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Lewica: a united Polish left

The Polish left is pulling together against the ruling right-wing populist PiS. But that doesn't solve its strategic problems

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This autumn, Poland will be voting in a new parliament. The political climate in the country is dominated by the increasing hegemony of the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) within the party system as well as by the chaotic situation in the opposition camp. The 'European coalition', which was founded by the biggest opposition parties a few weeks before the European elections, has unexpectedly fallen apart after the elections. Recently, a new left-leaning party alliance was created as a spontaneous reaction to this split: *Lewica* ('the left').

Polish left-wing parties have been stuck in a crisis for a long time now. A cleavage between liberalism and conservatism has been a feature of Polish politics since the middle of the last decade. In the midst of this battleground there's barely any room to be found for the left.

On the liberal side, there are mainly the urban middle class. Its members accept demands that are close to left-wing positions, for example on cultural issues or regarding the promotion of European integration. It's quite peculiar though that, in Poland, the parties that dominate on the liberal side belong to the conservative European People's Party (EPP) family. By contrast, Polish conservatism has resolutely turned to social policy. It rather represents the less well-off levels of society as well as the peripheral areas of Poland in their conflict with the urban centres.

The old left

Poland's biggest left-wing party – the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – was able to cushion the effect of their crisis in recent years. Despite a lack of parliamentary representation, it succeeded in maintaining its regional organisations throughout the country. In the communal elections last year, the party obtained almost as many votes as in the last elections to

the *Sejm* (the lower house of the parliament) in 2015. It was thanks to the mobilisation of its traditional electorate, which was bound up with the state apparatus before 1989, that it achieved this result. Above all, one has to point to the military as it opposed the politics of historical memory that right-wing parties are using.

Thanks to this good election result, the Democratic Left Alliance was invited to join the grand European coalition for the European Parliament elections, which was supposed to unite the opposition across all ideological divisions. This coalition, led by the liberal Civic Platform (PO), secured a high level of support with 38 per cent of the vote. The candidates of the Democratic Left Alliance gained five seats. The record-breaking high voter turnout also proved to benefit the right, such that Jarosław Kaczyński's PiS party achieved its best ever result: 45 per cent.

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The arrival of the newly founded Wiosna party, led by the former Democratic Left Alliance activist Robert Biedroń, also contributed to the victory of PiS. Wiosna took away some voters from the European Coalition, above all from its biggest party, the PO. Wiosna avoided any identification with the left in the election campaign.

After the elections, there was a series of internal conflicts within the European Coalition. The Polish Peasants Party (PSL) for example found it unacceptable that, in the election campaign, LGBT issues came up and it therefore refused to remain in a coalition with the left-wing parties. The alliance broke up. And a new left coalition emerged.

A new left was born

This new 'Lewica' is a coalition of three parties. The biggest is the SLD: it stands for a traditional social-democratic programme and has around one million voters, who identify themselves with the concept of the 'left'. The core SLD electorate are to be found most of all in medium-size and small cities – above all in the western and northern parts of the country. The Democratic Left Alliance plays a particular role in the new coalition, as Lewica is *de jure* a party electoral committee of the Democratic Left Alliance.

The second party involved in the coalition is Biedroń's Wiosna. Its electoral potential is hard to estimate and it's totally dependent on the popularity of the party chairman. The Wiosna programme can be described as left-liberal. Its electorate is above all rooted in metropolitan

areas.

The third party in the coalition is Razem ('Together'). It was founded in 2015 and could be referred to as the Polish equivalent of the Greek Syriza or the Spanish Podemos. However, the left's prospects among the youngest generation in Poland as well as in other countries in the region are practically zero. Razem picked up 1 per cent of the votes in each of the communal and European elections. The group presented itself as highly anti-communist and critical of the SLD. That's why the distribution of Lewica's party lists, which benefitted Razem, represent a concession of the SLD to the smaller coalition partners.

