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Evaluation of the “Street and Abroad” Strategy Implemented by Political Opposition in Poland under the Rule of Law and Justice

Abstract: After the 2015 parliamentary elections in Poland, the parties that moved to the opposition declared themselves the “total opposition” and adopted the “Street and Abroad” strategy, the aim of which was to organize anti-government protests in the country and to use foreign fora, including above all EU mechanisms, to fight the new right-wing government, criticize its actions and eventually remove it from power. The paper aims to assess the effectiveness of the strategy adopted by the Polish opposition after seven years of right-wing rule. The subject of particular interest is, on the one hand, the evaluation of the “Street” strategy on the example of mass protests concerning courts, abortion, and the media. On the other hand, the “Abroad” strategy was analyzed through the impact of the European Parliament’s resolution on social mobilization, electoral preferences, and the level of support for the ruling party. For this purpose, the leading indicators of support for opposition parties published by opinion polling centers were used in the examples analyzed.

Keywords: *Poland, political opposition, Law and Justice, social mobilization, strategy “Street and Abroad”*

Introduction

Since 1989, democracy in Poland has been perceived as not perfect but sound, confirmed by the Freedom House reports (Puddington, 2023). Progress towards meeting Western democracy model standards continued until 2010 (Puddington, 2023). Negative trends that weakened democracy in Poland were observed during the rule of the liberal coalition of Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska – PO) and the Polish People’s Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe – PSL), but they did not significantly affect the overall assessment of the state of democracy in Poland (Freedom House, 2015, p. 543–547). In 2015, Poland was still recognized as a ‘consolidated democracy’ – a country that embodies the best policies

and practices of liberal democracy but may face challenges contributing to a slightly lower score (Freedom House, 2015, p. 543). However, by 2022, Poland's democratic status had changed significantly. It was no longer a 'consolidated democracy' but a 'semi-consolidated democracy' – an electoral democracy that met relatively high standards for selecting national leaders but exhibited weaknesses in defending political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House, 2015, p. 543–547).

The change in Poland's democracy status undoubtedly reflects a departure from the standards of liberal democracy and a slow drift toward an 'illiberal democracy' (Zakaria, 1997; Antoszewski, 2018; Institut Montaigne, 2023). In an 'illiberal democracy,' formal attributes of democracy are retained, but the relationship between individuals and the state undergoes profound reorganization and reinterpretation. This process began during the second term of the pro-European and liberal PO-PSL coalition. Still, it intensified after the 2015 parliamentary elections, won by a right-wing coalition – the United Right (*Zjednoczona Prawica*) led by Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* – PiS). One manifestation of this process was a change in the position and attitude towards political opposition in Poland.

Analytical Approach

The article analyzes the effectiveness of the “Street and Abroad” strategy adopted by Polish opposition parties after the 2015 election. For this analysis, an evaluative approach was employed. An evaluative approach to political opposition involves critically assessing and analyzing the role and impact of opposition parties or movements within a political system (Stiers, 2023). This field of study, encompassing extensive literature from various regions, historical contexts, and political systems, presents diverse perspectives (Lipset, Rokkan, 1967; Rodan, 1996; Green, Söderström, Uddhammar, 2013; Kernell et al., 2015; Madrid, 2019). The evaluative approach seeks to gauge political opposition's effectiveness, legitimacy, and significance in a given context. Key elements of this approach include:

1. Effectiveness: Evaluation of the opposition's ability to influence government policies and decisions, which can be measured by assessing the opposition's success in blocking or amending legislation or by examining the impact of their advocacy on public discourse and policy outcomes (König, Lin, Silva, 2022).
2. Legitimacy: Evaluation of whether the opposition operates within the bounds of the law and adheres to democratic norms (Zariski, 1986).
3. Representation: Evaluation of whether the opposition represents a significant portion of the population's views and interests and whether it can mobilize support and win elections (Ong, 2022).
4. Accountability: Evaluation of whether opposition parties hold themselves to the same standards they expect from the ruling party or government (Ilonszki, Marangoni, Palau, 2021).

5. Engagement: Evaluation of the opposition’s approach to engaging with the ruling party or government (Müller, König, 2021).
6. Policy Alternatives: Evaluate the opposition’s ability to present viable policy alternatives (Bawn, Somer-Topcu, 2012).
7. Media and Public Perception: Evaluation of the opposition’s relationship with the media and public perception (Olechowska, 2022).
8. International Support: Evaluation of whether the opposition receives support or recognition from the international community (Ayan Musil, Yardımcı-Geyikçi, 2023).
9. Long-Term Impact: Evaluation of the potential long-term impact of the opposition’s actions. Does it contribute to the strengthening of democratic institutions and norms or pose a threat to political stability and governance (Selolwane, 2002)?
10. Contextual Analysis: Evaluation of political opposition is context-specific (Bertrand, 2021).

