



Weekly Briefing

**Poland social briefing:
Debates on Social Policies
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Debates on Social Policies

In the new Polish parliament, elected in the October 13, 2019 elections, five electoral coalitions and as many as 15 parties appeared. Importantly, leftist parties will again sit in the Sejm. They were completely unrepresented in the years 2015-2019, when none of them crossed the electoral threshold. This brings a huge change to the discussion on topics related to the functioning of the family, the rights of women, children or animals, environmental protection and social challenges of the 21st century, to which left-wing parties are definitely more sensitive than the conservative right groupings. Certainly, an important change will be the takeover of the Social Policy and Family Committee in the Sejm by deputy of the Left, Magdalena Biejat. This is a remarkable decision, which exerted a lot of interest but at the same time showed that in important matters, even political competitors can unite their forces, because Biejat was voted for the president of the commission by deputies from both the left and the right of the political scene. Some parties, however, are demanding her dismissal.

The Social Policy and Family Committee has been a part of permanent parliamentary committees since the 4th term (2001-2005, the Democratic Left Alliance was ruling at that time). After the parliamentary elections in 2005 and creating a government out of a conservative bloc (Law and Justice, League of Polish Families and Self-Defense), its powers were, however, divided between several other commissions: the Social Policy Committee and the Family and Women's Rights Committee. Their tasks included shaping the state's social policy, protecting employees, including health and safety at work, analyzing the payroll system and living costs, fighting unemployment, dealing with social problems of disabled people, social security, social benefits, social assistance, municipal construction housing, veterans' problems and matters related to acts directly related to the functioning of the family, fulfilling its roles and tasks, proposing legal regulations regarding these issues, and cooperation with the government representative for family and women's matters.

In the new parliament, all these competencies return to one commission, which is to be headed by Magdalena Biejat, a young politician who is just debuting in parliament. Biejat comes from Warsaw, where she graduated from a bilingual high school, then studied sociology at the University of Granada and the University of Complutense in Madrid. She is also a graduate of the School of Social Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Professionally

she was involved in the translation of Spanish-language literature, but for many years she has also been associated with non-governmental organizations, including Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Stefan Batory Foundation as well as the Stocznia Research and Social Innovation Foundation. As a volunteer, she worked with people affected by homelessness. She is a mother of two children and is 37 years old.

The election of Biejat as head of the committee sparked a wave of comments. Some right-wing politicians and commentators did not conceal their surprise or outrage that a person so young, without experience, but above all with very left-wing views was elected as the leader of the commission, even with the votes of Law and Justice MPs (in total, 25 members of the commission took her candidacy, 3 were against and 4 abstained). The main reason for Biejat's criticism is the explicit support of handicraft solutions with a very conservative worldview - she supports women's right to abortion, the use of in vitro fertilization and opposes to the so-called "conscience clause", used in recent years by some doctors with conservative views who oppose, *inter alia*, the writing of contraceptives, which in Poland are available only on prescription.

Against Biejat as chairwoman protested the extreme right-wing parties: United Poland (Solidarna Polska - the party of the Minister of Justice, Zbigniew Ziobro) as well as the Confederation (Konfederacja - national and eurosceptic party which is for the first time in the Sejm). MPs of those groupings have even issued a letter in this matter, in which they wrote: "We cannot allow MP Magdalena Biejat - a person who destroys Polish families, wants to kill conceived children, who threatens our future - continued to perform the honorable function of the head of the Social Policy and Family Committee in Polish Sejm".

United Poland argues that every child has the inalienable right to life. This is a natural law that no one can challenge. This party refers to the entries of the Convention on the Rights of the Child promulgated by the United Nations which was adopted by the vast majority of countries around the world. MPs of the party believe that such a law also applies in Poland, and this right must be protected and defended from the moment of conception. MP Jan Kanthak indicated that the family is the foundation of society and children are the future of the state, thus a person who supports the right to abortion is absolutely not suitable to be a head of committee.

