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**An Institution that Gives Citizens a Real Impact on Applicable Law? Casus of the Civic Draft Amendment to the Act of 7 January 1993 on Family Planning, Protection of the Human Foetus and Conditions for the Admissibility of Termination of Pregnancy, Submitted to the Sejm of the 8th Term**

**Keywords:** citizens' legislative initiative, direct democracy, termination of pregnancy, Sejm of the 8<sup>th</sup> term

**Słowa kluczowe:** obywatelska inicjatywa ustawodawcza, demokracja bezpośrednia, przerywanie ciąży, Sejm 8 kadencji

**Abstract**

The Constitution in Article 118 (2) granted the group of at least one hundred thousand citizens the right to submit a citizens' bill and initiate the legislative process in the Polish parliament. Due to the formalized mode of implementation of the constitutional right of citizens to submit draft bills, this form of initiating the legislative process constitutes a negligible percentage compared to the number of submitted drafts by other authorized entities. Sometimes, the submitted projects concern controversial matters, arousing emotions and distorting public opinion. An example of such a draft is the citizens' bill proposed in the 8th term of the Sejm, amending the Act of 7 January 1993 on family planning, protection of the human fetus and conditions for the admissibility of termination of pregnancy (Sejm print 2146). The article analyzes the legislative process of the project.

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The author points out that sometimes the legislative process is paralyzed because political interests turn out to be more important than respect for sovereign's rights.

### Streszczenie

#### **Instytucja dająca obywatelom realny wpływ na obowiązujące prawo? Casus obywatelskiego projektu ustawy o zmianie ustawy z dnia 7 stycznia 1993 r. o planowaniu rodziny, ochronie płodu ludzkiego i warunkach dopuszczalności przerywania ciąży, wniesionego do Sejmu VIII kadencji**

Konstytucja w art. 118 ust. 2 przyznała grupie co najmniej stu tysięcy obywateli, prawo do złożenia obywatelskiego projektu ustawy i zainicjowania tym samym procesu ustawodawczego przed polskim parlamentem. Z uwagi na sformalizowany tryb realizacji konstytucyjnego prawa obywateli do wnoszenia projektów ustaw, ta forma inicjowania procesu legislacyjnego stanowi znikomy procent w porównaniu z liczbą składanych projektów przez inne uprawnione do tego podmioty. Niekiedy zgłaszane projekty, dotyczą spraw kontrowersyjnych, budzących emocje oraz dzielących opinię społeczną. Przykładem takiego projektu jest zgłoszony w VIII kadencji Sejmu obywatelski projekt ustawy o zmianie ustawy z 7 stycznia 1993 r. o planowaniu rodziny, ochronie płodu ludzkiego i warunkach dopuszczalności przerywania ciąży (druk sejmowy 2146). W artykule analizie poddano proces ustawodawczy przedmiotowego projektu. Autor zwraca uwagę, iż niekiedy proces legislacyjny jest paraliżowany bowiem interesy polityczne okazują się być bardziej istotne niż szacunek dla praw suwerena.

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### I.

The Citizens' Legislative Initiative is one of the institutions that co-creates broadly understood mechanisms of civic activity<sup>2</sup>. As a form of direct de-

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<sup>2</sup> P. Uziębło, *Inicjatywa ustawodawcza obywateli w Polsce na tle rozwiązań ustrojowych państw obcych*, Warsaw 2006; S. Grabowska, *Instytucja ogólnokrajowej inicjatywy ludowej w wybranych państwach europejskich. Studium prawnoporównawcze*, Rzeszów 2005, pp. 18–19; M. Michalczuk-Wliziło, *Citizens Legislative Initiative in Socially Controversial Matters Submitted to the Sejm of the 8<sup>th</sup> Term*, "Białostockie Studia Prawnicze" 2019, vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 69–80; M. Marczevska-Rytko, *Demokracja bezpośrednia w teorii i praktyce politycznej*, Lublin 2001;

mocracy, it enables the sovereign nation to participate in a democratic state by submitting draft laws to the legislative authority in all matters not reserved for the exclusive competence of other entities. The institution of the citizens' legislative initiative was introduced to the Polish legal system by the provisions of the Article 118 s. 2 of the Polish Constitution of April 2, 1997. The regulations in question were clarified in the Act on the exercise of legislative initiative by citizens of June 24, 1999<sup>3</sup>, which set out detailed procedure to be followed regarding a citizens' legislative initiative. The awareness of the functioning of the institution in question and its popularity in recent years has increased noticeably, despite a number of difficulties encountered by citizens wishing to exercise their constitutional right to submit a bill to the Sejm. They most often opt for it, if the applicable legal norms regulate important, from the applicant's point of view, areas of legal relations that are different from their expectations, needs and beliefs.

