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A RETREAT FROM CONGRUENCE? REGIONAL COALITION POLITICS IN THE AFTERMATH OF POLAND'S 2024 ELECTIONS

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Abstract

The article analyses regional coalition formation in 2024. Initial observations suggest that coalition building at that time diverged from the previous three terms, in which the aim was to extend cooperation between the national coalition partners in the largest number of regions, even if it meant building oversized coalitions. The opportunity of forming fully congruent coalitions in 2024 was limited by the fact that in four regions one-party rule of the opposition PiS party was established. Among the parties in the national coalition, two dominant patterns of coalition building were distinguished, that is PO-PSL or PO-PSL-SLD, and only one fully congruent coalition. The PO regional elite (according to the heads of regional boards) were often advocates of incumbent two-party coalitions. The small size of the regional boards was also not convenient for full congruence in the case of the four-party national coalition. However, as the third partner, SLD was invited much more often than Polska 2050, which could not be explained by the election results. To solve this puzzle, the calculation of congruence was extended to also include voivodeship offices, with the number of what was called regional congruence then increasing, as seven regions followed full four-party congruence.

Keywords

regional coalitions, congruence, cross-cutting coalitions, political parties, regional boards

Introduction

This article examines Polish regions' coalition formation in 2024, which it is argued breached the previous policy with both national and regional politicians favouring congruent coalitions. With the stabilisation of the regional party system in 2006 and the parliamentary electoral victory of Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*, PO) and the

Polish People's Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*, PSL) in 2007, congruence was seen as a model approach. The close cooperation between the two parties led to a policy of forming regional coalitions, even when they were oversized. This was illustrated in 2010 when PO-PSL ruled in all 16 regions, although sometimes with third parties (Table 1). In 2024, fully congruent coalitions could have been introduced in five regions, but it was only implemented in one. This article investigates the radical and puzzling shift of elites' attitudes in some regions where congruence lost its charm. At the same time, it is argued that congruence remained positive among national politicians, and the central elite restored it in regions by adopting the supplementary measure of division of spoils in regional units of central administration.

Literature review

Fourth-generation theories argue that coalition bargaining cannot be seen as an isolated case, and the critical dimension has been the *verticalisation* of coalition politics through attempts to extend alliances between coalition partners at other levels (Albala 2018a). Bäck et al. (2013) advocate that it is the centre that favours installing regional executives who reflect the composition of the national government or opposition. Such arrangements are less visible in regions with stronger policy-making competencies, which suggests a lower incentive for regional elites to adopt congruence.

However, the crucial question is whether these observations are applicable to Poland, a unitary central European state, with more recent tight regionalisation than Western Europe, which Albala and Reniu (2018) claim recent research has been limited to. In Polish regions, developments in national coalition politics, since its formation nearly three decades ago, are critical to understanding the coalition formulas adopted at the regional level with the radical embracing of congruence since 2006 (Majcherkiewicz 2021). The recent, unexpected decrease in support for congruence stated in this article is motivated by the regional elite's increased autonomy due to political fragmentation. Consequently, it is argued that the Polish case throws light on the phenomenon of the shifting political autonomy of the regional elite and changes in their approach to congruence.

The meaning of the term congruence can be ambiguous. Thus, its subcategories are distinguished. Ștefuriuc (2013) and Albala (2018b) argue that *full congruence* exists when two conditions are fulfilled:

1. All parties included in the national government are also coalition partners at regional level.
2. Regional coalitions must not incorporate additional regional (or national) political parties.

The term *partially congruent coalition* evolved in recognition of the existence of various options for coalition formation among national government parties and among national opposition parties. In general, congruence indicates some resemblance regarding parties forming national and regional coalitions (Linhart 2018). The primary importance is the question of how far the term congruence can be expanded. A line is generally drawn between national government and opposition parties. However, Däubler and Debus (2009) identify *cross-cutting coalitions*, which encompass cooperation not only within those two separate camps. This arrangement has been seen as an option benefitting neither the government nor the opposition.

