

POLISH PUBLIC OPINION TOWARDS DEMOCRACY

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Abstract:

In the course of the last two years, the model of democracy being implemented in Poland has been undergoing substantial changes, which consist in moving away from liberal democracy, and these changes do not reduce the considerable level of support for the ruling party. In this context, it is worthwhile to make an attempt at answering the question of what are the views and attitudes found among the Polish public that promote such a high level of support. The answer will be given based on results of public opinion polls understood as the sum total of responses in surveys. The main emphasis in the answer will be placed on such issues as the level of delegitimation of the previously existing democratic system, the ambivalent attitude towards democracy itself as a principle constituting the political system, the continued high level of authoritarianism, the growth of xenophobic and conservative attitudes, the appreciation of traditional values and the great importance of positive evaluations of the level of material living standards.

Keywords: rule of Law and Justice, polish public opinion, attitudes towards democracy, legitimisation of the system, authoritarian and xenophobic attitudes.

1 Introduction

As soon as the Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) party came to power in the autumn of 2015, it took actions aimed at changing the political system, which consisted, broadly speaking, in a departure from the previously followed model of liberal democracy¹. Winning the parliamentary elections by a wide margin this party achieved an absolute majority of seats in the Sejm² (and also in the Senate), which admittedly did not give the party the power to amend the Constitution but enabled it to pass ordinary Acts of Parliament independently. By voting through a number of acts, some solutions were adopted which introduced amendments of a systemic nature, strengthened the position of the ruling party and provided it with an increasingly greater freedom of action. Also, a replacement of personnel was carried out on a large scale at institutions controlled by the government and the parliament. At the same time, actions propagating the policy of PiS were pursued taking advantage of the public mass media and other potentials for shaping the public awareness. Additionally, a facilitation for the ruling circles is the fact that the opposition is fragmented and its leaders do not enjoy any greater public trust.

However, the most distinctive feature of this situation seems to be the fact that the support for the ruling party as declared in surveys is not decreasing and even has an upward trend – in the last months of 2017 it remained and still remains at the level of ca. 43% (in a November poll it was declared by half of the respondents) (Sondaże 2017). This is a sort of unique phenomenon – since 1989, none of the ruling parties (or governments) managed to maintain the initial support during its term in office, not to mention increasing it. In this context, it seems essential to make an attempt at answering the question of which views, assessments and approaches of the Polish society have been conducive to such a great support. It would be an oversimplification to think that the underlying reasons for the sustained support for the PiS are only the measures implemented by this party within the realm of social policy as part of the fulfilment of the election campaign promises, the most spectacular of which are the ‘Family 500+’ benefit programme and the lowering of the retirement age. Their importance is obviously great and they should be emphasised when talking about the party’s success; however, in order to provide a comprehensive explanation of the reason for the support to the PiS, it is necessary to take into account also other factors including the ones that characterise the public awareness. These are in the first place the views and approaches indicating that the attitude towards democracy as a form of rule is not obvious and the acceptance thereof as the best system may be, to a large extent, merely declarative. This thesis may be substantiated by reference to a lot of indicators. Some of them will be presented below, inter alia an assessment of the previously existing democratic system, the ambivalent attitude towards democracy itself as a principle constituting the political system, the constantly high

¹ Without going into further considerations concerning definitions, liberal democracy (i.e. such where the majority achieved as a result of an election is restricted in its actions) can be characterised for the purpose of this paper by citing the following features: there exist all institutional guarantees of polyarchy listed by Robert Dahl (Dahl 2000: 81-82), those in power are subject to the control of specialised institutions (this concerns, inter alia, conformity of legislation with the constitution as well as adherence to other principles of the rule of law), there exist strong guarantees for civil rights including minority rights, which are adhered to by the rulers.

² PiS achieved 37.58% of votes, which translated into 235 parliamentary seats; the next party, the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska) achieved 24.09%.

level of authoritarianism, the increasing prevalence of xenophobic and conservative attitudes. The basis for the considerations will be the results of the Polish public opinion polls understood as the sum total of responses in surveys³.

