

HOSTILE NARRATIVE BRIEF

WAR IN UKRAINE

Political Context: Poland



June 2023



About The Beacon Project

The International Republican Institute strengthens citizen voices and helps make their leaders more accountable and responsive. To put it simply, IRI encourages democracy in places where it is absent, helps democracy become more effective where it is in danger and shares best practices where democracy is flourishing.

Vladimir Putin is actively trying to sway public opinion throughout Europe using hostile propaganda, disinformation, and political subversion as a way to destabilize its neighbors. Therefore, in 2015, IRI launched the Beacon Project to counteract this misinformation.

The Beacon Project does not prevent disinformation from occurring—a laudable but impossible goal. Nor does it confront every instance of disinformation—though we work with partners who do just that. IRI’s focus is to dismantle the underlying conditions that allow disinformation to spread. Strengthening democracy is the best approach for nations to respond not just to today’s threat, but to better endure in the face of future threats in whatever form they take.

Publication Details

The Beacon Project (powered by IRI)
Hostile Narrative Brief: War in Ukraine • Political Context: Poland

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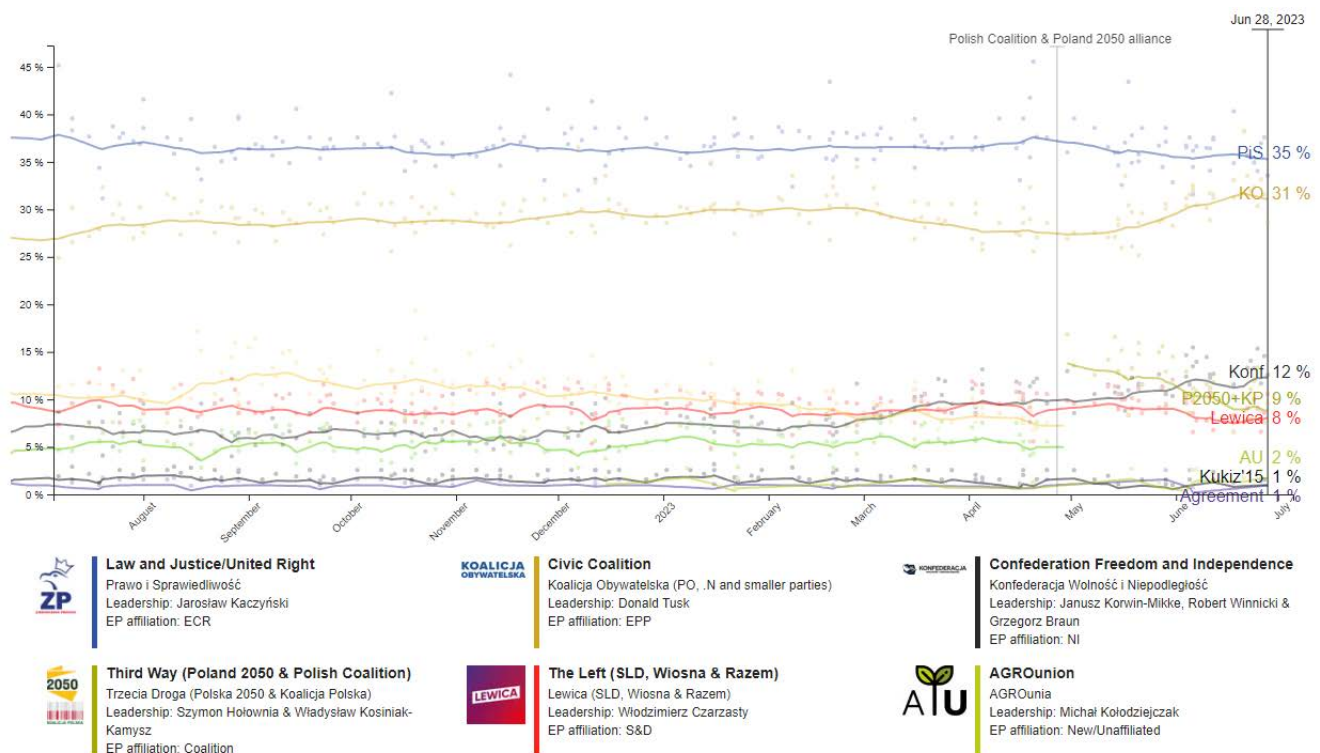
June 2023

