

Februar 2023

Länderbericht

Foundation Office Poland



Is political change on the horizon?

The Polish opposition ahead of the 2023 parliamentary elections

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Voters in Germany's largest eastern neighbour will be called to the polls this autumn. This election will decide on both chambers of parliament, the Sejm and the Senate. The opposition parties see this as an opportunity to vote out the PiS-led national-conservative government. Although the year has only just begun, Poland is already focused on the upcoming election campaign and the possibility of a change of government. Against this background, this report focuses on the current situation of the Polish opposition and explores scenarios for future cooperation.

The current situation

For the United Right, the polls are painting an increasingly disappointing picture. It seems unlikely that PiS can regain its former favour with the electorate. The polls suggest that the majority of Poles are tired of the conservative-nationalist government, and the current economic difficulties (including soaring inflation) are not exactly helping the government camp. And, for a while now, aggregated polls have been indicating a slight but growing increase in support for the opposition parties. The result of all this is that, at the start of the year, the government camp stands at just over 30% in the polls. This means it is still in the lead and will continue to play a major political role, whatever the outcome of the elections. However, there is currently no sign of a new coalition partner that could provide the ruling party with a majority after the elections. The Democratic opposition parties refuse to enter into coalition with them. The radical-to-extreme-right Konfederacja (Confederation) party is also not an alternative due to its instability and heterogeneity.

In this way, the starting position of the Civic Platform (PO/KO), Polish People's Party (PSL), Polska 2050 (P2050) and Lewica (The Left) has improved significantly since the last parliamentary elections in 2019. However, success depends on the opposition parties working well together, despite their many differences. This stands and falls with their leaders. It is about fundamentals, about atmosphere, but unfortunately rarely about substance.

The Civic Platform (PO)/Civic Coalition (KO)

The Civic Platform has seen a particular improvement in its situation. In 2019, for the first time, the PO ran in an electoral alliance with the liberal Nowoczesna (Modern) party, the left-liberal Inicjatywa Polska (Polish Initiative) and the Greens. However, forming this united bloc was not enough to regain control of the Sejm. Party chairman (and former foreign minister) Grzegorz Schetyna resigned a few months after the election, but his successor, Borys Budka, also failed to build on the party's historic successes. At times, the party slumped to around 13% in the polls. The Civic Coalition's ratings only began to improve when Donald Tusk returned as leader of the PO. Although the Civic Coalition is still lagging behind PiS, it has gradually improved its position since the summer of 2021. At the start of this election year, the Civic Coalition is averaging just below 30% (across all polls). This also appears to be a psychological hurdle. This is the target that Tusk set for the end of 2021 upon his return.

There are also some suggestions that the Civic Coalition has exhausted its voter potential and will be unable break the 30% barrier unless it finds more allies.

Its success in the polls, and above all in the autumn parliamentary elections, will be largely determined by the policies set out by the Civic Platform. The Civic Platform has not yet presented its manifesto for the upcoming elections. This absence is attracting criticism, especially from the government camp, which regularly calls on the PO to explain how it would do things better. The polls also show that the majority of voters are still in the dark about what the PO actually stands for. Such confusion is not surprising. Sometimes party leader Tusk sounds strongly socialist (“housing is a human right”); at other times he expresses liberal views. This tends to confuse voters, who are looking for a clear stance, particularly on the economy and social issues.

Some PO politicians have pointed out that the main focus of the Civic Coalition’s manifesto is ousting PiS. But critics say a desire to remove the PiS government does not constitute an adequate manifesto to obtain a mandate to govern. Apart from this rejection of PiS, the PO has not presented any concrete policies. In 2015, the Law and Justice Party (PiS) made sure voters understood the kind of Poland it wanted – involving a focus on expanding the welfare state. It can be assumed that the PO will remedy this deficit before election day and deliver its own manifesto for a different Poland. However, the PO is not completely devoid of substance. The party has been finding a new direction over the last few years. The PO has clearly taken a much more liberal direction, particularly on social issues. This is highlighted by the abortion issue, for example when Tusk spoke at the Poland of the Future Campus. Addressing hundreds of young people, he stated his opposition to the candidacy of anti-abortionists on his party’s electoral lists. Later, the party rowed back slightly on this statement, but the PO still positions itself on the side of the vast majority of the Polish people and in clear contrast to the government camp. This liberalisation can also be seen in the party’s clear support for the legalisation of artificial insemination in Poland. The party is currently collecting signatures across the country in support of this goal. Tusk has also repeatedly spoken out in favour of introducing registered same-sex unions. The party has even criticised the church, although this criticism is clearly directed against the official Polish Church.

