

---

## SPECIAL REPORT ON POLAND:

# Exorcising the Past, Imperiling the Future

## WHAT'S BEHIND POLAND'S CONSERVATIVE TURN?

By Barbara Crossette

**I**N THE AUTUMN OF 2005, NOT LONG after one of the most conservative parties in Poland unexpectedly emerged from an election with enough legislative seats to form a right-wing coalition government, some like-minded Polish members of the European Parliament mounted an exhibition at a parliamentary building in Strasbourg. The show was called, innocently, “Life and Children in Europe,” but it was shocking. Most distressing to some who saw it were photographs of children in Nazi concentration camps juxtaposed with images of fetuses and a damning quote from Mother Teresa, an implacable foe of abortion until her death. The link between abortion and the crimes of Hitler was obvious.

Ana Gomes, an outspoken Portuguese Socialist member of the European Parliament (MEP), went with two Belgian colleagues to the exhibition, determined to remove several particularly offending panels. In an e-mail exchange in August 2006, Gomes said, “They tried to equate women who abort with Nazi crimes. Two colleagues and I decided to go into action.” A scuffle ensued, and the relevant parliamentary committee was called in to

settle it. The peacemaker, a Socialist MEP from Poland, ordered the controversial panels removed. “She was savaged in the Polish media,” Gomes recalled. “We had to give interviews all over to support her.”

Months of campaigning followed by Poland’s new government, which engaged battles that Western Europe thought had long ago been won by voices of moderation. Poles would call for, among other things, the restoration of the death penalty, an end to support for stem cell research and no movement on strengthening gay rights at a European level. To Krzysztof Bobinski, director of the Warsaw-based pro-European Union foundation Unia i Polska (the Union and Poland), it seemed the European Union’s largest new member was choosing to move in an opposite direction on social issues from the “old” E.U.

“I think we went into the period of freedom after 1989 with a kind of liberal consensus—liberal in terms of free-market economics and also liberal in terms of morals and manners,” Bobinski said during an interview in Warsaw during September 2006. In 1989, a relatively open election in Poland led the way to the collapse of single-party communist rule across Central and Eastern Europe. Nearly two decades later, Bobinski said, the current government and Poland’s powerful Roman Catholic church may not be signaling the early death of liberal

Poland, “but there hasn’t been an attempt made like this since 1989.”

Poland was on a spoiler trajectory before last year. On the eve of its 2004 entry into the European Union, which brought Poland out of the European cold for the first time in generations, Heather Grabbe of the Center for European Reform in London described the country as “the E.U.’s new awkward partner.” (*Bulletin of the Center for European Reform*, February/March 2004.) The issues then were different, mostly budgetary and procedural. Poland was under a government led not by the religious-conservative right but by former communists. But the sense that a nationalistic Poland had the capacity to be difficult for the sake of being difficult was already a concern. Now, a broad assault on social issues dear to “old” Europe intensifies this worry.

At the European Union’s headquarters in Brussels, in its parliamentary chambers there and in Strasbourg and among nongovernmental organizations and research institutes across Europe, this combatively conservative Poland is seen as a potential problem not only for Poles. With 40 million people, a reasonably strong economy—getting stronger within the E.U.—and an illustrious if often tragic history, Poland appears ready and willing to lead a societal retreat in Europe. It can call on support from other new E.U. members (and pockets in some older E.U.

---

**BARBARA CROSSETTE** is the former foreign correspondent and U.N. bureau chief for the *New York Times* and is researching global reproductive health issues for the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

member countries) that share its conservative Catholic, nationalistic views. Widespread damage could result if the trend away from liberal reproductive and sexual health policies continues and is reflected in European aid to projects in the developing world—something similar to the Bush administration's global war on condoms. Beyond Europe, Poland is often part of a group of United Nations members resisting significant commitments to the reproductive rights of women, despite international agreements. [The growing power of conservative coalitions within the United Nations is exposed in a new book, *Born Again: The Christian Right Globalized*, by Jennifer S. Butler, a Presbyterian minister who directs Faith in Public Life, [www.faithinpubliclife.org](http://www.faithinpubliclife.org).]

The news from Warsaw is not encouraging. From right to left, politicians and analysts say there is no major political group in Poland willing or able to battle the government on these social issues. Women's rights—let alone sexual rights—are not priority subjects, even in the liberal private media. “You look at news programs on these private TV stations,” said Danuta Przywara, vice president of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights in Warsaw (during an interview with the author in Warsaw, September 2006), “they are all liberal, and they are openly struggling against the government. But if you watch their reports on women's issues, they would speak in language that implies this is not serious at all, [that] it's child's play.”

During an interview at her offices in September 2006, Wanda Nowicka, director of the Polish Federation for Women and Family Planning, explained pithily the dilemma she sees: “This society is Catholic, but this society is not antichoice,” she said,

citing low birth rates and the continuing practice of abortion, however much it is restricted or driven underground. “But the society is not fighting.”

The bottom line is this: The church in Poland ultimately wants a total ban on abortion and has made this single issue a *sine qua non* in its relationship with elected governments, a payback for church support for the anti-communist

attitudes and characteristics that shape social policies. Ethnically, Poland is nearly 97 percent Polish. In religion, between 90 percent and 95 percent of the country's people regard themselves as Roman Catholic, even if only nominally. Add to that an uncommonly catastrophic history that can still gnaw at Polish trust in contemporary Europe—and be used by politicians to drum up a narrow nation-



**The Catholic hierarchy has led protests against abortion reform. Here, an antiabortion activist holds a rosary as the prochoice Women on Waves campaign arrives aboard the Dutch ship Langenort in 2003.** © REUTERS/FORUM/LUKASZ GLOWALA/PA, 2003

opposition before communism collapsed in 1989. The church won its first big victory with a restrictive abortion law in 1993, but that was not enough. It now wants the Polish constitution amended to protect life from the moment of conception, and it has a willing partner in the current government.

On the other side, men and women who are prochoice are having trouble finding a way to stop the juggernaut. So far, they have not found a winning strategy, the necessary institutional strength or an effective collective voice.

The Poles are a singular society and out of that singularity flow many of the

alism. A thousand years ago, this was a kingdom with nascent cosmopolitan cities, magnificent castles and gilded halls. By the end of the 18th century, it was a country that had disappeared from the map, partitioned by three continental empires: the Russian, Prussian and Austro-Hungarian.

A heady period of restored independence began in 1918 and, despite Soviet attempts to reassert power in Poland in the 1920s, the Polish republic survived in one form or another until the Nazi German invasion of 1939. In 1944, about 200,000 Poles who took up arms to try to restore at least a free Warsaw in the

waning weeks of the war were slaughtered by the Germans, as the Soviet Army stood by and waited to pounce on the ruins. Four decades of imposed communism, capped by martial law, followed. All in all, the 20th century was bloody for Poland, with millions of lives lost and most families touched by violence and fear.

Communism may have crumbled politically by 1990, but the lingering effects of the era are still playing out in Polish society, often in cruel ironies. One of these is the decline of women's rights.

