

Prospects for a Progressive Poland

An interview with Bartłomiej Kozek, Maciej Gdula, Urszula Zielińska

February 5, 2020

The second term of Law and Justice rule starts with yet another conflict over the independence of the judiciary. It comes after late 2019 elections saw the Greens enter parliament for the first time and the Left make a return. What will the coming months and years bring for the Polish political scene? How will the forces across the spectrum adjust to the new balance of power? Bartłomiej Kozek talks to two new MPs – Urszula Zielińska from the Greens and Maciej Gdula from the Left.

Bartłomiej Kozek: What do the parliamentary election results of October 2019 mean for progressive politics in Poland?

Urszula Zielińska: The election results were a mixed bag. On the one hand, it was hugely disappointing that Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS*) retained a mandate to rule the country after four years of constitutional violations, moves to subjugate public institutions to party interest, and tensions with the European Union. On the other hand, such a result was always possible. The constitution or the independence of the judiciary can appear abstract to the electorate, while the direct cash payments that PiS introduced, such as the 500 złoty (roughly 115 euro) per-child benefit, had a much more tangible effect on the daily lives of many voters.

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The result for the Left (*Lewica*, a coalition of three left-wing parties) was a good sign. While the Greens did not take part in the coalition, the political programmes are quite similar. PiS's objectionable social policies will now be scrutinised in Parliament by competent MPs from the left of the political spectrum. It is also satisfying that after 15 years the Greens – a party driven by the voluntary work of idealists – have gained three MPs, of which two are women. It is a first step in the movement's further growth.

Maciej Gdula: PiS kept its majority in the lower house (*Sejm*) but lost control of the upper chamber (*Senat*). This situation is a first for Polish politics. Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of PiS, will now have to turn to the two smaller right-wing parties that ran on the same electoral list more often. The return of the Left to both chambers is also significant.

Overall, Kaczyński's field of play is smaller. For progressive politics that combine solidarity in social policies with individual freedom, this can only be a good sign. Social policies will be more prominent because the polarisation of the political field between PiS and the main opposition party, the centre-right Civic Platform (PO), had limited public debate to a discussion over democracy in danger. While it is important to hold PiS's record on democracy to

account, too much of a focus narrows the range of topics discussed and demobilises large swathes of the electorate.

Will PiS adjust to its small majority in the Sejm and its lack of control of the Senat by toning down its rhetoric or will the party pursue its plan for far-reaching social and political change?

Maciej Gdula: The situation is more complicated for Kaczyński now. He is no longer in the position of the creator of an expanding empire but that of a patriarch that needs to divide the spoils of war amongst his generals. Some of these generals will insist on radical change. Others will orient towards the centre and try to seduce if not the conservative wing of PO then that section of the party's support.

I think that Kaczyński will position his party more to the centre until the presidential election due to be held in the first half of 2020. At the same time, the more radical parts of his electorate will be offered some symbolic gestures such as promoting politicians from that wing of the party to the Constitutional Court. After the presidential election, this shift to the centre will subside and governmental policies will be determined by power dynamics within the ruling camp.

Urszula Zielińska: I fear that PiS will attempt to further tighten its grip on power. In December, PiS introduced legislation that brought in fines and disciplinary action for judges. These penalties can be applied for almost anything such as the expression of views considered to be politically biased, in public or in private, or even for executing the rulings of the European Court of Justice. It was yet another step to strangle the democratic state. This legislation is now in the Senat and the EU Commission has already sent a first response. I am still hopeful that this legislation can be prevented from entering into force, but its opponents will need support from Europe.

Which topics were most important to the campaign?

Urszula Zielińska: Beyond the crisis of democracy, healthcare, and education, climate and environmental issues were key. From forestry, conservation, and logging to waste imports, droughts, smog, and the climate emergency, environmental topics generated many emotional discussions and debates. The Green campaign emphasised their importance and looked to talk not only about challenges but also possible solutions that offer hope.

One of the best events from the campaign was an action organised with a Swedish MEP from the European Greens. Since PiS came to power in 2015, the Polish Parliament has been sealed off with metal barriers, even though its grounds have always historically been open to the public. We assembled outside the Parliament to decorate the barriers with flowers and slogans against hate, before organising a debate on good environmental practices from Sweden. The Swedish Greens put forward an aviation tax that, while small, resulted in a 7 per cent drop in flights and decreased greenhouse gas emissions. Hearing examples from a country that is planning to close their nuclear power plants and go 100-per-cent renewable before 2050 changes one's perspective.

