

# **Explaining mass protests against abortion ban in Poland: the power of connective action**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines successful mass mobilization against the proposed total ban on abortion, focusing on the Black Protest initiated online in September 2016 and the All-Poland’s Women Strikes which took place on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> of October 2016. The aim is to explain how the resistance towards the proposed bill emerged and developed over time, and to shed light on the factors behind its success. It is argued that the emergence of and mass participation in the protests resulted from a range of factors including the heightened political climate in Poland and normalization of street protests as a reaction to the closing of regular communication channels between citizens and authorities, as well as an emotional dynamic of mobilization and wide use of social media for sharing information, communication and networking. The success – the government’s decision to reject the project – can be explained as stemming from the mass scale of mobilization but also from favorable political opportunity structure and the lack of popular support for the proposed law. The analysis shows that the protests followed the logic of connective action based on the use of flexible, easily personalized action frames, which were well-embedded in cultural narratives referencing the struggle for Poland’s independence and resistance against an oppressive state.

## **Introduction**

Despite chilly autumn weather and pouring rain, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets of over 140 cities and villages in Poland and abroad on Monday October 3, 2016.<sup>1</sup> Many participants reported afterwards that they did not expect many people to attend the rallies, so the site of the big crowds in the squares of Warsaw, Wrocław, Szczecin or Kraków was both surprising and exhilarating. The majority were women clad in black carrying hand-made banners bearing slogans such as “My body, my choice!”, “I am, I think, I decide!”, “The

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<sup>1</sup> Police registered 143 rallies and demonstration that day, gathering approximately 100,000 participants (CBOS 2016). Additionally, solidarity demonstrations and marches were organized in many cities abroad including Berlin, Stockholm, London and Sydney.

government is not a pregnancy – it can be easily removed,” or “Keep your rosaries out of my ovaries!”. Many of the protesters and organizers did not identify as feminists or even as activists, they just felt that “enough is enough,” that in the face of grave danger to all women’s health and lives they just had to act. To many, the All-Poland Women’s Strike (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet) became a revolutionary moment when fear and anger were transformed into feelings of solidarity and empowerment, a moment of personal and collective transformation.



All-Poland Women’s Strike  
October 3, 2016 in Warsaw.  
Photo by Elżbieta Korolczuk

The main reason to protest was a proposal for total abortion ban, submitted to the parliament on July 5, 2016 by conservative organization Ordo Iuris Institute and supported by the Roman Catholic Church. The anti-choice network Stop Abortion had launched the campaign for a total ban on abortions already in March 2016 and managed to gather over 400.000 signatures supporting the proposal over the period of three months.<sup>2</sup> The project included a total ban on abortion and the threat of criminal prosecution for both doctors and women (up to five years in prison). Polish law already strictly limits access to abortion, which is illegal unless one of the three exceptions occurs: when the pregnancy is the result of criminally proven rape or incest, if the woman’s life is in danger, or the fetus is “seriously malformed.” If the new law was passed, there would be no exceptions: the proposal stipulated that the prosecutor can drop charges under extraordinary circumstances, e.g. if the pregnancy was terminated to save the life of a woman, but many experts warned that this would happen only after a police investigation. Moreover, according to some doctors and lawyers, there was a very real chance that even women after involuntary miscarriages would be punished by up to 3 years in prison, because the law stipulated that person responsible for “fetal murder”,

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<sup>2</sup> Under Polish law citizens can submit law proposals to the parliament. Such a proposal has to be considered by lawmakers if initiators’ committee manages to gather 100,000 signatures within a period of three months, but the parliament can either accept it for further proceedings or outvote it.

even unintentional, may face criminal charges. Additionally, doctors and human rights advocates warned that the new law would effectively put an end to prenatal diagnostics. Every invasive procedure, for example the amniotic fluid test that is used to determine whether the fetus carries certain genetic disorders, involves a risk of miscarriage (*Protesters...* 2016). Even if such risk is minor, experts warned that few people in the medical profession would risk ending up in jail.