Research Assumptions

Two research assumptions were made for this analysis. First, there was an observable deterioration in the position of the parliamentary opposition in Poland, which began before 2015 and continued during the rule of Law and Justice. Second, the “Street and Abroad” strategy is considered an “extra-institutional” strategy by opposition parties.

Extra-Institutional Strategies

Extra-institutional strategies employed by political opposition involve actions and tactics from opposition parties and groups outside formal political institutions to influence public opinion, mobilize support, and challenge those in power (Tilly, Tarrow, 2015; Gamboa, 2017). ‘Street’ and ‘abroad’ strategies are types of extra-institutional strategies. Both strategies aim to influence political change by leveraging different forms of power and resources. Street-level activism seeks to engage the domestic population and raise awareness about issues, often emphasizing nonviolent protests and demonstrations (Chenoweth, Stephan, 2011). Abroad-level strategies focus on international diplomacy, advocacy, and transnational networking to gain support and pressure the domestic government (Putnam, 1988). These strategies are not mutually exclusive and can be combined to maximize their impact. The effectiveness of these strategies depends on the specific political, cultural, and social context in which they are applied.

Street-level activism encompasses tactics and activities conducted within the domestic or local sphere, often involving protests, demonstrations, civil disobedience, and other forms of public mobilization. This strategy focuses on actions within the country where the opposition operates. Abroad-level strategies involve activities conducted outside of the national borders of the country in question. These strategies often entail seeking sup-

port, solidarity, and intervention from international actors, such as foreign governments, international organizations, and the diaspora community.

Evolution of Opposition Strategies

The strategies employed by the Polish opposition since 1989 have evolved in response to changing political dynamics and government actions. Street-level activism continues to be a vital part of opposition efforts. At the same time, engagement with international actors, particularly the European Union, has significantly advocated for democratic values and the rule of law in Poland. The paper hypothesizes that the declaration of itself as a “total opposition” by Civic Platform – the main opposition party after the 2015 election, and the adoption of the “Street and Abroad” strategy was due to a significant reduction in the ability of opposition parties to influence decision-making processes in the Polish parliament through institutional arrangements. It marked a transition from a cooperative to a confrontational opposition in Poland (Krawczyk, 2000).

Structure of the Paper

The paper consists of three parts. The first part discusses factors determining the status of parliamentary opposition in Poland. Special attention is given to institutional and non-institutional factors, and the resources of opposition parties are identified, determining their strategies. The second part explores the process of deterioration of the status of political opposition in Poland, investigating the relationship between the ruling majority and the opposition in the Polish parliament before and after 2015. The third part evaluates the “Street and Abroad” strategy adopted by opposition parties in Poland after the 2015 elections, using three contested decisions as examples: the reform of courts, abortion, and the media. The choice of these examples is not coincidental, as each of them helps demonstrate how the political opposition in Poland combined both ‘levels of action’ to achieve its political goals.

Effectiveness Criteria

While in the case of institutional strategies, based on legal regulations and established practices, effectiveness criteria are easy to identify and include factors like the share of representatives of opposition parties in parliamentary bodies or the number of legislative proposals submitted and approved, in the case of non-institutional strategies, such as “Street and Abroad,” it is much more challenging. Therefore, for the analysis conducted in section 3, four criteria to measure the effectiveness of the “Street and Abroad” strategy were identified:

1. The government’s withdrawal from contested laws and decisions – evaluation indicator: yes/no.
2. Changes in the level of support for the ruling party and the opposition in public opinion polls – evaluation indicator: growth/decline.

3. Communication of its narrative by the political opposition to foreign audiences – evaluation indicator: acceptance/lack of acceptance.
4. The level of social mobilization against the ruling party – evaluation indicator: high/low.

The analysis timeframe covers seven years of PiS rule, including the completed first term from 2015 to 2019 and three years of the second term from 2019 until 2022. It should be noted, however, that after the 2019 elections, the composition of the Polish parliament changed significantly: the upper house – the Senate – was controlled by opposition parties, and the number of MPs representing the ruling party (PiS) in Sejm decreased from 239 MPs in the term 2015–2019 to 228 MPs in 2022, meaning they did not have a majority and quorum (460/230 MPs). The presidential election 2020 was successful for the ruling party, as its candidate won.

The analysis is based on primary sources, including legal acts, documents, regulations, official data of the Polish Sejm and Polish Election Commission, speeches, and interviews, as well as secondary sources such as analyses, expert reports, newspaper articles, and subject literature, including books and scientific articles.

