

Poland's rock star-politician: What happened to Paweł Kukiz?

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/05/11/polands-rock-star-politician-what-happened-to-pawel-kukiz/

5/11/2016

A year ago rock star and social activist Paweł Kukiz caused a sensation when he finished a surprise third in the first round of the Polish presidential election. He held on to enough support for his new Kukiz '15 grouping to secure representation in the legislature after the October parliamentary election. [Aleks Szczerbiak](#) writes that Kukiz '15 has retained a reasonably stable base of support, but its lack of organisational and programmatic coherence casts doubt over the grouping's long-term prospects, which are closely linked to its leader's personal credibility.



Election success in spite of blunders

Last May the charismatic rock star and social activist Paweł Kukiz caused a political sensation when he came from nowhere to finish third in the first round of the Polish presidential election, picking up more than one fifth of the vote. Standing as an independent right-wing 'anti-system' candidate, Mr Kukiz's signature issue, and main focus of his earlier social activism, was strong support for the replacement of Poland's current list-based proportional electoral system with UK-style single-member constituencies (known by the Polish acronym 'JOW'), which he saw as the key to renewing Polish politics.

Opinion polls conducted immediately after the presidential poll showed Mr Kukiz to be Poland's most trusted politician and his (as-yet-unnamed) grouping running in second place behind the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party – the main opposition grouping, which went on to win a decisive victory in the parliamentary election – but ahead of the ruling centrist Civic Platform (PO). Mr Kukiz squandered much of this political capital as his grouping, which eventually adopted the name Kukiz '15, descended into a series of bitter rows and splits with former colleagues which caused its electoral support to plummet. These political blunders overshadowed attempts to mobilise for the September referendum on replacing the country's proportional electoral system with one based on single-member constituencies, which was called by the previous (subsequently defeated) Civic Platform-backed President Bronisław Komorowski as a panic move to win over Mr Kukiz's supporters. Although many commentators expected the referendum to provide Mr Kukiz with a major boost it ended in fiasco with a derisory 7.8% turnout.



In the event, Mr Kukiz turned out to have sufficient hard core supporters immune to the kind of gaffes that would have been fatal for more mainstream politicians, and in the October election Kukiz '15 held on to enough of his support to cross the 5% threshold for securing parliamentary representation. Mr Kukiz's grouping emerged as the third largest in the Sejm, the more powerful lower house of the Polish parliament, securing 8.8% of the vote and 42 seats. According to exit polls, Kukiz '15 polled particularly strongly among younger voters and students picking up 19.9% and 20.2% of their votes respectively. Widespread anti-establishment feeling, which was the dominant theme of the election, was particularly evident among these younger voters, many of whom were increasingly disillusioned

by what they saw as an invidious choice between moving abroad to take jobs that fell well short of their abilities or remaining in a country which offered them few prospects for the future.

Surviving its first crisis

However, Mr Kukiz's extremely eclectic candidates list produced a potentially unstable parliamentary caucus. Having fallen out with and publicly attacked many of the local government and civic activists who formed the backbone of his presidential campaign, he came to rely increasingly upon the organisational support of smaller nationalist and liberal-conservative parties and political associations, notably the radical right National Movement (RN) which enjoys close links with Hungary's 'Jobbik' party. However, the largest group within the caucus still comprised non-aligned businessmen, local civic activists, trade unionists and single-member constituency campaigners. The only common denominator was opposition to the constitutional foundations of the post-1989 Polish state and its dominant elites, together with a vague 'anti-systemness' that Mr Kukiz was felt to embody. This led to predictions that Kukiz '15 would implode as soon as it was forced to confront issues that brought its ideological incoherence to the fore.

In April, Kukiz '15 faced its first major post-election crisis. The grouping came to an agreement with Civic Platform, now the main parliamentary opposition party, and the smaller liberal 'Modern' (Nowoczesna) grouping, which appears to have overtaken the former ruling party in opinion polls, that they would not participate in the election of a new member of the constitutional tribunal nominated by Law and Justice. By removing their voting cards the opposition parties hoped to reduce the number of deputies present to below the required quorum and thereby invalidate the vote. Kukiz '15's tactics led to accusations from Law and Justice that it had struck a deal with establishment politicians, exemplified by a symbolic handshake between Mr Kukiz and 'Modern' leader Ryszard Petru. Such accusations are extremely dangerous for Kukiz '15 given Mr Petru's links to the large banking corporations which, for many Poles, symbolise the hated political-business nexus (often referred to disparagingly as 'banksters') that motivated them to vote for Mr Kukiz in the first place. Mr Kukiz's supporters responded that the abstention tactic was determined spontaneously as a response to Law and Justice's decision to bring forward the timing of the vote.

As it turned out, the plan failed when seven members of the Kukiz '15 caucus broke ranks and cast an abstention or voted with the ruling party. One of these, Małgorzata Zwiercan, cast a vote for both herself and another (momentarily absent) colleague, the legendary former anti-communist activist Kornel Morawiecki. Mr Kukiz suggested that the deputies who broke ranks were encouraged to do so by Mr Morawiecki's son, Mateusz, who is deputy prime minister and development minister in the Law and Justice government. Ms Zwiercan was expelled from the caucus while Mr Morawiecki, who said that she acted in line with his intentions, also decided to leave Kukiz '15.