The law prepared by Ordo Iuris Institute and supported by Stop Abortion network was not the first such initiative. Several similar projects had been submitted to the Polish parliament in recent years, none of them, however, was met with such forceful opposition simply because those bills did not receive official support of the representatives of the then ruling parties. Mass protests, including the October 3 strike resulted in the proposal's failing in parliament, but this development can also be attributed to the favorable political opportunity structure. The bill was not proposed by the ruling party of the government, so after the protests erupted, Law and Justice party representatives distanced themselves from the bill. Moreover, the anti-choice movement was also divided on the issue: while the Stop Abortion Network insisted on including the prison sentence for pregnant women, other groups did not support such a solution. They came up with an alternative proposal and submitted to the parliament in the form of a petition in the summer of 2016.

Mass mobilization of Polish women not only resulted in stopping the Ordo Iuris bill from being discussed further in the parliament, but apparently shifted public opinion on the issue, recent polls suggesting overwhelming opposition to the proposed law, and some signaling an increasing support for the liberalisation of existing regulations (OKO Press 2017). This leads us to the question why Polish women mobilized in such large numbers in 2016, how did the protests come about and why they were successful.

This article analyzes protests against abortion ban in Poland, with specific focus on the Black Protest (Czarny protest)<sup>3</sup> initiated in September 2016 and All-Poland Women's Strike (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet) organized on October 3 and then again October 24, 2016 (see also Korolczuk 2016, Kubisa 2016 and 2017, Narkowicz 2016, Majewska 2016). In what follows, I aim to explain the factors behind the mass scale of protests, focusing on the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in mobilizing the public. I argue that

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<sup>3</sup> In the title I use the expression "black protests" in a generic sense as it has been popularized by the media internationally in the context of resistance against the abortion ban in Poland. This article, however focuses on a range of different initiatives, including Black Protest, All-Poland's Women Strikes, the activities of Gals for Gals collective and more.

while the successful mobilization should be seen in the context of recent changes in political opportunity structure and the rise of mass-scale opposition to the regime shift implemented by the ruling Peace and Justice party. Of key importance for “scaling up” of protests was the fact that the mobilization followed the logic of connective action based on personalized engagement, in which communication became an important element of organizational structure.

The article starts with a short discussion of data and methods. The following section includes an exploration of theoretical perspectives employed, followed by the analysis of the protests against the proposed abortion ban, focusing on the shift of action logic in social movement mobilization. I conclude by pointing to the specificity of protests facilitated by technological advances and discussing potential long-term consequences of this phenomena.

### **Note on data and methods**

The insights presented in this article are based on the analysis of media coverage of women’s protests and participatory observations, both online and offline. As social movement scholar and activist engaged in Polish women’s movement for over a decade, I took part in almost all protest events organized in Warsaw throughout 2016, and I participated actively in internal discussions among the organizers both via social media and in meetings. Since late March 2016, when the plans to change abortion law in Poland were announced, I have also participated in a number of public debates and events concerning reproductive rights organized by activist groups, public institutions, and Polish media.

In the course of events examined in this article, I repeatedly switched between the roles of observer (as in the case of the main demonstration on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October, which I did not organize and merely participated in along with thousands of others) and participant observer (events I helped to organize or those in which I took part as an invited speaker, like in the case of the rally in front of the parliament on April 3, 2016). I experienced directly what other participants were experiencing, I took detailed notes, made pictures and collected materials, e.g. leaflets. Unlike most participants, I was also aware of the internal dynamic of discussions and communication inside many of the groups initiating and organizing the events. While some researchers prefer the position of complete observer to ensure “objectivity” and “distance” towards the subjects of the study, I agree with Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln who claim that “there are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of – and between – the observer and the observed” (2011: 12),

which is why I deployed a range of interconnected interpretive methods to better understand the dynamic of the events in question.

