

The two-party tendency in Poland's political system: manifestations, causes and prospects

Putintsev, Igor S.

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Putintsev, I. S. (2023). The two-party tendency in Poland's political system: manifestations, causes and prospects. *Baltic Region*, 15(1), 18-33. <https://doi.org/10.5922/2079-8555-2023-1-2>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

THE TWO-PARTY TENDENCY IN POLAND'S POLITICAL SYSTEM: MANIFESTATIONS, CAUSES AND PROSPECTS

I. S. Putintsev 

MGIMO University
76, Vernadskogo Pr., Moscow, 119454, Russia

Received 29 July 2022
Accepted 15 December 2022
doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2023-1-2
© Putintsev, I. S., 2023

The article analyses the Polish political system and the increasing role of two political parties in it. This tendency has been observed in Poland for more than 15 years. We can draw a conclusion that two-and-a-half-party system has formed in Poland. Using Duverger's phrasing, there is a "two-party tendency" in the functioning of the Polish model. The study analyses the facts that firm up this conclusion: not only the distribution of seats in the Sejm (the main criterion) but also many other quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the political system contribute to the development of the current political trend. The main goal of this article is to identify the factors that have led to the emergence and development of the tendency and assess the prospects of its further evolution, considering that both leading parties face multiple difficulties. The article concludes by pointing out that Poland is unlikely to continue strengthening its two-party tendency, and could instead return to the multiparty system with many influential parties which is more characteristic of the country historically. However, in recent years the leading role of two parties in the political system has had more positive effects rather than negative ones.

Keywords:

Poland, party system, Law and Justice, Civic Platform, two-party system, two-and-a-half party system, two-party tendency

Introduction

Poland's party system has changed considerably in the first two decades of the 21st century. Chaotic rotation of several unstable parties has been replaced by a much more well-structured model with two new parties — Law and Justice (PiS) and Civic Platform (PO) — as its key elements. Each president and prime-minister who has assumed office in the country since 2005 is a member of either PiS or PO. The polarisation of political life has also increased with the two-party rivalry growing into the nerve centre of Polish politics. Its intensity is succinctly captured in the widely used expression 'Polish-Polish war'. The rivalry between

To cite this article: Putintsev, I. S. 2023, The two-party tendency in Poland's political system: manifestations, causes and prospects, *Balt. reg.*, Vol. 15, № 1, p. 18–33. doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2023-1-2.

PiS and PO often becomes the focus of international interest, as was the case with the air crash near Smolensk in 2010 or the increasing tensions between the Polish government and the EU institutions observed in recent years.

Despite the dominance of PiS and PO in the political life of Poland, hardly ever is the country's political system referred to as two-party. In a strict sense, a two-party system suggests that no political party but for two has any political influence, a prime example being the USA. Yet, this is not the case in Poland. Since 2005, there have been from two to four other parties and blocks in the Sejm along with PiS and PO. As parts of the governing coalition, those parties ensure parliamentary majority. The current type of Poland's multiparty system differs from that that existed in the 1990s. Using the term introduced by Maurice Duverger [1, p. 298], we may say that Poland's multiparty system is demonstrating a 'two-party tendency'. It may also be called a two-and-a-half party system, as defined in Alan Siaroff's classification: the term is applicable when two political forces control from 80 to 95 % of the parliamentary seats by [2, p. 272].

In recent years, several researchers have come to a conclusion that an embryonic two-party system emerged in Poland in the mid-2000s [3, p. 592]. Yet, at first, such an idea seemed premature and lacking evidence. The then experience of party formation and the historical traditions of Polish political culture cast doubt on the thesis about the establishment of an institutionally sustainable party system, not to mention its two-party version. The conclusion was made that it was early to speak about a bipolar system and that the trends observed at the time were attributed to the polarisation of public opinion and protest voting [4, p. 435]. It was argued either that Poland was destined to have a multiparty system in the future [5, s. 82] or that the transition to such a system would take a lot of time and require strengthening the inner stability of the main political forces [6, s. 199]. Claims were made about the theoretical impossibility of classifying Poland's political system as belonging to one or another commonly acknowledged type [7, s. 51].

What can be stated with acceptable certainty is that the Polish party system has stabilised in the past 15–20 years, with two political forces assuming the leading role. Below, I will attempt to describe the manifestations of this leading role and the reasons behind the formation of country's party system. I will also analyse the current trends to understand whether the 'two-party tendency' is a temporary phenomenon or its further development can be expected.

