INTERVIEWS 13.07.2020

'The close election result is quite surprising'

Ernst Hillebrand in Warsaw on the re-election of PiS candidate Andrzej Duda and the opposition's good performance

Read this interview in German.

The candidate of the national-conservative PiS, Andrzej Duda, was re-elected as Polish president on Sunday. The result was close: only about 3 percentage points separate Duda from his liberal opponent Rafał Trzaskowski. Were the elections free and fair?

There is no doubt that the elections were fair and free. The postponing of the elections – which originally should have taken place in May – has largely removed the conditions to which the campaigners would have been subjected under corona restrictions. Voter mobilisation in these elections has been massive: with 68 per cent voter turnout, a new record for presidential elections was achieved. Andrzej Duda received 10.4 million votes, more than any other presidential candidate since 1991, and Trzaskowski also received significantly more votes than the PO candidate in the elections five years ago. Polish society is enormously politicised, but also extremely polarised.

And can the result nonetheless be considered a success for the liberal forces in Poland?

Trzaskowski's result is indeed a success. He reactivated opposition voters in a very short period of time and led a very good election campaign. The assumption that he, as mayor of Warsaw, would not be able to speak to voters in the countryside and in the smaller towns proved to be incorrect. He probably only made one major mistake when he refused to take part in the presidential debate on state television. It would have given him the chance to reach even the one half of Poland that is not hostile to PiS. This way, he could have won a few more votes.

The outcome of the elections was almost as close as 2015. Back then, Duda also had a slight lead of 3 percentage points. Does that mean that the lines conflict in Polish society have merely become more entrenched since then?

The close election result is quite surprising. In itself, the conditions were favourable for a smooth re-election of Duda: Poland's economy has been booming for years, the country is growing far more than the EU average, unemployment has fallen sharply, wages are rising and the government's social policy has significantly improved the living conditions of many poorer families. For years, Duda has continuously topped the lists of the most trustworthy or popular politicians. And then the country has also come through the corona crisis very well, with few deaths and the smallest economic slump in the EU.

Accordingly, it looked like the incumbent would be re-elected without any problems for a long time. The close result, similar to that in 2015, simply shows that Poland has two entrenched political camps facing each other, with little exchange and movement between them: The Poland of PiS, which is one of the last real people's parties in Europe, a cross-class and cross-milieu alliance of ordinary people – workers, small and medium-sized employees, small entrepreneurs, farmers, inhabitants of villages and small towns – and the Poland of the anti-PiS camp, which also includes different social milieus, but is generally better-paid, better-educated and more urban than PiS supporters.

Can the two camps still be brought together at all?

The question of whether the camps can still be brought together is indeed interesting. The candidates' strange "TV duel" last week marks a perfect symbol for the way these two camps take shape: There was no joint debate, but two parallel monologues on two different TV channels, each with an empty platform for the other candidate. One can only hope for the country that the situation will gradually ease now that there's no election in the foreseeable future.

Both sides really need to have a think: The PiS about why, despite its economic and social successes, it's not succeeding in overcoming the aversions of a considerable part of liberals and the middle-class, but also of the liberal Christian Poland. And the PO about why it has now lost the sixth national election in a row. During the election campaign, Trzaskowski had declared that he wanted to overcome Poland' division and that was quite willing not to touch certain political decisions made by PiS – for example in social policy. That's probably the path the PO would have to take to be able to win a majority again.

PiS can now govern without restraint for at least three years – until the next parliamentary elections in 2023 – and further consolidate its power. What's at the top of the party's political agenda?

That's a mystery. The answer depends crucially on the forces that will prevail in PiS and the right-wing camp: the hardliners or the more moderate forces. There are various different assessments. In any case, the renewal of the party's leadership structures is due in autumn. The question is also whether Jarosław Kaczyński will continue as party chairman, or whether he will allow for a rejuvenation, with him as the "old" or honorary chairman. So far, the 71-year-old has held the camps together and, for example, enabled the rise of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki within PiS.

Morawiecki stands for a pragmatic course that focuses primarily on economic development. But of course there are fears in Polish society that the ideological warriors in the right-wing camp will now push their agenda further: With restructuring the justice sector, the Polonisation in the media landscape and a confrontational course towards the EU and the liberal-governed big cities. In this case, it will be interesting to see how the President behaves. In the second term of office, the president is always freer than in the first, as he does not have to seek re-election – for which he needs the support of a party apparatus. Duda could therefore increasingly act on his own in the coming years.

Since PiS came to power, Poland's relationship with the EU has been tense – to put it mildly. After Duda's victory, can we expect continuity here?

Yes, that is to be expected. The government will not be prepared to make many concessions. It has a clear democratic mandate and has now been confirmed by the voters in three elections with record turnout – the European elections, the parliamentary elections and the presidential elections. The Polish government will continue to defend its vision of the EU – a kind of De Gaulle's "Europe of the Fatherlands". On the other hand, the political actors in Warsaw know exactly what they get from the EU. That's why, I would expect a kind of utilitarian pragmatism in dealing with Brussels in the coming years: If in doubt, they won't let it break down. Poland's enormously pro-European society would not forgive its rulers.

This interview was conducted by Daniel Kopp.



Ernst Hillebrand

Budapest

Dr Ernst Hillebrand is head of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung office in Budapest. He was previously Head of the foundation's International Policy Analysis Unit, the Central and Eastern Europe Unit and Head of the Warsaw, Paris, London and Rome offices.

-