

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 36 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN POLAND, 7 JUNE 2009

**Prof Aleks Szczerbiak
Sussex European Institute,
University of Sussex
Email: a.a.szczerbiak@sussex.ac.uk**

Key points:

- At 24.5%, turnout was the second lowest in any post-1989 Polish national election and nearly 20% down on the most recent 2007 parliamentary poll.
- The main governing party, the centre-right Civic Platform party, won a clear and overwhelming victory, increasing its share of the vote compared to 2007.
- The right-wing Law and Justice party confirmed its position as the main opposition party and easily saw off challengers on the Eurosceptic right, but lost ground to Civic Platform.
- Although the communist successor Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) made little headway in establishing itself as a contender for power, it also beat off a rival centre-left grouping to finish third.
- While Polish-EU relations and European trans-national party links did feature in the election, the main party campaigns focused primarily on domestic issues and viewed 'Europe' as a valence issue in which they competed over which of them could represent Polish national interests most effectively within the EU.
- Only the small, radical Eurosceptic parties gave a high profile to offering different visions of the EU's future trajectory but they, and other fringe parties, failed to make any impact.
- Although the election appeared to represent the further consolidation of the Polish party system around the two large right-wing blocs, other evidence suggests that the political scene is more fluid and unstable.

The June 2009 European Parliament (EP) election was held nearly two years after the most recent October 2007 parliamentary election in which the centre-right Civic Platform (PO) party had secured a clear victory.¹ After the election, the party formed a coalition government with the agrarian Polish Peasant Party (PSL), with party leader

¹ See: Aleks Szczerbiak, 'Europe and the October 2007 Polish parliamentary election,' *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Election Briefing No 37* at http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern_37_poland2007.pdf.

Donald Tusk becoming prime minister. With only four parties crossing the 5% threshold for parliamentary representation and the two largest securing more than four-fifths of the parliamentary seats, the 2007 election produced a more consolidated Polish party system. The Peasant Party was primarily an office-seeking party with a clearly defined rural-agricultural electoral constituency, making it a pragmatic negotiating partner with a fairly narrow policy agenda. The two governing parties also had somewhat different core electorates, with Civic Platform mainly an urban party, so were not competing directly for the same voters. All of this brought some stability to the Polish political scene.

However, in the right-wing Law and Justice party (PiS) the Tusk government faced a large and relentlessly hostile opposition backed by the President Lech Kaczyński. Given his close links with Law and Justice - Mr Kaczyński's twin brother, Jarosław, was the party's leader and prime minister in the previous government - the President soon emerged as a natural focus for opposition to the new government. The fact that Mr Tusk's ultimate political ambition was to replace Mr Kaczyński after the next presidential election, scheduled for autumn 2010, was a further source of tensions between the government and head of state. As a result, frequent clashes between the two main state organs became an ongoing feature of the political scene, with Mr Kaczyński using the various instruments at his disposal to hamper the new administration; particularly his legislative veto, which the government lacked the 60% parliamentary majority required to over-turn. However, the government and Mr Tusk generally proved much more adept at public relations than Mr Kaczyński, who damaged his public standing severely by coming across as a 'partisan president'.

The new Civic Platform-led government also made a concerted effort to change the country's image as a trouble-maker on European issues. The outgoing Law and Justice government and President Kaczyński had significantly re-oriented Poland's foreign policy which, they argued, needed to be 're-claimed' from a post-1989 establishment that had been insufficiently robust in defending Poland's interests abroad. This re-enforced an already-emerging perception that Poland was developing as a 'new awkward partner' within the EU. The new administration adopted a much more conciliatory tone with the Poland's EU partners, especially Germany with whom the 2005-7 Law and Justice governments and Mr Kaczyński had clashed bitterly.

