

## POLICY BRIEF

### A European Victory for the Eurosceptics?



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With more and more voters visibly irritated with the government, the eurosceptic Law and Justice party will approach the European election in 2014 as the favourite. The ruling Civic Platform cannot, however, be written off completely. A new political initiative from the Left got off to a poor start, but could potentially mobilise significant support.

#### **Law and Justice: a Eurosceptic ticket to victory?**

Judging by the polls, Law and Justice (PiS) – the main opposition party – is the favourite to win the European election in May 2014. Having long trailed the ruling Civic Platform (PO) in the polls, PiS has taken the top spot since spring 2013.<sup>1</sup> Even though the difference between the two remains small, considering the shrinking popularity of the prime minister, it will not be easy for PO to regain the lead. PiS can also hope that it will benefit from the character of the election. Research shows that because voters generally consider European elections less important, they are more likely to punish the government by supporting the opposition. Voters who are more or less disappointed with the

government may support PiS, not necessarily with great conviction, but above all to show the struggling prime minister a yellow card.

With the low popularity rating of the government being its main asset, PiS will probably try to focus on domestic issues in its electoral campaign. Such a strategy will make it easier to attack its main rival and, at the same time, divert the electorate's attention away from PiS's modest achievements in the European Parliament (EP). Out of 15 MEPs elected as PiS candidates in 2009, only seven are still affiliated with the party. MEPs played a prominent part in two splits that affected PiS in 2010 and 2011 (the leaders of both parties created as a result of those splits are MEPs). PiS MEPs, bar a few exceptions, cannot boast a large number of achievements in the chamber. Some of them are manifestly more interested in domestic politics, others – simply invisible. Their poor performance is partly due to the fact that PiS MEPs are members of a small political group – European Conservatives and Reformists –

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*The views presented in the article are those of the author and the Institute of Public Affairs and do not represent the position of the author's employer.*

<sup>1</sup> Voters were asked about intentions in the parliamentary election, while polls on the European election have not been carried out yet.



which with only 56 MEPs, cannot really make a difference in parliamentary politics. PiS may also have a problem fielding candidates with the appropriate credentials to become an MEP. When forced to talk about EU-related issues, PiS will most likely focus on defying the government for not being assertive enough in EU negotiations. Recently, PiS presented a scathing criticism of the EU climate and energy package, and the government's position towards it. The party will also emphasise its opposition to prompt accession of Poland to the eurozone. As the most euro-sceptic of the major Polish parties, PiS will hope to reap the benefits of the growing popular distrust of the EU.<sup>2</sup> Even though in recent years Poland has seen a growing activity of far-right groupings spreading xenophobic and anti-EU views, it is unlikely that any of them will field candidates in the election.

<b>Poles in the European Parliament: increasing fragmentation</b>	
Civic Platform	25 MEPs
Law and Justice	7 MEPs
Democratic Left Alliance	6 MEPs**
Polish People's Party	4 MEPs
Solidaristic Poland	4 MEPs**
Poland Comes First	3 MEPs**
Europa+	1 MEP***
Independent	1 MEP**

\* Including one MEP representing a sister-party – Labour Union.

\*\* Elected from the lists of Law and Justice.

\*\*\* Elected from the list of the Democratic Left Alliance

The two parties created following a split within PiS are unlikely to win seats, with support for them being around 2 to 3 per

<sup>2</sup> According to Eurobarometer, the number of people who distrust the EU in Poland increased from 18 per cent in 2007 to 42 per cent in 2013.

cent. They may, however, harm PiS as they vie for support from similar social groups. Consequently, PiS is already trying to eaken them by trying to convince their members, including the leader of one group of secessionist – Zbigniew Ziobro<sup>3</sup> – to return. By neutralising or at least weakening the splinter parties, PiS increases its chances of winning the election.

### **Civic Platform: flexing its European muscle**

Despite a recent dip in the polls, the ruling Civic Platform is far from being bound to lose. The party's current slump is not necessarily irreversible. The polls in July 2013 have also shown a slight increase in the number of respondents who support the government and those who positively assess the general condition of Poland.<sup>4</sup> If economic conditions improve, as is currently expected, Civic Platform may yet bounce back. Although the European election is a tough challenge for the ruling party, PO has a number of assets that it can use in the campaign. Most importantly, it can highlight its impressive record in the EP. Several PO MEPs have gained influential positions, and the election of Jerzy Buzek (PO MEP) as president of the chamber in 2009 may be treated as the most noticeable sign of PO's standing. Being the fourth largest delegation<sup>5</sup> in the Christian Democratic political group – the largest in the chamber, PO is much better positioned than its main rival to influence the decision-making process. Going beyond the EP, PO can also draw attention to the government's generally positive record in EU politics, stressing the smoothly-

<sup>3</sup> Once a prominent figure of PiS, who still enjoys considerable popularity among conservative voters.

<sup>4</sup> According to the polls carried out in July 2013 by the Public Opinion Research Centre ([www.cbos.pl](http://www.cbos.pl)).

<sup>5</sup> The Polish delegation in the EPP Group consists of 25 Civic Platform MEPs and 4 MEPs representing the Polish People's Party – an agrarian party which is PO's coalition partner in the national government.



run presidency in 2011 and the outcome of negotiations regarding the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020. Poland was a leading member of the so-called Friends of Cohesion in these negotiations, coalition which advocated a generous budget with considerable funds for the EU cohesion policy. Contrary to the eurosceptic opposition, PO can field a number of candidates who are recognised as experts on EU issues (Jerzy Buzek, Danuta Hübner, Jan Olbrycht, Jacek Saryusz-Wolski). It can also take comfort from its particularly good showing in the last European election, which may be due to the fact that voters prefer its engaged pragmatism to the eurosceptic attitude of its main rival (see table below).

