

European Union and Far-Right Politics: A Case Study of Poland

Prachi Raj

Department of Political Science, University of Delhi

Corresponding author: praj@polscience.du.ac.in

Available at <https://omniscientmijprujournal.com>

Abstract

The contemporary dominant political pattern in Europe reflects a struggle for power between anti-communists and post-communists in various Central and Eastern European democracies. The Republic of Poland too is experiencing such dominance of far-right politics since its inception in the European Union. The post-communist left parties left the wide gap that the far right has captured since 2005 by Poland's ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS). Moreover, there has been a populist rise of the right-wing parties that appeal to national feelings all over Europe. Due to this, there is an ongoing tussle between the former statist and conservative parties and, the liberal European Union shouting to promote democracy, freedom, cosmopolitanism, and multiculturalism in general.

Moreover, it is also presumed that the European Union is heading towards far-right politics, by undermining the latter principles. These are some of the prominent research questions for this paper, which are analysed through the content analysis methodology. This paper further seeks to understand and examine the rise of the far-right parties in Poland and the response of the European Union over the same in the contemporary political scenario.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, Ethno-regionalism, European Union, Euro-whiteness, Far-Right, Poland.

Introduction

European Politics is undergoing a paradigm shift with the rise of the far right in Europe. They are successful either in forming a government or by supporting the same from within Parliament. This can be seen in states like Poland, Italy, Sweden, and Finland (Marsili and Tassinari 2023). Moreover, states like Germany and Spain are also experiencing the surge of far-right parties with an expectation of becoming a kingmaker in the forthcoming elections (Vohra 2024).

European Union resembled European Unity, multiculturalism, and a greater cosmopolitanism, which is being threatened by the rise of the far right in Europe. There is a fear that such a surge of the far right may result in “ethnoregionalism” which is defined as the appeal to safeguard and defend the European Civilisation (Kundnani 2023). The EU stood for cosmopolitanism; the opposite of nationalism as projected by the far right.

The relationship between the far-right and the EU needs to be analyzed in contemporary politics. It has been examined whether the surge of far-right is transforming the EU. If yes, in what manner and on what terms? What kind of future EU is going to have? Such questions have been addressed by Hans Kundnani where he examines the notion of ‘Eurowhiteness’,

which is defined as reflecting the pro-European' tendency while thinking of the EU as an expression of cosmopolitanism which ultimately, has created a kind of blind spot around the possibility of what Kundnani calls 'ethnonationalism'. He defines it as an ethnic/cultural version of European identity analogous to ethnonationalism, a concept closely connected to the idea of whiteness. For him, a far-right EU is theoretically possible given such an understanding (Vohra 2024).

Initially, the far-right parties in European societies often opposed the idea of European integration promoted and practiced by the EU, seeking to disrupt the latter. However, the situation has changed a lot in the contemporary political scenario with the rise of radical right in many European member states. The far right in European societies positions itself as the champion of a strong European identity, one premised on the ethno-nationalist idea of a white, Christian, and Western Civilisation (Marsili and Tassinari 2023).

Literature Review

Graham Pollock (2001) in his article "Civil Society Theory and Euro-Nationalism" has outlined a correlation between the two in a banal state nationalism, which is masked by the hypocritical anti-national rhetoric employed by the state mainly against minorities. Debates over civil society have been central within European politics and are used to legitimise political positions, projects, and practices both by the left and right-wing parties.

Hans Kundnani (2023) in the book "Euro-whiteness: Culture, Empire and Race in the European Project" argues that the European Union is an expression of regionalism and analogous to nationalism having a variety of kinds. EU is more of an expression of ethnic/cultural elements and is more complicated even after 1945. The formation of European identity was defined as against various non-European Others, and regionalism identifies the dangers of a pro-European appropriation of far-right tropes which Kundnani calls "Ethnoregionalism".

Arun K. Pokhrel (2016) in an article entitled "Eurocentrism" defines how the understanding of European superiority and dominance termed as "eurocentrism" views the history and culture of non-European societies from a Western perspective. It is considered anti-universalist by falsely presenting itself as a universalist phenomenon based on Western values like individuality, equality, free markets, democracy, etc.

