

Warsaw, 25 October 2015: National conservatives win in Poland

Poland has elected its new government. 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. Beata Szydło will succeed Ewa Kopacz as prime minister. Szydło was a relatively unknown politician until a few months ago, when, as his campaign manager, she helped the also fairly little known Andrzej Duda win the presidency. Following this victory she was rewarded by the party chairman Jarosław Kaczyński and appointed as the top candidate for the parliamentary elections. Speculation continues as to whether Kaczyński might take the helm in the medium term. Overall, only parties from the centre and right of the political spectrum are now represented in the Polish parliament. Not a single left-wing party has made it through the elections.

By Irene Hahn-Fuhr, Director

On Sunday 25 October 2015 the Poles elected a new parliament. The voters decided on the composition of the Sejm (the lower chamber with 460 MPs, elected with proportional representation using the D'Hondt method) and the Senate (the upper chamber with 100 senators, elected by majority vote in single-member districts). 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. They had ruled the country for eight years but were seen by many as 'worn out'. 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. PiS also gained an absolute majority in the Senate, with at least 60 of the 100 seats.

After Andrzej Duda (PiS) was elected president in May, it was already clear that Poles would live through an uninterrupted, emotional and politically hectic period of campaigning until the autumn. However, despite the stable economic situation, many citizens perceived the government camp of PO and PSL as one that had lost contact with the social problems and political priorities of the population, and PiS was **the clear favourite** from the outset.

The election campaign was varied in its content, 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.

One popular policy pledge of the **PiS** campaign was the promise to **introduce a child benefit** amounting to an equivalent of around 120 euro a month. Just like a large number of other highly costly proposals, such as lowering the recently increased retirement age, and increasing the defence budget, this pledge is also intended to be financed through a tax on banks and supermarkets, as well as through 'honest governance'. Another key theme of the election campaign was the debate on the abolition of so-called '**junk work contracts**', i.e. employment without a regulated social security component.

Among its social and political proposals, PO included the idea of the legal **unification of various types of employment contracts**, which was aimed at preventing undeclared work and putting all employers in the same position with regard to social insurance. Ultimately, this would result in increased total tax revenues, which is why PO made noticeable reductions in tax rates, especially for average earners, and suggested raising the statutory minimum wage to PLN 15 (over EUR 3.50) per hour. In contrast, the newly founded **Modern Poland (NowoczesnaPL)**, headed by **Ryszard Petru**, an economist with excellent connections in the business world, tried to present itself as a successor to PO among liberal voters and opted mostly for a policy of tax relief for owners of small and medium-sized businesses. The **PSL** programme was economy- and family policy-oriented, and focused on ideas such as the creation of Special Economic Zones in rural areas, tax cuts for self-employed people and subsidies for children.

Initially, the former rock star **Paweł Kukiz** seemed to have lost much of the 20.8% of the vote he had won in the first round of the presidential elections. Factors that had a particularly negative effect on his result included lengthy arguments about the set-up of his electoral lists and the attempt to consolidate extreme national conservative elements. His original proposal was narrowed down to the introduction of majority voting in single-member districts for the Sejm, but his agenda was then expanded by adding the anti-elitist triad, 'Democracy-Prosperity-Security', which went down especially well among 20% of young voters. This part of the population also strongly supported **KORWiN**, the Eurosceptic formation headed by MEP Janusz Korwin-Mikke, who received the disproportionately strong 17% of votes from among that group. **KORWiN** proposed a massive downsizing of the state and an end to financing political parties from public money, and also favoured radical tax cuts and the privatisation of social insurance and health care.

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. During the elections, the party patriarchs such as Leszek Miller (SLD) and Janusz Palikot (TR) were pushed to the background in favour of up-and-coming young females such as Barbara Nowacka (SLD, place no. 1 on their Warsaw list). In the face of failure, there is a chance that the leadership may be genuinely renewed.

What also emerged on the left side of the spectrum was the grouping that came together under the name **Razem** (Together). Much like Kukiz, though instead seemingly imitating the ideas of Podemos and Syriza, the new grouping seemed to represent a tricked and disappointed young generation. They aimed to do away with the rule of parties and banks, and would endeavour to enable the working masses access to well-earned salaries and wages. Much as was the case with the United Left, whom Razem opposed and called 'swindlers', the proposals put forward by Razem focused on social policy (for instance, a minimum wage of PLN 15 per hour, construction of social rental housing). However, it had significantly different ideas when it came to proposals for further socio-economic modernisation, for instance with regard to subsidy-dependent coal mines in Upper Silesia. Even though Razem missed the threshold entitling it to enter parliament, it succeeded in attracting attention, and so the grouping should be viewed as a force one should take seriously in future, especially with Adrian Zandberg evolving into a new charismatic leader.

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 rolled out a massive negative online campaign against PO – a method successfully tested in the presidential campaign. During the scandal-filled campaign, PiS described PO, and also partly PSL, as 'the worst criminal gang since the communists' – one which had quite consciously led Poland 'into ruin' for the sake of their own enrichment. At campaign events in the traditionally national conservative Polish emigré community in the USA, the deputy chairman of PiS, Antoni Macierewicz, known for his conspiracy theories regarding the presidential airplane crash near Smolensk, even suggested that Donald Tusk was allegedly a secret service agent. However, PiS were not alone in using such tactics. Also KORWiN, Kukiz and sometimes even Razem also attacked their political opponents, resorting to dubious methods such as ad hominem attacks.

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 the image of this period was 'exaggerated by the media'.

There is tense expectation as to how the new Polish government will behave towards **Donald Tusk**. The current President of the European Council, whose first term of office in Brussels ends in 2017, is thought to have the ambition to become Poland's president in 2020. If, much like in the case of Hungary, more Eurosceptic voices are heard, a conflict is inevitable, especially as PiS plans to make amendments to the constitution – these include the centralisation of the country's administration, political control over the judiciary, cleansing in the media etc. This might in turn also entail an intervention by European institutions and partners.

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 personal resentment against migrants and warned of an excessive foreign influx. The possibility of a withdrawal from, or at least a thwarting of, the European compromises undertaken by the previous government cannot be excluded, and this would represent an attempt to restore the so-called 'compromised solidarity with the Visegrad countries'

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, especially in light of the fact that some bilateral relations, such as, for instance, those with Lithuania, are burdened by past events. There is also a clear conflict of opinion with Hungary about the Ukrainian question. It would only be convenient for smaller EU member states to form closer ties with Poland if it resulted in their voices being stronger in Berlin.

When it comes to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Poland's politicians 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. However, one should not overlook the elements within PiS that sympathise with anti-Ukrainian sentiments, which are widespread among the Polish national conservatives. For this reason, the political staff of PiS, which is not as strongly networked internationally as PO has been, should initially focus on preparing for the NATO summit to be held in Warsaw in 2016.

As regards **energy policy**, Poland's existing strategy is likely to be maintained. PiS consistently stresses the importance of coal as 'Poland's gold', providing reasons for this stance in economic policy, and wants to follow a strategy of modernising the ailing coal mines. There are plans to establish a new ministry for energy, whose responsibilities have so far been divided between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Economy. PiS views the lack of such a dedicated ministry as a barrier to the development of a coherent policy. Piotr Naimski, who was Deputy Minister of Economy in Kaczyński's government in 2005-2007, could be considered a ministerial candidate here. 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 recent law on renewable energy, adopted mostly thanks to PiS votes, this topic was barely brought up during the election campaign. It remains to be seen whether or not, and how, the new government will handle the 'renegotiation of the climate package', as promised in the campaign.

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.