

## **“The Most Challenging Term Since 1989”: Uphill Struggle for the Polish Greens**

**Article by Urszula Zielińska**

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Rising corruption, shrinking democratic freedoms, and a crackdown on free media: the political landscape in Poland is challenging to say the least. After a long struggle, Polish Greens made it into parliament in 2019, where they have been standing in solidarity with protestors and fighting to put green issues on the agenda. We asked Green MP Urszula Zielińska how the environment and Europe fit into the Polish political debate, and how Greens are gearing up ahead of local and parliamentary elections in 2023.

*This interview is part of a [series](#) that we published in partnership with [Le Grand Continent](#) on green parties in Europe.*

**Green European Journal: 2020 saw presidential elections in Poland as well as a great wave of protest provoked by further restrictions to abortion rights. The pandemic is ongoing in Poland as everywhere. How are the Greens approaching the main issues in Polish politics in 2021?**

**Urszula Zielinska:** This period is significant for the Greens. We entered parliament for the first time after the October 2019 election with three MPs as part of a coalition with the Christian Democrat party Civic Platform (PO) and two other partners (The Modern Party and Initiative Poland). It's taken the Greens 14 years to reach this point and the coalition helped us gain our first MPs. But at the same time, it has been an extremely difficult parliamentary term in general for Poland. In some respects, it may have been the most challenging term in 30 years of free, democratic Poland.

The 2020 presidential elections took place in a context of shrinking democratic freedoms and human rights. They were run in an increasingly oppressive and anti-LGBT atmosphere with hate speech from top political leaders going unchecked. The dismantling of the rule of law in Poland has continued since 2015. By now, new judges of courts at all levels, including the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Tribunal, are political nominees. The positions of Head Prosecutor and Minister of Justice have been merged into one politically nominated position. Our last democratic institutions are being taken over. Corruption and nepotism are also on the rise. Public investigations and trials are postponed, avoided or cancelled by the politically nominated national public prosecutor.

The media is also increasingly under pressure. These days a large petrochemical company in which the state is a significant shareholder is purchasing the leading local media company Polska Press, whose outlets reach about 60 per cent of the population. The government plans to “re-Polonise” Polish media so that it publishes what the government wants rather than free information. Journalists increasingly complain about being cut off

from information that should be legally accessible and experience police violence. For example, on 11 November 2020, police shot a reporter in the face with a rubber bullet and beat another female reporter with batons. Since 2015, Poland has dropped by more than 40 places in the [World Press Freedom Index](#), putting it at 64 out of 180 countries in 2021. It's Poland's worst result since 1989.

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The European Recovery and Resilience Fund is another extremely important topic right now. The opposition is concerned that EU funds will be used by the Polish government entirely to its political benefit, including for projects that further undermine the rule of law. Central government wants to single-handedly distribute 90 per cent of the funds and only allow local councils and governments to distribute about 10 per cent. Previously, similar funds were used to fund political programmes and tailored to win votes. The European Commission should pay attention to this.

**How are the Greens approaching these threats to democracy and the rule of law? Is mobilisation against these trends still ongoing despite the pandemic, and are the Greens part of it?**

Poland experienced a huge wave of street protests in autumn 2020 despite it being the peak of the pandemic's second wave. The protests followed the October ruling by the (already politicised) constitutional tribunal which introduced an almost total ban on abortion [read more on [reproductive rights in Poland](#)]. They were at their largest in October and November before starting to fizzle out towards Christmas. Small protests are still ongoing here and there, but not like before.

As an MP, I was out in the streets during the protests, trying to diffuse conflicts with the police – which were really severe at points – and protect people, who were mostly peaceful throughout. The police, however, weren't always peaceful. We organised searches for people taken to police stations and held for up to 48 hours. Police often made it difficult for detainees to phone relatives and even to get medicine if they needed it. The Green MPs were out in the streets almost daily at one point, helping to deal with this, sometimes until 3 or 4am.