In order to justify the thesis articulated above one might indicate, *inter alia*, that the level of delegitimation of the previously existing system of liberal democracy was relatively high in the Polish society; appreciation for democracy as the best form of rule is not certain at all, there occur strong authoritarian tendencies as well as a number of views contrary to the principles of democracy. The effect of this kind of attitudes and views on the support for the PiS is manifestly enhanced by the positive assessments of the economic situation, good assessments of the situation in the labour market (which are impacted by the low level of unemployment), opinions that the ruling party keeps its campaign promises. It will also be necessary for defining the attitude of the society to democracy to demonstrate that the consent to a departure from the model of liberal democracy, expressed in the support given to the PiS, does not stem from a failure to perceive this process or from a positive assessment thereof. However, views on these matters are not able to outweigh those previously mentioned, which can be considered as a confirmation or the relatively not too great value ascribed to democracy as a form of rule.

Before moving on to a more detailed presentation of the issues indicated above, it should be stipulated that it is the prevailing tendencies that will be primarily presented; and it should be borne in mind that the Polish society is strongly fragmented and conflict-ridden with regard to political views and preferences (47% of respondents stated that these divisions were further reinforced during the current term of parliament) (O polityce 2017). Therefore, apart from the prevailing category of adherents to the PiS policy there is also the category of its opponents having other views and convictions.

Discussion of the issues indicated might be commenced with the observation that it was already a few years prior to the election of 2015 that a critical approach towards the existing political system and the existing state of society revealed itself in the Polish society. Survey results presented by Krystyna Skarżyńska, concerning, *inter alia*, the moral legitimisation of the system, testify to a deficit of legitimisation that had already existed, to a larger or smaller extent, for quite a long time⁴. The responses that were obtained in 2011 to the individual questions making up the scale of legitimisation of the system, were, *inter alia*, as follows:

- the Polish political system is functioning as it should – yes 14%, no 79.8%;
- people in Poland in general have what they deserve – yes 35.3%, no 59.9%;
- in Poland everyone has equal chances to be rich and happy – yes 25.7%, no 71.3%;
- our society is arranged fairly – yes 20.6%, no 72.6%;
- organisation of the society requires a radical change – yes 72%, no 20% (Skarżyńska 2012: 537-538).

Based on the above results, it can be stated that nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents did not consider the Polish political system as the best one, and thus deserving support. This indicates that a large portion of the society did not accept the ideological justifications for the existing system or information on the improving social and economic situation (the growth of GDP, the decreased unemployment rate, the reduction of social inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient, etc.) and concurrently with the growing level of satisfaction with the majority of aspects of living there was the conviction of the necessity of making significant changes. This can be confirmed by the survey results obtained by the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) in 2015 where 31% of respondents choose the answer that the Polish political system is bad and requires a lot of substantial amendments while 41% stated that it was not too good and requires a lot of amendments (only 1% of respondents stated that any amendments are not needed). This was the highest level of delegitimation of the system from January 1989, i.e. from the moment preceding the transformation (Postulaty 2015).

The negative assessment of the existing system was enhanced by a sense of injustice declared by a large portion of society. This is the effect of the fact that social justice is commonly identified with equality with the concurrent occurrence of social differentiation, which is considered too big. In a survey concerning assessment of earnings of various professional groups, it turned out that the postulated gap in earnings only admits a seven-fold one and is less than four-fold in the vast majority of cases. And in 2010, the gap between the rich and the poor as well as the gap in earnings were considered as too wide by approx. 90% while a similar percentage of respondents (77%) thought that it should be the government's responsibility to reduce the gap in earnings (Opinia 2010). It was confirmed that equality is the most highly regarded value – authors of the CBOS report from 2012 found, *inter alia*, that 'For the overwhelming majority of respondents (74%) equality is more important than economic growth ... where nearly half (49%) are clearly convinced that protecting society from excessively increased stratification is more important than welfare' (Polacy 2012).

³ It is essential to bear in mind the character of public opinion, which was aptly defined by John Zaller who wrote that we deal with not just one but with many versions of public opinion, revealing themselves depending on the questions asked and other situational factors. (Zaller 1998: 221-223).

⁴ In the simplest terms, legitimisation refers to approaches expressing acceptance for the existing order of things. Seymour M. Lipset wrote: 'Legitimisation comprises the capacity of a system to produce and sustain the conviction that the existing political institutions are the best for society'. (Lipset 1998: 82).

The conviction of injustice prevalent in Poland was also expressed in the assessment of one's own earnings. In a survey conducted in 2014, for the question 'Do you consider your earnings as fair?', the following distribution of answers was obtained: definitely yes – 4%, rather yes – 34%, rather not – 39%, definitely not – 23% (among people earning below PLN 2,800 as many as 84% considered their earnings as unfair) (Czy nasze 2015). Thus, the prevailing majority of society had a sense of injustice existing in the remuneration system, which was bound to lead to frustration.

