

From Poland with Love

Monthly Newsletter – May

Topic of the month

The Indomitable. 40 Days in Sejm

On April 18th parents of disabled children started occupation of the halls of the Sejm. The protest lasted for 40 days. On Sunday, May 27th, one day after the Mother's Day, they left the parliament building and were welcomed by the supporting crowd, like heroes. The government did not meet their demands, but the protesters have accomplished something more - they changed the attitude of Polish people towards the disabled. In Poland people who choose not to work in order to care for a disabled child receive €350 per month from the government. But they can only receive this benefit if they have no other income, which means they cannot take even part-time work. What is more, as soon as the child turns 18, even that meager payment expires and parents are left alone with their children who need constant support and no means for living.

Back in 2014, Poland's Constitutional Tribunal deemed the law unconstitutional. But none of the governments - the previous PO-PSL coalition nor the current PiS government - have done much to improve situation of parents of disabled children. It is important to say that the parents of the disabled children also protested for 17 days in the Sejm when Civic Platform led the government.

This protest has hit the government hard – it has revealed the declared “pro-social” attitude of PiS so the government politicized the protest, presenting the protesters as tools in hand of the opposition. The government has started a counter-offensive against the protesters to neutralize an overwhelming social support for parents of children with disabilities. The strategy was described by the opposition media web site OKO.press as follows: disinformation, isolation and verbal aggression. The government could not see their demands as postulates of the people who were begging for help but as clamors of political enemies who accepted help of the opposition MPs in the Sejm. Beata Szydło, Deputy-Prime Minister responsible for social affairs refused to meet them. Also Jarosław Kaczyński did not find time for the protesters. The authorities of the Sejm refused the entrance permission to much respected Janina Ochojska, founder and chairwomen of the Polish Humanitarian Action, visibly disabled, who was willing to talk to the protesters and mediate between them and the PiS authorities.

One of the most touching moments of the protest was when 91-year-old veteran of the Warsaw Uprising Wanda Traczyk Stawska was also refused to enter the parliament to talk to the protesters. She could only exchange some words with them when they approached the outer gate. She gave them a gift - a damaged teddy bear from the WW II - that became a symbol of this protest. One of the supporters who could visit the protesters easily was Lech Wałęsa, only because he, being an ex-President - can enter the Sejm without any permission.

For trying to meet with Janina Ochojska two protesters on wheelchairs were punished by the Speaker of the Sejm and were not allowed to leave the building for walks, which are part of their therapy. The Speaker also used the protest to ban all visitors from the Sejm – only holders of permanent entrance passes were allowed to enter, no single entry badges for experts and journalists were granted.

Although the government has passed two bills that better the situation of the disabled, the most important one, a 500 zloty allowance, still hasn't been met.

The protest, the permanent presence of the protesters, both disabled people and their parents, in media made them visible for the Polish society. All the stories about their everyday struggle triggered the public compassion and understanding. The public support for the protesters reached 90% and a unique momentum for an institutional change was created. Also, the protesters - a bunch of them in the Sejm, and many more supporting them in street demonstrations and online - concluded that it was a turning point in their life - once they left their homes and became visible, they will not come get locked in anymore.

The opposition got united for a moment, signing a Solidarity Pact for the disabled. Now the big test for the opposition is how they will behave when the protest is over and media lose the interest in the topic. Will they keep their support for the cause? I can only hope. Some of the MPs showed their best intentions being with the protesters every day, supporting them quietly, talking with them, providing food and taking them for walks, without using the opportunity of jumping in front of the cameras whenever they appeared around. One of them was a liberal MP Monika Rosa who guarantees that Nowoczesna will keep on fighting hand in hand with the disabled people for their rights.

Politics

Petru leaving Nowoczesna. Opposition united without him

Ryszard Petru, founder and former leader of Nowoczesna (firstly known as Ryszard Petru's Nowoczesna) has decided to leave the grouping. "Nowoczesna is my child, but it is flowing its own path now," he stated. "I have made a difficult decision to leave Nowoczesna effective today. I do it with sadness and regret".

Rumors about Petru leaving the party he created were all in media ever since he lost internal party elections. In November 2017 he was defeated during the party annual conference by Katarzyna Lubnauer, former group leader in the Sejm. In opinion of many Nowoczesna MPs Ryszard Petru could not accept he lost his position and played a destructive role in the party undermining decisions of the new leadership. When he created a new association "Petru's Plan" it became clear that he chose an independent political career. Only two other MPs left the parliamentary group with the ex-leader, one being Joanna Schmidt, Petru's partner in private life.

Petru announced that he will create a new social-liberal party in autumn which was a big surprised since when he was a member of Nowoczesna he presented himself as a rather classic or conservative liberal, accusing Katarzyna Lubnauer of being a leftists.

