

Are the Polish opposition's prospects really so hopeless?



Poland's liberal and centrist opposition has struggled to challenge the country's Law and Justice government since losing the 2015 Polish election. [Aleks Szczerbiak](#) writes that the opposition lacks convincing leadership and has failed to offer a credible and attractive alternative to Poles on the issues that they care most about. But the right-wing ruling party will go into local elections in autumn with high expectations and the most high profile contests will be fought in areas where the opposition is relatively strong.

Poland's weak and divided liberal-centrist opposition has failed to mount an effective challenge to the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) grouping, the country's ruling party since its decisive autumn 2015 election victory. In March, the '[Pooling the Poles](#)' micro-blog that aggregates voting intention surveys showed Law and Justice averaging 42% support compared with only 26% for the liberal-centrist Civic Platform (PO), Poland's governing party between 2007-15 and currently the main opposition grouping, 9% for the anti-establishment 'Kukiz '15' grouping, 7% for the smaller liberal 'Modern' (Nowoczesna) party and the communist successor Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), and 5% for the agrarian Polish Peasant Party (PSL).

Since the election, Civic Platform, and the liberal-centrist opposition more generally, have been constantly on the back-foot. They have focused on constitutional and 'rule of law' issues that are too distant and abstract for most ordinary Poles and failed to offer a credible and attractive programmatic alternative on the more pressing social and economic concerns that they care most about. Here Law and Justice is clearly more in tune with public opinion as a result of its generous, high profile social spending programmes which were the key to the party's 2015 election victory and on which it appears to have delivered in office while maintaining strong economic growth. At the same time, Law and Justice has outmanoeuvred the opposition by highlighting issues such as the European migration crisis where the overwhelming majority of Poles share its vehement opposition to the EU's compulsory migrant relocation quota scheme, while Civic Platform's stance on this issue has been equivocal and inconsistent.

The opposition's strategy of trying to exert pressure on the government by invoking the disapproval of, and presenting the Law and Justice government as isolated within, international institutions such as the EU has proved ineffective; indeed, arguably counter-productive. Although Poles are overwhelmingly pro-EU they also do not like what they see as external interference in the country's domestic political affairs and are critical of the opposition's attempts to use the Union's institutions and forums such as the European Parliament (EP) in ways that they feel could weaken Poland's international standing and harm the national interest.

No return to the status quo ante

On numerous occasions, the opposition has shown itself to be tactically inept, confusing and alienating even many of its core supporters. For example, in January, forty Civic Platform and 'Modern' deputies abstained in, or absented themselves from, a vote on whether to refer a draft bill aimed at liberalising Poland's abortion law promoted by the feminist 'Save the Women' (Ratujmy Kobiety) civic committee to the parliamentary committee stage (three Civic Platform deputies also voted to reject the bill outright and were then expelled from the party's parliamentary caucus).

This meant that the draft law could not proceed beyond its first reading in spite of the fact that sixty Law and Justice deputies, including party leader Jarosław Kaczyński, actually voted against rejecting it at this stage. (These deputies strongly opposed the draft law's provisions but argued that all civic-sponsored bills that collected the requisite number of supporting signatures should, as a matter of principle, be allowed to proceed to the committee stage.) The failure of Civic Platform and 'Modern' to take a decisive stance on this issue provoked a wave of criticism in the liberal-left media and even anti-opposition street demonstrations by feminist and non-parliamentary left-wing groupings.

The liberal-centrist opposition also lacks a strong and convincing leader around whom government opponents can rally. Civic Platform leader Grzegorz Schetyna lacks dynamism and charisma, but when he was elected in January 2016 was nonetheless seen as an effective political operator who could restore a sense of discipline and purpose to the party. However, his failure to land any blows on the Law and Justice government, exemplified by the fiasco surrounding the abortion law vote which severely damaged Mr Schetyna's reputation as an effective party manager, has led to constant criticism of him in the liberal-left media. He now has to spend far too much time in internal party battles with competing coteries to shore up his leadership. It is not surprising that a March survey conducted by the CBOS polling agency found that only 21% of respondents declared confidence in Mr Schetyna compared with 51% who did not, making him Poland's least trusted politician.



Grzegorz Schetyna, Credit: [EPP \(CC BY 2.0\)](#)

More fundamentally, the liberal-centrist opposition has failed to grasp the nature of the social changes that have occurred in Poland in recent years, particularly the increased insecurity and frustration among those Poles who felt that they had not shared fully in the country's increasing prosperity. Law and Justice's 2015 election victory reflected widespread disillusionment with the perceived arrogance of the country's ruling elite in general and the outgoing Civic Platform-led government in particular; with a strong prevailing mood that it was time for change. Most Poles do not want to see a return to the status quo ante which they still associate with the liberal-centrist parties that they rejected so decisively in 2015. While many have misgivings about some of Law and Justice's policies and actions, particularly its programme of radical state reconstruction, they also feel that the government is at least trying to tackle many of the pathologies which previous administrations appeared content to ignore.

