
Political Context of the Fight Against the COVID-19 Pandemic in Poland

Submitted 17/06/21, 1st revision 04/07/21, 2nd revision 24/07/21, accepted 28/08/21

Grzegorz Rydlewski¹

Abstract:

Purpose: The article presents the activity of public authorities and the opposition in Poland in the crisis situation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The text is a report that uses the tools of systemic and decision-making analysis.

Findings: It confirms the precept that public and political actions and their social evaluation are determined not only by the essence of emerging challenges, but also result from conditions of place and time. Four conditions were identified as particularly important, confrontational division of society into two relatively powerful political camps, which goes beyond politics, model of the state and governance underlying the activities of the United Right in power since 2015, significant deficit of trust in those in power on the part of a large part of the society, relatively good state of the economy and the situation in the budgets of most households at the threshold of the pandemic.

Practical Implications: The research findings of the report facilitate understanding of the causes and manifestations of the process by which the pandemic in Poland is being politicised.

Originality Value: The resources of governance that have so far not been sufficiently utilized have also been identified. A forecast of political developments against the background of further pandemic tensions is outlined.

Keywords: Public decision-making, public policy, Polish political scene, politicisation of the pandemic, praxeology of the fight against the pandemic, relations between the pandemic and politics in Poland, public health.

JEL Classification: A12, D70, D 81, H12, H19, I18.

Paper type: Research study.

¹Professor, PhD, University of Warsaw Faculty of Political Science and International Studies, Head of the Department of the State and Public Administration, Warsaw, Poland, e-mail: panstwoadm.wnpism@uw.edu.pl;

1. The Political, Social and Economic Picture of Poland at the Threshold of the Pandemic Crisis

The significance of individual events is determined not only by the essence of these events, but also by the conditions resulting from the place and time of their occurrence. This also applies to the political significance of events whose very essence is non-political. This refers to public decision-making in Poland related to the pandemic and the development of the political situation in the country during the period of the fight against COVID-19.

The pandemic crisis found Poland in the spring of 2020 in a situation determined by the systemic social, political and economic changes that had taken place in the thirty years since Poland left the socialist system in 1989 (Rydlewski, 2020). The state had stable regulations. Society was characterised by its ability to cope with difficult situations. The results of the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections paved the way for the rule of the right-wing conservative political coalition, which has a slim majority in the Sejm and is in sharp confrontation with the opposition. The government coalition has the support of President Andrzej Duda, who comes from its environment. A separate group of determinants of the situation related to the pandemic was the lack of trust in the state authorities on the part of a large part of the society, which made it difficult to use the so-called soft resources of governance in the fight against the pandemic. An important determinant of the situation at the time of the pandemic attack was the economic growth trend in Poland.

In 2019, Gross Domestic Product growth was 4.5%. As a consequence of social transfers, treated by those in power as a method of guaranteeing support for themselves, areas of poverty were reduced. In 2015, 23% of respondents assessed their material situation as bad or very bad, in 2019 there were only 15% of such people. The financial situation of their households was assessed as good or very good by 23% of respondents in 2015, and in 2019 it was as much as 33% of respondents. The economy, based mainly on industrial production, including production for export, was in 2020 largely immune to the constraints of the pandemic. In 2020, for the first time since 1990, there was a fall in Gross Domestic Product, but this was a fall of 2.8% in a situation where it was over 7% across the European Union. The financial reserves of many households averted the prospect of a dramatic financial collapse.

The first stage of qualitative changes in Poland after 1989 saw the departure from the socialist state system. The foundations of a new political and economic order were laid. New relations between politics and administration, as well as between politics and the economy, were established. The ownership systems in the economy were rebuilt. The solutions of a democratic state were adopted. Poles learned to cope with difficult situations. In 1997 a new constitution was passed and confirmed in a nationwide referendum. It placed Poland in the group of democratic states governed

by the law of a republican and unitary character, with the division and balance of power (legislative, executive and judiciary) and a parliamentary-cabinet system.

Within the dualistic model of executive power, comprising the President of the Republic and the Council of Ministers, the Council of Ministers has a stronger position. Relations between these two components of the executive power have been defined in a way that enforces their cooperation. The principle of a constructive vote of no confidence in relation to the Council of Ministers strengthens the position of the executive vis-à-vis the Sejm. The Prime Minister has considerable powers in the matters of determining the composition and organisation of the Council of Ministers, directing the work of the government, implementing government policy, and coordinating and controlling the work of members of the Council of Ministers. The local self-government has gained a strong position in Poland, within the constitutional guarantees of decentralisation of public authority.

