

Rightwing populists are on course to win Poland's election. But resistance is stirring

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The Law and Justice party's super-conservative, anti-LGBT agenda is alienating many young and moderate Poles

In the decades since the end of Communism, Poland has rarely been a country of mass demonstrations. It has never had its equivalent of [Ukraine's Euromaidan](#), for instance. But the four years since the [Law and Justice party \(PiS\)](#) came to power have been marked by public demonstrations – from nationalist commemorations of independence day and Catholic-run “marches for life and family” to LGBT rights parades, pro-choice protests and the Campaign to Defend Democracy's [KOD] fight against the government's perceived weakening of the constitution.

[Sunday's parliamentary election](#) can be viewed as a test of the relative success of these different campaigns. Despite polling that suggests Law and Justice will secure the best results of any single party in the post-1989 period, there is much to suggest the country is increasingly divided.

[Law and Justice's platform](#) is to provide a strong Catholic moral foundation to a programme of social benefits, and it has clearly paid off over the past four years. As the messages from the party and its allies in the media and clergy become ever stronger in tone, it runs a greater risk of alienating more moderate voters.

With figures such as the party president, [Jarosław Kaczyński](#), reminding us that his party exclusively recognises families as “one man, one woman and children”, it is clearly not aiming to soften its rhetoric yet. But then, it has never pretended to be a party that works for everyone: instead it has identified a specific base of supporters and cornered their vote through smart, if occasionally cynical, campaigning and largely delivering on electoral pledges. Schemes such as the [500 Plus child benefit package](#), offering 500 złoty (£103) each month for every child after the family's first, have genuinely improved the lives of people in parts of the country that previous Polish governments had stopped even paying lip service to, and have begun to more evenly distribute the country's growing wealth for the first time since EU accession in 2004.

For the last four years, [Civic Platform](#) (PO) – the mainstream opposition party, which governed between 2007 and 2015 – has had a clear strategy for re-election. It has poured its energy into attacking Law and Justice's judicial and constitutional reforms, leading the Campaign to Defend Democracy in order to underline the supposed dangers of these changes. Yet that approach has had little success beyond PO's natural base. Cabinet ministers and pro-government outlets have pointed out, quite accurately, that actions such as appointing sympathetic judges are perfectly in keeping with the behaviour of every previous government. The opposition's subsequent campaigning has similarly failed to win much support: it has preferred to point out the government's faults, rather than underlining what it would do to improve the country if given the chance.

Law and Justice, for its part, seems happy to campaign on LGBT issues. Just as the 2015 election was

marked by strong rhetoric against the EU's refugee quotas for individual countries – and indeed, Law and Justice later limited Poland's resettlement obligation to [just 150, mostly Christian, Syrians](#) – the government's determination to promote the family values of the Christian right has encouraged deeper divisions between liberal and conservative-minded people. Some local councils have declared "LGBT-free zones", which have no real legal implications but have received explicit support from various government figures, and it is hard to escape the sense that many on Poland's right feel that some citizens just don't fit into the society they are building.

By contrast, a great deal of energy and positivity has been generated by the resurgent left, following campaigns by both the [women's rights movement](#) against a tightening of abortion laws and, more recently, the LGBT equality marches. A new party, [Spring \(Wiosna\)](#), has made its name through its tireless campaigning for LGBT rights. It serves as a front for the likable (if slightly bland) [Robert Biedroń](#), Poland's first openly gay politician, who rose to prominence as the popular mayor of the small northern city of Słupsk. The party's work deserves respect in a country where far-right Christian terrorists were recently arrested for planning bomb attacks on Lublin's equality march, and where Biedroń himself has experienced various acts of homophobic violence.

The most effective electoral campaign on the left, however, has been run by [Together \(Razem\)](#), which was founded four years ago in frustration at the conservatism and complacency of the once-governing Left Democratic Alliance [SLD]. A mixture of seasoned campaigners and younger activists energised by this new wave of protest, Together failed to secure the 5% of votes necessary to have representation in the Sejm (the lower house) in 2015. But it still passed the 3% threshold to receive funding from the state, under Poland's electoral rules, which it has used to build its platform as the country's first truly modern centre-left party. Now it has formed an electoral alliance with Spring, as well as the somewhat stagnant SLD. Between Together's campaigning strength and Biedroń's charisma, the group is increasingly confident that the left will return to the Sejm after a four-year absence.

Not that Law and Justice will be worried: it seems almost certain it will be returned to government on Sunday. But therein may lie its ultimate downfall. The party's enormous success risks instilling the same kind of complacency that brought down its opposition four years ago. Nowhere can a party rule democratically for several terms while making enemies of significant blocs of the population. And the number of Poles declaring themselves atheist is steadily rising; anyone who has joined one of those pro-LGBT marches that took place around the country this summer will have noticed just how young its participants were. Large numbers of these marchers won't be eligible to vote until the elections in 2024, but that hasn't stopped them from campaigning and signalling that the country they will inherit will be more open and welcoming.

[Poland](#) is conservative and Catholic, but also queer, atheist, Jewish, progressive, and many things besides. While there are many reasons for the left in this country to be pessimistic, looking beyond the depressing headlines suggests that it is nevertheless taking the very first steps to building a tolerant nation of multitudes.

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