



Strengthening Social Democracy in the Visegrad Countries

Poland's Political Left: Is There Life Beyond Parliament?

Michał Syska

December 2016

- The parliamentary elections of 2015 were a watershed for Polish democracy for two reasons. For the first time since Poland's political transformation, a single party (the right-wing and populist Law and Justice), rather than a coalition of two or more parties, formed the government. It is also the first democratic parliament in Poland not to contain a single political party with a left-wing label. This makes Poland unique not only in the Visegrad region but also across the entire EU.
- The Democratic Left Alliance (SLD - Poland's post-communist social democrats), which had been the country's key left-wing party before the elections, did not make it into the Sejm (parliament). The party formed a coalition with smaller centre-left organisations in the run-up to the elections (including the Greens and Twój Ruch party) and received 7.55% of the vote, whereas the entry threshold for coalitions in Poland is 8%.
- A new political party established just before the elections, Razem (Together), did not secure any seats in parliament either. Razem, inspired by Spain's Podemos and Greece's Syriza, received 3.62% of the vote (the threshold for parties is 5%).
- The combined result of the United Left (led by the SLD) was assessed as a defeat. In contrast, the result of Razem, a new movement on the left, was seen by experts as a success.

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1. The Social Democratic Left Alliance

Background

In January 1990, the last congress of the Polish United Workers' Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR) was held. The party was a political body which had governed Poland in an authoritarian and exclusive way since World War II. Between the sessions of the congress, a group of reformers decided to establish the Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland Party (Socjaldemokracja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, SdRP), which became the PZPR's heir both in historic and in formal terms. However, the new party's political programme rejected the tradition of non-democratic communism. From the PZPR's 3 million members, a few thousand people joined the SdRP. The new party's first leader was Aleksander Kwaśniewski. In 1996, the SdRP joined the Socialist International.

The party never ran in parliamentary elections as a single party. It was, however, the main political body of the election coalition under the name Social Democratic Left Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej, SLD), which also encompassed trade unions and smaller left wing parties as well as organisations.

In 1999, the Alliance became a single political party under the same name. It was based on the structures and membership of the SdRP and its first leader was Leszek Miller.

The Alliance's position on the political scene

The Democratic Left Alliance¹ was an isolated political body on Poland's political scene in the run up to the country's first democratic elections. The political factions which had arisen from the earlier democratic opposition rejected the possibility of any cooperation with the SLD, a formation of communist descent, and some of them even claimed that the post-communist social democratic party had no right to exist any more. Consequently, the SLD's election result in 1991 (11.91%) was perceived as a success by the party. The 60 seats in the Sejm secured by the Alliance turned it into the second biggest political party in the parliament.

After the elections of 1993, the Alliance was the most powerful party in the parliament. It formed a government coalition with the Polish Peasant Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL). In the subsequent elections the left improved its results, but right-wing parties secured a governing majority and formed a government.

In 2001, the SLD was at the peak of its popularity, with over 40% of the vote. The united left created a coalition government with the Polish Peasant Party. However, the four years of government ended with a spectacular defeat in the following elections. In 2005, the Alliance lost nearly 30% of its voters.

The subsequent establishment of a centre-left electoral coalition (the Left and the Democrats, LiD) with the key role played by the SLD, was an attempt to remedy the party's crisis. The coalition received 13% of the vote, which was hardly a success. This was followed by a disastrous result in 2011 when the party only received 8.24% of the vote. However, its true demise came in 2015 when the electoral coalition entitled the United Left, with the Democratic Left Alliance at its core, received only 7.55% of the vote and did not secure any seats in parliament, the threshold for coalitions being 8%.

¹ In the elections of 1991, 1993 and 1997 the SLD constituted of a coalition of parties, trade unions and civil society organisations with the major role played by the SdRP. In 2001, the SLD ran in the elections as a unified party which entered into a coalition with another social democratic party – the Labour Union (Unia Pracy, UP). In 2007, the Democratic Left Alliance formed an electoral coalition under the name the Left and the Democrats (Lewica i Demokraci, LiD) which also included the following smaller parties: Social Democracy of Poland (Socjaldemokracja Polska, SdPi), the Labour Union and the liberal Democratic Party (Partia Demokratyczna, PD). In the 2015 elections the Democratic Left Alliance was the largest entity in the electoral coalition under the name the United Left (Zjednoczona Lewica). The coalition also included the Labour Union, the Greens, Twój Ruch party and some other, smaller parties.