Comparison of Western European regions shows national variation in the propensity towards congruence or building cross-cutting coalitions (Bäck et al. 2013, Dullaghan 2021). Studies, including by Detterbeck and Renzsch (2003), suggest a growing asymmetry of national and regional party systems and a surge in incongruence in Germany. In addition, Jeffery (2005) suggests that this territorialisation of politics necessitates innovation in coalition formation. Similar trends were also reported by Deschouwer (2009) in Belgium and Giannetti and Pinto (2018) in Italy. Also, in some countries, e.g. Germany, there is a tendency to avoid oversized coalitions, with a one-party regional government being seen as an attractive political option. Thus, it began to be recognised as a realistic congruent formula. Similarly, opposition rule (one party or coalition) is not defined as a form of incongruence as before, but rather as a subcategory of congruence, since it does not cut across the government-opposition divide – a so-called *alternative coalition* (Albala, Reniu 2018; Linhart 2018).

Downs' (1998) interviews with regional politicians in Belgium, Germany and France suggest that building a perfectly matching coalition was not necessarily their priority. Ștefuriuc (2013) found that for German regional politicians, congruence had "little strategic value" in contrast to national leaders. However, she identified dissimilar motivations among Spanish regional politicians who declared strong incentives for seeking congruence.

Likewise, Polish regional politicians interviewed by Majcherkiewicz (2024) declared a positive approach to congruence in a highly polarised system. They saw it as not only serving the central elite, but also as being favourable to them. As a result, PO-PSL coalitions were in power in 2010 and 2014 in all or nearly all regions (16 and 15 regions respectively). To be more specific, e.g. in 2010, they can be divided according to the type of coalition: 12 coalitions were formed by these two parties (fully congruent) and four coalitions were with third partners; two with regional parties (partially congruent) and two with the national opposition, the Democratic Left Alliance (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej*, SLD) (*cross-cutting*) (Table 1).

It should be stressed that the policy which evolved in 2024 is particularly puzzling in the light of previous Polish coalition politics that *unconditionally* extended PO-PSL cooperation to the largest number of regions and built oversized coalitions rather than choosing one-party rule (mainly PO) or abandoning one of the national partners by forming two party-regional coalitions with the other parties (PO or PSL with other partners).

Furthermore, understanding political elites' approach to congruence in 2024 also requires reference to the policy towards cross-cutting coalitions in previous terms. In general, the Polish case has been in line with the previous observation of avoiding such arrangements in regions with a low level of regional autonomy. However, a fourth particular feature of cross-cutting coalitions in Poland must be mentioned. First, Majcherkiewicz's (2021 and 2024) studies have shown a tendency to evade cross-cutting coalitions, albeit not at any cost. In situations in which they were seen as the only possible option for guaranteeing majorities, they were regarded as acceptable. With the exception of the period 2006–2007, these coalitions had a particular feature of never being formed by the main central government party and the main opposition party (the so-called *grand coalition* type). Instead, the junior parties from the opposition or government switched sides to enable their formation. Secondly, in the initial phase (1998–2006) of regional coalition politics, self-government showed that history matters. The "post-communist divide" increased reluctance to form cross-cutting coalitions between the Communist Successor

Party, the SLD, and the former anticommunist opposition parties of the right.¹ Thirdly, in contrast to the German standard, cross-cutting coalitions formed after 2007 were oversized: PO-PSL-SLD. As such, they had congruent and cross-cutting components at the same time, and in situations of the predominance of congruence in other regions, their cross-cutting element was overshadowed, becoming nearly invisible. Fourthly, since 2018, cross-cutting coalitions have been rejected even in those occasional situations where they seemed to be unavoidable, and they were replaced by a new policy of building a majority by seeking support from those who crossed the floor directly after the election. This practice enabled PiS to rule in one more region following the so-called “Councillor Kałuża’s betrayal” (Pawlik 2024). Although regional politics generally only raise limited interest among Poles (Bożewicz 2024), his action was highly publicised and roundly condemned.

Finally, regional coalition formation can be modified by contextual factors. Among others, Debus (2008), Däubler and Debus (2009), Ștefuriuc (2013), Bäck et al. (2013), and Giannetti and Pinto (2018) indicate the importance of *incumbent coalitions*, which have significantly more chance of being formed. Also, in Polish regions in 2024, a strong trend was expected to re-create PO-PSL *incumbent coalitions*, which could work against full congruence.

