

# The Landscape After a Disaster and Even Two: On the Genealogy of the Polish Left

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## 2015: At the bottom

The Polish parliamentary elections in October 2015 marked the first time after the fall of communism in 1989 that the Left proved unable to win seats in parliament. The results of the

elections showed how deeply the Polish Left was dispersed and disoriented. Of course, the left-wing political parties and organizations had made a lot of foolish tactical errors. The beginning of the catastrophe could be traced back to the presidential elections earlier the

same year. The leader of the *Democratic Left Alliance* (SLD) Leszek Miller, himself a very experienced politician who had started his career in Communist Poland and had survived the most ferocious political storms, decided to put forward a very strange presidential candidate. His surprising pick was Dr. Magdalena Ogórek, a 36-year-old historian who had hardly any political experience and was not even a party member. Her political views were an enigma as she kept saying that she would



Old (Leftist?) Boys Network  
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reveal her agenda in due time. It is little wonder that she got only 2.38 per cent of the votes, which was the worst result ever for the party. After the elections, she cut off all ties with the Left and embarked on a new career as a right-wing journalist in TV and press.

Following the disaster of the presidential elections, the *Democratic Left Alliance* decided to assemble as many small left-wing parties and organizations as possible to augment the chances of the left in the parliamentary elections. It was never going to be an easy task. Emerging from the Communist period, the *Democratic Left Alliance* had been a hegemon on the left nearly throughout the democratic transition. However, in 2015 the situation changed. New, emerging movements, such as the urban activists, which focus on the local issues, more often than not preferred keeping their distance from the “discredited” party. This was especially true about *Together*, a new party founded in May 2015. Initiated by well-educated young people who were disappointed with the economic policies of Poland’s liberal government, the party was supposed to be a response to the inactivity of the official Left and to promote a radical programme of changes not only in culture (which by that time had come to be a traditional field of left-wing action), but also in labour relationships. *Together* refused any cooperation with

the SLD, but for some small groups such collaboration seemed to offer attractive prospects as the party’s well-established structures, wide network of contacts and considerable funds, all promised at least some seats in parliament. Nevertheless, these groupings did not want to be identified too closely with the SLD, so they formed a coalition. According to the Polish law, while the electoral threshold for individual parties is 5 per cent, it is as much as 8 per cent for coalitions. Eventually, the *Unified Left* coalition fell short of the threshold, achieving only 7.55 per cent. This result gave the right-wing party *Law and Justice* (PiS) an independent majority in the Polish Parliament.

Of course, this catastrophic defeat was not only caused by the tactical mistakes and ambitions of various leaders of the left-wing parties and movements. The main reason behind it was the ideological weakness of the Polish Left. The Left, at least its dominant party, has never been able to present a consistent social programme of mitigating the social consequences of the transformation which could tell it apart from the variety of the liberal movements. On the other hand, in order to fulfill the demands of its electorate it had to pay lip service to the progressive agenda claiming their involvement into working for the diminishing the social and cultural inequalities. This situation

made the Left always, even in the heydays of its power, ideologically fragile. This failing has haunted the Left since the beginnings of the transformation and eventually caused its collapse.

As such, the SLD could hardly come across as distinct from the ruling liberal *Civic Platform* (PO). Additionally, the right-wing PiS proposed a very comprehensive welfare programme of reducing poverty in Poland. The SLD was also on the defensive in cultural matters, and, again, its programme, which was admittedly more radical than that of the PO on questions such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and the separation between (the Catholic) church and state, was not radical enough to attract voters from beyond the party's traditional electorate. By the same token, the SLD was very cautious on the issue of migrants, the hottest issue of the 2015 campaign. The PiS rejected any idea of taking migrants and criticized the PO for complying with *European Commission* directives. The SLD tried to find a "moderate" way, which failed to satisfy anybody.