"You have to remember one very important thing," said Adam Kozie, of the Helsinki Foundation in Warsaw. "We used to live in a communist country which made everybody equal. So you can say we

had the power to keep the campaign going, women went from abortion on demand to almost no legal abortion at all. The 1993 law, with later modifications, allows for abortions on medical, genetic and criminal grounds, but requests are frequently denied.

Wanda Nowicka, in addition to directing the Federation for Women and Family Planning, heads the secretariat of ASTRA, a network of sexual and reproductive rights advocates in Central and Eastern Europe. She said democracy has certainly brought some setbacks.

"My generation of women and many others would never believe in the '80s that this was possible, to lose a right which we had for many years," she said. "The feder-

Catholic and were antichoice. They made this gift to the church and supported this legislation. At the same time, there were some others, more liberal, [but] who didn't see this issue as a priority. They didn't support this legislation, but they wouldn't die to be against this legislation."

"At the time there had been many protests," she recalled. "There were 1,300,000 signatures collected against the restriction of abortion, but that was ignored by the parliament. So it showed that there were problems with our democracy, and there still are. In this particular issue, the politicians do not really represent the position of the society. The society is practicing abortion. Access to contraception and sex education is still very limited and very

**The church in Poland ultimately wants a total ban on abortion and has made this single issue a *sine qua non* in its relationship with elected governments.**

already have equality. This is the paradox of the situation: The former system provided this, and took so much pride in it and used it in their PR struggle against the West, in issues like freedom of abortion. For abortion, it was simple. It took 10 minutes. And you had women working in the fields hand-in-hand with men, doing many other heavy jobs, for a similar close-to-nothing payment. Some people still remember that. So it's very difficult to find the proper words and expressions to reach those people who in their imagination are really tired of this stupid communism, this communist past."

In expunging the communist past, the prevalence of abortion has been a major target, not just on religious grounds. Abortion became the leading form of birth control across the Soviet bloc (except in Romania)—not a perfect situation, even most prochoice people would agree. Abortion could easily be made a symbol of what Central and Eastern Europe had to get rid of, along with command economies, political repression and the curbing of civil rights and free expression. In Poland, where a conservative church

was established in 1991, when there was the hottest debate regarding abortion in Poland, which eventually ended up in the introduction of one of the most restrictive legislations in Europe. So unfortunately our federation hasn't succeeded to stop this process. For us at that time it was a real shock to end up in the situation of having this restrictive legislation after having almost 40 years of liberal legislation in Poland."

"I would like to strongly emphasize the fact that this trend, this abortion law, did not come from the society," said Nowicka, who has been at the center of the debate since it began and is a walking history of the prochoice movement. "In fact, at that time and still now, a majority of the society is against restrictive legislation. At that time it was 70 percent of the population [that] was against restrictive legislation. This trend came from the policymakers, who at the time were very closely connected to the Roman Catholic church, especially to the fact that the church was very much supportive to the anti-communist opposition during the 80s. Some of the leaders of Solidarity were

politicized, so of course the need for abortion services is high. And of course all these Catholic women are using abortion in the underground now, unfortunately. But the society is not fighting. This is not the first issue for them, especially when you have economic transition, and the country has changed dramatically, so in the list of priorities, abortion was not on the top of the list. There was action, but not strong enough to confront the power of the church."

Like others who see this as a bellwether issue, Nowicka faces an argument that goes like this: Since we are now building a new society, we should get rid of everything that is associated with communism. "So they are trying to associate very strongly communism with liberal abortion, and introducing an antiabortion law was presented as an anticommunist revolution in a way," she said. "The people were not buying it, but this is the public debate. This is communist, they had a liberal law, now we have to get rid of it."

In practice, said Nowicka, it is assumed that abortion is being used widely. Poland has negative population growth (-0.05

percent, according to U.S. government figures in the August 2006 online edition of the CIA's *World Factbook*). Yet statistics compiled in 2001 showed that a small majority of Poles, 52.5 percent, were not using any modern contraception. (*Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Europe: Report to the European Union*, ASTRA, Warsaw, January 2006.) The ASTRA report noted that although the 1993 Termination of Pregnancy Act required full access to contraception, succeeding governments have not fulfilled this pledge. ASTRA found that public health clinics were promoting church-approved natural family planning, and contraceptive counseling was not available. "In some cases," the report said, "doctors...may impose religious biases on women, or may be ignorant of modern methods of contraception." (In another paradoxical throwback to a state welfare mentality, a lot of Polish women assume that contraceptives should be paid for by the government, an especially absurd hope in this political climate.)

Although the 1993 law allows abortion on medical, genetic or criminal grounds, Nowicka said that "in practice, it's very hard to exercise this right by women." She cites statistics: "According to official data, you have no more than 200 abortions a year due to all these conditions. For example, you have 2-3 abortions due to rape—which, of course, when you have thousands of rapes and more than 10 million women of reproductive age..." Because Poland for so long practiced above-board abortions, however, underground procedures are not as dangerous as in many other parts of the world, in particular developing nations. (The Inter Press Service reported on August 30, 2006, that in Kenya, up to half the high number of maternal deaths are caused by unsafe abortion.) In Poland, said Nowicka, "Abortion underground is very well developed, so it is provided by medical doctors, which is relatively safe." She added that this keeps maternal mortality low and does not force many women to leave the country in search of safe abortions.

But women are still often victims of the law, Nowicka said. She gave the example

of a woman with a brain tumor who was denied an abortion on medical grounds. Then she was denied drugs to treat the tumor, lest they harm the fetus. This was her eighth pregnancy. Two weeks after the birth of the baby, the mother was dead, but her death was not attributed to the pregnancy. "There are thousands of such examples, which are nowhere reflected in statistics," Nowicka said. A case now before the European Court of Human Rights was brought by a Polish woman, Alicja Tysiac, who said she had

populations. Nowicka said there is no evidence to show abortions are a major factor. "This concern about low birthrate is shared by the politicians here, and this is used a lot, although we all know very well that restricting abortion laws doesn't help increase population," she said. "But the demographic argument is very strong in the Polish abortion debate."

Joanna Senyszyn watches these debates from the vantage point of the Polish Parliament, where she is an elected member and deputy president of the



The influence of the Catholic church has grown, with crucifixes appearing in many public places. The leader of the Polish Families party, Roman Giertych, is pictured emerging from a polling station in 2003 after voting in the referendum on membership of the E.U. His party led the campaign against membership.

© REUTERS/PETER ANDREWS, 2003

been refused an abortion even though she had medical proof that a pregnancy would severely damage her eyesight. The court has only limited jurisdiction, and Poland is expected to disregard the verdict if it is in Tysiac's favor.

