

Poland: A skirmish before the decisive battle

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INTRODUCTION

Elections to the European Parliament (EP) in Poland took place on Sunday, May 26th 2019. As in 2014-2015, they were part of a long ‘election marathon’ during which Poles elected their representatives in local government (October-November 2018), MEPs (May 2019), MPs and senators to the national parliament (most likely October 2019) and the President (most likely May 2020). Such serial electoral contests have several precedents, as this is the fourth time it has happened in the history of EP elections in Poland. The circumstance is not without consequences.

The 2019 EP Polish elections are one of the skirmishes in the long ‘electoral war’ of 2018-2020 among the main protagonists of Polish politics. Because of this, these elections had primarily a national character. The political discourse was primarily concerned with domestic and internal issues (discussed in detail below); EU and European issues were invisible. In this sense, the 2019 European Parliament elections in Poland were typical second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Politicians defined them – and voters accepted this definition – as a tool of domestic politics, serving political accountability and aggregating the interests of particular segments of the electorate.

MAIN ACTORS AND ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN

In the 2019 European Parliament Elections in Poland, only six national committees – which submit lists in all constituencies – were registered. This is the smallest number in the history of EP elections in Poland; never before have so few (national) electoral committees registered lists in all the constituencies. In 2004 there were fourteen national committees registered, in 2009 ten, and in 2014 nine.

Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) is the largest and strongest party that registered candidates in the 2019 EP elections in all districts. This party had been in power since 2015 as part of an informal, not fully institutionalised coalition with *Solidarna Polska* and *Porozumienie*. The party has been described in scholarly literature as populist and Eurosceptic (Stanley, 2019). Its ideology is an unusual combination of Christian democracy, social and national conservatism, solidarity and interventionism. Sin-

ce its founding, it has been advocating Poland's membership in the European Union and the expansion of the EU's structures. However, its politicians postulate is that the EU should be reformed. The European policy of PiS could be described as confederative and supporting the 'Europe of nations'.

In preceding months, prominent PiS politicians made several statements that diminished the significance of the EU for Poland. This led opposition parties and political commentators to accuse Law and Justice (PiS) of calling for PolExit. This could be politically harmful to PiS, due to high popular support for the EU. As a result, PiS presented itself in the election campaign as a definitely pro-European party. Furthermore, during the EP election campaign, PiS promised a lot of social transfers to disadvantaged groups – the same strategy it had followed in national elections. PiS, as a party in office, had several problems during the electoral campaign. The party was accused of employing its activists in lucrative positions in state-owned companies. A teachers' strike broke out in the period preceding the elections, which crippled the operation of state schools in Poland for a month. The strike was caused, among other things, by the chaos that arose after the introduction of educational reforms. The Prime Minister (M. Morawiecki) was accused of opaque land trading in the period before taking office. The last few weeks before the elections, Poland was shaken by an independent documentary on paedophiles in the Polish Catholic Church. One of the crucial themes of the film was the covering up of paedophile scandals by church hierarchy. It was speculated that this might weaken the PiS in elections because of the party's strong relationship with the Catholic Church.

Koalicja Obywatelska (KE) is the second largest organisation to run for EP elections in 2019 with candidates registered in all constituencies. KE is a coalition block consisting of Civic Platform (PO), Modern (N), Polish People's Party (PSL), Alliance of Democratic Left (SLD) and Zieloni (Greens). The coalition united political forces against PiS. It is a broad movement, therefore also very eclectic, composed of former communists and anti-communists, supporters of economic liberalism and state intervention in the economy, agrarian parties and green parties. The leaders of the electoral lists were former prime ministers coming from different political traditions. Apart from being an opponent of the PiS, it was difficult to identify a clear programme proposal. It also seems that MEPs elected from KE lists will join a variety of groups in the European Parliament (EPP, ALDE, S&D).

Two new and significant political forces appeared in time for the EP elections. The first one was *Wiosna* (Spring). It is a left-wing party with a social welfare agenda, which aims at introducing a real separation of church and state and a liberalisation on moral issues. In the context of a traditional and conservative society, it is meaningful that the leader of the party is Robert Biedroń – a person who is openly gay. *Wiosna*, since its foundation in January 2019, presented itself as the third political alternative to the duopoly PiS vs PO. Spring targets those voters who do not appreciate the authoritarian practices of PiS, but, on the other hand, are also not satisfied by simply voting for a non-ideological anti-PiS coalition.

Another new actor is a rather exotic coalition called the *Konfederacja - Korwin, Braun Liroy Narodowcy*. This group brought together several figures of the Polish ra-

dical right wing. They include Janusz Korwin-Mikke, a veteran of the Polish right, an anti-democrat, a supporter of radical economic liberalisation and at the same time a promoter of the traditional model of social roles, G. Braun, a monarchist who strives for the coronation of Jesus Christ as the king of Poland, Kaja Godek, a supporter of a total ban on abortion, and Liroy, a former rapper who supports the legalisation of marijuana. This party is also supported by a group of (mainly young) activists of national organisations. The group targeted the right flank of the PiS voters. Those who were dissatisfied with the conciliatory (according to them) actions of PiS, e.g. in the matter of the abortion ban and relations with the EU or Israel.

