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SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN POLAND:
FROM TOP DIVISION
TO THE THIRD LEAGUE
AND THE NEW PLAY-OFFS

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Published by:

FEPS - Foundation for European Progressive Studies and the Karl-Renner-Institut
Avenue des Arts, 46 – 1000 Brussels, Belgium
T: +32 2 234 69 00
Website: www.feps-europe.eu

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This book was produced with the financial support of the European Parliament.



978-2-39076-072-6 9782390760726.

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 **Renner**Institut



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A few words from the Editors

The Next Left Country Case Studies are now a well-established publication series in the FEPS and Karl-Renner-Institut Next Left Research Programme, which is entering its 17th year of existence. This extraordinary collection of books is designed to provide readers with answers to reoccurring questions, such as *how are the other (sister) parties doing? What are the best examples that could be shared from their respective practices? Does their current situation result from a long-term process or just an electoral blip?* These and many other queries are covered in the volumes, which are intentionally kept short and remain focused on social democratic parties and the specificities of the respective national contexts in which they operate. Although they are crafted with a mission to zoom in on respective parties, they also provide incredibly valuable material that can enable comparative studies – as an innovative assemblage that fills an obvious void within the world of think tanks and contemporary academic writings. As such, they are relevant contributions for political scientists interested in party systems and contemporary political thought, as well as those who wish to gain a more nuanced understanding of the connection between European processes and the specific national political contexts.

Consequently, the collection aims to show the pluralism within the progressive movement in terms of narratives and interpretations; mobilisational capabilities; and anchoring within societal coalitions,

organisational cultures and electoral struggles. And as such, it hopes to build a better understanding within and beyond European borders, reserving annually one volume for the study of a party from another continent. This time, Poland is in the spotlight – with an incredibly informative, academically outstanding and politically illuminating volume by Anna Pacześniak (professor and lecturer at the University of Wrocław).

The story reads like a political thriller. Indeed, *Social Democracy in Poland: from top division to the third league and the new play-offs* depicts a political journey full of detours, with both triumphant and dramatic moments that today's Nowa Lewica (and its predecessors) has lived through in the last four decades. The story begins in the historic year 1989, showing the transition moment, followed by the transformation towards a post-communist party and an attempt to establish itself as a modern social democracy. Effectively, as Pacześniak describes, these were challenging years when, on one hand, there was a climate of hostility towards anything that might have had a connection to the past (regime), and on the other, an immense fragmentation on the left side of the political spectrum. SdRP emerged as an organisation that persevered to strive for a new relationship with voters and regain ground in institutional politics. It succeeded in assuming the lead of government as early as 1993, only to lose it four years later. The defeat was temporary, as in the context of hard liberalisation and the hunt for the ghosts of the past, it still emerged as a predictable reformer – one could say, a new powerhouse that saw Aleksander Kwaśniewski be re-elected as the president in 2000 in the first round, as well as the centre-left (SLD and Unia Pracy) marking a landslide victory in the 2001 parliamentary elections. This heyday for social democracy, which was rather common in Central and Eastern Europe, again

did not last long, and the next set of elections brought spectacular losses, seeing progressives eventually be eliminated from parliament in 2015. While political scientists tend to see it as the ultimate moment of consolidation of the two-party system, whereby both of the two dominant parties in question centre-right and right and had their roots in the *original Solidarność* movement, Pacześniak offers a more nuanced, and hence truly valuable, overview of both internal and external factors that more specifically defined the positioning and strength (or feebleness) of the centre left in those moments.

Therefore, while the electoral records may serve as an objective measure of the condition of SdRP, SLD and Nowa Lewica, the design of the case study allows us to see beyond these numbers. Pacześniak, in an incredibly skilful manner, maps the major political and strategic choices of the party (in its different incarnations). She illustrates the struggle connected to the internal transformation and search for a distinctively Polish understanding of the social democratic ideology. This exploration made the party shape, shift and scrap parts of the programme. The move from a post-communist party that could appeal to voters dissatisfied with the 1990s dynamics (when it comes to the already mentioned liberalisation and exposure of a country newly opened to the world to the effects of globalisation) towards a post-materialist one (which today is seen as credible, first and foremost, on issues such as gender equality, a secular state, LGBTQIA+ rights and the right to abortion) shows the route taken, as well as contemporary vulnerability, when it comes to being a relevant voice on economic and financial issues. This liability is not uncommon for other parties in the region, but, as Pacześniak argues, requires revisiting and reclaiming – especially since Nowa Lewica is now in government, with responsibility for portfolios such as labour and social affairs, digitalisation and national assets. To that

end, with elections approaching in 2027, there may also be reason to reconsider the party's position on international affairs – whereby Pacześniak adds a question mark in the relevant subchapters, when assessing how far the current program is truly progressive. On one hand, Nowa Lewica is profoundly pro-European; on the other, it puts much emphasis on transatlantic relations and their narrowly understood security, with NATO being the main guarantee of it. Pacześniak explains here the specificity when it comes to an understanding of the Polish *raison d'état*, but she also argues that the party's role in the Coalition of the Willing, including flat-out support for both the wars in Iraq and in Afghanistan, as well as enabling CIA secret prisons on Polish territories, present themselves as somewhat darker moments.

Furthermore, for Pacześniak – being an extraordinarily diligent scholar – the task of writing a country case study is not only about offering an analytically strong chronicle of events and the anatomy of programmes, but also about seeing the assignment as a task in a scientific laboratory. This is an unusual, but thrilling, approach for an academic from within the social sciences. Consequently, she puts under the microscope questions such as the mechanisms of party splits and mergers; the mechanics of the diverse electoral coalitions; and the relationship towards trade unions and other civil society organisations, as well as towards other stakeholders on the political stage. Among the carefully extracted conclusions, she argues that Nowa Lewica has a clear profile when it comes to being anti-PiS (Law and Justice Party), but its voters may feel rather volatile and – when the elections come – abandon it, voting more strategically, for example, for KO (Civic Coalition), if that guarantees keeping PiS out of government next time around. Pacześniak shows, citing an impressive number of polls and papers, that the party's base has

shifted and now voters live in larger agglomerations and do not represent a homogenous group. Many are susceptible to liberal economic policies and one third believe that privatisation may help solve problems with the inadequate provision of public services. What is also troublesome is that Nowa Lewica is likely to face fierce competition from its former electoral ally, Razem, a party that has a charismatic leader and is bolder in its criticism of the current state of affairs, as well as contemporary capitalism in the broad sense. There, Paczeński wagers that Nowa Lewica will face the need to resolve where it stands on some of the important distributional societal conflicts. And succeeding is not going to be made easier by the fact that it is the third junior coalition partner in the KO-led government, a position that has not yet allowed it to deliver on some of its earlier promises, like the empowering of labour inspections or the liberalisation of abortion law.

All in all, *Social Democracy in Poland: from top division to the third league and the new play-offs* by Anna Paczeński is a must-read, a thrilling read and an informative read. It constitutes an important contribution to sharing knowledge about the political processes within EU member states and regions, the evolution of the party system and transformations of the electoral coalition, and diagnoses of the state and prospects of social democracy in Poland. Written with academic precision, a political feeling and a populariser's passion, it is wholeheartedly recommended herewith for the attention of readers.

Brussels / Vienna, May 2026

1

Introduction

The Polish political scene is unique compared to most other European countries in that party rivalry has shifted strongly to the right, leaving little room for left-wing parties. The conflict structure and party family positioning differ from those in Western European countries, a phenomenon long observed in Poland.¹ Although Poland does not have a classic two-party system, since 2005, the key political actors have been two right-wing parties: the conservative-nationalist Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* – PiS) and the liberal-conservative Civic Coalition (*Koalicja Obywatelska* – KO). If we add the tendency of a large share of Polish citizens to engage in political experimentation and to vote for political newcomers in every parliamentary election since 2011, we can better understand how little political oxygen classic social democracy has at its disposal.

However, for the first 15 years after the democratic transition, the social democrats' political situation was much better. Although after 1989 the centre-left faced many challenges, such as (1) the need to convince public opinion of the successful ideological and programmatic transformation from the monopolistic state party rooted in the previous regime into a future-oriented and modernised social democratic formation, whilst also providing refuge for those who felt victims of or left behind by the 1989 transformation; (2) building a loyal

electorate; or (3) finding partners to form cabinet coalitions, social democrats became a relevant party, determining the electoral and parliamentary strategies of other actors by influencing the shaping of patterns of political competition and their cohesion or divisions in other parties. In the 1990s, discussions over whether to cooperate with the post-communists from the Democratic Left Alliance (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej* – SLD), apply the *cordon sanitaire* to them or to “decommunise” them, as well as the question of what electoral system to introduce to make it as unfavourable to SLD as possible, became a cause of divisions in other parties.² At the same time, electoral support for the centre-left continued to grow, enabling the SLD to form a coalition government for the first time in 1993-1997, and then again in 2001, thanks to its best result (41%) achieved in an electoral alliance with the Labour Union (*Unia Pracy* – UP). The picture of success was completed in 1995 and 2000 by two consecutive victories of the left-wing politician Aleksander Kwaśniewski in the presidential elections. In the 2000 election, Kwaśniewski won in the first round – something no one had managed before him, nor anyone has managed since.

After the turn of the millennium, the positive trend for the centre-left collapsed. In 2004, in the first European Parliament elections since Poland acceded to the EU, electoral support for the SLD dropped below 10%, mainly as a result of the *Rywingate*: a corruption scandal around the media legislation reported in the mainstream media, which suggested that Prime Minister Leszek Miller and some prominent left-wing politicians were involved. An electoral defeat is never down to a single cause; therefore, the dramatic drop in support was also influenced by other factors, such as the broken promise regarding the abortion bill; difficulties in governing and implementing reforms; and, finally, the war in Iraq and the fact that Poland was so eager to join the coalition of the willing. As a result, in spring 2004, some politicians

left the SLD, including the prominent Speaker of the Sejm, Marek Borowski, to form a new political party. One day after Poland acceded to the EU, Prime Minister Miller resigned and was replaced for a year by Marek Belka, who led a technocratic cabinet.

In subsequent elections, the electoral results were sometimes slightly better, sometimes worse, but social democrats (in various electoral constellations) never managed to regain even one third of the support they had enjoyed at the beginning of the 21st century. In 2015, the party's election result was so poor that it lost its parliamentary representation. Four years later, three left-wing parties, including SLD, presented joint electoral lists and returned to parliament. In the 2023 parliamentary election, despite again receiving modest electoral support, social democrats (now rebranded as the New Left, *Nowa Lewica* – NL) entered the coalition government led by KO as the smallest junior partner, with limited influence.

Although the NL party remains the largest centre-left force in Poland, the Together Party (*Partia Razem*) – formed in the early months of 2015 and which has dynamically expanded its membership base – is its potential challenger. The party supports left-wing economic and social policies and liberal cultural values.³ *Razem* sympathisers tend to be potential social-democratic voters: well-educated, young urban dwellers. NL has also been effectively challenged from the centre-right, mainly by KO, led by Donald Tusk, who is perceived by the Polish electorate as the strongest politician capable of opposing the conservative-nationalist and populist PiS party. Rafał Trzaskowski, who was twice nominated by KO as a presidential candidate (in 2020 and 2025), also won over part of the centre-left electorate. And in the newly consolidated KO, one also finds progressive organisations – such as the now dissolved *Inicjatywa Polska* of Barbara Nowacka or the Green Party (*Partia Zielonych*).

