

Right Wing Hegemony and the Challenge for the Polish Left

Two Narratives

There are currently two dominating and contradictory narratives in Europe about the situation in Poland. The first of these is that Poland is the success story of Central and Eastern Europe and an example of a country that has effectively managed the transition from 'Communism'. Poland remains the only European Union country not to have endured a recession since the outbreak of the global economic crisis and its economy has grown every year since 1992. Unemployment has fallen steadily in recent years, it has had one of the fastest growths in real wages and its budget is in a relatively healthy state. According to this narrative, Poland is an economy and society that is developing and modernising through following the dictums of free market economics and integration into the structures of the European and world economy. In opposition to this first narrative, is the argument that Poland is reversing the course of the transition pursued over the past two and a half decades. The country is turning away from the dictums of both liberal economics and democratic practices. It is moving in a more authoritarian and conservative direction and is increasingly pursuing hostile positions towards the European Union and allies such as Germany.

Both of these narratives reveal a partial truth about the current reality in Poland. They reflect a country dominated by two right-wing blocs, with competing, although overlapping, political ideologies and programmes. This right-wing hegemony has consolidated due to the collapse in support of the left over a decade ago and its inability to rebuild itself as a credible alternative to the right.

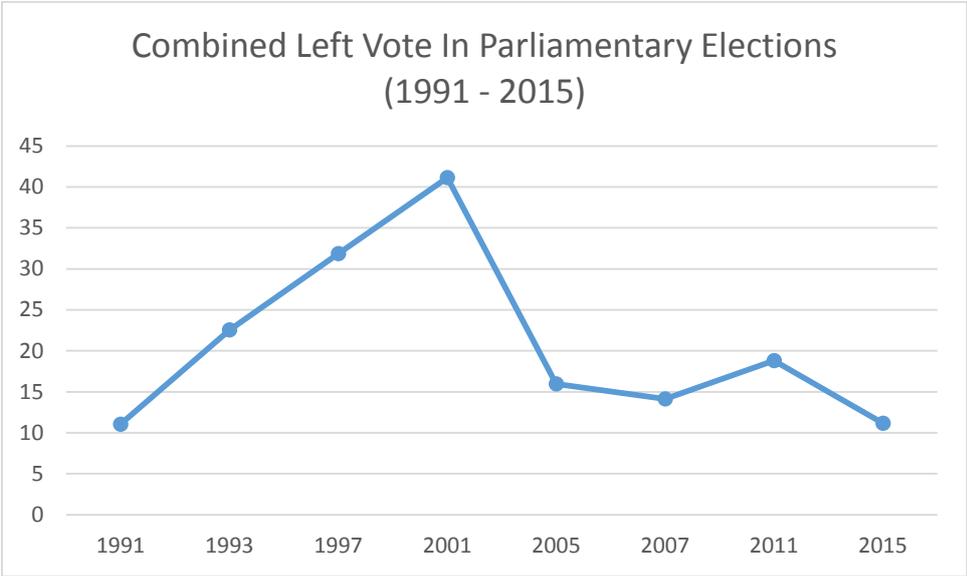
The Rise and Fall of the Left

Despite its current weakness, the left was actually the most stable force in Polish politics for most of the first decade and a half of the 'post-Communist' transition.

As we can see in the graph below, the left's vote rose steadily from 1991 to 2001.¹ The first left coalition government from 1993 (led by the Democratic Left Alliance – SLD) partially slowed the pace of the economic reforms and although it lost power in 1997 the left actually increased its vote at the following parliamentary elections as people's living standards rose. In 2001, the SLD won over 40 percent of the vote and around the same time its candidate, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, gained the Presidency. The SLD formed another coalition government with the Polish Peasants' Party (PSL), yet this time followed a Blairite Third Way social democratic programme. It introduced a series of neo-liberal economic reforms (partly under pressure to implement reforms as part of its accession into the EU); supported the implementation of a flat-income tax; did not challenge the power and dominance of the Catholic Church (e.g. failing to liberalise the draconian abortion law); and supported the US war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Combined with a series of corruption scandals, the party suffered a dramatic decline in support at the 2005 elections, from which it has yet to recover.

