




Weekly Briefing

**Poland political briefing:
Polish Internal Politics, January 2019
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The beginning of 2019 proved to be very difficult in Polish domestic politics. On January 13, 2019 there was a tragic event, the consequences of which Poland will have to take for the next months. During the final of the great charity event, the president of the city of Gdańsk, Paweł Adamowicz, was fatally stabbed. His sudden death has become a reason for a serious discussion on the condition of Polish politics, role of local governments, hate speech that spreads in the public debate, and the political future that can be fulfilled in the next few months.

Since 1993, on the second Sunday of January, a big event related to collecting money for the treatment of young children is taking place on Polish streets. The action was launched 26 years ago as a happening to support the Department of Pediatric Cardiac Surgery at the Children's Health Center in Warsaw. The culmination of this happening was the finalé of the entire action, organized in the Polish television studio in Warsaw. During the first final, over PLN 2.4 million (USD 1.5 million) were collected, what exceeded the boldest expectations of the organizers. Thanks to the collected money, Jerzy Owsiak - the initiator of the action, Polish radio and television journalist - together with the later established Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity Foundation, could purchase the necessary equipment not only for the Children's Health Center in Warsaw, but also for 10 other pediatric hospitals in Poland. In subsequent years, the campaign grew, and in 2018, during the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity finalé, it was possible to collect PLN 126 million (USD 37 million). In total, for over 27 years, Jerzy Owsiak's foundation has collected and donated to charity (support of Polish pediatric hospitals and geriatric departments, purchase of equipment, training in first aid, etc.) over PLN 1 billion (USD 267 million) and the idea of collecting funds to help ill children as well as seniors (providing decent medical care for seniors was the purpose of the collection in the years 2013-2017) enjoys enormous popularity and trust in Poland - since April 2016 the Great Orchestra ranks on the top of the list as the most trusted public entity according to Brand Asset Valuator and is the second strongest brand in Poland in the ranking gathered by Millward Brown and Young & Rubicam agency.

The final of the annual gathering is a peaceful celebration of mutual support and respect. Hundreds of charitable events such as concerts, sports events, competitions, etc. take place throughout the country and abroad. Its ending - called "Light to the Sky" - takes place at 8 pm and is associated with a light show in every city or town where the collection is organized.

This year however, during the closing ceremony of the charity action in Gdańsk, a man armed with a knife attacked president Paweł Adamowicz, who performed on stage in front of the crowd gathered to celebrate the finalé of the Great Orchestra. The politician died the next day in the hospital as a result of injuries. The attack on Adamowicz and his later death caused a great shock in Poland and launched a public debate on many levels.

First of all - surprise and shock related to the disturbance of a peaceful event. So far it was the first such tragic event throughout many years of the charity event organized by the Great Orchestra. In previous years there were small incidents (e.g. stealing a donations can), nevertheless it was a completely peaceful and safe event, during which the representatives of the younger and older generation could take part in a huge number of various mass happenings.

Secondly - case of securing mass events. In Poland the level of security for mass events has been very low for years. Since there have been no terrorist attacks so far, Polish politicians did not introduce any precautionary measures. Although the Act on mass events requires specific actions from the organizers to ensure the safety of participants, in practice, however, compliance with regulations is often not kept. It's not surprising than, that to kill the president of Gdańsk, it was not necessary to organize a complicated operation, but a single cutler was enough to lead to Adamowicz's death.

Thirdly - issue of disturbing the foundations of social peace and starting a debate on the so-called hate speech, which was considered to be a spark for the whole incident. Hate speech - which president Adamowicz was one of the main recipients, as a person with conservative but open to the world and tolerant views - expanded in Poland in recent years to a huge extent, and is a result of an enormous political and social polarization. It is a consequence of the hatred and malice that spread in Poland because of the conflict between the two main camps and with their mutual consent - the conservative, nationalist right, forming the ruling camp centered around the Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), and the liberal-conservative, pro-European opposition centered around the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO). The difference between the two camps - though programmatically and ideologically, they are, ironically, quite similar in their views - was growing after the tragic crash of the presidential plane at Smolensk in April 2010, and increased after taking over power by PiS in autumn 2015. Both sides accuse each other of creating hate speech and using the so-called online trolls to discredit the opponent. This political struggle in Poland is often ruthless, very sharp and has practically eliminated in recent years the possibility of conducting an open, substantive debate in public life. Furthermore, from the political life it also goes into the social sphere, resulting in lowering the level of citizens' trust in each other.

There is also the layer of a figurative meaning. Since the principal seaport Gdańsk is a symbolic city for Poland - it is associated with the beginning of the Second War on Westerplatte on September 1, 1939 and the strike of Solidarity movement in August 1980, which for good, along with its leader and later President of the Republic of Poland, Lech Wałęsa, made this city famous in the world media and public opinion - it is also symptomatic, that this attack caused by a repeatedly punished criminal, took place in a city associated with the fight for freedom.

