

# The plan to overturn abortion rights in Europe

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## The activists taking inspiration — and money — from US anti-abortion groups

When [news broke](#) that the U.S. Supreme Court had overturned decades of precedent and opened the door to abortion bans across the country, the reaction from opponents of the procedure in Europe was simple: We can do it too.

With support for legal abortion in Europe [polling](#) at the highest in the world, its opponents know they are rowing against the tide. But activists on the Continent got a practical demonstration of how a determined minority can make the impossible happen last weekend, when the U.S. Supreme Court confirmed a POLITICO [scoop](#) that it was repealing the landmark Roe v. Wade ruling. The decision made, or will soon make, abortion [illegal](#) across 16 states.

For opponents of abortion in Europe, the ruling confirmed their belief that public opinion and — perhaps more importantly — public policy can be changed.

“This is very positive, and it will be looked at by other judges,” said Grégor Puppinck, director of the European Center for Law and Justice and one of the biggest names in anti-abortion activism in Europe, a few hours after the Supreme Court decision was announced.

“I think it is obvious that 50 years after Roe v. Wade, abortion is still a problem, and it will always be a problem,” he added. “Normalization is not possible.”

Puppinck, a Quebec native who studied law in France, heads the legal foundation out of Strasbourg, where he is carrying out a strategy inspired by the American anti-abortion movement — with funding and support from backers in the United States.

By issuing legal opinions and representing clients in court cases, the ECLJ pushes for conservative interpretations of the law on topics like religious freedom, assisted suicide and, of course, abortion, in the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and other international organizations.

Over the years, Puppinck has made a name for himself. He’s served as an adviser to the Vatican, and was [awarded](#) honors by the Italian government for his legal services in a lawsuit over the right to hang crucifixes in public schools.

This May, he [gave a speech](#) at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest, where he inveighed against socialism, postmodernism and French President [Emmanuel Macron](#). The annual U.S. version of the conference is a top political meetup for the American Republican Party. In the Hungarian edition, not-coincidentally held in the capital of Viktor Orbán’s hard-right government, Puppinck was joined by heavyweights from the American right, including Fox News host Tucker Carlson.

## American ties

Organizations like Puppinck's are part of an American effort to export anti-abortion activism across the Atlantic.

Over the past half-century, U.S. anti-abortion activists have chipped away at the precedent set by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* case, even when it looked set in stone, arguing that the verdict was based on faulty legal reasoning.

It was in the U.S. that largely evangelical activists blazed a trail and turned opposition to abortion into a basic conservative position, making the religious right a decisive voting block for Republican candidates. They also targeted law schools. In 1982, activists set up the [Federalist Society](#) to promote conservative interpretations of the American Constitution.

Now, through a combination of electoral success, determination to expand their influence in the judiciary, and sheer luck with the timing of a number of key U.S. Supreme Court appointments coinciding with Donald Trump's presidency, they had their biggest win in a half-century.

Opposition to abortion isn't anything new in Europe either. The Catholic Church's condemnation of abortion dates back [hundreds of years](#), and it's only hardened over time. Orthodox and conservative Protestant groups take similar stances.

But with activists on the Continent so far unable to replicate the success of their American counterparts, U.S. groups are trying to put their thumb on the scale, sharing tactics and funding with allies in Europe.

In total, \$81.3 million worth of funding flowed from U.S. donors to help fund activism against abortion and other conservative causes between 2009 and 2018, [according to a report](#) compiled by the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF), a pro-abortion access network that connects members across European parliaments with a liberal stance on sexual and reproductive rights.

EPF Executive Director Neil Datta called the U.S. Supreme Court decision the result of a multidecade campaign by Christian conservatives to influence the American judicial system. Now the same is happening in Europe, said Datta.

"We're just at a much earlier stage in the process than the United States."

In the funding model outlined by Datta in the report, influential mega-donors set up charitable foundations that back activist groups in the U.S. These in turn operate, directly or through subsidiary organizations, overseas.

