opposition and becoming too politicized (O1). The “Razem” party also underlined that they perceived themselves as a constructive actor between the ruling party and the opposition (O1). The divisions can still be observed in 2020-2021. However, they had different nature. Marta Lempart often mentioned the possibility of the men from the opposition taking credit for the outcomes after the movement’s success - “You bring the government down and we’ll take over” was the sentiment she voiced (OSK1). Lempart also criticized EU for the lack of action (OSK2). Perceptions of the movement allies shows that the movement is more diverse and divided than it is seen at first glance and apart from the tensions with the outside actors, there are tensions with the inside actors as well.

### *Vulnerability of elites*

In this category, I have included pro-life actors and how their legitimacy was perceived by the movement participants over time. Identified pro-life actors were very similar across the time frame. More specifically, Catholic Church and the ruling party were mentioned by most of the interviewees in reference to both 2016-2018 and 2020-2021 time periods. The only difference was that while in 2016-2018, “Ordo Iuris” was frequently mentioned, in 2020-2021 it was replaced by the Constitutional Court, which is not at all surprising considering the developments of the abortion restriction measures in Poland between those years. One more interesting observation is that the Church and the ruling party were mentioned together several times, pointing to the fact that the participants mostly associate those two actors with each other.

The second sub-category offers interesting results with regard to the Catholic Church. Even though the Church was actively mentioned with reference to the 2016-2018 time period as well, in 2020-2021 the increased criticism towards the institution is apparent. Moreover, the participants often referred to the Constitutional Court as “illegal” in reference to the 2020 protests, pointing to the decreased legitimacy of the institution.

### *Social networks and collective identities around common themes*

The categories of social networks and collective identities, as well as the common themes were inductively identified based on the interviews. Five main sub-categories were identified: **“identity of protests”**; **“forms of expression”**; **expressed emotions”**; **“referred symbols”**; and **“identity of the protesters”**. Some key changes in protest identity can be observed across the years, which presents quite interesting findings. Identity of the “Black Protests” were quite one-dimensional and the participants mainly referred to the strike and colour black as well as solidarity. It is also interesting that “Razem” party member highlighted in the interview that the #czarnyprotest hashtag originated from one of their members (O2). When it comes to the 2020 protests, the identity was multidimensional and often referred to the unprecedented scale of the protests, underlining its bottom-up nature. However, what is extremely important is the claims of the “All-Poland Women’s Strike” members that the protests are inclusive and widespread (OSK9). Therefore, when it comes to protest identity, we mostly see the increase in scale as well as inclusivity.

The form of expression is another sub-category that changed the most along the time. In 2016-2018 the mobilisation mostly used the strikes and social media. Even though the scale of the protests was something new, forms of expression were quite common. However, in 2020 the protests incorporated various forms of expression starting from organized rallies to techno marches, which were innovative forms of protest. A lot of emphasis was put on the language of the protests as well since it was radicalized, and that kind of vulgar language was not acceptable for everyone. However, the radicalization is connected with the inclusion of more diverse groups in the movement, especially young people as well as the pandemic, which forced participants to get creative with the forms of expression. One more important characteristic of the 2020 protests is an active protest directed towards the Catholic Church specifically, which is not observed in the interviews referring to the earlier 2016-2018 protests. Therefore, 2020 protests more directly and aggressively identified the Church as a counter-actor.

When it comes to emotions expressed by the participants, it seems like the emotional range was wider during the 2016-2018 protests. Some of the emotions did not change, namely “anger”, “resistance”, “solidarity”, “hope”. However, the differences in the expression of anger are apparent. Participants of the 2020-2021 protests express their anger more aggressively and use profanities, which can also be explained by the context of the protests. Further restrictions in 2020 took place amid the global pandemic and directly through Constitutional Court, which cause frustration among the participants and those emotions can really be observed in their interviews (Art1, J/A1). When it comes to hope, even though it can be observed in both time frames, the context is still different. In 2020-2021 the hope is expressed together with the frustration, while in 2016 the hope was related to the hopes of better future. In reference to 2020-2021 hope usually refers to not giving up and continue fighting (OSK2).

When it comes to the symbols, there is not much mentioned in the interviews. They are usually mentioned by the artists who were participating in the protest. The common symbol is mentioned in reference to both protests and is described as the symbol of caution (Art1).

Perceptions over the identity of protesters reflects a very similar trend to protest identities. It is recognized by most of then interviewees that 2020-2021 protests are more inclusive and covers “all social spectrum”, while in reference to the 2016-2018 protests, the most recognized identities are Black attire, both men and women, and people from the small towns (O6). It is also worth mentioning here that the involvement of small towns seems to be very important for the identity of protests since it is underlined quite often in reference to both time frames.

### **5.2.2. Inductive categories**

It is very interesting how the protesters talked about the protest demands and outcomes in two different time periods. Those categories and sub-categories were not part of the initial deductive frames but were rather identified in the content analysis process.

#### ***Protest Demands***

Protest demands are very straightforward and issue-specific in the interviews referring to the 2016-2018 protests. The participants mostly talk about reproductive rights and demand maintaining the status quo and demarginalization of the abortion topic. In 2016-2018 there is mostly no mention of the liberalisation of abortion laws but rather dropping the bill and maintaining a status quo, some

of the protesters even mention maintain the “abortion compromise”, adding that with the Law and Justice in power, liberalisation of the abortions is not expected (O6). When compared to the 2020-2021, it can be observed that the demands grew with the scale, and they were mostly about legal abortions and liberalisation of the abortions. Here differences between the protesters can be observed. While artists expressed more anger and talked about the demands of secular country and representation (Art), Marta Lempart talked about full human rights and independent court system among other things (OSK2). Therefore, expansion of the demands is apparent in the data.

### *Protest outcomes*

One more interesting category is protesting outcomes and how the participants frame them, if they frame them as success or failure. Interestingly, both of those protests were framed as the success, but the success was conceptualized differently. In then 2016-2018 protests context, success was described as retraction of the bill and stopping further restrictions (OSK6), while in 2020-2021 a lot of the outcomes were names, including the 2016 successful protests, defeat of the “compromise” myth, increase in abortion support among the opposition parties, and EU declaring abortions human right (OSK9; OSK1; A/J1). One more interesting finding here is the frequent reference to changes in the public opinion polls and increased support towards liberalisation of the abortions (A/J1; OSK9). The only context the failure was mentioned, it was together with hope that the ban is temporary, and nothing is over (OSK4). One last sub-category of the protest outcomes is future plans and how they are mentioned. In 2016-2018 interviews, the main focus is on the success and the current events, there are no mentions of future plans. One activist mention that there is need for continuous fight for the legal abortions and sexual education (A1), but this does not seem to be a common sentiment. Unlike 2016-2018, in 2020-2021 there is a huge emphasis on hope and on the need to keep fighting, reminding everyone that the movement will win in the end (OSK2).

### **5.2.3. Protest signs**

Visual frame analysis of the protest signs presented very interesting finding. One of the most general observations is that the signs were more widely used as well as more widely documented and archived during 2020-2021 protests compared to the 2016-2018 mass mobilisation, which reflects increase in the scale and resonance of the protests. Common categories identified among all the signs are: Reproductive rights; Women’s rights; Warning/threat; Revolution/War;

Choice/freedom/autonomy; Fear; Anger; Profanities; Humour; International references; Local cultural references; PiS and PiS officials; PiS; Religion/Catholic Church; Solidarity; Covid-19, and General category. Women's and reproductive rights as well as well as categories of choice/freedom/solidarity and warning towards the authorities were observed across both timeframes. However, issue-specific signs referring to the reproductive and women's rights and freedoms were in absolute majority in 2016-2018, while in 2020-2021 different categories took the centre stage. In 2020-2021 protests most signs were directed at the government and government officials and a lot of signs used swear language and profanities as well as a lot of local and international cultural references, which were absent from the 2016-2018 protests. Signs referring to the freedom and autonomy was also very common at the 2020-2021 protests. A lot of the signs were directed at the Church at both protests. However, 2020-2021 signs were more vulgar and a bit derogatory as well, while 2016-2018 signs were mostly to the point and demanded secular system rather than attacking the church. As for the symbols', lightning bolt was much more prevalent in 2020-2021 protests. The following discussion part will discuss the findings more in depth and put them in the context of theoretical and methodological framework.

## **6. Discussion**

### **6.1. Mismatch between the structural and perceived opportunities**

Previous chapters discussed different elements of this thesis in depth, starting from literature review, continuing with theoretical and methodological frameworks, and concluding with the key findings of the conducted research. The following chapter connects all those elements and puts the findings in a broader context in order to answer the research question.

