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The left will decide Poland's future

The rising star of Robert Biedroń could finally unite the opposition against the populist Polish government

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On October 21, Poland will hold local elections, which will be followed by the European Parliament elections in May 2019, national parliamentary elections next fall, and a presidential election in May 2020. Taken together, these four elections may be the country's most important votes since 1989.

As the European Union's largest former communist state, Poland plays a role analogous to a US 'swing state' within the bloc. Its current government, under the Law and Justice (PiS) party, is solidly populist; but there is a broad opposition arrayed against it. The majority of Polish media tend to be more critical than supportive of the PiS government. The judiciary has stood firm against the PiS's assault on its independence. And corporations and civil-society groups have made their resistance to the PiS known.

Unlike Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, PiS Chairman Jarosław Kaczyński can be beaten domestically. And should that happen, Poland will no longer stand in the way of EU sanctions against the Orbán government's corrupt and lawless behaviour.

The political calendar is very favourable to the Polish opposition, which will likely perform well in the local elections next month. A lot of the money and power in Polish politics resides at the local level, and opposition parties already control 15 of Poland's 16 states (*voivodeships*) and all major cities. Current polls indicate that the opposition's dominance could slip significantly, but that it will almost certainly retain control of the country's western regions and most large cities.

A deeply divided left

According to a recent study by *Krytyka Polityczna*, the biggest problem

for the main opposition party, Civic Platform (PO), is that it is disliked even by its own supporters, who are animated almost solely by fear of the PiS.

More ominously, the PO's leader, Grzegorz Schetyna, remains unpopular at a time when politics is driven largely by spectacle and the strength of individual personalities. The *Krytyka Polityczna* study demonstrates that voters take their views on the courts, refugees, and opposition politicians from top party leaders, rather than from their own experiences. In other words, they select their views to justify their political choices.

Polls indicate that if all of the parties on the left united, they would secure 16 per cent of the vote. That, together with the PO's share, could be enough to deprive Kaczyński of his majority.

This explains why the PiS's aggressive policies and confrontational behaviour have bolstered, rather than undermined, its base of support. Despite the PiS's constant nepotism scandals and ongoing conflicts with the EU, the judiciary, and business and civil-society groups, its support has not fallen below 35 per cent. By contrast, the PO's support has yet to climb above 25 per cent. It is as if the PO has hit a glass ceiling, while the PiS is blessed with a glass floor.

With Kaczyński having cemented the PiS's position as the party of the right, Poland's future now rests in the hands of the left. But the left is deeply divided. The PiS government's decision to cut the pensions of communist-era civil servants has resurrected the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), which now enjoys around 7-10 per cent support. But the SLD must compete with Razem, a radical leftist party that was founded just before the 2015 parliamentary election.

Razem is managed collectively, rather than by a single designated leader. Though its support has remained stable, at around 2 per cent, the hope that it inspired when it first appeared has been replaced by disillusionment and infighting. Despite its name, which means 'Together,' it refuses to enter into any kind of alliance with the mainstream parties, including SLD, even though both parties failed to meet the electoral threshold in the last parliamentary election. In the event, the 'wasted' votes they received benefited the overall winner, the PiS, which gained an outright parliamentary majority.

The rising star of Robert Biedroń

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be enough to deprive Kaczyński of his majority. The question, then, is whether the left can overcome its divisions. The answer may lie with Robert Biedroń, who has already been likened to French President Emmanuel Macron, who upended the French political landscape in 2017.

Biedroń wants to change that. But he cannot simply imitate Macron.

As Poland's first openly gay politician, Biedroń surprised the entire country when he won the mayoralty of the provincial city of Słupsk in 2014. He has since become a media darling and a political celebrity, all while effectively managing his city's government. In polling for the 2020 presidential election, he currently comes in third with 12-19 per cent support, behind the current president, Andrzej Duda, and European Council President Donald Tusk.

Biedroń recently announced that instead of seeking a second term in Słupsk, he will focus on building a political movement. He hopes to unveil the movement's name and platform in February, after the local elections, but he has already made a point of avoiding the word 'left' (preferring 'progressive' instead).

Biedroń has been preparing this announcement for at least six months. During that time, he has commissioned extensive public-opinion polls to determine the issues that really matter to Polish voters, just as Macron did in France. And he has been crisscrossing the country, drawing impressive crowds everywhere.

Having already proved effective at running a municipal government, Biedroń can credibly compete with the PiS for small-town voters and with the PO for urban voters. And, also like Macron, he is attempting to position himself between pragmatism and idealism. Until now, the Polish left has been consumed by one or the other: the SLD has been pragmatic to the point of cynicism, while Razem has been too idealistic to be taken seriously. In either case, the result is the same: a *de facto* withdrawal from politics. Consigned to the wilderness, neither party has any real national influence.

Biedroń wants to change that. But he cannot simply imitate Macron. Rather, he will have to trust his own instincts and tap the same energy that won him the Słupsk mayoralty in 2014.

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