



UL. WIEJSKA 12
00-490 WARSAW
POLAND
TELS: (+48 22) 628-2418, 629-5608, 621-9866
FAX: (+48 22) 628-4617
E-MAIL: poland@cecgr.com
WEB: www.cecgr.com

THE 2009 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS IN POLAND

By Marek Matraszek

The 2009 European elections were the second time Poles had elected their European representatives, after Polish entry to the European Union in 2004. At stake were 50 seats in the European Parliament (EP), but the significance of the elections went beyond the actual vote itself. For each of the parties competing the elections, and especially Civic Platform (PO) and Law and Justice (PiS), the poll was seen as a test of the political strategy each had pursued after the domestic parliamentary elections of 2007, and a lead indicator of how the parties might perform in the cycle of local, Presidential and parliamentary elections over the upcoming two years.

The results themselves broadly reflected the trends of the national opinion polls of the previous year, showing a continued strong lead of the ruling Civic Platform (PO) party, with 44% of the vote, followed by the main opposition Law and Justice (PiS) party with 27%. The only other two parties to enter the EP were the post-communist Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) with 12% of the vote, and the junior governmental coalition partner of the PO, the Polish Peasant Party (PSL) with 6% of the vote. These percentages translated into 25 seats in the EP for PO, 15 seats for PiS, seven for the SLD and three for PSL. In the case of the first three parties, these numbers represent an increase in relation to the seats held in 2004, and thus can on the surface be seen as a relative success for each of them.

Interesting in the Polish and European context was the failure of any radical, protest or anti-European parties to break through the 5% threshold. Neither the much-touted Libertas list, nor the alternate Centre-Left list led by former MEP Dariusz Rosati, managed to enter the EP. This is in contrast to many other European countries where anti-European and sometimes openly extremist parties made strong headway. This is a strong confirmation of the stability of the Polish political scene and the seemingly increasing immunity of the Polish electorate to novelty initiatives or non-credible political offerings.

Although the above implies an unexciting picture, a closer look at the results and at the details of the personalities elected shows a more complex reality. The first obvious word of caution relates to the turnout for the elections, which at 25% was 4% higher than in 2004, but still represents a significantly smaller vote than is common in Polish national elections, and is at the lower end of the European average. This makes it more difficult to extrapolate the result to the national level in coming years in elections, which have a much different dynamic. Certainly an increased turnout will not spread equally among the parties in terms of votes, and it is unclear whether this additional turnout would proportionally help PO or PiS more. Nonetheless, the continuing dominance of the ruling PO is a fact, which is all the more remarkable given the difficult economic conditions that the country has faced in the past year.

Both PO and PiS had privately been hoping for a better result for themselves. PO had sought to pass the 50% threshold, and thereby entrench the popular perception that they were the “natural party of government” in Poland. PiS had also hoped to cross the 30% threshold and approach their result in the 2007 parliamentary election, but although they doubled their representation in the European parliament, they failed to put to bed the suspicion that 30% represents the effective vote ceiling for the party among the Polish electorate. The result for the PSL was especially disappointing in terms of EP seats won, down to three.

Only the SLD can gain some comfort from the vote. The past year has been one of bitter internecine fighting within the party between the current leader Grzegorz Napieralski, and former leader Wojciech Olejniczak who ran for the EP from the Warsaw constituency. Despite personality and policy conflicts, the SLD polled a respectable 12% and obtained 7 seats in the EP, including one for Olejniczak, and the party leadership will see this as a signal that in future national elections they can hope for more votes, pushing towards 15% and more.