Finally, there was a populist, anti-establishment citizens' movement, set up in 2015 for the parliamentary elections, called KUKIZ 15. They attack the 'partiesocracy' (allegedly functioning in the Polish party system), arguing that the PiS-PO divide is a spurious cover for an entrenched cartel of professional politicians. Their key proposals include the introduction of a single-member majoritarian (FPTP) electoral system (to promote individual accountability to the electorate) and the replacement of the liberal-democratic political system with a system based on more extensive use of direct democracy.

According to pre-election polls, it was a close race between PiS and KE. Both parties had predicted support between 35% and 40%, and it was difficult to determine who would be the winner. The polls also expected significant support for Spring (about 8-10%) and *Konfederacja* (about 6-8%). The expected support for Kukiz15 was on the border of the electoral threshold (5%).

RESULTS

Voter turnout was 45.7% - a significant increase compared with the turnout of previous EP elections, (20.9% in 2004, 24.5% in 2009, and 23.8% in 2014). This increase was most likely caused by an intense political conflict dividing Polish society, which strongly mobilises voters.

The results of the election were surprising given what the polls predicted. The best result in the election was achieved by the ruling party PiS (45.4% of vote and twenty-seven seats in the EP). The second-best result was achieved by KE (38.5% and twenty-two seats). Spring had the third-best result, with 6.1% of the vote and only three seats. The remaining parties did not reach the electoral threshold. The KBLN Confederation (4.6%) and KUKIZ (3.7%) had a surprisingly poor result.

The election results suggest the apparent victory of the PiS. Such a victory was somewhat unexpected for several reasons, not only because of the polls. PiS has been in power for three and a half years. During this time, they have made many controversial decisions, including some that expose them to allegations of violating the constitution, anti-democratic actions and breaking the rule of law. However, during the election campaign, the party announced the introduction of new measures, such as a PLN 500 allowance for each child (previously only distributed from second child onwards) and the introduction of a thirteenth month pension for the retired.

Table 1 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Poland

PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)
Law and Justice (PiS)	ECR	6,192,780	45.4
European Coalition - Civic Platform, Polish People's Party, Alliance of Democratic Left, Modern, Greens (KE - PO PSL SLD .N Z)	EPP and S&D	5,249,935	38.5
Spring (W)	S&D	826,975	6.1
Confederation (KKBLN)		621,188	4.6
Kukiz'15 (K'15)		503,564	3.7
Left Together		168,745	1.2
Other		84,124	0.6
Total		13,647,311	100
Turnout (%)			45.7
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)			5%

The leaders of the eclectic KE had expected a win, also predicted by the liberal media. One of the reasons for the defeat could have been the aforementioned lack of ideological cohesion of the KE, in which the only binding force was the desire to remove PiS from power. Another problem for the KE is the lack of a clear leader as the former one, Donald Tusk, is now President of the European Council.

Support for Spring was also lower than expected. The KE camp criticised Spring for dismantling the anti-PiS block. The weaker than expected outcome of the Spring may paradoxically indicate the maturity of Polish democracy. It turns out that it is impossible to found a party a few months before the elections and achieve a dozen or so per cent of support.

Only these three election committees gained seats in the EP. The extreme right was very close to the threshold, reaching 4.6%. Their attempt to circumvent the PiS on the right and gain the support of the radical part of the PiS voters failed.

	SEATS	SEATS IN CASE OF BREXIT	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014 IN CASE OF BREXIT
	26	27	+13.6	+7	+8
	22	22	-9.87	-6	-6
	3	3	-2.6	-4	-4
			+3.7		
			+1.2		
	51	52		+6	+7

These elections revealed many differences in the structure of voters supporting particular groups. The factor that sharply differentiated voters was their place of residence. In rural areas, PiS gained more than twice as much support as the KE (56% voted for PiS vs 28% for KE), while in large cities, the KE received almost twice the votes of the PiS (27% voted for PiS vs 50% for the KE). There was also a much higher increase in turnout in rural areas compared to the previous EP elections. It may mean that the victory of PiS was partly due to the mobilisation of the rural electorate.

Voting for PiS was also associated with lower education, being older, performing manual jobs, being unemployed or retired (Exit polls results: <https://www.tvn24.pl/wybory-do-europarlamentu-2019/wyniki,450>). Apart from being metropolitan, the electorate of the KE also consists of specialists, entrepreneurs and better-educated people. The age group in which the KE had the greatest support was

40-49. Among the youngest voters (under the age of 30), PiS and KE had similar support. In this group, however, the extreme right *Konfederacja* gained most support.

CONCLUSION

This election had the highest turnout in the history of EP elections in Poland (46%) (Czesnik and Kotnarowski, 2014). Although Polish turnout is lower than the EU average (53%), it is higher than the turnout registered in many CEE countries. The election results indicated the dominance of two political blocs, as PiS and KE received 84% of the valid votes. However, it would be incorrect to conclude that there is a two-party system in Poland. The KE consisted of several groups, quite diverse in terms of their programmes. Therefore, it is not clear how long this coalition will last. Moreover, the victory of PiS in Poland does not mean that this party is of great importance in the European Parliament. PiS belonged to the European Conservatives and Reformists faction and will probably continue to do so. This faction is of little significance in the EP and, after Brexit, PiS will be the faction's largest national group.

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