In this way, the PO is following the trend towards greater liberalisation and secularisation of Polish society, in which the Church is gradually losing influence. It is difficult to predict what role these social issues will play when the election campaign heats up. But there is no doubt that the PO has become much more progressive on social issues over the last few years. In this way, it is reflecting positions that are generally accepted in the political centre. Looking at the party itself, the internal party discussion about the leadership of the PO has clearly been settled in Tusk’s favour. His leadership is unquestioned within the ranks of the Civic Platform. Outside the party, however, the situation is very different. The fact that Tusk is so unpopular with the vast majority of the electorate is a major weakness. If the opposition were to win the election, almost two-thirds of Poles would be against Tusk’s appointment as prime minister. This rejection is also (but not only) based on the fact that Tusk feels he is constantly exposed to attacks from the government and the media channels that act as its mouthpiece. The main news programme on Polish state TV sometimes mentions him dozens of times in a negative context, without any discernible journalistic value. But the political value is clear – the permanent discrediting of the leader of the PO.

More than one in two Poles (52.3%) do not trust Donald Tusk, and only 27.6% say they have confidence in him. Meanwhile, the front-runner in the vote of confidence is Warsaw Mayor Rafał Trzaskowski, who continues to play a key role as the party’s deputy leader. It would, therefore, be possible to make Trzaskowski the front-runner. Polls suggest that Tusk would only win 14.8% of the vote in a direct election, whereas 24.4% of all voters favour Trzaskowski. Among democratic opposition voters, Trzaskowski polls as high as 41% -- twice

as much as party leader Tusk. In such a constellation, Tusk would assume a role similar to that of Kaczyński for PiS, in that he would lead the governing party but not actually be in government. Unlike the PiS, which has no competition for the post of party leader, this would certainly result in conflict between Tusk and Trzaskowski. In addition, it would certainly be a better option for the Warsaw mayor to remain in City Hall, win the local elections again in early 2024, and then run in the 2025 presidential elections. This is certainly the more pleasant, albeit risky, option for Tusk too.

Despite his poor personal ratings in the polls, Tusk's party views him as the most likely and probably uncontested candidate for the office of prime minister. The question of who is the front-runner should also not be overestimated. In Poland, the head of government is not directly elected. Whether Tusk succeeds in leading a government will depend primarily on the coalition partners. In their relationship with the other democratic opposition parties, Tusk and the PO as a whole see themselves as the leaders of the opposition. But this claim is not necessarily accepted by parties outside of the Civic Coalition. In the last few months, Tusk and the PO have made repeated attempts to convince fellow democrats to team up against PiS. In November, the Civic Platform drafted a party resolution on this matter with a view to expediting the creation of a joint list. Yet Tusk had previously announced early last year that he would do everything in his power to ensure that PO was the strongest party if the other parties decided against an electoral alliance.

