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How Far-Right Konfederacja Became Poland's Likely Kingmaker

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In just five years, Konfederacja has grown from an anti-system force on the fringes of Polish politics into a likely kingmaker after the parliamentary elections on 15 October. What brought it to this result is an explosive mix of anti-refugee sentiments and an almost scientific approach to scapegoating minorities.

The Polish political landscape isn't much different from its European neighbours. One of its significant divides is between voters who traditionally support the more established parties of the political mainstream and anti-mainstream voters who support new political movements or parties which champion anti-system slogans. Election data from the past twenty years suggests between 3.5 and 4 million anti-mainstream voters in Poland, or one in every four voters. Accordingly, new movements and parties emerge before every parliamentary election, and independent candidates spring up before presidential ones. These new parties and candidates have varied ideological profiles: nationalist, right-wing, liberal, leftist, and sometimes purely populist. They all, however, share four characteristics: a strong leader, a critique of the prevailing mainstream, a novelty appeal, and a base in the anti-mainstream voter group.

Ahead of Poland's parliamentary elections in October, only one anti-mainstream party – Konfederacja (the Confederation) – has played a significant role. Set up in 2018, this party is a somewhat exotic alliance of smaller anti-system parties, which are libertarian, nationalist, monarchist, or centred around various conspiracy theories. Konfederacja's current agenda can be summarised as follows: upending the political scene; low and simplified taxes; freeing the economy; a house, BBQ, lawn, two cars, and vacations for every working Pole. How did this party – with a stable base of about one million voters (around 6 per cent) for the past four years – suddenly gain traction in the polls, with up to 2.5 million people now expressing their willingness to vote for it?

First, no new political force has appeared on the liberal or leftist side ahead of these elections, and the new faces, and anti-system parties from previous elections have joined coalitions with mainstream parties. This makes Konfederacja the only party with the credibility required to attract anti-mainstream voters.

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Second, the party has found an excellent speaker in Sławomir Mentzen, a well-educated 36-year-old tax advisor recently turned chairman of one of the parties forming Konfederacja. A vast majority of the 1.5 million new Konfederacja voters, including many people with more centrist views, trust Mentzen rather

than the party itself. This gave Konfederacja not only a distinct leader but also novelty appeal.

Third, a simple, populist message which resonates not only with the aspirations of the Polish middle class dreaming of a comfortable life or with small entrepreneurs averse to any taxes, but also with xenophobic, nationalist, and radical voters. Sławomir Mentzen in March 2019 delivered a lecture on Konfederacja's electoral strategy: "We conduct these surveys, these focus groups, we track what message resonates with voters. We know what to say so that voters listen to us. We use data, this is a scientific approach. And scientifically, we came up with five postulates. I've named them Konfederacja's Five, and I'm announcing them to the world for the first time. We don't want Jews, homosexuals, abortion, taxes, and the European Union.""

Konfederacja's Five updated

"Konfederacja's Five" was announced before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, before Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko opened a migration corridor for refugees on the eastern border, and before Russia launched a full-scale aggression against Ukraine. So the party's anti-vaccine, anti-refugee, and anti-Ukrainian messages began to replace its anti-Semitic ones over time. Anti-refugee and anti-Ukrainian narratives, in particular, have been at the forefront of the current election campaign, greatly benefitting Konfederacja.

The politicisation of migration and refugees in Poland can be linked to three significant migratory movements.

First was the Mediterranean sea crisis in 2015. The topic dominating both the presidential and the parliamentary elections that year was the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean. In just three months, one million people reached European shores and headed north, mainly to Germany. This started a Europe-wide discussion about the need for a solidarity mechanism to relocate refugees from the countries of first entry to the rest of the European Union. Poland's main right-wing party, Law and Justice (PiS), built its anti-refugee message on opposing forced relocation, often using racist and anti-Islamic rhetoric.

The party utilised a proven socio-technical and propaganda strategy which exploits fears in order to control and manipulate groups or entire societies. This was based on constructing, directing, and effectively amplifying social anxieties or moral panic, allowing politicians to present themselves as protectors. Many argue that it was this fearmongering that led Law and Justice to an election victory. Studies indicate that during this time, 11 million Poles shifted from being willing to accept refugees to opposing them.

Then there was the crisis on the border between Poland and Belarus. In the summer of 2021, Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko launched an operation aimed at destabilising the Polish and Lithuanian borders. He lured refugees and migrants from various Asian and African countries to Minsk with promises of a better life in the West. They were then transported to the border, where they were robbed and forced by Belarusian guards onto the Polish side, only to be captured by Polish guards and illegally pushed back to Belarus.