Factors Determining the Status of Political Opposition in Poland

Political opposition is generally understood as an institution within a political regime that allows political parties to exchange power regularly, providing an alternative to the existing government (Dahl, 1966; Ionescu, de Madariaga, 1968; Helms, 2004). In the subject literature, two approaches to political opposition can be distinguished: the narrow approach, defining political opposition as parliamentary opposition – an institution of the system of parliamentary democracy that offers a political and programmatic alternative to the ruling majority (Łabędź, 2012, p. 9–24; Machelski, 2016; Dahl, 1966), and the broad approach, defining political opposition as an institution that exists in every system of political power, including undemocratic systems (Antoszewski, 2012; Pałęcki, 2002, p. 11–19; Schapiro, 1972).

After 1989, political opposition in Poland transformed into a parliamentary opposition due to its institutionalization in the new political system (Antoszewski, 2012). Three factors affecting the status of opposition parties in Poland can be distinguished: institutional, non-institutional, and resources at the disposal of political parties.

The institutional context determines the relationship between the government and the opposition. It consists of formal legal regulations and informal, well-established parliamentary practices that allow opposition parties to participate in decision-making processes. Among them are peculiarities of the Polish political system, such as the bicameral nature of the parliament and the dual executive branch, which consists of the government and the President. Due to the different ways of electing members of the Sejm (lower house) – proportional elections, the Senate (upper house) – majority elections, and the President –

general elections, the opposition can gain significant resources to influence decision-making processes and the ruling party's actions.

While the Constitution of Poland does not directly relate to political opposition, it includes legal tools that the opposition can use to overthrow the government or block its initiatives. For example, the opposition can dismiss the government through a constructive vote of no confidence, request the dismissal of individual ministers, and request that state officials be brought before the State Tribunal (Constitution of the Republic of Poland, 1997).

Another set of critical institutional factors pertains to the decision-making procedures in the Polish parliament. The status of the opposition is defined in the Rules of Procedure of the Sejm, which provide the formal basis for the association of MPs in clubs (requiring 15 MPs), allowing them to decide about the composition of all internal bodies of the Sejm. Thus, the opposition may influence the selection of the Speaker of the Sejm and deputy speakers. The composition of the Presidium of the Sejm, responsible for deciding the work plan of the Sejm, traditionally includes the Speaker and Deputy Speakers. Still, it does not necessarily require the presence of representatives of opposition parties. That has led to situations where the opposition was discriminated against in the Presidium of the Sejm (Machelski, 2016, p. 209). However, the opposition's participation is guaranteed in the Council of Seniors (Konwent Seniorów), which provides opinions on drafts of the Sejm's work plans and the agenda for particular sessions (Rules of Procedure of the Sejm, 1992).

The status of the opposition is also regulated by established practices and customs related to the composition of parliamentary committees and subcommittees. An informal principle of parity is applied, guaranteeing the right of all political forces, including the opposition, to participate in the composition of committees. Opposition participation is guaranteed explicitly in two standing committees: Parliamentary Ethics and Special Services. Separate provisions ensure that the composition of investigative committees reflects the political composition of the parliament (Dz. U. z 1999, nr 35, poz. 321).

Of great importance from the perspective of the opposition is its participation in legislative processes, which encompasses legislative initiative and voting. Parliamentary bills can be submitted by parliamentary committees or a group of at least 15 MPs, giving the opposition freedom. However, amendments introduced to the Rules of Procedure of the Sejm in 1997 strengthened the position of the Speaker, who decides which projects to proceed with. It can lead to the discrimination of opposition projects, often placing them in a 'parliamentary freezer.'

Voting is another formal instrument available to the opposition. It can vote against bills brought by the government or supporting MPs, vote for the President's veto of bills passed by the parliamentary majority, making it difficult for the government to override it. The opposition can also challenge bills sent to the Constitutional Tribunal. Additionally, members of opposition parties can obstruct legislative work through activities of a parliamentary obstructionist nature, which may include blocking access to the parliamentary rostrum,

drowning out parliamentary speeches, making mass calls and speeches unrelated to the ongoing debate, as well as multiplying motions to prolong the discussion and leaving the meeting room during voting time (Łabędź, 2016, p. 57). Institutional factors also encompass the right to access current information, as MPs can demand different types of information from the government and its members.

The second group of factors influencing the status of political opposition in Poland consists of non-institutional factors. These can be divided into two categories: internal and external. The most significant internal factor is the economic situation, which can either work for or against the opposition. Economic deterioration tends to benefit the opposition, allowing them to frame the political debate around economic issues crucial to all voters, regardless of their political views.

