

# Poland is back at the European table

## An analysis of the EU elections 2024

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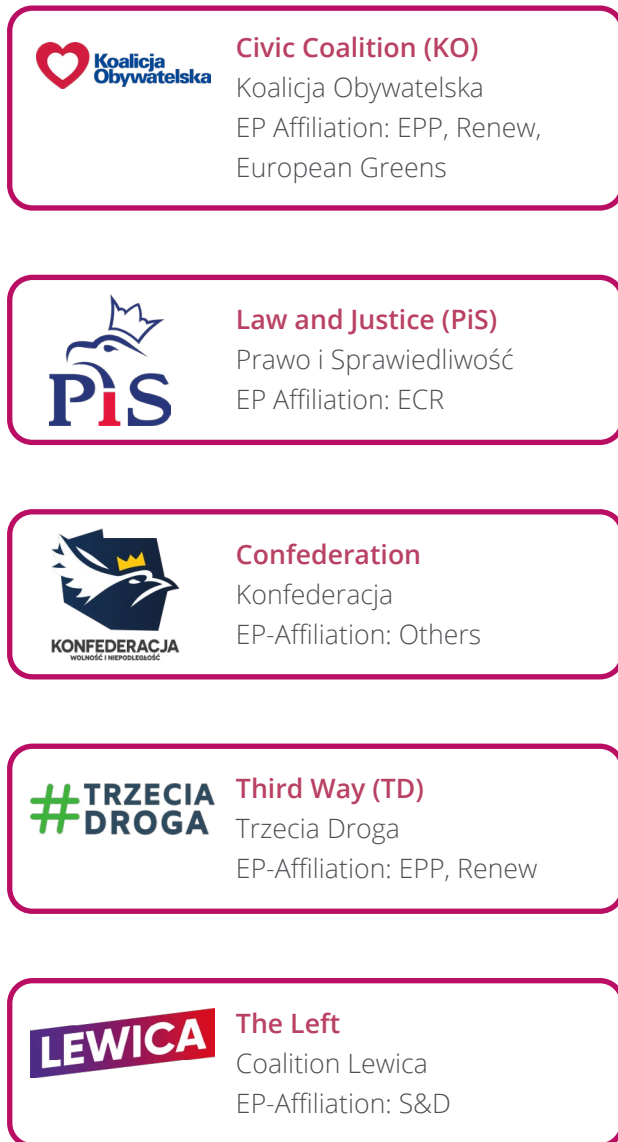
### Introduction

The 2024 European elections took place exactly 20 years after Poland joined the EU. But the mood in the country this year was not exactly Euro-enthusiastic, let alone celebratory, with increasing scepticism about the European Green Deal and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. In addition, this year's election in Poland was tainted by the security threats coming from the East.

While European elections have always been “second order”, the increasing political polarisation in Poland has put the spotlight this time even more strongly on domestic issues, as yet another platform to express partisan affiliation. And even more than in previous elections the European Union (EU) was debated from a perspective of national interest, in particular controlling immigration, building up the armed forces and protecting the competitiveness of Polish agriculture. The election served as a proxy for garnering and measuring political support at home.

The result cemented the stalemate between Donald Tusk, leader of the Civic Platform (PO) and current Prime Minister, and Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the Law and Justice Party (PiS). The outcome not only determines the distribution of seats in the European Parliament (EP), of which Poland has 53, but can also be interpreted through the lens of the continuing domestic power struggle. It can be seen either as a sign of consolidating the power of the *Koalicja Obywatelska* (Civic Coalition, which includes parties which are part of EPP, Renew and the European Greens) and delivering the final blow to the United Right coalition, founding parties of which belong to the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) in the EP; or as a proof of the current coalition's weak governing capacity and the persistent pole position of the PiS party in national politics. Other parties and election committees, such as *Trzecia Droga* (Third Way, part of EPP and Renew), *Lewica* (The Left, part of the Socialists & Democrats) and the far-right *Konfederacja* (Confederation, nonaligned in the EP), were sidelined by the continuing clash between the two heavy-weight rivals.

