

## Accession Twenty Years On – Experiences, Expectations and Effects on the European Union

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# Physically Present but Spiritually Distant: The View of the European Union in Poland

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**Abstract:** The Polish people remain staunchly in favour of the concept of a European Union. Paradoxically though, there has been strong and continued electoral support for Law and Justice (PiS), its ruling party, despite its insistence on precipitating and then continuing multifaceted conflicts with EU institutions. This article examines the internal structural changes in Poland and the attitudes to the EU of Poland's leaders; the article will argue that those attitudes have deepened pre-existing divisions over integration. By fusing the triple modernization theory of European integration with a two-dimensional concept of party-based Euroscepticism, the article shows how PiS's ambiguous discourse on European integration, combined with an increasingly instrumental approach to the EU by the Polish electorate—and that electorate's deepening polarization—have secured steady support for PiS from ostensibly Europhile voters.

**Keywords:** Poland; European Union; European integration; rule of law; Euroscepticism

## Introduction

General Polish support for the country's membership of the European Union (EU) remains remarkably strong. A survey by the Public Opinion Research Centre (*Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej*, CBOS) in June 2022 showed 92 % of respondents in favour of Poland's remaining in the EU—the highest level of support recorded

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since 1994.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, in the two most recent parliamentary elections—2015 and 2019—Poles voted overwhelmingly for Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS), self-proclaimed “Euro-realists” who have led Poland into heated conflict on many fronts with various EU institutions over the principle of the rule of law. Paradoxically, support for PiS remains high in Poland even given the tensions with the EU, and this article attempts to answer the broad question of why Poles, despite their overwhelming support for membership of the EU, continue to vote for a political bloc that has displayed so much hostility to the European Commission. To put it simply, “Why does a nation of Europhiles vote for a party of Eurosceptics?”

A number of factors must be considered. First, Poles, are often characterized as having an instrumental approach to the EU and, while seemingly Europhile, as having only superficial attachment to its institutions. Second, Poles’ growing sense of cultural difference from Western Europe—which they share with other Central and East European (CEE) nations—has been exploited in its own support by PiS who have argued that the distinctiveness of the Polish character means that there may quite reasonably be more differences than commonalities between them and other EU member states. Third, political polarisation of Polish society is increasing, and that is now being expressed in Polish elections. However, what we find most compelling is the existence of different dimensions of party-based Euroscepticism in Poland, in particular the rather popular “soft” Euroscepticism represented by PiS, which accepts the benefits of the EU but still takes delight in criticizing it. In fact, utilizing the typology of Kopecký and Mudde (2002), this article shows that support for PiS, despite the party’s confrontational approach to the EU, remains strong precisely because PiS has never been a “hard” Eurosceptic nor a Euroreject party. Politicians associated with it and the leaders of PiS have criticized EU institutions fiercely; they have joined political battle with them, but as what follows will show, PiS has never questioned Poland’s membership of the EU and has always rejected any idea of “Polexit.” In fact, the party has itself developed along with the electorate, mirroring their worries about European integration.

The article is structured as follows. First, we discuss a theoretical and conceptual framework to describe and help understand the phenomenon in question, fusing triple modernisation theory applied to European integration (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Konieczna-Salamatin and Sawicka 2021); and Kopecký and Mudde’s (2002) two-dimensional conceptualization of party-based Euroscepticism. We shall then examine how European Union membership was perceived in Poland in the years leading up to its EU accession and in the first years of its membership. Critically

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1 Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej 2023. “Stosunek do członkostwa Polski w Unii Europejskiej.” n. d. [https://www.cbos.pl/PL/trendy/trendy.php?trend\\_parametr=stosunek\\_do\\_integracji\\_UE](https://www.cbos.pl/PL/trendy/trendy.php?trend_parametr=stosunek_do_integracji_UE) (accessed 12 August 2023).

building on Szczerbiak's (2021) observation that, over time, "attitudes towards the EU in post-communist states became increasingly less abstract and romantic and more instrumental and contingent", our argument will be that in fact, both a pragmatic cost-benefit analysis and an idealistic idea of Europe were always present among Poles and their political elites. Finally, we reconstruct Poland's political landscape since the early 2000s, noting that while Eurosceptic or "Euro-realist" trends were present in public debates, they gained no traction. We then analyse the shift in attitudes to the EU that took place in the aftermath of the migration crisis and the subsequent rise to power of Law and Justice, followed by increasing conflict with the EU and widening polarization of the Polish electorate's views of European integration. Finally, we return to the triple modernization approach to offer some conclusions.

## European Integration and Its Discontents

In general terms, modernisation means the transformation from a traditional, rural, agrarian society to a secular, urban, industrial (and then post-industrial) society. Among many theories of modernisation, one of the most prominent is Inglehart and Wenzel's (2005), which describes three dimensions of development: socioeconomic, cultural (value change), and institutional (democratization). According to Inglehart and Wenzel, the first and main driver of extensive changes in society, culture, and politics is economic growth, because by providing security, education, and social resources it prepares the ground for changes in cultural values. Wealthier countries tend to emphasize self-expression and individual liberty, gender equality, and responsive government, as well as democratization through the pursuit of civil and political liberty. Importantly, modernization is not a linear process, and balance in societies shifts between modernization and tradition (Inglehart and Welzel 2005, 2).

Drawing on modernization theory, Konieczna-Salamatin and Sawicka (2021) have proposed that integration driven by the European Union encompasses all three of those aspects of modernization—economic, institutional, and cultural. Economic modernization is based on the market economy, opening up to foreign markets, and creating and joining the single European market. Institutional modernization includes development of democratic institutions, adopting the principles of political pluralism, and the rule of law with checks and balances and protection of human rights. All those conditions are explicitly stated in the so-called Copenhagen criteria for EU accession, established in 1995.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Eur-Lex. 2021. "Accession Criteria (Copenhagen Criteria)." n.d. Publications Office of the European Union. Luxembourg. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/accession-criteria-copenhagen-criteria.html> (accessed 7 January 2023).

EU member states are expected to conform also to the set of values written in the Treaty on European Union and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. There is therefore another aspect of cultural modernization, that demonstrated by adoption of values, diffusion, and change. Konieczna-Salamatin and Sawicka's argument of the process of European integration maintains that the societies of the new member states are assumed to be "to a large extent passive absorbers of cultural pressures and should be molded to fit into the European stencil," while in fact, they are "active subjects who also interpret cultural influence within the frames of their local cultural schemes and symbolic systems" (Konieczna-Salamatin and Sawicka 2021, 364).

This process of integration has also engendered what Taggart described as "the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating out-right and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration" (Taggart 1998, 366); in short, "Euroscepticism", a concept originally applied to certain Western European parties. While the genesis of Euroscepticism might be rooted in the omnipresent tension between the United Kingdom and its European partners and might have been used to describe "a sense of the country's 'awkwardness' or 'otherness' in relation to a Continental European project of political and economic integration," Euroscepticism became in due course a prominent trend in continental Europe in the 1990s (Harmsen and Spiering 2004, 13).

Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak (2002) further developed a conceptual distinction between the two types of Euroscepticism which they claimed to be present across EU member states. They focused specifically on party-based systems and the use by those parties of anti-EU sentiments: "hard" and "soft" Euroscepticism (Table 1). The hard variant is applied by parties to express objection to the current form of EU integration or, alternatively, *all* forms of economic and political EU integration, while the soft form is often opposed to one particular policy of integration—such as the euro—but broadly supports the overall framework of

**Table 1:** Definitions of hard and soft Euroscepticism according to Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002, 4).

