

PROTESTING DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Motivations and choices made in the abortion law protests in Poland 2020

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Abstract

This thesis analyses the motivations and choices made by participants and organisers of the 2020 Abortion Law protests in Poland. It is a qualitative study where the data was collected through interviews. The thesis investigates what motivated and influenced the participants' and organisers' decision-making regarding participation in the protests, and in what way the Covid-19 pandemic influenced the protests. The thesis applies a theoretic framework focusing on threat as a motivation for collective action and protests, and emotional energy in protest movements. By applying the theoretical framework to the data collected, it is concluded that people were motivated by reflex emotions of anger and fear, when the court ruling was announced. It was seen by many as a last straw, after a long process where several decisions had previously been adopted by the ruling party, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS). Therefore, the protest motivation was not only against the abortion law, but rather against the government as a whole. Further, this thesis concludes that the Covid-19 pandemic affected many different aspects of the protests, from the ways to protest to the reasons why people were arrested. Through protests participants felt an emotional release and this thesis shows the importance of physical space for protests. The Covid-19 pandemic was not deterring people from participating. Instead, emotional energy was created among the protesters, through music and dancing but also through just being at the same place. This energy and the emotional release were communicated internally and externally and motivated further participation throughout the autumn of 2020.

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1 Introduction

On 11 March 2020, WHO declared the spread of the Corona virus Covid-19 a global pandemic. The Director General noted that we have never before seen a pandemic sparked by a coronavirus, underlining the uniqueness of the situation and the challenges the world was facing (WHO 2020). Since then, the pandemic has affected most parts of society and people's lives throughout the whole world. As of May 2021, more than a year later, the pandemic is still in progress, with more than 159 million confirmed infected and 3.3 million confirmed deaths caused by the Covid-19 virus (WHO 2021).

In an attempt to stop the spread of the virus lockdowns and restrictions on gatherings and participation in public events have been enforced. Although the reason for enforcing restrictions is connected to minimising the spread of the virus, pandemic-motivated restrictions was used in some countries to hinder opposition from speaking out against the regime or to stop political protests. In December 2020, the international Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) announced that the pandemic has undermined democracy and basic rights, as more than 60 percent of the countries of the world has enforced restrictions (Holmgren, 2020). For Poland, the IDEA Covid-19 measurement tool notes that “the government has not taken extreme emergency measures to curb the pandemic, but its utilization of the legal framework for suspending the right to information can be potentially damaging to democratic oversight and civic space. Also, the cell phone app for monitoring compliance with quarantine measures may potentially impact upon Civil Liberties” (International IDEA 2021). IDEA also noted that “In late March, Poland's secretary of state of the Ministry of Health, Józefa Szczurek-Żelazko, published a written statement forbidding (regional administration) medical consultants from making COVID-19 statements without prior authorization by the Ministry of Health or Główny Inspektorat Sanitarny (GIS, the national health agency)” (IDEA, 2021). Echoing this, Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) writes that autocratization accelerates in the world, and that the EU has its first non-democracy as a member as Hungary is now classified as an electoral authoritarian regime rather than a democracy. Poland is noted as one of the countries where autocratization has taken place, a development that can be seen since 2015, when Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) party came to power. Further, V-Dem show that attacks on freedom of expression and the media intensified during 2020 and that the quality of elections started to deteriorate. However, V-Dem also notes that pro-democracy resistance grows as “citizens are taking to the streets in

order to defend civil liberties and the rule of law, and to fight for clean elections and political freedom” (V-Dem, 2020).

These two reports both show that Poland has indeed put restrictions on freedoms during the pandemic and that Poland is moving toward a more autocratic society where freedom of Expression and Association as well as Freedom of Assembly may be limited for social movements and society actors. Many have argued (see for example Domaradzka, 2018, p. 609) that civil society, mobilisation of people and engagement from citizens in political matters are key for a functioning democracy. Even though there is disagreement on what initiatives should be included in democratic processes, it remains clear that civil society actors are still valuable for promoting inclusiveness and open societies. Therefore, mass protests and open debate become vital for a democratic society.

1.1 [Protesting during Covid-19](#)

Considering the restrictions discussed above and the way restrictions have been used, one might argue that fewer, and smaller, protests would have been carried out during 2020 and 2021, but this does not seem to be the case. Instead, massive street protests have taken place in many countries; The Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests started in the US but soon spread to many other countries; Protests were held in Belarus after the 2020 election where police brutality followed; In Hong Kong, the protests continue even after the Covid-19 pandemic started and, in many countries, there have been mass protests against the restrictions of the pandemic itself. Many protests have also been organised worldwide focusing on the restrictions and how governments have handled the pandemic. In Poland, protests have taken place several times during the pandemic. Most notable are the mass protests related to the Abortion Law ruling of 2020, gathering hundreds of thousands of people in the streets, not only in Warsaw, but all over the country.

There is a need to examine what considerations are made when people decide to stand up for a cause, knowing there is a risk of being infected of a contagious virus and considering that there are severe restrictions in place. I argue that there is a need to further investigate how different threats influence and motivate action and how emotional response motivates people to partake in protests. The implications of the ongoing pandemic provide a unique opportunity to investigate threat and protest movements. Here, the threat of the pandemic, as well as the threat of new abortion regulations as well as the covid-19 restrictions in place, may affect the

decisions made and how protests are being carried out, but in different ways. I argue that there is a need to investigate further how and what threats are more important for protest and what emotional responses are involved in protests.

1.2 Aim and research questions

In this thesis I further investigate the motivations behind protests, focusing on the Abortion Law protests in Poland, in the midst of the pandemic in 2020. The aim of the study is to analyse what motivated people to participate in the protests and how the covid-19 pandemic influenced the protests, concerning planning, organisation and involvement in the protests. The pandemic presents a unique opportunity to investigate how threat and emotions play a role in protests as there are many different threats at play. By examining this, I further the knowledge of motivations behind protests and why protests occur even if restrictions are in place and the threat of being ill is imminent.

I analyse this issue by addressing the following **research questions**:

RQ1: What motivated and influenced participants' and organisers' decision-making regarding participation in the abortion law protests in Poland 2020-2021?

RQ2: Did the Covid-19 pandemic influence the protests, and if so, in what way?

2 Previous research

As discussed above, this thesis focusses on the protests in Poland 2020. For this section I present the relevant concepts and previous research of the field by discussing social movements and protest movements during the pandemic followed by a discussion on the case of Poland.

2.1 Conceptualising social movements

Even though this thesis does not discuss social movements in detail, there is still a need to briefly discuss what is meant when social movements are discussed. Here, social movements are conceptualised in terms of five key elements, defined by Snow and Soule (2010): they are challengers to or defenders of existing structures or systems of authority; they are collective rather than individual enterprises; they act, in varying degrees, outside existing institutional or organizational arrangements; they operate with some degree of organisation; and they typically do so with some degree of continuity. Combining these five elements yields the following definition: social movements are collectives acting with some degree of organisation and continuity, partly outside institutional or organizational channels, for the purpose of challenging extant systems of authority or resisting change in such systems, in the organization, society, culture or world system in which they are embedded (Snow & Soule, 2010, pp. 6–7). Social movements and protest movements is used interchangeably throughout the thesis.

2.2 Protest movements during the pandemic

There are some studies published on movements during the pandemic. Pleyers' (2020) study where he discusses what happened throughout the world during the short period of March 11th to May 26th that year. He discusses the different ways social movements adapted during this time period, methodically discussing one continent after another, by looking at media reports, social media reactions and webpages of organisations. He concludes that the 2020 pandemic put a halt to the 2019 wave of mass protests for democracy and social justice and that movements have responded to the pandemic in similar ways around the world, but have had various success levels. As this study investigates all continents of the world during a short period of time, it provides an overview of what happened during the spring of 2020, however lacks a more detailed analysis into the different protest movements, and how motivations and strategies may have changed over time. Unlike Pleyers study, Zajak et al.'s (Zajak et al., 2020) research looks at local occurrences of protest during the pandemic. They use the case of

pro-migrant mobilization in Germany as an example of how temporary suspensions of the right to assembly has affected social movements. They found that there has been a proliferation of protest rather than a breakdown. This gives weight to the idea that protest does not stop, but it changes and develops when the “usual” strategies are no longer possible, that is, the pandemic changing the “modus operandi of all social movements” (2020:2). As this study focuses on strategies of how to keep an issue alive during the pandemic, it is an interesting study of framing but does not take into consideration protest movements that may have occurred during the pandemic which have had other motivations for protesting. Mendes (2020) on the other hand, discusses urban social movements in Lisbon, and how the action of these intensified during the pandemic. He writes that “[t]he situation of an authentic State of Exception that exists in Portugal due to the expansion of the COVID-19 pandemic and the triggering of the state of emergency with the mandatory social isolation and lockdown, as well as limitations on freedom of movement, resistance and economic activities, intensified the discussion around the right to housing in Portugal” (Mendes, 2020, p. 318). Because of the pandemic, movements working toward housing rights, could capitalize on housing being a right as sanitation and isolation at home is not possible if there is no home. By using digital protests and campaigns such as email bombings, virtual assemblies, creating groups and networks at academic level, and creating local networks of mutual support (Mendes, 2020, p. 325), new spaces for contestation were created and the struggle was kept alive. Hibbett (2020) also discusses how the pandemic became a hindrance in protesting, where “the pandemic threatens traditional forms of mobilisation and may reduce the political attention available for their issue. How grassroots groups do, or do not, mobilise after the pandemic will be shaped by this dichotomy of threat/opportunity” (Hibbett, 2020, p. 1108). This being said, it still does not account for the processes and instances, such as the Polish abortion law protests in Poland. In Poland, the protests took place despite the pandemic. Similarly, the protest repertoire in the US did not change much due to the pandemic. Street protests, public speeches and marches has occurred frequently during the pandemic and “protestors did not use online tools in dramatically new ways but probably did make use of these tools far more frequently. In other words, this was probably more of a quantitative growth, than a qualitative shift” (Pressman & Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2020, p. 1).

From the discussion above, it can be argued that few studies consider the motivations of protests and how the pandemic affected the participants decision-making. The protests in focus for this paper were the biggest in modern history, despite the threat of Covid-19 and

despite the regulations in place. We can see that there is a need for further research into motivations behind protests, and especially when the pandemic creates an additional threat. At the time of writing this thesis, there is a lack of research considering the threats and emotional response involved in protest movements and how participants in protests consider Covid-19 in relation to the issue they are protesting.

2.3 Abortion rights in Poland

The current abortion regulations are not simply a contemporary phenomenon, but rather an issue with deep roots in Polish history. In 1932 Poland was the second country in the world, after the Soviet union, to legalise abortion “if there was danger to the life or health of the woman, incest or rape” (Hussein et al. 2018, 11). During the Soviet era, in 1956, the law was extended to include right to abortion to women suffering harsh social or material conditions. However, the decision making was not given to the woman herself, but by a commission of obstetric physicians and state bureaucrats. In 1959, the Polish government ordered a disposition that made it possible for women to make their own abortion decisions.

Szelegieniec (2018) writes that “from 1956 to 1989, over 97 percent of abortions were sought for social and material reasons” (Szelegieniec 2018, 47). However, the decision to allow abortion for social and material reasons, did not pass without debate in Poland. The Roman Catholic Church and the right-wing camp of the bureaucracy, denounced the decision to extend abortion rights. Stanisław Sławiński, an ultra-religious pedagogue, who later became an advisor to the minister of education of the PiS government (2005-2007) argued in 1986 that the emancipation was a danger to motherhood and the “national role of women’s biological gender” and that “a feature of womanhood, is the need for a full and exclusive tie with a man. (...) It is a strong driving force in a woman’s life...strictly related to a woman’s vocation for maternity.... A woman’s fear of solitude...leads a lot of women to totally lose the ability of critical thinking” (Sławiński 1986, translation as Szelegieniec 2018, 47-48). He argued that movements such as abortion right movements, were in opposition to women’s interests, since they made women less likely to be female.