Equally important are situational contexts created by various events, such as natural disasters or political scandals. Political scandals are helpful for the opposition as they provide a basis for setting up investigative committees. This was the case in Poland in the context of the Rywin affair in 2002, the wiretapping scandal in 2014, and the Amber Gold scandal in 2016. The presidential plane crash in 2010 was a unique event from the perspective of the opposition. The "Smolensk plane crash," in which a part of Poland's political elite perished, marked a turning point for Law and Justice, the opposition party at the time. The monthly commemoration ceremonies for its victims organized by Law and Justice contributed to the internal consolidation of the party and the mobilization of its supporters.

The polarization of public opinion is also a significant non-institutional factor that can influence the status of opposition parties. The causes of public opinion polarization have evolved over the years in Poland. Initially, it was rooted in historical divisions between supporters of post-communist and post-Solidarity political forces. However, this division has since lost its sharpness and has been replaced by a new division between supporters of liberal Poland (Civic Platform) and solitary Poland (Law and Justice). With changing programmatic positions of major political parties and a generational shift among politicians and voters, ideological issues have taken center stage, replacing historical divisions as the primary factor in polarization.

The political scene configuration also determines the political opposition status in Poland. The 2005 elections marked the definitive end of the division between post-communist and post-Solidarity forces. It is argued that after the 2005 elections, the previous rivalry structure was challenged based on the alternation of power between post-communist and post-Solidarity elites. Since then, the struggle for power (in all types of elections) has taken place between two formations originating from the "Solidarity" Movement but differing significantly in their assessment of the achievements of the Third Republic of Poland and their vision of Poland's economic and cultural development introduced after 1989 (Antoszewski, 2012, p. 292-293).

External non-institutional factors determining the status of the opposition in Poland include states and international organizations, such as the EU, that attempt to shape the

political scene in Poland according to their preferences. In this context, a clear pro-European and pro-German orientation of the Civic Platform and a pro-American orientation of Law and Justice can be observed. After the 2015 election, neither Germany nor the European Union remained impartial arbiters but instead supported the opposition to varying degrees.

The third group of factors consists of the resources available to political opposition in Poland. Holding critical public positions, such as the President, the Ombudsman, the Presidents of the Constitutional Tribunal and the Supreme Court, and the President of the National Bank of Poland, as well as controlling or influencing state institutions, such as the Supreme Chamber of Control, the Supreme Court, the Constitutional Tribunal, the Monetary Policy Council, courts, prosecutors' offices, and local governments, are examples of these resources. It should be noted, however, that the opposition's resources are dynamic and have changed after the 2015 and 2019 elections.

A specific category of resources includes opposition-friendly media. After the 2015 elections, print and electronic media (excluding public media, which have been controlled by the ruling majority since 1989) actively joined the political dispute, supporting the opposition. The community centered around "Gazeta Wyborcza," the most influential nationwide printed newspaper since 1989, played a significant role. Moreover, the development of new media offers excellent opportunities for opposition parties, providing direct contact with voters and a new platform for government criticism.

The Deterioration of the Status of Political Opposition in the Polish Parliament

Many scholars identify two significant turning points in the functioning of parliamentary opposition in Poland. The first occurred in 1993 when electoral thresholds were introduced into the electoral law (Antoszewski, 2012, p. 217). The second turning point was the 2005 elections, which marked the end of "a fairly functional democracy based on respect for the rights of the opposition" (Machelski, 2016, p. 196). Until the 2005 elections, the relationship between the opposition and the ruling majority was characterized by power-sharing and respect for the opposition's rights (Antoszewski, 2012, p. 222). However, since the 2005 elections, which saw the dominance of two parties originating from the Solidarity core, the status of the opposition has gradually evolved, both in terms of self-identification (self-declarations as "hard" or "total" opposition) and in the attitude of the ruling majority toward it.

While the power struggle between the opposition and the ruling majority is inherent in democracy, in practice, there is a sphere of cooperation between the two, often reflected in the level of opposition support for government legislative projects. An analysis of Sejm terms since 2005 reveals that opposition parties have offered relatively high support for government projects despite the verbal hostilities among politicians (Table 1).

While comprehensive analyses in the literature do not always identify the criteria that determine opposition parties’ support for government bills, the differences mentioned above can be attributed to “non-controversial” bills, including projects introducing EU law into the Polish legal system (Łabędź, 2016, p. 60–61). Law and Justice, as an opposition party, often displayed a critical attitude toward European Union-related bills, while Civic Platform demonstrated its pro-European stance by supporting them.

