



End of Doctors' Protests

Yesterday, an agreement has been reached between the new Health Minister Łukasz Szumowski and representatives of resident doctors. Since October 2017, young doctors argued that their working conditions deteriorated the quality of public healthcare in Poland. They pointed out several issues: the lack of sufficient regulations leading to abuses (e.g. excessively long duty hours); the quality of training - residency doctors are not permitted to conduct many basic procedures; and no long-term placement planning for certain specialisations. The dissatisfaction of medical students and residents causes significant brain-drain. Since 2010, over 4000 qualified doctors left Poland to practice medicine in a different EEA country, mainly the UK, Norway, and Germany. According to 2015 OECD data, there are 2.3 doctors per thousand inhabitants in Poland – a very low figure in comparison with western EU states.

As of yesterday, the strike has officially ended. The agreement reached by Minister Szumowski assumes:

- The most important aspect of the agreement is the higher than planned rise of funds for healthcare and reaching the 6% GDP level. The current deadline assumes this level of spending will be reached by 2024. The previous agreement, made by Minister Konstanty Radziwiłł, gave 2025 as the deadline.
- Specialists, which work in only one facility, are meant to receive a minimum salary of PLN 6750. There will also be higher salaries for resident doctors who will commit to continuing their practice in Poland for 2 years after their specialisation is complete. The agreement also foresees a new position of a medical assistant/ secretary who would fill out documentation for the doctor – an answer to many complaints that doctors spend most of their time doing paperwork.
- Resident doctors will now have the right to additional sabbatical and the labour code will be regulated so that there will be no “shifts for 1 PLN” – a very common practice today. They will also receive legal protection on the same level as public servants currently enjoy. Szumowski has also vouched that he will begin talks with other health professionals by the end of 2018, to implement similar solutions across the sector

Minister of Health Radziwiłł and PM Beata Szydło made a number of efforts to end the strike, however, they were not successful. This was one of the reasons for Radziwiłł's dismissal during the January government reshuffle. Beata Szydło's government accurately

speculated that the issues presented by the doctors would not escalate to a levée en masse type of strike. Allowing Konstanty Radziwiłł to play the steadfast negotiator. However, the ongoing strike, which over the months lost major media attention, caused significant personnel problems within the Polish healthcare system.

It would be unwise to disregard the timing of the doctors' strike. Even if its choosing on the doctors' side was unintentional, it forced the government into an undesirable position. Late September, the 2018 budgetary bill was submitted to the Sejm. Though parliamentary amendments still discussed until mid-January, any financial promises made by the government would have to have been reflected in this bill.

The primary motivation for Szumowski's appointment was his good standing with the medical professional's community. As shown by the agreement with resident doctors, Szumowski fulfilled his first task in record time. The Polish healthcare system, however, has deep rooted structural problems and the Ministry of Health is one of the most difficult jobs in the government. It remains to be seen whether Szumowski will be able to implement wide-ranging reforms or only hold the front by appeasing medical staff.

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