The ongoing power struggle between the government and President also spilled over into the realm of international affairs. Although, the Polish constitution gives the government a leading role in foreign policy matters, it also assumes an important role for the President, but without delineating their respective powers precisely. This led to frequent clashes between the two state organs, with the government accusing Mr Kaczyński of attempting to pursue a parallel foreign policy. One of the most high profile and embarrassing of these occurred in October 2008 when Mr Kaczyński and the government disagreed over who had the right to determine the composition of the Polish delegation at that month's EU summit meeting in Brussels. This ended in a major political embarrassment for Poland, as Mr Kaczyński attended that summit against the government's wishes. Mr Tusk acknowledged subsequently that the row, particularly the government's decision to refuse Mr Kaczyński use of its official aircraft forcing him to charter a private jet, was one of his greatest political mistakes as prime minister.

Mr Kaczyński and the Civic Platform-led government also had a number of high-profile disputes over Poland's EU policy, most notably over the ratification of the Lisbon treaty and the timing of Polish accession to the euro zone. At one stage it was thought that, as part of the new government's efforts to make the country's approach to EU policy appear more predictable, Poland would be one of the first countries to ratify the Lisbon treaty. The more radical Eurosceptic parties that opposed the treaty on principle – notably, the clerical-nationalist League of Polish Families (LPR), a junior coalition partner in the previous Law and Justice-led government - failed to secure re-election to parliament in 2007. The new government did require the votes of the Law and Justice party to secure the two-thirds parliamentary majority needed to push the ratification bill through parliament. However, it was felt extremely unlikely that they would oppose ratification, given that it was President Kaczyński and the outgoing government that had actually negotiated the treaty; which, at the time, they proclaimed as a great foreign policy success. Nonetheless, in a reversal of one of Civic Platform's election pledges, the new government promised to respect the Polish exemption from the treaty's charter of fundamental rights negotiated by Mr Kaczyński, in order to avoid any risk that treaty ratification would be blocked. Law and Justice had argued that some of the charter's provisions could allow abortion, euthanasia and gay marriage to be imposed on Poland through the backdoor, as well as enabling Germans to make claims for properties that they lost after they were displaced from Poland following the Second World War.

In fact, ratifying the Lisbon treaty was to prove much more problematic than the government envisaged. Firstly, facing pressure from Eurosceptics within its parliamentary caucus and among its core supporters - particularly the clerical-nationalist, anti-EU broadcaster Radio Maryja, whose listeners formed an important component of its electoral constituency on the 'religious right' - in March 2008, Law and Justice threatened to vote against the ratification bill unless it was amended to include safeguards defending the terms of Poland's participation in the treaty negotiated by the previous government. Together with the country's opt out from the charter of fundamental rights, these also included a mechanism allowing a small group of countries to delay the passage of some EU decisions that were felt to be unfavourable to Poland. While insisting that it continued to support the treaty in principle, Law and Justice argued that the ratification act should include a clause requiring that future decisions on the charter opt-out and blocking mechanism could only be taken with the joint consent of the President, government and parliament. President Kaczyński supported the party in a controversial televised speech interspersed with clips showing, among other things, a pre-war map of Germany including territory that is now in Poland.

In response, the government argued Law and Justice's fears were unjustified and its proposed amendments un-constitutional, warning that Poland risked a huge loss of credibility if it failed to ratify the treaty. The Law and Justice party's stance also confused its more moderate, pro-EU parliamentary deputies, some of whom threatened to break ranks and vote with the government. In the event, the deadlock was broken when Mr Tusk and President Kaczyński hammered out a compromise deal that involved parliament approving the ratification bill in the version proposed by the government, while the concerns raised by Law and Justice would be addressed in a separate 'competencies law'. This would prevent politicians from changing the terms of Poland's participation in the treaty, as well as giving the President an

oversight power on the government's behaviour in future EU negotiations. The stand off appeared to end when the Polish parliament approved the treaty in April 2008.

However, the President then refused to sign the ratification bill into law, arguing that he was under no constitutional obligation to do so until the new 'competencies law' was approved. Shortly afterwards, following the rejection of the Lisbon treaty in the June 2008 Irish ratification referendum, Mr Kaczyński ignored calls from EU leaders for Poland to join other countries in continuing the ratification process in order to help force a re-vote in Ireland. The President claimed that the treaty had, effectively, ceased to exist and that signing it would be 'pointless' until the Irish changed their mind. For his part, Mr Tusk argued that ratification was in Poland's interests and that Mr Kaczyński's refusal to sign up to the treaty was a blow to the government's efforts to re-cast Poland as a reliable European partner.

