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The Road to Autocratization?
Redefining Democracy in Poland[1]

Abstract

The present paper explores how political thinking in Poland changed after the election campaigns (general and presidential) of 2015. Its main goal is to determine what the current developments mean for the future of democracy in Poland. Will Poland face a new wave of autocratization – similar to Pilsudski's one?

The paper is based on empirical research conducted during the last presidential and general elections in Poland. An e-survey covering 10,000 respondents was conducted, out of whom over 4,000 left their data for further analysis. The main aim of the study was to find a connection between patterns of political thinking and electoral behavior, demonstrating a link between one's set of political values and one's voting decisions.

The ruling party in Poland openly refers to esthetics and rhetoric of an authoritarian regime introduced by Pilsudski. Its election slogan: "A good change" has been treated as reference to the interwar concept of "sanacja" driven from the Latin term "sanatio" which means to cleanse or to heal. The main goal of the Sanacja political group was to amend the then parliamentary democracy, which they believed was corrupt and inefficient.

The authors of the paper try to present recent patterns and changes in the electorate. In its summary, the paper includes some predictions for the future of the Polish democracy, based on empirical data and observed actions of the ruling party.

Key words: Europe (Central and Eastern), Democracy, Democratization, Comparative Perspective, Liberalism

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Introduction

In 1962, the first edition of Robert E. Lane's *Political Ideology* was published. The book dealt with the problem of political ideology (as stated in the title), but it was not simply another book on the history of political philosophy or defining ideology and applying this new definition into research. In fact, the volume concentrated on ordinary people and their understanding of politics. The political ideology embodied in ordinary people was the main topic of the book. 50 years later, Michael Freeden published a book on political thinking proving that it is a common practice and all of us do that in every day situation. The research presented below is an attempt to find a link between political thinking i.e. the ideology that can be found in every single person and the way of making political decisions that affect the political system as a whole. To quote Lane: "the democratic machinery works well enough in a plural, fragmented, open-ended and multiple-meaning society. But it is a question, at least, whether men live their lives well enough it these limiting circumstances".[2] In fact, the question about changing the political system in Poland is a question about the existence of political pluralism and the possibility to live a good life in this country.

The research performed for this paper was of an introductory nature. The survey was conducted during the electoral and presidential campaign of 2015 and the obtained data were compared with big data from CBOS and GUS. A high level of compliance was determined.

The main purpose of the study was to answer the question what the political spectrum and ideological backgrounds of the Polish political system looks like. The survey was performed to find the link between the way of political thinking and making political decisions, such as voting decisions. In this manner, the present research can be seen as an attempt to perform an empirical study on the political philosophy that can be found in every single person and which drives their political actions. The survey meant to determine the level of plurality of political parties and political ideologies (or doctrines) in Poland. The ultimate answer was not so obvious, as even what is perceived by the mainstream media as far right in fact belongs to the broad family of social parties and political doctrines.

The obtained data allowed the researcher to answer most of the above questions. For instance, they proved that plurality of political ideologies represented by mainstream political parties was secured. Nonetheless, most political parties (including the ruling and the main opposition party) show a certain connection with social doctrines. What is more, there are no conservatives and especially no conservative-liberal counterproposals for voters, even though

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[2] R.E. Lange, *Political ideology*, New York 1967, p. 249.

there is a significant percentage of voters that represent this kind of political ideology and way of political thinking in the Polish society.

In parts of the research, the approach represented by Michael Freeden (on political thinking) and Roger Eatwell (on ideology) was used. The methodology and the model of political spectrum applied in the project were developed at the University of Warsaw and its core was presented at the IPSA World Congress in Brisbane this year.[3]

