

Europe Failed to Listen When It Mattered

Article by Małgorzata Tracz

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Since entering parliament in 2019, Polish Greens have been mainstreaming green issues in a challenging context. How does the party evaluate its impact in a time of crisis? We asked Green MP Małgorzata Tracz about the party's influence on Polish politics and the country's response to the war in Ukraine.

Green European Journal: You have been a Green member of the Sejm, Poland's lower house of parliament, since 2019 and you are a former co-leader of Poland's Green Party. How are the Greens doing politically in Poland?

Małgorzata Tracz: The Greens succeeded in getting three MPs elected to the Polish parliament for the first time in 2019. This was a major breakthrough for us – and a major change too. We decided to run for election as part of a coalition made up of non-left parties. For many years we had tried to form a coalition of the left, but without success. So we decided to change our approach. And now, for the first time in our history, the Polish Greens have parliamentary representation.

Partia Zieloni was founded in 2003 as a strongly pro-European party just before Poland's first European elections. Our country's extremely restrictive electoral laws require even established parties to collect large numbers of signatures in order to join the electoral race. In spite of this obstacle, the Greens managed to make it onto the ballot paper for the 2004 European elections, gaining over 16,000 votes. However, the five-per cent electoral threshold meant that we didn't stand a chance of making it into the European Parliament.

Since our foundation in 2003, we have been pioneers on environmental issues, human rights, and social justice. For instance, we were the first political party to clearly state that it is a woman's right to have an abortion, and we support the liberalisation of abortion law. But for a long time, our voice went unheard, undoubtedly because the political landscape is dominated by major players and the bigger political parties.

However, Polish society is currently undergoing massive change. Abortion, LGBT rights, the rule of law, and environmental protection are becoming publicly debated issues. This is something totally new in Poland. Two years ago for instance, there was a huge government crisis in Poland over a bill banning fur farming and stopping halal and kosher meat exports. We're seeing the issues on which we have a coherent stance and have won voters' trust increasingly visible and more important in public debate; this has even started to worry other parties.

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How open is the Polish political scene to environmental issues?

The problem is that the environment is not treated as a priority in Poland. Governments, including the present incumbent, set their sights on more roads, more airports, more industry, more growth. They have essentially neglected – and are still neglecting – basic environmental stewardship such as the protection of forests, water bodies, or valuable ecosystems such as wetlands. Yet this is crucial. Because of climate change, of course, but also because biodiversity is in crisis. Political parties often talk about the environment, but they don't really understand it. They just know that it's an issue, a fashionable issue – above all for young people or those who have lived abroad. But environmental protection still isn't a manifesto priority. So I think we still need to devote a lot more time and resources to convincing people in general, and politicians from other parties, that in protecting nature we are protecting ourselves – we are protecting humanity.

One of the most important principles of political ecology is pacifism. What is your position on the current international situation?

As Greens, we are obviously pacifists. We oppose war and emphasise the importance of diplomacy and the protection of human rights as a foreign policy priority. However, Russia's aggression towards Ukraine is changing attitudes, including among Polish Greens. To be honest, at first I was a little fearful of the reaction to our position, as Polish Greens, in favour of sending arms to Ukraine. We have roots in the non-violence movement that dates back to the peaceful demonstrations of the communist period. But a shared understanding has developed on the need to do everything we can to support the people of Ukraine: by agreeing to take in refugees, by helping them, and also by supporting their country militarily. I think we have this attitude because as Poles – and I expect that my colleagues from other Eastern Europe countries feel the same – history weighs on our minds. We still remember, or have heard our parents' accounts of, the time when our countries weren't independent, when there was nothing in the shops, when you had to queue for bread, and when life was really hard compared to Western Europe.

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Leaders across the political spectrum in Eastern Europe have always insisted that Putin cannot be trusted. His long-term plan is to restore the pre-1989 era. And step by step, he's carrying it out. The illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 was an excellent example of this. The international response to the initial Russian invasion was not firm enough. Nobody wanted to stand by Ukraine. As a result, Putin had carte blanche to annex Crimea. It was all

over the headlines for a few days, then it faded out of the conversation and everyone went back to business as usual with Putin. From our point of view, this was a mistake. We saw clear parallels with what had already happened in Georgia with the Russian invasion and subsequent occupation of part of the country. All the signs were there that Putin had his own playbook, and he was also going to use it elsewhere. The clock was then ticking: the EU had ten years and counting to move away from Russian energy supplies and towards renewables. However, it did nothing. Many Eastern European leaders said that Putin was a dangerous man whose goal was to shatter Europe's hard-won peace, but Western Europe didn't want to listen.

What is your take on the Polish government's position on welcoming Ukrainian refugees?

Personally, and as a member of the opposition, I strongly oppose the current PiS government. However, I must acknowledge the speed with which it brought forward legislation providing support for Ukrainian refugees. The bill was amended on several occasions because of the fluidity of the situation. We thought that the flow of refugees would only last weeks, or maybe a few months at most.