**Figure 1: Polish Political Parties and Affiliations**  
(Source: Politico)



## Election marathon amidst farmers' protests and security threats

Since February 2022, politics in Poland have been heavily affected by the Russian war against Ukraine. It has taken a direct toll on the country, which has faced diverse challenges, ranging from receiving

millions of Ukrainian refugees<sup>1</sup>, grappling with several new security threats from Russia, mostly due to armed conflict in Poland's neighbourhood, political conflicts around food security and the import of Ukrainian grain, as well as unexpected budget challenges over providing direct and indirect aid to Ukraine. Other consequential developments that occurred in the run-up to the EP elections were farmers' protests against the European Green Deal, and mounting tensions due to migrant pressures at the Polish-Belarusian border.

The European election was another milestone in the election marathon that started in October 2023 with the Polish parliamentary elections, followed by regional ones in April 2024. This race will conclude in late spring 2025 with the presidential ballot. This continuous campaign mode fuels the fierce political rivalry between PiS, which is clinging to the vestiges of power, and KO, led by Civic Platform (PO), which is trying to win back both the legislative and the executive in the country. This permanent mobilisation might eventually result in voter fatigue. The record-high voter turnout in the 2023 parliamentary elections<sup>2</sup> might have been a one-time mobilisation effort, instead of a permanent change in political practice, as many would hope. The decade-long feud between Tusk and Kaczyński has long frustrated Poles, who long for a generational change in Polish politics, but see no alternatives emerging.<sup>3</sup>

## The big four: Green Deal, Migration, Security, Federalisation

Owing to the nationwide regional elections in April, the European campaign properly started only in May. The election campaign's manifesto dimension was completely overshadowed by the make-up of

lists. Political parties only used social media to a very limited extent: paid advertisements had a small reach and relied on tiny budgets.<sup>4</sup> Instead, all parties prioritised direct outreach by canvassing and organising local events.

The main cleavage in the Polish political landscape in the EU elections – like in many other EU countries – ran along the line of pro-European vs. Eurosceptic attitudes. The centre right, the liberals, the greens, and the left presented a rather positive narrative of the EU, stressing the advantages of Poland's EU membership, such as security back-up in times of war, tackling the climate challenge, and financial benefits. In the opposite corner were the national-conservatives and the far-right. During the 2024 campaign, none of the parties raised the case for "Polexit", but they did embark on a pessimistic rhetoric about the EU, emphasising the need to defend Poland's sovereignty, security, and the financial interests of Polish citizens.

The European Green Deal, migration and security issues dominated as election issues. After the wave of farmers' protests, which ran from March till May, the Green Deal became a source of discontent in Poland. The political responsibility for implementing this policy was attributed to the European Commissioner for Agriculture, Janusz Wojciechowski of PiS – even by his own party. The governing coalition, KO, adopted an ambivalent stance towards the Green Deal during this campaign. While they recognised the need to respond to climate change and adapt agricultural policies to new challenges, they, at the same time, blamed the PiS for the flawed design of the Green Deal. Green policies were also a hallmark of *Trzecia Droga* (Renew and EPP) and *Lewica* (S&D), yet the polarising potential surrounding the topic toned down their pro-climate rhetoric. This ambiguity reflects the general mood in Polish society: Poles generally support climate-friendly policies, yet they are extremely critical of the European Green Deal.<sup>5</sup>

