

AD Could you introduce yourself and tell us what Ciocia Czesia is?

JN I am a visual artist from Poland based in Prague, but in the last year and a half, my practice shifted towards activism. Ciocia Czesia is the name of our informal collective. We help to obtain legal and safe abortions in the Czech Republic for Polish people. Ciocia means aunty in Polish, aunty from Czech Republic, and Czesia is an old school Polish name, which refers to the country where we are based. Our initiative started because of the anti-abortion law, how it was introduced in Poland, in October 2020. Back then, I organised some little protests in front of the Polish embassy in Prague and posted about it in some group—and we just started to talk. I didn't know any of them back then, but that's when we founded Ciocia Czesia.

JZ Can you tell us what changed in 2020?

JN Before October 2020, abortion was already really restricted in Poland, and there was already a huge need for an initiative. Before, it was legal only in three cases: first, if the mother's health was at risk, and this exception is still valid; second, if the pregnancy was a result of a criminal act, meaning incest or rape, and this exception is still valid; and third, if there was a problem with the foetus, meaning some embryonic, pathological, or genetic problem—and this is not legal anymore. Unfortunately, this third case is usually discovered in a quite late stage of pregnancy, around the 15th, 16th week. As you can see, even before October 2020 it was quite limited. I mean, let's be honest, if there is a pregnancy as a result of rape, it's almost impossible to prove it. It's a big problem. You need to go to the police, you need to repeat your trauma, you need to have evidence. Sometimes, even a record of the testimony is not enough. It is really difficult. There are already some people who asked us for help, because of this reason. Even though abortion would still be legal in this case, it is just easier to go abroad than to prove that you were raped. This is one of the reasons why I believe that abortion should be legal on demand, like it is in Germany or in the Czech Republic. It should just be the choice of the person without the need to provide proof. As you can see, it was already very limited, but October 2020 was groundbreaking for a lot of feminist movements. It was way too much, how the government limited abortion in Poland. This is the political context of why we started our initiative.

AD Are there still other exceptions for abortions after 2020?

JN Now there are only these two first exceptions I mentioned: when the mother's health is at risk, and when it's a criminal act. But I have to say that even if the mother's life is at risk—many doctors are hesitating to perform it until the very last moment—which means that there is almost a complete ban on abortion.

JZ Why?

JN Because doctors might be charged, they might be accused of not making good decisions. We already know three pregnant women who died in Poland. The last one was really problematic, and very complicated. I don't want to comment on that topic, but even for the first woman who died it was clear that the doctors waited for the foetus to die first. Unfortunately, she died because her body got infected. So, we can see that the mother's health is apparently protected by law, but there is an influence on the fear of the pregnant person and also on the doctors and hospitals.

JZ Could you explain a little more about the moral and cultural reasons, how and why this law in October 2020 was implemented in Poland?

JN I think it is very complex and there are many different influences. On the one hand there is a very, very conservative government, the PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość). On the other hand, there is the church, who is very close with the ruling party and I think that's the problem. The church provided a lot of votes for PiS in the past. They were clearly encouraging people, especially older ones, to vote for Jarosław Kaczyński, the chairman of PiS. So, now it is sort of paying debt back to the church, it is sort of a transaction. And there is even a third hand, the law organization Ordo Iuris, a very conservative organization of legal practitioners, who actually proposed and wrote this anti-abortion law. They are not going to stop, and they are even working on more restrictions. For example, they are working to ban pride parades in Poland, or recently Ordo Iuris had this idea to make divorces more difficult. They are trying to go further and further with a weird imagination of a conservative and patriarchal world. The government, the church, and Ordo Iuris, those three sides are influencing on each other, and this is how the anti-abortion law was implemented.

AD There were also a lot of protests in Poland in 2020. I would be interested in the mood among the population, regarding the latest abortion restrictions.

JN The protests were huge. It is said that they were the biggest protests since 1989. A lot of people were going on the streets, even those from smaller cities had the courage to protest. In small cities this topic is a big taboo, there is a stigma about abortion, and in general about peoples' sex lives and reproductive rights. To see these huge protests was something really amazing. The vast majority were against this anti-abortion law. They were against it for sure. The plural society was really pissed, but what can we say. I mean there were so many legal victories in the meantime, for example the European Parliament was saying that abortion is a human right, but so what.

