

# The Polish opposition – an attempt to destabilize the state

Last weekend and this week, some demonstrations of the opposition took place in Warsaw and some other Polish cities. They were part of the strategy of the “total opposition”, which is based on “streets and abroad” – as stated by the leader of Civic Platform (PO), Grzegorz Schetyna, after the lost elections in 2015.

News on the demonstrations were disseminated by the domestic and foreign media, but – similarly like in case of the previous street protests of the opposition – both reasons and the scale of those demonstrations were presented in a way suggesting that something worrying and undemocratic had been happening in Poland. However, the reality looks quite different.

## Spontaneous protests or planned provocation?

Some domestic and foreign media presented the recent protests as spontaneous, notably those on last Friday and Saturday (16 and 17 December). However, the Saturday demonstration was registered already a few days before. Also, the statement of Eugeniusz Kłopotek – a politician of the opposition PSL party – calls into question their spontaneity. On Friday morning, in the public television’s program “Guest of the morning”, he said: *“Today, you will see what happens. (...) Again, there will be huge insolence, fight, booing, shouting and offending each other. (...) I am afraid that it may end in fisticuffs in the current term of the Parliament.”* On Friday evening, his predictions materialized.

It may also be surprising that the opposition protest to defend free media did not start on 14 December, i.e. when the Chancellery of the Sejm proposed the new rules on the media in the Parliament, but only on 16 December – moreover, at the plenary sitting unrelated to the media, i.e. during the budgetary debate.

The dates of the recent opposition protests do not seem coincidental since 13, 16 and 17 December are the anniversaries of very important and tragic events in Polish history – the introduction of martial law and the massacres of miners and workers in Silesia and Pomerania in 1970 and 1981. In this way, the opposition tries to compare the current situation in Poland to the communist era, although it is clear – also for the opposition – that they have nothing to do with each other. Organizing protest on those days confirms that they are planned rather than spontaneous. In fact, the Sunday demonstration of government supporters looked more spontaneous – unplanned and organized in response to the opposition demonstrations.

## Official reason: “free media”

On 14 December, the Chancellery of the Sejm presented a proposal to change the organization of work of the media in the Parliament, e.g. creating a modern Media Center, a TV studio in the Sejm (the lower house of the Polish Parliament), the accreditation of Permanent Correspondents Parliamentary, etc. It was announced that journalists would have unlimited access to the Media Center, which would be the key place for cooperation of the media and politicians, and in which the latest technology would be applied.

The changes were considered necessary since the current activities of the media in the Polish Parliament are not governed by clear and precise rules, and communication between the media and Members of Parliament (MPs) is often chaotic and random. The proposed changes were intended at allowing journalists and MPs to carry out their professional duties in a more professional and comfortable way than today. Moreover, the new rules would provide greater pluralism and equal access to the politicians by the media, keeping in mind that the current situation is discriminatory for many editors, notably the smaller ones who are unable to compete with big media corporations.

The proposed amendments were also aimed at making the working conditions of Polish journalists similar to those prevailing in other European parliaments, where the work of the media is carried out according to



strict rules and principles. Changes in organizing the work of journalists were inspired by practices functioning in the EU, e.g. in the European Parliament in Brussels or in the Parliaments of France, Italy, the Czech Republic, or Hungary. It was noted that the proposals on the work of the media in the Polish Parliament are much less restrictive than in other EU countries and in the European Parliament.

However, those proposals were considered by the opposition as an attempt to restrict freedom of the media in the Polish Parliament, or even an “attack on free media”, and obviously the ruling party (Law and Justice, or PiS) was accused of it. Therefore, the opposition decided to defend the allegedly threatened media and organized a demonstration using the slogan “Free media in the Parliament”. However, one could have serious doubts whether the real purpose of the opposition demonstration was “defending the media”, as evidenced by the fact that some participants of the demonstration, who protested on Friday in front of the Sejm, tried in various (often aggressive) ways to prevent a reporter of the public television – regarded by them as the “government television” – from reporting live the ongoing demonstration.