The Democratic Left Alliance's government representation

The Democratic Left Alliance has twice formed governments as the dominant coalition partner.

The 1993-1997 term was won by the Alliance due to social discontent caused by the free-market shock therapy; radical economic reforms had led to the closure of many industrial plants and a sharp increase in unemployment in the country. Moreover, the Alliance also benefited from new election legislation, which was favourable to large parties. The political right, in turn, was split into small parties, most of which did not make it into parliament. The Alliance slowed down the neoliberal reforms but did not implement a significant paradigm shift in terms of Poland's social and economic development. The political left's greatest success of the term was to adopt Poland's new and democratic constitution, which was widely supported in a national referendum.

The second government formed by the Alliance was in power from 2001 to 2005. That term of office was largely devoted to the preparations for Poland's accession to the European Union. The accession turned out to be the highlight of the government's activities. Also, at that time the Alliance was beset by corruption scandals. Inspired by the ideology of the "third way", the party's leader and Prime Minister Leszek Miller shifted the party towards the centre-right. The decision was made to support the war in Iraq and deploy Polish troops, taxes for businesses were lowered, and Miller introduced a plan to implement a low linear personal income tax.

Moreover, the Alliance's candidate won the presidential post twice: Aleksander Kwaśniewski was Poland's president from 1995 to 2005.

Changes to the distribution of social and political cleavages.

The crisis of the Democratic Left Alliance

Contrary to Western Europe, parties in Central and Eastern Europe do not represent socio-political cleavages in the sense described by S. Lipset and S. Rokkan. We may therefore distinguish three types of cleavages in post-communist countries:

- a) the territorial and cultural cleavage (rural vs. urban, traditionalists vs. modernisers, religiousness vs. secularism, nationalism vs. openness to the world);
- b) the post-communist cleavage (anti-communists vs. persons associated with the previous system's state institutions or people nostalgic for the social security offered during communism);
- c) the socio-economic cleavage (advocates of the free market and privatisation vs. advocates of state interventionism).

After 1989, the Polish political scene was structured mostly by the first two types of social and political divisions. The main criteria for the electoral decisions of Poles were their evaluation of the period of 'real socialism' and their approach to certain cultural issues (e.g. the role of the Church in public life, the right to abortion, some moral issues, European integration).

The Democratic Left Alliance was able to win thanks to its ability to mobilise voters who had been part of the state's structures before 1989 (former members of the PZPR, military and police staff, employees of state-owned enterprises and state administration) as well as those who felt nostalgic about the social security offered by the socialist period and who did not benefit from the country's systemic transformation. On the other hand, left-wing politicians were able to attract a large proportion of the electorate by emphasising their competence, consensus-building abilities and their reluctance to become involved in ideological disputes,

coupled with secularism, a pro-European attitude and openness to the world. Prior to the successful elections of 1993 and 2001, the SLD's politicians presented their party as a predictable, moderate and competent alternative to the heavily ideological, divided and decrepit political right. A similar message sent to voters in 2007, however, did not yield the expected results. The leaders of the post-communist political left did not realise that after the defeat in 2005 their modernist position (in accordance with the cultural division) had been taken over by the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) led by Donald Tusk. The Platform was perceived by voters as a more attractive and more reliable alternative to the right-wing and populist Law and Justice party.

Donald Tusk's party was able to attract part of the Alliance's traditional electorate, i.e. those who had voted for the Alliance for historical reasons. For that group of voters, the Platform became a safeguard against the anti-communist rhetoric presented by PiS before the party's return to power.

The Alliance proved unable to develop its new political identity, an identity aimed at breaking through the dominance of the two right-wing parties. As the post-communist cleavage is becoming weaker for demographic reasons, we may predict a rise in the importance of the socio-economic cleavage.

End of post-communist social democrats?

We may distinguish four paths leading to the formation of left wing parties in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989:

- parties which arose from the former communist parties but which have abandoned communist ideology and rhetoric, adopting a social democratic approach instead, and which have (at least partially) cut their ties with the former system (e.g. the Democratic Left Alliance in Poland, the Hungarian Socialist Party);
- parties which arose from the former ruling parties but which have retained the communist ideology and symbolism; such parties have not cut their ties (or have only done so to a limited extent) with the previous system (e.g. the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia);
- parties which were created as a result of the rebirth of social democratic parties that had existed in Europe prior to the arrival of communism in CEE countries (e.g. the Czech Social Democratic Party);
- newly-formed parties (e.g. the Labour Union in Poland).