The uniting of citizens around an important goal and initiating the decision-making process, by bringing a civil bill to the Sejm, shapes and strengthens civil society. It also makes clear to decision-makers, what scope of social relations is important for the sovereign, and this knowledge can be used, for example, in electoral campaigns. Such an extremely important issue, arousing extreme emotions, is the issue of the admissibility of termination of pregnancy and thus the tightening or relaxation of the Act of 7 January 1993 on family planning, protection of the human fetus and conditions of admissibility of termination of pregnancy.

## II.

On November 30, 2017 Sejm received a citizens' draft bill amending the Act of 7 January 1993 on family planning, protection of the human fetus and conditions for the termination of pregnancy. The entity submitting the project, dated August 17, 2017, was the "Stop Abortion" [pl. "Zatrzymaj Aborcję"] Legislative Initiative Committee, which appointed its representative, a well-known

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M. Rachwał, *Funkcjonowanie obywatelskiej inicjatywy ustawodawczej w Polsce. Podstawy prawno-praktyka-perspektywy rozwoju*, Poznań 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Dz.U. 1999, No. 62, item 688, as amended.

pro-life activist, Kaja Urszula Godek<sup>4</sup>. Acting according with the Article 6 section 4 of the Act on the exercise of legislative initiative by citizens, on August 31, 2017 the Marshal of the Sejm issued a resolution accepting a notice on the establishment of the “Stop Abortion” Legislative Initiative Committee<sup>5</sup>. The bill was supported by over 100,000 correct signatures of authorized citizens<sup>6</sup>, which were verified by the Legal and Staff Affairs Office of the Sejm Chancellery<sup>7</sup>. The Marshal of the Sejm, after hearing the opinions of the Sejm Analysis Bureau of the Sejm Chancellery, regarding the compliance of the draft with the European Union law<sup>8</sup> and the possible implementation by the provisions of the citizens’ bill of the amendment to the Act of 7 January 1993 on family planning, protection of the human fetus and conditions of admissibility termination of pregnancy within the EU law<sup>9</sup> on January 4, 2018 sent the draft for first reading (Sejm print 2146). The project was not extensive, it assumed repealing the provision specifying one of the three prerequisites for the admissibility of termination of pregnancy, the so-called “Eugenic abortion”. The civic project was accompanied by a justification in which the most extensive (one-page) part was the applicant’s assessment of the current legal status regarding the admissibility of termination of pregnancy. According to the initiators, the *ratio legis* of the proposed change is to refrain from differentiating the right to protection of life according to the state of health of the conceived child<sup>10</sup>. It was argued that due to the fact that neither the initial nor the final limit of the applicability of the constitutional right specified in the Article 38 of the Constitution of the Republic of Po-

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<sup>4</sup> Notice of the establishment of the Legislative Initiative Committee of August 17, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Resolution No. 16 of the Marshal of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland of August 31, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from the “Stop Abortion” Legislative Initiative Committee of November 30, 2017, No. MK-020-664/2/17.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from the Chief of the Chancellery of the Sejm of December 15, 2017, ref. BPSP-020-6(12)/17.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from the Parliamentary Analysis Bureau, ref. BAS-WAPM-2653/17.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from the Parliamentary Analysis Bureau, ref. WAMP-BAS-2654/1.

