

# Can Civic Platform still win the 2015 Polish election?

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*Poland will hold its next parliamentary election in October. [Aleks Szczerbiak](#) writes that the country's current ruling party, Civic Platform, has launched a fightback following its shock defeat in Poland's presidential election in May. However, he notes that the political fundamentals are still working in the opposition's favour and that Paweł Kukiz, an 'anti-system' rock star-turned-politician, could emerge as kingmaker after October's vote.*



Following the [shock defeat](#) of party-backed incumbent Bronisław Komorowski in May's Polish presidential election, the ruling centrist [Civic Platform](#) (PO) was plunged into a period of crisis. Opinion polls showed it falling into third place behind both the right-wing [Law and Justice](#) (PiS) party, the main opposition grouping, and the movement clustered around Paweł Kukiz, the charismatic former rock star who, standing as an 'anti-system' candidate, came a surprise third in the first round of presidential voting, securing more than one-fifth of the votes. Some commentators predicted Civic Platform's certain defeat in the October 25th parliamentary election, whose outcome will determine the shape of the Polish political scene for years to come.

However, during the last month the ruling party has made a concerted effort to fightback. Trying to demonstrate that it has drawn lessons from Mr Komorowski's complacent campaign, Civic Platform leader and prime minister Ewa Kopacz has been extremely energetic in trying to convince voters that she is in touch with their concerns. The centrepiece of this has been a prime ministerial rail tour of Poland with the strapline '*Kolej na Ewę*' (which can be translated as either 'Train for Ewa' or 'It's Ewa's turn'), with Mrs Kopacz travelling around the country and meeting voters to discuss their problems and expectations. It also involved a government roadshow with cabinet meetings being held in Poland's provincial cities, starting with the key electoral battleground regions of Silesia and Łódź.

## The 'politics of fear' returns

Another important element of Civic Platform's counter-offensive was an attempt to mobilise its supporters through generating fear of an opposition victory. Although the presidential election result suggested that this previously successful strategy was not as effective as it had once been, the argument that the ruling party is a better guarantor of stability than the confrontational and allegedly authoritarian style of politics that many voters (rightly or wrongly) associate with Law and Justice and its combative leader Jarosław Kaczyński has been a staple of all Civic Platform's previous successful election campaigns.

Moreover, party strategists were hoping that, unlike in the presidential campaign when the Law and Justice leader kept a very low profile, Mr Kaczyński would be the focus of its negative campaigning. Mr Kaczyński has an extremely dedicated following among Law and Justice's core supporters but is a polarising figure and one of the country's least trusted politicians among more moderate voters. It was precisely to anticipate these kinds of attacks that Law and Justice decided that its more emollient deputy leader Beata Szydło and not Mr Kaczyński would be the party's prime ministerial nominee. Civic Platform responded by claiming that Mr Kaczyński would attempt to steer Mrs Szydło from behind-the-scenes if his party won the election and challenged him to a head-to-head debate with Mrs Kopacz.

The ruling party's anti-Law and Justice offensive has two main strands. Firstly, Civic Platform has tried to present itself as the 'party of individual freedom' in contrast to Law and Justice, who they argue want to interfere in and control ordinary citizens' private lives, highlighting its alleged radicalism on moral-cultural issues. For example, the government pushed through a liberal in-vitro fertilisation law opposed vehemently by Law and Justice and the Catholic Church, which is against the artificial creation of human life, but enjoying widespread public support.

Poland is an overwhelmingly Catholic country and the Church an influential political actor, especially on the political right, but Poles are much more divided over whether it should play a prominent role in public life, with many of them hostile to what they perceive as interference in the political sphere. Mrs Kopacz has tried to play on this fear by emphasising that while a churchgoer herself, she does not wish to live in a 'confessional state'. The focus on moral-cultural issues was also part of a concerted effort by the ruling party to win over socially liberal voters disillusioned with the current left-wing groupings.