It should be noted who attended the demonstration “in defense of free media” on Saturday – inter alia, politicians of the former ruling coalition (PO and PSL) as well as post-communist SLD. Those political parties virtually monopolized the media market in Poland during the past years (when the PO-PSL coalition ruled the country) and were able to influence both the public television and the largest private television stations. It resulted in the lack of media pluralism and very one-sided information addressed to the public, i.e. almost uncritical support for the then ruling coalition (PO-PSL) and aggressive fighting against the then opposition (PiS). Several independent journalists were fired, and many of them were under surveillance. It is worth mentioning that no EU institution regarded that situation as a threat to Polish democracy.

Generally, protests organized by the opposition to defend free media – in the situation where media pluralism is currently considerably greater than during the time of the PO-PSL coalition – are rather unconvincing. Similarly, demonstrations of the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (KOD) are not credible since they want to defend allegedly threatened democracy in Poland, while Polish citizens – including the opposition – enjoy all democratic rights and freedoms (free elections, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, etc). A kind of hypocrisy of the opposition was also uncritical defending Andrzej Rzepliński, who for the past year – as the Chairman of the Constitutional Tribunal – often breached the law and the Constitution, but he was presented by the opposition media as a defender of the constitutional order in Poland (his term of office expired on 19 December, and on 21 December, Julia Przyłębska was appointed as a new Chairman, which is a hope to put an end to the constitutional crisis and bring the situation back to normal).

## **Actual reason: defending privileges**

If the defense of democratic values (e.g. free media) is not the real reason for organizing anti-government demonstrations by the opposition, the question arises: what is it in fact? Considering who inspires those demonstrations (beneficiaries of the political transformation in Poland and the system established after 1989, including people of the former communist regime), it seems clear that it is about maintaining the status quo, i.e. numerous privileges and benefits for a small group of the society. Such an oligarchic system combining politics, business and media functioned for 8 years under the PO-PSL coalition, but last year, it was removed from power (and privileges) in democratic elections. Therefore, the beneficiaries of that situation – who still have difficulty with accepting the election results – seek to overthrow the Law and Justice government that wants to limit or eliminate those privileges.

In this context, it should be noted that the Parliament (Sejm) planned to adopt on 16 December the Act aimed at cutting pensions of officers serving in the communist Security Service in the period 1944-1990. The purpose of the Act is not to punish former communist security officers, but depriving them of unfair privileges, i.e. high pension benefits.



The first attempt to reduce pensions of former communist security officers was undertaken in 2009, but it was not effective enough. As a result, they continued to receive very high pensions (often more than PLN 10,000), substantially higher than the average pension (currently, about PLN 2,000), which was perceived by a majority of the Polish society as a blatant injustice. It was particularly shocking that former communist security officers received much higher pensions than former activists of the anti-communist opposition.

Thus, the real reason fueling the opposition activities last weekend seems to be the following: a desire to prevent the Sejm from adopting the Act cutting cash benefits paid by the state to a privileged social group. To this end, the opposition parties (mainly PO and Modern) decided to occupy the plenary hall podium and the Sejm Speaker's chair. An excuse for this unparliamentary behaviour was the decision of the Sejm Speaker to exclude one of the MPs (PO) from the budgetary debate for his disruptive behaviour. By the way, in the previous term of the Polish Parliament, the Sejm Speaker (from PO) also excluded some opposition MPs from debates, but it never resulted in as hysterical reactions as currently (the opposition MPs, who had been occupying the plenary hall since 16 December, announced that the occupation would be continued until the next plenary sitting of the Sejm starting on 11 January).

The Act was, however, adopted by the Sejm as planned, i.e. on 16 December – in another parliamentary hall (the Column Hall), following the decision of the Sejm Speaker. Then, on 20 December, it was also adopted by the Senate. According to the Act, reduced pension benefits will not exceed the average pension paid by the Social Insurance Institution - ZUS (as of June 2016, the average pension amounted to PLN 2,053, pension for incapacity for work – PLN 1,543, and family pension – PLN 1,725). Reduced benefits will be paid from 1 October 2017 onwards. The above cut of pensions, which affects about 32,000 people, is expected to bring annually over PLN 500 million of savings in the state budget.

Of course, attempts to block Parliament's works could not be openly conducted as aimed at defending pension privileges for a small group of disgraced people. Therefore, the opposition used the convenient and catchy slogan of "defending free media". A similar mechanism of reversed meaning is being applied on the KOD demonstrations, which take place under the slogan of "defending democracy", but in fact they are an expression of enormous frustration of privileged social groups that have lost various benefits as a result of democratic elections (e.g. well-paid positions in state-owned companies, state agencies and institutions, grants from the state budget, public procurements, high pensions, as well as the authorities' tolerance for conducting fraudulent business, tax evasion, etc).