Mapping out the dynamics of structural opportunities in Poland between the years of women's mass mobilisation against the further restrictions of the abortion laws showed that the mobilisation unfolded in parallel with the worsening democratic situation in the country starting soon after the ruling Law and Justice party formed a single-party government in 2015. Kitschelt (1986) observes "curvilinear relationship" between the citizen's access to the system and social mobilisation, finding that neither too restrictive nor too open systems form the best conditions for the expression of the movement (p.62). Therefore, systems that are moderately accessible create the best conditions for mobilisation, but at the same time, do not necessarily offer concessions to the

movement's demands (Ibid). The aforementioned premise aligns well with the Polish case since the country turned from consolidated into semi-consolidated democracy (Freedom House, 2023). Therefore, if we look at the structure, we have favourable conditions for the mobilisation, but at the same time, due to the worsening democratic situation, the country has stricter grip on the power as well as more oppressive mechanisms. Additionally, the protests coincided with the Covid-19 restrictions, providing the government with additional legal repressive mechanisms.

Now if we look at the results of interview analysis, we can see that most of the protesters had quite positive protest experiences during the first cycle of protests and therefore, did not expect such high level of repression. In a study conducted in 2023 focusing on the emotions of the 2020 protest participants, one of the respondents recalls that she felt fear towards the police at later stage of the protests (Blackington, 2023, p.12). That account shows that repressions and genuine fear of the law enforcement was really something that unfolded not right from the beginning and therefore, most of the participants were not prepared. Furthermore, church sit-ins in a way legitimized violence against the protesters. Also, even though the mobilisation reached unprecedented number, the government also had increased control over the power, as already mentioned, both due to gradual power grip over the years and the implemented Covid measures.

One more dimension where it is apparent that there is a mismatch between the available opportunities and the participants' perceptions is the demands of the 2020-2021 protests. While 2016 mass mobilisation and the protests two year later (organized by "Strajk Kobiet") had a very specific and very narrow demands - to oppose further legal constraints on already one of the strictest abortion laws in Europe (Amnesty International, 2021), 2020 protests significantly widened the scope of the demands. Moreover, the demands put forward by the "Strajk Kobiet" in 2020 called for fundamental institutional changes, in which reproductive rights was one of many and not the main demand. Visual thematic analysis of the protest signs in 2016-2018 versus 2020-2021 years (Appendix 4) clearly shows those differences. Overwhelming majority of the protest signs during the first wave of the protests were around reproductive and women's rights as well as the freedom to choose, while in 2020-2021 signs directed against the government took central stage. The similar observation can be made regarding the official postulates officially published by the "All-Poland Women's Strke" (Strajk Kobiet).

The organizer of the “Strajk Kobiet” presented their demands in the middle of mass mobilisations on October 27 in 2020. There were ten different demands in total addressing various issues and directed at several individuals and institutions (Zabrzewska & Dubrow, 2021, p.41). Interestingly, the postulates start with cursing at the Constitutional Tribunal and the head Julia Przyłębska, demanding their removal. Next three postulates ask for reorganization of Supreme Court and Ombudsperson’s office as well as budgetary changes for more social equality. Postulate 7 asks for the full range of rights for women and postulate 8 goes beyond women and demands more respect towards human rights in general. And finally, “Strajk Kobiet” calls for more secularization of the country and less interference of church in education system as well as. The resignation of the government (Ibid). The use of crude language that was observed among the protests can also be seen in the wording of the official postulates – “Get the fuck out” is directed towards Przyłębska, the President of the Constitutional Tribunal, as well as towards the religious teachings at schools (Zabrzewska & Dubrow, 2021, p.41). Moreover, the sequence of postulates is quite interesting since the demand for wider reproductive rights is placed on the 7<sup>th</sup> place and is preceded with more wider demands directed at several institutions.

Those wide range of demands was voiced in interviews by the organizers of the protests as well as the participants and additionally, visual data analysis showed that the demands of the resignation of the government was repeated by majority of the protest’s participants (“Get the fuck out”, Appendix 4). Social movement theory literature argues that “...single-issue groups to be successful more often than those addressing multiple goals” (Gamson, 1990, pp.44-46, cited in McAdam et al., 1996, p.15). Of course, it is impossible to claim that the wide range of demands directly caused the failure of the protests in a sense that the mass mobilisation did not manage to overturn the abortion ban. However, it is quite clear that by voicing too many demands, which went far beyond reproductive rights, overshadowed a very specific demand and also, made it easier for the counter-groups to discredit the protests.

One more important category that was observed in various interviews during content analysis is the positive role of social media in mobilisation. The protest organizers and participants often referred to the #czarnyprotest and #strajkkobiet hashtags as mediums used for mobilisation and online calls for protests (OSK1, J/A1; O2; O6) social media also contributed to the increased international recognition and involvement of the protests, which increased the feeling of solidarity among the protesters (CSO1, OSK9). However, even though social media was an effective tool to

disseminate the message and mobilise protesters, offline mobilisation is no less important. Before the 2016 mass protests, post-90's Polish pro-choice activism only remained in online space and while it can strengthen the movement, it should be complementary to street activism and not an exclusive form of mobilization (Narkowicz, 2018, p.6). If we put 2011 activism in a comparative perspective to the 2016 and 2020 protests, it can be seen clearly that online activism was used for mobilization in parallel with the street activism (Nacher, 2020; Korolczuk, 2016).

Discourse analysis of the tweets around the hashtag #StrajkKobiet in October-November 2020 also confirms that the protests went beyond the abortion rights and the Constitutional ruling and were mostly directed at the PiS government (Trzcińska, 2022, p.10). At the same time, most of the respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with the broader messages that were directed more against the government rather than focusing on the abortion issues (Fazan, 2023, p.26), which is understandable since the protesters were coming from different backgrounds and some of the demands were not acceptable for certain protesters.

Timing of the publication of the postulates is also very interesting. If we look at the number of protest distribution in October-December 2020, the publication of the demands came after 5 days of the Constitutional Tribunal's decision, at the peak of the protest performance. The protests grew exponentially from October 23<sup>rd</sup> (58), peaked at 157 on October 26<sup>th</sup> and then started slowly declining after October 28<sup>th</sup> (from 141 on 28<sup>th</sup> to 46 on 29<sup>th</sup>) (Zabrzewska & Dubrow, 2021, p.40, appendix A). The content analysis also shows that while talking about the 2020 protests, "All-Poland Women's Strike" members primarily referred to its unprecedented scale, especially amid the pandemic. However, it seems like the larger scale of the protests was counterproductive since it also became predominantly anti-governmental and the main focus of the protests – abortion restrictions and reproductive rights was overshadowed by other demands and issues (Trzcińska, 2022, p.7).

When it comes to the protest demands, interview analysis showed that attitudes towards the "abortion compromise" changed over the years and while in 2016, understanding of the most protestants was to maintain the compromise and oppose to the further restriction of the abortion laws specifically, in 2020 the demands grew, and abortion compromise was declared as a "myth". The protesters demanded not only legalisation of the abortions, but also sexual education and human rights in general. The timing and context of the protests also needs to be taken into account.

In 2016 the Law and Justice party was newly elected and still did not have enough control over the institutions, therefore it was more willing to make some concessions. However, in 2020, the power of the state was as wide as ever due to emergency measures taken amid the pandemic.

Furthermore, protest organizers and protest participants often refer to public opinion polls to add legitimacy to the protests and show that they have the public support. However, the numbers vary from source to source. The interview analysis identified references to the public opinion polls by different actors. Also, the framing is usually quite ambiguous. For example, in one interview, Marta Lempart state that “69% of people in Poland are now in favour of abortion being legal” (OSK1). However, it is not stated if legal means legal for socio-economic reasons, on demand, or some other conditions. Public opinions provided by CBOS regarding the abortion issues over the years does show increase in support towards abortion laws. Even in 2020, support towards legal abortions for social-economic and personal reasons remain low at just about 20% (CBOS, 2020). Within this context, it is also important to refer to the type of proposed restrictions that triggered protests in both 2016 and 2020. 2016 proposal called for a total ban while 2020 Tribunal’s ruling removed one of the three existing conditions. The literature also suggests that “the effectiveness of social performance is largely dependent on the actors’ self-awareness” (Alexander, 2011, cited in Kampka, 2022, p.132), which aligns with this research’s findings. Lack of awareness of the system dynamics and misperceptions contribute to the variations in mobilisation and outcomes of the contention.