Poland was, I think, one of the first countries – if not the first – to introduce equal rights for Ukrainian refugees in terms of healthcare, access to education, and access to the labour market. These rights were guaranteed for a period of 18 months. This was a great help. But there hasn't just been action on the part of the government: civil society organisations and ordinary people have also been very involved, especially in helping the first refugees. At the very start of the invasion on 24 February, the police tried to do what they could but didn't have the resources. So charitable organisations and individual citizens went to the border to help the refugees, and put them up in their own homes. Only then did the government take action.

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The fact that Ukrainian refugees have the right to work and claim additional benefits such as an allowance to cover food costs has made it much easier for local authorities to manage the situation. All of this was put in place in spite of problems at the border due to many refugees arriving without papers or passports. They were allowed to cross the border, and their social security applications were then fast tracked so they could access benefits and find work as quickly as possible.

At present there are almost 5 million Ukrainian refugees in Poland. Our country is an obvious destination because many Ukrainian families had already settled here prior to the conflict. Family reunification has led to certain areas having more refugees than others. For example, I come from Wrocław, Poland's second biggest city, which is located in the west of the country. Prior to the war, around a quarter of our residents were Ukrainian. As a result of the conflict, the number has probably increased. But this doesn't seem to be causing any problems. Wrocław is a large, diverse, culturally rich city that is relatively open and

Western, I think. However, it is important for us to be mindful of the present situation. While we still want to help and support those who have been forced to leave Ukraine as much as we can, the rate of inflation is currently at 16 per cent, and we know that the coming winter will be difficult because of the energy crisis. I hope the solidarity shown by Poland towards Ukrainian refugees since 24 February will endure in the tough times ahead.

Poland also faced waves of refugees fleeing wars in Syria and Afghanistan. Where do you stand on this issue?

When the crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border began, we as Greens emphasised the importance of equal treatment for all. We must accept refugees. We must help them. The Syrians and the Afghans were tricked by Lukashenko. Our duty as a state is to help them, to give them international protection, to provide them with housing and social assistance. But the attitude of our government was totally different in this case. I'm glad you asked about this, because lots of people in Europe and around the world see Poland as a country that has extended a particularly warm welcome to refugees from Ukraine. However, we can't forget the people who died or who are still dying on the Polish-Belarusian border. There are organisations that provide help to these refugees, but they are operating under difficult conditions. Polish citizens and NGOs are not allowed to help refugees coming from Belarus, but there are still brave people who do so. Those refugees who are able to cross the border are taken to detention facilities – asylum centres that sometimes look more like prisons, with no access to the outside world. Many then have to spend weeks just waiting around: for an interpreter to arrive so they can fight for their rights, and for a decision from the Office for Foreigners on whether they can stay in Poland. As Greens, we have been involved in the relief effort. [Green MP Tomasz Aniśko](#) worked to help refugees in these detention camps, and we have been supporting applications for international protection. After several visits to detention centres, we also wrote to the authorities to demand that living conditions be improved.

In a year's time, critical elections will be held in Poland. What are your priorities for these?

Between autumn 2023 and late spring 2024, there will be a series of three very important elections in Poland – national, local, and European. Parliamentary and local elections are both supposed to be held in autumn 2023; we still don't know the exact dates. Never before in Polish history have two such important elections been held so close together. It will probably be organisationally impossible to run these very different campaigns simultaneously, not to speak of the legal obstacles to doing so. We're currently waiting to find out if the local elections will be held before or after the national elections, as well as the exact date of the European elections.

All of these elections are important to us as Greens. National elections of course enable us to send MPs to the national parliament as well as to receive public funding, which is crucial for any political party. But the importance of local elections should not be understated. We have a lot of activists involved in city-level politics. Our goal is to be present in these cities, both by having elected councillors and by promoting green ideas. The European elections are also extremely important for me personally as an active member of the European Green Party. Our main goal is to have as many Green MEPs as possible after the 2024 elections and to work hard to support Green parties throughout Europe.

What are your expectation for the national elections?

When it comes to the national elections in Poland, it's hard to say how this will play out from an opposition perspective. We all saw what happened in Hungary when the anti-Orbán parties ran as a single bloc. That approach didn't work. I think the situation in Poland is different to that of Hungary – it isn't as bad. Orbán has done some terrible things. In Poland, the PiS is heading in the same direction, but it hasn't got there yet. Because of Poland's complicated electoral system, it would seem logical for the opposition to combine its powers and run as a single, enormous bloc. But the breadth of political positions favours the emergence of two opposition blocs. All of this has to be taken into account by the leaders of Poland's opposition parties, and I am a firm believer in their wisdom. Even though we hold different positions on issues such as abortion and environmental protection, we have a single goal and will always be able to find common ground on issues such as the European Union and the rule of law. I am convinced that we all care more about the future of Poland than we do about the success of our own individual political parties.



Małgorzata Tracz was elected to the Polish parliament in 2019. She served as co-chair of Partia Zieloni, Poland's Green Party, from 2015 to January 2022.

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