Only in the Czech Republic did a revived, historic social democratic party become the dominant political party of the left. In the remaining countries of the region, the monopoly on the left was scooped up by social democratic parties arising from the former communist parties.

The elites and leaders of these parties came mostly from the technocratic and pragmatic members of the former communist parties. They did not have any problems accepting a free market economy or parliamentary democracy. Their adoption of a social democratic identity was not a result of thorough ideological debates; rather, it was a form of seeking legitimisation and adaptation to the new political reality. Michael Dauderstadt, Andre Gerrits and Gyorgi Markus claim that the adoption of new political agendas by post-communist social democratic parties in CEE countries was largely symbolic in nature; it underlined the severance of the ties with the communist past. From a practical angle, however, the new political agendas did not constitute the most important point of reference for these parties.²

² Dauderstadt M., Gerrits A., Markus G. G., *Troubled Transition. Social Democracy in East Central Europe*, Bonn/Amsterdam 1999, p. 82.

According to Przemysław Sadura, after the collapse of the PZPR, the new social democratic party was formed by politicians who had made their political débuts in the 1970s, when the communist party was already merely an ideology-free party of power. Over the years, they were taught how to cynically distance themselves from their own ideology, and acquired experience in intra-partisan power struggles, in conditions close to the rules of democracy.”³

In turn, Anna Materska-Sosnowska in her account of the origins of Poland’s post-communist social democracy claims that “it (the Alliance) was from its onset a diverse party in terms of its ideology, politics and groups of interests. It constituted a conglomerate facilitated by the past and by the unfriendly environment formed by Poland’s post-Solidarity parties. The most significant glue for the party’s members was a feeling of a shared past, not ideological identity. The party was created in a totally pragmatic way and its aim was to institutionalise the syndicate of power which it in fact was.”⁴

One of the Alliance’s leaders, Józef Oleksy, said in 1996: “In fact the allegation that our party has shifted away from ideology is not justified at all. We have made a conscious decision not to be an ideological party, to be non-ideological pragmatic social democrats striving for success; we want to make use of the opportunities presented to us and we want to be an election-ready party.”⁵

A survey conducted among the SLD’s delegates to regional conventions confirms that being a repository of left-wing ideology and values was not the most significant binding factor for the party. Over 40% of the party members surveyed were in favour of restoring the death penalty in Poland, while nearly 50% thought that the main function of school was to teach children discipline. For 30% of the respondents, homosexuality was against human nature.

As many as 67% of the delegates thought that the less state intervention in economic affairs, the better. Furthermore, 35% of the delegates were against increasing the influence of trade unions on economic and social decision making.⁶

Excessive pragmatism, approval of neo-liberal concepts, lack of a clear ideological identity and corruption scandals must be regarded as the factors which led to SLD’s defeat in the 2005 election. The attempts at finding a way out of the crisis that have been made over the last decade have failed. In fact, they eventually ended in a disaster for the party in 2015.

The Alliance is out of the Parliament

For the politicians of the Alliance, finding themselves out of parliament is a completely new situation. Prior to 1989 they had existed within the single ruling party and after the transformation their party became a part of the new political establishment.

Polls conducted in 2016 have put the SLD on the edge of the parliamentary threshold with around 5% of the vote (with different polls indicating a range of support from 2 to 6% for the party). The party’s membership is

³ Sadura P., *Ideologie elit III RP*, [in:] Raciborski J. (ed.), *Elity rządowe III RP 1997 – 2004. Portret socjologiczny*, Warsaw 2006, p. 241.

⁴ Materska-Sosnowska A., *Socjaldemokracja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej – dostosowanie syndykatu władzy do zasad demokracji parlamentarnej*, Warszawa 2006, p. 198.

⁵ Seminar for SdRP’s leaders – Mierki’96, Warsaw 1996, p. 8.

⁶ Survey conducted by Prof. Jean-Michel De Waele, dr. Anna Pacześniak and dr Michał Jacuński in the years 2008 – 2009 among delegates to 16 regional conventions of SLD and PO; see De Waele J.-M., Pacześniak A., *The people of the party: idealists or pragmatics? Political party members in the light of an empirical study*, Warsaw 2011.

estimated at 20,000 – 30,000 members. Nine city mayors are associated with the party, as well as 3 members of the European Parliament, who sit in the EP's Socialists & Democrats group. These links are significant assets which, coupled with party funding from the state budget, may constitute a basis for the re-development of the party's political capital. However, the party's survival beyond the parliamentary environment requires huge determination based on solid ideological foundations. This is something that the SLD has always lacked.

