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Increasingly incoherent

Fearing a loss of power, Poland's PiS party is willing to question its support for Ukraine in order to win more votes from the nationalist camp

An untimely dispute between Poland and Ukraine? Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki recently reacted with reluctance to Ukraine's support for Germany's permanent seat on the UN Security Council. And he also interpreted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's remark that some countries were only faking solidarity with Ukraine while indirectly supporting Russia as an insult to Poland. His brusque response that Poland would no longer be supplying Ukraine with weapons but instead would be prioritising its own defence capacities caused an outcry both internationally and at home. This is not tantamount to Poland terminating its support for Ukraine, however. In fact, these discordant notes can only be properly understood by examining the ailing position of the governing PiS party in the final phase of the Polish election race.

Poland's parliamentary elections will be held on 15 October, and the election campaign has now reached a critical stage. Having been governed by the right-wing national-conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS) led by Jarosław Kaczyński for two terms, there is a lot at stake for Poland. The PiS has eroded democratic checks and balances, jeopardised the rule of law by interfering in the justice system, introduced stricter abortion laws and pursued a nationalist politics of memory, thus clearly taking Poland along an illiberal, Eurosceptical path. But the gloomy economic situation (high inflation, weak growth) means that the PiS can no longer score points with its social redistributive policy, an approach which, up to now, had been successful.

A right-wing populist kingmaker?

The PiS seems to be losing its grip on power and is waging a correspondingly nervous and aggressive campaign. The strongest opposition parties are Donald Tusk's Civic Platform Party (a member of the European People's Party, at 29 per cent in the polls), which is seeking

to build a coalition against the PiS together with the New Left (part of The Left coalition, at 10 per cent) and the pragmatic Third Way alliance (at 10 per cent). In the polls, the PiS is at 38 per cent and the opposition alliance at 49 per cent.

The right-wing populist and neoliberal Confederation Liberty and Independence ('Confederation') plays a pivotal role in this constellation. Confederation is the only party that is sceptical about supporting Ukraine. If Confederation does not vote for, support or at least tolerate the PiS, it is inconceivable that the latter will be able to form another majority government. But, as a right-wing populist force, Confederation does not see itself as a coalition partner, instead tending to adopt more extreme positions. With this approach, the party periodically reached 15 per cent in the polls, and, although it is currently in a slightly weaker position (10 per cent), it is still crucial for majority formation. This gives the campaign a new twist.

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Poland perceives the threat of the war in neighbouring Ukraine as more existential than many other European countries do. After all, Poland also shares a border with Russia at Kaliningrad. Should Ukraine not defeat Russia, it is anticipated that the latter would pose a direct threat to the former. The military, political and humanitarian support provided by the Polish government and population has been correspondingly large, particularly for the nearly one million Ukrainian refugees living in Poland.

There has been a consistent cross-party consensus about the sacrosanctity of unwavering solidarity with Ukraine in the midst of the otherwise polarised confrontation between the parties. As the biggest supporter of Ukraine in the EU, the Polish government has prided itself in driving other countries to follow. In the words of Morawiecki in January 2023: if Poland had not exerted pressure, Germany would never have made the move to supply Ukraine with tanks. Indeed, Poland is the most important support hub for Ukraine when it comes to weapons and ammunition, gaining a new centrality in the changed geopolitical situation. President Joe Biden's two official visits to Warsaw this year bear witness to the importance of Poland's role in the eyes of the US as well. However, since the Ukraine issue could not be used for the purposes of polarisation, it has not yet featured in the election campaign.

Discordant notes, faux pas and international tension

Hence, it is all the more surprising to hear such discordant notes about support for Ukraine coming from Poland of all places. Morawiecki announced on 21 September that, apart from the weapons deliveries that have already been agreed upon, Poland will not be supplying Ukraine with any further arms but instead will be prioritising its own defence capacity. This not only sparked outrage in the EU and indeed around the world but in Poland, too. The opposition and the liberal press sounded the alarm — because the social consensus on support for Ukraine is most certainly still in place. This announcement followed the statement made by Zelenskyy to the United Nations that some countries were faking solidarity with Ukraine. Without explicitly referring to Poland, in doing so, Zelenskyy was criticising the country's obstructionist behaviour in continuing to prohibit imports of Ukrainian grain even after the ban had been lifted by the EU. With this step, the Polish government sought to protect the country's own farmers from cheaper Ukrainian grain flooding the Polish market.

Undermining support for Ukraine is neither in Poland's strategic interests nor is it in line with the beliefs of the majority of the population. Here, a different pattern is evident: nervous about losing power in the upcoming parliamentary elections, the governing PiS party is willing to use every available means to tap into groups of potential voters. Obviously, the party sees the nationalist camp of the right-wing populist Confederation as an opportunity. International reputational damage and diplomatic uproar are deliberately and irresponsibly accepted in order for the PiS to present themselves as the alleged protectors of Polish national interests. Following this pattern, German-Polish relations, too, have been harmed in recent years, for example with demands for reparations to the tune of €1.3 bn for damage suffered during the Second World War. Confrontation with Germany, sometimes with great popular appeal, is sought at every opportunity, even when it comes to the deployment of anti-aircraft missiles on Polish territory or the establishment of workshops to repair tanks destined for Ukraine.

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Here, the policy pursued by the PiS-led government is becoming increasingly incoherent. This is also evidenced by the visa corruption scandal where an estimated 250,000 visas, including those to enter the Schengen Area, were granted by the visa brokerage companies of Polish diplomatic missions in exchange for bribes. While high-ranking

members of the PiS are also implicated in this scandal, it seems almost hypocritical that, on election day, the PiS has also scheduled a referendum on whether the Polish people approve of 'the admission of thousands of illegal immigrants from the Middle East and Africa' allegedly imposed on Poland by the EU bureaucracy.

The Polish opposition, including the social-democratic New Left, will be able to profit from these discordant notes, faux pas and international tension caused by the PiS. Above all, this election campaign is about mobilisation; the opponents of the PiS have barely presented any of their own issues or visions. Their strongest argument is that the PiS has to go, and this is likely to have gained importance. A large-scale demonstration held on 1 October in Warsaw has attracted hundreds of thousands of opposition supporters.

That said, observers assume that the PiS is going to be the strongest party again but will have no clear majority on its own. The opposition can only form a government if it has a clear majority of between 10 and 20 seats (of 460 mandates), and it is unlikely to achieve this either. It is therefore to be expected that, by the time the parliament is formed 30 days after the election, quite a lot may still change. It is, for instance, quite possible that in forming parliamentary groups, there will be some crossovers, especially from Confederation to the PiS. Thus, following the critical phase of the Polish election campaign up, the no less heated period in search of a majority for the new parliament will begin.



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