Negative assessments of the existing system were conducive to the electoral success achieved by the PiS, a party promising introduction of fundamental amendments in the manner of rule. Assessments of this kind were reinforced by statements made by some prominent PiS members as well as various conferences, meetings, demonstrations or the monthly celebrations of the Smolensk plane crash, all organised by this party, during which those in power and the existing political system were harshly criticised, which essentially contributed to the lowering of the level of legitimisation of the system. A peculiar propaganda achievement was convincing a large proportion of voters (who put the blame for the bad state of the system mainly on the political class) that the PiS had nothing in common with the previously ruling elites on whom the party put the blame for all the negative phenomena, both prior to the election and consistently during the first few years of their rule.

Another factor that should be taken into consideration when explaining the fact that the popularity of the ruling party is growing despite a departure from the model of liberal democracy is the approach of the Polish society towards democracy, which is also reflected in the level of authoritarianism observed. Very broadly speaking, the majority of society are not fully convinced about the value of democracy, which in addition is rather not unambiguously understood. The survey results suggest that democracy is primarily associated with free elections (92% consider them as important), equality before the law (88%) or protection of personal freedom (86%); nevertheless, equally important are issues such as provision of equal chances of education for children from all families (87%), state-funded health care, education and culture (83%) or caring for the citizens' welfare by the government (80%) (Zasady 2017). Thus, to a considerable proportion of society the material issues are equally important as the democratic procedures, and based on other survey results it can be assumed that even more important. This is evidenced by, inter alia, results of public opinion polls concerning the Visegrad Group countries, carried out in August 2017 by the Polish Institute of Public Affairs. To the question of which one of the aspects is more precious to the respondent in the evaluation of the current political system, i.e. freedom, democracy, the possibility of expressing themselves or their views, or the standard of living, prices of goods and availability of services, the prevailing response was admittedly that both aspects were important (for Poland, this response was selected by 56% of respondents) but it turned out that the standard of living is treasured by more people (22%) than freedom and democracy (12%). Similar proportions were observed in the cases of the Czech Republic and Hungary while the Slovaks more frequently chose freedom and democracy (Demokracja 2017).

The Polish society's approach to democracy is most clearly visible in the scale of acceptance of democracy applied in the Social Diagnosis ('Diagnoza społeczna') surveys indicating that appreciation for democracy is not the predominant view. Beside the 29% of those choosing the view that democracy has an advantage over all other forms of rule, 14% stated that occasionally non-democratic governments may be better, 17.2% that it did not matter whether a government is democratic or non-democratic, 4.7% that democracy was a bad form of rule and 35.2% did not provide any response (Czapiński 2015: 322)⁵. Even neglecting that last figure, showing the scope of difficulty related to evaluation of democracy, it can be asserted that the unambiguously pro-democratic views do not prevail.

The results cited are congruent with results of surveys on authoritarianism providing evidence that it characterises a considerable proportion of the Polish society; in September 2015, 65% of respondents agreed with the view that 'a strong leader can do more for the country than legal acts, discussions, consultations' and nearly half of the respondents accepted the classical indicator of the authoritarian attitude by agreeing with the statement that 'if you really think about it, then you have to admit that there are just two types of people out there in the world, the strong and the weak' (Psychologiczne, 2015). Furthermore, nearly half of the respondents agreed with such statements as: 'freedom of speech is not worth anything if it means that we have to come to terms with the danger posed to society by extreme political views' or 'it is better to live in a disciplined society than to give people too much freedom as this can be destructive' (Autorytaryzm, 2012).

Authoritarian attitudes are also visible in views concerning punishing for criminal offences as well as relating to the homosexual minorities. Over 2/3 of the Polish society (70%) think that it would be better if punishments for law offenders were more severe (over 60% advocate reinstating capital punishment for the gravest crimes) and among the most essential problems of the Polish system of justice administering too low punishments ranked fourth (Społeczne, 2017). As far as homosexuality is concerned, nearly 80% of respondents think this is a

⁵ Other results, indicating significantly stronger acceptance of democracy, are obtained in surveys carried out by the CBOS, in which the questions that make up the scale mentioned are asked separately. However, due to the manner of asking the question concerning the approach to democracy, the size of the sample (in 'Social Diagnosis 2015' it was over 25,000 people) as well as the results of other surveys it can be assumed that the scale of acceptance of democracy is more reliable in presenting the actual state.

deviation from the norm where 24% think that homosexuality must not be tolerated. The vast majority are against the possibility of entering into civil partnerships for same sex couples (64%), the possibility of adopting children by homosexual couples (84%) or the public demonstration of their lifestyles by homosexual persons (62%) (Stosunek, 2017).

