SOCIAL DEMOCRACY WITH(OUT) PEOPLE:

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL AND EXPANSION OF THE POLISH LEFT







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This Policy Study was produced with the financial support of the European Parliament. It does not represent the view of the European Parliament.

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Front Page Photo (source): Shutterstock

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Proofreader: Rosalyne Cowie Graphic Design: ASPRA-JR

Legal deposit registration number: D/2025/15396./18

ISBN: 978-2-39076-023-8 /// 9782390760238

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION	4
2. LEFT-WING FORMATIONS IN POLAND SINCE 1990	
2.1. THE GOLDEN DECADE	
2.2. THE HISTORICAL DIVIDE	
2.3. TRAJECTORY OF DECLINE	
2.4. INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT: THE PASOKIFICATION OF THE LEFT	10
3. THE SUPPLY SIDE: PROGRAMME OF THE POLISH LEFT	
3.1. IDEOLOGICAL POSITIONS	
3.2. CHOSEN POLICIES AND MAIN GOALS	13
4 THE DEMAND SIDE: LEFT-WING ELECTORATE IN POLAND	
4.1 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS	
4.2 WORLDVIEW AND POLICY ATTITUDES	
4.3 VOTING BEHAVIOURS	19
5 DOES THE SUPPLY MEET THE DEMAND?	22
5.1 EXPECTATIONS TOWARDS THE LEFT IN POLAND	23
5.2 PERCEIVED PERFORMANCE OF THE LEFT IN POLAND	24
5.3 IN SEARCH OF A NEW SOCIAL ALLIANCE	25
6 SURVIVAL AND EXPANSION	28
6.1 SURVIVAL	29
Programme and policies	
Ideology and narratives	
Image and appeal	
Possible alliances	
6.2 EXPANSION	
Scenario A: Status quo	
Scenario C: U-turn	
Scenario D: A new social alliance	
7. CONCLUSIONS	
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	
	70

1. INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION

This policy study examines the prospects for rebuilding a strong social democratic left in Poland. The Polish left has found itself at a low point for almost two decades, with politics dominated by two main political formations of the right: Civic Platform (PO) and Law and Justice (PiS). The left has struggled to create a strong political identity, structures, leadership and membership base that could challenge this duopoly. The travails of the left are not unique to Poland and rather reflect a decline in the fortunes of many left-wing parties and movements across Europe. This has helped to fuel the rise of neo-liberal, conservative and far-right political forces and entrench right-wing ideals and opinions within large swathes of the population.

The aim of this study is to analyse how the Polish left may stabilise and rebuild itself in these challenging circumstances. We trace the rise and fall of the Polish left during the "post-socialist" transformation (i.e., after the fall of so-called "real socialism"), to understand the context of its current malaise. We look at the election manifestos of Polish social democracy (the supply side) and how these resonate with the opinions of current left-wing voters and the broader electorate (the demand side). In doing so, we are able to highlight the possible areas where the left could most fruitfully expand its support and which sections of society may be most susceptible to supporting the left.

We endeavour to answer the following questions:

- 1. What was the background and causes of the previous successes and failures of the Polish left?
- 2. What is the current electoral programme of the left, and how does this relate to the opinions of left-wing voters and the broader electorate?

- 3. How may the left form a new social alliance that could challenge the right-wing dominance in Poland?
- 4. Which political areas and combination of topics should the Polish left concentrate on when devising a new political strategy of survival and expansion?

The analysis is based on two polls conducted by Fundacja Instytut Badań Rynkowych i Społecznych (IBRIS) in November 2023 and August 2024, as well as desk research on existing sources on the general electorate and voter behaviours in Poland. These data were acquired within a project of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and the Warsaw Office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES), conducted during the years 2021-2024.

2. LEFT-WING FORMATIONS IN POLAND SINCE 1990

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The Polish left has undergone a series of transformations, since the early 1990s, whilst being dominated by the political current that emerged from the former ruling party during "real socialism". Therefore, although the organisational form, name and symbols of the Polish left have regularly changed over the past few decades, the dominant position of the "post-communist" structures has remained a consistent feature of the Polish centre-left.

We shall use the term "left" to describe the broader or prospective left-wing movement, from the centre to the radical left, that exists in Poland. The word "Lewica" (Left) is deployed to refer to the current left-wing alliance, under the same name.

2.1 THE GOLDEN DECADE

In January 1990, the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) was dissolved and replaced by a new social democratic party: the Social Democratic Party of the Republic of Poland (SdRP).1 The SdRP retained around 60,000 of the PZPR's nearly 2 million members, becoming one of the country's largest and most stable political parties. It was led by a young reformist current that had grown within the PZPR in the 1980s, which included prominent figures, such as Aleksander Kwaśniewski and Leszek Miller. Kwaśniewski became the first leader of the SdRP and then won the presidential election in 1995 (beating the leader of the Solidarity Movement, Lech Wałesa) and 2000. Kwaśniewski sought to gain political respectability for the "post-communist" left and build bridges with the liberal centre. Meanwhile, Miller was initially seen as a more "traditional" leader of the left, opposing some neo-liberal reforms whilst Labour Minister during the first SLD-led government and refusing to fully distance himself from the period of real socialism. Miller was prime minister for most of the period of the second SLD-led government (2001-2005), whilst Kwaśniewski remained president. They had a strained and competitive relationship during this time, despite there being little programmatic disagreements between them.

During the initial years of the "post-socialist" transformation, the left struggled to survive as a distinct political current. The so-called "postcommunist" left faced particular difficulties connected to its associations with the previous system. In the 1991 parliamentary elections, SdRP stood as the dominant participant in a left-wing electoral coalition: the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), which included the General Association of Trade Unions (OPZZ).² At the 1991 parliamentary elections, SLD won almost 12% of the vote, gaining 60 members of parliament (MPs). The Labour Union (UP), a party associated mainly with the left wing of the Solidarity trade union movement, which had led the opposition movement during "real socialism", won over 2%, gaining four MPs.

The left made a dramatic return in the 1993 parliamentary elections, with SLD winning 20.4% and UP 7.3% of the vote. UP refused to join a coalition government with SLD, seeing it as a party associated with the former nomenclature. SLD subsequently formed a governing coalition with the agrarian Polish People's Party (PSL), whose political roots reach back to the pre-war period. SLD consolidated itself as the dominant representative of the Polish left, by transforming into a single political party in 1997. By 1999, SLD had been accepted as a full member of both Socialist

International and the Party of European Socialists.

Although SLD lost power at the 1997 parliamentary elections, it received 700,000 more votes than it had in 1993, raising its support by seven percentage points. At this time, SLD still stood as a coalition of the left, structured around the trade union federation OPZZ, and incorporating different parties and associations of the left and progressive movements. However, UP did not manage to cross the 5% threshold needed to gain a parliamentary seat. Therefore, SLD now stood as the unrivalled left-wing party in Poland, with alternative left-wing parties (such as the UP and Polish Socialist Party (PPS)) marginalised to the sidelines of Polish politics.

SLD returned to power at the 2001 parliamentary elections, winning over 41% of the vote. This was not enough to gain an overall majority government, and SLD once again formed a majority governing coalition with PSL. In 2000, Aleksander Kwaśniewski was re-elected for the second time as president of Poland, meaning that the centreleft held a monopoly of political power in the country. However, by the mid-2000s, the left had lost both governmental and presidential power. The decisive defeat for the left was its collapse in support at the 2005 parliamentary elections, slumping to just 11.31%, with SLD losing around three guarters of its total votes and MPs from 2001. During these elections, an alternative social democratic party (Social Democracy of Poland, SdPL), created by some prominent figures (such as Speaker of the House Marek Borowski and Vice-Speaker Tomasz Nałęcz), who had broken from SLD and UP, won 3.89% of the vote. Therefore, despite suffering a sharp fall in support, SLD remained the dominant party of the Polish left.

2.2 THE HISTORICAL DIVIDE

The height of SLD's popularity corresponded with the period when the "historical cleavage" dominated Polish politics. The major divide was between parties and coalitions associated with either the former socialist system and its ruling party (the left), or those that derived from the former opposition movement (the right). These political blocs were also connected to trade union confederations rooted in the former system, that is, the left to OPZZ and the right to the Solidarity trade union ($Solidarnoś\acute{c}$).³ Alongside the historical cleavage, the "post-communist" and "post-solidarity" blocs were divided along liberal/conservative lines, around issues such as the role of the church in public life, abortion and LGBTQ+ rights.