One more important component of the interplay between structural and perceived opportunities is the two-fold nature of those opportunities. Tarrow (2011) draws attention to the fact that “...more often, opportunities signalled to some are also perceived and taken advantage of by others” (p.163). The aforementioned observation can be applied to the Polish context quite well and it contributes to the argument that the perceptions are key to identifying and using available opportunities, and differences between the actions and outcomes of social movements can be explained through analysing dynamics between those two types of opportunities over time. This can be discussed in two different layers. First, the citizen’s initiative, which gives citizens more access to the formal institutions and decision-making process, was utilized not only by pro-choice actors, but pro-life actors as well and when coupled with the elite configurations, what seems to be an opening at first glance, could become counter-productive and instead success, can end in failure. Secondly, the perceived opportunity was used by various pro-choice actors and caused divisions inside the

movement, which can be observed quite in the content analysis results. The results of interview content analysis show divisions inside the women's movement. For example, while talking about the protests, representative from the Razem party, which at that time was not in the parliament, underlined that they did not want to cooperate with the liberal-right (O1) despite the fact that in 2016 those two actors both opposed the further restrictions of abortion laws. The similar dynamics can be observed in 2020-2021. In several interviews, Marta Lempart, co-founder of the "All-Poland Women's Strike" expressed fear that they might have been left out by the men in case of success (OSK1). Therefore, mobilisation creates opportunities not only for one actor, but for other actors as well, which creates divisions and tensions inside the movement as well as between the actors as well and contributes to the dynamics of mobilisation and outcomes. As Tarrow interestingly put it "political opportunities are fickle friends" (Tarrow, 2011, p.169), meaning that the opportunities open for one actor can be grasped by other actors as well (Ibid), which can be counter-productive for the social movement in question and make it more difficult to achieve set goals.

Reflections and perceptions of the protest agents often underline inclusivity of the protests, especially the 2020-2021 protests. In fact, existing literature confirms that the movement is diverse and covers a lot of society groups, including Catholics and PiS supporters. The aforementioned study confirms the divisions and differences inside the movement since interviewees expressed differing attitudes towards the liberalisation of abortions as well as the forms of protests (Kościańska et al., 2021, p.24). The study shows that among the Catholics who support the mass protests in Poland, some support on demand abortions and some are in favour of status quo, some are practicing Catholics, while others are involved more moderately, some are feminists, while others are not, and some of them support the creative and sometimes vulgar forms of protests, while others are opposed to it (Kościańska et al., 2021). That is precisely why the forms of expression and broad demands was not well-received by all the protest participants. For example, the Facebook posts of the "All-Poland Women's Strike" openly expressed disapproval towards the Polish Catholic Church, referring to the institution and their supporters as "church sadists", "Catholic fanatics", and accused them of "legalising torture" (Chałupnik & Brookes, 2022, p.320). The Polish Catholic Church was frequently mentioned on Twitter as well during the 2020 protests, mostly in a negative context (Paradowski, 2021, p.263). The perceptions show that the protest organizers consider diversity as a success "Our new strand of popular feminism is very inclusive and pragmatic." (OSK9), but at the same time more inclusivity also brings more opinions, and it

becomes harder to agree on common demands and forms of protest, which then might cause some rifts inside the movement.

Kościańska, Kosiorowska, and Pomian (2021) study the Catholic participation in the pro-choice protests in Poland. In the framework of their study, the authors interviewed more than 50 Catholics, almost half right after the Constitutional ruling (Ibid, p.21), which presents an invaluable finding since the protests were fresh in the respondents' memory. Additionally, the dimension of Catholic participation in and their attitudes towards the protests offers an important insight since during the 2020-2021 protests the Roman Catholic Church was one the key targets of the protesters.

One more interesting issue is the use of the "ordinary women" category, which was used by the protesters to refer to the women who came from all over the Poland and participated in the protests, while for the pro-life activists, ordinary women was used with different meaning, referring to the women with traditional values (Trzecińska, 2022, p.11; Fazan, 2023, p.22). With that kind of framing, the social movement signalled its inclusivity, especially since 2016 was the first time when the protests on women's issues managed to go beyond the big cities and spread into small towns. Importance of small-town activism was repeatedly underlined by the protest organizers and activists (A6). The aforementioned example once again shows the importance of perceptions and then framing for dissemination of messages both inside and outside of social movements.

Last but not least, one more important observation from the visual frame analysis is the framing of the 2020 protest outcomes. Even though despite months of protests, the Constitutional Court's ruling was still published and came into force, protest organizers and activists did not see it as failure and refer to other categories that they feel can be considered as a success. Among those categories were the delay of the ruling, strengthening of the feminism, increased public support towards legal abortions, among others (A/J1; OSK2). What is also interesting is the reference to success of 2016 protests. The framing of the outcome of 2020-2021 protests and continuous contention aligns with the framework of success and failure framing. According to Suh (201), "As long as individuals attributed failure to obtain goals not to their means of collective action but to their external political situation, they are not necessarily dissuaded from future action and may in fact be energized." That observation proves to be true for the 2020-2021 protests since it observed overwhelming number of protest signs directed against the government and expressing anger and

frustration. Despite demobilization, Marta Lempart seems hopeful and says that the fight is far from over (OSK2).

Overall, the assessment of the dynamics of political opportunity dimensions on the one hand and analysing the perceptions of the protesters on the other hand show that structural dimensions are not always accurately perceived by the agents. Some of the differences in the social movement dynamics, namely in the mobilisation and outcomes, can be attributed to those mismatches between the structural dimensions and perceptions and framing by the agents.

## **6.2. Further research**

The thesis adds to the existing literature on social movements and mass mobilisation in Poland as well as to the literature on perceived opportunities. However, since the research methodology is adjusted to the Polish context and employs an in-depth analysis of a single country, more systemic research with cross-country cases of successful and unsuccessful mobilisations would be useful to form more robust logic behind the role of structural and perceived opportunity interactions in mobilisation and outcomes of social movements.

Moreover, this research focused on the perceptions of the social movement participants and the role of those perceptions in the research dynamics. The scope of this thesis did not allow studying the perceptions of other relevant actors around the abortion debates. Further research on that subject would be quite interesting and contribute to the understanding of wider picture.

Finally, women's social movement is still new in Poland, and it will be interesting to research the dynamics of its development in future.

## 7. Conclusions

This thesis aimed to study the role of interplay between structural and perceived opportunities in the mobilization and outcomes of social movements. To fulfill that aim, the thesis conducted a comparative case study of the women's mass protests in Poland in 2016 and 2020 in the framework of social movement theories. By mapping out the dynamics of structural opportunities in Poland between the years of 2016 and 2021 and exploring the perceptions of the protests' organizers and participants through content analysis and visual thematic analysis, the study concluded that the differences between mobilizations and outcomes can be explained by the mismatch between the structural/objective and perceived opportunities.

This thesis systematically assessed the dynamics of structural/objective opportunities in Poland in the context of abortion rights debate and mass mobilisations against further restrictions of the abortion laws between the years of 2016 and 2021. Assessment based on indices, reports, and existing academic literature shows that the access to the state institutions was reduced, elite alignments mostly stayed the same, while the number of potential elite allies to the women's movement increased in the parliament in 2019, mostly due to the representation of the left. Finally, the state's capacity and willingness to use repression measures grew exponentially between those years.

Comparative analysis of the perceptions of protest organizers and participants showed variations in the perceptions of several opportunity dimensions as well frames and collective identities between those years. The analysis show that dynamics and changes in structural opportunities is filtered through agents' perceptions and those perceptions are not always accurate. Therefore, differences in social movement mobilisations and outcomes cannot be explained only through structural opportunities since those objective dimensions might be perceived differently by different actors. Perceptions act as mediums through which structural opportunities are filtered and therefore, agents' decisions and the movement's dynamics are shaped by not only structural and perceived opportunities alone, but through the interaction between those two dimensions.