Consequently, this study builds also on textual analysis of articles reporting on this mobilization in major newspapers (including both dailies such as *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*, and weeklies, e.g. *Polityka*, *Newsweek Poland* and *Wprost*); on interviews with, and public statements by, key activists engaged in organizing the protests; and on various materials published on the internet sites of specific groups and organizations, constituting a wide array of densely interconnected virtual communities. These include social networking sites, blogs, websites of emerging or existing organizations, such as Facebook groups of Gals for Gals (Dziewuchy Dziewuchom) and All-Poland Women's Strike (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet). Additionally, I have also studied media reports on related mobilizations in other countries (South Korea and Argentina). While my analysis focuses on the Polish case, I strive to examine the ways in which information and communication technologies change the logic of social mobilization, which is of relevance beyond the local context.

### **Polish civil society reawakened**

Mass demonstrations on October 3, 2016, dubbed by the media as Black Monday, were only the high point of a wave of protests that had begun already in early spring. The plan to submit a civic law proposal banning abortions in Poland was publicly announced by representatives of the Stop Abortion network on March 28, 2016. Over the next few days tens of thousands of outraged women and men started to communicate online and organize. From the very beginning, the mobilization was a two-tiered process of building grassroots groups “from scratch”, and forging alliances between existing women's NGOs, which at times included also extra-parliamentary left parties. The biggest grassroots network emerged already on April 1, and took the form of a Facebook group Gals for Gals (Dziewuchy Dziewuchom). In the course of first 48 hours over 100.000 women and men joined in. As the initiators explain on their website:

This year's April Fools' was no joke for Polish women. The media were full of information on the draft amendment to the abortion law. In a couple of days, we began to rally against the planned modifications. We sought support in other women and soon enough started something huge. (<http://galsforgals.org/aboutus/>)

Fuelled by dismissive statements of representatives of the ruling party, contention was spreading like wildfire, successfully moving from online to offline actions. Already on Sunday April 3, extra-parliamentary left party Together (Razem) in cooperation with Gals for Gals' initiators organized rallies in Warsaw and other cities, protesting against what they saw as "politicians' plans to torture Polish women" (*Protesty przeciwko...* 2016). Media reported that over seven thousand participants joined the demonstration in Warsaw and hundreds of people attended rallies in several smaller cities. On April 9 similar crowd attended demonstration organized by the feminist pro-choice coalition Get back the choice! (Odzyskać wybór!), which took place in Polish capital. Soon, different groups and individuals began to initiate small-scale creative actions, which included leaving churches during Sunday mass, sending packages with wire coat hangers symbolizing illegal, unsafe abortions to the office of Prime Minister Beata Szydło and posting detailed information about women's menstruation cycles on the Prime Minister's facebook page under the hashtag #toughperiod (#TrudnyOkres) as an ironic commentary to the government's efforts to control women's bodies. Many of these initiatives running alongside one another were started by feminist activists, but some were instigated by persons with no such experience.

In May 2016 several feminist organizations created the coalition Save the Women! (Ratujmy Kobiety!) which focused the efforts on preparing a civic law proposal including a set of measures to ensure access to modern contraception, comprehensive sex education and abortion services up to 12 weeks of pregnancy. The proposal was endorsed by women's organizations and individual women from all over Poland, which gathered over 240,000 signatures in summer 2016 and submitted the project to the parliament (Kubisa 2017). In September, however, members of Sejm, the lower chamber of Polish parliament, voted against discussing the Save the Women! proposal in the parliament, while simultaneously accepting the Ordo Iuris bill for further proceedings: it was this decision that, figuratively speaking, "broke the camel's back" and led to mass protests culminating on October 3.

