INTERVIEWS 05.04.2019

'This is the beginning of the end of Kaczyński's era'

Robert Biedroń on progressive politics in Poland, the relationship with the EU and NATO, and his new party Wiosna

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Mr Biedroń, you've often been described as the Polish Macron. Is there something to it?

I'm Biedroń, not Macron. I see a lot of similarities, but also a lot of differences. I think the similarity is that France, too, was endangered by populism. Marine Le Pen going for the presidential elections was a big threat to France, but also to Europe – a threat to democracy, the rule of law, to human rights. Macron not only succeeded in defeating Marine Le Pen in a presidential campaign. He also raised hope that we can defend democracy through brave programmes, through putting democratic standards on the agenda. I think that's what we should admire Macron for. But he's a neoliberal. That's where the similarities end. I'm a progressive politician with a progressive agenda unlike Macron's.

Polish politics have long been dominated by two parties, the national-conservative Law and Justice (PiS) and the centrist Civic Platform (PO). Their antagonisms are fuelling the so called Polish-Polish war. How does your new party Wiosna [Spring] want to overcome this deep division in Polish society?

Of course, we still need to prove ourselves, and we need time to grow like flowers during spring. We are a political start-up, but we've already shifted the discussion from the Polish-Polish war to a discussion on the everyday problems of people: on minimum wage and minimum pension, air pollution, housing, on equality of men and women, equal human rights for every single group living in our country.

We brought the discussion into another sphere and this has fundamentally changed the political scene in Poland. For three years, we had to witness how PiS was leading in the polls. Now, after they made some mistakes and Wiosna appeared, Kaczyński is losing ground in the polls. People feel that they can defeat PiS. The hope we brought is unstoppable. This is the beginning of the end of Kaczyński's era, and it's the beginning of a new era of progressive politics in Poland.

PiS has recently presented a new programme with improved child benefits, higher pensions and lower income taxes. These economic welfare policies are pretty similar to Wiosna's. Do you see them as a reaction to your programme?

Of course, PiS has to react. They're not blind. We have an average support of 12 per cent now, which is quite a lot for Polish realities. PiS, at the same time, appears to be less credible than it was three years ago. They got caught up in a corruption scandal and internal fights. So PiS tries to pick up on social issues, but we stand on two legs: We battle social injustice, but we also defend our liberties, human rights, equality – all these things which for PiS are symbols of degeneration, of a badly organised European Union. If we want to be a democracy, we should take care of it all, because everything is connected.

It's obvious that Wiosna appeals to progressive, young and cosmopolitan Poles, but in a Catholic society like Poland's you find very conservative souls, too. How do you respond to more traditional, religious voters?

People are not blind. Kaczyński has recently launched a homophobic debate, but Poland is not Russia. I'm gay and I came out of the closet a long time ago. You cannot scare Polish people with homosexuality anymore, because they know how gay people live, that there are good and bad ones, like with everyone else.

I believe this sort of debate won't work anymore. Kaczyński has lost this game, because he gambled too much. We can see it. Thanks to these changes and thanks to Wiosna, the political spring will really come, not only in May for the European Parliament elections, but also in autumn with the national elections in Poland.

You've faced sharp criticism for dividing the opposition. Different polls show that the majority of potential Wiosna voters would come from the biggest opposition party, PO. Are you playing into the government's hands?

All the opinion polls now show that we are also mobilising new voters

who are progressive and who would not vote for any of the existing parties. The appearance of Wiosna brings hope that the opposition can win elections. So every Polish democrat should pray every single evening before going to bed that Wiosna will be successful. Without Wiosna it won't happen.

Still you refused to become part of the European Coalition, an alliance of the larger Polish opposition parties against PiS.

I know at the very beginning I was blamed for going against the stream, but that's not the case anymore. If we joined the European Coalition, many voters wouldn't vote at all. Many have contempt for the traditional political parties, they want to vote for something fresh, new and brave. If you merge old with fresh, what do you get at the end of the day?

Are you considering a different alliance to break the power of PiS?

I consider every single alliance with pro-democratic forces in Poland. It's unimaginable that any of the opposition parties would form an alliance with Kaczyński and his PiS. But before the elections we want to put forward our own agenda. If you ask the European Coalition about their agenda on public housing, agriculture, equality of men and women, registered partnerships, coal and green energy, they don't have any answers. And they won't have answers, because the coalition is too broad. Greens and Conservatives, they will never agree on the future of coal, not in today's Poland at least. Conservatives and Liberals, they won't agree on registered partnerships. So they will not deliver a programme which is credible. That's why we won't join the coalition.

In the recent years, Poland has seen several new movements and parties on the rise, like Razem, Nowoczesna and Twój Ruch, which you took part in. They all started out really hopefully and then failed to build on that momentum. What has Wiosna learned from their mistakes?

I invest in Wiosna long-term for it to stay. But I don't believe today's politics are so much about traditional parties. There will be new movements, putting new issues on the agenda, fresh politics and fresh politicians that regenerate politics. They will play their role and sometimes disappear again. I find that alright in the 21st century. When you look at all the different political parties, they all brought something interesting to politics.

Like what for example?

The movement I used to be part of, Twój Ruch, put the separation of state and church on the agenda. It started a debate about misconduct of the Polish church, about paedophilia issues and finances. All these issues had been skipped by politicians and the media. I'm in national politics because of Twój Ruch. Minorities were not represented in many debates and Twój Ruch has brought me and some of my colleagues into the mainstream of politics. Isn't it refreshing in a traditionally conservative, right-wing dominated country? The movement has disappeared but something stayed. I think this is important.

Wiosna's first bid are the European Parliament elections in May. Where do you see Poland's role in Europe and the EU's role in Poland?

We want to be part of a strong European Union and NATO. If we want to live in a safe environment and be protected, then we should further integrate with these two institutions. But we want to see the European Union solving our everyday issues, too: combating air pollution, providing a good healthcare system, good education. The EU has brought us huge changes in infrastructure. We have built lots of stadiums, airports and highways. But now we should start a new era of investing directly into everyday European and Polish problems. It should be practical.

What can the EU and NATO expect from Poland? After the end of the INF treaty, some observers fear that Poland may allow new deployment of US nuclear weapons on its territory, thus risking the unity of NATO with such a bilateral deal.

The position of the current Polish government is to weaken EU structures and getting close to Donald Trump's policies. It thinks that while getting closer to Donald Trump and his ideas, we will be his favourite child in Europe – which won't happen. I think we should keep America as our closest ally, while investing more in stronger European security and defence capacity. This is a long-term policy. You must also remember, Poland has this feeling – which to some extent I understand – that our European partners have often not been thinking about our common interests, but about their specific interests.

Are you talking about Nord Stream 2 now?

Yes, I'm talking about Nord Stream 2. There must be some margin of understanding why Polish people play this game. If we talk about European solidarity, this solidarity should always be applied – to

everyone, on all issues. This has not always been the case in the past.

This interview was conducted by Joanna Itzek.



Robert Biedroń

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Since 2019, Robert Biedroń is chairman of the Polish party Wiosna that he co-founded. From 2014 to 2018, he was mayor of the city of Słupsk. Biedron is the best-known openly gay politician in Poland.