Party system and election results in 2024

The Polish regions (voivodeships) are governed by a dual administration: the central government representative (a *voivode* appointed by the prime minister) and regional self-government. The self-government is composed of a regional assembly and regional executive (a regional board composed of five members and presided over by its head). The small executive size can be seen as a much more serious potential problem in building a fully congruent coalition in 2024 than in previous terms. The fact that elections for all regions are held on the same date favours regional politics being highly nationalised. The presentation of the Polish party system focuses on crucial features in the context of regional coalition formation. It is argued that the choice of coalition option in 2024 was directly impacted by the 2006 electoral law – the so-called *blocking of the list*. The necessity to form electoral coalitions led to a realignment of the political system, which was redivided into two blocs. According to this formula, for a party to be successful it had to enter an electoral coalition. The first electoral coalition (the bloc) was formed by the government party Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) and its junior partners: the League of Polish Families (*Liga Polskich Rodzin*, LPR) and Self-defence (*Samoobrona Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, SPR). The second alliance, created by PO and PSL, proved much more long-lived and extremely efficient in regional cooperation due to its synergy effect. The SLD was located outside these two blocs and was rebranded before the 2023 parliamentary election as the New Left (*Nowa Lewica*, NL).

The national and regional political scenes have been divided since then into two blocs with competition focusing on the two main parties, the PiS and PO, which governed in turns and that Flis and Kwiatkowska (2018) dubbed the premiership parties (Table 1). This main framework has been preserved despite composition changes among junior parties

¹ Similar trends were observable in at national level in Poland and in other Central Europe (Grzymała-Busse 2001).

in coalitions and some new parties appearing, e.g. in the regional election of 2024, Polska 2050 and Confederation (*Konfederacja*) (Table 1).

Table 1. Types of regional coalitions at the beginning of terms from 1st to 6th

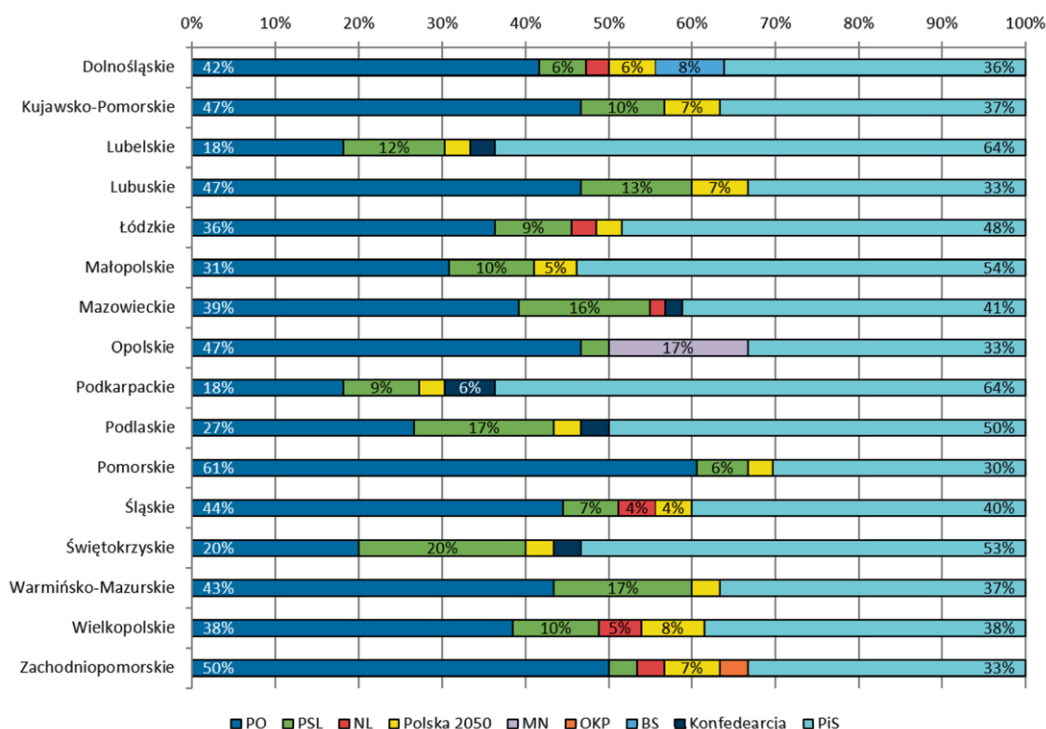
NATIONAL COALITIONS	2005–2007 PiS-LPR-SRP		2007–2015 PO-PSL		2015–2023 PiS		2023– ... PO-PSL-NL-	
REGIONAL TERMS	2006–2010		2010–2014		2014–2018		2018–2024	
Fully Congruent coalitions	0 PiS-LPR-SRP	7 PO-PSL	12 PO-PSL		13 PO-PSL	1 PiS	7 PiS	0 PO-PSL - NL-Polska 2050
Partially congruent coalitions	1 PiS	5 PO (1) PO-PSL +councillors crossing the floor (3) PO-PSL-MN (1)	2 PO-PSL+regional parties PO-PSL-MN (1) PO-PSL-RAS (1)	1 PO-PSL-MN (1)	1 PO-PSL+MN	0	1 PiS-BIS (1)	9 PO-PSL (4) PO-PSL-MN (1) PO-PSL-SLD (1) PO (1) PO-PSL+ councillors crossing the floor (2)
Alternative coalitions	8 Four variants: PO (1) PO-PSL (3) PO-PSL-SLD (1) PO-PSL-MN (1)	1 PiS	0	1 PiS since 2013	1 PiS	15 PO-PSL (11) PO-PSL-SLD (1) PO-PSL-MN (1) PO-PSL-BIS (1) PO-PSL-SLD-RAS (1)	8 PO-PSL (3) PO-PSL-SLD (2) PO-PSL-MN (1)	7 PiS (6) PiS-BIS (1)
Cross-cutting coalitions	6 PO-PiS (1) PO-PSL-PiS (3) PO-PSL-PiS-SRP (1) PiS-LPR-PSL (1) +1 ⁴ since 2007 PiS-PSL (1)	3 PO-PSL +national parties PO-PSL-PiS (1) PO-PSL-SLD (2)	2 PO-PSL-SLD ¹		1 PO-PSL-SLD	0	0	0