In the same week, the National Movement's political council called upon the five Kukiz '15 deputies who are party members to resign and form their own parliamentary circle. The proximate cause of this was the publication of a tape recording where Mr Kukiz referred to one of the Movement's leaders in vulgar language. However, there was a broader crisis in relations between Mr Kukiz and the Movement with the latter criticising the caucus leadership's attempts to introduce a more unitary programmatic line in areas where the nationalists were at odds with its official stance, specifically: in their support for Polish withdrawal from the EU and strengthening Poland's abortion law, and opposition to Kukiz '15's tactical co-operation with liberal and centrist parties.

However, although these events exposed the underlying divisions within Kukiz '15 and fuelled speculation about its imminent implosion, the grouping's parliamentary caucus emerged relatively unscathed. Although Mr Morawiecki gave Kukiz '15 gravitas and rooted it in the anti-communist tradition, apart from Ms Zwiercan none of his other allies joined him in forming a new parliamentary circle. Plans to form a separate Nationalist Movement parliamentary caucus were also scuppered by a conflict between party leader Robert Winnicki, who resigned from Kukiz '15, and other nationalist deputies who decided to stay. An important reason why the Kukiz '15 parliamentary caucus has

held together in spite of its ideological heterogeneity has been its relative lack of discipline in parliamentary divisions, with many deputies often voting differently from the majority.

Mr Kukiz's charisma is still the key

Mr Kukiz's grouping has also tried to develop a more distinctive political identity. Although it has become increasingly critical of the Law and Justice-led government, especially over the issue of party-linked appointments to state bodies, Kukiz '15 has attempted to position itself as a 'constructive' opposition. It has, for example, tried not to become directly involved in the bitter and ongoing conflict over the membership and functions of Poland's constitutional tribunal which has dominated political debate since the election. While criticising the government's handling of the dispute, Kukiz '15 has refused to join other opposition groupings in street protests organised by the anti-government Committee for the Defence of Democracy (KOD), and tried to propose a compromise solution based on re-constituting the tribunal with new judges elected by a qualified two-thirds parliamentary majority.

At the same time, Mr Kukiz's grouping has tried to outflank Law and Justice by promoting constitutional reforms and legislative initiatives that position it as a genuinely reformist 'anti-system' movement. For example, in addition to its signature issue of electoral reform, Kukiz '15 has promoted: measures which they argue empower ordinary citizens, such as more direct democracy and referendums triggered by civic initiatives; shifting from a parliamentary to presidential system of government; and ending state party funding and political appointments to ministerial cabinets. It has also tried to tap into popular concerns about the potential security and societal cohesion risks posed by mass Muslim immigration by collecting signatures for a referendum on whether or not Poland should accept refugees from the Middle East and North Africa under the EU's migrant relocation scheme.

However, as part of its appeal of not belonging to the so-called 'partocracy', Kukiz '15 did not register as a formal political party thereby depriving itself of access to ongoing state funding (given its share of the vote Mr Kukiz's grouping was eligible for around 7 million zloties per annum). Nor has it yet developed a network of local grassroots organisational structures that could act as a counter-weight to centrifugal tendencies within the parliamentary caucus. This lack of organisational consolidation makes Kukiz '15 vulnerable to hostile approaches from better resourced competitors such as the Coalition for the Renewal of the Republic—Liberty and Hope (KORWiN) grouping led by Janusz Korwin-Mikke. Economically libertarian, socially conservative and radically Eurosceptic, Mr Korwin-Mikke is one of the most controversial figures in Polish politics. However, while his party failed to cross the 5% threshold in the parliamentary election its 4.8% share of the vote was enough for it to secure an annual state subsidy of 4.17 million zloties, and a number of Kukiz '15 deputies who are ideologically close to Mr Korwin-Mikke may end up defecting and forming a new parliamentary caucus linked to the grouping.

In fact, the key to Kukiz '15's future prospects remains its leader's personal popularity. Although he can be gaffe-prone and emotional under pressure, for many of his supporters Mr Kukiz's impulsive behaviour outside established political norms is evidence of his authenticity. Although no longer enjoying the very broad appeal that he achieved last May, Mr Kukiz has held on to much of the support that he was able to garner in the parliamentary election: a March-April survey by the CBOS agency found him to be Poland's third most popular politician with a 51% approval rating (22% disapproval, 21% neutral). As a consequence, Kukiz '15 has retained a reasonably stable base of popular support: the 'Pooling the Poles' micro-blog that aggregates voting intention surveys currently shows it averaging around 11%.

An uncertain future

In spite of its ideological incoherence Kukiz '15 emerged relatively unscathed from its most serious crisis and its core electorate appear willing to support the grouping as long as they perceive its leader to be the embodiment of opposition to the establishment. However, Kukiz '15 remains an unstable construct and serious question marks hang over its longer-term prospects. In the current, highly polarised political climate it will be increasingly problematic for it to find a niche between the Law and Justice government and the 'establishment' opposition parties. Lack of discipline in parliamentary voting also makes it difficult for the grouping to develop a more coherent programmatic

identity and means that Mr Kukiz cannot be sure of delivering his deputies in crucial votes. The grouping's continued success, and even survival, therefore, depends very much on his personal credibility, so could erode very quickly if his supporters cease to see him as the most credible fighter against 'the system'.

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Note: A version of this article appears at Aleks Szczerbiak's [personal blog](#). The article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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