

What's Left in Poland? Can the 'three tenors' led by Adrian Zandberg, take on Poland's duopoly?

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At least the coalition program was written under the massive influence of Razem... it will be a decent social democratic set of postulates that the independent left need not be ashamed of.

This is an unlikely alliance, and yet the only one possible. Three completely different streams of the Polish left and centre-left have united for an electoral coalition in the upcoming national election on October 13. With three male figures representing the coalition and smiling next to each other at press conferences, the arrangement was quickly nicknamed the "Three Tenors" pact. Their names are: Włodzimierz Czarzasty, Robert Biedroń and Adrian Zandberg and the new formation's name is "Lewica", "The Left".

The general public expresses a lot of enthusiasm for the pact, with polls giving Lewica between 9% and 15%, numbers nobody on the left has seen for years. Yet the coalition is being born in a lot of pain, as the three parties are often more of rivals than friends, their internal structures, political goals, organisational history and political views being radically different. A marriage of convenience more than anything else.

The biggest player in this arrangement is SLD, the Alliance of the Democratic Left – the Polish post-communist party, with the legacy which comes with it. Dodgy figures from the state apparatus of the previous system – check; provincial barons combining party politics with profitable businesses – check; a history of going full-on Blairite third way social democracy – check; major corruption scandals while in government – check; elderly men making fun of women's and minority rights – check, and so on. Yet, over the last 14 years SLD has been through political purgatory. Unlike other former communist countries, they have not been in the government since 2005 and in the last election they didn't even make it to the Parliament. The party leader Włodzimierz Czarzasty knows that for his party it is now or never and if winning seats in Parliament requires a change and a concession here and there, he seems ready for it.

Wiosna, Spring, is a meteoric political project by a left-leaning mayor of one of the Polish coastal cities: the likeable, smiling, openly gay Robert Biedroń. He launched his party before the European election in May this year with the goal of storming the European Parliament, then the Polish Parliament and finally trying his hand at presidential elections in 2020. The plan didn't go as expected. The support for Wiosna swooped down as quickly as it skyrocketed in the beginning, exposing the chronic weaknesses of the formation. Biedroń led a sugary Macron-style campaign, exaggeratingly oriented on him as a leader. He very quickly built a broad movement of volunteers but allowed only his closest friends to actually join the party and have influence on the decisions. He surrounded himself with people whose political motivation and views seemed very random, to put it mildly. Finally, he made irreversible mistakes in his finances and lost a chance to get public funding

for his party. Biedroń, together with two other Wiosna members, is now an MEP. But his initial messianic ambitions to shake the political scene in Poland have been downscaled so much that according to leaks he is actually going to abandon his project and merge Wiosna with SLD after the election.

The third player, Razem, was founded four years ago, before the previous national election, as a grassroots political party combined with a social movement. After their previously completely unknown representative, Adrian Zandberg, had surprisingly won a TV debate, their support grew to almost 4%: not allowing Razem to get to the Parliament, but earning them some recognition and stable state funding. Over the last four years Razem has been the default political organisation for the entire Polish progressive community, with views ranging from social democracy through democratic socialism even further to the left. Flat structure, collective management, full gender parity, deliberative decision-making, and an evidence-based program: despite many internal problems Razem was a good place to be active as a leftist. Unfortunately, it has also so far been a very unsuccessful electoral project, recently scoring below 2% in the European election. With looming withdrawal of public money the otherwise very cautious Razem members decided to hop into deep water and go into the elections with the SLD and Wiosna.

A divided political landscape

Since 2005, the entire dynamics of the Polish political scene has been based on the growing polarisation between the two post-Solidarność political formations: the current governing party Law and Justice (PiS) and the previous governing party, Civic Platform (PO). It has divided the Parliament, the media and the society into two camps mobilising against each other and escalating their rivalry, without always knowing for sure what the fight is for. As is common in many former communist countries, the polarisation started quickly to vaguely overlap with the probably deepest social division in the country, between those who benefited from Poland's transition to capitalism and those who lost out. Big city liberals (PO) against the provincial working class (PiS), this is how the division is imagined in the society and how it – to a great extent – actually works.

Between 2007 and 2015 Poland was governed by the centre-right neoliberal PO which seemingly enabled the country to pass unscathed through the economic crisis. Throughout Europe the GDP fell or stagnated, while in Poland it kept growing, allowing the government to make bombastic statements about the country being an economic "green island". Yet, this growth was due to a cheapening labour force and PO's big words infuriated people at whose expenses the "success" was achieved: workers pushed to trash contracts with no minimum wages, no health insurance, sick leaves, holidays or prospects for a pension. They joined forces with those traditionally opposing the liberal drift towards a "cultural Europeanisation" of Poland and removed PO from power.

Jarosław Kaczyński's party knew how to make the most of this situation. Their social and economic policy has been inconsistent and their ideas for redistribution revoltingly oriented towards the "traditional family" model, but what they do is working. Moves like the introduction of generous child benefits or an hourly minimum wage resulted in immediate and tangible improvements in people's lives. In fact, voters fear the come-back of the liberals and despite numerous scandals and transgressions, support for PiS is steadily growing. At the same time the government is making the country browner and browner, unleashing nationalism, attacking women and the LGBT+ community and dismantling to some extent the system of democratic checks and balances.