- The Movement for Autonomy of Silesia (*Ruch Autonomii Śląska*).
- In one region the board was only elected in 2007.
- One of these coalitions was extended in 2014 and also included the regional party (Dolnośląskie). In the course of the term, there were two such coalitions, as in one region the cross-cutting coalition was replaced by an alternative coalition (Podkarpacie), but in the other region the partial coalition was superseded by cross-cutting (Śląskie).

Source: Author.

Among the regional assembly election results, the winner was the main opposition party, PiS, with 43% of seats nationwide, followed by PO, with 38% of seats. PiS gained a majority in four regional assemblies and was able to form one-party regional boards there.² The main ruling party, PO, was able to rule alone in one region (Figure 1). In the other 11 regions, to obtain majority rule, it was necessary to form regional coalitions. In regional bargains, an important agent was PSL. Although it gained only 11% of seats in total, it was represented in all regional assemblies. Formally, PSL and Polska 2050 stood in the Third Way electoral coalition, together winning 15% of seats. After the regional election, they performed independent personnel politics and were therefore treated as independent actors. Two other central coalition parties fared much more poorly: Polska 2050, with 4% of seats, passed the threshold in 14 regions, and NL, with 1.5% of seats, was present in six regions. The last parliamentary party was the Confederation, with 1% of seats and representation in five regions.

² A regional board is classified as one-party even if there are members of other parties, as long as they are seen as minor groupings (that is standing on the electoral list of the main party, PiS).

Figure 1. Results of regional elections 2024

Source: Author.

Data and methods

The main research question is did the political elite aim to continue the previous policy of forming congruent coalitions or was there a shift in coalition politics. The preliminary assumption is that a much more limited scale of congruence was driven by the interests of regional actors, whose bargaining position towards the centre increased due to the fragmentation of national politics. To verify this claim, their opinions were supplemented by qualitative data on coalition bargaining outcome: the partisan composition of regional coalitions.

The second supposition is that the reduced scale of congruence derives from central politics. As the national coalition has been a multiparty coalition, its size means that divergence of interests among the parties is natural. In addition, cooperation is more probable among some partners while other national partners are excluded.

Finally, were there any central elite actions aimed at maintaining the national government coalition's coherence?

Two main sources of data were used. The first were documents: assembly resolutions on regional executive formation were based on mapping regional coalitions not only in the aftermath of the 2024 election but also in previous terms since the 2006 political stabilisation. The coalitions were then classified in relation to congruence (fully or partially congruent, or alternative coalitions) if this principle was rejected and the cross-cutting option was chosen (Table 1). Furthermore, the official voivodship offices' websites were used to reconstruct data on the appointment of *voivodes* and their deputies. This was used to map the central elite response to the challenge of reduced congruence. Second, the regional elites'

attitudes were investigated based on their opinions presented in the regional press. Thus, the analysis was limited to the heads of regional boards whose interviews were available.

