

Maria Winclawska

RADICAL TURN, FRAGILE DEMOCRACY:

Poland After the 2025 Presidential Election



Main thesis

1. The polarisation traditionally structured around the PiS–KO divide has, under the combined influence of shifting electoral behaviour – particularly among younger cohorts – and the increasing salience of radical parties and their programmatic appeals, transformed into a deeper cleavage based on identity and values.
2. Moreover, the growing support for the radical right in Poland moves the political scene to the right overall, causing mainstream parties to radicalise their narratives and introduce more radical policy proposals to cater to voter expectations.
3. With Karol Nawrocki’s win in the 2025 presidential elections, this process goes even further. It poses a challenge not only for the Coalition government of Donald Tusk, but also for the restoration of the rule of law in Poland and, therefore, to relations between Poland and the EU.

Introduction

The 2025 presidential election in Poland has intensified the structural tensions embedded in the country’s democratic framework. On the strategic level, Karol Nawrocki’s win, supported by Law and Justice (PiS), was a major setback for the ruling coalition. This second group has been dubbed by the liberal media as the ‘democratic’ bloc and took power in the 2023 elections after eight years of PiS government.

The coalition was convinced that Rafał Trzaskowski, a candidate supported by the Civic Coalition (KO), would win the elections. After the difficult cohabitation with President Andrzej Duda (PiS), Trzaskowski’s win was to guarantee the government’s discretionary authority in pursuing its objectives and conducting its policies. Nawrocki’s victory constituted a sobering defeat for the government, which foreshadows a further deterioration of relations within the framework of Poland’s dual executive authority.¹

On the systemic level, change in the parties’ support can be observed. The electoral campaign, the narratives proposed by many of the main parties, and the results of these elections, have consolidated the rightward shift of the Polish political stage. As a result, far-right, national conservative, populist, and Eurosceptic candidates won 53 per cent of the vote in the first round of this election, which enjoyed a high electoral turnout of 67 per cent. Also, the recent polls show that this side of the political stage has higher support. If the parliamentary elections were to take place in October 2025, populist, national conservative, and far-right parties would win them.² These elections have also confirmed what has been observed for some time, namely, that the duopoly of PiS and KO appears

1 In the Polish parliamentary system of government, it is the government that conducts internal and foreign policies. However, the president, who is elected through direct elections and thus has a strong social mandate, can block government’s decisions and veto bills passed by the parliament. To override the presidential veto, a qualified majority of 3/5 is required, with at least half of the statutory number of MPs (230) present.

2 Sondaże Polska (2025). Sondaże Polska. Podział mandatów, <https://ewybory.eu/sondaze/>, October 8.

to be weakening.³ They still dominate the Polish political stage and will likely remain the largest political parties for some time to come. However, the patterns of political rivalry are changing. Politics is becoming more radical and the parties are seeking to find supporters not as much in the centre of the political stage, as it was before, but more often by reaching out to the edges.

A telling example of this dynamic is the rise of three radical parties and their good electoral results: the radical right and Eurosceptic Confederation (Konfederacja), the extremist hard Eurosceptic Confederation of the Polish Crown (Konfederacja Korony Polskiej), and the far left – Together (Razem). They all had their presidential candidates, with Confederation's candidate Sławomir Mentzen receiving 15 per cent of votes. At the same time, Grzegorz Braun, an even more radical politician than Mentzen, surpassed 6 per cent, while Adrian Zandberg, supported by Razem, got almost 5 per cent of votes. In October 2025, the polling support for their three parties exceeded 20 per cent, which means that many voters are willing to support the most radical groups on the Polish political scene.

The time between the 2025 presidential elections and the 2027 parliamentary elections (if they occur within the constitutional term) will be challenging for both the governing coalition and the main opposition party, PiS. The first group has already experienced how difficult a coalition it is with four coalitional partners. The important position of prime minister is held by the largest party KO, with three small groups, ranging from the left-wing New Left, through to the centre-right Poland 2025 and conservative Polish People's Party (PSL), each having their own ambitions, priorities, and 'red lines' that they do not want to cross in coalitional bargaining. Due to this, many internal disputes have been argued in public. This has resulted in relatively low governmental effectiveness, which is perceived as even weaker by the public. This has fuelled voter disappointment and disillusionment, and ultimately has led to declining approval ratings. Moreover, under circumstances in which there is a president from PiS and disagreements within the coalition, the restoration of the rule of law in Poland is very difficult, if not impossible, since the necessary changes require legislative actions that would be blocked by Nawrocki. So, a legal impasse will only exacerbate existing legal chaos, and democratic backsliding will not be reversed. A compromise between the government and PiS, which would probably be the only way out of the situation, seems unattainable, since both sides would perceive it as a betrayal of their interests, values, and ideals.

