



## **Weekly Briefing**

### **Poland political briefing:**

**This could be a year of rising tensions in the ruling coalition**

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## **This could be a year of rising tensions in the ruling coalition**

### **Summary**

*In Polish politics, 2022 is a year without national or local elections. However, the ruling United Right coalition will face challenges related to internal disputes with coalition partners and allies in order to maintain parliamentary majority in key votes. The government's popularity will be significantly affected by the economic situation related to high inflation and huge increases in electricity and gas prices, which translates into higher costs of living and doing business. The outcome of this year's parliamentary elections in Hungary may be of great importance for Polish politics. The defeat of Victor Orban, who is Poland's key European ally on the international arena, may give wind in the sails of the Polish opposition and accelerate its unification. The division in the Polish political arena over the government's move to increase Covid 19 vaccination coverage may also be significant. Tensions over the influx of illegal migrants to Poland inspired by Belarus remain open.*

### **Introduction**

Mid-year is the deadline for the wall on the border with Belarus, which is to protect against the influx of illegal migrants, to be put into operation. It is to be 1.5 high and nearly 200 km long. The issue of security and danger on Poland's eastern border, as in 2021, will be one of the dominant issues this year. The crisis on the border with Belarus could escalate at any moment. The decisive actions of the Polish government in this last year have received international support and are mostly well appreciated by the Polish public. The state of emergency on the Polish border has limited the decline in support of the Polish government coalition, and even caused it to increase by a few percent.

### **Tensions within the ruling United Right camp**

This year will certainly be marked by tensions in the government coalition. It consists of the currently dominant Law and Justice party and much smaller partners - Solidarna Polska and the Republican Party. The government is supported by smaller parliamentary circles and some independent MPs. The coalition enjoys a majority, but it is less stable than last year, before

deputy prime minister and development minister Jaroslaw Gowin and his party Porozumienie were thrown out of the government (some politicians from this party remained in the government or support it). For this reason, many of the government's important votes may require more consultations with small parties, the outcome of which may not always be 100 percent certain. Smaller parties and groups of MPs will try to take advantage of the lower stability of the government coalition to realize their increased expectations in this situation.

The most significant player in the current ruling coalition is the leader of the Solidarna Polska party and minister of justice Zbigniew Ziobro. His party positions itself as more "right-wing" - national-Catholic - than the dominant Law and Justice party. It criticizes the submissive - in its view - attitude of the Polish government towards the European Union, whose institutions are critical of Polish judicial reforms, as well as the "submissive" attitude towards the EU climate policy and the lack of payment of funds from the EU Reconstruction Fund to Poland. According to the party, the actions of EU institutions in pressing for the reform of Polish courts and energy transition (the Polish energy mix is 80 percent coal-based) violate Polish national interests and sovereignty.

There are also differences of opinion regarding the government's planned actions related to increasing public pressure on expanding the vaccination program and privileges for vaccinated persons. Solidarna Polska is taking advantage of the strong position of anti-vaccination groups in Poland and Poles' aversion to vaccinations.

Solidarna Polska's leader Zbigniew Ziobro also has ambitions to replace the ruling party's president Jaroslaw Kaczynski as the leader of Poland's political Right in the future. He is also in conflict with Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki. This situation will certainly generate tensions within the government.

### **Will the President of the ruling party leave the government?**

The most important event in 2022 may be for the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party the departure from the government of PiS chairman and deputy prime minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski, who would take charge of the party's affairs and prepare it for elections in 2023. Kaczynski himself has previously announced his departure from the government. For the president of the Law and Justice party, the most important thing is the law on national defense, which he announced last year together with the head of the Ministry of National Defense Mariusz

Blaszczak in response to the crisis on the border with Belarus. It aims to increase the size of the Polish army several times, modernize it and provide new funding. Its passage through the Sejm (lower chamber of Polish parliament) and, for example, the completion of a wall on the border could be the moment Kaczyński decides to leave the Council of Ministers. However, it is not certain that such a change will happen at all before the 2023 parliamentary elections.