<p>HARD EUROSCEPTICISM is where there is a principled opposition to the EU and European integration and therefore can be seen in parties who think that their countries should withdraw from membership, or whose policies towards the EU are tantamount to being opposed to the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived.</p>	<p>SOFT EUROSCEPTICISM is where there is NOT a principled objection to European integration or EU membership but where concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas lead to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU, or where there is a sense that "national interest" is currently at odds with the EU trajectory.</p>
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**Table 2:** Typology of party positions on Europe (Kopecký and Mudde 2002).

	<b>Europhile</b>	<b>Europhobe</b>
EU-optimist	<b>Euroenthusiasts</b> support the general ideas of European integration and believe that the EU is or will soon become the institutionalization of these ideas	<b>Europragmatists</b> do not support the general ideas of European integration underlying the EU, nor do they necessarily oppose them, yet they do support the EU
EU-pessimist	<b>Eurosceptics</b> support the general ideas of European integration, but are pessimistic about the EU's current and/or future reflection of these ideas	<b>Eurorejects</b> subscribe neither to the ideas underlying the process of European integration nor to the EU

integration (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2002). Kopecký and Mudde (2002), building on Taggart and Szczerbiak's definitions, created a more complex, two-dimensional conceptualization of party positions on Europe. They distinguished Europhiles and Europhobes based on the levels of political parties' support for the general ideas of European integration, while classifying specific support for the general practice of European integration into two additional categories, EU-optimists and EU-pessimists (Table 2).

That specific typology offers a way to help understand how party mechanisms interact with the idea that EU integration is modernization, as the hardest of Eurorejects would argue that modernization is possible only through national sovereignty (the idea animating Brexit), while other quadrants would perhaps be more welcoming of certain facets of modernization but more wary of others. This nuanced approach to Euroscepticism also allows an understanding of how one party (or, as we shall show, country) can simultaneously support the idea of European integration as an economic or cultural project but be against its concrete institutional forms.

## Historical Overview of the Development of the “Europe Idea” in Poland

Poland's integration into the European Union began almost immediately after the collapse of the communist regime in the late 1980s. By September 1989, the newly democratically elected Polish government signed an agreement on trade and economic cooperation with the European Communities and soon afterwards, in May 1990, officially applied to commence negotiations on an Association Agreement, which became effective in February 1994. In 1994, the country formally applied to become a European Union member state.

## Return to Europe

Before the transformation of 1989, the Polish opposition idealised the idea of the EU which they felt burned brightly as a beacon of hope for the country. Among intellectual and political elites, discussions on EU membership revolved mainly around values and ideas, and a return to a cultural home. When during the 1990s the prospect of joining the European Communities became a tangible goal, some pointed out that Poland had “always been part of the European community, but as a result of an unfavorable combination of circumstances, [was] cut off—not voluntarily—from [its] European sources” (Grzymiski 2016, 154). By becoming an EU member state therefore, Poland would be “returning to Europe”; the political elite saw joining the European Union as the final act of leaving behind the Soviet past, “an end to the Cold War division of Europe and symbolic reuniting of the Eastern and Western halves of the continent” (Szczerbiak 2021, 256) and a long-overdue reunification with the rest of the continent after decades-long ideological division (Ceka and Sojka 2016, 485). Within the framework of Konieczna-Salamatin and Sawicka’s triple modernization (2021), the political elite hoped for cultural and institutional modernization—a modernization long interrupted by Soviet influence.

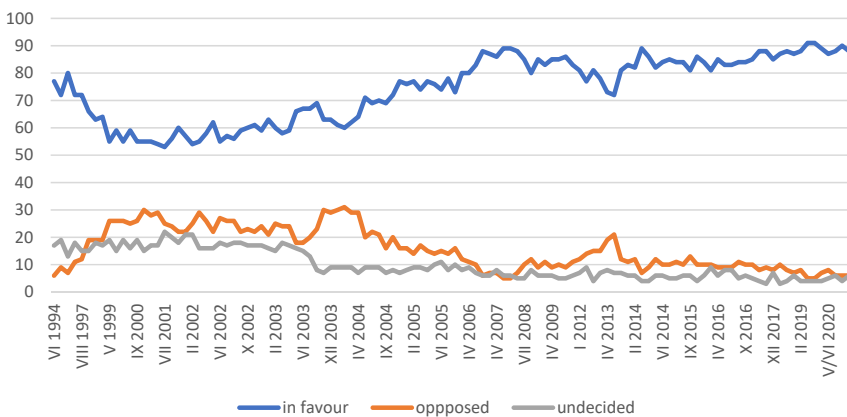
The romanticized intellectual discourse of reuniting the two halves of the European continent coexisted with a wider and more commonplace economic aspiration to “catch up with Europe”. “Europe” in this context meant the EU; and often overlapped with notions of “the West” or “(Western) civilization” but with the EU implicitly as its leader (at least on the European continent). Europe thus became a metaphor for the modernization of Poland and an assurance of progress (Horolets 2006). The institutional dimension of modernization (democratization, liberalization, transition from communist institutions) and the cultural (a strong feeling of a common European identity and shared values) were forcefully present in the public debate about Polish membership of the EU. Ceka and Sojka (2016) argued that the desire to be considered European was a key factor in the vast societal support for European integration seen among the Central and East European states. Nevertheless, to be European for most Poles was associated first and foremost with economic modernization and prosperity. Zdzisław Mach, writing in 1997, showcased different perceptions and ideas of what joining the European communities would mean for different groups: “For the educated elites Europe was a mythical paradise of freedom, market economy and democracy [...]. For most uneducated Poles it was less so an ideological centre of traditions and values, but rather a mythical paradise which they wanted to belong to—a paradise of wealth” (Mach 1997, 40).

While political elites promoted a romanticised idea of Europe, most Poles saw the EU as an economic union first and foremost, potential benefits of membership

being assessed against that benchmark rather than some cultural metric. Since accession in 2004, access to EU funds and investment has remained the major benefit from EU membership in the eyes of most Poles, a consistent view over the last 30 years, as even by 1994 half the Poles polled by the national public opinion polling centre CBOS believed that joining the EU would be beneficial to Poland; among key expectations were economic improvement and greater competitiveness of the Polish economy. What Poles were hoping for and expecting were overall improvement in living standards and lower unemployment. Their concerns about possible adverse effects were focused on how, for example, Polish companies might compete against Western European ones. Economic modernization—defined by Konieczna-Sałamatin and Sawicka (2021, 364) as a belief in open markets and foreign investment as a model of economic development that would bring long-term collective welfare benefits and socio-economic convergence for CEE—was the paramount gain Poles expected from EU membership.

## Modernization or Domination? Fears and Concerns Surrounding the Integration Process

Since 1994 when the CBOS first asked about Poles' attitudes to EU membership, the level of support for Poland's membership of the EU has never fallen below 50 % and for the past 15 years has remained above 80 % (Roguska 2021). Interestingly, the months and years leading up to EU accession saw the historically lowest levels of support (Figure 1) as public discussion of potential threats to Polish agriculture, the



**Figure 1:** Attitudes towards EU membership.

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on data from Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej (2023).

sale of Polish land, or loss of national sovereignty became ever more heated (Lázár 2015). The number opposing joining the EU was the highest ever in the months immediately before Poland joined the EU proper on 1 May 2004. Many Poles seemed to be having second thoughts about the potential advantages of joining, wondering now whether the costs to the country and themselves personally they might actually outweigh those potential benefits (Roguska 2014).

As noted by Horolets (2006, 19), “already at the beginning of the development of the Polish Euro debate, these ideas were questioned by some of the Polish elites, who considered the progressive model of development alien to Poland and carrying the dangers of losing tradition,” and “[t]he issue of belonging to Europe divided the Polish elite into bitter opponents and ardent supporters of the European model of development.” The modernization framework provided by Konieczna-Salamatin and Sawicka (2021) has proved useful in describing societal attitudes to European integration during the pre-accession years. As explained above, while the cultural and institutional aspects of modernization were romanticised by the political elites who negotiated the accession, most significant for wider society was the economic aspect of modernization; people were motivated by the view that “life in the West is better than life in Poland because the West is generally more affluent than Poland” (Konieczna-Salamatin and Sawicka 2021, 369).