Split in Nowoczesna is very unfortunate. “It’s not time for solo-players, it’s time for the team work”- Katarzyna Lubnauer commented Petru’s departure. It is a bad signal for the voters who appreciated close cooperation between the opposition parties, giving a big bonus in polls to the Civic Coalition created by Nowoczesna and Civic Platform. It became clear by now that only the Civic Coalition can beat PiS in the November elections.

Foreign Affairs

Poland ends UN Security Council presidency

May was a month of Poland’s rotating presidency of the 15-member Security Council of the United Nations. Poland on January 1st became a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for a two-year term that ends on December 31, 2019.

The May 17th debate in New York was chaired by Polish President Andrzej Duda, who said that international law was fundamental to world order. He added that there can be no peace without law and that “international law remains the strongest tool for civilized nations to ensure long-term peace.” This speech looked especially peculiar for Polish commentators since Mr. Duda’s political party that governs in Warsaw is known for its lack of respect for the rule of law in Poland that has a consequence.

On May 22nd, Poland hosted a high-level UN Security Council debate on protecting civilians in armed conflicts. During the debate, Jacek Czaputowicz, MFA, said that Ukraine is still a target of military aggression and that its territory continued to be illegally occupied. One week later Minister Czaputowicz delivered a speech during the meeting in New York in which he called for international peacekeeping forces to be sent to Ukraine.

Earlier during the presidency Poland proposed a UN Security Council session on children suffering as a result of armed conflict around the world. Poland’s ambassador to the UN, Joanna Wronecka, said: “The idea was to showcase positive examples from Africa of combating problems such as child soldier recruitment.” “Too many children are deprived of the right to a normal childhood, dignity and respect,” Ambassador Wronecka said.

Economy

Cohesion funds: Less money for Poland?

In the last week of May the European Commission published its long-term plans for cohesion policy — the money and programs the EU uses to reduce regional disparities in the EU. Such funding makes up around a third of the EU’s current seven-year budget. It is needless to say that these funds are of extreme importance for the Polish budget. In Poland over 60 percent of public investment between 2015 and 2017 came from EU cohesion money.

Commission is planning to allocate an inflation-adjusted €373 billion to the policy over seven years, 2021-2027. The main reason of the cut is the Brexit.

The biggest winners of the new budget are - at least on the surface - the southern countries, like Spain, Greece and Italy. While cohesion is set to be cut overall in the EU budget, Athens' allocation would go up by 8%, funds for Rome would rise by 6,4% and for Madrid by 5% . Romania and Bulgaria will observe modest increases, compared to small sums they are getting now.

Poland together with other V4 countries, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary, will receive about 23,3% less in the next budget cycle. On 2018 prices, allocation to the three Baltic states and the V4 of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia will be less by €37,5bn between 2021-2027 compared to the current budget. The Commission is explaining this fact with arguments that the region has succeeded economically so much that less assistance is required, but many observers - including the governments in Warsaw and Budapest - see it as punishments for the governments that are openly fighting with the Commission over a wide range of issues, including the judiciary reforms and migrants' quotas.

"We are ready to seek a compromise, but Central Europe should be treated fairly against other priorities and regions", said Konrad Szymanski, Deputy-Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland. "Poland is on the path of economic development and the role of transfers from the EU budget will decrease, however we do not give our consent for budgetary revolution." He called the proposal unacceptable.

Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said that the Polish economy will become less and less dependent on the European Union funds. Morawiecki added that due to the huge neglect of previous governments, Poland lacked the infrastructure and therefore the government would "fight very hard for EU's structural funds and the common agricultural policy funds."

Poland has criticized the introduction of new criteria and they fear it is another way for the EU executive to divert money from them to southern, crisis-ridden EU countries. But the Commission warns that since regions in Hungary and especially Poland have performed so well in terms of GDP growth, the two countries would have suffered even bigger cuts if 100 percent of the allocation would have been based on GDP per capita criteria. Poland's GDP grew by 3% in 2016, 4,6 percent in 2017 and is projected to expand by 4,3% according to the Commission's forecast compared with Italy's economy lagging by 0,9% in 2016, 1,5% in 2017 and 1,5% in 2018.

The calculations of Poland's Ministry of Investment and Economic Development show that that CAP funds for Poland may be reduced by 15 percent.

Burning Problem

Poland became a magnet for European Union waste materials in the wake of a ban on sales to China. Since 2015 the amount of permissions for trash import to Poland has almost doubled. Private investors have opened dozens of new dumping grounds (often calling them recycling units only because it is easier to get a license this way). By promoting trash import and waste dumping instead of waste reduction and recycling programmes Poland became the Europe's dumpster, in words of Nowoczesna.

Environment Minister Henryk Kowalczyk acknowledged there were about 120 illegal landfills in the country, which imports about 400.000 tons of waste per year. The value of illegal imports alone is estimated at some PLN 1,5 billion (€340 million), he said.