Additionally, for the main opposition party, PiS, which gained momentum after Nawrocki's win and is believed to be on a path to power, perspectives do not appear to be so clear and straightforward. First, the party cannot be certain how much the President, who has never been a PiS politician or even a party member, would be compliant and respectful to the party and its chairman, Jarosław Kaczyński, and how his policies and actions would affect the party's message. Second, PiS is feeling growing pressure from the radical right-wing Confederation, which holds a strong third position in the polls with almost 14% in the last few months.

3 Two candidates supported by the main parties, Rafał Trzaskowski (PO) and Karol Nawrocki (PiS) together received in the first round of the elections 61 per cent of votes. It was the second worst result in the history of the rivalry between PiS and KO in the presidential and parliamentary elections, with the worst being in 2005.

Societal consequences

Poland has been a deeply polarised country. Since 2005, KO and PiS have won every consecutive election and have alternately held power. In almost every parliamentary or presidential election (the first round), they have gained more than 2/3 of all the votes. This divide built by these two parties has had an impact on their electorates, which, as time has passed, have become more distrustful or even hostile towards each other.⁴ The difficulties that have appeared with this gap can be seen in the words of the respondents from focus groups, where the supporters of Trzaskowski described ‘us’ as the Poles, and ‘them’ as morons, while Nawrocki’s supporters divided the voters into ‘us – patriots’ and ‘them – traitors’.⁵ But the consequences of this cleavage go further: when one of the political ‘camps’ wins elections and forms the government, the other tries to undermine this victory and deny its legitimacy, which further reduces confidence in the state and its public institutions, i.e., government, courts, and the electoral system. This further erodes trust among people and triggers strong emotional reactions and political stress among the voters.⁶ This political rivalry presents elections as if they are a ‘zero-sum game’.

The presidential elections of 2025 confirmed these deep societal divisions. However, they also proved what has already been observed for some time: rather than a binary competition between KO and PiS, another axis of division that is more fundamental is gaining prominence. This has taken the form of a collision between supporters of liberal-democratic governance and values, and backers of right-wing populist, anti-systemic and sovereigntist alternatives. The main cleavages are embedded in issues such as the understanding of national sovereignty, particularly in the context of EU integration, EU policies, and human rights, including those related to gender and LGBTQ+ issues, as well as stances towards Ukraine and Ukrainians in Poland.

A policy area in which inter-party differentiation remains relatively limited is migration. The parties present a restrictive position on migration, especially from non-European countries. This is primarily based on security concerns (shared by all), but also on identity arguments (more frequently used by PiS and Confederation) and a rejection of the Migration Pact. Even though neither Law and Justice nor Confederation explicitly calls for Poland to withdraw from the EU, the narratives of both suggest that this option is on the table, especially if Poland were to become a net contributor to the EU budget and its internal integration continues.⁷ However, in the elections of 2025, a new political actor emerged – the Confederation of the Polish Crown, which is led by Grzegorz Braun.⁸ This party promotes a nationalist, sovereigntist, and ultraconservative agenda, rooted in traditional Catholic

4 Górska, P. (2019). Polaryzacja polityczna w Polsce. Jak bardzo jesteśmy podzieleni? Raport. Centrum Badań nad Uprzedzeniami. Warszawa. <http://cbu.psychologia.pl/wp-content/uploads/sites/410/2021/02/Polaryzacja-polityczna-2.pdf>; Zagala, Zbigniew (2020). Partie polityczne i ich elektoraty. Od sympatii do antagonizmu. Na przykładzie Platformy Obywatelskiej i Prawa i Sprawiedliwości. *Przegląd Politologiczny*, 25(2), 193–205. <https://doi.org/10.14746/pp.2020.25.2.14>

5 Sadura, P., Sierakowski S. (2025). Nowy duopol obali ten system. Raport z badań po wyborach prezydenckich. Instytut Krytyka Polityczna, p. 8.

6 Haidt, J. (2012). *The righteous mind. Why good people are divided by politics and religion*. New York: Pantheon Books; Skarżyńska, K. (2025). Obywatele w politycznym stresie. In: P. Sadura, W. Rafałowski (Eds.), *Państwo, demokracja, wybory. Studia dedykowane prof. Jackowi Raciborskiemu*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo UW (in print).