The dangers of joining the European project presented by its opponents included the steady secularization of European Union societies and, perceived as a consequence of it, their moral degeneration. Economic modernization was therefore the prime goal rather than any institutional or cultural modalities, and Polish policies followed that emphasis. More practically, there was too a worry that there would be excessive bureaucratization—and deception—with promises to Poland of European funds that would never materialise. Some warned that joining the EU would bring disaster to the Polish economy; Polish industry would collapse; and eventually Poland’s sovereignty and independence would be swept away (Żuk 2010). In that sense, Taggart and Szczerbiak’s “soft” Euroscepticism (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2002) was already taking hold, combining the desire for the benefits of overall European integration and wariness of the precise institutional form that integration was taking.

## A Successful Pro-European Campaign

The culmination of the campaigns for and against the European Union came on 9 June 2003 with a nationwide referendum on EU accession that would decide Poland’s European future. In the months leading to the referendum there were concerns that the 50 % turnout required for its constitutional validity would not be achieved.



The pro-EU campaigners put a vast amount of effort into encouraging Poles to vote (Szczerbiak 2004); and they succeeded, for almost 60 % of Poles headed to the polling booths and 77.45 % of them cast their votes in favour of joining the EU. The following year, on 1 May 2004, Poland duly became a member state of the European Union (Roguska 2003).

A year into EU membership, while many still felt uncertain and even apprehensive, the number of Poles feeling “hope” associated with EU membership had risen to 55 % (Roguska 2005). Relatedly, the number believing the benefits of accession outweighed the costs had risen too. Most often, as benefits respondents pointed to open borders and the opportunity to work abroad, as well as EU support for the Polish farmers and the agricultural sector, while price increases, particularly of food, were the most often referred to as a negative consequence of accession. While respondents cited non-economic benefits such as the strengthening of Poland’s international standing and military security, CBOS analytics found that the strongest correlation was that between the prospect of economic benefits and support for the EU. Once again, the economic dimension of modernization proved to be central in the minds of Poles.

The other valued benefit of becoming an EU member state was freedom of movement, obviously an inherently economic aspect and indispensable for those wishing to work in other EU countries. Thanks to resulting intra-EU migration, “Europeanness” infiltrated every level of daily lives of the Polish people, becoming a benchmark for evaluating what is happening around them” (Kowalski et al. 2019, 242). Poles began comparing their own experiences of interaction with officialdom, or making use of public services with reports—admittedly through family, friends and acquaintances, whether first- or second-hand—of similar experiences in other EU countries. What they heard raised their expectations of their standards of living, of the quality of their institutions, and of the social security system, consciously or not adding another layer to the economy-focused anticipations of EU membership. Despite initial fears about EU accession, large majorities of Poles remained consistently and staunchly in favour of EU membership. They had now perceived joining the European Union as one of the last century’s most important achievements by Polish people, third only to regaining independence in 1918 and engineering the fall of communism in 1989 (Badora 2018).

## Political Landscape

While in the early 1990s there was overwhelming pro-EU integration consensus in Poland among political elites and public opinion alike, the actual accession negotiations prompted debate about not only benefits but costs too of EU

**Table 3:** Classification of Polish parties by position on Europe (according to Kopecký and Mudde 2002).

	<b>Europhile</b>	<b>Europhobe</b>
EU-optimist	<b>Euroenthusiasts</b> Civic Platform (PO) Polish People's Party (PSL) Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union (SLD-UP) Freedom Union ( <i>Unia Wolności</i> , UW)	<b>Europragmatists</b> None
EU-pessimist	<b>Eurosceptics</b> Law and Justice (PiS)	<b>Eurorejects</b> League of Polish Families (LPR) Self-Defence ( <i>Samoobrona</i> )

membership. The emerging uncertainty suddenly revealed the extent of the concessions that Poland had been required to make to join the EU. Political forces that might previously have been cautious in expressing Eurosceptic views now noted the change in the public mood (Szczzerbiak 2008, 223) and the turn of the millennium marked the emergence of Eurosceptic and anti-EU parties. Table 3 presents Kopecký and Mudde's classification of parties on Poland's political scene as it stood in the early 2000s.

In 2001, parliamentary elections took place (Table 4). The majority of votes (54 % in total) went to ostensibly Euroenthusiastic parties: the Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej-Unia Pracy*, SLD-UP) coalition and Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*, PO). Euroreject (or hard-Eurosceptic) parties—Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland (*Samoobrona Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej*, SRP) and the League of Polish Families (*Liga Polskich Rodzin*, LPR)—together received 18 % of votes, while the soft-Eurosceptic Law and Justice (PiS) and Polish People's Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*, PSL) together received 18.5 % of votes.<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, given the advanced stage of Poland's accession negotiations, “by virtually any measure EU membership was not a particularly salient campaign

**Table 4:** Results of the 2001 parliamentary elections in Poland.

Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union (SLD-UP)	41.04 %
Civic Platform (PO)	12.68 %
Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland (SRP)	10.20 %
Law and Justice (PiS)	9.50 %
Polish People's Party (PSL)	8.98 %
League of Polish Families (LPR)	7.87 %

Source: National Electoral Commission of Poland (2001).

<sup>3</sup> Numbers have been rounded.

issue. Most parties devoted very little time to it in their campaigning (e.g., Self-Defence said virtually nothing about it in its TV campaign) and very few Poles (3–7% cited it as a major factor in determining their voting behaviour” (Szczurbiak 2008, 224). That statement highlights an important characteristic of electoral campaigns in Poland since 2001: European affairs generally do not play an important role in public debate about elections.

The first elections in Poland to the European Parliament took place in June 2004. Both the turnout and the results were shocking to many analysts and commentators, especially considering the high level of support for the EU declared by Poles. Only a fifth of Polish citizens (20.87 %) entitled to vote did so: with the exception of Slovakia a turnout lower than any other member state.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the election results differed significantly from the 2001 parliamentary elections, with the Euroreject LPR coming second, the Eurosceptic PiS coming in third, and the Euroreject Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland fourth (Table 5). Combined with the extremely low turnout, that result could have been perceived as a Eurosceptic backlash, but as Table 6 shows, the majority of supporters of all parties, even the LPR, continued to support Poland’s membership of the EU, although each had its own critique of various EU policies. Among party members and affiliates of the Left Alliance, Civic Platform, and Law and Justice, for example, Euro-enthusiasm was overwhelming.

The driver of those results, and indeed of the electoral success of the fringe League of Polish Families and Self-Defence parties, could be identified within the concept of second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980) rather than being ascribed to any deep or abiding ambivalence about the EU—or antipathy to it. Reif and Schmitt categorized national elections as first-order elections, and regional and

**Table 5:** Results of the 2004 European Parliament elections in Poland.

Civic Platform (PO)	24.0 %
League of Polish Families (LPR)	15.9 %
Law and Justice (PiS)	12.7 %
Self-Defence (SRP)	10.8 %
Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union (SLD-UP)	9.3 %
Freedom Union (UW)	7.3 %
Polish People’s Party (PSL)	6.3 %
Polish Social Democrats (SDPL)	5.3 %
Other	8.4 %

Source: Gaisbauer (2007).

<sup>4</sup> European Parliament. 2019. “2019 European Election Results: Poland.” Strasbourg. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/national-results/poland/2004-2009/constitutive-session/> (accessed 12 August 2023).