Helene Bienvenu (2023) in an article "Nationalist, Libertarian far-right alliance takes root in Poland" analyses how the 2023 elections in Poland will be a tough one for the ruling ultra-

conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS) ruled the state for 8 long years. Moreover, various electoral predictions are also made based on the campaigning issues raised by various parties.

Content Analysis Methodology

This study is primarily based on secondary sources, using the content analysis method to analyse qualitative and quantitative data. For this purpose, various articles from different websites, academic articles, electoral data, media reports and a few speeches particularly covering the topic were selected. Such contents were analysed through the Content Analysis method, which rests on the assumption that text and contents are a rich source of data having great potential to reveal valuable information about a particular event. Moreover, it facilitates the reduction of phenomena or events into defined categories for better analysis and interpretation (Harwood and Garry 2023).

Characteristics of Far-Right Politics in Europe

Many Far-right parties and their leaders seem more interested in securing populist tendencies and issues instead of implementing public policies that deliver results. If they seek power, they are often assumed to enhance the divide of an already divided European continent in a very short period (Marsili and Tassinari 2023). However, tension within far-right thinking within far-right thinking over the question of nationalism and civilisationism is also visible. According to Hans Kundnani, the far right in Europe not merely speaks on behalf of the nation against Europe, but it also does so on behalf of Europe, resembling a different kind of imagined community, located in a different cultural and political setup other than the nation (Kundnani, A far-right EU? 2023) (Pokhrel 2016) .

Furthermore, it was presumed that given their ideological interests, far-right parties in Europe would hardly cooperate across borders, and they would be more engaged in fighting with each other. However, by defying such understanding and by falsifying such claims, far-right parties stand up and cooperate, and many of them are also willing to accept further integration if their terms and conditions are being fulfilled or accepted.

Far Right in European politics is experiencing a surge due to multiple reasons, like-

1. A backlash against multiculturalism, ever-deepening cost of living crisis, “woke” cultural wars, etc. (Marsili & Tassinari, 2023).
2. Failure of European leaders in addressing the people’s consistent demand for security, control and protection.
3. Situations like global conflict and climate emergency.

4. Incapability and powerlessness of small European nation-states to ensure a sense of stability and security.
5. Reluctant attitude of European elites in taking necessary steps towards political union.
6. Lack of effective and humane migration management in Europe.
7. Lack of a single powerful actor that can address and steer such issues.
8. Overt, aggressive and ethnic nationalism offered by far-right politics.

Center Right's Shift towards the Far-Right: A Civilisational Turn?

European Politics has two versions of Rightist parties- one, which believes in extreme Rightist (Far-Right) ideologies and seeks to completely oppose the European Union and its principles like Cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism; while the other which is mainly Centrist party with some rightist orientation having a pro-European approach. The so-called far right in European politics that is also called as 'Eurosceptic' far-right parties are being suspicious of encapsulating within themselves the 'pro-European' center-right parties (Marsili and Tassinari 2023) (Gera 2023). It has become a matter of analysis and observation whether the two are going to be unified followed by their policy-level dilutions or convergence.

Given the refugee crisis of 2015 and other identity-based issues, it has been observed that the center-right is gradually shifting towards the right. This shift is also based on issues like Islamism and immigration in European states. Nevertheless, interestingly, a chunk of the far right itself is busy moderating, or at least reframing its strategies of Euroscepticism (Kundnani, 2023). For example, many far-right parties are hardly voicing over leaving the EU, instead, they are working to transform and modify the latter. Like Meloni has a healthier and harmonious relationship with the EU than Viktor Orban.

Other than such identity-based issues, a shift of the center-right towards the right can also be seen in cultural issues. The former seems to draw various elements of its agenda from issues like Populism, voiced by the latter. A sense of compromise is reflected in such issues between the two parties. However, such compromises further reflect a unified agenda of safeguarding European civilisation (Pollock 2001).

