

# WOJCIECH JABŁOŃSKI

## *A downfall of Polish “left wing”? An analysis of IFiS PAN panel research*

### **Introduction**

A statement that the electorate takes the majority of information used in order to make electoral decisions from the media is, in the time of mediatizing the Polish political scene, rather trivial. Without a long term and skillfully built image, there is no chance to win elections and what is more, to make people identify themselves with particular values a party represents, which would enable it success in the future or simply survival on the political arena. Politicians attempt to take the information initiative and present a favourable image of their party to journalists who, in turn, project this image on to the public. At times, the stakes are being the major party in government but sometimes – political survival. It often, happens that even during the worst of times for a party (low ratings), a some parties are not able or do not want to change the image they have among the electorate.

Lately this seems to be the case of the Polish “left wing”<sup>1</sup>. For some time the “left wing” parties in this country have been experiencing crisis. It can even be said that this is an existential problem, the so called “to be or not to be”. For much of the electorate in Poland, and as the election results in 1993 and 2001 showed, the “left wing” parties are considered to be a legacy of the old Communist system. In today’s world of more established Polish democracy they are unable to secure a stable programme position for themselves. The today’s “left wing” remains without leadership, it is divided, often in conflict and it cannot find common goals. Considering the fact that the political scene is dominated by right wing parties, it would seem logical to pull together to counterbalance this. Meanwhile, the political “left” does not even seem to be credible, in the eyes of its own electorate or as the opposition and seems to be content to be somewhere “in between” the conflict between the president and the government<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Due to the character of present “left wing” parties in Poland presently, this phrase will be used in quotations.

<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, this “convenient” position is not used to its best advantage. The leaders’ tactical (?) decisions result in a lot of commotion, in some cases it looks like a cordial alliance with ultra right wing President’s Palace (both blocked the media government project from July 2008), another time – the difficult to understand support

### The “left wing” punished by the voters

It seems that 2005 was a breakthrough year for the “left wing” parties, like Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej (presently, together with the virtual *demokracy.pl* making up *Lewica i Demokraci*), Socjaldemokracja Polski and other minor parties. The so far powerful left, basing on the voters’ resentiments for the “social” face of the system present in Poland between 1994–1999, now lost the parliamentary elections by a landslide. The “left” was reduced to a few seats in the parliament. Although many believe the crisis occurred earlier (some journalists consider the Rywin affair of 2002 a turning point when SLD lost its reputation<sup>3</sup>), the voters in their choices made it clear as to how they felt about the “left wing” parties<sup>4</sup>. The decisive element proved to be not “media” scandals around people from the presently governing party but their style of governing which had little to do with the “leftist” or “social” values. During the four years (2001–2005) in government SLD did not put into life what they promised in its official programme<sup>5</sup> but imposed onto people decisions<sup>6</sup> that took away its rights!

Logically speaking, the fact that old “left wing” parties compromised themselves and simply wore out should lead to other, new “leftist” parties forming. They could take part of

---

of the liberal/peasant coalition regarding limiting access to “bridge” pensions (rejection of president’s veto by PO, PSL and... SLD, December 2008).

<sup>3</sup> This kind of behaviour by the media is due to its “fourth power” status – the ability to define crises, or decide which situations within a democratic system are to be considered threatening to its functioning. (cf. W. Jablonski, *Kreowanie informacji, Media Relations*, Warszawa 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Official Sejm election results from 25.09.2005 were: PiS – 26.99%, PO – 24.14%, Samoobrona – 11.41%, **SLD – 11.31%**, LPR – 7.97%, PSL – 6.96%. Below the parliament entry level (between 0.3% and 5%) support were: **Socjaldemokracja Polska – 3.89%**, **Partia Demokratyczna – 2.45%**, Platforma Janusza Korwin-Mikke – 1.57%, Ruch Patriotyczny – 1.05%, **Polska Partia Pracy – 0.77%**. In Senate, only SLD won one seat (losing 75 in comparison to 2001). In comparison, the 2007 Sejm results were: PO – 41.5%, PiS – 32.11%, **Lewica i Demokraci (SLD, SDPL and PD) – 13.15%**, PSL – 8.91%. Below Sejm entry level were: Samoobrona – 1.53%, LPR – 1.3%, **PPP – 0.99%**, **Partia Kobiet – 0.28%**. Samoobrona Patriotyczna – 0.02%. In the dominated by PO and PiS Senate, there was only one representative of “old left wing”, generally outside party lines, Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the “Cracow” initiative by Onyszkiewicz and Rosati (2008–2009) aiming to create a “leftist movement” (in contrast to “left wing” parties which people were tired of) – informally inspired by right wing Dutkiewicz’s Ruch Polska XXI. Their movements were similar in a way that they gave new “packaging” to old party people.

