

# **To Abort or To Be Polish?**

## **Civil Liberties, National Belonging, and Democratic Backsliding in PiS-Era Poland**

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## Abstract

This research examines how Poland's Law and Justice Party (PiS) discursively justified abortion restrictions as part of broader democratic backsliding between 2015-2023. Through systematic discourse analysis of parliamentary debates, election programs, and political statements, I investigate two questions: what role did abortion restrictions play in the erosion of Polish democracy, and how did PiS legitimize the curtailment of reproductive rights as civil liberties? Drawing on theories of liberal democracy, nationalist identification, and existential threat, I demonstrate that PiS transformed reproductive rights from individual civil liberties into national threats requiring state intervention.

Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) and qualitative analysis, four key discursive strategies are revealed: (1) positioning Catholic morality as essential to authentic Polish belonging, (2) framing abortion as demographic threat to national survival, (3) constructing restrictions as tests of national loyalty, and (4) categorizing pro-choice advocates as foreign enemies undermining Polish sovereignty.

These findings contribute to understanding how populist nationalist parties utilize moral issues to justify democratic backsliding, revealing mechanisms through which civil liberties are systematically eroded under the guise of national preservation and cultural authenticity.

## **Author's Declaration**

I, the undersigned, Pearl Ewa Bianco, candidate for the MA degree in Nationalism Studies Program declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography.

I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 3 June 2025

Pearl Ewa Bianco

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To my friends, from Vienna to Italy and far beyond, and to my classmates, thank you for the stimulating conversations, feedback, laughter, and solidarity. Whether it was a word of encouragement, a shared coffee (or beer), or a late-night message, your presence made this journey far more bearable and meaningful.

This thesis is dedicated to the right of choice – the fundamental freedom for all individuals, but in particular for women, to make decisions about their own bodies, lives, and futures. It is written in solidarity with those who continue to fight for reproductive justice in the face of growing restrictions, and in memory of those who have suffered or been silenced when that right was denied.

I realize this account may exasperate or repel some readers; it may also be branded as distasteful.

I believe that any experience, whatever its nature, has the inalienable right to be chronicled.

There is no such thing as a lesser truth. Moreover, if I failed to go through with this undertaking,

**I would be guilty of silencing the lives of women and condoning a world governed by male supremacy.**

Annie Ernaux, *Happening* (2000)

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## 1. Introduction

On October 22, 2020, Poland's Constitutional Tribunal ruled that abortion due to foetal abnormalities was unconstitutional, arguing it constituted discrimination against the unborn and infringed on the right to life, as guaranteed by Article 38 of the Polish Constitution (Wyrok w imieniu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, Act K 1/20, 2020).

This decision, which reduced Poland's already restrictive abortion law to an almost total ban, sparked nationwide protests and international condemnation. In 2024, a bill promoted by the current Tusk government, with the aim to legalize abortion in the first trimester, faced a narrow defeat<sup>1</sup>. This decision underscores the enduring influence of restrictive abortion laws. As a consequence, abortion is currently only legal in Poland in case of (1) an endangerment of the woman's life or health as a consequence of the continuation of pregnancy; and (2) a pregnancy resulting from a criminal act.

The near-total elimination of abortion access in Poland under the Law and Justice Party (PiS) governance (2015-2023)<sup>2</sup> exemplifies a broader phenomenon of democratic backsliding that has transformed the country from a post-communist success story into a case study of illiberal governance within the European Union. While existing scholarship has extensively documented Poland's judicial reforms, media capture, and restrictions on civil society, the role of reproductive rights in the trend of democratic backsliding remains underexplored. This thesis argues that abortion restrictions functioned not merely as conservative social policy, but as a key mechanism through which PiS systematically eroded civil liberties while

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<sup>1</sup> The bill was rejected by the Polish lower house (Sejm) in a 218-215 vote as the PLS, *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* [Polish People's Party], a conservative, agrarian party which is part of the Tusk coalition, voted together with the opposition from PiS, therefore causing the proposal to be struck down (Kość, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this period PiS has both controlled the presidency and the parliament. Currently, only the presidency is still in the hands of the party, as its role has been represented by Andrzej Duda since 2015. On the 1st of June 2025, the second round of the presidential election was scheduled, and PiS-supported, head of the Institute of National Remembrance, Karol Nawrocki won. Since the President of Poland holds veto power, this underscores the continued influence PiS is likely to exert over future government decisions.

legitimizing this erosion through nationalist discourse that positioned such restrictions as essential to national survival and authentic Polish identity.

Unlike classical authoritarian transitions characterized by military coups or revolutionary upheavals, Poland's democratic erosion occurred through legal and constitutional means, often enjoying significant popular support and therefore presents a critical puzzle for understanding contemporary democratic backsliding. The restriction of abortion rights illustrates this pattern: rather than simply imposing authoritarian rule, PiS constructed elaborate discursive justifications that reframed the curtailment of civil liberties as democratic, patriotic, and morally necessary acts of national preservation.

This discursive transformation is particularly striking given Poland's constitutional framework, which formally guarantees religious pluralism and civil rights. How, then, did PiS successfully legitimize policies that effectively subordinated women's reproductive autonomy – a fundamental civil liberty, as I will demonstrate – to collective imperatives rooted in Catholic moral order? And what role did these restrictions play in the broader erosion of Polish democracy?

To address these questions, this thesis develops a theoretical framework that connects scholarship on liberal democracy and civil liberties with theories of nationalist identification and existential threat. Drawing on Bermeo's (2016) conceptualization of liberal democracy, I position access to safe, legal abortion as a civil liberty essential to individual autonomy and democratic governance. Building on Brubaker's (2012) analysis of identity and belonging and Grzymała-Busse's (2015) work on religious nationalism, I examine how PiS constructed “authentic Polishness” through Catholic moral order while categorizing feminist, pro-choice advocates as foreign threats to national identity. Finally, utilizing Hirschberger et al.'s (2016) Multidimensional Existential Threat Model and Knott's (2023) concept of existential nationalism, I analyse how PiS discursively constructed abortion as both a demographic and

symbolic threat requiring state intervention for national survival and continuity. This theoretical synthesis reveals how reproductive rights become transformed from individual civil liberties into collective concerns, legitimizing state intervention through discursive construction of existential threats. The approach contributes to understanding democratic backsliding by illuminating how moral issues serve as vehicles for eroding civil liberties while maintaining popular legitimacy through nationalist appeals.

The thesis proceeds in five main chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 develops the theoretical framework connecting liberal democracy, civil liberties, nationalist identification, and existential threat. Chapter 3 presents the methodological framework, outlining the data sources and analytical approach. Chapter 4 traces the historical and political context, from the role of Catholic nationalism in Poland, the rise of PiS to the abortion regulations of the past century. Chapter 5 presents the empirical analysis, examining four key discursive strategies through which PiS legitimized abortion restrictions (positioning Catholic morality as essential to Polish national belonging, framing abortion as demographic threat to national survival, constructing restrictions as tests of national loyalty, and categorizing pro-choice advocates as foreign enemies). Chapter 6 concludes by synthesizing these findings to demonstrate how moral issues serve as mechanisms for democratic backsliding.

The central argument is that PiS successfully legitimized the erosion of civil liberties by discursively constructing abortion restrictions as necessary for national preservation. Through systematic analysis of political discourse, this thesis reveals how populist nationalist parties utilize moral issues to justify illiberal policies while maintaining democratic legitimacy, contributing to broader understanding of contemporary democratic backsliding in Europe.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter develops the theoretical framework for analysing how PiS legitimises abortion restrictions as part of a broader nationalist project. While existing literature often frames these policies as mere products of religious conservatism (e.g., Mishtal, 2015; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022), I argue that they are more accurately understood as discursively constructed threats to national identity, sovereignty, and demographic survival.

To support this argument, I begin by defining liberal democracy and civil liberties, drawing on key contributions from Bermeo (2016), Bollen (2009), and Naidu (1991). I identify access to abortion as a civil liberty and demonstrate how its restriction under PiS governance exemplifies broader processes of democratic backsliding. I then expand this framework by engaging with scholarship on nationalism and identity, including Brubaker (2000, 2012), Calhoun (2003), Grzymała-Busse (2015), and Friedland (2001, 2002), to examine how national belonging in Poland is constructed through Catholic moral order and processes of political identification and othering. In this discourse, “authentic” Polishness is linked to Catholicism, while liberal actors and pro-choice advocates are cast as foreign or morally illegitimate. Finally, I introduce the Multidimensional Existential Threat (MET) Model (Hirschberger et al., 2016) and Knott’s (2023) concept of existential nationalism to show how nationalist actors construct abortion as both a symbolic and physical threat to the survival of the Polish nation. These frameworks help to illuminate how PiS links reproductive rights not only to moral decay but also to national vulnerability, legitimising illiberal policies as measures of self-defence.

By connecting theories of liberal democracy, civil liberties, nationalist identification, and existential threat, this chapter lays the foundation for my empirical analysis of PiS discourse. It concludes by presenting my research questions and a visualisation that maps the theoretical framework guiding the empirical analysis.

## 2.1 Defining Liberal Democracy

Democracy is broadly understood as a political system in which governance is vested in the people, typically exercised through elected representatives and inclusive decision-making processes. However, as the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project (Lindberg et al., 2014) highlights, there is a distinction between an electoral democracy, and a liberal democracy, which extends beyond mere elections. Despite the fact that the conceptualization of liberal democracy remains contested among scholars, as highlighted Bollen (2009, p. 369), it should not preclude the development of clear operational definitions for empirical research.

He characterizes liberal democracy through two primary dimensions: political liberties and democratic rule. In this regard, the components of political liberties encompass not only fundamental freedoms of expression and association, e.g., of group opposition, but also freedom of media (broadcast and print), and, for my research most importantly, civil liberties, which I will further define in the next subchapter by drawing their connection to reproductive rights. As described by Bermeo (2016), there are further key elements characterizing liberal democracy, such as (1) free, fair, and regular elections; (2) the equal application of laws, therefore the rule of law; (3) pluralism, by ensuring that governance represents various societal interests; and (4) responsive governance, holding elected officials accountable through institutional checks and electoral mechanisms (Bermeo, 2016).

It is crucial to note that democracy and its maintenance are not static, as they can experience democratic backsliding, which Carothers and Press (2022, p. 4) define as “processes of political change in which countries that enjoy a certain level of democracy become significantly less democratic.” In particular, democratic backsliding occurs when a nation that has previously established substantial democratic governance subsequently undergoes a notable deterioration of its democratic framework, characterized by the systematic undermining or elimination of essential institutional mechanisms and procedural standards, resulting in a political system that increasingly deviates from established democratic principles and practices.

Evidence of democratic backsliding in Poland has manifested through several interconnected developments that have eroded the quality of democracy, despite the country initially being viewed as a success story in post-communist democratization (Bernhard, 2021).

Two key factors of this phenomenon in the case of Poland include:

- (1) the erosion and politicization of judicial independence through judicial reforms aiming to increase political control over legal appointments and undermine its independence, checks and balances (Sadurski, 2019);
- (2) the undermining of civil society and independent media through systematic restructuring of public media organizations, therefore reducing the space for civic engagement and dissent. E.g., by removing existing leadership from state-owned radio and television networks and establishing new governing bodies under the direct authority of the Treasury Ministry (Bernhard, 2021; Meijers & Veer, 2019).

This occurred during the coming to power and leadership of PiS, which was characterized by populist nationalist agendas, capitalizing on sentiments of disenfranchisement and a general socio-political climate determined by polarization and division, further contribution to trends of backsliding.