Polska 2050

Polska 2050 is a relatively young grouping. Its roots lie in a political movement founded by Szymon Hołownia shortly after the 2020 presidential election. This political newcomer entered the campaign for the presidency and came in third from a standing start. He was previously known as a liberal Catholic journalist who was also director of the Religia.tv channel, a commentator for Newsweek and Gazeta Wyborcza, and a columnist for the Catholic weekly Tygodnik Powszechny. He also became known to a wider audience by hosting TV talent shows. Hołownia has the ability to rally the support of public-spirited people who are tired of the political games and ideological battles in Warsaw. Thousands of young volunteers worked on his election campaign throughout Poland, which considerably boosted his movement's credibility. Hołownia registered the Polska 2050 party in March 2021. Ideologically, the party is at the centre of the political spectrum and generally supports Christian democratic principles, with a strong focus on green, liberal, and pro-European issues. P2050 has a group of seven deputies in the Sejm and one senator in the upper house. Hołownia's party has not yet had the opportunity to prove itself in parliamentary elections. His party's deputies came to the Sejm via the electoral lists of the Civic Coalition or The Left, and only changed their party affiliation after being elected. P2050 also includes Róża Thun, a well-known MEP who used to be in the Civic Platform. At the European level, the party belongs to the liberal Renew Europe group.

In spring 2021, Szymon Hołownia's party was polling at more than 20%, five points higher than the PO, and it began preparing to become the main opposition party. However, its support in the polls started to wane when Donald Tusk returned to Polish politics. In early 2023, support for P2050 has fallen below 10%. Nevertheless, it is still the third-strongest party behind PiS and the PO, and just ahead of The Left.

Hołownia's electorate consists overwhelmingly of PO voters (about 53%). But a recent poll showed that the party is also becoming the second choice for the moderate right, which until recently voted for PiS. Hołownia's slogan is about breaking the PiS-PO duopoly and making a qualitative leap forward. He also champions issues that have not been in the mainstream debate, such as environmental issues (rapidly achieving climate neutrality), education, and family policy (equal rights for women). He is also clearly reaching out to

young, undecided voters, of whom there are many in Poland. They see the long-standing dispute between the established political parties as an anachronism and believe a modern formation that is unencumbered by the exercise of power could be a good alternative. Hołownia calls his grouping a political start-up. However, Hołownia's novelty factor is gradually fading, and the media are showing less and less interest in the new grouping. The issues he addresses have also lost some of their appeal now that hard security issues relating to the war in Ukraine and the threat of economic collapse have come to the fore. However, Hołownia is not giving up and has been campaigning hard over the last few months. The chairman of P2050 has travelled thousands of kilometres and visited a dozen cities, where he has presented candidates for the electoral lists – not people who already know the Sejm like the back of their hands, but new candidates who are rooted in their local communities. They include people who have already made a name as local politicians, along with social activists and entrepreneurs who understand local problems. This brings politics closer to the people, to a place where concrete problems can be addressed, such as the difficulties faced by small businesses, hospital closures, or the lack of daycare places. Hołownia is also keen to present himself as a statesman and expert on Europe. In September 2022, a three-day European congress was organised jointly with the Renew Europe Group, which hosted its president Stéphane Séjourné and 300 delegates in Warsaw. At the event, Hołownia said that Poland should join the eurozone as soon as possible. However, this proposal testified to Hołownia's lack of political experience, as the majority of Poles are clearly opposed to an early introduction of the euro. It remains to be seen whether P2050 will succeed in building effective structures and filling an electoral list with appealing candidates, even with a popular leader, a motivated team, and the electoral slogan of a policy of renewal. It is also unclear whether P2050 can escape the 10% trap. It is possible that, like the Palikot movement after 2011 and Nowoczesna after 2015, the party will slowly disintegrate, lose its most valuable people to other parties, make increasingly difficult compromises, and eventually disappear from the scene. The lower P2050 falls in the polls, the greater the need for an electoral alliance and the creation of joint electoral lists.

Polish People's Party (PSL)

The Polish People's Party is a party that draws on the traditions of the peasant movement and Christian democracy. In the past, it was merely an agrarian party that represented the interests of farmers, but today it wants to be perceived as a modern people's party. The PSL's platform is based on the principles of modern agrarianism, which draw upon Christian social teaching and the principle of subsidiarity. It postulates the primacy of labour over capital, the rejection of American neoliberalism, and the pursuit of a system of market economy flanked by regulatory policy. On ideological issues, PSL politicians generally oppose the death penalty and the legalisation of euthanasia, abortion, and same-sex unions. As one of Poland's oldest political parties, the PSL has helped three government coalitions to gain a majority – most recently with the PO until 2015. The PSL has also become a refuge for politicians from other groups who feel the PO has become too liberal in its worldview or that PiS has become too radical. In theory, its ability to form a coalition is high, but the PSL claims to be part of a pro-democratic bloc in opposition to PiS.