The turning point in the election campaign came with the last public debate of all the parties, which was a success for *Together's* Adrian Zandberg. He presented a well-balanced economic programme modeled on the Scandinavian welfare-state experience, took a radical stance on cultural issues for Polish standards, especially insisting on a

strict separation of church and state, and voiced a very positive attitude to accepting migrants. Although eventually *Together* did not win any seats in Parliament, it got 3 per cent of the vote, which was a great achievement for a new party and also the required minimum for obtaining public funding. But it was exactly this margin of the vote that caused the defeat of the Unified Left led by the SLD.

### **1989-2003: The fall and the glory (at a price, though)**

The Round Table talks in 1989 and the partly free elections in June 1989 marked the end of the Communist regime in Poland. The *Communist Party* was officially dissolved in 1990, but it found its continuation in a new organization, called the *Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland* (SDRP). The leaders of the new party hailed from the youngest generation of the old-regime apparatchiks who tried to save not so much the ideology of communism, in which they did not believe anyway, as the political influence and financial resources of the organisation.

In the same period, a plethora of various left-wing organisations emerged as well. Some of them seemed quite promising as they were heralded as a continuation of pre-war, non-bolshevist socialism (e.g. the *Polish Socialist Party*), but they proved rather ephemeral and either disappeared or accepted

the hegemonic position of the SDRP, creating a federation. The ideology of the SDRP was rather ambiguous. Of course, the leaders endorsed the inevitable socio-economic changes, but promised to “soften” the burden of the transition and reverse the most onerous consequences of what came to be called the shock therapy, that is, a rapid privatisation of the Polish economy, which saw unemployment soar and standards of living plummet for most people almost overnight.

In fact, the SDRP did not have to work hard on its programme; it was enough that it was simply there. Sociological research suggests that the main political rift in Poland in the 1990s materialised in a “post-communist divide” (Grabowska 2004), i.e., a gulf between people who (somehow at least) identified with the communist regime and people who rejected the old system altogether. As this divide had shaped the Polish political scene for over a decade, the voters almost automatically supported either option. Therefore, the agenda of the SDPR and later the SLD (which was founded in 1999 as the federation transformed into a unified party) was a strange blend of a nostalgic defence of the communist past, neoliberal economic policies, and a staunch pro-American stance combined with an equally determined pro-EU attitude, which was not contradictory back then. The SDRP leadership kept their distance

from the Catholic Church, but accepted the concordat with all its consequences, including special economic privileges for the Church (e.g. preferential taxation), religious instruction in schools, and so on. They also spoke with great caution on matters such as abortion (in 1993, Parliament adopted a restrictive anti-abortion law which allowed only three exceptions) and same-sex marriages.

Capitalising on growing disappointment with the economic results of the transition, the SDRP/SLD was able to win the parliamentary elections twice: in 1993 and in 2001, and was a senior partner in the coalition which it formed with a peasant party by the name of the *Polish People’s Party* (PSL). Probably, the greatest political achievement of the post-communist Left was the victory in the presidential elections of its leader Aleksander Kwaśniewski over Lech Wałęsa, one of the historical founders of *Solidarity*. The triumph of the former *Communist Party* apparatchik, the youngest minister in Poland’s last Communist cabinet, was highly symbolic. To some extent, it exonerated the Communist period and it seemed to indicate that reconciliation was possible.

Kwaśniewski’s success and the post-communist party’s political expansion came as a shock for the former dissidents. Some of them emphasised in the press that although the SDRP gained a majority, it had no moral

legitimation. However, the leaders of the post-communist Left promptly tried to show that their position on a number of political matters was very close to that of the former dissidents, those at least who had turned into liberals in the 1990s. During its two terms in power, the Left implemented rather neoliberal economic policies, to the point of considering even flat taxation. The Left ushered Poland into the *European Union*, became vigorously engaged in NATO, supported the intervention in Iraq, and sent Polish troops there. It is very likely that the Left-led government collaborated with the US on setting up secret CIA prisons on Polish soil. In the ideological sphere, the liberals and the post-communist Left also had a lot in common. Both orientations tried to tame the nationalist tendencies in Poland, and both envisaged the future of Poland as closely associated with the West not only through economic and military alliances, but also through the adoption of Western values. Both were also aware that because of the specifically Polish 'right slope', i.e., permanent ideological leaning to the right, this 'Westernisation' should be introduced very carefully and without irritating the Catholic Church. But despite this affinity of attitudes and the warm personal relationships that some former dissidents developed with the post-communist party leaders, the first formal coalition of the two groupings was established only in 2006, so strong were

the historical divisions and animosities.