The second stage of changes in Poland after 1989 was a time of adopting the standards of the European Union state and NATO's common security mechanisms, as well as implementing systemic and legal solutions that constitute the canon of a democratic state. The process of transition was advanced: from a model of a power state to a model of a social service state; from a centralised state to a largely decentralised, deconcentrated state, organised in a multi-level and multi-entity manner. Monitoring and reduction of corruption and conflict of interest situations in the public sphere was implemented. Poland gained membership and subsequently established itself as an active member of the European Union and NATO.

The third stage of change, lasting in Poland until now, is a time of qualitative modernisation. The background is provided by the challenges of globalisation and transnational integration, geopolitical changes in Poland's environment, as well as the consequences of computerisation and digitisation, and the increasing power of the media. The aim is to develop the foundations for sustainable and responsible development. Until 2015, changes were mainly related to strengthening quality, professionalism, efficiency and modernity in public affairs, including the introduction of modern information and communication technologies into the public space as part of the process of transition from a "paper state" to a "digital state". The strategy of increasing cohesion and efficiency and improving access to public services and public information was dominant.

At the time of the pandemic attack, modernisation changes in the state were undermined by a fierce dispute between proponents of different models of the state, governance and public administration. The parties to the dispute were the ruling coalition of the United Right (Polish: Zjednoczona Prawica, which also emerged victorious from the 2019 parliamentary elections) and the internally divided parliamentary opposition. The ruling coalition is formed by the Law and Justice (PiS)—the main party of the parliamentary majority, and two smaller political groupings: the Agreement (Polish: Porozumienie) party—which has a relatively

pragmatic and conciliatory identity (experiencing internal tensions at the beginning of 2021) and the Solidary Poland (Polish: *Solidarna Polska*) party – which is the most radical element of the coalition. The dominant position in the coalition is held by PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński.

At the time of the pandemic attack, he was a rank-and-file MP, but at the same time decided on the policy of public bodies. He maintained his position after becoming Deputy Prime Minister. This created an abnormal situation in which the political leader of the government coalition is formally the Deputy Prime Minister, while the Prime Minister is in turn politically dependent on him. The political groupings that have been in power in Poland since 2015, having a majority in the Sejm – the lower house of parliament, from 2019 onwards lose by a difference of one mandate to the opposition in the Senate – the upper house. This makes it difficult to legislate in a way that is subordinate to the visions of the United Right.

The pandemic policy is influenced by the fact that the groups currently in power in Poland have a national, anti-liberal and conservative orientation. They enjoy the support of the Roman Catholic Church, which has considerable political influence in Poland. Those in power are distanced from the idea of a strong position of the European Union in relation to the Member States. They build their electoral strength on policies emphasising the current interests of the less well-off part of the society. They win the support of those who felt ignored by the centre-left coalition (consisting of the Civic Platform [*Platforma Obywatelska*] and the Polish People's Party [*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*]) that had previously ruled for almost a decade, and who did not identify with, active years earlier, the left-wing groupings largely originating from post-socialist circles.

The tools used by those in power to strengthen the social base include social transfers to financially disadvantaged families, dignity policies, strengthening of fears of difference and minorities, and criticism of elites blamed for living at the expense of ordinary people. Those in power identify the strength of the state with the expansion of administrative power. They are closer to the concept of an omnipresent state rather than a subsidiary state with a multi-level system of decision-making. Acting on the basis and within the limits of the law is displaced in their concepts by ruling by means of the law.

At the time of the outbreak of the epidemic, accusations were made against the state authorities in Poland (also in the framework of the procedures underway in the European Union and the Council of Europe) concerning the violation of constitutional principles and norms, including in particular issues relating to the tripartite division of power and the independence of judges. Politicisation of the Constitutional Court has deprived this body of the authority necessary to effectively resolve legal disputes. Protests, usually organised by entities outside the party system, are increasingly frequent in the streets. Young people predominate among critics of the authorities in matters concerning the approach to abortion, while in

matters concerning the rule of law – representatives of legal circles and people from the cultural and liberal professions. Poland has lost its status as a promoter of democratic change and has slipped down the world rankings of democracy. It is currently included in the group of countries with a model of unconsolidated democracy with discrepancies between systemic norms and the practice of their implementation. In The Economist's EIU Democracy Index for 2019, Poland was included in the group of countries with "flawed democracy" and ranked only 57th out of 165 countries.

2. The Politicisation of the Pandemic in Poland

The COVID-19 pandemic is a socio-political challenge (Rydlewski, 2020). In Poland, as in other countries, the pandemic has become a conditionality and an object of political play. In mid-February 2021, Poland was in 14th place in the world in terms of the number of infections. There were 1,570,658 confirmed cases. The number of deaths reached 40,177, and at the same time 2,107,089 people were successfully vaccinated. The epidemic crisis led to a revision of the strategic challenges and their importance in the collective narrative. Those that emerged were, additional threats to existence and fields of social exclusion, new tensions between freedom, privacy and security, a global economic infection and the massacre of entire industries forced to restrict their activities. Questions about the role and responsibilities of the state in a crisis situation and about the relationship between the needs of today and the future have resurfaced.