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In this volume, we analyse the bumpy and winding political path of social democrats in Poland, from their status as pariahs, through their rise to become the strongest party in the country, their loss of power and parliamentary representation, to their return to the political game as a junior partner in the governing coalition. Next, we look at the centre-left's policy ideas in practice, both in government and in opposition. Then, we examine the party organisation's internal life, its social base and its relationship with the social democrats' allies. Finally, we identify the challenges and prospects for the centre-left in Poland in the third decade of the 21st century.

2

Social democrats in the Polish party landscape

2.1 The journey from pariah to state power: The first decade of social democrats after 1989

One of the results of the democratic transition initiated in 1989 by the Round Table (*Okrągły Stół*) talks among officials of the communist regime, the opposition from *Solidarność* and Catholic Church representatives was the self-dissolution of the monopolistic Polish United Workers' Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza* – PZPR). In 1990, the majority of its former activists established the Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (*Socjaldemokracja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej* – SdRP), which became PZPR's successor and quickly shifted toward social democratic ideas and values by rejecting references to communist ideology, accepting democratic rules, and looking for legitimisation at the international and European levels (within Socialist International and the Party of European Socialists).⁴ It was not an atypical transition in the region, if we look, for example, at countries such as Hungary or Bulgaria.

The party rebranding was not credible to everyone. Social Democrats were treated by journalists and other political parties, first and foremost,

as “post-communists”, namely, as a formation that was “allowed less”. Therefore, despite programmatic and organisational evolution and leadership change, left-wing politicians devoted a significant part of their energy to proving that they, like other political actors, were full participants in socio-political life and that their mission was about looking forward, not backwards. For many years, they did not fully succeed in this; at the cabinet and coalition levels, Social Democrats were isolated by all other political parties, except the agrarian Polish People’s Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* – PSL), which is one of the two oldest political parties in Poland, and which was active – under the modified label of ZSL – under the previous regime.

Initially, a large part of the public also shared this distrust of the “social democratised” post-communists. When SdRP nominated its own candidate (Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz) in the first popular presidential elections in 1990, he received just over 9% of the vote (coming fourth). Elections were won by the symbol of resistance, and the *Solidarność* strike in Gdansk’s shipyard, led by Lech Wałęsa. One year later, in the first fully free parliamentary elections, which resulted in 29 different political parties and party coalitions entering the Polish Parliament (Sejm), SdRP, as part of an electoral coalition called SLD, won almost 12% of the vote; objectively, not a very impressive result, but still the second best. Between 1991 and 1993, the SLD parliamentary club, as a “post-communist” one, was practically isolated: it had no representatives in the Sejm Presidium nor at the head of parliamentary committees.

In 1993, in the early parliamentary elections, the leftist SLD coalition received one fifth of all votes (the most of any electoral committee), resulting in over 37% of seats in the Sejm and allowing it to form a government coalition with PSL. The price for forming a coalition cabinet was handing over the position of prime minister to the agrarian PSL.

But in 1995, during the same parliamentary term, there was a change, and a Social Democrat politician, Józef Oleksy, became prime minister. However, he soon had to resign from his position due to accusations of spying for Russia, which were fabricated by the interior minister of his own government, who was politically linked to the right-wing president Lech Wałęsa. Social Democrat Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz (already mentioned before as a presidential candidate in 1990) took over as head of the government, and Oleksy became chairperson of SdRP. In the same year, one of the centre-left leaders, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, won the presidential election against Wałęsa, the incumbent president and an icon of *Solidarność*. The golden decade of social democracy in Poland began.⁵

In 1997, despite achieving an even better result in the parliamentary election, SLD was forced into opposition for one term, only to return to power with its own prime minister in 2001, achieving the best result of 41% of all votes, which translated into 47% of seats in the first chamber of the parliament, the Sejm. The centre-left was in a state of euphoria and convinced that, although this fell a few seats short of a majority, the landslide gave them the legitimacy and strength to govern. Leszek Miller became prime minister of the coalition government (again with PSL) and was referred to by many journalists at the time as the chancellor. This term did not stem from the Polish political system, but from the political power of this particular politician, who combined his public role with chairing the strongest political party at the time.

The success story can be explained by both systemic and party-political factors. SLD was unique among almost all other parties (with PSL as an exception), which have been dominated by parliamentary representation, leaving much less space for the party on the ground. This pattern was typical of post-transition Central and Eastern Europe. The parties newly formed in the 1990s immediately focused on

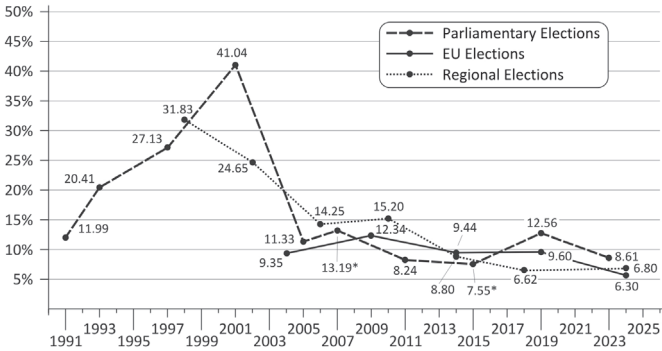
securing positions of power at the national level and paid little attention to building mid-level structures. Soon, they became convinced that consistent success at the polls could be achieved without a substantial grassroots presence. As Ingrid van Biezen explained,⁶ this was possible because most young democracies lacked traditional socio-political cleavages that would tie certain social groups to a particular party. However, post-communist parties stood out somewhat against this background due to the greater importance of grassroots structures, an internal organisation more akin to the mass party model,⁷ or greater on-the-ground visibility. To a large extent, this was due to the party's "infrastructure" being inherited from the previous regime, when the mono-party had representation in every municipality, even the smallest. Thus, the SLD's strong position in the 1990s was achieved through a solid, stable organisational structure, members' loyalty, a high degree of institutionalisation,⁸ as well as the political experience and professional qualifications of senior party officials.

Systemic factors were equally important. For the first 15 years after the restoration of democracy, social democrats benefited from the historical cleavage between post-communism and post-*Solidarność* blocs.⁹ The main division was between parties and coalitions linked to either the former socialist system and its ruling party (the left, so mainly the SLD) or the former opposition movement, *Solidarność* (the right-wing parties).¹⁰ The paradox was that describing SLD as a post-communist party undermined its democratic character and right to participate in politics, and thus, in practice, limited the scope for building government coalitions exclusively to PSL, and at the same time, it placed the party in the position of an important player, representing the interests of a large part of the electorate and important to it from the point of view of historical polarisation. In the absence of classic socio-political cleavages, this situation consolidated the left-wing electorate,

which perceived attacks on SLD by other political actors as a challenge to their beliefs, biographies and experiences.

However, the 2001 parliamentary election is now considered the last one when the competition was primarily between the post-communist and post-solidarity blocs. It was also then that two new parties were formed, both emerging from the *Solidarność* stream: the Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska* – PO) and PiS, which faced their first electoral test. In 2001, their results were still modest – 12.6% for PO and 9.5% for PiS – but starting in 2005, the rivalry between these two formations would come to dominate the Polish political scene for years to come, and create antagonistic, mutually distrustful camps of supporters, leaving the centre-left behind.¹¹ Since 2005, a new dimension of opposition has become a significant and permanent phenomenon – between a “solidary Poland” identified by the nationalist-populist right-wing PiS and a “liberal Poland” represented by the centre-right PO. The problem for social democrats was that they found themselves caught between them. The centre-left was and remains closer to the vision of a “solidary Poland” in socio-economic terms, but closer to the liberal vision in terms of values. Subsequent elections proved that few people were interested in such a political offer. The changes in electoral support for social democrats, with steady growth in the 1990s, a surge in votes in 2001, a sharp decline in 2005 and an inability to recover in subsequent years, are shown in Figure 1.

The presidential elections were no better for the centre-left. In each election following Aleksander Kwaśniewski’s two terms in office, candidates supported by social democrats received negligible support (Table 1). The exception was the 2010 presidential election, held after the Smoleńsk plane crash, in which incumbent President Lech Kaczyński died. The left-wing presidential candidate Jerzy Szmajdziński also lost his life in the same accident, and his successor



* The result of a broader electoral coalition involving social democrats.

Figure 1. Election results for the social democrats in Poland in the period 1991-2024.

Source: own elaborations based on National Election Commission data.

and at that point the party's leader, Grzegorz Napieralski, came third in the snap presidential election, securing almost 14% of the vote thanks to a successful election campaign. Subsequent presidential elections ended with left-wing candidates receiving significantly fewer votes than their parties, and all fell below the electoral threshold for political parties (set at 5%).

The results of the presidential elections since 2005 clearly illustrate shifts in Poland's political landscape, the deepening polarisation between PiS and PO, and the fact that the presidency has alternately been held exclusively by candidates backed by these two right-wing parties, taking the wind out of the sails of the other candidates. Although Poland does not have a presidential or semi-presidential system, the role of president of the Republic cannot be reduced solely to representative functions. The president has real instruments of influence over both domestic and foreign policy. If he (there has

Table 1. Election results for candidates supported by social democracy in presidential elections between 1990 and 2025.

Year	Name of candidate	Score (%)	Place
1990	Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz	9.21	4th
1995	Aleksander Kwaśniewski	51.72	1st
2000	Aleksander Kwaśniewski	53.90	1st
2005	Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz	withdrawal	–
2010	Grzegorz Napieralski	13.68	3rd
2015	Magdalena Ogórek	2.38	5th
2020	Robert Biedroń	2.22	6th
2025	Magdalena Biejat	4.23	7th

Source: National Election Commission data.

never been a woman in that position) adopts a confrontational style of cohabitation with the government, it can result in legislative paralysis and a lack of coordinated action, which has been evident over the past year and a half of Andrzej Duda's presidency, and even more so now that Karol Nawrocki is serving as President of the Republic. Symbolically, the president's position is strengthened by the strongest direct democratic mandate, as winning in the second round means that he has secured the support of between several million and over 10 million citizens, depending on the turnout. No other politician stands a chance of securing anywhere near the same level of support. The presidency, therefore, carries real political and symbolic significance. Consequently, the fact that the centre-left is too weak to contest the position undermines its importance.

In the next subsection, we look at the most difficult period, when the centre-left achieved such poor election results that it not only lost power, and even status as the leading opposition party, but also disappeared from parliament for one term (2015-2019).

2.2 Falling from a great height: Loss of power and then even parliamentary representation

The greatest crisis of the Polish centre-left and the organisational weakening of social democrats began in 2003. Considering their presence in state power, everything looked great: the head of state was a left-wing president; the second part of the executive power, namely, the government, was still in the hands of a social democratic prime minister; his party had the largest parliamentary club and an advantage over other parties at the regional level. However, by 2002, support for the government's policies, which were increasingly at odds with social democratic ideas, had gradually declined. Opinion polls showed that after a year in office, the government had many more opponents than supporters.¹² In December 2002, the so-called *Rywingate* broke out, that is, a corruption scandal involving work on a new broadcasting law. Under the initiative of the opposition PO and PiS parties, an investigative committee was set up in the Sejm in January 2003, before which, among others, Prime Minister Leszek Miller and SLD politicians testified. It was broadcast on national TV and captivated most voters' attention. It was a real "earthquake" in Polish politics. The centre-left was discredited, and the opposition parties built their capital as forces fighting against state corruption.