Nevertheless, the ruling majority has little interest in supporting the opposition’s legislative initiatives but must follow procedures and respect accepted rules and practices. Therefore, despite the cooperative appearance of parliamentary opposition in Poland, gradual shifts have led to more aggressive dynamics. This transformation became particularly evident at the end of the 2007–2010 term of the Civic Platform and Polish People’s Party coalition, which prompted the announcement of the “Democracy Package” by Law and Justice, the opposition party at the time. The “Package” included changes to the Sejm Rules of Procedure to facilitate the opposition’s work and eliminate problematic practices they had faced. It introduced measures like the institutionalization of the opposition, making it mandatory for clubs and parliamentary caucuses to submit statements of support or non-support for the new government or the obligation to hold the first reading of a bill no later than six months after its submission, thus eliminating the ‘parliamentary freezer’ (Marczewski, Sześciło, 2017). Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of Law and Justice, explained the need for these changes by stating, “We are facing today a situation in which... the rights of the opposition in parliament are disregarded, and often the rules of procedure are simply abused... many projects presented by the opposition or by the public under the so-called people’s initiative are not considered at all or are rejected in the first reading” (Money.pl, 2023).

The problem of growing disregard for the opposition’s rights and the violation of established practices intensified after 2015. It manifested through restrictions on parliamentary debates, including shortened debate times, limiting MPs’ speeches to less than 1 minute, turning off microphones for opposition MPs, and not allowing opposition-submitted bills to proceed. These practices had far-reaching consequences, such as reducing the role of opposition parties in the legislative process, diminishing the transparency of legislative proceedings, and limiting the space for parliamentary debate, a key pillar of democracy. Some observers of the Polish political scene noted that Law and Justice seemed to forget about its “Democracy Package” after winning the elections in 2015 (Stankiewicz, Szułdrzyński, 2023). Civic Platform, the largest opposition party at the time, presented in 2016 a draft amendment to the Sejm’s Rules of Procedure, which somewhat resembled the “Democracy Package” proposed by Law and Justice (PAP, 2023).

In 2021, a new project for amending the Rules of Procedure was submitted by all opposition parties and named the “Parliamentary Freedom Restoration Project.” The proposal aimed to abolish the expedited legislative process that bypassed public consultations. It also specified a maximum time limit for commencing work on a bill submitted to the Sejm, which should not exceed six months from the submission date (PSL, 2021).

These proposals to amend the Sejm's Rules of Procedure indicate the deteriorating status of parliamentary opposition. This deterioration can be attributed to how political elites in Poland interpret democracy, which has become particularly evident since 2005. Researchers argue that democracy in Poland is increasingly viewed as a zero-sum game, where the winner takes all and the losers are sidelined (Łabędź, 2012, p. 21; Antoszewski, 2012, p. 231).

Evaluation of the Opposition Parties' "Street and Abroad" Strategy Adopted After 2015

The deteriorating status of the parliamentary opposition in Poland after 2015 has been confirmed by a change in how it operates. Limited opportunities for institutional action have prompted the opposition to reach for non-institutional strategies, relying heavily on non-institutional factors and resources. After 2015, opposition parties in Poland adopted an approach based on the "internationalization" of domestic political problems as well as street protests, known as the "Street and Abroad" strategy (Friszke, 2002, p. 89–90; Nosowski, 2023).

It must be stressed, however, that this strategy is not entirely new in Polish politics. From 2011 to 2015, Law and Justice, as the main opposition party, initiated public hearings in the European Parliament to draw attention to democracy violations in Poland under the rule of Civic Platform and the Polish Peoples Party. None of these efforts, related to the Smolensk catastrophe (March 23, 2012), freedom of media (June 5, 2012), and irregularities in local elections in Poland (December 11, 2014), provoked any significant reactions from the EU side (Majak, 2016).

While such a strategy was used by Law and Justice unsuccessfully, in the case of Civic Platform, it proved partially successful. This success was primarily due to the position of former Civic Platform leader Donald Tusk – the President of the European Council, and especially his close ties with Germany's political elite, Civic Platform's membership in the most prominent political group in the European Parliament, and the ideological alignment between Civic Platform, the EU, and most Western governments.

The adoption of the "Street and Abroad" strategy to counter Law and Justice was explicitly expressed by Grzegorz Schetyna, the leader of Civic Platform at the time, during a closed meeting with Civic Platform members in 2016. In recordings of the meeting, accessed by *Newsweek Polska*, Schetyna stated, "It is to be street demonstrations and international activity. If this pace of conflict is maintained, our activity will be on the streets for sure. And also in Europe" (Krzymowski, 2023).

The implementation of the "Street and Abroad" strategy was also discussed in 2021 during a meeting between Donald Tusk (re-elected as leader of Civic Platform in July 2021) and activists of the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (TVP Info, 2023). For the opposition, the "Street" has become a battleground for the democratic rule of law. At the

same time, the “Abroad” is seen as a tool through which EU institutions will exert pressure on the Law and Justice government to respect the values and rules of a united Europe.

