Poland political briefing:
Impact of pandemic on the political situation in Poland: the issue of presidential elections

Joanna Ciesielska-Klikowska
Impact of pandemic on the political situation in Poland: the issue of presidential elections

Last few months have brought about significant policy reorientation in many countries around the world. This case did not bypass Poland, in which the presidential election and the campaign preceding it were to be the dominant political event. The pandemic changed the planned course of events, yet giving it new political actors, shape and formula. The question of whether the election result stabilizes the situation in the country or will lead to an increase in ideological differences and deepening chaos remains open.

Policy changes in recent months

Today it is still difficult to write about the effects of the coronavirus on the political scene and presidential elections, since the number of infections in Poland is still rising, and the key goal of the state is to stop the epidemic. On the other hand, the COVID-19 and restrictions that accompany it, are changing Polish policy. The scale of this change is just reaching the Polish society and many consequences are not fully predictable. What was anticipated a few months ago – an unsurprising political situation, yet with a fierce electoral campaign and presidential elections in early May, became just a memory. The pandemic has completely altered the political life in Poland. And although the same people remain in power, their options for exercising this power are diverse at present.

Before the outbreak of the epidemic, the ruling United Right camp (consisting of the largest Law and Justice party [Prawo i Sprawiedliowsc, PiS], and smaller coalition partners: Jaroslaw Gowin’s Agreement, and Solidarna Polska) and President Andrzej Duda were in serious trouble. The allocation of almost PLN 2 billion annually to public television instead of health care support, as postulated by the opposition parties, the vulgar gesture of MP Joanna Lichocka, as well as quarrels of Andrzej Duda’s staff that went out in February and March 2020, indicated that the state authorities are experiencing serious image and organizational problems (see: Poland 2020 March Domestic Policy Briefing). Although PiS and Duda polls did not fall sharply, strong turbulence was visible. Other earlier crises have not been resolved as well - especially the scandal of the head of the Supreme Audit Office, Marian Banas, or disputes about changes in the judiciary system.
The outbreak of the coronavirus with great force flushed all these problems out of public debate, leaving the government camp blank. It was in fact difficult to criticize the government, which, as it was emphasized, “is fighting for the lives of Poles”. In face of the crisis, people gathered around the government, which gained monopoly for political and economical action, because all the tools to fight the epidemic were (and sill are) in its hands. At the same time, it reached also an information monopoly: it was the government, that decided which news to convey, and which to omit. The subordination of public media of the ruling Right over the past few years has only enhanced this effect. It seemed that PiS has already won the presidential election.

However, the ruling majority encountered a clear obstacle - opposition MPs and senators did not agree to hold the voting, scheduled for May 10, 2020. The government’s intention was to conduct only correspondence elections. Yet, the opposition MPs were afraid of too fast pace of work on conducting these elections, because of multiple reasons, i.e.: they have never been conducted in such a formula in Poland; there was a possibility of spreading the disease through electoral packages being delivered to homes; there would be lack of secrecy and possible chaos associated with the subsequent counting of votes. Therefore, the National Electoral Commission decided to cancel them two days before the planned date. At this point, all previous forecasts regarding the political situation in Poland have become outdated.

**Consequences of pandemic for presidential elections**

The situation in Polish politics did not return to the starting point, and made a full volley. The largest opposition party - Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) - decided to take advantage of this situation, and surprisingly changed its candidate for the office of head of state. Instead of Malgorzata Kidawa-Blonska, Rafal Trzaskowski became PO’s candidate (Trzaskowski is the current President of the capital city of Warsaw, and inter alia former Minister of Administration and Digitization in Donald Tusk’s government). The other candidates remained unchanged - there are 10 of them in total. However, the replacement of Kidawa-Blonska with Trzaskowski completely changed the dynamics of this campaign, which will last almost until the end of June. The new date for presidential elections (in mixed formula - voting at polling stations, and via post for people who want to do so) was set for June 28. The possible second round will therefore be held on July 12.

As a result, Poland is currently in a strange situation of presidential elections that were to take place - but were cancelled; will take place - but in a not-so-clear mix formula; with
candidates who cannot run the election campaign in the traditional way - but mainly through social media. There are three scenarios for ending this situation, considering the candidates, who have the biggest chance for winning:

1. Victory of the current President Andrzej Duda (PiS), who actually enjoys the greatest public support, but his poll results are getting weaker every day (42% support on June 12, even 58% in April 2020). His success will bond the authorities of the United Right and will certainly consolidate the current political situation for the coming years, even for subsequent terms. The president is known for his very active support for his own political camp and its initiatives (he is even called the “notary of the government”), as well as for passive policy towards other groups. Therefore, no change should be expected in this respect. Yet, if Duda’s mandate proves to be very strong (victory in the first round), the power camp may even decide to hold early elections hoping to obtain even broader support, and perhaps to obtain a 2/3 majority in the Sejm - needed to amend the Constitution.

2. Victory of the opposition candidate, most likely Rafal Trzaskowski (PO, currently 23%-27% support), will guarantee wide possibilities for political change by opposition parties (which also have a slight advantage in the upper house of the parliament, the Senate). Perhaps it will give faith in systemic change also in the next parliamentary elections and turn Poland back to the European track. At the same time, this victory will lead to enormous political tension on the Sejm - Senate - Presidential Palace line and, as a consequence, will strengthen the fierce and ruthless political struggle that has been going on for many years. None of the parties to this conflict will want to let go, and the interests of citizens will become (probably) only a declared goal.

3. Victory of the non-party candidate, Szymon Holownia, a well-known journalist and publicist, who over the past few months has been able to unite people tired of constant political fights of the main parties (15-17% support). Holownia boasts the greatest financial support from citizens (his collection for the campaign has exceeded PLN 6 million) and at the same time brings hope that it will be possible to break Polish politics from the clutches of the conflict between the right-wing PiS and the liberal PO. At the same time, he is accused of being only a media personality who builds the electorate on recognition and not on his political experience.

Which of the three candidates wins - the other participants of the race have little public support, not exceeding 6% - will decide about Polish politics for the coming years.
Conclusions

The coronavirus pandemic has already started the processes of decomposition of the Polish political scene with the possibility of large political chaos. This disintegration means mainly shifts among the party power groups of both the opposition and the ruling coalition. The pandemic situation will at least sustain or even deepen the fragility of the Polish political scene. This is due to the fact that the state of the pandemic creates situations of surprising unpredictability for which political decisions need to be made.

At the same time, this state of challenges will reveal the increasingly low quality of party power groups, with their outrageous political practices, as well as mediocre practices of government and Sejm. The daily nuisance of fighting a pandemic will sharpen the negative assessments of political practices of main parties among ordinary citizens, creating an ever more fragile basis for political support for those in power, but also for the opposition.

This weakness of the political scene is ensured above all by the current proportional ordinance to the Sejm, creating fragmentation among the opposition and divisions among the ruling coalition. This ordinance was also the main reason for PiS relative defeat in recent parliamentary elections. This is because in this ordinance politicians and deputies stop counting on voters who are not directly dependent on them. And sooner or later they decide on arrogant political decisions towards their constituents, consisting in moving from one party to another within their parliamentary mandate.

Thus the ongoing pandemic and its medical, social and economic consequences can even lead to growing chaos in Polish politics. This chaos will be caused by the decreasing predictability of political behaviour and decisions of party power groups, both the opposition and the ruling coalition. It is difficult to predict whether the result of the presidential election will somehow calm this situation.