7 Winclawska, M., Pacześniak, A. (2026). Deconstructing Polish Euro-Enthusiasm: The Illusory Incongruence of Party Narratives with Public Opinion. *Politics and Governance*, 14, Article 11082.

8 This party split from Confederation, when Grzegorz Braun decided to run for president against the Confederation candidate Sławomir Mentzen.

values. It promotes strong opposition to the European Union, pejoratively calling it ‘Euro-kolkhoz’ — a term evoking the image of a coercive, centrally controlled system reminiscent of Soviet collective farms. To the surprise of many, Braun gained relatively high support in the presidential election, above 6 per cent, which gave him fourth place overall. The electoral result of Grzegorz Braun should be read as a rising alarm about the growing appeal of extremists. It should also be interpreted as a part of a broader far-right swing in Poland and in Europe.

The radicalisation of electoral preferences is particularly evident among the youngest cohort of voters, aged 18 to 29. However, the phenomenon is not confined to this age group. In the first round of the 2025 presidential election, candidates from the political extremes, such as Sławomir Mentzen and Grzegorz Braun from the radical right, and Adrian Zandberg from the far-left party Together (even though there is less radicalism within the left) jointly secured almost 60 per cent of the youth vote with a high turnout. Notably, support for right-wing radicals significantly outpaced that of the left, with Mentzen and Braun receiving more than twice as many votes as Zandberg. Moreover, if only this age group participated in the first round, then the run-off would have been contested between Mentzen and Zandberg, excluding both mainstream candidates.

The youth preferences indicate a significant generational gap in voting behaviour between the younger and older cohorts, a gap that is much wider than in the past. However, the question remains open as to whether the young in future elections will maintain their voting patterns and support radical candidates and parties, indicating a lasting ideological alignment and enduring political loyalty, or whether, with age, they will choose to vote for mainstream political forces. Moreover, even though the young cohort, due to demographic processes, is shrinking in size, they have become more mobilised in the last two elections than the older generations. In the past, an opposite trend was observed, with the young not being interested in politics, meaning they were more difficult to mobilise and thus voted less often. The high level of political mobilisation among young people may prove to be a lasting trend, as the increase in turnout appears to be rooted in a disenchantment with current politics and its main actors, as well as genuine grievances, identity concerns, and frustration with the outcomes produced by representative mechanisms. However, maintaining higher turnout will depend on how political actors respond: whether they offer issues that matter to young people, whether civil society keeps them engaged, and whether institutional incentives (such as election timing and campaign outreach) remain favourable.

The radicalisation of Polish politics has consequences for the language used in the public sphere, which is increasingly brutal, especially on social media, and in the behaviour of supporters of both sides of the political divide. The intensification of verbal attacks — emanating from both segments of the electorate and from political elites — alongside the normalisation of aggressive conduct by actors on both sides of the political spectrum, reflect a broader erosion of democratic and liberal norms in Poland. Moreover, such behaviour is frequently met with silent acquiescence, or even tacit endorsement, by the political class.

Political consequences

President Karol Nawrocki took office in August 2025. Already in his inauguration address, he presented his adversarial stance towards the Tusk government, criticising it sharply for its policies, unfulfilled electoral promises, and breach of the rule of law. Nawrocki, rather

than positioning himself as willing to work with the government as a consensus builder, a role imposed on him by the constitution, situates himself as the government's critique, reviewer, and supervisor. He aims to be active through his legislative initiatives and stretch his prerogatives to the maximum, or even beyond. For example, he has already announced that he will appoint and promote judges based on his own discretion and invite the government to brief him on the state of public investments. Moreover, Nawrocki has openly expressed ambitions to displace the current government, marking a departure from traditional cohabitation norms. This is true even more than during the time of President Duda, with whom collaboration, according to Tusk, was 'unsophisticated and highly predictable'. Cooperation with Nawrocki is going to be much tougher for the government, since the presidential palace has become a power base that PiS seeks to utilise as a platform for exerting influence in opposition against the incumbent government. Even more importantly, it is also a vehicle for mobilising support ahead of the parliamentary elections.

However, Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of PiS, with whom Nawrocki works in the same camp on the anti-Tusk front, does not currently appear inclined to exercise a constructive veto against the government. This is because such a move would require him to seek coalition partners, potentially more than one, to form a viable majority. Instead, he is strategically focused on consolidating the party, redistributing responsibilities, and activating local structures so they are ready for the forthcoming elections. So, for now, despite his confrontational rhetoric, Kaczyński seems to be preparing for a political return by patiently observing how Tusk navigates the challenges of governance under difficult and unfavourable conditions.