In this regard, judicial and legislative manoeuvres undertaken during the PiS leadership have made legal, safe and choice-based abortion nearly inaccessible in Poland, thereby (1) effectively disregarding women's autonomy and civil liberties; (2) exemplifying unequal application of the law; and (3) undermining liberal democratic principles of equality and freedom through state control and imposition of ideological control over personal decisions.

I therefore argue that the suppression of reproductive rights is an example of curtailing civil liberties, which is a central element of democratic backsliding, as illustrated in Bernhard's argument (2021).

## 2.2 Defining Reproductive Rights as a Civil Liberty

With regard to civil democracy, as discussed in the previous chapter, individual civil liberties constitute fundamental protections that safeguard citizens from governmental overreach and interference by other private actors. According to Naidu (1991, p. 5), these protections can be understood as “the privileges of the individual (in the form of the protection of life, liberty and property) that are to be shielded from encroachments by the government and by other individuals.” They are defined similarly by T.H. Marshall (1992 [1950]), who, when discussing the recognition of individual rights and civil rights, characterizes the latter as essential for individual freedom, comprising liberties like freedom of movement, speech, property rights, and access to justice. It is important to highlight in this regard that the scholarly literature reveals some conceptual distinctions, with some scholars differentiating between civil liberties and civil rights based on their operational character. As Naidu (1991) lays out, while civil rights are understood as affirmative governmental guarantees, civil liberties represent limitations placed upon state power and individual interference. However, these concepts are frequently treated as interchangeable terms or combined into unified frameworks of “civil rights and liberties” in academic discourse.

For liberal democratic governance to function effectively, Naidu (1991) identifies four essential liberties that serve as foundational pillars upon which other democratic freedoms depend: (1) the protection of individual existence and physical security; (2) the autonomy of personal conscience and belief systems; (3) the liberty to express oneself freely; and (4) protection against unjustified governmental intervention. These core protections ensure that citizens can engage in political processes without fear of reprisal or arbitrary state action.

Within this framework I argue that the right to control one's reproductive choices, including access to abortion, are a form of essential liberty necessary for a woman's autonomy and agency. Following the above characterization, this encompasses the liberty for a woman to: (1) protect her existence and physical safety by being able to access choice-based abortion;

(2) be autonomous in her decision regarding the morality and rightness to undergo an abortion; and (3) to be protected from governmental intervention limiting her access to abortion in a safe and legal manner. The importance of this, in particular regarding the first point, is reflected by Fernandez's analysis of the liberalization of abortion on demand (2021, p. 91): "The recognition of women's civil rights radically transforms their life chances."

In fact, when women have legal rights that safeguard their autonomy, it enables them to make informed decisions about their reproductive health without coercion or external pressures. This economic empowerment means that the opportunity cost of an unwanted pregnancy becomes higher: women are more likely to pursue their educational and career goals, and thus, having access to safe and legal abortion aligns with their rights to make choices about their bodies and futures. With regard to this, it is essential to also define reproductive rights.

As Fernandez (2021) and Lebret (2020) lay out, these refer to the legal and ethical principles that safeguard an individual's or couple's ability to make autonomous decisions regarding reproduction. These rights encompass multiple aspects, including: (1) freedom to decide on parenthood, as every individual and couple has the right to determine whether, when, and under what conditions they wish to have children, free from external pressure or discrimination;

(2) access to family planning and reproductive health services, including contraception, fertility treatments, and safe, legal abortion, ensuring that individuals have the necessary information and resources to make informed reproductive choices; (3) the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health; (4) informed consent in reproductive decisions; (5) non-discrimination in reproductive choices; and finally (6), affordability and accessibility.

This concept was formally articulated in the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, which affirmed that individuals and couples have the fundamental right to make informed and responsible choices about reproduction,

including the number, timing, and spacing of their children. These rights align with broader human rights principles such as bodily autonomy, privacy, and access to healthcare. Within the European legal framework, reproductive rights are often examined through the lens of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects private and family life.

However, critiques of European jurisprudence argue that reproductive rights remain insufficiently recognized, particularly in relation to gender perspectives and the specific needs of reproductive health. This results in three distinct categories of reproductive rights, including the right to and not to procreate and to regulate reproductive conditions (which, however, do not encompass the right to regulate a safe and legal access to abortion).

As demonstrated, the key elements of democratic backsliding in Poland concern the curtailing of civil rights and the rule of law, which includes, in my argument, the restriction of abortion rights. This is exemplified by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), which has ruled on cases involving Poland's abortion laws, highlighting how restrictive policies infringe upon women's rights. An example is the case of *R.R. v. Poland* (2011), as a woman was denied diagnostical tests on her foetus and discouraged, and then hindered, from having an abortion: “the authorities in the applicant’s case had failed to comply with their positive obligations to secure her effective respect for her private life.” (*R.R. v. Poland*, App. No. 27617/04, Eur. Ct. H.R., 2011) Another case is *P. and S. v. Poland* (2012), whereas a 14-year-old rape survivor became pregnant and sought access to abortion. The girl faced hostility and procrastination by medical personnel, the unlawful diffusion of her confidential information with the press and anti-abortion activists, arrest, and placement in a juvenile shelter. This resulted in a judgement that stated that “no proper regard had been given to her vulnerability and young age and to her views and feelings.” (*P. and S. v. Poland*, App. No. 57375/08, Eur. Ct. H.R., 2012)

As analysed by Lebret (2020), the ECtHR tends to exercise self-restraint, prioritizing women's rights mainly when their health is at serious risk. Its rulings on abortion emphasize procedural rights – such as access to services and accurate medical information – over substantive protections, often framing the issue as one of health rather than individual autonomy.

Furthermore, the above-mentioned cases highlight how legal and bureaucratic barriers can render abortion rights ineffective and undermine women's self-determination. Finally, it is crucial to highlight that Poland has not complied with any of the ECtHR judgements on this matter (yet).

### 2.3 Religion, Identification, and National Belonging

In the previous two subchapters I have defined civil democracy, democratic backsliding, and the right to access abortion in a legal, safe and choice-based manner as a civil liberty. As I argue that the limitation of access to this right is an example of the curtailing of civil liberties, it is crucial to highlight the manners in which this is legitimized.

In order to characterize the PiS understanding of national belonging, I rely on a theoretical understanding of nationalism which requires moving beyond simplistic binary classifications toward more nuanced frameworks, as I will highlight throughout this section.

Definitions of “national belonging” or “identity” are highly discussed and contested throughout scholarly contributions. For example, in one of his critical responses to Brubaker, Calhoun described the concept of national belonging as a socially grounded sense of solidarity and “identity,” rooted in shared history, culture, and collective institutions (Calhoun, 2003). I argue that religion is a fundamental marker of the latter, too – following the four approaches of the intertwining of religion and nationalism as proposed by Brubaker (2012). Thereby, I maintain that Catholicism functions not merely as a dominant religious force, but as a provider of substantive content for joining state, territory, and culture. Brubaker thereby draws on

Friedland (2002), who highlights how religious nationalism often centres around regulating public and private life – particularly through norms on family, gender, and sexuality – offering a totalising moral order that differs fundamentally from secular nationalist projects. Friedland describes the dynamic of the latter specifically with regards to the reinforcement of restrictive of reproductive rights, which would represent a necessary measure to protect the moral and spiritual integrity of the “people” (Friedland, 2001). I assert that this type of regulation reflects not only the actual 2020 ban on abortion implemented by PiS, but also the general discourse promoted by the party during their 2015-2023 leadership.

But who constitute “the people” that PiS promotes their policies upon, and who are the “outsiders”? Brubaker and Cooper (2000) define identity not as a stable property of individuals or groups, but as an ambiguous and often reified term that collapses important distinctions between self-understanding, external categorization, and groupness. Therefore, when analysing how PiS, and other rightist political actors, have constructed and imposed internal and external categories, it would be more suitable to use the term “identification”, rather than “identity”. In fact, when using this frame, it becomes more clear how the (self-)identification category of “true (Catholic) Polishness” can develop, in contrast with the concept of, e.g., “(liberal) outsiders”, created through political othering and external categorization.

Grzymała-Busse's (2015) elaborates further on this concept, demonstrating how nationalist appeals integrate people, “identity”, and religion to create unified national narratives. This can occur through various mechanisms, e.g. by (1) emphasizing homogeneous national communities defined by ethnicity, language, or shared history; (2) constructing collective identity that fosters pride and belonging by contrasting against external influences; and (3) fusing national and religious goals using religious criteria to define national membership and legitimize policies.

In this regard, the discourse surrounding abortion restrictions reflects the notion promoted by

PiS, that “authentic” Polishness, as their self-identification is understood, is inseparable from Catholic morality. At the same time, advocates for abortion rights are portrayed as outsiders or traitors to the nation and its composing religious morales.

Bobrowicz and Nowak (2021) also examine these polarising dynamics, framing them as an example of Polish “paleoconservatism” (Ashbee, 2000). They highlight how PiS actively resists progressive policies on abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, a resistance that draws on historical narratives and cultural myths rooted in Catholicism to mobilise public sentiment. According to the two authors, this resistance is framed through the much repeated and alleged historical notion that “a Pole equals a Catholic” (e.g., Kriegseisen, 2013, p. 92). Thereby, the interconnection between national and religious identification as fundamental to “authentic” Polish existence is reinforced. This positioning underscores a broader moralizing discourse, in which national policies as moral imperatives are framed as aiming at preserving the country's cultural integrity. Hereby, within the frame of self-identification by PiS, Poland becomes a defender of “Western civilization” (as understood in its Christian roots), against external categorizations, which become perceived liberal encroachments, particularly from the European Union. Identity, from this perspective, is strictly defined, unlike Brubaker's arguments, by clear ethnic, cultural, and religious demarcations that maintain historical continuity while opposing radical societal transformation.

Therefore, I argue that the exclusionary stance of PiS, tied to notions of self-identification and othering, can be used to analyse the discursive framework employed by the party, through which the ban on abortion was legitimized in 2020.

## 2.4 Existential Threat and Survival

Building on the previous section's discussion of religion, identification, and national belonging, this segment examines how PiS constructs existential threats to legitimize the restriction of reproductive rights. I argue that abortion is not only framed as a moral or cultural

concern, but as a threat to the very survival of the Polish nation, drawing on symbolic and demographic registers of nationalist discourse.

To understand this framing, I use the Multidimensional Existential Threat (MET) Model developed by Hirschberger et al. (2016). The authors define existential threat as a perceived threat to the survival of a group or individual, which includes not only physical survival but also the preservation of identity, culture, and values. The MET model conceptualizes existential threats as operating along three axes: (1) individual vs. collective; (2) physical vs. symbolic; (3) past-oriented vs. future-oriented (Hirschberger et al., 2016, p. 3–4). Within this framework, PiS’s nationalist discourse mobilises two key dimensions of collective existential threat: physical annihilation and symbolic annihilation.

First, the threat of physical collective annihilation is evoked through demographic anxieties, e.g., highlighting particularly low birth rates and the decline of the Polish population. In this discourse, abortion is framed as a direct threat to national continuity, undermining the reproductive capacity of the nation and weakening its future viability. As a result, individual reproductive choices are reinterpreted as matters of collective responsibility. Women’s autonomy is subordinated to pro-natalist imperatives, and restricting abortion is justified as necessary for ensuring the long-term survival of the Polish nation, a concept theorized by Yuval-Davis (1996) within her studies on the intersections of nationalism and gender.