Nevertheless, as the agendas and ideologies of former dissidents and post-communists came across as largely overlapping, the two groups gradually came to be identified with each other. This identification had grave consequences, for people started to look around for a non-neoliberal social alternative. Since the Left was unwilling to offer such an alternative, voters slowly started to embrace the right-wing nationalist political orientation. They could not find such an alternative on the left because the post-communist party had nearly monopolised this sector of the political stage. Of course, there were a handful of small and dispersed groups which sought to show that another Left was possible, but they were irrelevant, at least in terms of popular support.

This bipolar division of the Polish political scene produced the situation which David Ost describes in his *The Defeat of Solidarity* (2005). Workers, who were dissatisfied with the effects of the transition and felt abandoned by the leadership of trade unions and parties, started to back nationalistic, rightwing organisations. In this way, the historical Solidarity was taken over by the nationalists, and similar political bodies gradually obtained more and more significant support. According to Ost, this shift was triggered as popular anger was channeled in the

ideological form of nationalism while foreign elements, such as international capitalists, former Communists, and the like, were blamed for the desperate situation in which many losers of the transition had found themselves.

The first warning sign was the election of 1997, when a newly hatched coalition of conservative and religious parties, called *Solidarity Electoral Action*, allied with the liberal *Freedom Union* to form the government, pushing the SLD into opposition. The government launched a batch of radical reforms, which caused a wave of dissatisfaction and eventually hoisted the SLD back into power in 2001. But this episode showed that there was a powerful upsurge of right-wing political sentiments to be reckoned with.

### **2003-2015: The second fall**

The general elections of 2001 were a great success for the SLD, which got 41 per cent of the vote. However, as the election procedure prevented the SLD from forming a cabinet on its own, the party again entered into a coalition with the peasant party PSL. Yet, in the meantime, the political landscape and its ideological background had undergone deep changes. Most importantly, parties had emerged from the debris of the *Solidarity Electoral Action*, among them the *Civic Platform* (PO) and the *Law and Justice* (PiS). Initially, they seemed

to supplement each other, with the PO more centre-right liberal and the PiS rather farther to the right with some nationalistic leanings. Both parties shared a slogan of creating the *Fourth Republic*, a shorthand for radically transforming the political system in place, which they accused of being thoroughly corrupted.

The elections of 2001 also saw an unexpected rise of a populist party. The *Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland*, usually called simply the *Self-Defence* (Samoobrona), was a populist mixture of socialist, nationalist, and religious elements. The party got 10 per cent of the vote and became the third largest political force in Poland. Though technically an opposition party, the *Self-Defence* very often supported the SLD in parliament.

Gradually more and more besieged from both sides of the political stage, the SLD tried to continue its already tested political course of moderate liberalism and moving Poland closer to the EU, which culminated in signing the accession treaty on 1st May 2004. However, the climate had changed, and it was hardly possible to stop the surging demands for fundamental political reforms and a greater transparency of public life. These demands dovetailed with a revisionist vision of the transition, which was increasingly perceived as a plot of the dissidents and the communists rather than a real people's revolt against the communist regime. Therefore, the

slogan of building the *Fourth Republic* was juxtaposed with ever more insistent calls for completing the transition by removing the people linked to the old regime from power and reinforcing the anti-liberal and anti-leftist character of the transformation. The *Fourth Republic* thus was to be a return to the original programme of *Solidarity* which was distorted at the *Round Table Talks*.

