

Green electoral capability in Poland study

The main objective of the green electoral capability in Poland study was to supplement the picture of the Polish political scene with an analysis of the development of green ideas, trends and political actors. The project was carried out on commission of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. Because the main “green force” in Poland and the only Polish political party associated in European Green Party is the Zieloni 2004, the present study focuses on their electoral prospects.

The research of "potential green electorate" consisted of four stages:

- analysis of questionnaires collected from the participants of the three party conventions of Zieloni 2004,
- analysis of party documents and programmes,
- CATI survey on a representative sample of Poles, the goal of which was to identify the potential Zieloni 2004 electorate and the socioeconomic characteristics of this group and their views, as well as diagnosing the opinion of Poles on issues important for the Greens,
- focus group interviews with representatives of groups identified as a potential target groups at the stage of quantitative research.

Party organisation

Zieloni 2004 are undoubtedly a novelty on the Polish political scene as the first left-libertarian party. Their basic platform document, “Zielony Manifest” (Green Manifesto), defines them as a group of people of different backgrounds and social status who share the following fundamental values: respect for human rights and respect for the principles of sustainable social, environmental and economic development. They are the only political group which derives its principles from the Green Politics – the worldwide Greens ideology. Their ideas are a typical reflection of this ideology: ecology, pacifism, feminism and sexual minorities’ rights as well as supporting the development of civil society. The main weakness of the party in this field is the lack of a comprehensive economic programme, which is one of the most important determinants in electoral decisions among Polish voters. A general vision of the economy was initially outlined in the Programme for the elections to the European Parliament in 2004 and in the project of a yet-to-be passed party resolution: “Green economy – the key issues”. Also in electoral campaigns and social actions Zieloni 2004 focus on the themes of personal freedom and equality rather than economic matters. This does not confirm with the needs of potential voters, as expressed in the CATI survey and focus interviews.

The poll among party convention participants indicates the members of the Greens are younger than activists from other parties (average age 32 years to 37-43 years in other parties), include more women (40% vs. 10%) and are better educated: in 2008 about 80 % had a university degree. Such socio-demographic characteristics as age, residing in large cities, education and earnings are similar to those of their electorate. This facilitates communication between the party and its electorate. In the course of focus interviews, respondents expressed that they would support a party consisting of people who are "idealists", "well-educated", are not "pursuing their own interests", have "many new faces", and "fresh, inspiring and attractive ideas". Nearly half of the members of the Zieloni 2004 already have experience in social or political activities, mainly in the non-governmental organizations. Among members of the Polish Greens there are also scholars, journalists, artists, but the party lacks well-known,

reputable persons in the role of leaders or experts. Party members articulate a deficit of experts in such areas as foreign affairs, social policy, fiscal and monetary policy and justice. A strength of Zieloni 2004 lies in its integration. Conflicts within the party are mostly of a personal nature, which seems inevitable in a small, highly ideological party. However, two major lines ideological division between the members can be identified and this - depending on which option wins - will affect the nature of the further development of the party.

Firstly, it is a conflict between political professionalism of the Greens (including centralisation, hierarchy, strong central authorities, rapid decision-making, etc.) and the NGO's-style of action (autonomy of local authorities, decisions based on consensus and made in a decentralised way, etc.). As a result of the presence of large numbers of people with experience in non-governmental action, there is an internal dispute over how the party should be organized in the future. The study of 2008, however, indicates that there is growing support for the professional methods. A choice of the future organization does not have to be made immediately, but the existence of two different visions of Greens may become the cause of conflicts, especially in situations where quick and effective action is perceived as important, such as the campaigns before elections.

The second point of contention may emerge from the debate over the party's economic platform – there is currently a liberal and a social option. For now, these two different views coexist mostly without conflicts (besides the issue of electoral coalition partner choice) probably because of the vague nature of the economic programme of Zieloni 2004. Infighting may arise as the result of the party adopting a more detailed document. The social faction seems to be prevailing (in numbers as well as in the party's discourse) among the party members and leaders and, more significantly, attach greater importance to economic views. On the other hand, it is not unlikely that discrepancies in the Greens' members' economic views, in combination with the fact that the current, very general programme has been in existence for over four years, serve to demonstrate that only issues of the philosophy of life are of high importance to Zieloni 2004 activists: in such a case, the best option for an economic platform would be selecting the one preferred by the electorate (survey results indicate that there are more supporters of a liberal economic policy among the potential green electorate). Zieloni 2004's leaders can alleviate this conflict either by delaying clarification of the party's position on economy (a lack of economic vision, however, may cause the party to not be taken seriously by voters) or by proposing a combination of liberal and social solutions in some version of the "Green third way".

The most important problem faced by Zieloni 2004 seems to be their inability to mobilise significant resources and, above all, the small number of members, which in turn translates into difficulties in their daily activities (short-term character of the operations) and in acquiring funds. The proposed solution is building the party's structures on the basis of a network of personal contacts, internet and also making use the external actions (such as "green information points" during manifestations, leaflets with basic information about the Greens and ways to contact the party).

Social support

Greens 2004 have so far taken part in four elections: for the European Parliament in 2004, for the national parliament in 2005 and 2007 and in the local elections in 2006. The results were similar in all cases (although a weak upward trend can be observed) and did not exceed 0.5% of the votes cast nation-wide. The CATI survey showed that top leaders of the Greens 2004 and the party itself are poorly known to potential voters: only about 8 % of Poles claim to recognize that group.