Women's protests against a total abortion ban can be interpreted part of a much wider phenomenon: in 2016 Polish civil society – often depicted as NGOized and depoliticized – was finally waking up (cf. Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2017). The socially conservative and populist Law and Justice party which won parliamentary elections in October 2015, swiftly began to introduce changes in virtually every sphere of social and political life, gradually dismantling the basic tenets of liberal democracy. These developments instigated a wave of

grassroots mobilizations, organized mostly under the umbrella of the Committee for the Defense of Democracy (KOD). In the process, Polish society became extremely polarized but also much more engaged and politically active, and street protests became normalized as a mean of communication between the citizens and power holders. Ironically, the Law and Justice representatives, who appear to be deeply suspicious of any spontaneous grassroots organizing, proved to be extremely effective in mobilizing thousands of women and men in Poland and abroad.

The question is whether the wave of opposition against abortion ban was as unique in terms of its scale and its wide repertoire of contention and political effectiveness, as some commentators claimed. There are some interesting parallels between the women's mobilization of 2016 and the wave of protests against the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) that took place in 2011-2012 in Poland (Jurczynszyn et al 2014). Both initiatives seemed to appear out of nowhere: they surfaced on the Internet, but participants quickly moved from online discussions to street protests. Both emerged in response to specific pieces of legislation supported by the power holders and both managed to stop further proceeding over the controversial regulations. Moreover, studies show that in both cases it was the youngest generation of Poles that was the most engaged. The results of the study conducted by Millward Brown SMG/KRC in January 2012 revealed a generational gap in how the respondents conceived of anti-ACTA protests: while the majority of older respondents did not identify with the movements' goals and strategies, the youngest ones were the most likely to take interest in protests and to participate in them (among of respondents younger than 30 years old, 53% declared they follow the protests or engage personally and 13% declared that they took part in it) (Millward 2012; cf. Jurczynszyn et al 2014). A similar dynamic was clearly visible in the case of the mobilization against the abortion ban: the youngest respondents were the most likely to support the protests. Among 25 year olds and younger, 48% declared they took part in the protests, and in the age group of 25-34 year olds 70% declared their support for this mobilization (CBOS 2016). Moreover, in both cases mass mobilization brought tangible results: mass protests led Polish government to withdrew its support for ACTA in 2012 and, under similar circumstances, Polish parliament voted against the Ordo Iuris proposal. While these successes should be seen as battles that were won rather than wars ending in success, they exemplify the potential for mass citizen's engagement, especially among young people, mediated by information and communication technologies and leading to very real political changes.

### **Internet and social movements: from collective to connective action logic?**

In this section I analyze the relation between technology / medium and the processes of mass mobilization. Some scholars interested in new information and communication technologies claim that technological advances can play an important role in mobilizing people, for example by overcoming the scarcity of resources, fostering the promotion of collective identity and strengthening “a perception among individuals that that they are members of a larger community by virtue of the grievance they share” (Garret 2006: 205). This view holds that the Internet is a tool that enhances the sense of solidarity, strengthens collective identity and the potential for mobilization (e.g. Myers 2000, Krejtz et al 2014). As shown by Krejtz et al (2014) taking part in online discussions fosters people’s engagement in public issues and may encourage them to become active offline. Thus, it can be argued that some online groups are in fact imagined political communities, much like the reading circles in the early days of the printing press (Anderson 1983, cf. Fabian and Korolczuk 2017).

There are scholars, however, who warn that digitally mediated action may be short lived and politically ineffective, while others ask skeptically if there is anything really new or genuinely grassroots about this trend (e.g. Garret 2006, Wall 2007, cf. Bendyk 2012: 45). For example, the team examining the successful mobilization against ACTA showed that while internet platforms were crucial for sharing information and scaling up of contention, they were not conducive to forging coherent collective identity among protesters or to cultivating long-term engagement (Jurczyszyn et al. 2014). Also, research on social mobilization around access to in vitro fertilization in Poland suggests that the Internet may also have a “centripetal” effect, due to the tendency for establishing and policing borders within online community, which weakens the potential for collective direct action (Korolczuk 2014).