Another topic exploited in this campaign was migration. It took over public debate shortly before the election, fuelled by media reports about a Polish

soldier on duty, who was stabbed to death by a migrant attempting to cross the border from Belarus.<sup>6</sup> This only aggravated both the moral panic against migrants as well as the fear of an escalating hybrid war with the Kremlin and its allies. Here the PiS party and KO united in rejecting the New Pact on Migration and Asylum.<sup>7</sup> As a party leader and prime minister, Donald Tusk continuously criticised the Migration Pact's relocation plans for non-European migrants, blaming the previous United Right government led by the PiS for failing to protect Poland's interests in Brussels. The far-right *Konfederacja* highlighted the alleged adverse effects of the Pact, explaining that this would result in increased migration pressure due to the acceptance of non-European migrants into the EU and the introduction of relocation quotas. This far-right messaging reflects the overall mood: Poles are reluctant to let the migrants trapped at the border with Belarus into the country. In 2021 almost six in ten respondents thought the migrants arriving at the Belarus border should not be allowed to apply for asylum in Poland, and this view became increasingly popular.<sup>8</sup>

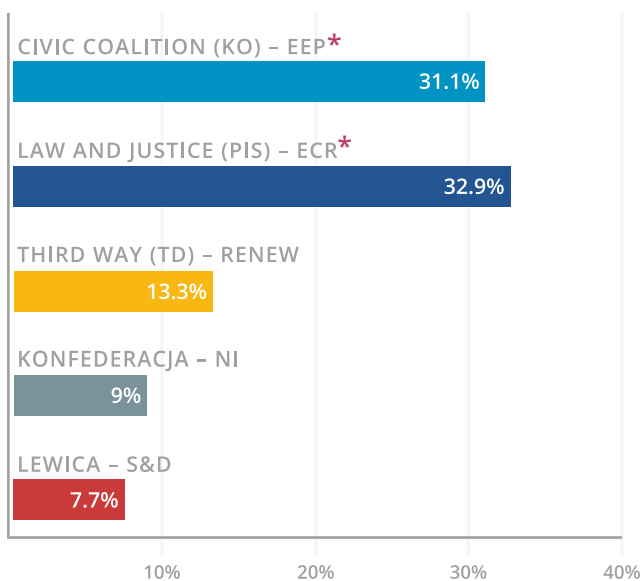
In addition, two other contextual issues echoed in this election campaign. First, the attempted assassination of Robert Fico, the Prime Minister of Poland's neighbour Slovakia<sup>9</sup>; and second, the defection to Belarus of a high-ranking Polish judge with access to confidential data. This resulted in all parties prioritising security, both in the military sense of protecting the eastern border from potential harmful actions from Moscow and migrants, and domestically, of countering espionage. Finally, potential institutional reforms of the EU, especially a muted change to veto rights in the Council was perceived – especially by the parties on the right of the political spectrum – as a threat to Poland's sovereignty. Only the left argued against the veto right and for deeper integration. Interestingly, apart from the liberal *Trzecia Droga*, no-one advocated for the introduction of the Euro.

## A symbolic victory for Tusk – but the real winner is the far-right

The national rules on European elections in Poland establish a preferential voting system based on 13 constituencies, an electoral threshold of 5% and a legal voting age of 18. In total, there were 11 political parties, coalitions, or committees of voters, which registered their lists for European elections - seven of them in all constituencies.<sup>10</sup> The five main competitors were all election alliances of political parties, some even aligned across different groups in the EP (*Koalicja Obywatelska, Trzecia Droga*).