European Union has a history of being ruled by a de facto coalition against the opposition of such Eurosceptic far right and far left, which now seems to be changing. Furthermore, such compromise also reflects a 'pro-European' version of far-right ideas, called as a 'civilisational turn' in the European project (Kundnani, 2023).

The Polish Case

Poland, officially the Republic of Poland, is a parliamentary republic country located in Central Europe. It became a member of the EU in May 2004. Poland has a very interesting history of the rise of the right-wing parties. Its history is inextricably linked with the history of the struggle against the communist regime and the democratic transition (Tomaszewska 2010). Moreover, it is also being advantaged by the identity crisis faced by the left. Because of the failure of left to reinvent itself, the right seems to be dominating the politics of Poland. The history of the right and left polish parties narrates a very interesting story. Since the early 1990s, the Polish right was extremely divided on multiple factors; whereas the post-communist left appeared united within one stable political entity. But later on, this scenario was changed and the right experienced two major currents.

Two major right-wing parties in Poland are PiS (Prawo I Sprawiedliwosc-- Law and Justice) and PO (Platforma Obywatelska- Civic Platform). PiS is often described as “radical conservativists or Statists”, while PO is called “free market liberals” (Tomaszewska 2010) Since 2005, their opposition among themselves replaced the succession of the right-wing and left-wing governments, which traditionally characterised the first fifteen years of Poland’s young Democracy.

PiS was founded in 2001 by Lech and Jaroslaw Kaczynski and has ruled Poland since 2015. It favours a strong state with far-reaching prerogatives, often characterised by a powerful repressive security apparatus along with a highly developed welfare state. On domestic policies, the party seeks to involve the aspiration towards a certain moral order and state control of state industries’ (Fella 2024). It is socially conservative and shows a strong attachment to family, religion and patriotism. The party believes that a quasi-omnipotent state resembles the solutions to all the problems; therefore, it seeks to protect the interests of the nation-state (Ohanes 2024). In its approach, PiS is not so Eurosceptic.

PO, on the other hand, ruled the state in 2007 followed by its victory in the parliamentary elections. It believes in the free market’s capacity to guarantee prosperity for the Polish state. Therefore, it seeks to strongly support privatisation and foreign investment. It is also believed to be a pro-European party based on its aspiration of ensuring a quick membership of the eurozone for Poland (Tomaszewska 2010).

The Polish left represented by SLD (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej*- Alliance of the Democratic Left) after losing the parliamentary elections in 2005 is marginalised and is grappling with its issues.

Solidarnosc: A Melting Pot of the two Polish Right parties

However, the divide between PiS and PO mimics a left-right divide, which is reflected in their approach and ideology in the way that the former seeks to enforce welfare-intensive policies, while the latter supports privatisation and small government (Tomaszewska 2010).

The rise of the Polish right parties can be traced back to the opposition movement around the 1980s against the communist regime. Their movement was consolidated around the workers' union Solidarnosc, which resembled a heterogenous movement where people from different horizons participated. Solidarnosc included groups, that were strongly nationalist and catholic and were staunchly anti-communist. However, this movement saw a break-up during the 1990s, mainly due to the political rife between Lech Walesa and Tadeusz Mazowiecki for the political leadership, after the formation of the first non-communist head of the government in September 1989.

As a Christian democrat, Mazowiecki was leading a government mainly composed of communists and free-market reformers. He is known to implement a series of reforms including the introduction of a market economy, which is popularly termed “shock therapy” (Tomaszewska 2010).

Later on, Mazowiecki and Walesa contested against each other in Poland's first presidential election in November 1990, in which the former suffered a considerable political drawback. Such events resulted in the creation of a new political party stemming from Solidarnosc- Unia Demokratyczna (Democratic Union), which in 1994 became Unia Wolnosci (Freedom Union-UW) under the prominent leadership of Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Leszek Balcerowicz and Bronislaw Geremek sought for free market economy and centrism (Tomaszewska 2010). However, its gradual decline throughout the 1990s encouraged some of its members to create a new free-market liberal party, PO in 2001.

