

Polish Premier Fires Justice Minister for Embryo Comments

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk dismissed his justice minister on Monday for comments about trade in embryos, highlighting rifts which threaten the government's slim majority in parliament.

Justice Minister Jaroslaw Gowin, seen as an informal leader of the conservative wing of Tusk's Civic Platform, has clashed with him on other issues. If he quits the party and takes some supporters with him, the governing coalition that holds a slim five-seat margin in the lower house of parliament could fall.

The party's feud mirrors splits in Polish society as a whole, where more liberal Poles, seeking more secularity, disagree with conservative Catholics who oppose abortion, in-vitro fertilisation and legalizing gay civil partnerships.

"I don't have the time to make excuses every week for what Minister Gowin is saying," Tusk told a news conference. "I hope Jaroslaw Gowin will remain in the Civic Platform and will fight for his rights within the party."

Hoping to fend off any departures from the party's right flank, Tusk nominated former interior minister Marek Biernacki, who holds views often in line with Gowin's.

Gowin's sacking is the second cabinet departure in less than two weeks after Tusk fired his treasury minister, who oversees state assets, for failing to stop the state oil firm agreeing with Gazprom to build a pipeline through Poland.

In a television interview this month, a day before Tusk visited Germany, Gowin accused German scientists of buying and experimenting on embryos bought from a Polish in-vitro clinic. The justice minister gave no evidence for the allegation.

Gowin had earlier backed severe limitations on in-vitro fertilisation before Tusk pushed through state financing for the procedure to break a parliamentary deadlock.

Although in-vitro fertilisation has been performed for more than two decades in Poland and results in some 4,000 births each year, there are no regulations governing the procedure.

Gowin also clashed with the premier over legal unions for gay couples, when he led a group of Civic Platform lawmakers who blocked a bill proposed by another party member from going forward despite Tusk's support.

Poland, the largest central European economy, has been a symbol of political stability since Tusk took office in 2007 in a region where unrest over the effects of the global economic slump has brought down governments in Romania and Bulgaria.

Tusk also faces a leadership challenge from his former deputy Grzegorz Schetyna at a party election next year.