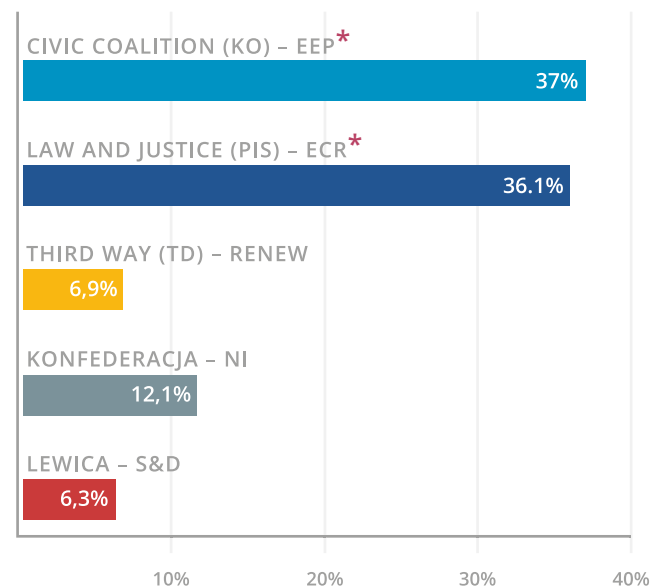
One month before the election, voter preferences on average reflected the composition of the Polish parliament.<sup>11</sup> PiS and KO were running neck and neck (31% versus 30.4%), followed by the liberal-conservative *Trzecia Droga* (10.2%), the far-right *Konfederacja* (9.5%), and the left *Lewica* (8.7%), with 7.7% undecided.<sup>12</sup> Other parties failed to reach the 5% threshold.

**Figure 2: EP Election Voting intentions in Poland (29 May 2024, Data by Euronews, \*Coalitions of parties belong to different groups in the EP)**



The actual results varied to some extent from that early prognosis. Whereas the governing coalition KO won by the skin of their teeth against the conservative PiS and their junior coalition partner *Suwerenna Polska* (37.06% vs. 36.16%), there was a serious reshuffle among the second-tier parties. *Trzecia Droga* (Renew and EPP) suffered significant losses (getting just 6.91% of the votes) and *Lewica* (left/S&D) also under-performed (6.3%). Reflecting the overall trend in the EU, the far-right *Konfederacja* took third place on the podium, making significant gains compared to 2019 (12.08% vs. 4.55%). As a result, the 53-strong cohort of Polish MEPs will comprise: 23 going to the EPP, 20 to the ECR, three to S&D, and one to Renew. It is yet to be seen which group the six MEPs of the far-right *Konfederacja* will join.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 3: EP Election results in Poland (10 June 2024, Data by Euronews, \*Coalitions of parties belong to different groups in the EP)**



The fierce competition between the current and former government camps may have remained inconclusive, but Tusk managed to mobilise more voters, cannibalising the electorate of *Trzecia Droga* and *Lewica*, emerging finally able to declare a symbolic victory over PiS. Perhaps a tactical vote against the PiS party convinced some voters to support the strongest opponent of the previous government. As a result, the new player in Polish politics, *Trzecia Droga*,

failed to solidify their place in the political landscape. The left's poor result eroded even further their leverage in the governing coalition as the smallest and weakest partner. Only the nationalist far-right had reasons to celebrate. However, the Polish political scene remains dominated by the KO-PiS duopoly, accounting for as much as just over 73% of the votes.

The 2024 result is difficult to compare with that of 2019, as different election committees were registered. In 2019, the opposition formed a broad united front against the PiS, with Christian democrats allied with social democrats, liberals, and greens (getting 38.47% of all votes). Other left-wing parties ran separately, with modest success. The nationalist *Konfederacja* failed miserably, falling below the electoral threshold. The undisputed winner of that ballot was the PiS, on 45.38%<sup>14</sup>, reflecting their hegemony in domestic politics. Compared to 2019, the PiS lost almost 2 million votes this time.

The anticipated turnout proved accurate: only 40.65% of all voters cast their ballot.<sup>15</sup> European elections usually command less interest than parliamentary ones, but turnout in the last two ballots had doubled (2019: 45.68% vs. 2014's 23.83%, 2009: 24.53% vs. 2004's 20.87%).<sup>16</sup> This might be attributed to embracing European elections as a standard political process: normalising Poland's EU membership. However, a spill-over effect on voter mobilisation of the fierce political rivalry at national level cannot be ruled out.