Biejat's chairmanship is also not accepted by the Confederation party. That is why this grouping issued its opponent as head of the commission - Grzegorz Braun, one of the leaders

of this political alliance. His candidacy, though, did not gain the willingness of other committee members. According to one of the leaders of the Confederation, Robert Winnicki, Biejat (as a member of the Left party) is a guarantee that the “Stop abortion” project - a key issue for conservative circles - discussed in the Sejm for many months, will not be introduced at all. That is why the Confederation has created a parliamentary Team for the Defense of Life and Family, which is to deal with this project. The bill “Stop abortion” is intended to suppress the possibility of abortion due to the high probability of severe and irreversible fetal defects (so-called eugenic premise) - and therefore practically excludes the possibility of performing abortion in Poland, forbidding all premises for its implementation.

Biejat herself refuses all accusations, emphasizing that her goal is not to promote abortion as a contraceptive, but to take care of the good of both the child and the mother, who often has to face huge problems resulting from unwanted pregnancy - for example, when it is the result of a rape, it is the pregnancy of a juvenile, when the fetus has birth defects, or when the birth of a child can mean a dramatic deterioration in the mother’s state of health. Biejat points out that the issues of family, children’s and women’ rights, but also the matter of access to education, medical care and legal assistance are *de facto* guaranteed in the Polish constitution, and as such should be just valued in all respects.

Therefore the MP emphasizes that during committee meetings she will count on cooperation with other clubs: “The social policy committee deals with very important issues that are related to the everyday life of Poles, with our quality of life and how we operate every day. It is no secret that the parties: Left, Law and Justice and the Civic Coalition have slightly different views on how to solve these problems and which problems are the most important. However, I look forward to working together”.

She underlines, that the election of the Left representative to chair the committee was a good omen: “We are very focused on being deputies and especially being constructive deputies and I will try to transfer this approach to the way the committee works. It is important that, despite the differences, we learn to cooperate, that we take our obligations towards Polish women and Poles seriously and that we would be able to work out the best solutions”. According to Biejat, the main agenda of the committee’s work should primarily focus on the issues related to the development of public services, meaning crèches, social security system and the affairs of people with disabilities. As she points out: “The task of the committee should

be to strive to eliminate inequalities. They are still very deep and if we want us to cooperate well in this country, then we should work on filling these inequalities”.

Comment

The debate about the election of Magdalena Biejat as the head of the Social Policy and Family Committee is part of the wider discussion about the role of family, women and children in Polish society. Without a doubt, this is one of the most important topics in the public discourse, which was outstandingly emphasized in his parliamentary *exposé* on November 19, 2019 by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki. He recognized that issues of demography and family are key challenges for the Polish government.

Yet, the fuss about the candidacy and the choice of Biejat shows how extreme positions are represented in Polish general public. On the one hand, a great part of the society (represented by some important political fractions) demands respect for constitutional rights, respect for the United Nations’ Declaration and European Union regulations. But moreover it demands the introduction of in vitro treatments into the Polish healthcare system, admission of abortion, prenatal examinations, perinatal care, and reliable sex education in schools - devoid of indoctrination by Catholic Church. This part of the society has been protesting for last 4 years through public gatherings and marches (so-called “black marches”) in defense of civil liberties and loudly demands the women’s broad rights to dispose of their own body.

On the other hand there is another part of the society which believes that it is necessary to protect human life completely, meaning “from natural conception to natural death”. This social group, represented by conservative groupings (which are at the moment quite well represented in the Sejm) demands a total ban on abortion (although the regulations in this case are anyway extremely restrictive in Poland), preventing in vitro fertilization and accepting naprotechology as the only method to fight infertility. It is a group which has its foundation in a very traditional understanding of family – meaning the father as the head of the family, the mother taking care of the children, where things which happen behind the walls of the house should not be of public interest. The group opposes adopting the “Anti-violence Convention”, that protects victims of domestic violence. For this faction, the choice of Magdalena Biejat on the committee’s chief worked like a red rag for a bull.

One can only hope that in a situation of such difficult discussion, it will finally be possible to develop a valuable consensus, that will not hurt the feelings of numerous Catholics and conservatives in Poland, but anyway will introduce Polish society to the 21st century.