<sup>6</sup> The most infamous of such decisions was “left wing” support of the attempt to take away “milk bar” subsidies (November 2002). SLD made a decision they were going to regret for years (“SLD supports trade unions. Pressuring it to take away social right, trade union rights, employee rights, not allowing trade unions to negotiate with the government, we are not going to do that. You know why. Because 15 years ago or so, for six hours, the Finance Minister had an idea to cut milk bar subsidies. And to this day, every few weeks or so you are you remind us of it, you are not letting us the right to be „leftist”! – Jerzy Szmajdzinski in an interview with Monika Olejnik, “Gosc Radia Zet” radio programme, Radio Zet, 16.12.2008. Source: [www.radiozet.pl/Programy/ProgramSzczegoly.aspx?AudycjaId=1482&PageIndex=5](http://www.radiozet.pl/Programy/ProgramSzczegoly.aspx?AudycjaId=1482&PageIndex=5)). As it turned out, the „left wing” did not draw conclusions from old mistakes and contrary to announcements, together with PO–PSL rejected the President’s veto, or according to Szmajdzinski, took part in “taking away social rights”.

SLD's electorate and have programmes similar to those from before 1989. Meanwhile, the downfall of old "Communists" is still an obstacle for new "left wing" parties with slogans such as "pro-social" or "labour". "Leftists", and not just those "new", not connected to post-Communists, continue trying to build a new quality<sup>7</sup> but voters do not appreciate it. It could be that "left" is still associated in a wrong way. According to research<sup>8</sup>, none of the "left wing" parties is associated with "leftist" values!

### **The "left" – an unfavourable environment for the socially excluded?**

The question that every party should ask itself is: "What are the chances of carrying out our programme?" or, in other words, "Whose support can we count on?". This is the brutal truth of politics – it is done with other people. And this does not have to mean the party activists<sup>9</sup> but also that part of the electorate to vote for the party (and revote in the future). The question is – what kind of voter support can the "left wing" count on in Poland?

The answer is – little. This is due to the fact that presently the "left wing" parties are not tied to or supported by groups that traditionally support the "leftist" parties. Both old and new "left wing" parties in Poland do not represent those groups (theoretically speaking) they should support. This means groups the "leftists" should especially care about – the poor and the disadvantaged by the system<sup>10</sup>.

The "old left wing" parties are in the worst situation – those previously in power. According to the respondents (see Table 1), these parties failed miserably. When identifying parties that represent the interests of the poor, the respondents pointed at SLD and SDPL just as often as the right wing PiS or pseudo-liberal PO! According to the survey, SLD represents the interests of the poor "to a low degree" (32.3% respondents), and "does not represent them" – 17%. Only less than 5% of the respondents stated that it supported the poor and a quarter of them believed that it "somewhat" supported them. SDPL rated similarly. It seems that the respondents did not forget that SDPL's leaders between 2001 and 2005 were part of

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. footnote 9.

<sup>8</sup> Research project "Computerisation and change in employment situation" as part of panel research "Social change in Poland", cyclical, carried out every 5 years since 1988 by IFiS PAN. Research carried out in November and December 2008).

<sup>9</sup> For more on "left wing" profile – see latter part of the text.

<sup>10</sup> Some characteristic quotes from SLD's programme: "We want a country [...] without poverty, homelessness, with opportunities for young people, regardless where they live, their parents' or their own wealth [...]. The Poland we desire is a country actively working against social and economic exclusion [...]. Poverty, especially inherited poverty, low level of education and lack of solidarity are favourable conditions for social exclusion. We need to care more about the weakest" (the fragments of article No. 3, from SLD's IV Congress – *Jakiej Polski chcemy?*).

the SLD government. It was only after there had been a rift in the party, regarding the ousting of the Prime Minister Leszek Miller, that SDPL was created by the disgruntled.