On the other hand, a new party called Porozumienie Centrum was created by the Kaczynski brothers (Jaroslaw and Lech Kaczynski), two close aides of Lech Walesa within Solidarnosc in 1990, which strongly criticized Mazowiecki's free-market reforms and conciliatory attitudes towards communist representatives. However, this support turned into an open political battle between the Kaczynski brothers and Lech Walesa in 1992, and the former joined the ranks of the opposition against the latter. Following this setback, the twin brothers formed a new party PiS in the 2000s.

One Platform, Two Aspirations: Political Currents within the Right

As far as Poland's transition to democracy is concerned, both PiS and PO have played very important roles, though have multiple differences in their attitudes and approaches mentioned below-

- a. PO represents the free-market liberals and considers Round Table negotiations and agreements as a founding gesture of Polish democracy. They support the market reforms of Leszek Balcerowicz and the Third Republic.
- b. PiS represented the conservatives who view Round Table as a betrayal and a sin of Polish democracy, which for them has skewed the formation of the young republic since its very beginning (Fella 2024). Against the invalidation of the Third Republic, they proposed to build the Fourth Republic, especially after coming to power (2005-2007).
- c. Both the parties, even after being the two major currents of the Polish right, lack a common vision of their origin, and towards *Solidarnosc*. For PiS, *Solidarnosc* was a movement designed to win back national sovereignty but was betrayed by some of its leaders. They have managed to enjoy its political support to date. While on the other hand, PO seems to lose its connection to the movement even after its leaders become active members of it. For PO, *Solidarnosc* is a liberation movement that is credited with introducing capitalism in Poland, especially by the Mazowiecki government.

Far Right Coalition in Contemporary Poland

The Polish far-right coalition is known as the Confederation Liberty and Independence (Polish- *Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość*), frequently shortened to just Confederation (Polish- *Konfederacja*). Founded in 2018 as a political coalition for the 2019 European Parliament election in Poland, it was later transformed into a political party. It won 11 seats in the Sejm after the 2019 Polish parliamentary elections. It expresses right-wing populist rhetoric and skepticism towards the European Union and immigration (Walker 2023). It believes in economic liberalism and seeks to lower taxes. It is also known to express a conservative and Polish nationalist stance for Polish society.

The Hard-right Confederation party is quite popular among young Polish citizens who are fed up with the political parties that have dominated Poland for most of the post-Communist era.

The 2023 Parliamentary Elections in Poland

2023 Parliamentary elections showed a battle between Jaroslaw Kaczynski's right-wing nationalist Law and Justice party, in government since 2015, and Civic Coalition, led by

former prime minister Donald Tusk, which is in alliance with other opposition parties: the progressive Left and the center-right Third Way (Kostrzewska 2023). Meanwhile, the rising far-right party Confederation is setting to swing the balance between right-wing incumbents Law and Justice, and the liberal opposition (Vohra 2024).

The Confederation party made their case for issues like lower taxes, less regulation an anti-European Union, and anti-Ukraine foreign policy. It further criticised governments' social spending and regulations, which for them increase double-digit inflation (Gera 2023). Despite its popularity, some prominent leaders are known for their critical standings. Leaders like Janusz Korwin-Mikke was suspended as a lawmaker in the European Parliament for making Nazi salutes during sessions. He believes that Poland should have cooperated with Adolf Hitler, and repeated a false claim that Hitler did not know about the Holocaust (Gera 2023).

He also questioned whether women should have the right to vote, claiming wrongly that they are "less intelligent." He further defended Russian President Vladimir Putin after the invasion of Ukraine. Another leader of Confederation, Grzegorz Braun, has falsely claimed that there is a plot to turn Poland into a "Jewish state" and has called for homosexuality to be criminalized (Gera 2023).