On the other hand Adamowicz's death allowed to discover large deposits of good and potential for kindness in the Polish society, it forced politicians to stop the dreadful emotions and stop the media quarrel, and in relation to president Adamowicz himself - to take a closer look at his achievements. Adamowicz's funeral on Saturday, January 19, 2019, was attended by most important politicians, local government officials and activists, as well as crowds of Gdańsk residents and guests from all over the country. People gathered under large screens in many cities, also abroad - although the city's long-time president was primarily a local politician, he spoke on matters related to the whole country.

Paweł Adamowicz was elected president of Gdańsk for the first time by the City Council in 1998, when he was a councilor of the Conservative People's Party. In 2002, after introducing the principle of direct election, Adamowicz won in the second round, winning over 70% of votes. Twice, in 2006 and 2010, he won in the first round. In 2014, he was reelected for the next term - it was also the last time when he was a candidate of the Civic Platform. The last election, on November 4, 2018, he has won as an independent candidate, leader of the association Everything for Gdańsk (Wszystko dla Gdańska). In recent years Adamowicz clearly and staunchly defended local government against the central authority, combining it with the defense of the legal order, democracy, courts and constitution.

Taking into account the after-effect of his presidency, these 20 years was a period of the largest infrastructure development of the city after the Second World War. Regardless of the comprehensive and detailed assessment of the governments of president Adamowicz, three basic elements define his method of city management. First of all, Gdańsk in 1998-2018 was consistently managed with a defined vision of small steps and long-term investments of almost monumental character (i.e. PGE Arena stadium, expansion of the Wałęsa Airport, development of a significant part of road infrastructure, building of the European Solidarity Center, creation of Museum of the Second World War and Shakespeare Theater). Secondly, it was important for Adamowicz to know that Gdańsk cannot live only from its history and must develop consistently forward (through i.e. construction investments, creating a positive image of Gdańsk as an attractive city for employees, students, young and dynamic people). Thirdly, Adamowicz understood that Gdańsk, due to its past, is a special city, making the words from

the city's coat of arms "Nec temere, nec timide" (Neither rashly nor timidly) a literal motto of his presidency. During two decades as president, he often came into conflict with both his own government and those coming from other political camps, and stood uncompromisingly on the barricade of protection of the constitutional legal order, liberal democracy, European identity of Gdańsk and Poland.

Adamowicz was definitely not a president without flaws. He was not free from political and legal controversies and was an object of harsh criticism of his political opponents as well as his political associates. His presidency favored the creation of the so-called municipal interest, group of influences and business-social relationships. The criticism of president Adamowicz was also a consequence of his stubbornness, perversity, and sometimes a tone that did not raise any objections. The political dispute over the principles, assumptions, concepts, accents, nuances, quality of life of the inhabitants and the future of the city has always been in a natural way inscribed in the essence of territorial self-government, democracy and public life.

Despite the conservative approach not only to the world view, but to many aspects of the city's functioning, he was able to change his attitude, often making decisions in the absolute vanguard to his current position (i.e. support for women rights and LGBT rights), sometimes causing surprise even for the biggest critics. It must be admitted that in the general resumé of his life, weighing the reasons - strengths and weaknesses of the presidency, Paweł Adamowicz will be remembered as a politician who matured, learned and evolved, so as Gdańsk changed and civilized with each subsequent term of his office.

Conclusion

The attack on the President of Gdańsk was a tragedy, which caused a national mourning. It forced to stop and reflect on the political and social development of the country. Though it did not change the political calendar. This year, a double election campaign awaits Polish politics - the European elections in May and parliamentary elections in October. However, along with the trauma associated with Adamowicz's death, a new, yet unrecognized factor, which the parties are now investigating, has come to the already familiar pattern of the election campaign.

Politicians of various options, especially the most important ones, are still intimidated, cautious, they are afraid to make a mistake, cause a greater rasp or dissonance that will destroy the atmosphere. Therefore there is a thorough analysis of whether the deadly attack will cause Poles to press for "reconciliation", to mitigate the conflict, to show that they want a different language and emotions that have dominated the public discourse over the past few years. On the other hand perhaps, the murder of the president of Gdańsk à la long will strengthen the polarization of politics and will radicalize the politics even to a bigger extent.

Definitely it has showed, that Polish society is a community that gathers in tough moments in history; it also illustrated what value and significance local politicians have, and what importance should be associated with the policy implemented at the level of local self-governments. However, it is currently difficult to predict how many of these experiences and political reconciliation will remain until the next elections to the European Parliament, to which the election campaign will soon begin.