Paper designed by Nicoleta Diaconu

Introduction

General political situation in the country

In 2023, Poland is currently in its eighth year of governance under the “*United Right*” coalition (pl. Zjednoczona Prawica). This coalition comprises several parties, with the primary force being Law and Justice (PiS), along with smaller parties such as Sovereign Poland (Suwerenna Polska), The Republicans (Republikanie), and Renew PR (OdNowa RP). While not holding a government position, Jarosław Kaczyński serves as the main leader of the party, with Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki as his second-in-command. President Andrzej Duda also shares political alignment with Law and Justice. Despite facing internal challenges, Law and Justice remains the leading party in opinion polls a few months ahead of the upcoming October elections. But the political situation is rather chaotic, and while still leading, Law and Justice may likely fail to get enough parliamentary seats to form a majority government. On the other hand, the opposition is very fragmented, with five main parties having limited ability to form a coalition. The main force here is Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska), followed by Poland 2050 and PSL election bloc, the Left (Lewica) and Confederation (Konfederacja). The last one consists of a mix of nationalists, far-right and conservative parties, which contrary to the rest of the political scene, use anti-Ukrainian, Kremlin-aligned, anti-European narratives. The next few months will be characterized by a fierce election campaign, with many parties tempted to use polarizing topics to gain some political advantage. The upcoming elections will happen in the extraordinary context of the war in Ukraine. Considering Poland’s crucial role in providing aid to Ukraine, there is a high likelihood that the election campaign will become a target for foreign manipulation and influence activities.



Main Political Actors



Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, PiS)

PiS is the main power within the ruling coalition and forms the Polish Government since 2015. The party is focusing its program on a mix of conservatism and social programs. The party successfully introduced a number of them, focusing the government's financial support especially on families and elderly people, who also make up a sizable part of the electorate. Their international relations favor transatlantic cooperation, especially in the context of ongoing conflicts and legal disputes with the EU. PiS policies are openly pro-Ukrainian and anti-Russian, and are presenting full political and military support to Ukraine. But the period of undeniably good relations with the US and straightforward foreign policy took its current form with the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Before that significant shift, PiS-led government put great effort into fostering good relations with the Trump administration, which negatively affected the relations with the new Biden Administration. In Europe, fighting small battles with the EU, Morawiecki and Kaczyński took active part in an attempt to create an anti-Brussels, right-wing conservative alliance, along with Hungary's Viktor Orbán, France's Marie Le Pen and Italy's Giorgia Meloni, all of whom at one point presented views favourable to Vladimir Putin's. This became an issue after the full-scale invasion, when the Polish public, following its PiS government, assumed the position of one of the European leaders of support and aid to Ukraine. This active position brought Warsaw closer to Washington and distanced it from all anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian politicians and forces. Another significant chapter of PiS foreign policy is focused on its hard relationships with the EU. The ongoing political conflict is multilayered and complex. A number of internal reforms introduced by the PiS government were judged as not aligned with the EU's legal system and European rule of law. Additionally, during the last two major political campaigns (last Presidential and Parliamentary elections) PiS utilised anti-EU slogans and narratives for its election goals, trying to portray Brussels as German-French puppet, set to stop Polish rapid development and destroy its conservative values. This kind of scapegoating of different political entities, groups or individuals is typical for the PiS election campaigns. The disputes with the EU are fueled mainly by the extremely anti-European faction of the ruling coalition, centered around the party SP and its leader Zbigniew Ziobro, who holds the position of Minister of Justice. This also causes a lot of tensions within the ruling camp and will most likely result in PiS' alone starting into the next elections, leaving out all troublemaking coalition partners.

Since the Russian full-scale invasion, PiS led the Polish government efforts into providing help for Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. Thus, its pro-Ukrainian stance cannot be questioned. As stated on many occasions by its leaders, PiS sees the war in Ukraine as existential threat to Poland. Therefore, according to them, any costs and economical sacrifices required to provide support will be lower than the hypothetical cost of defending against destabilization of Poland's eastern border or Russian aggression against Warsaw. The full-scale invasion also triggered a debate about Polish military power and the army's needs in terms of new investments. This quickly became an important part of PiS' rhetoric when Jarosław Kaczyński announced an ambitious plan to expand the Polish army through extensive purchases of the latest equipment and an increase in the number of professional soldiers to 300,000.¹ The Polish government played a significant role in overcoming refugees' crisis, when millions of Ukrainians started to cross the Polish eastern border. They offered financial aid to poles hosting refugees and created legislative and procedural processes to allow their professional adaptation. On the other hand, as stated by many experts, the measures implemented by PiS after the full-scale invasion are ad-hoc in nature and lack systemic solutions to arising problems. A manifestation of this can be seen in the fact that a very large part of the burden of helping refugees arriving from Ukraine has been shifted to citizens and NGOs, which with great effort carried out the tasks of the state.

1 https://www.rmfm24.pl/fakty/polska/news-kaczyński-celem-jest-250-tys-zolnierzy-wojsk-operacyjnych-i-,nld,6736868#crp_state=1



The war in Ukraine plays a significant role in the rhetoric of the PiS. It creates what can be called a “*crisis-dividend*” that taps into people’s natural desire for strong leadership during times of crisis. It also provides an opportunity for ruling politicians to demonstrate action, particularly in support of Ukraine and against Russia, which unifies the Polish population. In contrast, opposition parties are unable to capitalize on this opportunity, as they are unable to challenge or influence the government’s policies in any meaningful way. Simultaneously, PiS has started using the war as a convenient tool to divert attention from their own policy failures, economic struggles, and crises related to energy and inflation. A prime example of this is the slogan “*Putinflacja*” coined and promoted by PiS politicians in response to the issue of increasing inflation in Poland. By attributing rising inflation to Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, they effectively shift the blame and silence critics.

