

Anti-European Rule in a Pro-European Society

Creating Opportunities for Progressives in Poland

By Konrad Golota and Adam Traczyk

Introduction

Progressives in Poland operate in an extremely hostile environment. The political imagination of Poles is dominated by two political blocs: one symbolically represents the victories of the transformation after the overthrow of communism, while the other represents those who have lost out. Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice Party (PiS) has consolidated support among people who perceived themselves to have lost out, not just through conservative policies but also through social policies that provide economic security and a sense of personal dignity to an electorate that often felt neglected by liberal elites.

To overcome this, progressives in Poland will need to move beyond a polarized culture war and tell a new story about Poland's future that appeals not only to the young, to women, and to the highly educated, but also to those left behind by today's politics. This will require a new economic agenda and a less condescending and identity-driven progressivism. However, all this may still not be enough to break the existing duopoly. Therefore, the left in Poland must also support social movements that may contribute to a fundamental reshuffling of the political scene in the country. As the recent mass protests against abortion restrictions demonstrate, there is a visible appetite for change. Though it is too early to draw conclusions, one thing is certain: The progressive Polish movement is at the forefront of the biggest protests seen in Poland in 30 years. How these protests evolve will shape the future of politics in Poland for the foreseeable future.

The roots of success and the governing style of the Law and Justice Party

In 2015, the national conservative Law and Justice Party ended the eight-year rule of the liberal-conservative Civic Platform (PO) by winning both the presidential and parliamentary elections, gaining a majority in both chambers of Parliament. The party managed to repeat its success in the next election cycle, led by Kaczyński. In 2019, Law and Justice and its small coalition of partners once again

obtained a majority in the Sejm, the lower house of the Polish Parliament, but lost the majority in the Senate by a slim margin. In 2020, despite the controversy surrounding the postponed elections—due in theory to the COVID-19 pandemic—Andrzej Duda was reelected as president of Poland.

Since taking power, the Law and Justice Party has overhauled Poland's political institutions. Carried out with revolutionary zeal, it is not surprising that outsiders often portray PiS' image as an illiberal, authoritarian, power-hungry party that has taken over Poland. But this portrayal tells only half the story. In addition to the well-known mixture of a conservative worldview infused with democratic backsliding, culture war rhetoric, xenophobia, and homophobia, the nationalist right in Poland has also introduced at least a seemingly inclusive and pro-social model of development, which is widely supported by Poland's economically underprivileged electorate.

It is this latter aspect that drove PiS' electoral victory in 2015. The party crafted an electoral narrative based on the promise to introduce a child benefit of about \$120 USD a month and to lower the retirement age to 60 for women and 65 for men after it was previously raised to 67 years by the Civic Platform in 2013. Although Poland is not a country with great social inequalities—the Gini index score for Poland is approximately 0.3, less than that of Germany or France¹—there is a strong sense of division between two competing visions of Poland. This new divide, which replaced the traditional cleavage of post-Solidarity and postcommunism in the mid-2000s, suggests that on one side of the barricade are those who consider themselves “winners” from the transformation after the fall of communism and the “losers” on the other.

For many Poles, Law and Justice does not appear to be an anti-systemic party that turned the democratic order upside down. Rather, many voters view PiS as a guarantor of stability and security, and especially of social security. In fact, satisfaction with the way democracy is functioning in Poland has reached its highest numbers since the fall of communism in 1989.² Support for PiS' flagship social policy, the child benefit Family 500+ programme, exceeds the party's own poll numbers by far: Two-thirds of Poles support the policy, while only 40 percent of the population actually voted for the party.³ Polling results also indicate that Law and Justice is able not only to mobilize voters from the eastern, more traditionalistic regions of Poland, but also former voters of the Democratic Left Alliance and the Civic Platform in other parts of rural and small-town Poland. This means that some voters support the ruling party not because of its cultural conservatism or dismantling of democratic institutions, but because they fear that an opposition win could pose a threat to their recently gained economic well-being. In other words, while some voters may be concerned about PiS actions that undermine rule of law and democracy, they believe that PiS' social reforms lead to a higher quality of life and are working to catch Poland up with European social standards.

