

BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE

The Polish Parliamentary Election and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism: Consequences for Poland and Europe¹

The Polish parliamentary election to be held on 25 October, will take place in the middle of an unprecedented refugee crisis in Europe and in the context of rising support for right-wing populist movements in almost all EU Member States. If and how the migration issue will affect the election remains to be seen, but it is likely that it will boost support for the right-wing opposition, not only the Law and Justice Party, but also more right-wing fringe parties with an anti-immigration and anti-EU stance, such as Janusz Korwin-Mikke's Coalition for the Renewal of the Republic Freedom and Hope (KORWiN). It is with parties like KORWiN that Law and Justice would have to build a coalition in order to be able to form a government.

A crucial aspect of the rise of right-wing populism in Poland is the backlash against women's rights and gender equality, reinforced by the ideology of the Catholic Church. What makes this issue even more interesting is that both main prime ministerial candidates, Beata Szydło, Law and Justice and current premier Ewa Kopacz, Civic Platform, are women.

As Poland is the biggest of the 'new Member States' and a serious player on EU level, the consequences of a return to power of the Right after the elections in combination with growing right-wing sentiments among the population would be disastrous for Europe and Poland alike. The outcome of the Polish election could strengthen the right-wing movement in Europe, feed into negative attitudes towards refugees among European public opinion elsewhere and reinforce tendencies against further European integration. Will Poland continue to grow as a modern European democracy or will it fall back into a right-wing nationalism drenched with conservative Catholicism?

After the presidential elections earlier this year, the Polish citizens get to vote on the composition of both chambers of parliament and can hence change the distribution of power in the sixth biggest country in the EU. It is expected that the right-wing populist Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) is going to take the biggest share of the votes and succeed the currently governing Civic platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) in office. Given the current success of right-wing populist parties across Europe, this is not by far a unique case, however, there are some particularly intriguing developments currently taking place in Poland at the same time, each of which could mark the beginning of a new era in the country's politics.

The turn to the right

Poland's political landscape is difficult to compare to that of its European neighbours, mainly because the classical divide between the left and the right takes a different shape than elsewhere. Among the population there is a near consensus on the role of the state and many

¹ The event took place on 21 October 2015. Guest speakers were: **Jacek Kucharczyk**, President of the Executive Board, Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw, **Aleksandra Niżyńska**, Policy Analyst and Programme Manager, Gender Equality Observatory at Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw, and **Ulrike Lunacek**, Member of the European Parliament Greens-EFA, Austria and Vice-President of the EP. The event was moderated by the director of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union, **Klaus Linsenmeier**. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

Polish voters would actually classify as 'social democrats' in a European sense. Consequently, parties across the political spectrum share the same vision of the role of the state and the macroeconomic policies that should be enacted. In addition, voter identification as left or right of centre can barely be explained through socio-economic status.

Instead, the political identities are determined by where people stand on value-based issues such as LGBTI rights or abortion, Church state relations and European integration. Since it is significantly more difficult to agree on values the tone of the electoral campaign has been polarised and toxic and provided a fertile ground for populist rhetoric, where critics of an idealised vision of Polish history as well as its cultural norms and traditions are attacked as traitors and lackeys of foreign powers.

On the other hand this divide along a scale of values helps explain how Poland could have drifted towards the right despite its good performance during the economic crisis. After two terms in office – the longest a Polish party has held on to power since Poland's independence in 1989 – a number of voters are just fed up with PO and want something new. The two terms of office of the Civic Platform government also led to an accumulation of discontent of different social groups. Many felt that they have not benefited from the economic growth over the past years. If you add to this the still insufficient performance of the state to care for the poorer part of the population and unemployed as well as the frustratingly slow improvements in the performance of public services and the health sector, it is less surprising that the present government is under pressure. The failure to close the gap to richer western European countries has furthermore triggered some disenchantment with the EU and sparked a Eurosceptic rhetoric of national interests defined in opposition to broader European interest.

The key reasons of this radical turn to the right of a large part of the Polish society are not economic but socio-cultural. After the Smolensk plane crash in 2010 in which the then ruling president Lech Kaczyński (PiS) died alongside many of the country's economic, military and economic elite, a new wave of nationalism went across Poland and fuelled the narrative that whoever is against PiS, is also against Poland itself. This explains the fact that even in today's Poland Lech Kaczyński's twin brother Jarosław is still the man pulling the strings in the PiS party, notwithstanding several electoral defeats and widespread unpopularity of his persona.

It is in this environment that the Catholic Church, still a very influential institution in Poland, has blamed LGBTI people and feminists for the demographic challenge Poland is facing and warned that feminism is a threat to Polish culture and tradition. PiS has gladly aligned itself with this propaganda. Last but not least, the current refugee crisis in Europe gave the Polish Right a final boost this year allowing PiS to tap into anti-foreign sentiments in the population.