Manifestations of the 'two-party tendency' in Poland's political system

I will begin by analysing some examples to demonstrate why Poland's party system can be classified as a two-and-a-half rather than multiparty one. Firstly, the election results generally meet the necessary quantitative criteria. As was

mentioned above, such a system is present if two main parties jointly control at least 80 % of the parliamentary seats. In case of Poland, of major importance is the distribution of seats in the Sejm, which is invested with the powers to legislate and form the cabinet. Since 2007, PO, PiS and the electoral blocs led by these parties have won from 79 to 82 % of the Sejm seats in four elections in a row (Table 1). Usually, their results lie at the lower values of the criterion. Not only the figures and rates are important but so is their stability through time. Given this distribution of seats in the Sejm, only PO and PiS members can become the head of government. The other parties can take on the role of junior partners in a coalition, in a best-case scenario. In the Senate, the dominance of the two parties is absolute: since 2007 they have controlled more than 90 % of the seats (however, the Senate of Poland does not have broad powers). The difference in the number of seats won by the two parties in the Sejm and in the Senate is mainly explained by the use of different voting systems: proportional and majoritarian, respectively. As for the European Parliament elections, since 2009 deputies from PiS and PO have traditionally won from 75 to 80 % of the Polish quota.

Table 1

The results of PiS and PO¹ in national elections since 2005, %

Year	% of seats		% of votes in the first round of presidential elections
	Sejm	Senate	
2005	63	83	66
2007	82	99	—
2010	—	—	78
2011	79	94	—
2015	81	95	69
2019	80	91	—
2020	—	—	74

Note: the m-dash means that no elections were held in the year in question.

The Polish party system has been strengthened by that since 2005 only members of the two major parties have been elected presidents. It matters little that the President becomes non-partisan after having been elected. In fact, he or she is indissociable with the political force supporting him or her, the more so as the existing limitations, established in 1995 by President Kwaśniewski, have never been turned into a clear cut legal norm.² All the presidential elections held in

¹ Taking into account the blocs headed by these parties, i.e. the United Right coalition formed around PiS in 2015 and the Civic Coalition formed around PO in 2019.

² L. Kaczyński: konstytucyjnie dyskusyjne czy prezydent może być szefem partii, *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*, 15.06.2009, URL: <https://prawo.gazetaprawna.pl/artykuly/324893,lkaczynski-konstytucyjnie-dyskusyjne-czy-prezydent-moze-byc-szefem-partii.html> (accessed 26.07.2022).

the past 20 years were a struggle between opponents from PiS and PO, each vote going into the second round. This standard scenario of presidential race has a marked effect on public expectations, the actions of parties and the political strategies they use. Despite the limited powers, the President plays an important role in Polish politics. For instance, he or she has the veto power which can be overridden by no fewer than 60 % of votes in the Sejm (usually the ruling forces cannot obtain such a majority).

The tendency towards stronger influence of two parties is visible in both the national and regional politics. Between 2006 and 2014 PiS and PO gained from 63 to 66 % of seats in voivodeship sejmiks across the country; in the 2018 election this share rose to 80 %.³ In 7 out of 16 voivodeships one of the two parties managed to gain the absolute majority of sejmik seats: PiS in six regions, PO in one.

Of large importance is the two parties' visible, albeit asymmetric, participation in local governance. PiS traditionally underperforms in local elections, while PO enjoys huge support in big cities. Six of Poland's ten largest cities have been governed by PO mayors: Gdańsk uninterruptedly for twenty years; Warsaw and Lublin since 2006; Łódź and Bydgoszcz since 2010; Poznań since 2014. The capital is a special case: PO has been in power in the city ever since a short period in the first half of 2000s when PiS prevailed (future President Kaczyński was mayor at the time).

Another factor in the party system stabilisation, which was brought about by the growing dominance of the two parties, was the tightening of party discipline observed in the parliament since 2005. Mass abandonment of factions by members of the ruling parties ceased to be a common occurrence in the second half of the 2000s [8, p. 359]. The discrete attempts to split PiS and PO from inside, some of them involving high-ranking politicians (see, for instance [9, p. 74–75, 78–79]), yielded an opposite result. They led to a further consolidation of the parties without threatening their influence [10, p. 190].

The dominant role of the two parties is made evident by not only election results and other quantitative measures, but also the high polarisation of the Polish political life. As newly established parties, PiS and PO were not antagonistic to each other; on the contrary, pursuing right wing policies, they were considered as potential partners. The tongue-in-cheek abbreviation POPiS, a blend of the Polish names of the two parties that translates as 'performance' or 'show', hinted at the political and ideological kinship of these forces. In the 2002 local election, the parties even submitted common lists of candidates all over the country but for the capital voivodeship. After the 2005 parliamentary election, the first one in which PiS and PO came first and second, the parties were confidently expected to establish a wide coalition. The deal between PiS

³ The author's calculations based on the official election results; the number of seats in each of 16 voivodeships was considered as having equal weight.

and right wing populists to form a coalition government and the contentious presidential election of 2005 marked the beginning of political and ideological division between the two parties.

Later, this division grew even deeper. The Smolensk air disaster, which killed President Lech Kaczyński and members of his team, drew a wedge between the new leader of PiS Jarosław Kaczyński, the brother of the late president, and the leader of PO Donald Tusk, whom his opponents tried to hold responsible for the catastrophe. By 2015, when PiS got back to power, Tusk had already been elected President of the European Council, thus personifying the EU-oriented forces, and the new Polish government had started a lengthy conflict with Brussels. (Ironically, Poland was the only EU member who voted against Tusk's re-election in 2017). Inside the country, PiS declared itself a champion of traditional Polish values and sovereignty, while PO was making a stand for democracy, civil rights and a united Europe. The personal differences between Jarosław Kaczyński and Tusk are also substantial: the former is a 'conservative revolutionary' often compared to Viktor Orbán and Recep Tayyip Erdogan [11, p. 89], the latter is a flexible pragmatist committed to technocratic solutions rather than ideology (the policy of 'warm water in the tap') [10, p. 185].