The obtained data were useful in developing interpretations on the state of the Polish democracy, the future of the Polish political system and the way Poland is changing currently, which some believe is revolutionary. It is safe to say that these changes concern not only the establishment but also the way of thinking about politics and democracy. The socio-liberal (or demo-liberal, as defined in the survey) majority of pre-2015 election lost and was replaced by a new socio-conservative one. Crucially, the establishment as a whole underwent these changes; not only the government but all the political institutions and politically involved entities such us the state media, all three branches of power and specific political institutions, which are not even present in all European democracies. One of them is the Constitutional Tribunal, which has no judicial power, but is crucial in developing the Polish political system. The former is the only political body that can amend the Polish constitution by reinterpreting it. This willingness to change the background of the political system without changing a single letter in the constitution was developed as a result of judicial activism, and is not driven from the constitution itself. In Poland, there is no single institution that has constitutional or any other legal right to provide a generally applicable interpretation of the Constitution itself. It can be done only on a case by case basis. This Polish peculiarity is not broadly understood, especially in western Europe, consequently leading to many misunderstandings. Nevertheless, this self-developed and strong position of the Constitutional Tribunal has been the reason behind its involvement in the transition that can be observed in nowadays Poland.

After a brief presentation of the obtained data, the proposed way of interpreting them will be explained. Importantly, the current research should be treated as an introduction to further works.

Methods

The questionnaire was carried out as an attempt to apply in practice the researcher's theoretical assumptions, presented in an up-coming book devoted to the ways of political spectrum modeling. These assumptions are as follows:

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[3] The Polish presentation of the model and methodology was included in the publication of the *Report* on the research (2nd, amended edition 2017).

- ideologies should be treated as Weberian ideal types with coherent axiology and philosophical anthropology;
- particular doctrines, political programs and rational solutions for political problems result from the above;
- making decisions does not have to be accompanied by a conscious reference to any of the ideologies, but it is possible to indicate which method of political thinking is represented by the decision-maker;
- for the correct diagnosis of the way of political thinking and of the ideology by which the decision-maker is influenced, the motivations of his actions should be given;
- it is not possible to diagnose whether a given problem solution is dictated by a given ideology based only on the effect;
- the left-center-right model is methodologically useless, due to the subjective nature of such a distinction;
- two-axis models of the Nolan Chart are methodologically useless, because they take one of the results as a standard;
- the existence of three great ideologies – liberalism, conservatism and socialism - is highly inter-subjective;
- it is possible to create internally coherent anthropological and axiological visions of the three basic ideal types.

The above assumptions allowed to construct a theoretical model of a political spectrum including three ideal types: liberal, conservative and socialist ones and three ideologies which derive their anthropological and axiological foundations from two ideal types: social liberalism, conservative liberalism and social conservatism. The requirement of coherence of the assumptions arising from the vision of human and political order excludes the existence of an ideology referring to all three ideal types, because it would lead to an *aporia* – namely an incoherent coherence.

For the needs of the study, it was assumed that politics is a sphere of social life, which refers to the organization of power structures, their strategies and implementation, and relations between them and subordinated units. The above operational definition synthesizes Polish intellectual achievements, combining politics, above all, with the struggle for power, with a three-part approach (division between: politics, policy, politics) of the Anglo-Saxon thought. The (political) power is understood not only as the ability to shape essential elements of life, but also as the possibility to implement a specific vision of the political order – resulting directly from one's anthropology and coherent axiology. Thus, beyond the political dimension, all actions appropriate to other manifestations of social life, which remain in the field of research of disciplines like management (including marketing), sociology and psychology, were excluded. The Ideology (in a political sense) is understood as a relatively co-

herent set of empirical facts, normative beliefs and thoughts, focusing on the problem of human nature, historical processes and socio-political solutions, including those in the field of law. It is a product of collective thought and should be treated as an "ideal type".

Using the above assumptions, the model of the Polish political scene was reconstructed. To locate political parties in the scheme, the method of competent judges was used. The analysis covered: KORWiN, .Nowoczesna (*Modern*), Platforma Obywatelska (*Civil Platform*), Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (*Law and Justice*), Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (*Polish People's Party*), SLD / Zjednoczona Lewica (*United Left*).

