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Poland's Parliamentary Elections and a Looming Hungarian Scenario

by Sławomir Sierakowski

Thanks to economic growth, Poland's ruling PiS party has introduced social programs that have further bolstered its popularity. Unlike in recent European elections, the opposition is not running as a unified bloc in parliamentary elections on October 13, 2019. If PiS again wins a majority, it will take steps to cement its system of illiberal democracy. As long as he maintains good relations with Donald Trump, PiS's leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski does not seem wary of reactions from Brussels and Berlin.

Four years of majority rule by the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland have changed the paradigm of the country's politics. Other Polish parties, media, and public opinion, have ceased to consider liberalism – both economic and political – as a given. Indeed, the liberal order is being implicated in the political dispute over people's quality of life. Despite a strong economy, Poland's previous liberal governments were unable to satisfy the population's rising aspirations for the household budget. PiS took advantage of that circumstance and offered voters the largest social transfers in Polish history, together with a conservative nationalist vision of government, history, culture, and foreign policy.

Thanks to favorable economic growth (4.6 percent in 2017, 5.1 percent in 2018, and 4.4 percent as of the second quarter of this year), PiS has introduced a range of social programs that have bolstered the party's popularity beyond the 37.8 percent it won in 2015. The ruling party has made sure that voters feel the positive effects of its promises at just the right moment. For example, PiS implemented its plan to pay out a thirteenth month of retirement benefits a week before the EU Parliamentary elections in May 2019, which were widely regarded as the opening act of the upcoming Polish parliamentary elections on October 13. It was – at least in part – thanks to its mobilization of retirees that PiS was able to beat its

competition, winning 45.5 percent of the vote, compared to only 38.7 percent for the opposition united under the banner of the European Coalition.

Poland's ruling party banks on child subsidy

In October's upcoming parliamentary elections, voters will cast their ballots shortly after three months' worth of child subsidies have been paid out – as of this year, the benefit of 500 złoty per month (roughly 114 euro) has been expanded to cover all children without exception. Moreover, PiS has just promised to raise the minimum salary from 2,250 złoty per month in 2019 to 3,000 złoty in 2020 and 4,000 złoty in 2023 (roughly 480, 685, and 914 euro, respectively). It should be underlined that the government's social programs impart not only a financial benefit, but above all bestow dignity, especially on residents of provincial areas. Such programs also demonstrate that the state can indeed have a tangible impact on citizens' lives, which is why PiS enjoys such unshakeable support in villages and small towns. That support is enough for them to win countrywide elections,

even if the opposition still has the advantage in medium and large cities.

Despite its wide-ranging social support programs, PiS has announced that, for the first time in Poland's history, the government will adopt a deficit-free budget. The ruling party also announced that the lowest personal income tax rate will decrease from 18 percent to 17 percent. Social transfers help maintain economic growth, at least in the short run, by increasing consumption, translating to about 0.5 percent economic growth. Higher consumption facilitates balancing the budget because it leads to higher tax revenues, primarily through the VAT.

The opposition is not running as a unified bloc

The proposals of the opposition pale in comparison to the government's plans, especially since PiS has, in the eyes of many, achieved the status of a miracle worker. Given the low level of trust in institutions, the opposition's overtures to improve public services or implement systemic reforms in areas such as healthcare or education are unable to compete with the government's financial promises, even though such changes are deemed by voters to be of the highest importance. That is especially true now that, thanks to the child subsidy, parents can pay for private medical appointments or tutoring for their children.

Unlike in the European elections this past May, the opposition is not running as a unified bloc in October's parliamentary elections – despite the fact that Poland uses the D'Hondt method of counting votes, which rewards the largest parties at the expense of smaller ones when it comes to the distribution of parliamentary seats. The disintegration of the European Coalition was initiated by the Christian-democratic Polish People's Party (PSL), which determined that it was losing support in favor of PiS because of its alliance with the liberal-conservative Civic Platform (PO) and the post-communist, social-democratic Democratic Left Alliance (SLD). Grzegorz Schetyna, the leader of PO, put the nail in the European Coalition's coffin when he decided that a two-party alliance with the SLD might prove unacceptable to PO voters. As a result, SLD decided to create a coalition of the Left, joining two other small left-wing parties, Robert Biedron's Wiosna and Razem. Because the electoral threshold for party coalitions is 8 percent, however, all candidates are running as part of SLD, which, in turn, means that only SLD will receive state subsidies. After the election, Wiosna will most likely join with SLD, while

Razem, which is even further to the Left, will probably establish its own parliamentary circle.

Aggregated polling in September showed PiS with 48 percent of voter support, PO with 28 percent, SLD with 12 percent, and PSL with 6.5 percent. The far-right Konfederacja may also win some seats; it currently stands at 4–5 percent in the polls. Konfederacja is also a potential coalition partner for PiS. If it does well, but not well enough to enter the Sejm, the d'Hondt rules dictate that the majority of votes cast for Konfederacja will go to PiS. Winning as little as 43 percent of the vote could give PiS a majority. If it falls a few seats short, the current ruling party may simply try to bribe support from several members of PSL, which is considered the most fickle and opportunistic party.

