



CEC Weekly Political Update **20th May 2019**

Debate on the Catholic Church

The recently released documentary “Don’t tell anyone” (Nie mów nikomu) has provided new momentum to the ongoing election campaign. The crowd-funded film provides insight on the controversial issue of child abuse in the Catholic Church in Poland. It was produced by the Sekielski brothers – well-known journalists. Within five days of its release on YouTube, the film was viewed nearly 18.5 million times. Top representatives of the Church in Poland expressed regret, apologised to the victims, and pledged an investigation.

The Church in Poland

For many Poles, throughout communist rule in Poland, the Roman

Catholic Church was a symbol of freedom. The Church provided much more than faith and hope. Its role in Poland's struggle for freedom, especially given the Papacy of John Paul II, was invaluable. Its involvement in the creation and operation of the anti-communist opposition further rooted the Church in the transformation process, and subsequently bonded its representatives with the new democratic political elite. The concomitance of the Church with the Polish state has an even longer history, resulting in the strong position of the Church amongst the public – especially in smaller agglomerations and rural areas.

The Polish state is currently in a “friendly separation” with the Catholic Church. This means that the state limits its interference with the matters of the Church, and vice versa. This was regulated in 1993 in a Concordat between Poland and the Holy See of the Roman Catholic Church. However, many commentators argue that the Church remains significantly involved in politics. For example, there have been cases of representatives of the church giving support to specific candidates or parties. Many argue that this support comes as the price of preferential treatment e.g. various subsidies from the state budget or influence on legislation. The ruling PiS party is not unique in having the support of the Church either – the opposition Civic Platform, too, has received open support from many Catholic clergymen.

Political debate

Initially, as a result of the documentary, politicians across the spectrum – similarly to representatives of the Church – expressed their regret and pledged action. Although all agree that child abuse should be heavily prosecuted, the political debate has now evolved to a dispute on the relations with the Church as a whole.

Many PiS members argued that the film was deliberately timed for release at the climax of the election campaign with the opposition using this opportunity to attack the Church, and that any cases of child abuse cannot be used to taint the entire Church in Poland. According to the party's narrative, such crimes occur above all outside the Church, and some PiS supporters have sought to downplay the incidents involving priests. There is also concern that the goal of the opposition is not to

root out child abuse in the Church, but to fundamentally reduce the strength of Catholic faith in Poland and lay the ground for a liberal “cultural revolution” in Poland. Many figures on the opposition argue that the PiS party is protecting the Church and is withholding measures which would facilitate investigations and the prosecution of perpetrators of these crimes. However, Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro has highlighted that the PiS government has already undertaken measures to prevent sex crimes – the introduction of a sex offenders register, which was not supported by the opposition in the past.

It is clear that the scale of public interest in the matter has surprised the PiS party, which had little time to adapt to the shifting focus of the political debate. Many representatives of the ruling party appeared overwhelmed by the issue and failed to adhere to official party messages and some statements made by PiS politicians have been badly received by the public.

Legislative action

The ruling PiS party in response to the film hastily introduced changes to the Criminal Code. The changes include the non-expiration of child abuse crimes, as well as the extension of the top punishment to thirty years of imprisonment.

Opposition parties did not oppose the changes to the Code; however, they did not participate in the vote either. Grzegorz Schetyna, head of the European Coalition, argued that the amendments were an electoral gimmick to create the impression of dealing with the problem. The opposition further proposed to deal with the problem in a complex manner, providing mechanisms to efficiently prosecute the crimes – an independent, nonpartisan State commission, which would investigate particular cases.

Secularisation

According to data of the Catholic Church Institute of Statistics, the secularisation of the Polish population is slowly increasing, but at a stable rate. In 1980, the percentage of Catholics attending the Sunday Mass) amounted to 51%. Accounting for small fluctuations, this

percentage was maintained throughout the 1990s. However, since that time, the percentage is falling by a few percents per decade. Since 2011 the percentage remains below 40% – in 2017 it amounted to 38,3%.

In 2018, according to data collected by the State Statistical Office, 81% declare themselves religious. Out of these, 50% declare attendance at mass at least once a week. These differences are a result of a different methodology. The Church Institute counts attendees at a single mass in October or November. The Statistical Office, on the other hand, collected data from a questioner – the answers are declarative.

Effect on European Elections

Throughout recent months the ruling PiS party has managed to dominate the public debate through narratives on its new spending plans and social programmes – so-called “Kaczyński’s New Five”. The public debate following the publication of the documentary film has put PiS on the defensive. Commentators note that in the last stretch of the campaign, PiS has lost some momentum while other parties, such as Robert Biedroń’s Spring managed to capitalize on the ensuing debate. The European Coalition did not have a strong voice in the debate. Still, the ongoing public discussions have the potential for last-minute developments which may sway a couple of percent in Sunday’s vote and it remains to be seen if the controversy may, in fact, cause a greater turnout of strong Church supporters in the countryside.

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