The division of Polish politics into two blocs -SLD and the Solidarity Electoral Alliance (AWS) - reached its acme at the 1997 parliamentary elections. Both attracted support from a range of social classes, encompassing the so-called "winners" and "losers" of the "post-socialist" transformation. AWS won the votes of 26.9% of managers. 34.2% of businesspeople, 32.7% of office workers, 33.8% of the unemployed, 40.3% of industrial workers and 34.2% of pensioners. In comparison, 33.8% of managers, 22% of businesspeople, 31% of office workers, 25.4% of the unemployed, 26% of manual workers and 32.2% of pensioners voted SLD.4 These parties were not divided primarily along socio-economic lines, and they both drew their support from a range of social layers. It is therefore not the case that SLD was once a party whose primary electorate was the industrial working class or so-called "popular class". SLD had a broad social base of support, which was united primarily around historical attitudes and connections to the past. Nevertheless, SLD came to be seen as the party which best protected the living standards of the population against the negative effects of neo-liberal reforms. This image was cemented during the course of its first term in office, when it slowed down the pace of reform, which helped to boost economic growth and halve the rate of unemployment. It was in this context that SLD won its second term in office in 2001.

The collapse of AWS at the 2001 elections signalled the beginning of the end of the historical divide in Polish politics. The extreme neo-liberal policies introduced by the right-wing coalition government (1997-2001) resulted in economic

stagnation, rising social inequalities, and soaring unemployment (reaching around 20% of the working population), which decimated the political base of the AWS and its liberal coalition partner the Freedom Union (UW). UW was led by political heavyweights, such as Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Bronisław Geremek, who enhanced this government's legitimacy both domestically and abroad. Two main parties of the right emerged from the disintegration of AWS: PO and PiS, an incumbent of Centre Agreement (PC). Although there were many similarities between these two parties, they divided more clearly over socio-economic issues and drew their support from different social layers. The historical cleavage was finally dismantled after the collapse in support for SLD at the 2005 elections. Ever since, politics has been dominated by PO and PiS.

During the SLD's second term in office, living standards did not rise as they had during the previous SLD-led government, with, for example, unemployment standing at close to 20%. Simultaneously, it did not fulfil its electoral promises, such as abortion reform; it was one of the central participants in the disastrous US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and became embroiled in a series of corruption scandals.⁵ Over time, PiS replaced SLD as the major political party most regarded as representing the social interests of the population, particularly amongst the most disadvantaged sections of society. Similar to Hungary, the declining fortunes of the left were replicated with the growth of the conservative right.

2.3 TRAJECTORY OF DECLINE

The left has never managed to rebuild its support to the levels that it had enjoyed in the early 2000s. At the 2007 parliamentary elections, SLD tried to broaden its appeal by forming a new centre-left coalition (Left and Democrats, LiD). Although this was presented as a fresh start for the left, under a new younger leadership, it only managed to increase the left vote by two percentage points from 2005. In 2011, SLD won just 8.24% of the vote and gained its lowest number of votes since

1991 (Table 1). At these elections, a new eclectic social liberal party (the Palikot Movement⁶) contested the elections, eclipsing SLD by winning 10.02% of the vote. The Palikot Movement had effectively broken up by the 2015 elections, with SLD once again leading a new political coalition: United Left. United Left⁷ gained 7.55% of support (below the required 8% threshold for electoral coalitions), meaning that, for the first time, the left had no political representation in parliament. At these elections, SLD faced a new rival on the left, Razem (Together), which was formed as a leftwing alternative to SLD. Razem made a breakthrough in these elections, winning around 4% of the vote, meaning that they could receive state subsidies and survive as a political party. However, this was not enough for it to cross the parliamentary threshold of 5% for political parties, meaning that, for the first time, in modern history the Polish left had no representatives in parliament.

Razem failed in its declared political project of forming a new party that could replace SLD as the dominant party of the Polish left. At the 2019 elections, Razem candidates stood as part of the SLD slate, which won 12.56% of the vote and gained 49 MPs (Table 1). During these elections, candidates from a new social liberal party, Wiosna (Spring, led by Robert Biedroń), stood on the SLD slate. In 2021, these parties merged to form a new political party: Nowa Lewica (New Left). At the 2023 elections, Nowa Lewica led a coalition grouped under the logo of Lewica (Left), which included candidates from Razem and smaller leftwing parties, such as PPS.8 Razem candidates also stood as part of the Lewica slate, which won just 8.61% of the vote, the lowest combined percentage support for the left in any parliamentary election in modern Polish history (Table 1).9 They gained only 26 MPs and nine senators, of which 18 and five, respectively, came from the New Left. Despite this political failure, Lewica has entered the new centre-right coalition government led by Civic Coalition (KO), a liberalconservative alliance dominated by PO. From Lewica, Krzysztof Gawkowski became deputy prime minister and Minister of Digitisation; Agnieszka

Table 1. Support for the left in parliamentary elections 1991-2002.

Year	1991	1993	1997	2001	2005	2007	2011	2015	2019	2023
Party/ Coalition	SLD	SLD	SLD	SLD	SLD	Left and Democrats	SLD	United Left	SLD	New Left
% Vote	11.99	20.41	27.13	41.04	11.31	12.15	8.24	8.00	12.56	8.61
Number of Votes	1 344 820	2 815 169	3 551 224	5 342 519	1 335 257	2 122 981	1 184 303	1 147 102	2 319 946	1 859 018
Number of MPs	60	171	164	216	55	53	27	0	49	26
Party/ Coalition	Solidarity Labour	Labour Union	Labour Union		Social Democracy Poland		Palikot Movt	Party Razem		
% Vote	2.06	7.28	4.74		3.89		10,02	4		
Number of Votes	230 975	1 005 004	620 611		459 380		1 439 490	550 349		
Number of MPs	4	41	0		0		40	0		
Total Left	Total Left	Total Left	Total Left	Total Left	Total Left	Total Left	Total Left	Total Left	Total Left	Total Left
% Vote	14.05	27.69	31.87	41.04	15.2	13.15	18.26	11	12.56	8.61
Number of Votes	1 575 795	3 820 173	4 171 835	5 342 519	1 794 637	2 122 981	2 623 793	1 697 451	2 319 946	1 859 018
Number of MPs	64	212	164	216	55	53	67	0	49	26

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza.

Dziemianowicz-Bąk became Minister of Family, Labour and Social Policy; Katarzyna Kotula became Minister of Equality and Dariusz Wieczorek became Minister of Science. It also holds 16 viceministerial positions.¹⁰

The 2024 European elections confirmed the difficulties facing the left, with *Lewica* winning just 6% of the vote. *Lewica* currently participates as the smallest party in a three-way coalition government, in which its influence is severely limited.¹¹

2.4. INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT: THE PASOKIFICATION OF THE LEFT

The declining fortunes of the Polish left were part of a wider fall in support for many centre-left parties during the 2000s and 2010s. One of the most dramatic examples of this decline was the Greek social democratic party, PASOK, whose support fell from 43.9% in 2009 to 4.7% in 2015. The term "pasokification" has been widely adopted as a generic term to describe the collapse in support for

the left, which has consequently opened up room for the growth of alternative parties to their left and right.

Some major Western European social democratic parties rebuilt (at least temporarily) their electoral support, after suffering an initial electoral decline, for example, in Germany, Portugal, Scandinavia and Spain. However, others failed to recover from their electoral humiliations, for example, in Greece, the Netherlands, Ireland and France. Social democratic parties throughout Europe have suffered large falls in their membership. For example, between 2000 and 2020, membership of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) fell from 775,000 to 519,300; the French Socialist Party (PS) from 130,000 to 22,000 and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) from 400,000 to 170,000.12 Meanwhile, trade union membership also declined during this period: down in Germany from 8.6 million to 6.0 million; France from 2.2 million to 1.6 million; and Spain from 1.8 million to 1.5 million.13

The difficulties faced by the Western European social democratic left opened up space for alternatives to its left and right.¹⁴ In some cases,

parties to the left of social democracy (such as *Syriza* in Greece, *Podemos* in Spain and *Sinn Féin* in Ireland) partially replaced the centre-left parties as the dominant political representatives of the left in their respective countries. However, the decline of social democratic parties has most often resulted in the growth of right-wing populist and far-right parties, which have grown in support throughout the EU.

