

Polish Local Elections: Time for Realignment

Article by Bartłomiej Kozek

November 30, 2018

The Polish local and regional elections of autumn 2018 are the first in a series that will shape the political scene of the country for years to come. While it seems that there was no clear winner – although both the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) and the centre-right Civic Coalition (KO) claim this title – the voting may signal the start of profound changes in the country's political landscape. The main questions are which of these two forces will blink first, and will the the next stages of this showdown at the European and national parliamentary elections in 2019 and the vote for president in 2020 leave space for other, more progressive political forces.

After the first stage of local and regional elections in Poland, which took place on October 21 and included voting for assemblies on the communal, county, and provincial levels, as well as the direct election of mayors, who have large powers in local communities, it appeared that the ruling PiS party had quite a few reasons to be cheerful. Despite initial exit polls, PiS's main rival in the rural regions, the christian-democratic Polish People's Party (PSL), suffered a larger than expected setback. This in turn weakened the firewall of the liberal-democratic opposition in the regional assemblies. In effect, PiS was able to get an outright majority in six out of the nine provinces in which it gained the most votes, and in another it entered into coalition with a list of independent local politicians.

Gains for PiS

While it is still less than half of 16 Polish regions that have a large role in the Polish political system due to redistributing a large part of European funds sent to the country (and the rest will almost certainly stay in the hands of the opposition) it is worth remembering that after the previous regional elections in 2014 PiS was able to rule in just one voivodeship. Therefore, PiS has made quite some progress in reclaiming the eastern part of the country, as well as in making inroads in territories previously considered PO strongholds, especially in Silesia.

The liberal opposition – the formerly ruling PO and the more economically liberal Modern party (.N), which decided to join forces under the Civic Coalition banner, focused much more on the situation in larger cities. Despite attempts to gain more highly educated, urban electorate by changing the prime minister to a former banker, Mateusz Morawiecki, PiS suffered a string of defeats, including losing in the first round of the mayoral election in Warsaw and skyrocketing the support for the incumbent in Łódź after a PiS politician suggested she may not be eligible to reclaim the title due to being convicted in a court case.

Until the second round that took place on October 4, the results seem to show a status quo, with both KO and PiS appearing to keep their strongholds. That impression now seems to be more nuanced after the mayoral elections in towns and cities, in which no candidate obtained more than 50 per cent of the votes. While victories of incumbents in places like Kraków or Gdańsk were not a big surprise, a string of wins for the current opposition in smaller towns, even in regions dominated by PiS, is a potential gamechanger.

Problems in the heartlands

The scale of PiS's setback can be seen in the fact that the largest towns in which politicians of PiS and the wider United Right front have either retained or won the mayoral election have less than 65 000 inhabitants. This means that most of medium and a substantial part of smaller towns seem to be open towards the opposition – and, as Lech Mergler pointed out in his article on urban issues in Poland, due to the character of urban settlements in Poland they seem the country's equivalent of American swing states.

Of course, such a narrative is not without its weaknesses. Mayoral elections, in which the second round is a choice between just two options, is something quite different to elections to any assembly-like bodies in which the electorate has a far wider choice. The fact that in regional elections KO trailed PiS by over 7 percentage points (34.1 to 27 per cent), and that PSL, which gained 12.1 per cent, scores way lower in other types of elections shows that the ruling party still has a serious chance of winning the European and national vote next year.

The worst the liberal opposition can now do is to sit on its laurels and think that it can limit itself just to attacking the government. November 11 2018 – the 100th anniversary of modern Polish independence – shows that all too well.

PiS used the fact that the outgoing mayor of Warsaw, Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz (PO), outlawed the far-right Independence March to hijack it and force its organisers to have a joint event. For PiS it was a great way to hide the fact that months of preparations to celebrate this a historic moment have been largely wasted.

While the aim of taming nationalist elements largely failed, the fact that the government – together with nationalists – was able to gather 200-250 000 participants shows that it is still able to use the narrative of ‘rising from our knees’ and protecting traditional, Polish and Judeo-Christian values to its advantage – even if it means opening the public space to forces to the right of the party. All that did not in any way help with international perception that Poland is drifting further away from conventional, contemporary European values and going towards a form of illiberal democracy, similar in style to the rhetoric of Viktor Orbán in Hungary.

Disarray on the Left

This article’s focus so far has been on three centre-right and right-wing electoral lists – and not without reason. They are now the only ones with political representation in assemblies in all 16 Polish regions. It also shows the level of disintegration of other political forces, especially on the left of the political spectrum.

Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) managed to gain just 6.6 per cent of the regional vote and enter regional assemblies in just seven voivodeships. In one region they will be indispensable in an anti-PiS coalition, while in another four they will probably end up in a similar position. Other, left-of-centre electoral lists fared badly, failing to pass the 5 per cent threshold by a wide margin. The Razem (Together) party, which wanted to show it retained the momentum from the 2015 parliamentary election, in which it won 3.6 per cent of the votes, gathered just 1.6 per cent this time around. Partia Zieloni (the Green Party) for the first time was present in all 16 regions and scored 1.15 per cent. In 2 voivodeships it surpassed Razem, reaching up to 2.6 per cent in the Lubuskie region in western Poland.