The polarisation has turned the relations between the two parties into a zero sum game: what is good for PiS is bad for PO and vice versa. In the shadow of these two parties (and to some extent in their orbit), there are other less influential political forces, which, however, do not unduly affect the agenda. The choice between PiS and PO is the central issue of Polish politics and the main factor in political self-identification for the majority of voters; it largely determines the tenor of public and political debate. The parties have diverged even more widely: in 2005, 45 % of PO supporters considered PiS the main electoral alternative; by 2011, this share reduced to 3 %; among PiS supporters, it dropped from 37 to 6 % [12, p. 493].

Polish political journalism has responded to the division with stereotyped images of PiS and PO partisans. The supporters of the former — senior residents of smaller towns, most of them ardent Catholics with secondary education and a below-average income — are commonly called 'mohair berets'. The latter's voters — cosmopolitan youngsters from big cities, having a good education, a large income and a high level of social mobility — have been dubbed 'lemmings' [13, p. 55]. Territorial division in support for PiS and PO is also explicit: the former is more often voted for in the central and south-east regions, and while the latter in big cities and so-called Recovered Territories, which became part of Poland in 1945.

Yet, these images do not give a full picture of the electorate division. Contrary to the stereotypes, both parties have supporters across all social strata all over the country; this comprehensiveness is a characteristic feature of a sustainable

political system dominated by two parties, which enjoy greater support than any other political force in virtually every electoral group stratified either by age, education, place of residence or profession. Since the mid-2010s, PiS has secured support across all electorate groups: youngsters, students, residents of big cities and people with higher education except managers [14, p. 104].

The two-party tendency apparent in Poland since the mid-2000s has contributed to the stability of the party system. The 2007 election was the first one where no new parties entered the parliament. In 2011, the ruling coalition was successfully re-elected for the second term, having broken the tradition of the opposition always winning parliamentary elections. In 2015, for the first time, there was no need to form a coalition in the Sejm, because one political force took the absolute majority of seats. The situation repeated itself in 2019. Both major parties have been in government and opposition: PiS has won three elections (in 2005, 2015 and 2019); PO two (2007 and 2011). The Polish party system remained stable amid external and internal disturbances: the 2008 financial crisis, the Smolensk air disaster, the military conflicts in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic. The weighted average data from the survey conducted from January to October 2022 shows that PiS is consistently supported by from 36 to 38 % of voters and the approval rating of the Civic Coalition formed around PO has ranged between 27 and 29 %.⁴

The above indicates that the alternation in power of PiS and PO made Poland's party system better structured, causing it to assume 'two-and-a-half party' characteristics. Up until now, it has withstood the test of time. Thus, it is necessary to analyse what led to the formation of the present-day party system.

The origins of the 'two-party tendency'

The key to understanding the origins of the 'two-party tendency' is the time of its genesis. Having emerged in the early 2000s as second-tier Polish parties, PiS and PO became leaders by the end of the decade. A vital prerequisite for their ascent was the deep ideological crisis of Polish left-wing forces (traditionally called *Lewica* as opposed to the right-wing *Prawica*).

The core of *Lewica*, which has a rich historical tradition, was composed of 'turncoat' communists. In the 1990s and in the first half of the 2000s, it was one of the poles of the Polish politics: its member Aleksander Kwaśniewski was twice elected President; social democrats played the key role in the ruling coalition during two parliamentary terms. Despite the importance of support from the citizens who resented dwindling social protection and the consequences of the 'Shock Therapy', the party took a right turn. In the second half of the 1990s, it

⁴ Poll of Polls — Polish polls, trends and election news for Poland, 2022, *Politico*, URL: <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/poland/> (accessed 29.10.2022).

abandoned its cautious view of the socialist past, condemned totalitarianism [15, p. 56] and fully supported the country's accession to NATO and the EU. Under Prime Minister Leszek Miller (2001–2004), *Lewica* became indistinguishable from right-wing parties as regards socio-economic policy. As Roman Savenkov notes, the liberal economic policy pursued by the left-wing forces in the first half of the 2000s 'led to a shift away from the values of social democracy and the loss of ideological identity' [16, p. 179].

The main beneficiaries were the two parties that could grow rapidly by attracting the now disappointed supporters of social democrats. Each party had something to offer them: PiS promoted leftist paternalistic views of the economy and social problems, while PO attracted people of secular thinking who opposed the intensification of clerical trends — a burning issue in Poland. A product of historical contingency and a focus on Poland's history and ideology, the right-wing sentiment of the two parties gave them an opportunity to expand beyond their initially narrow groups of supporters and assert themselves as parties with a broad political agenda capable of engaging all social strata.