The role of ICTs, however, seems to go beyond enabling communication and fostering the construction of collective identity: studies of digitally networked action (DNA) suggested that the medium changes the action logic. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2012, 2013) who analyzed the cases of national and transnational mobilizations against globalization, proposed to distinguish between groups and networks following traditional logic of collective action and those that follow the logic of “connective action.” While the former requires high levels of organizational resources and efforts to form and develop collective identities, the latter is based on “using resources to deploy social technologies enabling loose public networks to form around personalized action themes” (Bennett and



Segerberg 2012: 757). This in turn changes the core dynamic of the action, making it more flexible and personalized, based on a rather eclectic and fluctuating sense of identity. As shown by Bennett and Segerberg:

these more personalized, digitally mediated connective action formations have frequently been larger, scaled up more quickly, and have been flexible in tracking moving political targets and bridging different issues. (ibid: 742)

I argue that the protests against the abortion ban are an example of initiatives that follow the logic of connective, rather than collective action, and that this new logic was one of key factors facilitating mass engagement. This is not to say that contextual factors and changes in political opportunity structures were of no importance. To the contrary, the fact that the proposal was submitted to a parliament dominated by socially conservative parties and that the ruling right-wing Law and Justice party was supported by anti-choice groups during the elections was crucial in consolidating the popular view that the law proposal is an immediate danger to Polish women. In other words, it was widely believed that this time there was a real chance that the parliament would accept a total ban on abortion. Clearly, the heightened political climate and the mobilization of citizens opposing other reforms introduced by the new regime played an important role as well. These developments led to normalization of street protests and the emergence of local and national groups and networks, most of them under the umbrella of the Committee for the Defense of Democracy (KOD). In some locations, for example in Łódź, these groups supported the protests' organizers with know-how and important resources, such as acoustic systems, security staff during rallies or printing leaflets and distributing informational materials. As one local activist explained in a personal communication:

Here in Łódź we have great communication with all citizens' groups, with KOD, with old organizations, everyone chips in, there are no conflicts because we know we are in this together (communication during a meeting, December 2016)

Moreover, in some cases protests against the abortion ban were organized by women and men engaged in local KOD groups. In fact, one of the key organizers of the All-Poland Women's Strike – Marta Lempart – had been engaged in KOD local structures in the city of Wrocław prior to the women's mobilization, and had never been involved in feminist organizing.

Shifts in political opportunity structure and the general awakening of Polish civil society were of utmost importance, but in order to fully grasp the factors behind mass

mobilization, we need to examine the role of information and communication technologies, which effectively changed action logic of the protests. Arguably, both earlier protests and All-Poland Women's Strikes are examples of how effective personal action frames or memes can be in mobilizing people who are uninvolved observers. Memes are here defined as packets of information (textual and/or visual) that are easy to adapt and share, thus they travel easily across diverse populations (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 745). Key to their popularity are inclusiveness and emotional appeal combined with high potential for personalization, as in the case of Black Protest and the Strike. The Black Protest's core idea was very simple: in order to join, one had to simply post a photo of her(him)self wearing black with hashtag #blackprotest. The uncomplicated and gender-inclusive formula was easy to personalize. As noted by philosopher and feminist activist Ewa Majewska (2016) the power of this idea lies not only in inclusivity but also in challenging of traditional hierarchical relation between powerful creator (of images, slogans or strategies) and weak participants, who can only accept or reject these creations. This formula allowed participants to be in control of what they share with others: most participants publicized carefully arranged selfies, many women choosing to post photos with friends, partners or children, and some opting for a group photo, which in turn helped to engage bystanders (members of the family, friends and colleagues at work places or schools). There were also persons who preferred an anonymous version and posted pictures of favorite celebrities, media figures or even pets wearing black pieces of clothing or just in a black-and-white photograph. Most not only used hashtags but also added a personal message: the original concept invited alterations and personalization of the content, which allowed the people to express their agency and control in creating their own meaning.