**Table 6:** European orientation of potential party electorate in Poland.

Party	Support of EU membership		
	In favour	Against	Neutral
Left Alliance (SLD)	94*	3	3
Civic Platform (PO)	94	4	2
Law and Justice (PiS)	85	15	0
Polish People's Party (PSL)	77	16	7
Self Defence (SO)	64	30	6
League of Polish Families (LPR)	45	38	17

Note: \*¼% of potential (SLD) electorate. Source: Gaisbauer (2007).

European Parliament elections as second-order elections, treated by the electorate as less important and dominated by matters of national politics. The European Parliament (EP) has gradually acquired powers and competences since the first direct EP elections in 1979, but nevertheless voters, media, and political parties still perceive that there is less at stake in European elections, and national considerations and perceptions of national events still dominate their decisions (Clark and Rohrschneider 2009; Gagattek 2009; Weber 2007).

Once admitted to the European Union, Poland was better placed first to influence policy and second, to perceive the EU's institutional shortcomings, whether real or imagined, from within the EU policymaking process. Perhaps given better understanding of what the EU entailed and retaining certain qualms about the full panoply of EU initiatives, the parliamentary elections of 2005 marked the first steps towards power of Eurosceptic Law and Justice. PiS was founded in 2001 by twin brothers Jarosław Kaczyński and Lech Kaczyński as—considering its programme and its electorate—a classical conservative party. From its inception, PiS supported Poland's accession to the European Union and postulated that once Poland became a member state, the EU should (and could) be reformed from within. Over the four years between its creation and the elections in 2005, however, PiS realigned its rhetoric towards a much more Eurosceptic discourse (Markowski 2006, 820).

PiS emerged from the 2005 parliamentary election barely ahead of Civic Platform (Table 7) and formed a coalition government with *Samoobrona* and LPR. The coalition proved extremely unstable and PiS's first term in office lasted only two years, to 2007. During that term, PiS accused previous governments of having been too conciliatory and failing to defend Polish interests sufficiently robustly in the European arena (Markowski and Tucker 2010). At the same time, while not questioning the economic modernization nor Poland's strategic interests in its EU membership, PiS did question the cultural modernization demanded by the EU, which it perceived as a "hegemonic EU liberal-left consensus that it [PiS] believed

**Table 7:** Results of the 2005 parliamentary election in Poland.

Law and Justice (PiS)	26.99 %
Civic Platform (PO)	24.14 %
Self-Defence ( <i>Samoobrona</i> )	11.41 %
Democratic Left Alliance (SLD)	11.31 %
League of Polish Families (LPR)	7.97 %
Polish People's Party (PSL)	6.96 %
Polish Social Democracy (SDPL)	3.89 %
Democrats	2.45 %

Source: National Electoral Commission of Poland (2005).

undermined the country's traditional values and national identity" (Szczerbiak 2020, 181). PiS envisaged the EU as a "Europe of Nations" based on Judeo-Christian tradition and built around the idea of solidarity. The party argued that the "European Union without these traditions and values undercuts the roots of its own civilization, becomes a heartless and technocratic creation" (Karnowska 2012, 48).

A key point to note here is that the idea of European integration, or even of the EU itself, was not criticized in principle but merely in its current institutional and functional form. Indeed, Law and Justice perhaps best exemplifies the instrumental approach used by Poland in its perception of the meaning of EU membership. Poland's presence in EU structures was presented first and foremost as a way of "promoting the interests of a sovereign Polish state":

The government after 2005 and its parliamentary background (Law and Justice, Self-Defence, League of Polish Families) seem to regard integration as a zero-sum game [...]. In the Polish public debate, there are few threads concerning a broader European interest in specific issues. Attention is focused almost exclusively on defending Polish interests, which are often not fully defined (Kaczyński 2008, 22).

The year 2007 saw an early parliamentary election after the coalition fell. While the campaigns for that election were similar to previous ones, focused on domestic issues and internal conflicts, PiS continued to promise "tough foreign policy in defence of Polish values and interest" (Markowski 2008). The 2007 election was won by the Civic Platform, which formed a coalition government with the Polish People's Party (Table 8).

**Table 8:** Results of the 2007 parliamentary elections in Poland.

Civic Platform (PO)	41.51 %
Law and Justice (PiS)	32.22 %
The Left and Democrats coalition	13.15 %
Polish People's Party (PSL)	8.91 %

Source: National Electoral Commission of Poland (2007).

Apart from PiS, all the parties that won parliamentary seats in 2007 were Euroenthusiast according to Kopecký and Mudde's classification. *Samoobrona*, and LPR, two Euroreject parties, received respectively 1.53 % and 1.20 % of votes, leaving them shut out of Parliament and effectively off the Polish political scene. The PO-PSL coalition continued its rule after the 2011 elections.

## The Evolving Approach to the EU and the Rise of the Law and Justice Party

### The Global Financial Crisis and the Eurozone Debt Crisis

The first noticeable major development affecting Poles' assessments of the benefits of EU membership was the global financial crisis of 2007–2008 and the subsequent debt crisis in certain eurozone countries. The period between 2007 and 2013 was the first time since joining the EU that Poland saw a detectable downward trend in support for EU membership—and it was prolonged; at its lowest in May 2013 it had fallen to 72 %—still high among member states but the lowest it had been in Poland since September 2004 (Roguska 2013). As the financial crisis went on, more and more Poles believed that EU integration “had gone too far”; 21 % of them when the CBOS first asked the question in May 2009, while by May 2013, 33 % thought so—one in three Poles. Correspondingly, support for closer integration declined over the same period by 14 %, dropping to 34 % (Roguska 2021).

The most visible impact was on support for joining the eurozone. A CBOS study from 1994, before Poland joined the EU, showed that 48 % favoured the introduction of a common European currency should Poland join the EU (Barański and Starzyński 1994). In 2002, two years before accession, that proportion had risen to 64 % (Roguska 2010). Amid the crisis however, support decreased to 34 % at the beginning of January 2007, increased to 52 % in January 2008, and dropped back to 41 % in April 2010. Most probably, Polish voters, seeing that adoption of the euro had not in the end protected countries such as Greece from crisis, but that Poland's retention of its own currency had enabled it to maintain healthy levels of economic growth, were therefore dismissive of the idea of monetary union. Even most of those who did support it—68 % of them in fact—thought eventual adoption should not be rushed (Kowalski et al. 2019). Based on those numbers and applying Taggart and Szczerbiak's (2002) framework, we can see that Polish society exhibited definite traits of soft Euroscepticism—while not objecting in principle to European integration nor EU membership, they remained concerned about certain areas of policy, leading them to express a certain amount of opposition—albeit qualified—to further integration (Kopecký and Mudde 2002).

## The EU's Humanitarian Crisis 2015–2019 and the Victory of “Law and Justice”

Despite rising support for the EU occasioned by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the political mood surrounding the 2015 parliamentary elections was influenced by the surprising victory of a relatively unknown PiS candidate named Andrzej Duda, who defeated the incumbent Bronisław Komorowski in the presidential elections in May. The parliamentary campaign was, as usual, focused on domestic matters, including a scandal that involved recordings of private meetings of Civic Platform politicians—the so-called “tape affair.” However, summer 2015 also marked the beginning of the European migrant crisis. The Civic Platform government initially agreed to participate in the Europe-wide relocation scheme and consequently to accept 7,000 refugees over two years. Law and Justice used the dubious feelings of many Poles towards Muslim refugees to win popular support. “Do you want us to stop being masters in our own country? Do you want that? Poles do not want it and PiS does not want it”, said Jarosław Kaczyński in September 2015, in one of his many statements opposing the relocation scheme (Cywiński et al. 2019, 1).