Since coming to power in 2015, three pillars have defined PiS' political strategy:

- **Economic redistribution:** Flagship policies redistribute monthly unconditional child benefits and provide extra benefit payments for pensioners. These policies appeal to those disgruntled voters who previously felt that they had no stake in the transition from communism to capitalism.
- **A conservative revolution:** Based on fearmongering and a politics of blame, framed in Poland as a fight between good and evil, voters have rallied against a host of perceived enemies, from elites, banks, Germans and Russians, the LGBTI community, and even European institutions themselves.
- **Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the redistribution of prestige:** Many Poles felt excluded and betrayed by so-called big-city elites, feeling that this group looked down and condescended toward them. PiS targeted messages to these people and sought to restore not just their economic dignity but also their sense of self.

While direct transfers give people who were previously economically excluded the feeling that they are finally participating in the economic transformation of the country, it is actually the redistribution of prestige that restores their sense of dignity and personal or group respect. This combination of policies and outreach has created a historically popular formula for PiS. As a consequence, progressives' strategy has often backfired. All too often, in aiming to mobilize one part of the country, progressives can alienate other key constituencies and groups they need to support their policy agenda—offending rural and lower-income voters, for example, by characterizing them as stupid, bigoted, or backward.

Though PiS' initial victory was a surprise, it is clear that their political strategy and campaign tactics are now a permanent feature of Polish politics.

Beyond a divided opposition and toward a progressive movement

Law and Justice's main political rival is the Civic Platform. The PO, like the Law and Justice Party, has its roots in the post-Solidarity camp of Polish politics; however, unlike the party currently in power, it represents a moderate, pragmatic, and centrist current of conservatism. Its conservative-liberal course under the leadership of Donald Tusk, the former president of Poland and former president of the European Council, ensured its electoral victories in 2007 and 2011. At the same time, the image of the PO as a nonideological party practicing postpolitics was consolidated. To this day, the party can be best characterized by Tusk, who described his political goals as providing "warm water in the tap."

In the last four parliamentary elections—2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019—the PiS and PO together won about 70 percent of all votes cast. The other parties competed for third place on the podium. In the 2019 parliamentary election, these included the progressives, the far-right Confederation, and the conservative Polish Peasants' Party.

The Polish left camp currently consists of three parties: the Democratic Left Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej, or SLD), Spring (Wiosna), and Razem (Together). The SLD was formed after the dissolution of the communist party in 1989 and won the parliamentary elections in 1993 and 2001; in 1995 and 2000, its candidate Aleksander Kwasniewski won the presidential elections. The SLD has been the party with the clearest pro-European agenda in Poland. The SLD-led government finalized Polish accession to the European Union and produced the compromise which gave Poland a new constitution. It has been a party of modernization and progress and the only one fighting for the separation of the state and Catholic Church.

Since 2005, the SLD has paid a huge price for corruption scandals that rocked the party. Since then, the party has been in a continual search for a new agenda and new alliances. These attempts have been mostly unsuccessful, and the party has continued to lose support. Indeed, the party seems to offer a nostalgic social democracy that lives in the past. This decline culminated in the poor results in the 2015 parliamentary elections, where the United Left coalition failed to pass the 8 percent threshold required for coalitions and thus was excluded from Parliament for the next four years.

It is in this context that, in 2019, the SLD, Wiosna, and Razem joined together to take on Law and Justice and the Civic Platform. Together, they would receive more than 13 percent of the vote. This new alliance brings together a new generation of politicians and proposes a combination of typical social democracy, progressivism, and socialism.

Wiosna was established in March 2019 as a new progressive movement initiated by Robert Biedroń, the first openly gay man to sit in the Polish Parliament and later mayor of Słupsk, a midsized town in the north of Poland. In the European Parliament elections of 2019, Spring received 6.6 percent of the vote. Starting from the assumption that the number of left-wing voters in Poland is relatively small, Wiosna initially focused on an agenda that went beyond classic left-wing issues in order to attract other voter groups. These included not only big-city liberals but also voters from the provincial areas, based on Biedroń's image as an effective and people-oriented small-town mayor. In the course of the campaign, however, the thematic focus shifted from a mix of progressive policy proposals—including women and minority rights, modern social policy and health care, and environmental and climate policy issues, which gave the impression of a catch-all party—to identity politics.

Razem was founded in 2015 by the nonparliamentary left-wing circles critical of the SLD and modeled on the Spanish party Podemos. In the 2015 parliamentary elections, it won 3.5 percent of votes. This result did not allow the party to enter Parliament but provided it with funding from the state budget until the next elections.