In the aftermath of scandals involving SLD politicians, the party experienced a series of secessions and steadily lost electoral support. After four years in power, SLD came fourth in the 2005 parliamentary elections, losing almost 30 percentage points compared to the 2001 result. The electoral defeat removed social democrats from power for many years, even depriving them of their status as the largest opposition party in parliament, first in 2005-2007 in favour of PO, and

then in 2007-2015 in favour of PiS. The results of successive elections at various levels (from local to European ones) reflected declining support, despite attempts to unite with the post-*Solidarność* left and SLD secessionists (the Left and Democrats project in 2006-2008), to show the new generation at the helm (with Wojciech Olejniczak and Grzegorz Napieralski as chair and secretary general, respectively, both in their 30s at the time) or to form an electoral coalition with a political rival (cooperation with the Your Movement party – *Twój Ruch* – within the United Left coalition in 2015), changes of party leadership, programme shifts and even episodic tactical rapprochements with PiS (an agreement on public media in 2010, or simultaneous questioning of the reliability and fairness of local elections in 2014).¹³

The electoral losses caused local and regional party structures to shrink. The coffers started to dry up, so it had to sell off many of its properties. The failure to maintain a parliamentary presence meant SLD received far lower sums in state subventions. These circumstances badly affected the party's grassroots presence. The party on the ground, tasked with recruiting candidates for local elections, found it increasingly difficult to fill SLD's ballot space.¹⁴ For example, in the run up to the 2014 municipal and regional elections (one year before the loss of parliamentary representation), the board of the local party organisation in Wrocław, a city of 640,000 people at the time, appealed to party members to run for seats on the city council and the regional assembly. Although there were over 70 vacancies to fill on SLD's list of municipal positions and around a dozen more on the list for the regional assembly, only nine candidates volunteered.¹⁵ The example of Wrocław was far from unique, reflecting how the party's mid-level structures degraded and ceased to be a viable source of local cadres.

The SLD leadership sought ways to reverse its losing streak. One of them was to nominate Magdalena Ogórek as a candidate for the

2015 presidential election, which preceded that year's parliamentary elections. The unknown candidate, not only to the broader audience but also to party members, was supposed to attract new voters while assuming the loyalty of existing ones. Her candidacy was the brainchild of party leader Miller, who announced her candidacy without subjecting the decision to internal party discussion, saying he wanted to create an element of surprise. During the campaign, Ogórek presented neoliberal, conservative and populist views that did not align with the profile of SLD voters.¹⁶ Her election programme included proposals to promote a market economy, help young Poles take out mortgages, support entrepreneurs and reduce corporate income tax. Ogórek received 2.38% of the votes. When the right-wing PiS won the parliamentary elections a few months later (in October 2015), a former SLD candidate became a prominent employee at the public media outlets the party took over.

When I conducted research within the party after the 2015 presidential elections on the perceived causes of this defeat, party members did not so much question the leadership's decision as place the blame on the candidate. She was portrayed as a cynical person who promoted herself, did not care about the party's interests and sought publicity. If she was praised, it was only for her appearance and beauty, and the compliments were immediately followed by criticism and a list of serious shortcomings: an inability to speak in public and a lack of knowledge and experience.¹⁷

After this failed political experiment, SLD decided to form a broad, ideologically incoherent coalition for the 2015 parliamentary elections. This decision proved to be another mistake, for which SLD paid the highest price, namely, the loss of representation in parliament. By forming an electoral coalition, the electoral committee had to exceed the 8% threshold, while only 7.55% of voters voted for the left-liberal lists.

In the 2015 parliamentary elections, social democrats faced competition from the left in the form of the new Together Party (*Partia Razem*), which formed in the spring of that year and fielded its own candidates for the Sejm in all constituencies. Its candidates were initially largely absent from the media, as evidenced by party-collected statistics. The broad public learned about *Razem* during the successful performance of its representative, Adrian Zandberg, in a pre-election debate broadcast on public television. Ultimately, the party received 3.62% of the vote, which was not enough to win any seats in the Sejm but was enough to receive state budget subsidies for the next four years. The left-wing newcomers from *Razem* were blamed by social democrats for SLD's poor election results, which hampered, but did not block, as the next parliamentary elections showed, political cooperation that enabled the left to return to parliament after four years.

The loss of parliamentary representation for social democrats caused financial difficulties (although state subsidies were maintained, their amount was significantly reduced). The party's deteriorating financial situation was evident earlier, and it touched many areas: from the mundane, such as the need to reduce staff numbers and cut salaries and allowances, and the elimination of lump sums for telephone and fuel expenses, to the way election campaigns were conducted and decisions about who would represent the party in elections for high office (president of the Republic, commune heads and mayors in local elections) or run from high positions on electoral lists. An example of this can be seen in the 2014 local elections in Wrocław, when financial backing of the candidate for mayor and his willingness to finance his own campaign were of fundamental importance in obtaining the nomination of the local party organisation, while the convergence of his views with the social democratic line was a secondary issue.

The restraint shown by SLD, like every other party in Poland, in spending party funds on local elections was due to the fact that, in Poland, subsidies from the state budget are paid out after parliamentary campaigns. It is therefore much more difficult to obtain a bank loan for campaign expenses related to other types of elections, as commercial banks require party guarantees. SLD incurred a debt of 3 million Polish zloty for the 2010 local elections. Taking out another loan was contingent on repaying the previous one. In mid-2011, the party sold its legendary headquarters (a remnant of the PZPR's assets on Rozbrat Street in Warsaw), mainly to repay debts and finance subsequent election campaigns.

The loss of parliamentary representation had another aspect, namely, the reduced visibility of the party and its politicians in the mass media. Political journalists focus on the most important organs of power, including parliamentary work, and it is extremely difficult to interest them in events organised by non-parliamentary parties. The Broadcasting Act, which regulates, among other things, politicians' access to public media, stipulates that public radio programmes should accurately reflect the full diversity of events, enable political parties legally operating in Poland to present their positions on key public issues and ensure pluralism of opinion. In practice, these provisions apply to co-governing parties and opposition parliamentary parties, limiting the visibility of extra-parliamentary groups.

2.3 Back to the political game: Parliamentary opposition in 2019 and a junior partner in the government coalition in 2023

Such weakening prompted a search for potential allies ahead of the 2019 parliamentary elections and raised the question of how to rebuild the party's influence. Firstly, before the spring 2019 European Parliament elections, SLD joined a broad coalition of parties opposed to the Eurosceptic United Right government, called the European Coalition (*Koalicja Europejska*). The electoral alliance was not based on ideological or programmatic similarities, as the parties forming it belonged to the Party of European Socialists (SLD), the European People's Party (PO and PSL), the European Green Party (*Zieloni*), and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (*Nowoczesna*), but was an expression of disagreement with the PiS government's confrontational policy towards EU institutions. The left managed to win five seats in the European Parliament, including those of three former centre-left prime ministers: Cimoszewicz; Belka; and Miller.

Then, before the 2019 parliamentary election, SLD found allies in new left-wing formations that had initially emerged as its competitors: the Together Party, formed in 2015; and the Spring Party (*Wiosna*), formed in early 2019 by Robert Biedroń (a popular politician of SLD, then *Twój Ruch* and then leader of *Wiosna*). In the run up to the 2019 parliamentary election, these three parties built an electoral coalition that garnered enough support to enable the centre-left to return to the parliamentary arena as an opposition force. They also prudently ran as an electoral committee, which required them to obtain 5% (not 8%, which, as noted previously, remains the threshold for electoral coalitions).

For the 2019 Senate elections, held under a majority voting system (unlike the Sejm ones, which are under the proportional rule), social democrats entered into an agreement with other opposition parties as part of the so-called Senate pact (*Pakt Senacki*). The agreement stipulated that the parties involved would field one agreed candidate in each of the 100 Senate constituencies. This was to prevent the dispersion of votes and increase the opposition's chances of gaining an advantage over the ruling party in this chamber. The goal was achieved, with the opposition gaining a one-vote advantage in the Senate and SLD gaining several senators.

After the 2019 elections, preparations for the unification of the two left-wing parties, SLD and *Wiosna*, began, but were slowed by the pandemic, and finalised in 2021 under the name the New Left (*Nowa Lewica* – NL). The unification and rebranding of social democrats, as well as the consensual cooperation in the 2019-2023 parliament with the Together Party, made it possible to broaden the shrinking historical electorate base. It succeeded in bridging the divide between the younger and older cohorts of the left-wing electorate, between traditional voters – such as working-class people without higher education and employed in either services or the public sector, who consistently voted for the post-communist party after 1989 – and the well-educated, socio-cultural progressives over-represented in larger cities. In addition, SLD brought extensive (under Polish conditions) field structures to NL's common political project, and younger *Wiosna* brought credibility on issues such as minority rights, gender politics, climate change and the green transition. In the 2023 parliamentary elections, in which PiS lost power and moved into opposition, NL, having won 26 of the 460 seats in the Sejm, joined Prime Minister Donald Tusk's coalition government as the smallest junior partner.

Initially, NL and *Razem* formed a joint parliamentary club, despite

adopting different strategies towards the cabinet. *Razem* remained in opposition, while the social democrats were part of the ruling coalition. One journalist aptly summed up the difference between *Razem* and NL parties as the difference between an “all-or-nothing” strategy and a “little-by-little” strategy, respectively.¹⁸ Following the incremental strategy, social democrats implemented their demands in stages, as far as circumstances and their status as a junior partner allowed. *Razem*’s increasingly open criticism of this policy led to a split in the parliamentary club and the departure of opposition MPs in autumn 2024.

The next step was the launch of campaigns by three left-wing candidates for the 2025 presidential election. They personalised the different faces of Polish leftism: the ideologically pure (and proletarian) left was represented by *Razem* MP Adrian Zandberg, while his former party colleague, Senator Magdalena Biejat, who was now supported by NL, leaned slightly more towards the centre-left (with a strong emphasis on women’s rights). In turn, hardline feminism and post-communist identity manifested in a memetic way through Joanna Senyszyn, a former MEP and SLD politician who left the party after its merger with *Wiosna* and rebranding. Finally, this diversity and multitude did not mean that the left-wing candidates would cannibalise each other’s electorates; rather, they produced a synergistic effect, although none of them could even dream of reaching the second round of the elections. During the election campaign, the leader and candidate of the *Razem* party, Zandberg, openly criticised his former left-wing parliamentary ally for his lack of effectiveness and for endorsing the centre-right policies of Donald Tusk’s government. Exploiting the electorate’s frustration with unfulfilled left-wing election promises, such as the liberalisation of the anti-abortion law and the legalisation of same-sex partnerships, has fuelled this “family feud” and is likely to result in a separate electoral list

←NEXT LEFT→

of the left-wing parties in the 2027 parliamentary elections. Zandberg finished the race with a slightly better result than Biejat, who, however, did relatively well and, through an extensive campaign, mobilised more voters than the polls had given her a chance for initially. Joanna Senyszyn's result wasn't outstanding, but her return to politics and her establishment as a kind of moral authority definitely were.

