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# THE FALSE NARRATIVE OF POLAND'S RETURN TO 'DEMOCRACY' WITH THE ELECTION OF DONALD TUSK

Text & pictures - Lila Bednarska

*Written in late August 2024, Kłodzko, Poland*

**H**as Poland truly resisted the authoritarian right and populism giving an example to others?

On 15th October 2023, Polish citizens went to vote at a historically record turnout of 74,38%. Many had to queue for hours even until late evening hours to cast a vote, while some commentators described the day as the most important parliamentary election since 1989. Yet, in the Polish context, nearly all parliamentary elections are deemed as “the most important election since 1989”. With the benefit of hindsight, the election and results were perhaps momentous. Indeed, after 8 years the populist and illiberal party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice; known as PIS) lost its mandate to govern after failing to gain sufficient seats to form a coalition in Sejm (the lower house of parliament). In its place, Koalicja 15 października (the October 15 Coalition) a combination of three groups: Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska), Third Way (Trzecia Droga), and New Left (Nowa Lewica) has taken over. Donald Tusk has returned as prime minister after 10 years.

The foreign commentators issued headlines such as “Thank you, Poland, for showing faith in EU values under threat from the au-

thoritarian right”[1], “A reason to be hopeful: in Poland they’ve kicked out the right-wing populists. Britain can too”[2], “With Opposition Gains, Poland Looks to Unwind an ‘Illiberal Democracy’”[3]. The spirits were highly optimistic. But should they have been?

**T**he glorious return of Donald Tusk to domestic politics and the prime minister's office is not a case for optimism. When I started primary school Donald Tusk was the prime minister, as I'm completing a master's degree, he's still in charge. It feels like we're back in 2014 and have not made little or no progress in shaping the domestic political scene. Indeed, in 10 years, the Civic Coalition and the centre-right establishment failed to produce an alternative nation-level leader. This encapsulates one of the challenges of the Polish political scene – there is little to no space for new faces and younger faces. Consider also long-term strategy and legacy, who is going to take over the Civic Coalition when Donald Tusk is gone? Is there anyone there who can prevent the party from crumbling into an insignificant thing of the past? Paradoxically, these are issues the Law and Justice struggles with too as Jarosław Kaczyński ages. Furthermore,

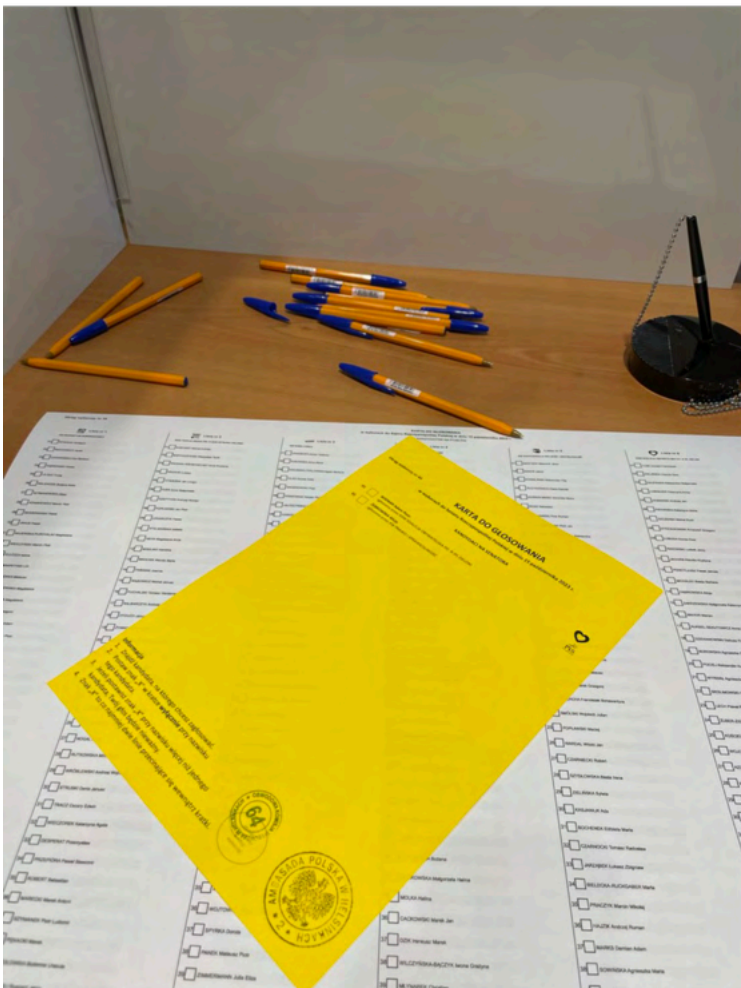


this is not particularly encouraging for young people to engage and participate in politics if the political faces are increasingly older men.