While this may be seen as a step in the right direction for the Greens, it would be delusional to think of these elections as particularly successful in terms of progressive politics in Poland. In Warsaw, the green-left campaign of Jan Śpiewak was squeezed by the KO-PiS polarisation. The candidate won just 3 per cent of the votes, finishing in a distant third place. His electoral list got 3.9 per cent of the votes on the city-wide level and a single seat on the district level (which has limited competences on day-to-day issues).

Local obstacles

Three trends seem to work against electoral breakthroughs on the local level, which is important due to the fact that most medium and large cities in Poland combine the competence of the commune and county level, giving them significant power in terms of influencing local quality of life.

In some cities, local urban movements decided to run fully independently, embarking on a largely anti-party ticket.

In the case of Warsaw, it resulted in two electoral lists (Wygra Warszawa and Miasto Jest Nasze) failing to get seats in the city council. In cities in which such alliances were developed, the seat distribution promoting larger parties resulted in no seats despite active and engaging campaigns (Gdańsk, Białystok).

The second trend is embodied by Independent Local Politicians, a loose association of politicians trying to distance themselves from established parties (even though large part of them were connected with them in the past). They combined the anti-party card with their experiences in city halls and regional assemblies, which made them seem more competent than urban activists in managing local and regional issues. They won representatives in five voivodeships and will be co-governing at least one of them.

The third trend is currently limited in scope just to local politics in Kraków. A former liberal MP, Łukasz Gibała, managed to gather 17.1 per cent of the vote in the first round of the mayoral elections on a largely ecological platform (including calls for free public transport and large-scale investments in public green spaces), downplaying his more free-market ideas. His electoral lists included local ecological and feminist activists, winning 12.7 per cent of the votes and a significant representation in the City Hall. The more left-wing list, comprised mainly of Razem politicians and more leftist activists gathered just 3.1 per cent of the votes.

It seems perfectly feasible that in the next local elections in five years time we will see more candidates similar to Gibała. These elections marked a symbolic end to candidacies of more old-school, technocratic local politicians which ran their independent campaigns in cities such as Warsaw and Poznań, often criticising urban movements as being anti-development (protesting against investments such as skyscrapers or shrinking local green areas).

The shift towards more green-capitalist offers, inspired by urban sustainability and smart city visions, will mean another difficulty for proposals trying to focus on both ecological and social justice. The question of whether to collaborate with such initiatives – and, if not, how to differ from them in a way that will allow electoral significance, may be of crucial importance to their future.

Before the next storms

Another interesting issue is much more connected to the future of the Polish left on the national level. There is little doubt that its formula needs to drastically change, not just for electoral significance but even for survival. Survival is becoming more difficult since other parties and movements started raising issues and trying to provide answers for traditional ‘leftist’ and ‘green’ topics, from public housing to air pollution.

The first steps in such a realignment are already being taken, as is primarily signalled by how Razem politicians are now open towards discussions on electoral cooperation with SLD, despite having shown animosity towards SLD ever since its first day of existence in the Polish political sphere.

This in no way means that we know how the electoral landscape of the Polish left will be redrawn. The former mayor of Słupsk, Robert Biedroń, is already working on making his own progressive political project. It is hard to say if he will be interested in joining hands with the parties already present on the political scene, as they can be seen more as a liability than an asset.

If that were the case, we would be heading towards a scenario with at least two lists competing for a similar electorate. At least two, as Biedroń’s decision not to have a joint list may mean that Razem would be less likely to sacrifice ideological purity for hypothetical seats in the Polish parliament. Razem was created in 2015 largely to rejuvenate the Polish Left and to end the existence of SLD, which it criticised for the Iraq war, corruption, and third-way economic policies during their 2001-2005 rule.

None of the above trends bode well in terms of strengthening progressive political groups in the European

Parliament after the 2019 elections. While low turnout usually means that urban-oriented, progressive forces have chance to gain MEPs (even if they do not create a joint electoral list), it may in large part depend on the level of political emotions and polarisation between PiS and KO. It is not unimaginable that other political forces, such as PSL or SLD, may decide to join the KO, despite their reservations.

While all these shifts are undoubtedly interesting, they do not bring us much closer to seeing Poland as an active player in strengthening European integration, fighting climate change, and actively promoting human rights on the continent. Let us hope that Polish progressive and left-wing forces will prove me wrong.



Bartłomiej Kozek is a journalist of Zielone Wiadomości (Green News), a Polish bi-monthly magazine and web portal presenting current affair commentary from a green point of view. He has been a secretary general of the Polish Green Party – Zieloni 2004 and one of the authors of the party's policy on social issues.

Published November 30, 2018

Article in English

Translation available in Polish

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/polish-local-elections-time-for-realignment/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space. Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.