The Electoral Committee of Voters Kukiz15 was also not analyzed, as it is not a political party, but a broad social movement representing diverse political views – it would only be possible to evaluate the various environments included in it separately.
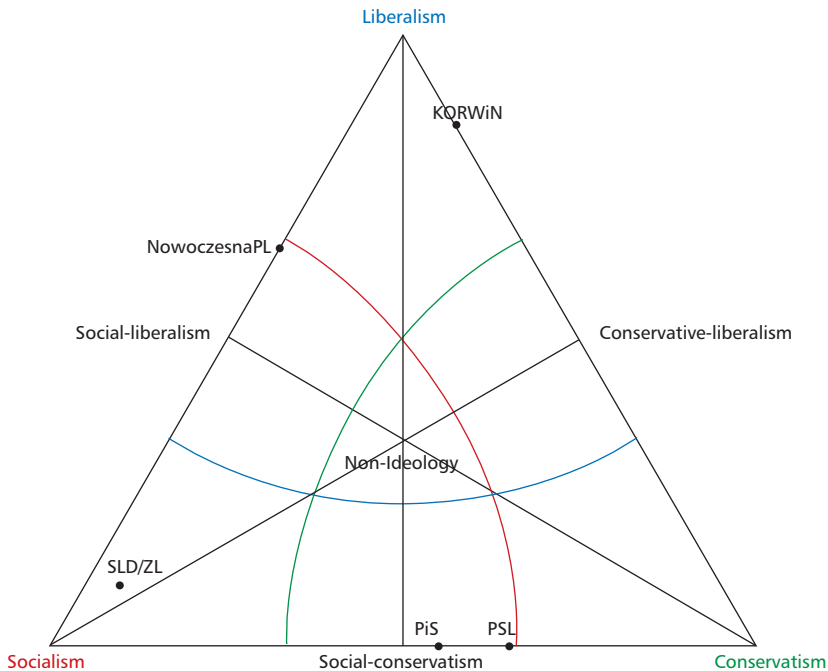

Figure 1. Model of the Polish Political Spectrum

Source: own study.

20 questions were asked to the respondents with three closed answers to choose from. The questions allowed the researcher to move on the axes in relation to the three ideal types; the answers were constructed so as to corre-

spond with one of the three basic ways of political thinking. The respondents were instructed to select an answer which was closest to their own opinions. In addition, in the case of answers assuming a similar solution, they were asked to choose the justification that is closest to them.

The project aimed, on the one hand, to present a simple tool for self-evaluation based on a peer-reviewed scientific methodology, and, on the other hand, to conduct an online survey of respondents' opinions on the position of political parties. The study cannot be treated as an election poll – quantitative analyses have not been carried out in this direction either. It may, however, be regarded as an attempt to capture the relations of voters with political parties. Any conclusions drawn from this report must take into account the fact that the data comes from the burdened group.

Results

As part of the study, 4,507 questionnaires were obtained, and 4,185 were used for the analysis. A summary list of the results applied to the model of the Polish political spectrum is presented in Figure 2 – parties and average voter results. The average result (the point signed as "average" on the model) is: 9,63448735 for liberalism (A), 5,26431425 for conservatism and 3,67643142 for socialism. This is the same in the conservative-liberal field, which could mean that the test was poorly structured (suggesting the "a" answers). The second possibility could be that the society is indoctrinated, however, in all likelihood, the reason was an anomaly. This anomaly consists in the overrepresentation of KORWiN party supporters (2,002 out of the total 4,185 participants). After removing the anomaly, the average result for all respondents (marked as "average without KORWiN") is located in the central field of non-ideology – with a slight shift towards social liberalism. The hypothesis indicated that in an indoctrinated society all ideologies are similarly represented, additionally to the fact that no respondents could receive a result that would point to the middle of the graph – 20 questions with 3 axes. Thus, it can be considered that the survey met the adopted requirements.

An analysis of individual responses also showed a shift towards liberalism and socialism. The tables below indicate the percentage share of the results in individual sets – including both the records from supporters of the KORWiN party and without it.

