

## **Poland Discovers Ecology**

**Article by Bartłomiej Kozek**

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**After a long time of being either ignored or seen as a Western luxury topic, the state of the environment has begun to occupy a broad space in Polish public debate. From the threat of air pollution to the climate crisis, sustainability is now more visible than ever in the media and the campaign ahead of parliamentary elections on October 13. But will this shift produce a real change in direction for the good of both people and planet?**

A busy afternoon at work. I tune in to one of Poland's most popular radio shows, the Third Programme, an afternoon current affairs round-up by the public broadcaster. The first hour of the three-hour show consisted almost entirely and reports on the environment and sustainable development. A recent accident at Warsaw's sewage treatment plant, a report on local waste management policies, and a feature on climate adaptation in Polish cities all earned a slot in a packed programme.

From a reporter on a small, conservative channel asking politicians about their parties' take on environmental issues to Fridays For Future strikes covered live on morning television, much has changed since the time when only a handful of protesters stood outside Polish government buildings to denounce the inaction of global leaders at COP 15, held in Copenhagen in 2009. It is as if a tide has turned and a new chapter for Polish political life has begun, climate change and the environment can come front and centre, arrived to us at last.

Opinion polling indicates that this sense is more than a hunch or wishful metropolitan thinking. A poll, published by the *Rzeczpospolita* daily in August this year, found that climate change is the second most important political topic for Poles ahead of the October parliamentary elections. 64 per cent of respondents said that climate should be central to the campaign, second as an issue only to healthcare (78 per cent).

### **Growth and decay of environmental movements**

This change was a long time in the making. The final days of communist rule in Poland saw a rise of ecological movements not dissimilar to those experienced in the western part of Europe. Air and water pollution caused by local state-owned industries became a source of social mobilisation, often connected with criticism of the undemocratic regime and, sometimes, pacifist rhetoric.

It was therefore not a surprise that one of the working groups in the 1989 Round Table negotiations on a political transition was dedicated to environmental protection and sustainable development. This activism largely fizzled out in the years after the political and economic transformation due to the lack of success of ecology-centred political projects and the pressing social problems such as crime to unemployment created by the "shock therapy" of the new market era.

Environmental activism took the form of professional NGOs or localised social protests, often connected with infrastructure investment decisions made with little regard to nature and biodiversity. The motorway passing through the landscape park near St. Anne Mountain in the Opole region was one notable example.

While some of these protests did gather significant public attention in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as plans to build a road across the Rospuda valley in north-east Poland, they never sustained their presence in the public debate. The global economic crisis in 2007 and 2008 helped cement the view that caring for the environment should not take precedence over economic development and the aim of closing the wealth gap between Poland and the countries of Western Europe.

But a mix of stable economic growth (albeit with social repercussions that include an underdeveloped social safety net and a precarious job market) and EU-funded “hard” infrastructure investment created a situation in which citizens began to see the costs of the Polish development model laid bare. The most visible sign that something was wrong was air pollution, currently estimated to be responsible for over 45 000 premature deaths each year. 36 of the 50 European cities with the worst air quality are in Poland.

Social movements such as “**smog alerts**” rose up in response to this state of affairs. These initiatives joined a lively collection of local groups fed up with developers being prioritised over green spaces and cars over public transport. Some activists became engaged in **urban movements** and created their own lists to run **local elections** in their towns and cities.

## **Ecology as an election card**

Fast forward to today and all five of the electoral lists that managed to register nation-wide mention environmental issues in their programmes. This is true even in the case of the far-right Konfederacja (Confederation), currently hovering around the 5-per-cent threshold.[1] Though Konfederacja opposes EU climate regulation and defends coal power, the far-right grouping wants to prohibit the import of waste into Poland and supports the development of cleaner, more efficient energy sources.

The rural Polish Peoples Party (PSL, junior coalition partner of the centre-right Civic Platform from 2007 to 2015) is running alongside with the Kukiz’15 movement, led by musician and fan of the first-past-the-post electoral system Paweł Kukiz. This largely unexpected alliance of Christian Democrats and an anti-establishment movement has not however retained Kukiz’15’s climate sceptic stance. Instead the coalition argues for ecology to be part of the school curriculum, blocking EU-Mercosur trade treaty to protect the Amazon, renewables to make up half the energy mix by 2030, and scraping limitations on onshore wind.

The three largest electoral blocs have environmental ambitions as well. Polling above 10 per cent, the joint list of three left-wing, progressive parties – Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), Wiosna (Spring), and Razem (Together) – call for a Green Pact for Poland. This plan promises a ban on coal imports, green prosumer energy, new industries for former coal regions such as Silesia, a special rewilding fund, and the establishment of an Animal Rights Ombudsman.

The main opposition bloc, Koalicja Obywatelska (Citizens’ Coalition, KO), is dominated by the centre-right Civic Platform (PO), which ruled the country with PSL from 2007 to 2015. The bloc includes the remnants of the liberal Nowoczesna (Modern) party, as well as the Greens and the small leftist Inicjatywa Polska (Polish Initiative).