Secondly, Civic Platform accused Law and Justice of dramatically under-estimating the cost of its election promises to reverse the government's increase in the retirement age, raise income tax thresholds, and increase benefits for families. The ruling party warned that if Law and Justice's pledges were to be implemented then Poland would face a Greek-style fiscal crisis, arguing that the tough terms of Athens' bailout deal were the price that Greece was paying for irresponsible budget policies by its 'populist' government.

Law and Justice anticipated this by trying to identify the sources of funding for its spending programme – additional VAT revenues, new taxes on banks and supermarkets, and improved tax collection – but Civic Platform responded by arguing that its revenue assumptions were overly optimistic and that the costs of the new taxes would be borne by ordinary citizens.

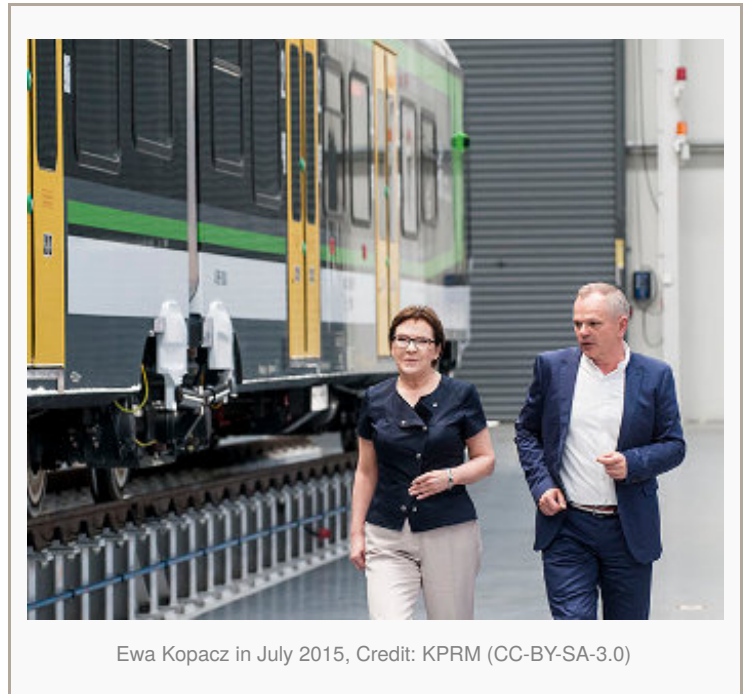
However, the ruling party's arguments were undermined somewhat by its own spending pledges, including Mrs Kopacz's curious proposal that the government should directly supplement the incomes of the lowest paid.

Moreover, Law and Justice argued that the root of the Greek crisis was the country's adoption of the euro and that Poland would be in the same situation if it had followed Civic Platform's advice and joined the Eurozone. Mr Kaczyński's party argues that Poland should not adopt the euro until its economy is more closely aligned with the rest of the EU; indeed, it has increasingly given the impression that it could not envisage any point in the foreseeable future when it would be advantageous for the country to join the Eurozone. Mrs Szydło has pledged that one of her first decisions as prime minister will be to disband the office of government responsible for Poland's euro entry. While there is still overwhelming public support for EU membership in Poland, most Poles also oppose their country adopting the single currency.

### **The fundamentals are working against Civic Platform**

Civic Platform's counter-offensive has certainly stopped the rot: the party has regained second place in the polls and Mrs Kopacz is on level pegging with, or even slightly ahead of, Mrs Szydło when voters are asked who would make the better prime minister. However, in spite of this Law and Justice retains a clear opinion poll lead of around 10 per cent. Moreover, there are real question marks over whether Mrs Kopacz has the political leadership skills to turn around the ruling party's fortunes.

She has proved to be a reasonably effective political tactician and while her railway tours of the country and mobile cabinet meetings appear unconventional (sometimes even comical) they do at least give the impression of an active government and prime minister trying to engage with the public. Nonetheless, Mrs Kopacz lacks gravitas and charisma and has always found it difficult to translate the fact that voters appear to warm to her personally into electoral support for the ruling party. On the other hand, most Poles are still making their minds up about Mrs Szydło



who comes across as stiffer and more wooden than the prime minister but also, arguably, calmer and more reassuring.

