

Poland's Opposition Is Failing to Turn the Right-Wing Tide

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This month, Poland's liberal opposition mobilized hundreds of thousands of people to protest the ruling party's attacks on the rule of law. But it's less clear that it's winning over the government's supporters, who remain wedded to its social programs.

On June 4, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets of Warsaw to protest the destruction of democratic institutions. Denouncing the record of the national-conservative party that has been in power since 2015, it was Poland's largest single protest since the women's demonstration against the [de facto ban on abortion](#) in fall 2020. So, with parliamentary elections due by November, is this a breakthrough in Polish politics? Not exactly.

The Warsaw march responded to the call of Donald Tusk, prime minister from 2007 to 2014, a veteran European official, and today chairman of the largest liberal opposition party, Civic Platform (PO). Although the march was officially supported by other opposition parties, from the center-right Third Road coalition to the social democrats of the New Left, Tusk was widely perceived as the main figure behind it. The ideological face of the demonstration was similarly defined: the politicians who spoke focused exclusively on threatened democratic norms and the need to restore the rule of law in Poland. To this end they drew parallels between the right-wing, Catholic authoritarianism of today's ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) and Poland's pre-1989 "actually existing socialism."

These are hazardous comparisons, to say the least, given the social and economic structure of today's Poland and the one before 1989. Yet it is true that PiS has been undermining the rule of law in Poland since its first year in power. Back in 2015, PiS violated the procedure for electing the Constitutional Court in order to secure a majority of judges openly sympathizing with the government. In 2016, it controversially merged the posts of minister of justice and prosecutor general, making the prosecution — the opponents of the government claim — a politicized institution. In the next step, the government introduced two new judicial chambers to the Supreme Court. One of them, the Disciplinary Chamber, has been packed with former prosecutors loyal to Zbigniew Ziobro, the present justice minister and prosecutor general, with a more or less clear intention to monitor the judges and, potentially, suspend those who do not work according to the government's wishes.

Another example of PiS's authoritarian practices was the suppression of women's protests in 2020–2021, when peaceful gatherings were surrounded by the police and forced to stay in one place, and some of the participants were beaten up or taken to a faraway police station under the pretext of violating COVID-19 safety policies. PiS leaders are quite outspoken about their intention to build a "healthy society based on traditional values." This focus on Catholic values, family-based social structure, and strong centralism has nothing in common with socialist ideology or even rhetoric, with its support for publicly owned industry and mass politics.

But while Law and Justice's Poland is authoritarian and hostile toward opponents and minorities, it offers a [limited social policy](#) that was deemed impossible in the neoliberal Polish state before 2015.

Hence, while it is absolutely right to speak about how PiS has been violating democratic procedures, the neoliberals comfortably forget that for millions of voters, a focus on returning to what went before does not sound so promising.

The Real Poland?

Surely, there were also younger supporters of left-wing policies in the crowds on June 4, demanding a “social, not authoritarian Poland,” as well as activists of the feminist movement. And yet, their voices had little impact on the event’s ultimate message. The liberal opposition simply demanded that PiS be removed from power, without promising that its own future government would introduce something radically different from the austere “cheap state” of the transition era and Tusk’s rule.

Speaking to the crowds gathered in the center of Warsaw, Tusk exclaimed that this is where the “real Poland” is. A cheering political assessment — but far from the reality. While the liberals and their allies were mobilizing their supporters, Law and Justice did the same with its own. The right-wing media wrote for weeks about the “march of the crooks” and suggested that Tusk, if given the chance to return to power, would drive Poles into poverty (from which, by implication, they had already begun to recover thanks to PiS) and pursue policies in the interests of Germany, not his own country.

It should be recognized that this right-wing discourse is not falling on deaf ears. The government’s supporters do not take to the streets, but polls leave no doubt: Law and Justice’s hard-core electorate is not shrinking. In the first poll after the march, Tusk’s Civic Platform did come out on top, but with a minimal lead over the ruling party (32 percent to 31 percent). At the same time, the smaller opposition parties lost, so it was their voters, not disillusioned PiS supporters, who joined Civic Platform’s electoral base. There is virtually no movement of voters from the conservative-nationalist camp to the liberal side.