We argue that this was an important moment in the development of Polish society's approach to European integration, one which again underscored the tension between economic benefits desirable from the average Pole's point of view, and the same Pole's ambivalence about the accompanying EU institutional and cultural modes. In the words of Krastev and Holmes (2018, 127), “populists in Warsaw and Budapest have turned the refugee crisis in the West into a ‘branding opportunity’ for the East,” creating a sense of cultural distinctiveness of the CEE region and stoking fears of losing its own traditions within the EU's institutional apparatus. To be fair, these fears have been present in Polish society since pre-accession (as discussed above), but the refugee crisis and fears of the EU's migrant relocation scheme “raised significant doubts as to whether the elites and public in these countries actually wanted to make the same ‘civilisational choices’ as those being made by their West European counterparts” (Szczerbiak 2021, 258).

Coming back to Konieczna-Sałamatin and Sawicka's modernization framework (2021), we must note that the refugee crisis deepened previous fears surrounding institutional and cultural modernization. PiS's discourse on the refugee relocation scheme led many Poles to believe that the EU “dictates” to Poland the terms of what should be Poland's own foreign policy; it attempts to “subordinate” Poland and thereby deprive it of its sovereignty, imposing solutions without considering Polish public opinion; in fact the West was now “exploiting” Poland, taking advantage of its relative economic vulnerability (Konieczna-Sałamatin and Sawicka 2021, 372). Conservative media argued that contemporary Europe had “gone astray,” and was

betraying the “fundamental European values” which conservatives understood as Christian and traditional. This, they said, was leading to the “moral decline” of the societies of “old” Europe (Konieczna-Salamatin and Sawicka 2021, 378). While Poles were still keen to benefit from economic modernization, the cultural and institutional impact of European integration became undesirable to the more conservative wing of society that now forms PiS’s core vote.

While support for EU membership was not directly affected and remained above 80 % throughout 2015—its lowest point was the still high 81 % recorded in September that year—the same was not true of support for tighter integration inside the EU, which was split depending on the party affiliation of the voter (Roguska 2015). The crisis was one of the factors that contributed to the populist Law and Justice party’s decisive victory (Table 9) in the parliamentary elections in autumn 2015 (Cywiński et al. 2019).

Despite initial promises to do so, Poland eventually refused to accept any immigrants under the EU relocation scheme, which put the country at odds with the European Commission. In the middle of 2017, in the aftermath of sustained anti-refugee messages from the government, more than half the respondents to a survey declared their reluctance to accept Muslim refugees even if it would mean Poland having to leave the European Union (Cywiński et al. 2019). Returning to the modernization theory, that level of societal resistance was somewhat unexpected. Inglehart (2006) had suggested that economic modernization and increasing existential security lead to growing acceptance of out-groups (including foreigners) and decreasing xenophobia. Yet, despite Poland’s considerable economic growth and modernization since 1989, the anti-refugee campaign organised by PiS led the majority of Poles decisively to reject the relocation scheme.

## Brexit and the Spectre of Polexit

*Polexit* is of course another portmanteau word inspired by the similarly derived Brexit, and the idea first appeared in Polish public debate in 2015. While the original

**Table 9:** Results of the 2015 parliamentary elections in Poland.

Law and Justice (PiS)	37.58 %
Civic Platform (PO)	24.09 %
Kukiz’15	11.41 %
Ryszarda Petru’s Modern party ( <i>Nowoczesna</i> )	8.81 %
The United Left Coalition	7.55 %
Polish People’s Party (PSL)	5.13 %

Source: National Electoral Commission of Poland (2015).



term was created to describe the United Kingdom's possible withdrawal from the EU, Polesxit denotes both

the situation of Poland's actual departure from the structures of the European Union as well as a less drastic situation, but with similar political consequences. Namely, isolation on the European stage, exclusion of Poland from the group of countries influencing EU decisions, reforms, and scenarios and, finally, cutting it off from EU funding. (Fomina and Kopka-Piątek 2021, 4)

Indeed, discussion prompted by Brexit—that is, the UK's actual departure—along with the escalation of Poland's conflict with the EU over the rule of law and the intensification of anti-EU narratives have all inspired Poles to rethink Poland's EU status.

When asked directly, the majority of Poles opposed from the beginning the very idea of withdrawal from the EU (77 % in a survey conducted in June 2016) (Pacewicz 2016). With time however, as Brexit progressed and the atmosphere of conflict between the EU and Poland grew ever more rancorous, the fear of Polesxit grew among Poles. Between November and October 2018 the number who believed that Poland might indeed leave the EU increased from 15 % to 21 %, despite numerous assurances from prominent PiS representatives, including Jarosław Kaczyński, that speculation about Polesxit was nothing but “propaganda talk” and that Poland's future was in the EU.<sup>5</sup> While not shying away from criticizing the EU and its policies, PiS consistently avoided allowing itself to be perceived as hard Eurosceptics of the Taggart and Szczerbiak variety, nor as Kopecký and Mudde's Eurorejects.

## The 2019 Elections

The year 2019 saw a triad of local, European, and parliamentary elections. At the end of 2018, PiS announced that its campaign slogan for the European Parliament elections would be “Poland – the heart of Europe”. The slogan was intended to appeal to feelings of national pride, but it was a suggestion too that under PiS rule, Poland would be a key player on the European stage and an agenda-setter (Nadolska 2020).

At the end of April 2019 in the heat of the campaign, prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki's message to the media was that PiS would continue to fight for Polish interests “in the European ring [...] not just cowering in the corner and letting others beat us, as has been the case before”; at the same time, he emphasised his party's “great love for the EU” (Morawiecki 2019). However, PiS offered no vision of

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<sup>5</sup> “Polesxit. Jarosław Kaczyński Zabrał Głos. Prezes PiS: Niczego Takiego Nie Będzie; to Wymysł Propagandy.” *TVP.Info*. 15 September 2021. <https://www.tvp.info/55866946/polesxit-jaroslaw-kaczynski-zabral-glos-prezes-pis-niczego-takiego-nie-bedzie-to-wymysl-propagandy> (accessed 12 August 2023).

transformation of the EU, instead positioning itself as the protector of Europe's "Christian identity" and champion of its religious values (Marcinkowski 2020). It is worth mentioning here that in a 2019 survey, 35 % of respondents felt that Poland's membership of the European Union had negatively affected Poles' religiosity and 47 % thought it had contributed to a loosening of morals (both percentages were the highest since 2005) (Roguska 2019).

Instead of focusing on the EU, PiS's campaign manifesto for three consecutive elections had focused on strictly domestic matters, mainly in the area of social policy and with a scheme which amounted effectively to buying off parts of the electorate. For example, PiS announced that it would implement and then extend the 500+ programme, a family benefit of 500 PLN per month for each child. The proposal earned PiS the support of many social groups, while pensioners were promised a "thirteenth pension" and adults under 26 were promised exemption from income tax. The focus on domestic policy was a quite deliberate strategy. Victory in the European elections would confirm PiS's position as the leading party in the run-up to the Polish parliamentary elections. "PiS sought to create interest in the EP election among its supporters (mainly seniors and rural inhabitants with secondary and vocational education) for whom the EU had previously been a distant institution, and the matters it dealt with difficult and incomprehensible" (Nadolska 2020, 52). PiS's strategy indeed proved effective (Table 10). Turnout in the European elections in May was exceptionally high at 45.68 % (compared to 20.87 % in 2004, 24.53 % in 2009, 23.83 % in 2014) and PiS received an impressive 45.4 % of votes cast. The broad European Coalition (*Koalicja Europejska*, KE) formed by the Civic Platform, the Polish People's Party, the Democratic Left Alliance, the Modern Party (*Nowoczesna*), and the Green Party (*Partia Zieloni*, PZ) came in second with 38.5 %, followed by the newly created centre-left Euroenthusiast Spring Party (*Wiosna*) with 6.1 % votes, gaining it 3 seats.