Table 2. Types of regional coalition after the 2024 regional elections

Regions	Possibilities for formation of fully congruent coalition (PO-PSL-NL-Polska 2050)	Parties forming coalitions	Was there a national coalition party that passed the electoral threshold but was excluded from regional coalition?	Coalition size	Coalition type	Parties with representatives in voivodeship office (VO)		Regional congruence after incorporating VO
						Voivode	Deputy voivodes	
Dolnośląskie	Yes	PO-PSL-Polska 2050- BS	NL	OvSC	CrC	PO	NL	FC- reg.
Kujawsko-Pomorskie	No	PO-PSL	Polska 2050	MWC	PC-ncp	PO	NL+Polska 2050	FC- reg.
Lubelskie	No	PiS Majority		OPB	Alt	PO	Polska 2050+PSL	
Lubuskie	No	PO-PSL	Polska 2050	MWC	PC-ncp	PO	Polska 2050-NL	FC- reg.
Łódzkie	Yes	PO-PSL-NL-Polska 2050	0	MWC	FC	PO	PSL-NL	
Małopolskie	No	PiS Majority		OPB	Alt	PSL	PO-NL	FC- reg (FC)
Mazowieckie	No	PO-PSL	NL	MWC	PC-ncp	PO	Polska 2050-NL	FC- reg.
Opolskie	No	PO-MN-PSL	0	OvSC	PC-reg	PO	PSL	
Podkarpackie	No	PiS Majority		OPB	Alt	PO	NL-PSL	
Podlaskie	No	PO-PSL+floor crossers (PiS)	Polska 2050	NC	PC-FCr	PO	NL-PSL	
Pomorskie	No	PO-PSL+Polska 2050	0	OvSC	PC-ncp	recom. PO	Polska 2050-NL	FC- reg.
Śląskie	Yes	PO-PSL-NL	Polska 2050	OvSC	PC-ncp	PO	Polska 2050	FC- reg.
Świętokrzyskie	No	PiS Majority		OPB	Alt	PO	PSL	
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	No	PO-PSL	Polska 2050	MWC	PC-ncp	PSL	PO-NL	
Wielkopolskie	Yes	PO-PSL-NL	Polska 2050	MWC	PC-ncp	Polska 2050	PO-PSL	FC- reg.
Zachodniopomorskie	Yes	PO-PSL-NL	Polska 2050	OvSC	PC-ncp	Polska 2050	PO-NL	FC- reg.

Source: Author.

Abbreviations: Alt – alternative coalition; CrC – cross-cutting coalition; FC – fully congruent coalition; MWC – minimal winning coalition; NC – not classified; OPB – one party board; OvSC – oversized coalition; PC-ncp – partially congruent coalition including some but not all parties of central government; PC-reg – partially congruent coalition including some but not all parties of central government and regional party; PC-FCr – partially congruent coalition including some but not all parties of central government and floor crossers; FC-reg. reg.- full regional congruence including both regional institutions (regional board and Voivodeship Office).

Results – multilevel setting and types of regional coalitions

In analysing opportunities to form fully congruent coalitions in regions, it is clear that such arrangements were only possible in 12 regions, as in the other four, the main opposition party (PiS) had a majority (Table 2).

Among these 12 regions where it was necessary (or expected) to build coalitions to rule, only five were fully congruent coalitions and all four central coalition parties passed the electoral threshold (Table 2). However, a fully congruent coalition was formed in only one of these regions. In this case, the participation of all four parties was necessary to form a minimally winning coalition. This meant that in the other 11 regions the political elites had more autonomy over choosing the coalition formula. Observing regional coalition formation outcome, three main patterns can be distinguished.

Towards fully congruent coalitions, or the closest variant

This pattern developed in the three regions where PO, PSL and NL formed alliances. These coalitions suggest that regional coalition formation follows a clear pattern, with some formulas having more chances of appearing than others. These were all partially congruent coalitions but not random ones. It should be stressed that they were very close to full congruence and it could be argued that they were in line with developments in previous terms (Tables 1, 2 and Figure 2). For example, in one of these regions (Zachodniopomorskie), due to NL inclusion,³ an oversized coalition was built (suggesting that the regional leaders favoured preserving the incumbent coalition of these three parties).

However, at the same time, the shift in regional elites' policy suggests unexpected and consistent "discrimination" towards one party (Polska 2050) that was not incorporated. The absence of Polska 2050 seems to contradict the tendency to form coalitions as close to full congruence as possible (observable in previous terms). The explanation for this different attitude towards NL than to Polska 2050 is recognised as critical in a thorough investigation of coalition politics after the 2024 elections. Some insight into why full congruence was rejected by regional leaders indicates coalition barring in one of the regions (Wielkopolska). (This issue is analysed in detail in the section on central elite response.)

