

National conservatives win in Poland

After successfully having put its candidate in the presidential seat in May 2015, national conservative party PiS, has now managed to win an absolute majority in the parliament. Not a single left-wing party has made it through the elections. It remains to be seen how in the medium term the electorate will feel represented by this shift to the right in parliament.

By Irene Hahn-Fuhr, Director

On Sunday 25 October 2015 the Poles elected a new parliament. The national conservative party **PiS** (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, Law and Justice), headed by Jarosław Kaczyński, gained 37.6% of the votes, thus becoming the clear winner and receiving an absolute majority of 232 seats. PiS had been in opposition since 2007. The hitherto ruling party **PO** (Platforma Obywatelska, the Civic Platform), seen by many as 'worn out', slipped to second place with 24.1% of the votes. Other forces that are represented in the new parliament include **Kukiz'15** with 8.8% of the vote, **NowoczesnaPL** (Modern Poland) with 7.6% and **PSL** (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, the Polish People's Party) with 5.1%. Among the groupings which ended up in non-parliamentary opposition are **Zjednoczona Lewica** (the United Left) with 7.5% (it failed to reach the 8% threshold required for alliances to enter parliament), **KORWiN** with 4.7% and **Razem** (Together) with 3.6%. As a result, the Polish parliament will contain no left-wing parties for the first time since 1918.

The elections were preceded by a varied campaign, and Poles were faced with a political scene that was livened up thanks to new groupings across the entire political spectrum (*Kukiz'15* on the right, *NowoczesnaPL* in the centre and *Razem* on the left) that offered a variety of economic and socio-political choices. Moreover, it was the first time that two women, **Ewa Kopacz** (PO) and **Beata Szydło** (PiS), had contested the post of prime minister. The slogan '**Time for Change**', used by Andrzej Duda during his presidential campaign, underlined the new direction, with virtually all opposition parties attempting to tap into this new mood. Even though the last eight years under PO had been an economic success story, the party had become burdened with the image that it had lost contact with its citizens.

The left-green alliance has failed

Partia Zieloni (The Green Party) joined forces with **Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej** (SLD, Democratic Left Alliance), Janusz Palikot's **Twój Ruch** (TR, Your Movement) and the by now fairly insignificant **Unia Pracy** (UP, Labour Union) to form **Zjednoczona Lewica** (ZL, the United Left), yet their effort was all in vain. This alliance campaigned principally for an increase in the minimum wage by nearly 50%, to the equivalent of almost 600 Euro, as well as for higher pensions, reindustrialisation and government support for exports (following the German model). They also called for greater investment in health care, education and new housing, and supported the renewable energy sector.

In contrast to the positive developments as regards the **programmes and profiles** of political groupings, an increasing **aggression in style and tone** was felt during the campaign and debates. PiS, who always claimed an absolute majority in the style of Viktor Orbán, rolled out a

massive negative online campaign against PO – a method successfully tested in the presidential elections. However, KORWiN, Kukiz and sometimes even Razem also attacked their political opponents, resorting to dubious methods such as ad hominem attacks.

Energy policy in the shadow

The election campaign centred almost exclusively around domestic affairs. Topics that dominated debates included **labour policy and social policy**, especially issues such as retirement age, support for families with children, the abolition of employment contracts that lack a social security component, and an increase in the minimum wage. Among the main methods for increasing tax revenue, candidates discussed, above all, the increased taxation of high earners, corporations and banks, and the easing of tax burdens for small and medium-sized businesses.

Energy policy was not a major focus due to the fact that there was universal agreement on the fundamental role coal plays in Poland's economy. The only question was how exactly the nation's ailing coal mines should be saved, but no specific ideas were presented. Nuclear energy was raised by PiS solely in the context of delays in the construction of power plants as an example of the wasteful management of public money. Despite the recently adopted law on renewable energy, pushed through primarily with the help of votes from PiS, this topic was hardly raised during the election campaign. It remains to be seen whether, and how, the new government will pursue the 'renegotiation of the climate package' it promised during the campaign.

Resentments against migrants

The fact that pro-European Poles chose a eurosceptic party to form the government is noteworthy, yet it should not be overstated. Even if PiS can be expected to **adjust existing European policy** and aim for even stronger representation of national interests, the **new government's agenda remains focused primarily on domestic politics**. Any concrete steps to be taken in the international arena will largely depend on success or failure 'at home'. 'First Poland, then the neighbours, and then Europe', was the motto of Paweł Kukiz, and this certainly also applies to PiS. It remains to be seen whether or not PiS will be guided by anti-German sentiment. Until now, President Duda has attempted to send fairly co-operative signals to Poland's European partners and has sought to dispel the bad memories of 2005-2007, when PiS was last in power, suggesting that this period is 'exaggerated by the media'.

PiS has so far **opposed the introduction of the euro** on the grounds of the supposed costs involved. There is also speculation about the adoption of a so-called 'sovereignty law', which would be designed to affirm the 'primacy of the Polish Constitution over EU law and ECJ rulings' as well as the intention to 'evaluate the existing integration projects'. With regard to **refugee and migration policy**, PiS will probably refer to its clear mandate to maintain a definite line here. During the campaign, Kaczyński fuelled resentment against migrants and warned of an excessive foreign influx.

The question of whether the new government will hold onto the negotiated European compromises, which were branded 'compromised solidarity with Visegrad countries', is an issue that raises many question marks. Another area of uncertainty is its future relationship with EU institutions, represented by the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, incidentally Kaczyński's longtime domestic enemy.

In terms of regional co-operation, conservatives of various colours have long professed the idea of Poland as the self-confident regional power, with respect to both the **Visegrad countries** and the **Baltic states**. However, it is by no means clear whether neighbouring countries wish for Warsaw to play a leading role at all and if so, in which spheres this would be welcome. When it comes to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the new government could try and push through an extended format of the (Minsk) negotiations in order to run a symbolic test of their superiority vis-a-vis the previous government.



End of an election marathon

Last Sunday marked an end to an **election marathon**, which has lasted for a year and a half and seen European elections in May 2014, municipal elections in November 2014, presidential elections in May 2015 and most recently the parliamentary elections of October 2015. In the short term, it can be hoped that, by moving out of this long phase of permanent pre-election mood, and by softening its rhetoric, Poland will focus on solving urgent political challenges, both on the national and European scale. Only medium-term developments will show how Polish citizens identify with the new political landscape and whether or not they feel truly represented.