This process continues to this day, despite a four-metre border fence erected by Poland. Exact data is unknown since Poland does not provide statistics, but according to humanitarian organisation Grupa Granica, tens of thousands of people have passed through this migration route in the past two years. About 50 people have drowned, frozen, or died in other ways on the Polish side alone, with certainly

many more on the Belarusian side. Throughout the crisis, the PiS government maintained an anti-refugee narrative. Footage of pushbacks of women and children and reports of more refugees dying did not affect the polls: most Poles continued to support the government's policy.

Last was the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the largest war in Europe since World War II. In the first weeks, around 3 million refugees crossed the Ukrainian-Polish border. At least half of these, mainly women and children, decided to stay in Poland. The government was unprepared. There were no ready refugee camps, organised transport from the border, or logistics support with basic survival items. But ordinary Poles did not disappoint. They drove en masse from all over the country to the border in private cars, and accommodated most refugees in private apartments.

This helped the government and local authorities prepare a support system. Poles were paid for each month of hosting refugees in their own homes. Refugees were assigned a Polish ID number and incorporated into the Polish public system, getting free access to hospitals, schools, and social benefits. Integrating migrants into the system built for residents – instead of creating a parallel support system with different access to state support – is one of the most refugee-friendly solutions in the world. The government proudly accepted Ukrainian refugees. Polls also showed huge public support of over 90 per cent for pro-refugee actions in this case. This, however, began to drop over time.

A crafty referendum

While the PiS used effective propaganda based on fear during the Mediterranean Sea crisis in 2015 and the ongoing Polish-Belarusian border crisis, it applied a totally opposite approach to refugees from Ukraine. Konfederacja, meanwhile, was the only party to oppose migrants in all three cases, gaining enormous credibility on the topic. One and a half years after the outbreak of the war, with Poles increasingly tired of helping refugees, this is starting to pay off. Trying to score political points in the campaign and following a dispute on agricultural imports from Ukraine, Law and Justice has also taken a harsher stance on the issue. Anti-Ukrainian rhetoric is growing and spreading on social media too. Each passing month works in Konfederacja's favour.

Many Poles are looking for politicians who implement anti-refugee demands, and those who were reluctant to vote for scandal-ridden Law and Justice now see Konfederacja as a "votable" option.

Meanwhile, in preparation for the 15 October elections, Law and Justice sought effective topics for fearmongering. LGBTQ rights, Russian and German influences on Polish politics, and loss of sovereignty to the European Union, however, have all proven less effective in igniting voters' emotions compared to the refugee issue. This led the government to decide to hold a referendum alongside the elections. it will pose four questions, two of them about migration:

"Do you support the acceptance of thousands of illegal immigrants from the Middle East and Africa, according to the forced relocation mechanism imposed by European bureaucracy?"

"Do you support the removal of the barrier on the border between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Belarus?"

Both questions are formulated in an extremely propagandistic manner. The word choice and the structure inherently suggest an answer. The questions are also based on false premises: immigrants are not illegal; the European Union does not propose any “forced” relocation mechanism; this is not a bureaucratic solution; no Polish party has expressed a desire to dismantle the newly constructed barrier at the border. The aim of this referendum is to exploit the “package voting” mechanism. The ruling party hopes not only to mobilise voters on a sensitive issue but also lead them to cast their vote for Law and Justice, which has long been anti-refugee.

At the same time, however, this referendum and its leading questions significantly strengthen Konfederacja by cementing the refugee debate as one of the main issues of the election. Not only does Konfederacja have more anti-refugee credibility than the ruling party, but it also sends a message to anti-mainstream voters, where it can still increase its consensus. Many Poles are looking for politicians who implement anti-refugee demands, and those who were reluctant to vote for the scandal-ridden ruling party now see Konfederacja as a “votable” option. Most recently, a visa-for-cash scandal has further reduced Law and Justice’s credibility in the eyes of anti-refugee voters.

A likely kingmaker

What does this mean for Poland? Konfederacja is currently third in the polls ahead of October’s election. It could secure as many as 60 to 80 of the 460 seats in parliament and it’s likely that a new government cannot be formed without it. This means that if the democratic opposition parties do not gain more than 230 seats, they have no chance of taking power, as they cannot imagine governing with Konfederacja. Law and Justice, on the other hand, can envision ruling with Konfederacja. But a marriage with the establishment could be lethal for an anti-system party. There is also a chance that, if Konfederacja gets a very good result, Law and Justice will try to obtain the number of MPs it needs to rule from one of the parties that make up Konfederacja, and therefore break it up. If Konfederacja resists and decides not to join a coalition with the PiS, Poland may face snap elections. With the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border persisting and no indication of a swift end to the Russo-Ukrainian war, the refugee issue looks likely to remain key to any future election.

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