The other source of political controversy as far as Polish-EU relations were concerned was Mr Tusk's unexpected September 2008 announcement that the government had decided to give much higher priority to early adoption of the euro. Initially, Mr Tusk declared that Poland was aiming to join the currency bloc in 2011 but later toned this down so that this would be the target year for Poland to meet the euro adoption criteria; the single currency would actually be introduced at the beginning of 2012. Mr Tusk's ambitious declaration was part of an attempt to 're-launch' his government, following mounting criticisms of its alleged passivity and failure to push ahead with reforms. Although, in recent years, Polish politicians had floated a number of possible dates for joining the euro zone, up until then the Civic Platform-led government had avoided giving any firm commitments. Later, it went on to use the global economic crisis to build political momentum for Poland to adopt the euro as quickly as possible; arguing that, whatever the short term costs, it was safer for the country to be inside the euro zone than outside.

However, joining the single currency zone required a constitutional amendment so that the European Central Bank could assume the National Bank of Poland's responsibilities to determine monetary policy. As the ruling coalition did not command the two-thirds parliamentary majority required to push through such an amendment - even with the votes of the communist successor Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), the smaller left-wing opposition party in parliament - it needed to secure the political agreement of the Law and Justice party. For its part, Law and Justice argued that Poland should only join the single currency zone when its economic development was comparable to richer EU states; which, it suggested, would be in around 15-20 years time. The party also made a referendum on the timing of Polish euro adoption a pre-condition of its support for the necessary constitutional amendments and, not surprisingly, received the backing of President Kaczyński on this issue. However, both the governing parties and the Democratic Left Alliance argued that such a referendum made no sense given that Poland was already committed to adopting the euro under the terms of its EU accession treaty, which Poles had approved overwhelmingly in an earlier June 2003 referendum.

At one point at the beginning of 2009 it looked possible that, in order to secure a political consensus, Mr Tusk would overcome his misgivings and call such a referendum to coincide with the EP elections. He was, no doubt, counting on the fact that Polish support for EU membership, which stood at record levels, would translate

into enthusiasm for early euro adoption. However, in the end Mr Tusk ruled out the idea when consultations between the government and opposition on the appropriate wording of the question broke down.²

The Campaign

However, although Polish-EU relations had been fairly prominent political issues during the last couple of years, the main party campaigns in the June 2009 EP election focused mainly on domestic rather than European themes. Civic Platform concentrated on the quality and ideological breadth of its MEP candidates, making a concerted effort to field well know politicians on its candidate lists who were previously associated with other political groupings. These included: Danuta Hubner, who was nominated Poland's first EU commissioner in 2004 by the then Democratic Left Alliance-led government; and Marian Krzaklewski, a former leader of the Solidarity trade union (which had always backed Law and Justice against the more business-friendly Civic Platform), who was founder and one-time presidential candidate of the now defunct right-wing, union-backed Solidarity Electoral Action grouping, which governed Poland between 1997-2001.³ Civic Platform planned to build its election campaign around a series of one-to-one debates between the party's candidates and their Law and Justice rivals; hoping thus to polarise the election as a straight choice between the two right-wing parties and, in some cases, expose their opponents' apparent lack of expertise in EU affairs. In the event, most Law and Justice candidates avoided these confrontations, focusing instead on party meetings with voters, although Civic Platform's ability to attract high profile names to run on its ticket did force Mr Kaczyński's party to change its strategy and allow several of its well-known parliamentary deputies to also stand as EP candidates.

For its part, Law and Justice attacked the Civic Platform-led government for its apparent failure to fulfil its bold 2007 election campaign promise that it would deliver an 'economic miracle'. As part of this, the party's principal weapon in the closing days of the campaign was a controversial but highly effective election broadcast featuring the same actress who had played a nurse in a 2007 Civic Platform advert, which ran under the slogan 'For a Better Life'. In an attempt to prove that Civic Platform had failed to keep its election promises, in the new broadcast the 'nurse' questioned why she voted for Mr Tusk's party and said that she intended to show the government a 'yellow card' by supporting Law and Justice instead.