The obtained data were used to determine the average position for the electorate of several parties. During the survey, a respondent could also get information about his or her position in the model and a short explanation of it. The outcomes of the analysis of 4,185 records are shown below. The analysis was made for each party's electorate separately, thus the numbers of respondents

affiliated with several parties vary and the average result is not representative. However, it is close to the middle and leans just slightly towards liberalism which is a case in most representative surveys made by GUS (General Statistic Office) or CBOS (Center for Research of Public Opinion).
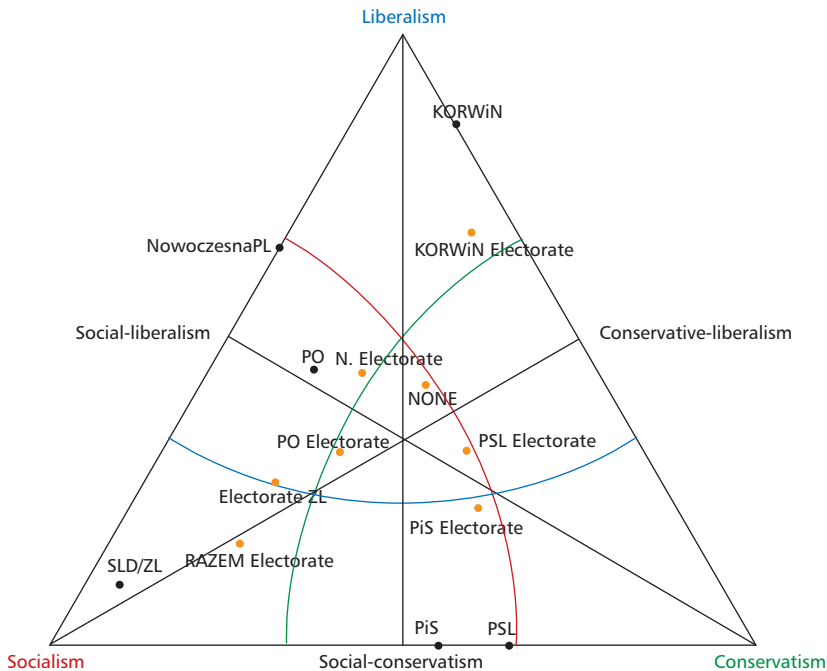

Figure 2. Parties and Average Voter Results

Source: own study.

Different variants of the right-left axis that can be applied to the political spectrum. The choice of the variant is always subjective. For socialist, the axis will be drawn from socialism to conservative liberalism. For social-liberals from social liberalism to conservatism. Due to this subjectivism, actors representing different ideological point of views will understand differently what is "left-wing" and what is "right-wing". That indicates that the concept of the left-right axis cannot be useful in describing the political spectrum. Nonetheless, in can be useful to explain why political actors cannot find the middle ground, and how voters or parties perceive their subjective political spectrum that they use to tell a friend from a foe.

Comparing the results of this initial research with the data from CBOS published between 2016 and 2017 (that is after the 2015 elections), all are
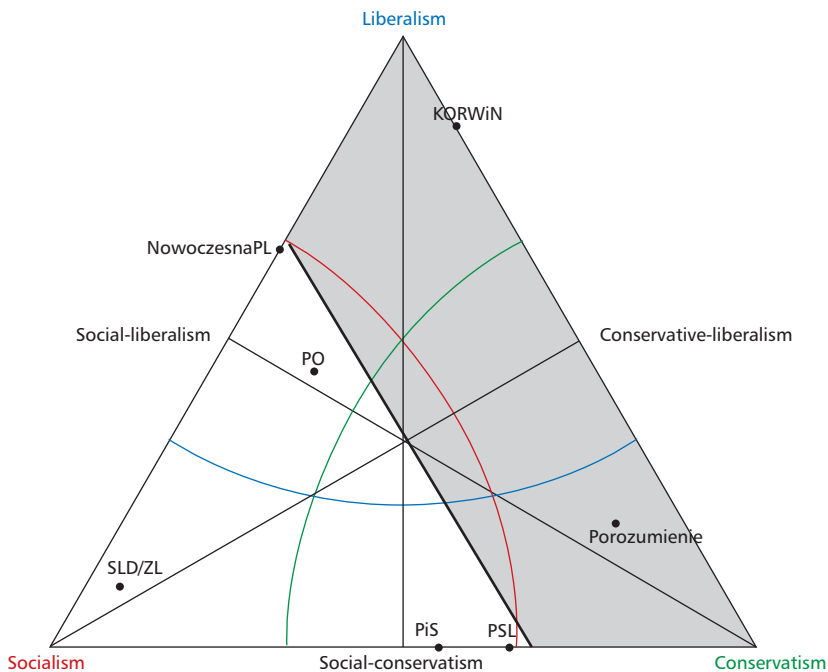
Figure 3. Polish Political Triangle

Source: own study.

highly coherent.[4] Similarities give hope that the proposed methodology and the adopted approach are correct. It is worth mentioning that similarities apply only to the obtained qualitative data. The interpretation is different and some of the inquiries were made in different manner to address the issue of the way of thinking about politics and the hidden preference for one of political anthropologies. Moreover, the interpretation was different as CBOS uses the terminology of sociology and not of political sciences, which definitely does not correspond to the one adopted in the initial research.

