

Melchior Szczepanik

Head of Brussels Office, Polish Institute of International Affairs
@mEUlchior

Tomasz Zajac

Analyst, Polish Institute of International Affairs
@T_Zajac_

Although Law and Justice (PiS) received the most votes in the national election on October 15th, 2023, this did not translate into a parliamentary majority, and the three main opposition forces formed the government – the Civic Coalition (KO), the Third Way (TD) and the New Left (NL) – ending eight years of PiS and United Right (ZP) rule. This closed an important era in Polish politics. The two terms of PiS (affiliated with the European Conservatives and Reformists; ECR) were marked by conflicts regarding the breach of rule of law principles, numerous penalties for non-compliance with EU legislation, as well as the rulings of the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) (e.g. €1m per day in connection with disciplinary procedures in the judiciary) and high political polarisation.

Against this backdrop, the representatives of the new government – made up of parties allied with the major European political families¹ and led by former President of the European Council Donald Tusk – were very vocal about the need to improve relations with the EU institutions and claimed a greater agency in this regard compared to PiS. The ruling coalition was unanimous on ending the dispute over the rule of law by implementing the European Commission (EC) recommendations and the CJEU rulings. The commission and the council assessed the government's actions in the realm of the judiciary as sufficient to disburse payment under the union's recovery fund (Next Generation EU; NGEU).

Several (though mostly symbolic) pro-European actions have been taken, among others joining the European Public Prosecutor's Office. The governing coalition is also trying to revitalise cooperation within the Weimar Triangle: two meetings in this format have been held since the beginning of the year. It is worth noting, however, that on some high-profile issues, its stance is very close to that of its predecessor. This applies for instance to Ukrainian exports of agri-food products, reservations about institutional reform of the EU², [rejection of the Pact on Migration and Asylum](#), and opposition to the Nature Restoration Law.

1. In the European Parliament (EP), Civic Platform, the dominant party in KO, belongs to the European People's Party (EPP) group, as does the Polish People's Party (PSL), one of two partners in TD. Poland 2050, the other party from TD, is part of the Renew Europe group, while NL belongs to the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). This gives the government more leverage in legislative works in the EP than was the case for the PiS government and ECR party.
2. It is worth noting that the introduction of Qualified Majority Voting in selected areas is not excluded by the current government.

On some high-profile issues, the government's stance is very close to that of its predecessor. This applies for instance to Ukrainian exports of agri-food products, reservations about institutional reform of the EU, rejection of the Pact on Migration and Asylum, and opposition to the Nature Restoration Law.

Campaign: themes and strategies

The European campaign started relatively late as parties only began to present their main ideas and candidates after local elections held on April 7th (with the second round of mayoral elections on April 21st).

Ruling coalition

Although in the 2019 European elections the parties of the ruling coalition (then in the opposition) ran together, this time they decided to stick to the winning formula of the 2023 national election, in which there were three separate lists.

Civic Coalition (KO) is positioning itself as a pro-European party that can still look after the interests of Polish citizens if those are in conflict with some European policies. The beginning of its campaign underscored the high international standing of Prime Minister Donald Tusk, its agency in unblocking the NGEU funds and its capacity to shape the EU position in other policy areas, particularly security. At a prominent economic conference in Poland, Tusk and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen spoke in unison about the necessity to boost support for Ukraine and develop greater defence industry capacity in Europe. KO will also attempt to present itself as a guarantor of the rule of law in Poland and draw attention to Law and Justice's close ties to the pro-Russian prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán.

Although KO generally supports the green transition, it tries to distance itself from its supposedly inordinate costs. The government has still to withdraw the lawsuits against certain aspects of the EU's climate policy filed at the CJEU by its predecessors. Additionally, the deputy minister for foreign affairs claimed that Poland is negotiating [opt-outs from some provisions of the Green Deal](#).

The two parties that form the Third Way (TD) have different electoral profiles: the Polish People's Party (PSL) is more traditional and appeals to voters from towns and the countryside, whereas Poland 2050 targets centrist metropolitan voters. TD successfully used this to its advantage by diversifying its communication depending on the target audience and the same is to be expected from the two parties during the campaign for the European Parliament (EP) elections. Their message regarding the EU consists of being Euro-realistic and the need for Europe to return to its roots. This is probably motivated by the party leaders' diagnosis of the social mood, in which a moderate narrative towards the EU will be the most advantageous. Being too pro-EU might be perceived as naïve and TD wants to present itself as the party that best knows how to win concessions from other members and EU institutions.

The Left is the most pro-European party sitting in the current parliament and it will emphasise its strong support for integration. The representatives of this party spoke out in favour of treaty changes and strongly supported the Green Deal. One of the first proposals unveiled during the election campaign was to start a discussion on the future constitution for Europe. It will hope that a more Euro-enthusiastic profile

will woo voters who are dissatisfied with the Civic Coalition's reticence about closer integration and its neglect of the policies to prevent climate change.