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## **Appendices**

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Interview list for content analysis

Reference #	Interviewee Name/Pseudonym	Affiliation	Protest period in reference	Date of publication	Link to the Source
<b>All-Poland Women's Strike (OSK)</b>					
OSK1	Marta Lempart	Co-initiator of the All-Poland Women's Strike	2016-2021	March 2022	<a href="https://www.goethe.de/prj/zei/en/art/22801705.html">https://www.goethe.de/prj/zei/en/art/22801705.html</a>
OSK2	Marta Lempart	Co-initiator of the All-Poland Women's Strike	Post 2020-2021	March 8, 2021	<a href="https://europe.ippf.org/news/women-human-rights-defenders-poland-interview">https://europe.ippf.org/news/women-human-rights-defenders-poland-interview</a>
OSK3	Marta Lempart	Co-initiator of the All-Poland Women's Strike	2016-2020	November 14, 2020	<a href="https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/11/14/we-are-at-war-an-interview-with-the-leader-of-polands-abortion-protests/">https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/11/14/we-are-at-war-an-interview-with-the-leader-of-polands-abortion-protests/</a>
OSK4	Marta Lempart	Co-initiator of the All-Poland Women's Strike	2020-2021	October 2, 2021	<a href="https://progressivepost.eu/interview-with-marta-lempart/">https://progressivepost.eu/interview-with-marta-lempart/</a>
OSK5	Marta Lempart	Co-initiator of the All-Poland Women's Strike	2016-2020	November 10, 2021	<a href="https://www.freiheit.org/central-europe-and-baltic-states/not-single-one-more-poles-protest-against-strict-abortion-law">https://www.freiheit.org/central-europe-and-baltic-states/not-single-one-more-poles-protest-against-strict-abortion-law</a>
OSK6	Marta Lempart	Co-initiator of the All-Poland Women's Strike	2016-2018	March 19, 2018	<a href="https://osf.cz/en/2018/03/19/english-democracy-can-die-fast-interview-with-marta-lempart/">https://osf.cz/en/2018/03/19/english-democracy-can-die-fast-interview-with-marta-lempart/</a>
OSK7	Marta Lempart	Co-initiator of the All-Poland Women's Strike	2016-2021	February 11, 2021	<a href="https://www.vogue.com/article/poland-abortion-marta-lempart">https://www.vogue.com/article/poland-abortion-marta-lempart</a>
OSK8	Marta Lempart	Co-initiator of the All-Poland Women's Strike	2016-2021	n.d.	<a href="https://defendthedefenders.eu/marta-the-freedom-fighter/">https://defendthedefenders.eu/marta-the-freedom-fighter/</a>
OSK9	Klementyna Suchanow	Co-founder of the Polish Women's Strike and the International Women's Strike	2016-2020	September 1, 2020	<a href="https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/4590-poland-we-invented-new-forms-of-protest-because-we-had-to">https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/4590-poland-we-invented-new-forms-of-protest-because-we-had-to</a>

OSK10	Dominika	Leader of the Women's Strike in a small city	2016-2020	n.d.	<a href="https://defendthedefenders.eu/dominika-the-womens-strike-protesters-are-on-the-right-side-of-history/">https://defendthedefenders.eu/dominika-the-womens-strike-protesters-are-on-the-right-side-of-history/</a>
OSK11	Iwona	Women's Strike activist in a small city	2016-2020	n.d.	<a href="https://defendthedefenders.eu/iwona-teacher-with-a-mission/">https://defendthedefenders.eu/iwona-teacher-with-a-mission/</a>
OSK12	Dorota	Women's Strike activist	2016-2020	n.d.	<a href="https://defendthedefenders.eu/dorota-women-are-the-force-that-will-change-this-country/">https://defendthedefenders.eu/dorota-women-are-the-force-that-will-change-this-country/</a>
OSK13	Bożena	Women's Strike activist	2016-2020	n.d.	<a href="https://defendthedefenders.eu/bozena-courage-and-faith-in-success/">https://defendthedefenders.eu/bozena-courage-and-faith-in-success/</a>
OSK14	Katarzyna	Women's Strike activist	2016-2020	n.d.	<a href="https://defendthedefenders.eu/katarzyna-krakows-unrelenting-activist/">https://defendthedefenders.eu/katarzyna-krakows-unrelenting-activist/</a>
OSK15	Hanka	Women's Strike activist	2016-2020	n.d.	<a href="https://defendthedefenders.eu/dhanka-i-cant-and-dont-want-to-let-go/">https://defendthedefenders.eu/dhanka-i-cant-and-dont-want-to-let-go/</a>

#### Civil Society Representatives (CSO)

CSO1	Ines L.	Association for the Defence of Democracy in Poland	2020	December 2020	<a href="https://www.thenewfederalist.eu/parisian-protests-of-polish-law-interview-with-the-association-for-the?lang=fr">https://www.thenewfederalist.eu/parisian-protests-of-polish-law-interview-with-the-association-for-the?lang=fr</a>
CSO2	1. Magdą Malinowską 2. Martą Rozmysłowicz	Workers' Initiative on the Polish women's strike	2016-2020	November 15, 2020	<a href="https://www.transnational-strike.info/2020/11/15/the-polish-women-strike-freedom-of-abortion-freedom-from-exploitation/">https://www.transnational-strike.info/2020/11/15/the-polish-women-strike-freedom-of-abortion-freedom-from-exploitation/</a>
CSO3	Ewa Kulik-Bielińska	Director of the Stefan Batory Foundation	2016-2017	May 23, 2017	<a href="https://www.alliancemagazine.org/interview/interview-ewa-kulik-bielinska-stefan-batory-foundation/">https://www.alliancemagazine.org/interview/interview-ewa-kulik-bielinska-stefan-batory-foundation/</a>
CSO4	Justyna Frydrych	the founder of Feminist Fund	2016-2020	November 9, 2020	<a href="https://gy-sz.hu/en/2020/11/we-all-are-the-change-that-is-happening-now/">https://gy-sz.hu/en/2020/11/we-all-are-the-change-that-is-happening-now/</a>
CSO5	Draginja Nadaždin	Amnesty's Poland director	2020	December 10, 2020	<a href="https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/12/10/we-cant-be-passive-when-the-government-creates-hate-an-interview-with-amnestys-poland-director/">https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/12/10/we-cant-be-passive-when-the-government-creates-hate-an-interview-with-amnestys-poland-director/</a>

#### Activists/protest participants (A)

A1	Marianna Szczygielska	Queer-feminist activist	2016	October 10, 2016	<a href="https://lefteast.org/czarnyprotest-the-battle-is-won-but-the-struggle-for-abortion-rights-continues/">https://lefteast.org/czarnyprotest-the-battle-is-won-but-the-struggle-for-abortion-rights-continues/</a>
A2	Katarzyna Boni	Author, protest participant	2020	April 1, 2021	<a href="https://jewishcurrents.org/the-power-of-the-polish-womens-strike">https://jewishcurrents.org/the-power-of-the-polish-womens-strike</a>

A3	Ewa Pospieszynska	Abortion rights activist	2016-2021	March 1, 2021	<a href="https://www.workersliberty.org/story/2021-03-01/strajk-interview-ewa-pospieszynska">https://www.workersliberty.org/story/2021-03-01/strajk-interview-ewa-pospieszynska</a>
A4	Urszula Nowakowska	Founder of the Women's Rights Center	2020-2021	March 7, 2022	<a href="https://www.fondation-raja-marcovici.com/en/uncategorized/womens-rights-in-poland-interview-with-urszula-nowakowska.html">https://www.fondation-raja-marcovici.com/en/uncategorized/womens-rights-in-poland-interview-with-urszula-nowakowska.html</a>
A5	Agata Diduszko-Zyglewska	Journalist, Social activist	2016	May 6, 2016	<a href="https://politicalcritique.org/cee/poland/2016/polands-abortion-law-is-not-working-interview/">https://politicalcritique.org/cee/poland/2016/polands-abortion-law-is-not-working-interview/</a>
A6	Agnieszka Żuk	Polish feminist, activist and author	2016-2021	October 22, 2021	<a href="https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/blog_post/what-future-for-womens-rights-poland-video-interview/">https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/blog_post/what-future-for-womens-rights-poland-video-interview/</a>
A7	Nadia	Young activist	2016-2020	n.d.	<a href="https://defendthedefenders.eu/nadia-there-is-hope-for-a-better-future-for-women-in-poland/">https://defendthedefenders.eu/nadia-there-is-hope-for-a-better-future-for-women-in-poland/</a>
A8	Dariusz	Civil rights activist	2016-2020	n.d.	<a href="https://defendthedefenders.eu/dariusz-a-rebellious-defender-of-rights/">https://defendthedefenders.eu/dariusz-a-rebellious-defender-of-rights/</a>