This change necessitated a more explicit ideological positioning and an emphasis on the program differences between the two parties. Under the rule of ideologically catch-all social democrats in the first half of the 2000s, the differences in the political programs of Polish parties were insignificant. Voters struggled to choose from a limited number of alternatives [17, p. 594]. This situation, which led to a drastic decay of left-wing forces and a fast rise of right-wing populist parties, indicated the need for a clear-cut political division. The ensuing crystallisation of views, political narratives and ideological self-identification facilitated the institutionalisation of the party system on a new basis [18, s. 85]. The support for the two parties increased, inter alia, owing to the extreme segments of the political spectrum: in 2007, PiS drew 60% of voters from the right-wing populist League of Polish Families [19, s. 589], which lost its seats in the parliament. At the same time, PO at that moment started recruiting supporters from across the liberal wing. The right-wing populist Self-Defence, whose leader Andrzej Lepper was dubbed 'the third twin' for his likeness to the Kaczyński brothers [20, p. 897], found itself in a much complicated predicament: half of its supporters absented themselves from the 2007 election [19, s. 589], and in the 2010s, they started voting for PiS.

Remarkably, this ideological division did not follow the standard *Prawica—Lewica* (right wing–left wing) model, which was typical of Poland. Although the two parties combined in their programmes elements of both ideologies, they were still considered right-wing. The analysis of their programme goals shows that the political views of PiS are 70% right-wing and socioeconomic ones 100% left-wing. PO has adopted a leftist perspective on political issues and right-wing on the economy [21, s. 168]. Polish politics became unbalanced

as a result: although about 25 % of voters support leftist ideas [22, p. 64], the left-wing forces gain from 7.5 to 13 % of votes in elections (in 2015, they did not even win any seats in the Sejm), and the rest of the votes usually strengthens the two major parties. The best asset of PiS is its proactive and consistent social policy. The 500+ state program launched under its rule (500 zlotys paid monthly for each child) was supported by 77 % of people, which fully blocked the opportunities of other parties to oppose it [23, p. 186]. An important role was played by the annulment of the pension reform carried out under the rule of PO and the reduction of retirement age. The PiS programme stated as its main goal ‘a Polish model of a modern welfare state’.⁵ At the high of its popularity in the early 2020, PiS enjoyed the record level of support in the region of 50%.⁶ In its turn, PO benefits from the evident discontent of many Poles with the authoritarian and clerical trends associated with PiS: the attacks on the judiciary system, the tightening of abortion rules, Sunday trading ban etc. That is why PO has shifted its main ideological emphasis from the economy to politics, standing up for democratic institutions, women’s rights, legalisation of same-gender partnerships and avoiding references to the Christian ideology and the Catholic cultural tradition characteristic of the right-wing parties.⁷ So, both parties have adopted important elements of the leftist agenda, thus dividing most of the political landscape between them.

The EU factor has had a profound influence on the formation of the bipolar party system in Poland. Before the accession to the EU in 2004, Polish parties were generally euro-optimistic; since the mid-2000s, the rise of euro-sceptic attitudes has pulled them apart. Interestingly, PO which had wooed the corresponding segment of voters before the accession to the EU, started to define itself afterwards as a force uniting the supporters of a united Europe – by contrast with PiS, which included the principle of ‘euro-realism’ in its program⁸ and explicitly drifted towards euro-scepticism. The debates about European integration reflect the rigid attitude towards preservation of national sovereignty specific to Polish society. The right-wing politicians see Brussels as a new imperial centre striving to lay down the law and impose cosmopolitan values far removed from the national traditions [17, p. 597]. But because the idea of Poland as part of Europe

⁵ Program Prawa i Sprawiedliwości 2019, Polski model państwa dobrobytu, 2019, S.22, URL: https://pis.org.pl/files/Program_PIS_2019.pdf (accessed 28.10.2022).

⁶ Polish Public Opinion, CBOS — *Public Opinion Research Center*, November 2021, P. 3, URL: https://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/public_opinion/2021/11_2021.pdf (accessed 29.10.2022).

⁷ Twoja Polska. Program Koalicji Obywatelskiej, 2019, S. 9–10, 16, 23, URL: <https://platforma.org/upload/document/86/attachments/121/KO%20Program.pdf> (accessed 28.10.2022).

⁸ Program Prawa i Sprawiedliwości 2019, Polski model państwa dobrobytu, 2019, S. 20, URL: https://pis.org.pl/files/Program_PIS_2019.pdf (accessed 28.10.2022).

and the catholic world is the basis of the country's national ideology, PiS does not question its EU membership, insisting instead on the Union's fundamental transformation in conformity with Christian values, following the 'Europe of nations' model [24, p. 20]. Poland's search for its place in the EU has sparked off the never-ending public debate overlapping with the struggle between the two parties.

