

# Poland: Left is united against bigotry, but doesn't agree on social and economic issues

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**Poland's left parties have cooperated in the campaign leading to today's general election. But can they find common answers to the problems facing ordinary Poles?**

It has been an awful campaign season. An early indication of its main themes happened in March when the Marshall of the Senate, Stanisław Karczewski, from the ruling party Law and Justice (PiS) tweeted an image showing a PiS umbrella protecting a Polish family from rainbow-coloured rain. The tweet quoted the party's leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, calling the LGBT movement an attack on children.

In the months since, Law and Justice has waged war on what it calls the 'LGBT ideology'. We've heard politicians give speeches warning voters about the rainbow threat, and the government-controlled public broadcaster has regularly aired programmes LGBT activists allegedly attacking Catholics and depraving children. A pro-government newspaper gave away stickers saying "LGBT free zone", a mantle proudly claimed by a number of local authorities. The consequences were predictable: reports started circulating online about violent attacks on openly queer individuals, participants of Białystok Pride were beaten up by an organised group of homophobes, and during Lublin Pride a straight couple were arrested for carrying potentially lethal homemade explosives.

Since taking power in 2015, the PiS administration has become known as one of the most aggressively conservative governments in Europe. For years, its main enemies were migrants and Muslims, who it blamed for every ill facing the West. The infamous national remembrance law criminalised any mention of Poles' involvement in the Holocaust. Hundreds of thousands of women took to the streets when PiS considered backing a complete abortion ban. Meanwhile, the government has turned public media into a grotesque propaganda machine and undermined the independence of the judiciary. Nevertheless, Law and Justice managed to maintain its support, partly as a result of piecemeal redistributive policies such as the popular '500+' child benefit programme. In the upcoming parliamentary elections on 13 October, the party is expected to celebrate another resounding victory.

The primary opposition, the Civic Coalition (KO), is a broad alliance including everyone from former social democrats to rightwingers who openly call LGBT rights a distraction. At its core, however, KO is economically liberal, socially committed to not rocking the boat, and primarily focused on not being PiS. Those uninspired by its vision – or lack thereof – can also opt for nationalist populists agitating for first-past-the-post, or a far-right party whose leader declares that women don't deserve the vote.

And then there is the left. Currently, there's no party represented in the Polish parliament that is even nominally left-of-centre. In fact, the left has been absent as a major force for more than a decade. The post-communist social-democratic party Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) was in power in the 1990s and early 2000s, when it embraced third-way economics and collapsed following

corruption scandals. In 2015, young activists set up Razem (Together): a left-wing party with strong links to social movements. However, despite having played a key role in the women's strike, actively supporting workers' disputes and Pride marches, and running a flagship campaign for a 35-hour working week, it has struggled to achieve mainstream recognition. More recently, Wiosna (Spring) – a centre-left, pro-environmental and pro-European party – was launched by the charismatic LGBT campaigner Robert Biedroń. However, it has also failed to gain the momentum it had hoped for.

Faced with the real possibility of progressive forces being once again left out of parliament, in August the three groupings decided to form an electoral coalition. It would be generous to call it a marriage of convenience; indeed many would describe it as one of despair.

It's no secret that the parties don't always see eye-to-eye. Many in SLD are keen to emphasise that much of its right wing has quit, and that a new generation of activists now makes the party less reliant on figures associated with the Soviet regime. However, the endorsement of individuals like former prime minister Leszek Miller is hard to swallow for some of the left's candidates: due to his involvement in the Iraq war, Razem supporters have been known to chant about finding him a prison cell.

Wiosna, in turn, is criticised for its top-down leadership style and overreliance on the personal popularity of its founder. While Biedroń is an unquestionable icon of the LGBT movement (in 2001 he founded the influential Campaign Against Homophobia, he later became Poland's first openly gay MP and he has survived multiple physical attacks due to his activism), his economic views have been less clear. For a long time, the former SLD member rejected ideological labels, gaining him the nickname 'Polish Macron' before making a left turn during the European elections. Meanwhile, Razem struggles to escape the label of being a fringe party, seen as too radical to be taken seriously.

Yet despite differences, the united left has managed to run a vibrant and optimistic campaign, and is expected to win between 10% and 15% of the vote, which would make it the third force in parliament. On social issues, its programme is unapologetic: abortion on demand, marriage equality, inclusive sex and relationships education in schools, secularisation of public life and international collaboration instead of nationalism. Economically, it includes standard social-democratic proposals: more funding for health and education, transition to green energy, higher minimum wage and public sector pay rises, banning evictions onto the street, strengthening workers' rights and writing them into the constitution. While not as confrontational as Razem would like, it's still the most progressive manifesto a major Polish party has put forward in a generation.

The fate of the alliance after 13 October is unclear, as the parties involved seem keen to preserve their own brands. However, flawed as it is, entering parliament as a coalition presents two key opportunities. The first is rebuilding a left identity in Poland. In recent years, the term 'left-wing' has most frequently been used by the right, as an almost-insult describing anyone even slightly critical of their ultra-conservative ideology. Now, the left defines itself – a tendency combining economic justice and liberation politics, and presenting the two as inseparable. The other opportunity is that we could now see entering parliament a number of solid activists who cut their teeth in grassroots movements, and who hold views rarely heard by most of society.

Will they successfully broaden the political discourse and convince new sections of Poles that they can demand something better? Or will the left surge be just a blip in history? Time will tell.

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