3

Policy ideas of social democrats in the practice of governing and being in opposition

In the 1990s, the left- and right-wing orientations of political parties in Poland were primarily determined by historical factors, with politicians' views on the economy, socio-cultural issues, axiology and ideological identity playing a secondary role. Attitudes towards the recent past and biographical factors also played an important role in party affiliation. This fact meant that SLD included not only politicians with progressive views, as we demonstrated in our research conducted in the first decade of the 21st century.¹⁹ We then examined the attitudes of SLD middle-level party cadres, namely, activists, local leaders and delegates to party congresses, who have always been regarded as the spirit of any political formation. Many of them were economic neoliberals and social conservatives. The party activists on the centre-left, whose image emerged from this research, did not differ in their views from the so-called statistical Pole, even if this category is imprecise. The party itself promoted ideas from various ideological orders and worlds; its program was so eclectic that it was hard for some left-wing voters to swallow, leading them to seek political alternatives elsewhere. Their search was so wide-ranging that it sometimes went beyond the left

side of the political spectrum, veering towards the centre and placing hope in seasonal novelties, whose appeal faded faster than it flared up, such as the personalistic anticlerical party Palikot's Movement (*Ruch Palikota*), the liberal Modern party (*Nowoczesna*) or personality-driven Szymon Hołownia's Poland 2050 party (*Polska 2050 Szymona Hołowni*).

The ideological purity of the left was further disrupted by contextual factors. The first years after the political transition were a period when social democrats sought acceptance from politicians of the former anti-communist opposition, which was dominated by conservative right-wing and liberal centrist parties. This obliged the party to marginalise some classic left-wing demands and ideas. The party's attitude toward the Catholic Church was also rather peculiar for a left-wing party, although understandable given the legacy of PZPR, which included vehement anti-clericalism and religious intolerance. Therefore, to avoid further straining relations, SLD was careful not to clash openly with the Church, which in Poland is considered a social institution that was key to preserving national spirit under diverse occupations and regimes and remains influential. And lastly, it is worth noting that between 1999 and 2004, SLD, led by Leszek Miller, embraced the Third Way, or New Middle Way, doctrine, as represented in Europe by Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder, combining welfare-state policies with neoliberal ideology and economic practices. Since social democrats were in power in Poland at the time, many voters developed an image of a party that understood left-wing politics through cutting state spending and social investments, driven by a desire to improve economic indicators and modernise the country.

Several years have passed since then. The ideological identity of the political left, enriched by the experience of electoral setbacks and the loss of parliamentary representation, but also strengthened by

successes such as the return to the Sejm and the smooth cooperation of left-wing parties in the 2019-2023 parliamentary term, has been crystallised; this is reflected in the programme, electoral offer and legislative initiatives of the late SLD and NL.

The Polish Social Democrats, as a member of the Party of European Socialists, bases its appeal on the heritage of Polish and international socialist and social democratic movements, emphasising equality, social justice, the welfare state, non-discrimination, freedom and human rights, including the protection of minorities. It is also important to pursue a policy of remembrance by expressing respect for and recognition of the creators of People's Poland and for the achievements of the former socialist state (the development of western territories after the change of borders, the elimination of illiteracy, the development of higher and vocational education, and the creation of social and economic infrastructure, which contributed to the success of the Third Polish Republic).²⁰

The merger of SLD and *Wiosna* into a single political party in 2021 required the development of a new political programme. The combination of a classical social democratic approach to socio-economic issues with post-materialistic values and identities became an asset of NL's programme entitled "The future is now". In the introduction, the party states:

By combining the Democratic Left Alliance and *Wiosna* forces, we are welding together different traditions of left-wing politics. On the one hand, *Nowa Lewica* seeks to counter the harmful effects of systemic transformation and to build a socially just, secular state in which human rights are an unquestionable standard. On the other hand, we are strong in our support for social movements and in introducing new topics and problems into politics, such as LGBT+ rights and combating the climate catastrophe. We combine traditions of sensitivity to current

social needs with the knowledge of how to govern the state—courage in formulating demands and reason in implementing them.²¹

We analyse the political positions of centre-left parties in Poland based on their manifestos and election documents, and then compare these positions with the policies implemented during periods when social democrats were in power or part of coalition governments.

3.1 Socio-economic issues

A characteristic of social democrats is a commitment to the state's leading role in addressing social problems (welfare, public services, education, decent pensions, healthcare, housing), and to the state's role as a guardian of norms and standards in the labour market and the economy.²² SLD and NL then represent employees' interests, affirming the protection of their rights and striving to improve employment conditions.

However, the policies of Leszek Miller's government (2001-2004) and later Marek Belka's (2004-2005) deviated significantly from these values in many respects. Miller, as prime minister and leader of SLD at the same time, clearly shifted the party towards neoliberal positions, announcing, for example, his intention to introduce a flat tax (which never happened). His revolutionary statements, which were surprising coming from a prominent left-wing politician, were published in 2003 in an opinion weekly and met with genuine resistance. Miller announced:

The economy, which for a century and a half has been an area of radical polarisation, is ceasing to be a field of confrontation between the left and the right. The differences are slowly blurring because the dispute between liberalism and socialism has already been settled. It is obvious which system is more effective. It is also easy to prove

that it is not worth arguing with the market, because in the end, the market is always right. If we think about the modern left, which seeks sustainable, high economic growth and the fair sharing of its fruits, it must be said that traditional left-wing values should be pursued outside the market and through mechanisms that do not conflict with market mechanisms. This means separating economic policy from social policy and acknowledging that the generation of national income and its distribution are largely separate areas governed by different rules. In the former, hard and objective economic laws prevail, in the latter, the principles of social justice.²³

In reality, this was a renunciation of social democratic values in the socio-economic sphere. These were not just words. During the SLD government, spending on areas such as healthcare and education was reduced. For example, according to Rae, while education spending accounted for 4.6% of GDP in 2001, this proportion fell to 4.1% in 2004, and healthcare spending declined from 3.3% to 3.1% over the same period.²⁴

The "social democratisation" of SLD's program began in 2005 and was made possible by a leadership change. However, even Miller's return to the leadership position in 2012-2015 did not reverse this trend. Firstly, the concept of the Third Way had long been questioned; secondly, the SLD in opposition criticised the then-liberal-conservative PO-PSL government, so even from a pragmatic point of view, it was more advantageous to promote a left-wing programme. In its 2017 manifesto,²⁵ SLD, which at that time remained in extra-parliamentary opposition to the conservative-nationalist United Right government led by PiS, emphasised the need to raise the minimum wage, guarantee the right to join trade unions and ensure fair pay in the public sector. It stressed the importance of seniority-based pensions (40 years of service for men and 35 for women) and a seniority policy called the

“silver revolution”. It also included proposals to increase public health spending, build public rental housing, maintain a national collective agreement for teachers and adhere to a multi-level progressive tax system.

In the manifesto of NL from 2021, the party 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 all, banning free internships, preventing wage discrimination and violence at work, legally eliminating the gender gap in remuneration, increasing the number of days of annual leave, and gradually reducing weekly working hours without reducing wages. NL also advocates strengthening social dialogue, trade unions and the principle of codetermination by expanding collective agreements at the company and subcompany levels and enhancing the role of works councils. Regarding taxation, the party advocates a progressive income tax rate, taxing of large digital corporations and addressing tax avoidance.

With this programme, NL entered Donald Tusk's government at the end of 2023. As a junior partner, in the distribution of government posts, NL was given the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy; the Ministry of Digital Affairs; and the Ministry of Science. The first two ministries, as well as the position of Deputy Minister of Economy and Development responsible for housing issues, held by a social democrat politician, are ideally suited to implementing the programme proposals set out in the 2021 manifesto. The implementation of a programme providing financial support for parents of young children, a pilot programme for a 35-hour working week, the preparation of an amendment to the State Labour Inspectorate Act aimed at increasing its powers to combat abuses in the labour market, and the preparation of a draft law introducing a digital tax for large technology companies

are just some of the actions taken by left-wing ministers. They show that there is no discrepancy between the election manifesto and specific policy proposals, demonstrating the ideological path that Polish social democrats have taken since the beginning of the 21st century.

3.2 Respect for human rights and socio-cultural issues

The second pillar of the programme, alongside socio-economic issues, is human rights and socio-cultural issues. The centre-left declares its commitment to a modern, secular state, gender equality and minority rights. Key demands include reproductive rights (access to legal abortion up to 12 weeks of pregnancy), LGBTQ+ rights, full marriage equality, and the introduction of legal and medical procedures enabling gender reassignment. The party seeks full compliance with national law and international standards, including in the area of comprehensive sex education in schools. The importance of such issues stems from the fact that Poland has one of the most restrictive laws regarding abortion among all European countries: abortion is only permitted if the pregnancy threatens the health and life of the mother or if the pregnancy is the result of a criminal act (e.g., rape, incest, sexual activity with a person under the age of 15).

The left advocates abolishing the privileged position of the Catholic Church by terminating the concordat; separating the church from the state in financial terms; and abolishing the possibility for doctors and pharmacists to invoke the conscience clause, which leads to the refusal to provide certain medical services that violate women's reproductive rights. However, when SLD was in power twice (in 1993-1997 and 2001-2005), it did not take the opportunity to liberalise the abortion law passed in the early 1990s by the right wing in collaboration with the

Catholic Church hierarchy. In both cases, centre-left decisionmakers explained that they could not afford to take such a step for tactical reasons, as it would provoke strong opposition from the Church, whose support they needed, first on the new Polish constitution (1997) and later on the referendum on EU accession (2003).

During the term of the United Right (2015-2023), social democrats faced the challenge of explaining their position on direct social transfers, which were very popular with the public, to several groups, primarily families with children and pensioners. The ruling right-wing parties (mainly PiS) presented their policy as an implementation of the principles of the welfare state. However, according to social democrats, the right-wing cabinet used the pretext of supporting a higher birth rate by paying individual transfers called 500+, relating to the amount of benefit per child in Polish zlotys, to perpetuate the traditional division of social roles, forcing women to focus on housework and raising children.

In its campaign for the 2023 parliamentary elections, NL strongly emphasised issues such as marriage equality for all, regardless of gender; European standards on reproductive rights; the need to restore state funding for in vitro fertilisation; access to contraception; and broadly defined sex education for young people. After the elections, a left-wing politician was appointed Minister for Equality in Donald Tusk's government to translate the programme's demands into political decisions and legislation. The results have not been spectacular, because, on one hand, the left-wing agenda is tempered by conservative politicians from PSL and the prime minister himself, and on the other, the more progressive solutions to socio-cultural issues have been vetoed by the right-wing president: first, Andrzej Duda; and since August 2025, Karol Nawrocki.

3.3 Europe and progressive (?) foreign policy

Social democrats in Poland are viewed as the most pro-European political family. Even if initially the programmes of left-wing groupings centred on SLD treated European issues only marginally, at the beginning of 1990, SdRP opposed the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, which served as a guarantor of the USSR's interests in the region.²⁶ However, when SLD won the parliamentary election for the first time and became the main governing party between 1993 and 1997, the party felt obliged to reaffirm Poland's commitment to EU integration both in words and through a programme of liberalisation reforms, driven by two motives: (1) strengthening its democratic legitimacy; and (2) the conviction that EU integration is a guarantee of economic development. The SLD considered EU integration a top priority, and EU accession was perceived as a chance for "civilised" Poland to overcome backwardness in socio-economic development through faster economic growth, modernising agriculture, improving infrastructure and enhancing security. It is worth noting that social democrats, unlike other Polish actors, have never seen EU enlargement as a gift to Poland, as a payment for historical injustice or Polish service. For the 2004 European Parliament elections, SLD prepared a programme document in which they highlighted that European integration was an opportunity to realise social democratic values: solidarity; equality; freedom; justice; and democracy.²⁷

The Polish centre-left envisages the future EU as a European federation. Nevertheless, before Poland's accession, the government led by Leszek Miller criticised certain stipulations of the Constitutional Treaty on several occasions. Many scholars and observers of the Polish political scene interpreted it as a tactical move by the governing party,

which was then being accused by other political actors of betraying Poland's interests in accession negotiations.²⁸

Listening to the narrative of the centre-left in Poland, there is no doubt that it regards the emphasis on its own role in Poland's accession to NATO (even though this took place in 1999, when SLD was in opposition) and to the EU as part of its legacy and a key element of its political credibility.

