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What majority coalition is possible in Poland following the parliamentary elections on 15 October?

On 8 August, the President of the Republic, Andrzej Duda (PiS), announced that the next parliamentary elections in Poland would be held on 15 October next. The Polish people will be called upon to renew the 460 MPs of the Sejm, the lower house of parliament, and the 100 members of the Senate, the upper house.

Poland has been governed since 2015 by the Law and Justice party (PiS). Mateusz Morawiecki has been Prime Minister since 2017. Jaroslaw Kaczynski, a member of the Sejm who is considered to be the country's true leader, recently returned to the government because of divisions and tensions in his camp, according to political scientist Kazimierz Kik.

In 2015, the PiS formed the "United Right" coalition with Poland's outgoing justice minister, Zbigniew Ziobro, and a number of independent figures, which is in the running for the 2023 elections. It hopes to win a third term at the head of the country, which would be a first in the history of democratic Poland. PiS can count on a solid electoral base, particularly in the medium-sized towns and villages in the south-east and centre of the country.

Civic Platform (PO), the main opposition party led by former Prime Minister (2007-2014) and former President of the European Council (2014-2019) Donald Tusk, appeals to voters in large cities and to people who are tired of the PiS's intransigence, particularly on societal issues, and worried about Poland's isolation on the international stage.

According to the opinion poll carried out by the IBRIS/Onet institute on 13 September, the United

Right coalition is expected to come out ahead in the elections with 33.3% of the vote, outstripping the Citizens' Coalition, organised around Civic Platform and 3 other parties - Modern, The Greens (Z), Polish Initiative (iPL) - which is expected to win 26.4% of the vote.

The Left, which comprises several parties, is expected to come third with 11.1%. The Third Way coalition (Trzecia Droga), which includes two centrist parties (Poland 2050 and the Polish Coalition), is forecast to win 10.2%, just ahead of the Freedom and Independence Confederation, an ultra-nationalist and liberal party, with 11.1%.

On the face of it, neither the United Right coalition nor the Citizens' Coalition would be able to secure an absolute majority in the Sejm. There is a very real risk that the parliamentary ballot will result in a "hung parliament", as was the case after the elections on 25 October 2015, which led to new parliamentary vote being held in 2017.

Inflation and the cost of living are the most important issues for the majority of Poles (35%), followed by national security (22%).

PIS ON COURSE FOR AN HISTORIC THIRD TERM IN OFFICE?

During its 8 years in office, the PiS has pursued a policy that combines social redistribution and conservatism. "The government is offering a vision of solidarity that draws on the legacy of the Solidarnosc movement and is guided by the main principles of

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social solidarity. This is our vision for Poland. It is this vision that we want to continue to produce," declared outgoing Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki.

It has rolled out a vast and generous social welfare programme. In particular, it has introduced a monthly allowance of 500 zlotys (€124), known as 500 + (Rodzina 500 +), paid to families for each new child. Parliament has just decided to increase the monthly allowance to 800 zlotys (€198), effective next January. It has also voted to make medicines free of charge by 1 January 2024 for people aged over 65 and under 18.

PiS has lowered the retirement age and allocated a 14th month's pension to the retired, and lowered the income tax rate from 18% to 12%. These measures are particularly welcome in a country where the social security system is not as well developed as in the western part of Europe. In fact, Jaroslaw Kaczynski claims that he wants to build the "*Polish version of the welfare state*".

However, the party's decline in opinion polls can be explained more by voters' economic difficulties and their concern about the curtailment of PiS's generous social policy than by ideological reasons.

PiS can point to some respectable economic results: strong GDP growth (5.1% in 2022) and low unemployment (2.8% in 2022). GDP per capita at purchasing power parity is 40% higher than it was 8 years ago, and the country ranks 40th in the world on this criterion, ahead of Portugal. The country's budget remained balanced, at least until the Covid-19 pandemic. Inflation is high, however lying at 10.8% in July 2023.

The sanctions imposed on Russia following the invasion of Ukraine by Russian armed forces have led to an increase in fuel and energy prices and have raised concerns about Poland's energy security. While the rise in interest rates has limited PiS's room for manoeuvre when it comes to social spending, the party has nonetheless subsidised access to fuel and heating.

