Poland Chooses between Two Right-Wing Politicians

written by Jan Radomski | July 10, 2020



Polish President Andrzej Duda (top) flashing V-signs after addressing supporters as exit poll results were announced during the presidential election in Lowicz, Poland, on June 28, 2020 and Candidate in Poland's presidential election, Warsaw Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski flashing V-signs to supporters as exit poll results were announced during the presidential election in Warsaw, Poland, on June 28, 2020. – Poland's right-wing President Andrzej Duda topped round one of a presidential election on June 28, 2020, triggering a tight run-off with Warsaw's liberal Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski on July 12, according to an Ipsos exit poll. (Photos by Wojtek RADWANSKI and JANEK SKARZYNSKI / AFP)

In less than few days there will be a second round of a presidential election in Poland that may affect not only the politics in Poland but also other regions of Europe. Poles are choosing between two right-wing politicians. What is the cause of this situation and what role does the left play in all of it?

It is easier to understand current situation in Poland if you are a Canadian or American than a European. Most of European countries got used to a power structure with at least several strong political parties, including a strong left. For more than 15 years in Poland two right-wing parties have been taking turns in charge: Law and Justice and Civic Platform. The first one – after having won the parliamentary election in 2015 – has thoroughly dominated almost the entire Polish political stage: they have had a president, a prime minister and a majority in the parliament. The opposition has been holding only the Senate and local governments in most of big cities, including the capitol. Both parties' origin was in the Solidarity movement of the 1980s and a significant number of their members consider themselves conservative or right-wing.

Civic Platform is unambiguously pro-European and democratic and many politicians from this fraction have been holding main European offices such as the President of the European Parliament or the President of the European Council. Voters of Civic Platform come from big cities and the west of Poland, they are the ones – to put it simply – in a better economic situation, those whom the political transformation of 1989 treated quite well. On the other hand, people voting for Law and Justice defend Catholic or conservative values and live in the south and the east of the country.The Law and Justice party got their support through numerous well-diagnosed and effectively-carried-out social reforms such as the 500+ Program ensuring parents with 500 PLN (equivalent of about 170 Canadian dollars) a month from national resources.

Polish politics has been dominated by a conflict between these two political formations for many years now. It escalated in 2015 when Law and Justice took full power and launched a series of reforms described as not democratic by both the opposition and a significant part of foreign observers and commentators. Also in 2015, the president, Andrzej Duda, vetoed the appointment of judges of the Constitutional Court that led to a crisis lasting many years and eventually made the Constitutional Court subordinate to the parliament. Two years later the government forced changes in the functioning of the National Council of the Judiciary to protect the independence of the courts and judges. As a consequence of these actions there were demonstrations in many cities and towns in Poland, gathering tens of thousands of protesters, and the decision of the government raised concerns from international bodies such as the Venice Commission and the Court of Justice of the European Union.

Simultaneously, many incidents happening during the last five years may point to authoritarian tendencies in the government and in Polish society. A great number of artistic events have been censored (in a soft or hard way) by the authorities and the public media has been turned into a tool of propaganda for the government. The authorities have also been stimulating xenophobic and homophobic sentiments within a large part of Poland. They have criticized a previous government (led by Civic Platform) for its willingness to help refugees from Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq. Many Law and Justice members have been speaking against the LGBT+ community. Local governments arising from this party symbolically announced their territories to be LGBT-free zones and just a few weeks ago president Andrzej Duda compared LGBT+ postulates to Soviet indoctrination.

In this year's presidential election Law and Justice put Andrzej Duda in the running for the second time and – despite major criticism from the opposition – he still has strong social support. His main antagonist from the Civic Platform had initially been Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska, a former Marshall of the Polish government; however, due to disturbances caused by the epidemic of the SARS-CoV-2 virus the election was postponed and Civic Platform nominated a new candidate, Rafał Trzaskowski – a representative of a liberal part of this formation who won the election for the Mayor of Warsaw in a first round in 2018 gaining 56.67% of the vote.

Two weeks ago both parties proved to still be dominant on the Polish political stage – in the first round almost 3/4 of Poland's electorate voted for their candidates. Duda obtained the highest score (43.50%) and Trzaskowski placed second (with 30.46%). Before the second round surveys showed that all bets were off – the difference between the results of both candidates remains in the limits of statistical error and the winner depends on the kind of poll.

This is why it is crucial for Duda and Trzaskowski to take votes from the rest of the candidates. The third place (13.87%) belonged to Szymon Hołownia – a celebrity, a host of the Polish edition of "Got Talent" who ran as an independent candidate. During the campaign Hołownia appeared as a moderate candidate in every way and his programme consisted of a populist mix of leftist and rightist demands. Undoubtedly he managed to convince those who felt sick and tired of the choice between Law And Justice and Civic Platform but at the same time he was distancing himself from the

actions of the present authorities. His weeping over the Constitution – a new symbol of resistance to non-democratic decisions of the government – went viral on the Polish Internet.