Social democrats from SLD and later from NL want to pursue closer European integration through cooperation on social matters, including the introduction of equal standards for labour law, social insurance and healthcare. They see the potential and benefits of closer energy cooperation within the EU through an effective system to promote and finance a fair energy and economic transition.²⁹ The left also supports the European defence cooperation, especially in the face of growing threats from Russia and in view of US President Donald Trump's transactional approach to the role of guarantor of European security.

According to social democrats, Polish *raison d'État* requires not only further European integration but also continued pragmatic cooperation with the USA and the strengthening of NATO as the main guarantor of international and European security. This explains why Polish soldiers were sent by the social democrats in power to Afghanistan (2002) and Iraq (2003), so that no one would have any doubts about Poland's loyalty to its powerful protector. This decision was strongly criticised by then French President Jacques Chirac. Chirac accused the candidates for EU membership who had expressed support for Washington's actions of recklessness, infantilism, irresponsibility, bad manners and an inability to foresee the consequences. He stated that the countries then seeking to join the EU had "wasted an opportunity to keep quiet". However, no criticism was heard in the Polish internal debate, even though sending troops abroad could hardly be

considered a sign of progressive foreign policy. Internal protests arose when, in 2005, the public learned about secret CIA prisons in Kiejkuty, where, as established in an investigation by the Council of Europe and the European Parliament, prisoners suspected of terrorism were tortured. The Miller cabinet gave its consent to intelligence cooperation and the temporary access of American special services to the Polish Intelligence Agency Training Centre, where the tortures were to take place. Although it is difficult to defend this decision from a humanitarian perspective, it can be seen as another example of the importance that SLD attaches to Poland's relations with the USA.

In terms of its programme, NL also advocates ensuring Poland's security, which it guarantees primarily through military alliances, especially NATO. However, this did not prevent its leader, Włodzimierz Czarzasty, as Speaker of the Sejm, from taking an assertive stance in January 2026 against pressure from the Trump administration on the Polish parliament to support the motion to award the US president the Nobel Peace Prize. This shows that the centre-left has changed its understanding of loyalty to a strong ally, and this is not due to the more convenient status of the opposition party in this respect, as it is happening at a time when the left is co-governing within a coalition government.

The centre-left in Poland supports a progressive foreign policy, that is, prioritising diplomacy, human rights, sustainable environmental development and economic justice over military interventionism. However, in view of the war raging beyond the country's eastern border, the left takes the position that diplomacy cannot act to the detriment of victims, as in the case of Ukraine, that a neighbour attacked by Russia has the right not only to defend itself but also to attack the aggressor, and that Poland should provide logistical support to Ukraine.

3.4 Migration

Poland has only been a net migration country since 2018, which is why issues related to migrants and migration entered the public agenda much later than in Western European countries.³⁰ Therefore, there are no references to this topic in the early election manifestos of social democracy. The centre-left consistently expressed solidarity with refugees, arguing that people fleeing war and political persecution should be helped, especially since Polish migrants have been welcomed by other countries many times in history. The party often portrays migrants as victims, especially those stuck on the border between Poland and Belarus (victims of Lukashenko's regime) and Ukrainian war refugees (victims of Putin's regime).

In the 2023 electoral manifesto of NL,³¹ there was no mention of the party's migration policy, as if the party felt that voters had already learned its position from the previous 2021 manifesto, where the party's priorities were defined using mainly utility-based argumentation. Then, the party indicated that, because of the country's depopulation, Poland should welcome newcomers to ensure its security and prosperity.³² NL advocated the creation of a responsible and solidarity-based migration policy; the improvement of living conditions in refugee centres; the implementation of programmes to prepare migrants to start working in Poland; the provision of free access to healthcare for asylum seekers; support for entrepreneurs and institutions employing migrants; and the introduction of programmes to help foreigners at the local government level, such as legal consultations and free Polish language classes.

In parliamentary debates on migration policy, left-wing MPs urged their colleagues to move beyond the dispute between PiS and PO over who was better at protecting Poland from illegal immigration, and instead emphasised the need to introduce an integration policy for

people arriving in Poland legally to help them find work, pay taxes and social security contributions, and support access to housing, education, culture and the opportunity to gain professional qualifications. MPs pointed out that without these people from outside, it would be difficult to solve labour market problems in the future. They also emphasised that recruitment agencies operating in South America, Africa and Asia bring in workers who are not protected on the Polish labour market, are exploited and often live in degrading conditions. This approach to migration, which emphasises the protection of incoming workers and their families and highlights their contributions to economic development, is an exception in Polish public debate.

4

Internal life of the Polish left: Party as an organisation

Well-established party organisations, capable of surviving electoral defeats, usually boast solid regional and local structures and a stable membership base. Some researchers argue that parties lacking this asset are doomed to marginalisation, and any successes they achieve are likely to be short-lived. Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly clear that strong grassroots organisations alone no longer guarantee electoral victories; leaders and their personal qualities have become at least as important (and perhaps even more important). In the current era of mediatisation, individual popularity and recognition are crucial. This leads party elites to believe that maintaining complex local structures is not worth the effort required. As campaign strategies increasingly focus on personalities, party leaders take responsibility for winning over the electorate. They act as cognitive shortcuts for mobilising support and serve as a link between citizens and parties,³³ thereby strengthening their position within party organisations.

While the importance of regional and local structures may be shifting, they still unquestionably carry certain advantages. For example, they are key for monitoring local events and developments, enabling direct mobilisation of members and voters, and giving the party's central office a sense of control over the organisation's image

in a given constituency. Through the party on the ground, partisan organisations can maintain frequent contact with the electorate, build their credibility and capacity to address environmental challenges, and take responsibility for their actions.³⁴

It is therefore worth examining how the centre-left in Poland functions as an organisation, the state of its local structures and membership base, the model of party leadership, and the level of internal party democracy.

4.1 Evaporating membership base

Socialist and social democratic parties began as mass organisations in Europe. They were characterised by a large and homogenous membership base, which was actively recruited and encapsulated. The birth of European social democracy in the second half of the 19th century coincided with Poland's absence from the map of Europe. The distance between the parties of Northern or Western Europe and Polish parties was not bridged after Poland regained independence in 1918, especially because following partition diverse areas had socialist parties with dissimilar views on how to regain independence (i.e., the famous debate on "socialism and the Polish case") and were born in different contexts (to compare PPS with Ignacy Daszyński and SDKPiL with Rosa Luxembourg). The brief democratic episode in interwar Poland ended with Józef Piłsudski's *coup d'état* in May 1926 and the introduction of autocratic rule. After the Second World War, Poland found itself within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, so political parties operated according to a completely different model from that in democratic countries. The ruling party, PZPR, had around 3 million members at its peak, so, in terms of size, it met the criterion for a mass party.

However, membership figures have remained low since the democratic transition. The post-communist successor parties³⁵ inherited reasonably well-functioning structures, affiliated organisations and a relatively extensive membership base, but these quickly evaporated. The post-*Solidarność* formations, created in a top-down process by parliamentary elites, were poorly rooted in society and either unable or unwilling to build a solid grassroots base.³⁶ It is estimated that in 1990, only about 1.5% of the electorate were members of political parties.³⁷ By the turn of the century, this number further dropped to around 0.9%.³⁸ In 2010, the M/E ratio remained below 1% and has been slowly but constantly declining since (Table 2). Compared with other democracies in the 21st century, Poland's M/E ratio is considerably lower. For the 15 democracies selected in the mid-2000s, the average M/E ratio was 4.4%.³⁹

Table 2. Party membership figures in Poland (2012-2024).

Year	Electorate	Total party membership	Total membership as % of national electorate (M/E)
2012	30,762,931	291,900	0.95
2014	30,591,886	298,100	0.97
2016	30,534,948	259,800	0.85
2018	30,154,816	241,600	0.80
2020	30,118,852	239,900	0.80
2022	29,532,595	203,800	0.69
2024	29,094,845	209,200	0.72

Source: M/E values calculated from data provided by the Main Statistical Office (GUS) (2024) and the number of persons eligible to vote provided on the webpage of the Polish Electoral Committee (PKW) in respective years (or at the closest approximate dates).

For social democrats, the number of party members was closely linked to their electoral results. The largest increase in membership occurred between 1999 and 2003. This coincided with two consecutive electoral victories: in 2000, acting President Kwaśniewski, supported by SLD, was elected to a second term; one year later, SLD garnered 41% of the vote in the parliamentary election. In January 2003, the number of members reached its peak at 154,866 people (Table 3).

Table 3. Party membership of SLD and NL.

Year	Number of members
1999	76,209
2000	98,283
2001	126,600
2002	149,579
2003	154,866
2004	79,978
2005	78,471
2007	73,935
2009	69,322
2010	67,200
2011	57,551
2012	36,329
2015	38,470
2016	23,452
2018	33,554
2019	32,800
2020	31,930
2021	29,187
2022	26,625
2023	25,703
2025	approx. 21,000

Source: statistical data provided by SLD and NL.

However, over the next 18 months, between January 2003 and June 2004, SLD's membership shrank by a massive 48.36 percentage points, even before the losses in the 2005 parliamentary election. The main reason for such a sharp decline in party membership was a series of scandals involving leading figures of SLD (the *Rywingate* and the *Starachowice case*⁴⁰). A significant group of disillusioned activists, led by Marek Borowski, left SLD in 2004. Soon afterwards, Borowski formed a new party called the Social Democracy of Poland (*Socjaldemokracja Polska* – SdPi), which attracted approximately 6,000 former SLD members.

4.2 Party on the ground and intra-party democracy

As successor parties, SdRP and then SLD, inherited well-developed, established regional and local structures from PZPR. The organisational structure of NL is essentially based on that of SLD, which is why it has branches in every county, making it one of four parties operating nationwide.

The party is organised on four levels: local branches; district; regional (province); and national. The first three remain relatively independent of the centre: they nominate candidates for local and regional elections and decide whether to join local coalitions; they also propose candidates for general parliamentary elections, but their proposals require approval from the central party organs. Regional structures select their own chairpersons and influence the selection of party leader, who is elected by regional delegates during national conventions or congresses. Central organs supervise the activities of regional structures. In justified but rare cases, they are entitled to dissolve or establish new regional bodies.

After the merger of SLD and *Wiosna*, the structure of NL was determined by factional logic: there were two factions within the party, and each member had to belong to one. Leadership positions at the regional and national levels were filled equally by members of both factions. After several years, however, this rule was abolished, and in practice, from 2025, there is no trace left that two separate entities once existed. Two youth organisations – the Federation of Young Social Democrats (*Federacja Młodych Socjaldemokratów*) and the Young Left (*Młoda Lewica*), which were affiliated with SLD and *Wiosna*, respectively – have also merged and have been operating under a single banner since autumn 2025.

