

Laying the Foundations for Progressive Change – the Polish Greens After Local Elections

Article by Bartłomiej Kozek, Małgorzata Tracz

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Elections on both the local and regional levels for assemblies in communes, counties and provinces took place in Poland this autumn. For the first time, Partia Zieloni, the Green Party in Poland, registered its candidate lists for the elections to regional councils in all Polish provinces. A countrywide campaign increased visibility, but failed to win seats, save in one constituency. What is the party's plan for next elections? Bartłomiej Kozek speaks with Małgorzata Tracz, co-chair of Partia Zieloni.

Bartłomiej Kozek: What is your green take on the local elections? What goals did you set and were they reached?

Małgorzata Tracz: We are content with the elections to regional councils. The goal was to have lists with candidates in all provinces and poll the first per cent. We were one of ten electoral committees which had lists in every province, received media attention and were included in opinion polls. Our final result at 1.15 per cent is owed to the hard work of over 400 people we had on our lists!

At the level of *powiats* (second-level administrative units) and city councils, we managed to keep a green seat in Szprotawa district council. Regrettably, big cities were a disappointment. We tried local coalitions (Warsaw, Gdańsk, Łódź) and an independent list (Wrocław). Yet the divide between the supporters and opponents of the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) turned out much sharper than we had expected.

The elections to regional councils brought some very good results in some places: we got 22 per cent in Ośno Lubelskie and 10 per cent in Żary. Some of our candidates emerged as local leaders and will run for the European elections and the national election in 2019. We have gained experience in running a countrywide campaign and have attracted new members. However, there is still hard work ahead of us to develop the party structure, especially in small cities and towns.

So we have grown and gained significance, which bolsters our position in the prospective coalitions for the European and national elections next year. The aim of this year's elections had been to do just that: grow stronger and gain campaign experience. Next year will not be about becoming more and more recognisable, but primarily about securing seats in the *Sejm* (the lower chamber of the Polish parliament) and the European Parliament. Still, if the coalition talks collapse, we are ready to run independently.

In Wrocław, where you were running for mayor, Partia Zieloni ran independently. The question “why” is asked not just by those in favour of a united opposition against the ruling PiS, but also by those hoping to see a united left. Did you try to build a coalition? If so, what went wrong?

When preparing our strategy for the triple elections – this year's local elections and next year's national and European elections – we decided that our priority is to expand the party and become more recognisable in the entire country. Never did we exclude the possibility of forming a wide coalition of progressive parties, which could have become a third force, an alternative to the national(ist)-conservative PiS and the liberal-conservative coalition of the Civic Platform (PO) and the Modern party (.N). It would have to be a coalition on equal terms and based on trust and specific policy agenda.

We tried to build a coalition for the elections to regional councils with the leftist Together party (Partia Razem),

but there was no resolve to cooperate. In Wrocław we had rounds of talks with Partia Razem and urban activist groups. The process lasted a year and a half. Then we talked with pro-democracy groups. Unfortunately, in both cases all sides somehow did not share faith in a common project. So we decided that it would be better to have separate committees, and in case of winning seats we could cooperate in the council, rather than run a campaign together with doubts and at half steam.

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We agreed – and still do – that the strategy ‘all against PiS’ prevents many people from voting with hope and not just with fear or hatred. Building one anti-PiS coalition would only cement the division of Poland into two political camps for years to come. The very division has already made people give up any hope for change in Polish politics, and so people feel repulsed watching the increasingly brutal fight between the two camps, fuelled not by ideas about the future of the country, but rather by mutual hatred.

I believe that running independently under our own banners was a good decision. The elections to regional councils gave us a tremendous boost. Also, many valuable people joined the party and they will be our new leaders in the regions. This unlocks great potential in the forthcoming elections. In many constituencies our results were better than those of parties with much bigger budgets and wider recognition in the media.

Our result in the elections to the city council of Wrocław at 2.6 per cent is far from satisfactory, but I do not think a coalition would make it much better. The coalitions and civic committees we were part of in other cities – for example in Warsaw, Łódź and Gdańsk – also failed to win seats and the visibility of the Greens was limited.

Generally, the elections have disclosed the meagre potential of and the support for progressive forces in Poland today. They have exposed that we often live in a bubble which fosters our belief that uniting two or three organisations guarantees electoral success. We have learnt the lesson of how to build foundations for future coalitions – these have to be wide to ensure progressive representation in the *Sejm* and the European Parliament.

Two new strategies have recently emerged among the Polish left and progressive forces. The first is represented by Barbara Nowacka, who joined the liberal camp of PO and .N. The second is represented by Partia Razem and Robert Biedroń, who wants to build a new party for progressives. What is your opinion about the strategies?

I have great respect for the political activity and charisma of both Barbara Nowacka and Robert Biedroń. We are at a crossroads in Poland and it is extremely difficult to predict which strategy could win seats.

In my opinion, a coalition based on cooperation and mutual trust among the progressive groups – emerging as a third force and opposing PiS and the Civic Coalition formed by PO and .N – stands the highest chance of success. It is not the first time PO has lured leftist politicians, yet so far they have never decided to implement leftist policies after elections.

What we need is a coalition of progressive and leftist groups, such as the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), the initiative of Robert Biedroń, Partia Razem, us Greens, and other pro-democratic groups, all those trying to offer an alternative to the PiS and PO duopoly. Most of the organisations have expressed the will to make that attempt, and I do hope Robert Biedroń joins in. My main worry is that we will end up with separate electoral lists and many people will be afraid to waste their vote for a committee bound to be below the electoral threshold and so they will eventually vote for a bigger committee – even if it turns their stomach.