Law and Justice also claimed that the government had hidden the true impact of, and failing to respond quickly and decisively enough to, the global economic crisis. This followed the party's strategic shift signalled at its January-February 2009 congress when the party adopted a new programme focusing on bread-and-butter economic issues and modernising Poland, pushing its traditional themes of fighting crime and corruption into the background. President Kaczyński tried to re-inforce this message

² He may also have been discouraged by opinion polls suggesting that, while most Poles supported their country joining the single currency in principle, they were much more evenly divided on the question of whether this should occur rapidly or not. Moreover, even if a majority did vote 'Yes', it was extremely unlikely that such a referendum would secure the 50% turnout threshold required under Polish law to make it constitutionally binding, which Law and Justice would almost certainly have interpreted as indicating a lack of public support for the Mr Tusk's plans.

³ In fact, in one of the greatest upsets of this election, Mr Krzaklewski actually failed to win an EP seat.

when, at the end of May, he became the first Polish head of state to make use of his constitutional right to address parliament (which was televised live) in order to voice his concern that the country might be sliding into a major recession and call upon the government to take more effective (if unspecified) measures to put the economy right. Law and Justice also accused the government of delaying the release of figures showing that its 2009 budget forecast was unrealistic until after the election. Civic Platform responded by arguing that, although growth had slowed considerably, Poland was still faring much better with the economic crisis than other countries, pointing to a European Commission report published during the campaign that showed the Polish economy was one of the few in Europe that was still expanding. It acknowledged that the government would have to amend the budget law in the light of reduced revenues from lower than expected growth rates, but justified delaying the revised projections until after the election on the grounds that it was waiting for more accurate economic data to become available.

Two other (linked) domestic political issues that surfaced during the campaign (although one of them also had a clear EU dimension) were: controversy surrounding the celebrations marking twenty years since the historic June 4 1989 partly-free parliamentary election that heralded the end of communist rule in Poland, and the future of the Polish shipbuilding industry. Civic Platform had hoped to secure political kudos from presiding over the 1989 anniversary celebrations, which fell on the Friday before the election and would be attended by a number of international leaders from the region. The commemorations were originally planned to take place at the historic Gdańsk shipyard, which had a particular symbolism as the place that originally gave birth to the anti-communist Solidarity movement back in 1980. However, the celebrations became marred in political controversy when the current Solidarity trade union - which, as noted above, was closely aligned with Law and Justice - announced that it would stage a demonstration on the same day to protest against the European Commission's ruling forcing Poland to re-structure its shipbuilding industry, which could have resulted in the closure of Gdańsk shipyard. Fearing that the union protests would be disruptive, Mr Tusk moved the main political part of the celebrations from Gdańsk to Kraków in southern Poland. Shipyard trade unionists had earlier clashed with police during the international congress of the European People's Party (EPP), the centre-right European party federation of which both Civic Platform and the Peasant Party were members, held in Warsaw at the end of April (see below). However, President Kaczyński boycotted the Kraków event choosing instead to attend the rival Solidarity-organised celebrations in Gdańsk; where Law and Justice also staged a simultaneous election rally.

In fact, 'Europe' was not completely absent from the election and actually featured as a more important sub-theme in the main party campaigns than it had in the previous 2004 EP poll, when EU issues were almost completely over-shadowed by domestic and non-European foreign policy themes.⁴ However, only the smaller, right-wing Eurosceptic parties - such as the Right-wing of the Republic (PR), a conservative-Catholic breakaway from Law and Justice led by former party deputy chairman Marek Jurek, the Polish branch of the trans-national Libertas grouping (see below), and the radical conservative-libertarian Union of Real Politics party (UPR) – gave a

⁴ See: Aleks Szczerbiak, 'The European Parliament Election in Poland, June 13 2004,' *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network European Parliament Election Briefing No 1* at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epnep2004poland.pdf>.

