



CEC Weekly Political Update

9th April 2019

Teachers' Protest

On Monday, after months of preparations, Polish teachers began a country-wide protest. According to the main teachers' trade union ZNP, approximately, 600,000 teachers from 74% of schools have joined the strike. The Ministry of National Education counters the Union with different data, which suggests that only 50% of schools are participating in the strike – the ministry has included a wider range of schools to its data (non-public schools, vocational schools etc.).

Still, it remains clear that it is the largest strike of this professional group in Poland for the past 25 years. There are fears that the strike will affect exams, which are to be sat on 10 April (end of secondary school) and 15 April (end of 8th grade). However, the government is organising social committees to oversee the exams and remains adamant that all exams will be held as

scheduled. Although an end date to the protest has not been set, the government hopes that some teachers will decide to end the protest due to the financial burden they have to incur - teachers do not receive remuneration for the time of the protest. Estimates suggest that a single day of protest may cost a teacher PLN 85-100.

The government's response remains chaotic. Though Deputy PM Beata Szydło and Social Minister Elżbieta Rafalska hoped to take over the negotiations and gain the upper hand, Education Minister Anna Zalewska's inability to provide resolution has already negatively affected the public perception of the government. Experts argue that appointing a new minister on short notice is unlikely to improve the government's image. As a result of this failure, Zalewska may consequently lose her position on the party's EP electoral list. Amidst the EP elections, the strike forces the government and the PiS party to refocus its attention, depriving the ruling party's campaign of momentum. This may provide the opposition with a unique opportunity to improve its position at a crucial moment.

Signals of potential teachers' protests have been circulating in political debates since December 2018. Nearly 5 months ago teachers around the country conducted a protest, similar to that of Police officers, who collectively went on sick leave in late 2018. More than 1500 teachers were absent from 38 schools, several kindergartens were closed, and many classes in middle schools and high schools cancelled.

At the turn of the year, teachers and their Union representatives demanded a minimum PLN 1000 wage increase for all vacancies and argued for a change in the recently amended, but criticised system of performance assessment. The remuneration postulate was recently amended to a 30% wage increase, to be introduced in two increments – according to Union representatives, this amendment was supposed to be a nod towards the government, supposedly being more preferential to a set raise.

The remuneration level of teachers is provided by a regulation of the Minister of National Education, which sets out the minimum rates. These depend on the seniority, as well as professional qualifications. Currently, the remuneration of teachers ranges from PLN 1751 net for an apprentice teacher to PLN 2377 net for a certified teacher. Additionally, teachers may earn bonuses and various additions e.g. for working in a village school or being a form tutor etc. The

average annual teacher's salary in an EU primary school is EU 26,000 - teachers in Luxembourg are best paid up to EUR 100,000 – in Poland, a teacher's minimum remuneration without additions amounts to approximately EUR 6,600. Moreover, it remains relatively low even compared with the statistical average remuneration in Poland amounting to PLN 4949,42 in February 2019.

Negotiations between teachers' unions and the government have failed. Only the Teachers' Solidarity trade union agreed to the final government proposal - a 15% raise in 2019, which accounts for the 5% raise granted in 2018. Now there is growing discontent amongst the Solidarity members, who argue that its President Ryszard Proksa has colluded with the government, and broke unity with other larger teacher organisation. Many teachers are now revoking their Solidarity memberships and joining other teachers' unions, such as the ZNP, which is spearheading the protest.

Both teachers and many commentators now argue that unions are consistently disregarded by the government. They point out that in terms of education the ruling party did not budge even when over 900,000 signatures were submitted to hold a referendum on the contested education reform. Agricultural promises made by Jarosław Kaczyński last weekend have further fuelled the dissatisfaction (for details see CEC Daily 9 April 2019).

It is clear that the teachers' protest is a significant test for the ruling party. So far, the government did manage to save face during previous protests which took place during its term. However, none had a similar magnitude to that of the teachers. PiS has been trying to build a narrative against the protests, arguing that teachers are taking their students hostage. This has worked somewhat, with 65% of Poles being against strikes during exams.

Still, it appears that teachers are gaining significant public support and their demands are backed by numerous public figures. This, however, may change as parents face difficulties in finding daycare for their children. According to commentators, the government was late to react to the intensifying situation. Experts argue that the government hoped the strike would not take place and consequently was hesitant to start negotiations. This, however, deprived the ruling party of the ability to nip the protest in its bud.