



# Five Key Takeaways from the European Elections in Poland

by Daniel Tilles  
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Poland's European elections resulted in a clear victory for the ruling national-conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party, which won by an even greater margin than polls predicted. Their 45.5% share of the vote was the highest any party has ever received in an election in post-1989 Poland, and put it seven percentage points ahead of the European Coalition, an alliance of opposition parties, on 38.5%.

The only other party to pass the 5% threshold required to win seats was the social-democratic Spring, founded by Robert Biedroń earlier this year, which took 6%. That left the far-right Confederation alliance (4.5%), anti-establishment Kukiz'15 (3.7%) and left-wing Together (1.2%) with no representation.

As the dust settles, and following a frantic few days of commentary and debate in Polish political and media circles, here are five takeaways from the vote and a look ahead to autumn's vital parliamentary elections.

## **Poles are voting in record numbers**

We hear a lot from Poland's opposition and international observers about how Polish democracy is under threat – and for understandable reasons. Yet both of the elections since PiS returned to power have broken records for turnout: 55% voted in the local elections last autumn (compared to a previous high of 47.5%) and 45.5% took part on Sunday (compared to a previous high of 24.5%).

Given how low turnout has generally been in post-1989 Poland, this is to be welcomed. One could argue that this is a consequence of the public's concern that democracy is indeed threatened. Yet in both of the recent elections PiS has won convincingly: with 34% last autumn, ahead of the Civic Coalition with 27%; and with an even larger overall share and similar margin of victory on Sunday.

Of course, when people talk of challenges to democracy they are not referring to votes at the ballot box, but rather to the institutions and norms that uphold the broader framework of a democratic system. But in the free and fair elections that Poland still has, PiS is the most popular party – and is likely to be again in parliamentary polls later this year.

## **PiS continue to set the agenda, with Kaczyński to the fore**

PiS ran a professional, energetic and effective campaign for these elections. It toured the country, holding regional conventions that presented a clear, consistent and coherent message based around a package of five main promises, but which was also tweaked in response to events and to appeal to local audiences. PiS was better than its opponents at getting out to meet voters, and at targeting areas where it stood the most to gain.

The party, which employed British and American consultants in its campaign, produced a memorable slogan, 'Poland, the Heart of Europe', which counteracted opposition arguments that the government wants to lead Poland out of the EU, appealed to Poles' sense that their country is at the centre of Europe (not on its eastern periphery), and made a nod to the traditional, religious-conservative values PiS wants to promote.

PiS also continued to set the political agenda, as it has for the last four years, forcing the opposition to be responsive rather than proactive. Its core election pledges expanded the popular social policies that helped bring it to power in 2015 and which the opposition have failed to find an answer to. It then made cultural and religious issues a major theme, in particular opposition to 'LGBT ideology' and defence of the church. This energised conservative voters and, as we will see below, left the opposition coalition divided and struggling to respond.

It was also notable how prominent party chairman (and Poland's de facto leader) Jarosław Kaczyński was during the campaign. For much of the time since PiS returned to power in 2015, Kaczyński has pulled the strings from behind the scenes, leaving others – such as Andrzej Duda, Beata Szydło and Mateusz Morawiecki – to be the public face of his political camp.

At the start of this campaign that looked likely to continue, with PiS's package of electoral pledges labelled the 'Piątka Morawieckiego' (Morawiecki's Five). Yet soon the name changed to 'Piątka Kaczyńskiego' and Kaczyński became the main face of the campaign, speaking at all the regional conventions and setting the tone. Despite rarely giving TV interviews, Kaczyński appeared on a morning chat show as part of an effort to create a more sympathetic image, discussing his favourite foods, his pet cats, and his relationship with his mother. PiS's subsequent electoral succession will be seen as a vindication of this approach, and may mean Kaczyński now plays a more public role.

### **The opposition needs a positive message**

In the build up to these elections, there was some optimistic talk among opposition figures and liberal commentators about how the European Coalition had found the key to defeating PiS (and even populism more broadly).

Opposition leader Grzegorz Schetyna appeared at an event alongside historian Timothy Snyder to explain 'how to defeat populism'. The New York Times published two pieces by Polish authors, one arguing that those who 'want to save Europe' should 'learn from Poland' and another claiming that a new documentary on clerical sex abuse could 'take down the government'. 'We really believed we would win,' an anonymous opposition politician said after the election.

Their argument boiled down to the idea that opposition parties, by uniting into a single coalition, had been better able to focus their energies on bringing down PiS. However, polling always suggested that this was optimistic, and the official results now confirm it. Instead, all that happened was that, by forming an alliance, the parties combined their respective vote shares but did not increase them overall.

This has certainly been tactically useful: it prevented smaller parties' votes from being wasted by falling below the 5% threshold. But strategically it has not been a success: it has not added any value in the fight against PiS and, in fact, has probably been a hindrance by forcing them to avoid tackling their main deficiency.

One of the reasons for PiS's success is that it has constructed an appealing, positive message, one that helped it to win power in 2015 and which it has enhanced further since. And one of the reasons for the opposition's failure is that it has not managed to respond with a similar narrative of its own. Instead, it has relied mainly on negative campaigning, criticising all of PiS's policies and offering dire warnings about the country's future under its rule (including the unrealistic and unconvincing claim that the government is leading Poland to a 'Polexit' from the EU) but without setting out a clear vision of what it can offer instead.

By forming a broad coalition that contains parties ranging from the conservative agrarian Polish People's Party to the urban liberals of Nowoczesna, the opposition have made it even harder to construct a positive message because it is so difficult to find common ground amongst themselves, meaning they end up focusing on being anti-PiS, which is the one thing that unites them.