A potential opening

In fact, the opposition retains considerable political assets. These include: a sizeable potential base of popular support, especially in the larger towns and cities; substantial financial resources and the backing of most of the privately-owned media; significant influence within, and widespread support from, the country's cultural, legal and business elites; and close links with the EU political establishment and Western opinion-forming media, many of whom share their dislike of Law and Justice.

Moreover, in recent weeks the Law and Justice government has increasingly found itself on the defensive. After a successful launch of his premiership last December and a well-received government re-shuffle in January, which led to an increase in support for the ruling party, new Law and Justice prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki faced a major crisis concerning the country's relations with Israel – and, as a consequence, the United States, the administration's key foreign policy ally.

This was prompted by the passage at the end of January of a controversial anti-defamation law which makes it a criminal offence to falsely ascribe responsibility to the Polish nation or state for the crimes committed by Nazi Germany, but which Israeli critics argued could lead to the punishment of Holocaust survivors for their public testimony against Poles who harmed Jews during the German occupation. This was followed by controversy over the generous bonuses paid to Mr Morawiecki's predecessor Beata Szydło and other ministers. All of this has provided the opposition with potential openings that it can exploit.

Difficult elections for the ruling party

Moreover, the next major test for the Polish parties will be the autumn 2018 local elections and these could be very problematic for Law and Justice. For a start, the ruling party is likely to enter the local election campaign with extremely high expectations: anything significantly less than the 38% national share of the vote that it secured in 2015 is likely to be viewed as a disappointment. At the same time, much attention will be focused on the results of the mayoral elections in Poland's large towns and cities, where Law and Justice is relatively weak and the situation should be favourable for the liberal-centrist opposition.

Winning a mayoral race in any of these areas would be a huge achievement for Law and Justice, particularly given that victorious candidates have to secure more than 50% of the vote, if necessary in a second round run-off. Indeed, the most prestigious and high profile contest will be the Warsaw mayoral election which will be an extremely difficult one for Law and Justice, but the ruling party appears to have manoeuvred itself into a position where this could become a key symbolic test and one of the main prisms through which the local election results will be evaluated.

In fact, mayoral contests are often heavily localised and personalised, and in most towns the favourites will be non-party independents. Moreover, given that Poland's 16 regional authorities play a major role in distributing EU funds and are a key source of local party patronage, the most politically significant of the local polls will actually be the regional assembly elections. These are also the best indicators of party support as they are the only local government tier where elections are fought on national party lines.

However, given its weak coalition potential, if Law and Justice does not win outright majorities in these assemblies (it is hoping to do so in at least half of them) then it will struggle to secure control of many regional authorities, even if it emerges as the largest single party. In the previous 2014 local elections, for example, although Law and Justice narrowly won the largest share of the vote nationally and in half of the assembly elections, it was only able to secure a majority in one regional authority while Civic Platform took control of the remainder either on its own or as part of a coalition. One major problem here is that it is not clear how well 'Kukiz '15' – which is Law and Justice's most viable coalition partner, but only has a very weak local organisational base – will perform in these elections.

At the end of January, in order to consolidate their support, and as an attempt to regain the political initiative following the abortion law vote fiasco, Civic Platform and 'Modern' agreed to stand joint lists in the regional assembly elections. (The two parties also announced that they hoped to stand joint candidates for mayoral contests in the large towns and cities, but so far have only been able to reach agreement in Warsaw and Szczecin.)

At the same time, Law and Justice could be squeezed in smaller towns by the Peasant Party, Civic Platform's junior governing coalition partner between 2007-15, which is hovering around 5% in national opinion polls but always performs much better in local elections due to its strong grassroots organisational base and the fact that there is always a higher turnout in these polls in rural areas that form the bedrock of its support. In 2014 the party won nearly 24% of the regional assembly vote; although Law and Justice supporters questioned the reliability of these results.

Changing opposition fortunes?

For sure, while the local elections will be very difficult for Law and Justice, disappointing results for Civic Platform will not only threaten Mr Schetyna's leadership but also raise fresh doubts about the future of a party which many voters continue to support out of habit and a lack of alternatives. This could happen if, for example, the party loses control of a majority of regional assemblies, or suffers a symbolic defeat in Warsaw or another large town or city currently run by a prominent Civic Platform politician.

Nonetheless, some commentators argue that, however weak and divided the opposition may appear to be now, it will present a united front at the next parliamentary election, scheduled for autumn 2019, and point to the agreement of joint Civic Platform-Modern regional election lists as the start of this process of (at least partial) consolidation. Although the opposition is currently at a very low ebb, better-than-expected local election results would provide it with a major boost and could play a major role in helping to change its fortunes in the run-up to next year's decisive parliamentary poll.

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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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