In the polls, the Lewica coalition is reaching a level of support of around 10 per cent. It's working in its favour that the Polish electorate frequently leans towards short-term support for new formations. If a party takes on the legal form of an electoral committee, that also reduces the risk of it not being represented in the *Sejm*. In Poland, party coalitions have to secure 8 per cent and individual parties 5 per cent to be part of the distribution of seats for the *Sejm.* In addition, the widespread view that it will be anyway impossible to outperform the ruling *PiS* in the elections may move a section of the liberal voters to vote for a smaller election committee like Lewica and not for Civic Platform.

Lewica's strategic problems

The emergence of the left-wing coalition does not, however, resolve the left's strategic problems. There was cooperation between the SLD and liberal left-wing circles in the elections in 2007 and 2015 and both times the cooperation failed. The problem of the European left – to bring together the majority of their traditional voters with a younger electorate in big cities – can also be observed in Poland, even if in a more original form.

Typical left-wing voters mainly do not come from the working classes but rather from the bureaucracy, especially from the police and the military. Demands for LGTB issues do not interest them. They look critically at the political activity of the Catholic church but do not want any culture conflicts. In eastern Poland, large numbers of the orthodox minority vote for the left. Its members vehemently reject the privileges associated with the Catholic church but do not themselves support any liberal cultural demands. Most Polish voters, especially members of left-wing parties, reject political extremes.

The parliamentary

By contrast, the younger voters in big cities reject the symbols of the left. Unlike traditional

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left-wing voters, they see the Poland of the Communist era in a critical light and do not advocate a social-democratic agenda in economic and socio-cultural policy but prefer a market economy-oriented model.

In 2015, the 'United Left' alliance admittedly won a few liberal voters in the metropolitan areas. But that could not make up for the loss of numerous traditional SLD-voters. The left lost a particularly large number of votes in smaller places and poorer regions.

The future of the left

A further problem concerns the internal party situation of the SLD. There, tensions have emerged of late. Some popular local politicians associated with the SLD were not allowed to stand for Lewica because of the anti-communist mindset of the smaller parties. Among those was, for example, Monika Jaruzelska, the daughter of the last party chairman of the People's Republic and first president of transition period. Some known SLD politicians are now running as candidates on the PO's lists. The joint appearance with the SLD led to protests by some Razem activists.

However, the situation for Robert Biedroń's Wiosna emerges as the most complicated of all. Wiosna relies on just one person and had a poor result in the European elections. There are quarrels about the fact that Biedroń originally announced renouncing his seat in the European Parliament, but then never implemented it. Local activists are leaving the party and, on top of all that, support in the polls is melting away. Some observers say that Wiosna's focus on LGBT rights in the election campaign was one of the main factors for the departure of moderate voters, who reject a cultural revolution, to the conservative right.

The situation within the opposition only benefits the ruling PiS. The paradox of the Polish cleavages lies in the fact that some voter groups have passed unnoticed between the conservatives and the social democrats and that neither the Civic Platform nor the Democratic Left Alliance are fighting for these voters. Instead, they end up with Kaczyński's PiS.

The left-wing coalition's programme contains socio-economic and cultural concepts that are typical for the left. Cultural issues are dominant in the Lewica coalition's election campaign. With this tactic,

liberal middle-class Civic Platform voters are supposed to be enticed to switch.

The distribution of seats in the *Sejm* according to the D'Hondt process works to the advantage of the biggest electoral committees, such as PiS or Civic Platform. The ratio that emerges from this ensures that the opposition parties obtain fewer seats than Kaczyński's party, even if they should together secure a similar number of votes as PiS. Because they are missing the relevant financial budget and because they are also not represented in local governments, it could be problematic for Wiosna and Razem to continue to exist on their own after the elections.

The outcome of the election will decide over the future relationship of the SLD with the coalition and if they will form a common party. If the results will be a success, that would pave the way for closer cooperation. But if they turn out to be worse than the current polls, the trend for criticising the coalition could become stronger.

The parliamentary elections in October and the presidential elections next year constitute the conclusion of a struggle for survival in the history of the Polish left. The fact that the struggle has been successful so far is thanks to the strength of will of the traditional Democratic Left Alliance voters – but an electorate that is made up of these circles will no longer be enough for the left to last in the future. So far, all the attempts to liberalise the left and to address the young, big city voters who are in favour of cultural emancipation, have led to electoral disaster. The coalition Lewica has not solved the left's strategic problems.



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