In the beginning of the 1990s abortion legislation rose to the top of the political agenda, the debate being pushed by the Catholic Church. Hall (2018) writes that “[i]ssues of gender and sexuality—perceived as a threat to the traditional model of family and Polish cultural values—have been mobilized regularly in post socialist Poland, in public discourse as well as state policies” (Hall, 2019, p. 1498). In 1993 the Family Planning Act was approved and adopted, again banning abortion due to material or social conditions. The Act states that life is

a fundamental right of a human being and that abortion is only legal in certain situations, for example when the pregnancy poses a threat to the pregnant woman (article 4a.1), when the pregnancy is a result of a criminal act, or in cases of severe fetal defects (see The Family Planning, Human Embryo Protection and Conditions of Permissibility of Abortion Act of 7 January 1993). The legislation has had implications for the Polish society. Szelegieniec (2018) writes that “Hospitals where abortion is still legally performed are routinely targeted by ultra-Catholic “pro-life” organizations, who picket in front of their buildings. Furthermore, the abortion compromise has deepened class and material disparities in access to safe abortion. Higher income women are likely to travel to other EU countries for abortions, while others who lack such means are left at the mercy of medical staff who often block access to abortion”(Szelegieniec, 2018, p. 49). During the 2000s several attempts to ban abortion altogether were made, provoking new protests.

2.3.1 Manifa protests

The Manifa protests on the International Women’s Day is an example of protest movements in Poland, related to women’s rights and abortion. Starting in 2000, the protests were a response to police action in the city of Lubliniec, where a gynaecologist's patient was detained and forced to undergo forensic examination. The protests of 2000 was held under the slogan *Demokracja bez kobiet to pół demokracji* (Democracy without women is only half democracy) and has since been held yearly, under a different slogan each year (for more information on the Manifa, see for example Roosalu and Hofäcker 2016).

2.3.2 Black protest of 2016 and 2018

Noteworthy in the discussion on Abortion law protests in Poland are the massive Black protests of 2016. The protests were a response to the proposals of the Ordo Iuris Institute, a reactionary Catholic foundation, that gained support from *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS, Law and Justice in English) and the Roman Catholic Church. The proposals were designed to deny all access to abortion, without exceptions and proposed prison sentences for women who when through an abortion as well as the medical staff carrying out the procedure. The protesters dressed in black to protest the abortion law, in public but also posting pictures of themselves on social media, dressed up in black, using the hashtag *#czarnyprotest* (*#Blackprotest*).

The protests in 2016 went through two waves, where the second wave of 2016 was the biggest. 250 000 people participated in the protests on October 3. Protests were held in 150 Polish cities and approximately 60 cities abroad. There were strikes where women left work

and stores closed down as their owners supported the protests. In the protests, only signs and banners directly related to abortion ban were allowed, in order to hinder other political messages to shift the focus of the protests (see Szelegieniec 2018).

The protests provoked reactions from the right-wing political camp in Poland as well as the Catholic church that stated that they did not support imprisonment for women who had abortions and Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS), the ruling party in Poland, took a step back and did not vote for the Ordo Iuris proposal. Two days after the protests, the bill was withdrawn.

In 2018 new protests were organised as the “Stop Abortion” bill was passed through the parliamentary committee (Hussein et al., 2018). This bill was less harsh than the 2016 law and included dropping the suggested criminal charges for women who have abortions, still promoting restrictions on abortions. 200 NGOs wrote a joint public appeal to the Polish lawmakers arguing that the bill would put women’s health at risk (Santora & Berendt, 2018). The 2018 protests were not as large as the 2016 Black protests, but because of the public outcry, the bill was once again withdrawn.

Unlike the earlier Manifa-protests, the Black protests were carried out in many cities, and this dispersity, together with the social support, indicates a new quality. Kubisa and Wojnicka (2019) write that “these mobilisations have initiated a broader reflection and demands for a redefinition of the terms of inclusion and boundaries of citizenship, yet conditioning such changed on the need to limit the public role of the Catholic Church in Poland” (Kubisa & Wojnicka, 2019, p. 52). It should be noted that the protests should be considered in a wider context as many of the PiS initiatives such as regulations limiting public gatherings (Kubisa & Wojnicka, 2019).

Szelegieniec (2018) argues that public opinion on abortion legislation changed due to the protests. However, “it should be noted that these changes in public opinion have not yet yielded concrete political gains, and the idea of the abortion compromise remains dominant.” (Szelegieniec, 2018, p. 57). Supporting this claim, Wojnicka (2016) writes that “While the feminist movement is far from weak, at least in the context of the Eastern European region, it has limited ability to influence legislation due to resistance at different levels” (Wojnicka, 2016, p. 45), much because of the strong influences of the Catholic Church in Poland and the masculinist antifeminist rhetoric which has influenced the Polish public debate since the 1990s.

Despite massive protests, new regulations were put in place in Poland. A monetary benefit was introduced, for women who decide to bear children with severe health conditions, and sales of emergency contraception was further limited. Król and Pustułka (2018) write that “It can be argued that the new *For life* program is the most profound governmental reaction to the Strike’s initial victory, in that it aims at financially encouraging completion of risk-laden pregnancies with a one-time benefit of approx. 1,000 euros. [...] while the mobilization was very much welcomed by the public and translated to increased feminist awareness, multifarious forms of the state’s violence against women surged (Król & Pustułka, 2018, pp. 377–378) .

During the Black protests of 2016 and 2018, street protests were the most visible type of protests. However, other types of protests were also implemented in order to make visible the political discontent, such as online activity and protest where selfies of people dressed in black circulated on social media. Women strikes were another strategy employed.

2.3.3 2020-2021 protests – a short background

In 2020, the ruling party of Poland, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS), appointed a tribunal, which was to rule on whether abortion was unconstitutional or not. On October 22 2020 the Constitutional Court of Poland ruled that abortion due to fetal defects was in fact unconstitutional. Street protests took place in 60 Polish towns and cities, with more than 100 000 people participated in street protests in Warsaw on October 30 2020 (Davies, 2020). Other protests, such as staged sit-ins at Catholic churches was also staged, disrupting the Sunday Mass in Katowice and Poznan (Stezycki and Ptak 2020). These protests occurred despite the bans on gatherings of more than five people due to the pandemic. Discussing the 2020 protests, Kasia (2020) argues that even though the protests stopped the 2016 law proposal, Andrzej Duda had then not yet been re-elected as president, and that the re-election in 2020 is “a decision that has given extra legitimacy to the right-wing agenda” (Kasia, 2020, p. 28).

On November 3 2020, it was announced that Poland delayed the abortion ban. Michał Dworczyk, the head of the prime minister’s office, told media that “There is a discussion going on, and it would be good to take some time for dialogue and for finding a new position in this situation, which is difficult and stirs high emotions” (Walker, 2020). However, as of January 27 2021, Poland put the new restrictions on abortion into effect. This meant that Poland banned abortion due to fetal defects which results in a near-total ban on abortion.

Access to abortion has declined even without the legislative curbs “as more doctors refuse to perform them on religious grounds and many women seek abortion abroad” (Reuters, 2021). New protests were held in the days to follow.

Many different networks and movements engaged in the protests of 2020-2021. The main organisation that has been taking a leading role in the protests, is *Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet* (English: All-Poland Women’s Strike), and its local sections in many, if not all, Polish cities, each one presenting a local Facebook page. *Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet* is a social movement formally in 2016 in response to the abortion legislation discussed in previous section. Other organisations worth mentioning are *Abortion Dream Team*, *Girls for Girls* and *Sztumski Strajk Kobiet*, just to mention a few.

2.4 Research gap

As can be seen above, many protests were held in 2020, during the global pandemic. However, only a handful of studies has been published with regards to how the pandemic affected the protests held. The case of Poland and the abortion law protests provide a timely and relevant example of protests as it was in the midst of the pandemic and because people involved therefore needed to weigh possible threats against each other. Albeit there are studies with regards to threat, presented in the following chapter, there are few studies on how different threats are weighted and what choices need to be made in those cases. This study aims to fill that gap by presenting an analysis of how the pandemic was thought upon and in what way these thoughts influenced the protests.

I argue that spring of 2021 is the ideal time to study protests. As this study commenced, some protests were still held, but over the months of 2021, the protests have become smaller. This presented a good opportunity to interview organisers, who were not as busy as previously. For the participants, the events of 2020 were close in time, but still not too close to be imminent. This gave me the possibility to ask the participants to reflect on their recent experiences.

There has not been yet any studies published on the 2020 abortion law protests, and this thesis therefore provides new insights into this case.

3 Theoretical framework

This section presents the theoretical ideas that may explain how protests occur and what motivates action.

3.1 Threat, crisis and collective action

In the last 20 years, many theorists have discussed the role of threat as a motivator for collective action. In this thesis, I take a closer look at a small selection of texts to summarise the theory laid out and show the possible relationship to the case at hand for this thesis. Kerbo (1982) laid out his theory of movements of crisis and movements of affluence by criticising the theories of deprivation and theories of resource mobilisation. By looking at these two strands that explained why movements occur, he argued that there are yet other reasons we need to investigate. Kerbo (1982) argues that “neither deprivation theories nor resource mobilisation theories alone have adequately explained the early development of all types of social movements” (Kerbo, 1982, p. 647). Even though Kerbo does admit that his two categories, movements of crisis and movements of affluence respectively, are exaggerated and that they need further delimitations and definitions, he uses these two binaries to explain collective action brought about “by life-disrupting situations including (but not limited to) widespread unemployment, food shortages, and major social dislocations” (Kerbo, 1982, p. 653) (movements of crisis); and collective action in which the major participants are “not motivated by immediate life-threatening situations of political or economic crisis, but rather, have their basic needs of life met, or even in abundance. In fact, it is because these basic needs have been met that they have surplus resources such as time, money and even energy to devote to social movement activity” (Kerbo, 1982, p. 654) (movements of affluence).

Tilly and Goldstone (2001) further continue Kerbo’s (1982) discussion by stating that “threat” has not been as extensively explored as “opportunity” when discussing how a movement occurs. They note that the relationship between oppression and a movement is much more complex than just these two binaries and argue that the relationship between popular action and state response consists of moves and countermoves. However, the authors do come back to the fact that threat is not as well researched as opportunity and that more needs to be said with regards to this as empirical research over and over again show the role of threat in the creation of a movement that challenges the state.

<i>Form of threat</i>	<i>Examples of collective responses</i>
Economic-related problems	Austerity protests, Unemployed worker movements, Occupy/Indignados, movements over loss of housing, land, affordable food
Public health/ environmental decline	Local actions related to disease and illness outbreaks attributed to government/Corporate ineptitude (e.g. Love Canal, Flint, Pesticide Poisoning, HIV/AIDS), Environmental Justice movements, Transnational Climate Justice movements, anti-mining and extractive industry movements, other environmental hazards
Erosion of rights	Fraudulent election protests, policy threat protest (reproductive rights, anti-war, welfare rights)
State repression	Protest campaigns against government harassment, arrests, killings, states of emergency, police abuse, and other human rights atrocities. Radicalized movements against authoritarian and repressive regimes.

Table 1: Major forms of threat (source: Almeida 2018, 52)

Almeida (2018) builds on Kerbo (1982) as well as Tilly and Goldstone (2001), and shows how threats and negative conditions stimulate collective action in social movement, and how these relate to grievances and resources. Almeida writes that “communities and social groups are more likely to collectively attempt to resolve such problems when opportunities or threats enter the political environment of the aggrieved population” (Almeida, 2018, p. 44). Threats make the issues at hand feel more acute than opportunities do and increase the sense of grievances. Almeida highlights four main dimensions of threat that tend to activate protest and movements: economic-related problems, public health/environmental decline, erosion of rights and state repression. Examples of collective responses can be seen in Table 1. This is interesting, as the protests in Poland could be seen as being activated as both an erosion of rights – and a form of state repression. I apply this to identify what threats the interviewees discussed, and how threat mattered for participation motivations.