Another negative consequence of the war on the Polish economy has been the import of Ukrainian products, particularly those of an agricultural nature, which has led to a glut, responsible for the decline in market prices that has greatly displeased farmers. On 15 April, the government, acutely aware of the importance of the vote in the country's rural areas, decided to ban imports of four cereals (wheat, maize, rapeseed and sunflower) from Ukraine. On 12 September, it asked Brussels to extend the ban on imports of these cereals, which Brussels did not do. "*I would like to assure all farmers, the entire Polish countryside, that we will defend the interests of Polish farmers,"* said Mateusz Morawiecki. "*Poles want to help Ukraine, but at the same time we must not forget our fellow citizens,"* said Jaroslaw Kaczynski.

Poland has been extremely active in its support for Ukraine, which has restored the country's reputation and given it a new respectability on the international stage. Warsaw has also announced its intention to increase its military spending to 4% of GDP (137 billion zlotys, or €34 billion) and to double the number of soldiers (currently 300,000) - decisions that will strengthen its position in Europe. Jaroslaw Kaczynski wants to make the Polish army the largest on the Old Continent. Around a million Ukrainians have fled their country to take refuge in Poland since 24 February 2022.

The country's two main parties - PiS and PO - share the same views on the conflict raging on their border. However, the PiS has criticised the PO for having imported energy from Russia when it was in office (2007-2015), just as it claims that Donald Tusk wants to redefine the European Union's relationship with Moscow.

THE REFERENDUM

On 15 October, a referendum will be held on the same day as the elections. This decision was passed by Parliament by 234 votes (210 against and 7 abstentions).

4 questions will be put to the Polish people:

- Are you in favour of selling off state assets to foreign entities?

- Are you in favour of raising the retirement age to 67 for both men and women?

- Are you in favour of removing the barrier between Poland and Belarus[1]?

- Are you in favour of admitting thousands of illegal migrants to Poland under the forced relocation mechanism imposed by the European Union[2]?

"For us, the opinion of ordinary Poles is always what must prevail," states Jaroslaw Kaczynski, who also claims that holding the referendum on the same day as the elections will cut costs.

The man is nonetheless a shrewd political strategist, and he knows full well that this referendum will deepen the existing rift between Poles, which can only benefit his party. In addition, the referendum will help the PiS to regain control of the political agenda and to increase its campaign spending, since expenditure on the referendum is not subject to any limit, unlike that on the elections.

"The PiS is rehashing the theme that worked for it in the elections on 25 October 2015 when it tapped into the fear of foreigners," said Stanislaw Mocek, a political scientist and president of Collegium Civitas University. "Anti-German arguments benefit the PiS. They mobilise its most loyal electorate and encourage them to go to the polls", said Marcin Zaborowski, a political scientist at Warsaw's Lazarski University, adding that "it will no longer be a simple choice between PiS and the opposition, but it will be about the general vision of the world, economic issues and migration".

"The anti-German rhetoric (present in the first question) is in fact concealed anti-European rhetoric," stressed Anna Materska-Sosnowska, a political scientist at Warsaw University. Jaroslaw Kaczynski has also claimed that the referendum has been set up to prevent Donald Tusk's PO from selling Polish national companies to Germany and other foreign investors. "The Germans want Donald Tusk to come to office in Poland so that they can buy our assets", he declared.

The opposition forces have announced their intention to boycott the referendum so that the turnout falls below 50%, the threshold required for the vote to be declared valid. The manoeuvre is difficult, however. "Campaigning in favour of participation in the elections, because every vote counts, while at the same time calling for a boycott of the referendum is not an easy task", said Ewa Marciniak, a political scientist at Warsaw University.

Another move is designed to disqualify Donald Tusk and turn his supporters not just into political adversaries, but into enemies of Poland: last May, members of parliament passed a law establishing a commission of enquiry into Russian influence in Polish politics between 2007 and 2022, empowered to investigate the actions of the country's leaders during this period. The penalties for a politician accused of having acted under Russian influence and against the interests of Poland can go as far as a ban from holding any public office for a period of 10 years.