In the initial stage, the head of the regional board, Marek Woźniak, declared:

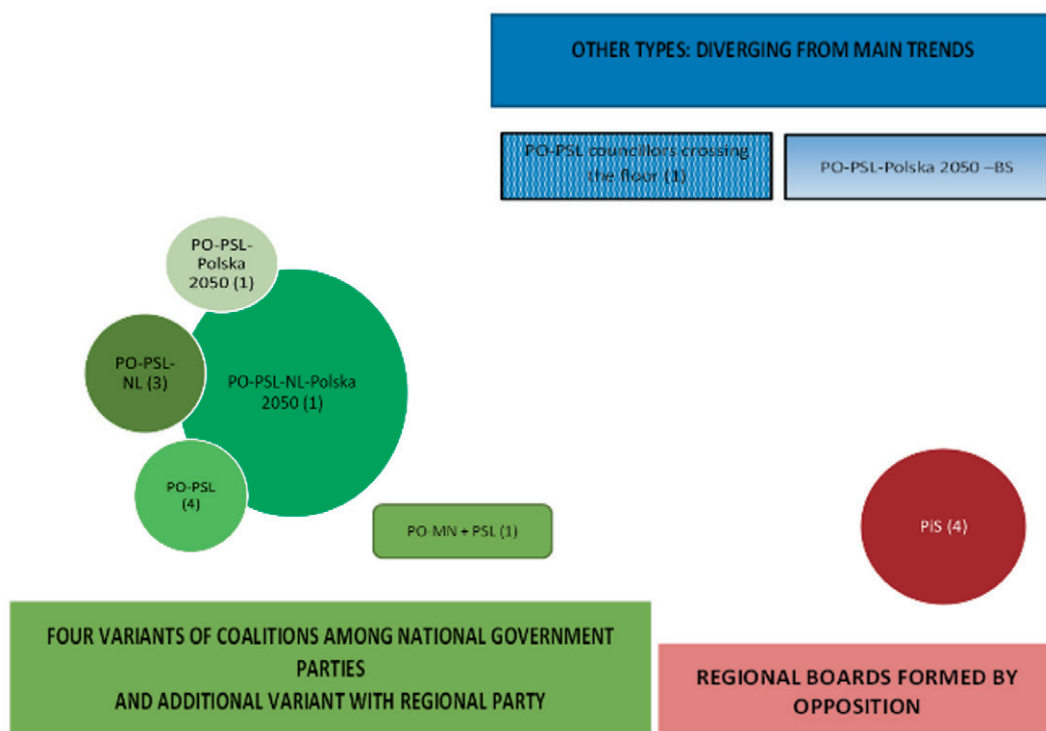
If there is an agreement that the Left enters a complete coalition [meaning not only assembly coalition], it receives a seat on the regional board, so a board will be formed in which *each* party of the coalition [emphasis mine] will have its member and KO will have the head and one more member. (Woźniak in Konieczna 2024)

This suggests that a four-party regional board was considered a viable option. Furthermore, in this region, two seats were guaranteed for the Third Way, which one may expect facilitated a four-party coalition. The division of these two posts led to delays in establishing regional boards as the next round of negotiations was held including national politicians. However, the PSL argued to keep both posts for itself, as this solution would allow them to be held by the incumbents. Other parties did not interfere. They saw this as

³ PO was able to choose whether to select the PSL or NL as a coalition partner. However, since the PO-PSL coalition had existed from 2006, the PSL was seen as a natural partner.

an internal dispute within the Third Way coalition. Polska 2050 was marginalised despite receiving very similar election results to the PSL⁴.

Figure 2. Other types: diverging from main trends



Source: Author.

Partially congruent coalitions: PO-PSL cooperation

In the next four regions only two central government parties, PO and PSL, built coalitions (Table 2). In choosing this option, regional politicians were not driven by the tendency to achieve fully congruent coalitions or the variant closest to this aim, and their efforts were overcome by election results (that is neither central government parties passed the electoral threshold). Instead, coalition formation was motivated by the principle of renewing the previous cooperation between these parties established in those regions since 2006.⁵ Furthermore, in most cases, these coalitions were the minimal winning coalition (MWC) and the PO-PSL formation facilitated the preservation of posts on the regional boards by the incumbent regional elites.