The flexibility of the original idea was even more pronounced in case of the Women's Strike: at the beginning the initiators discussed the possibility of organizing a typical strike, one that would include abandoning work places and taking to the streets, but after an internal debate the formula became much more open. The strike became an all-encompassing symbolic packet, which covered a whole range of activities, such as striking, wearing black to work, having your kids wear black to school or kindergarten, wearing badges, posting supportive messages on social media, blockading the entrance to Law and Justice party offices, participating in collective reading of a feminist book on abortion in public, organizing a debate on reproductive rights, or even making sandwiches for fellow activists, as was the case of some Warsaw-based male participants. In other words, to be a part of the strike women (and men) did not have to actually abandon their work places, an act that for many of

them would be difficult or highly risky. The open formula allowed them to join in and feel that they are part of a nation-wide initiative, even if they could invest just a fraction of time and energy that a regular strike requires. Arguably, this was of special importance for economically underprivileged women and to people in smaller towns and villages, where scarcity of jobs and conservative local milieu make it risky to publicly engage in potentially controversial issues, such as reproductive rights.

It should be noted, however, that not all memes travel far, and not all are appropriated and shared with equal enthusiasm. The successful ones need to be not only flexible and easily personalized, but also emotionally alluring and having rich histories of social transmission. The symbolic power of such action frames comes from their embeddedness in local culture, which in turn enhances the chance for wide social resonance. In the case of Black Protest the choice of the color itself carried deep cultural significance, referencing the tradition of Polish women publicly wearing black to mourn the loss of the country's independence during the XIX century, when Poland ceased to exist as a country. The symbolic meaning of such a gesture was clear to all potential participants, conveying the gravity of the situation and indirectly linking the women's struggle for reproductive rights with the complicated history of the Polish nation. Many protesters used well-known signs and symbols associated with the fight for the country's independence, but altered in order to stress the gendered character of the fight against abortion ban. Popular were banners and pins with letter "P" inscribed in an anchor, which is a popular symbol of the Home Army and the 1944 Warsaw Uprising known as Fighting Poland, but with added woman's breasts and a braid to signify the gendered nature of women's mobilization.<sup>4</sup>



The new version of the symbol of Warsaw uprising was used by feminist activists already in 2013, when the yearly feminist manifestation – Manifa – was held under the banner “Let’s fight for the independence of Polish women!”  
March 8, 2013 in Warsaw.

Some participants also displayed slogan “Fighting Polish Woman” (Polka Walcząca), “Independent Polish woman” (Polka niepodległa) or the words of the Polish national anthem

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<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive discussion on the politics of memory of the Warsaw Uprising see Napiórkowski 2016.

“Poland has not yet perished” (Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła) replacing the word “Poland” with “Polka” signifying a female Polish citizen. The strategy to use national imagery was met with outrage of many right-wing commentators, who accused protesters of defilement and even took to the court, but the message was clear: women have equal rights to employ symbols embedded in Polish cultural legacy, and their fight for personal independence should be seen as no less important and noble than the fight for Poland’s independence.



“Poland/Polish woman has not yet perished”  
All-Poland Women’s Strike  
October 3, 2016 in Warsaw.  
Photo by Tomasz Gzell, PAP

Significant and strategic was also the choice of strike as a protest form and all-encompassing slogan for the protests that took place on October 3 and 24, 2016. That decision was inspired by Icelandic women’s strike of October 24, 1975 when up to ninety percent of the country’s female population did not show at their workplace and did not do any household tasks in order to demonstrate the true value and indispensability of their work. In the Polish context, however, strikes bring associations with the heroic tradition of the first Solidarity of 1980, the collective action of Polish workers, who – supported by intellectuals and activists – challenged the communist rule. Despite the fact that there is a long tradition of women’s strikes under communism, which were organized in big factories, e.g. in the city of Łódź, to protest against low pay, horrible working conditions and unequal treatment (Fidelis 2010, Mazurek 2010), the hegemonic narrative focuses on the heroic figure of male hero, as exemplified by Lech Wałęsa (or Lech Kaczyński in the right-wing version of Polish history). As explained by Majewska (2016), this heroic tradition downplays the importance of collective effort and shared responsibility, stressing instead the role of individual qualities, such as (male) charisma, strong will and personal sacrifice. Herein lies an important, if not the key, difference between the ways in which Solidarity strikes are portrayed in Polish tradition and the All-Poland’s Women Strike: while the former is constructed around specific figures of