Second, the threat of symbolic annihilation refers to the erosion of cultural identity and moral order. In this register, abortion is not only a demographic issue, but a symbolic marker of Western liberal values perceived to undermine Poland’s Catholic heritage and traditional values. Abortion rights are thus framed as “imported” ideologies – alien to “Polish cultural authenticity” – and the push to liberalise them is cast as a form of foreign domination, particularly from the European Union. This narrative positions PiS as the protector of Polish identity and sovereignty against external encroachments.

This discursive logic aligns closely with what Knott (2023) terms “existential nationalism” – a mode of nationalist politics that actively constructs perceived threats to produce a sense of urgency, crisis, and unity. These threats are not necessarily grounded in empirical reality but are discursively constructed to mobilise support for illiberal policies and assert ideological dominance. Therefore, the nationalist discourse promoted by PiS frames abortion not merely as a personal or religious issue but as a threat to national survival and identity. By invoking existential danger – both physical-demographic and symbolic – PiS legitimises its efforts to curtail reproductive rights as acts of national preservation. This framing plays a significant role in how the party justifies the erosion of civil liberties under the broader project of defending the Polish nation – and provides a clear framework for my analysis.

## 2.5 Research Questions

Drawing on the theoretical framework established in this chapter, this thesis addresses two research questions that examine the intersection of reproductive rights, nationalist discourse, and democratic backsliding in contemporary Poland.

**(1)** What role did abortion restrictions play in the erosion of Polish democracy under PiS governance (2015-2023)?

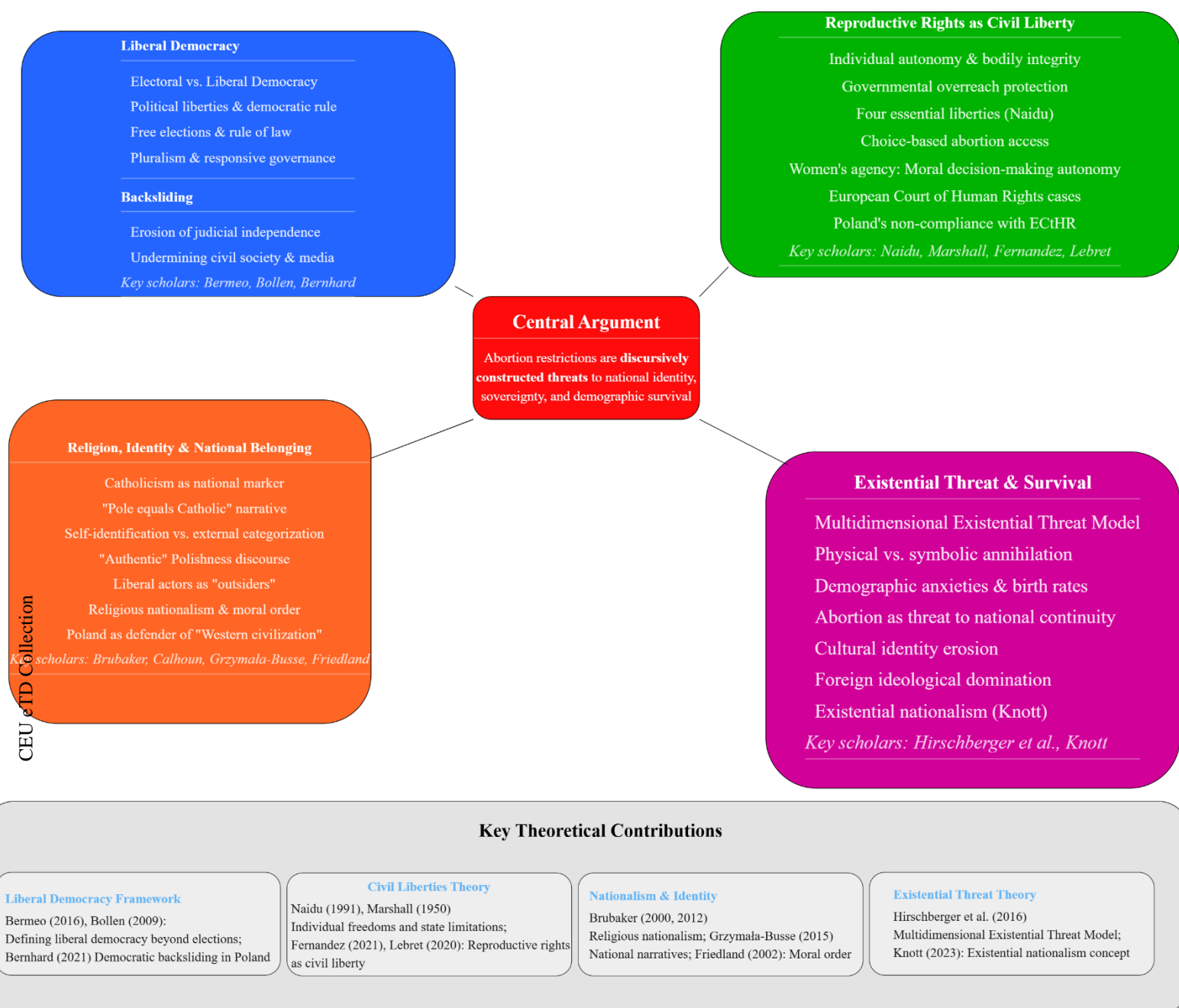
This question examines abortion restrictions as both a manifestation and mechanism of democratic backsliding in Poland. Building on Bermeo's (2016) conceptualization of liberal democracy and Carothers and Press's (2022) definition of democratic backsliding, I investigate how the curtailment of reproductive rights – understood as civil liberties – exemplifies the systematic undermining of democratic principles.

**(2)** How did PiS discursively justify the curtailment of abortion rights as legitimate policy measures?

This question focuses on the discursive strategies employed by PiS to legitimize what constitutes a significant erosion of civil liberties. I examine how PiS constructed abortion

restrictions as necessary and legitimate through four key discursive mechanisms:

- (1) positioning Catholic morality as essential to authentic Polish national belonging;
- (2) framing abortion as an existential demographic threat requiring state intervention;
- (3) constructing abortion restrictions as tests of national loyalty and moral order;
- (4) categorizing pro-choice advocates and external actors as threats to Polish sovereignty and national-cultural integrity.



### 3. Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological framework used to analyse how PiS discursively constructs abortion in relation to national identity and traditional values. My research adopts a qualitative methodology and is grounded in the tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) developed by Ruth Wodak. CDA views discourse as inherently social and ideological, concerned with uncovering how language contributes to the construction and maintenance of power relations. As Wodak (2007, p. 209) explains, “CDA sees language as ‘social practice’ (Fairclough and Wodak 1997), and considers the context of language use to be crucial.” Moreover, CDA aims to expose both “opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control, as they are manifested in language” (Wodak, 2007, p. 209).

Within this tradition, the DHA provides a particularly suitable framework for examining the political discourse of PiS, as it is distinguished by its interdisciplinary and multi-methodical orientation, incorporating diverse forms of empirical data and theoretical context (Wodak, 2007, p. 211). A key methodological strength of the DHA is its four-level model of contextualization, which enables the analysis of political texts not only in their immediate linguistic form but also within their broader sociopolitical and historical frameworks. According to Wodak (2007, p. 211), this includes: (1) the co-text of each utterance or clause; (2) the macro-text or genre of the broader discourse; (3) the socio-political context of the speech event; and (4) the intertextual and interdiscursive relationships to other relevant events and discourses. This multi-level approach enables a nuanced analysis of how PiS situates its restrictive reproductive policies within a broader nationalist discourse that frames abortion as a threat to national identity, sovereignty, and demographic survival. Therefore, by combining textual analysis with historical and sociopolitical contextualization, the DHA facilitates a deeper understanding of how language is used strategically to legitimise ideological positions and produce exclusionary narratives.

The empirical material analysed in this thesis consists of official political texts and public statements by PiS, specifically: (1) the 2014, 2019, and 2023 PiS electoral programs for the Sejm (Polish Parliament) and Senate; (2) Sejm protocols, speeches, and interpellations by PiS members of parliament (MP); (3) statements made by PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński during interviews published on the official PiS website.

These texts were selected via purposive sampling, based on their thematic relevance with regard to abortion, gender, nation, and Catholic values. And, most importantly, they represent key venues through which PiS communicates its political vision, justifies policy decisions, and shapes public opinion.

The data was collected through an iterative, multi-stage process, following qualitative research practices. First, I conducted general exploratory readings of journalistic and political commentary. E.g., I used international sources in English such as *Notes of Poland*, *EUobserver*, and *Visegrad Insight*. Then, by aiming at specific pro-PiS outlets in Polish language (e.g., *TVP Info*, *Telewizja Republika*, and *wPolityce.pl*), I continued my research by using an in-browser translation function. This initial media scan was not part of the primary dataset but instead helped me identify dominant narratives and recurring key used in both support and critique of PiS abortion policy. Second, drawing on insights from my initial readings on these journalistic sources, combined with my theoretical framework and existing scholarly literature, I developed a list of analytical keywords. These reflect the core themes of my theoretical lens – such as national belonging, moral order, and sovereignty – and were subsequently translated into Polish for the discourse analysis.

Examples include specific abortion-related terms, such as: *aborcja* (abortion), *przerywanie ciąży* (pregnancy termination), *ochrona życia poczętego* (protection of unborn life), *cywilizacja śmierci* (culture of death), and *świętość życia* (sancity of life) – but also other terms that would form ideological and identity markers: *ideologia gender* (gender ideology),

*tradycyjne wartości* (traditional values), *wartości chrześcijańskie* (Christian values), and *polska tożsamość* (Polish identity).

Then I used the Polish designation of the above terms to conduct targeted searches on Google, the official PiS party website, and the website of the Polish Sejm. This ensured that I captured a range of relevant excerpts in their original language and in politically significant contexts, which I then translated into English using an in-browser translation function by Google.

Then, as selection criteria, I decided to only retain texts that explicitly addressed abortion, gender, or so-called “Polish national values,” or implicitly referred to the latter. To analyse the selected texts, I used the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA, which through its approach to manual coding enabled the use of schemes aligned with CDA principles. I developed a coding scheme based on deductive categories derived from my theoretical framework and initial media scans, including:

- (1) Identity and Belonging (e.g., references to Catholicism, Polish heritage, “true Poles”);
- (2) Survival and Demography (e.g., birthrates, existential threat, continuity of the nation);
- (3) Sovereignty and the West (e.g., EU “interference”, imported values, national autonomy);
- (4) Moral Order and Tradition (e.g., gender roles, family, sin, moral decay).

These categories mirror the analytical dimensions developed in the theoretical framework, enabling direct linkage between discourse elements and broader nationalist narratives.

However, at the same time, I remained open to inductive insights emerging from the data. As I analysed the texts, I refined my codes and subcodes to capture patterns in rhetorical strategies, intertextual references, and implicit ideological framings. This approach allowed me to trace how nationalist discourse portrayed abortion not merely as a policy matter, but as a

symbolic threat to Poland's cultural, moral, and political order – as imagined by PiS during their 2015-2023 leadership.

Since my research relies exclusively on openly available political texts and speeches by public figures, there are no ethical risks concerning data privacy or human participation. However, I acknowledge certain methodological limitations. For example, translation inaccuracies may have affected the subtleties of rhetorical nuance, although I attempted to mitigate this through contextual cross-checking. Similarly, despite Google Translate becoming more and more advanced, in a few cases a literal translation from Polish language would not make sense – and in this case, I allowed myself to correct the sentences to ensure grammatical correctness and ensure a smooth understanding for potential readers. Finally, the analysis is limited to official party discourse and does not include media interpretations, public reactions, or the perspectives of Polish women obtained through interviews, which may limit the scope of findings to “elite” political discourse. Nonetheless, this approach enables a deep understanding of the discursive logic employed by PiS to frame abortion as a nationalist issue and to legitimate restrictions as acts of national protection.