## Euro-enthusiasm cooling down

The 2024 EP election took place 20 years after Poland joined the EU in the 'big bang enlargement' on 1 May 2004. Poland has always been one of the most pro-European societies. Controversies around join-

ing the EU were at their most pronounced back in 2004, with intense 'pro' and 'con' campaigns preceding the referendum. Over the last 20 years, the percentage of opponents has never exceeded 1/5th of the population (in 2014), with a record-high support for EU membership of 92% in 2022.<sup>17</sup>

A murkier picture emerges when it comes to the costs and benefits of EU membership. Polish Euro-enthusiasm has clearly cooled down in the past years. Today, only 77% support the membership, with 59% seeing more advantages than disadvantages.<sup>18</sup> Financial and economic benefits are followed by the freedom of movement and security. Of all EU policies, migration, green transition, and agriculture raise the most concerns among Poles.<sup>19</sup>

When it comes to subsidiarity or support for particular EU policies, opinions more favourable towards the EU correlate with political sympathies: national-conservative and far-right voters (PiS, *Konfederacja*) tend to disagree with EU policy-making more often, whereas people voting centre-right or left (*Trzecia Droga*, *Lewica*, KO) usually support the course of the EU.<sup>20</sup> This was particularly true for disputes between the previous PiS-led government and the EU, such as the 2016 logging operations in Białowieża Forest, 2019 LGBTQ-free zones, 2020 licensing process for the Turów lignite mine, and the 2021 rule of law crisis.<sup>21</sup>

The increased political competition and polarisation turned the European election into yet another indicator of support for or against specific domestic politics, and into a platform on which to express partisan affiliation. The EU was debated from the perspective of national interests and through the lens of domestic political rivalry. The Europeanisation of election campaigns and debates simply didn't materialise.

## Consensus on EU membership, no common vision of Europe

The clash between KO and PiS, two premier league players restlessly competing for primacy, set the agenda of the electoral campaign. As the day of the election approached, bragging about patriotic virtues and mutual accusations of treason in favour of Brussels, Germany, Russia, and 'Polexi't'<sup>22</sup> intensified.

The PiS and their junior coalition partner *Suwerenna Polska* chose "the white-reds" as their team slogan - referring to the national colours - and embarked on voicing the rhetoric of "Brussels diktat"<sup>23</sup> and anti-German sentiments<sup>24</sup> that so intensely figured in the 2023 parliamentary campaign. It advocated for a 'Europe of Fatherlands' and strongly opposed any further federalisation.<sup>25</sup>

Of all the major campaign topics, the PiS party singled out the European Green Deal for its dire consequences for agriculture and impact on everyday lives, such as the rising cost of living, travel, and mortgages<sup>26</sup>: "The Green Deal is a scam, it is poverty, it needs to stop", said the former Prime Minister and candidate for the European elections, Beata Szydło, during her campaign.<sup>27</sup> The Migration Pact was portrayed as a threat to national security.<sup>28</sup> The debate on the envisaged treaty changes, including scrapping the veto rights or pursuing even closer integration, got deranged and shifted towards emotional appeals to protect national sovereignty<sup>29</sup>, including the Polish złoty.<sup>30</sup>

An instrumental approach of the PiS party towards the EP manifested in treating it as a form of deserved political retirement home. The PiS often tends to reward the most active members with well-paid mandates as Members of the European Parliament, and this time was not different. For

example, Maciej Wąsik and Mariusz Kamiński, former government officials recently sentenced for Pegasus spyware abuse, were candidates. Further loyal party members were rewarded, such as Jacek Kurski, former president of the public broadcaster TVP, Daniel Obajtek, former executive chairman of the state-owned petrol retailer and oil refiner PKN Orlen accused of corruption or Beata Szydło, Prime Minister from 2015 to 2017.