There was a need for strategic financial and economic projections. There was a return to politics with national borders. The calculus of supranational solidarity and state autonomy began to take shape in a new way. The enforced limit on face-to-face interactions reinforced the importance of preparing people and the state to operate remotely in the cyberspace and to be able to govern in a world of fake news and internet trolls (Rydlewski, 2021).

The background to the politicisation of the pandemic in Poland was determined by the fact that it occurred at a time when the society was divided into two confrontational political camps, balanced in size, organised mainly around political parties and incapable of working together. The divisions reach into all social circles. They are reflected in the world of the media. The public media have become propaganda tools for those in power. A culture of alternative parallel truths is taking shape in the approach to history, the present, and the future. The internally divided opposition is reactive and lacks common leaders. Attempts to supplement the party system have not produced lasting results for years. Non-institutional protest movements are emerging. In the local self-government, which is strong in terms of competences and organisation, representatives of opposition groups dominate in many cases (especially in large cities). This reinforces the government's desire to limit the powers of local self-government.

Those in power in Poland have linked their activities in the fight against the pandemic to the strengthening of administrative power and centralised solutions. They are playing on the fears arising from the policy of the European Union, which is presented as interfering in the course of matters belonging to the competences of national states. They use restrictions on contact, including bans on public gatherings, to implement ideological solutions that generate social resistance in the hope that opponents will not have the conditions to protest. The right to abortion was almost completely eliminated by a Constitutional Court ruling, which, despite the ban on assembly, resulted in street demonstrations and clashes with the police.

The epidemic occurred on the eve of the start of the presidential election campaign. This prevented the campaign from proceeding normally. Those in power treated the election of Andrzej Duda, who ran from their political camp, for the second term as an absolute priority. Procedures were launched which violated the principles of electoral law. The elections were to be held by mail-in voting organised under government supervision by the post office. Fierce social and political opposition and the refusal of local self-government bodies to provide access to the voter lists at their disposal forced the authorities to abandon their project. Voting took place at the polling stations. In an effort to encourage the elderly to participate and thus strengthen the position of the PiS candidate, the state authorities, including Prime Minister Morawiecki, argued in mid-2020 that the epidemic was in retreat and voting was safe. It quickly became clear that such assessments had no basis in facts and were politically motivated.

The determination of those in power to hold the presidential elections on schedule at all costs was one of the reasons why one of the extraordinary measures provided for in the laws was not resorted to in order to combat the pandemic. The introduction of a state of natural disaster would have given the fight against the pandemic a systematic and orderly character. The constitutional prohibition on holding elections during a state of emergency would, however, make it necessary to postpone the elections. The state of emergency would also give businesses affected by the restrictions during the pandemic the right to claim compensation from the state. The law on epidemic risk and epidemics, which was amended several times, was therefore used in the fight against the pandemic.

Implementing regulations issued by government bodies on these flawed bases created a situation of legal chaos. Solutions assessed by lawyers as unconstitutional were introduced to the normative order. This resulted in lowering the authority of the law.

Financial sanctions applied by the law enforcement authorities and administrative bodies against those who did not comply with the orders of the authorities were often overruled by the courts.

3. The Praxeology of Public Decision-Making in Poland on the Pandemic Issues

In relation to the pandemic, the praxeological requirements for efficiency and effectiveness become increasingly important in the state's decision-making activities. Eight capabilities are of primary importance. These abilities include:

- acquisition of information by the authorities and its management in real time, programming that is orderly in the arrangement of time and departments of government administration,
- management of tensions and crisis,
- strengthening of intra-systemic synergy through cooperation of all state institutions and non-state entities,
- ensuring the implementation of decisions made and choosing the best implementation path for this purpose,
- interactive social communication (realization of information needs and mobilization of people by facilitating their understanding of decisions made),
- evaluation of adopted solutions (based on the criteria of legality, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of the result),
- preservation of leadership and carrying out flexible changes in case of difficulties in maintaining the existing directions and principles and techniques of action (Rydlewski, 2011; Waliszewski, 2021).