JZ So, it's a government decision, and not one made by the people.

JN Yeah, yeah.

AD How did neighbouring countries react to the newly enacted law in Poland?

JN I can only talk about the Czech Republic, I don't know the context of the other countries so much, but here there was a lot of support coming from politicians. For example, the biggest opposition party, which is called Pirates, Piráti, they wrote open letters to the Polish government. And it's still going on, just right now they are working on something new. The president of Prague made an announcement that he supports Polish people, but of course it doesn't really change anything. There are nice gestures, but for people who are pregnant it didn't and doesn't change anything, they are in the same shitty position as before. Even though for us it is really important to see them and to know that we are not alone in this struggle.

JZ What does your work include, how exactly do you help?

JN Our help comprises the whole process, we give support even before the actual abortion and beyond, also afterwards. So, it means that we help to find the right place, organise the transport, including all of the logistics, being informed about Covid restrictions, with tests—which was difficult one year ago when there was no vaccination yet and mandatory quarantines in the Czech Republic. We also provide emotional support, which is important to mention, especially in Poland—abortion is a big taboo. A lot of pregnant people are scared to go abroad, some think that they are doing something illegal. Part of our activity is to ensure that they understand their rights,

and that it is legal to go abroad. And of course, we help with the finances—there is no such thing like having costs covered by health insurance or something like that. They need to pay everything—the full price. For many people, it is really expensive, too expensive to afford it, including the travel costs, or taking the day off from work. One cannot take a sick day, especially those who do not have any contract for example. That’s the other layer, but it is such a big topic. Sometimes there is the need to provide care for children, when a mother has to go abroad for the abortion. These costs can go up like crazy. So, this is what we do, in a nutshell.

JZ Who is part of Ciocia Czesia, and how are you organised in the group?

JN We are an informal collective. The number of helpers is changing, but more or less I would say there are 10, 12 core members in our initiative. We are organised in different teams. There are the core members, who are the most exposed to the emotional labour, through responding to the requests, and every month there are around 100 requests. It is a lot. Then there is another team who works, let’s say, on the PR, meaning doing interviews, and being in touch with the press. This is very important for us, to gain visibility. Then there is another team that works most closely with the hospitals and clinics. They are more responsible for the flow of information. This is necessary so we can be updated about some changes, especially as I said about Covid restrictions—it is changing constantly. That is the basic structure of our group. And then we have an extra group of volunteers. They are not really part of the core group, since they don’t have much time—but still they want to help. For example, they support with translations, or with research on Polish gynecologists, which is another problematic topic—because two weeks after an abortion, the person should go to a control check in Poland. And very often, in almost 90% of the cases, they are writing that they are too scared to go to their gynecologist, and to tell that they went abroad for abortion. Even though it’s legal they are still scared. You don’t even have to say it, because basically abortion and miscarriage don’t look different to the gynecologist. What we do is to research pro-choice gynecologists in different Polish cities, and map the places. In big cities it is easy, but you can imagine in smaller cities it is quite difficult sometimes. So, this is another group we have with another activity we are involved in, the after-abortion care.

JZ Is there the risk that the person who went abroad for abortion would be fined by the state?

JN No. According to the law they will never be charged in Poland. That’s the thing, that the person who had an abortion will be never charged, will be never accused. The only one who could be in danger is the one who helps to perform the abortion. For example, if I would buy abortion pills for my friend—but if I would buy pills and would give them from my hand to another hand, I could be charged. And there were cases already when the partners who bought pills had troubles. In April 2022, Justyna Wydrzyńska, an activist and founding member of the Aborcyjny Dream Team, is facing three years in prison for helping a woman access abortion pills. It is the first case like that in Poland. This is the only danger, but besides that nothing can happen to the person who is seeking an abortion, especially not abroad.

AD How are you financed?

