



## **CEC Weekly Political Update**

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### **Poland and the next European Commission**

While candidates for MEPs are the main aspect on which the media is focusing in Poland, discussions on the new composition of the European Commission are already ongoing within the ruling PiS party. In the current Commission, Poland is represented by Elżbieta Bieńkowska who is responsible for the Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs. Before she assumed her office in November 2014, Bieńkowska was a Deputy Prime Minister (11.2013–09.2014) in the PO-PSL government.

Appointing the new Commission President will be one of the first tasks of the new European Parliament. Then, member states and the Commission President-elect will adopt a list of candidate

commissioners – one for each member state. While it is most likely that the PiS government will be proposing candidates for Poland's commissioner, reports from Brussels indicate that hearings may take place in late autumn, after the parliamentary elections in Poland. Commentators are already considering the possibility that if PiS does not stay in government, and the hearings are delayed, the new commissioner from Poland will be appointed by the current opposition. This, however, is not very likely.

The short-list which is being considered by the PiS leadership consists of top figures, but the debates are supposedly concentrating on whether to bet on a more political or technical candidate. The list reportedly includes Minister of Development and Investment Jerzy Kwieciński, Foreign Affairs Deputy Minister Konrad Szymański, the Deputy Speaker of the Senate and one of PiS' top strategists Adam Bielan, and the head of PiS' EP campaign Tomasz Poręba. Reports indicate that Minister of the Interior Joachim Brudziński is also being considered, which came as a surprise to many commentators. PiS' candidates will still have to face hearings in the European Parliament where references will emerge related to the conflict between Warsaw and Brussels concerning adherence to the rule of law. Therefore, the ruling party's candidate for commissioner is not likely to be associated with front-line politics or previously involved in the back-and-forth concerning the judiciary reforms in Poland.

## **Shifts in EP Groups**

For political parties across the EU, the balance of powers in the European Parliament will be equally important as the number of mandates won. Commentators anticipate that the upcoming elections will bring a major overhaul to the structure of EP groups. Polarisation within these groups has become increasingly apparent. As certain political factions will aim to facilitate this change, others will strongly defy in a bid to maintain the current setup.

With strained relations between the Hungarian government and Brussels, there are growing tensions within the European People's Party.

Viktor Orbán's Fidesz is a member of the EPP. Within the EPP, concerns are also increasing that voters across the bloc are critical of Fidesz's membership in the group. Parties from Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal, Luxembourg and Scandinavia took a common position to exclude Fidesz from the group. Despite its differences with other member parties of the EP, Fidesz is not looking to leave, but rather reform the group from within. Orbán's government is hoping to find support with Germany's CDU, which will likely have the decisive vote on the matter. It is expected that this issue will become the primary point on the agenda during the EPP's political assembly on 20 March. Still, the EPP will have to consider whether the expulsion of Fidesz will be beneficial for the group in the wider context. There are fears that Orbán, if expelled, will ally with right-wing forces, shifting the current balance of powers in the EP.

Italy's Matteo Salvini is currently building a coalition to create a new grouping that could compete with existing forces in the European Parliament. The Lega already has 6 MEPs, but hopes to improve its previous result, and increase its heft by incorporating like-minded parties. Salvini already held talks with France's Marine Le Pen, which would potentially reinforce the new grouping. In January, Salvini also met with PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński. Though no concrete commitments were made, Kaczyński is expected to meet Salvini in March – potentially accompanied by PM Mateusz Morawiecki.

PiS may theoretically benefit from a new EP group. Poland's ruling party is a founding member of the European Conservatives and Reformists – the third largest grouping in the EP. However, in view of Brexit, the ECR will diminish, weakening its sway in the European Parliament significantly. With its current 14 MEPs, PiS is a significant force with good perspectives for gaining more seats in 2019. Even with a substantial improvement, Kaczyński's party will have to strategically choose its alliances to maximise its potential for influence in the EU. If the EPP goes through with expelling Fidesz, a new opportunity may arise for the PiS party – a natural alliance with the ruling Hungarian party may further defragment the EP political scene.

On the other side of the political spectrum, it will be the liberal and left-wing newcomers that will counterbalance the shifts on the conservative

side of the EP. It is yet unknown which group Macron's EN Marche will decide to join, however, with its pro-European approach, it can choose from a wide array of potential allies. Though Poland's European Coalition – PO, PSL, SLD, Modern, Now & the Greens – are most likely to remain within the EPP, it will be Biedroń's Wiosna party that will be of interest to EP groups looking to strengthen their position.

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