

# Should the EU be concerned about a possible 'Polexit'?



*The Polish government has come into conflict with the EU's institutions on several fronts, notably over judicial reforms and the relocation of refugees during the migration crisis. [Aleks Szczerbiak](#) explains that although opponents of the government accuse it of undermining the country's ties with the EU, its supporters argue that the ruling party is committed to defending national interests and sovereignty within a reformed Union. Overall, while Poles are still overwhelmingly pro-EU, this support is shallow and increasingly instrumental.*



Polish PM [Beata Szydło](#) at a European Council meeting in June, Credit: European Council ([CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#))

On the face of it, Poles are overwhelmingly pro-EU. A June survey by the CBOS polling agency found that 88% of respondents supported their country's EU membership compared with only 9% who were against.

The right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) grouping, Poland's ruling party since the October 2015 election, is committed to defending Polish interests and sovereignty robustly within the EU, especially in the moral-cultural sphere where it rejects what it sees as a hegemonic EU liberal-left consensus that it believes undermines the country's traditional values and national identity. Law and Justice is also anti-federalist and has articulated an increasingly fundamental and principled critique of further European integration.

Nonetheless, although it has been labelled Eurosceptic, the dominant view within Law and Justice is still that it is in Poland's interests to remain an EU member and reform the organisation from within. No major political grouping questions continued EU membership and the only calls for 'Polexit', following the UK's example in leaving the Union, have come from fringe politicians on the radical right. However, the Law and Justice government has found itself in conflict with the EU institutions and major European powers on several fronts.

## Conflict with Brussels

In January 2016, the European Commission initiated an unprecedented 'Article 7' investigation into Poland, a procedure which it can invoke against any EU member state where it feels there is a 'systemic threat' to democracy and the rule of law. This followed the outbreak of a bitter domestic political and legal dispute over the membership and competencies of Poland's constitutional tribunal. The row escalated this July when the Commission asked the Polish government to justify a series of laws reforming the judiciary.

Two of these were vetoed by Law and Justice-backed Polish President Andrzej Duda, but the Commission nonetheless gave Poland a month to address its concerns or face the prospect of a recommendation to the European Council that sanctions be imposed which, in the worst-case scenario, could mean suspending Warsaw's voting rights. Law and Justice rejected the Commission's claims as biased and as representing political interference in Polish domestic affairs. Unanimity is required in the Council to trigger sanctions and the Hungarian government, for one, has made it clear that it will oppose such moves. Consequently, in a separate action the Commission also launched an infringement procedure against Poland arguing that its judicial reforms breached EU law.

In June, the Commission initiated another EU law infringement action against Poland (together with the Czech Republic and Hungary) for its refusal to implement a plan agreed at a September 2015 EU summit on the compulsory relocation of Middle Eastern and North African migrants located in Greece and Italy. This proposal was accepted by Law and Justice's predecessor, the centrist Civic Platform (PO) which was Poland's ruling party from 2007-15 and is currently the main opposition grouping.

Although Law and Justice was against the EU plan when in opposition, it initially agreed to implement it but then suspended the process, arguing that procedures for vetting migrants were insufficient to guarantee Polish security. In July, the Polish government also refused to implement a European Court of Justice order to stop logging in the primeval Białowieża Forest, arguing that it was acting in line with the injunction because it was only removing trees affected by a plague of spruce bark beetles on public safety grounds.

Poland's clashes with the EU institutions have been one of the factors contributing to a worsening of its already-strained bilateral relations with the main European powers. In August, French President Emmanuel Macron accused the Polish government of isolating itself within the EU by undermining European solidarity and democratic values. Mr Macron's remarks came as he omitted Poland (and Hungary) from a trip to central and Eastern Europe to mobilise support for new EU rules which would limit the rights of temporary (so-called 'posted') workers, which Warsaw says will hit Poles employed in Western Europe particularly hard. At the same time, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had previously kept a low profile in the ongoing row over the Article 7 procedure, also appeared to be moving closer towards supporting the Commission more openly on this issue.

### **Slow motion 'Polexit' or defending Polish interests?**

The government's opponents, Civic Platform and the smaller liberal 'Modern' (*Nowoczesna*) grouping, argue that Law and Justice has marginalised Poland within the EU's decision-making structures to such an extent that the Union will be much less engaged in the country's future development. They warn that Poland could end up on the EU's periphery as the major European powers have signalled that they favour a 'multi-speed' Europe with the locus of decision-making and integration likely to develop even more around the Eurozone hard core.

Although it has not ruled out Eurozone accession in principle, Law and Justice argues that, given the single currency's huge problems, it cannot envisage any point in the foreseeable future when it would be advantageous for Poland to adopt the euro. Drawing analogies with the process that led to the UK's June 2016 Brexit referendum, the government's critics argue that by mobilising Euroscepticism for short-term domestic political advantage and treating every action by EU institutions as a hostile one, Law and Justice could bring about a slow motion 'Polexit' by progressively undermining confidence in, and weakening Poland's ties with, the Union.

