

Deeper EU integration is in Poland's interest

N°8 – October 2015

Gabriele Schöler

Bertelsmann Stiftung, gabriele.schoeler@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

The Polish people have voted in favour of the political change: former prime minister Jaroslaw Kaczyński's party Law and Justice (PiS) with its front-runner Beata Szydło turned out strongest in the parliamentary elections on Sunday with almost 38 per cent of votes. The liberal Civic Platform (PO), headed by prime minister Ewa Kopacz, gained only 23.4 per cent. Why this shift to the right? And what will be the consequences for Polish politics? We asked Jacek Kucharczyk, President of the executive board of the Warsaw-based Institute of Public Affairs.

Bertelsmann Stiftung: What was the main reason for this shift to the right – the desire for political change or the conviction that certain challenges facing Poland could be better managed by Law and Justice?

Jacek Kucharczyk: I think it was both. There was definitely a fatigue factor after eight years of the Civic Platform government. People were looking for an alternative, and they found this alternative in Law and Justice, which describes

itself as conservative right-wing party, although some analysts label them as right-wing populists. It is not only a coincidence that voters look for an alternative to the centre-right Civic Platform further to the right. Most people in Poland define their political views as right-wing.

But this is only part of the story: Law and Justice offered them a kind of world-view, which they found attractive in times of European crisis – I would call it, "shelter from the storm".

The "storm" can be exemplified by the refugee crisis. This came at a perfect time for Kaczyński. His hard line on refugees, verging on xenophobia, won over people who would normally not vote for Law and Justice. And it turned out that the fear of migrants actually prevailed not only with people with a lower education and in the countryside. We know from public opinion research that fear of migrants, especially from Muslim countries, is also widespread in big cities and among well-educated people. This helps to explain why Kaczyński's rhetoric could break through the

flashlight europe

electoral “glass ceiling” and reach out to a broader pool of voters.

However, the refugee crisis is only the peak of the iceberg, there are other types of fears and prejudices which Kaczyński’s party successfully exploited with his promises to shelter people from “evils” issuing from Western Europe and the world: secularisation or the so-called “gender-ideology”, which – according to the Polish bishops and right-wing politicians – would destroy Polish family life and cultural tradition. That is where he attracted many voters by appealing to latent homophobia and sexism.

As you mention “secularisation”, has the Catholic Church, which has an enormous impact on Polish life, played any role in the electoral campaign?

I would say that during the campaign the presence or participation of the church and its officials was not very conspicuous. At least not as conspicuous as in earlier elections, for example the 2010 presidential elections. That was a kind of turning point then, because so many church officials supported Jarosław Kaczyński’s unsuccessful bid for presidency after his brother’s death in the Smolensk air crash. Such direct involvement of the Church was met with a lot of criticism from the general public. After that campaign some people called Poland “the republic of Parish priests”. Let me remind you of the success of the anti-clerical Palikot Movement, which came third with 10 per cent of the votes in the 2011 parliamentary elections. Since then, the church has certainly learnt its lessons and has refrained from being too active in electoral campaigns of any party.

But the support of the church for Kaczyński indeed played a major, if not crucial, role in having him elected. The church has backed Kaczyński’s party without any reservations. Kaczyński was sure of its support and, through this support, also sure of his core electorate. After the Palikot victory, the church launched what one could call a “counter-reformation programme” to

stop the advances of secularization already visible in the Polish society. The church ideologues coined the expression “ideologia gender”, which was a catchphrase for everything that the Church disliked in modern European societies – not just secularisation, but women empowerment, LGTB rights and even in-vitro-fertilisation. Civil-society groups supported by the church campaigned for more even more restrictive abortion laws, and Kaczyński became sort of the political arm of this campaign. His party several times tried to introduce bills with a total ban of abortion, including for rape victims. Another bill which was drafted by his party would ban in-vitro-fertilisation and punish doctors who did it with jail.

What is interesting, during the 2015 presidential and parliamentary campaigns, Law and Justice found out that such religious conservatism was unpalatable to more moderate voters it wanted to attract and their track record in this respect became a liability. The Civic Platform tried to remind voters of the IVF bill as well as the party’s authoritarian constitution draft, which was first published during its 2005 –2007 stint in government. However, by that time Law and Justice had skilfully refocused the campaign to socio-economic issues, forcing the Civic Platform to compete in a race of ever more generous welfare promises. Still, the backing of the Church secured the loyalty of Kaczyński’s more religiously conservative voters and left him free to seek the support of other segments of the society.

Is this success owed to Beata Szydło, not only as a campaigner as in the presidential elections but as a political actor giving Law and Justice a more modern and less radical face?