Above all, the underlying fundamentals are still working against Civic Platform. Hostility towards the political establishment has been a noticeable feature of Polish politics in recent months and it is being directed almost exclusively at the ruling party, whom much of the electorate, especially younger voters, see as representing an out-of-touch elite. In spite of Mr Kopacz's tour of Poland and the mobile cabinet meetings, to many voters Civic Platform still comes across as disconnected from the concerns of ordinary people. For all her undoubted energy and commitment, Mrs Kopacz does not appear to have her predecessor Donald Tusk's capacity for the kind of strategic political thinking that can help to develop an effective response to the changes in societal attitudes that have eroded support for the party.

### **Kukiz the kingmaker?**

A key factor determining what kind of government emerges after the October election will be the performance of the minor parties. Even if it wins the election, Law and Justice is extremely unlikely to secure an outright majority and currently has no obvious potential coalition partners among the main parliamentary groupings. This means that even if it 'loses' the election Civic Platform could still remain in office with the support of the agrarian Polish Peasant Party (PSL), its current junior coalition partner; the communist successor Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), the smaller left-wing opposition party; and a new liberal grouping ModernPL (NowoczesnaPL).

However, in recent months all of these parties have been struggling to cross the 5 per cent threshold required to secure parliamentary representation. For sure, polls have always tended to underestimate the Peasant Party's electoral support and the odds are that it will probably make it into the new parliament. On the other hand, while the Democratic Left Alliance looks like it will be contesting the election as part of a broader 'United Left' coalition, polls suggest that it will struggle to cross the higher 8 per cent threshold for such electoral alliances.

At the same time, the possible entry into parliament of a substantial 'anti-system' right-wing bloc clustered around Mr Kukiz could radically alter future coalition configurations, opening up a potential pathway to power for Mr Kaczyński's party. In fact, the rock star-turned-politician has been struggling since the presidential election: polls show support for his putative grouping dropping to around 10-15 per cent and he has fallen out with the local government and civic activists who had formed the backbone of his campaign team. Moreover, at a convention of his supporters where he was expected to set out his political vision in greater detail, Mr Kukiz declared that he had no intention of unveiling more well-defined policies arguing that detailed party programmes were one of the 'biggest lies' in politics.

His one concrete policy remains the replacement of the country's current proportional electoral system with one based on UK-style single-member constituencies which he sees as the key to renewing Polish politics. However, while his recent difficulties may have damaged Mr Kukiz's credibility among more centrist voters, many of his ideologically eclectic potential supporters are immune to the kind of gaffes that would be fatal for other, more mainstream politicians, and will continue to support him as long as he remains a credible fighter against 'the system'.

### **Law and Justice remains favourite**

Civic Platform appears to have recovered from its post-presidential election trauma. Although severely weakened, the party retains considerable assets including the powerful backing of most of Poland's cultural and media establishment. The outcome of October's parliamentary election is more open than some commentators predicted after the presidential poll and it is not inconceivable (although unlikely) that Civic Platform could cling on to power.

However, the political fundamentals – strong hostility towards the political establishment directed mainly against the ruling party – now appear to be working very much in Law and Justice's favour. While Mrs Kopacz has energy and

commitment in spades, voters appear to be rather cynical about her various attempts to win back support for the ruling party. In fact, both the election outcome and post-election coalition configurations could depend a lot on the performance of the minor parties, especially Mr Kukiz's new grouping. Although he appears to be squandering the political capital acquired during the presidential election, unless the Kukiz movement completely implodes the rock star-cum-politician could still be the kingmaker after the October poll.

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*Note: This article originally appeared at Aleks Szczerbiak's [personal blog](#). It gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [KPRM](#) (CC-BY-SA-3.0)*

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