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Maciej Gdula: The larger parties tried to run away from a debate on social issues. While smaller political forces – mainly the Left – put forward topics close to experiences of common people and connected them to larger ethical questions. The poor standards of public services and quality of life were a strong focus. Poland has growing

problems with access to medical specialists, overcrowded classrooms, and persistent smog. The Left stressed that a lack of resources is only a partial explanation for these problems and that choices made by PiS are largely to blame.

The Left was also firmly on the side of the LGBT community, a group that the ruling party presented as its main enemy in these elections. There can be no democracy when members of the LGBT community are physically attacked and suffer from verbal abuse.

One of the trends in these elections was a division between liberal and left-leaning voters in larger cities and voters in smaller towns and the countryside supporting PiS. How can opposition forces bridge this divide?

Maciej Gdula: The view that sees this divide as cultural is overrated. Regional Poland votes PiS because the party promises to share economic growth more equally between the cities and the rest of the country. After four years, these promises have not been kept. Hospital wards are closing in small towns. Air quality is now worse in smaller cities than in larger ones. University reforms will harm local tertiary education. The centralisation of power is driving the neglect of regional Poland.

Urszula Zielińska: Poland's so-called "public service" broadcaster is a large part of the problem. I say "so-called" because it is now controlled by PiS. The amount of lies and manipulations on these channels on a daily basis cannot be overstated. The opposition has to fight these lies whenever and however it can. The opposition also needs to be more visible in small towns and to organise meetings on current affairs. As a MP, I plan on continuing campaigning events where I get out on the streets to serve lemonade and talk to people as much as possible.

The Greens ran as part of the Civic Coalition and now sit in its parliamentary group. Can the Greens keep their distinct identity in a bloc dominated by the centre-right Civic Platform?

Urszula Zielińska: The green position will be seen in votes on social and values issues, for which the Greens will vote in accordance with our programme as there will be no group discipline. The Greens had their own manifesto and that full programme applies. Nonetheless, to cooperate with other political parties, we will need to build on our similarities, not our differences.

How has the cooperation between parties of the Left – the Democratic Left Alliance (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej*, SLD), Spring (*Wiosna*), and Together (*Razem*) – gone so far? Can you avoid infighting to create a coherent alternative to both PiS and PO?

Maciej Gdula: Up to this point, only good things have come from our cooperation. Each party has shown the best of what they offer and the cooperation continues as a joint parliamentary group. The current focus is on our differences with PiS and PO. The differences within the bloc allow us to work in unorthodox ways and be more effective on our common policies.

Environmental issues, such as smog or climate, were an important part of this campaign. How do the Greens plan to combine them with other issues such as hospital waiting times or women's rights?

Urszula Zielińska: The Greens will always support such initiatives and are present in the parliamentary working groups on women's rights and other social issues. We also participate in protests of teachers, women, and the LGBT+ community. Whenever human rights and minorities are under threat, we will be there. Nevertheless, the environment and climate issues remain the priority. With just three MPs, we need to focus.

What are the challenges for a left-wing political project in Poland? Would re-reading your 2018 book *New Authoritarianism* help progressives create coherent answers to the challenges they face?

Maciej Gdula: Gaining popularity by force and targeting weaker members of society are trademarks of PiS rule.

The Prime Minister recently put forward quite a few policies similar to the progressive agenda with regards to the environment or road safety. But, significantly, the narrative was based on “the norm”. The implication is that those who disagree are “abnormal” and a threat to a “healthy community”. PiS decides who it puts in that category. Recently it has been the LGBT community and sex educators but tomorrow it could be “eco-terrorists”, the “grandchildren of the communist security services” or “anti-Polish NGOs”.

The task of the Left is to promote political change based on a different sense of community that is not defined through exclusion or force. Such a community is founded on accepting difference and recognising it as a source of strength.



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.



Maciej Gdula obtained a PhD in sociology in 2006 at the Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Warsaw. For several years, he has been a member of the Stanisław Brzozowski Association, a non-profit organization coordinating the actions of *Krytyka Polityczna*. In October 2019, he became member of the *Sejm* (the lower house of the Polish parliament) of the Republic of Poland.



Urszula Zielińska graduated from management and marketing at the Academy of Leon Koźmiński in Warsaw. She is a member of the National Board of the Green Party and a co-chair of the Warsaw Circle.

Published February 5, 2020

Interview in English

Translation available in Polish

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/prospects-for-a-progressive-poland/>

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