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# Is Poland turning over a new leaf?

After this weekend's elections, Poland is facing a change of government. This could mean a fresh start for the country, but also for Europe

It is a good day for democracy in Poland, for the chance of a fresh start, for the crisis-ridden German-Polish relations and for the chance of a Europe capable of reform! The outcome of the parliamentary elections in Poland was in favor of the opposition parties. Although the Law and Justice (PiS) Party, which was in power until now, remains the strongest force, it cannot form a majority. And the right-wing populist '*Konfederacja*' remains far behind its poll ratings.

According to preliminary results on the election evening, the three opposition parties from Donald Tusk's Civic Coalition, the social democratic '*Lewica*' and the 'Third Way' have a majority of 248 out of 460 seats in the Sejm. This lead is too large for the PiS to be able to put together its own majority or minority government through negotiating skills and factional defections. Poland is facing a change of government, with Donald Tusk's Civic Coalition leading the new government and the Social Democrats being one of the three coalition partners.

## New room for manoeuvre

But the new government will also face major challenges. Poland is currently in dispute with the EU Commission over the release of funds from the 'Recovery Fund', and milestones must be reached to restore the rule of law. In addition, repairing the legal system in Poland is a long and difficult task. The relationship with Poland's western neighbour and largest trading partner, Germany, has suffered greatly during the PiS government and is in a deep crisis — compensation claims amounting to €1.3 trillion for war damage in the Second World War were made in October 2022. With the new government coalition, there is now a chance for a new beginning. But the PiS driven accusations that Tusk is a puppet of German interests will not abate and will limit his room for manoeuvre.

From the German side, too, there is now an opportunity to approach the new Polish government with more empathy and the chance of a positive response. After all, tensions between Poland and Ukraine had recently come to light, despite the fact that Poland actually stands by Ukraine as a reliable partner in unrestricted solidarity. Internationally, the words of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki were interpreted as a halt to Polish arms deliveries to Ukraine. This is certainly the easiest way to pick up the pieces of the erratic and aggressive PiS election campaign, as a turn away from solidarity with Ukraine is certainly not in Poland's strategic interest.

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The opposition's election victory in Poland can be a real game-changer for Europe's ability to reform. With Emmanuel Macron in Paris, Olaf Scholz in Berlin and – in the future – Donald Tusk in Warsaw, there is a chance of a European leadership group that can drive reforms in the EU. These three large and populous countries would unite old and new, eastern and western, as well as the three most important political families of liberals, conservatives and social democrats. Hungary, as the most important opponent, would be largely isolated. Certainly, one should not allow oneself to be befuddled by such blue and gold dreams of Europe, but the chance of movement in the deadlocked debates is certainly there. Another PiS term in office, on the other hand, would have resulted in the fossilisation of these plans.

Before the Christmas break, a government coalition led by Civic Platform together with '*Lewica*' and the 'Third Way' ('*Trzecia Droga*', 3D) is expected to be formed. But there may still be some glitches along the way in the next couple of weeks. Within 30 days, the new parliament must be constituted and elect a speaker. Given the surprisingly clear majority, all attempts by PiS to enlarge its parliamentary group by pushing and pulling should come to nothing, so that the new absolute majority of the three coalition partners will be apparent for the first time when the parliament is constituted. After that, it will be up to President Andrzej Duda to designate a prime minister, who must then receive the confidence of parliament for himself and his cabinet within two weeks. It is quite possible that the president will first give this mandate to the largest faction, i.e. to the PiS – in all likelihood to the current Prime Minister Morawiecki. Only after his failure will the right to propose a prime minister lie with parliament. It is very likely that Tusk and his cabinet will then stand for election two weeks later and receive the

majority of the governing coalition. According to this scenario, it could be mid-December before the new majority in Poland finds itself in a new government.