Civic Platform seems to have energized its core voters in response to Law and Justice’s antidemocratic moves: the attack on the independent judiciary, and more recently, the project to create a commission to investigate Russian influence in Poland, which would have the power to exclude any politician from public activity for ten years, if it deems that the politician has acted under Moscow’s influence — vaguely defined — in the past.

However, for millions of Law and Justice voters, especially the working-class and small-business voters living far from the main cities, Tusk and his party are not symbols of anything good. Voters remember that under his government, employment contracts were massively replaced by “junk contracts” depriving people of basic social guarantees, and laborers’ wages of around five to six zloty per hour (0.20 to 0.30 euros) were not infrequent. PiS — which raised the minimum wage more than twice, established children and elderly allowances, and exempted those under twenty-six from taxes — for these people remains a benefactor. Destroying the Constitutional Court or independent courts, in the face of undoubted improvements for personal budgets, are really unimportant details, especially when the ruling party constantly addresses “ordinary Poles” and “hardworking families” and promises to work on their welfare.

Law and Justice is also extremely skilled and aggressive in propaganda: the national broadcaster, TVP, is controlled by the party faithful, and systematically broadcasts the government’s point of view, accuses its critics of working for Putin and/or Germany, and turns up the heat against LGBTQ people or — as during the protests around abortion — women. One only has to read the statements of Law and Justice supporters on social media to see that such a narrative is successfully applied to the June 4 march as well: it is presented in pro-government media either as a deplorable rally of hooligans or as an event that served “German influence.” Mentioning Germany in this context, PiS

revives a fear that was present in Polish society for decades and only recently began to fade away — that Germany never accepted its territorial losses after World War II and would be glad to conquer back East Prussia, Lower Silesia, or Western Pomerania. A historically based mistrust of Germany or a feeling that good, neighborly relations are never possible between Germans and Poles is particularly widespread among PiS voters, while neoliberal circles are eager to strengthen economic ties with Germany and even consider it to be a model state administration.

PiS has no intention of explaining itself for its violation of democratic principles, because its voters simply tend not to care. The opposition, on the other hand, is unreliable in their eyes when it argues that in the course of the struggle for democracy and against PiS, the social gains of the party's rule will not be eradicated. It's hard to do otherwise, after all, since among the advisers and vocal supporters of Tusk are economists who cocreated Poland's capitalist transition, headed by the infamous Leszek Balcerowicz, the architect of "shock therapy."

Thus, the march mainly proved that Polish political life still revolves around the clash between national, partly Euroskeptic, strongly Catholic conservatives and pro-European economic liberals (a liberalism less strong in their statements on, for example, women's rights). If anyone can be a potential "third force" in Poland, the best chance goes to the extreme free-market, ultraconservative Confederation. The party did not support the June 4 march, and has unambiguously hinted that after the elections it could become a coalition partner for either PiS or PO. Recent polls give the Confederation as much as 15 percent support, won thanks to extremely primitive pro-free-market slogans, suggesting, among other things, that the total elimination of taxes will increase universal prosperity. This boundless enthusiasm for business freedom is the key element that makes the Confederation different from PiS, which, though it surely does not attack capitalism, does offer a limited set of social policies and speaks positively about state interventionism "when historically necessary."

In other areas, the Confederation stands for the traditional family (openly praising subordinating wives to their husbands), advocates national pride instead of "cosmopolitanism," and takes up Western-style right-wing ranting against "cultural Marxism," "multiculturalism," and "depravity" caused by LGBTQ people. Most of Confederation's voters are young men, based in both big and middle-sized cities, with varying levels of education, often running a small company. The Confederation is hardly visible outside of urban circles or indeed among older voters, and tends to be extremely unpopular among women.

The Confederation's advance does not mean some unprecedented rise of the far right, a characterization that could equally be applied to the ruling party itself. Polish national conservatives, as Law and Justice calls itself, have already exploited the most disgusting Islamophobic arguments and portrayed LGBTQ people as a danger to Polish families and society to mobilize voters against imagined threats. While PiS's words and deeds can be seen as a part of wider trend in European politics (the right-wing parties benefited almost everywhere from both the refugee and COVID-19 crises), the Polish party could be seen as a trendsetter. Indeed, right-wing parties from Spain (with Vox cooperating permanently with PiS) to Romania have praised Law and Justice's way of running the state as a model they strive toward.

