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Be the change you want to see in the world

Tusk's second victory in Poland shows that resorting to polarisation and the demonisation of anti-democratic opponents only feeds their agenda

A victory against the global trend of democratic backsliding, which has now been repeated in the European elections — the new governing coalition in Poland defeated the populists thanks to pro-democratic polarisation strategies in the parliamentary elections in October 2023. Their efforts have now also been confirmed in the European Parliament elections. So, what can we learn from this for the fight against authoritarian and populist forces?

Last election Sunday, Donald Tusk's Civic Coalition (KO) achieved 37.1 per cent, outperforming Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice (PiS) party for the first time in ten years. The Third Way won 6.9 per cent and the New Left 6.3 per cent of the vote. Overall, the governing coalition of the Civic Coalition, Third Way and New Left almost matched its result from the 2023 parliamentary elections. PiS won 36.2 per cent and the Confederation 12.1 per cent of the vote.

The European elections – just like the previous regional elections – mainly tested the mood of the new governing coalition. It is thus clear that their electoral success in October last year was by no means characterised by short-termism, but is actually sustainable in the medium term. It is all the more interesting to take a closer look at the (electoral) struggle for democratic change at that time and to consider what lessons can be learnt from it: In addition to the autocratic PiS government, the so-called democratic opposition (Civic Coalition, Third Way, New Left) had also engaged in targeted polarisation. Against the backdrop of global democratic backsliding, the rare case of the democratic turnaround in Poland thus offers the opportunity to expand the debate space to include the pro-democratic potential of polarisation.

A buffet of democratic choices

Looking back at the parliamentary elections in October 2023: What polarises the democratic (opposition) parties is their common desire to restore Polish democracy. All three are united in their criticism and rejection of the autocratic PiS government. Nevertheless, this polarising element has been supplemented by a pluralistic element. Contrary to initial assumptions, the democratic opposition decided against a joint electoral list and entered the election campaign with separate lists. As a result, there was no absolutely polarising confrontation between the democratic opposition and the autocratic government. Although there was polarisation in terms of the normative understanding of democracy, this was not reflected in a binary government-opposition structure, as was recently the case in Hungary. There, the very broadly united opposition to Viktor Orbán failed miserably. By having separate lists, the Polish opposition was able to allow for political nuances and offer voters a pluralistic political programme ranging from left-progressive (New Left) to liberal-conservative (Civic Coalition) to conservative (Third Way) politics.

The Poles were therefore able to choose the most suitable of the three pro-democratic offers for their individual needs without having to swallow too big a toad 'to save democracy'. The prospect of a real choice is likely to have contributed to mobilisation in general. Positive emotions and concrete substantive offers also played an important role, which were combined with the polarising, negative attitude towards PiS in campaigns by the democratic opposition.

The heart in the national colours of Poland, which the Civic Coalition established as its new party logo, is symbolic of the harmonious and patriotic emotions they were conveying.

PiS ran a particularly polarising election campaign, mainly at the expense of Germany — did they succeed? In the end, they were only able to mobilise voters who remained ideologically close to them from previous elections. Its strategy of polarisation, driven by fear of the state's demise in the event of an election victory for ('German agent') Donald Tusk, ultimately came to nothing. Above all, the election was influenced by the mobilisation of voters who had not yet voted in 2019 — especially women and young people. These voters, however, were mobilised primarily by the democratic opposition.

By warning of the demise of Polish democracy if PiS were to remain in office, the democratic parties themselves polarised the electorate. A key

difference, however, was that instead of polarising and mobilising exclusively through a negative view of the political opponent and the stoking of fear, they also incorporated a view of the country's future, positive emotions and concrete content. The heart in the national colours of Poland, which the Civic Coalition established as its new party logo and which also gave its name to the March of a Million Hearts - the media event in the election campaign - shortly before the elections, is symbolic of the positive emotions. In this way, positive, even harmonious and patriotic emotions were conveyed. The KO underpinned this with a list of 100 easily communicable demands. Overall, this created a powerful blueprint for the future that did not give the PiS's campaign of hate and fear a sounding board and was therefore able to stifle it.

Mobilising women and the youth

The Third Way also did not rely exclusively on the rejection of PiS to mobilise and polarise and strategically positioned itself between the two alphas PiS and KO as well as Konfederacja. On the one hand, value-conservative positions were represented in competition with PiS and economically liberal positions in competition with KO and Konfederacja. Just a few weeks before the elections, the latter was on a high of over 12 per cent in the polls, but was only able to achieve 7.2 per cent in the elections due to a strong voter migration to the Third Way. A post-election survey also showed that the Third Way had the largest proportion of voters among the parties who chose the party due to a lack of good alternatives. The Third Way thus played an important role in mobilising potential PiS and Konfederacja voter groups that would not have been mobilised by other parties under certain circumstances.

In contrast to the other two parties, the New Left primarily focused on polarisation with Konfederacja. The spectre of a coalition between PiS and Konfederacja was raised — which was certainly realistic. This would have hit Polish women and their rights hard. Parallel to the polarisation, however, concrete counter-proposals were also proposed by presenting the election programme with the strongest focus on women's rights.

Political parties should fundamentally take a clear pro-democratic stance, but, at the same time, continue to be able to offer real alternatives.

The mobilisation of women and young people was the decisive element of the Polish parliamentary elections. A large number of non-partisan parties contributed to this.

Even though the New Left achieved a weaker result compared to the

previous elections, it raised the issue of women's rights to the political stage and contributed to the mobilisation of corresponding voter groups through issue-specific polarisation.

Based on this, political parties should fundamentally take a clear pro-democratic stance, but, at the same time, continue to be able to offer real alternatives. As soon as the (supposed) rescue of democracy and the common demarcation from authoritarianism push the substantive positions of the parties into the background, there is a risk of demobilising potential voters due to a lack of electoral options. In the (electoral) battle for democracy, people also adopt substantive political positions that want to be represented. It is important not to be tempted to demonise the (anti-) democratic opponent. This would only give the polarisation that may be pursued by the other side the space to develop further, which could lead to a spiral of escalation and a hardening of friend-foe patterns. Instead, the focus should be less on the political opponent and more on one's own programme with positive and, above all, concrete content.



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