¹ This graph shows the combined votes of left parties in Poland.

The failures of the SLD led government opened up many new conflicts within the left. Some members and leading activists, split from these parties and attempted to create new alternative left-wing parties in Poland. However, these parties were unable to gain much support and rapidly declined in size and influence.



The near total collapse of the social democratic left replicated a similar process occurring in other Central and Eastern European countries, such as Hungary. The harsh economic effects of the transition to capitalism helped to further dissipate a working class, much of which had already become disillusioned with the left during the period of ‘real socialism’. When the left helped to introduce neo-liberal economic reforms it suffered a huge fall in support. This situation is not unique to Central and Eastern Europe and has recently been replicated in some Western European countries, where social democratic parties (e.g. in Greece, Ireland and Holland) have introduced austerity policies. This leaves a void within the political scene that is often filled by the conservative and nationalist right.

Right-Wing Dominance

Since 2005, Polish politics has essentially been dominated by two political parties from the right – the Law and Justice Party (PiS) and Citizens’ Platform (PO). Both of these parties share similar historical roots. Their founders (including Jarosław Kaczyński and Donald Tusk) were relatively marginal figures in the opposition movement during ‘real-socialism’. They later participated in the round-table talks that negotiated the end of ‘real-socialism’ and then the right-wing coalition government of the Solidarity Electoral Alliance (AWS) from 1997 to 2001. After the collapse of this coalition both PiS and PO were formed as new political parties and before the 2005 elections it was commonly believed that they would seek to form a joint coalition government. However, after PiS unexpectedly emerged as the largest party in the 2005 parliamentary elections, it instead opted for form a coalition government with a nationalist and a populist farmers’ party. For a short period PiS held near total power, with Lech Kaczyński (Jarosław Kaczyński’s twin brother) winning the presidency in 2005. However, in 2007, PO won the most parliamentary seats and formed a coalition government with the PSL. It repeated this success in 2011 (becoming the first party to win two successive parliamentary

elections in modern Poland) after its candidate, Bronisław Komorowski, had won the Presidency in 2010.²

PO won the 2010/11 elections by mobilising a section of the electorate which feared that PiS would turn Poland in an authoritarian and conservative direction. Despite the fact that PO is itself a party of the conservative right, it managed to attract the support of a large section of liberal centre voters and even parts of the left electorate who feared the return of PiS.³ During its two terms in office, PO were able to maintain consistent economic growth in Poland, even during the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis. This was primarily due to the large inflow of funds from the EU, that enabled the country to raise public investment to the highest level, as a percentage of GDP, of any member state. Also, the ability of workers to move and work in other EU countries eased the country's high unemployment rate and provided a new source of income for millions of Polish families. In these conditions there was high social support for membership of the European Union and the Polish government allied closely with Brussels and Berlin.

This liberal narrative of Polish success was dominant within the European political elite and media; and former PM Donald Tusk was dully rewarded when he became President of the European Council in 2014. However, the image of Poland as Europe's success story did not reflect the living reality of millions of Poles. Poland had become integrated into the international division of labour as a country with low wages, taxes and labour standards. The country attracted large inflows of foreign capital, often through the sale of its state industrial and financial assets. This left the country with an underdeveloped national capital base, with around 70% of Polish banks owned by foreign banks. The country underwent a huge period of deindustrialisation during the transition. At least two-thirds of the country's medium and large industrial enterprises collapsed, leading to around 2 million people losing their jobs.⁴ Since this time, at least 45% of the Polish workforce has remained inactive (i.e. they neither work nor study), with large areas of the country suffering high unemployment and poverty. Average salaries continue to be more than 4 times lower than that in countries like Britain or Germany; and more than a quarter of those in work are employed on temporary insecure contracts. Many of the country's public services (such as the health service) have been heavily underfunded leading to their steady deterioration.⁵

These social and economic contradictions helped to consolidate the political division between PO and PiS, despite their political similarities. PiS managed to present itself as a party opposing a corrupt elite that had unfairly usurped economic and political power. They claimed that this elite was often connected to the previous system and/or that it was supported by international interests that are hostile to Poland. They combined Catholic conservatism and anti-Communism with a promise to root

² This election was held after Lech Kaczyński died in the Smoleńsk air-tragedy that killed nearly 100 leading representatives of the Polish state.