Despite PiS’s clear position and involvement in the war on the side of Ukraine, they have not been immune to mini-crises arising within this context. One recent issue pertains to the transportation of Ukrainian grain through Polish territory. Due to the absence of proper legal and procedural solutions, the duty-free flow of Ukrainian grain, instead of being transported further west, inundated the Polish market and triggered a crisis in the domestic market. In response, the PiS government blocked the transit of grain from Ukraine, leading to strained relations with Kiev. This situation further fueled anti-Ukrainian narratives within the Polish information space. Another strain in relations emerged from the impact of a probable Ukrainian missile in Przewodów, a small town in eastern Poland. Initial media coverage of the event created shock and chaos in the information space. The government’s delayed communication for several hours resulted in what is known as an “*information void*,” allowing numerous conspiracy theories, particularly anti-Ukrainian ones, to proliferate.

The upcoming elections have raised concerns about the extent to which PiS is willing to jeopardize its relations with Kyiv for the sake of internal electoral goals. On May 19th, Łukasz Jasina, the Spokesman of the Polish Foreign Ministry, expressed his opinion that President Zelensky should officially apologize for the Volhynian Massacre.² This historical event, which occurred during World War II, involved brutal killings of Polish minorities by Ukrainian nationalists. The statement immediately drew a strong response from the Ukrainian Ambassador in Poland, leading to a surge of anti-Ukrainian messages and narratives in the public discourse. It is possible that this statement from the Polish side is already part of the election campaign strategy, aimed at appealing to fringe right-wing voters for whom the Volhynian Massacre holds significant cultural and identity significance. It is likely that we will witness more actions of this nature as the upcoming election campaign unfolds.

² <https://www.rp.pl/dyplomacja/art38498611-rzecznik-msz-prezydent-zelenski-powinien-przeprosic-za-wolyn>





Platforma Obywatelska (Civic Platform, PO)

PO is the largest opposition party, and it is currently led by Donald Tusk, ex-Polish PM and ex-president of the European Council. The party positions itself as a centrist party, with a conservative liberalism profile. PO is a member of the European People's Party.

The party is a harsh critic of the current government, highlighting in particular the negative effects of PiS's poor relations with the European Union, the failed reforms of the judicial system, the overextended social system and the government's pro-inflationary economic policies. Within international relations, PO is the biggest pro-EU party in Poland and advocates maintaining a good relationship with Washington as a major ally in the area of security policy. This can be seen, for example, in the visit of Rafał Trzaskowski, the second leader of the PO, to Kyiv, where he met with the Mayor of the Ukrainian capital. PO focuses particular criticism of PiS's actions in the context of Ukraine on the current government's inability to cooperate with Germany and France. PO emphasizes the important role of European cooperation formats and regional initiatives, and the need to build Poland's position precisely on the basis of such activities. Here, PO specifically singles out PiS's cooperation with Viktor Orban or Marie Le Penn from before the full-scale invasion, portraying it as a manifestation of the ruling camp's pro-Russianism. The axis of criticism is also the lack of systemic solutions and the inability to resolve contentious situations with Kyiv, such as the issue of transporting Ukrainian grain. The PO is also trying to use the current economic and energy crisis to make political capital. One of its leading arguments is record high inflation which it portrays as the result of ill-considered government policies, not just the effect of the war in Ukraine.

PO currently has one strong leader – former Prime Minister and EU head Donald Tusk, and a secondary one – Rafał Trzaskowski, the mayor of Warsaw. They are very active in political communication, both online and offline. Their social media channels are among the most popular politically.

The Left

The Left is the sole left-wing alliance in the Polish Parliament, consisting of five smaller leftist parties: SLD, Wiosna, Razem, Polish Socialist Party, and Work Union. The coalition is led by a trio of frontmen: Włodzimierz Czarzasty from the SLD, Robert Biedroń from the Wiosna, and Adrian Zandberg from the Razem. It is challenging to define the coalition's precise ideological profile due to substantial differences among its member parties. Generally, the Left can be categorized as embracing social democracy and democratic socialism, advocating for progressive and secular policies.

The party bases its policies and rhetoric on the concept of establishing a contemporary European nation founded on social-democratic principles. Their platform advocates for liberalization in various aspects of society, including expanding the welfare state system, implementing higher taxation for the affluent, and enhancing public services.

In terms of foreign policy, the Left strongly supports the European Union (EU) and emphasizes the importance of maintaining positive relations with NATO and the United States. They also take a clear stance on Ukraine, advocating for substantial aid to Kyiv, including military assistance, and a proactive approach to addressing the needs of refugees in Poland. It is noteworthy that the Polish Left, unlike their counterparts in Western



Europe, holds an explicit anti-Russian position and avoids any illusions about Moscow. However, it is important to acknowledge that the Left's current foreign and defense policy trajectory was influenced by the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Prior to this event, Left politicians often questioned the necessity of strengthening the Polish military or maintaining a permanent NATO presence within the country. This perspective shifted after February 24, 2022.