The 'two-party tendency' is largely a produce of the peculiarities of the country's election laws. After the explosive growth in the number of parliamentary parties in the early 1990s, a number of legal mechanisms were created curbing the potential of small parties. A rather high electoral threshold was set: 5% for parties and 8% for coalitions. This, for instance, skewed the election results in 2015, when PiS and PO gained much fewer votes than before, but their factions in the Sejm increased significantly (see Table 2). Since 2005, the distribution of seats in the Sejm has followed the d'Hondt method, which slightly diminishes the representation of small parties. Moreover, the seats are allocated separately in every electoral district (on average 11 seats in each). To be elected to the Sejm, it is necessary to pass the threshold set in the district. In smaller districts, this mechanism favours big parties [25, s. 77]. Combined with the d'Hondt method, this creates quite noticeable disproportions in the allocation of mandates in Poland. But for the influence of those disproportions, the ruling coalition could not have retained majority in 2011 or created the single-party PiS government in 2015 and 2019. In the Senate elections, the majority voting system is employed minimising the chances of the other parties. None of this confirms the thesis that the role of election laws has diminished since the beginning of the 21st century [26, s. 345]. These legislative mechanisms stay an important limitation for small parties, as it was envisaged in the turbulent 1990s.

Table 2

Disproportions in seat allocation in the Sejm since 2005, %

Year	Share of votes for PiS and PO ⁹	Share of seats of PiS and PO	Share of votes for other parliamentary forces	Share of seats of other parliamentary forces
2005	51	63	38	37
2007	74	82	22	18
2011	69	79	27	21
2015	62	81	22	19
2019	71	80	28	20

⁹ Taking into account the blocs headed by these parties, i.e. the United Right coalition based on PiS in 2015 and the Civic Coalition based on PO in 2019.

Prospects for transition to a two-party system

Let us consider the prospects of Poland's two-and-a-half party system. Here, it is necessary to consider what factors prevent it from transforming into a full-fledged two-party system and may cause Poland to revert to the more traditional multi-party system.

The Polish model cannot become two-party in its classic form as long as the Sejm elections are held according to the proportional system, which is not likely to be abandoned in the near future: today's polarisation does not encourage PiS and PO to cooperate, let alone create a 'party cartel' capable of changing the rules of Polish politics at its own discretion at the expense of the interests of small forces [27, s. 103]. An attempt to do so using the votes of a single-party majority would explode the situation in society and urge the opposition forces to rally to support for the rival party. The tradition inherent in the national ideology holds that all important public groups should have a right to political representation.

The phenomenon, termed the 'party fad' [28, p. 158], is another characteristic feature of the Polish political system. Since the beginning of the 2010s, each parliamentary and presidential election has brought relative success to new political forces and candidates positioning themselves as anti-system ones. In the 2011 parliamentary election, that was the acutely anticlerical Palikot movement; in the 2015 presidential and parliamentary election, the right-wing populist politician and rock-musician Paweł Kukiz and his movement; in the 2019 Sejm election, the Confederation far-right bloc passed the electoral threshold in several districts; in 2020, the independent candidate showman Szymon Hołownia finished third. These politicians and movement managed to gain from 7 to 21 % of votes, investing much less than the traditional parties with their solid organisational structures and state funding. To a great extent, the success of anti-system forces is the result of protest voting. For instance, 25 % of Kukiz's supporters voted for Janusz Palikot in the previous election, albeit the two candidates had virtually nothing in common [29, p. 242]. Traditionally, from 20 to 32 % of Polish voters think that none of the existing parties advocates their interests [30, s. 52]. As Jerzy Jaskiernia writes, 'forming a "successful" political party in Poland is a matter of months' [29, p. 240].

Besides the unstable populist parties, there are more resilient parliamentary forces with rich historic traditions and certain influence in real politics. These are social democrats and the agrarian parties,¹⁰ such as the Polish People's Party, which is the most stable in the Polish politics and the only one that has been represented in all the consecutive Sejms. Advocating a most eclectic set of views, it has the largest coalition potential among all the Polish parties [21, s. 168—169]. Its traditional role is making attempts towards a coalition with a more powerful

¹⁰ In Poland, they are called *ludowcy*, i. e. agrarians.

parliamentary force [31, p. 94]. Within such coalitions formed both at the national and regional levels, the party often becomes more influential than it would be expected based on its approval rating of about 8–9%.

It is interesting to compare Polish parties in terms of membership. Paradoxically, the two major Polish parties are not leaders in this respect. In the early 2010s, the Polish People's Party had, on average, 100,000 members; social democrats, 59,000 [12, p. 492]. PO and PiS were inferior to these parties in terms of membership: each had only 34,000 members in 2018 [10, p. 191].

Except for some big cities where PO prevails, Poland's local governments are rarely led by either of the two major parties. Poland's local authorities are among the strongest and their self-reliance among the greatest in Europe [32, p. 512]: not only are they financially independent of the national government or voivodeships, they can also receive direct subsidies from EU funds [33, p. 151]. Many big cities have been governed by independent politicians for decades, even those generally considered the electoral strongholds of PiS, such as Kraków and Rzeszów, or PO, such as Szczecin and Gdynia. Local politicians prevail in small cities and rural areas. Parties do not play an important role there. For example, in the early 2010s, the agrarians had a wider representation in local governments than PO and PiS combined [12, p. 491].