2. Razem

Background

At the beginning of 2015, around 200 activists representing the non-parliamentary political left published an open letter in which they called for the formation of a joint list of candidates for the upcoming elections. In May 2015, Razem (Together) was established as a political party. The founders included representatives of the Greens and activists from the Young Socialists (Młodzi Socjaliści) association.

Razem's position on the political scene

Razem received 3.62% of the vote in the most recent elections and did not enter parliament. However, the result gives the party the right to receive a contribution from the state budget, and an opportunity to sustain itself and develop further.

Opinion polls from about 2 weeks before the elections gave Razem about 1% of the vote, and the party's politicians found it very hard to get their political message through to voters in the media, which consistently ignored the newly-established party. A breakthrough came in the TV debate of party leaders. The debate was clearly won by Razem's representative, Adrian Zandberg. Zandberg, a 36-year-old IT specialist with a PhD in history, suddenly became a media celebrity. During the debate, Razem's website crashed because so many people were trying to find information about the new political left.

Social democracy or radical left?

The appearance of Razem on the country's political stage caused varied reactions among the observers. Right-wing and liberal commentators described the party as "neo-communists", "leftists", "radicals" and "Marxists". In turn, marginal representatives of the revolutionary leftwing criticised the new party as "reformist" and "social democrats", etc.

The party's politicians describe it as a social democratic party. At the same time they dissociate themselves from the SLD, which they believe to be non-ideological. They also emphasise their links with Podemos, the Spanish anti-establishment movement created as a left-wing alternative to the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE).

The political agenda adopted by Razem in May 2015 contains, among other things, the following points:

- the fight for stable employment, abolition of precarious work contracts, an increase in the minimum wage;
- introduction of a 35-hour working week, abolition of non-remunerated apprenticeships, more powers for the National Labour Inspectorate;
- an end to the commercialisation of the health service, health care to be funded directly from the budget, introduction of full reimbursement for in vitro treatment;

- introduction of a “CEO tax”, 75% of the amount exceeding the annual income of PLN 500,000;
- creation of central- and local government-run seed funds investing in enterprises in return for a share in future profits for the state;
- curbing commercial trade on Sundays and holidays;
- increasing the non-taxable amount, introduction of a progressive tax system for companies, abolishment of linear tax for companies;
- shifting the funds for the creation of ineffective micro-companies to facilitate the creation of social enterprises;
- prohibition of evictions without the ensuring of replacement accommodation;
- introduction of sexual education classes in schools;
- introduction of equal treatment of partners regardless of their gender;
- introduction of unified, 480-day-long parental leave divided fairly between the parents;
- reducing MP’s remuneration to the value of the minimum wage multiplied by 3
- opposition to the TTIP agreement.

The party’s political programme contains references to the idea of the “welfare state”, and Razem’s spokespersons often bring up solutions applied in the Nordic model of the welfare state. The party’s politicians do not question the market economy as a whole; rather, they challenge its neoliberal model. Razem’s political agenda represents, without doubt, a social democratic programme from before the introduction of the Third Way by Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroeder towards the end of the 20th century.

As far as Razem’s political strategy is concerned, it is a populist party which presents itself as an advocate of ordinary people, and a party opposed to the current political establishment. The opening lines of Razem’s political programme are: “We’ve had enough of tax incentives and privileges for large corporates and banks. We’ve had enough of the political caste whose members don’t have a clue about the life of ordinary people”.

Razem has a traditional, social democratic socio-economic agenda which appears radical after three decades of neoliberal hegemony and the ideological surrender of the Third Way / New Centre social democrats. Political radicalism is a notion which is characterised by relativism of time and space. It is clear that a pro-social programme for correcting the neoliberal course of capitalism currently appears to be radical in Poland.

In conclusion, we may claim that Razem is a new radical left as its programme is positioned where the social democratic movement traditionally used to be.

Razem – the party of the precariat?

Professor Guy Standing described Razem as “Poland’s first authentic movement representing the precariat”. This seems to be largely overstated when we compare the large number of Poles employed on the basis of un-

stable contracts and working for low rates (Poland is one of the EU's leading countries in terms of the number of precarious employment contracts) with the still relatively low level of social support for Razem.