PiS continued its victorious progress in the national parliamentary elections in October (Table 11), paving the way for a new party to enter parliament: the Confederation Liberty and Independence (*Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość*, commonly shortened to Confederation – *Konfederacja*), is a far-right, Euroreject party and the first hard Eurosceptic party in the Polish parliament since the LPR and Self-Defence Party.

**Table 10:** Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections in Poland.

Law and Justice (PiS)	45.4 %
European Coalition (KE)	38.5 %
Spring ( <i>Wiosna</i> )	6.1 %

Source: European Parliament (2019).

**Table 11:** Results of the 2019 parliamentary elections in Poland.

Law and Justice (PiS)	43.59 %
Civic Coalition (KO)	27.40 %
Democratic Left Alliance (SLD)	12.56 %
Polish People's Party (PSL)	8.55 %
Confederation Liberty and Independence ( <i>Konfederacja</i> )	6.81 %

Source: National Electoral Commission of Poland (2019).

## Deep Polarization Reflected in Polish Society's Views on EU-Related Matters

Political polarization refers to ideological or programmatic distance between parties lying along a given political spectrum; it is usually understood to refer to the Left and Right scale. When a party system is highly polarized, intensified ideological debate is to be expected, along with weakened legitimacy of a regime, and a generally destabilized political system (Casal Bértoa and Rama 2021; Dalton 2008). In Poland, it is argued, the axis along which polarization occurred in the 2000s could well be described as “liberalism vs. ‘solidarism’...” a division previously connected to the competition between PO and PiS, two parties established in 2001 sharing an initially similar centre-right ideological stance. PiS, in order to distinguish itself from PO, became increasingly radicalised, questioning the status quo and the post-1989 liberal-democratic political order, and pitting “winners” and “losers” in the transformation against each other (Markowski 2006; Tworzecki 2019).

The discourses of the political elites have contributed to the widening polarization among the electorate, which can be seen in views on matters pertaining to European integration, among many other topics. However, such polarization is absent from attitudes to Poland's membership of the EU: 92 % of PiS voters support it, therefore differing from other parties' supporters negligibly if at all (Table 12). Even 76 % of supporters of the Euroreject party Confederation declare support for

**Table 12:** Attitudes to Poland's membership in the EU (May–April 2022).

Potential electorates	Supporters (%)	Opponents (%)	Undecided (%)
Civic Coalition	100	0	0
Poland 2050	100	0	0
The Left	98	2	0
Law and Justice	92	6	2
Confederation	76	24	0

Source: Roguska (2022).

remaining in the EU. Meanwhile, a new centrist political party, Szymon Hołownia's Poland 2050 (Polska 2050 Szymona Hołowni, PL2050), created in 2020, is characterised by decisively Euroenthusiast views.

All the same, opinions are much more divided on Poland's position within the European Union, and here Law and Justice's supporters stand out. PiS is an anti-federalist party favouring the idea of a "Europe of Nations"; between March 2021 and June 2022 an EU-wide Conference on the Future of Europe was launched as an initiative of the European Parliament, Council and Commission. The aim was to giving citizens a platform to debate Europe's challenges and priorities<sup>6</sup> and in response Law and Justice were co-signatories to a declaration prepared by Eurosceptic parties from various member states. The declaration stressed that "[t]he EU is becoming more and more a tool of radical forces that would like to carry out a cultural, religious transformation and ultimately a nationless construction of Europe, aiming to create a European Superstate". The document underlined the need to secure the competences of national governments, and highlighted the fear that the EU was becoming "a particular form of oligarchy".<sup>7</sup>

Such views are reflected in survey respondents' preferred direction of development of the European Union and Poland's role in it (Table 13). Supporters of the Civic Coalition, Poland 2050, and the Left overwhelmingly favoured deepening

**Table 13:** Which of the following possible visions of the future of Poland and the European Union is closest to your own expectations? (May–April 2022).

Potential electorates/supported vision (%)	Civic Coalition	Poland 2050	The Left	Law and Justice	Confederation
Poland's exit from the EU	0	0	2	3	9
Limiting integration and increasing the role of nation states in the EU	0	3	7	<b>35</b>	<b>35</b>
Maintaining the current state of integration	22	25	16	<b>29</b>	11
Deepening integration between all EU member states	<b>70</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>75</b>	20	<b>40</b>
The emergence of a "multi-speed" Europe in which some countries work together	7	6	0	4	5
Don't know	1	6	0	9	0

Source: Roguska (2022).

<sup>6</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe. 2022. The Future is in Your Hands. <https://futureu.europa.eu/en/> (accessed 13 August 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Prawo i Sprawiedliwość. "Wspólna Deklaracja Europejskich Partii." 2 July 2021. <https://pis.org.pl/aktualnosci/wspolna-deklaracja-europejskich-partii> (accessed 12 August 2023).

integration of EU member states. Somehow, paradoxically, deeper integration was the most common choice of the Confederation's electorate too, followed closely by limiting integration and increasing the role within the EU of nation states. Law and Justice's voters, following the party's stance on the matter, would for the most part prefer to limit integration and increase the role of nation states in the EU, with the second most-favoured vision being the maintenance of the current level of integration.

## The Rule of Law and Democratic Principles

Nowhere is the polarisation of Polish society more apparent than in the country's conflict with the EU over infringement of the rule of law. Questions about the rule of law in Poland were first posed in 2015; a constitutional crisis had its origins in the Act on the Constitutional Tribunal that allowed the governing majority in the Sejm (the lower house of the parliament) to elect five new judges to the Constitutional Tribunal. The election took place despite numerous reservations raised by opposition parties, various NGOs and international bodies as to whether the provisions were constitutional. The crisis only deepened when parliament hastily adopted a subsequent act changing the functioning of the Tribunal in a way widely perceived as a threat to the independence of the Constitutional Tribunal and its judges. The crisis reached its peak when then prime minister Beata Szydło failed to publish a ruling by the Constitutional Tribunal that deemed unconstitutional parliament's previously imposed changes and declared them to be in violation of the principle of the separation of powers. Tens of thousands of Poles protested against Szydło's decision and the changes to the Constitutional Tribunal (Szuleka et al. 2015).

As a result of these events and following an intensive but fruitless months-long dialogue between the European Commission and the Polish government, in June 2016 the Commission decided to initiate Rule of Law Framework proceedings against Poland. The conflict came to a head with the Polish Constitutional Tribunal's ruling of 7 October 2021 on the principle of primacy of EU law, according to which Article 1 ("establishing a contractual relationship between an 'ever closer Union' and Poland") and Article 19 ("defining the role and composition of the Court of Justice of the EU") of the Treaty on European Union were deemed "incompatible with the Polish Constitution".<sup>8</sup> The European Commission reacted swiftly with the statement that

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<sup>8</sup> "Trybunał Konstytucyjny: Ocena Zgodności z Konstytucją RP Wybranych Przepisów Traktatu o Unii Europejskiej." Trybunał Konstytucyjny. 7 October 2021. <https://trybunal.gov.pl/postepowanie-i-orzeczenia/komunikaty-prasowe/komunikaty-po/art/11664-ocena-zgodnosci-z-konstytucja-rp-wybranych-przepisow-traktatu-o-unii-europejskiej> (accessed 12 August 2023).

it “will not hesitate to make use of its powers under the Treaties to safeguard the uniform application and integrity of Union law” (European Commission 2021).

