

Poland: Old turnout and new right

Mikołaj Cześniak and Michał Kotnarowski

30 May 2014

Introduction: The context

The European Parliamentary (EP) election held on May 25 was the third EP elections in the modern history of Poland. The first was held in 2004, just after Poland joined the European Union (EU), and the second was in 2009. The main characteristics of previous Polish EP elections were low voter turnout and relatively good results of small and radical parties.

Voter turnout in the 2004 EP elections in Poland was 21%, and it was the second lowest rate among EU countries in the 2004 EP elections. The only country with a lower voter turnout was Slovakia (17%). The voter turnout in 2004 EP elections was also low in relation to the closest-in-time elections on the national level. The voter turnout in national parliamentary elections held in 2005 was 41%, and in the presidential elections held in the same year, it was 50%. Voter turnout was also relatively low in the 2009 EP elections—25%. It was one of the lowest turnout rates in Europe in the 2009 EP elections. Voter turnout in the closest-in-time national elections was also substantially higher—54% in the parliamentary election held in 2007 and 55% in the presidential election held in 2010. As one can see, voter turnout in Polish EP elections was low in comparison with both EP elections in other EU countries and national level elections.

In the first Polish EP elections (held in 2004), small parties achieved relatively good scores. They were either anti-EU parties such as League of Polish Families (16% vote share) and Self-Defence (11%) or pro-EU parties such as Freedom Union (7%) and Social Democrats of Poland (5%). Small parties did not attain a good score in the second EP election (2009), and election results were very similar to national parliamentary results held two years before. This lack of difference could be caused by relative stabilisation of the Polish party system and weakness or absence of small parties at that time.

Because of low turnout and relatively good results of small and radical parties (only in the 2004 case), Polish EP elections could be classified as second-

order elections, the term introduced by Reif and Schmitt (1980). It means that EP elections in Poland were viewed by voters as less important and dependent on first-order elections, which are national elections.

The important contextual information about EP elections in Poland is high public support for European integration among Polish citizens. Approximately 60% of Poles supported joining EU in June 2004, whereas 30% was against European integration in the survey conducted a few weeks after joining the EU and a few weeks before the first Polish EP elections. Public support for the EU was growing in subsequent years until mid-2008, when European integration was supported by almost 90% of Poles. From the second half of 2008, the share of supporters of integration slightly decreased; however, it still remained on high level. Almost 75% of Polish citizens supported European integration at the beginning of 2014. Massive support for European integration is probably related to huge financial support from the Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund of the EU. Almost every person could notice in his/her surrounding many investments cofinanced from EU funds. One point should be mentioned here. While Poles in general support the presence of Poland in the EU, their opinions are divided as far as further and deeper integration with EU is concerned. In May 2013, one third of Poles supported strengthening European integration, another one third declared that integration already gone too far, and the remaining one third did not have an opinion in this matter.

There is important contextual information. The 2014 EP election was the first election in Poland after a four-year period without any election (excluding local elections or local referenda in a few places). The last nationwide elections before the 2014 EP ones were local ones held in November 2010. Moreover, this year, EP elections are first in the 'four-election marathon', which is taking place from spring 2014 to autumn 2015. The next will be local elections planned for autumn 2014, then the presidential election on spring 2015 and the last one, national parliamentary elections, which will be held autumn 2015. Such a long period without elections could make media as well as political parties yearning for important political events. On the other hand, as a first election in this 'four-election marathon', the EP elections could be treated as a first skirmish before a serious battle in first-order elections (national one), which will be held next year.

Main issues in the campaign

The main topic of the campaign was Ukraine. Because of geopolitical reasons, Ukrainian issues have always been a central topic in Polish politics.

Therefore, the last crisis in Ukraine has been very closely monitored in Poland from its very beginning. In the campaign, 2–3 months before the EP election, the issue of Ukraine dominated political discussions and public discourse.

Obviously, most of the discussions focused on safety issues, including predominantly military and external security. Poland is a country bordering Russia, exposed to its imperial attempts. Ukrainian crisis provided evidence that the previous Polish security policy (which was intercorrelated with the politics of the EU towards Russia), characterised by spirit of cooperation and agreement and focused on rapprochement with Russia, was ineffective. The prime minister, Donald Tusk, who was ‘the face’ of this policy, has been heavily criticised during the campaign, especially by the main opposition party Law and Justice. Moreover, during the crisis (and the campaign), he changed quite importantly his position and accepted a more militant attitude towards Russia.

Another important issue raised in the campaign was the topic of energy’s security. Main directions of the country’s energy policy have been thoroughly discussed. Poland is the biggest hard coal producer in the EU, and nearly all of its generated electricity (approximately 92%–94%) comes from coal-fired power plants fuelled principally by hard coal and lignite. But Poland imports nearly 90% of its crude oil and 66% of its natural gas. Its main supplier remains to be Russia. This heavy reliance on external supplies of gas and oil to Poland remains a threat to the security of energy supply to the nation. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict (including gas disputes) undoubtedly endangers the security of gas and oil supply to Poland.

In general, the campaign was rather rational and programmatically structured (at least for the Polish standards). Meritocratic and programmatic discourse prevailed; political quarrels, scandals and clashes were relatively infrequent (especially in comparison with previous electoral campaigns in Poland).

Election results

Voter turnout in the 2014 EP election in Poland was 23.8%. The turnout rate is similarly low as in previous EP elections held in Poland. The fact that in three other EU countries voter turnout level was even lower (Slovakia 13%, Czech Republic 19.5% and Slovenia 21%) is not very heartening.