**Table 1.** Level of interest in the poor by the “left wing” parties (November – December 2008, in %)

Which of the selected parties represents the interests of the poor?	SLD	SDPL	KPEiR	PPP	PK
to a large degree	4.7	3.7	10.3	6.0	3.7
somewhat	24.7	17.4	19.6	14.6	16.4
to a low degree	32.3	26.7	18.3	18.3	21.1
does not	17.0	18.7	15.3	15.3	18.7
don't know/no answer	21.3	33.5	36.4	36.4	40.0

Source: Research project “Computerisation and change in employment situation” as part of panel research “Social change in Poland”, cyclical, carried out every 5 years since 1988 by IFiS PAN.

It is no secret that among the poor, one of the strongest sub-groups are the senior citizens. Although they may not be very attractive from a marketing perspective (having little purchasing power due to their low pensions), they are imperative in election campaigns (the so called “mohair berets” are very disciplined and have been known to be responsible for the success of some candidates and parties knowing how to use that potential).

The today’s “left wing” parties are not seen as those defending the interests of seniors (see Table 2). The survey results are puzzling, nearly 50% of respondents claim that these parties do not represent or represent their interests to a low degree! Here, the same is true as before (probably because many people consider the word “seniors” to be the equivalent to “poor”). Both SLD and SDPL rate similarly to the ruling PO (to a low degree – 32.9%, does not represent them – 22.6%) and the opposition PiS (28.8% and 21.5% correspondingly). What is interesting, the co-governing PSL seems to be very “leftist” (representing seniors to a low degree – 22.8% and not representing them – 12.3%). After sixty years of the old PZPR and ZSL parties (the then equivalents of SLD/SDPL and PSL) there have been a switch in public opinion’s eye, in the past the “peasant” party was in the background, while today it is considered more a “people’s” party...

**Table 2.** Level of interest in seniors by “left wing” parties (November – December 2008, in %)

Which of the selected	SLD	SDPL	KPEiR	PPP	PK
-----------------------	-----	------	-------	-----	----

parties represents the interests of seniors?					
to a large degree	3.4	1.5	20.2	4.3	2.6
somewhat	20.2	15.0	24.7	12.7	12.9
to a low degree	30.7	27.9	15.3	18.7	19.3
does not	19.4	18.3	11.8	15.9	18.7
don't know/no answer	26.4	37.4	28.0	48.4	46.5

Source: same as Table 1.

### The ambiguous “moral” image

The “leftist” parties seem to rate slightly better in terms of their support for the women’s rights (see Table 3). In this case, the majority of respondents answered “to some degree” (SLD – 27.9%, SDPL – 22.1%) and “to a low degree” (SLD – 25.8%, SDPL – 23.4%). In comparison to the above, there is some improvement but it definitely cannot be said that the public considers these parties to truly represent the women’s rights. Probably a number of respondents have not forgotten the “abortion compromise” (a ban in reality). What is more, it is interesting that the rightist PO rates better (to some degree – 36.3%) in this area than the old “left wing” parties! This is probably due to the fact that the media continually use the word “liberal” in connection with PO, although the Tusk’s party does not seem to have much in common with it anymore.

The fact that the “left wing” parties are not associated with aiding women’s interests is disquieting. Traditionally, the right wing parties have treated women as citizens with less rights, somewhat excluded from the rest of the society and they have found support among the “leftist” groups (regarding equalizing the men’s and women’s retirement age, the protection of pregnant women and women with children in their workplaces). There is only one exception, Partia Kobiet (Women’s Party), which is viewed as supportive of women’s rights. When asked whether it represents the women’s interests, 37% of the respondents answered “to a large degree”, and “somewhat” – 22.1%. This could be due to its name (Women’s Party), for who else’s interests could a party with such a name represent? This impressive result, however, has little to do with voters’ choices since this party gained meagre results in the last parliamentary elections (see footnote 4). We can, therefore, say that the modern “left wing” parties have very little influence on the women voters. PK is the exception, as mentioned earlier, especially in comparison to other parties that gained similar results in the survey and in the elections and who are considered “leftist”. What is striking are the low percentages that the other, alternative to SLD and SDPL, “left wing” parties have obtained in terms of the voters being familiar with their programmes regarding the women’s rights

(53.3% cannot say whether Polska Partia Pracy (PPP) supports the women’s interests while for Krajowa Partia Emerytow i Rencistow (KREiR) the percentage is 47.7%).

