



Weekly Briefing

Poland Political briefing:
THE SITUATION IN POLISH POLITICS IN 2018
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THE SITUATION IN POLISH POLITICS IN 2018

The year 2018 in Polish political narrative was regarded as a unique and unrepeatable. For the 12 months of its duration, the main paradigm of the internal policy remained the matter of one hundred years of Poland's regaining independence. However that time was also politically characterized by the conflicting visions of Poland's future, since the local government elections took place in October, what was the first round in a series of elections awaiting Poles in the months to come.

On November 11, 1918 Poland became independent - after more than a century of foreign rule. For this success of sovereignty many Poles had long struggled. But on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the state, the country is still arguing about how to deal with its own history. Even the celebration of this jubilee was treated as a clash between two (conservative or centro-liberal) versions of Poland and visions of its future. The most clear and symptomatic expression of these differences were two marches organized in Warsaw by the President and the national camp, and numerous events rejecting any political colors.

On the one hand, the patriotic narrative was dominant, concentrated on the history of Poland as a country surrounded by unfriendly neighbors, which had to fight constantly in the past and which is still forced to struggle for the maintenance of independence. This narrative, represented by the ruling Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), focused on the evolution of the Polish internal policy, foreign policy, economy and social policy in the last three years since PiS won the elections. The politicians of the ruling party underlined the transformation of the country and regaining national pride and independence from previous partners on the international political scene (mainly Germany).

On the other hand the opposition groups - primarily Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) and Modern (Nowoczesna, N), centered around the so-called Civic Coalition - have called for a greater openness to the world and creation of a strong Poland in a powerful, reformed Europe. Politicians representing these groups, for whom an alternative way of celebrating the centenary of regaining independence was the participation in the "Freedom Games" organized by liberal milieus, emphasized the need to redefine the meaning of such words as "Pole" and "European" and look for a new model of patriotism, based on openness, tolerance as well as political and economic liberalism.

This clash of both narratives has been present in Polish political discussions for the last 13 years (at least since the 2005 presidential and parliamentary elections, both won by PiS), yet this year it was marking the division of political scene even stronger than before.

It is though worth noticing that both parties define themselves not as conservative or democratic, but as "realists". They mutually define their view of Europe by referring to a sober look at the events around and both describe extremely differently, at least in the verbal layer, the same phenomena. The Civic Platform proclaimed through the whole 2018 the need for Poland to participate in as many European initiatives as possible and to maintain close relations with the core of the European Union, namely France and Germany. Contrary to popular opinions, especially among the right-wing circles, such policy does not result from submissiveness, but from the conviction that isolation from Germany and France would lead to pursuing a policy that would be distant from Polish interests. Meanwhile, right-wing circles believe that Poland must cut off to the main "European trend", to be fully independent. PiS considers, that it does not necessarily mean Poland's isolation - their "realism"

focuses on infrastructure development, building an information society, creating a citizen-friendly state with a large social base. Referring to international affairs, Law and Justice is not only against the introduction of euro currency in Poland, but often even questions the sense of the existence of the euro as such. "Realism" also orders, according to PiS, to focus primarily on the alliance with the United States, and only secondly with the EU.

The events of 2018 clearly show that the combination of these two visions is becoming more and more difficult. Political divisions make it difficult to conduct social dialogue on such important issues as reform of the judiciary, changes in higher education, the role of the Catholic Church, the importance of non-governmental organizations or the place of Poland on the international arena.

This partition was also visible during the last months of the above-mentioned electoral campaign preceding the municipal elections, held on October 21, 2018. Elected were the deputies of the provincial assemblies, the counties, county cities and towns. However the largest parties treated this election as an indicator of the voter's sympathies at the beginning of a series of elections planned for the next year and a half (European elections in May 2019, Parliamentary elections in October 2019, presidential elections in May 2020).