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[4] *CBOS, Elektoraty partyjne – charakterystyka poglądów* (*Party electorates – characteristics of views*), Komunikat z badań nr 95/2016; CBOS, Elektorat lewicy od roku 2005 (*Electorate of the Left since 2005*), Komunikat z badań 105/2017; CBOS, *Elektoraty PO i PiS w ostatnich dwunastu latach* (*PO and PiS electorates in the last twelve years*), Komunikat z badań nr 130/2017; CBOS, *Elektorat PSL w latach 2005–2017* (*PSL Electorate in 2005–2017*), Komunikat z badań nr 141/2017; CBOS, *Elektorat Kukiz'15 wczoraj i dziś* (*Electorate Kukiz'15 yesterday and today*), Komunikat z badań nr 131/2017; CBOS, *O polityce która nie buduje wspólnoty* (*On a policy that does not build a community, a message from research*), Komunikat z badań nr 160/2017.
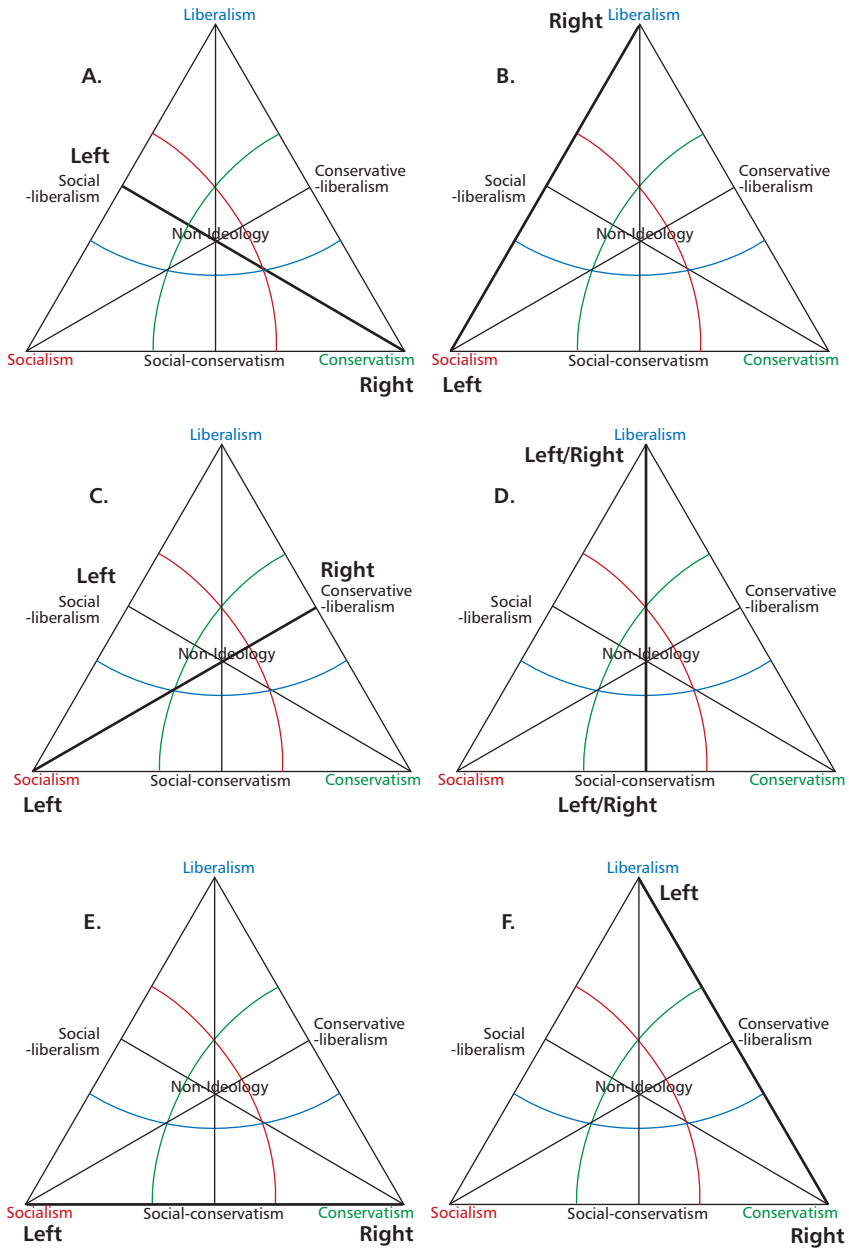
Figure 4. Variants of Left-Right Axis