PiS has so far proven remarkably immune to scandal. Contrary to expectations and unlike in the past, numerous scandals, which have revealed PiS's shortcomings to voters, have not undermined support for the ruling party. On the one hand, the traditional PiS electorate remains unmoved by them. On the other, voters who started supporting the party more recently find that PiS's implementation of its social promises gives them little choice but to continue – despite the fact that nepotism, corruption, the reduction of public media to instruments of propaganda, and international isolation may be problematic. This is especially true in light of the fact that the liberal-conservative PO party is largely seen very negatively, even among its own supporters. And, as long as PiS satisfies voters' material expectations, the new coalition of the Left will be hampered because it lacks support in rural areas. Only 8 percent of voters can be described as hardline supporters of the Left, while at most a further 12 percent might be won over.

The opposition is putting forward a unified electoral list for the Senate, where all 100 senators are elected in single-mandate districts. An opposition majority is more likely in the Senate than in the Sejm. Winning the Senate would at least give the opposition some options to delay the dismantling of liberal democracy. Poland's constitution, for example, cannot be amended without the Senate's consent. The Senate also has influence when it comes to certain appointments.

PiS plans to “re-polonize” media

If PiS wins a majority, the party will try to cement its system of illiberal democracy. The main obstacle to realizing that goal remains Poland's private media. The country's most significant private television network, TVN and TVN24, is owned by the American company

Discovery, Inc., while Onet.pl, the largest internet portal, is owned by the Swiss-German Ringier Axel Springer Media AG, which also owns the largest tabloid Fakt and the popular weekly Newsweek Polska. Without taking over these media outlets, PiS cannot feel as secure in its power because of the possibility of, for instance, an economic downturn with consequent press coverage of a loss of faith in the government. The former PiS politician Pawel Kowal (the originator of the expanded child subsidy), who is currently running from the Citizens' Coalition list in Krakow, believes that, if the current ruling party wins a 240–250-seat majority, it will try to convince American politicians to turn a blind eye and push Discovery to sell TVN and TVN24 to one of the larger state-owned companies. Unlike in Hungary, Poland's ruling party cannot simply acquire unfriendly media through its oligarchs because it has none – meaning that PiS would have to resort to a state-owned bank or insurance company for help.

A confrontation with Berlin is more likely than one with Washington

It is much more likely that what the ruling party terms the “re-Polonization” of the media would take place through anti-monopoly legislation that would restrict the portion of the media market that one company could control. In that case, regional media outlets owned by German companies would be most at risk. The German media concern Verlagsgruppe Passau, for example, controls almost half of Poland's regional newspaper market.

Because of mostly economic interdependencies, Germany is the second country – after the United States – that PiS takes seriously. A confrontation with Berlin is more likely than one with Washington, however. An attempt by the government to take over more control of regional media from Germany seems almost guaranteed. Other likely developments include an attempt “to complete the reform” of Poland's Supreme Court, from which PiS partially backed away as a result of pressure from the European Court of Justice, as well as the subjugation of cultural institutions, which are largely hostile to PiS.

Most of the funds paid to Poland by the European Union are controlled by the country's regional governments. They currently have significant competences and run schools and cultural institutions. The opposition still rules in seven out of sixteen of Poland's regional governments, as well as almost all large and medium cities. PiS has already started to limit these

competences and funds. If it wins the parliamentary elections, PiS will try to go much further.

PiS may hold off on such actions, however, until after the next presidential election, which is slated for spring 2020. Andrzej Duda's reelection seems likely. While Donald Tusk is set to announce whether he will run in December 2019, opinion polls currently show that he would lose to the current president. Moreover, many voters hold a grudge against Tusk because he raised the retirement age to 67 – a decision reversed by PiS. Nevertheless, Tusk is an able politician and may increase his support over the course of a campaign. Still, it remains unclear whether Tusk will be nominated by his own party, which is currently led by his rival, Grzegorz Schetyna.

The EU is barely at issue in the electoral campaign

In terms of foreign policy, it seems clear that PiS does not fear confrontation with Brussels. The Polish ruling party understands the EU's weaknesses when it comes to decision-making. Any attempt to suspend Poland's voting rights under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union would be vetoed by Hungary. The rule of conditionality – making payment of EU funds dependent on maintaining the rule of law – has not yet been implemented, and it is unclear whether it ever will be. Having observed the EU's inability to defend the rules of liberal democracy as defined by the Copenhagen Criteria of 1993, which apply to all member states, the Polish government most likely assumes that Brussels will continue to be ineffective in this regard, especially in light of the attention it needs to pay to Brexit and a possible trade war with the US.

Relations between the Polish government and the European Commission or the European Parliament are not at issue in the campaign. Even the opposition has ceased raising questions related to them because voters do not find them compelling, even though Poles overwhelmingly support European integration. Polish voters simply do not believe that Poland faces any real threat from Brussels. The majority of voters generally oppose any outside interference in Polish politics. The opposition does not support the EU's rule of conditionality, meaning it is in line with the government on this issue. For PiS voters, relations with the United States are particularly important, and that bilateral relationship seems to be going very well under Donald Trump's administration, meaning that the current cooling of Poland's relations with Brussels and Berlin do not undermine its sense of security.

Jaroslaw Kaczynski is on a straight path to assuring his party's parliamentary majority, which will enable him make the PiS's "Budapest in Warsaw" plan a reality. Poles have clearly shown that, after three decades of transition based on the neoliberal reforms that became known as "shock therapy," they expect concrete benefits from a welfare state. What is more, they will accept a welfare state that provides them these benefits whether it is part of a liberal or illiberal order – something that still

seems to come as a surprise to the majority of Poland's opposition and media. Consequently, what Poles are going through as their country becomes more illiberal and a Hungarian scenario looms can be seen as shock therapy in the opposite direction, especially for Polish elites.

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