Poland's slow population growth and low birthrate—the "birth dearth" feared by so many industrial countries—play into the hands of conservative politicians and church leaders, who can argue that more legalized abortion or wider use of contraception will make the situation worse. A number of European countries and Japan already fear serious economic consequences from the prospect of a dearth of workers in decades to come to continue economic growth and support aging

Democratic Left Alliance, the only bloc genuinely opposed ideologically to the current coalition government. Senyszyn, an outspoken critic of the church, acknowledges the limitations of the left's power. Her bloc has 55 members in the Sejm, the lower house of parliament. A larger opposition group, Civic Platform, has 131, but its policies on social issues do not differ substantially from those of the right-wing coalition government, with 239 members from three parties. Making common cause with Civic Platform seems out of the question for the left, at least for now. "The opposition is still quite weak in Poland," Senyszyn said during an interview through an interpreter in September 2006. "The coalition enjoys wide

support.” She said that the alternative governments of the 1990s, from left and right, were all more committed to democratic principles and open debate. “The party that is in power now, Law and Justice, they seem to want to have all the power in this country,” she said. “They want to rule the people’s thoughts.”

Senyszyn said she has watched the influence of the church grow recently in the country: the cross hanging in Parliament, crucifixes in state offices and cars and in schools. Parliament members have added the phrase “so help me God” to oaths of office. “The state gives money to Catholic universities and schools, which is against the constitution,” she said.

stress in the Polish public over clashing East-West social attitudes. “The government is trying to put through a revolution in morals and manners, and they’re trying to reintroduce certain traditional ways of thinking, which I suppose would be something other people dealt with in the ’50s and ’60s in other parts of the world,” he said in an interview. “There is a certain amount of tension.” Bobinski thinks it is interesting that political jokes, which had disappeared in the 15 years since 1989, are coming back. “Jokes were a kind of defense mechanism against communism, and now people are finding more to laugh at in this government, which I don’t think is a good sign.”

prime minister, rather rotund twins, as talking hamsters.

In this atmosphere, when few seem willing to challenge trends, the concerns of women are not on the political radar screen, said Senyszyn. Worse, when she and others try to inject some concern for gender issues into the mix of topics discussed in Parliament, they are often derided. She said she is listened to more as a university professor, her part-time job, than as a member of parliament. “Polish women are looked at only from the perspective of their being able to carry a child,” she said. “A member of parliament from the League of Polish Families says that a woman has the right to decide

**“Polish women are looked at only from the perspective of their being able to carry a child. An MP from the League of Polish Families says that a woman has the right to decide on the color of her hair, but not whether she wants a child or not.”**

**—Joanna Senyszyn**

“Poland now is not a secular country; it is a religious country.” For most Poles, this would be a hardly visible change, because life on the streets is no different, except more prosperous-looking. Unlike in Islamic and extremely conservative Jewish and Christian communities, where conservatives demonstrate their control in codes of dress and behavior, Polish men have long, short or no hair on their heads, and women bare their midriffs in the heat above skirts of every length. But from the pulpit, in the confessional and in schools, strong messages get across.

Poland’s government has certainly not created a one-party state or reverted to a planned economy. Krzysztof Bobinski of Unia i Polska, a former correspondent in Warsaw for the *Financial Times*, said ruling party members—who before coming to power opposed Poland’s E.U. entry—are learning to live within Europe and to appreciate the benefits of E.U. membership. Opinion polls show growing support for the E.U., but Bobinski senses

The new government appeals not only to those who like the idea of traditional morals and values but also to those who have concluded they were somehow left out economically after the fall of communism, Bobinski said. The left-wing political opposition apparently does not attract these Poles, though it is very early in the game. “We don’t have an alternative, and this is the greatest problem,” Bobinski said. “We thought that people were more wedded to the communists in the sense of a welfare state and inability to cope with a market economy. What this experience is telling us is that if you have a determined government which is taking over everything, the response is not to oppose or protest in ways that one would expect. There is a kind of resignation. You retreat into humor, but get on with what you’re doing. This is exactly the way people behaved in the communist time.” A virtual cult is growing up around a Polish cartoonist’s Web site that portrays the president and

on the color of her hair, but not whether she wants a child or not. A statement like this could mean the end of a political career in another country in the European Union, but here it is just something commonly said.”

In 2003—when a left-wing, not a right-wing, government was in power—Senyszyn wrote a draft law that would have liberalized the abortion legislation. It was never discussed in Parliament, she said, suspecting that a quiet backroom deal with the church kept it off the floor of the Sejm. Now the new government talks about making abortion constitutionally illegal by writing a provision protecting life from the moment of conception, although there is a sharp difference of opinion about whether it can succeed. Asked if a referendum of Poles might indicate that the public was ready for such a discussion, Senyszyn replied, “Parliament would not agree to a referendum on abortion in the first place. But it is difficult to say what the outcome of

a referendum would be [if there were one] because the church took a very strong stand on this. You can see the change in the language. Before 1989 it was called ‘abortion’ or ‘the interruption of pregnancy.’ Later, in the mid-90s, some people started saying ‘killing unborn babies.’ Nowadays, some in the media just say ‘killing babies.’ So, what if you were to frame the question as, ‘Do you think killing babies should be allowed?’ They could formulate a referendum in a very tricky way.”

Senyszyn said not all Catholics, and not even all bishops and priests, are as opposed to women’s reproductive rights as the church hierarchy and the Vatican might be. Nevertheless, the Polish priesthood was never touched in any significant way by social action movements or aspects of liberation theology that sent priests elsewhere into slums to minister to the dispossessed, teaching many of them about popular opinion at the grassroots in other countries. Polish priests missed out not only on the 16th century Reformation but also on those life-changing social movements of the 1960s, because the focus here at that time was on bolstering the church and keeping the flock together under communist rule. “Contrary to churches in South America, for example, where priests care more about the poor, and the needs of the people, the Polish church deals mainly with Poles’ sexual life,” Senyszyn said.

Clerical extravagances are not questioned by the public either, she said. When controversial priest Tadeusz Rydzyk—who runs Radio Maryja, a station broadcasting extremely conservative views and, human rights groups say, fanning intolerance—was found to have one of the most expensive cars in Europe, he quipped, “Well, I’m not going to ride a cow.” People laughed it off, Senyszyn said. The car was a Maybach, made to order in Britain at a cost of \$500,000 or more. “In another country, people would comment on this more and say it is not appropriate for a priest,” she said.

Senyszyn is both frustrated and increasingly threatened. “People like me in

## No Sex, Please, We’re Polish

By Anka Grzywacz

Sex education is almost nonexistent in Polish schools. According to the law, classes are voluntary, and minor students need parental consent to participate. Even if lessons are organized, young people do not always get a chance to obtain neutral and scientific information, as many family planning educators have undergone training at Catholic universities and schools. Some of the approved textbooks used in teaching include biased statements condemning homosexuality as unnatural and reinforcing gender stereotypes. The books misinform students, saying that emergency contraception is the same as the abortion pill and suggesting that hormonal pills cause infertility.

Ponton—the word in Polish means an inflatable orange life raft—is a group of volunteer peer educators affiliated with the Federation for Women and Family Planning. I was one of the first enthusiasts who launched it four years ago. At first, we organized street actions, targeted at young people. We distributed condoms and brochures about contraception and HIV prevention. Later we realized that there is demand for sex education classes conducted by independent young educators. After a series of professional trainings and workshops, which included interpersonal and teaching skills and theoretical knowledge, we began to look for ways to advertise our services free of charge, and we used our personal contacts to organize the first classes. We have been doing this for two years now.