There is an ongoing debate in the political science literature about what intra-party democracy is and how it should be measured. In a democratic party, decisions and actions should be taken from the bottom up, power within the party should be distributed as widely as possible across different levels, bodies and individuals, rather than concentrated in a single central body, and the decision-making process should take into account the interests of individual members and a diversity of opinions. Implementing the principles of inclusiveness and decentralisation in party management enables the party to engage more people, and thus, uphold the basic elements of democracy: responsibility and accountability for actions.⁴¹ Von dem Berge et al.⁴² have developed a tool for measuring the level of intra-party democracy, which takes into account (1) members' rights, including membership rules, minority rights, namely women, the representation of ethnic minorities and so forth; (2) organisational structures (party organisational levels); and (3) political decision-making processes, including the method of selecting party leader and other people of the party's central bodies, the process of nominating candidates for public office, the involvement of local party organisations or ordinary members

in the creation of political manifestos, or decision-making on forming coalitions with other parties. For a party to be considered internally democratised, the conditions of representation should be met, either by adopting representative democratic methods or by introducing mechanisms of direct democracy. Kaczorowska used this tool to measure the level of internal democracy within Polish political parties and found that SLD was the most democratic.⁴³ NL's statute maintained SLD's internal solutions, although elements of direct democracy were abandoned in favour of representative democracy.

4.3 Exclusively male party leadership

Neither SLD nor NL had strongly personalised party leadership. In the history of social democracy, Leszek Miller, who was elected as the chairperson of SLD (in 1999, 2003 and 2012), had the strongest position as leader compared to previous and next chairpersons, especially in the period 1999-2003, but not so much due to statutory regulations as to the legitimacy resulting from electoral victory in the 2001 parliamentary elections and good results in the local elections at that time. However, even then, public opinion did not perceive the party as an organisation subordinate to a charismatic leader, a strongly personalised one whose existence depended on one person. Hence, social democracy in Poland after 1989 fulfilled one of the characteristics of an institutionalised organisation: it was valued in its own right, apart from its momentary leaders and their initial goals; and it behaved according to regularised procedures rather than on the whims of a leader.⁴⁴

The centre-left in Poland has not had a female party leader to date. Although it is the party that regularly has the most feminised

parliamentary representation, female politicians are valued for their high placement on electoral lists and, moreover, are perceived by voters as advocates of pro-women policies. The fact that women do not yet hold senior leadership positions in the party is sometimes criticised as a sign of inconsistent messaging and image incoherence.

For many years, the party leader was elected during the party congress, although the centre-left experimented with direct elections of the chairperson by all party members. This direct democracy mechanism has been applied only once, in 2012. In 2016, the party opted for a combination of direct voting and delegate voting: in the first round, all eligible members cast their votes directly; and in the second round, delegates to the congress chose the leader from the two candidates who received the most members' votes. On one hand, this compromise allowed the party to maintain its image as an internally democratic organisation in which every member has a say in important decisions; on the other hand, by involving the congress and delegates in the process, regional branches of the organisation retained some control over the choice of leader. NL has abandoned even partially direct elections of its leader; at the last party congress in December 2025, the chairperson, who was the only candidate, was chosen by delegates.

The competition for leadership within the party did not always look like it did at the end of 2025; it was quite often fierce and highly competitive. On many occasions (in 2004, 2008 and 2016), the results for the two strongest candidates were close (Table 4). In such cases, the rivalry did not end with the nomination of the new leader, as the defeated opponent attempted to build a loyal camp within the party and continued to challenge the chairperson.

What used to distinguish social democrats from other relevant Polish political parties was the more frequent alternation among their

Table 4. Party leadership election results for SLD and NL (1999-2025).

Year	Percentage of the leader's supporters	Percentage of the leader's opponents	Leader(s)
1999	NDA	NDA	Leszek Miller
2003	80.43	19.57	Leszek Miller
2004	55.88	44.12	Józef Oleksy
2005	64.49	35.51	Wojciech Olejniczak
2008	52.38	47.62	Grzegorz Napieralski
2012*	92.00	7.8	Leszek Miller
2016**	58.39	41.61	Włodzimierz Czarzasty
2021	85.37	14.63	Włodzimierz Czarzasty and Robert Biedroń
2025	NDA	NDA	Włodzimierz Czarzasty

*In 2012, the National Congress only endorsed the choice made earlier by all party members in a general election.

** In the first round of the election, all members had the right to vote; in the second, only the congressional delegates voted.

NDA indicates no data available.

Source: statistical data provided by SLD and NL.

leadership. In SLD, it was common for a chairperson's four-year term not to be renewed in subsequent leadership elections, as party structures were disappointed with the party's electoral performance. The change of chairperson was often seen as the best response to an election defeat, as a symbol of cutting ties with mistakes and a new beginning. There were also other reasons for personnel changes at the top of the party, such as internal rivalry and external accusations against left-wing politicians. The situation changed in 2016, when Włodzimierz Czarzasty took over as party leader. He has held that position ever since, and in December 2025, he was again re-elected as party chairperson.

The first leader of SLD after its transformation from a coalition of left-wing groups into a unified political party in 1999 was Leszek Miller, who had been chairperson of SdRP since 1997. After winning the parliamentary elections in September 2001, Miller became prime minister. One year later, in October 2002, SLD, in coalition with UP, won the local elections under Miller's leadership. These electoral successes meant that, despite the parliamentary commission of inquiry that had been deliberating for almost six months to investigate allegations revealed in the media concerning cases of corruption during work on the amendment to the Broadcasting Act (the so-called *Rywingate* scandal), which directly affected SLD, Miller won the party leadership election again in June 2003, without any competitors. Just a few days later, in July 2003, the party was hit by another image crisis (the so-called *Starachowice* case), followed by the next one in August (allegations against several SLD activists of accepting large bribes). Polling support began to decline, and party preference surveys conducted systematically by the Centre for Public Opinion Research (*Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej* – CBOS) recorded the first change in the ranking of political parties in four years (exactly 57 months) in November 2003, with PO taking the place previously held by SLD.⁴⁵

In February 2004, Miller announced that he would step down as party leader and focus on his work as prime minister. Following this decision, intended to calm tensions within the party ranks, the SLD national convention appointed Krzysztof Janik in early March 2004 to replace him. Janik was to hold this position until the next congress, which is the statutory body responsible for electing the party leader. However, Leszek Miller's resignation did not prevent a split – shortly afterwards, a group of activists led by Sejm Speaker Marek Borowski left SLD and formed a rival group called SdPI.

In December 2004, the party held its third congress, at which the SLD leadership changed. Krzysztof Janik and Józef Oleksy, who had replaced Marek Borowski as Speaker of the Sejm a few months earlier, competed for the position. The election was highly competitive, with Oleksy emerging victorious. Shortly after taking office as the head of SLD, the so-called lustration court⁴⁶ found him to be a “lustration liar”, as a result of which he first resigned as Marshal of the Sejm in January 2005 and then resigned as party leader in May of the same year. The party convention in May 2005 decided that SLD would be led by the Minister of Agriculture, Wojciech Olejniczak, then a 31-year-old politician. The rejuvenation of the leadership was intended to bring freshness and dynamism to the party and show openness to new voters. His election as party leader was accompanied by internal party tensions between supporters of broad cooperation with left-wing circles (including politicians who had recently left the party) and the so-called SLD patriots, who not only did not believe in the integration of the entire left, but also called for a return to left-wing, rather than liberal, socio-economic policies.

Olejniczak remained at the helm of SLD until May 2008, when, somewhat unexpectedly, as evidenced by the close results of his competitors, he was replaced at the election congress by the then secretary general, Grzegorz Napieralski, also a representative of the “young generation”. This happened more than six months after the poor result in the 2007 parliamentary elections, when SLD ran as the Left and Democrats (*Lewica i Demokraci*) electoral committee. Two years later, Napieralski ran in the 2010 presidential election and achieved a surprisingly good result: 13% of the vote and a strong third place, behind Bronisław Komorowski (PO candidate) and Jarosław Kaczyński (PiS candidate), while the other candidates won only 1-2% of the vote. However, this result was not a predictor of the centre-

left's future successes; on the contrary, subsequent elections showed that it was rather a pleasant incident, a moment to catch one's breath before further defeats. Napieralski paid for SLD's poor performance in the 2011 parliamentary elections with his position as chairperson. He resigned, as expected by the party.

In December 2011, party members elected Leszek Miller as their leader in a direct vote. This marked his political comeback not only to the most important position in the party, but also to the ranks of social democracy, which he had left for several years after resigning from leadership in 2004. Despite the high level of trust party members placed in him, voters did not return to the party. After another defeat in the 2015 parliamentary elections, which this time resulted in the loss of parliamentary representation, elections for new leadership were held within the timeframe provided in the party's statutes.

Both former SLD leaders, Miller and Napieralski, caused image problems for their party, and their strange political trajectories undermined its reputation. Although it is rare for a former leader to leave a party unnoticed, such an event arouses public and media curiosity, but in the case of the two former SLD chairpersons, it led to embarrassing situations. Miller left the party in 2007 to run unsuccessfully in the 2007 parliamentary elections on the electoral list of the populist Self-Defence (*Samoobrona*), the party that co-governed the country in 2006-2007 in a coalition with PiS and the strongly Eurosceptical and nationalistic League of Polish Families. Then in 2008, Miller formed his own party, the Polish Left (*Polska Lewica*), which quickly disappeared from the political landscape. None of these facts prevented Miller from returning to SLD in 2010, running in the 2011 parliamentary elections, in which he achieved a strong individual result, receiving a seat in the Sejm, becoming chairperson of the SLD parliamentary club, and finally returning to the party leadership position he had held until 2004.

However, in 2015, as party leader, he single-handedly pushed through the nomination of a largely unknown candidate from outside the party for the presidential election, and he resigned from his bid for another term as chairperson after her electoral defeat. The frustration within the party was so deep, exacerbated even further by the loss of parliamentary representation a few months later, that he probably would not have been elected anyway. In 2019, Miller ran on the European coalition's list for the European Parliament and easily won a seat. In 2021, he left the party again, which had since been renamed NL. After five years in Brussels and Strasbourg, he did not seek re-election to the European Parliament and announced his retirement from politics. He then took on the role of a volunteer commentator on Polish politics and often shocked the public and his former party colleagues with statements that contradicted the ideals of social democracy, the NL position and even the Polish *raison d'État*, including anti-Ukrainian remarks.⁴⁷

The fate of another SLD leader, Grzegorz Napieralski, who served from 2008 to 2011, also took an unusual turn. In January 2015, he was suspended from the party by the national executive committee, which deemed his media statements following his loss in the local elections detrimental to the party. In his public statements, Napieralski repeated that the party "no longer had a chance and should be disbanded". At the end of March 2015, he was punished by the intra-party court with a three-year ban on holding party office. Consequently, he left the party and, in October 2015, was elected to the Senate on behalf of PO. Since 2023, he has been a member of PO.