#### Journalists and Academics (J/A)

J/A1	Justyna Zając	Professor at the University of Warsaw	2016-2021	March 2022	<a href="https://againstthecurrent.org/atc217/successes-challenges-in-poland-womens-mass-protest/">https://againstthecurrent.org/atc217/successes-challenges-in-poland-womens-mass-protest/</a>
J/A2	1. Annabelle Chapman 2. Dr Kerry Longhurst	1. Journalist, The Economist and Monocle (Warsaw) 2. Jean Monnet Professor, Collegium Civitas (Warsaw)	2016-2021	December 10, 2020	<a href="https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/12/inside-poland-protests">https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/12/inside-poland-protests</a>
J/A3	Dagmara Zawistowska-Toczek	Teacher in the city of Gdansk, protest participant	2016-2020	November 9, 2020	<a href="https://lefteast.org/poland-demonstrating-for-womens-rights-and-for-an-end-to-the-right-wing-government/">https://lefteast.org/poland-demonstrating-for-womens-rights-and-for-an-end-to-the-right-wing-government/</a>
J/A4	Lydia Gall	Europe researcher	2016-2017	October 24, 2017	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/24/interview-polish-governments-dangerous-power-grab">https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/24/interview-polish-governments-dangerous-power-grab</a>

#### Opposition Party Representatives (O)

O1	1. Magdalena Mips 2. Kuba Danecki	1. Member of the Razem National Council 2. Member of the Razem National Executive Board	April 2016	May 16, 2016	<a href="http://politicalcritique.org/cee/poland/2016/razem-the-left-in-poland-is-starting-from-scratch-interview/">http://politicalcritique.org/cee/poland/2016/razem-the-left-in-poland-is-starting-from-scratch-interview/</a>
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O2	Joanna	Member of the Razem Party	2016-2018	December 26, 2018	<a href="https://lossi36.com/2018/12/26/interview-polish-protester-abortion-rights-activist/">https://lossi36.com/2018/12/26/interview-polish-protester-abortion-rights-activist/</a>
O3	1. Aleksandra Wolke 2. Mikołaj Ratajczak	1. Feminist activist; steering committee of the Razem party in London 2. Philosopher who edits the Praktyka Teoretyczna journal; member of the Razem party in Warsaw.	2016 (upcoming 3 October protests)	September 30, 2016	<a href="https://www.rs21.org.uk/2016/09/30/interview-the-czarnyprotest-and-mondays-women-strike-might-be-a-turning-point-in-polish-politics/">https://www.rs21.org.uk/2016/09/30/interview-the-czarnyprotest-and-mondays-women-strike-might-be-a-turning-point-in-polish-politics/</a>
O4	Adrian Zandberg	Razem party	2016 (before the protests)	August 10, 2016	<a href="https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/interview-with-adrian-zandberg-part/">https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/interview-with-adrian-zandberg-part/</a>
O5	Agnieszka Dziemianowicz-Bąk	Polish feminist activist and member of parliament for Lewica (the Left)	2016-2020	November 11, 2020	<a href="https://jacobin.com/2020/11/poland-abortion-protests-andrzej-duda-lewica">https://jacobin.com/2020/11/poland-abortion-protests-andrzej-duda-lewica</a>
O6	Małgorzata Tracz	Co-chair of the Green Party of Poland - Partia Zieloni, Member of KOD (Committee for the Defence of Democracy), activist	2016	n.d.	<a href="https://europeangreens.eu/news/discussion-polish-greens-abortion-and-womens-rights">https://europeangreens.eu/news/discussion-polish-greens-abortion-and-womens-rights</a>
<b>Artists (Art)</b>					
Art1	Natalia Sielewicz	Art historian and curator at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw	2020	November 06, 2020	<a href="https://www.frieze.com/article/artists-and-art-workers-challenge-polands-abortion-ban">https://www.frieze.com/article/artists-and-art-workers-challenge-polands-abortion-ban</a>
Art2	Zula Rabikowska	Polish-British documentary photographer and videographer	2020	May 11, 2023	<a href="https://photojournalismhub.org/2021/05/04/polands-abortion-ban-protests-interview-with-zula-rabikowska/">https://photojournalismhub.org/2021/05/04/polands-abortion-ban-protests-interview-with-zula-rabikowska/</a>

## Appendix 2. Codebook

Deductive Categories			
	2016-2018	2020-2021	
Category Label	Codes		Statements
1. Costs of collective action			
1.1. Disapproval	“Disciplinary Cases”; “Smear campaign” „media propaganda”; “repression”	X	2016-2018 “Some teachers who participated to the protests got disciplinary cases because they posted pictures but eventually nothing more happened.” (O2) “In November, for example, it launched what was basically a smear campaign against civil society organizations.” (CSO3) “There is a huge propaganda against women’s rights on national media.” (OSK6)
1.2. Criminal Case	X	“charged”; “detained”	2020-2021 “Yet in Warsaw a lot of arrests of photojournalists were being made and this completely infringed freedom of speech in my opinion” (Art2)
1.3. Physical threat	X	“attacked”; “physical damage”	2020-2021 “There were cases of people having arms broken” (A6)
1.4. Psychological terror	X	“Mental health problems”; “Verbal attacks”	2020-2021 “Some of the organisers use the help of female therapists on a permanent basis” (OSK8)
2. Potential allies			
2.1. Actors supporting protests	Razem party (OSK) “Girls for girls” (O) “Abortion Dream Team” (O)	“LGBTQ+” (Art); “Green communities” (Art); “Cultural milieu” (Art); “Female MPs from the center-left parties” (A/J)	2016-2018 “The political party “Razem” (Together) then launched a social media campaign under the hashtag #czarnyprotest (Black Protests) and organised several demonstrations” (OSK1)

2.2. Divisions	“Left vs liberal-right” (O)	“Fear of competition from men”; “Criticism from progressive side”; “Politician supporting the “compromise””; “EU criticism”	<p>2016-2018</p> <p>“...as a party, we do not want to be part of the same movement with the people who are responsible for all the processes that went wrong in Poland in the last twenty-five years – and that’s exactly how we feel about the liberal-right parties who have joined KOD.” (O1)</p> <p>“We see ourselves as a third possibility...And there are some things in which we are better than KOD.” (O1)</p> <p>2020-2021</p> <p>“...it is a very hard to force politicians and democrats, who would call themselves democrats, to actually say the word abortion.” (OSK5)</p> <p>“Many of us are afraid that following a success, men from the opposition will oust us from the political arena – as they did back then” (OSK1)</p> <p>“You bring the government down and we’ll take over” is a very strong message and for us, it represents a serious threat.” (OSK1)</p> <p>“What I find most difficult is the hatred that comes from the democratic, progressive side” (OSK1)</p> <p>“It's really sad to see that the European Institutions don't understand that, that European politicians don't understand that, or they just try not to see the link.” (OSK2)</p>
3. Vulnerability of elites			
3.1. Pro-life actors	“Catholic Church” (OSK, J/A); “Ordo Iuris” (J/A; O2); “Law and Justice Party” (O2)	“Catholic Church” (OSK, J/A); “Ordo Iuris” (J/A); “Law and Justice Party” (J/A); “Constitutional Court”; “PiS/Church” (J/A2)	<p>2016-2018</p> <p>“There were a lot of initiatives coming not only from the government, the church, but also from a very powerful organization, from the fundamentalist Catholic organization, which is called Ordo Iuris, and which operates in Poland.” (A6)</p> <p>“It is for example now formally part of the process of pushing forward the abortion ban by collecting signatures for the bill in churches around Poland” (OSK6)</p> <p>2020-2021</p> <p>“The ruling Law and Justice Party is traditionally allied with the Catholic Church and presents itself as the defender of the traditional Polish family against the LGBTQ+ community” (J/A2)</p>

3.2. Changes in the support/legitimacy of pro-life actors	“anti-clerical protest”	“Church lost significance” (OSK)	2016-2018 “The power of the Church has grown “(OSK6) 2020-2021 “Illegally appointed Constitutional Court” (OSK2)
4. Social networks and collective identities around common themes			
4.1. Identity of protests	“hashtag #czarnyprotest” “solidarity”	“Large scale”; Reference to “Solidarnosc” (OSK); “Bottom up”(OSK); “Inclusive” OSK, A/J); “Interclass” (A/J); “Nationwide” (A/J)	2016-2018 “The hashtag #czarnyprotest (#blackprotest), was invented by one of our members.” (O2) 2020-2021 “Our new strand of popular feminism is very inclusive and pragmatic.” (OSK9)
4.2. Forms of expression	“Strike”; “Social Media”; “Mainstream”	“Spontaneous strikes”; “Organized rallies”; “Church protests”; “State institutions”; “Road blockades”; “Techno marches”	2016-2018 “Monday’s strike was declared by individuals associated with the KOD, the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (Komitet Obrony Demokracji), an independent social movement” (O3) 2020-2021 “Now, we’re so many. It’s a massive event.” (OSK2) “These protests differ from the ones in 2016 because their slogans are more radical, and because the demands are more social and economic. “Fuck PiS [the ruling party]” and “fuck off” are the main slogan shouted in the streets.” (CSO2)
4.3. Expressed emotions	“Anger”; “Resentment”; “Resistance”; “Anxiety”; “Fear”; “Hope”; “Solidarity”; “Empowerment”	“Anger” (Art); “Hope”; “fear of killing” (OSK)	2016-2018 “Manifest our anger, resentment and resistance” (J/A1) 2020-2021 “Women are pissed off” (Art1) “I know everything will turn out all right in the end.” (OSK2)
4.4. Referred Symbols	Black Red lightning bolt – Caution	Red lightning bolt – Caution	„It is a symbol of caution. When all verbal and polite pleas fail, women use this as a warning sign.“ (Art1)