As a rule, two educators visit one class for a 45- or 90-minute lesson on contraception and sometimes also a separate one on HIV prevention. We would like to run a series of lessons for each class, but schools cannot find enough time in schedules for a comprehensive program. Also, our group is still too small to cover the demand. At the moment, we have about 15 volunteers, only female, although male participation is encouraged. Young men who had been interested in joining the group gave up quickly. We don’t divide the class to talk separately to girls and boys, which is not an unusual practice in Poland. We try to present the knowledge as interactively as possible, and we welcome questions and suggestions from students. The most exciting moment for them is usually the presentation of condom use on a penis model.

Although we lack resources to develop our project and reach pupils in other cities and rural areas, we try to provide counseling via e-mail and telephone. The summer hotline for teenagers again proved that our work is very much needed. We had a case of 12-year-old girls who had been sexually abused by a chaperone at a summer camp and were afraid to call their parents. We witnessed the confusion of young people who are left alone with their problems. Nobody talks to girls about menstrual periods, or to boys about masturbation. Some girls think they might become pregnant from sitting on their boyfriends’ laps fully dressed. We never take these worries for granted and reply to all questions seriously and as thoroughly as possible.

The current political situation is beginning to have impact on the work of Ponton. Conservative politicians from the ruling coalition seem to disregard the results of the 2005 poll conducted by the research company CBOS, which found that 79 percent of people in Poland are in favor of sexual education in schools, including classes on contraception and HIV prevention. Our group coordinator, Ola Jozefowska, participated in a debate during which one of the members of parliament from the Law and Justice party threatened to dismiss school principals willing to invite Ponton to their schools. Now that the leader of the far-right League of Polish Families, Roman Giertych, has been appointed minister of education, we expect further obstacles. Ponton is not giving up, however. Whatever the political climate, we plan to continue providing comprehensive information on human sexuality, one way or another.

Ponton, W: [www.ponton.org.pl](http://www.ponton.org.pl), E: [info@ponton.org.pl](mailto:info@ponton.org.pl)

Poland have problems dealing with these difficult issues in a serious way. We are often laughed at. When I wrote that sex education should start in elementary school, adjusted to the age of the child, many newspapers—even more serious ones—said I wanted to teach small children sexual positions. Even my friends say, ‘Why are you fighting for these issues? Why are you doing this?’ We do not see much female solidarity here. Many female voters do not vote for other women. The same in the Parliament: In debates on equal status, women do talk, but often they criticize other women and ideas like equality. So you see this backward trend.”

A rare voice in government supporting women’s issues, Senyszyn fears her polit-

aware of that. Yet it may be recorded in the files that you were an informer. Under new draft laws, among the ideas being considered is a requirement that you fire a person if it is proven that there is some mention in the files that the person was an informer. Then you will have only the right to prove in court that you are innocent.” Meanwhile careers will be interrupted or destroyed, and with them a critical part of the prochoice lobby.

#### WHO IS A POLE?

Human rights activists of all kinds and causes say that the future of women’s rights, gay rights, minority rights, Roma rights and migrant rights are all in the mix of targets ultranationalists may see as works

in Poland by the Germans), and most of the rest in a final military attack in 1943. In 1968, a communist government effectively expelled the Jews who remained, or had returned. Today, the ethnic homogeneity of Poland strikes an outsider almost immediately. In a European capital city the size of Warsaw, one might expect a more international mix.

Yet the current Polish government and its political allies still talk of defining and protecting a “national identity.” Some intellectuals see a dangerous step leading toward even more introversion, and isolation from the 21st century world and its rapidly evolving social norms. Krzysztof Sliwinski, a former diplomat whose political analyses are widely read in Europe,

**When Fr. Tadeusz Rydzik—**who runs Radio Maryja—was found to own one of the most expensive cars in Europe, he quipped, “Well, I’m not going to ride a cow.”

ical career may be in jeopardy because she was once a communist, a necessary step to getting a good university post before 1989. The current government has promised to purge communists and their collaborators from public life. It is apparently a strategy to decimate a secular leftist opposition and end the squawking over abortion and other issues disparaged by the political right. Many Poles are facing this threat. “There is this screening now for people under communism,” Senyszyn said. “There is this Institute of National Remembrance, and they have files on people from the communist era. Possibly there may be papers that they think show that people who are now in the left-wing opposition were all secret agents. People from the ruling party, some of their papers may be ‘lost,’ and they will all be cleared of charges against them.”

Even the most innocent can be trapped, many people in Poland say. “If, for example, your house was bugged [during communist rule], they would listen to your conversations and you did not know about it,” Senyszyn said. “They got information from you, although you were not

of enemies and want to deal with in similarly intolerant ways. The opposition feels a need for solidarity, with a small s. Given that circumstance, it is not surprising that a Jewish students’ association should lend public support to gay rights advocates, or that feminist organizations would join in marches for tolerance that are not primarily about women’s equality. The disparate groups come together in demonstrations and conferences, but are not able to dent the solid front of government and church, and the obsession with Catholicism and Polishness.

Before World War II, when Poland had a vibrant intellectual life, the society was more cosmopolitan, with a lively mix of other Europeans and a significant Jewish population, influential in the arts, the professions and commerce. Soon after the German invasion and occupation in 1939, the Jews of Warsaw were herded by the Nazis into a walled ghetto. Over the next four years, more than 400,000 of them would die—some of starvation and disease in the ghetto, others in Nazi concentration camps (some of the worst of them, symbolized by Auschwitz, set up

said in an interview that the concept of national identity can only reinforce the power of the church. “Now you have this identity, Catholic identity, swept through the churches, by stupid priests, of course,” he said. He was struck by how often he heard people talking about identity when he returned a few years ago after several years as ambassador in South Africa. “Before it wasn’t so much present.”

Sliwinski, a Catholic, has served as Foreign Ministry spokesman. He was a special envoy to the Jewish diaspora until he was accused of being “more Jewish than Polish” by the Polish primate, Cardinal Josef Glemp, during a controversy in the late 1990s over whether the church could erect crosses at the Auschwitz camp. He worries that a politically supported search for national identity will veer into simplistic definitions and distinctions, when Polish society should be more complex. Are you Polish only if you oppose divorce and abortion and the rights of homosexuals?

“The danger of this identity is that you use simple things to define it or to distinguish it,” he said. “It shouldn’t mean

obvious behavior. Because then you go one step further and you are trying to build a very exclusive community and you put to the margins a lot of different so-called Others. And those Others become the focus." Among those Others still are, incredibly, Jews, as well as newer targets such as former communists, gays, prochoice organizations and "liberals" in general.

Sliwinski, who has been asked by Warsaw University to teach a course in religion and politics, says he sees nothing wrong with a search for identity if it means re-rooting Poles whose lives were disrupted and overturned in the tumultuous 20th century. But he has reproached the current government for appearing most interested in appealing to negative emotions, such as anger and frustration, rather than stressing a restoration of what is good and noble in the Polish character. Very carefully, he made allusions to modern European history.

