



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Polish elections - a struggle to restore European values or European respect



The elections in Poland in a little more than 3 weeks are the most significant European elections this year. The stakes are high, not only for the principal political actors in the country, but also for the European Union.

The ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) has a tangible possibility of maintaining its position in the next 4 years because it has been leading steadily in pre-election public opinion surveys, and has the strongest electoral support on its side.

Jaroslav Kaczynski's right-wing populists could currently count on support from 33% (Ibris) to 38% (Politico), thus being ahead of the main opposition party, Civic Coalition (KO) of former Prime Minister and President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, which has between 26% and 29% as the end of the campaign approaches.

The gap between the 2 long-standing enemies has been narrowing as the election nears. It will be exceedingly challenging for the opposition to reach Tusk's goal of 5% more votes than the ruling party to be certain of being able to form a government.

Irresolvable lack of votes

Voting issues appear to be overwhelming in both political camps. The ruling conservatives are conscious of the fact that they cannot create a government on their own, but their network of prospective allies is almost non-existent.

On the other hand, Tusk's pro-European liberals have potential coalition allies. But their figure is only slightly higher than the electoral threshold of 5%, so even their capital may not be enough for a parliamentary majority.

The anti-systemic, right-wing populist Confederation movement emerges as the third strongest. This apparatus has only existed for 4 years. It is composed of former extreme nationalists and young ultra-liberals. Their rating ranges between 10 and 12%, and they could act as possible "kingmakers" in the

elections on October 15.

But no major mainstream party wants to cooperate with this group, which has been steadily increasing its ratings through aggressive online campaigning.

Kaczynski said their programme was "written by lunatics" and that "only children could believe in such a programme". Tusk called their plans "nonsense" and that, even though they act as the opposition, they are much more radical than the government itself.

This reluctance exists now, just before the elections. However, the story could be entirely different after the election results, if it confirms that no one could form a government without Confederation.

Competitors invest everything they have

Both principal political blocs - ruling and opposition - have invested almost all resources at their disposal for the elections. Amongst other things, the government has made a number of populist economic moves to reach as many families as possible with financial relief.

Donald Tusk is quite confident in the power of mobilisation against the PiS government, which not only they, but also the EU majority, rightly considers to be illiberal due to its systematic attack on the rule of law and democratic institutions, above all the judiciary, human rights and freedom of the press.

After the success of the anti-government street protests in Warsaw on June 4, the anniversary of the first partially free elections in 1989 when Poland abolished communism, Tusk will try to repeat and surpass the size of the last June protest on October 1.

Last June, a fascinating half a million Poles gathered in the streets, demanding the departure of a government they consider a threat to democracy. The final test of support

for Tusk and his coalition will be the "March of a Million Hearts", whose focus will be on women's rights protection - that is, opposition to the government's conservative policy.

However, even if the goal in the name of the protest is achieved and a million people really take to the streets of Warsaw, Tusk cannot be sure that this massive support would be reflected in the number of votes for his party 2 weeks later.

Europeans want a change in Warsaw

The vast majority of Europeans want political change in Warsaw because, in the past 8 years, the country with the fifth largest economy in the EU has been considered a "problem child".

Banning abortion, subordinating the judiciary to executive power, and turning the largest part of its media into propaganda tools of the ruling party have been the principal reasons for the problems in relations between Poland and Brussels in recent years.

Considering their significant influence on the surrounding Baltic and Eastern European EU members, the new mandate of PiS conservatives would represent a prolonged headache for European partners in the West, because Warsaw would still have proven usurpers of democratic institutions in power as a negative role model.

This time, they would benefit from renewed legitimacy from the October elections and with significantly fewer limitations regarding the EU warnings.

Donald Tusk wants more Europe in Poland and a revision of the controversial decisions of the conservatives and PiS, including the promise to unfreeze €36 billion of EU support to Poland to rehabilitate the economic consequences of the pandemic. It was a punishment for the severely damaged rule of law, particularly in the sphere of the judiciary.

However, the Poles have been extremely positive regarding the EU. As the biggest winners of the transition from communism to a market economy in Eastern Europe, they do not want to give up their membership benefits.

More Poles want to vote in next year's elections (62%) than the European average (56%). Poles are more satisfied with the EU than other Europeans on average regarding every significant issue that involves democracy.

Poles are satisfied with the EU's attitude towards Ukraine (as many as 83%), which is one of the most significant national issues with a social consensus leading to the impression that the EU has done good things in supporting Ukraine to defend itself from Russian aggression.

Loyalty to the EU is undeniable, but Poland is asking for more

Poland's EU membership and loyalty to the bloc will not be in question, even in the forthcoming elections. But the 2 principal political competitors want different things from Polish membership, which polarises Polish society.

Kaczynski and his conservatives want Poland to be paid more respect and granted a more significant position in the Union's decision-making. But a prevailing feeling is that they are too big for Eastern Europe, but not big enough for EU leadership.

The German dominance of the EU, which is often spoken with anger by people from the Polish elite, is something that PiS wants to resist and take a larger share of influence for Poland than it has had so far, as part of the "new Europe".

Tusk warns that Poland, with conservatives in power, is fundamentally distancing itself from the EU because it violates its fundamental values, which is why it does not contribute to shared policies.

Support for Ukraine has raised Poland's status among partners

As one of the most active allies in providing military support for the Ukrainian defence, the conflict in Ukraine has altered how the EU and even NATO view Poland.

Poland has become one of the pillars of Western solidarity with Kyiv during the past 18 months thanks to this unquestionable alliance, Poland's significant financial contribution to Ukraine, and its political influence in advancing the Ukrainian cause.

"The United States needs Poland and NATO as much as NATO needs the United States", said US President Joe Biden during a visit to Warsaw last February.

For the ruling conservatives, the fact that Poland has shown a commitment to supporting Ukraine might be a partial Euro-Atlantic compensation for their demands for greater recognition in the West.

But, as in the case of Tusk's mass street protests, conservatives will not be able to sit back and wait for the election results on October 15 with that sentiment.