Many decisions made by the Law and Justice government have become the focus of the “Street and Abroad” strategy. These include Constitutional Tribunal reform, judiciary and Supreme Court reform, education reform, media reform, changes in the functioning of NGOs, access to abortion and in-vitro procedures, sex education, sexual minority rights, and Białowieża Forest logging. For this analysis, only three issues were selected which prompted the most significant protests from the public and the opposition: judicial reform, the tightening of abortion laws, and changes to media legislation.

The results of the analysis are presented in Tables 2 and 3. Table 2 provides essential information related to the selected reforms, illustrating the context, the narratives of the ruling and opposition parties, and the manifestations of the “Street and Abroad” strategy. Additionally, the effectiveness of the plan was assessed using the four identified criteria, as presented in Table 3:

1. The government’s withdrawal from contested laws and decisions – evaluation indicator: yes/no;
2. Changes in the level of support for the ruling party and the opposition in public opinion polls – evaluation indicator: growth/decline;
3. Communication of its narrative by the political opposition to foreign audiences – evaluation indicator: acceptance/lack of acceptance;
4. The level of social mobilization against the ruling party – evaluation indicator: high/low.

An exemplification of the effectiveness of the “Abroad” strategy, as well as a confirmation of the acceptance of the opposition’s narrative on the reforms implemented by the Law and Justice government, is provided in Tables 4 and 5, which present data on the number of European Parliament resolutions and debates concerning the three decisions questioned by the political opposition in Poland.

Conclusions

The analysis has revealed that the opposition, in formulating the “Street and Abroad” strategy, primarily relied on non-institutional instruments and resources. An evaluation of the strategy’s effectiveness concerning the three selected issues leads to the following conclusions:

First, public protests and international reactions influenced a change in the ruling majority’s decision in only one case. However, this occurred due to the President’s veto rather than the government’s withdrawal from the controversial law. Notably, the involvement of US politicians, perceived as a critical partner by the ruling majority, played a pivotal role in this instance.

Second, there was a decline in support for the ruling party in response to protests and foreign criticism. However, these declines were temporary and did not represent a permanent trend. An analysis of public opinion polls conducted six months after the protests revealed that support for the ruling party remained relatively stable, averaging around 37%.

Third, accepting the opposition's narrative accompanying the analyzed decisions can be considered a definite success of the strategy.

Fourth, the level of social mobilization, considering both participation in protests and support for the opposition, strongly depended on the specific issue. The analysis demonstrated significant differences between the 'abortion' and 'media' issues on the one hand and the 'courts' on the other. The largest mobilization was observed concerning the issue of abortion, while the lowest mobilization was related to the reform of the courts.

Fifth, as the "Street and Abroad" strategy did not bring significant success to the opposition, elements of other strategies emerged in the lead-up to the 2023 elections. These included pursuing an alternative program to Law and Justice, mirroring many of the policies of the ruling majority, with an emphasis on expanding social promises.

Table 1. The number of bills supported by opposition parties in the Polish Sejm of VI, VII, and VIII term

	Sejm of VI term 2007–2011	Sejm of VII term 2011–2015	Sejm of VIII term 2015–2019
Ruling party (coalition)	Civic Platform /Polish People's Party (PO/PSL)	Civic Platform /Polish People's Party (PO/PSL)	Law and Justice (PiS), United Right
Main opposition party	Law and Justice (PiS)	Law and Justice (PiS)	Civic Platform
Number of bills passed by the end of term	952	753	923
% of bills supported by opposition	67.9 %	41.4 %	64.3 %

Source: Own elaboration based on: Sejm, <https://www.sejm.gov.pl>; Łabędź, 2012, p.181; Łabędź, 2016, p. 60–61, Matuszek, 2021, p.183–184.

Table 2. Context, Narratives, and “Street’ and “Abroad” reactions to the selected decisions