**Green and ecological issues have been pushed far down the agenda, but are they still on it? The ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) has used coal as a symbolic issue. Does the carbon economy structure Polish politics?**

We're on the verge of a transition to a greener economy. This transition must happen now, because otherwise Poland's energy system may not be stable in the years to come. Energy consumption is steadily growing but the system is still about 70 per cent based on coal. Meanwhile, renewables are growing fast but from a very small base, still below the EU's 20 per cent target and out of line with the Paris Agreement.

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As an MP, I'm a member of two parliamentary committees that are key for Greens: energy and climate, and environment and forestry. There's a lot of talk and legislative work about moving away from coal, albeit very slowly and in a direction I wouldn't necessarily endorse. There are plans to build a "gas hub" and nuclear energy is very much on the cards, with six nuclear plants planned by 2040. Renewables are there too, but as an add-on rather than a base. Poland was also very reluctant to commit to the European Commission's 2050 climate neutrality objective in December 2019. It did so eventually at "an EU level", but it isn't ready to commit to this goal at a national level.

**Is this shift coming from within Polish politics or society, or is it the influence of Europe and its Green Deal? Is it being forced on the government or is it more organic?**

Both. On the one hand, EU climate policy and legislation is slowly being integrated into the Polish legislative system. In that way, the transition is being forced upon the Polish government, which is always happy to blame Europe for any negative impacts. These include Poland's extremely high energy prices which the government blames on the EU's carbon emissions pricing, for instance.

On the other hand, bottom-up pressure is coming from environmental NGOs and simply from Poland's very outdated infrastructure. Most Polish power plants are extremely old – some were built 50 or 60 years ago – and should have been decommissioned years ago. Other coal plants were built recently and will run until at least 2037. The energy transition is a specialist topic that the Greens along with a few NGOs discuss. Our approach is to be as constructive as possible because it's in everyone's best interest to quickly find solutions. But there's little will from the government to discuss it and most dialogue happens behind the scenes between the government and the European Commission. It doesn't involve parliament unless we force the debate or take the opportunity of energy-related legislation passing through parliament.

**The climate issue seems like a technical, behind-the-scenes agenda in Poland. Are environmental issues more broadly salient in society?**

They are, and more so than is covered in the media. Poland has a strong and active NGO movement which really helps MPs in our work. Specialist ecological NGOs support us almost like think tanks. The youth movement through Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion is small but active in bigger cities.

Forest management is a matter of growing public discussion. The government-run forestry corporation operates with little public oversight and is logging intensively across the country. Recently one NGO created a map with a red dot indicating each logging site in Poland. It looks as if our country was on fire. This caused huge public outrage. There's also a new plan to log the Bialowieza Forest – one of Europe's last-remaining natural forests. But the fact that environmental issues are more salient among Poles than they used to be

brings hope.

**Poland is a specific case when it comes to Europe because there's a discrepancy between a Eurosceptic government and a largely pro-European population. How do European issues play out in Polish political debate? Is there anything beyond the "good versus evil" Europe stand-off?**

The pandemic has turned the focus towards domestic problems, and I sense it's the same for many countries. People are asking how Europe will support us in the biggest challenges we face, such as the vaccination programme and rule of law. They're looking to Europe for stronger support and quicker action. There's some frustration over why Europe hasn't taken action on rule of law in Poland for so long since triggering Article 7. It's been an ongoing issue for the past six years and there's great uncertainty. Is rule of law no longer a priority for Europe, or is the Commission putting the issue on hold while it deals with the pandemic? This would be understandable to an extent, but there's still frustration.

Rule of law may have stopped being a priority but it continues to impact people in Poland as well as Europe as a whole. The discussion isn't all black and white, for and against. There's also an ongoing debate about whether Poland should rely on the European Commission and the European Court of Justice to support us in a growing number of issues, or whether we're on our own.

**Do politics in neighbouring countries such as Germany and the Visegrad countries impact Polish politics?**

Yes. Although in general Polish politics are very inward looking, the country which impacts Poland the most is probably – sadly – Hungary. In many aspects, PiS follows the tracks laid by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his party Fidesz. Recently, there has also been tension with the Czech Republic around the Turów open-pit coal mine.