This was highlighted by their struggles to adapt to one of the biggest issues of the campaign, LGBT rights. While PiS pushed a consistent anti-LGBT message, the opposition failed to effectively respond because they were so internally divided. This was the case not only between parties but even within them: some Civic Platform (PO) mayors from big cities embraced LGBT rights, while others in more conservative places sought to ban gay pride parades. A PO MP was caught on camera telling a supporter that, while the party 'will be progressive' on introducing civil partnerships once in government, it does not want to 'expose too much now' because 'we have to attract votes in the provinces', where this issue is a 'problem'.

This is precisely the kind of fudged messaging that will make it very difficult for the opposition to unseat PiS. They are left simply waiting for a government scandal (all of which PiS have so far brushed off) or an economic crisis (which isn't going to happen between now and the autumn). Instead, they should be seriously discussing a new approach – and possibly a change in leadership – ahead of the parliamentary elections.

## **Antisemitism can win votes**

One of the more unpleasant surprises of this election season has been that it saw the most explicitly antisemitic campaign run by a major political movement in Poland for a long time. And an even more unpleasant surprise was that it worked to some extent.

The Confederation coalition, a ragtag mix of nationalists, right-wing libertarians, and other fringe figures, initially struggled, with low polling figures and little media attention. This changed after it latched on to Jewish property restitution as their main campaign theme. While this is a subject that merits genuine debate, for the nationalists it was simply a vehicle to stoke antisemitism.

At an anti-restitution march in Warsaw, they chanted ‘This is Poland, not Polin’ – a reference to the Hebrew name for Poland and a common codeword on the far right for the idea that Jews want to take over the country. With around 10,000 attending the march, scholar Rafał Pankowski called it ‘probably the biggest openly anti-Jewish street demonstration in Europe in recent years’.

One of Confederation’s leading figures said that the party’s main five policies were: ‘We don’t want Jews, homosexuals, abortion, taxes and the EU.’ Another, during a televised local debate, held a yarmulke over the head of his PiS opponent, saying it was a ‘symbol of PiS’s rule. They kneel before the Jews, they want to sell Poland’.

This clearly rattled PiS, which was forced to respond. Yet instead of condemning the antisemitism or pointing to the dishonesty of some of the Confederation’s arguments, the ruling party instead actually pandered to them. Though it did not use the same explicit language as the nationalists, it perpetuated the idea that Jews were seeking to unjustly extract huge sums of money from Poland and argued that only a PiS government could defend against this. Meanwhile the opposition largely avoided talking about the subject altogether, presumably realising there were no votes to be won (and some to be lost) in defending Jews.

This is sadly in large part a product of the tension that has been stoked by the conflict between Poland and Israel over the last 18 months. While there is fault on both sides, PiS’s clumsy efforts to pass its controversial IPN law amendment (known internationally as the ‘Holocaust law’) last January sparked the controversy, triggering a bitter debate that exposed, encouraged and normalised antisemitic attitudes among sections of the Polish right (as well as anti-Polish attitudes in Israel, in a vicious circle of escalating mutual animosity).

Then PiS’s subsequent backtracking on the law, annulling parts of it under Israeli and US pressure, handed the far right a further gift by superficially validating their claims that Polish legislation was being dictated by Jews.

In the end, the Confederation fell narrowly below the 5% threshold. Yet, given that turnout in this election was twice as high as the last one, this meant it won a significant number of votes – 100,000 more than the party of Janusz Korwin-Mikke, one of the Confederation’s leaders, obtained in 2014. Among the youngest voters (aged 18-29) almost 19% supported the Confederation.

Moreover, it was clear that their support in polls rose after they made Jewish restitution the main theme of their campaign, and it is hard to escape the conclusion that one reason why this dipped slightly in the final vote was because PiS responded by expressing its own strong opposition to Jewish restitution.

## **Biedroń has a lot of work to do**

Following a long build up, there was great excitement when Robert Biedroń launched his new social-democratic Spring party earlier this year. However, following an initial surge in the polls, it has gradually fallen away and, despite putting on a brave face, will regard Sunday’s result as a disappointment.

These wounds are largely self-inflicted. While the liberal social values Wiosna represents are never going to allow it to win elections in conservative Poland, its early success, when it reached a peak of around 14% in the polls, showed that there is a significant electorate out there for it target. But since then, confused messaging and a very shallow talent pool beneath the popular and charismatic Biedroń have seen it fail to capitalise on that.

Upon founding the party, Biedroń's initial talk was about fostering a new form of politics, less hostile than before and escaping the 'Warsaw bubble' of politicians and media to focus on the everyday concerns of the public. Yet, after a promising start, the party quickly descended into precisely the kind of 'political war' it claims to have wanted to avoid.

Biedroń labelled PiS as Poland's 'Taliban', saying the government wants to enforce a Catholic version of sharia law. One of the party's top election candidates (who until recently was Poland's deputy commission for human rights) suggested that people with homophobic views should not be allowed to stand in elections.

Such language only appeals to a narrow section of the public, many of whom would probably have voted for Wiosna anyway. To go beyond this, Wiosna will have to be much more disciplined and better organised, returning and sticking to the original, more positive vision Biedroń laid out, which he spent so long honing before the party's launch but too quickly abandoned at the first sign of falling polling figures.

[https://notesfrompoland.com/2019/05/30/five-key-takeaways-from-the-european-elections-in-poland/?fbclid=IwAR0p44XfvjU\\_RuqecXiBosjDjedL\\_uUmqLw8S2FBvakB7k5maCjGxtuj-mdg](https://notesfrompoland.com/2019/05/30/five-key-takeaways-from-the-european-elections-in-poland/?fbclid=IwAR0p44XfvjU_RuqecXiBosjDjedL_uUmqLw8S2FBvakB7k5maCjGxtuj-mdg)