

From Poland with love

Monthly Newsletter – August

Topic of the month

It's campaign time!

Polish Prime Minister announced on the last possible day according to the law (August 14th) the date of the local and regional elections. Poles will head to the ballot box on October 21. The second round of voting for mayors will be held on November 4. It means that the government chose the earliest possible date to organize the elections, consequently it will be shortest campaign possible. Obviously PiS sees this short campaign as something that will benefit its candidates. And the result of this elections will be observed closely in Poland and Europe. It is not only about local leaders but these elections are seen as a key test for the government ahead of parliamentary elections next year.

Politico named Polish local elections one of six most important European elections to follow in 2018: “What’s at stake: About a year before local elections are set to take place, the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party pushed through controversial electoral reforms in the lower house of parliament that the opposition says were drafted to help boost PiS’ electoral chances. PiS says the reforms will make the system more transparent. The measures include changing the way State Election Commission members are selected, limiting mayoral terms to two and abolishing postal voting in local elections.”

PiS prepared itself well for this one changing the electoral law. The most important changes (important for local elections) of this law are as follow:

- limits first past the post to municipalities (*gmina*) with population smaller than 20.000,
- extends the period between local elections from four to five years,
- introduces a two-term limit for mayors,
- shrinks the constituencies for regional assemblies (*sejmik*) (between five and fifteen seats).

Also, it changes the definition of a spoiled ballot - only ballots where the voter had put an “X” sign next to a candidate’s name were considered valid with all other marks thrown out, but now any ballot where the voter put “at least two intersecting lines” next to a candidate's name is valid, and additional marks will be valid. It opened a public debate on how this reform can help those who want to distort the election results. Also only PiS and PSL’s nominees were granted seats in district (and upper) electoral commission that are actually counting the votes. All other parties will participate in a draw, so it is technically possible that in some places in Poland there will be electoral commissions without representatives of the Civic Coalition.

These elections on the regional level and in big cities will be a battle between PiS and the Civic Coalition (KO), electoral alliance of Nowoczesna and Civic Platform. In most of the national polls the

governing party is ahead the liberal coalition, but the coalition wins in almost all big cities. Also, having in mind that also representatives of other parties, eg. PSL (farmers), SLD (nominally social democrats), anti-PiS majorities should be possible in at least eleven regions. According to the polls PiS will be able to govern in up to five regions, compared to today's one region (see Polls and Trends section).

Like always the most important battles will be for the biggest cities. With Warsaw being the cherry on top. And in the capital city the campaign has started long time before it was officially announced (President of PKW has intervened many times warning (pre)candidates that they are breaking the rules). It is a clash between Rafał Trzaskowski from KO and Patryk Jaki from PiS. Trzaskowski is a former MEP and deputy minister of foreign affairs, an intellectual with good manners. Jaki is a top fighter of PiS government, deputy minister of justice. Jaki's campaign is very dynamic, focused around promises he makes to all groups of voters, leading with the one of 2 new subway lines he wants to build in 10 years. Still, all the polls are showing that Trzaskowski will win in second round with landslide. It looks like the left did not learn any lesson from 2015 general elections, when none of the left wing parties entered the Sejm even though they got in total over 1 million votes, and will again campaign separately. This time we have as many as four leftist candidates with Jan Śpiewak (coalition of radical left Razem party, Greens and some local activists) has the highest support of 5% is followed by candidates of SLD and two independents.

And in other cities? In Kraków incumbent mayor Prof. Jacek Majchrowski (independent with support of KO) should easily win against PiS young star Małgorzata Wassermann. In the third biggest Polish city Łódź Hanna Zdanowska (KO) will win in first round already. In Wrocław nominated by Nowoczesna Jacek Sutryk is leading all polls. In Poznań popular mayor Jacek Jaśkowiak (KO) will have no problems with re-elections. Interesting race will be in Gdańsk where current mayor Paweł Adamowicz (before PO) will compete with Lech Wałęsa's son, Jarosław Wałęsa MEP (KO) and Kacper Płażyński from PiS.