Opposition

Law and Justice (PiS) is likely to run a campaign focused on criticising the EU's record in recent years. Its main aim will be to fend off the challenge posed by the radical right, Eurosceptic Confederation party that will attempt to portray itself as the only genuine defender of Polish sovereignty against the EU. Polls show that only 17% of PiS supporters believe EU membership brings more benefits than losses; therefore the party can afford to be strongly critical of the EU establishment.³

Since losing power in December 2023, Law and Justice has been less restrained in voicing its disapproval of EU institutions. PiS leaders accused the EC of being biased on the issue of NGEU money and argued that the main reason for withholding the funds was to create favourable conditions for the then opposition parties to win the elections. The EP was lambasted as well: its plea for treaty change was depicted by numerous politicians of this party as an assault on the powers of member states. In addition to opposition to institutional changes (such as greater use of Qualified Majority Voting – QMV), the main thrust of the campaign will be the condemnation of measures adopted as part of the Green Deal. The project found itself in the limelight in relation to farmers' protests and PiS clearly believes that the spectre of green transition can mobilise voters in the countryside, where it enjoys strong backing.

While focusing on criticising EU actions, PiS will stay clear of calling for leaving the EU. It will attempt to pass itself off as constructive: willing and able to change the union, and even open to collaboration with parts of the mainstream forces, namely the EPP group (provided the latter reconsider their support for left-inspired projects). To further strengthen its respectability, PiS will emphasise that like-minded politicians are gaining ground in other member states.

Confederation inaugurated its campaign on April 15th, claiming its goal is to oppose “eurocrats' crazy ideas”. The green transition and migration policy feature prominently among them. Poland's most Eurosceptic party emphasises its opposition to regulations adopted within the framework of the Green Deal, such as the ban on combustion engine cars, and stresses that the green transition is largely to blame for EU's woes, including higher energy and food prices. The party strongly backed the farmers' protests, condemning not only the green regulations but also the influx of Ukrainian agricultural products. It also expressed an unambiguous opposition to Ukraine's membership of the EU.

Confederation will question Law and Justice's credentials as a Eurosceptic force and remind the electorate that it was Morawiecki's government that subscribed to climate neutrality, the Green Deal and the CAP reform that featured stronger environmental measures. They will also reiterate opposition to common debt and claim that paying off the loans taken out for NGEU will imply the introduction of “EU taxes”.

3. “Sondaż. Polacy o Unii: mniej entuzjazmu, więcej sceptycyzmu”, *Rzeczpospolita* (April 2nd, 2024).

However, the party will not bring up the idea of leaving the EU but claim its goal is to reform a flailing Union driven by misguided federalism.

Likely result and its impact

Regional elections of April 2024, won by Law and Justice, have shown stability of popular support for the political forces⁴ and their results suggest PiS can be considered the favourite. However, the Civic Coalition, which has topped most public opinion polls since February, could emerge as the winner due to advantageous circumstances that it enjoys in European elections. First, the pro-EU urban electorate is more willing to go out and vote, while mobilisation might be weaker in the PiS-friendly countryside. In addition, some conservative and Eurosceptic voters, who in national elections tactically support PiS as the strongest player, could vote for Confederation. Whatever the outcome of the race between Poland's two largest political forces, the pro-EU parties of the ruling coalition are on course to win a majority of seats.

Tusk's government, if fortified by a clear-cut victory over the Eurosceptic camp, could perhaps be somewhat more open to tackling delicate subjects such as the future of the green transition and institutional reforms. Yet more significant shifts in key policy areas are unlikely. With the presidential election of 2025 looming, the ruling coalition will be wary of being portrayed as "soft" in the EU arena by the opposition.

A victory for Civic Coalition would strengthen Tusk's credentials as a leader able to confront Eurosceptic forces and boost his international standing, especially given the fact that other pro-EU leaders of large member states (Emmanuel Macron, Pedro Sánchez and Olaf Scholz) have rather slim chances of a convincing electoral success. This would place him in a favourable position to make an impact in negotiations regarding EU top jobs and the division of portfolios within the new EC.

Conclusions

The European campaign will be short but quite vibrant. Several EU-related issues will feature prominently in inter-party discussions. The latter will focus on the EU's record in recent years, touching upon questions such as the feasibility of the green transition and the union's right to sanction member states because of failings related to the rule of law. The political forces that are critical of the current condition of the EU seem to have a clearer narrative. Yet mobilising Eurosceptic voters will be an uphill struggle. The parties of the pro-integration camp – with the exception of the Left – will be at pains to run a campaign that reconciles a positive attitude towards integration and European cooperation with opposition to some key initiatives of the outgoing commission. Even though the variety of attitudes towards integration present within the ruling coalition could lead to inconsistencies on some occasions and provoke internal frictions, it can also facilitate appealing to both more pragmatically-minded and more idealistic voters. Regardless of the result, the election is unlikely to provoke a significant shift in the Polish government's EU policy.

Tusk's government, if fortified by a clear-cut victory over the Eurosceptic camp, could perhaps be somewhat more open to tackling delicate subjects such as the future of the green transition and institutional reforms.

4. Support for the Law and Justice stood at 35,4% in the national election of October 2023 and at 34,3% in the election to regional legislatures of April 2024. Other parties' respective results were: the Civic Coalition 30,7%/30,6%; the Third Way 14,4% /14,2%; the New Left 8,6%/6,3%; the Confederation 7,1%/7,2%. It is worth noting, however, that these results are not fully comparable due to the specificity of the local elections.