Puppinck's ECLJ, for example, is an offshoot of the American Center for Law & Justice (ACLJ), a conservative organization based out of Washington D.C. The ACLJ was set up by American televangelist Pat Robertson and is led by [Jay Sekulow](#), one of the lawyers who represented Trump in his first impeachment trial. [Tax filings](#) show how the ACLJ helps fund its European counterpart, transferring \$1.4 million in the year ending March 2020.

In parallel, liberal American donors back pro-abortion rights groups, and the EPF website [lists](#) George Soros' Open Society Foundations (OSF) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as backers. The ECLJ itself has published [a report](#) tracking links between the OSF and judges who served on the ECHR.

The Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) International is another European-headquartered offshoot of a conservative U.S. organization.

[Tax returns](#) show how the U.S.-based ADF donated around \$2.7 million to various European groups under the name ADF International headquartered in Belgium, France, Switzerland, Germany and the U.K. in the year ended June 2021. ADF, in turn, [received \\$100,000](#) in the year ended June 2020 from the Prince Foundation, where the founder of the security contractor once known as Blackwater and Trump ally Erik Prince serves as director.

ADF International is headquartered in Vienna but has offices in Brussels, Geneva, London and Strasbourg. According to the EU's [transparency register](#), ADF International's Austrian branch had a budget of €9.5 million for the year through June 2021. The organization provides legal services to defendants in sensitive cases — for example helping a midwifery student [win damages](#) after being suspended from a university over what ADF International said was her anti-abortion views.

The group is also active in the European institutions. In 2017, it [co-hosted an event](#) with MEPs from the center-right European People's Party group on the use of fetal tissue in scientific research. And last year, it organized [a briefing](#) on the persecution of Christians in Myanmar with MEPs from both the EPP and the right-wing European Conservatives and Reformists group.

### **Updating the script**

Legal battles and lobbying efforts with conservative politicians are one thing; but the activists know that if they are to obtain their objectives, they can't ignore the court of public opinion.

Lois McLatchie, 26, originally from Scotland, is a communications officer for ADF International out of Vienna. She said that while "people may be surprised to hear" it, she believes her stance against abortion is a feminist one. "I think we can do far better to support mothers and their babies," McLatchie said.

On May 7, anti-abortion groups converged on Brussels under the banner of the pan-European group One of Us.

In 2014, the group — at the time under the leadership of Puppinck — made waves in the EU capital, after it gathered nearly 2 million signatures in [a citizen's initiative](#) to ban EU funding for research using fetal tissue (it didn't pass). The gathering this year coincided with the end of the Conference of the Future of Europe, where One of Us also had tried to bring the topic of abortion to the forefront, this time with less success.

The event also highlighted the difference between the movement's traditional campaigners and a new generation of activists working to deliver a fresher — more hopeful — message.

Though the gathering took place the same week as the bombshell news of POLITICO's U.S. Supreme Court leak, its mostly older speakers made almost no mention of it. Instead, sounding more like an academic meeting than a political rally, participants discoursed on the meaning of freedom and responsibility. Aristotle was mentioned more than once. The names of the justices that were about to overturn Roe v. Wade didn't come up at all.

In an interview after the event, One of Us president, the grey-bearded 70-year-old former Basque politician Jaime Mayor Oreja, painted a gloomy picture of the future, for both the anti-abortion activism and society as a whole.

"We're experiencing the end of a period," said Oreja. "A period that is presided over by decadence."

Younger attendees, however, gave a cheerier take on the future of their movement — one more attuned to current events than Classical philosophers.

Aliette Espieux, 23, is a spokeswoman for France's March for Life. Another American export, the first March for Life was a street demonstration first held in 1974, the year after the Roe v. Wade decision. An annual Paris version of the event was started in 2005. In 2017, official [estimates](#) put the number of attendees at around 11,000, though this year attendance fell to about [4,500](#), according to the Paris police.

"My main goal is, first of all, to change the mentality of people on the ground," said Espieux, whose [Twitter bio](#) predicts that she belongs to the generation that will "abolish abortion."

Like others in this younger — very often female — cohort, Espieux is working to update the movement's pitch for a modern audience, putting sympathy for the plight of women front and center.

"Women who have an abortion suffer ... we want to speak with this person on the street," she said, adding she was enthusiastic about the news from the U.S. — at the time only a leaked draft.