Surely, PIS or more accurately United Right (Zjednoczona Prawica), losing the grip over the government was enjoyable. After all, the party and people responsible for effectively banning abortion in all cases, destroying the judicial system and directing Poland towards authoritarianism and illiberalism have been removed. Yet, their removal from government will not magically repair the damage that has been done. Especially, when the new governing coalition is neither saint nor politically healthy.

A closer look at the governing catch-all coalition should be a sufficient explanation of why Poland has a long way to go until it unwinds authoritarian tendencies and ultra-conservative policies (e.g. abortion ban). The coalition combines mid-left party, centre voices and conservative right-wingers. More precisely, each coalition group is made of multiple smaller parties and groups. There is no unity in values. The whole purpose of the coalition is to keep PIS out of power. Nothing else. Unsurprisingly, in those circumstances, reverting Poland onto a liberal track is unachievable.

The newly elected government ended 2023 with an upheaval at a public service broadcaster Telewizja Polska S.A., which during the PIS-rule has become extremely politicised and propagandistic in tone. Undeniably, transforming the state's broadcaster into a more independent BBC-esque company is desirable. The new government opted for a revolutionary approach, the legality of which can be questioned, that still backfires. It had an opportunity to show that they are indeed different, better than the PIS government. The coalition government didn't use it, instead starting their term in poor, authoritarian-esque style. One thing is clear: if the new government wanted to stay away from measures on the verge of breaking the rule of law, it failed within its first month.



The PIS government has been notorious for eradicating women's rights, in particular for practically eliminating abortion access. According to the manifesto's Civic Coalition, the party should have introduced legal, safe and accessible abortion until the 12th week. It's been nearly a year and instead of taking a step forward, the government has taken a step back. On the 12th of July 2024, the parliament rejected a bill for decriminalisation of abortion up to the 12th week. A coalition partner Polish People's Party (Polskie Stronictwo Ludowe known as PSL) in the majority voted against the bill demonstrating the lack of value unity. Most controversially, the conservative Civic Coalition MP Roman Giertych missed the vote, further indicating internal cracks within the party. The abortion vote leads to a question of whether in this term liberalising abortion access is even possible. Considering that "the women's hell" and women's electoral mobilisation were significant issues that may increase discontent among pro-liberalisation groups and eradicate any remaining trust in the Civic Coalition and the governing coalition putting a possibility of the second term at risk.

At first glance, Poland is a success story of resisting authoritarian rights and populism. The populists and authoritarians are no longer in government. And Poland is again a good girl in the EU. Polish foreign policy looks professional once again thanks to Radosław Sikorski as Minister of Foreign Affairs. But the story of authoritarianism, illiberalism and populism in Poland is far from being over. PIS is still a major political power, while Konfederacja (Confederation), an even more right-wing populist and conservative party, has gained seats in the European Parliament. As the new government approaches a year in power, it has made little to reverse the destructive years of the PIS government or build back better. Instead, it feels like Poland remains in limbo where changes are constantly being promised, but little is done. Donald Tusk and Civic Coalition have promised to complete 100 things in the first 100. Out of 100, a few were actually completed. The rest remains forgotten in the ether. Unsurprisingly,

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therefore, the majority – 62 per cent — believes Tusk’s government is not keeping up to its promises.[4]

**W**ill the Tusk’s government be able to reverse this poll? Probably not. Time is of the essence, and we have experienced a year of wasted opportunities. Personally, I am not disappointed or surprised that the coalition government, and, in particular, Civic Coalition, have not implemented their manifesto’s promises yet. To be disappointed, one needs to believe

in the promises first. I never did. The question is, however, what will happen in the next three years and will the liberal-centre voters become discontent with the coalition government? Will the Civic Coalition and other coalition partners secure a second term after the disappointing start of the first one? We’ll see in the 2027 parliamentary election, but for now, the authoritarian right and populism are not yet buried in Poland. The next test comes in spring 2025 when the Polish women and men will elect a new president. **g**

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[1] Will Hutton (2023). Thank you, Poland, for showing faith in EU values under threat from the authoritarian right. In: *The Guardian*.

[2] Polly Toynbee (2023). A reason to be hopeful: in Poland they’ve kicked out the rightwing populists. Britain can too. In: *The Guardian*.

[3] Andrew Higgins (2023). With Opposition Gains, Poland Looks to Unwind an ‘Illiberal Democracy’. In: *The New York Times*.

[4] Jakub Czermiński (2024). Czy rząd Donalda Tuska wywiązuje się z obietnic? Jednoznaczny wynik sondażu. In: *Rzeczpospolita*.

## About Lila Bednarska



Lila is a law graduate from King’s College London, currently pursuing a Master’s in Russian, Eurasian, and Eastern European Studies at the University of Helsinki. She has diverse experience in research, project management, and communications, working with think tanks, NGOs and private companies. Her research interests centre around political and economic issues in Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus.