The most interesting implications of the elections are for the future internal politics of Poland’s parties, and also for the balance of power in the next European Parliament. In the case of the PO, the election result has cemented the power of PO leader and Prime Minister Donald Tusk, as well as his position as the natural candidate of the PO for the 2010 Presidential elections. There was never really any doubt at this, but the election result was a final hurdle Tusk had to cross to cement his legitimacy in running for the Presidency next year. In the case of Law and Justice (PiS), the result has raised more questions than answers. Not only was the result at the lower end of what was politically acceptable to the party’s leadership, the remarkable success of Zbigniew Ziobro in his Krakow constituency has elevated the former Justice Minister to the position of natural successor to current leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski. This sudden elevation has been accompanied by new political tensions within the party, which may yet translate into damaging infighting at a time when increased pre-election discipline is required.

For the SLD the result is being presented as a vindication of the political line of leader Grzegorz Napieralski, that of eliminating his most dangerous rival Wojciech Olejniczak, shifting the party leftward, and refusing to enter a coalition with the more moderate social-democratic forces that ended up being grouped around the Centre-Left EP list led by Dariusz Rosati. The failure of the latter list to enter the EP represents probably the final deathblow of the Polish Centre-Left and leaves the SLD as the sole leftist player on the Polish political scene. As for the PSL, there will be disappointment at not at least matching the 8% achieved in the 2007 Polish parliamentary election, but the result is excused on the basis of the natural apathy of the peasant vote. In any case, the result has left unchallenged the position of Deputy Prime Minister Waldemar Pawlak as PSL party leader.

In the case of each list, it is interesting that in many cases the successful candidates were those who ran genuine local campaigns or who were well known locally, whilst frequently candidates who had been imposed by the central party leaderships either failed to get elected or made it into the EP only by the narrowest of margins. This was the case with both PO, where the most spectacular failure was that of the inability of former Solidarity leader Marian Krzaklewski to get elected in Subcarpathia, and also in PiS, where in several constituencies a local candidate managed to do better than the one favoured by the central party machine.

The impact of the Polish results for the 2009-2014 European Parliament is not to be underestimated. The PO faction with the additional votes of the PSL, which is also a member of the EPP, will play a significant role in the European Peoples’ Party in the EP, especially following the departure of the UK Conservatives from the EPP. This will be reflected in the upcoming push for former Polish Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek to become President of the European Parliament. The PO in the EPP, and Buzek himself, will push for a continued focus on issues of energy security, market

liberalisation, eastward outreach and pro-Atlanticist foreign policy. It is also likely that a PO MEP, either Janusz Lewandowski or Danuta Huebner, will become Poland's commissioner in the new European Commission, to be nominated toward the end of 2009, and head a major economic portfolio.

It will also be interesting to watch the impact of the new political faction in the EP (to be called European Conservatives and Reformists Group, ECRG), made up of PiS, the Czech ODS and British Conservative parties, and based on the old UEN faction in the previous parliament. The withdrawal of the UK Conservatives from the EPP and their decision to establish a strategic relationship with Eurosceptic Poles and Czechs is significant, not only in terms of more clearly articulating a robust Conservative line in the EP but also in the context of the still ongoing uncertainty over the future of the Lisbon Treaty. There remains a chance that the Treaty will not enter force, given political uncertainty in the UK and the as yet unheld Irish referendum. PiS will be the senior partner to the UK Tories in the new group, although the group may yet face some internal problems because of the clear divisions between those MEPs loyal to Adam Bielan and Michal Kaminski, and those looking to Zbigniew Ziobro as the next leader of PiS.

Despite the best efforts of the Polish media and political elites, the 2009 elections to the European Parliament failed to excite the interest of ordinary Poles. However, the elections represent a major stepping-stone in the evolution (or perhaps ossification) of Polish politics, and have laid the ground for the true upcoming electoral struggles for mastery over the Polish political scene, in 2010-2011. In the European context, the new Polish MEPs, more confident now than in 2004, and emboldened by their new-found leverage both within the EPP and ECRG, will be a much more vocal and determined political force than in the previous EP. In both Brussels and Warsaw, political actors in 2011-2012 will look back to these elections as the ones that set the stage for the battles which followed.

Warsaw, June 2009