It would be much closer to reality if Razem were to be defined as a party created by young people from the precariat. Among Razem's 6,000 registered members and supporters the dominant group consists of well-educated 20- and 30-year-olds for whom the issue of professional and financial instability has been a formative experience for their entire generation.

Razem declares that it wants to be the political representative not only of the precariat, but of all those who feel that they have not benefited from the country's neoliberal transformation. The party's leaders emphasise that their objective is to reclaim the disappointed and socially insecure voters and drag them away from the right-wing populists in Law and Justice, the party which owes its political success to (among other things) its effective welfare rhetoric as well as its channelling of social anger through the indication of enemy groups (minorities, refugees, elites, etc.).

3. Summary: Right-wing populism vs. liberalism. Is there space for the Left on Poland's political scene?

The Polish political scene is currently dominated by rivalry between the two main blocks, the civil society organisations that support them, and the media. This creates a clash between right-wing populism (represented by Law and Justice) and liberalism (represented by the liberal and conservative-liberal parties of the parliamentary opposition). The conflict currently occupies almost all of the public space and it is pushing the left out to the margins.

However, political polarisation and criticism from the European institutions seems so far to be working well for Law and Justice: the party can continue to pursue its anti-elite discourse and indicate that it is the protector of ordinary Poles from both domestic and international elites.

Poland's liberal democracy may be saved if the populism vs. liberalism conflict is replaced by the dispute between the left-wing and right-wing visions of development. Thanks to a left-wing narrative, many current supporters of Law and Justice may be attracted to the left.

Poland's liberal democracy will not be protected and saved by the liberals themselves, as they are still attached to their radical free market postulates and they still do not understand that freedom without social security is a fantasy. Only citizens who are not anxious about their survival may fully enjoy their political rights and personal freedoms, and only those who fully enjoy their political rights and freedoms will defend these rights and freedoms with real conviction.

The task for the left is to develop a viable alternative to Law and Justice. In its current extra-parliamentary circumstances, the left must elaborate a clear-cut ideological identity and a new organisational formula.

The two left-wing parties which are now outside parliament have different strengths and weaknesses. The asset of the Democratic Left Alliance is its extensive nationwide organisational structure as well as a socially well-rooted electorate which has a historically strong emotional link with the party. The weakness of the Alliance is the lack of a clearly defined social democratic ideological identity, in particular as regards economic issues. A further problem faced by the party is its ageing membership and voter base dominated by people aged 60 and more.

The strength of Razem lies in its well-defined ideological identity and its substantial knowledge base, in which it may readily apply when confronting the right wing parties in the economic field. The party's members are comfortable in their extra-parliamentary situation and are effective in an environment made up of social movements, NGOs, and protests organised by both citizens and trade unions. In October 2016, Razem was a co-organiser of the hugely successful demonstrations against the planned legislation introducing a complete ban on abortion. Thousands of people took to the streets to join the protests organised across the country.

New left such as Razem is effective user of the Internet as a communication channel (Razem's Facebook fan page has 77,000 followers, whereas the fan page of the Alliance has 31,000 followers). As a relatively young party, Razem is also able to introduce innovations in its internal management more easily. The party is managed collectively by a team composed of nine people. All decisions are adopted through a democratic vote and after comprehensive consultations. Moreover, special attention is paid to equal representation of men and women.

The weak points of Razem are that it is relatively unanchored in society, and that the party's membership is dominated by the younger generation. This may cause difficulties in reaching older voters from rural areas who currently choose to vote for Law and Justice for social security reasons. Moreover, Razem's young membership does not necessarily ensure electoral success among young people. In recent years the election results in Poland have shown that the youngest voters (especially young males) support organisations whose approach to economic issues is far-right, nationalist and libertarian.

Today, integration of the two left wing environments does not seem probable. In particular, representatives of Razem emphasise that cooperation with SLD appears unfeasible. The question of the future of the left in Poland therefore remains open. There is no doubt that left-wing organisations in Poland face similar challenges to those faced by the progressive movements in the other countries of the Visegrad Group, i.e. the growing support for right-wing populism and the resulting threats to the liberal foundations of democracy. This problem affects not only Central and Eastern Europe – it is also visible in the western part of the continent, where it poses a challenge for the local social democratic movements. In view of this, it is highly desirable that the left-wing parties grouped within the Party of European Socialists should tighten their cooperation and go beyond the current, mostly formal, contacts. Furthermore, the Party of European Socialists should be expanded to include new social and political movements, including Poland's Razem.

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