"I am reading now a lot of books about the period of the '20s and '30s in European history," he said. "And just to put it clearly: I am far from accusing nationalists now that they are Nazis or something like that. No. But it is a climate similar to the climate which brought in Franco, Mussolini and even at the very beginning, Hitler in '33—not Hitler later." He said nationalist politicians in Poland are now talking about some of the same issues used by earlier European extreme-rightists, such as unemployment and the perceived threats of foreign capitalism. While he sees absolutely no danger of a return to communism, he said that on the right there is a danger in the development of ideas that, taken a step further, could lead to "horrible" extremes. "It's like in Europe in the '20s, beginning of [the] '30s," he said. "Therefore I think that talking now about fighting communism or post-communism is taking [focus] away from the real danger. The real danger is where there is an ultranationalistic public—a sort of tribal politics, to the exclusion of so many people."

There is much discussion about how much anti-Semitism still exists in Polish society. Sliwinski thinks it has been much reduced in the last decade, at least in

outward expression, because of a kind of political correctness born of more contact with the wider world. People may still think in anti-Semitic terms, he said, "but they don't dare to use the formulas." Like others, he suggests that the stultifying communist era, which stretched from the end of World War II to 1989, stagnated independent thinking and deprived Poles of the oxygen of international discourse.

"Anti-Semitism, until the fall of communism, was in a frozen state because

refuge for Poles when even Solidarity was closely tied to the church. Now, the foundation's activists say some of the cruder forms of anti-Semitism have gone underground. But they add that the theme is still detectable in broadcasts of Radio Maryja, which also attacks Masons and prochoice liberals. The controversial radio station, which has provoked a reprimand from no less than the Vatican for its provocative language and political activity, had backed the League of Polish



The headquarters of the ultra-conservative Catholic religious broadcaster Radio Maryja in Torun.

© REUTERS/PETER ANDREWS, 2006

of lack of contacts with the outside world," he said. "Expression of Polish anti-Semitism was so shocking for Westerners because there was no evolution of democratic society—free press, books. All was communist ideology. So I would say Polish anti-Semitism wasn't much worse than, say, French, but its expressions were shocking. The people have to learn consciously or unconsciously that to communicate in the family of democratic nations, you have to use another language." He is nonetheless skeptical about those who protest loudest about not being anti-Semites.

The Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, called the Helsinki Committee in the communist era, was a leading secular

Families, considered the most hardline of Catholic nationalist parties in the governing coalition. At the last election, it swung firmly behind the conservative Law and Justice Party of president Lech Kaczynski and his twin brother, prime minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski—a Helsinki Committee member under communism. Radio Maryja's relationship with the governing party gives the station more political protection and clout, after years of an uncertain relationship with national governments. But much of its funding still comes from the church, which is supposed to be regulating the station. The church hierarchy could in theory shut down, or at least tone down, Radio Maryja, though it shows no intention



of doing either. When Pope Benedict XVI visited Poland in the spring of 2006, he delivered what was interpreted as an allusion to the debate over Radio Maryja: “The priest is not asked to be an expert in economics, construction or politics. He is expected to be an expert in the spiritual life.” (Craig Whitlock, “Mixed Reception for Polish Catholic Radio,” *Washington Post*, May 27, 2006.)

Rydzik, the Maybach driver, is a priest of the Redemptorist order, which is known for its evangelical or missionary approach. He founded Radio Maryja in the Polish city of Torun in 1991, and continues to run it with other Redemptorist priests “in the name of God, Church, Fatherland and the Polish

European Racism and Xenophobia Information Network. Milkulska says that although violence against minorities is rare in Poland, the government has been unconvincing in its promises to stop hate speech. When charges are brought, cases are often dismissed, or those found guilty escape penalties. Milkulska drew attention to the example of a freelance reporter for Radio Maryja, who had used anti-Semitic language in broadcasts and was dropped by the station, only to be quietly hired by a government-owned radio network. Despite hopes to the contrary, the vocabulary of anti-Semitism still spills into daily life, contributing to the great unresolved problem of hate speech, said Milkulska. She recalled how anti-gay

Justice and the League of Polish Families—have become partners in governing Poland. When a 2006 march for equality and tolerance was held in Warsaw, supported by prochoice groups, participants were pelted with stones and eggs.

#### THE YOUNG LOOK FOR HEROES

Leaders of prochoice and other social-action organizations and analysts of contemporary Polish society almost unanimously volunteer an arresting observation: The young of Poland, mostly growing up since the end of communism and during a period when some post-communist governments stumbled over charges of corruption and mismanagement of national affairs, are being drawn to

**“We are publicly called perverts, pederasts, pedophiles and fags.”**

—The Campaign against Homophobia and Lambda Warsaw, two gay rights groups

Nation,” while also organizing pilgrimages and antiabortion demonstrations. The station’s audience share is estimated variously at only 4 percent to 10 percent. With its call-in shows and commentary, though, it has established loyal support groups at the parish level around the country. Michael Magner, writing in the journal *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, said that the movement led by Radio Maryja dwarfs all other contemporary Catholic movements. “Radio Mary is not simply a radio station with a weekly audience of about 5,500,000. It is also at the root of a wide network of organizations and social movements called the Family of Radio Mary. Undoubtedly it is one of the most significant social phenomena in contemporary Poland.” (Michael Magner, “Civil Society in Poland after 1989: A Legacy of Socialism?” *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, March-June 2005.)

Agnieszka Milkulska is in charge of monitoring minority rights at the Helsinki Foundation and is part of a national focal point team tracking racism, xenophobia and discrimination for the

protestors held up placards at a recent tolerance march in Warsaw that said “Send the fags to the gas chambers.” Apparently the phrase is so common it is used even to trash an opposing soccer team in the heat of a match.

Over the last year, the Campaign against Homophobia and Lambda Warsaw, two organizations representing gays and lesbians in at least half a dozen Polish cities, have been saying that they see homophobia on the rise, and recalling that the current president had tried to ban gay demonstrations when he was mayor of Warsaw. “We are publicly called perverts, pederasts, pedophiles and fags,” a statement from the two groups said in June last year. “Politicians, including leaders of political parties, and members of the Polish and the European Parliament do this openly and proudly. The justice system doesn’t react when they call for discrimination against homosexuals, tacitly giving support for the crimes that we are victims of.” Since that statement was issued, the two political parties most feared by the gay groups—Law and

parties of the political right. “They have the support of quite a number of young people,” said Krzysztof Bobinski. “Why is that? While you have a wide range of opinions in any society, from time to time a certain sector of opinion comes to power and begins to impose its views on everyone else. I think part of it is also that for 50 years the society was not able to develop in tune with the way people were thinking about things like sexuality or abortion in the Western world. Even though we had this liberal consensus after 1989, and that seems to have survived until now in a sense, there is a lot of reactionary opinion in the society. It’s just that people were rather ashamed of those opinions, didn’t want to articulate them.” Now, he said, the government is saying, “It’s OK.”

