

The 2014 European Elections in Poland Are we in for another uninspiring campaign?

Melchior Szczepanik

In previous European elections, Polish political parties were not able to draw a large number of voters to the polling stations. Poland stood out in the European Union mainly by its extremely low turnout. Given the current situation in the Polish political scene, the chances are that the 2014 electoral campaign will also be lacklustre, focused on domestic issues, resulting yet again in a disappointing turnout.

Who wants to talk about Europe?

Since 2005, Polish political life has been dominated by the rivalry between the liberal-conservative Civic Platform (PO), in power since 2007, and Law and Justice (PiS), staunchly conservative on social issues and somewhat statist in economic matters. Over the years the rivalry has become embittered, with acute personal animosities between leaders of both parties often overshadowing programmatic differences. It seems that another electoral campaign revolving around a struggle between the two cannot but alienate voters.

Law and Justice has been leading in the polls since spring 2013 and can be considered the favourite to win the European election. It is likely that the party will want to capitalise on the shrinking popularity of the prime minister and his government, and will therefore focus its campaign on domestic issues. Such a strategy will make it easier to attack its main rival and, at the same time, divert the electorate's attention away from PiS's modest achievements in the European Parliament (EP). Out of 15 MEPs elected as PiS candidates in 2009, only seven are still affiliated with the party.¹ MEPs played a prominent part in two splits that affected PiS in

¹ Out of eight rebel MEPs, four remained members of the political group of European Conservatives and Reformists, to which PiS belonged since the beginning of the term, while four others joined the more eurosceptic Europe of Freedom and Democracy Group.

EPIN Commentaries offer concise, policy-oriented insights into topical issues raised by the debate on the political integration of Europe. The European Policy Institutes Network (EPIN) is a network of think tanks and policy institutes based throughout Europe, which focuses on current EU political and policy debates (see <http://www.epin.org> for more information). Unless otherwise indicated, the views expressed are attributable only to the author in a personal capacity and not to any institution with which she is associated.



Dr Melchior Szczepanik is an expert of the Institute of Public Affairs in Warsaw and Secretary of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Senate of Poland. This paper is the third in a series of Commentaries by EPIN researchers, aimed at examining the European elections in May 2014 from an EU perspective and considering the outlook for the elections in various member states.

2010 and 2011 (the leaders of both parties created as a result of those splits are MEPs). The infighting may be one of the reasons why PiS MEPs, bar a few exceptions, cannot boast a large number of achievements in the chamber. Some of them are manifestly more interested in domestic politics; others struggle to make a significant impact. Their mediocre performance is also due to the fact that PiS MEPs are members of a small political group – European Conservatives and Reformists – which, with only 56 members, can rarely influence the decisions shaped in negotiations between the largest political groups in the chamber.

At first sight, Civic Platform should be more willing to bring EU-related issues to the forefront of its campaign. The party – together with its coalition partner, the agrarian Polish People's Party – has a strong delegation in the EP's largest political group and is thus much better positioned than its main domestic rival to influence the decision-making process. A number of PO MEPs (such as Jerzy Buzek and Danuta Hübner) have won praise both at home and in Brussels for their effective work in the chamber.

However, one may fear that PO's campaign may be less EU-centred than expected. After a series of setbacks in local and national by-elections, the party is desperate for a success that could enable it to bounce back. Therefore, the party leadership may be tempted to field popular local and national politicians rather than former MEPs or highly qualified candidates who are often poorly known to the electorate. Rumours have recently surfaced that party leaders will be trying to discourage MEPs who are serving their second term from seeking re-election. Such a move would most probably result in a more nationally-oriented campaign. The growing internal strife may be another factor that will limit PO's capability to launch a dynamic campaign. The leader of the party's conservative wing recently quit following an unsuccessful campaign, full of recriminations, to replace the prime minister, Donald Tusk, as party chairman. The latter is now facing a serious conflict with another influential party member, Grzegorz Schetyna, who used to be seen as Tusk's successor.

Surprisingly, even though a growing number of voters are manifestly fed up with the cutthroat struggle between – as well as within – the two major parties, nobody seems able to seize the opportunity. None of the two conservative parties, which were created following splits in PiS, and which promised a less aggressive version of conservatism, enjoys considerable support in the polls. The left-wing parties are also unlikely to improve their results compared to previous elections.² A new initiative called Europa+, launched in spring 2013 by Aleksander Kwaśniewski, the former president of Poland, and Janusz Palikot, the leader of the newest left-wing party, suggested that the Left could unite for the European election. Such a new undertaking, bringing together the parties and some well-known independent politicians, could arguably provide a spark for a dynamic and attractive pro-European campaign. Yet the initiative has not taken off: it was rejected by the leader of the

² The Democratic Left Alliance (Social Democrats) attracted the support of 12% of voters in the 2009 EP election and 8% in the 2011 national election. Meanwhile, the Palikot's Movement, set up in 2011, received 10% of the votes in the parliamentary election that year, campaigning on a liberal economic agenda and a progressive stance on social issues.

Social Democrats, Leszek Miller, and has not attracted any important public figures. Its revival is highly improbable as both Kwaśniewski and Palikot have manifestly lost interest in it. Both left-wing parties will certainly try to highlight EU issues in their campaigns and emphasise the benefits of integration, ranging from freedom of movement to generous cohesion funds. However, with Palikot's Movement still searching for its identity³ and the Social Democrats clearly lacking ideas to attract a bigger following, one may doubt whether they will be able to stimulate interest and enthuse voters.