The Civic Coalition (KO) led by Tusk presented the least detailed manifesto to voters, focusing instead on the composition of its lists. The coalition set their priorities as security and arms expenditure, healthy and sustainable energy, and defending the interests of Polish entrepreneurs and farmers.<sup>31</sup> KO highlighted its recent diplomatic success in releasing EU funds from the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RFF). They also warned against the combative style of doing politics represented in the past by PiS in Brussels/Strasbourg: "The European Parliament cannot be a place for lunatics and political idiots", Tusk said at a press conference in May<sup>32</sup>, and his tone became increasingly confrontational as the campaign unfolded. In the final stretch, Tusk's campaign focused mostly on the efforts to improve security on the eastern border and migration. This is a significant change in Tusk's rhetoric: As the opposition leader, he used to accuse the PiS-government of an inhumane approach towards migrants. In taking over the authorities, he was confronted not only with ever-rising tensions with Belarus, but also with a public mood that is not favourable to migrants normalising at the border. This combination of factors has probably caused a 180-degree turn in approach.

The fight for third place between *Trzecia Droga*, *Leвица*, and *Konfederacja* was more substantial. *Trzecia Droga* (Third Way), a coalition of *Polska 2050 Szymona Hołowni* (Szymon Hołownia Poland 2050) together with the agrarian PSL (Polish People's Party) advertised their offer with the following slogan: "The Third Way - be yourself in Europe". They tried to offer a positive European narrative and highlighted the need for Poland to take on a proactive role in defending its interests and shaping EU policies.<sup>33</sup>



The main message was about providing peace and economic growth.<sup>34</sup> They set the following priorities: security (border defence), green transition (investing in nuclear energy and amending the European Green Deal), defending the interests of Polish farmers in the EU, European health policy, and digital competitiveness.<sup>35</sup> The coalition of parties *Trzecia Droga* highlighted that its founding parties belong to different groups in the EP (Renew and EPP), giving them more leverage to influence political decisions and build bridges for cross-party alliances.

The alliance of left-wing parties, *Lewica*, inaugurated their campaign with the slogan “Europe for you”. It was the most Euro-enthusiastic campaign tailored to a pro-European electorate. The left recalled its historical heritage as the leading force behind Poland’s EU accession.<sup>36</sup> In this year’s campaign, they argued for greater European integration in social policy: launching a European Housing Fund; creating a European Workers Package to better protect workers’ rights, in particular the minimum wage, transparency of salaries, protection against mobbing at work, ban on unpaid internships, fight against precarious contracts and investing in common European healthcare initiatives. They also opted for a more integrated security policy. *Lewica* continued to raise their signature topic, gender equality, but this time in the European dimension, putting forward the adoption of the EU Charter of Women’s Rights.<sup>37</sup> Yet, despite the ambitious and very comprehensive programme with its strong European focus, they were unable to reach a broader electorate.

“We want a normal life”, was the motto of the far-right *Konfederacja*.<sup>38</sup> They used the most pronounced Eurosceptic messages from all parties, in a simple and concise form. Their central positions can be summarised in four points: “No to the European Green Deal; No to Energy Performance of Buildings Directive; Yes to Diesel; Yes to the Polish currency, the Złoty”.<sup>39</sup> They are also against EU enlargement in the near future. In public debates and on social media, *Konfederacja* exploited three topics in particular: migration, calling the New Pact on Migration and Asylum an “absurd” idea to legalise

irregular migration<sup>40</sup>; climate and agriculture policy, labelling them “mad ecologism”<sup>41</sup>; and they warned of the loss of control due to expanding EU powers, excessive taxation, and - in their eyes - an ongoing federalisation.<sup>42</sup>

In the same vein but with a much smaller electoral scope, the goal of the Poxit Party was - astonishingly - not “Poxit”. Instead, they advocated for what they assumed was “a European Union as envisaged by the Founding Fathers (an area of free trade and movement of people, not the rule of states and the power of bureaucracy)”, refraining from imposing “laws that slow down Poland’s development”.<sup>43</sup> Other Eurosceptic committees included *Głos Silnej Polski* (The Voice of Strong Poland), *Ruch Naprawy Polski* (Movement for Repairing Poland), *Normalny Kraj* (Normal Country), and *Bezpartyjni Samorządowcy* (Nonpartisan Local Politicians).<sup>44</sup> A liberal, anti-establishment and pro-direct democracy group, *Strajk Przedsiębiorców* (Entrepreneurs Strike), founded in response to COVID-19 restrictions, also participated in the EU elections, but without any particular EU programme.<sup>45</sup>