The Left's rhetoric regarding Ukraine is centered around advocating for a Polish approach rooted in European structures. One prominent demand put forth by the Left was a proposal to secure €500 in financial support for each refugee from the European Union, a proposition rejected by the Polish government, which sought to maintain a certain distance from Brussels.³ Addressing current pressing issues such as the "grain crisis," the Left takes a distinct perspective compared to other parties, highlighting the concerning practices of major food companies that have benefited from the availability of cheaper Ukrainian grain.⁴ The Left demonstrates full support for economic sanctions against Russia and has even proposed expanding these measures by blocking all trucks with Russian and Belarusian registration plates from entering Poland.⁵ One year after the invasion, the Left unveiled its new program, which included proposals to cancel Ukraine's foreign debt, advocate for the development of a robust professional Polish military, and emphasize the importance of not relying solely on the United States for national security, but rather building a network of alliances within Europe.⁶



The Third Way

The Third Way is a recently formed political alliance, bringing together two distinct parties: Polska 2050 (Poland 2050) and Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (Polish People's Party, PSL). In a strategic move, both parties have decided to join forces and run on a single electoral list in the upcoming elections. The merging parties have contrasting backgrounds, with PSL being one of the oldest political parties in Poland, boasting a history that predates World War II, while Polska 2050 is a newcomer to the political stage.

The latter was established in 2020 under the leadership of Szymon Hołownia, a former television presenter who gained prominence during the previous Presidential elections, where he secured a notable third-place finish. It is a centrist party that tries to position itself as an alternative for people tired of the interchangeable governments of PiS and PO. Among their most important demands are the de-partitioning of the state and SOEs, raises for the public sector, investment in green energy and tax cuts. In the area of foreign policy, the party prioritizes repairing good relations with the European Union and continuing cooperation with the US, especially in the security and military areas. According to Polska 2050, the basis of the country's security is the existence of a strong and independent Ukraine, but it also places a strong emphasis on the issue of Belarus and the need to support democratic movements there. They are strong supporters of sanctions against Russia, calling for stopping all business with Moscow, including a ban on oil and gas.

3 <https://klub-lewica.org.pl/aktualnosci/2137-europejski-trojpak-lewicy-ws-ukrainy-odciac-rosje-od-dochodow-z-ropy-i-gazu-europejski-mecha-nizm-goscinnosci-oraz-wsparcie-dla-polski-w-wysokosci-500-euro-miesiecznie-na-jednego-uchodzce>.

4 <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/lewica-o-zbozu-z-ukrainy-nieuczciwosc-wielkich-sieci-handlowych/z4tygpb>

5 <https://lewica.org.pl/aktualnosci/7351-solidarni-z-ukraina>

6 <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/kraj/artykuly/8667340,lewica-konwencja-programowa-obronnosc-bezpieczenstwo.html>



PSL, the Polish People's Party, is an agrarian party that encompasses a broad spectrum of centrist, center-right, and Christian Democratic ideologies. Under the leadership of Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, PSL's political program prioritizes supporting small entrepreneurs, reducing taxes, providing assistance to the agricultural sector, and upholding conservative values. Climate protection and mitigating hazardous environmental changes are also key objectives within their agenda. In terms of foreign policy, PSL maintains a strong pro-European Union (EU) stance and has even proposed incorporating Polish EU membership into the constitution. They emphasize the importance of active cooperation with China and India, particularly in economic matters. PSL is committed to aiding Ukraine, supporting freedom movements in Belarus, and isolating Moscow as integral components of their foreign policy agenda. Additionally, PSL aims to maintain military spending at approximately 2.5 percent of GDP.



Konfederacja (Confederation)

Konfederacja is an alliance situated on the far-right of the political spectrum, comprising three main parties: Nowa Nadzieja (New Hope), Ruch Narodowy (National Movement, RN), and Konfederacja Korony Polskiej (Confederation of the Polish Crown). United by far-right nationalism, conservatism, and Christian values, the alliance displays slight variations in its approaches to the economy, security, and foreign policy. The leadership is composed of prominent figures from each coalition member, namely Sławomir Mentzen (Nowa Nadzieja), Krzysztof Bosak (RN), and Grzegorz Braun (Konfederacja Korony Polskiej). Notably, Konfederacja is recognized for its fringe positions, particularly concerning Russia and Ukraine, making it one of the few instances of anti-Ukrainian political forces in Poland.

They advocate minimizing the role of the state, radically cutting taxes, slashing all social benefits and basing legislation on Roman Catholic values. Within the foreign policy Konfederacja is openly anti-EU, by for example opposing the EU's Recovery Fund as a tool to combat the sovereignty of Member States. They are strong opponents of federalization of Europe, while some of Konfederacja representatives are openly advocating for dismantling of the EU. On security issues, they point out the need for Poland to develop its own defense capabilities, without relying on the United States, and announce a strong militarization of society, particularly through liberalization of the right to own weapons.