The fall in support for social democracy and the rise of right-wing alternatives has been particularly pronounced in Central and Eastern Europe, for example, in Czechia, Hungary and Poland. The situation in Hungary most closely resonates with what has occurred in Poland. The Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) is also a "post-communist" successor party, which evolved out of the former ruling party during socialism and in the 2000s moved politically to the centre. After winning over 40% of the vote in the 2002 and 2006 elections, MSZP suffered an electoral collapse and currently holds only ten seats in the Hungarian parliament compared to the 190 it won at the 2006 elections. The unpopular austerity measures, which it introduced during its last term in office, and the political scandal following the leak of a private speech by Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány in 2006, in which he admitted that the government had lied about the state of the economy to win elections, decimated its electoral base. His later return to politics brought the establishment of Demokratikus Koalíció (DK, Democratic Coalition) and a further fragmentation of the centreleft in Hungary. Similarly, as described above, the second SLD government (2001-2005) in Poland also failed to live up to the expectations of its electorate. The membership of social democratic parties declined from 55,000 in 2000 to 12,000 in 2024 in Hungary, and from 110,000 in 2000 to just 15,000 in 2024 in Poland. Trade union density has also fallen from 20% in 2000, to 8% in 2024 in Hungary and from 18% in 2000 to 10-11% in 2024 in Poland. 15

The effective collapse in support for the centreleft parties in Poland and Hungary facilitated the rise of right-wing authoritarian parties: the PiS Party in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary. No significant parties to the left of social democracy existed in these countries, who could gain from the declining fortunes of the SLD and MSZP, leaving space for the conservative and authoritarian right to grow. To some degree, these parties have (at least rhetorically) replaced the social democratic left as "pro-social" parties that represent the economic interests of working people and the most disadvantaged sections of society. In other words, the fall in support for the left helped to facilitate the rise of right-wing populism and illiberal authoritarianism in both Poland and Hungary.

Therefore, although the decline in support for Polish social democracy has been both dramatic and sustained, it is not unique. This means that reversing this trend does not just require minor adjustments in programme, narrative or delivery, but demands reestablishing the left as a competitive political player, reconnecting with sections of the population and rebuilding the party and trade union membership and structures.

3. THE SUPPLY SIDE: PROGRAMME OF THE POLISH LEFT

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The overall review of the political profile of *Lewica* has been compiled using the election manifestos from the 2023 parliamentary elections¹⁶ and the 2024 European elections.¹⁷ Positions and policies that, on one hand, reflect the flagship postulates traditionally associated with *Lewica*, such as for a secular state and welfare state, and on the other hand issues particularly salient in Polish society in recent years, like women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights, were selected. Some topics can be included in both categories at the same time, hence their particular cross-over significance. According to exit poll surveys, these themes also influenced motivations to participate in the elections and voting decisions.

3.1 IDEOLOGICAL POSITIONS

Characteristic of *Lewica* is a commitment to the leading role of the state in solving social problems (housing, welfare, education, pensions and healthcare) and the function of the state as a guardian of norms and standards with respect to market forces, especially concerning the labour market and the economy. The state is also an initiator of investment in public goods, as opposed to the socio-economic life being directed by market forces and corporations.

A strong, modern, worldview-neutral state, firmly rooted in the EU, skilfully implementing the principles of subsidiarity (role of local governments) plays a central role in the implementation of public policies and the creation of conditions for the realisation of citizens' needs. The state is also the guardian of the human rights and liberties of its citizens, including minorities and those seeking international protection in Poland.

Lewica represents the interests of employees, protecting workers' rights and improving employment conditions. This constitutes one of the central pillars of Lewica's political programme, standing in the tradition of the labour movement in Poland and abroad.

Lewica also presents the most advanced (progressive) worldview of all the parties present on the Polish political scene, going furthest in terms of supporting human rights, the rights of women, sexual minorities and migrants.

3.2 CHOSEN POLICIES AND MAIN GOALS

The positions and policies of the Polish left were organised into sixthematic groups: (1) the welfare state and the labour market; (2) social policy and housing; (3) climate and energy; (4) migration and security; (5) worldview and values; and (6) the overall approach towards European integration.

The welfare state and the labour market

Lewica supports the need for dignified and stable employment, achieved through eliminating precarious employment conditions (so-called "junk contracts" and forced self-employment), guaranteeing full employment rights for those working for digital platforms, banning free internships and introducing minimum hourly wage for interns, preventing wage discrimination and violence at work, legally eliminating the so-called gender gap, limiting working time by increasing the number of days of annual leave, and gradually reducing weekly working hours without reducing wages. Lewica proposes introducing 2.5 times higher

pay for work on Sundays, holidays and public holidays. Employment standards should be protected throughout the EU, through the introduction of the so-called European Workers' Package.

Lewica also advocates measures to increase wages: raising the minimum wage in Poland to 66% of the previous year's average wage; supporting the establishment of a European minimum wage; paying interest for late payment; and providing remuneration for periods of inability to work in the form of sick pay equal to 100% of wages.

Lewica also postulates strengthening social dialogue, trade unions and the principle of codetermination through the spread of company and subcompany collective agreements and strengthening the role of works councils.

Concerning taxation, *Lewica* proposes reducing the VAT rate and simplifying the law on income and corporate tax. It also advocates a progressive income tax rate, taxing large digital corporations and countering tax avoidance.

Social policy and housing policy

Lewica is committed to preserving the social benefits (transfers) introduced by the PiS-led government for families in the form of cash transfers, additionally valorising them annually by the inflation index. It is also important to increase institutional care for dependent family members: children (availability of crèches); the elderly (day care homes for seniors); and systemic support for people with disabilities.

In terms of housing, Lewica recognises the acute lack of availability of new flats and proposes to solve this through the National Housing Programme and the European Housing Fund, using EU funds for housing construction. Above all, Lewica postulates supporting rental properties, housing associations and non-profit entities that want to build housing. Local governments should play a special role in solving the housing issue. The state should regulate rents and the quality of rental properties.

Climate and energy

Lewica is in favour of decarbonisation and investment in the development of nuclear energy and low-carbon renewable energy, as well as strengthening energy cooperation within the EU, in particular the development of a new energy market model, a system of emission fees and support for cooperative financing of large-scale energy.

In addition to the energy transition, *Lewica* also supports energy efficiency, namely, investments in thermo-modernisation and the replacement of heating sources. This involves not only reducing the cost of energy production but also the level of energy consumption. The universal financing of affordable electricity is to be implemented by introducing a cheaper tariff for the average energy consumption level in households with similar characteristics.

Lewica promotes the concept of a "just transition", meaning that the green transition must not come at the expense of workers. As we move away from fossil fuels, the left proposes supporting the regions most heavily dependent on them, thus maintaining employment levels and living standards in these areas.

Migration and security

Lewica is in favour of a humane migration and refugee policy: respecting the right to seek international protection both at the border and within the territory of the Republic of Poland; ending the pushback of those seeking protection; and preventing the deaths of refugees. It supports ensuring the fundamental rights of refugees, in particular opposing the separation of families.

Lewica criticises the Migration and Asylum Pact, seeing it, unlike other parties, as violating human rights in the EU. Lewica believes that the EU should take responsibility for its borders and strongly opposes cooperation in this area with authoritarian regimes, such as Turkey, Libya or Tunisia. It instead proposes a common EU asylum law.

In the field of security, *Lewica* puts its weight behind the mechanisms of a common foreign and defence policy of the EU. It supports the integration of armed forces within the EU, aiming at self-sufficiency and defence autonomy for Europe within the structures of NATO, and the European defence industry.

Worldview and values

Lewica's most prominent theme for several years has been the right to legal abortion up to 12 weeks. This should apply throughout the EU as part of the EU Charter of Women's Rights. Lewica also calls for the European principle of gender parity.

Lewica also calls for the protection of the rights of LGBTQ+ people, full marriage equality, the institution of civil partnerships regardless of gender, and the facilitation of the legal and medical procedures for gender reconciliation.

Lewica also demands the secularisation of the state to end the privileged position of the Catholic Church: termination of the Concordat; financial separation of church and state; and the abolition of the conscience clause of doctors and pharmacists.

European integration

The declared goal of *Lewica* is to strengthen Poland's role in the EU through cooperation with its member states and institutions based on respect and trust, which would materialise in the launch of the draft European constitution.

The concept of a "two-speed Europe" is extremely harmful from the perspective of Poland and the countries of the Central and Eastern Europe region, which is why Lewica wants to pursue closer European integration through cooperation on social matters, including the introduction of equal standards of protection of the labour law, social insurance and healthcare. Lewica does not rule out Poland adopting the euro as its currency, but only after the convergence criteria have been met and at an optimal time for the Polish economy and domestic households.