So far, all attempts to crush the concreted duopoly have ended in failure, no matter if they were coming from the right, from the left or from sheer anti-systemic grief. This was also the fate of Razem and Wiosna which on different occasions tried to present themselves as an alternative to PiS and PO. The duopoly has efficient ways to smash parties which try to drive a wedge between them:

two powerful pieces of propaganda machinery and "identity media" systems cannibalise each attempt to start a new topic in public discussion. They have the power to silence aspiring third-party politicians to death and to convince voters that supporting small players is treason in the war between PO and PiS. And no wonder they do everything to uphold and petrify the situation: both camps feed on each other and cannot live without the enemy and the neverending mobilisation. In fact, because of this, the Polish political scene recently started looking like a two-party system.

Since the last election in 2014 every single political formation and initiative opposing the government – probably with the exception of the fascists – has been blackmailed to join the liberal opposition camp. For the European election, the „all against the government“ block led by PO grew to an enormous size and included also SLD. A true political Frankenstein, the block was unable to even present an electoral program and unsurprisingly lost by a great margin. After this experience, even the most persistent liberals noticed that their strategy is getting them nowhere, and gave it up. The loosening of ties between PO and SLD have made it possible for the left coalition to emerge.

Will the coalition finally break the duopoly spell?

There are some positive indicators. Voters who like to see leaders shaking hands and exchanging smiles give the "Three Tenors" a bonus for reconciliation. The political offer in the coming election will finally correspond more or less with the major groups of the electorate: apart from the two main players and Lewica, the voters will have a choice also between the Peasant Party (PSL), very deeply rooted in the countryside, and probably Konfederacja, a coalition of far-right, semi-fascist and fascist movements. With the parties actually representing the voters and divided along ideological lines, it will make it much harder to reduce every debate to a polarised diatribe. Finally, the current attack on the LGBT+ persons, disgusting and awful as it is, makes some space for the left as the only defender of the community.

Depending on how it is calculated, Lewica can win between 15 and 50 seats. Most of them will fall to SLD and Wiosna, however – thanks to an unlikely win by the Razem negotiators – if the coalition is just to introduce one MP, this MP will be [Adrian Zandberg from Razem](#). Razem accepted many humiliations during the coalition talks, but did manage to put Zandberg on the top of the most prestigious electoral list in the Warsaw district, ipso facto making him leader of the entire political undertaking.

However, the process of building the alliance, composing the electoral lists, writing the programme has been extremely painful. The tension is particularly tangible in Razem: the coalition is far from being what idealistic leftists dreamt of. First, it was not built on mutual trust but rather on hard negotiations with foul tricks, in which SLD and Wiosna frequently bullied the smallest partner. That's why in fact Lewica is not an actual, official electoral coalition of three parties but a one-party electoral committee formed by SLD with members of Wiosna and Razem only being "invited" to the electoral lists. This is a way of avoiding the 8% electoral threshold for coalitions and maximising the chance to pass the 5% threshold for parties – yet it deprives Razem of much of their independence. Many see it as a way to subordinate Razem to the SLD: the post-communists are famous for devouring organisations that they collaborate with.

But there are further sins. In their share of candidates, Razem proposed many female activists and politicians. However, the lists will be altogether very male-dominated and already the picture of the "Three Tenors" is extremely disturbing for Razem members. Furthermore, for many of them, the SLD is synonymous with the compromised left, not only in its connection to the previous system but also in its responsibility for passing neoliberal reforms and, importantly, for Poland's participation in the first Iraq war and hosting of Poland's secret CIA prisons. In fact, one of Razem's early demands was to put on trial one of the SLD's former prime ministers for war crimes. Wiosna, a formation with

a very brief history, sparks less controversy, but few actually like the superficially progressive, compulsively devious Biedroń and his colleagues.

What worries many, is the coalition's positioning on the political scene. Razem has put a lot of effort into showing that they oppose both PiS and PO and that being against the government doesn't mean supporting neoliberal policies. It is true that Razem have mostly failed in their attempt to attract the working class and people living outside of the big cities, which currently vote mostly for PiS.

However, Wiosna's and SLD's undisguised leaning towards the liberal camp as well as their vision of the upcoming election as a battle of two "armies of democracy" clashing with the "army of darkness" – an image very much cherished by centre-left commentators – feel to Razem like a betrayal of their ideals. Luckily, at least the coalition program – which will be officially presented on Saturday – was written under the massive influence of Razem. Even if not radical, it will be a decent social democratic set of postulates that the independent left need not be ashamed of.

Despite the lack of an alternative plan, the decision to run together with SLD and Wiosna prompted many ideologically and morally strict Razem activists to leave the party. The coalition also caused internal tensions, with some of the members convinced that the party founders and leaders had sold their organisation out for seats in the Parliament. On the other hand, the media hype and genuine social interest in the unification caused an unprecedented influx of people to Razem. It is a crossroads and no matter what happens, there is little doubt that the new left in Poland will not be the same any more.

It looks to many as if Razem is about to dive into a cesspit from which they will surface again in mid-October. How much crap will stick to them and how permanently? Will they be able to rinse out and start anew, possibly with MPs, almost certainly with continued public financial support? Will they finally find a way to grow their own reputation and support to reform the internally ponderous party and make it a vehicle of activism and organising rather than a space for internal fights?

Will Razem manage to address people with a radical message and start out on an independent, courageous path towards social change? Or, as feared by so many, will the current ugly deal be just the first in a series of rotten compromises, internal petrification and ideological stasis, in the shadow of the SLD? Let's keep our fingers crossed for the former.

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