high profile to the future of the European integration project; all three of them opposing both the Lisbon treaty and Polish accession to the euro zone. The Peasant Party was the only major one to publish a separate EP election manifesto, while the Democratic Left Alliance simply translated the common programme of the Party of European Socialists (PES) trans-national federation into Polish. Rather, among the main parties, 'Europe' was viewed as a 'valence' issue in which they competed over who could represent Polish national interests most effectively within EU institutions. There appeared to be a broad (if not necessarily openly articulated) consensus that, as far as its EU relations were concerned, Poland's 'interests' were clear and shared. The only 'debate' was over which party was most effective at advancing these shared objectives.

For its part, Civic Platform highlighted its links with the European People's Party, the largest EP party grouping that launched its election manifesto at a political rally in Warsaw attended by all the major European centre-right party leaders. Mr Tusk's party argued that if it scored a clear election victory and increased the size of its representation within the centre-right grouping then one of its MEPs, former prime minister Jerzy Buzek, would have a strong chance of being elected President of the new EP. Law and Justice responded by claiming that it could achieve more in advancing Polish interests by being a major component in a smaller, but still influential, new anti-federalist EP grouping that it planned to form with the British Conservatives and Czech Civic Democrats. It also forced Mr Tusk's party to deny that the European People's Party congress, which the international party federation had paid for, marked Civic Platform's official campaign launch, following claims by Law and Justice that it had violated Polish law which banned foreign funding of party election campaigns.

Towards the end of the campaign, Law and Justice also tried to use Civic Platform's links with the German Christian Democrats (CDU), a fellow European People's Party member, to accuse the governing party of being unpatriotic. This followed a Christian Democrat election statement that, among other things, called for international condemnation of the post-war expulsion of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe and supported the expellees 'right to a homeland'. According to Law and Justice, the resolution meant that the Christian Democrats were trying to revive a simmering row over the rights of native Germans exiled after 1945 and encourage them to claim back land ceded to Poland. Arguing that the resolution was a direct consequence of the Civic Platform-led government's 'soft' policy towards Germany, Mr Kaczyński's party called upon Civic Platform to leave the European People's Party and co-operate with them in amending the constitution to prevent any German legal challenges to Polish ownership in the so-called 'recovered territories' of northern and western Poland. Earlier in the campaign, Law and Justice ran an election broadcast in which it attacked Civic Platform for being in the same European party federation as Erika Steinbach, a German Christian Democrat deputy and the controversial head of the Federation of Expellees. Interestingly, having undergone a major effort earlier in the year to re-package itself as a more consensual party, the use of anti-German themes in its EP campaign suggested that Law and Justice election strategists had decided to return to the more combative approach that appeared to come more naturally to them, and thereby make a clearer pitch to the party's core electorate.

In response, Civic Platform leaders argued that, while agreeing with Law and Justice that the Germans themselves bore the responsibility for the expulsions, Mr Kaczyński's party was stirring up an international conflict that could damage long-term efforts to improve Polish-German relations. Interestingly, at the very end of the campaign, Civic Platform also used the Law and Justice party's trans-national links to hit back at their opponents by running a series of election broadcasts pointing out that the British Conservatives were in favour of reducing EU regional aid and scrapping agricultural subsidies; which, they argued, ran directly counter to Poland's interests.

One minor party that attracted considerable attention during the campaign was Libertas, the trans-national Eurosceptic grouping set up by the millionaire Declan Ganley who played a key role in the successful No campaign against the Lisbon treaty in Ireland last year.⁵ The Polish branch of Libertas ran an electoral list comprising representatives from a number of small radical right parties, including the League of Polish Families. However, in a major public relations coup for Mr Ganley's party, the former Polish President and first historic leader of the Solidarity movement, Lech Wałęsa, gave a speech at the international convention held in Rome at the beginning of May to officially launch the Libertas EP campaign. Although Mr Wałęsa admitted that he participated in the event for a substantial appearance fee and not because he supported the party personally, he also praised Libertas and said that he agreed with some of Mr Ganley's views on the current condition of the EU. The Libertas campaign also received disproportionate coverage in news and current affairs programmes on Polish public TV – whose head, Piotr Farfał, had close links with the party. Although Libertas was considered mainly a potential electoral rival for Law and Justice on the Eurosceptic right, Mr Wałęsa's appearance at its events was also politically embarrassing for Civic Platform, given that the former President gave a keynote address at the Warsaw European People's Party congress held just before the Rome convention.