In the 2019 parliamentary election, all three parties formed a coalition and ran together on one list, which reflected the diversity of a potential left-wing electorate. The Democratic Left Alliance appealed both to the traditional postcommunists and to the more conservative electorate from medium-sized towns. Spring was a magnet for at least some liberal voters and Razem attracted young progressive social leftists.⁴

This internal diversity and collective leadership allowed the Left to return to Parliament after a four-yearlong absence. Together, the unified list received well above 10 percent of the votes, making the Left the third-largest group in the Polish Parliament behind the PiS and Civic Platform. This was a much better result than what would be achieved in the following presidential election in 2020.

The challenge of “two Polands” and the 2020 presidential elections

A comparative study on the heterogeneity of Polish values by Lisa Blaydes and Justin Grimmer shows that, apart from Romania, no other society in the world is as divided on fundamental values as Poland.⁵ Effectively, two different societies live side by side in Poland, and as another study by Paulina Górska shows, these two groups are extremely hostile to each other.⁶ The deep mistrust and mutual aversion of government supporters and opponents extends to the dehumanization of the other. Interestingly, progressives often have a worse image of PiS supporters than PiS supporters do of them, which contributes to the difficulty in developing a strategy that appeals to both groups.

The 2020 elections were emblematic of the challenges facing progressives in Poland. Four key candidates stood in this election: the incumbent President Andrzej Duda, from the Law and Justice Party; the Civic Platform candidate, former Parliament Speaker Malgorzata Kidawa-Blonska; the candidate of the Left and leader of Wiosna, Robert Biedroń; and the candidate of a new anti-establishment movement, TV celebrity and journalist Szymon Holownia, who offered a strange combination of progressivism and conservatism and the promise of a new politics.

Polish elections consist of two rounds if no candidate receives more than 50 percent of votes in the first round. The contest for the election was strange, as it was held in the middle of the first wave of the pandemic in April and May. Candidates could not meet voters and were limited to online statements, except for President Duda, whose daily appearances among the people were presented as presidential

duties. Additionally, for much of the campaign, the opposition called for postponing the elections, asserting that it was more important to save lives and jobs than to engage in political campaigning. After many disputes and a short political crisis, elections were postponed for just a few weeks, from May 10 to June 28.

Rafał Trzaskowski, acting mayor of Warsaw and vice president of the European People's Party, joined the campaign after the elections were postponed, replacing Kidawa-Blonska as Civic Platform's candidate. He benefited from being a newcomer, when all opposition parties helped him obtain the required 100,000 signatures of support he needed to stand. This provided a real boost to his campaign—he ended up receiving more than 1.6 million signatures, which helped reinforce the perception that he represented the progressive wing of conservatism.

In the first round, Hołownia received support from voters tired with political elites and typical political divisions in Poland. Biedroń had lost support and momentum during the preelection lockdown and did not recover once the campaign began. Despite having a very active campaign and a comprehensive progressive program, much of his support moved to Trzaskowski as voters began choosing the strongest candidate to take on the president, and Biedroń and the Left were the first ones to support Trzaskowski for the second round. In the second round, incumbent President Duda, won reelection with 51.03 percent of the vote compared with 48.97 percent for his rival.⁷

An analysis of the demographics of the two voter groups, PiS and opposition supporters, illustrates that there were only minimal differences between male and female voters but clear generational and educational divides. Trzaskowski won younger voters decisively with a 64.4 percent share, more than two-and-a-half times his result among the same group in the first round. This suggests that the Civic Platform was effective in attracting the younger supporters of all opposition parties between the first and second rounds. Among older voters, however, Duda received 61.7 percent of the vote in the second round.⁸

Similarly, Trzaskowski decisively won among the higher educated Poles, with 65.9 percent among people with university degree or higher.⁹ However, this was canceled out by Duda's exceptionally high support among voters with only primary education (77.3 percent) or vocational training (74.7 percent).¹⁰ Regional divides are stark, too. Trzaskowski won in the largest cities, reaching 66.5 percent of support. But the incumbent president won 63.2 percent of communities with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants in the second round, up from 55.9 percent in the first round.

However, there is reason for hope for the progressive movement. The 2020 election was not really a clash between ordinary people and the elites. The opposition candidate was still able to win in small cities, if not in the most rural districts. The election was also a victory for turnout for the progressive movement: More young people and women, who typically support progressive candidates and policies, went to the polls this year than in any previous national election.

Moreover, even if the PiS has recognized the needs of small cities and villages and has politically captured large parts of this electorate, many issues remained unsolved in these communities, such as transport-related exclusions, lack of attractive jobs in rural areas, climate change, and rising energy prices and water supply problems. In the future, this will present progressives with the chance to make further inroads into these parts of the country. At the same time, progressives have a clear opportunity to solidify support among women, although there is still much work to do to appeal to them more effectively. Overall, in the future, it will be much harder for the governing majority to cover up Poland's problems by simply raising their voices, disseminating their propaganda, and presenting attacks against Poland's imaginary enemies.