The highly controversial Constitutional Tribunal ruling appeared in the midst of negotiations between Poland and the European Commission on payment of funds from the EU’s Recovery and Resilience Facility, exacerbating the legal dispute over to the rule of law conditionality mechanism. Yet, to the dismay of many rule-of-law advocates—including members of the Commission itself (Bayer 2022)—after months of discussion the European Commission approved Poland’s National Recovery Plan on Wednesday 1 June 2022. However, in order to receive any of the €23.9 billion grants and €11.5 billion pledged loans, the Polish government was required pass a number of milestones along a path to the independence of the judiciary. Those milestones, which the Commission considers “necessary to ensure the effective protection of the Union’s financial interests and must be fulfilled before Poland presents its first payment request” have not been achieved at the time of writing (European Commission 2022).

Poles remain bitterly divided over the changes to the judicial system and on the EU’s role, many feeling uneasy about the EU’s power over Poland. In August 2021, 72 % of Poles agreed that “the EU should only provide funds to member states conditional upon their government’s implementation of the rule of law and of democratic principles”—the worst outcome in the entire EU (against an EU average of 81 %) and fewer than those who thought it important that the EU “puts the respect of its core values such as democracy, human rights and the Rule of Law as a priority in its relations with major international actors such as the USA, China, Russia, or Turkey” (79 % against the EU average of 85 %).<sup>9</sup>

In March 2022, 66 % of respondents declared that the government should comply with EU recommendations on the rule of law and end its dispute with the EU. However, during the same survey, 56 % of respondents stated that in view of the war in Ukraine and the challenges facing Poland, the EU should stop making its rule of law demands on Poland and should release money from the Recovery Fund unconditionally (Danielewski 2022). Seemingly, facing Russian aggression against Poland’s neighbour and the immense influx of war refugees, the majority of Poles though the money from the EU Recovery Fund should be made available as soon as possible—either by means of the Polish government’s complying with the Commission’s requirements or the Commission’s withdrawing its demands regarding the rule of law in Poland (Table 14).

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<sup>9</sup> Eurobarometer. 2021. State of the European Union Survey 2021. European Parliament. Strasbourg. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/soteu-flash-survey> (accessed 12 August 2023).

**Table 14:** How do you assess the EU policy on compliance with the rule of law in EU countries?

Potential electorates	Good (%)	Bad (%)	Don't know (%)
Civic Coalition	84	9	6
Poland 2050	83	10	7
The Left	81	10	9
Law and Justice	28	57	15
Confederation	46	45	9

Source: CBOS, May–April 2022 (Roguska 2022).

## The Question of Sovereignty

On the question of sovereignty, closely related to the question of the extent to which the EU should intervene on matters related to the rule of law, opinions are equally divided, mostly along political lines. It is worth stressing, however, that the majority of Poles consistently oppose the government's official stance and disagree with it that Polish sovereignty is constrained by its belonging to the EU.

During the pre-accession period, in 1994, 52 % of Poles surveyed by CBOS believed joining the EU would not limit Polish sovereignty, while 29 % believed that it would—but at the same time only a quarter of the latter considered it too high a price to pay whatever the potential benefits (Barański and Starzyński 1994). While during the first decade after joining the EU more people began to worry about membership's impact on Polish sovereignty, since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 steadily more Poles have begun to favour closer integration within the EU. In a related trend, since 2014 a growing proportion of Polish respondents consider that EU membership does not threaten Polish sovereignty nor its independence—even as during the last two years a small drop in their number has been noticed (Roguska 2022).

As of the end of 2021, approximately just one in three Poles saw EU membership as overtly restricting their country's sovereignty or independence (Table 15). Among those, the majority voted for Law and Justice (and parties in coalition with it) and the Confederation party; 66 % of supporters of the latter and 60 % of supporters of the former were of the opinion that membership of the EU is too constraining on Polish sovereignty. Their view was shared by only 4 % of those voting for Civic Platform, 9 % of those supporting left-wing parties, and 14 % of followers of Poland 2050 Szymon Hołownia, once again underscoring deep political divisions running through the country (Roguska 2022).

**Table 15:** Which of the statements do you agree with?

Potential electorates	Membership in the EU limits Poland's sovereignty and independence too much (%)	Membership in the EU does not limit Poland's sovereignty and independence too much (%)	Undecided (%)
Law and Justice	68	24	8
Confederation	50	46	4
Poland 2050	12	85	3
The Left	7	93	0
Civic Coalition	6	93	1

Source: CBOS, May–April 2022 (Roguska 2022).

## Common Security and Defence Policy

Both Polish citizens and subsequent governments have for the most part supported the idea of a common defence and security policy among the EU member states. As of winter 2021/2022, according to the Eurobarometer, that was true for 77 % of Polish respondents, on a par with the EU average (Eurobarometer 2022a). Following the second Russian invasion of Ukraine, in February 2022, 85 % of Poles agreed that the war highlighted the need for greater military cooperation within the EU, far above the already high EU average poll of 76 % and in fact the highest among all member states, level with Estonia and Finland (Eurobarometer 2022b).

Law and Justice has been officially in favour of the EU maintaining a common army, supporting increases in defence spending by all EU member states and even supporting the idea that the EU might become a nuclear power, as stated by the leader of the party Jarosław Kaczyński.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, however, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has traditionally been seen as the guarantor of Poland's security, and some level of concern has remained regarding the potential adverse effect on the American-led alliance if independent EU military power were to grow. In fact, despite officially expressed support for tightening military cooperation, the Polish government has been taking steps towards a more reserved approach and has expressed a greater preference for closer military cooperation with Washington than for coordination with Brussels and other European capitals. Indeed, from cancellation of the purchase of Caracal helicopters from Airbus in 2016, through to resignation from possible participation in the Eurocorps framework in 2017, ever since it came to power PiS has been distancing Poland from the common

<sup>10</sup> “Jarosław Kaczyński Chce, by Europa Była Atomową Superpotęgą. I Chwali Merkel.” *Newsweek*. 7 February 2017. <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/polityka/jaroslaw-kaczynski-o-angeli-merkel-i-niemczeh-merkel-jest-numerem-jeden-w-europie/vr09v98> (accessed 12 August 2023).



security and defence policy (Balcer et al. 2017). That position changed only recently, when, at the beginning of 2022 Poland did join Eurocorps and, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, has been among the most fervent supporters of strengthening the EU's defence capabilities.<sup>11</sup>

## Monetary Union

The question of adoption of the euro is controversial in Poland, with economists vehemently disagreeing about whether any advantages of joining the eurozone will in the long term outweigh associated costs (Kowalski et al. 2019). Poles themselves remain steadfastly against the euro: according to the 2021/2022 Eurobarometer which asked respondents for their views on the “European economic and monetary union with one single currency, the euro,” as many as 53 % were against, compared to an average of 24 % in the rest of the EU. It should perhaps be noted here that respondents knew Poland did not meet the criteria for joining the eurozone. As noted above, the eurozone crisis was a major factor undermining faith in the common currency, as Poles saw even the Germans—with their history of monetary rectitude—pressured into policy actions with which they did not necessarily agree. A common refrain heard around Warsaw was that if the Germans could be pushed around due to the need to protect the euro, what was to happen with the Poles? Much as German attitudes to monetary policy are coloured by the memories of interwar hyperinflation and its political consequences, Poles too are worried that the introduction of the euro would result in significant price increases and a far looser monetary stance than they would like (Badora and Roguska 2013). In public debates, the main arguments against joining the monetary union also centre on the perceived threat to national identity (Kowalski et al. 2019).

