

POLAND'S ELECTION: A DANGEROUS DEVELOPMENT?

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With the far right making gains and losses in the Polish elections, Simon Murdoch spoke with Rafal Pankowski, co-founder of Poland's leading anti-racist organisation Never Again to understand the challenges facing the nation.



Ruling far-right party Law and Justice (PiS) won the Polish parliamentary election last weekend with 43.59% of the vote, giving it a narrow majority of 5 seats in the Sejm (lower house), though lost control of the senate (51 seats to 49). Came out ahead of the centrist Civic Coalition (27.40%) and the left-wing coalition, The Left (12.56%).

Worryingly, however, the competing and even more extreme far-right party alliance, Konfederacja, took home 6.81% of the vote (11 seats) in the Sejm.

PiS has come under fire since it came to power in 2015, with its undermining of the judiciary, the media and civil society and its campaigns featuring strong anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQ rhetoric. The country's far-right have been emboldened by these developments, with the murder of the pro-refugee Gdańsk mayor Pawel Adamowicz in January 2019 being the nadir of increased hostility towards progressive political actors.

The country's rightward and illiberal turn has also been an inspiration for the international far right. As HOPE not hate reported in November 2018 during Poland's Independence Day march, alongside a deeply worrying turnout of the domestic far right, international activists including Canadian far-right vlogger Stefan Molyneux attended. Molyneux even credited his trip with pushing him towards embracing white nationalism, telling his viewers afterwards that he'd "always been skeptical of the ideas of white nationalism" but that he "could not help but notice that I could have peaceful, free, easy, civilized and safe discussions in what is essentially an all-white country".

Illiberal and far-right forces in Central and Eastern Europe more broadly have been a source of inspiration for the international far right in recent times. Speaking at an event in Ukraine in October 2018, leading US alt-right figure Greg Johnson told the audience, "This is not a speaking tour, it's a listening tour. I really want to learn how maybe we can do things better in the United States and Western Europe".

Yet, Poland's election comes alongside events this year suggesting the tide could be beginning to turn. This week saw the defeat of the ruling far-right Fidesz party-backed mayor of Budapest in Hungary by a centre-left candidate, huge protests against the populist right-wing Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis have continued since the summer, and in June the progressive candidate Zuzana Čaputová became the first female President of Slovakia. Whilst the situation is far from straightforward, this backlash raises the question of whether the region will continue to be able to offer a vision for the international far right.

One person who has real insight on the situation facing Poland is Rafal Pankowski, co-founder of Poland's leading anti-racist organisation Never Again. Rafal was glad about the developments elsewhere in the region, yet considered that "though there are some connections and influences within the Visegrad countries [Hungary, Poland, The Czech Republic and Slovakia] especially with Hungary" overall he didn't think these recent events would have a big impact in Poland.

What, then, does Poland face now?

The Big Change

From the governing PiS, Rafal reckoned that "overall, it will be more of the same". Whilst clear that this was not a comforting baseline, his concerns were much more focused on the entry into the Sejm of 11 Konfederacja MPs. Initially established as a coalition in 2018, it has undergone changes in membership but its core, key elements are the KORWIN

party, led by Janusz Korwin-Mikke, a man who amongst other things has said women should not have the right to vote, and the extreme far-right National Movement (NM). NM itself is an alliance between former activists of the National Radical Camp, a fascist group named after an antisemitic organisation from the 1930s of the same name, and the homophobic Catholic nationalist group, All-Polish Youth, likewise named after a group from the 1930s.

Whilst KORWIN are at the extreme (Korwin-Mikke recently appeared in a video in front of the US Confederate flag) they come from a libertarian-right tradition Rafal notes, whereas the National Movement are at their core “ethno-nationalist, younger, more organised, and more racist”. Konfederacja’s entrance into parliament “is the big change” in this election; they are perhaps “the most extreme political party in Europe today when it comes to parliamentary politics”.

Yet, the danger is not only in the nation’s legislature but also on the streets. “The bulk of Konfederacja’s vote came from the younger generation, especially young men,” Rafal explained. NM members, including National Radical Camp and All-Polish Youth, are the main organisers of the annual Independence Day march in Warsaw. With the next march just a month away, the organisers have recently revealed a logo which, clutching rosary beads and declaring ‘look after the people’, puts their staunch Catholicism and nationalism front-and-centre. When I asked Rafal about whether he believed this year’s event would attract the international far right, he had no doubts, telling me that he expects it to be “as international as before, or more so”. National Movement themselves have announced that on the eve of the march, they will hold an event which will have invitees from abroad.

The Threat Against Polish LGBT+ Communities: Conspiracies, Crackdowns and Violence

At present, central to current Polish far-right narratives, be it from PiS, Konfederacja or elsewhere, are attacks on LGBT+ communities. Concrete measures have included many local governments declaring their regions “LGBT free” or “LGBT ideology free”, Rafal tells me, alluding to the anti-LGBT+ and anti-feminist conspiracy theory of ‘Gender Ideology’ which has gathered steam in the international far right (just this week the Polish parliament has voted to consider criminalising the teaching of sex education, likewise seen as part of this “ideology”).

Speaking about the “LGBT free” declarations, Rafal noted that “It has no basis in law” in Poland, but that flaunting legal boundaries has not stopped the authorities on this topic. Several times officials have tried to ban Pride marches but these have been overturned by the courts. Where they have gone ahead, there have been many cases of violence. The city of Bialystok held its first Pride march this year, but they were met with violence from some of the 4,000 counter-protesters from the far right, Rafal informs me. Poland, a deeply Catholic country, has seen this anti-LGBT+ sentiment stoked by leaders of the country’s church; the phrase “rainbow disease” has been used by some Polish bishops to describe efforts at promoting LGBT+ rights.

The Prospects for Civil Society

In this climate, the work of organisations like Never Again are vital. When I ask Rafal if the government’s undermining of institutions has extended to civil society, there’s little ambiguity for him: “Generally speaking, the answer is yes – especially the state-controlled media has gone after NGOs in a really nasty way”. Never Again themselves have faced these pressures, though were luckier because whilst “many groups that had [government] funding have lost it” they had never been recipients. Whilst they’ve stopped short of changing the laws around NGO activity, “there are some proposals for more ‘Hungarian-style’ or ‘Russian-style’ approaches”.

When I spoke to Rafal he had just returned from travelling through South East Asia, where he had taken part in several workshops in various countries in the region. At these he shared Never Again’s experiences in tackling the spread of hate and discussed the value of international cooperation, as well as how to use sport and music to help bridge division. Many participants were newer to facing their own countries’ threats from authoritarian and far-right political actors, and he was keen to stress to them that we can never take our circumstances for granted; “One of the things I could tell them is that democratic progress is not a one-way street”.

Despite recognition of this, I wondered if the event had given him a renewed sense of hope in light of the election, and he was affirmative:

“It was really positive. You know, the phrase ‘Never Again’ means different things in different places, but it’s also a kind of motto that many people in many places can relate to in their own way. So it was a real discovery that the people there

from South East Asia face many similar problems. Whilst these are worrying times, it was a pleasure to share those experiences”

<https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/2019/10/18/polands-election-a-dangerous-development>