In her 1986 article *Coalition work in the pro-choice movement: organizational and environmental opportunities and obstacles*, Staggenborg examines the environmental and organizational factors affecting the success of coalitions in pro-choice movements in Illinois. Her research shows how internal and external financing and other resources contribute to the possibility of coalitions to form. Staggenborg (1986) states that “The ability of these different groups to work together is critical to the movements chances for success in achieving goals and gaining access to power” (1986, 374) and that “when there is a crisis, or when some environmental actor is particularly hostile, coalitions are likely to form. Cooperation is particularly likely to occur with the mobilization of a strong countermovement and with countermovement success” (1986, 375).

Borland (2010) analyses women's organizing in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where women have played an important and central role in the fight against dictatorship. This is interesting to my study as it can show how threat and crisis can contribute to the way people cooperate, and find new allies. Borland (2010) examines the organizations, how they work and organize and crisis as a catalyst for cooperation between different groups. In her text, Borland (2010) discusses different issues that divided the women and made cooperation difficult. Issues such as class, sexual orientation, strategies and organization as well as age, all presented issues that the movement needed to handle in order to cooperate. One way to do this, Borland (2010) argues, was to recognize the differences and contributions. She writes that "the need to recognize and respect differences within the movement was a repeating theme in this document and in the cooperative efforts I witnessed in my fieldwork" (Borland 2010, 254). Efforts were made rhetorically as well as physically, as internal elements such as bridge builders to bridge the age differences, prior social ties and common ideology were used to create cooperation between different groups of activists.

Both Staggenborg (1986) and Borland (2010) pinpoints that exceptional conditions such as economic crisis, may in fact cause organizations and groups to set aside their differences in order to achieve change. However, they both also argue that competition for resources and ideological disputes make it difficult to maintain the coalition or cooperation, once the crisis or exceptional situation pass and things return to normal. Even if the organizations or groups do share the same general goals, the difference in ideology and needs may lead to differences of use of tactics and competition over resources (1986, 388). Borland argues that power dynamics played a role in the coalitions that did not work as smoothly, and that there seemed to be disagreement on wording and how to address the movement, and "groups with common goals often fail to successfully work together because of failure to recognize their "common place" of similar goals and interests" (Borland 2010, 259). Even if Borland's study was carried out in Argentina, it contributes to this thesis through its framework of threat and how this may lead to new ways of organising. I discuss how threat may have led to new cooperation in the case of Poland too.

3.2 Emotional response and the need to perform the protest

Threat can be a motivator for protest but also for cooperation to achieve greater thing. However, it does not fully explain the decision making that follows and how risks are assessed as protests begin. In his book, first published in 1915, Durkheim (1976) argues religious representations are collective representations and that the collective is key in all

religions, but also beyond religion as societies become more secularised. Here, the emotional and moral ideals of what is good and desirable in society constitute drivers which lead to action that can change society or have the potential to do so. When a group or collective comes together to communicate in one voice, for the same cause, a certain type of electricity is created, what Durkheim (1976) labels as “collective effervescence” which is needed to keep attracting and motivating adherents of religion. Although primarily being an analysis of religion, Durkheim’s work has influenced many researchers with regard to how emotional responses stimulate action. Collins (2005) continues Durkheim’s argument, saying that interaction and the rituals involving interactions, produce emotional energy motivating people to act, and that we all seek this emotional energy as it makes us feel better that solidarity bonds are created between people. Rituals therefore can be found in many and all aspects of society, not only in religion, and these rituals are key in our produce a common purpose and shared solidarity (Collins, 2005).

Jasper (2011) further the discussion by Durkheim (1976) and Collins (2005). He discusses two different aspects of movements where emotions play a great role: *goals of political action* and *means of action*. The goals, according to Jasper, are roughly defined as reputation, connection, sensuality, impact on the world, and curiosity. In discussing means of action, Jasper writes that “organisers try to arouse emotions to attract new recruits, sustain the commitment and the discipline of those already in a movement, and persuade outsiders” (Jasper, 2011, p. 292). Here, Jasper discusses different ways this is done and the way emotions can be used to make people react, act and sustain their action. Here, Jasper discusses, among other things, the value of shock and how it is used to make people feel things that makes them act in a certain way. Jasper argues that there is a need to further categorise different types of emotions and understand that there are many different types of emotions that affect collectives and individuals differently. For example, reflex emotions are identified as “Fairly quick, automatic responses to events and information, often taken as the paradigm for all emotions” (Jasper, 2011, p. 267), for example anger, joy, surprise, chock and disgust. Emotional liberation, on the other hand is defined as “a package of emotions that removes blockages to protest, including a shift of affective loyalties from dominant identities and institutions to protest-oriented ones, reflex emotions of anger, rather than fear, moods of hope and enthusiasm rather than despair or resignation, and moral emotions of indignation” (Jasper, 2011, p. 296). These two notions are applied in the analysis of this thesis.

Although Jasper discusses the two aspects separately, he argues that goals and means are often intertwined and can be difficult to separate. He writes that “any flow of action throws up a constant stream of emotions, and the more positive they are- or the more emotional energy and excitement they generate- the more likely participants are to continue. The satisfactions of action, from the joy of fusion to the assertion of dignity – become a motivation every bit as important as a movements’ stated goals.” (Jasper, 2011, p. 296). Specifically, routines of protests must offer satisfactions along the way as the goals of the movement sometimes is difficult to reach or far from being obtained. As people engage in conversation, singing, shouting and dancing in the streets, satisfactions are achieved, which in turn keeps protesters motivated to keep protesting. Continuing this discussion on music and dancing, Eyerman, in his 2002 article focuses on the role of music and visual arts in relation to the formation of collective identity. He argues that music is central in different kinds of movements, both American Civil Rights movements, as well as White Power movements, and that the ties between music and politics are close. Here, the internet and new techniques to make and distribute music becomes important for the songs to spread. Eyerman (2002) writes: “Here collective experience, listening with the whole (individual and collective) body is more important than the cognitive experience of the text, at least in the opening stages, but probably all along the way. The music encourages bodily movement and contact, and collective experience” (Eyerman, 2002, p. 450). Even if Eyerman focuses on other types of movements in his research, his theoretical arguments, as presented above, are suitable for this thesis. These are applied to discuss the role of music in the Polish protests.

So far, it can be seen that emotional reactions are key for protests and that collective action breeds further action as the emotional response is further stimulated as the protest is carried out. Here, the physical aspect of protest also becomes relevant. Kowalewski (2018) argues that physical presence is key in democratic processes in public space, as it attracts the attention of other citizens and restore dignity when people are ignored by their government. Discussing physical protest tactics, Kowalewski argues that:

“They are designed not only to demonstrate claims, shared identity, or objectives but also to deliver a multifaceted message to participants, passers-by, and target recipients. With political practices, a protest makes the physical space, social relations, and the symbolic sphere into a coherent whole.” (Kowalewski, 2018)

Here, physical protest affects not only the participants themselves, but also onlookers. This is an important aspect as the visual impression communicated through physical protest then

involves audiences too, where new emotions can be stirred and create new action. Here, the physical space is needed to communicate to a wider audience the amount of people and the importance of the cause. Parkinson (2012) also argues that “politics involves people, who take up space, doing things to other people. Political conflict is often about accessing and preventing access to space because of exclusive claims to resources that go with space” (Parkinson, 2012, p. 204). It can therefore be argued that even though our interactions become more digital and digital protests occur, the physical performance of protest is required for a democratic society. Parkinson also argues that when it comes to public claims, it is important that the person or people making the claim, can be seen in “dignified, symbolically rich public space” (2012, 205), and that narratives work best when conducted face to face.

Continuing this chain of thought, where communal action is important for movements, I argue that the physical public sphere becomes connected to that action. Physical space is key for protest as can be used to communicate strength to others. Molek-Kozakowska and Wanke (2019) argue that activists display unity through common attributes in order to achieve visibility. This can then be shared, appreciated and reposted in social media. Therefore, activity online activities as well as spatial protest do contribute to the protest at hand, but in different ways. Online, numerical strength is not as visible as in a mass demonstration, but online activities do provide a possibility to reach out to a wider audience.

To summarise, the framework built for this thesis relies on two main aspects: First, threat as an initial cause for action, where a common threat unites people to act together, and for new alliances to form. Following this, emotional response as a driving force for action for initiating protests but also to keep the protest going as the initial response fades. I argue that both theoretical aspects need to be applied in order to understand the how the activists in Poland considered the possible threats involved in ways to protest and why the protests continued in the way they did.

3.3 Hypothesis

Relying on the theoretical background, it seems reasonable to believe that emotions are key in understanding the motivations and reactions to and of the 2020-2021 protests. I hypothesize that reflex emotions, such as anger and fear, had a strong impact on the decision-making process before participating. The nature of the protests was very spontaneous, and other emotional responses may be observed *during* the protests, and that *the way* people participated, i.e., what strategies were used, was motivated by emotional responses. Further, I

hypothesize that Covid-19 may have been considered by the participants, but did not present a strong enough incentive to stay home or not partake in the street protests. This is because the threat to human rights may have been seen as, and more importantly: felt as, being more acute and severe in consequences and thereby motivating the participation albeit the threat of becoming ill.

3.4 Limitations

In the interviews and analysis, I have tried to capture and understand the emotions the interviewees show and talk about. The question could then be asked how one captures emotional responses. Indeed, emotional responses and expressions are complex and not always clearly distinguished from each other. Therefore, as a researcher, I have to make some interpretations and categorisation of the responses. Consequently, I need to apply my own emotional spectrum in order to be able to analyse the data collected. Sociology of emotions also have many different branches of theory and the choice of theory for this thesis becomes critical for the analysis. There are limitations in connection with the choices of theory as well as the depth of discussion on each theory.

It should also be said that the initial focus of this thesis was on strategies for protest and ways of protesting rather than motivations for protesting. This changed as the interviews were carried out, as many of the interviewees showed and discussed emotions in relation to the topic. As such, the thesis mentions strategies several times without carrying out a full analysis of these. Had the strategies themselves been the main focus of this thesis, other theories would have been applied, for example Infrapolitics by (Scott 1990) or submerged participation as described by (Melucci 1985).

4 Material and methods

This thesis applied a qualitative method, using interviews to collect data to analyse. In this chapter I present the reasoning behind methodological choices made.

4.1 Case selection: Poland

As the thesis focuses on protests during the 2020-2021 pandemic, Poland is a good example of how street protests took place despite regulations and pandemic. It is a useful example as several protests were held since the ruling was announced in October 2020, and many people participated in the protests. As Poland also have had many previous protests on Women Rights such as Manifa protests and the Black Protests, it makes for an interesting case, where the participants have participated or seen the previous protests and can relate their experiences to earlier ones.

4.2 Selection of participants to interview

The participants of the study have been chosen through what is commonly referred to as a snowball sample. Here, “the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contacts with others” (Bryman 2004, 101).

For this study, I started out by distinguishing between two different target groups: participants and organisers. The groups were used to find the right people to talk to and make sure that there were people with different roles interviewed for the study. As the organisers are fewer, some initial names of organisers and activists involved in the major organisations were identified by reading news articles, asking gate keepers and informants whom I have contacted and by looking to social media groups and pages. By asking my initial interviewees, I could later identify other people to interview.

