

# Polish lawmakers change course on controversial Holocaust law



June 27, 2018

WARSAW, Poland (JTA) — In a move that observers said could reduce tensions between Israel and Poland, lawmakers here voted to defuse a law that made it a crime to accuse Poland of complicity in the Holocaust.

The Sejm , or lower house of parliament, voted Tuesday at the request of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki to change the law to make it a civil offense, rather than a criminal one, to blame the Polish nation of crimes that were committed by the Nazis.

The original law mandated up to three years in prison for offenders. But under the amendment, violations would be no greater than misdemeanors.

“We are moving away from criminal laws that may divert attention from the initial objectives of the original law,” the news website Onet quoted Michał Dworczyk, a top official from Morawiecki’s office, as saying.

The Senate must sign off on the amendment to finalize it. The amendment passed with 388 votes in the 460-member Sejm.

One source close to Morawiecki told JTA that the amendment would give authority to enforce the law to the Institute of National Remembrance, a government agency. Under the change, citizens and nongovernmental institutions would be unable to initiate police investigations of alleged violations.

The law’s passage in January prompted sharp protests from Israel, as well as criticism by the United States, among other countries. Jewish organizations, including the World Jewish Congress, complained that the law was a violation of free speech and an impediment to historical research of the Holocaust.

According to The Washington Post, Morawiecki said Wednesday that he hoped the modifications would improve relations with Israel.

Also Tuesday, the International Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists called on Poland’s constitutional court to strike down the law, saying its intent was to minimize “the responsibility of the real perpetrators of the crimes.”

Rafal Pankowski, a spokesman for the Never Again foundation that monitors anti-Semitism in Poland, said his group “welcomes” the parliament’s vote.

“It is a pity it comes so late, since January the controversy resulted in a terrible wave of anti-Semitism in Polish media and politics,” he said.

Jonny Daniels, founder of the From the Depths group that works on Holocaust commemoration in Poland, had criticized the law but said the change “has the potential of defusing the whole crisis.”

“It’s a courageous move by the prime minister,” he said.

<https://www.jta.org/2018/06/27/news-opinion/1565967>