### **Uniting the opposition?**

Despite the fact that Polish opposition's support in polls is higher than coalition's, and opposition's supporters are more numerous than the government's, it is not united, which weakens its position. The lack of unity in the Polish electoral system favors the winning groups. Nowadays, the United Right and especially Law and Justice enjoy the support of about 1/3 of Poles and are the most popular Polish political forces. Polls increasingly show, however, that Law and Justice will need an alliance with an additional coalition partner to govern in the next, third term (the current formal coalition of parties ran as a single party in previous elections). Its strength lies in uniting and mobilizing voters.

An important factor for the opposition was the return to Polish politics last year of former Polish prime minister and European Council chief Donald Tusk, who took back the helm of Poland's largest opposition party, the Civic Coalition. It enjoys the support of about 25 percent of Poles. Thanks to Tusk's return it has strengthened its position, but according to many experts Tusk's return has limited the possibilities of uniting the whole opposition. Other important players on the Polish opposition scene are also liberal "Poland 2050" - former journalist Szymon Holownia, which has a dozen or so percent support, national-libertarian "Konfederacja" (Konfederation) with about 10 percent support, "Nowa Lewica" (New Left) with about 7-10 percent support and Christian Democratic Polish Peasants' Party with about 5 percent. Out of these groups, the Confederation is favoring the government in some issues. The remaining groups have much in common, but they are so diverse and have such distinct leaders and interests that it makes it impossible to unite the opposition into a common bloc.

However, the year 2022 may accelerate the unification of the opposition in the face of the weakening and burning out of the current coalition's rule, caused by internal tensions and the deterioration of the economic situation due to high inflation and a huge increase in gas and electricity prices. An important factor in the process of uniting the opposition may be the outcome of the elections in Hungary. The victory of the united opposition with Victor Orban

(the main ally of the Polish government in Europe) may be a factor that will mobilize the Polish opposition to unite.

### **Strengthening the independence of President Andrzej Duda?**

An important question also concerns the future of President Andrzej Duda. According to many commentators, his recent veto of the "lex TVN" bill, against the actions of the Polish government, may be the beginning of the Polish president building an independent political position. The act was meant to limit ownership capital in Polish media coming from outside the European Economic Area. It targeted the interests of the U.S. company Discovery, which owns TVN, one of Poland's largest television stations critical of the Polish government. The passage of the bill by the Polish Parliament has caused a rift in Poland's relationship with the United States. So far, the President has been seen as the executor of the will of the party and the government without an independent political position. According to other commentators, the President's veto of the bill is just a ploy planned by the ruling camp to "put a face" on the issue and return to better relations with the US. The next 12 months will show what kind of politician the president really is and whether he has greater ambitions for independence and a bigger political role.

### **Important decisions - election of the President of the National Bank of Poland and members of the National Media Council**

One of the most important personnel decisions in 2022 will concern the position of the President of the National Bank of Poland (NBP). In the middle of the year, Adam Glapiński's six-year term will expire. The head of the central bank is appointed by the President with the consent of the Sejm. Now, President Duda is expected to reappoint Glapinski as chairman. This is also a potential new field of dispute between PiS and the presidential center, should Andrzej Duda decide on someone else. President Adam Glapinski is a trusted figure of Law and Justice government leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski himself. However, he has been criticized by economists for excessively subordinating the NBP's policies to those of the government and for delayed reactions related to the fight against inflation.

This year also marks the end of the term for members of the National Media Council (RMN), the body that oversees Polish public media, appointed by the Sejm, the lower house of

the Polish parliament. There are three members. One of the leaders of a small group of deputies supporting the government, Paweł Kukiz, wants to have an influence on the staffing of the RMN. This means that the middle of the year is potentially another time of crisis for the Law and Justice party's hard-won parliamentary majority in 2021.

### **Conclusion**

2022 may be a year of tensions within the ruling coalition of the United Right, associated with the uncertainty of the parliamentary majority on many issues and the dependence of the dominant Law and Justice party on weaker coalition partners and small groups of deputies. This may be associated with a reduction in the government's decision-making capacity and an intensification of political infighting, which could ultimately lead to early elections. Tensions may also be generated by differences within the coalition, the ambitions of many politicians and internal struggles for influence within the ruling camp, which is entering the final stages of its second term in government and preparing for the next elections. Support for the government will also be affected by high inflation and rising living costs associated with high electricity and gas prices, which opens up opportunities for increasing support for the opposition, whose position will be weaker unless it unites.