An insight into the assertive approach of the regional elites defending the PO-PSL regional coalition formula is provided by the head of the regional board in Kujawsko-Pomorskie, Piotr Całbecki:

⁴ Pat w Wielkopolsce. Wciąż bez przełomu ws. wyboru nowego zarządu województwa, Portal Samorządowy, 10 May 2024 and Koalicja na kadencję pełną wyzwani, Monitor Wielkopolski — Magazyn Samorządu Województwa, 20 May 2024.

⁵ Not all these coalitions recreated incumbent coalitions. For example, in Lubuskie, before the 2024 elections, there was a three-party coalition. (In 2024, the NL did not pass the electoral threshold.)

In the national coalition mosaic, we also rule with the Left; however, in our region, it happens that it does not have seats in the assembly. [...] By delaying the session, we want to help our political power at the national level so they can make relevant arrangements in those regions where there have been difficulties in forming coalitions. [...] In relation to reshuffling on the regional board, there is no room for manoeuvre. We have been here [journalist: 'PO-PSL'] for many years.⁶

Finally, Całbecki discusses with journalists (which might seem puzzling) the issue of yielding a post in the executive to a party that did not pass the electoral threshold (NL) but does not even mention another party that did so (Polska 2050).

Mazowieckie is one of the regions where only a PO-PSL coalition was built. In contrast to three other voivodeships, the situation here became complicated as the NL passed the electoral threshold. As the press suggested, Tusk and Czarzasty (leaders of the PO and NL agreement) guaranteed the seat for the NL on this regional board, but the PSL was the pivotal party in the region (and after the PSL formed a coalition with the BS in Dolnośląskie, the scenario of this party making an agreement with PiS could not be discounted). As a result, it was the PSL regional leaders who had the upper hand and were able to convince PO to form a two-party coalition, which enabled the PSL to preserve the position of regional head (Szczepański, Baranowska 2024).

Long-term national and regional cooperation facilitated the formation of two-party PO-PSL coalitions. However, it could be argued that in 2024 such coalitions were not seen as unconditional for regional elites because in two regions, a coalition with the PSL was not necessary for PO to guarantee the majority in the regional assemblies. In Opolskie, PO could form a majority with the German minority (*Mniejszość Niemiecka*, MN). The first regional board (May–June 2004) was without the PSL and its head favoured a 'parliamentary type coalition' with that party, advocating such an approach due to the poor performance of the PSL in regional elections.⁷ The opposite policy was adopted in the second region, Pomorskie, where PO could rule alone but invited the PSL and also, after a three month delay, Polska 2050. This regional approach can be seen as extraordinary, due to the effort to build a coalition closest to full congruence. All the parties of the national government who passed the electoral threshold were present on the regional board.

Cross-cutting coalitions: pro and anti

In the Podlaskie region, even partial congruence failed to secure a quarantining majority, making a cross-cutting coalition appear necessary. However, such an alliance was rejected for a publicly unpopular method of gaining a majority: crossing of the floor by councillors who were rewarded with posts on the regional board. Examination of why the *cross-cutting coalition* was replaced by a seemingly worse solution can be found in the evolution of the Polish party system structure and party coalition potential. In this region, there were no small parties on the right where the central government parties could lure councillors to switch sides and build a cross-cutting coalition. The councillors of other minor right-wing parties were elected from PiS's electoral list and were accordingly seen as indistinctive from the main opposition party, so a coalition with them would not be seen as more acceptable and a better option than cooperation with PiS. On the other hand, PiS, lacking

⁶ Nie wybrali marszałka i zarządu. W kilku województwach wybory odroczone (aktualizacja), Serwis Samorządowy PAP, 8 May 2024.

⁷ Nowy zarząd województwa opolskiego bez przedstawiciela PSL, TVP 3 Opole, 25 April 2025.

coalition potential in both 2018 and 2024, was not able to attract a junior party from the government side. As a consequence of these two phenomena (the absence of minor parties on the right and a lack of PiS coalition potential), seeking candidates to cross the floor appeared to be a viable alternative approach.