Lewica also calls for closer energy cooperation within the EU through an effective system to promote and finance a fair energy and economic transition. Lewica supports the EU aspirations of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the Western Balkan countries, as well as European defence cooperation. Lewica's programme is one of Poland's most pro-European political manifestos today.

4. THE DEMAND SIDE: LEFT-WING ELECTORATE IN POLAND

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This chapter looks at the characteristics of the left-wing electorate in Poland: available data on its basic demographic; their worldview and attitudes towards chosen policy issues; and voting behaviours, such as party loyalty/electoral volatility, voter flows, voting alternatives and negative electorate/negative partisanship. The broad left-wing electorate is understood as citizens who identify with left-wing parties and their ideologies, and who are willing to vote accordingly. Occasionally, we also refer to left-wing voters who confirmed voting for left-wing parties in a past ballot.

Recent research suggests that demographic labels are increasingly less reliable in prognosing partisan identities. The ability to predict political behaviour using demographic characteristics only is generally low. Partisanship (self-identification with a political party or party membership), specific views on policy issues and even non-policy opinions (e.g., perceptions of individual politicians) prove more prognostic of voting choice.¹⁸

Nevertheless, by analysing voters by demographic factors, we are better able to understand their life situation, living circumstances and economic self-interest before moving on to their ideological positions. Together, they can better explain the impact of socio-economic and political transformations, as well as understand the underlying motivations for their political decisions and voting behaviours.

4.1 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARAC-TERISTICS¹⁹

The left-wing electorate in Poland is predominantly urban (Table 2). The left enjoys primary popu-

larity in medium-sized and big cities, in the west and north of the country, as opposed to the southeast, a stronghold of the PiS party. The left is also more popular among the diaspora in Western and Northern Europe than with voters at home.²⁰ A sharp decline in the popularity of the left among the rural electorate, including farmers, occurred between 2001 and 2008 and has never really recovered. The reasons for this might be the disintegration of the left, resulting in electoral defeat, and a parallel transformation of its ideological identity, gradually gravitating towards a more educated, urban electorate. Meanwhile, the support for the right amongst rural voters has continued to grow, especially since PiS took over in 2015.21 Although PiS lost some support in society during the recent parliamentary and regional elections, rural areas remain its major strongholds.

The left-wing electorate in Poland has been relatively gender-balanced, with similar support among men and women (Table 2).22 However, a visible change was observed in 2023, when more women than men voted for Lewica (according to exit polls: 10.1% versus 6.9%23). This phenomenon most probably can be attributed to a situational factor: the near-total abortion ban introduced in 2020, which Lewica made one of its flagship issues. In 2020, an increase in left-wing beliefs among women in most age categories was observed, although this remains below those with centrist and right-wing attitudes.24 Moreover, despite a clear pro-women messaging and prominent female politicians of Lewica, a large proportion of female voters has persistently cast its votes for PiS (2015: 39.7%, 2019: 43%, 2023: 36%).25

Table 2. Socio-economic and demographic characteristics of left-wing voters as a percentage of total electorate.

		2010	2012	2024
General		11%	8%	7%
Gender	Male	12%	8%	7%
	Female	10%	7%	6%
Age	18-24	6%	4%	7%
	25-34	17%	5%	7%
	35-44	12%	7%	9%
	45-54	9%	9%	8%
	55-64	14%	9%	5%
	65 and more	8%	8%	4%
Place of residence	Rural areas	8%	5%	5%
	Town up to 19,000	13%	7%	4%
	City 20,000-99,000	10%	10%	8%
	City 100,000-499,000	16%	11%	5%
	City 500,000 and more	14%	5%	12%
Education	Elementary	8%	5%	12%
	Vocational	9%	8%	4%
	Secondary	11%	8%	3%
	Higher	17%	8%	10%
ncome	Below 500 PLN/1,999 PLN	7%	7%	8%
	501-750 PLN/2000-2,999 PLN	10%	5%	3%
	751-1,000 PLN/3000-3,999 PLN	12%	7%	7%
	1,001-1,500/4,000-4,999 PLN	17%	9%	6%
	1,501 PLN/5,000 PLN and higher	11%	8%	8%

Sources: CBOS, BS/102/2010, July 2010; CBOS, BS/80/2012, June 2012; CBOS, NR 1/2024, January 2024.

The left-wing electorate is also made up of people who tend to have a higher level of education, particularly when it comes to the percentage of voters with secondary and higher education and working in white-collar professions, such as specialists and managers (Table 2). The left-wing agenda is appealing to a relatively well-off electorate, which corresponds with the level of education and place of residence (urban areas), but also low-income households.

Although the left has long enjoyed the most popularity among more mature voters (especially 30-54 year olds), the 2023 parliamentary election has shown a loss in the oldest cohort (60 year olds and above) and a steady gain in the youngest co-

horts of voters (18-24 and 25-34 year olds).²⁶ Today, students are also among the core left-wing voters. This corresponds with the rise in left-wing voters with primary education, which might be a result of mobilising young voters who are still continuing education as high school or university students.

4.2 WORLDVIEW AND POLICY ATTITUDES²⁷

The left-wing voters in Poland are self-conscious and tend to vote in line with their ideological preferences and party identification. The declared frequency of conversations about politics stands out for those with left-wing views,²⁸ and they tend to hold a genuine interest in politics and follow public debates.

As for the worldview, the left-wing electorate is committed to progressive values. One of their hallmarks is their consistency in rejecting religious practices, such as Sunday worship, holding negative attitudes toward the relationship of the state with the Catholic Church and against the interference thereof in politics.

Over the last ten years, the left-wing electorate has also become increasingly aware and sensitive to civil liberties and limiting state power and violence. Awareness and support for women's and LGBTQ+ rights have also risen significantly. All these phenomena can, with high probability, be attributed to the traumatising experiences caused by the policies and actions of the United Right government.²⁹ The upward trends are most prominent from 2019 onwards, when the openly homophobic narrative prominently entered the public debate ("LGBT-free zones"),30 the pro-partisan Constitutional Tribunal imposed a near-total abortion ban,31 and the number of cases of police brutality against protesting citizens rose.32 All this happened during the second term in office of the United Right government.

At the same time, next to progressive opinions and a liberal lifestyle, the left-wing electorate also manifests a consistently positive attitude towards the social functions of the state, maintaining the welfare state and social justice in terms of redistribution, particularly progressive taxation.

Regarding the role of Poland in the world, leftwing voters agree with a proactive policy towards tightening the relationships with eastern European countries (former Soviet republics). Left-wing voters also exhibit high approval rates for EU membership and are today the third most pro-European electorate after KO³³ and Third Way (*Trzecia Droga*, TD³⁴).³⁵ Support for closer EU integration has been on the rise in the last decade, especially after the United Right government entered a collision course with Brussels in 2015, in terms of both narrative and legal dimensions. Violations of the rule of law in Poland and resistance to implementing remedial actions proposed by the EU resulted in numerous infringement procedures and eventually in the blocking of funds from the Recovery and Resilience Facility. In this conflict, left-wing voters not only took the EU's side but also blamed the United Right government for the escalation.³⁶

Meanwhile, sympathy towards non-European migrants and support for a green transition have recently sunk. This, most probably, can be attributed to the escalating situation at the Polish-Belarusian border; rising costs of energy caused, among other factors, by the Russian war in Ukraine; and rising anti-refugee propaganda in Poland and the EU. At the same time, sympathy towards receiving Ukrainian refugees is the highest among leftwing voters (86%).³⁷

Over the last two decades, the left in Poland has successfully appealed to the rising middle class but simultaneously gradually lost its connection with the traditional working class and what some describe as the "popular class". Today, it is visibly less popular with voters in blue-collar jobs. with vocational training and with lower incomes. This is the most striking rift between the historical identity of left-wing voters and the current left-wing electorate. However, it also reflects the ongoing changes in Polish society, initiated by the 1989 transformation (the collapse of the planned economy, privatisation of state-owned enterprises, the introduction of a market economy, the rapid development of the private service sector) and continuing over time with mega-trends affecting modern societies, such as globalisation, technological progress, digitalisation and connectivity, ageing populations, and the resulting new organisational business models.

4.3 VOTING BEHAVIOURS³⁸

There is no comprehensive data reflecting voter flows between parties in Poland. However, CBOS

Table 3. Voter flows from the left to major political parties in Poland.