Polish voters elected 51 Members of European Parliament (MEP). The best result in the elections was won by senior incumbent party Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska – PO, EPP group in European Parliament)—32.1% votes. However, very close results were won by the main opposition party Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PIS, ECR in group in European Parliament)—31.8%. In fact, this result could be treated as draw. Apart from a

very similar vote share, both parties gained 19 seats in the EP. The third place in the election race was taken by Left-Democratic Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej – SLD). This party received 9.4% of votes and won five seats in the EP. SLD is a member of the S&D group in the EP. The real surprise of these elections was the fourth result of New Right (Nowa Prawica Janusza Korwin-Mikke – NP). This party got 7.2% of vote shares and four seats in the EP. This party is strongly against the EU. One of the points of its manifesto is dissolution of the EU. The leader of the party (Janusz Korwin-Mikke) is a person with a strong charismatic personality, who quite often used populist slogans. This is the best results of the leader of this party ever—the party is not present in national parliament. The fifth position in the election race was taken by Polish Peasants Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe – PSL, EPP group in EP). PSL won 6.8% vote shares and four seats in the EP. PSL is a junior incumbent party and belongs to the EPP group in EP.

According to the Polish electoral system, there is 5% electoral threshold in EP elections. Among parties that did not cross the threshold, the best result is won by Solidary Poland (Solidarna Polska – SP)—4%. SP was established by former PIS politicians—all SP members of national parliament were elected from PIS electoral lists. The next position in the electoral race was taken by Europe+ Your Move (Europa + Twój Ruch – E+TR)—3.6%. E+TR is a liberal-left coalition of different parties or groups, but a base of it was Palikot Movement, the third power in national parliament. In the last national parliamentary elections, Palikot Movement got 10% vote share. The result of this coalition is a surprise at least for three reasons. First, E+TR was one of the left alternative for the rightist parties, which are dominant in the Polish party system (rightist or centre-rightist parties got together at least 69% of votes in each election since 2007). Second, the former president of Poland, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, who is still popular in Poland, officially supported E+TR and was presented as patron of this coalition. Last, a group of popular politicians with leftist or liberal origins run in EP elections as leaders of electoral lists of E+TR.

Likewise, in other elections held in Poland, there is a strong and clear territorial diversification of results of the 2014 EP elections. The highest support for PO is observed in the north and west part of Poland. These are former German territories incorporated to Poland after the Second World War and settled mainly by people from former Polish territories on the east, which became part of Soviet Union after the war. High support for PO was also present in Silesia region (southwest part of Poland). People living there have strong local identification and cultural identity. PO won very good results in the capital, Warsaw, and other big cities. On the other hand, high support for main opposition party PIS was noted mainly on the east part of Poland. People living on these areas did not experience strong migration movements—they are mainly settled there for generations. People from east regions of Poland are

Poland: Old turnout and new right

Table 1. Results of the 2014 European Parliament elections – Poland

Party	EP Group	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (change from 2009)	Seats (change from 2009)
Civic Platform (PO)	EPP	32.1	19	-12.3	-6
Law and Justice (PIS)	ECR	31.78	19	+4.4	+4
Democratic Left Alliance (SLD)	S&D	9.44	5	-2.9	-2
New Right (NP JKM)	new in EP	7.15	4	+6.1	+4
Polish Peasants' Party (PSL)	EPP	6.8	4	-0.2	+1
Solidary Poland (SP)	EFD	3.98	0	+4.0	+0
Europe+ Your Move (E+TR)	ALDE	3.58	0	+3.6	+0
Others		5.15	0		
Total		100.0	51		-
Turnout (%)		23.83		-0.7	
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)		5%			

EP group abbreviations: EPP, European People's Party; S&D, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; ALDE, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; G-EFA, The Greens-European Free Alliance; ECR, European Conservatives and Reformists; GUE-NGL, European United Left-Nordic Green Left; EFD, Europe of Freedom and Democracy; NI, Non-Inscrits.

also more religious and attached to traditional values. High support for PIS, which is a conservative party, is understandable from this perspective. PIS got high vote shares also in smaller towns and villages.

Conclusions

Polish MEPs are going to constitute the sixth largest group in the EP. PO and PSL MEPs are going to join the EPP group; SLD MEPs will join the S&D group. Still rather unknown is the future of the right-wing parties; PIS MEPs will most probably join the ECR group; the NP MEPs can form an anti-EU group with other Eurosceptics. It is worth noting that the Polish MEPs are going to constitute the second largest group in the EPP.

Unquestionably, the 2014 EP elections results are going to influence Polish politics. In the context of previously mentioned 'four-election marathon', they have provided a new impetus for all the political parties. The winners—

PO and PIS—have strengthened their hegemonic role in electoral politics of Poland. Without a doubt, they are going to dominate the upcoming electoral campaigns (local elections in fall 2014, presidential election in late spring or early summer 2015, parliamentary election in fall 2015). SLD and PSL have fortified their positions; NP has grown as an important player on the right-wing of Polish politics. The losers of the 2014 EP election in Poland—SP, E+TR, and others—need to rethink their political appeals, in order not to be annihilated in the next elections.

References

- Reif, K., and Schmitt, H. (1980). Nine Second Order National Elections: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results. *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 8(1), pp. 3–44.
- Roguska, B. (2013). Stosunek Polaków do integracji europejskiej (No. BS/72/2013). Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej (CBOS), Warszawa.
- Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, Wybory do Parlamentu Europejskiego 2009 [WWW Document]. URL <http://pe2009.pkw.gov.pl/PUE/PL/WYN/F/index.htm> (accessed 5.29.14).
- Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, n.d. Wybory do Parlamentu Europejskiego 2014 [WWW Document]. URL <http://pe2014.pkw.gov.pl/pl/> (accessed 5.28.14).