

What are the prospects for Poland's radical right Confederation?



Poland's October election saw the unexpected success of a strongly pro-free market and nationalist radical right challenger to the ruling party. However, as [Aleks Szczerbiak](#) writes, the new grouping's youthful, anti-establishment core electorate is notoriously fickle, and its ideological eclecticism – and the presence of highly controversial personalities among its leaders – makes it an unstable political construct.

Formally constituted at the beginning of 2019, the radical right-wing 'Confederation' (Konfederacja) grouping is a political conglomerate comprising an eclectic mix of economic libertarians clustered around the veteran political eccentric Janusz Korwin-Mikke and radical nationalists from the National Movement (RN) party. The Confederation's first electoral outing was in the 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections, when one of its leaders summed up the grouping's policy platform as: 'we don't want Jews, homosexuals, abortion, taxes and the EU'. But the Confederation's signature issue was its criticism of the alleged failure of the government, led since 2015 by the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party, to stand up to the United States and Israel over the question of Jewish wartime reparations – something the Confederation views as being emblematic of the government's inability to defend Poland's international interests effectively (a charge the ruling party denies vehemently).

The Confederation narrowly failed to cross the 5% parliamentary representation threshold for parties, winning 4.6% of the votes, and most commentators expected it to once-again fail in the October parliamentary election last year. Given the higher turnout, radical political groupings tend to perform less well in parliamentary elections than in 'second order' EP polls. However, although it had hovered just below the threshold in opinion polls, in one of the biggest surprises of the parliamentary election, the Confederation secured 6.8% of the vote and won 11 seats in the Sejm, Poland's more powerful lower legislative chamber



Janusz Korwin-Mikke, Credit: [© European Union 2017 – European Parliament \(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0\)](#)

Some commentators argued that the Confederation was greatly helped by the decision of the pro-Law and Justice public TV channels to firstly ignore and then ferociously attack the grouping in their pre-election coverage. This, they said, (ironically) both provided the Confederation with high profile coverage during the final phase of the campaign while simultaneously evoking sympathy for it as the underdog. However, the Confederation also adopted a completely different strategy in the parliamentary campaign, playing down the most controversial elements of its programme. In an attempt to appeal to disillusioned middle-class voters, the grouping focused much more on stressing its free market credentials, calling for tax cuts and shrinking the size of the welfare state. In doing so, the Confederation sought to differentiate itself from all the other main political groupings (including nominally liberal ones) as the only one that did not support large-scale fiscal transfers and increases in social welfare, arguing that excessive taxation and state regulation stifled opportunities for the most dynamic sections of Polish society.

All of this appealed to voters who did not feel they were significant beneficiaries of Law and Justice's social programmes and were wary of the taxation required to pay for them, as well as groups such as smaller business owners concerned about the ruling party's plans for large increases in the minimum wage. The Confederation's success, therefore, suggested that there was a segment of the right-wing electorate who felt that Law and Justice's large state support and social welfare programmes did not address their concerns.

At the same time, as well as avoiding confrontational rhetoric and radical themes, the Confederation professionalised its image. It profiled relatively youthful leaders able to present its radical programme in a measured and reasonable way – such as the articulate nationalist politician Krzysztof Bosak, who represented the grouping effectively in pre-election televised debates – keeping more controversial figures such as Korwin-Mikke in the background.

A party for provincial young men?

In terms of the Confederation's social base of support: around 20% of younger voters aged under-30 supported the grouping; two-thirds of its voters were male; and more than three-fifths lived in smaller towns and rural areas. Younger, provincial voters of this kind feel that they have limited chances for professional and career advancement, are frustrated with the apparent 'glass ceiling' of vested interests and corrupt networks that they often feel stifles opportunities for them, and do not see state support as the solution to their problems. They first made their presence felt in the 2014 EP election when they supported Mr Korwin-Mikke's then-party the Congress of the New Right (KNP) which won 7.2% of the votes (on a much lower turnout than 2019).

Many of them were likely to have voted for rock star Paweł Kukiz, who caused a political sensation when, standing as a right-wing 'anti-system' candidate, he won one-fifth of the vote in the 2015 presidential election. Later that year, his 'Kukiz'15' grouping emerged as the third largest in the parliamentary election, securing 9% of the votes; and 24% of its 2015 supporters voted for the Confederation in 2019. The internet rather than the traditional broadcast and print media is often these younger voters' main source of political information, which also helped to give the Confederation a very strong on-line presence.

However, above-average levels of support among younger provincial men notwithstanding, the Confederation's electoral base was actually fairly socially heterogeneous and included many well-educated and relatively better-off Poles. Indeed, the grouping enjoyed above-average support among entrepreneurs and small- and medium-sized business owners, many of whom welcomed the Confederation's free market economic policies as a way of unblocking what they saw as a deadweight of state bureaucracy, excessive regulation and red tape, high taxes, vested interests and cronyism. In this sense, the Confederation's entry into parliament was the culmination of a series of trends which have been developing in Polish society for several years.