³ PO is a conservative party that introduced no liberal reforms on issues such as abortion or gay marriage rights whilst in government.

⁴ Polskie Lobby Przemysłowe. 2012. Polskie Lobby Przemysłowe. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.plp.info.pl/2012/04/02/raport-polskiego-lobby-przemyslowego-straty-w-potencjale-polskiego-przemyslu-i-jego-ulomna-transformacja-po-1989-roku-wizja-nowoczesnej-reindustrializacji-polski/>. [Accessed 11 October 2017].

⁵ Rae, G. (2016) 'Public Capital and the Post-Communist Welfare State; The Case of Poland', *Polish Sociological Review*, 2(194), pp155-169

out a corrupt elite and return power to ordinary people. They claimed that they would support national businesses and provide support to Polish families and the poor. PiS was able to fill the space vacated by the left and build support for conservative-nationalist politics in Poland.

The Hegemony of the Conservative Right

In 2015, PiS won both the parliamentary and presidential elections. For the first time since 1989 a political party in Poland won an overall majority in parliament, with PiS gaining over 37% of the vote. Support for PO fell below 5%, whilst a new right-wing political force – Kukiz15 – won nearly 9% of the vote.⁶ The previous belief that young people are more liberal in comparison to the elder generation was dispelled. Over 2/3 of those aged between 18 and 29 voted for the parties of the conservative right. Over 16% of them voted for the party of Korwin Mikke (which narrowly failed to enter parliament) which combines extreme neo-liberalism and social conservatism. A generation has been brought up believing in the principles of individualism and the free-market, but where the economic conditions do not now exist for real self-advancement. This liberalism has transmuted into a form of social Darwinism where any ideals of solidarity are absent. This was evident during the refugee crisis, with younger people being more hostile towards Poland helping refugees.⁷

Therefore, the whole political scene in Poland shifted rightwards from 2015 and a new political hegemony forged. PiS has targeted gaining control of different elements of the state – including the courts, media and education. They have undermined some of the independent democratic institutions of the state, promoting a conservative and nationalist ideology, with the active support of large sections of the Catholic Church. This has been combined with a new version of history, that leads beyond ‘anti-Communism’ towards the degradation of the whole history of the Polish left (e.g. against those who fought against Franco in Spain). Right-wing extremism is presented as civilized patriotism and organisations and activities of the far-right are tolerated and in some cases even promoted. This has been accompanied by a process of militarisation, with the government creating a new National Guard ostensibly to defend the country’s borders. Worryingly, the extreme right is encouraging its supporters to join the Guard. The government is pursuing a policy of increasing military spending to 2.5% of GDP. The government has clashed diplomatically with many neighbouring countries. Many in the government continue to claim or insinuate that Russia was to blame for the Smoleńsk air crash. Also, it has raised the issue of Germany paying war reparations and has come into conflict with the EU over issues such as accepting refugees and the reform of its courts. The Polish and Hungarian governments are now attempting to build a Central Eastern European conservative bloc that is seeking to move the EU in a more conservative and nationalist direction (whilst paradoxically continuing to be dependent upon the inflow of EU funds and benefiting from the free movement of labour).

This new conservative political hegemony has a material base. The Polish economy has benefited in recent years from two significant (and in modern Polish history unprecedented) injections of public money. As well as continuing to benefit from the largest inflow of EU funds to any member state, the

⁶ Kukiz15 combines anti-systemic rhetoric with nationalist and conservative-Catholic values, and a few of its MPs are directly connected to the far-right.

⁷ CBOS. 2017. Stosunek Polaków do przyjmowania uchodźców. [ONLINE] Available at: http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2017/K_001_17.PDF. [Accessed 18 October 2017].

new government has introduced a new social benefit for families with more than one child. This is the first significant downward redistribution of income for more than a quarter of a century, and alongside rising wages and falling unemployment has helped to raise consumption and drive economic growth. Furthermore, the government has also introduced reforms such as lowering the retirement age; increasing the threshold before which people have to pay tax; and introducing a minimum hourly wage. Although its promises to curb international capital and support local businesses remain largely rhetoric, they have served to promote the idea that PiS is breaking from the economic policies that have served the wealthy and international business. The left has found itself in the dilemma of having to oppose the authoritarian and conservative policies of PiS, whilst trying to avoid being associated with the liberal opposition that is against the interventionist economic policies of the government.