Source: own study.

The research revealed also that most political parties (and all represented in the national parliament) represent a more or less social affiliation. There is no serious proposition for conservatist or liberal voters, and definitely none for conservative liberals. Parties seen (especially outside Poland) as liberal such as the Civic Platform are rather social liberal and the ones seen as conservative, such as Law and Justice, are rather social conservative and less conservative than the Polish People's Party.

After analyzing the CBOS data and rethinking the established linear left-right spectrum model, which is useful to frame everyday political struggles, the researcher believes that the new approach should be included in the *Political Triangle*. As the position on the political spectrum provides the inner observer with a unique but not objective perspective, six different ways of providing the left-right axis may be differentiated. The first variant represents the axis between social liberalism (left) and conservatism (right), second between liberalism (right) and socialism (left), third between socialism (left) and conservative liberalism (right), fourth between liberalism and social conservatism (and in this case both can be seen as right or left depending on the discourse), fifth between socialism (left) and conservatism (right) and sixth between liberalism (left) and conservatism (right). The number of axes and the ways of conducting the left-right distinction can be in that case used not as a research tool to classify an ideology, a doctrine or a party based on its program, but to translate the emergence of a political discourse, or to provide explanation for the public on why and how they see the political spectrum.

The above hypothesis will be useful for further investigation during normative studies, and for explaining how individuals perceive their own political spectrum. In other words to enquire into the manner of political thinking (as Michael Freeden would probably put it) of ordinary people in Poland, depending on his or her political affiliation.

Conclusions

In the above text, the researcher has demonstrated that plurality in Poland is a fact – all ideologies were represented in an even way and the average result was near the middle of the spectrum (slightly leaning towards liberalism, which is a case in all major Polish Big Data surveys performed by e.g. CBOS or IPSOS). The main issue is not the lack of plurality but the concentration of the social conservatist parties (the so-called United Right) in one political block and dispersion of the social liberal parties which were ruling the country for the last 8 years.[5]

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[5] Even longer adding SLD government just before a short break for 2 years of PiS, LPR and Samoobrona government after 2005–2007 elections.

The Polish political system in that case is not going towards an authoritarian regime and still is a democracy.

The main issue with democracy in Poland and other CEE countries like Hungary is that democracy does not necessarily imply a liberal democracy. The rise of social conservatism means that the new way of political thinking and political doctrine is going to dominate in the region and other arrangements, driven from liberal and especially socio-liberal axiology, will take place. But as long as there is a real opposition and a real possibility to overtake power, there will be room for democracy. The ability to shift from liberal democracy (which must be seen merely as a normative, that is an ideological and not a technical or processual concept) to conservative, social conservative or any other democracy is the very foundation of democracy. such an ability to change its form constitutes the core of democracy. Referring to the quotation of Robert E. Lane from the introductory part of this paper: "the democratic machinery works well enough in a plural, fragmented, open-ended and multiple-meaning society". That means if we were to limit the definition of democracy only to its liberal form (driven form only one of many ideologies) there would be no democracy at all. CEE countries including Poland had political systems that were based on only one ideology and that ideology was advertised as the only one that could secure a true, that is a people's, democracy. It was when the Marxist ideology was promoted as a scientific theory. This is why political scientists in Poland conduct research aimed at separating the theory from the ideology.

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