“It seems that young people are looking for something stable,” Bobinski added. “Remember that we have a society which has been touched by a significant amount of corruption. People feel that. Young people are looking for values. They were very concerned when the last pope died; they saw Pope John Paul II as an author-

itative figure, someone you couldn't fault in any kind of way. This was somebody you could look up to." Pope John Paul II was a Pole, born Karol Wojtyła. His support for Polish anti-communism and the Polish church is now judged to have been a major force for undermining and ultimately bringing down communist rule in Poland. The current pope, Benedict XVI, is a German.

Important symbolic moments in Poland's unhappy recent history also attract the attention of the young. "There's a great renaissance in interest in the Warsaw uprising of 1944, which was a complete disaster in a sense, since it wiped out a large chunk of the population of the city—and the best people," said Bobinski. "But it's seen as a kind of selfless sacrifice of pure people. So when we had the anniversary two years ago, there was an enormous amount of interest by young people." Commemorations of the Warsaw uprising had been banned or discouraged under communist rule, and many Poles, including opponents of this government, do believe that keeping alive this memory is appropriate, but not as a vehicle for stirring nationalist sentiment or linking it to one view of moral purity.

"There is one more factor in the rightward swing of youth," said Bobinski. "What we're seeing is also the end of the rule of the generation which was in opposition between 1968 and 1989. These are people on the way out. There's a definite drive by young people to replace people of my generation. The legitimacy of the opposition up till 1989 was that they fought communism. Perhaps now, what is happening with the opening of the police files, the impression is being given that everyone was touched by communism, everyone was touched by the secret police, almost everyone has an episode where they collaborated. So what you're doing is denying the legitimacy of this older generation. Young people can say, 'All our grown-up life we have spent outside of communism, and so we are not touched by this.'"

A majority of young people may not be turning right, rightists themselves say, but

the phenomenon is still growing. There have been student demonstrations against the education minister and deputy prime minister, Roman Giertych, who is also parliamentary leader of the League of Polish Families (and the son of Maciej Giertych, the Polish member of the European Parliament who was responsible for the antiabortion display in Strasbourg). Students have objected to what they see



In October 2006, the Polish government barely survived a coalition crisis. © REUTERS/PETER ANDREWS, 2006

as efforts to introduce more religion into education at all levels and to tamper with high standards for admission to universities. But the protests are not sustained, and some young people who begin to feel intellectually cramped in this atmosphere do not fight, but join the otherwise largely economic exodus to better jobs in Ireland, Britain or Sweden. Tom Hundley of the *Chicago Tribune* reported from Warsaw in February 2006 that Poland loses about 30,000 workers a month, many of them young and well-educated, to these three countries, the first to welcome Eastern Europeans after the E.U. was expanded in 2004 (*Chicago Tribune*, "Eastern Europe

Faces Brain Drain," February 20, 2006). These young people are lost to liberal Poland, at least for now. Analysts say it is too early to know whether they will come back influenced to the point of action by their association with Western European thinking, including more liberal attitudes toward sexual and reproductive rights.

Krzysztof Bosak is, at the age of 24, not only a member of the Sejm but also president of the conservative All Polish Youth organization and a rising star in the League of Polish Families. In a conversation at a hip sidewalk cafe in central Warsaw, he ranged over the issues of importance to him as a present and possible future leader of his generation. He acknowledged that the right wing is not quite as attractive to Polish youth as some say. It would like to be, he said, but it isn't there yet, and there is more work to be done. Still, he is proud of the median age of his party's legislative bloc, or "club," as it is known in Parliament.

"I don't think the party is any more attractive than statistically normal for young people," he said in an interview through an interpreter, adding that there are probably many more liberals among the young, but that they are not as well-organized as on the right. "But some young people are joining our youth organization, All Polish Youth. It's a quite strong youth organization, and many young people from this organization are joining the party and then becoming politicians like me and like many of my friends. Our parliamentary club is the youngest club in our parliament. The average age is about 32 years old."

Bosak spoke of his plans to develop All Polish Youth as a training ground for politics, saying that getting conservative young people into politics from the local level upward was a major goal. These youthful politicians would be around for a long time to influence national politics. "The meaning of patriotism in our organization is that you should not only love your country but also work for the country, and you should do something in your town," he said. "Now we have local elections, so I

think that hundreds of our friends will try to get elected and that is a true dimension of patriotism; when you act.”

“Our values are maybe not the most popular in Polish society because these are traditional values and Catholic values and in ethical and moral issues we are anti-liberal,” he said. “When we are thinking about moral issues, we are against abortion and against homosexual marriages, euthanasia and all such things that are against the teachings of the Catholic church and the meanings of the pope. It’s very strange for us that there are Catholics who say things which are impossible to reconcile with the teachings of the church.”

Is the Polish right more right than elsewhere? “I think so,” Bosak said. “But we

lies, is feared by some Poles, who see it as a potential nucleus for right-wing paramilitarism. There are accounts of intimidation, of physical attacks on prochoice activities and of harassment of women, such as when the Dutch organization Women on Waves sent its abortion-clinic ship to Polish waters. Bosak dismissed the fears of liberals. He says that the youth organization’s 10 holiday camps, suspect in many liberal eyes, are centers for political discussion and outdoor fitness training and adventure sports, for both men and women. He said that rightist young people were initially at a disadvantage in establishing their camps and meeting places because comparable leftist organizations had inherited the resorts of the

Bosak sees some similarities and shared experiences in the Republican party, which he described as conservative in social outlook and liberal in economic thinking, at least in free-market terms. “When we are looking for some connections to United States politics, we are reading a book that we think is excellent,” he said. “The author is Patrick Buchanan and the title is *The Death of the Western World*. It is an excellent book, and about Europe. Young people who are conservative [and] also liberal in economics...are [also] reading about Ronald Reagan.”

In Poland, there is not the same level of support for the free market, because such thinking can collide with strong nationalist beliefs about economic sover-

## The political right is unabashed in its embrace of certain right-wing figures from modern European history.

are not a kind of extremist movement,” he insisted. “Liberal and left journalists are saying that we are extremists, nationalists, and that we are anti-Semitic and so on, but I think it’s a normal way to attack us. We are more conservative, but I think it’s not an issue of radicalism. You have to be consistent. When you believe in the church’s teaching, you have to be consistent with it in what you do.”

The political right is unabashed in its embrace of certain right-wing figures from modern European history. A program was held recently on the subject of the Spanish civil war and the role of Francisco Franco in supporting the Catholic church. “We recently made a conference in our parliament. It was about the anniversary of the war in Spain, of General Franco against the communists,” Bosak said. “There was one Polish scientist who wrote a book about General Franco and one of the professors from Spain who came here to talk about communist crimes against Catholics in Spain.”