## 4. Historical and Contextual Overview

In this chapter, I will examine the historical and political foundations that underpin contemporary debates over reproductive rights in Poland. I will trace the context of Polish national belonging through three interconnected developments: (1) the transformation of Polish nationalism from civic to Catholic foundations, (2) the rise of PiS and its alliance with the Catholic Church, and (3) the complex history of abortion legislation in Poland.

### 4.1 The Making of Catholic Nationalism in Poland

The relationship between Catholicism, politics, and nationalism in Poland represents one of the most intricate and enduring examples of religious-national fusion in modern Europe. As Zubrzycki (2006) observes, when discussing the concept of founding myths common to every nation, in Poland this is the myth of the country's “intrinsic Catholicity” (Zubrzycki, 2006, p. 34). This intertwining is observed by Grzymała-Busse (2015), too, who interprets the adherence to the dominant religion as synonymous with being part of the Polish nation, thereby conferring moral and political legitimacy on churches. However, this association was not predetermined but emerged through specific historical processes that transformed Polish conceptualizations of nationhood over centuries.

The evolution of Polish national identity began with what Zubrzycki terms “civic protonationalism” in the Polish-Lithuanian Republic during the 17th and 18th centuries. During this period, the concept of nation was primarily political rather than ethnic or religious, which referred the nobility who were most importantly united by their loyalty to the state, therefore, “Polishness was in principle blind to ethnic or religious background” (Zubrzycki, 2006, p. 37). This civic understanding of nationhood underwent a profound transformation following the Partitions of Poland in the late 18th century – three territorial divisions of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1772, 1793, and 1795 by Russia, Prussia, and Austria. With the disappearance of the Polish state from the map of Europe for 123 years, the political foundation for nationhood and national belonging became increasingly difficult to sustain. As Zubrzycki

underscores, the nation was reimagined as a moral and cultural entity rather than a political one, and thus no longer defined by territory or borders (Zubrzycki, 2006). This pivotal moment marked the beginning of a reorientation toward a more ethnically defined nationalism. Within this domain, the Romantic period proved crucial for cementing the connection between Polish national identity and Catholicism. E.g., as Romantic poets played a fundamental role in this transformation, depicting Poland as the “Christ of nations” (Zubrzycki, 2006, p. 45) – a martyred and suffering people destined for resurrection and the salvation of Europe.

Religious symbolism became central to nationalist narratives, appropriated with patriotic meanings, often used to represent the nation's suffering and struggle for freedom. This “Romantic messianism” (Zubrzycki, 2006, p. 69) created a powerful cultural framework that would shape Polish identity for generations to come. The association between Polishness and Roman Catholicism was further codified in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through deliberate political action. Roman Dmowski, considered the father of modern Polish nationalism, played a central role in forging what became known as the “*Polak-katolik*” (Polish-Catholic) identity, which equated Polish national identity with Catholicism. This resulted in the marginalization of religious and ethnic minorities, especially of Jewish people, who were seen as threats to the homogeneous Polish Catholic nation, and had a serious impact on the conception of the Polish nation (Zubrzycki, 2006, p. 74).

After World War II, Poland underwent significant border shifts and population changes, leading to an ethnically and religiously homogeneous society dominated by Catholicism, becoming “one of the most homogenous countries in Europe.” (Bilska-Wodecka, 2005, p. 345) This condition was reinforced by state policies favouring a monoethnic, monocultural identity over the previous multi-national, multi-religious character.

The Communist period (1945-1989) represented a crucial chapter in the Church-nation relationship, paradoxically strengthening the Church's position as guardian of Polish national

identity. As Oliner (1980, p. 64) documents, the Church's ability to maintain influence under Communist rule was unique compared to religious institutions in other socialist states, as historically, Poland's lack of “indigenous” political institutions due to external domination led the Church to occupy a critical role in preserving Polish identity and culture. However, the early Stalinist phase (1949-1956), saw intense repression of the Church, as Oliner notes that “Church estates were confiscated and Caritas, the large Catholic welfare organization, was destroyed” and the clergy “were imprisoned on various pretexts” (Oliner, 1980, p. 55). However, this repression failed to diminish the Church's cultural authority – instead, it reinforced the historical narrative of the Church as defender of Polish identity against foreign domination. A significant shift occurred in the 1970s, when the Church began to explicitly support workers' rights movements, in particular during the regular strikes and the food price-rise strikes, positioning itself as a defender of the populace against state oppressions (Oliner, 1980, p. 62). Zubrzycki emphasizes this, too:

[...] the Roman Catholic Church took on its “traditional” role of guardian and defender of the nation against a “foreign” state. Imposed from above and from abroad, the political regime and its elite were regarded as illegitimate by the bulk of Polish society. (Zubrzycki, 2006, p. 60).

Key events solidifying the Church's role as guardian of Polish national identity during this period include the Great Novena organized by Cardinal Wyszyński in the 1950s-60s, the election of the Polish Pope John Paul II, and his historic 1979 visit to Poland. The Solidarity movement, an independent trade union movement, also drew heavily on religious themes and imagery in its challenge to Communist rule.

The fall of Communism in 1989 presented the Catholic Church with both new opportunities and challenges. Žuk and Žuk (2019) observe that the Church, as it previously aligned itself with opposition movements during the communist era, sought to reassert its position within the new political context, which lead, they claim, to tensions between religious institutions and an increasingly secular society. In fact, the immediate post-Communist period

saw the Church attempting to translate its moral authority into direct political influence, which became focal points of public life. This tension was particularly evident in the constitutional debates of the 1990s. Zubrzycki (2006, p. 87) describes how during the debates leading to the 1997 Constitution, the controversy surrounding the preamble represents the clash between these notions: “the Center-Left insisted that it be defined in the most inclusive terms, and therefore proposed “We, Polish citizens,” whereas the Roman Catholic Church and the Right would only settle on the rather exclusive “We, the Polish Nation””<sup>3</sup>.

The definitive version of the Constitution, published on the 2nd of April 1997, became a compromise: “We, the Polish Nation - all citizens of the Republic”. (Constitution of the Republic of Poland, 1997)

## 4.2 The Rise of PiS

Poland's contemporary political system emerged from the transformative period following the fall of communism, with its Constitution establishing key democratic principles: “sovereignty of the Nation; independence and sovereignty of the state; democratic state ruled by law; civil society; separation of powers; social market economy and inherent dignity of the person” (Garlicki, 1999, as cited in Jaskiernia, 2017, p. 103). The post-communist political landscape from 1989 to 2015 was characterized by coalition governments, with no single party achieving outright dominance, as experienced by many modern democracies. This pattern reflected a multiparty system that necessitated compromise and negotiation in governance. During this period, Poland established itself as a success story of post-communist transition, developing democratic institutions and embracing market reforms while integrating into European structures (Jaskiernia, 2017, p. 103). However, over time, Poland's political system evolved toward what Putintsev (2023) characterizes as a “two-and-a-half-party system” dominated by PiS and Donald Tusk led PO, *Platforma Obywatelska* [Civic Platform]. This

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<sup>3</sup> This also mirrors the tension between ethnic and civic visions of nationalism, as Zubrzycki analysed in an article published in 2001.

transformation became particularly evident in the past fifteen years, with these two parties and their leading electoral blocs controlling “from 79 to 82% of the Sejm seats in four elections in a row” (Putintsev, 2023, p. 20). The stability in seat distribution reflected an unusual tendency toward two-party dominance rarely observed before in Poland's political history. This evolution was accompanied by significant ideological shifts within the party landscape, as the decline of the left-wing forces allowed these two parties to capture “disappointed supporters of social democrats” (Putintsev, 2023, p. 24). The polarization between the two, with PiS standing for “traditional Polish values and sovereignty” and PO aligning with “democracy, civil rights and a united Europe” (Putintsev, 2023, p. 22), intensified following the 2010 Smolensk air disaster<sup>4</sup>, which solidified their rivalry into a central feature of Polish political discourse. Finally, the 2015 parliamentary elections marked a decisive turning point in Poland's political trajectory, as PiS won an outright majority, breaking the established pattern of coalition governance.

As Jaskiernia (2017, p. 111) points out, the electoral success of PiS must be understood within the broader socioeconomic context of the time. While Poland had demonstrated strong economic performance following the 2008 global financial crisis, issues like government-imposed austerity, youth unemployment and the lack of job opportunities in the rural areas (especially in Eastern Poland) allowed PiS to gather broader support beyond their usual, conservative electoral bastions.

Żuk and Żuk (2020) highlight that the election of PiS in 2015 marked a new phase in Church-state relations. These were strengthened significantly, as PiS could find in the Church a pivotal partner in promoting a vision of Poland grounded in traditional values. This “alliance” becomes not only evident with regards to reproductive rights, but also in the domain of

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<sup>4</sup> On 10 April 2010, a Polish Air Force plane crashed near Smolensk, Russia, killing all 96 people on board, including President Lech Kaczyński and top political, military, and religious figures. They were en route to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre, a Soviet-ordered execution of nearly 22,000 Polish officers and intelligentsia by the NKVD in April–May 1940.

Lech Kaczyński is the former leader of PiS and twin brother of the current PiS leader, Jarosław Kaczyński. The brothers founded the party together in 2001.

LGBTQ+ rights, the protection of which worsened during the 2015-2023 PiS leadership, as the party reduced the effectiveness of the anti-discriminatory protections granted under EU law (Górski, 2020).

As underscored by Żuk and Żuk (2020, p. 575), PiS has justified this because so-called “gender ideology” would “create ‘moral chaos’ in society” and be “a new form of Marxism and another embodiment of leftist ideologies.”

As I have discussed in my theoretical chapter, following its electoral victory, PiS initiated a series of controversial reforms that many scholars have characterized as democratic backsliding. E.g., Sadurski (2020) observes that the systematic transformation of the Constitutional Tribunal represents a paradigmatic example of this process, transforming it “into a willing helper of the government’s will” (Sadurski, 2020, p. 327). Besides the restructuring of this pivotal body, the success of PiS’s political project has been underpinned by a distinctive ideological framework and strategic approach – positioning itself as representing the “real Poles” against what it portrays as corrupt and disconnected elites<sup>5</sup> (Bill & Stanley, 2020, p. 383). Furthermore, this populist narrative has been complemented by economic and welfare policies designed to address social inequalities, in particular with regards to more vulnerable groups, as highlighted before by Jaskiernia (2017). This approach is characterised by Yatsyk (2020) as “biopolitical populism”, describing it as a distinctive style of political communication that “focuses on bodily issues, including family and gender policy, sexual behavior [...]” and “is inherently performative and as such it appeals to emotions”, thereby directly connecting with “the people” (p. 148). In her work, she argues that this serves to “other” political opponents and undermine fundamental democratic values.