## Surprising in many ways

The election results in Poland clearly show how divided the country is, with PiS dominating in the east of Poland and in the countryside, while in the west and in the urban centres, the opposition performed better. Bringing the differences together and uniting Poland will be one of the biggest challenges for the next government. And despite the opposition's success, Jarosław Kaczyński's PiS has now become the strongest force for the third time after the 2015 and 2019 elections, with 36.6 per cent of the vote (198 seats). The decisive factor for its success so far has been that it managed to win over broad sections of the electorate beyond its core clientele with the promise of social transfers (2015 elections) and their successful introduction (2019 re-election). High inflation and dwindling disposable incomes have wiped out these successes for many Poles. Thus, while PiS was able to appeal to its ironclad core electorate with nationalist, anti-German and even Ukraine-critical messages, it failed to make enough of an impact beyond that.

The real winner of the evening is Donald Tusk's Civic Coalition '*Koalicja Obywatelska*' (KO). With 31 per cent, it cracked the 30-per cent mark and is expected to win 161 seats and thus lead the next government coalition. The alliance was able to disguise its neo-liberal image with social policy offers and has distinguished itself as the leader of an anti-PiS coalition. With two large demonstrations on 4 June and 1 October 2023, it was also able to bring several hundred thousand citizens onto the streets in each case to demonstrate for a vote out of PiS. But its true success lies in the mobilisation of many non-voters. The voter turnout of 72.9 per cent was higher than in any previous parliamentary or presidential election in Poland; even in the 1989 election, it was only at 62.7 per cent.

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Civic Platform's likely coalition partners produced mixed results. The 'Third Way' did surprisingly well, winning 13.5 per cent (57 seats). As a party alliance of the pragmatic-conservative party '*Polska 2050*' of the former presidential candidate Szymon Hołownia and the venerable Polish People's Party (PSL), 3D had an increased entry hurdle of 8 per cent, which is now easily jumped. Failure would most likely have destroyed the opposition parties'

chances of success. It can be assumed that many voters, therefore, also voted for 3D for tactical reasons. Moreover, the People's Party obviously has a reliable core constituency in the countryside.

The result for the social democratic '*Lewica'*, on the other hand, was weaker than hoped for, with 8.6 per cent of the vote and 30 seats, falling short of its 2019 result. After 18 years, however, it can again become part of a governing coalition, because without the participation of '*Lewica'* there will be no coalition against the PiS. This outshines its weak performance. '*Lewica'* was particularly successful with younger voters and women — distinguishing itself in the election campaign with concrete policy offers. In the end, the party obviously became a victim of many tactical voters for the 3D and of the stronger public bandwagon and opposition leader, Civic Platform.

***It is doubtful that a panacea can be learned from these Polish parliamentary elections on how to disenchant the right-wing populists throughout Europe.***

The biggest disappointment was suffered by the right-wing populists of the '*Konfederacja'*. After soaring in the polls to more than 15 per cent in July 2023, they now landed hard at just 6.4 per cent and 14 seats. This means they cannot play the hoped-for role of kingmakers and dictate terms to the PiS for a majority in the Sejm or even a minority government. Apart from a radical right-wing, nationalist core, the '*Konferdracja'* had scored points above all with neo-liberal messages, for example the introduction of a flat tax. The party was elected mainly by young men. And yet, the crash of the '*Konfederacja'* in these elections raises many questions, also beyond Poland. It is doubtful, however, that a panacea can be learned from these Polish parliamentary elections on how to disenchant the right-wing populists throughout Europe.

At the same time as the elections, the PiS government held a referendum in which four tendentiously worded questions could be answered on 'selling off state property', raising the retirement age, dismantling the border barrier with Belarus and 'accepting thousands of illegal immigrants'. The suggested fourfold 'no', however, was not uttered by all voters by a long shot; the turnout of about 40 per cent was below the quorum. The referendum will therefore have no binding effect.

Results for the elections for the second chamber, the Senate, which were held at the same time, are not yet available. It can be assumed that the already existing majority there against the PiS could be significantly expanded.

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**Max Brändle**
Warsaw

Dr Max Brändle currently heads the office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Warsaw, Poland. Previously, he worked in the Central and Eastern Europe Department of the foundation and headed the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Zagreb, Croatia and Belgrade, Serbia.