In clear contradiction with the principles of democracy is also the way of perceiving society, widespread in the Polish society, detected by means of applying the social dominance scale, i.e. denying some people and groups the right to respect, discriminating them morally, that is acknowledging that they are worse. The authors of the Social Diagnosis ascribe such an attitude to almost half of the public (46.5%) (Czapiński 2015: 317). This corresponds with the rhetoric frequently applied by the PiS containing a dichotomous image of society, in which the division is strictly related to value judgements in moral categories, i.e. we-good, they-bad. Such a division is one of the elements of the negative social capital, a resource counteracting the development of civic society.

The data cited seem sufficient for a partial explanation of the fact that the policy of the Law and Justice, constituting a departure from liberal democracy, does not find any significant obstacles resulting from social recognition of liberal democracy as an inviolable principle of the system. The explanation of the fact that the ruling is still enjoys a great deal of support despite having introduced some amendments to the system can be further supplemented with the social assessments of its activities in the social and economic sphere and the effects thereof.

In this respect, the prevailing assessments concerning different aspects of the social situation with the PiS in power are positive. Among them, the most important seem to be those that relate to the material standard of living. In 2017, assessments of Poland's economic situation were among the best since 1989; in October 53% of respondents assessed it as good. A similar percentage of respondents assessed the material situation of their own households as good (bad assessments made up less than 10%); and the situation at their workplaces was assessed as good by even 65% (Subiektywne, 2017). Assessments concerning the situation in the labour market clearly improved; already in March 2017, it turned out that during the previous year the percentage of very good and good assessments rose from 17% to 32%, while bad and very bad dropped from 49% to 25% and almost 2/3 of respondents expressed their conviction that there was a chance of finding employment in the local labour market (an increase by 14 pp) (Oceny sytuacji, 2017).

Equally important, taking into consideration the importance of justice for the assessment of the system, is the conviction, expressed by the majority of respondents, that during the last two years Poland became a fairer country; it was declared by 46% while 29% did not share this opinion (Opolityce 2017). From the point of view of the citizens, an important criterion of assessment of the government system is also the functioning of government offices that they have to deal with. Also in this respect the assessments improved: 44% of respondents declared that there was an improvement in the functioning of offices over the last few years and only 11% expressed an opposite opinion (Oceny funkcjonowania, 2017).

Considerable support for the ruling party has been sustained despite the conviction shared by the majority of the public that the provisions of the Constitution are not being complied with; such an opinion was expressed by 60% of respondents. The most frequently mentioned constitutional regulations deemed not respected included the principle of separation and balance of powers as well as those concerning citizens' personal rights. At the same time, 68% of respondents asserted that the provisions of the Constitution are of significance to the common citizens and thus the Constitution and adherence thereto are something important. Responses to the next question confirm that the majority of society has a negative opinion on violating the Constitution. This is evidenced by the distribution of responses to the question whether the government, having an important and urgent social problem to solve, should proceed in compliance with the Constitution even at the cost of failing to solve an important social problem or attempt to solve this problem even in a manner that is not in compliance with the Constitution. The first of these options was supported by 65% of respondents, the second by only 20% (Dwudziesta 2017), which means that the vast majority are in favour of following the principles of the rule of law even if this prevents achievement of the desirable objectives.

2 Conclusion

Based on the last of the survey results cited, it should be stressed that a considerable proportion of society are aware of the violations of the Constitutions by the ruling party and take a negative view of this phenomenon but this does not translate into mass participation in social protests (taking part in various protests was declared each time by merely 3% of respondents and these were typically the same people (Kto nie 2017) nor does it reduce the level of support for those in power. It can be thus assumed that the approach towards the Constitution does not differ from the approach toward democracy presented above; basically, its value is appreciated but this is not a strongly-felt value as a number of the views professed are not in conformity with it and the actual criterion of assessment of the ruling party is based on the actions carried out by it in the social and economic sphere and providing citizens with substantial material benefits. This was the democracy that can be termed as material overcomes the formal (procedural) democracy but it is worthwhile to remember that whilst the existence of formal democracy provides no guarantee for the existence of the material one, the absence of formal democracy will sooner or later render the existence of material democracy impossible.

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