Simultaneously, he is working to erode support for Confederation, either by framing it as a junior partner of PiS or by exploiting internal divisions. This is particularly clear between the National Movement, led by Krzysztof Bosak who is more responsive to cooperation with PiS, and New Hope, headed by Sławomir Mentzen, whose economically libertarian stance positions him, theoretically, as a potential coalitional partner to KO. Thus, Mentzen's strategy appears to be one of tactical ambiguity, aimed at maximising leverage after the 2027 elections when the parliamentary arithmetic will become clear. For the time being, he criticises both the government and PiS. This strategy, however, may prove impossible to sustain because the great majority of Confederation's voters would not accept a coalition with KO. Indeed, in the second round of the presidential election, despite the lack of Mentzen's clear endorsement of Nawrocki, almost 90% of his voters from the first round supported the current president.

The contest between the 'big palace' — the president's residence — and the 'small palace' — the prime minister's office — largely revolves around a struggle to discredit the opponent by emphasising their perceived incompetence and limited capacity for effective actions. The outcome of the upcoming elections will depend significantly on which power centre can construct a more persuasive political narrative of leadership and governance. Currently, President Nawrocki appears to hold an advantage as a newcomer with fresh social legitimacy and a projected image of energy and agency, especially amid declining government approval ratings. Nevertheless, the persistent obstruction of governmental initiatives by the head of state could undermine the president's image over time, fostering public perceptions of political deadlock and ineffective governance. Such dynamics not only risk diminishing the legitimacy of both institutions but may also further erode citizens' trust in

democratic processes and contribute to a broader climate of political instability. This could thereby weaken the already fragile or maybe even ‘hybridising’ Polish democracy.

The challenges faced by Donald Tusk’s government originate not only from external pressures but also from internal dynamics within the governing coalition, which is made up of four ideologically diverse parties. Although they share a common denominator in their opposition to PiS, their visions of governance, policy priorities, and strategies for implementation diverge to a great extent. These ideological differences manifest in debates over economic policy, social reforms, and institutional arrangements, which, in the context of inflated social expenditures and a high budget deficit inherited from the previous administration, coupled with substantial defence spending requirements, make the coalition inherently fragile. The necessity to accommodate such a broad spectrum of preferences increases the transaction costs of decision-making, risks legislative gridlock, and provides opportunities for veto players to exert disproportionate influence. Ultimately, the durability and effectiveness of this coalition will depend on its ability to reconcile programmatic differences while maintaining unity in the face of political and economic challenges. Currently, the governing coalition is exhibiting growing signs of internal discord, strategic exhaustion, and a diminishing capacity for reform. In effect, key democratic reforms, particularly in the judiciary, face substantial institutional and political obstacles.

International politics

In Europe, the 2023 election results were widely perceived as a democratic turning point, with the reinstatement of democratic norms providing a signal of Poland’s reintegration into the liberal European mainstream after eight years of a populist government. “It’s a striking win for politician Donald Tusk and his Civic Coalition,” wrote Ian Bremmer from Time, “it’s also great news for the European Union, which can expect a new government in Warsaw that will respect the EU rules on democracy and rule of law”.⁹ This victory was all the more significant given the broader European context: just two weeks earlier, Slovakia’s elections had been won by the left-nationalist leader Robert Fico, while far-right forces, for example, in Austria, France and Germany, were enjoying high polling numbers.

While relations with the EU have improved significantly, and the EU has released funds from the Recovery and Resilience Plan for Poland (KPO), efforts to reinstate the rule of law are either being implemented at a slow pace and with limited capacity or have reached an impasse. After almost two years, for example, Poland is *de facto* deprived of the Constitutional Tribunal. The Supreme Court is also in a deadlock, with some of its divisions and particularly ‘neo’judges unacknowledged and lacking legitimacy according to the Court of Justice of the European Union. Some prosecutorial offices are still filled with partisan appointees from the former administration. Moreover, according to Transparency International’s reports, since 2015, Poland has been perceived as a state with growing corruption, and the change of government has not reversed this negative trend. These all weaken the country’s democratic credentials, both domestically and on the international stage. With the new President, the situation is not going to improve. On the contrary, further deterioration is probable. This is especially true as the pressure from the EU on the Polish government to restore the rule of law could potentially intensify. Tusk’s position within the Union may also weaken, with Poland possibly seen again as a country on the road to right-wing populism taking back control.