The two major parties' strong personalisation is another potential factor of their weakness. As Anna Materska-Sosnowska points out, according to the classic scheme, parties create their leaders, while in Poland, as well as other Central and Eastern European countries, quite the opposite, parties are formed around leaders [34, s. 75]. Both PO and PiS have been called leaderist or even 'authorial', which means that their leaders are also their founders [6, s. 197]. PiS is the brainchild of Jarosław Kaczyński who is widely believed to have more political influence as the party leader than PiS presidents and prime ministers. PO is the patrimony of Tusk: all the attempts to promote new leaders after his moving to Brussels had consistently failed; in 2021, he retook the reins of the party. Both politicians are advanced in years (in 2022, Kaczyński was 73 and Tusk 65), having scaled the political heights more than 20 years ago. For Poland this is a very long period in power. It is uncertain whether the parties will survive their leaders: the experience of PO suggests that when the leader steps away, the party can plunge into crisis.

Yet, the two parties are not mirror images of each other [19, s. 599]. Ideologically, PiS is much more integrated: it is the only Polish party having a base of supporters who are permanently ready to vote for it and do not consider other political forces as an alternative [14, p. 108–109]. Despite the criticism of its ideological palette (see, for instance, [35, p. 58]), it should not go unmentioned that PiS is a party of explicit ideological positioning, and the electoral effect of the pursued policy is secondary to its ideology [36, p. 196]. PO, however, has faced problems with retaining the loyalty of its voters since the early 2010s: this

lack of commitment may be due to the party's growing pragmatism and ideological eclecticism. A considerable part of PO's supporters vote for new parliamentary forces: former PO supporters accounted for 43 % of the Palikot Movement electorate in 2011 [12, p. 492] and 71 % of Modern in 2015 [29, p. 238]. Since the mid-2010s, PO has plummeted in opinion polls, being outstripped by not only PiS but also other political forces. In 2015, it was losing to Kukiz'15 [37, p. 152–153]; in 2016, to Modern, a recently formed liberal party [38, p. 67]. In 2020, PO nearly lost the first round of presidential elections; only changing the candidate allowed the party to make it into the second round. In 2021, PO was for a short time outrun in the polls by Szymon Hołownia's anti-system party Poland 2050.¹¹ These problems are a result of the party's failure to articulate its stance on such burning issues as reducing clerical influence or granting of abortion rights to women, which discourages potential liberal supporters. PO's programme contains some vague indications that may encourage opposition-minded voters but does not make the position of the party clear (the document speaks of 'the rights of Polish women' instead of the abortion right¹², avoids naming the Church when addressing the principles of the secular state etc.). Unlike PiS, it is often hesitant to go beyond its habitual compromise policy, which, in the conditions of social polarisation, cannot satisfy a considerable part of the intended electorate.

The problems PO and PiS are facing lead one to the conclusion that the two-party tendency is not likely to intensify in Poland in the near future. The two parties have dominated the political arena for 15 years; support for PiS has skyrocketed all over the country; the influence of PO on local politics has gradually expanded; the drastic growth in voter turnout in 2019 and 2020 did not undermine the leading role of the two parties in Polish politics. Yet, these facts and trends do not outweigh the problems that PiS and PO are facing in their attempts to minimise the influence of third parties. The widespread opinion that PiS's authoritarian tendencies may lead to the emergence in Poland of a 'Hungarian' political system dominated by one party is also ungrounded. There are no prerequisites for such a development: PiS is incapable of securing the constitutional majority without PO votes.

Conclusion

The party system that has existed in Poland over the past 15 years can be characterised as two-and-a-half party. It meets the main criterion (party standings in the Sejm), and the other factors are also in place: the role of the President and the Senate, the substantial influence of the two parties in regional elections, sup-

¹¹ Poll of Polls — Polish polls, trends and election news for Poland, 2022, *Politico*, URL: <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/poland/> (accessed 29.10.2022).

¹² *Twoja Polska. Program Koalicji Obywatelskiej*, 2019, S. 16, URL: <https://platforma.org/upload/document/86/attachments/121/KO%20Program.pdf> (accessed 28.10.2022).

port for the two parties from almost all social groups, ideological polarisation, stereotype scenarios of electoral campaigns involving struggle between the two parties. The genesis of the party system in its new version has been facilitated by the deep crisis of leftist forces, the programme divergence of the two parties, the increase in the EU influence on Polish politics, the capability (especially in the PiS case) to attract voters with different ideological views and the peculiarities of the election laws. The new party model, which appeared in the late 2000s, has been characterised by inner stability despite the considerable number of problems PiS and PO have faced on their way to expanding their influence. The multiple sceptic forecasts concerning the prospects of Poland's system with two major parties have not been confirmed so far.