<sup>10</sup> According to the “Stop Abortion” Legislative Initiative Committee, in the current legal status, children who are suspected of disability in the prenatal period do not enjoy the constitutional protection of their fundamental right to live. The provision of Article 4a section 1 item 2, according to the applicants, it is imprecise in terms of the wording “high probability” of severe and irreversible impairment of the fetus or an incurable disease threatening its life.

land of 2 April 1997 were defined, it should be understood that legal protection of life applies from the moment of conception until natural death. In this perspective, the initiators of the civic initiative requested to remove, from the Act on family planning, protection of the human fetus and conditions of admissibility of termination of pregnancy, the Article 4a section 1, item 2 thereof<sup>11</sup>. It was emphasized that the proposed citizens' draft act amending the act is identical to the draft that was submitted in 2013, also as part of a citizens' legislative initiative.

The first reading of the civic bill amending the Act of 7 January 1993 on family planning, protection of the human fetus and conditions for the admissibility of termination of pregnancy took place at the plenary sitting of the Sejm on January 10, 2018. It was accompanied by a fierce, stormy, ideological discussion. It was a kind of political theater, referring to emotions and directed to the electorate MP Urszula Rusecka, on behalf of the Law and Justice parliamentary club, presented a position supporting the project and recommending the sending of this citizens' initiative for further work in committees. She argued that the right to life is natural and inalienable and cannot be subordinated to the needs and aspirations of other people, and abortion was the greatest danger to peace<sup>12</sup>. Bartosz Arłukowicz, speaking on behalf of the Civic Platform club, in his very emotional speech, addressed the deputies of the ruling camp, indicating, among others, the most serious fetal defects with which children are born, and submitted a request to reject the project in its entirety, firmly emphasizing that the Civic Platform will always vote against any project that "...will condemn Polish women to suffering, to tears... and terminally ill fetuses to dying for weeks"<sup>13</sup>. Then, on behalf of the Kukiz 15' club, MP Elżbieta Zielińska took the floor, concentrating her speech on the problems of mothers of children with disabilities and insufficient, in their opinion, assistance they get from the state. She argued that the right to life

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<sup>11</sup> Justification of the civic bill to amend the act of 7 January 1993 on family planning, protection of the human fetus and conditions for the admissibility of termination of pregnancy of August 17, 2017, items 1–3.

<sup>12</sup> Transcript of the 55th sitting of the Sejm on January 10, 2018,, p. 215. [http://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/StenoInter8.nsf/0/A7C70FF23D12E38BC12582120013123F/%24File/55\\_b\\_ksiazka\\_bis.pdf#page=34&zoom=76.61,-634,842](http://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/StenoInter8.nsf/0/A7C70FF23D12E38BC12582120013123F/%24File/55_b_ksiazka_bis.pdf#page=34&zoom=76.61,-634,842) (27.11.2019).

<sup>13</sup> Transcript of the 55th..., p. 216.

is connected with the right to a dignified life of a mother and her disabled child, and that citizens have the right to expect help from the state, not only till the moment they are born<sup>14</sup>. MP Joanna Scheuring-Wielgus, emphasized the importance of freedom of choice of women and the right to live according with one's conscience. She devoted a significant part of her speech to calculating the lies she thinks are told about abortion on the part of the ruling camp, and submitted a request on behalf of the Nowoczesna club to reject the project entirely at its first reading. On behalf of the Polish People's Party, MP Genowefa Tokarska spoke, stating that the deputies of her party would decide individually on the vote on the draft in question. At the same time, she argued that making the right to life dependent on the likelihood of a genetic defect or incurable fetal abnormality is unacceptable and appealed to those in power to increase support for families of children with disabilities<sup>15</sup>. Then the floor was taken by MP Stefan Niesiołowski, who on behalf of the Union of European Democrats submitted a motion to reject the project in its entirety. Mr Niesiołowski's speech was repeatedly interrupted by his political opponents.

After the official speeches of representatives of clubs and parliamentary circles, questions took place in a hot atmosphere, in which, however, the vast majority of parliamentarians made statements and tried to compromise the arguments put forward by the opposing party. During the discussion, which lasted several hours, none of the parliamentarians referred to the form of initiating this legislative procedure. Only the representative of the Legislative Initiative committee reminded that the draft was supported by over 800,000 signatures, which were collected in less than 3 months, which demonstrated, in her opinion, the will of several million Poles to amend the applicable law regulating the admissibility of legal termination of pregnancy. She emphasized that she comes to the Sejm as a citizen who represents people with different political views and agreeing on the need to abstain from eugenic abortion. She appealed to parliamentarians to respect the voice and will of the citizens, and thus to proceed with the submitted draft without interference<sup>16</sup>.