The European Union and the United States protested against this measure and the President of the Republic, Andrzej Duda, had to back down.

At the end of July, the Sejm passed a new text on this commission of enquiry. It will now comprise experts rather than members of parliament. Those accused of being under Russian influence will be able to challenge the decision before the Polish Court of Appeal rather than the administrative court. Finally, the penalty of 10 years' ineligibility has been abolished.

The 9 members of the Commission were elected at the end of August, with all the opposition parties refusing to take part in the vote. Unanswered questions remain: what constitutes pro-Russian behaviour or actions? How can someone be punished for something that was not punishable at the time they acted?

CAN THE OPPOSITION PREVAIL?

Opposition leader, Donald Tusk, is trying to unite all Poles opposed to PiS.

On 4 June, a symbolic date - since it celebrates the anniversary of the first semi-free elections in Poland in

[1] Between January and June 2022, Warsaw built a wall 5.50 metres high and 186 km long on the Belarusian border to prevent migrants from Africa and the Middle East from entering Poland via Belarus.

[2] In June 2023, the European Union voted in favour of an agreement on the arrival of migrants which provides for a fairer distribution of asylum seekers within the Member States and imposes financial compensation of €20,000 per person refused entry.

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1989, which marked the country's democratic opening after more than 40 years of communism - half a million people, again a number not seen since 1989, and all the opposition parties marched through the country's streets in protest against the high cost of living, fraud and lies, against PiS, in favour of democracy, free elections and the European Union. The event was organised at the initiative of Donald Tusk. *"I want to make a solemn vow. We are going to these elections to win, to call the guilty to account, to right the wrongs and (...) to reconcile Polish families"*, he declared.

The Citizens' Coalition, organised since 2018 around the PO and 3 other parties (Modern, The Greens, Polish Initiative), aims to represent reason and moderation on the Polish political scene. Its ambition is to restore the country's position on the international stage and strengthen cooperation with its European partners. It is positioned on the centre-right of the political spectrum. Founded on economic liberalism, the coalition is now defending a number of social-democratic measures, such as increasing healthcare spending. It sometimes outbids the PiS's welfare proposals, but in all events, it promises not to abandon or amend the various social measures taken by the current government over the last 8 years. As a result, voters have shown little conviction in the need to change governments in this context, as PiS remains more credible on social issues than its opponents.

The opposition is therefore struggling to convince voters that it is a real option against the PiS, particularly on economic issues. Its message against the ruling party may once again prove insufficient. We have seen in the past how the contempt shown by certain members of the opposition towards the PiS has only served to consolidate the latter's hold on its electorate.

Donald Tusk wants to improve Poland's international image. He is firmly opposed to the judicial reform passed by the outgoing government, which led to the European Union blocking Warsaw's payment of €35 billion, its share of the recovery fund voted by Brussels following the Covid-19 pandemic. The opposition leader has said that he would *"release the funds from the European recovery plan the day after his election"*.

The Citizens' Coalition support the voluntary termination of pregnancy, which the PiS has made very difficult in Poland, at the request of the woman and after discussion with a doctor during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. It also defends the institution of a civil partnership between two people of the same sex.

The question is whether the Citizens' Coalition can govern on its own. Donald Tusk has tried to bring together all the forces opposing the PiS, both left-wing parties and other centre parties. But to no avail. Moreover, Donald Tusk is one of the politicians who inspires the least confidence among Poles. The man has many opponents; he is seen as lacking empathy for those most in need. Many Poles remember when he governed Poland as Prime Minister between 2007 and 2014 and how far removed, he was from their concerns.

Two centrist parties, Polska 2050 and the Polish Coalition, have declined the opposition leader's offer of an alliance and joined forces in the run-up to the elections to form the Third Way coalition (*Trzecia Droga*). Polska 2050, led by Szymon Holownia, is a liberal, pro-European and environmentalist party. The Polish Coalition brings together several parties dominated by the People's Party, formerly known as the Farmers' Party.

The Third Way coalition hopes to attract voters dissatisfied with the two main parties. Although the former claims to be centre-right, their programmes are very different, which raises questions about the coherence of their union.