The party has been hovering around the 5% threshold for more than two years, so it is keen to join forces with another party before the elections. Despite its relatively low level of support, the party could be an attractive partner because of its numerous and extensive regional structures. It is a party that does well in local government, where it tends to be more strongly represented than in the national parliament. In the 2018 local elections, the PSL gained more than 12% of the overall vote.

If the PSL's poll numbers improve and it is no longer in danger of falling below the electoral threshold, or if P2050 and the PO do not agree to join it in a coalition, then it will run separately in the election. In such a situation, the PSL's lists would gather representatives of smaller centre-right parties under the umbrella of the "Polish Coalition". In the Sejm, it is already working in a faction with several politicians who have left their original groupings. The PSL will also have to try to win back voters in rural areas who currently vote for PiS. This will not be an easy task, but we should not forget how, several times in the recent past, the polls have predicted the PSL would be out of the Sejm, yet in the elections it still managed to exceed the electoral threshold by a few percentage points.

The Left

In addition to the Civic Coalition, the PSL and P2050, The Left should also be mentioned as the fourth democratic opposition party. Similar to the Civic Coalition, this is not a homogeneous grouping, but also a collective movement. Lewica (The Left) was originally a parliamentary group made up of three parties: the post-communist SLD (Democratic Left Alliance), Wiosna (Spring), and Razem (Together). The SLD and Wiosna united in October 2021 to form Nowa Lewica (New Left). However, the fact that it is still an electoral alliance of two parties means that The Left is subject to a threshold of 8% rather than the single-party 5% threshold. In recent months, the alliance has regularly been close to this threshold, so it could find itself in a situation similar to that after the 2015 elections, when The Left failed to enter parliament.

The competition from other parties is fierce in this regard. The above-mentioned liberalisation of the Civic Platform makes it attractive to left-wing voters. On social issues, it is primarily the PiS-led government camp that has been able to appeal to socially disadvantaged voters by expanding the welfare state. But P2050, some of whom are calling for greater separation of church and state, is also becoming a rival for The Left. There are also smaller groups such as the left-wing Inicjatywa Polska, which is part of the Civic Coalition, and the parliamentary group of the Polish Socialist Party, both spin-offs from the SLD.

The co-chair of Nowa Lewica has set a target of 10% for the upcoming parliamentary elections. This indicates that even The Left's leadership do not expect to significantly exceed this threshold. So, for The Left, it all comes down to whether it decides to run alone or join a larger electoral alliance. If Lewica failed to win any seats, this would not only mean the absence of a democratic left in the Sejm but could also prove fatal for the opposition as a whole. A drop of almost 8% (2015: 7.5%) would strongly favour the first-place finisher in the allocation of seats (also due to the D'Hondt counting method). If the opposition fails to stand together, the winner of the election could be Law and Justice. Accordingly, The Left is open to the idea of a broader electoral alliance – but can also envisage running separately.

A united opposition?

The current position of the liberal-democratic opposition means that there are several options for cooperation in the parliamentary elections this autumn. The simplest of these relates to elections to the Senate, the upper house of the Polish parliament. The majority of major opposition politicians are keen to find ways of cooperating in this respect, in the form of a "Senate pact". This involves the parties agreeing on who will represent the entire opposition in which of the 100 constituencies. Talks have been underway for several months in this respect. Although it seems likely that the parties will reach an agreement, a compromise takes time because no answer has yet been found to the question of a united bid in the Sejm elections.

Meanwhile, voters have a clear opinion on the issue: 53.1% of all voters are in favour of a joint list of KO, PSL, Lewica, and P2050, while 31.1% are opposed to such a list. Approval is particularly strong among supporters of the parties involved. 90% of KO voters, 88% of Left voters, 76% of PSL voters, and 83% of P2050 voters support such an electoral alliance.