They are officially critical of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but some of their prominent members like Janusz Korwin-Mikke and Grzegorz Braun have on many occasions justified Putin's regime, questioned the role of the US, NATO and Ukrainian right to defend, and disseminated narratives aligned with Kremlin propaganda. They oppose "*economic warfare*" with Russia as not being in the interest of Warsaw, thus are very critical of the western sanctions. An important role in the Confederation's rhetoric is played by criticism of the current Government's actions in the context of Ukraine and criticism of the servile relations with Kyiv. They propose basing relations with Ukraine on Poland's interests, raising many contentious issues that are currently supposed to prevent this, such as historical issues and Kyiv's failure to make an official apology for the Volyn Massacre. Some of its members voted against a resolution condemning the crimes of genocide in Ukraine and against the entry of Sweden and Finland into NATO.

Konfederacja has played a notable role in formulating and propagating anti-Ukrainian narratives, particularly concerning refugees. They have regularly fueled anti-refugee sentiments, even offering public support for right-wing militias that targeted non-white refugees in eastern Polish cities shortly after the invasion.



Dissemination of disinformation regarding an alleged rise in crime rates in areas hosting refugees has also been a consistent strategy employed by the alliance.⁷ A prominent initiative led by Konfederacja in this realm was the *#StopUkrainizationPoland* campaign, spearheaded by Grzegorz Braun. This campaign included organizing a committee meeting in the Polish Parliament and publishing a document with the same title. Within these efforts, Braun vehemently rejected the necessity of accepting Ukrainian refugees, portraying them as adversaries of Poland and categorizing them as displaced persons rather than refugees. Subsequently, an array of anti-Ukrainian circles participated in the campaign, engaging in activities such as astroturfing on Twitter, artificially promoting the hashtag *#StopUkrainizationPoland*.⁸ With the upcoming elections, the Confederation is trying to distance itself from the most extreme views on the subject of Ukraine and control the message of the most extreme MPs. However, it cannot escape notice as the most extreme ones remain in the party leadership and are the most media-savvy representatives. At the same time, the Konfederacja is very active online, the party channels and its representatives are among the most populous among Polish politicians, both on classic platforms like Facebook and Twitter, as well as on newer platforms such as TikTok.

7 <https://oko.press/przemoc-dezinformacja-konfederacja>

8 <https://oko.press/posel-braun-wykorzystuje-sejm-by-nakrecac-antyukrainskie-nastroje-to-spodoba-sie-w-rosji>



Parties and their Leaders Online

Main Political Parties on Facebook:

Party Name	Approx. Followers	Coalition
Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, PiS)	379 000	Ruling party of government coalition
Platforma Obywatelska (Civic Platform, PO)	345 000	Largest opposition party
Suwerenna Polska (Sovereign Poland, SP)	299 000	Part of the ruling coalition with PiS
Nowa Nadzieja (New Hope)	267 000	Part of the Konfederacja (Confederation)
Ruch Narodowy (National Movement, RN)	171 000	Part of the Konfederacja (Confederation)
Razem (Together)	168 000	Part of the Left
Nowa Lewica (The New Left)	149 000	Part of the Left
Nowoczesna (Modern, N.)	93 000	Part of the opposition coalition with PO
Polska 2050 (Poland 2050)	80 000	Part of the Third Way
Konfederacja Korony Polskiej (Polish Crown Confederation)	79 000	Part of the Konfederacja (Confederation)
Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (Polish People's Party, PSL)	52 000	Part of the Third Way
Zieloni (Green Party)	44 000	Part of the opposition coalition with PO

Most Popular Politicians on Facebook:

Name	Approx. Followers	Affiliation
Szymon Hołownia	1 000 000	The Third Way (Trzecia Droga)
Andrzej Duda	815 000	President of Poland
Rafał Trzaskowski	750 000	Civic Platform (PO)
Robert Biedroń	654 000	The Left (Lewica)
Donald Tusk	501 000	Civic Platform (PO)
Sławomir Mentzen	465 000	Confederation (Konfederacja)
Krzysztof Bosak	361 000	Confederation (Konfederacja)
Mateusz Morawiecki	280 000	Law and Justice (PiS)
Zbigniew Ziobro	253 000	Sovereign Poland (SP)
Grzegorz Braun	226 000	Confederation (Konfederacja)
Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz	110 000	The Third Way (Trzecia Droga)
Robert Winnicki	100 000	Confederation (Konfederacja)



Among politicians whose posts generate the most interactions on the Facebook platform are opposition leader Donald Tusk, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Conference leader Slawomir Mentzen. The most popular **post** since 24.02.2022 belongs to Slawomir Mentzen, in which he criticizes the idea of closing the skies over Ukraine, criticizing Polish politicians, U.S. policy and NATO for being too involved in the war in Ukraine. The post also reproduced the narrative of Poland being allegedly pushed into the war by the US and NATO. Mentzen's other most popular posts included those commenting on current political affairs in the country, directed at open criticism of the government and other opposition parties and their actions in the context of rising prices. The main theme of Mentzen's posts is precisely economics, in the area of which he criticizes other politicians, e.g. for allegedly **supporting the liquidation of cash**, and often hits out at the EU, e.g. **criticizing it for adopting the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (EPBD), which, according to him, is expected to have a negative impact on Poles' wallets**.