4.5. Identity of protesters	“Small towns” “man and women”	“Young generation”; “Taxi-drivers”; “Miners and farmers”; “Whole social spectrum”	2016-2018 “Many women and men became involved in the action on social media and then started wearing black and organising protests” (O6) 2020-2021 “I talk a lot about small towns because it’s also new.” (A6)
<b>Inductive Categories</b>			
	<b>2016-2018</b>	<b>2020-2021</b>	
5. Protest Demands	“Keeping “Abortion Compromise”” “Reproductive rights” “Opposition to marginalization and submission”	“secular country”; “fuck PiS”; “Visibility” (Art); “Representation” (Art); “Non-optical allyship” (Art); “Changes in abortion law” (A/J); “legal abortion”	2016-2018 “With the current government, we cannot expect the liberalisation of the abortion law” (O6) 2020-2021 “Not only do we want access to legal abortion, we also want an independent judiciary, a secular government, and full human rights” (OSK2)
<b>6. Protest Outcomes</b>			
6.1. Success (what?)	Success (O) Retraction of anti-abortion bill (A/J)	“success of 2016 protests”; “Delay in publishing the ruling” (Art); “Increase in public support towards legal abortions” (OSK, A/J); “Church’s decreased popularity” (OSK, A/J); “EU declares abortion human right” (OSK); “Strengthening of feminism” (A/J); “Defeat the “compromise” myth” (A/J); “Opposition in favour of legal abortions”	2016-2018 “We stopped the abortion ban” (OSK6) 2020-2021 “Only movement that has succeeded in forcing the government to take a step back from its idea to ban abortion in 2016” (OSK9) “69% of people in Poland are now in favour of abortion being legal” (OSK1) “Public opinion polls showed that more than 50% of Poles supported liberalizing abortion policies” (A/J1) “Church has lost its significance” (OSK1) “Things are changing. For the first time, the opposition party announced that they are in favour of legalizing abortion.” (OSK2)
6.2. Failure (What?)	X	“publishing of the ruling”	2020-2021 “It’s obviously going to take time, but I know, in the end, we will get there because it’s impossible any other way.” (OSK4)

6.3. Future plans	“liberalisation of abortion laws”	“Continue fighting” (OSK)	2016-2017 “We have to keep fighting for our right to safe and legal abortion on demand and to solid sexual education in schools.” (A1) 2020-2021 “We will continue to fight, we will not waver.” (OSK2) “I am sure that we will win” (OSK2)
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### Appendix 3. Interview Transcripts

#### Transcript #1

#### Video Interview with Marta Lempart during the Inspiration Forum in Jihlava, Czech Republic (28.10.2021)

Poland: “Not a single one more”: Poles protest against strict abortion law: Video Interview with Marta Lempart (N. Maráková, Interviewer). (2021, November 10). *Friedrich Naumann Foundation*. Retrieved February 11, 2023, from <https://www.freiheit.org/central-europe-and-baltic-states/not-single-one-more-poles-protest-against-strict-abortion-law>

- *Almost exactly one year ago, Polish Constitutional Tribunal paved the way for tightening already a very restrictive abortion law in Poland. What has been the impact of the ruling on Polish women since then?*

**ML:** It is kind of two effects. One is obviously worsening the **access to abortion**, worsening the access to **all basic reproductive rights**. But also, the other effect is **self-mobilisation**, and it is this **huge wave of grassroots initiative**, and this huge initiative that provides women with abortions. So, [when it comes to] the ones that would provide abortion services before the protests, [compared to] the number of the services they would provide in a month, now they provide in a day. So, we kind of saw this process of civic society organising to just build the system out of the system to provide women with abortions. I would not say nothing has changed - it is a demand issue, it is an organisational issue, it is a whole being unlawful issue – but it is a great job that the grassroots initiatives did that now provide women with abortions.

- *What are the current activities of All-Poland Women’s Strike to support women in their fight for reproductive rights and freedom?*

**ML:** We are actually **collecting signatures to legalize abortion**. Again, it is the first time. I am in the plenipotentiary forces with bill committee because we look at the Argentinian example – 9 attempts 15 years - we have to go all the way. And collecting signatures is then second element of people changing their minds about abortion. **When we started in 2016, it was 37% of people in Poland who would be for legal abortion, now it is 69%**. One part of it is the protests and the second part of it is collecting signatures, talking to people on the streets and so on. We are also collecting money, we are working with “Abortion Over Borders”, the biggest initiative that provides abortion. We are [also] working with European parliamentarians and it is quite effective - **European parliament declared abortion a human right**. And just recently, when there was a resolution on the rule of law in Poland, there was actually the **so-called ruling** because it is not a ruling, because it is not a constitutional court anymore. It was mentioned as an example of **what happens if you do not have a rule of law** if you **do not have judicial independence**. So, we have these mainstream democracy issues and rule of law issues, and abortion is finally there because **it is a very hard to force politicians and democrats, who would call themselves democrats, to actually say the word abortion**.

- *In the last years, Polish government got in conflict with the EU over what many calls the rule of law crises. Can pressure from the EU help restore the rule of law in Poland?*

**ML:** We have actually seen that happening. We had this thing happening I think two years ago, when we kind of went all the way trying to save the supreme court of Poland. And we were feeling that that is that we cannot do anything more. We have protested and it all happened and then the ruling of the European Court of Justice came and stopped that. I remember those protests and were calling for Europe to do not leave us and it actually worked. It was so much hope then because we thought we are at the end of the way that we cannot do anything more, and then it happened. And I have seen that happening many times. I am so angry that it goes so slow, I am so angry that **it is so late, I am so angry that it is so little**. But still, it is not about us being Polish and being in Poland and the country as it is, I am European and every European politician’s duty is to me, not to some government of Poland. I am European citizen, and they should stand for me, they should fight for me rights, and I see that happening too little too late. But it is still good that it is happening and that we are not alone, we do not walk alone.

## Transcript #2

### Video Interview with Agnieszka Żuk, a Polish feminist, activist and author (22.10.2021)

Żuk, A. (2021, October 22). What future for women's rights in Poland? (Video interview). ICNC. Retrieved March 8, 2023, from [https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/blog\\_post/what-future-for-womens-rights-poland-video-interview/](https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/blog_post/what-future-for-womens-rights-poland-video-interview/)

- *How did the movement for women's rights first emerge in Poland?*

It started in 2016. It was the first time when Polish women went out to the streets because at that time, the party in power, the **Law and Justice party, made the first attempt to totally ban abortion rights**. At that moment, the organization, "All-Poland Women's Strike" called the people, the women to go out to the streets and to protest. So, it was the first time when the women went out to the streets dressed in black to protest against this project of law, which was aimed to completely ban abortion rights. And the **protesters were numerous**, and I think **women were astonished** themselves that there were so many of them and at that time the **government backed up, stopped**.

- *Who did the 2020 protests target exactly, the Polish government? The Catholic Church?*

Since 2016, there were a lot of initiatives coming **not only from the government, the church**, but also from a very powerful organization, from the **fundamentalist Catholic organization, which is called Ordo Iuris**, and which operates in Poland. The members of this organization for the last few years are more and more present in the structures of power in Poland. They have a lot of money, and they have a lot of power. And every time they initiative – because they have lawyers who work for them, and they can write laws... So, last year it was pandemics and people were extremely **frustrated**, also because of the presidential elections held in summer. The candidate of the ruling party won the elections. So, the women went to the streets and the protests lasted for two months and it was very creative, powerful, but also extremely **exhausting**, and there were a lot of problems with the **police who was very brutal**. There were cases of people having **arms broken** and people who went out to the streets to protest and **found themselves in jail**, nobody knew where they were, etc.