JN We are financed just through our crowdfunding campaigns. We don’t have any sponsors or, I don’t know, big subjects behind us. We are able to provide financial support only because of crowdfunding campaigns, and we’ve been doing this since the beginning. We made different kinds of actions, we hosted a benefit first birthday party and now we are planning a one-day festival after the summer. We are just trying to find a way to do it, and so far, we have been very successful. We never had to reject someone for financial support, because

we are able to provide help to everyone, and I have to say we are really lucky. Czech people are very generous. I was really surprised how this topic was resonating here, and also in Slovakia. There is also a right-wing government there, and they started to talk about limiting access to abortion. It was resonating very strongly, and the topic was widely discussed in public discourse. We are really lucky to have this support from Czech people.

AD How much does an abortion cost?

JN There are two different procedures depending on the situation. The first one is up to 12 weeks of pregnancy, and it is abortion without needing to provide any reason. It’s called vacuum abortion, it takes 10 to 15 minutes—and the patient goes back home the same day. This is really easy. It costs around 450 euros. The second one is a little bit more difficult. It’s later in the pregnancy when they have some reason, in cases of embryo and fetal pathology. This is performed in the state hospitals where patients need to stay overnight. And yes—it can cost up to 1,000 euros—it’s very expensive. You need to give birth, this is like a forced labour induced by pills. The process takes longer, it’s more expensive and it’s also more complicated because we need to prove to the hospital that the person has a reason for the abortion. We are part of this, we help—to prepare the documents, send them—with all that.

AD Does the Czech state cover the costs?

JN It is not even free for the Czechs. It’s not covered at all up to 12 weeks, and then it is covered when there is a medical reason. Of course, it would be amazing if the costs were covered, but the abortion law in the Czech Republic is also quite problematic—we had some issues. In the beginning we thought that it would be easy because Polish people often go to the Czech Republic for termination of pregnancy—but in the meantime we realised that the law is really complicated, and a lot of hospitals are rejecting them. The law is quite outdated, from 1986, and it says that abortion can only be performed for those who are based in the Czech Republic—unless there is an international regulation. According to lawyers, this international law is legitimised by the European Union. But there are still two different interpretations of this law—which was a little bit complicated for us to go through. There was a big storm about it in the Czech media. They were saying something like “this is not legal,” and that the “Czech hospitals cannot do it.” While I was reading those articles, I knew about people who had abortions the same day, the day before, the day after in the state hospitals. I was reading these articles saying that it’s not legal, but then we received this great statement from the Czech minister of health who wrote that of course for citizens from the European Union in the Czech Republic, abortion is legal. So, we had this statement, it was already the second one. The first statement was in 2016 when the strike in Poland started and there were already some doubts about the Czech law, how it can be implemented for people from abroad. The second one was in 2021, and it was an amazing feeling to read the words of the minister of health who proved that it is legal. But I am just saying that, because this is not always easy, even though we think that abortion is legal in some countries, there are so many limitations and that’s why Ciocia Czesia needs to exist. Now we are facing a migration wave from Ukraine and we are sad about their lack of access to reproductive rights. The current situation only proves how insufficient the Czech law is—abortion should be accessible regardless of nationality or EU citizenship.

JZ I have to say, I love the name Ciocia Czesia, it carries the spirit of helping each other. We read that there is also Ciocia Basia in Berlin, and Ciocia Wienia in Vienna. Are you connected with each other?

JN Yes, of course. Actually, since we started, we have been in very close contact with them. They were kind of training us, and helped with how to start basically. Of course, we needed to

work on our own ways, and our own structures. But we are in very close relationships and always exchange information. For example, on Covid restrictions, we are just always in touch. Very often we have to send people to Vienna or to Berlin. Then we are communicating with each other and find the best solution for the person who needs help. Or the other way around. Some people who contact them are redirected to us, because that might be the best solution for them. There are many different possibilities and we are always trying to find the best one. This would be impossible without Ciocia Basia and Ciocia Wienia. But speaking about this name, I really love it when someone writes “Dear Auntie.” They start their email and it goes “Dear Auntie, I have to visit you in the Czech Republic.” This is so beautiful and innocent at the same time. We know what it means.