	Courts – judicial reform	Abortion – tightening of abortion laws	Media – changes to the media law
Context	2017 – amendments passed to the laws: on the National Council of the Judiciary, on the System of Common Courts, on the Supreme Court	October 22, 2020 – verdict by the Constitutional Court, which ruled that the possibility of abortion due to severe and irreversible fetal impairment or an incurable disease threatening its life is unconstitutional	August 11, 2021 – The Sejm has passed an amendment to the Broadcasting, which allows the granting of concessions only to entities based in a European Economic Area member state independent of foreign individuals, institutions, or companies outside the area
Government narrative related to the reform	The reform aims to improve the work of the courts, guarantee the impartiality of judges, increase confidence in the courts, improve the quality of the judiciary, democratization and independence the election of judges and disciplinary responsibility of judges.	“The verdict is completely in line with the Constitution.” “The Republic of Poland provides every person with legal protection of life.”	The new rules are primarily intended to clarify regulations and enable the state regulator to counter the takeover of Radio and TV broadcasters by non-EU entities, including those from countries that pose a significant threat to state security.
Opposition narrative related to the reform	Purpose of reforms: politicization of independent courts and prosecutors; unconstitutionality of the reforms, limitation of the independence of judges, demolition of the rule of law	Violation of women’s rights. Force Polish women to be heroic. Women’s rights ended in Poland. It’s not politics or religion; it’s a crime against humanity!”	Attempts to destroy the independent media while turning the public media into a tube of Law and Justice propaganda It is not just about TVN but about the future of free speech in Poland and our democracy’s future.
Manifestation of “Street” strategy	Between 20 and 24 July 2017 – protests were organized in 250 cities in Poland. According to different sources, 14 to 50 thousand people gathered the most prominent manifestation.	Protests were held in several hundred cities in Poland. On October 28, police recorded 410 protests nationwide, with more than 430,000 participants. About 100,000 people participated in the Great March on Warsaw alone on October 30. It is estimated that these were the largest demonstrations in Poland since the political transition in 1989.	Demonstrations were organized in 126 cities. The main protest under the slogan “Free media, free people, free Poland” was held in front of the Presidential Palace in Warsaw and attended by thousands of people. More than 2 million signatures have been collected under the “Appeal in Defence of TVN.”

	Courts – judicial reform	Abortion – tightening of abortion laws	Media – changes to the media law
Manifestation of “Abroad” strategy	<p>July 29, 2017, the European Commission urged the government to withdraw the law;</p> <p>On January 17, 2020, members of the United States Congress, in a letter to the President of the Republic of Poland, called for a halt to the legal solution to disciplining judges and “reaffirm Poland’s commitment to democratic values.”</p> <p>Eight debates and five resolutions on the judiciary system and the rule of law in Poland (Tables 1 and 2) were organized and adopted by the European Parliament.</p>	<p>The situation in Poland was commented on by the world’s most prominent media: BBC, CNN, Al-Jazira, New York Times, The Observer, Der Spiegel, Corriere della Sera, Independent.</p> <p>Three debates were organized, and two resolutions were adopted by the European Parliament (Tables 1 and 2)</p>	<p>US senators on the international affairs committees issued a statement expressing their concern about the new law;</p> <p>European Commission has concerns about the new law</p> <p>European Parliament: one debate and one resolution on media reform in Poland</p>

Source: Own elaboration based on analysis of Polish newspapers & websites: Rzeczpospolita, Newsweek, Dziennik Gazeta Prawna, Polityka, money.pl.; interia.pl, dw.com, onet.pl, natemat.pl, wp.pl, prawo.pl

Table 3. Evaluation of "Street and Abroad" Strategy: Courts, Abortion, Media

Criteria of Evaluation Case	The government's withdrawal from contested laws and decisions: yes/no	Changes in the level of support for the ruling party and the opposition: growth/ decline*	The support for the ruling party six months after the protests: permanent/temporary change	The acceptance/lack of acceptance of the opposition parties' narrative by foreign audiences	The level of social mobilization against the government: high/low.
Courts	No	The ruling party – decline: 37,2 % before the decision (July 10, 2017) and 33 % after the decision (July 22, 2017); Opposition party – decline (Civil Platform): 28,7% before the decision (July 10, 2017) and 23 % after the decision (July 22, 2017).	Temporary: 42% of the support (poll conducted on January 22, 2018)	Acceptance	Participation in protests – low (3 percent of respondents in the survey conducted in September 2017); The protests were supported by 42% of the public
Abortion	No	The ruling party – decline: 10% drop in support for Law and Justice from 39 % before the Tribunal verdict (October 19, 2020) to 30 % after the Tribunal verdict decision on abortion (November 2, 2020); Opposition party – Civil Coalition – grew from 26 % before the Tribunal verdict (October 19, 2020) to 27 % after the Tribunal decision (November 2, 2020).	Temporary: 33.1 % of the support (poll conducted on April 25, 2021)	Acceptance	Participation in protests – high (8 % according to a survey conducted by CEBOS in December 2020) High – The protests were supported by 70 % of the public
Media	Yes – President's Veto	The ruling party – declined by 38% before the decision (December 15, 2021) and 29% after the decision – (January 18, 2022); the Opposition party (Civil Coalition – grew by 24% before the decision (December 15, 2021) and 26% after the decision (January 18, 2022)	Temporary: 37 % of the support (poll conducted on June 22, 2022)	Acceptance	High – 2,5 million people signed the appeal to the President of Poland to veto the LEX TVN media law amendment.

