

Potential Stability - Poland after the End of the 4th Republic

Stephan Raabe

The victory of the conservative Law and Order party and the power takeover by the Kaczyński twins after the parliamentary and presidential elections in Poland late in 2005 fired the starting gun for the so-called 4th republic. Its stated objective was to re-establish social and historic justice and to combat corruption, the communist cadre system, and a decaying society. In fact, all that the coalition government formed by the Law and Order (PiS) party, the Self-defence party, and the League of Polish Families had to give the country were two years of instability, bickering among untrustworthy partners, and scandal. Its foreign policy was marked by inexperience and inferiority complexes, pretending all the while to defend the country's interests and especially to confront Germany's hegemonial ambitions in Europe.

The turning point came only when the coalition broke up and early elections were called in 2007. Although the PiS gained some votes, the winner was the civic platform PO led by Donald Tusk which now furnishes the government together with the Polish Peoples' Party (PLS). The strongest force among the opposition is the PiS. Further parties in parliament include the Left and Democrats (LiD) and one member representing the German minority.

It appears that the Poles, fed up with the bickering of the period from 2005 to 2007, yearn for stability and wish for a government that can be taken seriously. Consequently, the Tusk government will need to rebuild confidence at home and abroad and to brush up the reputation of Poland's politics. However, there are obstacles in the way, such as, for example, the difficulties that hamper cooperation between the president's office that is still held by the PiS and the government that is led by the PO, not least among these being the personal rivalry between Donald Tusk and Lech Kaczyński. Currently, so pollsters say, the PO enjoys an approval rate of more than 50%, while its competitor, the PiS, ranges around 30%.

Another test for the new team lies in practical politics: While democracy and market economy are firmly rooted in Poland by now, the country's performance, according to the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, is faltering in the fields of political and social integration, social order, and sustainability. High economic growth rates, a sound national currency, and noticeably declining unemployment are confronted by challenges like the management index crash. What is needed now are thorough reforms of the tax, social, legal, and administrative systems. An excessive budget deficit, persistent poverty, and/or the widening gap between rich and poor in Poland are giving rise to concern. The large number of persons who receive government benefits con-

stitutes a structural problem. The employment rate must be pushed up. The unbroken flow of emigrants shows that many young Poles lack a perspective at home. To dissolve the amalgamation of the state and the economy, privatization will be indispensable. Finally, the government will have to take up arms against corruption, for the country ranks third but last within the EU on the Transparency International index. The government needs to take action in many areas, and quickly at that. For the elections to the European Parliament in 2009 will be the first yardstick by which the performance of Donald Tusk and his team will be measured.

European Policy is still a source of dispute among the parties. Poland, whose people show far more confidence in the EU than their government, still has to find a place for itself within the Union. Which course is the country actually following in its European policy? Is it aiming, like Great Britain, for a Europe of nations which favours a liberal market? Or will it work, side by side with Germany and France, in the common institutions to build a political union that strengthens the supra-national element? Even its partners cannot see at the moment which way Poland will trim its sails.

Poland's European policy is closely intertwined with its German policy in political, economic, and psychological terms. Relations between the two countries are still far from normal. There is a lack of mutual understanding but no lack of great expectations. In 2009, the 70th anniversary of the start of the war will be commemorated as well as the 20th anniversary of the transformation. The new agenda, which is overdue, will certainly have to find space for history.

The instability of Poland's party system is a problem, marked as it is by a high degree of volatility. After the recent elections, in which the failure of the populist movements became apparent, a new perspective seems to be emerging. A four-party system is taking shape in which the PSL will play an important part as an optional coalition partner for the three other parties. The new parties are deeply flawed: Inactive party organizations, the lack of a sound membership backing, high voter fluctuation, concentration on leaders, vague programmes, favouritism, and subordination of the common good to group interests all form part of the picture.

Beyond the political parties, civil society, the media, and political culture are important for the consolidation of democracy. While democracy and market economy are firmly rooted in Poland now, the development of civil society is dragging its feet. As the 'organ which compensates the dynamism that emanates from the market and the state', as Herfried Münkler put it, its profile is relatively weak, although the Catholic Church does much to offset that weakness. Next to inadequate funding, the obstacles that hamper the development of the 'third sector' consist of internal weaknesses including inferior or-

ganization, lack of membership, disregard for ethical standards, the prevalence of oligarchic and clientelist structures, governmentalization, and commercialization. What is more, the legal and administrative framework for promoting the sector is backward as well.

That there is no such thing as an alarming degree of societal deprivation in Poland is partly due to the Catholic Church, a force that shapes the national culture and is highly institutionalized. Without its active involvement it will be impossible either to build a civil society or to consolidate democracy.

As the 'fourth branch of government', the Polish media are also confronted by new tasks. In many cases, their coverage can in no way be described as independent, qualified, and critical. It is revealing that, according to Reporters without Frontiers, Poland ranks last among the EU member countries as far as the freedom of the press is concerned, even ranging behind Bulgaria and Rumania. And yet television and the print media enjoy great confidence in Poland, and journalists are highly esteemed. Next to political pressure, the key obstacles obstructing the media include economic reasons, competition, self-censorship, and interference by religious/clerical circles.

Summing up, it maybe said that Poland is about to enter a hopeful phase of political stability after years of turmoil. There is no reason to despair or cultivate complexes. Indisputably great difficulties are outweighed by much greater opportunities. It is urgent that the political sphere should begin to act more rationally to promote the welfare of the community. Not only civil society but also the media of the country are called upon to contribute to this development.

IN: Overseas Information 6/2008, ISSN 0177-7521, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., Berlin, p.128-131