Donald Tusk's posts are equally popular. They clearly focus on criticizing the government's actions in the context of current events. Among the most popular ones we can identify those **commenting on food high prices**, and **criticizing different government activities**. There is also a large proportion of content relating to the war in Ukraine, mainly criticizing Russia and showing support for Ukraine, such as this one **showing support for President Zelensky**.

Another account generating significant reach belongs to Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki. Among the most popular were: responding **negatively to criticism of Pope John Paul II**, commenting on current events, and **referring to the war in Ukraine, showing unapologetic support for Kyiv**. The activity thus focused on positive messages. Within the ruling camp, popular profiles of the coalition party Sovereign Poland and its leader Zbigniew Ziobro are responsible for negative messages and open criticism. Among their most popular posts were those **openly criticizing the "anti-Polish actions" of the European Union** and featuring a speech by MEP Patryk Jaki in which he **criticizes the EU's alleged "pro-Russian" actions**.

From the opposition parties, the accounts of Szymon Holownia of the Third Way and Roberta Biedroń of the Left stand out. Both are focused on creating a positive image for their parties, showing both strong support for Ukraine and criticizing the actions of PiS. Among Szymon Holownia's most popular posts were **a report on the transfer of aid to Ukrainian refugees at the border** and **a speech presenting his party's attitude toward the Russian invasion, condemning Moscow and supporting Kyiv**. In the case of Robert Biedroń, there was a post **supporting Ukraine's push to join the EU under a fast-track procedure**, and a **sharp criticism of public media**.

The content published by the parties that make up the Konfederacja and their representatives is also hugely popular. The content published by the parties that make up the Confederation and their representatives is also hugely popular. This content focuses on open criticism of the government, the European Union and serves to spread controversial narratives, often containing disinformation or resonating with Kremlin propaganda. Among the most active in this area are the profiles of Grzegorz Braun, Konfederacja Korony Polski, Ruch Narodowy, Robert Winnicki and Krzysztof Bosak. Among the popular ones were:

- **a post promoting climate change denialism, undermining the effectiveness of vaccines on COVID-19;**
- **a video showing Grzegorz Braun's parliamentary intervention at the National Institute of Public Health, in which he reproduced disinformation content about the pandemic and the World Health Organization (WHO);**
- **a post criticizing political correctness;**



- a video of a speech by Grzegorz Braun in which he spread disinformation about the alleged better treatment of Ukrainians in Polish hospitals;
- a video of an event promoting the *“Stop Ukrainization of Poland”* campaign;
- content calling for Poland not to be drawn into the war in Ukraine;
- and a speech by pro-Russian activists openly proclaiming anti-Ukrainian views.

This content provides a very wide reach to the Confederation’s representatives, who have a sizable observer base that is constantly being successively expanded. It should also be noted a certain duality in the Confederation’s online activities. While its leader Slawomir Mentzen focuses on economic issues and openly condemns Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, its other members spread pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian content, often using disinformation. In this way, the Confederation seeks to reach a diverse audience, from ideologically moderate citizens for whom economic issues are most important, to extreme nationalists and anti-Ukrainian circles.



Main Challenges

The upcoming elections are taking place against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Ukraine, creating an extraordinary situation. Based on the SW Research poll,⁹ the most significant concern for voters in the upcoming months, by a large margin, is inflation and the state of the economy, selected by 47.4 % of respondents. This is followed by issues related to the war in Ukraine, which garnered 13.5 %. Additionally, Poland's relations with the European Union accounted for just 10.5% of respondents' concerns, while the state of democracy in Poland ranked at 8.8%.

The majority of the Polish political landscape, with the exception of certain right-wing groups, agrees on the importance of providing broad support for Ukraine and Ukrainians. Therefore, the overall stance of Poland towards the war is unlikely to be a decisive factor for voters. However, issues pertaining to the continued status of Ukrainian refugees in Poland and the potential costs incurred by Poles may be exploited for political gain. There is a real risk of shifting the public debate towards discussing the negative consequences of further support for Ukraine, capitalizing on public fatigue with the prolonged conflict. There is also a perceived concern regarding the consolidation of anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian circles, although their significance remains marginal for now. However, there is a possibility that they could gain traction and become more prominent, possibly through the involvement of political parties like Konfederacja. A signal for the initiation of such activities could be a slight decline in the overall friendliness of Polish society towards Ukrainians, as indicated by recent polls. For instance, while an Ipsos poll reveals that the majority (57%) still view the presence of Ukrainian refugees positively, there has been a gradual decrease compared to May 2022 when the figure stood at 67%. This trend can be linked to the phenomenon of public fatigue with the protracted war and, paradoxically, be the result of Kiev's information policy focusing on portraying the successes of its actions, which Polish media have spread into the Polish information space. From the outset of the Russian invasion, numerous experts and journalists have sought to convince Poles that Ukraine would swiftly and unequivocally defeat Russia, reclaiming all its territories. This has created inflated expectations among the public, and each passing month may further deteriorate public sentiment towards Ukraine.