In the area of the above-mentioned abilities, significant deficiencies were evident in the actions of the public authorities in Poland on the pandemic issues. There was improvisation in matters of principles and ways of combating the consequences of infections. The implementation of solutions provided for by state of emergency was neglected. Attempts were made to show that Poland can cope perfectly well on its own and that it does not need to use common European Union solutions. The possibility of close cooperation between governmental and local self-government structures was not used. Businesses and society were surprised by the decisions taken. There has been a lack of explanation of the reasons for introducing certain restrictions. Restrictions that had already been announced were often changed. The centralized vaccination system weakened the chances for the rapid development of social immunity to infection in Poland.

Important resources for governance in a situation of tension are public trust, the feeling of being taken seriously by public authorities, positive assessments of the government and the belief that things are moving in the right direction. In 2020, public opinion indicators on these resources clearly deteriorated. Confidence in most politicians in the government coalition fell. In December 2019, 59% of respondents expressed confidence in the head of government; in December 2020, it was only 43% (CBOS, 2020). In 2020, as many as 46% of those surveyed (the most since 1990), assessed that they were disrespected by the authorities (CBOS, 2021). The

year 2020 was in the opinion of Poles much worse than the previous one both in private and in public dimensions. In relation to Poland and the world, these results were the worst in the history of surveys conducted since 1984.

In December 2019, the government's activity enjoyed a good opinion among 42% of respondents, in December 2020 it was only the assessment of 33% of respondents. In November 2019, 52% of those asked expressed the opinion that the government's actions create an opportunity to improve the economic situation, in December 2020 such declarations were expressed only by 34% of respondents.

4. Main Conclusions

The pandemic is exacerbating the situation on the Polish political scene. There is no indication that confrontation in relations between the authorities and the opposition will be reduced in favour of cooperation across political divides. The President of the Republic of Poland is taking a passive stance in matters of building a front for cooperation in the fight against the pandemic. We cannot expect the resources of social trust to be used in the fight against the pandemic. It should be anticipated that further difficulties will arise in releasing synergies in the framework of cooperation between state bodies and local self-government.

Due to the lack of success in combating the pandemic and the decline in social support in the government camp in Poland, despite the determination to remain in power, tensions will continue to grow concerning the tactics of action. This will weaken the United Right's ability to govern. The conceptual weakness and fragmentation of the opposition mean that only the processes of destruction in the camp of power are now a reason for change in the ruling base. There is no opposition force that can be treated as an obvious and efficient successor to the present authorities. This heralds a power struggle fraught with tension.

With the prolongation of administrative restrictions on economic activity, tensions in Poland's public finances will become more difficult to manage in the long term. Decreasing tax revenues, the need to provide funds to support shut down businesses, and the depletion of family financial resources will be increasingly difficult to offset by ad hoc measures and by the government-friendly monetary policy of the National Bank of Poland. This will make it more difficult to use the model of transactional governance and gain political support in exchange for social transfers.

It is likely that those in power will strengthen the mobilisation of supporters with ideological arguments and by exposing threats to the interests of Poland and "ordinary Poles" from foreign and domestic forces critical of their policies. The search for those responsible for the failures will intensify outside the government, including primarily the political opposition and local authorities. The authorities' efforts to win the support of the Roman Catholic Church will lead to an even greater saturation of the public domain with religious content. A society tired of tensions

will be even more susceptible to simple evaluations and solutions addressed to emotions. This will strengthen the position of politicians using populism.

The pandemic reinforces the importance of assessing that public policies such as health, or scientific and environmental policies, must be treated not so much as in competition with economic policy, but as a necessary condition for economic development and the financial stability of the state. This will find its expression during the disputes over financial mechanisms and the budget.

References:

- Rydlewski, G. 2011. *Prakseologia decydowania publicznego*, (w:) ed. Rydlewski, G., *Decydowanie publiczne. Polska na tle innych państw członkowskich Unii Europejskiej*, Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, Warszawa, 58-69.
- Rydlewski, G. 2020. *Trzydzieści lat zmian w rządzeniu w Polsce po roku 1989*, (w:) *Rocznik Strategiczny 2019/2020*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa, 451-469.
- Rydlewski, G. 2021. *The coronavirus outbreak and pandemic in the perspective of socio-political challenges. Working and continuously updated set of theses and observations*. <http://oapuw.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Coronavirus-challenges-G.-Rydlewski.pdf>.
- Rydlewski, G. 2021. *Rządzenie w epoce informacji, cyfryzacji i sztucznej inteligencji*, Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, Warszawa.
- Waliszewski, K., Solarz, J.K. 2021. *Całościowe zarządzanie ryzykiem systemowym. Pandemia COVID-19*, EDU-LIBRI, Warszawa.
- CBOS 2020. *Trust in politicians in December*, Research Report, no. 162. https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2021/K_162_20.pdf.
- CBOS 2021. *The mood of Poles in 2020*. Research Report no. 1, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2021/K_001_21.pdf.