On the other hand, the Centrist Parties were contesting under the leadership of Donald Tusk who were in opposition in 2023. The Polish voters turned the entire proposition of rightist parties by offering a mandate to the Centrist parties, a historic mandate as centrist opposition parties managed to win after 8 years of nationalist rule in Poland. The result was a disappointment for the Law and Justice Party (PiS) and its leader Jarosław Kaczyński, who has governed Poland for eight years with a conservative, nationalist, and sometimes anti-EU agenda, however, it remains Poland's biggest party (Fella 2024).

The mandate further reflected those suggested voters had grown tired of the ruling party after eight years of divisive policies that led to frequent street protests, bitter divisions within families and billions in funding held up by the EU over rule of law violations. Donald Tusk declared the end of Law and Justice rule and beginning of a new era for Poland. However, Poles were possibly facing weeks of political uncertainty as Law and Justice said it would still try to build a new government led by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki (Gera and Scilowska 2023).

Some of the prominent promises made by the opposition parties included-

- a. To reverse democratic backsliding and
- b. repairing the nation's relationship with allies including the European Union and Ukraine

Nevertheless, even if the opposition parties take power, they will face difficulties in putting forward their agenda. The president has veto power over laws, while the constitutional court, whose role is to ensure that legislation does not violate the basic law, is loyal to the current governing party. President Andrzej Duda, an ally of Law and Justice, must call the first session of the new parliament within 30 days of the election and designate a prime minister to try to build a government.

EU and Poland: What is Coming Next?

European Union has often been sought by many for a complete structural transformation. However, many leaders have also tried to make Europe a united force capable of deciding its course of action. French President Emmanuel Macron has often mentioned building a “Europe that protects” with ideas like “sovereign, united and democratic practices”, which was disliked by few European leaders (Marsili and Tassinari 2023).

Even the European Commission tried to lay down and implement ambitious plans for joint climate financing, which was torpedoed by some member states. However, the future of far-right taking over of the EU depends totally on the will of the Europeans whether they want to oppose it or simply defend it on the ground of European unity.

The 2023 Parliamentary elections of Poland have profound effects not just for Poland, but for the European Union at large: It could usher in a pro-European government, revive fruitful cooperation between Warsaw and Brussels, bring back the rule of law, or it could entrench Poland’s populist semi-authoritarianism and bring about an even more confrontational approach towards the EU. However, it can be presumed that the Centrist opposition’s win has a responsibility towards safeguarding people’s democratic aspiration towards a cosmopolitan European Union. Rest is a matter of analysis as the government formation in Poland remains a task. It goes with the other EU member states with their electoral performances in the forthcoming elections. However, it is presumed that under the leadership of Donald Tusk, Poland can improvise its ties with the European Union. He sought that Poland win back its freedom (Byrska 2024).

At present, the country represents 52 members in the European Parliament, which reflects its spectacular development with the EU. It ranks as the European Union’s sixth-largest economy, despite not being a part of the Eurozone which is called a “civilizational leap” (Iwaniuk 2024). Moreover, the European Commission also decided to close the Article 7 Procedure against Poland which was invoked in 2017 in response to the political takeover of the country’s justice system and its challenge to the primacy of EU over national law during

the then Law and Justice Party's (PiS) rule. Article 7 is the EU's primary treaty-based mechanism which seeks to hold accountable EU member states who undermine its values, including the violation of the rule of law (Kirova and Gall 2024). Such an initiative of the EU showed a restoration of not merely the rule of law in Poland but also reflects the friendly future that both are going to have.

References

Bienvenu, Helene. 2023. Nationalist, libertarian far-right alliance takes root in Poland. September 26. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/09/26/nationalist-libertarian-far-right-alliance-takes-root-in-poland_6139890_4.html.

Chiappa, Claudia. 2023. Poland goes to war (verbally) with Europe's conservative chief. August 8. Accessed September 2023. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-poland-pm-mateusz-morawiecki-challenges-europe-conservative-leader-manfred-weber-debate/>.

Cienski, Jan, and Wojciech Kosc. 2023. Meet the far-right potential kingmakers in Poland's election. September 5. <https://www.politico.eu/article/meet-far-right-potential-kingmaker-poland-election/>.