Nonetheless, despite its populist rhetoric, PiS maintains a highly centralized and hierarchical structure, with limited grassroots engagement and decision-making concentrated

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<sup>5</sup> As I observed, this is exemplified by the fact that Donald Tusk’s name, who served as a Prime Minister from 2007 until 2014, is mentioned 84 times in the PiS election program of 2014, leading to the first PiS cabinet 2015.

around its long-time leader, Jarosław Kaczyński. According to Pytlas (2021), the party prioritizes short-term electoral gains over internal participation, reflecting a gap between its democratic claims and its top-down practices. This centralized model places Kaczyński at the core of PiS's political strategy and ideological direction, who is often referred to as the party's architect, as he exerts substantial influence over policy decisions and party messaging. Furthermore, a figure who is particularly close to him and the party – although not an official political figure –, is the controversial Catholic priest and Redemptorist, founder and director of the conservative Radio Maryja station<sup>6</sup> Tadeusz Rydzyk. As outlined by Żuk and Żuk (2019), “Father Rydzyk” uses his platforms not only contributing to the election of relevant PiS MPs and MEPs, but also to lobby for specific policies promoted by PiS in the Sejm, as he effectively influences “not only the Church authorities in Poland, but also the Polish government.” (Żuk & Żuk, 2019, p. 10).

During the period from 2015 to 2023, PiS led four cabinets. From 2015 to 2017, Beata Szydło governed backed by the United Right coalition (PiS, Solidary Poland, and Poland Together). She was succeeded by Mateusz Morawiecki, whose first and second cabinets (2017–2019 and 2019–2023) maintained the same coalition.

In December 2023, after Morawiecki’s short-lived third cabinet failed to win a vote of confidence, Donald Tusk (PO) returned as Prime Minister.

### 4.3 Abortion in Poland

In 1932, Poland became the second country in the world – after the Soviet Union – to legalize abortion in cases where the woman’s life or health was at risk, or in instances of incest or rape. While the Soviet Union, under Stalin, re-criminalized abortion in 1938, Poland took a different path: in 1956, the law was liberalized further to allow abortion on both medical and social grounds, including “difficult life circumstances”. In practice, the decision was effectively

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<sup>6</sup> His media concern also includes the Catholic newspaper *Nasz Dziennik* [Our Daily] and the television station *Trwam* [I Persist].

left to the woman, and the reform is often cited as a landmark moment in Eastern Europe's reproductive policy. Yet, as Fidelis (2008) argues, the reform was neither a triumph of women's rights nor a sign of progressive liberalization – rather than recognizing abortion as a right, the legislation instrumentalized reproductive control to address economic and demographic concerns. Journalistic discourses at the time frequently warned against the dangers of overpopulation (Glombik, 2023, p. 267), discouraging “population growth without adequate improvements in the standard of living” (Fidelis, 2008, p. 209). In this context, the Polish state, but also female socialist activists, promoted a pronatalist ideology focused on the “quality of the citizens,” rather than their “quantity,” thereby framing women's reproductive labour as a national asset rather than an individual choice (Fidelis, 2008, p. 214).

Crucially, the implementation of the 1956 law placed enormous power in the hands of physicians, many of whom were morally or ideologically opposed to abortion. Access remained stratified by class, as women without the means to afford private abortions – costing more than the average monthly income of an entire household<sup>7</sup> – often turned to illegal and unsafe procedures<sup>8</sup>. This legacy of conditional and uneven access to abortion has set the stage for future struggles, as abortion remained framed not through the language of civil rights, but through utilitarian and paternalistic lenses.

With the fall of communism in 1989, Poland entered a new phase, which Szelewa (2016) describes as a “re-masculinization” of Polish political life, e.g., through the reinstatement of traditional gender roles, supported by the Church's elevation as a symbol of national resilience and moral authority. In this context, the 1993 “abortion compromise” – which restricted legal

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<sup>7</sup> Polish women seeking abortions abroad pay an average of €500 in countries like Germany, Austria, and the Czech Republic – excluding travel and accommodation costs. Given that 50% of Polish women earn less than 4,000 PLN (approximately €940) per month (WBJ, 2025), this raises important questions about the role of class, which my thesis was unable to explore in depth.

<sup>8</sup> It is crucial to highlight that illegal, unsafe abortion procedures have not been consigned to history. As in 2016, only around 1,000 legal abortions were reported, while estimates for illegal (unreported) procedures ranged from 50,000 to 200,000 (Hussein et al., 2018, p. 11).

abortion to cases of rape, incest, severe foetal abnormalities, or threats to the mother's life – marked a pivotal retreat from reproductive autonomy. As I will further analyse in the empirical chapter of this research, the Church's influence permeated legal language, with terms as “foetus” increasingly replaced by emotionally charged phrases such as “unborn child”, equating abortion with murder and embedding this perspective in both public discourse and policy (Szelewa, 2016, p. 744). This ideological shift also reconfigured perceptions of women's bodies, becoming “biological reproducers of the nation” (Yuval-Davis, 1996), framed as crucial for the future of the Poland and thereby linking individual reproductive choices to broader narratives of national survival and moral decay. Finally, as Szelewa highlights, “conscience clauses” allowed medical professionals to refuse abortion services, further institutionalizing religious doctrine within healthcare systems.

The intertwining of the Church with abortion policy-making is further highlighted by Zielińska et al. (2024), as religion is not simply inserted into secular debates, but is rather fused with them, blending Catholic dogma with appeals to human rights, science, and national sovereignty to create a hybrid discourse that is both spiritual and secular, as I will demonstrate in my empirical analysis, too. As a result, according to Zielińska et al., the Polish abortion debate cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the Church's role as a powerful discursive actor shaping the very terrain of legitimacy and reason.

Even though this work does not allow to dive further into the role taken by the various resistance movements, it would be unfair to discuss the state of reproductive freedom in Poland without mentioning them. The most important movement has been *Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet* [All-Poland Women's Strike], as they co-organized the so-called Black Protest actions in 2016, and then the even larger protests in 2020 and 2021, also known as *Strajk Kobiet* [Women's Strike], drawing international attention to the Polish situation (Gwiazda, 2024, p. 15).

Finally, it is crucial to briefly discuss the findings published in 2024 by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, an UN treaty body which concluded that Poland violated multiple human rights guaranteed by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which the country ratified.

The Committee found that the Polish abortion law and practice violates provisions on (1) equality and non-discrimination (in particular against women in rural areas); (2) elimination of prejudice; (3) non-discrimination and equal rights in access to health care; (4) equal rights to decide on the number and spacing of children, and access to information, education and means to enable the exercise of these rights. These findings reflect another commentary by Młynarska-Sobaczewska (2021, p. 179) on the 2020 Court judgement, as it violates both “the right to privacy and the prohibition of inhuman and degrading treatment.”

These alarming findings underscore that the issue is not only one of legality, but of structural violence, where restrictive laws exacerbate health risks and entrench gender inequality.

## 5. Empirical Analysis

This empirical chapter examines how PiS discursively constructs abortion restrictions as essential to national belonging, national survival, and moral order, thereby legitimizing what constitutes a significant erosion of civil liberties within Poland's democratic framework. Building on the theoretical foundation established in Chapter 2, I demonstrate how PiS transforms reproductive rights from civil liberties into threats requiring state intervention for national preservation. My analysis reveals four interconnected discursive strategies, divided by subchapters, through which PiS legitimizes restrictive abortion policies as democratic backsliding unfolds:

(1) Christian Values at the Core of National Belonging, highlighting how Catholic morality is positioned as fundamental to authentic Polish national belonging, creating processes of identification and external categorization;

(2) Demographic Threats and the Nation's Survival, showing how demographic anxieties are mobilized through the MET Model's framework of physical collective annihilation (Hirschberger et al., 2016), positioning abortion as a direct threat to national demographic survival and reproductive capacity;

(3) Abortion Restriction as a Symbol of National Belonging and Moral Order, analysing how abortion restrictions are constructed as “tests” of national loyalty and moral coherence, effectively transforming women's reproductive autonomy – understood here as a fundamental civil liberty – into perceived threats to collective identity and symbolic survival;

and (4) Framing the Political ‘Other’, investigating how external actors, particularly the European Union and feminist movements, are framed through processes of external categorization as ideological enemies seeking to impose foreign values and undermine Polish sovereignty.

The chapter concludes by presenting a visualization of the discursive strategies employed.

## 5.1 Christian Values at the Core of National Belonging

This section examines how PiS frames Catholic morality as core to Polish national identity. Drawing on Brubaker's (2012), Friedland's (2001 and 2002), and Grzymała-Busse's (2015) insights into nationalism as a form of political, religious and cultural identification, I show how abortion is positioned not simply as a moral issue, but as a symbolic threat to the construction of "authentic Polishness" through Catholic moral order by PiS. This discursive linkage reinforces the notion that the restriction of abortion rights is necessary to protecting this moral-cultural core, characterized by notions of Christian values.

As observed throughout the material analysed, PiS has repeatedly rooted its political discourse in a Christian moral framework, emphasizing the by them perceived Judeo-Christian heritage as a core element of Polish national identity. I have observed that the party consistently references religious traditions to justify both social policies and cultural stances, presenting Catholic teachings as both morally authoritative and historically legitimized:

We owe the Judeo-Christian tradition, the second after the Greek tradition as the foundation of Western civilization, to the belief that man's duty is to be responsible for the world around us. (PiS, 2019, p. 6; similar phrasing found in: PiS, 2023, p. 12)

One can be Polish without being Catholic or a believer, but it is impossible to accept that Polishness can exist without the heritage brought by the Catholic Church. (PiS, 2019, p. 14)

These statements highlight a dual logic: while technically acknowledging religious pluralism and even atheism, as guaranteed by the Constitution, PiS draws a symbolic boundary around Polishness by framing Catholicism as the essential carrier of moral and national identity.

References to Pope John Paul II<sup>9</sup> are particularly significant in this context: "Let's follow the words of John Paul II: You have to be fearless and tenacious in defending your family." (Łatas, 20.03.2014).

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<sup>9</sup> Born Karol Józef Wojtyła, he was the head of the Catholic Church from 1978 until his death in 2003. He was the first non-Italian Pope since the 16th century and a key figure for his advocacy for human rights. His symbolic support for Polish independence solidified the Church's position as a moral and somewhat national leader (Davies, 2005, p. 494).

On June 4, 1997, in Kalisz, the Holy Father John Paul II pointed out: [...] A civilization that rejects the defenceless [is] barbaric, even if it had great economic achievements, or technical, artistic, scientific. (Gawron, 11.04.2024)

This discursive linking of Polish national identity with Catholic moral teaching is particularly effective because it resonates with historical narratives where Catholicism served as a repository of national identity during periods of foreign domination, as highlighted in the historical overview. Therefore, we can deduce that the invocation of John Paul II as both religious leader and national figure reinforces the notion that abortion restrictions protect not only unborn life but Polish identity itself.

In fact, speakers in the Sejm occasionally reference God and frame abortion restrictions as upholding divine moral law – which is questionable, considering that the Polish state is de-facto secular, and mentioned earlier with regards to the Constitution: “Help us so, Lord God Almighty, to all Members of this House, Members of the Republic of Poland. Amen.” (Mrówczyński, 12.04.2024)

However, as a justification, a key discursive strategy attempts to universalize Christian moral positions by claiming they apply regardless of religious belief:

[...] we are a wisely conservative nation [...] advocating the most important value – once again I will emphasize: regardless of whether we believe in God or not – for human life. (Bogucki, 17.04.2024)

These framing positions religious values as objective moral truths rather than faith-based perspectives, attempting to broaden their appeal beyond explicitly religious constituencies.

It also creates a particular conception of Polish identity as inherently conservative and pro-life:

Today we can appeal also to the preamble of the Polish constitution, in which we say that we, the nation, both those who believe in God and those who share this faith, we were in favour of good, truth and beauty. (Bogucki, 12.07.2024)

Religious morality is therefore consistently tied to national identity, with the Catholic Church framed as both a moral authority and a guardian of Polishness. For example, PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński emphasizes that “the Church must always defend life,” and that this defence is “the

foundation on which its science is based” (Kaczyński, 20.05.2021). The implication is that there is an organic link between Poland's religious traditions and its political and constitutional order, and that moral stances on issues like abortion are therefore not only doctrinal but civilizational. This, however, represents an ideological and subjective perception, as, as highlighted, this does not reflect the actual secular spirit of the Polish Constitution.