One of the limitations using a snowball sample, is that “it is very unlikely to that the sample will be representative of the population” (Bryman, 2004, p. 102). However, Bryman (2004) argues that concerns about the ability to generalise and external validity is not as great within qualitative research where snowball sampling is used, as it may be in a quantitative study.

Two other issues concerning snowball selection can be identified; firstly, the people interviewed could refer to people that are irrelevant for the study in some way. Secondly, there is a possibility that one cannot get new people to interview from those interviewed. Lastly, one issue could also be that all people found through this method, all come from the

same network and have the same experiences. The solution to these two issues is also two-folded. Firstly, I have asked questions to the people whom I made contact with, concerning their role in the protests, in what way they have participated and where they are located, to identify if the person is suitable to interview. Through this process, a number of people had to be rejected as their locality was not Poland or that they had not participated in the street protests. Secondly and importantly, I had to have more than one “starting point” for the project, interviewing more than one person to start with and from there on find new participants. I reached out through several different networks of people to generate interviews that did not relay the exact same experiences. Rather, the different networks produced interviewees that have participated – and organised – protests in different cities, with different people involved, and within different networks.

The method used generated 15 interviews; 11 participants and 4 organisers. I continued to interview until saturation was achieved, that is, until new interviews no longer contributed new perspectives or answers.

4.3 The interviewees

The interviewees had different backgrounds and education levels albeit most having a university degree or being in the process of obtaining one, but all spoke English fairly well. In some instances, the interviewee used online lexicons to look up certain word or phrases, or translate Polish expressions to English.

I did not use an age reference when choosing participants, instead focusing on their experiences of protest as a criterion. The result was that participants age varied between about 20 and 50 years old. The participants were predominantly situated in Warsaw, relating information on the major strikes of the autumn of 2020, but I also interviewed people living in Gdansk and Lodz. Three organisers were situated in Warsaw, while the fourth organiser was situated in Lodz. Only 2 of the 15 participants were male. All participants had participated in protests before, in some way. Not all had previous experience in protesting for women rights, but had protested other issues, such as climate change.

For the analysis I refer to the protest participants as P1-11 and organisers as O1-4.

4.4 Carrying out the interviews

Due to the current pandemic, travelling to Poland was not possible. All interviews were therefore carried out via Zoom (online). It is not a perfect solution, as the possibility for

disturbance, technical issues etc are higher, and there is a higher risk that the interviewee feels uncomfortable. This was addressed by a thorough introduction to each interview and a mutual understanding of the situation at hand. All interviews were recorded with consent from the interviewees which allowed me to follow the interview more closely rather than focus on writing. Some notes were made throughout the interview, noting interesting aspects of the conversation or thoughts that came to mind. These notes were also incorporated into the analysis, as well as additional information that was sent to me after the interviews. These materials were for example names of places, legal writings in relation to people being fined, song texts or pictures of banners with slogans.

4.4.1 Confidentiality

Interviewees were also promised anonymity, or rather confidentiality, which was key in the interviewing process. “True anonymity is achieved when researchers do not know the identities of the research participants, such as when people respond to questionnaires submitted in a manner that does not tie person and data” (Roth & Von Unger, 2018, p. 9) which is rarely the case in qualitative studies.

The reason for the interviews to be kept confidential is that, firstly, I wanted the participants to feel comfortable to speak their minds without being afraid of reprimands from society or their peers. Secondly, since several outspoken activists were interviewed, I wanted their identity to remain hidden so that their opinions could be seen on their own accord, not having the knowledge, or prejudice, with regards to the person expressing their opinion or experience. Many participants in the study noted that the information given in the interviews could become a problem for them at work or in their activism should it be traced back to them, for example if this thesis should name them. Because of this, I have not disclosed what organisations they were involved in, if any, and personal details such as workplace, names etc. have been removed from the transcripts.

4.5 Interview structure and interview guide

The interview questions were collected in an Interview guide (see Appendix 1). This guide was formulated in the beginning of the study and then redrafted after a pilot interview.

Bryman (2004), on piloting an interview, writes that “it may be possible to consider how well the questions flow and whether it is necessary to move some of them about to improve this feature” and that “the pilot study should not be carried out on people who might have been members of the sample that would be employed in the full study” (Bryman, 2004, p. 160).

Accordingly, the pilot interview was conducted with a similar person to those chosen for the study, and the interview guide was rearranged after the pilot interview to achieve a smoother interview and create a comfortable space for the participants.

For the most part, open ended-questions were used in a semi-structured interview. Open ended question present both advantages and disadvantages. According to Bryman (2004) open-ended questions can be time consuming as interviewees are likely to speak longer than when closed questions are applied. Another issue is that the answers need to be coded, which is also very time consuming. However, in this case, the advantages are plentiful; interviewees can respond in their own words, the questions allow for unusual answers and further discussions, and they are useful when exploring new areas (Bryman 2004, 145), much like the research at hand. As the interviews were semi-structured the questions were more general and opens up for the possibility to ask follow-up questions (Bryman, 2004, p. 113), for example, asking them to develop certain aspects of their answers and so on. This method was chosen since the participants might have different experiences and motivations for their actions, which was key to the study. It also, much like the open ended-questions, made it possible to allow for unusual answers.

The questions formulated in the guide are divided into different themes. As the questions were both related to experiences and to motivations, some questions brought forth freer discussions while others pointed to more specific facts. Mixing the different questions and providing follow-up questions, made the conversation flow better and provided a deeper analysis of the participants' overall experience. However, it should be noted that the guide was used as a guide, rather than a manuscript, as some questions brought about different answers and discussions from different participants. As can be seen in the Appendix 1, all interviews started with an explanatory introduction of how the interview was being conducted and the purpose of the study at hand. Each interview took 30-60 minutes long. The data was collected during February-March of 2021.

4.6 Process of analysis

As mentioned earlier, open ended questions require coding of the answers given. There are many different ways in which this coding can be carried out and data analysis has been characterised as the most complex phase of qualitative research (Thorne, 2000) and needs to be discussed to motivate the trustworthiness of the study. This being said, it should also be said that the analysis has been carried out continuously and cannot fully be separated from the

data collection phase. Kvale (2007) argues that this is key, as the method of analysis should be given thought in advance of the interview situation in order to create a solid analysis of the data.

The method used was qualitative content analysis. As noted by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), “Qualitative content analysis goes beyond merely counting words to examining language intensely for the purpose of classifying large amounts of text into an efficient number of categories that represent similar meanings (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278) in order to understand an phenomenon.

The coding process took several weeks to finalise and each step was carefully carried out and continuously re-examined. I started with an initial manual coding of all the interviews and notes and created an initial coding scheme (see appendix 2 for final coding scheme). I applied abductive coding, meaning that there were some set codes with pre-organised categories were in place before starting the coding process, while others developed through the reading and analysing process. Examples of prearranged codes were emotional response, public space, community, street protest and threat. I therefore had a general direction in mind but could also add and rearrange codes as the analysis was carried out, making the process more flexible. The prearranged codes stemmed from the theoretical framework suggested above. I added and rearranged categories as the analysis process proceeded. It should also be noted that the coding was not line-by-line coding, as might be the case when applying for example Grounded Theory, but rather broad to include the context in the discussion and thereby not lose the contextual reality of each section of text. Some sections of the transcribed text were categorised into more than one category as it expressed emotional response as well as police action for example. As the coding process proceeded, the codes changed and were rearranged to be mutually exclusive.

The coding process was carried out both manually and using the software NVivo to structure the codes. The manual process was carried out using coloured markers, noting codes in the margin of the transcripts. I then moved over to Nvivo to conduct a second round of coding, this time with some more knowledge as to what codes the first round of manual coding had provided. Through the third round of coding, I could now deduce some themes or categories in which the codes fitted, and rearranged the codes accordingly. This process was done several times to make sure that I did not miss out on any information. This final process was made manually without using any software, as it made sense to rearrange the categories and themes manually rather than using Nvivo.

Eight categories were identified during the coding process which were then arranged into three themes¹:

- Responses and emotional reactions before and during the protests
- Motivating strategic choices
- Participatory community

4.7 Quality of the study and other considerations

For qualitative studies, there are several important criteria to fulfil in order for the study to be deemed credible, and depending on where you look there are different criteria suggested. Looking to Tracy (2010), the following eight key markers need to be fulfilled: *worthy topic*, *rich rigor*, *sincerity*, *credibility*, *resonance*, *significant contribution*, *ethics*, and *meaningful coherence*. Significant contribution was discussed in theoretical significance and future research, and is not addressed in this section. The rigor can be seen in the theoretical constructs and the analysis process presented and discussed above, as well as the samples and data collected. I also argue that there is enough data collected to make significant claims as data saturation was achieved.

The criterion of sincerity is fulfilled by the above discussion on bias of the researcher and the coding scheme presented in Appendix 2 in an attempt to create transparency with regards to the process. It has been argued elsewhere (for example in (Elo et al., 2014, p. 5) that the analysis should be performed by more than one person in order to create trustworthiness and an sincere analysis. As this thesis is an individual project, only one researcher coded the data. This may reflect on the sincerity of the thesis. However, I have tried to circumvent this by continuously discuss the progress with my supervisor. Another important aspect of sincerity is the self-reflexivity of the author. In the process of writing this thesis I have continuously reflected on myself and my biases and motivations in researching this topic. I have to acknowledge that I am studying a movement of which I have not been a part of, in Poland, and therefore cannot fully comprehend the emotional process of the participants, and even though I can sympathise I need to be aware of how an emotional response in me is transferred to the study. Here, it should also be noted that I can only capture the emotional processes in the interviews, not in the whole movement in general. I have tried to overcome not being in Poland by following social media pages and accounts and translating into English for myself

¹ The finalised coding scheme can be found in appendix 2: coding scheme

to advance my knowledge. I do however acknowledge that this is not a perfect solution, but considering the current situation I do believe I have done what I can in this respect.

Connected to this is credibility, noted as an important criterion by several scholars (see for example (Bryman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). I argue that the analysis presented in the upcoming chapter is well founded and the findings supported by the data at hand.

Resonance is the fifth criteria, and refers to “research’s ability to meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience” (Tracy, 2010, p. 844) and is achieved through representation and transferable findings. I have invited others to read my findings throughout the process to see in what way the text resonates with the reader. On transferability, Schreier, (2014) argues that: “Clearly, interview research that examines the life experiences of small numbers of participants over time yields different findings than studies in which hundreds of participants are involved. By focusing on depth, researchers sacrifice breadth, whereas focusing on breadth precludes depth” (2018:12). Taking Schreier’s remarks into consideration I acknowledge that my study contributes to the understandings of the field, rather than make generalisations. One cannot apply the findings to all other cases of protests; however, one could argue that the results of this study are transferrable, meaning that similar experiences could be found should a similar study be carried out for other protests during the pandemic.

I have continuously considered over the possible ethical implication of my study. There is little harm to be done when relaying the findings of my study and I have been mindful to the relational ethics too, by acknowledging the character, actions and consequences for others by selecting and treating the stories relayed to me with great respect. None of the participants were paid for their contributions and no other advantages were promised. None of the participants had any personal relationship to the interviewer in advance.

5 Analysis and results

In this section, I present and analyse the results of the interviews conducted, applying the theoretical framework discussed previously. I begin by analysing the emotional response and reactions before and during the protests followed by the motivations put forward for the strategy choices made. Lastly, I discuss the participatory community that was created through the protests.