	PiS	PO	Lewica	Korwin/ Konfederacja	Palikot/ Kukiz/TD	PSL	N/v
Lewica 2007-2011	4	18	38	Х	8	9	23
Lewica 2011-2015	18	6	55	0	6	9	6
Lewica 2019-2023	0	3	56	1	1	Х	6

Sources: CBOS, BS/151/2011, November 2011; CBOS, NR 166/2015, December 2015; CBOS, NR 100/2023, August, 2023.

offers a general overview of voter migration, alternative electoral choices and negative electorates (Table 3). Their observations reach as far back as 2007 and offer a general understanding of voter loyalty, partisan hostility and even some assumptions regarding tactical voting.

Despite being a relatively small section of the electorate (8%), left-wing voters in Poland are disciplined and tend to vote in line with their ideological preferences and party identification. Regardless of the often-changing electoral alliances of the Polish left – new names, logos and changing constellations of the participating parties – left-wing voters are rather loyal. Although the commitment to vote among left-wing voters was historically relatively high, it has decreased over time. With about 60% declaring they would vote from 2011 onwards, this significantly dropped in the last parliamentary elections in 2023.³⁹

Today, left-wing voters are at the centre of the anti-PiS coalition. Yet, it was not always this way. In 2015, after eight years of the liberal-conservative government of PO led by Donald Tusk, a small fraction of left-wing voters (18%) migrated to the PiS party,⁴⁰ which introduced some policies aimed at raising social welfare and reducing social inequalities whilst in government. The United Right coalition government indeed improved social redistribution schemes, not least through the provision of new child benefits, nicknamed "500+". However, this was combined with the implemen-

tation of a right-wing conservative programme; the dismantling of some democratic standards, minority rights and the rule of law; and conflict with the EU. Also, despite the expansion of certain social benefits, the PiS government did not, for example, significantly invest in public services such as health and education. In these circumstances, left-wing voters switched back to the left.⁴¹

Since 2015, half of the left-wing voters have remained loyal to *Lewica*, despite splits on the left and the emergence of a new formation – *Wiosna* – which has inevitably resulted in personnel changes and politicians even switching parties. Some disaffected left-wing voters voted for the PO-led, liberal-conservative KO or, to a lesser extent, experimented with newly emerging, eclectic formations led by newcomers to politics, with anti-establishment narratives, for example, Ruch Palikota (2011) or *Kukiz'15* (2015). This was also the case with TD (2023), although they had a more clearly defined centre-right/liberal ideological position and allied with PSL, a veteran in the Polish political landscape.

The left-wing electorate is loyal and they tend not to vote for right-wing parties. It unchangeably and most vehemently applies to PiS, at least from the mid-2000s, and with lesser intensity to the far-right formations of Janusz Korwin-Mikke and their successors (UPR/Wolność/Konfederacja, etc.).

Table 4. Alternative voting decisions and negative electorate of the left-wing voters.

	Electoral alternatives for left-wing voters (If I had a second vote, I would cast it for)							Negative electorate (I would never vote for)					
	PiS	PO	Korwin/ Konfede- racja	Palikot/ Kukiz/ TD/ Samo- obrona	PSL	N/v	PiS	PO	Korwin/ Konfede- racja	Palikot/ Kukiz/ TD/ Samo- obrona	PSL	N/v	
Lewica 2001	6	21	Х	2	22	36	7	22	Х	19	2	5	
Lewica 2007	0	40	2	0	10	31	71	0	9	88	6	0	
Lewica 2011	7	37	Х	5	16	27	73	14	6	14	8	5	
Lewica 2017	6	25	2	8	2	28	72	9	36	34	11	6	
Lewica 2019	1	52	4	Х	12	31	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	
Lewica 2023	0	21	9	26	9	32	82	15	45	18+29	16	4	

Sources: CBOS, BS/85/2001, June 2001; CBOS, BS/25/2007, February 2007; CBOS, BS/78/2011, June 2011; CBOS, 38/2017, April 2017; CBOS, NR 123/2019, October 2019; CBOS, NR 32/2023, March 2023.

Regarding alternative voting decisions, the left in Poland finds itself in direct competition with PO, although they are potentially losing more voters to the conservative-liberals than the reverse (Table 4). Since the left flank of the political scene in Poland has been monopolised by alliances led by

the SLD, many left-wing voters see no alternative options.

The left is also often the most viable voting alternative among all voters, proving the existence of a potential electorate of quite significant size.

5. DOES THE SUPPLY MEET THE DEMAND?

5. DOES THE SUPPLY MEET THE DEMAND?

The historical identity of left-wing voters differs significantly from the structure of the left-wing electorate today, reflecting the change in Polish society, namely, the gradual decline of the traditional working class (blue-collar jobs) and the emergence of other socio-economic groups of people in different forms of employment, performing different types of labour, often in whitecollar jobs. On one hand, this partially corresponds to changes inspired by the neoliberal turn in economic thinking particularly visible in the Anglo-Saxon context (Thatcherism, Reaganomics), which pushed for deindustrialisation and privatisation of public services. On the other hand, it also showcases Polish exceptionalism and the effects of the post-1989 transformation that brought about a rapid implementation of a free-market economy (shock doctrine), resulting in structural mismatches, fragmentation of the labour market and widening inequalities. The EU accession, 15 years later, helped to cushion some of these effects, for example, by joining the single market and the use of Cohesion Funds. The form of the working class has changed and diversified during the past few decades. Regardless of being professionally active in heavy industry, services or the knowledge economy, working people still face risks resulting from asymmetric shocks affecting the economies and the erosion of the welfare state, which, in turn, has an impact on employment conditions and living standards.

Left-wing voters are loyal and *Lewica* is the most popular first alternative among all voters. This theoretically suggests the existence of a potential electorate of significant size. Successfully combining emancipatory principles with the concept of the welfare state could become a fundament of a new social alliance for the left

in Poland. However, the key question is whether there is enough common interest to maintain the current liberal-progressive voter base and reclaim the support of the left-wing electorate with a traditional worldview, yet identifying with etatist views on the economy.

5.1 EXPECTATIONS TOWARDS THE LEFT IN POLAND⁴²

Data shows that the *Lewica* voters have clear expectations with regards to improving employment conditions and fostering workers' rights: strengthening the trade unions; paid internships; fully paid sick leave; a 35-hour working week; raising the minimum wage; a pay rise for public sector employees; reducing unemployment; curbing precarious employment and forced self-employment; and charging interest on delayed wages. These proposals are pronounced in the current manifesto of *Lewica* and were consequently presented in both the parliamentary and European elections.

The strong interest in economic issues is also reflected in the overall expectations of *Lewica* voters towards the new government of Donald Tusk: changes in the income tax system (simplification of taxes, reduction of taxes); changes in the economic policy (stopping inflation, lower prices); and changes in international relations (regaining a strong position in the EU). Voters also expect them to take a clearer stance on economic issues (taxes, inflation, etc.).

But the socio-economic proposals of *Lewica* seldomly reach the electorate. Even if a few social policy issues resonate with voters, like more

medicine price control and increasing the stock of rental housing, voters do not associate the left with these issues, which previously had been the domain of the left.

Instead, the Polish left is associated with "freedom", "tolerance" and a "secular state" and seen as pro-European and green. In the minds of voters, *Lewica* stands for women's rights (abortion, access to contraception), LGBTQ+ rights and IVF. The excessive messaging on these issues happens at the cost of a traditional left-wing agenda: social and economic issues and the welfare state. The left-wing narrative has, therefore, become detached from the bread and butter issues of everyday life.

The symbolic turn of the Polish left towards worldview topics is an internationally visible trend. Building outreach campaigns around emotionally loaded and polarising identity issues has a mobilising effect on certain segments of the electorate, but simultaneously alienates others. The election success of the opposition in the 2023 parliamentary elections would not have been possible without the votes of (young) women. Lewica voters were particularly mobilised by the near-complete ban on abortion and ignoring the massive protests against the previous government (21%).43 But the choice of women in the 2024 European elections was a rude awakening: according to the exit polls, more of them voted for the conservative, anti-abortion far-right Konfederacja (8.1%) and the liberal-conservative KO (40%) than the pro-choice Lewica (7.9%).44

To sum up, at the manifesto level, even if there is a general agreement with the progressive worldview program of the left, in the eyes of the voters, lifestyle messaging seems to be missing from a convincing, progressive, modern economic agenda, manifesting more respect for working people and recognising the value of labour. Campaigning on worldview issues is not enough to build a broad and sustainable voter base.