Let us move on to the last and current leader of social democracy, Włodzimierz Czarzasty. After a disastrous 2015 for the centre-left in terms of elections, new leadership had to be chosen. In the party leadership election in January 2016, ten politicians put forward their candidacies, which was a record number in the history of SLD. In

the first round of voting, in which all party members could vote for the leader, three candidates received the most support: Włodzimierz Czarzasty with 37.8%; Jerzy Wenderlich with 24.7%; and Krzysztof Gawkowski (who had served as Secretary General) with 22.1%. As none of the candidates exceeded the required 50% support, the final choice was made by delegates at the sixth SLD congress in January 2016. Włodzimierz Czarzasty defeated Jerzy Wenderlich and became the SLD leader. He took over the party at its lowest point: without parliamentary representation; in debt; suffering from an identity crisis; and with demotivated voters. His main achievements include putting the party's finances in order, which involved cutting many existing expenses; regaining the trust of some left-wing voters; and convincing former rivals, namely, the *Razem* and *Wiosna* parties, to cooperate in the 2019 parliamentary elections under the SLD banner to minimise the risk of not exceeding the 8% electoral threshold. For the first time in many election cycles, there was only one social democratic electoral committee, which compensated for this left-wing uniqueness, as 12.56% support for the SLD electoral committee translated into the third-best result in the race: 49 seats in the Sejm and two senators.⁴⁸

After this election, in December 2019, SLD and *Wiosna* merged to form a single party, NL, and it was decided that the party would have two co-leaders at both the central and regional levels, representing two factions within the party. In July 2021, some members of the SLD executive committee sought to remove Czarzasty from his position as SLD chairperson, thereby ensuring he would become one of the NL co-leaders. This attempt at an internal coup, which attracted widespread media attention, failed, however, because the leader exploited new transitional provisions in NL's statute and suspended the rebels. In autumn 2021, he became co-chairperson, without any other obstacles, with Robert Biedroń from *Wiosna*.

After the NL's weaker results in the 2024 local and European elections, voices within the party and coming from its environment called for generational change and greater empowerment of women. It was noted that women predominate in the left-wing electorate, and that this should be reflected in the leadership. In autumn 2024, the party decided to move away from dual leadership, change its statutes and have the next electoral congress select a single leader. The incumbent leader, Czarzasty, was preparing to take up the position of Speaker of the Sejm (which, constitutionally speaking, is the second-most-important position in the country), as stipulated in the coalition agreement concluded by the co-governing parties after the 2023 parliamentary elections, and suggested that he was not interested in re-election as party leader. Therefore, several younger politicians, including women, began gauging the popularity of their potential candidacies, but a few days before the party congress in December 2025, Czarzasty announced his intention to run for the leadership of NL. Potential rivals withdrew their candidacies, so the incumbent easily retained his power in the party.

5

Social democratic base and allies: The left-wing electorate and trade unions

After 1989, class changes in Poland affected the structure of the centre-left electorate. Gdula analysed which classes in Poland had grown and which had shrunk in the first 15 years after the political transformation and concluded that statistical data did not always align with predictions about the dynamics of post-industrial modernisation.⁴⁹ Between 1991 and 2005, the share of specialists, that is, people performing intellectual work requiring significant qualifications, as well as people working in services, increased in the class structure, while the class of farmers shrank. However, there was also a surprising increase in the share of unskilled workers and a decrease in the share of skilled workers among the total workforce. After 1989, in the early years of the free-market economy, the labour market shrank, with over 4 million workers disappearing, and industrial employment declined significantly, mainly in the coal and textile sectors. Alternatively, the trade, business services and real estate sectors experienced strong growth, as did the share of people working in administration, which proved that the public sector was largely responsible for the increase in the share of specialists among the total number of employees.

According to Gdula, these changes have led to the emergence of a new class force, important to the left-wing electorate, which he identified as the public-sector middle class. Those employed in education, healthcare and other public services are characterised by a high level of unionisation by Polish standards and above-average participation in strikes and social protests. As the number of people employed in industry, who traditionally constituted the left-wing electorate, has shrunk, the increase in the percentage of public-sector professionals has partly mitigated the decline in the social democratic electorate.

As the social structure changed, social democracy sought new alliances to broaden its social and political base. It therefore turned to liberal-minded, well-educated, above-average-earning voters in large cities, seeing them as a promising reservoir of new voters. This was evident in the SLD's offer under the leadership of Leszek Miller, and in subsequent years in the search for liberal allies in the political market and in the formation of electoral alliances with them (Left and Democrats, United Left and – to some extent – the merger of SLD with *Wiosna*). The least successful in terms of election results, the 2015 United Left project was analysed from an electoral geography perspective by Chwedoruk and Rydliński.⁵⁰ Their calculations revealed a picture of a party that, compared to 2011, gained support in 2015 among voters living in the largest Polish agglomerations and in the most affluent provinces. However, it lost support in most counties further from large agglomerations and in less-affluent counties. The shift towards the liberal centre did not allow it to retain a significant proportion of voters traditionally associated with the left. In addition to this spatial shift, the liberal shift also caused a loss of support in industrial centres, especially those associated with mining, where SLD had previously enjoyed above-average support.

So, what characterises the social democratic electorate in Poland? In 2019, Marciniak described the left-wing electorate as a conglomerate of sentimental, social and cultural leftists.⁵¹ At around the same time, Potocki saw left-wing voters as an alliance of three niches, united mainly by pro-state sentiment, soft anti-clericalism, acceptance of same-sex relationships, expectations of liberalisation of the abortion bill and a critical attitude towards what was happening in Poland, governed by the PiS party.⁵² When Dymek portrayed left-wing voters in 2021, he wrote that their true image was far from the ideas, stereotypes, expectations and political definitions. He pointed out that left-wing supporters were above average in terms of education, more likely to live in large cities and tended to be well-off, or at least well-off enough to have time to “worry about smog, Poland’s place in the world and the degree of clericalisation in our country”.⁵³

IBRiS surveys conducted just before the 2023 parliamentary elections⁵⁴ revealed that supporters of NL were hostile toward PiS. Aversion to this party had long been evident in surveys, but just before the elections that led to a change in power, PiS aroused decidedly negative emotions among as many as 89% of NL voters. The least-disliked party was the nationalist *Konfederacja* (disliked by 66% of NL supporters). The aversion to PiS, a party associated not only with social benefits, redistribution and allowances, but also with the ruling party’s growing appropriation of the state’s role, created some dissonance among left-wing voters. For example, just under half were in favour of scrapping the 500+ child benefit scheme, whilst only 36% favoured retaining the scheme and indexing it to inflation.

Economic liberalism is not entirely new among left-wing voters, as shown by studies from 2019 and 2021.⁵⁵ In 2023, however, income egalitarianism was more often supported by PiS supporters than by NL sympathisers. However, it is not that difficult to understand if one takes

into account the social strata within the electorate of both parties. The statement that a society can be called fair if income and wealth are evenly distributed among all people was supported by one in three left-wing voters, while 59% believed it is fair when those who work harder earn more. What's next? Although 64% of left-wing voters favoured progressive taxation, 28% believed everyone should pay the same tax rate. There are, therefore, more supporters of progressive taxation among PiS voters (73%) than among those on the left. And it is rather difficult to consider this as evidence of the overwhelming and long-lasting influence on Leszek Miller's left-wing supporters, who, first as a left-wing prime minister, lowered the corporate income tax from 27% to 19% and imposed this flat tax on the earnings of sole traders, and then in 2007 – already as an opposition politician, but still theoretically referring to the ideological achievements of social democracy – proclaimed that the introduction of a flat income tax would consolidate rapid economic growth in Poland.

Left-wing voters are, by definition, not opposed to privatisation. One in three believes that privatisation would be the best solution to the problems facing the Polish healthcare system. A similar percentage agrees with the statement that private schools are better than public schools, although in this case, it is impossible to determine whether this reflects distrust of the public sector or a rejection of PiS's education policy, which is endorsed by the conservative Minister of Education.

Half of NL supporters disagree with the statement that taxes should be lower even if this would result in the introduction of fees for healthcare, higher education or road use. A socio-political analyst from Western Europe would sniff at this result, saying that it is not enough for a left-wing voter. A commentator from Scandinavia might even tear their hair out because of it, but in the Polish context, where taxes are perceived in the collective mentality as a burden and an oppressive

measure by the state, which falls short in delivering healthcare or elderly care, among others, and more than half of the population cannot bring themselves to pay taxes,⁵⁶ left-wing voters are exceptional in this respect. Although the constructs of left- and right-wing politics are built on the same foundations across Europe, in practice their meanings can vary greatly. Context always matters, as clearly demonstrated by the above example of Polish left-wing supporters' approach to fiscal policy.⁵⁷

However, it is not the case that NL voters are diametrically opposed to supporters of social democracy values. They are certainly the most pro-worker part of Polish society. 82% of NL voters agree that the state should protect and support workers' rights. Other issues that distinguish left-wing supporters from the general Polish electorate include respect for human rights, the Catholic Church's position, and the division of social roles between men and women. The majority support granting same-sex couples the right to marry: 60% strongly agree, and another 22% would accept such a measure in Polish law. It is therefore not surprising that 67% of the left-wing electorate (the highest percentage among all voters) oppose the statement that homosexuals should be prohibited from publicly disclosing their sexual orientation.⁵⁸

Left-wing voters also completely disagree that responsibility for taking care of the home should fall primarily on women, although they are less adamant about who should be responsible for providing for the family. 28% of left-wing voters agree that this is primarily the role of men, but this is still the lowest level of support among all electorates. There are no surprises, however, regarding the place of religion in the public sphere. 79% of NL sympathisers believe that religious education should be provided by parishes rather than schools (as it is now), and 85% are offended by the clergy's participation in various state ceremonies.

IBRiS also identified the greatest fears and social concerns of individual electorates. Left-wing voters are certainly not overwhelmed by fear at the thought of immigrants and refugees. This is another distinguishing feature compared to the electorates of other parties. 49% feel calm about immigrants (35% feel anxious). By comparison, among PiS voters, immigrants mainly cause concern (70% of responses); similarly, in the nationalist *Konfederacja*, immigrants are a cause for concern for 71% of the party's supporters. What worries left-wing voters is the issue of freedom of speech in Poland, women's rights and the state of democracy.⁵⁹

Election surveys show that the main motivation for voting for NL is the voter's agreement with the party's policies on issues such as abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, the role of the Church and lifestyle, rather than economic issues. Social transfers (though not social policy) are associated with PiS and *Razem*, but the latter, having never been in government, has had no opportunity to prove its effectiveness and efficacy.

Trade unionists should constitute a natural electoral base and allies of social democracy. However, the level of unionisation in Poland is very low compared with Western, Southern and Northern European countries and is similarly low to that in other post-communist countries in Central Europe. Only 5.5% of Poles report membership of a trade union, representing one in ten employees; this is the fourth-lowest unionisation rate in the EU. Women (13%) outnumber men (9%). One in four trade union members is employed in public institutions and state-owned enterprises, working as technicians or other mid-level employees (including nurses and police officers).⁶⁰

The three largest nationwide trade union centres in Poland are the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarność" (*Niezależny Samorządowy Związek Zawodowy Solidarność*), the All-Poland Alliance

of Trade Unions (*Ogólnopolskie Porozumienie Związków Zawodowych – OPZZ*) and the Trade Union Forum (*Forum Związków Zawodowych – FZZ*). Since the beginning, social democrats have cooperated closely with OPZZ. Before 1989, OPZZ had been practically subordinate to the ruling communist party, PZPR. After the party's dissolution, OPZZ formed an electoral coalition with SLD (1991-1997). As a result, running on SLD lists, trade unionists had political representation in the Sejm.