## **On behalf of the society or in own interest?**

As regards the scale of the demonstrations last weekend, some Polish and foreign media spoke of "thousands of people" protesting in many Polish cities, which was to suggest a massive public support for the activities of the opposition. According to the authorities of Warsaw, about 2,000 people gathered before the Parliament. However, according to other sources, several hundred people protested in Warsaw. In a few other Polish cities, there were usually less than 100 protesting people in each.

Therefore, it is hard to recognize those demonstrations as widespread and representing a large part of the Polish society. Moreover, the credibility of the authorities of Warsaw in estimating the number of participants of street demonstrations was seriously challenged in May 2016, when they estimated that the opposition demonstration gathered 240,000, although almost all other sources (pro-government and opposition) estimated that about 50,000 people took part in it (it was the largest and the only opposition demonstration of such a scale). Those inflated estimates should not be surprising, keeping in mind that the current parliamentary opposition holds the power in Warsaw (Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, PO Vice-Chair, is the President of Warsaw).

A declining number of people participating in the opposition demonstrations may suggest that the Polish society is more and more tired of a destructive and quarrelsome style of the opposition, notably that they



have nothing constructive to offer – only hysteria and further demonstrations. Also, it seems that the Poles begin to realize manipulations of opposition leaders who pretend to be martyrs fighting for social interests, but in fact they treat the society instrumentally, and cynically use it to fight for their own interests.

## **Destabilizing Poland means destabilizing the EU**

As mentioned, the opposition seeks to overthrow the democratically elected government, seize power and restore – favourable for themselves, but not necessarily for the society – the oligarchic system existing in the period 2007-2015. The opposition wants to achieve it at all costs, regardless of the interests of Poland and the Polish society, or Poland's image abroad.

The events of 16 and 17 December 2016, as well as recent days and weeks, have shown that the “total opposition” begins to move towards increasingly dangerous and irresponsible actions aimed at anarchy and destabilizing the state. This includes, for example, paralyzing the Parliament by occupying the podium or the entire plenary hall, which could make the Sejm unable to adopt the Budget Act for 2017 (and this, in turn, could lead to early parliamentary elections). Equally dangerous are the recent calls of opposition leaders to “withdraw from obedience to authorities” and even to use force against the government, as openly suggested by former presidents – Lech Wałęsa and Bronisław Komorowski. In recent days, some physical assaults on Law and Justice's ministers and MPs took place. It is evident that the opposition demonstrations are becoming more and more aggressive and focused on the confrontation, including the acts of violence. It seems that opposition activists, who on 13 December took part in the anti-government demonstration under the slogan “Stop the devastation of Poland”, should consider it the context of their own activities.

Anti-government actions are being undertaken by the opposition also because they are encouraged by the European institutions (European Commission, European Parliament, the Venice Commission), which tolerate such activities. In addition, those institutions conduct their own actions against the Polish government. It seems that the role of the EU institutions should be acting as an impartial arbiter seeking de-escalation of conflicts in Member States. However, as regards Poland, the EU institutions might be regarded as a party of the conflict, clearly supporting only one side of the political dispute (the opposition). This clearly leads to the escalation of the conflict, which begins to take dangerous forms.

It is understandable that the left-liberal EU elite does not like a conservative government in one or another Member State. Nevertheless, one could expect that the EU elite would act responsibly and in the interest of the entire EU. In this context, it should be kept in mind that Poland is the sixth largest country in the EU and a potential destabilization of the situation in Poland will certainly have an impact on the situation in the EU as a whole. And, as it is known, the situation in the EU has already been seriously destabilized by the migrant crisis, terrorist attacks, the constantly extended state of emergency in France, etc. Thus, creating an artificial problem in Poland is not needed, keeping in mind that the EU faces currently a number of real problems (migrant crisis, Brexit and other disintegration trends, geopolitical situation, etc).

Last but not least, a hypothetical but very important question. If subsequent, increasingly aggressive and confrontational actions of the Polish opposition – still tolerated or tacitly supported by the EU institutions – result in bloodshed, will the opposition and the EU elite take responsibility for this?

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