"It gives us a huge [amount of] energy," she said.

Maria Formosa is even younger. The 19-year-old comes from Malta, the country with the strictest abortion laws in the EU. Last year, Formosa said that with four friends she launched an online group called [I See Life](#) where pro-life young people could share their views.

"This was an initiative which we took, after observing that in Malta, there are many pro-life youths," she said. "However, they are afraid to speak up. We wanted to create a platform where youths can feel safe."

The potential of this new generation has not gone unnoticed by the movement's establishment. Last year, in response to what it described as the "deepening crisis of academic life," the Polish conservative think tank Ordo Iuris [founded](#) a Warsaw-based university intended to promote conservative causes and train a pipeline of graduates to staff the movement's organizations, as well as provide candidates for the courts and other government institutions.

At Collegium Intermarium, students can take a five-year course in law, as well as post-graduate courses in the "Management of non-governmental organisations" or in "Human Rights and International Dispute Resolution" — which includes a class taught by Puppinck.

## **What's to come**

It's not a coincidence that the Collegium Intermarium is based out of Warsaw. If in most of Europe the right to abortion is in no immediate danger, Poland is the country anti-abortion activists point to as their guiding star.

The country instituted a near-total ban in 2020, when a top court ruled pregnancies [couldn't be terminated](#) due to fetal defects. The decision left only rape or incest, or if the life of the woman is threatened, as exceptions.

Ordo Iuris was the driving force behind the ban, publishing a "friend of the court" brief to the tribunal. The organization's leader, [Jerzy Kwaśniewski](#), said it was "a great day" when the tribunal made its ruling.

Since then, the ultra-Catholic conservative group has been busy making sure that the ban is

followed, explained Katarzyna Gęsiak, director of the group's Center for Medical Law and Bioethics.

"The pro-abortion organizations, they are still active and they're finding another way to increase the number of abortions," said Gęsiak.

Abortions on the grounds of a threat to mental health was one example Gęsiak gave of — as she described it — the loopholes that pro-abortion NGOs were using to provide women abortions.

Pregnant Ukrainian refugees was another. The Ordo Iuris director said she was fighting to make sure that refugees were going through the Polish prosecutor's office to certify they had really been raped by Russian soldiers, before getting cleared to terminate their pregnancy.

The Polish example also shows how it's one thing to put in place restrictions on abortion — and another to maintain them.

Despite the dominance of the conservative Law and Justice party, the issue has been politically fraught for right-wing politicians.

In 2016, a proposed law to ban abortion was [withdrawn](#) for being too unpopular. And while the Constitutional Tribunal's 2020 decision avoided a dicey vote in parliament, it too was met with [huge protests](#) — the largest in the country since the fall of the Iron Curtain.

In 2021, these [flared up](#) once again after the death of a pregnant woman, which the family's lawyer blamed on doctors delaying a potentially life-saving abortion.

Meanwhile, opposition leader Donald Tusk, leader of the conservative Civic Platform party, has come out [in favor](#) of legal abortion, possibly seeing it as a vote-winner.

If anti-abortion efforts gain traction across the Continent, the reaction to this week's Roe ruling will likely presage a new division in European politics. Abortion might prove to split the European right as much as it unifies the left.

In the U.K., the country with the longest window of legal abortion in Europe, Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson [called](#) the U.S. Supreme Court decision "big step backwards."

In Italy, Simone Pillon of the far-right League party celebrated the U.S. court decision [on Twitter](#), calling it a "great victory." By contrast, Giorgia Meloni, the leader of Italy's other major hard-right party, Brothers of Italy, [played down](#) the relevance of the American abortion debate to Italy after the verdict: "The U.S. and Italy have profoundly different legal systems that can't be compared."

In Spain, the far-right Vox party has [its roots](#) in the "pro-life" movement, and its party leaders attended [an anti-abortion demonstration](#) in Madrid shortly after news of the ruling broke. Led by Oreja of One of Us, an estimated 20,000 people showed up.

Whether most European leaders like it or not, the abortion debate in Europe is here to stay.

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**P.S.**

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