**Table 3.** Level of interest in women’s rights by “left wing” parties (November-December 2008, in %)

Which of the selected parties represents interest in women’s rights?	SLD	SDPL	KPEiR	PPP	PK
to a large degree	9.7	4.9	3.9	3.9	37.0
somewhat	27.9	22.1	11.0	12.0	22.1
to a low degree	25.8	23.4	18.3	15.1	8.0
does not	11.4	12.0	19.1	15.7	5.4
don’t know/no answer	25.2	37.6	47.7	53.3	27.5

Source: same as Table 1.

Another issue which affects the image of the “left wing” parties is their attitude or relations with the Catholic Church, traditionally very influential in Poland (see Table 4). In this case, the survey results differed considerably from those regarding the women’s rights (which is strange since in terms of abortion the Church has a very firm stance). It seems that the “left wing” parties are not interested in or aiming to adopt an anti-clerical policy or any type of Church policy. As far as ratings, 40% of the respondents stated that SLD “does not seek Church support” and 30% – regarding SDPL. Looking at the other percentages, it is apparent that many people are simply not aware of the parties’ clerical policy (in SLD’s case, 25.6% answered “don’t know”, as far as SDPL’s – 39.8%). The percentages are even higher regarding the other parties (perhaps that is one reason why they are unsuccessful in gaining support?). For Partia Kobiet (formally being pro choice in the abortion policy) over 50% of respondents said they “don’t know” whether this party sought Church support! The results are similar for PPP – 55.1% said they didn’t know about that party’s relations with the Church, and for KPEiR – 47.5%.

**Table 4.** Level of interest in Catholic Church support by the “left wing” parties (November – December 2008, in %)

Which of the selected parties represents interest in the Catholic Church support?	SLD	SDPL	KPEiR	PPP	PK
to a large degree	2.4	3.0	6.4	2.1	3.7

somewhat	9.7	7.5	18.7	8.2	11.0
to a low degree	21.9	21.1	17.6	18.7	17.9
does not	40.4	28.6	9.9	15.9	16.8
don't know/no answer	25.6	39.8	47.5	55.1	50.5

Source: same as Table 1.

### **The very non-leftist “left wing”**

The “left wing’s” critical situation can be explained by the political views of the parties’ very members. The survey results by Political Life Research Centre at Vrije Universiteit in Brussels and the Wroclaw University Political Science Department from 2008 (carried out right before the regional conventions preceding the elections for the SLD party leaders) show that the “leftist” party members do not follow the values traditionally associated with the „left wing”!

Firstly, the SLD members’ professional backgrounds are interesting – only a little over 3% consider themselves a part of the “blue collar” working class! The majority of those who are to advocate the interests of the working class and correct social inequalities are not a part of it, 40% have managerial positions, 32.2% – are white collar employees and 11.5% have their own businesses. If a “left wing” party is made up of people with the above social profiles, it is questionable whether it is in their interest to aid the socially excluded, the poor, the homeless, the senior citizens, etc.

Secondly, what is also curious is the party members’ attitude towards the Catholic Church. Analysing their responses, it is difficult to say whether SLD is geared towards the Church or against it. For example, 90% of the respondents are critical of the Church’s strong influence on the public life, 80% are against hanging crosses in public institutions and 94% are against any religion marks being included in calculating students’ grade point averages but nearly two thirds (64.24%) consider themselves “believers” and 30% agree with the Church regarding its homosexuals policy (30% say it is “against the nature”) and their right to raise children (“children only for married couples” say as many as 30% of the Polish “leftists”!).