heroes and the imperative of self-sacrifice, the latter coalesce around collective effort and solidarity between women who refuse to be sacrificed for the greater good – be it God, the Nation or just higher fertility rates.

### **Modes of technologically enhanced activism**

Internet, with its dense web of social media sites and platforms enabling effective dissemination of personalized information, was crucial for mobilizing Polish women, but as I already noted, women’s organizations also played an important, if not crucial, role. Scholars of digitally networked collective action show that effective mobilization depends not only on how people use ICT, but on the interplay between online and offline organizing. This is also the case of protests against the abortion ban.

There are three basic modes of technologically enhanced activism distinguished by Bennett and Segerberg (2012 and 2013): self-organizing networks and organizationally enabled networks that both follow the logic of connective action, and organizationally brokered networks that follow the rules of collective action. My claim is that the Black Protest and the All-Poland Women’s Strike are examples of self-organizing networks, but in its entirety the 2016 wave of women’s protests exemplifies the dynamic of organizationally enabled digitally networked action (ODNA). The mobilization turned out successful due to “the right interplay of technology, personal action frames, and [organizations’ willingness] to relax collective identification requirements in favor of personalized social networking among followers” (ibid: 748).<sup>5</sup>

Media coverage of the events focused on the grassroots character of women’s mobilization and most groups and networks stressed their independence from established organizations (especially political parties, but also women’s NGOs and unions), implying that they represent “ordinary women” with no prior experience in social organizing. This was not entirely true, because many local organizers had some experience with social activism, or at least had contacts and resources needed to initiate action. It is accurate, however, that most protests were organized no-logo and the activists strived to keep political parties and other powerful political organizations at a distance, partly to avoid co-optation and partly to strengthen their legitimization as the authentic voice of “the people,” not the elites. When

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<sup>5</sup> Gals for Gals facebook group is another an example of self-organized network following the logic of connective action.

politicians entered the stage, they were not always welcomed by the crowds. For example, during Warsaw rally organized on September 18<sup>th</sup> 2016 by the Committee “Save the Women!”, the speech of Joanna Mucha, MP from the oppositional Civic Platform, was met with furious booing, hisses and cries: “You had 8 years to liberalize abortion!”, “We don’t believe you!”.

In practice, however, protesters cooperated with different political parties and individual politicians supporting their case. Extra-parliamentary left parties – Together (Razem) and Green Party (Zieloni), along with the political organization called Initiative Poland (Inicjatywa Polska) – were engaged in organizing protests, gathering signatures in support of the civic law proposal Save the Women!, mobilizing people and lobbying politicians (Kubisa 2017). Some of the movement’s leaders and some local groups had ties with representatives of political parties in parliament, which enabled them to follow parliamentary proceedings, for example MPs from the oppositional party .Modern (.Nowoczesna) ensured that the activists were up to date with parliamentary debates and could enter the parliament during discussions on both projects (the one proposed by Stop Abortion network and by Save the Women! committee). Such cooperation required relaxing collective identification requirements on the part of the feminist movement, because most of those politicians did not identify openly as feminists and some were openly against the proposition to ensure access to abortion for all women up until the 12<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy advocated by the women’s movement. This strategy was bitterly criticized by some feminists, accusing the movement’s leaders of betraying the core feminist value, namely the freedom of choice in the sphere of reproduction. In my view, however, such a strategy was inevitable: the feminists did not “own the movement,” thus they could not control the message.