Yet, the logic behind these forecasts holds up. One can hardly expect that the 'two-party tendency' will intensify in Poland: that would go against both the realities of Polish politics and the country's deep-rooted tradition. Further development of the two-party tendency is restrained by the inability of PO and PiS to join their efforts in changing the rules, the use of the proportional system in parliamentary elections, the weakness of the parties at the local level and a moderate membership of the parties. Other important factors are the 'party fad', the weak mechanisms for leadership handover in the parties and, in the case of PO, the instability of public support due to the ideological eclecticism of the 2010s.

The two-party tendency observed over the past 15 years has led to some negative consequences, such as marked social polarisation, as well as positive ones: more sustainable governments, a well-structured political process and consistent policies pursued by the Polish government when the two parties are in accord. The way the Polish party system has developed over the past 15–20 years shows that it does progress as a system proper without plunging every now and then into a chaotic change of different party combinations.

References

1. Duverger, M. 2013, *Politicheskie partii* [Political Parties], 5th ed., Moscow, Academic Project. 544 p. (in Russ.).
2. Siaroff, A. 2003, Two-and-a-Half-Party Systems and the Comparative Role of the 'Half', *Party Politics*, vol. 9, №3, p. 267–290, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068803009003001>.
3. Hou, P. 2020, Menu or Mandate? EU Governance and Party Politics in Poland, *Chinese Political Science Review*, №5, p. 588–607, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-020-00147-0>.
4. Szczerbiak, A. 2008, The Birth of a Bipolar Party System or a Referendum on a Polarizing Government? The October 2007 Polish Parliamentary Elections, *Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, vol. 24, №3, p. 415–443, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523270802267955>.
5. Kurek-Bąk, J. 2013, Transformacja polskiego systemu partyjnego po 1989 roku, *Studia Politicae Universitatis Silesiensis*, №10, s. 53–82.

6. Dzieciński, P. 2009, Kształtowanie się i ewolucja systemu partyjnego w Polsce po 1989 roku, *Prace Naukowe Akademii im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie, Seria: Res Politicae*, vol. 3, s. 185–200.
7. Danel, Ł. 2013, 25 lat kształtowania się polskiego systemu partyjnego — teoria i praktyka, *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego w Krakowie*, № 921, s. 35–53.
8. Gwiazda, A. 2009, Poland's Quasi-Institutionalized Party System: The Importance of Elites and Institutions, *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, vol. 10, № 3, p. 350–376, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15705850903105769>.
9. Mikhalev, O. Yu. 2014, Poland: Political Set up after the Smolensk (2010–2013), *Sovremennaya Evropa*, № 4, p. 70–83, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15211/soveurope420147083> (in Russ.).
10. Stanley, B. 2020, A Comparison of Two Polish Leaders: Jarosław Kaczyński and Donald Tusk, in: Gherghina, S. (ed.), *Party Leaders in Eastern Europe*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 171–195, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32025-6_8.
11. Volobuev, V. V. 2022, Kaczynism as a Polish Version of the Great Power Conservatism, *Svobodnaya mysl* [Free Thought], № 1, p. 89–104 (in Russ.).
12. Szczerbiak, A. 2013, Poland (Mainly) Chooses Stability and Continuity: The October 2011 Polish Parliamentary Election, *Perspectives on European Policy and Society*, vol. 14, № 4, p. 480–504, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15705854.2013.793535>.
13. Vorotnikov, V. V. (ed.). 2021, *Pol'sha v sovremennom mire* [Poland in contemporary world], Moscow, MGIMO University. 273 p. (in Russ.).
14. Tworzecki, H. 2019, Poland: A Case of Top-Down Polarization, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 681, № 1, p. 97–119, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218809322>.
15. Lykoshina, L. S. 2015, “Pol'sko-pol'skaya voina”: *Politicheskaya zhizn' sovremennoi Pol'shi* [“Polish-Polish war”: The Political Life of Contemporary Poland], Moscow, INION RAS. 258 p. (in Russ.).
16. Savenkov, R. V. 2019, Left Parties Today. The Potential of the Opposition in Contemporary Poland, *Svobodnaya mysl* [Free Thought], № 4, p. 168–181 (in Russ.).
17. Bernhard, M. 2021, Democratic Backsliding in Poland and Hungary, *Slavic Review*, vol. 80, № 3, p. 585–607, <https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.145>.
18. Materska-Sosnowska, A. 2011, Instytucjonalizacja polskiego systemu partyjnego — wybrane aspekty, *Studia Politologiczne*, vol. 22, s. 76–90.
19. Flis, J., Kwiatkowska, A. 2018, Polski system partyjny — idee i identyfikacje, w: Wojtaszczyk, K. A., Stawarz, P., Wiśniewska-Grzelak, J. (red.), *Zmierzch demokracji liberalnej*, Warszawa, Instytut Europeistyki Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, s. 587–606.
20. Noskova, A. F. (ed.). 2012, *Pol'sha v XX veke. Ocherki politicheskoi istorii* [Poland in the 20th century. Essays on Political History], Moscow, Indrik. 952 p. (in Russ.).
21. Filipczak-Białkowska, A. 2021, *Od prawicy do lewicy. Struktura ideologiczna polskich partii politycznych w latach 2015–2017*, Łódź, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 190 s.
22. Wojtasik, W. 2020, Changes in the Party System in the Context of Deconsolidation of Democracy in Poland, *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, vol. 49, № 1, p. 55–66, <https://doi.org/10.15804/ppsy2020105>.
23. Glukhova, A. V., Savenkov, R. V. 2019. New Authoritarianism in Polish Vestment, *Polis (Russian Federation)*, № 4, p. 181–191, <https://doi.org/10.17976/jpps/2019.04.13> (in Russ.).