Economist, The. 2023. Poland's far right could be the next government's kingmaker. August 15. <https://www.economist.com/europe/2023/08/15/polands-far-right-could-be-the-next-governments-kingmaker>.

Fella, Stefano. 2024. Poland: The Law and Justice Government and relations with the EU, 2015-2023. February 13. Accessed April 224. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9868/>.

Gera, Vanessa. 2023. A hard-right party gathers strength in Poland, pushing a new, less friendly course on Ukraine. September 23. <https://apnews.com/article/poland-election-far-right-party-confederation-3d29f10eb59ad880c6f64d5025277a8c>.

Gera, Vanessa, and Monika Scilowska. 2023. Poland gives support to centrist opposition after 8 years of nationalist rule. October 17. <https://apnews.com/article/poland-election-tusk-opposition-29eb9108f6e9c242e9bb3a2f803b5a63>.

Harwood, Tracy G, and Tony Garry. 2023. "An Overview of Content Analysis." *The Marketing Review* (Westburn Publishers Ltd.) 3 (4): 479-498.

Iwaniuk, Jakub. 2024. Twenty years after Poland's successful entry into the EU, its relationship with Europe has shifted. May 1. Accessed 2024. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/05/01/twenty-years-after-poland-s-successful-entry-into-the-eu-its-relationship-with-europe-has-shifted_6670048_23.

Kirova, Iskra, and Lydia Gall. 2024. European Commission Prematurely Ends Rule of Law Scrutiny of Poland: Key Reforms Still Needed to Meet Obligations. May 30. Accessed 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/30/european-commission-prematurely-ends-rule-law-scrutiny-poland>.

Kostrzewska, Zofia. 2023. Hanging in the balance: How the Polish far-right could swing the next election. September 28. <https://ecfr.eu/article/hanging-in-the-balance-how-the-polish-far-right-could-swing-the-next-election/>.

—. 2023. Euro- Whiteness: Culture, Empire and Race in the European

Project. London: C. Hurst and Co.
(Publishers) Ltd.

Lepiarz, Jacek. 2023. Poland's far-right Confederation party set to be kingmaker. January 8. <https://www.dw.com/en/poland-far-right-elections/a-66406501>.

Marsili, Lorenzo, and Fabrizio Tassinari. 2023. Are we heading towards a far-right European Union? July 19. Accessed September 2, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/7/19/are-we-heading-towards-a-far-right-european-union>.

Martinez, A, and Rob Schmitz. 2023. Poland's populist, right-wing government appears to be on its way out after 8 years. October 16. <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/16/1206061329/poland-s-populist-right-wing-government-appears-to-be-on-its-way-out-after-8-yea>.

Pollock, Graham. 2001. "Civil Society Theory and Euro-Nationalism." *Studies in Social and Political Thought* 31-56.

Sevim, OmerCarullah. 2022. The Rise of the far-right in Europe: The Polish Case. December 7. Accessed September 2, 2023. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-the-rise-of-the-far-right-in-europe-the-polish-case/2757719#>.

Tomaszewska, Dominika. 2010. "The state of the right: Poland." August. <https://www.fondapol.org/en/study/1916/>.

Vohra, Anchal. 2024. A Far-Right Takeover of Europe Is Underway. March 13. Accessed 2024 4, 2024. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/13/eu-parliament-elections-populism-far-right/>.

Walker, Shaun. 2023. Poland: hundreds of thousands march against right-wing populist government. June 4. Accessed September 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/04/poland-hundreds-of-thousands-march-against-rightwing-populist-government>.

23/jun/04/poland-hundreds-of-thousands-march-against-rightwing-populist-government.

Ohanes, Gasia. 2024. Poland. Accessed April 4, 2024. <https://www.dw.com/en/law-and-justice-pis/t-66789976>.

Byrska, Olga. 2024. A tale of two Polands. May 9. Accessed 2024. <https://eu.boell.org/en/2024/05/09/tale-two-polands>.

Kundnani, Hans. 2023. A far-right EU? July 18. Accessed September 2023. <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/a-far-right-eu-6854/>.