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The tectonic shifts in Poland's political landscape

The adoption of EU funds have widened the cracks in Poland's ruling coalition — and shown how the Left poses a challenge to the liberal establishment

Poland's political landscape is currently experiencing a moderate earthquake. On 30 April, the parliamentary group of the Left (*Polska Lewica*) reached an agreement with Jarosław Kaczyński's ruling right-wing conservative PiS (Law and Justice) party on the conditions under which they will agree to adopting the EU budget and the EU recovery fund (NextGenerationEU) in the *Sejm*, the Polish lower house of parliament. The immediate reactions of the liberal establishment, according to an opinion piece in that day's edition of the newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*, were 'almost hysterical'.

In particular, the former foreign minister Radosław Sikorski very decisively crossed the line into the realms of infamy and idiocy. The current Member of European Parliament from the *Civic Platform* party actually compared the agreement to the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939. The fact that *Lewica* and the *PiS*, as the largest governing party, reached an agreement lies at the heart of the supposed scandal: the Left voted in the *Sejm* for the EU budget and the 'national recovery plan' on the use of funds from the EU recovery fund. In return, the government is obliged to integrate six demands of the Left into the recovery plan.

Firstly, at least 30 per cent of the funds are to be channelled through local self-governments (Poland's big cities in particular are governed by the opposition). Secondly, 75,000 affordable rental flats are to be built from the EU funds. Thirdly, €800 million are to be invested in district hospitals to strengthen healthcare all over the country. Fourthly, €300 million should to go to sectors that suffered more than others from the Covid pandemic (especially hospitality and transport). Fifthly, the spending plan of the recovery plan has to be presented and published in detail. Sixthly, spending patterns are to be overseen by a monitoring committee to curb nepotism and cronyism.

A dangerous political gamble

The background to the agreement is the hitherto unresolved fate of the EU budget in the *Sejm*. Although Poland would receive up to €171bn from the combined resources of the EU budget and the EU recovery fund (including credit lines) in the years up to 2027, it was not clear until recently whether the adoption of the EU budget in the *Sejm* was assured. This is because the governing coalition around the PiS does not have a majority on its own. One of the two smaller coalition partners, the very small national conservative party *Solidarna Polska* of Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro, does not want to agree to the EU budget because, in their opinion, the rule of law criteria associated with it will undermine Poland's sovereignty.

Should the EU budget have not been approved in the Sejm, it would have had repercussions for the whole of the EU and cause great economic damage to the country.

For a long time it looked as if the adoption would nevertheless be unproblematic because the 'pro-European' opposition would not withdraw its approval. A few months ago, the Chairperson of the *Civic Platform*, Borys Budka, declared the adoption of the EU budget to be an element of the 'Polish reason of state'. In recent weeks, however, the member of the European People's Party (EPP) began to stealthily back away from this position. Instead – at least according to the way it was portrayed in various media reports – the idea of triggering a government crisis through not approving the EU budget bill and forcing snap elections gained the upper hand.

With its initiative, *Lewica* has now undermined the basis for such a high-stakes gamble. Should the EU budget have not been approved in the *Sejm*, it would have had repercussions for the whole of the EU and cause great economic damage to the country. According to an opinion piece in the liberal-conservative daily newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*, which is usually not very fond of the Left, *Lewica* has tried to show with this decision that 'politicians are in politics to make things happen for the people, and not just concern themselves with themselves'.

Lewica is in tune with the voters

Moreover, *Lewica*'s approach is clearly in line with the expectations of the Polish population as a whole: in a representative poll published on 28 April, 66 per cent of respondents were in favour of the opposition adopting the EU budget together with the government.

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The real reason for the hyperventilating reaction of both opposition EPP member parties, *Civic Platform* and the *Polish People's Party*, may then have less to do with the substance of the agreement itself. On the contrary, both parties should be glad that the basis for any tactical voting gamble has been undermined. A failure to approve the EU budget because of the abstention of two EPP parties (together with the opposition of extreme right-wing and ultra-nationalist forces) would have unleashed a pan-European political storm that would certainly have engulfed the already battered *Civic Platform* party leadership.

Instead, the nervous reaction shows that the civic liberal opposition forces have thoroughly lost their way politically. After losing six elections in a row since 2014, it's clear that *Civic Platform*'s strategy of 'total opposition' has failed. The subordination of all other political criteria to the mantra 'the PiS must go' ran the risk of turning into a total lack of responsibility in the case of the EU budget. Now, *Civic Platform* is also beginning to lose its traditional dominance among anti-PiS forces. It has to stand by and watch as the Polish Left re-establishes itself as an independent actor in the political landscape and successfully appeals to parts of the left-liberal metropolitan milieu. In the centre, the *Civic Platform* – which currently stands at only 16 to 20 per cent in the polls – is being rivalled by the new movement of liberal Catholic TV presenter Szymon Hołownia.

A recently published survey on the voting intentions of young and first-time voters must be even more worrying for *Civic Platform:* 49 per cent stated that they would vote for *Lewica*, but only three per cent for *Civic Platform* and zero per cent (!) for the second EPP party, the *Polish People's Party*. With these results, the Left is also reaping the fruits of its clear stance on abortion, which the *Civic Platform* could not because of its conservative wing.

The polls are also significant because the question of snap elections is indeed on the table. The tensions in the government coalition between moderate Christian Democratic-oriented forces and nationalist-fundamentalist Catholic circles are becoming more and more evident. As the Justice Minister's minor party *Solidarna Polska* opposed the PiS in the vote on the EU budget, the Polish government reached a point that in any other country would be considered the end of the coalition. Now, the question is no longer be whether there will be early elections. The

only question is when Jarosław Kaczyński thinks the time is right.



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