All Polish Youth, formed in the 19th century and long associated with the Giertych family of the League of Polish Fami-

ly, is feared by some Poles, who see it as a potential nucleus for right-wing paramilitarism. There are accounts of intimidation, of physical attacks on prochoice activities and of harassment of women, such as when the Dutch organization Women on Waves sent its abortion-clinic ship to Polish waters. Bosak dismissed the fears of liberals. He says that the youth organization’s 10 holiday camps, suspect in many liberal eyes, are centers for political discussion and outdoor fitness training and adventure sports, for both men and women. He said that rightist young people were initially at a disadvantage in establishing their camps and meeting places because comparable leftist organizations had inherited the resorts of the

communist youth organizations. He thinks, however, that this legacy made his ideological opponents a little complacent. Bosak is well-traveled. He was about to set off for a visit to Washington to meet American conservatives while prime minister Kaczynski was in the United States on an official visit. As part of a conservative bloc, Bosak regularly takes part in sessions of the Council of Europe, the continent’s oldest political organization, founded in 1949. The Council has 46 members and various observers, and its main tasks now are acting as a human rights watchdog over the post-communist nations of Central and Eastern Europe and generally promoting democratic development and the rule of law. “In the Council of Europe, most of the people there have different views than mine,” he said. “I’m in the conservative group. It’s not the biggest group. The situation is similar to the European Parliament. I rather would like to talk with conservative people and not with the liberals or leftists or socialists or communists—there are a lot of them.”

When he looks to the United States,

eighty. “Our position is not clear on this,” Bosak said, though he added that the once-total opposition on the right to the European Union has softened and criticism now focuses mainly on what the right wing sees as infringements inherent in the proposed European Constitution. “We were against joining the European Union and now we are against the European Constitution and we are against making European taxes, European army and such things,” Bosak said. “So we are against the process of federalization of the European Union. But we don’t think that it would be good for Poland to go out from the European Union now, because political costs could be too big for us.”

### POLAND AND THE EUROPEAN NEIGHBORHOOD

Neil Datta is secretary of the European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development in Brussels, a pan-European platform of parliamentary groups working on sexual and reproductive health and rights around the continent. He keeps track of these issues so that legislators in national parliaments and the European

Parliament can tap into a network of information when laws are discussed or public opinion is shaped. In Datta's view, there is a limited amount of direct influence that Poland or any other conservative E.U. member country can have on continent-wide regulations or policies that cover such issues as abortion, because member nations have authority over sexual and reproductive health laws. "Insofar as the E.U. does not have the right to interfere in that, that's still the prerogative of the member states, they cannot have a great deal of real legislative or policy impact in that—not any more than the prochoice members of Parliament could," he said. "Their potential is simply at the level of maybe having a more chilling effect in terms of the general orientation of the E.U. in the U.N. and in its development policies."

In the E.U., Poland is the largest and perhaps most deeply conservative of the newest members, but it is not alone, Datta said, listing Lithuania, Slovakia and Malta. (A few years ago, a Slovak E.U. Parliament member and chair of the European Parliament's women's affairs committee publicly declared HIV/AIDS "a punishment from God" for homosexuals.) Datta sees post-communist behavior similar to that in Poland as a factor in other former Soviet bloc nations. "I've heard of Lithuanians who go see their priest before they publish a book," he said. "It's not so much because they need to, but simply out of having to seek authorization for so long from someone else—from the pope, from the Communist Party or someone higher up in order to do something. Having the church there replacing that, you go to them instead."

These delegations also prod and encourage conservative sectors of opinion in older members of the Union—Italy, for example. "It's only with the recent Italian elections that the trend has reversed," Datta said. "And there are, unfortunately, people who are anti-reproductive rights in almost every parliament in Europe." Though Polish conservatives would very much like to galvanize this disparate lobby, there are some other hurdles to Polish influence that analysts



Poland's prime minister, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, kisses the hand of Pope Benedict XVI during a private audience at the Vatican. © REUTERS/CLAUDIO ONORATI, 2006

in Warsaw and Brussels point to when calculating the chances the new Polish government has in gaining supporters in the E.U. One is the unwillingness of many Central and Eastern Europeans to let Poland, the largest country among new E.U. members, bully them. Another, Datta notes, is the tone the rightist Polish government has struck in Brussels, where its parliamentary delegation has a strong right-wing component in part because barely one-fifth of Poles bothered to vote in their first E.U. election and the field was left open to the zealous. Poland's unsuccessful attempt to reopen the issue of reintroducing the death penalty, Datta said, was "so much out of line with current thinking in the E.U. that that it is undermining their own credibility."

Euro-Fam, an antichoice group that organizes action campaigns on reproduc-

tive health and other conservative issues and keeps track of votes in the European Parliament, has figures to show that the Polish delegation stands out as the most antichoice group in Europe on its Web site, euro-fam.org. Euro-Fam has campaigned against the proposed European Constitution, in limbo as of this writing because of its rejection by several E.U. members. In particular, Euro-Fam threw out this challenge: "How can the E.U. ensure that member states that refuse to legalize abor-

tion on their national territory will not be forced to 'import' these services, since Article 4 of the Draft Treaty protects the free movement of services and claims that any form of national protection against it will be deemed as 'discriminatory'?" This reflects very closely the Polish right-wing fear of breaches of national sovereignty or, more practically, the fear of new ideas blowing in on winds from outside Poland.

Bosak, the youth leader, admitted that the political right is not cohesive in the E.U., and he personifies the inflexible resistance of Polish rightists to compromise—at least until now—in order to have a greater voice in Europe. "In the European Parliament there are about two or three groups of conservative people and Euro-skeptics, but they are not together because of political divisions," he said. "They are weak. Some of the conservative people think that it would be better to be in one big party, which has a voice in ruling the European Parliament, not to be in a small group with similar people but without any influence. It's a very big problem."

Bosak, holding the line against a homogenizing of the right, dismisses Western European Christian Democ-

rats as “not Christian” and is outraged that the leader of Britain’s Conservative Party, David Cameron, talks of guaranteeing gays places among Tory candidates in the next parliamentary election. “They are doing it for votes,” Bosak said. “That’s going too far for us.” Polish conservatives lobbied hard against but failed to derail an E.U. nondiscrimination measure adopted in June 2006, which calls on all member governments to strengthen protections for minorities, including homosexuals. In Poland, gays “have rights like any normal citizen; there is no need to give them any special rights,” said Bosak. “It’s against the rule of law. We’re against demonstrations and all sorts of shows because we think it’s not normal and it’s not acceptable in our society. Maybe here in Warsaw, people are a little bit more liberal and it’s more normal. But in Poland, two men kissing on the street is unacceptable, and I would not like to see that change.”

Poland’s current stand on abortion and other social issues attracts the support of groups and individuals in the United States who share the Polish right’s views. The Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute (C-Fam) frequently cites and supports Polish actions in international forums, for example. There does not seem to be extensive cooperation, however, between the European and American right on prochoice matters within Europe, said Datta. “I think that perhaps what’s happening in the U.S. serves more as an inspiration or as a validation for what they could be doing here,” he said of the Polish right. “But I’m not aware of contacts between Polish members of Parliament, in Poland or [in Brussels], and the U.S. Congress on our issues. It could happen; I’m just not aware of these.” In Poland, people actively involved in prochoice groups largely concurred with this. But these are early days, and Bosak and others have begun to be courted by antichoice groups.