Yes, it is, to a certain extent. Many analysts believed that Law and Justice would be restrained by the “glass ceiling” and unable to gain more than 30 per cent of the votes, which is their “hard-core” conservative-nationalist electorate. Then came the successful

flashlight europe

presidential campaign where Law and Justice suddenly had the face of Andrzej Duda; younger and less controversial to most voters than Kaczyński himself. Duda's surprising success was largely due to the fact that the incumbent President Komorowski made such big mistakes in his campaigning, nonetheless his victory broke the glass ceiling and paved the way for successful parliamentary campaign.

Beata Szydło followed up on this. She is a new face, which does not alienate voters, unlike Kaczyński, who is one of the most distrusted politicians in Poland. Szydło is the friendly face of Law and Justice and key part of its strategy to shift the debate to more social issues. And this is the last piece of the puzzle of how Law and Justice won the elections. It presented a number of very well-targeted proposals or promises that addressed some of the grievances people had with an overall successful Civic Platform track record in government.

Among these, the retirement age reform should be mentioned first: one of the first things former premier Donald Tusk did after his re-election in 2011 was to gradually raise the retirement age to 67. For women, this amounted to seven additional years. This was a very unpopular reform criticised by both left and right. And this issue was the starting point of the social promises Law and Justice made, which included generous family benefits, increasing tax credits for low income earners, or forcing banks to convert Swiss franc mortgages to Polish złoty, which attracted many middle-class voters. All this played a role and was more credible than the Civic Platform programme.

But how will Law and Justice realise this programme? And who will pay for it?

It seems that now Law and Justice has a bit of a problem how to deal with these promises, which at least some of their supporters took very seriously. We already see Law and Order politicians withdrawing from some of the promises, for example they talk of family benefits

only for the poorest parents. But one can be sure that the Civic Platform, now in opposition, will spare no efforts to remind voters that Law and Justice made such commitments in no uncertain terms. These promises will not easily be forgotten.

Moving from Polish issues to the international level – what effects for German-Polish and European-Polish relations can we expect? Will we see a change towards strong anti-German rhetorics?

This is a tricky question. Kaczyński and his party know that this kind of radical Germany-bashing did not pay in the past in Polish politics. Many more moderate voters did not appreciate that. It would alienate voters whom Law and Justice have just attracted, and it would put Poland on an awkward footing in European politics. There are incentives for Law and Justice not to go the way they went ten years ago. I think President Duda's first visit to Germany was to show the friendly face not only to the Polish electorate, but also to the German partners. So hopefully we will not see a return to bad relations with Germany.

But there is also another scenario: blaming Germany can be very attractive domestically for other parts of the electorate, as we have already seen in the migrant issue. When Kaczyński spoke in parliament about the refugee crisis and the quotas, which had been proposed by the European Commission, he accused Ewa Kopacz of giving in to "the dictate of another power", i.e. Germany. If Kaczyński feels it politically expedient to blame Germany, he will not hesitate to do so. He knows how to strike the right tune with his voters. And I think there will be situations where this will be important. Take, for example, the Polish coal industry. Kaczyński promised to defend the Polish coal-mining sector, which is in deep trouble, and the temptation to blame Germany for economic unsustainability of this sector (of which the climate package is not the main reason) will be great. Therefore one negative but possible scenario will be that Kaczyński will fall back on anti-German rhetoric

flashlight europe

for domestic reasons, with negative implications for Polish foreign policy. I hope this will not happen but we cannot rule that out.

You have just mentioned the refugee issue. What is to be expected from the new government, also as regards a potential influx of refugees from Ukraine?

Kaczyński will resist any further quotas. It is unclear what he will do with the quotas Kopacz already agreed to. I think they will be checking if there is any legal room of manoeuvre to go back on these decisions. I don't think that they are

aware that in case of a worsening crisis in Ukraine Poland may need EU help to deal with a possible influx of refugees from that direction and in this scenarios quotas would actually help us. This inability to recognize that deeper European integration, also in the field of migration and asylum policy, is in Poland's interest well illustrates the narrow-mindedness and short-term thinking implicit in the Law and Justice definition of national interest.

Dr Kucharczyk, thank you very much for these insights.

Personal details:

Dr Jacek Kucharczyk is president of the executive board of the Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw, and one of the founders and board member of the Policy Association for an Open Society PASOS. He has authored and edited numerous policy briefs, articles, reports and books on democratic governance, foreign policy, EU integration and transatlantic relations.

The interview was conducted by:

Gabriele Schöler, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Europe's Future Program

flashlight europe

V.i.S.d.P.

Bertelsmann Stiftung
Carl Bertelsmann Straße 256
D-33311 Gütersloh
www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Isabell Hoffmann
isabell.hoffmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de
Telefon +49 5241 81 81313