Nevertheless, a cross-cutting coalition was formed due to interest by one of the sections of the regional elite. It was not a classical cross-cutting coalition as it was not built by a party in opposition at central level. As the literature suggests, history matters in Poland. Thus, previous party alliances can be used to establish a party position within the division: on the government-opposition side even if a party is not present at central level (a regional one). In Dolnośląskie, after the candidate of the largest party, PO, was unable to gain a majority in the assembly, the PSL gathered support for its project of a coalition with *non-partisan Regional Government Representatives* (*Bezpartyjni Samorządowcy*, BS) enlarged to include PO and Polska 2050. As a result, the PSL candidate was elected head of the regional board. This coalition was classified as cross-cutting and it was recognised as such by political actors, as they saw the BS as a party with close ties to PiS.⁸ In the 2008–2024 period, PiS was isolated and rejected as a coalition partner, so the BS's decision in 2018 as a regional party to form a coalition with PiS was seen as a breach of the wider rules of the game. Due to this exceptional stance, the BS was stigmatised as a PiS ally.

Restoring regional congruence: the centre's response

The most striking feature of the analysis of building of regional coalitions, with the exception of Pomorskie, was the marginalisation of Polska 2050. Despite being present in 14 regional assemblies, the party entered only two other regional coalitions. In the first region, Polska 2050 was necessary to build a majority (Łódzkie) and in the second it enabled building the most favourable variant of the coalition for the pivotal party – PSL (Dolnośląskie).

However, as the head of one region, Olgierd Geblewicz argued, responding to the fact that Polska 2050 was not included in the regional coalition, this approach signifies “a lack of understanding of the thorough construction”, referring to the regional institutional arrangement in which the position of voivode was given to Polska 2050 (Plecan 2024).

Evaluation of the scale of congruence changes when, following Geblewicz's suggestion, the other centre of regional power (the voivodeship office) is taken into consideration. In five out of seven regions in which Polska 2050 was excluded from coalitions, the party held positions of voivodes or their deputies (Table 2). A similar approach was applied to the NL, as the party was represented in voivodeship offices in regions in which it was not present on the regional boards. This analysis reveals a new form of congruence labelled *regional full congruence*, appearing on condition that in a region the personal interest of all four parties was recognised. The extension of the analysis of political posts to two regional institutions suggests the existence of a territorial mosaic aimed at preserving the balance of power among all four coalition partners.⁹ It is argued that due to the limited number of

⁸ In voting on a PSL candidate for the position of head of the regional board, he received support from the opposition, that is PiS councillors (‘Paweł Gancarz nowym marszałkiem Dolnego Śląska’, TVN24 Wrocław, 22 May 2024).

⁹ This attempt to restore full congruence in regions by central authorities goes against Schakel and

managerial positions on the regional boards, this political balance could not be achieved if the voivodeship offices were not included.

Conclusions

Analysis of Poland's coalition politics in 2024 indicates the applicability of observations made in Western European regions. However, political fragmentation radically decreased the number of fully congruent coalitions. The main argument is that regional coalitions, although reflecting the limited tendency for full congruence, nevertheless show that congruence was still 'the important game in town', which agrees with the literature suggesting such developments in regions with a lower degree of authority. The appearance of partial congruence, alternative coalitions or avoidance of cross-cutting coalitions points to the important role of multilevel coordination.

The second observation is the critical role of regional elites in preserving congruence, which is also in line with Western European studies. However, the impact of the multilevel setting was more limited, being "shallower" than in the period of stability (2006/2007–2023/2024), leaving more autonomy to regional elites. Some coalition "outcomes" (suboptimal in relation to congruence) were the result of the interest of regional elites driven by their own priorities, i.e. incumbency.

On the other hand, two observations indicate the peculiarity of the Polish case. Firstly, a contrary argument can be made, suggesting the opposite – an increase of congruence. If the regional mosaic of partisan composition in both regional institutions (regional boards and voivodeship offices) is deciphered, the number of cases of full regional congruence rises to nine out of 12 regions ruled by central government parties. Thus, the important contribution of the study lies in drawing attention to the link between administrative institutions, in which additional units are used to recreate congruence due to central elite actions. This also raises wider questions regarding democracy and decentralisation.

Secondly, Polish coalition politics underline the importance of history in defining the political space. This raises the question of whether the term *cross-cutting coalition* should be expanded to include the role of historic markers used to define the position of regional parties as belonging to the opposition side. Furthermore, developments in coalition politics in the 2018–2024 period underline the importance of the existence of certain features in the political system for the development of opportunities favourable for cross-cutting coalitions. In Polish regions, it is argued that they do not exist (due to the lack of PiS's coalition potential and the absence of small oppositional parties which could cross the floor).

Massetti's (2018) comparative analysis of western European countries, which suggests that cross-cutting multilevel government is higher among regional executives where the head is appointed by national government.

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