- *Who are the movement participants?*

So as for the movement itself, there was not only the organization we speak a lot [about] outside of Poland – **“All-Poland Women’s Strike”**. And, of course, it’s important to speak about the Women’s Strike, but in Poland since 2016, you have **a lot of feminist organizations** who are active in small towns. I talk a lot about **small towns because it’s also new**. Normally, you could see progressives [liberals] young people or older people in big cities, but not in the small towns. Now you also have people active in the small towns. So, there are a lot of organizations, feminist organizations, and there are about 100 organisations that became very active since 2016 and are well-organized. Of course, they did not come out of nowhere because it was prepared. There is a big event, which has been held since 2009 called “Congress of Women”, it’s a big event that unites women coming from all of Poland. Every time there is this event, the subject is different, and you have different groups where you can do training, speak about different problems, think about solutions, etc. It is not as if there protests, or organization came out of nowhere.

- *What came of the 2020 protests?*

**Before 2016, it was more elitist.** It was mainly women with higher education who were feminists and were dealing with these subjects. **But after 2016, it spread to different social groups, and it became a very large movement.** This is also a change. Last year, the protests lasted for about two months, and **by the end of those two months, the situation was not changing.** People were going to the streets, **they were exhausted, it was cold, everybody was sick.** You know, it was really **hard**, but they were going to the streets in spite of the police brutality, etc. And then, **at some point “Women’s Strike” said, “Ok, now we are going to go back home”**. They created some kind of... they called it committees, and every committee was supposed to work on different subjects. So, you could have one committee for the rights of disabled people, one committee about education, one committee about specifically women’s rights, one committee about the separation between church and state in Poland, one committee about paedophilia in the Church. So, they invited the experts to work on it. At first, for a few months, it was very dynamic, people were uniting, proposing laws. Everybody could see the proposals, and everybody could comment on it – like “I think it is good/bad/maybe you should think about it”. And **now these committees are suspended**... There were some problems in the organisation. So, for the moment, they managed to do something, so these proposals of law, different proposals exist, and they can propose in the parliament, but as far as I know the work is now suspended. Also, the experts who were invited, they also have their work, they are extremely busy people. But different organisations – as I told you, there are about 100 [feminist] organisations – continue to be active on different levels and they work on different subject.

## Appendix 4. Protest Signs at 2016-2018 and 2020-2021 Protests

Categories	2016-2018	2020-2021
<b>Reproductive rights</b>	<p>If you don't want an abortion, don't get one my rights            Beautiful boys of the right .... away from my uterus            I am a woman on my own terms away from my uterus            If you don't want an abortion, don't get one            If you don't want an abortion, don't get one            Beautiful boys of the right hand stay away from my womb            Abortion underground thank you            Not everyone has to be a mother            The secular vagina is our sacred right            My body my business            My body my life my conscience my choice            I have a dream: safe women            I am a mother by choice! and not by compulsion            First, dignity! Then, fertility!            Education and contraception instead of bans            A woman is not an incubator            Woman man free will not incubator under control</p>	<p>I want to treat the patients not the incubators - lightning bolt            My cat has more reproductive rights than me - lightning bolt            Incubator. Not a woman. In Poland I do not have voting rights. - lightning bolt            Stay away from my pussy            My body is not an incubator            My body is not a property of MP's            You have no conscience, forcing us to give birth (1)</p>
<b>Women's rights</b>	<p>If you don't want an abortion, don't get one my rights            You will not scrape away my rights            I am a woman on my own terms            free education screams the women of the world            Rational woman            Not everyone has to be a mother            My body my business            Whether by choice or by necessity we have the right to freedom            Laws for women, not for the church            My body my life my conscience my choice</p>	<p>Women's hell - hanger            Women who are leading the people to the barricades (reference to freedom)            I want human rights for Christmas - lightning bolt            Your law violates our rights            Women in the government and the government in the kitchen - lightning bolt (1)            Girls just wanna have fundamental human rights - lightning bolt (1) ENG            Girls just wanna have FUNdamental human rights (ENG)</p>

	<p>Sister and mom decides by herself  Education and contraception instead of bans  We will fight for our integrity, our daughters,  our sisters and all Poles. we're</p>	<p>I am fighting for my future - lightning bolt (1)  I will give birth to a leftie - lightning bolt  I am sorry. Human rights can't come to the  phone. Why? Because they are dead. lightning  bolt  And since a man can't make one, he has no right  to tell a women when and where to create one  (1) ENG</p>
<b>Warning/threat</b>	<p>We are not afraid of you  You will not spoil us all  No woman no country  We know how to cook, I will prepare  Revolutions for you  First, dignity! Then, fertility!  We demand the breaking of the violence  convention  A woman who thinks she is a threat to power  Attention, attention, citizens here! the power  of women holds power  He who lives by the sword dies by the sheath  Writing did not fix my life  Yes! for motherhood. NO! for barbarism  We will fight for our integrity, our daughters,  Our sisters and all Poles. we're</p>	<p>You will not burn us alive – lightning bolt  We have had enough - exclamation mark  Get the fuck out - lightning bolt  Being a woman in Poland threatens your life and  health  I will protect my sisters - lightning bolt (1)  Polish mother has had enough - lightning bolt  (1)  When will the contraception be banned?  Peace and not PiS!  Free Poland – lightning bolt (1)  Help the living children  Do not disturb us. We are fighting for Poland (1)</p>
<b>Revolution/War</b>	<p>We know how to cook, we will prepare  revolutions for you</p>	<p>Revolution is a woman - exclamation mark;  lightning bolt/woman; lightning bolt  God is a woman lightning bolt ENG  This is war – lightning bolt (5)  Revolution - lightning bolt (1)  The government is not pregnancy, it can be  removed  Your war (crucified pregnant woman visual)</p>
<b>Choice/freedom/autonomy</b>	<p>If you don't want an abortion, don't get one  I live, I love, I choose  Whether by choice or by necessity we have the  right to freedom  I have a dream: safe women</p>	<p>Choice - lightning bolt  I think, I feel, I decide. Fuck PiS - lightning bolt;  lightning bolt  My body is my property - lightning bolt  “Do not judge others</p>

	<p>Free country = free choice  I am a mother by choice! and not by compulsion  Paws off, I will live as I want  Freedom, freedom  Education and contraception instead of bans  What is freedom if you have no choice?  Right to legal abortion</p>	<p>Do not decide for others  You cannot  You are not her” – exclamation mark  Don’t fuck with my freedom - lightning bolt  My body is not a property of MP’s  I want to have a choice - lightning bolt (1)  My body my decision  Freedom = choice  I want to be free  My body, my choice lightning bolt 3\  Freedom  Abortion is my choice  Freedom of choice  My freedom is not your sin!  We want choice  I am fighting for my future - lightning bolt (1)  I love and understand freedom and I can’t give it back - lightning bolt  Instead of procreation, I have to go to the demonstration - lightning bolt  Do not disturb us. We are fighting for Poland (1)</p>
<b>Anger</b>	<p>I’m so angry that I came to the protest  I’m just venting hypocrisy here  I’m going to clean up the patriarchy</p>	<p>“Pissed off“ ideology - lightning bolt  You have blood on your hands  Fucking enough  Enough (1)  I wish I could abort my government (1) ENG  The government is not pregnancy, it can be removed  Sorry for the inconvenience, we have to overthrow the government - lightning bolt (1)  I don’t need Tinder. PiS fucks me everyday</p>
<b>Profanities</b>	X	<p>This is a fucking drama – lightning bolt  “Pissed off“ ideology - lightning bolt  PIS OUT ENG  For fuck’s sake  ***** *** (12)</p>

		<p>Don't fuck with my freedom - lightning bolt</p> <p>Get the fuck out - lightning bolt</p> <p>Fuck the system</p> <p>Fuck the system, if PiS was pro-life it would accept refugees</p> <p>Fuck off</p> <p>Nurses' advice: Fuck off - lightning bolt</p> <p>I don't need Tinder. PiS fucks me everyday</p> <p>Peace and not PiS!</p> <p>I don't need Tinder. PiS fucks me everyday</p>
<b>Humor</b>	<p>I will give birth a lefty</p> <p>I'm not peeking under your dress</p> <p>Nothing changes from sitting on your ass</p>	<p>Hope you step into Lego block barefoot</p> <p>I am mildly annoyed</p> <p>Mephedrone has better composition than our government</p> <p>Right to choose or a prank? (version of trick or treat) - lightning bolt</p> <p>Even introverts came</p> <p>How pathetic you are. Bye.</p> <p>I would rather listen to 2pac than Jarek. Keep Ya Head Up (ENG) lightning bolt (1)</p> <p>My uterus is not Jarek's cat - - lightning bolt</p> <p>Jarek, don't be like an onion, cakes have layers too - lightning bolt</p> <p>The cat can stay, the rest get the fuck out</p> <p>OK. Doja Cat said "play with my pussy", but it's not what she meant</p>
<b>International references</b>	X	<p>Girls just wanna have fun ENG</p> <p>Sex, Drugs, and Women Rights – middle finger and lightning bolt ENG</p> <p>No woman no kraj (2)</p> <p>I am ashamed to be Polish</p> <p>Welcome to GILEAD (1)</p> <p>Season of the witch</p>
<b>Local cultural references</b>	X	<p>Sticky with death at the hands of fanatics (from song lyrics "Blood</p>
<b>General</b>	Nothing about women without women	Economy, culture, art, sport, women