### **Conclusion: the “left wing” at crossroads**

Analysing the research results we can see certain threats but also opportunities for the “left wing” parties. These are the threats:

1. Firstly, it needs to be said that the “left wing” party **crisis on the political arena is more serious than may be presumed from the media broadcasts**<sup>11</sup>. The formerly strong “left wing”, winning parliamentary elections and being the governing party for two full terms (1993–1997 and 2001–2005), one which the longest running president in the “free Poland”, Aleksander Kwasniewski<sup>12</sup> (1995–2005) came from, is no longer what it once was. Presently, we are witnesses to internal conflicts between the new party leaders and low popularity ratings. The question is – can it continue existing this way and for how long? – a party without mission that people could identify with. It appears that, at this time, all “left wing” parties lack such identification. The same is true regarding their members. Parties recruit activists from random circles, not tied to the “left wing” environment (workers, unemployed, etc). In this situation the best solution would be a new recruiting policy<sup>13</sup>.

2. **The Polish “left wing” is just helping the crisis set in deeper.** After parliamentary elections repeated disasters, in 2005 and 2007, there have been no new ideas to turn to those social groups the “leftists” should support. “Poor” and “excluded” are just words that have appeared on the parties’ paper declarations. There have been no new bills proposed in order to aid the pensioners (and these are the people who the post-communists have traditionally relied on!), there are no signs of opening up to young people, despite the potential (young people are more liberal and open to change but they have a difficult head start, PO attempted to gain this electorate with, so far empty, promises of aiding this group return from working abroad). Instead of working on winning the voters, the left is focused on internal conflict (the disintegration of LiD, the Olejniczak–Napieralski clash). The destructive character of these conflicts does not help the “left wing” take advantage of being in opposition (wavering between supporting either PO or the president does not seem to be logical, putting it mildly).

---

<sup>11</sup> The most famous attempt of “left wing” confrontation with reality was the so called Chwedoruk report and it was widely discussed by media in January 2008. Despite many accurate remarks on the state of affairs, it was an individual opinion of an expert hired by the party (and the only to date report on the crisis from an internal and external point of view) and, thus, cannot be considered an in depth, based on “hard evidence” analysis of this side of the political scene.

<sup>12</sup> It was Aleksander Kwasniewski who was to be an icon of the coming back post-Communist camp (the face of Lewica i Demokraci for the 2007 elections) but in the end he was a symbol of its downfall (his “performance” in Kijew and his “Philippine disease” negatively influencing his verbal and non-verbal communication)

<sup>13</sup> There have been attempts to attract and recruit new people to the “left wing” (the so called “left wing clubs” under SLD’s patronage, a type of discussion groups on “leftist” values) but it is too early to talk about their effectiveness. Taking into account society being tired of belonging to traditional parties, they are a loose structure (without party affiliation and, thus, without influence on politics) between “leftist” voters and “leftist” groups.



3. In this situation, **the traditional “leftist” values being somewhat “up for grabs” are open to be taken over by other parties** (or other authorities<sup>14</sup>) representing contrary to the liberal environments. Hence, the other parties are fighting to win over the electorate that the “leftists” betrayed and are not even working to win back. The result is that the “left wing” ideals and ideas are being adopted by... the right wing parties. PiS and the president are working particularly hard to force the “left wing” values by blocking the introduction of the Euro in Poland (it will hit the poor the most), vetoing commercialization of hospitals (“health cannot be a market good”) and by turning their rightist in form and socialist in content programmes towards the economic crisis (the PiS’s new economic programme)<sup>15</sup>. Naturally, this trend does not only infringe on the “leftist” values but, in the long run, may result in winning its electorate. Nature but also political marketing abhors a vacuum. If, as the survey results show, a considerable percentage of respondents declare that the poor, the pensioners and priests are treated the same way by both, the left and right wing parties, it might mean that instead of weak communists people will prefer a strong right wing.