Let the show begin...

Politics

New Hope for the Left?

After months of speculations Robert Biedroń has announced he will create a political party.

Robert Biedroń was previously a member of Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (SdPR) party and the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD). Member of the Palikot Movement/Your Movement. He was a an MP in the previous term. Before he entered national politics he served on the board of the Polish Campaign Against Homophobia.

In 2014 he was elected a mayor of Słupsk, a city in Pomerania with 98.000 inhabitants. He became the only openly gay (gay and atheist) mayor in the country.

In Słupsk he focused on the city's and personal PR becoming a national star. Słupsk got a reputation of an open and tolerant town. Robert Biedroń created his image as a positive and always smiling politician who proves that politics can be different. He showed an alternative to the rhetoric of the

PiS government. He has been described as Polish Macron by many commentators, just on a very local scale.

An expectation that Biedroń will build his national wide party has been growing in Polish media for quite some time, especially in left-liberal outlets. A former Polish President, Aleksander Kwasniewski, has urged him to run for president in 2020. Opinion polls put him third behind the popular incumbent, Andrzej Duda, and the ex-prime minister and current European Council President, Donald Tusk.

Finally, in August Biedroń announced that he is not running for re-elections and he will create a new political project this year.

Bill 2.0

A flagship academic reform of the Deputy-Prime Minister Jarosław Gowin brought controversies... also in his government.

Known as Bill 2.0, the proposal includes reduction of funding and research opportunities for regional universities, and aims to diminish the control held by the University Senate — a body of students, academics and other university employees who organize the day-to-day running of the institution— in favor of a newly established University Council, consisting of persons from both inside and outside universities. Public universities are set to receive an additional PLN 3 billion in Treasury bonds, while funding for higher education next year will be increased by PLN 700 million (EUR 165 million). The law was warmly welcomed by most of the universities' bodies, especially rectors, whose authority would be strengthened thereby, and many of the official students' representations.

The bill has become highly controversial within the PiS party, especially among MPs representing mid-size cities whose universities could be downgraded and lose their academic status. But the bill was backed by Jarosław Kaczyński who guarantees it would pass and be implemented. In a process of looking for a compromise over 100 amendments were introduced to the bill by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, and only later it was sent for a second reading in the Sejm.

The first students' protest against it was announced on Facebook, a 5 June event titled "Wolne Dni Akademii" ("Free Academic Days"). Students from the University of Warsaw occupied the Rector's Kazimierz Palace balcony on the prestigious Warsaw Krakowskie Przedmieście street. Participants hosted panels and events, gaining the support of institutions from Poland and abroad. More students joined the protest in other universities but it never became a mass protest.

Some of the opposition groups were trying to capitalize on the protest and endorsed the protesters' postulates. The liberal opposition MPs from Nowoczesna in general supported the idea of the reform as much needed for Polish science but could not accept the way it was consulted with the universities. After the first bill was broadly consulted with stakeholders the ultimate bill with 100 governmental amendments was consulted very vaguely only with groups supporting the reform.

Foreign Affairs

Amendment of Controversial Law on National Remembrance

President Andrzej Duda has signed a legal amendment to decriminalize the false attribution to Poland and Poles of crimes committed by Nazi Germany during the WWII, signaling a partial retreat on contentious legislation enacted this year.

Before that Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki had asked the MPs to amend the legislation, which went into effect two months ago. PiS rushed through the amending process. They called an extraordinary session of the Sejm, officially to amend the law on trash (see the May edition of the Newsletter). In one day the amendments were voted by both houses of the parliament and sent to Riga where Andrzej Duda attended a bilateral meeting with his Latvian counterpart.

