

## What are the prospects for the Polish left?



*Poland's communist successor party has seen its opinion poll ratings increase in recent months. This upturn in support came after the revival of debates about the country's communist past prompted by government legislation affecting the interests of its core electorate. But as [Aleks Szczerbiak](#) writes, the party's leadership has failed to develop any new ideas or initiatives that can attract broader support beyond this declining group of former communist regime beneficiaries and functionaries. Without a political game-changer, the left will remain a marginal actor in Polish politics.*



Image from a Democratic Left Alliance campaign event ahead of the 2014 European Parliament elections, Credit: [Democratic Left Alliance](#)

For most of the post-1989 period, the most powerful political and electoral force on the Polish left was the communist successor Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), which governed the country from 1993-97 and 2001-5. However, the Alliance has been in the doldrums since its support collapsed in the 2005 parliamentary election following a series of spectacular high-level corruption scandals. It contested the most recent October 2015 election – won decisively by the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party, the first political grouping in post-communist Poland to secure an outright parliamentary majority – as part of the 'United Left' (ZL) electoral coalition in alliance with the 'Your Movement' (TR) grouping. The latter was an anti-clerical social liberal party led by controversial businessman Janusz Palikot, which came from nowhere to finish third with just over 10% of the votes in the 2011 election but failed to capitalise on this success and saw its support decline steadily.

However, the 'United Left' only won 7.6% of the vote, failing to cross the 8% threshold for electoral alliances to secure parliamentary representation (it is 5% for individual parties). This meant that, for the first time since 1989, there were no left-wing parties represented in the Sejm, the more powerful lower chamber of the Polish parliament. Following its election defeat, the Alliance elected ex-communist and one-time high-ranking media policy-maker Włodzimierz Czarzasty as its new leader. Mr Czarzasty is a controversial figure linked to the so-called 'Rywin affair', the first of the high-profile corruption scandals that engulfed the Alliance during the 2001-5 parliament. At this stage, many commentators wrote the party off as a cynical and corrupt political grouping whose ageing, communist-nostalgic electorate was literally dying off.

### **'Together' fails to achieve lift-off**

Instead, the future appeared to lie with the new radical left 'Together' (Razem) party, formed in May 2015, which refused to join the 'United Left'. It accused the Democratic Left Alliance of being a 'phoney' left, pursuing orthodox liberal economic and Atlanticist foreign policies when in office. In the event, 'Together' won 3.6% of the vote in the 2015 election which was not enough to obtain parliamentary representation but meant that the party secured state funding and peeled away sufficient votes from the 'United Left' to prevent the latter from crossing the 8% threshold.

The success of 'Together' and other anti-establishment groupings in the 2015 election reflected widespread disillusionment with the country's ruling elites and a strong prevailing mood that it was time for a change. The party also gained kudos among many younger, left-leaning Poles for its dynamism, 'newness' and programmatic clarity. However, 'Together' has failed to build on this promise and achieve political lift-off. It was wary about joining anti-government street protests on constitutional and 'rule of law' issues organised by the liberal-centrist opposition parties and Committee for the Defence of Democracy (KOD) civic movement. But it has proved very difficult for the party to cut through with its distinctive left-wing socio-economic message at a time when the Polish political scene is so sharply polarised around attitudes towards the Law and Justice administration. In April, the 'Pooling the Poles' blog that aggregates voting intention surveys showed support for 'Together' averaging at 1%.

The party's biggest problem is that it represents a rather niche political offering attractive mainly to well-educated urban 'hipsters'. Unfortunately for 'Together' the kind of younger, better-off socially liberal voters who in Western Europe would incline naturally towards left-wing parties, are in Poland often quite economically liberal as well and wary of some of the party's more radical economic policies, such as very high tax rates for top earners. The less well-off, economically leftist electorate, on the other hand, tends to be older, more socially conservative and often inclines towards parties such as Law and Justice that are right-wing on moral-cultural issues but also support high levels of social welfare and greater state intervention in the economy.

### **The Democratic Left Alliance's mini-revival**

At the same time, in the last few months the Democratic Left Alliance has had something of a mini-revival. In April, 'Pooling the Poles' showed the Alliance averaging 8% making it the fourth most popular political grouping after Law and Justice on 40%, the liberal-centrist Civic Platform (PO) – Poland's governing party between 2007-15, and currently the main opposition grouping – on 27%, and the anti-establishment 'Kukiz '15' on 9%. This has surprised many commentators given the Alliance's uninspiring leadership and lack of any new ideas since the 2015 election.

For sure, the Alliance still has an estimated 23,000 members and maintains extensive local organisational structures covering 320 out of Poland's 380 administrative counties. Moreover, although it failed to cross the parliamentary representation threshold, the party did secure state funding and will receive around 17 million zloties in subventions over the course of the four-year parliamentary term.