Ecology makes up one of the six chapters of Koalicja Obywatelska’s programme. It has some ambitious goals, such as ditching coal in household heating by 2030, in district heating by 2035, and in electricity generation by 2040. One of its biggest surprises was a commitment towards the rewilding of Poland’s rivers, an idea that contrasts sharply with the **government’s plans** to make them accessible for large-scale goods transport. Ideas such as limiting plastic use, expanding the area of national parks, and investing up to 25 billion euro on thermal insulation programmes are also prominent parts of their electoral platform.

The main question of these elections is whether the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) will obtain the outright majority in the Polish lower house, the Sejm, or whether it will need to muster a few MPs from other parties to continue ruling the country.

PiS focuses largely its achievements over the last four years. These measures include the national clean air programme that provides support for switching to less polluting household heating systems. For the next term, Law and Justice plans to support the installation of household solar power, create a register to eliminate grey zones in the waste sector, plant trees for climate protection purposes, develop offshore wind, and support electric mobility.

## **A question of trust**

From this short analysis a bystander might wonder if Poland is about to become an environmental trailblazer on the European stage. While the range of electoral promises regarding climate change and nature conservation may look impressive compared to the situation just 5 or 10 years ago, the credibility of their proponents – as in many places across the world – is debatable.

The most obvious example is PiS, whose rule has been heavily criticised on the environmental front. In power, the party has moved to log the **ancient Białowieża forest**, effectively killed onshore wind with strict distancing requirements, pushed through infrastructure plans such as a new Central Airport with ambitions to be a global transport hub, and cut through the Vistula Spit to open up a new route to the port of Elbląg.

The long-term energy plan of the government is to stick to coal despite the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change regarding achieving climate neutrality. Reliance on coal already results in imports from Russia, which raises eyebrows when confronted with the government's rhetoric towards Poland's eastern neighbour. While the government has begun to rebuild local public transport by financing new bus routes, the results of the programme are currently limited.

But that is not the whole picture. Critiques of the government often overlook its shift in rhetoric and policy since Mateusz Morawiecki took over as prime minister from Beata Szydło in 2017. The new government features a slate of younger ministers and vice-ministers. Not only interested in environmental protection as a means to strengthen the economy or improve quality of life, these younger figures promote a vision of conservative ecology inspired by British conservatives such as Roger Scruton.

While these changes in no way offset the faults of PiS, they speak to the change in the mainstream political debate in Poland. Climate sceptics can still be sometimes heard in the ruling party, but its frontline politicians prefer to talk about fighting smog and a just transition for the Silesia region. In a sense, such voices allowed for a much wider acceptance of the need for climate action rather than leaving them to be “owned” by the Polish opposition spectrum.

While the environmental turn of the Civic Platform is clearly visible, the party had its own eco-sins when in government from a lack of climate ambition to its reluctance to support feed-in tariffs for renewable energy. In its coalition programme KO surprisingly declares that no coal mine will be closed while there is still coal to be had (and an economic rationale for its exploitation). Similarly, it states that no coal-fired power plant will be shut down as long as they are still viable – a clear conflict with the requirements of global climate protection.

## **Will the eco-wave lift the Greens?**

The Polish Greens have presented their own set of priorities for these elections. As part of the larger KO coalition, they need to emphasise their expertise and reliability or risk being seen as a fig leaf to a partner offering a mixed bag of policies. Their focus is clearly on environmental issues, such as cheap renewable energy, limiting industrial

farming, and ensuring more robust producer responsibility for waste. To stand out from more conservative, centre-right candidates, the Greens combine their sustainability agenda with issues such as the right to abortion and marriage equality.

After October 13th we will see if this marriage of convenience will achieve its twin goals: electing Green MPs to the Polish parliament and **giving the opposition a fighting chance of breaking single-party PiS rule**. Even if such circumstances occur, creating an alternative, coherent government with a programme that goes beyond basic democratic principles will be an uphill struggle. If PiS wins, the soul searching in the opposition could be long and turbulent.

One thing seems certain: ecological issues are here to stay. Environmental issues are embedded in the political programmes of all major parties. Even if unexpected events such as a new economic crisis may set them aside in the party rhetoric, it will be extremely hard for politicians to ignore European and global trends, from the EU climate and energy policy to young people protesting on the streets (including in almost 70 cities in Poland on September 27th). As the environment is more and more often seen in relation to social and economic issues by parties from both left and right, reverting to an “ecology versus development” narrative will be difficult.

More interest in air pollution and the climate should benefit the Polish Greens. The elections will likely see two or three Green MPs enter the Polish lower house. With rising prominence, the party will face greater scrutiny from the media and electorate on its wider stance and voting patterns. The question of whether or not they will be able to build their own, independent position or will be squeezed – less by the coherence of their environmental policies, more by the political forces around them – remains an open one.

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## Footnotes

[1] Konfederacja is an electoral list created by a number of smaller parties and social movements, including right-libertarian MEP Janusz Korwin-Mikke, the far-right Ruch Narodowy (National Movement), and anti-abortion activist Kaja Godek.

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