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Brakujący. What Has Happened to Poland's Social Democrats?

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The world is currently watching the protests across Poland in response to a new constitutional court ruling that effectively amounts to a legal ban on abortion in that country. This conservative ruling should not surprise those with an interest in European studies because recent government reforms have seen Polish courts stacked with allies of the governing Law and Justice Party (PiS).

Since returning to power in 2015, PiS has sought to remake Polish society in accord with its blend of nationalist, social conservative, and populist ideology. It has strengthened its control over crucial institutions such as the judiciary and the media, actively promoted anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic and homophobic rhetoric, while at the same time it has delivered direct welfare support to those seen as fitting its socially conservative vision ('Polish heterosexual families').

As someone who identifies as a social democrat and supports the social democratic commitment to equality, wealth redistribution, social welfare security, and the protection and advancement of minority rights, I am concerned about the current path of contemporary Poland under PiS. Moreover, these recent developments should be of concern for social democrats all over the world, so it is pertinent to ask, 'What has happened to Poland's social democrats?'

The social democrats in Poland have been struggling to gain voter support in recent elections. At both 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, won by former PiS member

Andrzej Duda, social democratic candidates failed to make the second round run off. At the 2019 parliamentary election, won by the PiS, 'The Left' (social democrats were part of this alliance) received only 12.56% of the vote and won 49 seats in the 460-seat lower house (Sejm). At least this was an improvement on the 2015 parliamentary election when the 'United Left' only received 7.55% of vote and fell below the electoral threshold thus failing to gain a seat in parliament. Social democratic candidates in Poland have also found it difficult to gain voter support in European Parliament elections such as in 2019 when centre-left, social democratic candidates won only six seats of 52 delegated for Poland.

The position of social democrats in post-Communist Poland has not always been so tenuous. In fact, social democrats led a coalition government from 1993 to 1997 and again from 2001 to 2005. Four Prime Ministers of post-Communist Poland have been social democrats: Józef Oleksy (1995), Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz (1996-97), Leszek Miller (2001-04) and Marek Belka (2004-05). Also, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, President from 1995 to 2005, was backed by the social democrats. Since 2005, however, social democrats have been in opposition, usually lagging the centre-right Civic Platform, and the PiS.

Social democrats all over face challenges to remain relevant. Various explanations (usually focusing on Western Europe) have been put forward for the decline of social democratic parties. These include the spread of globalisation, advances in technology, mass affluence and consumerism, growing individualism and fragmentation, declining unionism, too much focus on identity politics, and the collapse of post-war economic boom. These wide-ranging explanations may also be relevant for the situation in Poland, but it is important to be aware of specific local circumstances.

I suggest there are three additional factors that might account for the decline of Poland's social democrats. One is corruption and subsequent electoral fallout. A major corruption scandal dubbed the 'The Rywin Affair' (2002-04) incriminated but did not prove the wrongdoing of some Democratic Left Alliance members including the social democratic Prime Minister at the time, Leszek Miller. Adverse publicity from this corruption scandal contributed to a big defeat for the social democrats at the 2005 parliamentary election, and they have since struggled to recover.

Secondly, the (mis)use of historical memory by the PiS has been used as a tool for electoral success. History is a very important element of Polish self-image and identity, particularly accounts of heroism and tragedy in the face of powerful neighbours and occupiers (Prussia, Germany, France, Sweden, Soviet Union, Russia). To win the support of voters, PiS leaders have been effective in promoting the party as the defender of Poland and its Catholic values against the threat of invasion from 'outside' interests (minorities such as refugees and migrants, those that identify as LGBTQI, followers of Judaism).

Thirdly, PiS is maintaining voter support by fulfilling election promises. For example, PiS has delivered (and expanded) on a 2015 election promise to provide an unconditional monthly payment to parents of two or more children. This initiative (known as Rodzina / Family 500+) is popular throughout Poland.

Lessons can be learnt from the situation in Poland. To resonate with voters at large, social democrats throughout need to put in place mechanisms to stamp out corruption. Also, social democrats should not underestimate the ability of political opponents to misuse historical memory as a tool for electoral success. Moreover, social democrats should not overpromise to ensure that, if elected, pledges can be delivered. These may seem obvious but time and time again social democrats in Poland and beyond fail to heed these lessons.

Clearly the political situation in Poland is a matter of concern. Fading before our eyes is the independence of crucial institutions such as the judiciary and the media. Under threat is the protection and advancement of minority and human rights. Yet, Poland's social democrats are struggling to gain traction. For those of us with social democratic values, it is time to find ways to support our friends and colleagues in Poland.

Bio: Matthew joined the European Union Centre in 2014. Matthew's interest in EU-Australia relations includes the EU Digital Single Market and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), psephology (statistical analysis of elections), trade and regional development for international business, and European film festivals as tools for cultural diplomacy and soft power.

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