## A stronger voice of Poland in the EU

The role of Poland is likely to become bigger in the upcoming mandate, due to the Russian war in Ukraine from 2022 onwards, with Poland’s eastern border being an important geographical defence line, but also thanks to its unconditional support for Ukraine and the welcoming of thousands of Ukrainian refugees. In addition, the political changes in 2023 brought Donald Tusk back to power, a former Council President, who knows EU decision-making and therefore has plenty of expertise in it.

The Polish delegation to the European Parliament now has 53 MEPs, with one additional seat added in the aftermath of Brexit. It remains the fifth biggest

in national terms. As for important Polish figures, in the most recent legislative term (2019-2024), Ewa Kopacz (EPP/PO) was the Vice-President of the European Parliament while Janusz Wojciechowski (ECR/PiS) was Commissioner for Agriculture.

Poland's geographical location predestines it to build bridges between the EU and Eastern Europe. As such, Tomasz Frankowski (EPP) co-chaired the Working Group on Belarus of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, an inter-parliamentary forum where members of the European Parliament and the national parliaments of Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia meet. Also, the country continues to be active in nurturing EU-Ukraine relations. Despite frictions around agricultural goods imports and unresolved historical issues, in relation to Ukraine Poland feels particularly predestined to take up this role: as its neighbour, as a country directly threatened by the possible further escalation of Russian aggression, and as the biggest country of the 'big bang enlargement', making it well-experienced in the accession process.

Two MEPs, Robert Biedroń (S&D/Wiosna) and Sylwia Spurek (Greens), were also active in the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality. This is likely due to the fight in Poland on abortion rights, which has seen several crowds heading to the streets and organising to fight the former government's restrictive course on women's and reproductive rights.

Lastly, the clashes over the rule of law between Poland and the EU also indicate that Polish decision-makers in the EU played an important role in this policy field. For instance, eight Polish MEPs, from all corners of the political scene, joined the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE), with Andrzej Halicki (EPP/PO) as its vice-chair. While the tensions are less since Donald Tusk became Prime Minister and the EU dropped the Article 7 procedure, the expertise in this field from Poland is likely to remain important for EU policy-making, especially as other countries face democratic backlashes.

## Conclusion

After the ousting of the last government in 2023 under the leadership of the PiS coalition (United Right) and with the return of former Council President Donald Tusk at the helm of the Polish government, Poland has left aside its confrontative course with the EU and even aspires a stronger leadership position. It made it clear: Poland is back at the table in Brussels.

From 2019 to 2024, Poland focused its EU policies on three priorities: avoiding fundamental institutional reforms and in particular Treaty changes; negotiating the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum and rejecting the relocation mechanism; and demanding structural support for "less advanced" EU member states and regulatory exemptions for the agricultural sector to avoid a heavy environmental burden from the European Green Deal.<sup>47</sup> These issues dominated the campaign across all parties, with no change of heart likely in the future on these three main issues. Given today's geopolitical challenges, a new focus on security and boosting the EU's defence potential will definitely be high up on the agenda, regardless of party affiliation. In fact, Poland is lobbying for creating a new post of EU Defence Commissioner and would be interested in staffing it. In addition, Polish interests are likely to remain high on the agenda in Brussels as Poland will host the Council presidency in the first half of 2025.



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## About Das Progressive Zentrum



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This report is one of four country reports analysing the election campaigns and results in France, Germany, Italy and Poland. These country reports will be part of a bigger report which will also include an EU chapter and recommendations on how to Europeanise the European elections.

The authors of the different country reports have used their own sources for the polling numbers as well as for the election results in their respective countries. As such, there might be slight differences in numbers between the graphics and the text when it comes to poll numbers before the election.

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