Now, OPZZ is declared to be independent of any political party. However, both the OPZZ leadership and the trade union chairpersons belonging to this umbrella organisation regularly consult on draft left-wing legislation and issue joint opinions on government proposals. Furthermore, NL politicians take part in street demonstrations organised by OPZZ and celebrate Labour Day together every year. OPZZ and the Polish Teachers' Union (*Związek Nauczycielstwa Polskiego – ZNP*) have issued opinions on the left's programme proposals concerning labour and education at all levels, demonstrating openness and closeness between the Social Democratic party and trade unions.⁶¹

6

Challenges and prospects for the centre-left in Poland in the third decade of the 21st century

Sociological analyses indicate that the centre-left party's election results are significantly lower than they could be, given the popularity of the left-wing and progressive agenda among Polish voters. Many left-wing voters do not support social democrats in Poland at the polls. They currently have two main competitors on the political scene: the centre-right KO and the left-wing *Razem*.

Although social democracy in today's Poland is the most credible political force fighting for the rights of women, LGBTQ+ people, and the true separation of church and state, in 2023 many voters declaring left-wing views believed Donald Tusk's announcement that, after removing PiS from power, his party's priorities would be the legalisation of abortion up to 12 weeks of pregnancy, the possibility of same-sex civil partnerships and the abolition of the special privileges of the Catholic Church, that is, the implementation of a left-wing programme. Months after the formation of the government, it became clear that the centre-right prime minister was unable (or unwilling?) to fulfil these promises, which confirmed the belief that, in reality, only NL, as a co-governing party, and *Razem*, as a critical opposition, were paying attention to

these issues. The KO's rightward shift may be an optimistic sign, as it leaves more room for NL. However, its politicians are threatened by the tendency among voters who declare left-wing views to vote tactically. As in the 2023 parliamentary elections, in the 2025 presidential elections, despite three left-wing candidates running, every third left supporter cast their first-round vote for KO candidate Rafał Trzaskowski. Although Trzaskowski belongs to the more progressive faction of his centre-right party, during the election campaign, he adopted a conservative stance, sharpening his anti-immigration rhetoric, focusing on security issues and avoiding topics related to the left-wing agenda. The fact that he still managed to convince some left-wing voters to vote for him shows that NL has a serious competitor in KO. It is reasonable to assume that, as the junior coalition partner, NL will be blamed for the current government's shortcomings. That is potentially dangerous, given that President Karol Nawrocki, elected in 2025, not only tends to veto all major bills but also attempts to counter them with his own proposals. From an institutional point of view, this is rather strange, as Poland remains a country with a parliamentary-cabinet system, but from an electoral perspective, it provides PiS and other right-wing forces with a platform to suggest that they are a credible alternative to the current government.

The centre-left also faces competition to its left from the *Razem* party. For young voters, who turned out in record numbers in the 2023 parliamentary and 2025 presidential elections, *Razem*, which is more radical, is ideologically credible and convincing; has a magnetic social media message; is more expressive; and, finally, is perceived as a better counterweight to the nationalist and far-right *Konfederacja*. Like the latter, it is often underestimated in the polls. NL has a milder image than *Razem*, which, in theory, makes it easier to attract a broad spectrum of left-wing voters but also makes it difficult to build a strong

identity. This was demonstrated by Magdalena Biejat's candidacy in the presidential election. During the election campaign, she gained increasing sympathy from voters, and the group of those indifferent to her melted away,⁶² but sympathy and being nice alone do not win elections. NL also has a similar image of being nice but ineffective. *Razem* is therefore beating the centre-left with a more noticeable and resonant message, as well as with a leader who has a unique, aspirational image. While NL may be the moderate voter's potential choice, those more strategic will seek to support those giving a real chance of keeping PiS, *Konfederacja* and others from entering the government. The voters of *Razem* do not entertain such dilemmas.

The challenges facing the centre-left extend beyond political rivals. It is especially true, as history shows, that the animosities on the left rarely preclude agreement on common lists or electoral coalitions in the end. But for some time now, we have been observing a significant shift in the political landscape of liberal democracies towards right- and far-right politics. The mainstream political scene, of which social democracy is a part, is under attack from nationalist ideologies and populists who are fuelling voters' concerns about migration, economic uncertainty and mistrust of traditional institutions. Poland is no exception; it fits perfectly into this trend and illustrates it. Especially because, as elsewhere, Poland is not only divided between rural and urban, but also clearly and possibly still historically between West and East. Overcoming divides, in which the strongholds of PiS and the far right are truly their bastions, limits the possibilities for expansion.

Social democrats in Poland are not helped by the strong affective polarisation between PiS and KO, in which they are not involved and remain on the sidelines. Although many social surveys show that Poles report being tired of polarisation, at the time of the elections, most still succumb to it and vote either for their first-choice party (PiS or KO) or

for the strongest competitor to the hated party. Furthermore, it seems that it is not the social democrats, but probably the *Razem* party on the left of the political spectrum and the *Konfederacja* on the right that will benefit in the future from a potential shift away from the primacy of this rivalry.⁶³

The next parliamentary elections in Poland will take place in autumn 2027. Judging by the intensity of the political disputes in spring 2026, one might say – with a touch of sarcasm – that once again these will be “elections in which everything is at stake”. What are the centre-left’s chances? Following the conclusion of a coalition agreement on the rotation of the post of Speaker of the Sejm, Włodzimierz Czarzasty, leader of NL, took up the second-most-important role in the state (after the president) in autumn 2025. He replaced the Polska 2050 party leader, Szymon Holownia, in this post. This Speaker’s rotation gave social democrats a clear basis for strengthening their position in negotiations within the government, as well as for increasing their ability to mobilise voters. Moreover, the manner in which Czarzasty carries out the state function helps shape his personal image as a tough political player. Shortly after his election as Speaker, Czarzasty pledged to protect the government from the opposition’s tactics by using the so-called “Speaker’s veto” – that is, blocking the president’s legislative initiatives primarily if he deems them harmful. This is possible because the Speaker controls the parliamentary agenda and can “freeze” the legislative process indefinitely. Practice shows that Czarzasty is consistent in this regard, which frustrates President Nawrocki, who attempts to attack him with accusations of unclear ties to Russia. In Poland, such insinuations have usually resonated strongly with the public, and at times, as the example of centre-left Prime Minister Józef Oleksy showed in the past, have led to the loss of important political posts. However, at present, given the strong polarisation between the

right-wing opposition and the ruling coalition majority, supporters of the latter have dismissed these insinuations as part of dirty political tactics.

Although the Speaker of the Sejm does not conduct foreign policy, in early 2026, he sparked a diplomatic row with US Ambassador Tom Rose, after which Rose announced he had officially severed relations with the Speaker over a serious dispute stemming from the Speaker's harsh criticism of President Donald Trump. Czarzasty had publicly stated that Trump did not deserve a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize, describing his foreign policy as violating international norms. The assertive stance taken by the left-wing Speaker of the Sejm has been well received not only among the left-wing electorate, but also among the Polish public, as criticism of the US Republican president's political style is clearly on the rise.

A leader's charisma alone is not enough to secure a satisfactory election result. Nevertheless, there is cause for cautious optimism given KO's shift to the right on issues such as migration and security, which allows NL to present itself as the only genuinely left-wing voice in government.

Annex 1

Important moments in the history of the party

- 1990** self-dissolution of PZPR and the formation of SdRP; first direct presidential election: leftist candidate in fourth place
- 1991** formation of a leftist electoral coalition around SdRP named SLD; first democratic parliamentary election, and SLD in second place
- 1993** SLD in government for the first time, in coalition with PSL
- 1995** change within government coalition, Józef Oleksy from SLD became prime minister; victory of the president of SdRP, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, in the second round of the presidential election
- 1996** Prime Minister Oleksy accused of espionage for Russia
- 1999** transformation of coalition SLD to a party with the same name
- 2000** Kwaśniewski's second presidency was won in the first round of elections
- 2001** after parliamentary elections, SLD was the largest party by number of votes and seats, the best election in the party's history; the leader of SLD, Leszek Miller, became prime minister in a government coalition (with agrarian party PSL and left party UP)

←NEXT LEFT→

- 2002 several SLD politicians suspected and accused of corruption – *Rywin-gate*
- 2004 a group of well-known figures led by Marek Borowski seceded from the party; Leszek Miller resigned from the office of prime minister a day after Poland's accession to the EU
- 2005 defeat of SLD in the parliamentary election
- 2010 presidential election after a plane crash in Smoleńsk, where SLD's candidate Jerzy Szmajdziński lost his life; new SLD candidate Grzegorz Napieralski in third place
- 2012 first membership vote over the selection of party leader; Leszek Miller, became SLD president again
- 2015 defeat of SLD candidate Magdalena Ogórek in the presidential election; failure to exceed the threshold for representation in parliament
- 2019 formation of a left-wing electoral coalition and return to the Sejm
- 2021 unification of SLD and Robert Biedroń's Spring party and the creation of NL
- 2023 after the parliamentary elections, NL became a junior partner in the coalition cabinet under Prime Minister Donald Tusk

Annex 2

List of political parties mentioned in the publication

Civic Coalition (*Koalicja Obywatelska* – KO)

Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska* – PO)

Confederation (*Konfederacja*)

Democratic Left Alliance (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej* – SLD)

Green Party (*Partia Zielonych*)

Labour Union (*Unia Pracy* – UP)

Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* – PiS)

Modern (*Nowoczesna*)

New Left (*Nowa Lewica* – NL)

Palikot's Movement (*Ruch Palikota*)

Polish Left (*Polska Lewica*)

Polish People's Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* – PSL)

Polish United Workers' Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*
– PZPR)

Self-Defence (*Samoobrona*)

Social Democracy of Poland (*Socjaldemokracja Polska* – SdPI)

Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (*Socjaldemokracja*
Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej – SdRP)

Spring (*Wiosna*)

Szymon Hołownia's Poland 2050 (*Polska 2050 Szymona Hołowni*)



Together Party (*Partia Razem* or *Razem*)

Your Movement (*Twój Ruch*)

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The Next Left Country Case Studies are a well-established publication series in the FEPS and Karl-Renner-Institut Next Left Research Programme. This collection is designed to provide readers with answers to reoccurring questions, such as how are the other (sister) parties doing? What are the best examples that could be shared from their respective practices? Does their current situation result from a long-term process or just an electoral blip? These and many other are covered in the volumes, which are intentionally kept short and remain focused on social democratic parties and the specificities of the respective national contexts in which they operate.

Social Democracy in Poland: From top division to the third league and the new play-offs

Anna Paczeńskiak

This time, Poland is in the spotlight – with an incredibly informative, academically outstanding and politically illuminating volume by Anna Paczeńskiak. The story reads like a political thriller. Indeed, the book depicts a political journey full of detours, with both triumphant and dramatic moments that today's Nowa Lewica (and its predecessors) has lived through in the last four decades. It begins in 1989, showing the transition moment, followed by the transformation towards a post-communist party and an attempt to establish itself as a modern social democracy. It traces key electoral moments, including the emergence of a new powerhouse in the early 2000s and later setbacks, culminating in exclusion from parliament in 2015 and a return in 2019 after entering the governing coalition.

To that end, Paczeńskiak puts under the microscope questions the mechanisms of party splits and mergers; the mechanics of the diverse electoral coalitions; and the relationship towards trade unions and other civil society organisations, as well as towards other stakeholders on the political stage. Paczeńskiak maps the major political and strategic choices of Nowa Lewica, a party that struggles with internal transformation and search for a distinctively Polish understanding of the social democratic ideology. This exploration made the party shape, shift and scrap parts of the programme.

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