

POLAND GEARS UP FOR CEE'S MOST ANTICIPATED ELECTORAL CONTEST

Analysis & Implications of the Upcoming Parliamentary Election

5 September 2023

SUMMARY





On 15th October, Polish voters will head to the polls in Central Europe's most anticipated electoral contest. The election will see the clash of the two, longstanding rivals of Polish politics; the right-wing populist United Right alliance led by the Law and Justice party (PiS) and the centrist Civic Coalition (KO) of former Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk.

Aside from the two main electoral blocs, three other formations – the far-right Confederation, the Third Way alliance and the centre-left Lewica – are expected to enter parliament, with the first two blocs fiercely competing for finishing third at the polls. Since neither the PiS nor the KO is expected to reach beyond 50% of the vote, both the Confederation and the Third Way blocs stand good chances of becoming kingmakers and entering government.

Recent political movements suggest the ruling PiS has the best chance of finishing first at the polls and successfully garnering a coalition post-election, potentially with the Confederation or the Third Way bloc. However, an opposition victory remains possible, although with the need for most anti-PiS formations to perform higher than [latest polls](#) predict.

Below, Aretera takes a deeper look at the election campaign in Poland and the implications of this long-awaited parliamentary election.

This memo will cover:

-  an introduction into the parties shaping the electoral contest,
-  a snapshot at the election campaign and the main driving forces,
-  possible forward scenarios for the October elections and
-  short-term political and policy implications.

PRE-ELECTION LANDSCAPE

On 15th October, Polish voters will head to the polls to elect the members of the country's bicameral parliament; the 460-seat Sejm (lower house) and the 100-seat Senate (upper house). The upcoming electoral contest is without doubt the most anticipated parliamentary election this year in Central Europe; it will decide the political future of the region's largest EU & NATO member, as well as its largest economy, with potentially strong implications for international businesses in Poland.

One and a half month before this high-stakes electoral contest, the ruling United Right alliance – led by the right-wing populist Law and Justice party (PiS) of Deputy PM Jarosław Kaczyński – seems to have expanded its lead over its main electoral rival, the centrist Civic Coalition (KO) of ex-Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who governed the country between 2007 and 2015.

[Latest domestic polls show](#) that the two blocs are currently polling at around 35% and 27%, respectively. The Tusk-led KO had high expectations for the electoral campaign, hoping to overtake the PiS as the largest formation at the polls, which was briefly achieved in June. However, support for the KO seems to have dropped significantly in recent months, leading many to predict a change of government is looking less likely.

Aside from the two main blocs of the Polish political spectrum, three other formations are expected to enter the country's parliament. These include the right-wing populist Confederation alliance, the electoral alliance of the liberal-conservative Poland 2050 and the agrarian Polish Coalition, as well as the centre-left and three-party Lewica.

PRE-ELECTION POLLING

Five Formations Projected to Enter Polish Parliament		
Party/Alliance	Popular Vote – October 2019 (%)	Polling Average – September 2023 (%)
United Right (right-wing populist, national conservative, led by the Law and Justice Party)	43.6	38
Civic Coalition (catch-all, multi-party alliance, led by the centre-right Civic Platform)	27.4	30
Confederation Liberty & Independence (right-wing populist, economic liberal, hard Eurosceptic)	6.8	11
Third Way (electoral alliance of the Poland 2050 movement and the agrarian Polish Coalition)	ran separately	9
Lewica (electoral alliance of three centre-left parties)	12.6	9

(Source: [POLITICO Poll of Polls](#). No other formation is expected to reach the minimum threshold.)

SMALLER PARTIES WILL DECIDE THE OUTCOME

Since neither the ruling United Right nor the Tusk-led Civic Coalition is expected to receive more than half of the votes, the parliamentary election will be decided by the performance of the right-wing Confederation, the Third Way alliance and the centre-left Lewica.

Currently, both the Confederation and the Third Way alliance stand good chances of becoming third, and thus, the kingmaker of this election. Led by economist and businessman Slawomir Mentzen, the Confederation has recently gone through a transformation, focusing on its liberal economic promises and softening its right-wing populist tone, with the ultimate aim of appealing to the middle class and younger voters. The movement, however, remains populist-nationalist or – say its critics – extremist, and support for the party remains dependent on the popularity of its leader.

While the latest polls show otherwise, recent trends seem to suggest that the Third Way alliance of the Poland 2050 movement and the agrarian Polish Coalition (led by the agrarian Polish People's Party) might produce the greatest surprise on 15th October. The alliance is currently polling at around 10% but stands good chances of scoring significantly higher. Given the differences in their goals and supporters, the alliance of the two formations is highly unusual, with their shared will to potentially join a PiS-led government being the only significant common ground. However, the alliance has successfully positioned itself as the most appealing option for voters rejecting the PiS-KO rivalry.

Although it is projected to lose seats in parliament, the centre-left Lewica alliance, seen as a natural coalition partner for Tusk's KO, is expected to receive 8-10% of the popular vote. While this formation remains appealing to young and liberal voters, its performance is limited by the lack of popular policy proposals, while centre-left parties also have a history of over-performing at pre-election polls.