24. Klemeshev, A. P., Vorozheina, Ya. A. 2018, National-Conservative “Turn” of Poland in Geopolitical Context, *Polis (Russian Federation)*, № 5, p. 17–28, <https://doi.org/10.17976/jpps/2018.05.03> (in Russ.).

25. Uziębło, P. 2011, Wpływ systemów wyborczych na systemy partyjne (wybrane zagadnienia), *Przegląd Prawa Konstytucyjnego*, № 3, s. 67–87.

26. Jastrzębski, M. 2013, Wpływ zmian prawa wyborczego na ewolucję systemu partyjnego w Polsce w latach 1989–2011, w: Kuczur, T., Wolsza, T. (red.), *Polska w XX wieku: w kręgu badań historycznych, politologicznych i prawnych*, Bydgoszcz, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, s. 323–345.

27. Radecki, M. 2012, Czy w Polsce istnieje kartel partii politycznych? *Świat Idei i Polityki*, vol. 11, s. 87–105.

28. Mayorova, O. N. 2016, The Right Turn in Poland. Presidential and Parliamentary Elections in 2015, *Slavyanskii al'manakh [Slavic Almanac]*, № 1–2, p. 147–163 (in Russ.).

29. Jaskiernia, J. 2017, The Development of the Polish Party System: a Perspective of the Parliamentary Elections Results, *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, vol. 46, № 2, p. 227–246, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15804/ppsy2017214>.

30. Marmola, M. 2020, Poziom reprezentatywności partii politycznych i zapotrzebowanie na nowe ugrupowania w polskim systemie partyjnym, *Wrocławskie Studia Politologiczne*, № 29, s. 49–57, <https://doi.org/10.19195/1643-0328.29.4>.

31. Lykoshina, L. S. 2015, 10 Years Afterwards: on the 2015 Elections in Poland, *Sovremennaya Evropa [Contemporary Europe]*, № 6, p. 89–98. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15211/soveurope620158998> (in Russ.).

32. O'Dwyer, C., Stenberg, M. 2021, Local-Level Democratic Backsliding? The Consolidation of Aspiring Dominant-Party Regimes in Hungary and Poland, *Government and Opposition*, vol. 57, № 3, p. 508–531, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.12>.

33. Nosovich, A. A. 2020, An Alternative for Europe. What Does the Internal Policy of “Law and Justice” Offer to Poland and Her Allies, in: Krasheninnikova, V. Yu., Bunovich, D. S. (eds.), *Pol'sha v bor'be za Vostochnuyu Evropu 1920–2020 [Poland's Struggle for Eastern Europe 1920–2020]*, Moscow, Kuchkovo pole, p. 144–153 (in Russ.).

34. Materska-Sosnowska, A. 2015, Relacje między wyborami prezydenckimi a systemem partyjnym w Polsce, *Studia Sociologiczno-Polityczne. Seria Nowa*, № 1, s. 75–92.

35. Yazhborovskaya, I. S. 2016, Poland 2015–2016. Chronicle of Neoauthoritarian Revanche, *Polis (Russian Federation)*, № 5, p. 49–65, <https://doi.org/10.17976/jpps/2016.05.05> (in Russ.).

36. Nosovich, A. A. 2022, Where Is Poland Heading? *Russia in Global Affairs*, № 1, p. 188–204, <https://doi.org/10.31278/1810-6374-2022-20-1-166-184> (in Russ.).

37. Volobuev, V. V. 2020, Poland: from the Social State to the Social Teachings of the Church, in: Nikiforov, K. V. (ed.), *Ocherki politicheskoi istorii stran Tsentral'noi i Yugo-Vostochnoi Evropy. Konets XX – nachalo XXI vv. [Essays on the Political History of Central and South-Eastern Europe. From the Late 20th to the Early 21st Centuries]*, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Nestor-Istoriya, p. 126–164 (in Russ.).

38. Mikhalev, O. Yu. 2018, Status and Perspectives of the Liberal Parties in Poland, *Sovremennaya Evropa*, № 7, p. 61–72, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15211/soveurope720186274> (in Russ.).

The author

Dr Igor S. Putintsev, Associate Professor, Department of European and American History and Politics, MGIMO University, Russia.

E-mail: isp90@mail.ru

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2576-4467>



SUBMITTED FOR POSSIBLE OPEN ACCESS PUBLICATION UNDER THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF THE CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION (CC BY) LICENSE ([HTTP://CREATIVECOMMONS.ORG/LICENSES/BY/4.0/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/))