Source: Own elaboration based on the political party support polls: <https://www.wnp.pl/parlamentarny/sondaze/poparcie-dla-partii-politycznych/165.html>
* comparison of public opinion polls before and after contested decisions.


Table 4. Number and topics of the European Resolution devoted to the situation in Poland after 2015

No	Date	Title of Resolutions
1.	13.04.2016	European Parliament resolution of April 13, 2016, on the situation in Poland (2015/3031(RSP))
2.	14.09.2016	European Parliament resolution of September 14, 2016, on the recent developments in Poland and their impact on fundamental rights as laid down in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2016/2774(RSP))
3.	15.11.2017	European Parliament resolution of November 15, 2017, on the situation of the rule of law and democracy in Poland (2017/2931(RSP))
4.	01.03.2018	European Parliament resolution of March 1, 2018, on the Commission's decision to activate Article 7(1) TEU as regards the situation in Poland (2018/2541(RSP))
5.	14.11.2019	European Parliament resolution of November 14, 2019 on the criminalization of sexual education in Poland (2019/2891(RSP))
6.	17.09.2020	European Parliament resolution of September 17, 2020, on the proposal for a Council decision on the determination of a clear risk of a serious breach by the Republic of Poland of the rule of law (COM(2017)0835 – 2017/0360R(NLE))
7.	26.11.2020	European Parliament resolution of November 26, 2020, on the de facto ban on the right to abortion in Poland (2020/2876(RSP))
8.	16.09.2021	European Parliament resolution of September 16, 2021, on media freedom and further deterioration of the rule of law in Poland (2021/2880(RSP))
9.	21.10.2021	European Parliament resolution of October 21, 2021, on the rule of law crisis in Poland and the primacy of EU law (2021/2935(RSP))
10.	11.11.2021	European Parliament resolution of November 11, 2021, on the first anniversary of the de facto abortion ban in Poland (2021/2925(RSP))
11.	09.06.2022	European Parliament resolution of June 9, 2022, on the rule of law and the potential approval of the Polish national recovery plan (RRF) (2022/2703(RSP))

Source: Own elaboration based on the EP data: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/pl/parliament-positions.html>

Legend:

Resolutions on judiciary reforms and rule of law 

Resolutions on tightening of abortion law 

Resolutions on media reform 


Table 5. Number and topics of the European Parliament Debates devoted to the situation in Poland after 2015


No	Date	Title of Debate
1.	19.01.2016	The situation in Poland (debate)
2.	13.09.2016	Recent developments in Poland and their impact on fundamental rights as laid down in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (debate)
3.	05.10.2016	Women’s rights in Poland (debate)
4.	14.12.2016	Situation of the rule of law and democracy in Poland (debate)
5.	15.11.2017	The situation of the rule of law and democracy in Poland (debate)
6.	28.02.2018	Commission decision to activate Article 7 (1) TEU as regards the situation in Poland (debate)
7.	13.06.2018	Independence of the Judiciary in Poland (debate)
8.	21.10.2019	Criminalization of sexual education in Poland (debate)
9.	26.11.2019	Public discrimination and hate speech against LGBTI people, including LGBTI free zones (debate)
10.	15.01.2020	Ongoing hearings under article 7(1) of the TEU regarding Poland (debate)
11.	11.02.2020	The ongoing threat to the rule of law in Poland (debate)
12.	14.09.2020	Determination of a clear risk of a serious breach by the Republic of Poland of the rule of law – LGBTI-free zones in Poland within the scope of the Rete Lenford case (debate)
13.	25.11.2020	Abortion rights in Poland (debate)
14.	09.02.2021	The de facto abortion ban in Poland (debate)
15.	10.03.2021	Government attempts to silence free media in Poland, Hungary and Slovenia (debate)
16.	19.10.2021	The rule of law crisis in Poland and the primacy of EU law (debate)
17.	20.10.2021	The first anniversary of the de facto abortion ban in Poland (debate)
18.	15.12.2021	Plans to undermine further fundamental rights in Poland, in particular regarding the standards of the European Convention of Human Rights and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (debate)
19.	06.04.2022	Ongoing hearings under Article 7(1) TEU regarding Poland and Hungary (debate)
20.	03.05.2022	Ongoing hearings under Article 7(1) TEU regarding Poland and Hungary (debate)
21.	07.06.2022	The rule of law and the potential approval of the Polish National Recovery Plan (RRF) (debate)

Source: Own elaboration based on the EP data: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/home.html>

Legend:

Debates on judiciary reforms and the rule of law 

Debates on tightening of abortion law 

Debates on media reform 

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