⁹ Bremmer, I. (2023). *What Poland’s Surprise Election Means for the E.U.*, Time, <https://time.com/6325783/polands-election-eu-donald-tusk-essay>

Moreover, Karol Nawrocki, much like his political base, adheres to the concept of sovereignty and presents a critical stance toward the European Union. He also underlines his robust and close bilateral relations with the USA and President Trump, with whom he shares a similar ideological stance, and who unequivocally supported Nawrocki during his election campaign. Trump would welcome Nawrocki's electoral victory in Poland as a favourable development.

Since the PiS government came to power in 2015, international policy has largely become a function of domestic politics, and though international politics, according to the constitution, is conducted by the government, with which the president has the obligation to collaborate, former President Duda pursued, and President Nawrocki is highly likely to pursue, a rather confrontational politics using the international arena to win domestic clashes.

Conclusions and scenarios

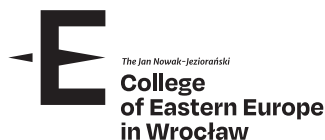
While the electoral victory of Civic Coalition and its partners on 15 October 2023 raised hopes that Poland had reversed its trajectory of democratic backsliding, the 2025 presidential victory of Karol Nawrocki, together with the significant results of far-right candidates, opens a plausible path to a PiS–Confederation (potentially even involving the Confederation of the Polish Crown) majority in 2027. While this scenario currently appears the most probable, it is by no means the only conceivable outcome. At least several alternative scenarios can be envisaged. Which of them proves to be feasible will depend on the convergence of various factors. The first, and the most desirable from the perspective of Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of PiS, would entail the party securing an outright electoral victory under favourable conditions and thereby forming, as in the years 2015–2023, a de facto single-party government. This scenario, however, presupposes a rather unlikely sequence of developments. The first part would involve a significant weakening or internal fragmentation of the parties located to the right of PiS. At the same time, this would be combined with the failure of smaller parties — such as Nowa Lewica, PSL, and Polska 2050, which currently govern in coalition with KO — to surpass the electoral threshold. The second involves Confederation choosing to form a coalition with KO rather than PiS. While such an outcome might appear plausible within the logic of coalition bargaining, it is difficult to imagine that Confederation's electorate would accept this alliance. In contrast, a coalition with PiS would almost certainly be more acceptable to its supporters. The third scenario assumes that KO remains in power, as PiS once again lacks the capacity to build a coalition, while KO's current partners succeed in crossing the electoral threshold. Alternatively, a newly established liberal-oriented party — like those that appeared in 2011, 2015, and to some extent in 2023 — could enter parliament and naturally position itself as KO's coalition ally. The third scenario foresees a post-election split within Confederation into two factions: the National Movement, led by Krzysztof Bosak, and New Hope, led by Sławomir Mentzen. Bosak's faction would seek a coalition with PiS, while Mentzen's would aim for an alliance with KO. The coalition securing the greater number of seats would then be able to form a government. Finally, the last scenario envisions Confederation declining to join either of the main parties, at most offering conditional support to a minority government, while strategically waiting for early elections in the hope of strengthening its position and eventually taking the lead in coalition negotiations in the subsequent parliament.

In the shorter term, an intensifying conflict between the government and the president appears inevitable, with the latter pursuing his apparent aspiration to expand his prerogatives

beyond their constitutional scope. Nawrocki is also positioning the presidency as both a symbolic bastion of opposition and a strategic platform for the future parliamentary campaign. If this confrontational equilibrium persists or intensifies, Poland risks a drift toward institutional immobilism and, thus, democratic erosion.

The victory of Karol Nawrocki should also be considered in the context of the growing appeal of radical narratives, which are predominantly right wing, but also, though to a lesser degree, left wing, among segments of the Polish electorate. It also reflects changing social polarisation and a shift in the national value system, in which ‘authenticity’, strength and anti-establishment sentiments are more valued than consensus, compromise, the rule of law and stability. It is now possible to see a system in which the normalisation of radical political language, actions and attitudes is becoming increasingly accepted, both among the public and politicians. It should also be understood as a signal of fundamental challenges ahead for the reconstruction of democratic institutions and the stabilisation of political norms in Poland. Recent events underscore the difficulty of establishing a political environment in which compromise is feasible and institutional checks are respected, suggesting that the formal mechanisms of democracy may increasingly be subordinated to partisan objectives and extreme positions, with radical, populist policies possibly becoming mainstream for several electoral cycles.

Maria Winclawska is an associate professor of political science at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland.



October 2025

Edited by Adam Balcer
Proofreading: Niall Gray

ISBN 978-837893-355-9

DTP: Dolasu



Co-funded by
the European Union