It seems optimistic, however, that 15% of respondents mentioned the issue of environmental protection as one of the most important problems in the future (this tendency is greater among people with higher education, office workers, women, residents of large cities, aged 30-50 years). Moreover, 25% of the population declares a readiness to vote for a party which has environmental protection as one of the most important elements of its programme – but only 1 / 3 of them stated they would indicate such a party on their ballots. Two parties most commonly associated with ecology are Zieloni 2004 and the Polish People's Party (PSL, which is perceived as a class – peasant's - party). When asked an assisted question (interviewer reads the names) in focus groups, of the 25% potential green electorate the most recognized leading Greens 2004 activists proved to be Radoslaw Gawlik (8.5% of indications) and Dariusz Szwed (7%). Both Agnieszka Grzybek and Magdalena Mosiewicz were indicated over 3% of times.

The low knowledge of the party results in low electoral support: 0.1% of those surveyed declared a will to cast a vote for the Greens, and for 2.8% they are the „second choice” party. A support rating of below 1% is noted also in tracking surveys of other survey institutes.

Characteristics of the potential electorate

Based on an analysis of the declarations of respondents in the nationwide survey, two promising target groups were identified:

- Persons aged 30/40 years, with a university degree, living in large cities, for which their interest in ecology is an expression of concern about the high quality of life,
- Students with an ideological profile similar to the New Left, combining endorsement for environmental protection with a focus on protecting the rights of minorities and left-wing vision of redistribution of wealth.

Focus group interviews with selected groups were carried out in two major cities: Warsaw and Katowice.

The most characteristic elements for the students group proved to be: a lack of public designs or a willingness to engage, reserved stance towards radicalism and public action and „not in my back yard” attitude. It should be noted that they are committed to conservative values and tend to concentrate their efforts on family and work. The issues of discrimination or the more equal redistribution of goods are perceived as unimportant by them. The surveyed students presented a rather individualistic approach, stating that each individual is solely responsible for his own life and taking action to change the mentality of society should not be an activity of the state (in their opinion, this is the role of non-governmental organizations).

The group of 30- to 40-year-olds seems to be constitute a more aware potential electorate of the Greens. Its members are more competent and politically involved, more aware of external causes of discrimination or an individuals' indigence and able to see the need for action in this field by the state. They recognize the provision of public services (especially health care assistance) on a high level as the most important activity for public institutions. In a situation in which the state is not able to satisfy that need, they support the privatisation of the service delivery system.

For both groups, environmental protection is not seen as a value in itself, but as one of the factors affecting the standard of living (clean air, rivers). They favour ecological solutions

only if they do not hamper the modernisation of the country. They are interested in economic and administrative benefits addressed to the middle class.

Zieloni 2004 are seen by their potential electorate as a highly ideologized, niche party, which bases its programme only around environmental issues. An overwhelming majority of respondents was unable to give any other ideological characteristics of the party. The issues of discrimination or the social economy are in no way associated with ecology for them (similar results were obtained in the CATI survey and in group interviews). In turn, the „one theme” party (in this case: ecological one) is not interesting to them, as they expect a more comprehensive platform including a stance on a plethora of issues - primarily the economy. Despite a lack of visible ideological links, they expect that a pro-ecology party should deal with issues of social and economic development.

Findings

It seems that, despite a fairly strong polarization of public opinion between the liberal and conservative views, disputes about abortion or the rights of sexual minorities do not make for the substantial cleavage in the political scene. The stance on personal freedoms, despite the hot atmosphere of public debate, is also not an important variable for voters. On the other hand, ideas associated with ecology or pacifism are commonly received warmly, but do not influence electoral behaviour. They are also quite effectively managed by the existing political parties. In the matrix of potential voters' expectations regarding the matters which politicians should deal with, “environmental protection issues” were defined as “of considerable importance and great dissatisfaction with the way the government deals with it”, whilst issues such as "minority rights" or "globalization" were rated as “of low importance and low dissatisfaction” by respondents.

Zieloni 2004 have to propose new issues in public debate in the form of a programme, which would be commonly recognized as moderate and achievable. Perhaps the step by step method would bring more support: suggesting transitional measures (for example, instead of partnerships of same-sex similar to marriage - the right to inherit after a partner, which, according to CBOS research over the past few years, is invariably supported by more than 40% of respondents). So, instead of outpacing the change in Poles' attitudes with a political programme seen as radical, a more balanced approach and readiness to observe these changes and take action based on how they unfold.

The Greens could also consider focusing on those Green postulates, which – as the CATI survey indicates - enjoy the highest acceptance in the Polish society:

- Gender equality,
- Abolition of Catholic Church privileges,
- Sexual education, including promotion of modern contraception methods,
- Health.

In addition, through a series of educational actions, the party should expound to the public how such issues as environmental protection or lack of military involvement positively affect quality of life and well-being of citizens (for example, a smaller percentage of lifestyle diseases, higher security). Such arguments may work better than pushing ecology as a fundamental issue, especially in a situation where the public is reluctant toward any form of social engagement. In order to enhance the social credibility of the presented programme, it

would be beneficial to attract to the party, as members or sympathizers, experts from various fields of science or at least a few leaders who would be universally recognized as authorities. Zieloni 2004 are also in need of some professional training in such fields as political marketing, (brand-building, political advertisement), fundraising, building local structures, public relations and information management.

It seems also necessary to develop a coherent and comprehensive economic programme. The difficulties with this task may arise from the existing liberalism vs. social-democratic split both within the Zieloni 2004 party and the potential electorate. Research shows that people who recognize ecology as an important political issue are characterized by a more liberal approach, which manifests itself in opposition to high taxes and support for reducing the role of trade unions. In turn, people with both ecological and social-democratic ideologies are characterized by a somewhat reserved stance toward homosexual partnerships. And among the supporters of the legalisation of this type of relationships, a high level of disregard for social-democratic solutions and a low (similar to the average for the entire survey) support for the ecology can be noted. This will constitute a serious problem and a challenge for a party which is trying to bring all three problems into political discourse.