

Poland and the European elections

By Marius Heuser
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Even against the background of extreme political polarisation throughout eastern Europe, Poland stands out when it comes to the alienation between the broad masses of people and the governing elite. This found clear expression in the European elections of June 13th. In no other country were voter participation so low and the decline in support for the European Union so pronounced.

Only 20.8 percent of the electorate went to the polls. The governing parties of the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) and the Labour Union (UP), which received 41 percent of the vote in parliamentary elections in 2001, won just 9.1 percent.

In terms of the electorate as a whole, less than one in fifty Polish voters cast a ballot in favour of the ruling coalition. A new political formation, Polish Social Democracy (SDPL), founded in April this year by a number of former SLD deputies, suffered a surprisingly poor result and failed to clear the five percent hurdle necessary for parliamentary representation. The Peasants Party (PSL), which quit the SLD government in March of 2003, was able to re-enter the European parliament with 6.9 percent. In the 2001 parliamentary election, this party won 9.0 percent of the vote.

On the other hand, the most important opposition party, the neo-liberal Civic Platform (PO), was unable to reach its target of over 30 percent, despite the low turnout. The PO gained 23.5 percent of the vote. In the 2001 election, the PO obtained 12.7 percent of the votes cast.

The clear winners of the election were the right-wing populist parties Samoobrona (Self Defence), led by Andrzej Lepper, and the League of Polish Families (LPR). Both of these parties are hostile to the European Union. Together, they obtained 28 percent, with the LPR significantly increasing its vote to 16.4 percent (as compared to 7.9 percent in 2001), and overtaking Samoobrona, which won 11.6 percent (compared to 10.2 percent in 2001). The law-and-order party Law and Justice (PiS) slightly increased its share of the vote to 12.5 percent. (In the 2001 election it recorded 9.5 percent). This latter party is regarded as a potential coalition partner of the PO.

As a whole, the result is not especially surprising. Entry into the European Union involves a massive decrease in living standards for most Poles. As a prerequisite for Polish membership, Brussels demanded the privatisation of state-owned enterprises and additional structural reforms in the sectors of agriculture and fishing.

These policies have already resulted in an official rate of unemployment of over 20 percent. Unemployment assistance payments are very low in Poland and extend for only a maximum of one year. Afterwards, there is nothing to prevent the unemployed from descending into poverty, if not outright destitution.

Entry to the EU on May 1 of this year has only served to worsen social conditions in the country. Polish farms receive only a fraction of the subsidies awarded to longstanding EU members, and must at the same time confront massive competition from the West. According to official studies, 26 percent of agricultural concerns can no longer be developed.

Irrespective of these problems, at the start of this year the government led by Leszek Miller began the implementation of the so-called Hausner plan, which involves drastic cuts in the sphere of welfare and social spending and reduces pensions and social insurance payments for farmers.

The government has completely lost touch with the population at large. The previous Polish government, comprising Election Action Solidarity (AWS) and the Freedom Union (UW) under Jerzy Buzek, was punished by voters in the 2001 elections for its anti-social policies and a series of corruption scandals. The AWS and UW plummeted from 47.1 percent in parliamentary elections in 1997 to a combined total of just 9 percent in the last national elections. They failed to win the necessary percentage to gain representation in parliament.

The SLD was able to profit at that time from the collapse of the AWS and UW. The SLD had emerged out of the SdRP, a successor organisation to the discredited former Stalinist ruling party. Leading the SLD are former Stalinist functionaries who have become transformed into the most avid advocates of neo-liberal “free market” policies and have monopolised political posts and offices.

Poland’s current president, Aleksander Kwasniewski, is a former leader of the Stalinist youth organisation who climbed to the highest posts within the old ruling party. The former head of government, Leszek Miller, was the secretary of the Stalinist central committee and is regarded as a Stalinist hardliner. The current prime minister, Marek Belka, was a long-time member of the state party.