However, as if to deny this, while PiS relies heavily on religious rhetoric, it attempts to manage the optics of church–state relations by denying any formal collusion. Kaczyński insists there is no “alliance of the throne and the altar” (Kaczyński, 20.05.2021), framing the relationship instead as one of “friendly cooperation” (Kaczyński, 20.05.2021). This distinction serves two purposes: it reassures secular critics while simultaneously reinforcing the legitimacy of religious influence on public policy.

Besides the strategic deployment of religious authority to support abortion restrictions, discourse used by PiS MPs reveals a scientific intertwinement, too, thereby claiming a consensus:

Medicine and science have clearly stated: human life begins at conception. This is a scientific fact, indisputable<sup>10</sup>. Everyone should know it: Catholic, atheist, Orthodox, Muslim, or Jewish. (Girzyński, 23.04.2012)

This blending of scientific and religious authorities creates a powerful rhetorical combination that attempts to position abortion opposition as both scientifically sound and morally righteous, appealing to multiple forms of authority simultaneously. Hereby, defending life becomes not just a religious duty but a patriotic act. Religious principles are nationalized, and any deviation from them is cast as an erosion of Polish sovereignty and identity. The overlap between Church doctrine and PiS policy is thus framed as both natural and necessary, bolstering the legitimacy of restrictive laws on reproductive rights – whereas this moral framework, when applied to

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<sup>10</sup> This point is actually disputable. While most branches of Christianity hold that a foetus is fully human from conception, Judaism views this process as gradual, considering a full person only at birth, and Islam teaches that ensoulment occurs at 120 days (four months).

contemporary issues such as abortion and euthanasia, is not only theological but civilizational: “We remember the terrifying totalitarian experiments [of the] 20th century and we approach with fear any attempts to make man the master of life and death.” (PiS, 2019, p. 6-7)

This draws a direct line from secular, liberal ideologies to totalitarian atrocities, framing modern progressive values as potentially catastrophic social experiments. Thus, Christian values serve a dual function in PiS discourse: legitimizing current policies and creating a moral opposition not only to the tragic past events of occupation and foreign domination, but also drawing an analogy of the latter to the external values, perceived as ideological threats and impositions which in their understanding stem from liberal Europe and are in contrast with a Christian understanding of the circle of life:

Euthanasia, eugenics, experiments on the human genome, abortion on demand – the modern world has almost unlimited possibilities of interfering with human nature. (PiS, 2019, p. 7)

## 5.2 Demographic Threats and the Nation’s Survival

Building on Hirschberger et al.’s (2016) Multidimensional Existential Threat Model and Knott’s (2023) concept of existential nationalism, this section explores how PiS constructs abortion as a demographic threat to the nation’s continuity. Here, reproductive policies are framed as a matter of national security and survival, with declining birth rates and “foreign” moral influences depicted as existential threats. I analyse how such narratives legitimise state intervention into reproductive choices by equating women’s fertility with national endurance.

In fact, demographic anxieties form a central motif in PiS narratives, often framed in alarmist tones to justify pro-natalist and family-centred policies. The language emphasizes national survival, cultural continuity, and the socioeconomic implications of a declining birth rate:

To make matters worse, fewer, and fewer children are being born in our country. [...] The dramatic fertility rate places our country in the inglorious 212th place out of

224<sup>11</sup> countries in the world. (PiS, 2014, p. 107)

By casting demographic decline as a national emergency, PiS positions family policy as a patriotic duty rather than a matter of individual rights or social support. The rhetoric connects low birth rates to emigration and socioeconomic insecurity, implying that material conditions must be reshaped to incentivize childbirth:

Over 2 million Poles left the country in search of work, seeing no prospects for starting a family or buying their own apartment. (PiS, 2014, p. 107)

Importantly, the party also merges this narrative with ideological critiques of liberalism and feminism. The so-called “gender ideology” is blamed for reducing the inclination to form traditional families:

The spread of gender ideology is also dangerous for the family and parenthood in Poland. [...] It contributes to the spread of attitudes that are not conducive to starting families and having children. (PiS, 2014, p. 14)

The implication is that not only material<sup>12</sup> but also cultural forces threaten national survival. This framing allows PiS to present its demographic agenda not just as economic policy, but as a cultural defence mechanism. In fact, another distinctive aspect of the abortion debate in Poland is how it connects to anxieties about national demographic survival:

Ladies and gentlemen, I want to emphasize that life is an overriding value and must be protected from its inception, that is, from conception. Today, in times of demographic crisis, this life for our country should be even more important than ever. (Wojtysek, 09.07.2024)

These framing positions abortion restrictions not merely as moral imperatives but as necessary for national continuation in the face of demographic decline. The concern with population sustainability becomes intertwined with abortion policy, constructing liberal reproductive rights as threatening to national survival. Such fears are profoundly tied with ideas and expectations

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<sup>11</sup> The commonly accepted number of countries in the world is 195 (193 UN member states + 2 observer states: the Vatican and Palestine). It is unclear which dataset was used by the election program writer(s).

<sup>12</sup> Despite PiS having introduced pro-family policies such as a higher child benefit, extended parental leave, increased childcare availability, and flexible work options to encourage higher birth rates and support parents, the fertility rate remained below replacement level.

of historical victimization and national survival throughout periods of different foreign influences, as briefly underscored in the previous segment.

For example, the support for abortion equating with a legacy of totalitarianism, claiming it originated with Lenin (and a general Soviet influence) as part of a broader moral collapse aimed at destroying traditional values and human life from conception.

Do you who are [in favour of] abortion know whose successors you are? Who came to mind first to legalize the killing of unborn children? Vladimir Lenin. (Kurowska, 16.05.2024)

In 1933, after becoming chancellor in the German Reich, Adolf Hitler legalized the killing of German unborn children who were or may have been sick. In this way he sought to create a pure, biologically strong, so-called race of masters. Over time, he perfected eugenic techniques. [...] When the war came to Poland, the same Hitler introduced abortion in Poland [...]. (Kurowska, 16.05.2024)

As illustrated, Kurowska uses emotionally charged rhetoric and historical associations in her speech to equate abortion with totalitarian crimes, claiming it continues a legacy of dehumanization and moral decay not only initiated by Lenin, but also brought forward by Hitler. She hereby uses fear appeals, binary moral framing, and apocalyptic warnings as a strategy, her argument portraying abortion not as a medical or social issue but as a direct threat to civilization. It is crucial to pay attention at the manipulatory use of the word “eugenic” here. In fact, a particularly prominent concern of PiS MPs regards the performing an abortion in cases of foetal abnormality, which is frequently termed “eugenic abortion” in the parliamentary discourse used by PiS:

Over 90% of abortions carried out in Poland are eugenic – i.e. they are performed due to the likelihood of a serious illness of the child. [...] This is similar to solutions from the most difficult times of the 20th century – the time of Nazi Germany [...]. Many examples from that time show how dramatic solutions they were, they were, in fact, manifestations of genocide. It was during the Third Reich that people were eliminated because of their impairment. (Sobecka, 31.05.2012).

This framing invokes historical atrocities to position such abortions as morally equivalent to genocide, reflecting how historical memory is strategically deployed to strengthen legal arguments against specific abortion provisions. Even though, technically, the decision to avail

of the right of pregnancy termination in case of foetal malfunctions would be of “eugenic” nature<sup>13</sup>, the discursive use PiS makes of it is highly problematic and manipulative, and for this reason up to scrutiny.

### 5.3 Abortion Restriction as a Symbol of National Belonging and Moral Order

This section turns to how PiS discursively constructs the acceptance of abortion restrictions as a “test” of national belonging and moral order. Rather than addressing abortion as a matter of health or individual choice, PiS situates it within a framework of national identification rooted in Catholic moral order, as demonstrated in the first segment. In this framing, abortion becomes a symbolic and cultural threat, which allows PiS to reframe women’s civil liberties not as part of civil democracy but rather as threats to the moral coherence of the nation.

As previously analysed, in the standardized and recurring discourse used by PiS, abortion is not merely a moral or medical issue – but is clearly framed as a cornerstone of Polish national belonging. By referring to abortion in cases of foetal abnormalities as “inhuman” and likening it to “eugenics in Poland” (Kaczyński, 18.04.2016), key party figures elevate the abortion debate to a symbolic struggle over the soul of the nation. This is further exemplified by the phrase “You definitely need to stop killing children who have various malformations” (Kaczyński, 18.04.2016), which uses emotionally charged language that positions abortion as a direct assault on innocent life and, by extension, on national morality. This framing creates a binary in which the rejection of abortion becomes synonymous with Polishness, while support for reproductive rights is portrayed as foreign, dehumanizing, or even genocidal. It also

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<sup>13</sup> Eugenics, as a scientific idea, originated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and developed into a biopolitical strategy aiming at improving human heredity through methods like selective breeding, sterilization, and abortion of foetuses deemed genetically “unfit”. While eugenics was widely discussed in Europe, only a few countries implemented it as policy, among which Nazi Germany, yet practices like prenatal diagnostics and selective abortion have become normalized in many European states today (Felder, 2022).

First-wave American feminist Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood, was among the first to support “eugenic” practices in 1919 – which however, when respecting the original context, referred rather to what we understand today as conscious family planning (Leszczyński, 2018).

marginalizes women's perspectives by entirely centring the foetus within the moral narrative, reinforcing a form of biopolitical nationalism that conflates population control with cultural survival. Similarly, throughout the parliamentary debates, references to the Polish Constitution emerge as a central discursive strategy linking abortion restrictions to national identity. Constitutional principles are invoked not merely as legal arguments but as expressions of collective national values:

The Polish constitution in art. 38 clearly states that the Republic of Poland provides every person with legal protection of life. This fundamental right implies the state's obligation to defend life at every stage, especially in the prenatal period. (Matecki et al., 06.09.2024)

This constitutional framing constructs abortion restrictions as fundamental to Polish legal identity, positioning them not as policy choices but as inherent to the nation's foundational principles. The invocation of respected legal authorities reinforces this connection:

Adam Strzembosz, former president of the Supreme Court, says 'The submitted project on conscious parenthood is, in my opinion, highly immoral, contrary to scientific knowledge and human rights'. (Wojtysek, 09.07.2024)

The frequent citation of Constitutional Tribunal rulings from 1997<sup>14</sup> and 2020 serves to present abortion restrictions as settled constitutional matters rather than contested political positions. This discursive strategy effectively frames abortion liberalization as not merely changing policy but undermining national legal identity.

Throughout the debates on the drafting of a new law in 2024, one of the most fundamental disagreements between PiS MPs and MPs of other parties, and the representatives of the invited NGOs, regarded the competing conceptualizations of when life begins and, consequently, whose rights deserve priority. As discussed, PiS MPs consistently frame abortion as an act of violence against an unborn person. This framing is explicit in statements such as:

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<sup>14</sup> In 1997, the Polish Constitutional Court struck down a law amended in 1996, which aimed at allowing abortion on social grounds.