The current Polish government too has maintained a sceptical position on the introduction of the euro. In 2018, prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki stated in an interview that he was against the adoption of the euro until Poland achieved “a similar level of economic development” to that of other eurozone countries and stressed that it was thanks to Poland's remaining outside the eurozone that it had avoided a recession during the eurozone crisis (Papiernik 2018). He reiterated his position a year later, saying that talks about Poland joining the eurozone should be “suspended” for the time being due to risks associated with joining the monetary

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<sup>11</sup> Ministry of National Defence Republic of Poland. 2022. “Poland Becomes the 6th Framework Nation of EUROCORPS.” Website of the Republic of Poland, 25 January. <https://www.gov.pl/web/national-defence/poland-becomes-the-6th-framework-nation-of-eurocorps> (accessed 12 August 2023).

union and the advantages of an independent monetary policy.<sup>12</sup> More recently, in February 2022, he noted that he “does not treat joining the eurozone as a goal” and repeated his arguments about lack of sufficient economic convergence. Tellingly, he added that he was unsure whether by the time such a level might be achieved “the common currency would still exist”.<sup>13</sup>

## Foreign Policy and Its Redefinition

When negotiations to join the EU commenced in 1994, a CBOS survey showed that 49 % of Poles would not accept relinquishment of certain national foreign policy prerogatives to the EU (32 % would accept such a situation) (Barański and Starzyński 1994). With time, however, Poles became more accepting of sharing foreign policy prerogatives, and between 2004 and 2017 the proportion who thought foreign policy should be shaped by both the EU and individual member states rose from 30 % to 42 %, while that of those believing it should remain uniquely in the hands of individual countries decreased from 46 % to 42 % (Roguska 2017).

Since 1989 there had been broad political consensus on Polish foreign policy: joining NATO, joining the European Union—with the aim of developing Poland’s position within European political, legal, and economic structures. But then, in 2015, Poland’s policy on the EU changed substantially with the election of PiS (Balcer et al. 2016), because PiS defined as its key objective that it would ensure Poland’s sovereignty vis-à-vis other states and international actors. PiS foreign policy has therefore decreased Polish integration and engagement in European affairs and increasingly used the EU as a tool for its own domestic political ends. On the EU stage, the European Commission has initiated a rule of law dispute with Poland (as elaborated above) and allied itself somewhat with Hungary, a country itself already in breach of European values, although things have changed somewhat on that front since February 2022 and Russia’s continued aggression against Ukraine. In this respect, “Poland has gone straight from being the EU’s bad boy to star pupil thanks to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine” (Cienski 2022). Indeed, the Polish government

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12 “Premier: Przystąpienie Dziś Do Strefy Euro Wysoce Ryzykowne.” *Polska Agencja Prasowa*. 5 September 2019. <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C506562%2Cpremier-przystapienie-dzis-do-strefy-euro-wysoce-ryzykowne.html> (accessed 12 August 2023).

13 Papiernik, O. 2018. “Premier Mateusz Morawiecki Nie Zgadza Się Na Wejście Polski Do Strefy Euro.” *Radio Zet*, 2 July; “Premier: Nie Traktuję Wejścia Do Strefy Euro Jako Celu. Jeśli Będzie Trzeba, Przedłużymy Obniżkę VAT.” *Bankier.Pl*. 14 February 2022. <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Premier-Nie-traktuje-wejscia-do-strefy-euro-jako-celu-8277145.html> (accessed 12 August 2023).

has received international praise, including from the heads of EU institutions, for the Polish people's exceptional generosity towards the hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees crossing the Polish border in flight from the war.

## Conclusion: What Kind of European Modernization?

According to Konieczna-Salamatin and Sawicka (2021, 368), “Poles consider themselves to be a European society. However, if we look at the European integration process in terms of modernization, then Poles’ beliefs, ideas, and attitudes toward it turn out to be far more complex.” Indeed, as this article shows, while Polish support for EU membership has been generally stable and positive, attitudes to different aspects of European integration and the EU as an institutional mechanism are often ambivalent, and reduced to an instrumental approach. That is most clear from responses to a CBOS poll (Roguska 2019) taken fully 15 years after Poland’s accession to the EU. Asked about the advantages of EU membership, the most common answers among Poles were “financial benefits, inflow of money from EU funds, grants and EU projects” (an option chosen by 34 % respondents), followed by “freedom of movement” (27 %), “benefits to the economy” (11 %), and “benefits to agriculture” (11 %). “In the economic aspect, Polish society is strongly determined to ‘catch up’ with West European standards of living” (Konieczna-Salamatin and Sawicka 2021, 380). One of the main drivers of support among Poles for their country’s continued membership of the EU remains the prospect of accelerated economic modernization, achieved thanks to access to the European single market and a commitment to liberalization—and aided in many ways by the EU’s cohesion funds. Alex Szczerbiak argues that the Polish approach to the European Union has evolved “from romanticism to instrumentalism” and that “support for EU membership in post-communist states was driven increasingly by a cost–benefit analysis based on an evaluation of the tangible material benefits that the Union was going to deliver” (Szczerbiak 2021, 258). Our analysis here shows that post-transformation, political elites have indeed retained a romanticized idea of Europe and of cultural and institutional modernization that would accrue from Poland’s accession to the EU. However, the attitude to the EU of Polish society at large has always been characterized by pragmatism, focused on economic modernization, lifestyle aspirations and financial benefits.

In the case of institutional modernization as understood by Konieczna-Salamatin and Sawicka (2021), Polish society is deeply divided, as typified by polarized views on the rule of law conflict with the EU, and at least partly explaining the ambivalence about further cultural integration. Referring again to the CBOS poll

cited above, answers connected to institutional modernization, including “support from EU countries,” “common policy and cooperation in various fields,” or “rule of law” were chosen by just 2 % of respondents (Roguska 2019). The “refugee crisis” proved to be a watershed in that process in that it was precipitated by Angela Merkel’s overestimation of the other EU member states’ readiness to share her impulse to welcome refugees. “Merkel’s welcome” was quickly revoked in Brussels by EU member states who, unable to stop people dying at their outer borders and sometimes even within them, preferred to turn the EU into what has become known as “fortress Europe” (Greenhill 2016). The Polish government was among those vociferously opposing Germany’s lead. Indeed, Polish attitudes to cultural modernization changed significantly during the refugee crisis, with the resistance of the Polish government to the EU’s migrant relocation scheme fuelling a sense of Polish cultural distinctiveness while raising questions about whether Poles necessarily wanted to follow choices made in Western Europe (Szczurbiak 2021, 258). At the time, a significant part of Polish society agreed that the EU had “gone astray” and was betraying “fundamental European values” (Konieczna-Salamatin and Sawicka 2021, 378). In other words, for many Poles, now, at last, Western Europe had ceased to represent “the model of a culturally triumphant West that Central and East Europeans long aspired to imitate” (Krastev and Holmes 2018, 127).

We would argue that the Polish instrumental approach to the European Union, focused on economic benefits, is one of the key reasons for the electoral success of PiS. The party cleverly plays to the Polish electorate’s fears concerning cultural and institutional modernization, and constantly stresses the importance of preserving traditional, national, Christian values, promoting the return of the “Europe of nations”. At the same time, in line with public sentiment, it has always maintained a commitment to remaining part of the EU, rejecting any suggestion that its actions might eventually lead to Polesxit. That is, PiS maintains a Eurosceptic position but decisively distances itself from what Kopecký and Mudde (2002) classify as the Euroreject position. PiS strategy therefore plays well with the reality that Poles feel little interest in broader European questions. Election campaigns, even for the European Parliament, tend to revolve around domestic matters, and by proposing attractive social policies at home while alluding to national pride and interests. PiS hits the very spots where the Polish electorate is most Eurosceptic and has managed to overshadow its conflicts with the European Commission. Indeed, while PiS’s European agenda has failed to convince the majority of pro-EU citizens (i.e. those actively engaged in EU politics and institutions), it has been persuasive enough with the rest of the electorate to win successive elections. Its vague and ambiguous discourse on EU integration, combined with an electorate increasingly seeing the EU as a means not an end, have created for PiS the steady support of ostensibly Euroenthusiast voters.

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