POSSIBLE FORWARD SCENARIOS

Aretera's baseline scenario suggests that the ruling United Right alliance will win the parliamentary elections. The chances of the PiS-led United Right coming first have grown following the stagnation of support for its main electoral rival, the Tusk-led KO. The ruling bloc also seems to be staying on message, focusing on its main economic and social policy promises, unlike its electoral competitors which are struggling to get their policy messages heard.

For PiS, there could potentially be a maximum of three coalition options: either with the Third Way bloc, with Confederation, or with both. The Third Way is increasingly seen as a potential coalition partner for the PiS, and Confederation remains an option due to ideological proximity. However, Mentzen's Confederation has been criticized by both the PiS and the KO during the campaign. A PiS victory could also be followed by post-election protests staged by the opposition over allegations of an unfair election, given the history of allegations against the PiS government concerning the erosion of democracy.

An opposition victory remains possible but could result in an unstable government. This scenario entails a better-than-expected electoral performance from the Civic Coalition, as well as from the remaining three formations competing against the ruling bloc. The KO has aimed to establish the widest possible anti-PiS coalition and – in an effort to do so – recently joined forces with the leadership of Agrounia, a populist agrarian movement. While this might help the opposition in the Polish countryside, it could also hurt the KO's anti-populist image, given certain controversies behind the movement. Simultaneously, however, the influence of future Agrounia MPs will be limited since their leaders' alliance with the KO is not a coalition. The movement's leaders joined the KO's candidate list but subsequently left behind their organization. Furthermore, it is yet to be seen how much votes this alliance could bring to the KO's candidate list as the Polish countryside's initial response seems to have been not as strong as expected.

Another challenge to overcome is boosting support in the most critical stage of the campaign after the past two months saw a sharp stagnation. Tusk's chances of success could also be hurt by the Polish government's recent decision to hold a referendum (also on 15th October) on topics such as migration, retirement and privatization.

The government's controversial commission, which was recently announced to investigate Russian influence in Poland but has ultimately been seen by many as a tool to hit the opposition, has not benefitted the opposition, either, at least not for long. At the same time, domestic and EU criticism towards the planned commission [led the PiS government to reconsider](#) and postpone its launch after the elections.

An inconclusive election remains the least possible but cannot be entirely ruled out. Theoretically, an electoral outcome that considerably differs from pre-election forecasts, could result in a scenario that would prevent the three smaller blocs to enter a coalition with either the PiS and the KO. Such an outcome would lead to an inconclusive outcome on 15th October, likely then followed by snap parliamentary elections and a caretaker government. However, we consider this option the least possible and anticipate that Poland will have a regular government, following successful coalition talks, led either by the PiS and/or the KO.

Under this scenario, the most likely outcome is that the PiS would look to recruit individual MPs to garner a parliamentary majority. This could include MPs from several candidate lists, including that of the rival KO, since a number of their candidates are not members of any party, with no obligation to stay in the KO's parliamentary group. While the PiS has successfully used this tactic before to collect the 231 lower house votes needed to form a government, the KO does not seem to have this option.

LOOKING AHEAD

A projected PiS victory in the parliamentary elections would mean the United Right would continue to lead the country, most likely in a revised composition of government. With such a cabinet, the country's strained relations with EU institutions are likely to endure. The two sides have been locked in a long-running dispute over alleged democratic backsliding in Poland, suggesting that it remains unclear when Poland could receive post-pandemic EU recovery funds, which continue to be blocked by the European Commission. A new PiS-led government may also be off to a rough start as the opposition – should they lose the election – may stage anti-government protests over allegations of an uneven playing field.


Should the Tusk-led KO win the election, the country's next cabinet would be a highly experimental government with multiple formations governing the country in an ideologically and structurally diverse coalition. Although this government would mean the start of a potential reconciliation between Warsaw and Brussels, the chances of a potential coalition crisis and a subsequent collapse of government would significantly increase, both on ideological grounds and in connection with policy issues, such as the country's draft budget for next year.

Both a PiS win and a KO victory indicate some level of instability in governance. An immediate result might be that the focus of political decision-makers will be diverted to solving front-page problems and political rivalry. Non-essential legislation would either be fast-forwarded or left in the backlog for a significant amount of time. The stability and capability of the new government will be tested directly after the elections as they will need to secure next year's budget.

Going into 2024, Poland will remain one of the most impacted EU countries of Russia's war against Ukraine, with continued implications for the country's security and economy. Warsaw has been among the strongest supporters of Kyiv in wake of the continuing Russian aggression, which is unlikely to change, regardless of which of the two large political blocs will lead the country's next government. However, an opposition victory could mean that Poland may follow the German-French approach to the war, in contrast to the PiS government's stance that aligns itself more on the United States.

###

If you would like to schedule a discussion of this paper, please contact:
[Dominik Istrate](mailto:d.istrate@areterapa.com), Lead Analyst for Central & Eastern Europe at d.istrate@areterapa.com

 Aretera is a leading independent public affairs advisory firm operating across Central & Eastern Europe, Ukraine Türkiye, Central Asia and a growing number of global emerging markets. We advise a wide range of leading multi-national corporations, providing counsel on all aspects of public policy, public affairs and reputation management. www.areterapa.com