“For us, the foetus is life from day one” (Sójka, 11.06.2024) and “Abortion is killing, and killing is never OK, because killing always takes the other's life.” (Kurowska, 16.05.2024)

This perspective positions the foetus as a rights-bearing subject deserving legal protection from conception. Opposition to abortion access thus becomes framed as a moral imperative to protect the vulnerable. In contrast, progressive voices emphasize women's personhood and autonomy, as one citizen participant (without any political or activist affiliation) asserted:

It is simply fatal how difficult it is to swallow this pill [for the people she refers to as 'a group representing opponents of abortion', author's note]. A pill containing the fact that I am more important than my own foetus, that my decision is more important than the decision of my partner, doctor, parents. (Filipiak, 16.05.2024)

This latter statement reframes abortion not as violence against a foetus but as an expression of a woman's right to bodily autonomy, as a civil liberty. In this framing, the fundamental disagreement about personhood – whether primary personhood resides with the foetus or the pregnant woman – becomes evident. While Kaczyński acknowledges that “the law cannot require heroism” (Kaczyński, 20.05.2021), suggesting a minimal concession to women's suffering, he quickly downplays the severity of restrictions by asserting that “proper knowledge” and legal exceptions for maternal health still exist.

Similar words are found in a statement published by President Andrzej Duda on the presidential website, whereas Duda acknowledges the emotional and physical toll on women but offers limited legal remedy – proposing only the inclusion of “lethal defects” as a basis for abortion (Duda, 30.10.2020). This rhetorical manoeuvre normalizes the near-total ban on abortion by casting it as reasonable, informed, and even protective. Women's autonomy is thus undermined while being framed as intact – a strategy of containment rather than outright denial.

By presenting abortion as “evil” and its prohibition as a civic virtue, PiS cloaks its restrictive policies in the language of national preservation and moral necessity. This justifies the narrowing of rights not as oppression, but as cultural loyalty. In fact, in the discourse

employed by PiS, traditional values – particularly around gender and family – are defended as timeless and foundational, while rights-based arguments are portrayed as relativistic, foreign, or dangerous. The family is conceptualized as both a natural and civilizational unit:

The family is irreplaceable, regardless of the perspective – religious or secular; in its monogamous and permanent form, it is the foundation of our civilization. (PiS, 2019, p. 11; similar phrasing found in: PiS, 2023, p. 14)

The framing employed by PiS positions family not just as a social unit but as the cornerstone of Polish national belonging. By explicitly linking this to reproductive policies, language of protection and privilege is used to counteract feminist critiques, which are framed as threats:

Motherhood [...] should be treated not as a burden, but a distinction and a privilege. The rank of fatherhood must also be raised. (PiS, 2014, p. 14; identical phrasing found in: PiS, 2019, p. 11)

Although women's health and dignity are mentioned in the various election programs – for instance, through free medications and perinatal care – these are framed as complementary to, rather than in conflict with, anti-abortion positions: “We consider the killing of unborn children unacceptable, while at the same time defending the dignity and health of women.” (PiS, 2023, p. 15) This creates a moral hierarchy in which foetal life is prioritized, and women's rights are only valid as far as they align with traditional motherhood, emphasizing moral absolutes:

Ladies and gentlemen, what I have listened to so far has unfortunately been the praise of abortion performed by many people, as if abortion were a good thing, but abortion is a very great evil. Why? Because abortion is killing a human. (Kurowska, 09.07.2024)

Let's switch our thinking to protecting children, to protecting lives, and not for abortion, because it is a shame for us Polish women to fight for the possibility of killing our own children. This is a great shame. (Kurowska, 09.07.2024)

This moral framing constructs abortion not as a matter of bodily autonomy as a civil liberty but as a moral failing, particularly for women as potential mothers – who otherwise are framed and perceived as threats. The use of the word “shame” specifically targets women's decisional autonomy, suggesting that support for abortion rights conflicts with “proper” feminine and national identity, understood within the framework of a traditional, Christian moral view of life

and of a woman's duties. Similarly, a notable pattern in the debates is the explicit hierarchical valuation of competing rights claims: "The good of the woman must be assessed, both in my opinion and in the opinion of the Polish tribunal, lower than the good of the developing child." (Wojtyszek, 09.07.2024)

This hierarchy explicitly subordinates women's autonomy to foetal rights, constructing a legal and moral framework where women's rights are conditional rather than absolute. This pattern appears throughout discussions of rape exceptions, health indications, and other circumstances where women's and foetal rights might conflict.

In this framing, women's autonomy as understood by PiS, risks being harmed by doctors who might perform a pregnancy termination (here called "gynaecological violence")<sup>15</sup>: "You also said that gynaecological violence is used in Polish hospitals against women. This should be prosecuted." (Wojtyszek, 09.07.2024)

This reflects tensions between paternalistic protection and individual autonomy permeate the discourse on women's reproductive rights:

I also don't want the following generalization – that [all] women want abortion in Poland. Ladies, you want this abortion – those of you who come here and speak out [those invited to the committee debate, author's note]. The women I talk to don't want abortion at all. Why? Because they want to give birth to their children normally. (Kurowska, 09.07.2024)

This pattern constructs women as needing protection from abortion rather than access to it, positioning restrictive policies as ultimately beneficial to women despite limiting their choices. The claim to speak for "real," "normal," "true Polish" women against liberal, feminist, "foreign" abortion advocates creates a false dichotomy between women's interests and reproductive rights – and a constructed mutual exclusivity of "Polishness" and "feminism." Therefore, we can find women's autonomy being contested, as the dominant framing positions restricting abortion access as "protecting" women rather than limiting their rights:

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that women are not criminally liable for undergoing an unlawful abortion; instead, medical professionals who authorize or perform the procedure may face penal consequences, including imprisonment.

By defending the life of a conceived child, we also protect the mother woman from the dangerous consequences that abortion causes in her body. (Girzyński, 23.04.2012)

The argument justifying the restriction of abortion rights arises from patriarchal, paternalistic discourses reconfiguring abortion restrictions as beneficial to women rather than limitations on their reproductive autonomy. This occurs through competing narratives of vulnerability, with foetal vulnerability typically being prioritized over women's vulnerability: fetuses are consistently described as “innocent,” “defenceless,” and “weakest.” For example:

This is the murder of an absolutely innocent and extremely defenceless human, who is conceived and yet unborn child. (Girzyński, 23.04.2012)

Following this argument, when women's vulnerabilities are acknowledged, they are frequently framed in ways that support abortion restrictions rather than access. Numerous statements emphasize alleged physical and psychological risks of abortion, particularly referencing to so-called “post-abortion syndrome”<sup>16</sup> as an allegedly significant health concern:

Mental disorders caused by abortion are referred to as post-abortion syndrome. They are as dangerous as the physical consequences of termination of pregnancy, but often women do not undergo treatment and are left alone with this serious mental injury. (Girzyński, 23.04.2012)

By emphasizing these purported health risks, the discourse creates a medical justification for abortion restrictions that prioritizes women's wellbeing while simultaneously limiting their reproductive choices. This framing shifts focus from rights-based arguments to medico-scientific claims about women's health interests, though these claims often lack rigorous scientific support. Another example is the claim, without statistic foundation, that positions abortion as harmful to women: “I met many women who have had an abortion and always regret it very much.” (Kurowska, 16.05.2024)

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<sup>16</sup> Neither the WHO, nor the American Psychiatric Association classify “post-abortion syndrome” as an actual disorder. Medical and scientific experts generally conclude that abortion does not increase the risk of mental health problems compared to continuing an unintended pregnancy.

This paternalistic framing suggests that restricting abortion safeguards women from making decisions they would later regret, positioning the state as protector rather than oppressor of women's civil liberties. Furthermore, the narrative used reveals interesting linguistic patterns in how women are referred to in abortion discourse. Women seeking abortions are frequently referred to as “mothers” rather than women:

Mothers and fathers become parents when the child has just been conceived. So, I think that this project presented by you [the cause supported by NGOs supporting reproductive freedom, author's note] is categorically to be rejected. (Wojtyszek, 11.06.2024)

This linguistic choice emphasizes a particular conception of womanhood centred on maternity, suggesting that motherhood begins at conception rather than birth. This discursive strategy effectively positions abortion as a rejection of an already-established maternal role rather than a reproductive decision, limiting the conceptual space for understanding women's identity outside of motherhood. Furthermore, I argue that PiS employs highly cynical and emotionally manipulative tactics by labelling women seeking an abortion as “mothers.”

Hereby, women seeking abortion and/or advocating for it as their civil liberty “became the enemy of democracy in Poland.” (Rezmer-Płotka, 2022, p. 95)

#### 5.4 Framing the Political ‘Other’

A key discursive strategy in PiS rhetoric is the construction of external enemies – particularly the European Union and international feminist movements – as ideological interferences threatening Polish moral order. In the previous segment, I have analysed this type of external categorization (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000) with regards to women who might potentially undergo an abortion or advocate for it. In this segment, I will demonstrate other cases of PiS framing external threats. The party positions itself as “the only guarantee that this moral revolution, which is the norm in the [European] Union, will not win in Poland,” with the aim to not let “[...] traditional values be destroyed.” (Kaczyński, 06.04.2017). This defensive stance constructs a moral border around Poland, suggesting that foreign values are incompatible

with the nation's traditions. In doing so, PiS turns reproductive rights into a sovereignty issue. Feminism and EU liberalism are portrayed as invasive ideologies seeking to unravel the moral fabric of Polish society, as also highlighted by Bobrowicz and Nowak (2021). Kaczyński's word-choice of "revolution" in the above statement implies chaos and disorder, legitimizing authoritarian, or exceptional measures to prevent intrusions to moral order, e.g., the 2020 Constitutional Court ruling and the neglect of the various rulings on matters of abortion restrictions ruled by the ECtHR.

As PiS portrays Poland a victim of historical aggression, e.g. by policies imposed by past totalitarian regimes such as the Nazi rule first and the communist one after, it also highlights the country being a sovereign actor needing to defend itself against "contemporary" threats. These are, as mentioned, both internal (women and progressive advocates) and external. It is crucial to highlight the deep intertwinement of this understanding with the country's historical memory of war, occupation, and totalitarianism:

Poland's history has many times painfully taught us that the defence of human beings and the provision of their safety may require heroism. (PiS, 2023, p. 12)

The militarization of citizenship, where public officials and soldiers are celebrated for risking their lives, reinforces a collective ethos of heroism through sacrifice and vigilance – necessary to ensure sovereignty and to protect the nation from perceived external threats:

Those who, as soldiers, firefighters, policemen or other public officials, are ready to make this supreme sacrifice every day can count on the state's respect, gratitude, and full support. (PiS, 2019, p. 7)

Once again, the idea of internal sovereignty is also tied to moral and cultural autonomy, and thereby through the interplay with religion:

We want to maintain [the Church's status] and we believe that attempts to destroy and unjustly attack the Church are dangerous to the shape of social life. (PiS, 2019, p. 15)

This implies that certain external threats are not merely military or political but also moral and symbolic. By spiritual authority, as in the above statement, PiS constructs a defensive stance

that legitimizes resistance to EU norms or liberal international expectations. This significant discursive pattern emerges in how abortion liberalization is framed as an external imposition rather than domestic policy evolution. The comparison to communist-era policies further reinforces this framing:

