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The corona campaign

The Polish Law and Justice party sees an opportunity in the wave of coronavirus infections to further consolidate power

The recent outbreak of Covid-19 has until now cost more than 50,000 lives and brought uncertainty and fear – emotions that can strongly affect political attitudes and decisions. Apart from the fact that this pandemic has a serious political impact, it is also politically instrumentalised. Recent developments in Poland are a striking example of how the coronavirus leads to unpredictable political dynamics, challenging the integrity of political leadership.

Poland is facing a presidential election in May this year. All eyes are on the country because of the open confrontation with the European Union over a rapid democratic backsliding: compromising the rule-of-law and bending the judiciary to the political will by the current national-conservative government, led by the Law and Justice (PiS) party. But undemocratic – or 'illiberal' – as they might be, the authorities acted immediately when the health risk emerged: schools, public institutions, restaurants were closed and borders monitored.

Still, the public healthcare system remains vulnerable after years of neglect and financial collapse. Doctors and other medical staff work without enough safety equipment and no sufficient access to testing. As a result, some hospitals were contaminated and closed, more than 500 healthcare staff got infected, 4,500 remain in quarantine. Simultaneously, the government-controlled public TV channels broadcasts the speeches of governing lawmakers, slamming the EU response to coronavirus and taking credit for successfully containing the epidemic.

The newly introduced 'state of epidemic' means even more restrictions in public life and practically the end of active campaigning. While other presidential candidates observe the social distancing rule and have put their campaigns on hold, the incumbent president Andrzej Duda travels across the country and makes numerous public appearances. The opposition accuses him of running an unfair campaign and labels him the

'corona candidate'. Duda responds that he simply does his duty as the head of state.

In February, his reelection was not at all obvious. Today, according to polls, Duda gets closer to a victory in the first round. Despite the aggravating situation, the election is still scheduled for 10 May. Legal experts express skepticism toward holding the ballot under a practical lockdown, medical authorities ring alarm bells facing the already dire situation. Regardless, the government sticks to the date.

Political calculation first

In Poland, more than 30 million people are eligible to vote. On top of that, Poles abroad can also cast a ballot. For the 2019 parliamentary election, 23 extraterritorial polling stations were created in Germany alone. People's determination to vote was so strong that, at some polling stations, they queued for hours. In the current circumstances, the idea to hold a public event, let alone a popular election, seems ludicrous.

This, however, does not discourage the governing party and leads to absurd situations and contradicting signals sent by the authorities. Further restrictions as well as severe penalties for violating the conditions of mandatory quarantine are being introduced. But while the health minister warns against the increasing risk of infection, both the prime minister and the incumbent president claim that as long as it's possible to shop one can also go vote.

According to the polls, a vast majority of citizens want the vote postponed.

There is a good reason why PiS is so determined to hold the presidential election now. The prognosis for the future months is either bad or worse than bad. Europe is most certainly facing a severe recession – and Poland is no exception. Early forecasts estimate negative GDP growth and unemployment exceeding 10 per cent by the end of the year. But it's not only the deteriorating economic situation that haunts PiS.

Since the party has made generous social policy programmes its signature reforms, the question emerges which of these measures – child allowance, extra pensions, increased minimum wage – will survive the recession. Therefore, the economic slowdown caused by the coronavirus outbreak might be a double shock for Polish households: first coming from the labour market, secondly from the social transfers they relied on. No candidate wants to compete for re-election in such circumstances.

Election to be or not to be?

It's fair to say that PiS is desperately racing with time. Their lawmakers anxiously follow how the epidemic develops while fiddling with safety measures not too restrictive, in order to legally hold the election. In a radio interview, the Commissioner for Human Rights, the last independent institution in Polish public administration, criticised the government for not having yet introduced the state of emergency, which would effectively halt the ballot.

According to the polls, a vast majority of citizens want the vote postponed. More and more mayors and local authorities rebel against the government and refuse to organise the necessary infrastructure: polling stations and their staffing, in fear for putting public health at risk. There even is a serious rift within the governing coalition, as the leader of one of the junior coalition partners and deputy prime minister, refused to support further preparations for elections and stepped down in protest. The situation is on razor's edge.

According to projections, Covid-19 will peak in Poland in late April. The health minister seems to be under enormous political pressure and will announce his recommendation only after the Easter break. Meanwhile, against both truth and logic, PiS tirelessly wades towards the presidential vote on 10 May, now endorsing the idea of a postal vote for all (on Monday before the Easter break, the Sejm quickly initiated a legislative process for a relevant bill proposal, passing it on to the Senate) or considering the use of the military to organise and carry out the election. Clearly, their political calculation sees an opportunity in the wave of coronavirus infections and related extraordinary measures, allowing to crush the competition and further consolidate power for the coming years.



Maria Skóra
Berlin

Dr Maria Skóra is a Policy Fellow at the German think tank *Das*

Progressive Zentrum. She was previously a research fellow at the *Institut für Europäische Politik*. She holds an MA in sociology and a PhD in Economics.