

Poland: Democratic Left Party heads new coalition government

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12 October 2001

The latest parliamentary elections in Poland ended as expected with a victory for the Democratic Party of the Left (SLD). The SLD had struck an electoral alliance with the Social Democratic Labour Union (UP), and together they won 41 percent of the vote. The most likely prime minister is SLD leader Leszek Miller.

In the absence of gaining an overall majority in the September 23 elections, the SLD-UP alliance has agreed to form a coalition government together with the Polish Peasants Party (PSL).

With just 46.3 percent of the population voting, turnout was extremely low. Broad layers of Poles regard the main parties and official politics with disgust. According to a recent opinion poll, 80 percent of the population rated the work of the former government as miserable. A similar majority also expects the current situation in Poland to worsen.

This mood made itself felt in the response to the incumbent government of Jerzy Buzek. The Solidarity bloc (AWS), who constituted the government for the last four years, did not even get back into parliament. Having received 33 percent of the vote four years ago, the bloc received just 5.6 percent this time round. Since the election the AWS has announced its dissolution.

Prior to the elections four years ago the AWS emerged from the Solidarity trade union movement as an alliance of very different parties. The AWS also contained the Freedom Union (UW), lead by Bronislaw Geremek, which had participated in virtually all Polish governments since 1989. With just 3.1 percent, the UW also collapsed in the September 23 elections and is no longer represented in the *Sejm* (parliament).

Coming second in the election with 12.7 percent was the Citizen's Platform (PO), lead by Andrzej Olechowski. Olechowski, a former foreign minister, as well as being a senior employee at the World Bank in

Washington and deputy chairman of the Polish Central Bank. The PO was formed in January this year by rebel elements from the AWS and UW. The party calls for tax cuts for employers and a rapid entry by Poland into the European Union (EU). It has rejected making any coalition with the victorious SLD.

Alongside the high abstention rate and the unparalleled debacle for the AWS, discontent was also expressed in the large number of votes given to parties on the extreme right, including nationalists, clericalists and anti-Semites, who all emphasised their opposition to Polish membership of the EU.

Samoobrona (Self Defence), lead by Andrzej Lepper, won 10 percent of the vote. Two years ago, Lepper attracted attention by organising sensational protests and rebellions by small farmers against the government and the EU. He is a right-wing populist and an enigmatic figure in Polish politics. Prior to 1989 he was a member of Poland's former ruling Stalinist party, the United Polish Worker's Party (PVAP), and had headed two agricultural communes. In 1993 he founded Samoobrona and posed as the advocate of the poor peasants, railing against the EU and the selling out of Poland's interests. Immediately after the latest election he indicated his willingness to form a coalition with the SLD.

The Law and Justice party (PiS) was founded recently by Lech Kaczynski, the man who was Poland's justice minister until summer of this year. The programme of the PiS, which received 9.5 percent of the vote in the election, stresses the struggle against corruption and crime and calls for the introduction of the death penalty.

The Peasants Party, which won 9 percent, is "against the entry of Poland into the EU at any price". It pursues an extreme nationalist line and regards itself as an

opponent of globalisation. The head of the party, Jaroslav Kalinowski, declared demagogically that he would put an end to Poland's general dependency on the uncontrolled flow of foreign and above all speculative capital. In addition, the party demands that Polish entry into the EU must be accompanied by subsidies for Polish agriculture—a demand that the EU would never agree to. The PSL emerged from a former Stalinist party and was part of the governing coalition with the SLD four years ago.

The League for the Polish Family (LPR) also entered parliament this time, with 7.9 percent of the vote. It warns of the danger of a “sell out of Polish property”. The party is a source of attraction for ultra-nationalist patriots, Catholics and anti-Semites.

A large majority of those who voted for the latter parties had left their decision to the last moment—in official opinion polls prior to the election Samoobrona and the LPR hardly featured.

The SLD emerged from the PVAP, Poland's former ruling party until 1989. Its victory has returned an old layer of Stalinist bureaucrats to power.

Before the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s, Leszek Miller was regarded as “Moscow's man on the [Polish river] Weichsel”. But in the mid-90s, Miller began to feverishly adapt to the new market economy. He began to agitate in his party for Poland's entry into the EU and NATO. As minister for domestic affairs in the SLD government between 1993 and 1997, he developed contacts with the US. Since then he has enjoyed especially close relations with the CIA, something which he himself willingly admits.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* recently described Leszek Miller as follows: “Renegades from the SLD confirm that Miller is entirely free of ideological ballast and has no overriding political principles. He is power hungry and adaptable, which is why he was equally able to make a career in a planned economy Poland dependent on Moscow, as well as in a democratic and capitalist Poland.”

Before the elections, the SLD announced that it would vigorously combat the threatening catastrophic budget deficit of 88 billion zloty (\$20.7bn) and plans to introduce drastic cuts in social welfare to achieve this.

Marek Belka, regarded as the future finance minister, intends to massively decrease state expenditure and

increase tax revenues. This means harsh savings in the area of welfare spending while raising general taxes on goods, which will lead to price increases in every area.

Another aim of the SLD is to rapidly push ahead with the flagging talks on Poland's entry into the EU and fulfil the conditions for membership as quickly as possible. This had also been the aim of the AWS government over the past four years, but its programme of economic reforms and privatisation continually provoked widespread protest from the population at large.

In the meantime, voices can be heard in the EU questioning whether Poland should be included in the first round of new entrants. Poland has fallen increasingly behind other aspiring countries in terms of fulfilling EU membership conditions. In addition, there is still no agreement between Poland and the EU regarding the free movement of Polish workers in the labour markets of west Europe, as well as the transfer dates for the sale of land in Poland to foreigners.

The EU believes that only a coalition government comprising the SLD and the Europe friendly PO can fulfil the EU entry conditions in the time remaining before the end of 2002. To this end, after the elections the EU Commission made an unprecedented intervention into the discussions on the formation of the next Polish government. A high-ranking EU Commission representative told Polish journalists: “Poland has responsibility for the entire process of expansion... the most obvious solution is a coalition with the liberals.” Leszek Miller would have eagerly pursued such a path, but was thwarted by resistance inside the PO.

The SLD is entering office in order to ruthlessly impose all of the unpopular measures that lead to the downfall of the former government. Its role models for such a policy are the Labour government of Tony Blair in Great Britain and Germany's SPD-Green Party coalition.



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