5.1 Responses and emotional reactions before and during the protests

I settled on the theme of responses and emotional reactions as all participants touched upon emotions when being interviewed, and because the interviewees often felt very passionate and strongly about the court ruling and protests that followed. Only two of the 15 participants claimed to not have an emotional response, or trying to not react emotionally, noting that they were different from others or that emotions would cloud their judgement. However, both of them did acknowledge fear, anger and joy as reflex emotions that they felt with regards to the court decision. The other 13 interviewees all talked about strong emotions of anger, fear, sadness and disappointment when hearing of the court decision in December, many referring to this as a defining moment. One participant said that she is not usually a person who cries, but as the decision was announced she started crying in disbelief. One of the organisers explained: *“It's something that crossed certain emotional limits of people”*. Several participants also talked about the decision as a threat to their lives and ways of living and that this was a continuation of the politics carried out by PiS. The previous decisions made by PiS played a role in the reaction, as the court decision on abortion rights was seen as a culmination of distrust and disagreement with the government that had been growing for a long time. For example, P6 argues that everything started when PiS came to power rather than in October of 2020. Some interviewees argued that the movement was not at all feminist, but rather a popular movement, motivated by this rage against the government rather than pursuing a feminist agenda. Few seemed to have been taken completely by surprise, but one participant explained that she watched the broadcasting and thought that it might go well, as one of the judges had said he did not agree with abortion being unconstitutional. As she watched the broadcast and the decision was finally announced, she watched in disbelief and felt fear, thinking that *“this cannot be real”*. These strong emotional reactions show the disagreement with the court ruling and an awakening of the feeling that there was a need to act *now*. Several interviewees said that they just had to do something when they heard of the

decision. Much like Almeida (2018) argues, the threat made the issue at hand feel more acute and thereby motivated action initially.

Some, who had children, motivated their action by talking about their children's rights and that they felt a threat toward their children's future too. As can be seen in the following section, the emotional response for O3 when thinking back on how this decision will affect her daughter was strong and motivated action:

"I have a daughter, but at the time she was 14 and I felt like, fuck, this is something wrong. You know, I was growing up in a communist country, as a teenager in a communist country. And I felt like I had more rights 10 years ago than she's having now in 21st century. [...] she's born in the European Union. And, so, she's wholly, totally European kid. And now because she's based in Poland, she's deprived of her rights. And what's more, she's threatened with prison! It was so unbelievable! [...] And it is time to say no!"

O3 also says that the protests of 2020 were an historical moment and that it was not an option not to participate, as it felt as if a revolution was finally coming. I suggest that this verbalisation of the initial emotions correlates to the theory of threat being a motivator for collective action to initiate change. Even though there had been issues before the October 2020 court decision, the court ruling made the issue more acute with an increased sense of grievance. The acuteness of the situation then spurred the protests following the court decision. I also note that it is far from the first time that protests have taken place in Poland, on the contrary. However, the protests of 2020 show how the threat became personal, threatening the way of living for many people, and it was a continuation of politics already at play. Here, the disdain for the government and court motivated action and continued to do so, as people came together and saw that others had felt the same thing when hearing the decision. There were several interviewees that argued that the government was really to blame for the protests, many times in the interview coming back to their dissatisfaction with the government in one way or the other, talking about how angry the government made them, that PiS had taken many other decisions too that motivated them to part-take in the protests and that the country is less free today than during communism era. It is clear that the issue at hand, limitations of the abortion law, may in fact not be the only or even the main reason for some participants to take to the streets. P11, argues:

“You know, I’m dissatisfied with so many things we are facing in this country that I just wanted to let myself experience some satisfaction with the fact that people actually started doing something. And it’s... it’s a big and important step.”

One participant also discussed this, saying that there were banners with slogans such as “leave us alone, take out a pandemic”, asking the government to focus on the pandemic rather than the protests. Another participant discussed the reasons for participating in the protests and noted that: *“the second thing was the cynicism: to do it in such a time when you have lots of other things you should take care of. It’s unbelievable!”*. She refers to how the government decided to make this decision in the middle of a pandemic, which is a general expression of anger throughout the interviews, several pointing to that the government should focus on the pandemic and helping people, both in healthcare and in aid for people who lost their jobs, instead of the issue of abortion. Two participants also joked about Jaroslaw Kaczynski being admirable for the way he had managed to gain control of Poland, one of them saying sarcastically:

“Honestly, I admire the leader of the party [laughing ironically] because that was such big accomplishments to gain control, like a single person in this country has control over most of the parts of the country right now. So, yeah, a big accomplishment for him and he will go down in history as one of the best dictators.”

5.1.1 Different threats simultaneously

Very few of the participants discussed Covid-19 when talking about why they wanted to participate, when talking freely on this topic. Only the few participants who were infected and therefore were isolated, mentioned this as a reason for not going, until they became well again. However, when asked to talk more about the Covid-19 pandemic, several participants said that they had had some considerations with regards to safety. Several of them wanted to, or planned to, visit family members who were older or in risk zones, and therefore avoided going to the streets the closer to Christmas they came. However, there might also have been other reasons for people not going to the protests the longer time went on, such as weather and maybe also fatigue, where the will and spirit of the protests may have been somewhat dulled.

Three participants also mentioned that they thought about safety with regards to there being so many people coming together. One of the organisers, who individually organised an event, said that he then saw an article that discussed the Black Lives Matters protests in the US,

where it said that there was no evidence to suggest that the spread of the virus increased during those protests, and he then felt safe in inviting people to his event too.

The data collected shows that the fear of Covid-19 was not that great in October 2020. Some motivate this by the fact that the first wave of the pandemic was not very severe in Poland. Therefore, people were not as scared when the second wave hit in the beginning of the autumn of 2020. Another reason could also be that the virus had been around for more than 6 months by then, and therefore it was more familiar than it might have been if the protest was held earlier in the year. Before the decision was announced in October 2020, there were many protests organised still, but in a different manor, such as protesting by car or bike, which is discussed further in the following sections. The pandemic was seen as a serious threat when going to the protest but people were rather fearing for relatives to be infected than themselves. Several people also said that there was a much bigger fear to lose their human rights than catching the virus. One participant explained this, as she talked about the emotions in place when hearing the court ruling:

“I’ve been like all my adult life in the streets fighting against something, for something. And it’s worse, worse and worse. So, this is - you know, this frustration is also it can be paralyzing, but it can push you to do risky things. But I was not you know, for me: It was pandemic? Who cares about pandemic? I have to be in that. “

The fear of police was also contrasted to the fear to the virus. As one participant put it, when talking about risks and covid-19:

“not that much the Covid, because those who are in the streets, we’re taking precautions and, you know, measuring this risk, they would put it right at the individual family levels, but when the brutalisation of bodies of the people starts, they stop going to... people start to withdraw from the active participation protests.”

It can therefore be concluded that other fears than the virus were much greater and therefore motivated participation, but also, that the fear of police and authorities made people think twice about participating. Here, it can be seen how these different threats at play are intertwined and influencing decision-making simultaneously – but in different ways and to different degrees. Apart from Covid, some other concerns that were brought up were concerns for safety during the protests. Police brutality and alt-right movements were discussed repeatedly in all interviews. This created a fear for many interviewees, with one remarking that they would “stand just in a safe distance from the other protest there so we can also have

a safe spot to run away in any case” (P7). P8 also acknowledges how these safety concerns affected her participation and the way she saw the protests. She and the people she went with decided not to follow the crowds on several occasions as it did not feel safe when police squeezed the crowds tighter together.

All participants, without exceptions, started talking about police and police brutality, before being asked about it. Many of them had personal experiences of fear when encountering police and some had fines given to them for participating. Many of the participants presented the way the police carried out the arrests, saying that once you get arrested in Warsaw, you are taken to a police station outside of the capital, in one of the smaller cities. You are not allowed to talk to anyone and they can detain you for 48 hours without bringing charges. In this way, you could disappear for two days without anyone knowing where you are. When you are released, you are not taken back to Warsaw, but instead need to find your own way back. This tactic resulted in protesters bringing many things to the protests, in case they would get caught. One participant said a couple of her friends had been taken by the police, and that you never know who will be there and not at the end of the protest. She said she is well prepared when going to the protest, just in case she would be arrested. Apart from her documents for identification, she brings things such as goggles to avoid pepper spray, milk to sooth sore eyes if she, or anyone else would get pepper sprayed, lense liquid, tissues, something to eat, like a chocolate bar, hot and cold drinks, charger and/or power bank, warm socks and tampons. She explains: “Because when you have your period, then you are going to spend two days at the police station and they are not going to even let you take care of your hygiene”.

Many people interviewed comes back to pepper spray as a way for the police to stop the protests. Milk was mentioned several times as a necessary product to have, and some relayed stories of how they had to run to people’s houses and apartments to retrieve milk.

There were some strategies employed to avoid being caught by, or fined by, the police. One participant had personal experience of running from the police, jumping fences and managing to get away, while her friends were less lucky in that sense. The organisers held educational seminars online where they informed protesters on how to react when interacting with police, and to not accept the charges given to them. To help, they set up a team of lawyers to fight the fines in court.

One participant, who ran from police, later sent an email to me, the author, relaying the charges her friends had. Both were arrested in the same day and time, but got different charges. One of them, male protester, for participating in an illegal meeting² and the other, a female protester, for failing to comply with the regulations in place to combating infectious diseases³. Why they were fined for different things is unknown and the two protesters fined, cannot see any reasons for this either.

One of the organisers pointed out that things have changed in Poland with regards to the police. She claimed that on previous protests the police were there to protect the participants, but that is not the case anymore. Her feeling was instead that the police is there to fine and detain people, instead of keeping the protests calm and safe. All participants talked about this feeling of threat from police in one way or another, but the feeling varied among the participants. One participant, who came into contact with police at the protest, expressed that it was frustrating because the police she talked to really did not understand the reason for the protests and seemed to be more interested in having her leave, rather than actually acknowledging the reason for the protests. This experience had her conclude that there is no use in speaking to the police. One expressed that the police is the enemy, while others argued that it was difficult also for police as they had to follow the governments orders and that the government was really to blame. One organiser, who previously had had much contact with police through her work, said that she knew policewomen who were afraid of losing their jobs when participating in the protests and thereby risking even more, but still coming to the protests.

Only once were the police mentioned in a directly positive way, and that was one of the organisers, who, when organising a blockade of a roundabout, was engaged in discussions with a police negotiator. He believed that this person was not a normal street police as she had normal clothes on and only a vest letting people know she was represented the police. The organiser expressed that the policewoman did a very good job at negotiating and that it was much thanks to her that the protest event ended in a friendly manner, without violence and without arrests.

² art. 54 Kodeksu wykroczeń (KW) w zw. odpowiednimi przepisami Rozporządzenia Rady Ministrów, czyli udział w nielegalnym zgromadzeniu

³ art. 116 § 1a Kodeksu wykroczeń (KW), czyli nie przestrzeganie zakazów, nakazów, ograniczeń lub obowiązków określonych w przepisach o zapobieganiu oraz zwalczaniu zakażeń i chorób zakaźnych u ludzi.

One participant explained that there is an historical distrust in the police in Poland. She explained that you would rather go to the fire station than the police station for help. Certainly, historical tensions with police may contribute to the view many of the interviewees had. However, the brutal actions of the police and the usage of the pandemic as a reason for detaining people could contribute to the feeling of erosion of rights that was already there. Increasing this threat created new motivations to protest and a renewed sense that the government are not on the side of the people. In that sense, the police actions here, could contribute to forming a new threat. Looking to Almeida (2018) she outlines state repression as a threat and, even though the protests originally may have been motivated by an erosion of rights, it may, in fact, be motivated by a new threat due to police actions. This new threat, I believe, can also be seen as an extension of the threat motivating the protests in the first place. The police action was seen as yet another proof of the initial threat from the authorities being real and true. The actions carried out by police therefore contributed to the feeling of threat making the situation even more explosive.