It is also PiS that erected a barrier on the border with Belarus and keeps pushing back desperate refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and various African countries. The pushback policy, polls show, has the support of more than half of the public, whom PiS has successfully convinced that refugees going through Belarus are tools of aggressive Russian policy against Poland, and should thus be treated as a threat to public safety. The completely different reaction to the arrival of a much larger group of refugees from Ukraine, who were generously welcomed in Poland, has not led to any rethinking on this score — all the more so because the pushbacks on the Polish-Belarusian border

are basically taking place with the approval of Brussels, in line with the policies of [Fortress Europe](#), closing the community's external borders to the influx of migrants. The EU, while rightly criticizing Poland for intervening in the judicial system, has never come out with equally harsh criticism of the violations of asylum law that — confirmed also by the rulings of Polish courts — occur at this border.

It can be expected that the ruling party will use xenophobic or anti-refugee slogans throughout the remainder of Poland's long election campaign. The problem for Polish authoritarianism is not the mobilization of the liberal electorate, which, as polls show, is unable to cross a certain threshold of support. The real problem is inflation and Poles' deteriorating living conditions. These issues may make people who have so far been grateful to PiS for social transfers feel disappointed. The government will therefore do everything to avoid discussing the problems of everyday life, the cost of living, the housing issue (while lack of affordable housing is perhaps the most pressing problem facing young Polish adults), or public services. On these topics, the undoubted negligence is criticized by the social democratic left (the liberals are not really interested in social issues, as one might have guessed), but its discourse is barely heard. The Polish left's yearslong neglect of building its own media has unfortunately led to a situation in which even the most accurate arguments of the social democrats — although obviously limited to proposals for correcting capitalism — only reach the already convinced.

Meanwhile, the Law and Justice government intends to make the most of Poland's unexpected rise to prominence in NATO and the EU following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Poland has taken in the largest number of refugees and has become the main hub through which Western military aid reaches Ukraine. Along with the Baltic states, Poland has also been a key advocate of continued unconditional support for Ukraine in the EU, acting in full accord with the position of its ally, the United States, on this issue (although it is fair to say that the belief that Ukraine should be supported until victory is almost a consensus in Polish public debate).

The EU's harsh course and successive sanctions packages against Russia led the Polish government to believe that Brussels would turn a blind eye not only to pushbacks on the border with Belarus, but also to the counterreform of the judicial system and violations of the rule of law. However, this was a rather illusory assumption — on June 5, the EU's Court of Justice assessed that Poland had failed to comply with its obligations under the Treaty on European Union. The verdict stated that the Disciplinary Chamber of Poland's Supreme Court, established at the inspiration of the government, "does not meet the requirement of independence and impartiality," and that the changes made to the Polish judiciary after December 2019 violated EU law. This means imposing further financial penalties on Poland. So, while the war in Ukraine has brought a certain boost to Poland's role — or rather, to the entire so-called eastern flank — in NATO structures, the conflict with Brussels over the rule of law is unlikely to end for PiS. And the party probably doesn't even want it to, since convincing voters that the "German-controlled EU" is oppressing the Polish government is another method of mobilizing the electorate.

The decisive clash in Poland's parliamentary elections this fall will therefore play out along similar lines to those of four years ago — between the conservative, sometimes prosocial, always antidemocratic, minority-hating right-wing party and . . . another right-wing party, this time a neoliberal one, which has only partially understood why it lost power in the first place, and why any kind of social program should be offered. The far right, taking free-market dogma to the point of nonsense and, like PiS, a strongly anti-LGBTQ force, is emerging as a third player. The Left — even the social democratic and "compromising" one, is struggling to break through with its demands. In addition, even moderate proposals, such as turning attention to the lack of affordable housing or calling to increase the powers of trade unions, are immediately labeled "extreme" or "harmful to the economy" in the stifling anti-communist atmosphere of Polish public debate.

It's hard to resist the impression that the prescription for the basic social problems of Poles would be a left-wing program — it's just that millions of voters won't even hear of its existence. Again, they will choose what they consider the lesser of two evils.

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