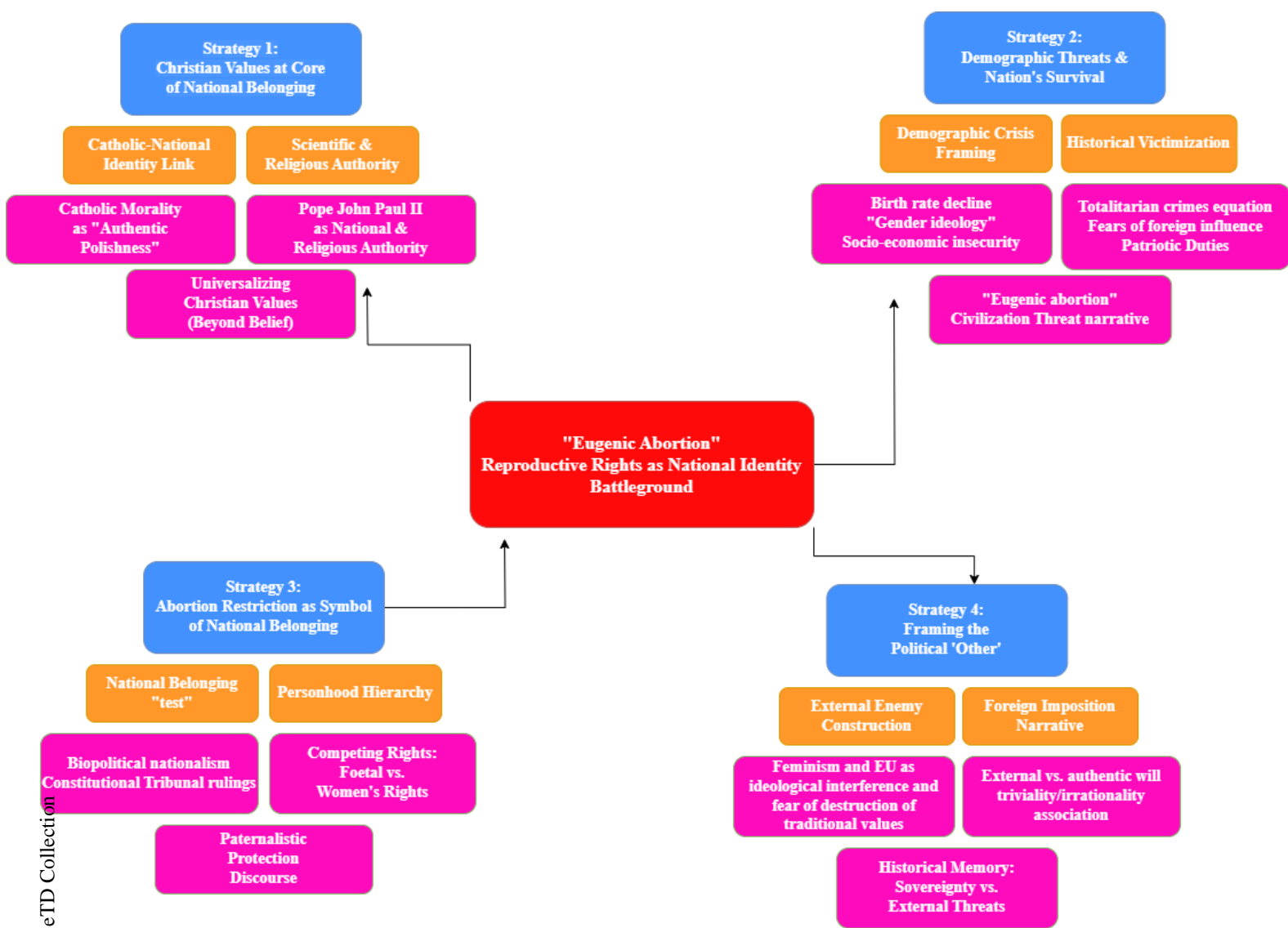
After all, they [advocates for abortion rights, author's note] disagree with the Polish *raison d'etat* and withdraw Poland into the dark period when the communists ruling Poland in 1956 adopted the abortion law without any restrictions. (Gawron, 11.04.2024)

This creates a discursive tension between externally imposed values and authentic national will, positioning abortion restrictions as expressions of Polish sovereignty against foreign ideological influence, be that of past, communist characterization or from the EU: “The pursuit of federalization of the European Union is deprivation Polish sovereignty. Striving to deprive Poland of sovereignty is state treason.” (Matecki, 15.05.2024)

Simultaneously, feminist actors are belittled and ridiculed. PiS MEP (and former MP) Joanna Wiśniewska, for instance, mocks feminist “agendas” by highlighting proposals which she deems as absurd, e.g.: “abolishing the division of toilets into women's and men's,” and “abortion on demand, [...] universal gender quotas” (Wiśniewska, 08.03.2017). The aim of ridiculing functions to delegitimize feminism by associating it with triviality, irrationality, or foreign extremism. The juxtaposition of “rational” cooperation with the Church and the maintaining of “traditional,” Polish values and the derision of feminist demands underscores a gendered hierarchy of credible voices in the public sphere.

Finally, this highlights the perceived imposition of Western cultural feminism in post-communist Eastern Europe, as highlighted by Ghodsee (2004). She argues that it clashed with socialist legacies prioritizing class over gender and contends that NGO-led feminism, aligned with neoliberal values and market structures, failed to challenge underlying economic inequalities, and instead facilitated capitalist expansion.

This underscores the need for a “new,” context-specific feminism.



## 6. Findings and Discussion

This research addressed two core research questions concerning the role of abortion restrictions in democratic backsliding under PiS governance (2015–2023) and the discursive strategies used to legitimize those restrictions. I found that PiS strategically reframed reproductive rights not as civil liberties, but as existential threats to national survival and sovereignty. In doing so, abortion restrictions became both a manifestation and mechanism of democratic backsliding, undermining liberal democratic norms, marginalizing dissent, and consolidating executive power. To justify these measures, PiS deployed a discursive framework grounded in Catholic morality, demographic alarmism, national loyalty, and sovereignty-based resistance to external actors such as the EU and feminist movements.

These strategies reveal how PiS constructed abortion policy as not only morally legitimate, but essential to national identity and survival, thereby normalizing authoritarian measures within a nationalist defensive narrative.

### 6.1 Key Findings

The abortion restrictions implemented by PiS should be understood not simply as an expression of religious conservatism, but as a strategic tool of democratic backsliding. Rather than treating reproductive rights as civil liberties, PiS reframes abortion as an existential threat that demands state intervention to protect the nation. Through four key discursive strategies, the party constructs a narrative that links abortion to national identity, security, and sovereignty.

First, PiS embeds Catholic values into the very definition of Polishness, presenting opposition to abortion as a marker of national loyalty. Religious figures, particularly Pope John Paul II, are invoked to legitimize state restrictions, while scientific and religious rhetoric are blended to broaden the discourse's appeal. Second, abortion is framed as a demographic crisis, threatening the country's survival amid declining birth rates. By drawing on Poland's history of foreign occupation and totalitarian rule, PiS equates abortion, especially in cases of foetal abnormality, with eugenics and genocide. Third, the party positions abortion policy as a test of

national loyalty and constitutional identity. In this framework, foetal rights are elevated above women's autonomy, and restrictive policies are presented as protective rather than punitive.

Paternalistic language, such as calling women seeking abortions “mothers,” is used to reinforce this narrative. Finally, PiS portrays external actors, such as the European Union and feminist movements, as ideological enemies seeking to undermine Polish sovereignty. By invoking the memory of historical invasions, the party constructs a defensive stance against what it calls foreign cultural imperialism, thereby delegitimizing feminist voices as alien and irrational.

## 6.2 Implications

I believe that the findings of my empirical chapter contribute significantly to understanding how reproductive politics become embedded in broader narratives of national identity and democratic governance. The Polish case demonstrates how abortion discourse serves as a vehicle for articulating competing visions of national identity in not only post-communist, but generally nation-building contexts, while simultaneously facilitating systematic democratic backsliding through the erosion of civil liberties.

In this regard, this empirical foundation supports theoretical perspectives that view reproductive politics as sites where national boundaries are negotiated, religious values are politicized, and gendered citizenship is constructed. My analysis reveals a distinctive form of national and nationalistic values that merges religious doctrine with national identity, positioning opposition to abortion as constitutive of “authentic” Polishness. This challenges simplistic understandings of Polish abortion politics as merely religious conservatism, instead revealing how religious, constitutional, demographic, and sovereignty concerns intertwine to create a powerful discursive framework that transcends conventional left-right divisions (as

demonstrated also by the failing of the bill promoted by Tusk's coalition to re-install abortion rights<sup>17</sup>).

Crucially, my findings demonstrate how the MET Model operates in practice, showing how PiS constructs both physical existential threats (through demographic anxieties and survival narratives) and symbolic existential threats (through cultural and moral decay discourse) to legitimize the systematic restriction of civil liberties. This represents a clear case of existential nationalism that transforms individual reproductive rights into perceived collective threats, thereby justifying illiberal policies as necessary acts of national self-defence. The restriction of abortion rights thus exemplifies broader processes of democratic backsliding, where fundamental civil liberties are eroded through nationalist discourse that reframes rights as threats to national survival and authentic identity.

From a more practical perspective, my findings highlight the challenges faced by reproductive rights advocates in Poland. By understanding how abortion has been constructed within broader narratives of national identity and democratic legitimacy, advocates might develop more effective counter-narratives that engage with these deeper cultural and democratic concerns rather than focusing solely on rights-based arguments that may lack cultural resonance.

My analysis also suggests that international pressure regarding abortion rights may inadvertently strengthen nationalist resistance by reinforcing perceptions that reproductive rights represent foreign impositions, as evidenced by PiS's strategic use of EU criticism and disregarding of ECtHR rulings to bolster their narrative of external ideological threats.

In this regard, in my opinion, more effective strategies might involve emphasizing how reproductive autonomy aligns with other valued aspects of Polish identity, such as democratic self-determination, constitutional principles of individual liberty, and protection of vulnerable

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<sup>17</sup> Although the current Cabinet of Donald Tusk is rather centre-right, than in any way left-leaning.

citizens, including women in crisis pregnancies. Such approaches could potentially reframe reproductive rights within Polish democratic identity rather than as foreign impositions, thereby challenging the nationalist monopolization of patriotic discourse while defending both reproductive autonomy and liberal democratic principles.

### 6.3 Further Research and Limitations

While my empirical chapter provides rich insights into parliamentary discourse, it does not capture the full spectrum of abortion discourse in Poland, particularly grassroots and activist perspectives that may offer alternative framings. Further research could explore how ordinary citizens negotiate these competing discourses in their own understandings of abortion, and how social movements have attempted to reframe abortion outside the dominant national-religious paradigm. Importantly, future research should also incorporate feminist theoretical frameworks and gender analysis to examine women's lived experiences and agency within these restrictive discursive environments. Such research could investigate how women navigate, resist, or internalize nationalist narratives about their reproductive roles, and how gendered citizenship is experienced at the individual level rather than merely constructed at the discursive level. This would provide crucial insights into the gap between official discourse and women's actual experiences, potentially revealing forms of resistance, adaptation, or alternative meaning-making that challenge dominant framings.

Additionally, comparative research examining how abortion is discursively constructed in other post-communist contexts could help identify distinctive elements of the Polish case versus broader regional patterns. Such research could illuminate how reproductive politics intersect with post-communist transition processes and nation-building projects across Central and Eastern Europe.

## 6.4 Final Reflections

As Poland continues to navigate these tensions, exemplified by the 2025 Presidential election of PiS-supported candidate Karol Nawrocki, and as similar dynamics emerge in other democratic contexts, understanding the discursive mechanisms through which reproductive rights become sites of nationalist contestation remains crucial for both scholarly analysis and democratic practice.

I hereby believe that my research indicates that the intersection of gender, nationalism, and democratic governance positions reproductive rights as a continuing barometer of liberal democracy's health in an increasingly polarized political climate.

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