The upcoming German federal election in September is also increasingly being discussed. Polish media is interested in [the German Green chancellor candidate] Annalena Baerbock. This attention to developments in Germany is a source of hope for all those who want more green politics to feed back into Poland.

**So Polish politics has been very inward looking. But throughout Europe, there's been a discussion on the future of Europe and Europe's place in the world. Is this discussion present in Poland and how do Greens position themselves?**

The discussion is quite limited. Poland has historically looked to the United States, which has always been seen as more of an ally than the EU by conservatives, including the current government. Donald Trump was an ally for PiS. Just days before the 2020 presidential elections, Trump even extended a last-minute invitation to visit the White House to President Andrzej Duda in a bid to help him win the election. Now the US has a new, climate-focused president, I hope it will help Europe to press ahead with its Green Deal and more progressive targets.

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With respect to other powers such as China and Russia, as Greens we always strive to build a stronger Europe and emphasise the need for European solidarity. When it comes to projects like the Russian-backed gas pipeline Nord Stream 2, we speak in one voice with the European and German Greens: the pipeline undermines European energy solidarity and should be stopped. But all in all, there's not as much discussion on this in Poland as there should be. For instance, cybersecurity – another major concern when it comes to China and Russia – is barely discussed. [The interview was recorded just before the major cyberattack which leaked emails from top Polish officials.]

**The Greens are now present in the Polish parliament, local and general elections are scheduled for 2023, and it seems as if green policies at the European level act as a lever for the Polish Greens. Which level of politics is most important for you?**

Local politics have always been our strength. People are most engaged and excited when they do something positive in their community, even through the smallest projects. Greens come from local politics. The priority now is to stand out on the national scene, especially since the Greens are still very small as a party with three MPs and relatively few members. New political projects are always appearing and gain traction rapidly. Almost every year – or ahead of every election – a new political party is created. Within six months, this new party gains up to 10 to 12 per cent of voter support because they haven't done anything wrong yet. In the actual elections, they tend to gain between 6 and 12 per cent and then they fade away just as quickly as they emerged. We're constantly battling this dynamic. Recently, the well-known television figure Szymon Hołownia set up a new conservative-liberal party, Poland 2050, and he's going from strength to strength.

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The Polish Greens have never been one of those fast-risers on a big budget. Instead, we grow slowly, organically. Standing out nationally is key right now; we need to build a stronger identity and use the success of other Green parties to our advantage. The German Greens are attracting attention and so are the Greens in Scotland, England, and Wales, who seem to be on the rise. As Polish Greens we'll try to build a strong national identity while also strengthening our European identity. Developments like the European Green Deal and its new forest and biodiversity policies go in our direction. If it's not the Greens who will deploy Polish versions, who else will?

The local and parliamentary elections in 2023 are sure to be challenging. The question is how closely together they will come – at the same time, or three or six months apart? Will PiS manipulate the election law in their favour? What we know for sure is that in 2023 we'll have to make smart choices.

**The Polish Green party has always been a small and democratic organisation. Has the structure of the party changed compared to a decade ago?**

Since the local and parliamentary elections in 2019, the Greens have doubled in size – at least in the number of local groups. It has been a challenge to keep people engaged and active during the pandemic but the numbers of local activists and actions have increased. The party has also shifted from being a big-city force, mostly present in cities like Warsaw, Poznan, Gdansk, and Wroclaw, to being a party with groups in small to medium-sized cities too. We're also much more visible in the media, with a small but steady presence in national news. In terms of party structure, we're working on a strategy for 2023 but also looking ahead to 2030. It'll be a long-term strategy backed by a new, regional structure. We're laying the groundwork to grow. Our steering committee will include representatives from regions as well as parliamentarians. We're planning for success.

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Urszula Zielińska has been a Polish MP since November 2019. She is a member of the parliamentary Energy and Treasury Committee and the Committee for Water Resources and Maritime Industry. She leads an intra-parliamentary group for environment, energy and climate. She studied business management in Warsaw and worked for over 16 years in international business in Poland, Germany and the UK

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