However, the Alliance's mini-comeback was driven largely by the revival of debates about the country's communist past prompted by some of the Law and Justice government's legislation and policies. Earlier this year, for example, parliament passed a so-called 'degradation law' which provided a legal means to demote army officers who had 'put Poland's national interests in jeopardy' when the country was under communist rule. Among those expected to be affected was the late General Wojciech Jaruzelski whose December 1981 martial law crackdown against the anti-communist opposition claimed more than 90 lives. (Although the law was unexpectedly vetoed at the end of March by Law and Justice-backed President Andrzej Duda on the grounds that there were no legal means for challenging these demotions.) Previously, the government had lowered the pensions and disability benefits received by thousands of communist-era security service functionaries so that their maximum would be no higher than average state pay-outs. More symbolically, Law and Justice also sponsored legislation requiring local authorities to re-name streets and other public places commemorating individuals and organisations linked to the communist regime.

The Democratic Left Alliance has always had deep social roots in those sections of the electorate that, due to their personal biographies, have positive sentiments towards, or direct material interests linking them to, the previous regime; especially those whose families were connected to the military and former security services. This is a relatively small, and steadily declining, segment of the electorate but one that clearly does not currently appear to see the liberal-centrist opposition parties as credible and effective enough defenders of its interests. If mobilised, this group of voters is sizeable enough to allow the Alliance to retain its hegemony on the Polish left.

### **Is Mr Biedroń the left's saviour?**

However, some commentators argue that, in the longer-term, the Democratic Left Alliance's demise is both inevitable and desirable, and that the left needs to develop a completely new political formula and set of leaders if it is to renew itself. Indeed, the last couple of years have seen the emergence of a number of new social movements and local initiatives identifying with left-wing causes. Among the most prominent have been feminist groups involved in the so-called 'black protests', opposing moves by anti-abortion civic organisations to tighten Poland's abortion law, already one of the most restrictive in Europe. A key figure in this movement was Barbara Nowacka, who spearheaded the 'Save the Women' (Ratujmy Kobiety) civic committee which promoted (unsuccessful) draft legislation aimed at liberalising the abortion law. Ms Nowacka is leader of the small Polish Initiative (IP) party, formed after the 2015 election by former leaders of 'Your Movement' (of which she was the co-chair) and the Democratic Left Alliance following the break-up of the 'United Left'. However, Ms Nowacka was unconvincing as the United Left's public face during the last election campaign (she was overshadowed by Together's charismatic leader Adrian Zandberg in a televised leaders debate), and the pro-abortion protests have not translated into electoral support for her party. Indeed, the Polish Initiative barely registers in opinion polls and, beyond the abortion issue, Ms Nowacka's political activism has been rather sporadic.

Another political hopeful often touted as the left's saviour is Robert Biedroń, a media-friendly one-time 'Your Movement' parliamentary deputy who in 2014 was elected mayor of Słupsk, a provincial city in the northern Pomeranian region. Mr Biedroń has tried to use this as a platform to develop a national media profile and project himself as both a charismatic left-wing leader and effective common-sense manager and political moderate. His supporters argue that Mr Biedroń is currently the only politician with the potential to transform the left's electoral fortunes; some commentators have dubbed him the 'Polish Macron'. Indeed, an April survey conducted by the Pollster Institute for the 'Super Express' newspaper found 19% of respondents saying that they would vote for Mr Biedroń in a presidential election (the next one is scheduled in summer 2020) compared with 36% supporting Mr Duda and 26% backing European Council President and former Civic Platform prime minister Donald Tusk.

However, his critics argue that Mr Biedroń is a 'political celebrity' who has built his reputation primarily as a popular local government leader and campaigner focusing on moral-cultural issues – he was the founder of the Polish Campaign Against Homophobia (KPH) in the early 2000s – but has not yet been seriously tested on the national political stage. It remains to be seen whether his Mr Biedroń's personal popularity can translate into a more high-profile role and if he is really prepared to undertake the difficult and painstaking task of building a new political movement from the bottom-up.

### **The left matters, but is weak and divided**

The future of the left matters for Polish politics. It is well represented among the country's intellectual and cultural elites, and enjoys considerable sympathy in Western academic and opinion-forming media circles. This gives it an influence in public debate well beyond its very limited electoral appeal. Moreover, in the last parliamentary election Law and Justice only won an overall majority because the various fragmented left-wing parties and groupings failed to secure representation in spite of obtaining over 10% of the votes. Whether or not the left presents a united front and can mobilise and channel its supporters effectively, could, therefore, be decisive in determining the outcome of the next parliamentary poll, scheduled for autumn 2019.

However, although the Democratic Left Alliance has made a minor comeback on the back of a revival of debates around the communist past, it is difficult to see a long-term future for the party. Its pragmatic and intelligent but, critics argue, cynical and unambitious leadership has failed to develop any significant political initiatives that could attract support beyond its steadily declining core electorate of former communist regime beneficiaries and functionaries. At the same time, by fragmenting the opposition, the Alliance's mini-revival complicates the process of developing a broad, anti-Law and Justice front which some commentators argue is necessary to defeat the ruling party. Indeed, while left-wing political groupings have sometimes worked together on single issues, such as abortion, they are likely to contest this autumn's local elections, the next major test for Poland's parties, in several competing electoral alliances. The left is, therefore, likely to remain a marginal actor on the Polish political scene unless someone like Mr Biedroń really does turn out to be a political game-changer.

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*Note: This article originally appeared at Aleks Szczerbiak's [personal blog](#). The article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.*

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