The government's supporters respond that Law and Justice remains strongly committed to Polish EU membership, an argument that most Poles appear to accept: a March-April CBOS survey found that only 17% of respondents thought that the government wanted 'Polexit'. However, Law and Justice does want a fundamental re-think of the trajectory of the European project to bring the EU back to its original role as a looser alliance of economically co-operating sovereign nation-states with a more consensual decision making process. The government's supporters argue that it has found itself in conflict with the EU establishment because it has been robust and assertive in defending and advancing Poland's national interests within the Union.

Law and Justice has shifted away from its Civic Platform-led predecessor's strategy of trying to locate Poland within the so-called European 'mainstream' and prioritising the development of close relations with the main EU powers, especially Germany. Rather, the party argues that Poland needs to form its 'own stream' within the EU by, for example, building alternative alliances with central and East European post-communist states to counter-balance the influence of the Franco-German axis. They cite US President Donald Trump's July visit to Poland, his first stop in Europe on only his second overseas trip since assuming office, as an implicit endorsement of Law and Justice's new approach. As well as making a keynote speech praising Poland as a key American ally, Mr Trump addressed a Warsaw meeting of the so-called 'Three Seas Initiative', a Polish-led scheme to develop co-operation and solidarity among East European states.

### **EU support is shallow and increasingly instrumental**

Moreover, Polish public support for the EU appears to be very broad but also rather shallow with many Poles critical of attempts to deepen European integration in a number of areas. For example, a March-April CBOS survey found that 72% of respondents were against Polish adoption of the euro, with only 22% in favour. The same survey found that 43% of Poles felt that defending the independence of member states should be given priority compared with 31% who favoured limiting national sovereignty to ensure the EU's effectiveness.

Poles also appear to be increasingly instrumental in their approach towards EU membership. A key motivation for their voting overwhelmingly for Poland's EU accession in a 2003 referendum was the idea it represented a historical and civilisational choice to re-unite with the West and the culmination of the post-communist democratisation process. One of the main reasons why levels of popular support for the country's EU membership remained so high was that many Poles, especially among the older generations, saw the European integration process as part of a symbolic re-uniting of Poland with a Western international community of shared values that they had always considered themselves to be part of culturally and spiritually.

However, this idea of EU membership as a natural and obvious civilisational choice has come under strain in recent years due to an increasing sense of cultural distinctiveness that many Poles feel in relation to Western Europe. This is particularly evident in the sphere of moral-cultural values where Polish attachment to traditional morality and national identity stands in stark contrast to the socially liberal, cosmopolitan consensus that predominates among West European cultural and political elites.

This issue surfaced in the contrasting reactions of Poles (and other Central Europeans) to the European migration crisis. A May 2017 CBOS survey found that 70% of Poles were against accepting refugees (never mind economic migrants) from Muslim countries and only 25% in favour; with 65% still opposed even if Poland was threatened with financial penalties. Poland is an overwhelmingly Catholic country with very few ethnic minorities and little experience of the modern migrations that have transformed Western Europe. Poles are keen to avoid the kind of cultural and security problems that many of them feel West European countries have experienced through admitting large numbers of Muslim migrants who are seen as difficult to assimilate and embedding violent extremists within their communities.

Polish support for EU membership is, therefore, driven increasingly by the tangible material benefits that the Union is felt to deliver, but there are signs that these will be more limited in the future. Among these perceived benefits are the sizeable fiscal transfers that the country receives, particularly EU regional aid of which Poland is currently the largest beneficiary and which many Polish commentators see as crucial to its economic modernisation. The current EU budget, which runs until 2020, was always likely to be the last from which Poland would benefit so substantially and Brexit will almost certainly limit the scale of these fiscal transfers even further in the future.

Another main pillar of support for EU membership was the ability that it afforded Poles to travel to and work in Western Europe. However, concern about un-controlled mass EU migration was an important driver of support for Brexit and, as Mr Macron's proposal to limit the rights of 'delegated' workers shows, there will almost certainly be more attempts to restrict Poles' access to labour markets in other EU countries. Supporters of EU membership point to the importance of Polish access to the single market for trade and attracting inward investment, but this argument may be too abstract for Poles to grasp. Moreover, while many feel that the country's geo-political situation requires membership of Western international organisations, they may also conclude this is best secured through NATO rather than the EU which is not a credible military security actor.

### Potential for Euroscepticism?

Although they are still overwhelmingly pro-EU, many Poles share Law and Justice's concerns about the trajectory of the European project. Interestingly, a June poll conducted by the IBRiS agency for the 'Polityka' journal found that 51% of respondents actually supported leaving the EU if it was the only way to prevent Poland from being forced to admit Muslim migrants. A particularly ominous sign for Polish EU enthusiasts is the fact that the younger, post-accession generation of Poles are easily the most anti-EU demographic: a March-April CBOS survey found that 22% of 18-24 year-olds opposed EU membership compared with an average of 9% among all respondents. So while there is no imminent prospect of the government seeking, or the public supporting, 'Polexit', all of this creates the potential for an increase in Polish Euroscepticism in the future.

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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 or the London School of Economics.*

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