This unfavourable situation, however, is not hopeless. There is a possibility to draw positive conclusions and take advantage of upcoming opportunities. The political context is interesting in view of the approaching European parliamentary elections in 2009 and, most of all, the presidential elections in 2010. The “left wing” can and should take advantage, or it can lose that opportunity. These are the opportunities:

1. **There is a realistic chance to draw young people to the “left wing”.** The economic crisis is an advantageous time for the opposition, including small “leftist” parties. We can also predict that the economic downturn will result in more Polish emigrants coming back from abroad (the same people who in the 2007 elections were drawn by the present government). The “left wing” should target these people who were once rejected by their own country (not provided with decent work conditions). One possibility to establish contacts with them is to set up, proposed by SLD, discussion clubs. A lot would depend on a new programme offer (ending with the impossible to defend the myth of the “left wing” being a

---

<sup>14</sup> This regards current President’s policy, in view of weak “left wing” and in opposition to governing liberal PO, it is a continuation of Lech Kaczynski’s campaign from 2005, a vision of solidarity Poland (in contrast to liberal Poland). In reality, this programme is attractive to part of the electorate, especially the poor, pensioners, large families and all those who are counting on government subsidies from the country’s budget or other taxpayers’ money, a purely socialist project, basing on “leftist” ideals, leaving old post-communist societies, who proclaimed very similar slogans, aside.

<sup>15</sup> An example of the right wing taking over “leftist” ideas was the “three million flats” programme from PiS’s 2005 election campaign (without “left wing” protests they took this traditionally “leftist” idea, by the way, Kwasniewski had a similar promise in his 1995 presidential campaign). These promises, as it turns out, were profitable to both, Kwasniewski and PiS, which means they are rather effective and should be used in the future.

party supporting the poor and become a party representing the young). It is the young electorate that is “ahistoric” (does not remember the before 1989 era or the following “left wing” governing) and who can become a huge pool of votes. In order to take advantage of this chance, the left should get rid of the old party activists who are considered not credible but this seems rather unlikely.

**2. The opportunity to take a more decisive stance regarding the Church-state relations.** It is curious that the “left wing” discusses such issues only when it is convenient to it (e.g. during election campaigns, also internal<sup>16</sup>) and it needs the public opinion support. Later on such issues as, for example, removing religion from the school curriculum, are forgotten about as if they had never existed. This is a huge mistake as it shows lack of credibility (smaller parties do not even attempt to take a stance on these “inconvenient” issues). Meanwhile, no party since 1989 attempted to seriously enter into the discussion on the relations between the Church and the state. If the “left wing” did so, there would be a chance it could win a lot of voters. When political parties do not take on this subject, the media do<sup>17</sup>, filling up this void in the public discourse.

**3. The inability of the right wing to fulfil their “leftist” promises.** The right wing’s and the current president’s taking over the old “leftist” slogans is an example of a temporary political offensive that has a small chance of success in the long run. There have been few ideas even on how to realize the promises and the process of hiring experts in the economic field has just started<sup>18</sup> but has also been largely unsuccessful. There has been no more talk of the “three million flats” promise and it is not likely to be settled. Hence, there is a chance for the “left wing” to remind the governing parties of their promises and to cut short their taking over the “leftist” slogans. It would be a good time to launch a defence of their traditional values.

All in all, it seems that there is a chance for a new Polish “left wing”. What needs to be worked on is a solid media strategy and, following, a consistent persistence (in the media!) in realization of the “leftist” legislation projects. The media aid in the association of a certain

---

<sup>16</sup> Last such attempt was carried out by Napieralski (June 2008). The introduction of anti-clerical themes by the “left wing”, whose people strengthened the influence of Catholic church in Poland (even Kwasniewski during his presidency in 1998 signed the concordat). The “new leftist offensive” was widely discussed by media which named Napieralski the “Polish Zapatero” at a time when he, himself, decided to withdraw his anti-clerical promises.

<sup>17</sup> For example, the issue of the Church-state property commission granting the Church any property in possession of the state, without the possibility to appeal such decisions (i.e. by regional authorities). This subject was predominantly discussed by media as no party decided to take it up.

<sup>18</sup> In mid January 2009, there was talk of hiring a “leftist” economist, Ryszard Bugaj, by the President’s office. In the end, he became the official adviser, similarly to Adam Glapinski, friend of Kaczynskis, who was nominated for the position that same day.

image with particular values (or lack of them) and can also, in the long run and with a good public relations policy, reverse the old “image” trends. The decision remains in the heads of the parties’ leaderships that need to face a tough public opinion judgment. The question is whether the party activists, tied to the traditional “leftist” ideals, are ready to take on the challenge and attempt to reverse their unfavourable image and tendencies discussed above? Will they “want to want”?