Such was the atmosphere when what came to be called the *Rywin affair* burst out in 2002. Lew Rywin, a well-known film producer with strong connections in political circles, approached Adam Michnik, a famous former dissident and then editor-in-chief of Poland's largest daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, to offer a deal. He said that he acted on behalf of a "group in power" which was ready, in exchange for an enormous bribe, to manipulate the legislation so as to enable the *Gazeta Wyborcza* to acquire the TV station *Polsat* (Zarycki 2009). In consequence, a special parliamentary commission was established to investigate the case. The commission (and a parallel court investigation) never determined conclusively whether Rywin was alone in his offer or whether he really represented a powerful group connected to the government, but the public examination revealed that there actually was a network of cronies which held power in Poland.

The compromised SLD suffered a landslide defeat in the 2005

election, winning merely 11 per cent of the vote – less than the *Self-Defence* (12 per cent) and much less than the two the right-wing parties: the PiS (27 per cent) and the PO (24 per cent). Two other left-wing parties made an unsuccessful run in the same election. They were the *Social Democracy of Poland* and the *Democratic Party*, both evolving from the SLD after the Rywin affair, with the latter being a coalition of former SLD members and old anticommunist dissidents, which was a much belated fulfilment of a "historical compromise" between the postcommunist left and the former dissidents united by their common aversion towards right-wing nationalism.

The following years were not a good time for the Left either politically or in terms of the ideological struggle. After the elections in 2005, Lech Kaczyński became the President of Poland and his twin brother Jarosław Kaczyński took the helm of a coalition government of the PiS, the *Self-Defence* and the extreme right-wing *League of Polish Families*. However, the snap election in 2007 changed the political situation again as the PO won decisively and formed the government with the PSL. The *Self-Defence* and the *League of Polish Families* remained outside Parliament. The Left took part in the election as a coalition of the SLD, the *Social Democracy of Poland* and the *Democratic Party*, under the label of the Left and Democrats

(LiD). This marked another attempt at creating a political body which would unify the former dissidents and the post-communists. The coalition's programme combined social demands to improve people's living standards and working conditions with vaguely defined liberal demands of plurality and openness in the public sphere. Again, the haphazard and slapdash agenda blew up in the Left's face. The liberal attitude was a signature feature of the PO while even bolder social reforms were proposed by the PiS. Therefore, it did not come as a surprise that the coalition got only 13 per cent of the vote and was soon dissolved.

With that election, the eight years of PO dominance on the Polish political scene commenced. The party had governed under the leadership of Donald Tusk, focusing on 'hot water in the tap', as a popular catchphrase had it, which meant that efficient administration rather than ideological discussion was the top priority. Although for eight years this strategy was quite effective, it probably helped the PiS gradually to win the ideological hegemony under the slogans of national pride and the recovery of social solidarity (Koczanowicz 2016).

The Left was rather passive in this tussle between modernisers and conservatives. The SLD was mainly preoccupied with its intra-party problems, especially with conflicts within the leadership, and enjoyed the

support of the shrinking electorate loyal to it only because of its attitude to the communist past. The party did very little to adapt its agenda to the changing circumstances and simply looked back to the past glory, hoping for its return.

The election of 2011 had a new political contestant in the *Palikot Movement* (Ruch Palikota), an organisation founded by an eccentric philosopher turned millionaire who was an MP of the *Civic Platform* (PO) at the time. The programme of the *Movement* was rather vague. While it took a firm position on certain issues, for example embracing a staunch anti-Catholic Church attitude and supporting the LGBT minorities, its economic agenda was a blend of liberalism (even libertarianism) and social democracy. Among the 40 MPs the *Palikot Movement* introduced to Parliament were Anna Grodzka, probably the first transgender MP in Europe, and Robert Biedroń, Poland's first openly gay man to be elected to Parliament, which significantly influenced the perception of LGBT people in Poland. The *Palikot Movement* (re-named as *Your Movement* in 2013) was a colorful organisation, and its founder tended to promote his ideas in non-standard ways, e.g. in quasi-artistic performances. However, as it never had a clear positive programme, it soon started to be plagued by internal tensions and splits, which gradually debilitated the organisation. Eventually, the remnants of



the Your Movement joined the Unified Left coalition and disappeared from the political stage after its electoral defeat.