The fourth result (6.78%) belonged to Krzysztof Bosak, a candidate of the extreme right with a nationalist programme and radically free-market views. Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, a member of the Polish People's Party – a centrist party representing farmers and citizens from smaller towns co-ruling with "Civic Platform" in the past for many years – obtained less than 2.5% of the votes.

The result for Robert Biedroń, a candidate of the left trying to find their place in this polarized political stage, was even worse. How could this happen?

For many years the strongest left-wing party in Poland was Democratic Left Alliance. It originated from a Communist party, but, in contrast to a great number of European parties with similar backgrounds, Democratic Left Alliance managed to evolve into a social democratic party and its politicians succeeded in making Poland a member of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. At the turn of the century Democratic Left Alliance had support from the majority of Polish society. Over time this formation completely lost the ability to communicate with its supporting groups such as factory workers and miners and as a result its support began to decrease. Controversially – from the standpoint of the left-oriented supporters – decisions like overeager involvement in the war in Iraq and introducing a flat tax for companies didn't help their case either.

At the same time over the years numerous political initiatives on the left wing have been emerging. Two of them seem to be the most crucial. The Together party (now Left Together) was established in 2015 by a group of young leftist activists as a protest against the entrenched Democratic Left Alliance. Left Together succeeded in "dusting off" Polish political discussion, injecting certain themes such as the struggle for workers' rights and profound tax reform. On the other hand, in 2019, Robert Biedroń – one of the most important Polish LGBT+ activists and a former MP – formed the Spring party. Unlike Left Together, this formation was supposed to address the mainstream, moderate electorate by mixing leftist and liberal views together. In fact, Biedroń avoided using the word "leftist" and was replacing it with the word "progressive".

It was about a year ago that all the three formations – Democratic Left Alliance, Together, and Spring – were in deep conflict. In May 2019, Spring and Together ran for the European Parliament elections separately, gaining 6.06% and 1.24% of the vote. Democratic Left Alliance ran in a coalition with a few other parties where Civic Platform played a leading role. The aim of this group – named "European Coalition" – was to keep Law And Justice from winning the election at all cost. The mission was a partial success because their result was decent (38,47%) but Law And Justice won the election anyway with support of more than 45%.

Less than six months later all three left-wing parties were standing together shoulder to shoulder in the parliament election and their collective result was 12.56% of the parliamentary vote. This was regarded as a success because in the previous term the left failed to bring its politicians to parliament. They formed a "club" together, uniting 49 members. Cooperation of these parties is pretty good, but they face numerous problems resulting from diversified expectations of their electorates. The leftism of the supporters of Democratic Left Alliance is significantly different than the leftism of Spring or Together. A large number of the Alliance's voters don't share an interest in matters like LGBT+ rights or environmentalism.

The three parties decided to nominate one candidate for the presidential election – the leader of the Spring party, Biedroń. A few years ago he seemed to be a natural political leader. Unfortunately, Spring's result wasn't what they expected. Additionally, Biedroń lost credibility due to an unfulfilled

promise to give up the mandate of being a Member of the European Parliament. This was the reason that this nomination was not received with great enthusiasm.

During his campaign Biedroń had to face many unfavorable situations. It stands to reason that supporters of Democratic Left Alliance found it difficult to fully accept him as an openly gay LGBT+ activist. Meanwhile, he might have seemed unreliable for the general leftist electorate because of his tendency to soften his views and ideas. However, in the end, it was ideological supporters of the left who turned out to be the most loyal voters for Biedroń – mostly due to lack of a credible alternative.

Also, the left parties got stuck in a narrative trap. They stridently distanced themselves from the two similar conservative candidates. This kind of rhetoric is sadly confusing for much of the electorate even though it is based on substantive premises. For plenty of voters "right wing" is synonymous with Law And Justice and refers to particular issues such as disrespect for the rule of law, a commitment to Catholic values or skepticism towards the European Union. For most Polish people equating Law And Justice with Civic Platform is totally incomprehensible.

The election showed that this rhetoric wasn't convincing for left-wing voters either – Biedroń obtained a score of only 2.22%. Over 300, 000 people supported the left in October 2019 while before last Sunday just over 430,000 voted for the candidate nominated by the left. As the exit poll shows, 44.1% of the left-wing voters from October chose Rafał Trzaskowski and only 21.2% cast their vote for Robert Biedroń. It is almost as much as left-wing electorate supporting Szymon Hołownia (19.8%). At the press conference after the first round of the election Biedroń expressed his strong support for Trzaskowski in the second round.

Since 2005 a first-round presidential election turnout has never exceeded 50%. This time, however, it was 64.51%. This proves the extraordinary engagement of Polish society in political matters. It also shows that the political fraction winning on July 12th will receive full and credible social legitimization. Though reigning unchallenged since 2015, Law And Justice has never received support from the majority of Polish society. Andrzej Duda won under completely different circumstances when a certain percentage of his voters were not aware of the consequences of their choice. Now, all cards are on the table and the next election probably will not be held until 2023. The winner of this presidential election will symbolically take over – even if they don't possess actual power. And the left will gain some time to think to whom and how to address their message.