Another significant challenge lies in the realm of economic issues, particularly concerning inflation and energy prices. The opposition parties consistently raise concerns about fighting inflation and criticize the government's actions in unison. Donald Tusk has presented a plan to combat inflation within a two-year timeframe¹⁰, Adrian Zandberg accuses the government and the National Bank of Poland of responding too slowly and causing harmful inflation,¹¹ and representatives of the Konfederacja emphasize the negative effects of Covid-19 pandemic countermeasures on inflation.¹² Interestingly, none of the opposition parties directly link this topic to Ukraine and refugees. In fact, they distance themselves from PiS and its promotion of the slogan "*Putinflation*," asserting that the situation across the eastern border had only a partial or minimal impact on the situation in Poland. When it comes to the energy crisis, there are two distinct viewpoints within the Polish political scene. However, neither of them directly focuses on Ukraine. The government side constructs its message by blaming Russia's aggressive policies and the European Union's climate and energy policies. Criticism of Brussels has particularly gained momentum in recent months, with a particular

9 <https://www.rp.pl/spoleczenstwo/art38151511-sondaz-gospodarka-i-inflacja-najwazniejszymi-tematami-wyborow-dla-47-4-proc>

10 <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/donald-tusk-obicial-niska-inflacje-mamy-byc-w-czolowce-europy-6883485348395968a.html>

11 <https://tvn24.pl/polska/inflacja-i-drozyzna-konferencja-nowej-lewicy-zandberg-trela-i-czarzasty-o-sytuacji-gospodarczej-w-polsce-7135709>

12 <https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art19254511-konfederacja-wskazuje-przyczynę-inflacji-lockdown-i-tarcze-finansowe>



focus on the assumptions of the Fit for 55 plan and the emissions trading mechanism, which are perceived as unhelpful to Poland's coal-based economy. On the other hand, the opposition primarily criticizes the government's actions and solutions concerning the domestic market, as well as its management of state-owned companies and Poland's largest fuel company, Orlen, which are seen as closely tied to the current government. From their perspective, it is the government that bears responsibility for the current situation, especially considering that the prices of most commodities have returned to pre-invasion levels in the global markets.

Another significant challenge revolves around Poland's relations with the European Union (EU). Since 2015, the PiS government has been engaged in various degrees of conflict with Brussels. The primary issue at the core of this conflict is constitutional reforms that the EU considers to be inconsistent with the principles of the European rule of law. Additionally, the climate policy, previously mentioned, is viewed unfavorably from Warsaw's perspective. As a consequence, payments from the EU Recovery Fund have been suspended. This topic holds substantial importance within the rhetoric of all opposition parties, with the exception of the Confederation. These parties have set their sights on swiftly repairing relations with Brussels and unlocking the EU funds. However, the Confederation, whose program includes anti-EU politics as one of its pillars, significantly differs in its stance on this matter.

The state of democracy in Poland is another crucial issue tied to the country's relations with the EU, and it holds significance for voters. The eight-year tenure of PiS rule has been characterized by unsuccessful judicial reforms that have frequently compromised the independence of judges, politicized the courts, and the implementation of legislation impacting civil liberties and minority rights. Instances of democratic procedure violations have also emerged. This topic directly resonates with the opposition, which pledges to distance itself significantly from the government's actions in this domain. They aim to break away from the majority of systemic reforms implemented over the past eight years, emphasizing a clear separation from such policies.



Forecast

The polling average for the month of May indicates the following results of the parliamentary elections in Poland:¹³

- PiS – 33,7%
- PO – 26,4%
- The Third Way – 12,9%
- Konfederacja - 9,6%
- The Left – 9,3%

If the election results align with current projections, the PiS would secure 189 seats in Parliament, falling short of the minimum majority threshold by 42 seats. This outcome represents a significant change compared to the past eight years when PiS was able to form a majority government. As a result, PiS would have limited coalition-building potential, with options restricted to potential cooperation with the far-right Konfederacja, which the Konfederacja has publicly ruled out, attempting an unlikely partnership with the Third Way, or pursuing a minority government. However, governing as a minority would likely be unsuccessful in the long term.

Alternatively, such results could create an opportunity for a potential coalition of the so-called democratic opposition, comprised of parties like the PO, the Third Way, and the Left, to secure a parliamentary majority. In this scenario, there would be a possibility of forming a government if they can secure enough seats. However, the position of the Polish President, Andrzej Duda, could pose challenges. Duda is affiliated with PiS and holds veto power over actions of the Sejm (lower house of Parliament), which can only be overridden by a 3/5 majority of the 460 deputies. Hypothetically, the opposition coalition may not have the ability to override such a veto, granting significant leverage to Duda and indirectly benefiting PiS.

It is important to note that this potential distribution of seats in Parliament is purely hypothetical and based on election poll specifics. Some experts suggest that poll results for the Konfederacja may actually be underestimated. This underestimation could be attributed to individuals feeling ashamed to admit their support for the Konfederacja to pollsters, fearing social stigma associated with being labelled as far-right. Additionally, growing doubts about the extent of aid to Ukraine and refugees could contribute to frustration and a vote for the “*party of rebellion*,” as described by Konfederacja representatives.

