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PiS-PLS showdown for regional assemblies



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The PiS convention on Sunday has kicked the local elections campaign into higher gear. While most media publications focus on the races for presidential seats in Polish cities, it will be the fight for regional assemblies that is paramount to the ruling PiS party.

While the regional assembly elections are nearly a strictly partisan event, the participation of non-partisan candidates for woyts, mayors, and city presidents is quite high in local elections in Poland. In 2014, out of 2475 leaders voted in, only 458 were party members. The rest were representatives of local movements. Even in large cities, political party members were a minority – out of 106 presidents, 67 are non-partisan. For PiS, achieving synergy between local and central governments will only be possible through winning in regional assemblies – party officials have unofficially stated that four voivodships are a must.

The regional assemblies, formally known as voivodeship sejmiks, are local legislatures in each of the sixteen voivodeships in Poland. Currently PiS governs only in one of the sixteen provinces – Podkarpacie (Subcarpathia voivodeship), which is considered the bastion of Polish conservatism. The other fifteen are ruled by the PO-PSL coalitions, with PSL being the bigger partner in five eastern regions. According to a poll prepared by Ibris for this week's Economic Forum in Krynica, a leadership earthquake awaits Polish local governments. The poll indicates that PiS can realistically fight for lone or coalition governing in seven voivodships: Wielkopolskie, Mazowieckie, Łódzkie, Lubelskie, Podkarpackie, Małopolskie, and Świetokrzyskie.

During the PiS convention, the competition against PSL was especially highlighted while PiS' main rival PO was barely mentioned. This is unavoidable; PiS and PSL are competing for the same voters from rural regions and small towns. Many commentators believe that PSL voters are the last voter group which PiS can realistically fight for.

The 2015 election did, for some, mark the beginning of the end for PSL. The grouping experienced its worst result in years, barely crossing the electoral threshold and becoming the smallest party in parliament. The movement has traditionally enjoyed a stable voting base but lost a large part of its supporters to PiS, which now hopes to make even more significant gains in rural areas.

The big question facing PSL is whether there is still room in Polish politics for a movement that focuses heavily on agrarian matters. If the party does not perform very well in local elections, then rumours of its demise might materialise. Especially that any PiS-PSL coalition in regional assemblies is very unlikely, if not impossible at the moment. In the 2019 parliamentary election, PSL might be forced into an electoral coalition with PO. The absorption of PSL into the liberal PO, however, could push PSL voters to vote for PiS.

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