5.2 PERCEIVED PERFORMANCE OF THE LEFT IN POLAND

Even if the left-wing electorate in Poland is disciplined and value-driven in their electoral choices (31.2%),⁴⁵ there is a discrepancy between the views of some voters on specific policy issues and their political decisions (not voting according to convictions). The disappointment in the electoral performance of *Lewica* may lead to tactical voting for other parties, despite support for leftwing policies. Therefore, there must be reasons other than the manifesto dimension that stop potential voters from choosing *Lewica* on election day.

The declining fortunes of the Polish left is entrenching its lack of a clear political, programmatic and organisational identity. SLD had a strong organisational structure, membership base and image, with the party's name and symbols recognisable in society. However, over the past decade, the left has undergone a number of organisational and name changes, which have weakened the identity of the left as a strong, autonomous political force. As it periodically allied with liberal parties, and now participates in a coalition government led by the centre-right, its identity as a clear independent party of the left has eroded.

The left no longer has a clearly identifiable political leader, with the leaders of the three main political groupings (Włodzimierz Czarzasty (SLD/Nowa Lewica); Robert Biedroń (Wiosna/Nowa Lewica) and (until recently) Adrian Zandberg (Razem46)), who at times compete for the position of leader of the left. There are no political leaders from the left who are highly recognisable and trusted by the Polish population. In a survey carried out in 2023, the left-wing personalities Włodzimierz Czarzasty, Robert Biedroń and Adrian Zandberg were identified as influential leaders by only 3.0%, 2.9% and 1.0% of respondents, respectively. 47 Society does not display trust for the leaders of the left. For example, 30.6% of Polish society say they trust Czarzasty, with 46.3% saying they distrust him, whilst 21.7% declare trust for Biedroń compared to 47.2% who respond that they do not trust him. Meanwhile, 28.4% of respondents say they trust Agnieszka Dziemianowicz-Bąk, with 27% responding that they distrust her. 48 This relatively good score for a left-wing leader perhaps reflects how her work as the Minister of Family, Labour and Social Policy is recognised by some sections of society and reveals how the left could benefit when it concentrates on improving the living standards of the population. Whether her record in government is enough to raise her profile sufficiently as a recognisable and popular leader of the left remains to be seen.

One of the problems for the left at the moment is that the electorate does not regard *Lewica* as a party that protects socio-economic interests. There are no longer any highly recognised leaders from the left connected to economic issues. This is in contrast to the 1990s and early 2000s, when left-wing leaders, such as Grzegorz Kołodko and Marek Belka, were acknowledged leading economic experts.

To sum up, the overall image of Lewica is positive, as it is perceived as a "warm" party with a "human touch". But with three party chairmen -Włodzimierz Czarzasty for SLD, Robert Biedroń for Wiosna and Adrian Zandberg usually representing Razem - the Polish left appears fragmented, cannibalising the already very narrow electorate. Despite Lewica's support for women's rights, its political leadership continues to be dominated by men. No consistent image and the lack of distinctive leadership leave the question about who is in charge without a clear answer. Left-wing activism - incidental mobilisation of all formations around protests or strikes and blocking evictions - dominates over communicating left-wing answers to real-world problems like employment, the economy, welfare, inequalities and social policy. As a result, the left in Poland lacks an identity; on one hand, because of the multipolar structure of Lewica, on the other hand, because of the strong perception within Polish society that it prioritises cultural over economic matters.

5.3 IN SEARCH OF A NEW SOCIAL ALLIANCE

The last survey commissioned for the purpose of this study⁴⁹ tried to examine how large support for progressive policies is among the general electorate to assess possible vectors for expansion. The purpose of this poll was also to establish if and how significant the overlap was between voters supporting both the economic agenda of *Lewica*, such as a modern welfare state, progressive taxation and active labour market policies, and their flagship worldview positions, such as unlimited access to abortion, registered partnerships for all and a secular state.

There is significant support in the general population for a proactive role of the state in providing social services and housing (welfare state), a proactive role in shaping industrial relations and employment conditions (active labour market policies), and economic redistribution (social security). The working population is particularly interested in proactive labour market policies: more regulation/regulatory role of the state in employment relations and protecting workers' rights, but not necessarily job creation. This also applies more to women, probably due to their experiences of discrimination. Generally, welfare state issues are equally popular among men and women; however, they are more salient among older (aged 50+) and less educated voters. A progressive and solidaristic welfare system in which high earners contribute proportionally more was especially unpopular among the youngest voters (aged 18-29). The social agenda is also more popular among inhabitants of small and middle-sized cities, that is, the urban population beyond metropoles.

On the contrary, there is less support within society for implementing progressive taxation and social insurance policies, which are an essential pillar of a social democratic economic programme to help generate revenue and redistribute wealth. Nevertheless, nearly half of the population still support such policies. Again, there is greater support for progressive taxation and social insurance

Figure 1. Overall support for core social-democratic positions in key electorates and non-voters in the 2023 parliamentary election: welfare state; protection of workers' rights; progressive taxation; secular state; unconditional access to abortion; and same-sex partnerships.



Source: IBRIS survey August 2024.

policies amongst the general population than within the left electorate.

The second main area of Lewica's political programme concerns worldview issues. There is relatively high support in the general population for a secular state and keeping institutionalised religion separate from the state. A considerably higher proportion of left-wing voters support women's unconditional right to abortion and for same-sex couples to have the right to form a legal partnership. Nevertheless, over 40% of the general population still agree with such policies, which is greater than those who oppose it. A significant minority is strongly opposed to such policies, showing how part of the population has entrenched conservative opinions and is unlikely to ever vote for the left. All worldview issues are more popular among higher educated, younger voters (aged 30-39 for women's rights and aged 19-24 for LGBTQ+ rights) and the urban population, including from the biggest cities. However, women's and LGBTQ+ rights resonate better with women.

The final area covered in this part of research concerns the green transition and European integration. Here, we find that almost half of society and left-wing voters support these issues, with slightly more left-wing voters in favour of both transitioning from coal and further integrating into the EU.

To sum up, there is a sensibility towards certain aspects of *Lewica*'s manifesto among the general electorate, correlating stronger with urban residence and higher education attainment. Proposals on developing a modern welfare state are more accepted in society than the worldview agenda, as well as the positions of *Lewica* on the energy transition to renewable energy sources and EU integration. However, from the demographic perspective,

the overlap between the segments of the electorate presenting a strong pro-welfare state orientation and voters more attracted to worldview issues is limited. Therefore, building a new social alliance connecting traditional social democracy with the new left may prove challenging.

The left electorate is most clearly aligned with the different policy areas included in Lewica's manifesto (Figure 1). The Konfederacja electorate is most opposed to the left-wing political agenda on both economic and worldview issues. There is no possibility for the left to try and win the support of this section of the electorate. Although less extreme than Konfederacja voters, the TD electorate also tends to be generally liberal on economic issues and conservative on social issues, meaning that there is little room for the left to expand its base of support amongst these voters. The non-voters in the 2023 parliamentary elections are somewhere in the middle: they are receptive to the social agenda, but more sceptical of the worldview agenda, although not to the same degree as right-wing voters.

When it comes to the two parties/coalitions that have dominated Polish politics for much of the past two decades, we can see possible room for the Polish left to expand. PiS voters are extremely pro-social in their economic opinions and if the left were to actively advance a left-wing economic agenda and cultivate an image and narrative within society around this, then it may be able to win over some PiS voters. However, these voters are amongst the most conservative and religious sections of society, which could discourage them from voting for the left. We find that the views of KO voters do not necessarily correlate with the liberal image of this party. These voters are not orthodox supporters of neo-liberal reform and possess some pro-social opinions, alongside holding liberal opinions on issues such as abortion. The left could therefore potentially cut into the voting base of KO.

Interestingly, the electorate of all the political parties/coalitions (including, to some degree, those of Konfederacja and TD) are generally supportive of improving workers' rights and building a welfare state. This further confirms our contention that the left should seek to build a social alliance based on the interests of working people and devise an economic strategy of public investment and social redistribution to meet these needs. Meanwhile, all of these voters, including amongst the left, are sceptical towards progressive taxation. Perhaps one way to square this circle would be for Lewica to advocate taxes that burden working people the least through targeting the most wealthy and highest earners. What is clear is that, on economic issues, the general electorate actually stands slightly to the left of the left-wing electorate. There is therefore even less basis for pursuing the failed "Third Way" strategy, carried out in the early/mid-2000s, of adopting a more neo-liberal economic policy stance.