A female prime minister

Whatever the result of this year's election may be, it is certain that Poland will have another female prime minister. All major parties PiS, PO and the Left Coalition are headed by female candidates, Beata Szydło, Ewa Kopacz and Barbara Nowacka, respectively. In addition a strict law on women's quotas on electoral lists has ensured that 40% of the candidates on the list are female. However when it comes to the electable places, female representation is with 29% markedly lower and only slightly higher than in the previous elections. Still this could lead to an increase in female representation from the current level of 24% in the *Sejm*. With regard to the Senate the picture looks rather different as the upper house is exempt from the quotas and thus still dominated by men, which is unlikely to change after this election. This illustrates that

despite some visible progress concerning the representation of women in Polish politics a lot of progress still has to be made.

Despite featuring a female candidate for prime minister, PiS is expected to turn back the wheel of time regarding some progress made by the previous government, which had taken several measures to strengthen the position of women in Poland. For instance the abortion law could be made even more restrictive as such attempts were made several times when Law and Justice was in opposition but were defeated by the ruling Civic Platform. The incoming conservative government is also likely not to honour the Istanbul convention on preventing violence against women, which was ratified by the outgoing parliament despite fierce resistance from Catholic Church and Law and Justice Party.

In spite of this bleak outlook concerning the upcoming election, one should not forget to mention that also the tolerant streams in society have become more present in Poland. The country has seen not only the election of the first openly gay mayor in the city of Slupsk in December 2014, but also hosted the Euro Pride parade in Warsaw in 2010. This illustrates the gap that is opening between the progressive and conservative parts of society.

Interestingly, one of the most nationalistic groups within Polish society are young Poles. As a consequence of a strictly religious education – Polish pupils have more hours of religion than of history – the school system has had its own share in positioning the youth to the more conservative side of the political divide. It is apparent that Polish society must have undergone some significant changes since, at the time of the EU referendum in 2004, the youth used to be the most pro-European group of society. These days, with Polish youngsters joining independent ‘self-defence’ battalions, a more patriotic and violent culture is being promoted. A remarkable fact: during the presidential election, almost half of young Poles voted for a rock star and social activist, Paweł Kukiz who had a one issue political programme (the introduction of a majoritarian voting system) but compensated this with strong anti-establishment rhetoric with right-wing overtones. The lack of civic education and a widespread disappointment with the political establishment played an obvious role in this voting behaviour.

All of this points at the erosion of social capital and a loss of trust in the political institutions of the country. Consequently, turnout in this election is expected again to be relatively low, around 50% of eligible voters. Poland is currently lacking a culture of proper public debate about substantive issues such as education policy or relations with the EU. This resulted in an electoral campaign dominated by populist slogans and promises. The opposition successfully captured the voters with its “Poland in ruin” narrative. In this ‘parallel reality’, facts and statistics were dismissed in favour of a litany of (often contradictory) complaints about the government policies.

The resurgence of nationalistic militarism has been strengthened by Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine, which over 80% of Poles considered a threat to Poland. Although the PO government has already called for the placement of NATO troops on Polish soil in order to deter Russia, PiS has criticised PO policy towards Russia as not strong enough and pledged to secure permanent US military presence in Poland as a result of next year’s NATO summit. Law and Justice is also expected to use more confrontational rhetoric towards the big neighbour, possibly with some references to conspiracy theory of a Russian involvement in the 2010 plane crash in Smolensk that killed president Lech Kaczyński and almost a hundred prominent Poles.

The crash and different views of its causes have polarised the Polish political class and the society as a whole and slowly poisoned relations with Russia even before the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine. On the other hand, the campaign revealed that Ukraine still enjoys broad support from all over the political spectrum, with the notable exception of Kukiz' party and other political groupings to the right of the Law and Justice party, which are at odds with Ukraine over the interpretation of several historical events. The differing understanding of shared Polish-Ukrainian history can also be a problem for some PiS politicians, who otherwise are willing to support Ukraine against Russia.

Consequences for the EU

The European Parliament hosts a considerable right-wing block after the European election in 2014. United by a general Eurosceptic attitude, opinions on other issues in the three rightist factions differ considerably and have left the right block disunited over a number of policy fields. Still, the EP has been able to pass legislation that improves the situation for women, but much of this legislation is currently stuck in the Council of Ministers, which is mainly responsible for obstructing progress on social issues on the European level. The likely election of a more conservative government in Poland would certainly not improve that situation although the current Luxembourg and the upcoming Dutch presidencies are expected to keep pushing the agenda of gender equality. Also on the hottest issue, the integration of refugees, a conservative government is likely to make coordinated EU action more difficult. Whereas the PO government broke with the Visegrád group on the vote on resettlement, the general attitude among the people is – cynically for a deeply catholic country – opposed to accepting refugees. A future PiS government might want to return to taking on even less responsibility on the European level while at the same time trying to keep the generous financial support that Poland has received since joining the EU.

Poland will take a different course on a number of issues and a victory for the conservative Law and Justice Party could have far-reaching consequences for Poland and for the EU. The political cleavage in Poland is more on a value level than on specific policy issues and a political discourse of fear and antagonism has pushed the progressive and the conservative camp far apart. Even a female prime minister would not be able to contribute to a significant improvement of the standing of women in Polish society, which has ramifications that extend in the economic sphere, too. On the EU level, this new government can be expected to obstruct the forming of a Social Europe even further and push for a harder stance against Russia. Whether or not this is a desirable future, the Polish voters will decide.