5.1.2 Responses to protests by other groups

Many participants also compared the way the Abortion Rights protests were handled by police, compared to the police action at the Independence Day march of 2020. Many refer to the incident where an apartment was set on fire during the march, and how the police protected the participants on that day, vis-a-vis the lack of protection during the abortion rights protests. As the following two quotes shows, there was a feeling of being treated unfairly, and that feeling was accentuated when other protests occurred and were treated differently by police and the government:

“I thought how the protests of the month of November looked like and group of drunk men that were demolishing half of the city, including the ones men apartment the day from the burning. [...] I saw how the police handled this protest, and I then saw how they are acting while our protest and... They are aggressive, they are trying to make you fear them.” (P1)

“There was like anti-covid protests. There was like a protest of the fascists and nobody said anything about that [...]. Every 11th of November, when Poland has their Independence Day in, like it starts as a nice affair. But then in the end, it's just like a space for, you know, fascists and radicals to exercise their beliefs and kind of demolish the city and police respond, but the number of police surrounded in those events was like - I felt it was not as large as during these protest” (P2)

The march held on the Independence Day could be studied in its own right, but that is outside the scope of this study. However, the emotional response to the actions by police further divided the participants in the protests and the police, and may have introduced further reasons to be scared of the police.

Other groups mentioned here were pro-life groups/organisations and work place responses. It is clear that pro-life organisations organised massive responses to the protests, as several interviewees addressed the banners and ads placed by these organisations. Organiser O4 discussed the billboards and the messages relayed by Catholic church with a pro-life message, pondering on how much money they must have as the billboards are everywhere, all over Poland, attacking the pro-choice movement. She expresses a frustration of this situation and says that “it's because of the government, because we have men. There are bad people, I can say, that are bad people. And these people hate women. I don't know why. I don't understand”. This interviewee also discusses how the work place can become a place where problems arise as you participate in the protests. This was echoed by several participants. For O4, a man at her work, publicly demanded her resignation due to her involvement in the protests. She still holds the position at work, but it was draining to endure this process. P8 also lays out issues with regards to her place of work, where she feels that the employer is not as progressive as one would hope. Both P8 and P3 says that if their names were to be published in this study, there may be consequences for them at work.

All of these examples of how the protests were compared to other protests and how pro-life-organisations worked to undermine the protests, can be seen as expressions of the common narrative of everything just being “too much” and crossing an emotional line. Police was considered to be on the other side, as an enemy. This also motivated further action and instilled in people this feeling of being right in defying regulations to protest.

5.2 Motivating strategic choices

Much like theory on emotions and social movements suggests, it is clear that the routines of the Polish protests did in fact offer some emotional release, involving movement such as dancing and singing. Because of the Covid-19 restrictions in place, a feeling of being deprived of social connections was created. Thus, the routines of protest may in fact be even more important in this case than in many other protest movements. As the protests began, many of the interviewees acknowledged the fact that the protests presented an opportunity to meet, to dance and to socialise, while standing up for an important cause. Looking to

Eyerman (2002), music is important in creating a collective (and in some instances individual) identity. In the protests in Poland, many of the participants mentioned the song *Jebac PiS*. The song was created by an artist, using the song “Call on me” by Eric Prydz, and putting new lyrics to the song. Two of the participants interviewed mentioned and discussed whether the song was appropriate or not, one participant saying: “the sad thing about this song is that the guy who recorded that is quite chauvinistic. So many feminists raised a question that should it really be our anthem?”. Then she continues:

“but honestly, for me this song was like... we had a boombox and were going on the streets and like dancing to this [song] because it's really powerful and you could feel like in the club, which we quite miss. So... we had our clubs in the streets now during the protests and... Yeah, that was nice.”

It should be noted that none of the participants said that dancing and socialising was the main reason for going to the protest. On the contrary, it is clear that all are motivated by other things than socialising, as mentioned above, and that the end-goal was not dancing but rather to protest. One of the protest participants, P6, notes that there were some criticisms in the news that people used the protests as an opportunity to party but arguing that music and dancing is “the right way to protest” comparing it to more violent protests. This is also visible in another interview:

“And sometimes, I mean, like, I shouldn't be saying this, maybe, probably... But you have great music. You can have your friends around. You know, it's also like some kind of a fun thing to do collectively with others.”

Here, the participant talked about the way it feels to protest with so many other people, compared to smaller protests. Her way of expressing this is almost apologetic, saying that the experience of the Warsaw protest was not only for an important cause, but also gave an opportunity to enjoy oneself together with other people. This shows that there must be some sort of satisfaction along the way, to keep people motivated. That the dancing and moving together may, in fact, make people more motivated to continue protesting. The feeling of joy and community, expressed by the participants in this study, show that music and dancing indeed was among the strongest memories for them, and that this made protest more fun and energetic. This is what Jasper (2011, drawing on Collins and Durkheim) refers to as emotional energy, where excitement and enthusiasm is generated in interaction and rituals and which then encourages further action. Through music, and through collective action, an emotional

energy is created and through participating in rituals of the protests, a collective community is created, motivating further action. Further, I argue that the emotional response during the protests can be seen as an emotional liberation, as discussed by Jasper (2011). First, anger over the court decision motivated people to take to the streets. The feeling of pride and community that followed, as people were at the protests, motivated further action. Here, mobilisation in itself can be seen as a goal in itself. The means of protest and the ends of it may be construed as each victory is as important as the end goal, as it injects confidence and emotional energy needed to keep going. That feeling of release is also addressed by some of the organisers interviewed, who recognise that people were “fed up” with staying at home and now took to the street. Here, the lack of stimuli at home, may in fact have made protest participation even more appealing. Hence, the pandemic may not have deterred people from taking to the streets, but rather motivated them to take part.

Apart from using music as a tool for protest, other strategies were also mentioned. Here, blockades of streets by masses of people as well as cars, busses and bikes, were among the strategies mostly discussed by the interviewees. Graffiti and putting up stickers were also common codes acknowledged in the data. Some discussed whether tagging churches with graffiti was an appropriate measure or not, as this happened during the protests. All interviewees who mentioned this seemed to agree with the tactic, while saying that there was disagreement among people whether it was ok or not.

One participant also acknowledged adusting as a tactic, where she went to the streets at night to replace signs by pro-choice movements with signs, she had made herself. In general, signs and banners and the humorous and creative messages that people had on the streets, was often brought up during the interviews.

5.2.1 Covid-19

When discussing strategies to protest and how these were chosen, several interviewees gave examples of ways to protest where people tried to circumvent the regulations and thereby avoid being arrested. One such example is that people gathered in smaller groups of 5 people, in line with the restrictions. P2 explains it like this:

“the measures kind of became more and more strict. What people would do, like, you know, you would still make a large crowd, but from like a bunch of smaller crowds of like three to five people, because at the time it was allowed for like five people only together”.

Whether this strategy really worked or not, was not conveyed in the interviews conducted. Other ways that people protested that was designed to avoid contact contamination, was for example car protests and bike protest. Car protests were arranged even before October 2020, because of the pandemic. Also, most participants witnessed of window protests, where people plastered their windows with banners, signs and lights to protest, even if they could not be on the streets. Several of the participants who were in Warsaw, said that it was such an amazing experience to walk through the streets seeing all the banners in all windows, and how the number of banners on building façades and in windows intensified the closer to Jaroslaw Kaczynski's house you got. The way the interviewees talk about this makes it clear to me that this too contributed to the feeling of coming together and through that an emotional liberation (Jasper 2011) changing fear into pride and thereby removing potential blockages for protesting, that would otherwise discourage the protesters. Emotional energy is created, visualised and communicated to others.

Yet another strategy worth mentioning was designed to circumvent the regulations, maybe more than avoiding the virus per se, was queuing protest. One participant explained that when the regulations came into place, people still wanted to protest. Because there was a limited number of people allowed in each store and shop, people started queuing outside of the store, carrying a banner or sign:

“So, there were lines formed to a shop that's on the street where the Polish parliament is. So, there was along the street was a line to a very small local shop of people who wanted to protest. So, they kept a distance of, I don't know, two meters or whatever. But standing with posters, with transparency. The police were confused, didn't know what to do or whether they are what...? So, it was a new experience.”

This shows that the pandemic very much influenced the thinking in relation to the protests, but maybe not as a threat but rather a factor that needed to be taken into account.

5.2.2 Off the streets

When talking about the protests, all participants related this to street protests rather than online protests or other strategies at first. Upon being asked to discuss other ways to protest and their own personal experience of that, online activities were discussed. Examples discussed were signing petitions, spamming authorities by emailing or calling them multiple times, change background picture of Zoom to the red lightning bolt which had become the sign of the protests, and thereby protest during university lectures and meetings. The visual

expression was important here, and this also resulted in people discussing the banners and signs placed in windows facing the streets.

However, it does seem as if online activity was more focused on communication, rather than protest. Many participants mentioned online apps where communication was encrypted, arguing that social media is not safe and that Facebook could not be used to communicate. Online activities, such as those mentioned above, therefore did not seem as important to the interviewees, as the street protests. When asked why so many people took to the streets and why it was important, one organiser said that there is no other way to protest:

“You can say no at home and but like, it doesn't matter, nobody's hearing you. So, this is the human condition that when you don't agree with some kind of power, you go to express it in a public space so that they can see you. They can notice that you're upset”.

The visual expression and being visual becomes key when protesting. By being in the streets, media could also witness the actions taken, and participants could spread the message of the protests to other people, both in Poland, as well as worldwide. The media attention therefore is key in getting the word out that something is going on, at this is most easily done by carrying out street protests rather than online protests. P9, who took many photos during the protests, describes that she wanted to post videos online, not to show the protest itself, but rather to show that many people participated, contrary to what was being said on government owned TV. She said:

“So, people were trying to capture how many actually were protesting. And it was quite often they were using drones also to show from our how many people were there. I was just there to show that I'm not agreeing with whatever is happening”.

These findings are in line with the theory by Parkinson (2012), as the online activity seem to have contributed to the protests, but that physical space is key for protests. Therefore, taking to the streets communicates strength and visually, it becomes more concrete for onlookers and others, when seeing the number of people participating, rather than only reading numbers online. Parkinson (2012) also argues for the need for choice of public space for protest. In the case of Poland, the symbolic places of protest mentioned in the interviews were for example the house of Jaroslaw Kaczynski, where the first and initial protests walked towards, but also the Government controlled TV building, as well as the court house. The place for protest therefore becomes key in protesting, and thereby for democracy.

5.3 Participatory community

When analysing the materials collected it is clear to me that the massive street protests held many different groups of people. All participants expressed the feeling that everyone was there, coming together to protest. This seems to have been giving extra strength and courage to participants and they talk about the number of people in a positive way and many also refers to this as a feeling of revolution. Children and parents, migrant workers, bus drivers, taxi drivers, religious people, football supporters and elderly people among others, were groups that the interviewees mentioned as participants. One participant talks about her friends from high school, with whom she has not spoken for several years, reached out to see if they could go to the protests together, and that you always met people you know in the streets. Interestingly, private companies were discussed by several participants, one commenting that companies that target millennials and younger generations highlight what side they are on, in the protests, to market their products.

Many of the participants said that the court decision and protests was defining moments and that they felt like they just had to be in the streets to protest, no matter what. Once the street protests started, they felt a strong community with other people in the anger and disappointment they felt. Here, interviewee P8 expresses in what way the protests made her feel this community:

P8: *And to have this sense of common values also because sometimes I feel like I'm... I'm in a social... lump? In a group in a group of people grew up thinking same... like a...*

Interviewer: *Hm... like a bubble?*

P8: *Yeah, exactly. That's what I wanted to say, like a social bubble. And sometimes, you know... I of course, I know that there is a world outside of a bubble, but I rarely meet these people, so when I saw that there are so many people who is supporting the same values... and different ages, they were very young people, like very young students or even from secondary school and also elderly people like 70 plus. Even so, I thought all this strength in the society and, and - I thought that, well, there is power! And maybe, maybe we'll achieve our goal, maybe our voice will be heard, more will be taken into account. It wasn't, but still there was this feeling of solidarity and power!*

When taking to the streets and this feeling of being connected may in fact be a very concrete example of the emotional energy, or collective effervescence, discussed by Durkheim (1976), Collins (2005) and Jasper (2011). As people came together a feeling of community and

emotional release contributed to a feeling of wellbeing and positivity. Through coming together something new and positive was achieved. The emotions that initially motivated people to take to the streets, were verified and enhanced as the bodily experience of coming together creates new communities and unity.