The challenge for progressives, then, is to solidify support among women and young voters and to build a broad coalition that includes people who are attracted to current PiS policies but are beginning to realize they want the government to go further in addressing the issues they are facing. To do this, however, progressives must avoid the pitfalls of polarization and seize the opportunity to shape a new narrative.

Toward a new progressive policy agenda in Poland

The key to unlocking the opportunity for progressive change will lie in developing a new agenda and a new approach to governing. At the center of this, progressives must present a fresh, coherent story about post-Law and Justice Poland. This must be a story which meets the needs and aspirations for quality of life, stability, and security of the opposition's core electorate, especially for young people under 35. This vision and narrative, however, must also be capable of demobilizing support for the PiS' conservative policies in the short run and convincing people to support progressive ideas the long run.

This strategy will be defined by four core pillars: confronting nationalist ideology where it is strongest and exposing the weaknesses of Poland's welfare state, moving beyond a politics of condescension, building a new media strategy, and adapting to governing in the time of COVID-19.

Confronting nationalists in the field where they are strongest and exposing the limits of Kaczyński's welfare state

In view of the successes and high popularity of various cash transfers at the center of PiS' government policy, one might argue that the working class has no reason to shift its support from the populist right to the progressives. However, to cede the realm of social policy—a crucial part of any progressive narrative—to the populist right would undermine progressives' long-term chances of policy success and leave the government's narrative uncontested.

Moreover, as Łukasz Pawłowski points out in his recent book, the “second wave of privatization” is underway in Poland.¹¹ This latest round of privatization will result in a fall in quality and availability of public services across the country. Today, two-thirds of Poles are dissatisfied with the state of public health services.¹² This is why more and more people have turned to the private sector. Of the 26 million Poles who pay health insurance, more than 2.5 million are already covered by additional, private insurance. In the long run, the victims of such divisions will largely come from low- and middle-income families, who will not be able to afford the fees of private clinics and schools, as well as the residents of rural areas and small towns without private providers of such services. Of course, the outbreak of the pandemic is likely to further expose the weaknesses of Poland's chronically underfunded public health care system. According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data, public spending on health care represents only 4.34 percent of Poland's gross domestic product, and the total expenditure is 6.3 percent of GDP. The average for OECD countries is 8.8 percent,¹³ putting Poland far below the average.

As such, progressives should not shy away from confronting the PiS on this policy agenda, even if social welfare currently seems like the party's strongest asset. In doing so, the Left can push back against the idea of an ethnically religious national community threatened by outsiders and minorities by promoting the vision of a civic community of solidarity, one in which no one is left behind. Ultimately, shifting the center of gravity of the political rivalry to competitive visions of the welfare state may be the key to advancing progressive policies.

Moving beyond the politics of condescension

At present, the majority of support for progressive policies comes from liberal parts of society. Despite divisions among left-leaning voters in the first round of the presidential electorate, exit polls after the second round suggested that as many as 85 percent of Biedroń's voters in the first round supported Trzaskowski in the second.¹⁴ This indicates an extreme hostility toward PiS on the left and that opposition to the government is one of the key motivating factors.

Appealing beyond this core constituency is no easy task considering that Poland has long been locked into the deeply polarizing rivalry discussed above.

Nevertheless, the progressive movement must try to defuse it and aim to reach out to Poles across the political spectrum. While a first step will be the development of a reform agenda for the welfare state that appeals to those who currently benefit from the government's limited redistributive agenda, their electoral success will also require a change in tone and attitude.

Here, the current discussion on restrictive abortion laws is instructive. Today, the left's previously marginal proposals to liberalize abortion access—a symbol of progressive change—are becoming more mainstream. Meanwhile, the Civic Platform agenda of compromise and accommodation with the Catholic Church is being rejected by huge masses of new politically active groups, especially younger people.

Build a media strategy for a hostile environment

The so-called public media in Poland is now an instrument of direct propaganda for the government. Polish state television, including flagship nightly news programs such as “Wiadomości” and the information channel TVP Info, are tools that the incumbents use to disseminate manipulated mass messages and mobilize the core voters of the governing party.