### 2018: After the fall. Three possible scenarios of recovery

After the downfall of 2015, it became clear that in order to survive the Left had to rethink its strategy. The

However, this progress towards recovery was somehow derailed by the general political situation in Poland. Having seized power, the PiS launched a series of radical changes in political institutions, clearly devised to establish an authoritarian (or at least illiberal) right-wing regime. Moreover, the PiS also methodically started to



A demonstration by the party Together (Razem) with the visible party slogan “Another Politics is Possible” (Inna polityka jest możliwa) in front of the Chancellery of the Prime Minister

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years when the SLD enjoyed hegemony without giving a serious thought to its programme were evidently a thing of the past. The *Together Party* started to develop an agenda combining economic demands with progressive cultural ideas. The Left also acquired a new asset, namely, urban activism movements which were evolving from strictly local initiatives into a significant, albeit dispersed, political force on the left.

consolidate the right-wing values through changing school curricula, influencing artists to produce ‘patriotic’ works of art, and similar strategies. The idea of renewing the national community, which had supposedly degenerated under Communism and the post-communist alliance of the Left and the liberals, was coupled with the idea of economic solidarity. Accordingly, the PiS also implemented a package of social programmes aimed at reducing

poverty in Poland. It also reversed the widely criticised pension reform which had raised retirement age from 60 for women and 65 for men to 67 for both sexes. The common popularity of these policies has confronted the Left and the whole of the opposition with the dilemma of how to fight the PiS without destroying the reforms it introduced.

In rough lines, there are three possible solutions to this puzzle, and each of them has some supporters on the left. The first solution is informed by the notion that democracy itself is at stake, and all political forces have to work together to stop the PiS. From this perspective, the profound differences between the Left and the liberals, concerning the economy and some cultural issues (e.g., abortion and same-sex marriages), are secondary in the face of the threat the PiS poses to the democratic system. Another variant of this solution is to form a bloc of all left-wing organisations, regardless of differences between them, and to cooperate with an analogous liberal bloc in creating a new government. This solution seems now to be most popular on the left side of the political spectrum. It is accepted by both the SLD and the majority of Together, which until recently repudiated any dealings with the SLD. Either variant assumes a rather cautious economic agenda and a more decisive standpoint on cultural issues.

Another solution is to develop an original programme of profound economic and cultural reforms and to take the risk of being relatively easily defeated by the PiS, but at the same time to have prospects of entering a possible coalition government as an equal partner. This perspective is endorsed by a faction of *Together*, especially those who feel drawn to Varoufakis' *Diem 25*, and by a new movement founded by Robert Biedroń. After losing his seat in Parliament, Biedroń was elected mayor of the mid-sized town Słupsk. During his tenure Słupsk became the model for many social and cultural enterprises, Biedroń himself garnering considerable popularity across Poland. In 2018, he decided to found a political movement with a view to participating in the European and parliamentary elections in 2019. The movement's programme is still work in progress, but rumour has it that it features some classic welfare-state ideas, bold proposals concerning the state-church relationship, and liberalisation of the law on abortion and same-sex marriages.

The third solution was not conceived by any of the political forces on the Left, but it was outlined in a paper by the left-wing journalist Rafał Woś. Woś proposed that the Left should join the PiS, endorsing its pro-social reforms, and then work from inside to 'civilise' the party on issues of democracy. The paper caused indignation on the Left, and

the journalist was fired from the liberal weekly *Polityka*, but his idea can prove tempting to some left-wing groupings.

It is too early now either to determine which of these solutions (if any) the Left will adopt or to estimate its chances in the elections of 2019. For now, the Left seems to be rather dispersed politically and ideologically while its ventures are confused and inefficacious. This may reflect a general crisis of the Left in the world, but this is another story.

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