Non-voters don't differ much from the overall population. They also expressed high support for a welfare state that fulfils citizens' needs by delivering social services and infrastructure as well as protecting workers' rights. They also tend to be in favour of a secular state free from the influence of religious organisations on public policies. However, when it comes to other worldview positions of the left, they are more distanced. Non-voters are less in favour of access to abortion and same-sex partnerships for all than liberal and left-wing voters. They also reported lower levels of support for closer EU integration and the energy transition. Nevertheless, overall, there is a notable level of support for a social democratic agenda, even if asymmetrically trending towards the socio-economic dimension.

6. SURVIVAL AND EXPANSION

6. SURVIVAL AND EXPANSION

The Polish political scene is dominated by the fierce competition between KO and PiS. No political formation seems to be able to successfully challenge this duopoly. The Polish left suffers from an identity crisis, both in terms of its popular perception tilted towards identity politics and because of its fragmented, vague leadership. Facing the petrified power dynamics in Polish politics and the ever-shrinking left-wing electorate, Lewica has two major tasks ahead. Firstly, it must develop a short-term tactic of survival to solidify its voter base and retain voter loyalty. Secondly, it must design a long-term strategy for expansion in the future, when more favourable conditions may exist for appealing to new potential voters and creating the space for a broader voter base for the left in Poland.

6.1 SURVIVAL

There are four areas in which improvements are fundamental for the left in Poland to survive the current political cycle without losing more voters before the next elections. These tactics refer to the manifesto, communications, strategy and organising recommendations along four dimensions: programme and policies; ideology and narratives; image and appeal; and possible alliances.

Programme and policies

The left-wing voters are committed to progressive values and worldviews, especially regarding a secular state, women's rights and LGBTQ+rights. The left-wing voters are also rather positive about European integration and the EU itself. This makes them susceptible to the liberal-conservative offer of KO and TD, even if their views on climate and migration policy are volatile and

susceptible to dominant narratives present in the public debate.

Both updated election programmes of Lewica (2023, 2024) offer a robust, modern social agenda that prioritises housing, the labour market, education and healthcare policy. However, the effects of digitalisation are mostly addressed through the lens of protecting workers' rights and privacy. Meanwhile, social policy topics have been successfully hijacked by PiS, which opts for a classic, although conservative form of welfare state based on social transfers. This offer is also not fully satisfactory from a left-wing point of view: it is too archaic for today's challenges, not fulfilling the expectations of a proactive welfare state protecting workers' rights and offering high-quality social services next to money transfers. It is designed to partially redistribute wealth through individualised social transfers, often aligned to a conservative ideological agenda, rather than using the state to invest in public services and infrastructure, for example, through a programme of constructing social housing or using the opportunities brought by mega-trends, such as digitalisation.

For the left to survive, public policy, redistribution, a modern welfare state, progressive taxation and active labour market policies must remain at the core of the left-wing manifesto and be better communicated to the public. *Lewica* also has to offer an alternative vision of stability, as, under the present circumstances, these issues favour the right: law and order; militarism; restricted immigration; and security.

Ideology and narratives

Worldview issues are extremely important for left-wing voters. Yet, they are also in favour of investing in welfare and expanding the regulatory functions of the state, especially with regard to the labour market. Meanwhile, Lewica has positioned itself in the cultural corner and cannot bring these ideas to general awareness. In the eyes of left-wing voters, there is much focus on culture, lifestyle, worldview and identity politics, which in a way became a niche for Lewica and its signature topics. Yet, as election results prove, they are not always enough to achieve satisfactory results, when the momentum in public debate is lost. On the positive side, Lewica is uniquely recognised as the party that represents the interests of workers, which is a major potential advantage. It should move towards being a left-wing party embracing a diversity of views and positions and developing a narrative that highlights both the unity of interests and diversity of lifestyles within this social layer.

Hence, for the survival of Lewica, its public perception must be recalibrated, bringing the existing social agenda into the spotlight, and move away from the dominating worldview issues, whilst not abandoning them. The socio-economic arguments and ideas of Lewica win recognition and support in society when they reach the electorate. They should be more pronounced in the public debate, with clear messaging and outreach and not only elaborated on in great detail in written documents. The Polish left should be more daring in owning political issues relevant for the voters and work on building credibility around them. This refers, in particular, to revamping their competence on economy and adding a fresh take on innovations. In this vein, the media presence of Lewica, today focused on worldview issues, must be equally balanced by presenting the socio-economic manifesto. They must also find a way of synthesising these issues through building a state that is protective, redistributive and fair to all sections of society.

Image and appeal

In the past, the Polish left ran on a number of different platforms: LiD; Lewica; Nowa Lewica; SLD; Wiosna; Razem etc. Today, the left in Poland is small, fragmented and populated by numerous

formations, fuelled by internal divisions. The image of *Lewica* is distorted and vague. This results from numerous experiments with brands, logos and election alliances. In the eyes of its voters, *Lewica* has no identity – on one hand, because of a multipolar structure of the left, and on the other hand because it is recognised for its cultural rather than economic views.

In some segments of society, there is a craving for change: new ideas; new policy approaches; and breaking down the political monopoly of Tusk-Kaczyński. This could potentially be the space for *Lewica* to rise. However, it seems that, with the current personnel, it is unable to generate a strong political narrative and alternative leadership. The great assets for *Lewica* remain its strong, charismatic, outspoken female figures. For *Lewica*, a great opportunity and possible future investment could also emerge from targeting the youngest voters, who are most drawn to leftwing opinions.

Improving the general appeal of Lewica is crucial for its survival. To achieve this goal, the leadership problem must be fixed to unite the movement and make it more credible to the general public. Firstly, instead of dispersed responsibility and one-man political parties, a convincing leadership must be established. Secondly, a dominant leadership role for the women of Lewica could improve the party's image, as their potential has not yet been fully instrumentalised, especially with regard to an all-male leadership. Finally, generating more politicians with clear thematic portfolios and profiles could help mainstream diverse aspects of Lewica's manifesto, not only niche topics. The left must not be afraid to actively break out of the ruling right-wing political consensus and actively promote the interests not only of workers, but the working population in general.

Possible alliances

Today, the united alliance of *Lewica* consists of three parties, of which only two are present in the government. While SLD and *Wiosna* are part of the governing coalition of Donald Tusk, *Razem*

did not join the new government, although they remain in the left parliamentary caucus. Due to eclectic alliances and diverging attitudes towards the governing coalition, Lewica comes across as lacking a political strategy towards its role in Tusk's cabinet. It has relatively poor visibility in Tusk's government, for example, low popular recognition of leading the digital portfolio, with little influence on policies. It is generally associated with "soft policies" - social policy, equality and education – but not "hard policies" or innovations - economy, regional development, security and defence, or digitalisation. Many voters, including the left-wing electorate, cannot even identify or correctly attribute the responsibilities of Lewica in the current government.50 The problem facing Lewica at the moment is that any attempts by it to promote a more pro-welfare/worker interventionist economic agenda will be undermined and discredited if it participates in a government that is seen to be acting against the interests of working people.

It remains to be seen how participation in Tusk's cabinet will impact the popularity of *Lewica* in the next elections. For its survival, it is crucial that it takes a stronger political stance by either highlighting certain policy areas (like in the case of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy) or making the left voice heard in negotiating policies crucial for its identity (like economic or fiscal policies). The left should not be afraid to break out from the ruling right-wing consensus, including on contro-

versial issues, such as opposing rising militarism and the Polish government's acquiescence with the ongoing war in Gaza. In doing so, it can also raise the issue of how public resources could be diverted more towards solving pressing social and environmental issues and how the left can proactively promote peace and security domestically and abroad, as well as aiding those fleeing persecution and war.

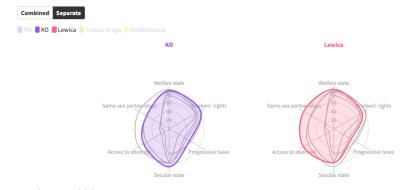
6.2 EXPANSION

Looking towards the future, there are four possible scenarios for the left in Poland to expand and mobilise a new electorate. Depending on the strategy chosen, the left either opts for targeting more a conservative or liberal electorate, or, as we recommend, it tries to construct a new social alliance by looking for a common denominator, which could bring together social democratic traditions and the worldview positions of the new left.