In the vote on the adoption of the application for rejection at first reading of the draft law contained in print No. 2146, the deputies decided not to reject the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 217.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, pp. 217–218.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, pp. 231–232.

civil draft bill on the amendment of the Act of 7 January 1993 on family planning, protection of the fetus and conditions of admissibility of termination of pregnancy<sup>17</sup> in its entirety, and thus the Sejm referred the bill to the Social Policy and Family Committee for consideration, with a recommendation to consult the Justice and Human Rights Committee<sup>18</sup>. The Presidium of the Polish Episcopate also expressed its opinion on the project voted in the Sejm in a statement published on January 10, 2018 appealing to the faithful to pray for the protection of the life of unborn children. It also asked all parliamentarians to respect everyone's right to life and to adopt the civic "Stop abortion" bill<sup>19</sup>. The President of the Polish Episcopate, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki, also called to politicians to try to keep their promises and respect the right to life<sup>20</sup>. In connection with the further proceeding of the bill in the Sejm, legal and substantive opinions were prepared on the subject of the civic draft act amending the act of 7 January 1993 on family planning, protection of the human fetus and conditions for the admissibility of termination of pregnancy, opinion on compliance with EU civil law of the draft act amending the act on family planning, protection of the human fetus and conditions for the admissibility of termination of pregnancy and analysis of the provisions of international agreements ratified by Poland in the matter covered by the draft, opinion on the compliance with the Constitution of the civic draft act amending the act of 7 January 1993 on family planning, protection of the human fetus and the conditions of admissibility of termination of pregnancy, and assessment of the effects of project's regulations. In the opinion of April 9, 2018, prepared by the Parliamentary Analysis Office, it was pointed out that the outlawing of abortion due to severe fetal defects may deepen the public dispute over abortion and violate the so-called the "abortion compromise" developed by the 1993 Act and will increase the number of illegal abortions. In addition, it was emphasized that a change in the content of the conditions allowing for termination of pregnancy may have

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<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, Vote No. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 259.

<sup>19</sup> Communique of the Presidium of the Polish Episcopate of January 10, 2019, [www.episkopat.pl/apel-prezydium-episkopatu-ws-zatrzymania-aborcji-eugenicznej](http://www.episkopat.pl/apel-prezydium-episkopatu-ws-zatrzymania-aborcji-eugenicznej) (15.03.2019).

<sup>20</sup> *Dziś w Sejmie czytanie obywatelskich projektów regulujących aborcję*, [www.wiez.com.pl/2018/01/10/dzis-w-sejmie-czytanie-obywatelskich-projektow-regulujacych-aborcje](http://www.wiez.com.pl/2018/01/10/dzis-w-sejmie-czytanie-obywatelskich-projektow-regulujacych-aborcje) (15.03.2019).

other, non-legal effects, such as reducing the number of prenatal tests or undertaking onerous therapy for children with lethal defects<sup>21</sup>. In the next opinion, regarding the assessment of the effects of the regulations contained in the civic bill, the Chancellery of the Sejm pointed to the danger of greater radicalization of the debate and activation of political environments aimed at abortion on demand<sup>22</sup>. On March 19, 2018, a meeting of the Justice and Human Rights Committee was held to give its opinion on the citizens' bill (print 2164) for the Social Policy and Family Committee. Ethical, philosophical and scientific arguments were cited in an ardent and fierce discussion. The committee, by a majority of 16 to 9 votes, expressed its positive opinion on the submitted draft<sup>23</sup>. On the same day, the message was issued by the President of the Polish Episcopate, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki, who thanked the Justice and Human Rights Committee for the positive recommendation of the civic "Stop abortion" bill<sup>24</sup>.