Results

Poland's 50 MEPs were elected from 13 electoral districts formed from Poland's 16 regional provinces, with 8 provinces merged to form 4 electoral districts, and the capital Warsaw forming a separate, extra district. In order to secure a share in the division of mandates, parties had to secure at least 5% of the vote nationally. In a provision designed to encourage electoral participation, there was no fixed number of seats allocated to each district. This was determined after the election on the basis of turnout in that district. First, the overall allocation of seats between the parties was determined nationally using the d'Hondt counting method (which favoured larger parties). Then, seats were divided between electoral districts according to turnout using the (more proportional) Hare-Niemayer method.

The election results contained few surprises and were broadly in line with opinion polls published during the campaign. The clear and overwhelming victory of Civic Platform - which, as **Table 1** shows, won 44.43% of the vote and 25 seats - was widely predicted. For sure, it is difficult to draw too many firm conclusions from the

⁵ See: Michael Holmes, 'The Referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon in the Republic of Ireland, 12 June 2008,' *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Referendum Briefing No 16* at http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern_no_16_ireland_08.pdf.

election result because of the extremely low turnout of only 24.5%, nearly 20% less than in the previous parliamentary election (53.9%). Although this represented a slight increase on the 2004 EP poll (20.9%), it was still the second lowest turnout in any post-1989 Polish national election and third lowest figure within the EU. Nonetheless, with that important caveat in mind, the fact that Civic Platform actually increased its share of the vote compared to the previous parliamentary election after nearly two years in office was an extremely good result for the party. This was particularly true when one considers that that the election was held in the middle of an economic crisis and that, according to the ‘second order election’ thesis, EP polls are generally used by voters as an opportunity for a cost-free protest vote against incumbent governments.⁶ Although, as noted above, the government’s critics accused it of hiding the real impact of the crisis, it is also true that most Poles had not yet begun to feel its effects particularly keenly.

Table 1: 2004 and 2009 EP election results, 2007 parliamentary election result

	2004		2007	2009		2007-9 Change
	%	MEPs	%	%	MEPs	
Civic Platform	24.10	15	41.51	44.43	25	+2.92
Law and Justice	12.67	7	32.11	27.40	15	-4.71
Democratic Left Alliance*	9.35	5	13.15	12.34	7	-0.81
Polish Peasant Party	6.34	4	8.91	7.01	3	-1.90
Centre-Left**	12.93	7		2.44		
Right-wing of the Republic***				1.95		
Self-Defence	10.78	6	1.53	1.46		-0.07
Libertas****	15.92	10	1.30	1.14		-0.16
Union of Real Politics*****	1.87			1.10		
Polish Labour Party	0.54		0.99	0.70		-0.29

Source: Polish State Electoral Commission (<http://www.pkw.gov.pl/>)

Notes:

*In 2004 and 2009 in alliance with the Labour Union. In 2007, as part of the ‘Left and Democrats’ coalition with Polish Social Democracy and the Democrats.

**2004 is the combined figure for the Democrats (known then as the Freedom Union, 7.33% and 4 seats), Polish Social Democracy (5.33% and 3 seats) and the ‘Greens 2004’ (0.27%).

***Fought the 2007 election in alliance with the League of Polish Families and the Union of Real Politics as the League of the Right-wing of the Republic (LPR).

****2004 figure is for the League of Polish Families, 2007 for the League of the Right-wing of the Republic.

*****Fought the 2007 election in alliance with the League of Polish Families and the League of Polish Families as the League of the Right-wing of the Republic.