Low turnout has been a characteristic feature of all elections in Poland, and the European election in particular. In the last European election, differences in turnout were noticeable with inhabitants of large cities turning up to vote in greater numbers than those living in small towns and in the country.<sup>6</sup> PO, which enjoys a bigger following among urban voters, will certainly hope that this pattern of participation will also be noticeable in the coming election.

***Election results in Poland (%)***

	2007 (parliamentary)	2009 (European)	2011 (parliamentary)
Civic Platform	41.5	44.4	39.2
Law and Justice	32.0	27.4	29.9
Democratic Left Alliance	13.0	12.3	8.2
Polish People's Party	9.0	7	8.3
Palikot's Movement	-	-	10.0

**The Left: time for a breakthrough?**

<sup>6</sup> Turnout in the cities and in countryside was 28.5 per cent and 18 per cent respectively.

Once dominant in Polish politics, the Left has not had an electoral breakthrough since 2005. The declaration made by the former president, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, to become involved in politics again has rekindled hopes for a resurgence of the Left. Kwaśniewski has launched a new political initiative called Europa+, aimed at uniting the pro-European and left-leaning parties and politicians. However, his project got off to a poor start. While most pundits thought he would first turn to his former party, the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), Kwaśniewski chose the controversial Janusz Palikot – leader of Palikot's Movement<sup>7</sup> (RP) – as his key ally. The two announced the birth of Europa+ at a press conference. No sooner had the announcement come, than Leszek Miller, leader of SLD, claimed that he would not join forces with Europa+, thus making one of its main goals virtually unattainable. Since then, Europa+ has been rather passive and failed to attract any public figures who could make it a credible option for the centre-left electorate.

The conditions are propitious for a major third player as a growing number of voters seem to be tired with the PO-PiS rivalry. The left-wing parties will have to find a way of mobilising the electorate which still has only limited interest in the European election and, most importantly, less enthusiasm for the EU. It seems that they have better chances of succeeding if they create a large coalition uniting Palikot's Movement, SLD and several popular independent politicians. Such an alliance will have greater electoral appeal and is more likely to attract independents, such as former heavyweights of SLD, Marek Borowski and Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz

<sup>7</sup> Set up in 2011, Palikot's Movement achieved a surprisingly good result in the parliamentary election of that year, displaying a liberal economic agenda and a progressive stance on social issues.



(both currently serving as independent senators). Yet chances of such a large coalition materialising are increasingly slim. Most importantly, Kwaśniewski himself seems rather half-heartedly involved and his initiative manifestly ill-prepared. Surprisingly, he decided to go public with only one of the major players – Palikot – on board. Leszek Miller seems to prefer to remain an uncontested leader of SLD to playing second fiddle in a big centre-left coalition. For Janusz Palikot, joining forces with the staunchly leftist SLD may not be the best option, as seemingly he wants his party to be left-leaning on social issues, but liberal when it comes to the economy. All in all, a mixture of personal rivalries and programmatic divergences may make a wider centre-left alliance impossible.

It is important to note that before the European election in 2009, efforts to unite the centre-left fell through. Back then, SLD and a coalition of centre-left parties called Alliance for the Future went to the polls separately (with the latter failing miserably).

### **Polish People's Party: avoiding a disaster**

The agrarian Polish People's Party (PSL) may be wary of the coming election. The party's rating oscillates around the five per cent threshold and the traditionally low turnout in rural areas makes a good result even more unlikely. The party lost one MEP in 2009, gaining only three seats, and this time, with PiS making inroads among farmers, it is in danger of leaving empty-handed. In an attempt to broaden its electoral appeal, PSL discussed an alliance with the Poland Comes First party, a splinter group of PiS, but to no avail.

Perhaps the wisest strategy for PSL would

be to join forces with its coalition partner – Civic Platform. Both parties have already concluded an electoral alliance on the occasion of the local elections, and PO could welcome it again as a way to gain support in rural areas. Such an arrangement would probably enable PSL to have its MEPs re-elected, while protecting it from the humiliation that a result of less than five per cent would be. On the other hand, with the government struggling and the next parliamentary election looming, PSL may not want to strengthen its ties with its coalition partner.

### **What's at stake**

The European election will be seen as a prelude to national elections that follow it – local elections in autumn of 2014 and, above all, the parliamentary election of 2015. After a streak of six consecutive electoral losses to its main rival (counting presidential, parliamentary, European and local elections), PiS will try to turn the tide by winning in 2014, and thus strengthening its position before the parliamentary election. Another defeat would be a severe blow to Jarosław Kaczyński, cementing his reputation of a politician unable to appeal to centrist voters. For Civic Platform, a victory would provide a welcome respite in a difficult period of shrinking popularity and the much-needed momentum before the parliamentary election.

The situation on the Left remains unclear. United or not, the left-wing parties will need a dynamic and imaginative campaign to convince disillusioned voters to go to the polls. Failure to do so would spell further stagnation for SLD and humiliation for Aleksander Kwaśniewski. The latter, often depicted as a political Midas, has already lived through a half-baked return to politics when he led a centre-left coalition to a



somewhat disappointing result (13%) in the 2007 parliamentary election. This time he faces the risk of serious defeat.

Should the Left remain passive, the contest will again come down to the duel between PO and PiS. Its result will depend on whether PiS will succeed in convincing the dissatisfied voters to participate and cast a vote which will be a vote “against PO” rather than for PiS. In the meantime, PO will try to make this election as European as possible, asking voters to reward its good performance in the EU arena. The end result is most likely to be a draw with the winner getting only a few more mandates than the runner-up.

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