The result of the vote, held at the April meeting of the Social Policy and Family Committee, triggered criticism of the representatives of the Church, who in an official statement expressed their regret concerning the non-referral the citizens' draft to the Sejm's agenda<sup>25</sup>. On July 2, 2018, another meeting of the Sejm Social Policy and Family Committee was held, at which the Committee's presidium's motion to appoint an extraordinary subcommittee to examine the civil draft bill amending the Act of 7 January 1993 on family planning, protection of the fetus and the conditions of admissibility of termination of pregnancy (print No. 2146). The representative of the applicants, Kaja Godek, expressed her outrage at the deliberate delays in the legislative

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<sup>21</sup> Substantive opinion to the civil draft bill amending the Act of 7 January 1993 on family planning, protection of the human foetus and conditions for the admissibility of termination of pregnancy (print 2146) of April 9, 2018, prepared by the Bureau of Sejm Analysis of the Sejm Chancellery.

<sup>22</sup> Impact assessment of the provisions contained in the civic draft act amending the act on family planning, protection of the human fetus and conditions for the admissibility of termination of pregnancy (print 2146) of April 18, 2018 prepared by the Bureau of Sejm Analyzes of the Sejm Chancellery.

<sup>23</sup> The transcript of the 126th meeting of the Justice and Human Rights Committee, of March 19, 2018, pp. 27–53.

<sup>24</sup> Communique of the President of the Polish Episcopal Conference regarding.

<sup>25</sup> The official statement of the spokesman of the conference of the Polish Episcopate – Rev. P. Rytel-Andrianiak.



proceedings of the bill. In addition, she announced conduction of an information campaign in the districts, where PiS MPs voting against the “Stop Abortion” project come from<sup>26</sup>.

In October 2017, a group of 107 deputies submitted a request to the Constitutional Tribunal to examine the compliance of the regulation allowing eugenic abortion with the Constitution. Within two years, the case was not examined, after the meeting date of the Constitutional Tribunal’s meeting was postponed several times. Failure to examine the application by the end of the eighth term of office of the Sejm, according with the principle of discontinuation, will result in that there will no longer be a requirement to consider it. The issue of tightening abortion laws seems to be highly controversial within the ruling party itself. On the one hand, pressure is exerted on decision-makers on the part of the Catholic Church, on the other hand, one can hear the positions of pragmatic politicians, who fear that by deleting the prerequisite for the possibility of terminating pregnancy for eugenic reasons, PiS may lose the parliamentary elections in 2019. Therefore, any political decision regarding the civil procedure of the draft act amending the act of 7 January 1993 on family planning, protection of the human fetus and conditions for the admissibility of termination of pregnancy taken will undoubtedly trigger a wave of criticism<sup>27</sup>.

The institution of civic legislative initiative, despite the fact that it gives the Sovereign nation itself a chance to influence the applicable legal system, does not enjoy due respect from parliamentarians. Also, in this case the political interests proved far more significant, than the citizens’ right expressed in the Article 118 s. 2 of the Polish Constitution.

### III.

Procedures, as those applied in the aforesaid citizens’ initiative, only strengthen the public belief that their voice will not be heard by the decision-makers, regardless of their efforts. In our analysis of legislative proceedings in the Sejm, the subject of which were drafts submitted pursuant to the Article 118

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<sup>26</sup> M. Kolanko, *Ostre słowa do PiS w dyskusji o aborcji*, “Rzeczpospolita”, 3.07.2018.

<sup>27</sup> As of the submission date of the article, the project was not further processed by the subcommittee.

s. 2 of the Constitution, with very long, unjustified, protracted proceedings in parliamentary committees or placing civic projects in the so-called “Legislative freezers”, it is difficult to resist the impression that, in fact, the belief of citizens as to their lack of real impact on existing legislation is justified. In this hot political period, when we consider the ongoing election campaigns, it seems that politicians should listen to the voice of potential voters even more carefully. Failure to fulfill promises made earlier, especially on such sensitive matters of worldviews as the protection of conceived life, will result in the withdrawal of part of the electorate. The ruling party should carry out a very detailed, thorough analysis and weighting of political interests because, as we all know, the tightening of the regulations contained in the current Act of 7 January 1993 on family planning, protection of the human foetus and conditions of admissibility of termination of pregnancy<sup>28</sup>, is advocated by the very opinion-forming Roman Catholic Church<sup>29</sup>. In the conservative media, closely related to the Church, voices criticizing the ruling camp were often heard, criticizing their sluggishness and suspension of work on a complex civic initiative introducing the ban on the so-called eugenic abortion<sup>30</sup>. The Constitutional Tribunal was also criticized for not examining the motion submitted by MPs to examine the compliance, with the Constitution, of the article of the Act of 7 January 1993 on family planning, protection of the human fetus and conditions of abortion, allowing for abortions for eugenic motifs<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> Dz.U. No. 78, item 17 as amended.