As a result, there are four main scenarios for the elections:

1. Create this kind of joint list, as favoured by the voters. In this way, the focus of the election campaign would be on ousting PiS. As the largest opposition party, the Civic Platform would have a leading role to play and would expect to appoint the prime minister from their ranks. The alliance partners would have to accept that Tusk, who is unpopular with the majority of voters, would again head up the government. But voters would also have to be offered an alternative to PiS that is acceptable to both left-wing and conservative voters. However, the danger lies in fixating too strongly on ousting PiS. The policies of the very different partners would initially fade into the background, only to become a problem after the election. It should also be remembered that cooperation will not necessarily result in a simple addition of individual results. The question of mobilising very different voters will play a decisive role here.

2. The individual parties could run separately, although this option is not favoured by the majority of voters. Together with its smaller partners, the Civic Platform would head up the Civic Coalition as an electoral alliance. A second electoral alliance would be formed by the Left (Nowa Lewica and Razem). The PSL would probably reopen its electoral list to smaller moderate-conservative parties. The newcomer, P2050, would stand on its own. In this scenario, it can be assumed that PiS would win the most votes. However, whether a majority could then be formed against PiS and the Confederation is questionable. In the end, running on a single ticket could result in defeat for the democratic opposition.

3. a) It would also be possible to create two opposition lists. The first would be joined by P2050 and the PSL (plus smaller partners). This electoral alliance could present itself as a centrist political force. It would possess the key political structures of the PSL, but also the novelty (insofar as it still exists) of Hołownia's P2050. In the past, the PSL in particular has often called itself the "new Christian democracy of the centre". Cooperation with Hołownia would strongly favour the creation of a third, liberal-conservative force situated between the liberal Civic Platform and the national-conservative PiS. The political proximity of these two groupings speaks in favour of such an alliance. Indeed, the two party leaders Hołownia and Kosiniak-Kamysz made a joint appearance in December. On the downside, however, the PSL chairman is said to have very clearly expressed his displeasure at the lack of cooperation between the P2050 deputies in the Sejm and the rest of the opposition. It is also said that broad swathes of the PSL base are against Hołownia.

b) Alongside this would be the formation of a left-liberal list comprising KO and The Left. Such a list would probably attract opposition within the Razem party, and more conservative members of the Civic Coalition could also have their problems with more radical elements in the Left. This option would clearly highlight a supposed shift to the left by the Civic Platform. As a result, moderate-conservative forces could leave the PO and find a new home with PSL/Polska2050. In this context, however, it is interesting to note that although the Civic Platform emerged from the anti-communist Solidarność movement, very few reservations about contact with the (former) post-communists exist today. Although cooperation

between PSL and P2050 seems possible, a KO/Lewica electoral list can probably be ruled out.

4. It is more likely that the KO will focus on the political centre. More specifically, this means cooperation with its EPP partner, the PSL. This EPP list would then stand against a Left list. In this scenario, P2050 would either join this list or run independently. With or without Hołownia, the alliance would cover a broad spectrum of voters, ranging from left-liberal to conservative. It is rumoured that the PSL leader is particularly keen to achieve this kind of cooperation with Tusk. A tripartite alliance of KO, PSL and P2050 would probably manage to achieve a majority in the Sejm. At the same time, such an alliance could present itself with the troika of Tusk, Kosiniak-Kamysz and Hołownia at its head. Then, for example, voters who distrust Tusk could be mollified by the fact that two other politicians head the list.

These are the potential options. Over the next few weeks, we will find out which scenario ultimately comes to pass. The domestic focus right now is firmly focused on settling this question of electoral lists, and every day brings new developments. P2050's lack of cooperation with the opposition seems to be a source of great irritation. As a result, the distance between the KO and PSL and Hołownia's party is widening. Recently, Tusk announced that he would not wait for Hołownia any longer. However, the other potential partners are certainly not in agreement with this. At the end of the day, a divided opposition that cannot find a way to work together could end up handing PiS a third term in office after all.



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