What these results could mean for the most pressing issues in the context of Ukraine?

There is a broad consensus within the Polish community regarding the importance of providing aid to Ukraine. The majority of Polish citizens and political parties support continued assistance to Kiev. The only exception to this consensus is the Konfederacja, which advocates for a review of Poland’s approach and a reduction in involvement in the war to safeguard Poland’s interests. However, the Konfederacja is unlikely to

¹³ <https://ewybory.eu/sondaze-europa/polska/>



secure a result that would allow them to implement such changes. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the evolving public sentiment, which may influence the extent and nature of the assistance provided to Kyiv. A survey conducted by United Surveys aimed to gauge public opinion on how Poland should support Ukraine, shedding light on these sentiments.¹⁴ The poll revealed that 49.6% of respondents believe that humanitarian aid is the most important form of support, followed by military assistance (16.9%), accepting refugees (14.9%), and allowing Polish citizens to fight in Ukraine (3.4%). In general, it is important to note that regardless of the election outcome, there is no plausible scenario in which aid to Ukraine will be undermined or withheld. The commitment to providing assistance remains steadfast.

The upcoming elections could have significant implications for the issue of Ukrainian refugees and the level of Polish assistance provided to them. While the PiS remains committed to its pro-Ukrainian stance, there has been a gradual decline in positive sentiment toward Ukrainians within Polish society. This shift in public opinion may influence the government's policies in the coming year, regardless of which party wins the elections. The biggest risk in this area is connected with the fact that the Konfederacja is currently the only party that speaks openly about the problematic issues related to the residence of more than two million refugees in Poland. Other parties, out of fear of being labelled as pro-Russian, have refrained from raising this issue. Considering the evolving sentiments in Polish society, it is likely that the Konfederacja will attract a growing portion of the electorate with such views. This poses a risk of introducing openly anti-Ukrainian voices and groups into the public discourse and political landscape. This situation could lead to a potential shift in Warsaw's approach to refugees, especially if the war in Ukraine continues for an extended period. In the event of a PiS victory, further assistance to refugees can be expected, as confirmed by Jaroslaw Kaczynski, who emphasized that this policy will remain unchanged and that the costs of social programs for Ukrainians will be covered by future European Union funding.¹⁵ On the other hand, the PO and most other opposition parties advocate for closer and more cooperative engagement with Brussels when it comes to providing aid to Ukrainians. In summary, the election results will play a crucial role in shaping the future of assistance to Ukrainian refugees, with differing approaches expected depending on the party in power. The issue of cooperation with the European Union will likely be a key consideration for the opposition parties in their approach to supporting Ukrainians.

The issue of relations with Russia and the sanctions imposed on Moscow is not a prominent topic in the current election campaign. Most political parties openly express negative views regarding Russia's actions and support broad sanctions, even if they may have some negative impact on Poland's interests. The only party with a different stance is once again the Konfederacja. While officially condemning the Russian invasion, its representatives advocate for maintaining political and economic relations with Moscow and propose limiting sanctions to those that do not harm Polish interests.¹⁶ However, regardless of the election outcome, the Konfederacja is unlikely to gain enough support to effectively pursue any proposal aimed at normalizing relations with Russia. The majority of parties prioritize a firm stance against Russia and the continuation of sanctions.

14 <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/kraj/artykuly/8713483,pomoc-dla-ukrainy-wojna-w-ukrainie-polacy-sondaz.html>

15 <https://www.wnp.pl/parlamentarny/wydarzenia/prezes-pis-udzwiagniemy-wydatki-na-uchodzcow-z-ukrainy-i-je-w-pewnym-momencie-wyegze-kwujemy-od-ue,618770.html>

16 <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/trojmiasto/sankcje-na-rosje-konfederacja-mocno-krytyczna-ogromny-koszt-dla-polakow/cmrtmp8>



Another important area of risk is relations with the EU and NATO. If PiS were to win the elections, their policies that clash with Brussels could continue. Violations of the rule of law, resulting financial penalties, and the withholding of funds from the Recovery Fund could become more prominent during the election campaign and afterward. PiS may use Brussels as an easy target, portraying the EU as being against them and actively seeking a change of power in Poland. This rhetoric has been employed in previous election campaigns as well. The risk here is that Warsaw could become increasingly isolated within the EU and strain relations with Brussels further, making it increasingly difficult to repair them in the future. Another party that criticizes the EU actively is the Konfederacja. While their ambitious plans to limit relations with Brussels and revise treaties may not be feasible, a rise in popularity and a good election result for the Konfederacja could shift the public debate towards more extreme positions, openly raising the question of a possible Polexit.

In the context of NATO, the risks appear to be minimal. The majority of political actors consider the Alliance as a crucial security ally, particularly given Moscow's aggressive policies. There are only a few isolated voices calling for a revision of cooperation with NATO, primarily coming from representatives of extreme factions, including some groups within the Konfederacja.





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