<sup>29</sup> K. Kowalczyk, *Wpływ prokościelnych grup interesu na ustawodawstwo. Casus regulacji antyaborcyjnych w Sejmie VIII kadencji*, “Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska Lublin-Polonia”, section K, 2019, vol. XXVI, No. 1, pp. 93–106.

<sup>30</sup> *Aborcyjny błąd PiS*, gość.pl of January 3, 2019, [www.gosc.pl/doc/5249487.Aborcyjny-blad-PiS](http://www.gosc.pl/doc/5249487.Aborcyjny-blad-PiS) (15.10.2019); *PiS nie zajmie się projektem „Zatrzymaj aborcję”*, *Biskupi niezadowoleni z decyzji. Jest reakcja episkopatu*, [www.newsweek.pl/polska/spoleczenstwo/pis-odrzucl-projekt-zatrzymaj-aborcje-biskupi-niezadowoleni/tecbnq](http://www.newsweek.pl/polska/spoleczenstwo/pis-odrzucl-projekt-zatrzymaj-aborcje-biskupi-niezadowoleni/tecbnq) (15.10.2019); *Biskupi przypominają: Popieramy projekt „Zatrzymaj aborcję”*, <https://www.rp.pl/Kosciol/180709970-Biskupi-przypominaja-Popieramy-projekt-Zatrzymaj-aborcje.html> (15.10.2019); *Czy PiS stanie po stronie życia?*, <https://www.niedziela.pl/artukul/136695/nd/Czy-PiS-stanie-po-stronie-zycia?> (15.10.2019); *Kaja Godek do Jarosława Kaczyńskiego: PiS nie robi nic w sprawie aborcji*, <https://www.rp.pl/Polityka/312019983-Kaja-Godek-do-Jaroslaw-Kaczynskiego-PiS-nie-robi-nic-w-sprawie-aborcji.html> (15.10.2019).

<sup>31</sup> *Abp Gądecki ostro o niespełnionej obietnicy PiS*. Terlikowski: *Ciesz, że abp Gądecki tak jasno mówi...*, <https://www.dorzeczy.pl/kraj/120393/abp-gadecki-ostro-o-niespelnionej>

However, it seems that the actions of the ruling party in the matter in question were very well thought-out and their final decision was to fail to resolve the subject matter, i.e. the draft amendment, by means legislative process. From commonly available surveys<sup>32</sup>, it is clear that any changes to the so-called “Abortion compromise” will cause waves of social discontent and disturb the wide public<sup>33</sup>. In addition, unequivocal support for narrowing the conditions for the possibility of termination of pregnancy may result in the more moderate worldview voters turning away from supporting the representatives of the ruling party.

In our analysis of the legislative process, the deliberate extension of the respective stages and the final non-completion of works on the subject civic draft during the 8th term of the Sejm, we should formulate an observation that the political interest of parliamentarians holding a majority in the Sejm proved to be more important than the institution of direct democracy, giving the citizens the possibility of real influence on applicable law. Politicians simply lacked the courage to settle the fate of the civic bill to amend the act of 7 January 1993 on family planning, protection of the human fetus and conditions for the admissibility of termination of pregnancy (Sejm print No. 2164).

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<sup>32</sup> SW Research survey on order of the rp.pl website, conducted on December 4–5, 2018 on a sample of 800 people representative for the population of Poland in terms of gender, age and residence., Survey of the Social Changes research laboratory commissioned by the wPolityce.pl website and conducted on November 8–12, 2019 on a sample of 1028 people representative for the population of Poland in terms of gender, age and residence.

<sup>33</sup> An example here are the demonstrations held by supporters of the liberalization of abortion laws on March 23, 2018, the so-called “Black Friday”.

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