Moreover, even though, unlike Law and Justice, the Confederation does not enjoy especially close ties with the hierarchy of Poland's influential Catholic Church, it is a strongly socially conservative grouping. Indeed, the Confederation tended to present moral-cultural issues in even clearer and more binary terms than Law and Justice, which, while also strongly socially conservative by broader European standards, also tried to portray a modernising and technocratic image and needed to secure the support of more socially liberal voters attracted by the party's socio-economic policies. Consequently, the Confederation also won over a segment of socially conservative voters dissatisfied with Law and Justice's perceived pivot to the technocratic centre, who felt that the ruling party had not delivered sufficiently on moral-cultural issues.

For example, although Law and Justice courted 'religious right' voters, it had failed to pass legislation promoted by Catholic civic organisations to further tighten Poland's (already restrictive) abortion law. Similarly, while the ruling party opposed the EU's plan for member states to admit compulsory quotas of mainly Muslim migrants from North Africa and the Middle East as representing enforced multi-culturalism and a potential threat to Polish national security, the Law and Justice government also accepted hundreds-of-thousands of economic migrants, mainly from Ukraine but also from some Muslim-majority countries.

Ideological eclecticism and controversial leaders

Although the Confederation's influence will be limited by the fact that it only has 11 deputies (four short of the number required to form a parliamentary caucus and, therefore, table draft legislation) its presence in the new legislature means that Law and Justice faces a challenger on its radical right flank that will spare no opportunity to criticise the ruling party from free market, nationalist and socially conservative perspectives.

In doing so it will put pressure on, and try and outbid, Law and Justice on various issues that are important to sections of the ruling party's electorate but that it has preferred to avoid up until now, such as abortion, and thereby put the government's efforts to strike a balance between its traditionalist and technocratic wings under increasing strain. For its part, Law and Justice faces a strategic dilemma as to whether to try and compete with the Confederation on the radical right or use the latter's presence in parliament to further triangulate and present itself as a more moderate, centrist political formation.

However, the Confederation faces an uncertain future and its success (indeed, its very survival) may prove brittle and short-lived. Although it remains a political conglomerate, unlike Kukiz'15 the Confederation formally registered as a political party which allows it to secure 27 million zloties of ongoing state funding in the course of the forthcoming parliament. The fact that it is well-resourced will provide the grouping with a source of short-term unity and cohesion. Moreover, its ideological eclecticism actually gave the Confederation a certain synergy effect during the election campaign.

In the longer-term, however, these internal divisions, together with the presence of strong personalities in its ranks, mean that the Confederation could find it very difficult to hold together as a single political entity in the new parliament. At the same time, although there is clearly a social base for the Confederation's brand of politics, many of its leaders, such as Korwin-Mikke and the highly controversial maverick Grzegorz Braun, are political eccentrics and if these individuals set the tone for the grouping it will seriously limit its chances of broadening out its support beyond the radical right hard core. Indeed, some commentators argued that, to some extent, the fact that the Confederation was ignored by both liberal-left and conservative mainstream media outlets during most of the election campaign actually boosted its prospects by keeping these individuals out of sight.

Law and Justice may also try and persuade some Confederation deputies to defect, as it did successfully with Kukiz'15 in the previous parliament. But this may not be so easy given that the Confederation's parliamentarians have a stronger ideological grounding than Kukiz's supporters did, although the more ambitious ones may become frustrated if the grouping fails to make any impact as the legislative term progresses.

The Confederation's immediate challenge is to select a candidate for next May's presidential election. This could end its programmatic 'constructive ambiguity' by forcing it to choose someone identified more strongly with either its nationalist or free market wings. The Confederation's presidential candidate – who will be chosen at a US-style convention in January by regional delegates elected to support particular candidates by registered supporters – could also emerge as the grouping's de facto leader. Bosak currently appears to be emerging as the front-runner.

Another flash-in-the-pan?

Although a predominantly young electorate should bode well for the Confederation's future, such anti-establishment protest voters are notoriously impulsive and fickle as the earlier one-term success of groupings such as Kukiz'15 shows. Even if the grouping is able to retain this support for a period, it could evaporate very quickly. The Kukiz'15 example also illustrates how difficult it is for 'anti-system' parties to function effectively, and communicate a contestatory, ideologically distinctive message in a parliamentary setting governed by formal rules and informal conventions, particularly if the political scene continues to be dominated by a bi-polar pro- versus anti-Law and Justice divide. The Confederation's not-altogether-credible claim that there is really no difference between Law and Justice and other liberal, centrist and left-wing parties representing the post-communist status quo will limit its potential appeal beyond a certain electoral niche, as will its contempt for the ruling party's social transfers which are so important to many less well-off right-wing conservative voters.

Since the collapse of communism in 1989, Poland has seen a series of 'anti-system' parties emerge, some winning as much as 10% of the vote, only to then fizzle out and disappear. The Confederation will undoubtedly benefit in the short-term from the political momentum derived from its electoral success and a charismatic and dynamic candidate such as Bosak could perform well in the presidential election. But there is every chance that it could prove to be yet another flash-in-the-pan and join the long list of fleetingly successful but relatively short-lived anti-establishment protest parties that have been a recurring feature of the post-communist Polish political scene.

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Note: This article originally appeared at Aleks Szczerbiak's [personal blog](#). The article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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