Finally, to the right of the PiS is the Freedom and Independence Confederation, an ultra-nationalist, liberal, even libertarian, party. The Confederation defends a liberal programme: lower taxes and limited state intervention in the economy. Created in 2019, the Confederation changed its leader in 2011: Sławomir Mentzen replaced Janusz Korwin-Mikke, and its party KORWiN changed its name to New Hope (NN). Sławomir Mentzen is a divisive figure who has made xenophobic as well as anti-Semitic comments. He presents himself as an ultra-liberal, which, according to Ewa Marciniak,

a political scientist at the University of Leuven, means that he is not a liberal.

THE POLISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Polish Parliament is bicameral: the Sejm, the lower house, has 460 deputies, and the Senate, the upper house, has 100 senators. The two chambers meet as the National Assembly (Zgromadzenie Narodowe) on only three occasions: when the President of the Republic is sworn in, in the event of an indictment of the President before the State Court, or when the Head of State is unable to exercise his powers due to ill health.

Parliamentary elections are held in Poland every 4 years. Apart from lists representing national minorities, any political party must obtain at least 5% of the votes cast to be represented in the Sejm (8% for a coalition).

For the Sejm, Poland is divided into 41 constituencies, each of which elects between 7 and 20 deputies. Parties and groups comprising at least 15 citizens are allowed to submit lists for the elections. Lists must have the support of at least 5,000 voters in the constituencies in which they stand. The electoral law requires each list to include at least 35% female candidates. The electoral law was amended in January 2023: the number of polling stations was increased in rural areas and local authorities are now obliged to take elderly and disabled people to their polling stations free of charge.

Senators are elected by direct universal suffrage in a first-past-the-post system. Each constituency in the country elects one senator. Candidates for the post of Senator must receive the support of at least 3,000 voters in their constituency.

The minimum age for election as a member of parliament is 21 and for election as a senator 30. Candidates are not allowed to run for both the Sejm and the Senate.

5 political parties won seats in the Sejm in 2019:

- the United Right Coalition, led by Law and Justice (PiS), the conservative party of outgoing Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and headed by Jaroslaw Kaczynski, has 235 MPs and 48 senators;
- the Citizens' Coalition, led by Donald Tusk's Civic Platform (PO), has 134 seats in the Sejm and 43 in the Senate;
- The Left, which includes the Alliance of the Democratic Left (SLD), Ensemble (R) and Printemps (W), has 49 MPs and 2 senators;
- the Polish Coalition, which includes Kukiz'15, a populist party led by Pavel Kukiz, a rock singer and actor, and the People's Party (PSL), a centrist and agrarian party led by Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz, has 30 seats in the Sejm and 3 in the Senate;
- the Confederation, a far-right coalition, has 11 MPs. The German minority has 1 deputy; 4 senators are independent.

Poles also elect their President of the Republic by direct universal suffrage every 5 years. Andrzej Duda was re-elected to this post on 12 July 2020 with 51.22% of the vote, ahead of Rafal Trzaskowski, mayor of Warsaw and Civic Platform candidate (48.78%).

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Results of the parliamentary elections in Poland on 13 October 2019

Sejm

Turnout: 61.74%

Political parties	N° of votes won	% of votes cast	N° of seats
United Right Coalition	8 051 935	43.59	235
Citizens' coalition	5 060 355	27.40	134
The Left	2 319 946	12.56	49
Polish Coalition	1 578 523	8.55	30
Confederation	1 256 953	6.81	11
Others	202 998	1.09	1

Source : <https://sejmsenat2019.pkw.gov.pl/sejmsenat2019/pl/wyniki/sejm/pl>

Senate

Turnout: 61.74%

Political parties	N° of votes won	% of votes cast	N° of seats
United Right Coalition	8 110 193	44.56	48
Citizens' coalition	6 490 306	35.66	43
The Left	1 041 909	5.72	2
Polish Coalition	415 745	2.28	3
Coalition for Local Government	331 385	1.82	0
Confederation	144 124	0.79	0
Independents	187 014	1.03	4
Others	1 511 672	8.31	0

Source : <https://sejmsenat2019.pkw.gov.pl/sejmsenat2019/pl/wyniki/senat/pl>

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