Over the years, there has been virtually no change in how such people interpret democracy. Shortly after taking power,

the government of the SLD, UP and PSL was confronted with its first corruption scandals, which involved, amongst others, the head of the government, Miller. Nevertheless, the government pressed ahead with the cuts and privatisation measures demanded by the EU for membership. The government sought to ignore a series of mass protests against its policies involving farmers, miners, nurses and other workers.

After opinion polls prognosticated single-figure results for the SLD, 20 deputies, led by the parliamentary president Marek Borowski, split away and founded the SDPL. The situation for Prime Minister Miller became increasingly untenable, and on May 1st he resigned. Instead of calling new elections, the SLD hung on grimly and attempted to stay in power with all sorts of bureaucratic machinations.

Kwasniewski appointed the economist Marek Belka as acting prime minister and the SLD is currently seeking to obtain a majority for Belka in the Polish parliament (Sejm) in order to avoid early elections. Belka was turned down by a majority in parliament on May 14. The vote was 262 against and 188 in favour of the president's nominee.

The parliament had the right to elect its own candidate, but failed to nominate a viable alternative. As a result, Kwasniewski has once again proposed Belka. Should he fail to garner the necessary support in a vote due this week, new elections must be called, according to the constitution.

The electorate plays a role in the entire process only to the extent that individual parties calculate the impact of a new election on their own electoral fortunes. Parties that confront electoral losses tend to support Belka. Those which stand to gain are in favour of an election.

The chairman of the PO, Donald Tusk, commented that the result of the European elections could serve to increase Belka's chances, because he could rely on increased support from those parties that fared badly, i.e., the SDPL and PSL. What is clear is that the entire process has little to do with genuine democracy.

At the same time, the established opposition parties have made clear that they are determined to pursue similar, or even more drastic, policies as those carried out by the present government. Borowski recently stated that the SDPL seeks to work closely with the SLD and that both parties have similar programmes.

The PO has repeatedly declared that the cuts have not gone far enough. It is demanding, for example, an intensification of the cutbacks proposed in the Hausner plan and more rapid privatisation of state-owned enterprises. The PO emerged from the discredited AWS, but despite the devastating defeat for the latter seven years ago, the PO placed former head of government Buzek on its list of candidates.

A recent survey conducted by Polish radio revealed that only 14 percent of Poles supported new elections. Some 53 percent declared they could detect no difference between the policies of

the current Sejm and its predecessor.

The only parties to oppose official government policy were the Samoobrona and LPR. They have sought to appeal to popular discontent and divert it along reactionary channels. Samoobrona was founded in 1991 by Andrzej Lepper and others, and functioned initially as a type of trade union for small farmers.

With the skilful use of social demands and spectacular actions, such as street barricades, the party attracted considerable popularity. In 2001 it was able to enter the Sejm for the first time with its own delegates.

From the outset, Samoobrona based itself on the most reactionary elements in Polish society. The party propagated Polish nationalism, encouraged anti-Semitic and anti-German sentiments, and worked with elements of the extreme right. On one occasion Lepper declared that he had studied the techniques employed by Nazi leader Goebbels.

The LPR was founded in 2001 by forces around the nationalist, religious-based radio station *Radio Maryja*. It declares itself to be anti-Semitic, anti-American and anti-German. It argues against membership in the EU on the basis of protecting Polish national culture and the prospect of a decline in moral values. The party goes so far as to warn of an invasion of the country by Turkey, pointing out that Turkish cafes and mosques have already been sighted along the river Oder.

None of these parties have any answer to Poland's mounting social problems. Their chauvinism is based entirely on maintaining existing social relations. In an interview with the German newspaper *Financial Times Deutschland* shortly before the European elections, Lepper declared: "The social discontent in Germany, France, Austria and other countries shows that Europe is threatened by social upheaval, even a social revolution!" The goal of these parties is to prevent this at all costs.

Their success is entirely due to the absence of any serious alternative. According to a poll conducted last May 18, 71 percent of Poles favour the unification of Europe, despite widespread rejection of the EU. In Poland, it is particularly clear that such a unification is necessary, but can be achieved only through the unity of working people in a struggle against the ruling elites.

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