JZ And it is giving comfort for those who need help.

JN Exactly.

JZ All of you are not paid, you’re all on a voluntary basis, right?

JN Yes. All of us, we are volunteers. We try to divide the work in a way that it is not too much. We had to learn, it took us some time to figure out our workflow—so, we don’t get burned out after one month or two. This is a really emotionally draining activity, reading all those emails and being in touch with people. The schedule can be very tight.

AD For emotional support, there is only one person in touch with another?

JN Yes, it’s like that. For example, today I have my shift and if there is a new person asking for help, then I would be in touch with them until the very end. We don’t switch, I just stay until the end, because I know their history.

JZ How do people know about Ciocia Czesia?

JN I would say that we are quite popular among those who are really in that topic, but it’s not enough. We have to be visible also to those who are not interested in reproductive rights. Fortunately, there is this organization called Abortion Without Borders, which is very popular in Poland. And I would say that everybody knows them. Really, the phone number of this organisation is all over Poland, it’s written on the walls, just basically everywhere. Thanks to them, when someone is contacting Abortion Without Borders, very often they say, “Hey, you know, if you want to go to the Czech Republic, contact Ciocia Czesia,” so this is how it works. We all work together very closely. For example, if we see some problem which is for a lawyer, we know where to transfer this person, like to a feminist lawyer known to us. It is also very important to realise all of those intersectional aspects of different problems, how they are tangled together: gender-based violence or economic violence.

AD I was wondering if the new legislation enforces attributions of roles to gender and class?

JN I think yes, mostly concerning class, but not only. That’s why financial support is crucial. Logistics are not so important, because you can find clinics online. But to pay that money, for some it’s insane. When I see they want to take a loan so they are able to go abroad for abortion, this is just incredibly

insane. In my opinion, our economical aspect is one of the most important—how we can provide financial help. This anti-abortion law works against those from smaller cities, who might not be wealthy, and also maybe to those who don’t have computer skills. This is an issue, using the internet, finding information, especially reliable information. There are a lot of websites that are promoting abortion pills, but they are just fake. They are sending—I don’t know what—but not abortion pills, and they are taking a lot of money for that. This is another layer of our work, finding reliable information, because obviously there are a lot of people who want to make money out of it and new fake information is appearing constantly. We are gathering information, doing research, even calling companies selling those pills, to then share the information, and our knowledge, further. Even just to give recommendations rather than solutions.

AD What happens if you are being forced to keep the baby but you had different plans for your life? Speaking of class or place in the social system, in a worker’s family for instance. Going to study would be more difficult, or if one simply wished for a different future.

JN Oh, well yeah, I don’t know what to say, because we are fighting so that these situations won’t happen—and we are not aware how many of those situations are actually happening. We just don’t know it. One of the saddest moments in my activity was a woman from a village who contacted us, and at some point, she just stopped responding to our emails. She was just about to come, and then she just wrote that her husband said that she cannot go, that he came with a priest to the house. It was one of the saddest moments, we didn’t know what to do, we couldn’t do anything about it, but I think this is one of those circumstances you are referring to.

AD Yes, maybe I just imagined that through the state’s legislation everybody stays at their same place, doesn’t change class, or gets stuck in their role because there is a hurdle enforced by the state.

JN I think anti-abortion law actually is about everyone. We help people with different degrees of education, different degrees of wealth—at some point it’s about everyone. But of course, those who are wealthier have more choices. If they have money to choose where to go, or how they want to travel and all that. It’s not like people without money don’t go abroad, because we are always here to help—don’t get me wrong. But it’s also about the way it is done. What I mentioned before, already having kids at home for example, this might be a big issue. When they don’t have a person to leave a kid with, nor money to pay for a nanny. These kinds of little things influence the final experience, it can make it either very stressful or the opposite, it can be done very easily. So, money plays a big role in this experience, of course.

JZ What do you wish for the future?

JN End of patriarchy, of course [laughter], but since this is not possible—probably not in the near future—I wish that there would be more and more of this belief in grassroots, transnational initiatives that bring solidarity. Even just small gestures.