Normally, politics should be about the contest of ideas. But in Poland, politics is presented as a battle of good and evil between the incumbents and everyone else. PiS is always portrayed by state media as morally higher than the opposition. The government's decisions are always portrayed as wise, far-sighted, responsible, and in accordance with the *raison d'état*. Therefore, even if their policies fail, the government has always been able to effectively communicate failures as the fault of the opposition, which is selfish, destructive, and inefficient and defends corrupted elites. Opposition parties are often referred to as the “total opposition” and portrayed as simple obstructionists whose sole aim is to create political chaos, spread fake news and disinformation, or cause a constitutional crisis. Even the mildest of criticism is presented as a savage and unjust attack on the government. Each news segment follows the same structure: applauding the wise decisions of the government defending ordinary people, attacking the opposition, and refusing to mention scandals in the governing camp.

State media, then, has become a very powerful tool to keep the core electorate in an imaginary world, especially since 30 percent of the country's population does not have cable or access to different TV stations. To counter state-run media narratives, progressives need to build a counter-information infrastructure. This will begin by engaging and harnessing the power and energy of social media. Progressives should build or finance their own news outlets as well as fact-checking portals to counter government propaganda. The Left should also collaborate more effectively with like-minded nongovernmental organizations, think tanks, and grassroots organizations that can reach groups they have historically found hard to connect with, thus helping amplify and expand the reach of progressive

messages. This strategy should be complemented by a proactive grassroots campaign that reaches out to the provinces, in all of the regions that progressives have lost or ignored.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the focus of the progressive message needs to change. For too long, progressives have focused on issue of process, such as the rule of law, democracy, and judicial independence, rather than speaking to the material economic and social issues confronting much of the population in their day-to-day lives.

Adapt to governing in the time of COVID-19

Despite serious risks, the COVID-19 crisis has not yet had a major impact on Poland's democracy. Postponing the presidential election averted the worst-case scenario, in which the election result could have been called into question and triggered a more serious constitutional and political crisis. In the end, Poles were able to cast their votes in a presidential election that, while not necessarily fully fair, was free.

While the risk of democratic backsliding cannot be ruled out, the pandemic also presents an opportunity for the Left. The social policy of the right-wing government is based on generous money transfers, but the quality and availability of public services remains lamentable. The current economic recession and crisis in the health care system could put an end to the right-wing vision of the welfare state and open a window of opportunity for a more progressive agenda.

While Poland managed the first phase of the pandemic reasonably well, the true challenge seems to be ahead. In early autumn, the country experienced a peak in new cases, exceeded 2,000, despite the government's constant claims that the pandemic is well under control. An additional factor that could advantage progressives is that the majority of Poles expect that the experience of the pandemic will result in closer cooperation among member states of the European Union.¹⁵ That means that if right-wing policy solutions are adopted at the European level, Poles might quickly come to the conclusion that their isolation in Europe, stemming from PiS' hostility to the EU and its institutions, is a mistake.

Looking forward

Regardless of the pandemic, the biggest challenge for progressives in Poland is finding a way to overcome the two dominant political narratives that overshadow the Polish political scene—or at least to establish a clear progressive agenda.

This does not mean that the left in Poland should not copy the language of liberals, but it does imply the need to improve messaging and make it more concrete for Polish people. Especially in the case of the overhaul of the judiciary, it is necessary to translate the language of values into the language of the interests of specific groups. An example of how to do this was given by Joe Biden in the first U.S. presidential debate: When asked about the Supreme Court nomination, he did not talk about procedures, political customs, or even point to the hypocrisy of the Republican Party. Instead, he focused on the negative effects of nominating a conservative judge for the poorest Americans and women, citing the potential repeal of the Affordable Care Act and overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. He referred to the hard interests of two key groups, not abstract values. This is something that the Polish opposition has not been able to do successfully thus far.

In the long run, in order to affect Poland's policy agenda, the progressive movement must strive to bring together a diverse political coalition by presenting an alternative vision of the Polish welfare state. However, the duopoly of Poland's politics will not be dismantled without a significant reshuffling of the political scene, similar to the one that took place in the mid-2000s. Such a change may come from outside the party system. Poland remains a country where a conservative counterrevolution is in place, despite the fact that no liberal revolution has occurred. But this strategy might backfire for Poland's conservatives. Generational change and the increase in women's political activity might lead to a reconfiguration of the political scene. The recent mass protests in the face of the abortion law being tightened by the verdict of the Constitutional Court are proof of this.

Today, a progressive coalition must be a loyal ally of grassroots social movements, even if this support does not immediately translate politically.

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