5.3.1 The role of the organisers

Four people, who had been involved in organising events and protests during 2020-2021, were interviewed for this study. The label “organiser” may be seen as deceptive, as the events of 2020 were very spontaneous, which several people interviewed witnessed about. I chose to keep this label since these people have, in some way, initiated or led actions which have made it possible for others to join in or take action. One of them organised his own blockade but was not associated to organisations in any way, while the other three interviewed have been involved in NGOs and networks that organised bigger events and engaged in strategic work.

The safety aspect of protests was discussed by all organisers interviewed, but Covid and the pandemic was not the first aspect, rather, police, traffic and general safety issues came to mind, before speaking of the pandemic. One organiser discussed that there were many issues involved in organising events like this, under the circumstances at hand. She explained that they cannot say outright that they are organising a protest, because then the police can come and say that they are breaking laws, and if people misbehave in the protests, they cannot help that. Instead, they do not claim responsibility for the protests, and focus on keeping people safe in whatever way they can, when the protest is going on. When discussing covid-19, three organisers mentioned masks and hand sanitiser and that they did what they could to make sure people kept a distance and kept safe. One of the organisers also said that she was afraid of the pandemic but that her position in the protests was more protected, or at least made it possible to keep a distance, as she was walking in the front of the crowd where there are very few people. However, for this organiser, other risks were identified. It meant being recognised by police at all times and being a public figure can cause other problems.

Even in the role of the organisers, Covid-19 became an issue in several ways. The planning process was different and events that would otherwise have been held in cafés or pubs or in public places, instead was held online. The topic of the seminars and educations changed a bit too, as there was a need to focus on how to avoid being fined due to the covid restrictions. Here, organisers from NGOs mentioned having lawyers engaged to work the processes of people who were arrested during the protests. Organisers mentioned that their right to

assemble and right to speak cannot be taken away just because there is a pandemic; that they should be allowed to protest either way, and that the government was using the pandemic to enforce restrictions on rights.

It also affected many different aspects of the planning process, as anyone could fall ill at any given moment. One organiser from Lodz explained:

“You know, one day I am one of the important people on the protest, other dates it is other girls or men, because... One day you can organise. But tomorrow you can say, oh my God, I have a covid and I will not come. So, we have to think about all the things and think about the future. Not only one person is the most important protest”.

The person who then could not come was assigned other tasks, such as keeping an eye on where the police is at, delegating orders and managing communications from home. That person, the organiser said, is just as important as those who are on the streets.

Another aspect, connected to this was brought forward by one person involved in the protests in Warsaw. She recognised that the pandemic made it more difficult to plan and assemble many people for planning, which was further complicated by the fact that the protests were very spontaneous. This led to them being very few people in the top planning team, leading the protests. This organiser did recognise that this, in some way, actually made things easier too, as they were so few people and therefore could communicate and take decisions faster. In the following section, this organiser discussed the effects of this:

“I think this is the best thing, that we learn to work together in such a way that within seconds we are able to make crucial decisions changing the order, for example, the direction of the march, and the police is totally surprised because they don't know how we do it! It's just based on a good, very good understanding between us and collaboration and exchange of communication”

Many organisers also argue that the protests were very spontaneous and that little planning was possible. Only hours after the court decision was announced people took to the streets. This can be seen in the following statement from O3, who said that they were totally unprepared when the protests started:

“[I]t was all spontaneous and based on our personal contacts, we didn't have time. [...] we didn't have even time to communicate with other cities at that moment. There's only a Facebook group where we like... It was not even time to write on Facebook, in fact. So, it was

hard to be in touch with others from other places. [...] The power was coming from the bottom, not from, you know, somebody who was on the top”.

5.3.2 New allies during crisis

As it became clear from interviewing participants that many different groups of people participated in the protests, I also wanted to know if there was any structural cooperation in place. One organiser told us that the spontaneity of the protests was one obstacle in talking to other groups, even those that they used to cooperate with. However, as the protests went on, more and more groups seemed to join, which is also discussed by interviewees themselves. Many groups with different political views, backgrounds and organisational strategies, helped out and wanted to cooperate. Here, the organisers interviewed mentions LGBTQ organisations, sexual education providers, parties with Green or Leftist orientation. However, there were also parties from the centre, who maybe was not the usual cooperation party. One organiser talked about the other participating groups, which they had not cooperated with before, in the following way:

At some point, we are not in our left-wing group anymore! It was quite surprising, but then it was like... They were involved in protests in the streets, but it somehow didn't become-became and the kind of cooperation because we don't share common values and somehow, they were also protesting because there was a very big part of this protest involved with people being angry at the government and there was like this Jebac PiS and so on”

Another interesting aspect that was brought up by some of the protest participants, rather than organisers, was the disagreement on strategies and what the protest were really about. As discussed previously, the motivations for participating differed between the people interviewed. One could argue that this is a pattern that can also be applied in general on the protests, as the many different groups seem to disagree to some extent, on the goal of the protest. One participant, who had close ties to the organisation Abortion Dream Team, expressed a relief in joining events that refocused the attention on the issue at hand, abortion rights, rather than what she saw as a general frustration over the situation in Poland. As mentioned, many of the participants interviewed said they knew that there was much disagreement on the goal of the protests; free abortions, or going back to the previous law of abortion. This created some confusion of end goal. One can compare the two passages below to see this difference in opinion on strategy. In the first quote, P4 discusses the law on abortion saying it is “sick” and “horrible”, and then continuing:

“And another thing is about being pregnant from rape, for example, or in the situation when I don't want to be pregnant, you know, something is like that, you are in a relationship or you are just hook up with some guy and then it just happens. It doesn't mean that you have to bear this child, it should be your choice. So that's what I believe in”.

P9, on the other hand, thinks that the situation before October 2020 was good and that a change needs to come after people have been educated and made aware of their rights:

“we are not ready for a full right to abortion as a country. And I think it was good what was before. So, it was good. And we should wait a bit. We should focus on teaching people. We should focus on awareness about that and then try to change something.”

This can also be seen when another participant talks about her experience when listening to the manifest on what the strike wanted, read by activists during the protests:

“what happened next was so they you know, they came up with the manifest, what the strikes with the people that coordinate all the strikes actually want from the government. And there was just, you know, everything! Like it wasn't about women anymore. It was about the government and about Jaroslav Kaczynski and... And let's say for me, it's OK, but I understand why we are not protesting anymore here, because we don't really know what about we are protesting. Because the first point of their list was to make the government quit. But hey, wait, we weren't talking about that even...?”

Contrary to her experience, many other protesters interviewed saw this manifest as something positive and felt that it really did reflect their own opinions on government – and abortion alike. This shows that the group of people taking part in the street protests may have seemed as one single community, marching for one cause – but in fact, they were not and some disagreed on the tactics and the goal of the movement. However, even if the people participated had different agendas, there was still an emotional bond among those participating. Despite different opinions or goals, people still came together and we can see that emotional bond and motivation driving the protest to keep going.

5.3.3 Bridging the age-gap

Difficulties in bridging the age-gap was another issue that was recognised in the data collected. Noting that there were indeed many people participating that were not teenagers or young activists, the age difference and that many young people participated in the protests was mentioned by several interviewees. In some instances, the age difference was bridged and

not seen as a possible issue while others were very aware of age as being something that separated the protesters, but also people in general. One participant stated that she, being in her forties, felt old when participating in the protests. She did not fully understand the banners made by young participants, as they contained online memes and inside jokes. She describes this as follows:

“I have a picture taken in the streets and I posted this picture on Facebook and I put this, Well, “We are like the aunts of revolution”, like we are like supporting and observing. But this is not our revolution. This is being made by younger generations.” (P8)

Here, the emotional energy created among the younger participants may in fact have created a void where older participants did not feel as involved or invited to partake.

Another example where age was seen as a division was one interviewee discussing herself participating in the protests and how she could see her parents dislike in some instances:

“You know, my parents are open minded. Let's say they're around 50s and they're like... they're cool with most of the people [...] [but] they have a really big problem, because for them, what I believe in and what I say, you know, very brave and using these words [swearing], it's too much for them. It's just too much. So, they could agree with me, but they want to keep, you know, their safe space without using words like penis or vagina. It's just bad for them really. And that's why I think that the left side has a problem, because they don't understand it. They don't get it. They want to be so cool. They want to they want to communicate with the Z generation. And it's yeah, it's working. That's cool. But it's not working with the middle-aged middle-class people”

As pointed out by Staggenborg (1986) and Borland (2010), new alliances and cooperation can indeed be created during a crisis of some kind. Even though the case of Poland differs from the abovementioned studies in many ways, being narrower and the threat being different, it is still key in understanding the possible alliances that can be created during crisis. As the above shows, the organisers say that they did indeed come into contact with other groups, formal and non-formal, which they had not worked with previously. They also acknowledge that little long-term cooperation came out of these cooperation's as their ideological backgrounds were too different. Both these conclusions are made by Staggenborg (1986) and Borland (2010) too, where things such as age and ideology were things that needed much attention in order to be bridged and to create lasting cooperation. For this study we can see that the difficulties in forming long-term relationships may not only be related to age or ideology per

se, but also that there were different ideas of what the goal of the protest actually was. Coming back to the earlier comment made by one of the interviewees, this again shows that the movement may in fact have been a popular movement rather than a feminist one.

6 Conclusion

To conclude this study, I now return to the research questions for the study:

RQ1: What motivated and influenced participants' and organisers' decision-making regarding participation in the abortion law protests in Poland 2020-2021?

RQ2: Did the Covid-19 pandemic influence the protests, and if so, in what way?

6.1 Motivations and influences

With regards to the first research question, it can be seen in this study that the motivations to participate for the interviewees were manifold. When the court decision was announced, many of the interviewees saw this as an enormous threat to their lives or ways of living. The hypothesis for this study, was that reflex emotions sparked by the court decision motivated the people to go to the streets to protest. However, the motivations for protesting proved to be more intricate than that and were motivated by a general dismay for the Polish government and PiS too, not only by the decision at hand. As people from different groups with different motivations participated, the goal of the protests was seen differently by different groups. In this study, some interviewees thought that the abortion rights issue was the key issue and most important, while others focused more on the general situation in Poland and their distrust in the authorities. Therefore, it can be concluded that the movement may indeed not have been feminist altogether, but rather popular in its nature.

This study also shows that dancing and music became a further motivation to continue protesting or joining similar events. Much like Jasper (2011) suggests, the positive emotions surrounding the protests could be analysed as goals or victories in themselves motivating further action. The community created during the protests made many felt empowered and motivated.

During the autumn of 2020, several protests took place, all over Poland. Several interviewees communicated that the initial anger motivated, but as the protests went on, joy and community also became visible. Here, protest rituals involving dancing and music became important instruments that kept the protesters going. Jasper (2011) argues that it is the emotional energy of the protest which motivates a continuation of protest. Music contributed

to the collective experience of the protests and a tool to create a collective and identity. The song *Jebac PiS* discussed, created some discussion internally among activists and participants, but in the end provided a way to communicate a message through dancing and singing which, according to theory can be seen as satisfaction necessary to keep protesting.