In practice, the main claims and collective identities promulgated by the mass mobilization against the ban on abortion were constructed in the process of interaction between feminist activists, women who got engaged when the protests started and those who were active only online. The representatives and leaders of feminist organizations played an important role in generating some of the action frames and providing expert knowledge, but they were not able to effectively moderate personal expressions through social networks. The influence of the feminist activists, scholars and experts was more indirect: they were an important source of knowledge and arguments, which often traveled far in the form of memes, quotes, specific arguments and phrases. While the concept of connective action does not pay much attention to the dissemination of knowledge and expertise and the impact it has

on a wider audience, these should be seen as an important factor influencing people's views and the construction of the action frames produced by participants.

## **Conclusions**

The women's protests of 2016 were not a unique phenomenon in contemporary Poland, which is characterized by heightened political climate, growing polarization in the society and normalization of street protests as a reaction to the closing of regular communication channels between the power holders and the citizens. Contention, however, is not something that simply follows from grievances or openings in political opportunity structures. It involves a range of social-cultural mechanisms, which facilitate networking, the scaling up of conflict and enable effectively pressuring those in power. Arguably, nowadays these processes are even more difficult to control, because of the increasingly individualized and alienated public, which often engages in specific struggles as individuals rather than as members of well-organized groups, such as labor unions or social movement organizations.

The concept of connective action's logic helps us to understand how people's individual engagement can be stimulated and how it is facilitated by information and communication technologies. The cases of Black Protest and All-Poland Women's Strikes confirm the view that Facebook or Twitter are not just handy tools, which allow people to spread their messages quicker and more effectively than before. This analysis shows that at one point communication becomes organization, changing the patterns of information exchange and dynamic of organization in emerging social networks. The protests against the abortion ban can be interpreted as an example of organizationally enabled network, in which women's organizations coordinated some national initiatives, provided social technology outlays and produced a body of knowledge that was effectively disseminated in different forms in online and offline encounters. The scaling up of contention was enabled by the use of flexible, easily personalized action frames, which allowed for creating and sharing messages that were both individualized and well-embedded in the narratives referencing the fight for Poland's independence and resisting the oppressive state.

The question that remains unanswered regards the future. It has become clear by now that while the current government rejected Ordo Iuris' proposal, the struggle over reproductive rights, gender equality and sexual democracy is far from over. Protests facilitated by technological advances allowed for a very effective process of mass mobilization, but will they be conducive to continuous engagement and will they bring

successes in the form of complex, long-term solutions when met with an unresponsive state? Most of the networks that emerged during protests remained active after October 2016 and there are numerous grassroots and organizationally enabled initiatives to strengthen communication and collaboration among different groups, which suggests that this mobilization may result in long-term engagement of many Polish women. At the same time, it is clear that facing a generally closed political opportunity structure, lack of recourses and internal struggles over the definition of the movement's goals, some groups and networks may soon cease to exist.

The question what shape will the Polish women's movement take in the years to come is open; there may be, however, other significant effects of this mobilization. Scholars studying the anti-ACTA protests suggest that while they were initially seen as short-lived and ideologically diverse, they might have been an important factor behind the consolidation of conservative groups in the Polish society, which in turn led to the victory of Law and Justice party in 2015 elections (Koltan 2016). Should we expect a similar development on the left following the mobilization against abortion ban? This view appears to be confirmed by studies showing a pattern of gender differences in political and ideological affiliations among Poles: while men, especially of the younger generation, are among the most socially conservatives clusters of Polish society, young women are the most progressive. This division was also reflected in the composition of the movements in question: while anti-ACTA protests attracted mostly young men, the Black Protests and the All-Poland's Women Strikes gathered mostly young women. The story of Hillary Clinton's defeat in the 2016 presidential elections in the US shows that voting behaviors escape simplistic models and institutional ramifications may play more important role than voters preferences. Still, there is a very real chance that in the case of Poland "the future is female".

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