On attitudes toward sexual and reproductive health, Europe is in many ways still split geographically down the old East-West divide, including among Catholics. Somehow these nations missed out on the

spirit of the 1990s, when a series of international conferences changed thinking about the centrality of women’s rights in areas of population policy and development. ASTRA has drawn comparisons in a policy paper, *Closing the Gap on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in the Enlarged European Union*, and a fuller report, *Sexual and Reproductive Rights in Europe*. ASTRA found in Eastern and Central European countries that abortion, illegal or not, remained the primary method of birth control: No choice involved. Slovakia, despite its performance in Brussels, has been among the most liberal countries in expanding contraception and sex education, with a concurrent drop of 70 percent in abortion over the last 15 years. At the other extreme are two countries still outside the European Union: Romania and Georgia, with estimates of 2 or 3 abortions for every live birth.

ASTRA found other characteristics common to most of the Central and Eastern European countries and largely missing in the West. Many women are denied access to contraception for various reasons, sex education is poor or nonexistent, and reproductive health services are limited “as a result of growing influence of conservative forces, including the Catholic Church.” The incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, has risen dramatically in the East. “The growing inequality between East and West in Europe in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights must be addressed by the E.U. in the same way that gender discrimination in employment is addressed, with comprehensive programs, policies and law,” ASTRA concluded.

Catholics in Europe diverge widely between East and West. “The Latin experience is very different from the East European experience,” Datta said. “The Soviet system was not similar to the dictatorships of Portugal and Spain. Franco and Salazar were both very Catholic in their approach, whereas after the Soviet system, which was atheist and anti-nationalist—after a system collapses, then you do the opposite of the system that oppressed you.” In the

Latin countries, he added, there was machismo and the relegation of women to second-class status, which in turn produced strong feminist movements. In the Soviet-bloc countries, where women were in theory already equal and abortion was freely available, there was not the same emergence of feminist organizations. “You don’t have these strong women’s networks in East European countries,” Datta said. “The women’s networks that exist there are to promote women’s entrepreneurship, entry into the marketplace and other things like this. There’s very little on rights.”

“Portugal and Spain are both evolving in a very interesting manner,” Datta said. “The elections in Spain brought about the Socialist government, which is in many ways more progressive than any other government in Europe. Fifty percent of the cabinet is women, they’re breaking ties with the church, they have this same-sex marriage law, they have all these measures in favor of women’s rights and sexual and reproductive health in their development policy. Portugal is moving slowly in that direction as well. It would be difficult to undo.”

In those countries, or most others in Europe, Datta said, it would be all but impossible to imagine someone getting elected by virtue of opposing all these trends. A politician may harbor antichoice or anti-gay views, but these would not qualify him or her for public office. Under the current Polish government, appointees to high offices are often chosen for their rigid social attitudes.

If the right found common cause in the European Parliament in coming years on reproductive issues, and the left declined to press these issues, that could leave the status quo in place on both sides of the divide. Women in the western part of Europe might not lose any ground, but in the East, women would certainly not be able to advance. Sally Ethelston, a consultant and analyst in Washington on reproductive health issues, raised the question of whether any cooling of European commitment to liberal policies, if only to avoid more confrontation within the E.U.,

could have a negative effect in the developing world also, because of the substantial aid Europe provides. That would replicate the trend in the United States, where government support for reproductive health programs abroad (and through the U.N.) is now tangled in a web of restrictions demanded by the conservative right, both Catholic and evangelical Protestant. The Polish right and its allies may not have come as far as their American counterparts, but they are trying. “What we have seen in the last few years in the European Parliament illustrates why ongoing, sustained advocacy is really important,” said Ethelston in an interview. “We know that there have been efforts to disinform policymakers and politicians, and what is always needed is to have reasonable, informed and science-based kind of positions being effectively voiced by advocates within the European context.”

#### “RESPECT BOTH LIFE AND WOMEN”

One of the great paradoxes of Polish life today is that lower fertility does not correlate with greater rights for women as many outsiders would expect, nor does it signal a diminution of inequality or the influence of religion. In this upside-down Polish world, women have fewer children and yet lose ground. This flies in the face of demographic experience around the world. Women have often climbed out of poverty and illiteracy, and continue to do so, through lower fertility. They translate their new freedom into making more significant choices in their lives. Joseph Chamie, a former director of the United Nations Population Division and now research director at the Center for Migration Studies in New York, has tracked changes in the lives of women statistically for years. “Clearly the forces of modern life in Europe were sufficient to overcome the Catholic church’s religious prohibitions on the use of birth control and induced abortion as well as divorce and gay marriage,” he said in an interview. That certainly applies to Western Europe, with Italy, Spain and Ireland the examples most often given. “With respect to marriage and reproduction, moderniza-

tion has trumped religious teachings as well as political ideology for many men and women in industrialized countries,” Chamie said. Does this mean that given enough time, Polish women should inevitably also emerge stronger?

Not without a huge infusion of new ideas and support for those who would be best placed to disseminate them in monocultural Poland, said Senyszyn, the prochoice member of the Polish Parliament. “It would be good for organizations like Catholics for a Free Choice to be more visible here,” she said. “It would be good to show that there are Catholics who don’t have this strict attitude toward abortion or homosexuals, for example.”

Sliwinski, the former diplomat, said that any healthy society lives with some moral uncertainties, and that he cannot accept convictions in theology that are so clear-cut that they serve to absolve those

who hold them from responsibility for the results of their beliefs and deeds. For example, a pacifist should understand that there may sometimes be reason for war, he said: “I would say, from my limited perspective, if I have to kill, merciful God, judge me.” A Catholic, he brings that perspective to abortion, refusing to accept the ironclad condemnations of the church that may result in a ruined life. “If I agree not to do an abortion on a 12-year-old rape [victim], then I have also to be responsible for what’s to come.”

Senyszyn says that these are lessons Polish society and its leaders need to learn. “It should be said more explicitly here that being a Catholic does not mean that you have respect for the life that has been conceived, but you have less respect for the life that is already here,” she said. “It has to be said here that a woman may sometimes have bigger rights than a fetus.” ■

## Prochoice Groups in Poland

### Polish Federation for Women and Family Planning

In 1992, the Federation was established to promote gender equality by defending women’s and girls’ reproductive rights. It consists of the following member organizations:

- “Pro Femina” Association
- NEUTRUM – Association for Ideologically-Free State
- Polish YWCA – Young Women’s Christian Association
- League of Polish Women
- Democratic Union of Women (Pozna Branch)
- Association “Assistance Center for Families”
- Family Development Association

Contact  
Federation for Women and Family Planning  
ul. Nowolipie 13/15  
00-150 Warszawa, Poland  
T/F: (48-22) 635-93-95; 887-81-40  
E: federacja@federa.org.pl  
W: www.federa.org.pl

### ASTRA: The Central and Eastern European Women’s Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

ASTRA is a regional network of NGOs and individuals advocating in a collective voice for sexual and reproductive health and rights in Central and Eastern Europe.

W: www.astra.org.pl