In fact, the results were as much a reflection of the weakness of the opposition parties, particularly Law and Justice, as any particular enthusiasm for the government. Mr Kaczyński’s party finished second winning 27.4% of the votes and 15 seats, thereby confirming its position as the main opposition to Civic Platform and easily seeing off challengers on the political right such as the Right-wing of the Republic (1.95%) and Libertas (1.14%). However, in spite of strenuous efforts to transform its image, Law and Justice failed to dent Civic Platform’s lead and its share of the vote actually fell by nearly five per cent compared with 2007. Although the months leading up to the election saw a steady decline in the government’s public approval ratings, particularly

⁶ See: Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt, ‘Nine second order national elections: A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results’, *European Journal of Political Research*. Vol 8, 1980, pp.3-44.

evaluations of its handling of the economy, it still had more supporters than opponents. Mr Tusk remained one of Poland's most popular politicians and, for all his alleged indecisiveness, voters seemed to prefer his more consensual style of politics compared to that of his combative predecessor, Jarosław Kaczyński, and the two years of turbulent government that they associated with the previous Law and Justice-led administration.

The Democratic Left Alliance, fighting the EP election with the small social democratic Labour Union (UP) party, finished third with 12.34% of the vote and 7 seats. In spite of deep internal divisions over its future political strategy, the party not only survived, comfortably crossing the 5% threshold (about which there had been serious doubts at one point), but easily saw off a challenge from a rival centre-left electoral coalition, the Alliance for the Future-Centre-left (PdP-C). Dariusz Rosati - a one-time foreign minister in the 1990s and outgoing MEP from the Polish Social Democracy (SdPI) party, a breakaway from the Democratic Left Alliance - led the new centre-left grouping. Together with the Social Democrats, it also comprised the Democrats⁷ and the Polish Green party. In the event, the Alliance only secured 2.44% of the votes, in spite of the fact that its electoral lists included a number of well-known political figures associated with the Polish centre-left.

However, the Democratic Left Alliance made little headway in its efforts to establish itself as a serious contender for power and continued to be squeezed by the two big right-wing blocs; especially Civic Platform, whom many of the left-wing party's potential voters still saw as the most effective way of keeping Law and Justice out of office. This followed a weak campaign in which the Alliance struggled to find a clear message. Its main thrust reflected party leader Grzegorz Napieralski's long-term strategy of trying to re-build the Alliance's support by presenting it as a clearer and more unambiguously left-wing alternative to Civic Platform, and thereby detaching those centre-left voters currently supporting Mr Tusk's party. This included a particularly unconvincing attempt to draw attention to the presence of Mr Krzaklewski, an iconic hate figure for the Polish left during the late 1990s, on Civic Platform's candidates' list, together with a pitch to left-wing anti-clerical voters keen to limit the role of the Catholic Church in Polish public life.

The Peasant Party once again tried to present itself as a pragmatic and locally rooted party that could act as a calming influence on the political scene, particularly stressing its role in securing EU funds for farmers and rural communities. However, with its share of the vote falling by nearly 2% compared to 2007 to 7.01%, and with the party losing one of its four MEPs, the EP election result was a disappointing one and increased the chances of further tensions emerging within the governing coalition.

Perhaps surprisingly, given that as 'second order elections' typically see higher levels of support for radical and fringe groupings, all of the minor parties fell well short of the 5% threshold; including, in spite of its relatively high public profile, Libertas. It was always going to be difficult for a party with an exotic name and led by an Irishman

⁷ The Democrats party was the organisational successor to the Freedom Union (UW), a party formed through the merger of two 'post-Solidarity' liberal-centrist parties that, between them, supplied three of Poland's first four post-1989 prime ministers. The Freedom Union was a junior governing coalition partner in 1997-2000 but failed to secure re-election to parliament in 2001 following a split when Mr Tusk led most of his liberal supporters out of the party to form Civic Platform.

to win a substantial share of the vote running a campaign aimed primarily at the nationalist electorate; especially when it emerged that Irish Libertas candidates had suggested restricting Polish access to the their country's labour market. Moreover, while the party's main leaders in Poland were radical Eurosceptics, Mr Ganley's message was (notwithstanding his opposition to the Lisbon treaty) aimed more at trying to make the more democratic and transparent than opposing the idea of further European integration as such. Above all, Libertas was constrained by the fact that Law and Justice continued to enjoy the support of Radio Maryja, which, as noted above, was extremely influential among Poland's Eurosceptic 'religious right' electorate, a key target group for Mr Ganley's party.