This time, the local elections gained unprecedented importance. Firstly, because the institutions of territorial self-government were not yet dominated and subordinated to the ruling Law and Justice party. Secondly, because in this rivalry the liberal-democratic opposition had relatively high chances for success, which was seen as a first step to regain power and a chance for restoration of democratic standards in state institutions.

The intense, violent and emotional campaign hid largely the theme of changes in the electoral system, the local essence of this elections and the development of the regions. The result of the election was the announcement of victory by all political fractions. Indeed PiS gained the majority of regional assemblies; the liberal-centrist Civic Coalition achieved a victory in large cities; Polish People's Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL) and Democratic Left Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej, SLD) remained in the position of significant players. However, more than the potential of all these options, their limitations have been shown.

PiS definitely won the elections. Total support at the level exceeding 34% in local elections was the best result in the history of the Third Republic of Poland, significantly better than the local government achievements of this party from four years ago (254 seats in regional assemblies totally). The victory in as many as 9 voivodeships (out of 16) can be regarded as a great success that distances the party's leadership. Though, it is impossible not to notice the profession - with the massive propaganda of public media, the political offensive of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, ministers openly supporting the PiS candidates and using threat of losing government funds in case of a wrong decision of voters, the result was a disappointment. The ruling party counted on a spectacular victory with a political support of 40% of voters.

In contrast stood the political narrative of the Civic Coalition, which imposed its own success story. Even if it was a facade victory - its candidates could boast spectacular success only in Warsaw, Poznań and Łódź, and smaller cities and towns were won both by the candidates of the ruling party and the opposition parties.

Taking into account the context of the elections, the result of the Civic Coalition in the entire country seemed to be well below expectations. With the

great mobilization of the anti-PiS electorate, the very high turnout, the Morawiecki image crisis and Grzegorz Schetyna's (Civic Platform's leader) earlier declarations of developing liberal and leftist wings, the Coalition won only 27% of all votes (194 seats).

Meanwhile, the PSL's success could be seen mainly as survival. The peasants party came out of this duel extremely weakened - in previous elections they gained as many as 157 seats in regional assemblies, in 2018 only 70. Considering the specificity of the position of the Polish People's Party in local elections, it is certain that this result will be even weaker in the parliamentary clash next autumn. There is also no reason for satisfaction of SLD, which won only 11 seats in regional authorities. Both PSL and SLD have proved so much that they exist - because even their role as a partner in building possible anti-PiS coalitions in the future is currently uncertain.

An attractive partner could though be definitely non-partisan governmenters and politicians, who gain constantly interest among the voters. In local elections they won 15 seats in total, but their political influence is still growing. They derive either from social clubs and citizens' initiatives, and focus around the Committee for the Defense of Democracy (Komitet Obrony Demokracji, KOD), the Citizens of the Republic (Obywatele RP) and the Action Democracy (Akcja Demokracja), which represent urban, democratic movements, concentrated on progressive and democratic values; or they originate from right-wing, nationalist or even neo-fascist groups, that attract mainly young people from towns and province, drawn by extreme political values. The most active are National Radical Camp (Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny, ONR) as well as the All-Polish Youth (Młodzież Wszechpolska). Both tie to the associations existing in the interwar period.

Conclusions

The celebrations of Poland's regaining independence planned and organized over many months could be an excellent opportunity to build a common Polish narrative about the challenges facing the Third Republic of Poland in the 21st century. Their result, however, is disappointing and brings the conclusion that in domestic politics the country is very diverse, divided and conflicted. These tensions were highly expressed both by the preparations to the electoral campaign before the local elections, as well as by the subsequent discussion and a clear division of the political scene afterwards.

The cycle of the elections, ending in 2020, will be interpreted as a referendum in four stages for or against authoritarianism. These will be no ordinary elections, which usually decide who takes which position in self-government, Polish or European Parliament. The weight of these choices is to outline a comprehensive, complete vision of the state - either moderate or conservative.