One aspect that is interesting to discuss here, is also the fact that new possibilities to create new alliances and cooperation with new groups was presented during the protests. Where many interviewees mention that there were all types of people in the streets protesting, new groups were also formed and were supported by existing groups in different ways. Much like theory suggests (Borland 2010, Staggenborg 1986), there are several issues that need to be overcome to create lasting alliances. We note that ideological issues did rise as a potential challenge to long-term cooperation. Much like Borland (2010), this thesis also concludes that age could present another issue that needs to be bridged in order to attract more people and that strategies used for protesting might not have suited everyone involved (using coarse language or graffiti on churches for example) and thereby deterred people from engaging in the protest rather than bringing them together.

Looking to the second part of the hypothesis of this thesis, I conclude that it was correct in some regards, while other aspects could be further evaluated. As anticipated, Covid was in general not a big enough threat to stop people from joining the protests. Even if the virus was not seen as a personal threat to those participating, many saw a threat to grandparents, other family members and friends, and acted so that they would not transfer the virus to them. This seems to have been a much bigger concern than for the personal safety of becoming ill. Instead, there are indications in this study that the isolation people had endured may have contributed to people feeling positive and motivated during the protests, as it gave an opportunity to meet others. Even if none of the interviewees said that they went only because of the lack of stimuli during isolation, some indicate that the positive feelings of dancing and meeting people felt like going to the club which they could not do due to the restrictions. The need to feel connected through protesting was very strong and I argue that this is an example of emotional energy emerging as people come together for a cause.

In addition to this, this study also shows that the way the pandemic was handled by the Polish government may in fact have made people more inclined to take to the streets, as they disagreed with the way things were handled. The study shows that when people took to the streets, many voiced dismays over the way the pandemic was handled and urged the government to take care of the pandemic instead of stopping the protests.

Even though the pandemic was not a big enough threat to deter street protests, other threats were mentioned as deterring factors. One such thing was the police brutality and the risk of being detained by police, or in other ways being harmed by police or by alt-right activists. This study also shows that covid had an effect on the way police handled the protests and what type of arrests and fines that were being made, as pandemic regulations were used to motivate fines. I suggest that the action carried out by police legitimised the initial feeling of threat that motivated the protests in the first place.

The pandemic stimulated new ways of protesting where the risk of being infected was lessened. Here we can see examples such as car protests, protest by bike and to protest from one's home by putting up banners and signs in the windows. Additionally, strategies to circumvent the regulations in place could be seen through queuing protests. Many of the participants note that these were carried out because of the pandemic, which leads me to conclude that the pandemic indeed affected the reasoning behind the choice of strategy too.

Protests were also held online, but most online activity was aimed at trying to communicate the protests and to initiate events, rather than protesting per se. Much like Parkinson (2012) argues, face to face protest seem to be more important than the online activities and many interviewees argue that the street protests are necessary to communicate and visualise dismay. Simply put, sitting at home does not help, no matter if there is a pandemic or not. The streets were too important for the protests to not be used. I argue that the street protests fulfilled two different, but intertwined, aspects. They help communicate the message of the masses to others, but also helps communicate and spread the internal pride and sense of righteousness. When physical bodies come together, change can be achieved, as the goals of the protest may in fact also be to identify others of similar opinions and to confirm that one owns opinions actually can be seen in others too. This creates a feeling of creating change and writing history, where several interviewees in this study note that it felt like a revolution. Participation in the streets therefore cannot be exchanged with online protests, despite our realities becoming exceedingly digital.

For organisers, the pandemic also brought about new challenges – but also new ways of organising. As can be seen in the analysis, the organisers had to rethink who did what and when as the risk of getting ill from one day to another presented a challenge. Instead of one person being responsible for a certain task, yet another person was added as backup for that task. Also, being at home and ill did not stop participation and engagement. Instead, the task of following the protests online and keep track of police movements etc was well suited for a

person being isolated due to Covid. Faster communication and easier planning were also noted by organisers as the organising groups became smaller and more flexible, partly due to covid restrictions, and partly because of the spontaneous nature of the protests.

To summarise, I conclude that the motivations behind the protest was the initial feeling of threat to human rights, and that the court decision announced in October 2020 was the last straw for many people, who took to the streets, not only to protest the court decision, but rather the situation in Poland in general. As people came together, emotional energy kept the protests going. The analysis suggests that streets are key for protests, no matter if there is a pandemic or not, and that not even the risk of falling ill can stop people from protesting if the threat to human rights is strong enough. The threat can also make people come together, even if they are of different opinions in general and new coalitions and communities can be forged. Interviewees identify a feeling of being part of something bigger, a revolution or such, and that it felt like 'everyone was there'. However, there are also issues, such as age and ideology, that may hinder long-term cooperation from being achieved. Here we can see that there were disagreements over tactics but also about the goal of the protest: protesting against the abortion law or protesting against the government in general.

Further, the Covid-19 pandemic did influence the protests in many different ways, and at different stages of the protests. The choice of how to protest was affected, as well as what to wear and bring to the protest. The government's way of handling the pandemic also motivated people to protest. It also influenced the way the protests were organised as well as the reasoning behind arrests by police. However, it did not hinder people from participating, and other threats, such as police brutality, alt-right activists and the government, were seen as bigger threats than the pandemic. The pandemic may have made people less active the longer the protests went on, as some wanted to see their parents and other family members over Christmas and decided against going to the protests in December. However, I have shown that physical participation is far too important for protests to do without. We, as humans, need to come together to achieve and experience emotional energy, but also to communicate pride and strength both internally and externally.

6.2 Future research

The pandemic of 2020-21 has created many new obstacles for organisations and movements in the world and there are many other protest movements worth investigating further. Some examples were given in the introduction of this thesis, naming for example BLM movement,

protests in Belarus and the protests in Hong Kong. The pandemic has indeed presented new challenges but also produced new solutions and it would be interesting to see how these solutions were implemented in other movements. I suggest to apply theories such as Infrapolitics (Scott 1990) to discuss other types of strategies as well as submerged participation, and thus to focus on strategies in various contexts.

Another aspect that this thesis has encountered but could not discuss in depth due to the scope of the study, was the language use on signs and the creativeness of banners, signs and their messages. Here, more research could be done.

This thesis also suggests looking further into the police response during the protests and the decision making within the police and government. What motivated the brutal response and was this seen as a productive way to handle the protests?

Lastly, the church involvement in the protests and its response has not been extensively discussed in this thesis. The aspect of religion presents an interesting scope for further research as the conservative rule of Poland is highly influenced by the Catholic church. The response by the church and protest participants who are members of the Catholic church could be worth exploring in future research.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.

Interview Guide

Background information script (approximately 5-10 minutes)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study! I will start off by just giving some background information about the study and how it will be carried out before we start.

The interview will be about protest movements and how to protest, particularly your involvement in the Abortion Law protests in Poland, and we will focus on your experiences and decisions made in relation to the protests. My aim is to find out more about the considerations with regards to how the protests were carried out, what the protests were like, and your thoughts with regards to that.

I don't have a personal connection to Poland, I don't know Polish unfortunately, but I have followed the protests in Poland, and the development for several years, and I am very interested in movements in general. So, this thesis presented an interesting opportunity to speak to people involved, such as yourself. Our conversation will be 30-60 minutes long.

There are no right or wrong answers, and you do not have to answer in a particular way or have a certain opinion. Feel free to formulate your answers your own way. All thoughts and opinions are welcome! If there is a question you don't feel comfortable answering, then it is absolutely fine to tell me so and we will move on to another question instead.

My idea of this interview is that it will be fun and a nice experience for the both of us. I will not be very strict but rather want to treat this as a conversation between the two of us. And I should probably add that there are two cats in this apartment and I do apologise in advance should they disturb us in any way.

The interview will be completely anonymous, that is: all information that you reveal of your identity will be removed during the analysis process later on.

*Lastly, I would like to ask for your permission to **record our conversation**? This is so that I can focus on the conversation at hand rather than taking a lot of notes at the same time. The recording will be deleted upon this project being finalised.*

Background information

Objective: Get an idea of how and in what way the interviewee has been engaged previously

- Please tell me a little bit about yourself – where are you from, what do you do for a living and other info that you want to tell me
- In what way have you been involved with the Abortion Law protests of 2020?
- In general, have you participated in protests before 2020?
- Would you consider yourself an activist – why, why not?

Theme 1: Protests of 2020, motivations

Objective: Understanding the motivations behind participating and in what way the interviewee participated

- Why was it important to join?
- What is your strongest memory of the protest in 2020?
- Tell me about your experience of the protest. What happened? What did people do?

Theme 2: Protest and pandemic

Objective: Understanding the reasoning behind breaking pandemic recommendations/rules to participating in a protest

- Considering there is a global pandemic going on, did you have any considerations when going to the street protests?
- Were there safety measures in place? If so, what kind?
- Did you feel safe?
- Did the pandemic influence your decision process?
- *If the organiser has organised before: How did these protests differ from earlier protests? Has the pandemic influenced the way you protest?*
- Were there police at the protests? Were there any repercussions for protesting? How did the police handle the situation?

Theme 3: Strategies and organization

Objective: Investigating what type of strategies were used to protest. Understanding organisers position in the protests

- Were you part of organizing the protests? Were there key figures/groups organizing? Who?
- If organiser: Please tell me about the procedures leading up to the protests. Did you have meetings, organisation groups, other preparations?
- If organiser: Why are street protests so important, do you think?
- If organiser: Did you cooperate with other organisations? - do you usually cooperate with these organisations? Why/why not?

- What did you do during the protests? March, public speeches, sit-downs etc.?
- Have you done anything else than participate in the protest on the street? (writing letters, posting on social media (what?), dialogue initiatives, boycott, adbusting...)
- What strategies do you think are the most effective strategies when protesting? Why?
- Are there organisations you would normally not associate with that partook in the protests? Please elaborate?

Other questions or ideas that have come to mind during the interview

Objective: Open up for interviewee to ask questions or add information

- Are there any questions that you expected me to ask or that you thought we would talk about that we have not discussed?
- Is there any feedback that you wish to give me?
- Can you recommend me some more people that would be interesting for me to interview? Do you know any of the organizers?
- Is it ok for me to reach out to you again, should I have any additional questions?

Appendix 2.

Coding Scheme

Theme	Categories	Codes
Participatory community	People that participated	bus drivers (1)
		Children (3)
		Private companies (5)
		Farmers (4)
		Football supporters (2)
		Homeless (1)
		Medics (1)
		Men and women (6)
		Migrant workers (1)
		Old friends (1)
		Elderly people (7)
		Organisations (13)
		Religious people (2)
		Taxi drivers (1)
		young people (12)
	Alliances and organisers	Role of the organiser (29)
		Spontaneous protests (6)
		Creating new alliances (18)
		Community (10)
		Everyone was there (33)

Responses and emotional reactions before and during the protests	Motivation	Disagreement w ruling (11)
		Government not functioning (29)
		Historical moment (3)
		Too far (9)
		Just have to do something (7)
		Anger (21)
	Concerns	Fear/being threatened (27)
		Covid (17)
		Safety concerns (7)
	Effects	Fear (13)
		police (56)
		Government response (29)
		Comparing previous protests and these (5)
		Safety concerns (7)
		Pro-life organisations (3)
		Far-right groups (13)
	Work place (2)	

Theme	Categories	Codes
Motivating strategic choices	Physical protest	Joy (5)
		coarse language (8)
		Street protest (21)
		Bike protests (2)
		Car protests (8)
		Covid protection strategy (36)
		Dancing (6)
		Music (8)
		Graffiti (6)
		Queuing (1)
		Weather conditions (1)
		Block streets (8)
		Signs and banners (18)
		Adbusting (1)
		Stickers (2)
	Off the streets	Window protest (14)
		Online activity (25)
		University (2)
		Spamming (2)
	Media attention	Media attention strategy (5)
		Visual expressions (8)
Physical space (1)		