Surprising convergence on EU issues

Another, less manifest reason for the unlikelihood that the electoral campaign will revolve around EU issues is a relatively small number of divergences between Polish parties in this domain. Interestingly, even though the two main political parties see the long-term relationship between Poland and the EU in different ways, they often agree when it comes to more immediate issues. PO wants to anchor Poland in the vanguard of integration, declares the intention to introduce the euro sooner rather than later and advocates closer political integration. PiS, on the other hand, is wary of deeper integration and tends to question the benefits of some of the existing common policies. Despite those differences, members of both parties – together with Polish Social Democrats – display the same, or similar, views with regard to some important issues debated by the EP. Polish MEPs in unison voiced support for a big EU budget, extolled the virtues of cohesion policy and called for closer relations with the EU's Eastern neighbours. They emphasised the benefits of a more integrated EU energy market and protested against potential EU regulations limiting the freedom of extraction of gas and oil from alternative sources (shale gas in particular). They were also unanimous in opposition to the calls for the EU to set stricter targets regarding climate policy (CO₂ emissions, use of renewables and the like). The main difference between Polish parties as regards the most pressing and widely debated problems is the attitude towards the reform of economic governance, with the PiS rejecting stricter control of national fiscal policies by EU institutions.

Consequently, political parties, willing to distinguish themselves from their adversaries, may shy away from discussing EU issues and focus on style rather than substance. The PiS will attempt to portray the government as too soft and easily pushed around by European heavyweights in negotiations. The PO will react by showing Donald Tusk as a leader who is highly respected by the European partners and depicting the PiS as eurosceptics with few allies in Europe.

³ The party has recently changed its name to Your Movement to make it less leader-centred, but the leading figures seem undecided whether the party should become akin to classic Social Democracy ideas or rather to reconcile economic liberalism with a progressive stance on social issues.

Conclusions

Should the Left fail to come up with an imaginative campaign, the duel between PO and PiS will most likely be the central theme of yet another Polish election. The opposition will try to gain support by highlighting governmental shortcomings on the domestic front. The PO may be too preoccupied with internal strife to properly highlight their achievements in the EU arena. One may fear that both parties will treat the campaign as a test before a series of national elections⁴ coming in the near future rather than as an opportunity to engage in serious debate about the future of the EU. A campaign that unfolds according to such a scenario will not attract a lot of public attention. This is a shame. Research shows that even though Poles support integration, they know very little about the EU and even less about the ways in which citizens can influence the decision-making process (many of them oblivious to the fact that MEPs are directly elected).⁵

A thorough electoral debate, focused on the main problems of the EU and alternative visions for the future, would not only convince citizens that casting a vote in the European elections matters, but also encourage them to make use of other mechanisms of public involvement. The only reason for optimism is that radical eurosceptics are extremely unlikely to win seats, as PiS holds sway among the nationalistically-inclined voters. As arduous as this task may seem, NGOs and the more respectable media must demand that parties pay due attention to the major problems of the EU. The media scrutiny of candidates should focus on the qualifications that will enable them to adapt well to the particular political environment that is the EP.

⁴ Local elections are scheduled in autumn 2014, while parliamentary and presidential elections will take place in 2015.

⁵ See, for example, Marek Dudkiewicz, Aleksander Fuksiewicz, Jacek Kucharczyk and Agnieszka Łada, *The European Parliament. Social trust and ignorance*, Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw 2013 (available at <http://isp.org.pl/uploads/filemanager/pliki/Mainconclussionsfinal.pdf>).

About EPIN

EPIN is a network of European think tanks and policy institutes with members in almost every member state and candidate country of the European Union. It was established in 2002 during the constitutional Convention on the Future of Europe. Then, its principal role was to follow the works of the Convention. More than 30 conferences in member states and candidate countries were organised in the following year.

With the conclusion of the Convention, CEPS and other participating institutes decided to keep the network in operation. EPIN has continued to follow the constitutional process in all its phases: (1) the intergovernmental conference of 2003-2004; (2) the ratification process of the Constitutional Treaty; (3) the period of reflection; and (4) the intergovernmental conference of 2007. Currently, EPIN follows (5) the ratification process of the Lisbon Treaty and – should the treaty enter into force – (6) the implementation of the Treaty.

Since 2005, an EPIN Steering Committee takes the most important decisions. Currently there are seven member institutes: CEPS, Clingendael (the Netherlands), EIR (Romania), ELCANO (Spain), HIIA (Hungary), Notre Europe (France) and SIEPS (Sweden).

Since 2005, an EPIN 'Steering Committee' takes the most important decisions. Currently there are seven member institutes: CEPS, ELCANO (Spain), Notre Europe (France), SIEPS (Sweden), HIIA (Hungary), Clingendael (Netherlands) and the European Institute of Romania (EIR).

Structure

Currently there are 34 EPIN members from 25 countries, also from countries outside of the EU. The 'hard core' work of the network is based on the cooperation of about 10 most active institutes. The member institutes are quite diverse in size and structure, but are all characterised by political independence and the absence of any predetermined point of view or political affiliation.

EPIN organises at least three events across Europe per year. The network publishes Working Paper Series and other papers, which primarily focus on institutional reform of the Union. The network follows preparations for the European elections, the EU's communication policy, and the political dynamics after enlargement, as well as EU foreign policy and justice and home affairs.

Achievements

EPIN is a network that offers its member institutes the opportunity to contribute to the 'European added-value' for researchers, decision-makers and citizens. The network provides a unique platform for researchers and policy analysts to establish personal links, exchange knowledge and collaborate on EU-related issues. Members bring their national perspectives to bear on the issues tackled and through collaboration they contribute to establish a 'European added-value' (e.g. on EU communication, flexible integration). By doing so, they strengthen a common European dimension in the national debates on Europe.



With the support of the European Union: Support for organisations active at European level in the field of active European citizenship.