The easiest way to get rid of all the waste is by burning them. Not only tones of trash, including the dangerous ones, disappear, but also it brings the insurance money. In last two months almost 60 uncontrolled fires took over dumping grounds causing putting in danger health and life of the locals.

The problem became a national issue when it was picked up by media and the opposition parties were accusing the government of risking Polish people's life. TV stations in Poland have been showing footage of huge clouds of smoke billowing into the air from various dump sites, as firefighters try to contain the situation. In many cases, local residents were told to stay indoors and keep windows shut, and a primary school in the village of Wszedzien was closed for a few days in central Poland while a nearby dump was burning. The government had to tighten trash-import rules.

Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said: "The dumping-ground fires appear to be "a coordinated action. There are all kinds of reasons to assume this isn't a coincidence." He added that relaxing regulations had contributed to the problem and announced at a news conference in Warsaw that he has tasked his environment minister to prepare new legislation in the next two weeks to "eliminate these pathologies." Minister Kowalczyk said he would present a set of new regulations next month that will increase inspection and surveillance of garbage sites. The time the garbage can be stored will be shortened from the current three years to one year, in a move that will prevent companies from piling it up.

Culture

Triumph in Cannes

Oscar-winning director Pawel Pawlikowski won best director award at the Cannes Film Festival.

His Cannes submission "[Cold War](#)" is a tempestuous love story based on his parents' life set on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Critics swooned over the film, shot in black-and-white with a sumptuous jazz soundtrack.

Pawlikowski won his Academy Award for "Ida" in 2015, a haunting and controversial drama which lays bare the ghosts of the Nazi occupation of the country and post-war Stalinist rule, with a novice nun as the central character. (Pawlikowski learnt when he was a teenager that his grandmother was Jewish and had died in Auschwitz.) The difficult topic of the film brought to the cinemas in Poland only 100.000 spectators. Six times less than in France.

Pawlikowski was born in Warsaw, in 1957. He left then communist Poland for Britain when he was 14 with his mother, a ballerina turned university lecturer, after his parents divorced. He studied philosophy and literature in London and Oxford before making a series of extraordinary documentaries for the BBC in the late 1980s as Eastern Europe shook off communism. He worked mostly in the UK, where he earned two BAFTA awards, including one in 2000 for "Last Resort" followed up in 2004 by "My Summer of Love," a bittersweet lesbian love drama set in Yorkshire.

Polish premiere: June 6th.

Germany and Poland

Award for Polish Lutheran Church

The presiding bishop of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession (Lutheran) in Poland Jerzy Samiec has been awarded the Grand Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany in recognition of his contribution to Polish-German reconciliation and cooperation between churches across country borders.

Accepting the award, Presiding Bishop Samiec discussed the challenges that faced previous generations in the fight for independence and recovery from war. Wounded by the tragedies of WWII they were "looking for a way to live after all that happened [...] That generation had to seek mutual forgiveness, as well as paths of reconciliation, building these paths of reconciliation. It is important that these roads were built."

NS2 under construction in Germany

Polish public radio reported that construction work on the German section of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline is now officially under way in the northern German town of Lubmin on the Baltic coast. The Stralsund Mining Authority in the German state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania has issued permission for this work.

Polish Deputy-Minister of Foreign Affairs protested again against the pipeline in an article posted on the politico.eu website. He said that the planned gas link "is a bad deal for the European Union and a bad deal for Ukraine, and it should not go ahead."

Environmental group Client Earth says it has submitted a complaint to a Finnish administrative court in a bid to halt the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline through Finnish waters, since it poses a serious risk to marine life. Also, German environmental protection organization Naturschutzbund Deutschland appealed to a court in Greifswald, northeastern Germany, to stop, at least temporarily, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline from being built.

Polls & trends

Support for political parties:

IBRiS for "Fakt", 11.05.2018

PiS (ECR)	36,9%
PO-N (EPP-ALDE)	33,4%
SLD (S&D)	10%
Kukiz'15	5,7%
PSL (EPP)	5,5%

And if the parties run separately, IBRiS, 30.05.2018:

PiS (ECR)	36%
PO (EPP)	28%
Kukiz'15	6%
Nowoczesna (ALDE)	5%
SLD (S&D)	5%

Support for the disabled people protest:

IBRiS for "Rzeczpospolita", 15.05.2018

Do you support the demand of PLN 500 monthly allowance for adult disabled people who are not able to take care of themselves?

Yes	79%
No	14,8%

Do you support rising the benefits for disabled people to the level of the lowest benefits?

Yes	83,2%
No	7,8%

Poland-Germany Barometer 2018

Should Polish-German relations be focused on the future instead of the past?

Germany	70%
Poland	60% (+13% compared with 2011)

Do you have a positive attitude towards the neighboring country?

Germany	29% (+1% compared with 2016)
Poland	56% (+3%)

Do you think German-Polish relations are good or very good?

Germany 31%

Poland 64%

Do you identify yourself with Europe?

Germany 54%

Poland 73%

About the author



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