As Greens, we are determined that a wider progressive coalition – which would be an alternative to the feuded two

camps, exchanging political power in Poland – would not oscillate at the electoral threshold, but reach more than 15 per cent and secure representation in various fractions in the European Parliament as well as in the lower chamber of the Polish parliament.

You ran for mayor in Wrocław and your priorities revolved around small improvements, for example, in green spaces and public transport. What is your broader vision of how Polish cities should develop and how different is it from that of other parties and urban activists?

Our programme for Wrocław was based on people's needs as shown in the Social Diagnosis of Wrocław 2017. The survey clearly demonstrated that people would like to see more funds invested in the already existing roads and pavements, better public transport that connects different parts of the city, higher quality of life within estates, clean and tidy yards as well as accessible and affordable public services – such as nurseries and kindergartens.

Our top priorities were a five-year scheme aimed at effectively reducing smog, new standards for managing green areas, improved waste management, and adaptation to the adverse effects of climate change.

We would like Wrocław to be 'European' not because of mass events or new huge stadiums or concert halls, but because of higher quality of life, for everyone, not just a few. We would like the city to use the potential of a synergy between local businesses, those trading in high-tech solutions, and universities, which could foster distributed and renewable energy grids.

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The Wrocław we envision has a long-term development plan based on ensuring security and high living standards: a city with a good climate for ecology (clean air, good public transport, large green areas), social welfare (ambitious housing schemes, good nurseries and kindergartens) and responsible investment plans relying on local businesses and the development of renewables.

We had put forward our policy proposals before, and we have been working on promoting them on a daily basis: cooperating with Dolnośląski Smog Alert, helping residents defend the unique character of the Grabiszyński Park, fighting for a better housing policy that takes into account the needs of the people and not just developers.

A few years ago, as Greens we were the only ones who demanded clean air, well-managed green areas and responsible zoning policy. This year almost every committee demanded these. Yet no other committee during the local elections pressed for switching to circular economy or adapting the city to climate change. Undoubtedly, even with zero seats in the city council, we will have influence and exert pressure on councillors to adopt solutions from our programme.

Do you think that Polish cities led by progressive politicians can become labs of resistance to the conservative PiS government?

Right now the central government fails to provide security and decent livelihoods, so local governments have to fill in the gap. A case in point is birth control: the government banned emergency contraception and stopped financing in vitro fertilisation. Many local governments – in Lubuskie province, in Częstochowa, Łódź or Poznań – introduced their own IVF programmes and 24-hour gynaecologists, where doctors prescribe the morning-after pill.

In the USA, due to Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, cities and states took up the challenge to reduce emissions and increase investments in renewables. Polish cities and regions can follow suit. There are EU funds for provinces to spend and climate change adaptation plans which should be implemented.

Ecology is particularly visible in the political message of the Polish Greens, but recently social issues less so. Do you have a recipe how to convincingly combine the two? If so, did you try it out during the campaign?

Since I became co-chair of Partia Zieloni in 2015, I have decided to put more emphasis on environmental protection and climate – the roots of the green movement. Yet never have we resigned from other fundamental issues. Our motto is, ‘we are everywhere one has to be’.

During the turbulent times after PiS came into power, we participated in hundreds of pro-democratic demonstrations. We were part of the civic-legislative initiative Ratużmy Kobiety (Save Women) with the aim of liberalising abortion laws. We marched in black protests, supported protests of workers and students. We have always turned out at Equality Parades in strength. We have ambitious programmes for energy transition and economic development, which prioritise social solidarity, democratic procedures, the rule of law and environmental responsibility.

I believe that as human beings we face two monumental challenges right now, at all levels: local, national, European and global. These challenges are growing social inequalities and climate change. The programme and actions of Partia Zieloni have responded to both.

Over the past few years, we have succeeded in showing that environmental protection, the energy transition from fossil fuels to renewables and effective measures against air pollution are not only about ecology, but also about social justice, because they are about protection, health, and leaving a better world for the generations to come. I am strongly convinced that these ideas will form the foundations of any future coalitions with us on-board.

As you said, local elections were the first of a series lined up within the next two years. What is your plan for the forthcoming months?

We are capable of running independently to the *Sejm* and the European Parliament, and have our own candidate for president of Poland. We are however aware that the polarisation in Polish politics is huge and, to have a say in shaping legislation, we need a wide progressive coalition – based on progressive, democratic, and ecological values.

Exceeding the electoral threshold and winning a few seats is not enough. What we need is comprehensive and lasting cooperation between groups valuing progress and social solidarity. Thanks to such a coalition our policy proposals stand a real chance of implementation.

Again – we are working hard to become one of the pillars of a green-left coalition, which could end the duopoly of PiS and PO. We want to give people hope and real choice, so that they are not afraid the next election is going to either of them. Instead of voting for establishment parties, with their horizon limited by the term of office, we want people to have the possibility to vote for a coalition with a long-term development plan, with a firm position of Poland in Europe, and with political discourse that ends the harmful divide of our society.



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Małgorzata Tracz has been the co-chair of the Green Party of Poland – Partia Zieloni – since May 2015. She is a city activist living in Wrocław and since February 2016, alongside co-chair Marek Kossakowski and members of the Green Party of Poland, she has been actively engaged in social movements in Poland, such as KOD (Committee for the Defence of Democracy), ecological movements and women’s rights movements.

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