	Democracy does not compromise	Sexism; misogyny; nationalism; fundamentalism – fuck off
<b>PiS and PiS officials</b>	X	<p>Godek into the bag and bag into the lake - lightning bolt</p> <p>The only pussies you can decide on are Andrzej Zbigniew and Mateusz</p> <p>Korwin, you coward, how many dead babies have you given birth to?</p> <p>I must be bad at history, I thought Jaruzelski was dead - lightning bolt</p> <p>Jarek, buy a piece of toilet paper and leave the constitution alone</p> <p>Jarek, Andrzej, ..., Kaja, please leave the country</p> <p>My uterus is not Jarek's cat - - lightning bolt</p> <p>Jarek, don't be like an onion, cakes have layers too - lightning bolt</p> <p>Jarek, you are the devil, not the god - lightning bolt</p> <p>Not your pussy (with Kaczynski's face) Lightning bolt</p> <p>Jarek get out of my daughters' wombs (fuck PiS, Fuck off)</p> <p>OK. Doja Cat said "play with my pussy", but it's not what she meant</p>
<b>PiS</b>	<p>We are not afraid of you</p> <p>Nothing changes from sitting on your ass</p> <p>Democracy does not compromise</p>	<p>"Pissed off" ideology - lightning bolt</p> <p>PIS OUT ENG</p> <p>For fuck's sake</p> <p>***** *** (12)</p> <p>Pull yourself together PiS - lightning bolt</p> <p>Women in the government and the government in the kitchen - lightning bolt (1)</p> <p>PiS was never an option (duck and lightning bolt)</p> <p>PiS is behind in embryology more than I am</p> <p>PiS kinda sus</p> <p>Nurses' advice: Fuck off - lightning bolt</p>

		<p>Government is destroying my workplace  The government: our uterus  Sexism; misogyny; nationalism;  fundamentalism – fuck off  I don't trust these things (zoom mic and camera,  polish government)  I don't need Tinder. PiS fucks me everyday  Sorry for the inconvenience, we have to  overthrow the government - lightning bolt (1)  Jarek get out of my daughters' wombs (fuck PiS,  Fuck off)</p>
<b>Religion/Catholic Church</b>	<p>Laws for women, not for the church  Episcopate, leave my pants  Get the bishop away from my ass  Real black protests next page under the  episcopate  Secular hospital, secular school, and religion,  to the church  We women are older than all the religions of  the world mother nature</p>	<p>The state is violence! Religion is slavery –  anarchy sign  Polish clergy collection of zeros  My body is not your religion  Roses are red, violets are blue, religious  fanatics, keep your rosaries</p>
<b>Solidarity</b>	X	<p>Solidarity is our weapon – lightning bolt  Exclamation mark  Lightning bolt in LGBTQI colors (1)</p>
<b>Covid</b>	X	<p>Fight the virus, not the women</p>

## Appendix 5. Screen Excerpts from the 2016-2018 and 2020-2021 Protest Sign Archives



Excerpt 1. *Hasła demonstracji [demonstration signs]*. (2019, November 11). Społeczne Archiwum Online. Retrieved July 15, 2023, from <https://buntkobiet.wordpress.com/hasla-demonstracji/>

## Słowa Rewolucji

fot. Magda Wojtanek



fot. Ignacy Tokarczyk



fot. Bogusław Byrski



fot. Iwona Smal



Excerpt 2. *Słowa rewolucji - Opowiadanie świata* [Words of Revolution - Notifying the World]. (n.d.). Teatr NN. Retrieved July 20, 2023, from <https://teatrnn.pl/opowiadanie-swiata/slowa-rewolucji/>

## Appendix 6. Screen excerpt from one of the interviews from the content analysis database

We have been protesting for five years now. Protest has its own dynamics: you have to feel the moment and decide how to react; sometimes you give it a try and it doesn't work out. It's always an experiment. **But right now, we feel that there is real energy and a momentum we need to ride on.** There is a lot of interest from foreign media, and this topic has become the focus of attention. This is slightly strange because every time we tried to do something on violence against women in the past, it was very hard to get people to mobilise on the streets. There is something about violence that makes it difficult to translate feelings into street action. While many people experience it or know somebody who has been a victim, they don't like to react to it. Many times in the past we failed when organising things on the topic of violence, but this time people took it up. We might now have a chance to defend the right to a life free from violence and make this a problem for the government.

**Do gender rights activists in Poland currently experience any restrictions on their right to organise, speak up and mobilise?**

I am a writer and artist, and as a result of my activism **I am cut off from state grants.** There are no state institutions that want to work with me right now because if my name shows up on their list, it becomes a problem for them. **You could also be arrested or be taken to court by a right-wing legal foundation such as Ordo Iuris.** Of course, there is also **hate speech**: the government uses your name and your image for propaganda on state media, and you can also be attacked by trolls on social media. **Police can hurt you, as happened to me at one protest in 2018.** This situation came about gradually, but at this point there is a wide range of forms of repression that you can experience. **For the time being, however, I haven't heard of feminist activists facing physical attacks from civilians.**

I am one of the activists who started taking direct action against the government, so there are a lot of things that I am being accused of. Ordo Iuris does not like me because I wrote a book exposing the international fundamentalist network that it is part of. I am on the list of their enemies, but so far, I have not been sued by them. They say they are working on their list of accusations against me, because there are so many. During our latest protest, members of Ordo Iuris approached a police officer and tried to convince him that I should be requested to show my identification. **But the police in Warsaw know us, they know our faces, they knew that I had not done anything illegal during the protest and refused their request.**

**In which ways can civil society hold accountable an increasingly authoritarian government such as Poland's, and what support from international civil society does it need to do so?**

Excerpt from the interview with **Klementyna Suchanow**, Co-founder of the Polish Women's Strike and the International Women's Strike [September 1, 2020]

POLAND: 'We invented new forms of protest because we had to': Interview with Klementyna Suchanow. (2020, September 1). *Civicus*. Retrieved June 10, 2023, from <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/4590-poland-we-invented-new-forms-of-protest-because-we-had-to>

## Appendix 7. BTI Transformation Index Data<sup>1</sup>

	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022
Ranking Status Index	9	11	10	6	5	5	10	13	14
Status Index	8,90	8,76	8,86	9,05	9,16	9,23	8,58	8,15	7,93
Ranking Democracy Status	9	13	11	8	5	4	11	18	24
Democracy Status	9,20	8,80	9	9,0	9,35	9,50	8,55	7,95	7,50

	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022
Q2 Political Participation	9,8	9,5	9,8	9,8	9,8	10	9,3	8,8	7,8
Q2.1 Free and fair elections	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	9	7
Q2.2	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	19	10

<sup>1</sup> The table is created by the author based on criteria and ranking adapted from the BTI Transformation Index database (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022).

Effective power to government									
Q2.3 Association / assembly rights	10	10	10	10	10	10	9	9	8
Q2.4 Freedom of expression	9	8	9	9	9	10	8	7	6

	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022
Q3 Rule of Law	9,3	8,8	8,8	9,3	9,3	9,3	8,0	6,8	6,3
Q3.1 Separation of powers	10	9	9	10	10	10	8	6	5
Q3.2 Independent judiciary	9	9	9	9	9	9	7	6	5
Q3.3	8	8	8	8	8	9	8	7	7

Prosecution of office abuse									
Q3.4 Civil rights	10	9	9	10	10	9	9	8	8

	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022
Q4 Stability of Democratic Institutions	9,5	8,5	9,0	9,5	9,5	10	8,0	7,0	6,5
Q4.1 Performance of democratic institutions	9	8	9	10	10	10	8	7	6
Q4.2 Commitment to democratic institutions	10	9	9	9	9	10	8	7	7