The piece of legislation, which threatened prison terms of up to three years for any breaches, sparked a war of words between Polish and Israeli politicians and an outpouring of anti-Semitic rhetoric in Poland, as right wing media sought to portray Poland as under attack from an international anti-Polish campaign orchestrated by foreign powers and “Jewish lobbyists”.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Polish counterpart issued a joint statement on Wednesday. “I am pleased that they have decided to completely cancel the clauses that have caused uproar and dissatisfaction in Israel and the international community. Relations with Poland are important to us and are based on trust. We stood for the truth and fulfilled our duty to ensure the historical truth about the Holocaust.” Israel’s Yad Vashem Holocaust Remembrance Center issued a statement saying the amendment was “a positive step in a proper direction.”

Liberal opposition in Poland criticized PiS for the speedy process, with Kamila Gasiuk-Pihowicz, head of the Nowoczesna group in Sejm, tweeting that the process was “a setup of the nationalists with PiS to make it impossible to ask difficult questions of the government.”

The move tailored to water down the law aimed to win back support of Washington during the open conflict with Brussels over the judiciary reform.

Polish lawmakers did not, however, remove another part of the law, criticized by Ukraine, which equated the World War II attacks by Ukrainian nationalists against Poles to that of Nazis and communists. Sadly, Ukraine’s support is not needed at the moment...

Economy

Government takes control over PESA

PESA is the first Polish company to design, construct and deliver modern low-floor trams. PESA trams are now in use in most large cities in Poland and in several European cities, eg. in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, the Czech Republic. It is bidding on tenders in Brazil. The company has become a Polish hegemon in a very short period.

PESA became a success of an old-style communist company that could reform itself and become a regional leader in its sector and expand to many foreign markets.

PESA has been in financial difficulties for some time due to a lack of major new train orders. Its main domestic rival Newag has beaten it in recent tenders to supply electric locomotives to PKP IC, while a major order to supply trams to Moscow has been scaled back amid political tensions with Russia. In addition, a large contract to supply Link DMUs to German Rail has caused cash flow problems for the company from Bydgoszcz because of a failure to get the trains certified for operation in Germany, which means PESA has yet to be paid.

Prime Minister Morawiecki since the beginning of its term saw PESA as one of economic champions and a jewel in the crown of national companies that must be saved and developed. So when PESA went into troubles the government decided to help it.

Troubled producer has signed an agreement regulating the details of the takeover of its shares, by the state-run Polish Development Fund PFR. According to unofficial information, the Polish Development Fund will pay PLN 200 million of the loan granted in November 2017 to PESA by a consortium of banks led by PKO BP and will invest PLN 100 million in the development of the company. The Office for Competition and Consumer Protection (UOKiK) has received an application for the takeover of Bydgoszcz Pesa by one of the funds belonging to the Polish Development Fund. The transaction will be finalized in the third quarter of this year, according to information acquired by the Polish Press Association

Culture

Vodka Museum Opens

After many years of waiting the Museum of Polish Vodka was finally opened.

Housed in a 19th-century vodka factory that has been abandoned for decades, the museum is located at the heart of the former working class Praga neighbourhood that has been undergoing regeneration. The main exhibition of the museum is located in a historic building in the former rectification plant, which is where vodka used to gain its unique and pure flavor. Visitors will discover the local tradition of vodka production and will learn about Polish Vodka's international career.

Since Poland entered the European Union in 2004, "Polish Vodka" strictly applies to spirits that are produced in the country according to traditional recipes using local potatoes or grains.

See: <http://muzeumpolskiejwodki.pl/>

Building of the Year

According to the *Bryła* magazine the Bałtyk building in Poznań became the building of the year, winning this popular award. In the final round it defeated the new Radio and Television Faculty of the Silesian University in Katowice.

Bałtyk appears totally different depending on what side it is approached from. A linear building with a concrete, entirely glass-fronted facade and clearly exposed aggregate grain, sets it apart from its surroundings and is an example of a balanced combination of "old" and "new" architecture in the context of the neighboring historic building of Concordia Design and the Haven.