A Divided Left

The 2015 elections were also historic, as they were the first time in Poland's history that the left had failed to enter parliament; meaning that Poland is presently the only country inside the EU where there are no MPs that associate with the left. Currently, the left remains divided between two main parties, both of which have broadly social democratic programmes.

The first of these is the SLD, which is a 'post-Communist' successor party, meaning that it was formed out of the previous ruling party during 'real-socialism'. This party has not recovered from its defeat in 2005 and the disastrous policies that led to its electoral collapse. At the last parliamentary elections it led a broader coalition (United Left) of left forces, but failed to cross the 7% needed for coalitions to enter parliament. The party stands at around 5% in the polls and has largely abandoned its attempt to build a wider left coalition. It is attempting to shore up its core electoral base, through campaigning on such things as the government's proposal to take away pensions from those that had served in the security services during the period of 'real-socialism'.

The second main left-wing party is Razem (Together), which was created before the 2015 elections. The party was founded on the basis of an initiative signed by different left wing groups and individuals, postulating that the 'pro-social' left should form a common slate. The idea was to replicate Syriza in Greece, by bringing together different left-wing forces and groups into one party. This initiative never came to fruition, and instead a new independent left-wing party was created, led mainly by people that had previously been connected to the Young Socialists and Greens. The party claims to be anti-austerity and looks for inspiration from parties such as PODEMOS in Spain. It consciously distances itself from the 'old left', particularly the SLD, which it sees as the main obstacle to forming a strong left-wing party in Poland. The party did not join the SLD led coalition at the 2015 elections, but instead ran as an independent party. They successfully managed to register candidates in the whole country and rose to prominence during a televised debate during the election campaign. They were successful in winning over 3% of the vote in these elections, meaning that they now have access to state funding. Critics of the party argue that they helped to split the left vote, resulting in the left having no parliamentary representation. Supporters of Razem claim that they have for the first time in nearly 20 years created a viable left-wing alternative to the SLD. Despite its overtures to the more radical left-wing parties such as PODEMOS and its participation in the Diem25 movement, the party essentially promotes a classical social democratic economic programme of redistribution through progressive taxation. It has been active in many campaigns on social issues, such as the black protests against the abortion law. It has however adopted an anti-Communist

stance and has even threatened to take people to court who have defined themselves as 'Communist'.⁸ Razem has also taken a broadly pro-NATO stance on international issues, arguing for example that the crisis in Ukraine was caused solely by the aggressive actions of Russia. Some of its leaders have also supported the idea of forming a European Union army.

A range of different left-wing organisations, parties and trade unions exist in Poland. These have participated and often helped to lead the significant protests against the present government (over issues such as further restricting abortion; reforming of the courts and the education reform) and for a long-time have been involved in issues such as opposing reprivatisation and the eviction of tenants from their homes.⁹ However, as the left has not created any coherent programmatic nor organisational formation that can unite its different strands and challenge the conservative and liberal right-wing dichotomy that has dominated Polish politics for over a decade. One of the effects of the policies pursued by the present government has been that it has weakened (although not broken) the unquestioned dominance of neo-liberal economics. Meanwhile there is large opposition within sections of society to the authoritarian and most conservative policies of the present government. The challenge facing the left is to Uniting these social and political forces and articulate a viable left-wing alternative to society.

⁸ This is in response to some right-wing politicians describing Razem as being 'Communist'. The far-right National Radical Camp (ONR) has even recently called for Razem to be banned. This came after a member of Razem declared publically that he is a 'non authoritarian' Communist and that there are others like him in the party. He was threatened with disciplinary action by the party before resigning. In the Polish constitution there is a clause that political parties and other organisations are prohibited 'whose programmes are based upon totalitarian methods and the modes of activity of nazism, fascism and communism'.

⁹ One small although prominent party campaigning on such issues is the Social Justice Movement (RSS) led by former MP Piotr Ikonowicz.