

POLAND'S DEMOCRATIC COMEBACK AND THE SPECTRE OF NATIONAL POPULISM

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Poland's opposition parties secured victory in the elections of October 2023, putting an end to the eight-year national-populist experiment led by the Law and Justice party (PiS). The incoming government, headed by former President of the European Council Donald Tusk, is expected to carry significant weight within the European Union and re-evaluate recent Polish alliances. However, the capacity of the new government to roll back backsliding measures, particularly regarding the independence of the Constitutional Tribunal and other judicial bodies, remains uncertain.

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A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of national populism. Far-right national populism currently holds power in Italy and Hungary, co-rules in Finland, and provides governmental support in Sweden. At the same time, it stands as the most popular political force in France and the option that won most votes in the recent Dutch elections. Leading democracy indexes confirm a decline in democratic quality, driven by the rapid ascent of national populism in Europe and beyond. The once celebrated waves of democratisation, as conceptualised by Samuel Huntington, appear to have given way to autocratic waves fuelled by people's resentment and anger arising from the crises within capitalist society, as articulated by Michael Sandel.

Yet constitutional-democratic resurgences and resistances have countered these recent disruptive dynamics. In Poland, three opposition parties – the Civic Platform (PO) led by Donald Tusk, in cooperation with the party coalitions the Third Way and the Left – have secured enough seats in the Sejm (the Polish lower house and main legislative body) to replace the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party and bring an end to its eight-year-long national-populist experiment. Since its surprise win in 2015, PiS has capitalised on solid economic development to implement significant social transfers to more deprived segments of Polish society. These populist policies played a crucial role in its electoral success, leading to PiS's re-election in 2019 with the highest support in post-communist history.

Under Jarosław Kaczyński's firm leadership, Law and Justice has championed a right-wing nationalist-conservative and religious-populist agenda with authoritarian undertones. PiS coupled its social policies with backsliding strategies, launching persistent attacks on the independence

of the judiciary, gaining control over public media, and seeking influence over private outlets. The party engaged in a contentious conflict with the European Commission over the rule of law. Furthermore, the party's stance was reinforced by religious conservatism, emphasising criticism against Poles who "deviated" from the Catholic-nationalist mission advocated by the PiS government.

Led by Kaczyński, who avoids travelling outside Poland and refrains from praising anything un-Polish, Law and Justice acted without clear foreign policy goals, heavily relying on two key partners in its external politics: Donald Trump in the United States and Viktor Orbán in Hungary. This approach suffered a setback when the US populist lost the 2020 elections, and Putin decided to invade Ukraine in February 2022. Confronted with the prospect of losing cheap energy from Russia, Orbán aligned himself with Putin, resulting in a freeze in the traditional Polish-Hungarian friendship and leaving the pro-Ukraine PiS without a key regional partner.

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Several factors contributed to the end of the PiS government in Poland. One crucial factor was the 2020 abortion verdict of the contested Constitutional Tribunal, which, by tightening the already strict abortion law, triggered the widely acclaimed "black protest" against the "Teheranisation" of Poland. Millions of women and younger Poles took to the streets in protest. Consequently, despite riding a wave of economic euphoria with stable support above 40% until then, PiS lost a quarter of its electoral backing in the polls. This decline was confirmed in the October 2023 elections, where women and younger voters turned out in large numbers at the polling stations and voted against PiS.

Other internal factors played a role, including a smear campaign against Tusk aimed at polarising society and a "fixed" debate on public television with moderators praising the PiS party, both of which ultimately backfired. Additionally, EU politics undeniably influenced the electoral outcome. The ongoing rule of law conflict with the European Commission hampered PiS's efforts to unlock most of the EU funding frozen since 2020 when the EU linked the defence of its values with financial conditionality. Polls conducted after the elections indicated that European financial support was crucial for Polish voters, and leading PiS politicians confirmed that its absence contributed to their electoral defeat.

The new government, led by Donald Tusk, is expected to bring notable changes to Polish external politics within the EU. With Tusk's experience as the former president of the European Council, Poland has a seasoned player at the helm. Since Tusk's last term as prime minister (2007-2014), Poland has made significant strides, earning the title of the EU's "growth champion". Tusk is likely to focus on revitalising the "Weimar Triangle"

with Germany and France. This tripartite cooperation had previously faced challenges due to Poland's asymmetrical position, but under Tusk's leadership, there may be efforts to strengthen and harmonise relations within this framework.

The Visegrad Group (V4), consisting of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, will likely freeze any substantive agenda. Founded in 1991 to serve European integration and act as a counterweight to a dominant West-EU axis, it has barely functioned recently. The protest against the migration quotas during the 2015 "migration crisis" was one of the few exceptions.

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Since Tusk's victory, the V4 countries sit on a spectrum ranging from pro-EU to Eurosceptic. Poland is now notably pro-EU, followed by the Czech Republic led by Prime Minister Petr Fiala from the mildly Eurosceptic Civic Democratic Party. Slovakia takes a leftist-populist stance under the leadership of Prime Minister Robert Fico, from the Direction-Social Democracy party (Smer). At the far end of the spectrum, Viktor Orbán stands out as a right-wing populist systematically undermining fundamental European principles and policies.

The connections between most of those leaders are well-established. Tusk and Orbán, who once shared a liberal political background and openly celebrated their friendship, had a close connection that extended to playing football together. As a gesture of camaraderie, Tusk invited Orbán to the opening game of Euro 2012 in Warsaw. However, a notable divergence occurred in 2015 when PiS aligned itself with Orbán's illiberal stance. This alliance prompted Tusk to distance himself from the Hungarian leader.

In a similar vein, the recently re-elected Robert Fico made a diplomatic gesture by attending a football match with Orbán in 2012, aimed at improving Slovakian-Hungarian relations, which suffer from unresolved issues concerning national minorities in both countries. At present, the two leaders are associated for similar reasons: they endorse Euroscepticism, advocate pro-Russian views, and oppose social liberalism and LGBTQ+ rights. However, despite their alignment in impeding EU influence and aid to Ukraine, the longstanding historical mistrust between Hungary and Slovakia could potentially act as an obstacle to deeper cooperation between the two states.

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or Russia. In the run-up to the 2023 election, in contrast to Romania, the PiS government did not endorse an EU solution for import quotas on Ukrainian grain. Under Tusk's leadership, and in response to Hungary's and Slovakia's anti-Ukrainian stance, Warsaw and Bucharest could potentially collaborate to develop a shared approach, emerging as a new focal point for Ukraine-related initiatives in Central and Eastern Europe. Additionally, Tusk's victory is anticipated to weaken the emerging "conservative" alliance in Europe, which had aligned PiS with far-right parties such as George Simion's Alliance for the Union of Romanians.

The potential of the new government to reverse backsliding measures, particularly those related to the independence of the Constitutional Tribunal and other judicial bodies, remains uncertain. President Andrzej Duda is aligned with PiS, having received support from Jarosław Kaczyński to become president in 2015 and secure re-election in 2019. Duda retains veto powers in judicial affairs until 2025. The Commission's willingness to lift financial conditionality in this uncertain environment remains to be seen, despite assurances following Tusk's statements that funding would be granted before Christmas 2023. A critical challenge for Poland will arise from the shifting dynamics of the global situation. The 2024 US elections, marked by the global spectre of national populism represented by figures like Donald Trump, may compel local actors, including Poland, to adjust their policies regarding Ukraine as part of a broader "turn" in international affairs.