Implications/Future Prospects

The June 2009 EP election in Poland conformed to the 'second-order' election thesis only in the sense that there was an unusually low turnout. Polish voters did not use it as an opportunity to punish the incumbent government and cast a protest vote. Civic Platform, the main governing party, retained a high level of support while radical and fringe parties made no impact. However, the government had yet to be tested in a real political crisis and the election result was more a reflection of the weakness of the opposition than enthusiasm for Civic Platform, suggest that the governing party's support base was broad but shallow. It was likely that the ruling coalition would come under much greater strain as the effects of the economic crisis started to be felt more keenly by Polish citizens and memories of the previous Law and Justice-led administration faded.

Although domestic themes dominated the campaign, Polish-EU relations were significant issues and certainly had a somewhat higher profile during this EP election than the previous one. However, this was not in the sense that the main parties competed over different visions of the EU's future trajectory and the nature of Poland's participation in the European project. Only the small, right-wing Eurosceptic parties gave a high profile to these kinds of issues. Indeed, the failure of Libertas and other radical Eurosceptic groupings, in stark contrast to the previous EP election when the League of Polish Families won the second largest share of the vote, suggested that there was no real demand in Poland for parties that were hostile to, or even extremely critical of, the European integration project. Rather, the main parties treated Europe as a 'valence issue' in which they competed over who could represent Polish 'national interests' most effectively within EU institutions. One aspect of this was the way that the major parties used their European party links, both positively to stress that they would help them to promote Poland's interests effectively and negatively by using statements made by their opponents' European partners as political weapons against them. As in the previous parliamentary election campaign two years earlier, divisions over 'Europe' between the main parties were, thus, largely assimilated into domestic party politics.

While the EP election was the most important test of public opinion in Poland since the last parliamentary poll, given the extremely low turnout, it was difficult to draw too many conclusions about long-term party development from the results. On the face it, the election appeared to represent the further consolidation and stabilisation of the Polish party system. Civic Platform and Law and Justice once again easily confirmed their positions as the largest parties, suggesting that Poland might be

settling into a pattern of bi-polar competition between the these two right-wing electoral blocs. For sure, this duopoly appeared likely to dominate the Polish political, at least until the autumn 2010 Presidential election. However, other evidence suggested that the situation more fluid and unstable than it appeared on the surface and that, in the longer-term, further party re-alignment was also a real possibility. Poland still has very high levels of electoral volatility compared with other European countries and, as this election once again confirmed, Polish electoral turnout remains incredibly low by European standards; both of which suggest that the Polish electorate remains relatively 'open' and available. Low levels of party institutionalisation and the extremely weak nature of the links between parties and their supporters mean that even the successful Polish parties remain extremely unstable constructs. Moreover, the big right-wing blocs have both failed to frame the kind of broad integrative narratives that play a crucial role in holding together diverse political formations in post-communist states, particularly when they encounter periods of political crisis.

In the short-term, the autumn 2010 presidential election looks like it could provide a catalyst for such a re-alignment, particularly if a strong 'third' candidate were to emerge and use it as a springboard to challenge the two big party blocs. In the longer-term, the most likely challenger to Civic Platform-Law and Justice duopoly looks most likely to emerge on the centre-left. In particular, there remain a sizeable number of potential centre-left voters who have supported Civic Platform in recent elections, but which the centre-right party will find it difficult to absorb in the longer term. Moreover, in spite of the fact that it ran an extremely poor election campaign, the Democratic Left Alliance was still able to hold on to its 2007 share of the vote of around 12-13% and easily see off a challenge from a centre-left rival. This suggests that not only does that the Polish centre-left have a fairly resilient core electorate, but also that the Democratic Left Alliance remains the most likely basis for any revived left that could emerged to fill the vacuum if the political circumstances were to change and became more favourable for this political formation.

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This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>.