

Donald Tusk Gives Polish Leftists the Ick. They Might Have to Get Over It

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He's unbearable.

"We could all feel we were participating in something huge and unprecedented. I actually burst into tears as we were approaching a meet-up point. That initial moment was unforgettable."

Dorota, 41, is an NGO worker from Warsaw, Poland. She was one of the estimated [half a million people](#) who took to the streets of Warsaw on Sunday to voice their opposition to the country's hard-right government. Their grievances were many: placards about [sky-high inflation](#) appeared alongside those criticising attacks on the rule of law (on Monday, the Polish government's changes to the country's judicial system were ruled to have [breached EU law](#)). Protesters called for public sector pay rises, state media reform and free abortion; they waved Polish, Ukrainian, EU and Pride flags.

Since the Law and Justice party (PiS) took power in 2015, mass protests have grown bigger and more frequent – though the scale of Sunday's was on another level. In 2017, [thousands took to the streets](#) when the government introduced reforms undermining the independence of the courts. In defiance of the government's [aggressively anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric](#), existing Pride marches multiplied in size; new Prides, known as Equality Marches, were established [up and down the country](#). When in 2020 Poland's highest court, packed with pro-government judges, voted through [a near-complete abortion ban](#), [hundreds of thousands of women protested](#). Sunday's march combined these and other struggles into one massive display of dissent, widely described as the biggest protest Poland has seen since 1989.

Comparisons to 1989 were intentional: Sunday marked the 34th anniversary of Poland's first partially free election since the start of communist rule, heralding the collapse of the Iron Curtain. By picking this symbolic date the march organisers – a coalition of opposition groups – aimed to link anti-PiS resistance with Poland's historic struggle for democracy.

The Donald Tusk Show.

In contrast to the largest women's marches, which had mobilised at just a few days' notice, Sunday's anti-government demonstration was a far less spontaneous affair. It was first announced seven weeks earlier on the Twitter profile of former prime minister Donald Tusk and was heavily promoted by his allies. Having also been involved in the women's marches, Dorota says the difference was "palpable": "One could really feel this was a political march, run by politicians. And that's fine, but it was clear that they were the focus, not us."

The prominent role of Tusk, who also opened and closed the march, raised eyebrows on the left. His seven years of premiership between 2007 and 2014 as leader of the centre-right Civic Platform party (PO) were characterised by relative political stability, but also by [privatisation](#), a public sector pay squeeze and the widespread use of insecure contracts. On women and minorities, Tusk favoured

caution: he failed to introduce civil partnerships for same-sex couples and did nothing to liberalise Poland's restrictive abortion law.

PiS finally took power in 2015, mobilising its base with attacks on minorities and a programme of social spending; Tusk, meanwhile, went on to serve as president of the European Council. In 2021, he announced his return to national politics, [returning to lead PO](#), now the biggest opposition party in Poland.

Left critics of the march see it as part of PO's strategy ahead of the upcoming general election this autumn. "Tusk is effectively hegemonising the opposition," warns Filip Ilkowski, 46, an activist involved with the socialist campaigning group Workers' Democracy. "He's showing everyone else their place. Everyone is invited but only PO politicians get to speak at the rally."

Despite having protested against the government countless times, this time Ilkowski stayed at home. He was put off by the tone of the march: "The flags, the uncritical embrace of 'Europeanness' treated as an article of faith, the smiley-faced liberalism."

"PO is the party of the rich," he adds. "In terms of the economy, they're Thatcherites. Of course, people were there for different reasons, from hard neoliberals to people protesting against racist policies, hatred towards women [and] LGBTQ+ people ... One of the problems with the liberal opposition is that they're trying to combine it all together: linking opposition to PiS with an endorsement of everything that came before it. They can't even understand why they lost."

However, many have argued that the Polish left doesn't have the luxury of picking and choosing its allies. "The country is in a total crisis," says Dorota. "Human rights crisis, economic crisis, democratic crisis. We are at real risk of being ruled by an authoritarian regime. Liberal democracy is seen as an absolute value here in Poland because we understand what it means when it's taken away."

"So yes, I'm a leftwing progressive who marched in a protest led by a neoliberal leader. And that is because our context is really complex, nothing is black and white."

Stay or split.

Join forces with liberals or organise alone? The dilemmas facing leftwing activists mirror debates taking place in party HQs. In the lead-up to what's shaping to be a tight and unpredictable election, pressure has been mounting for the opposition to unite behind a single list of candidates.

So far the left has resisted those calls, [preferring to stand separately as Lewica](#), an electoral bloc combining several left-of-centre groupings (including Razem, of which I'm a member). According to opinion polls, the alliance can count on around [8% of the vote](#) - well behind PO and PiS, and neck-and-neck with the far-right Konfederacja. In the likely event of a hung parliament, either of those smaller political forces could act as a kingmaker.

As well as its progressive core, many hope Lewica could speak to those who are wary of PiS's authoritarianism but fear the prospect of austerity. However, the more the anti-government vote consolidates around Tusk, the more pressure the left will face to back down.

While the left debates its strategy, PiS politicians are wasting no time pursuing theirs. Just days before the march, president Andrzej Duda signed a bill establishing a special commission to investigate alleged cases of Russian influence in Polish politics; those deemed to have acted in Russian interest would be declared unfit for public office. The new commission has been widely [interpreted as targeting Tusk](#), whom PiS has been trying to paint as an agent of the Kremlin; the

European Commission has [already launched legal action](#) against the government's plans. If PiS escalates its attacks on the PO leader, leftist pro-democracy campaigners could be forced to defend a figure they have little sympathy for.

With less than five months to go until the vote, the stakes look higher every day.

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