Scenario A: Status quo

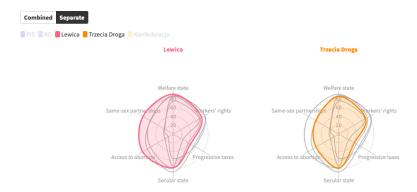
Lewica continues to have its main focus on worldview issues, such as abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, leaving it consolidated around identity politics, yet marginalised and too focused on "rallyinground-the-flag", even for a less orthodox left-wing electorate.

Figure 2. Support for core social democratic positions among KO and *Lewica* voters: welfare state; protection of workers' rights; progressive taxation; secular state; unconditional access to abortion; and same-sex partnerships.



Source: IBRIS survey August 2024.

Figure 3. Support for core social democratic positions among TD versus *Lewica* voters: welfare state; protection of workers' rights; progressive taxation; secular state; unconditional access to abortion; and same-sex partnerships.



Source: IBRIS survey August 2024.

Scenario B: Third Way

Lewica strives to potentially win some KO voters (Figure 2) – and to a lesser extent the voters of TD (Figure 3) – by appealing to the liberal electorate and moving towards the centre: becoming a social-liberal formation that supports a moderate welfare state; energy transition and EU integration; and moderately promoting worldview issues (abortion, LGBTQ+ rights).

Scenario C: U-turn

Lewica turns to some PiS voters by appealing to the conservative electorate and shifting towards

the right (Figure 4) by distancing itself from world-view issues but remaining strongly pro-social and statist in its attempt to re-win the blue-collar working class or "popular class", strengthened by adapting a less committed EU course in favour of a more patriotic (nationalist) narrative and stressing ethnicity-based community of values. Such a turn could possibly also reach some *Konfederacja* voters (Figure 5) and appeal to people who did not vote in the 2023 parliamentary election (Figure 5), however, only at the price of completely abandoning the worldview issues, that is, the demands for universal access to abortion and same-sex partnership for all.

Figure 4. Support for core social-democratic positions among PiS versus *Lewica* voters: welfare state; protection of workers' rights; progressive taxation; secular state; unconditional access to abortion; and same-sex partnerships.

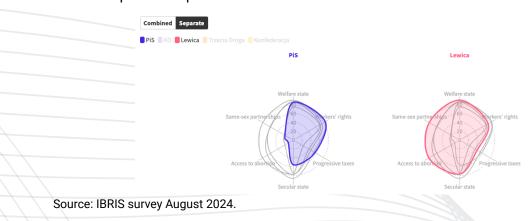
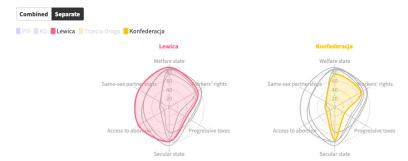
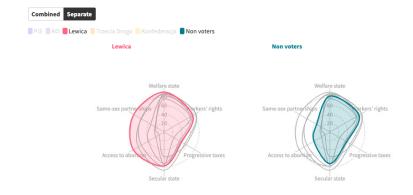


Figure 5. Support for core social democratic positions among *Konfederacja* versus *Lewica* voters: welfare state; protection of workers' rights; progressive taxation; secular state; unconditional access to abortion; and same-sex partnerships.



Source: IBRIS survey August 2024.

Figure 6. Support for core social-democratic positions among *Lewica* voters versus non-voters in 2023 parliamentary election: welfare state; protection of workers' rights; progressive taxation; secular state; unconditional access to abortion; and same-sex partnerships.



Source: IBRIS survey August 2024.

Scenario D: A new social alliance

Lewica reaches beyond the existing PiS-KO duopoly by bringing together the progressive worldview issues with a left-wing socio-economic agenda, based on a broad platform of common interests: economic and social investment; the provision of high-quality social services; the active role of the state in fulfilling citizens' needs; defending workers' rights and shaping labour market policies; and a secular state free from ideology. By pronouncing the socio-economic agenda, it might even mobilise non-voters supportive of the welfare state

but discouraged by too high a focus on identity politics. This new social alliance is anchored in representing the diverse interests of working people (both the industrial working class and white-collar middle class) and integrating equality and minority rights as a cornerstone of a modern welfare state. The same applies for secondary left-wing positions, such as the green transition or EU integration. The upcoming presidential election can possibly become a window of opportunity for improving its visibility and increasing media presence by designating a charismatic candidate standing for the united left.

7. CONCLUSIONS

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The opinions of the left electorate most closely resonate with those of the general electorate in three main areas: support for an active social welfare state; division of the church and state; and the protection of workers' rights. Therefore, on socio-economic issues, there is fertile ground for the left to win support for a social democratic programme.

The social agenda clearly is more accepted in society than worldview issues. Voters are clearly divided over these matters, the left needs to find a way of promoting them in a way that resonates with the narrative of a strong active state and the protection of workers' rights. Moreover, it seems that a disproportionate focus on worldview issues compared to a socio-economic agenda might discourage non-voters from considering casting a vote for *Lewica*.

To survive the current political cycle, the Polish left must reinvent its public image, in terms of thematic focus, narratives, visibility and organisation:

- (1) Keep a comprehensive manifesto embracing diverse policies, yet prioritising those of particular importance to the left-wing identity and resonating with the majority of voters: provision of social services; the protection of workers' rights; and a secular state.
- (2) Bring the existing social agenda into the spotlight and move away from dominating worldview issues, not abandoning them but framing equality and the protection of human rights as a foundation of a modern welfare state.
- (3) Solve the problem of vague and fragmented leadership to unite the movement and make it more credible to the general population.
- (4) Take a stronger and more political stance in the Tusk government so as not to be cannibalised by bigger coalition partners. If it is unable to achieve this, then it should consider

whether it is worth continuing to function as part of this government.

To expand, the Polish left has to make a decision on which strategy to follow:

- Short-term strategies include swinging the voters of political rivals – more liberal electorate of the KO or more conservative voters of PiS.
- (2) Long-term investment in expanding the electorate would mean striking a new social alliance by developing narratives and programmes highlighting the common socioeconomic interests of the majority of society (i.e., working people, their dependents and those reliant upon social benefits), simultaneously integrating worldview positions resulting from left-wing principles of equality and inclusion. These should not only refer to the rights of minorities but also bridge different generations of left-wing voters, sharing similar values despite diverging life experiences and living circumstances.

The risks that the Polish left is currently facing are as follows:

- (1) A shrinking electorate due to falsely communicating priorities and placing too much focus on worldview issues, embarking on ideological arguments while neglecting the socio-economic agenda.
- (2) Failing to retain voter support due to tactical voting because of the poor election results of the left.
- (3) Losing credibility due to a blurred image and dispersed leadership.
- (4) Further marginalisation due to insufficient visibility in key policy areas or areas of policy Lewica is responsible for in the current government, or even failing to effectively deliver campaign promises and participating in a government that contravenes some of its own political positions and principles.

The opportunities ahead of the Polish left are as follows:

- (1) The relatively high support among the general population for a traditional social agenda of social democracy: a welfare state delivering social services to citizens and the protection of workers' rights.
- (2) High support among the general population for another social democratic principle: a secular state, free from the influence of religious institutions.
- (3) High attachment of the left-wing electorate to worldview issues and value-oriented voting patterns, as opposed to opportunistic voting behaviour or clientelism.
- (4) Growing popularity among young people for left-wing political positions and the mobilisation potential of usually underrepresented female voters, which open the possibility for cultivating a new generation of loyal left-wing voters in the future.

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POSSIBLE STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL AND EXPANSION OF THE POLISH LEFT

After years of political marginalisation, can Poland's left-wing forces reclaim their place in national politics? This insightful policy study examines the current crisis and future prospects of the Polish left, which has been sidelined for nearly two decades amid the dominance of right-wing parties like Civic Platform (PO) and Law and Justice (PiS).

Amid a broader European trend of declining left-wing influence, this study explores how the Polish left might rebuild—by redefining its identity, strengthening leadership, and reconnecting with a broad base of voters. Grounded in original research, including two exclusive polls conducted by the Institute for Market and Social Research (IBRIS) in 2023 and 2024, the analysis draws on a joint project between the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) Warsaw Office, carried out between 2021 and 2024.

The publication identifies core areas of public support—such as an active welfare state, secular governance, and workers' rights—and provides a roadmap for crafting a compelling, modern social democratic platform. It offers strategic recommendations for survival and growth, and considers the choices the left must make to avoid further decline or political irrelevance.

This is an essential read for anyone interested in the future of progressive politics in Poland and across Europe.

POLICY STUDY PUBLISHED IN MAY (2025) BY:





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