See all the competing buildings and the winner:

<http://www.bryla.pl/brylaroku/56,157152,23398804,bryla-roku-2017-poznajcie-zwyciezcow-i-zobaczcie-najlepsze.html>

Sports

Another game, another disappointment

Poland was the first European team to crash out of the World Cup in Russia after losing their first two games, against Senegal and Columbia. A 1-0 win in their third and final group match against Japan was not enough for Poland to avoid finishing bottom.

Polish Internet blossomed with memes laughing at the football players and the fact that in recent months they spent more time acting as celebrities and playing in commercials instead of playing football.

After coming back to Warsaw Adam Nawalka stepped down as coach of Poland. "I feel responsible for the fact that at the World Cup we didn't fulfill our plans nor the expectations of supporters," Nawalka said.

Polish football federation president Zbigniew Boniek told a press conference on Tuesday: "We are now looking for a new coach."

Germany and Poland

Germany No Longer Seen as Threat

A majority of Polish citizens think Germany no longer poses a military threat to Poland, and more than half think strengthening the German military would be "positive," according to the latest German-Polish barometer poll published in June.

The poll — which surveyed 1.000 Polish citizens and 1.0000 Germans in April — found that some 65% of Poles do not see Germany as a political or economic threat to their country, with two-thirds saying they favor stronger cooperation between the two countries. More than half said they think Germany contributes to "better cooperation" in Europe.

According to the survey, 76% of Germans think Berlin should not pay World War II reparations. Polish opinion on the issue is split: 40% said Warsaw should not demand compensation from Germany, while 46% said they are in favor of the government pursuing reparations.

A large majority of Germans (70%) said they think German-Polish relations should focus on the future, rather than the past. In Poland, 60% agree — a drop since the last poll in 2011, when 73% agreed. Some 32% of Polish respondents claimed Poland should focus on its past with Germany.

See: <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-poland-no-longer-seen-as-threat-poll/>

HGPC turns 20

The House for Polish-German Co-operation in Opole (HPGC) celebrated its 20th anniversary.

The House for Polish-German Co-operation (HPGC) is a non-profit non-governmental organization, a union of associations gathering a number of Polish and German non-profit organizations and institutions. The House for Polish German Co-operation was officially opened in February 1998 in the presence of the President of the Federal Republic of Germany Prof. Roman Herzog and - on behalf of the Polish President - Prof. Danuta Huebner, head of his Chancellery.

"...a House for Germans, Poles and other friends and neighbors, which serves the purpose of dialogue on where we come from, where we are and where we are going to..." said Prof. Herzog during the opening ceremony at the House

Polls & trends

Support for political parties

Estymator for "DoRzeczy", 28.06.2018

PiS (ECR)	42,3%
PO (EPP)	25,2% (-2,7)
Kukiz'15	8,9% (+0,6)
SLD (S&D)	7,5% (-1,1)
PSL (EPP)	5,5% (+0,1)
Nowoczesna (ALDE)	5,2% (+1)
Wolność (EFDD)	1,4% (-0,5)
Razem	2,6% (-0,3)

Poles and summer holidays

Where do Poles go when they go abroad for holidays with tour operators?

Greece	27,8%	(-8,4 compared with last year)
Turkey	20,8%	(+11,4)
Bulgaria	16,1%	(-0,1)
Spain	8,2%	(-4,5)
Egypt	6,7%	(+1)
Albania	4,4%	(+1)
Italy	3,2%	(-0,3)
Tunisia	2,5%	(+2)
Croatia	2,1%	(-1,7)
Macedonia	1,3%	(+1,1)

How much do they spend on summer holidays?

Europe Assistance and IPSOS 2018

Poland	EUR 1.030
EU average	EUR 1.957

Where do Poles dream about going?

Europe Assistance and IPSOS 2018

Paris	27%
Rome	22%
New York	17%

About the author



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