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## EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION: WHY DO POLES NOT VOTE?

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A study of the Euro-barometer performed at the end of January and beginning of February 2009 showed that not even 34% of the surveyed in all the 27 countries of the European Union declares the desire to cast their vote in the approaching election to the Euro-community. 15% of the respondents answered that they would definitely not vote in the coming election.<sup>1</sup>

The participation in the European Parliament Elections has fallen from election to election. This tendency persists and no signs of improvement of the situation can be seen. In 1994, 56.8% of the entitled to vote participated in the elections in all the member countries. Ten years later, only 45.6% of voters cast their votes. New member countries with low level of interest in European matters have considerably contributed to the fall in the level of legitimisation of the European Parliament.<sup>2</sup>

As results from the aforementioned survey of the Euro-barometer, in Poland 19% of the respondents, already in January 2009, i.e. for half a year

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<sup>1</sup> *Polacy plecami do euro wyborów*, "Gazeta Wyborcza", 11–13 April 2009, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> See in detail: J. Marszałek-Kawa, *Parlament Europejski a parlamenty narodowe w państwach Unii Europejskiej*, Toruń 2005, p. 100.

before the voting, answered that they had resolved not to participate in the EP elections.<sup>3</sup>

Once again, the problem of attendance have become in Poland the subject of general discussion on the level of democracy in Poland. Why do Poles not vote? How to change this situation? Is it the fault of the political class, or of society itself? Do Poles not feel responsible for their own country? Or is it the rainy or the too sunny weather to blame? Perhaps voting should be obligatory, like in other countries?

It certainly is the subject to discuss, new, better solutions should be found. The results of the survey conducted by the Euro-barometer at the beginning of 2009 showed that little interest in elections to the EP still remains a valid problem, also of Poland. In January 2009, only 15% of the surveyed declared their participation in the elections, 19% claimed that they would certainly not vote in the Euro elections.<sup>4</sup>

The closer the date of the election, the more alarming the results were. The number of people declaring they would not vote in the election was on a steady increase. Therefore, we became a part of a group of the five countries that declared the lowest attendance in the elections, next to Slovakia (25%), Portugal (24%), Great Britain (22%), and Austria (21%). The attendance in Poland was predicted at 13%.<sup>5</sup>

April 2009 brought more optimism, since the per cent of people interested in the EP elections. According to the survey conducted by the CBOS [Public Opinion Research Centre], 39% of the respondents declared their participation in the elections. However, experts claimed that it is not possible to believe entirely in the survey. The example of the first EP elections in Poland in 2004 was provided, in which a week before the elections almost 45% of the surveyed declared the willingness to take part in the voting, while in reality, the attendance in this election in Poland amounted only to 20.87% of the entitled to vote (It is worth mentioning here that it was the one but last place in Europe. Close behind us there was only Slovakia with 17% level

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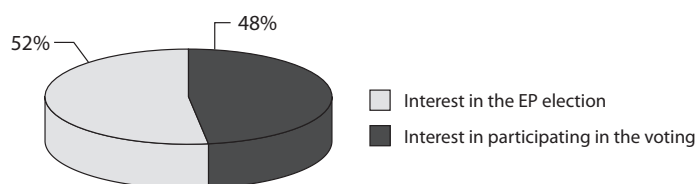
<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> *Polacy plecami do euro wyborów*, "Gazeta Wyborcza", 11–13 April 2009, p. 4.

of attendance in the election.)<sup>6</sup>. It was an election of the lowest attendance in the whole history of the Third Republic of Poland.

**Chart 1:** Interest in the election to the Euro Parliament, May 2009



Source: CBOS survey result, May 2009.

The above data clearly proved that it was possible that the level of attendance would be even lower than the poor result five years earlier.

The experts, looking for the reasons of such a low level of interest in the EP election, enumerated various reasons. Firstly, the Euro election has definitely lost its charm of a novelty. Voting in this election is no longer perceived as a prestigious act of democracy. Poland already is in Europe and Poles do not have to declare this fact again in voting. Secondly, both politicians and the media have done little to contribute to an improvement in our knowledge on the role that the Euro Parliament plays in the Union's structures. Just to mention, the candidates themselves have quite serious shortages in this field.<sup>7</sup>

A significant problem in Poland is also the level of our knowledge of what the European Parliament is, and how and when the voting takes place.<sup>8</sup> Not to mention the rules of the electoral law. In a CBOS survey conducted in April 2009, as many as 11% of the respondents confirmed that they had never heard about the European Parliament, its role and competence.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Małe zainteresowanie wyborami do PE*, [www.eurowybory.onet.pl](http://www.eurowybory.onet.pl), 28 May 2009

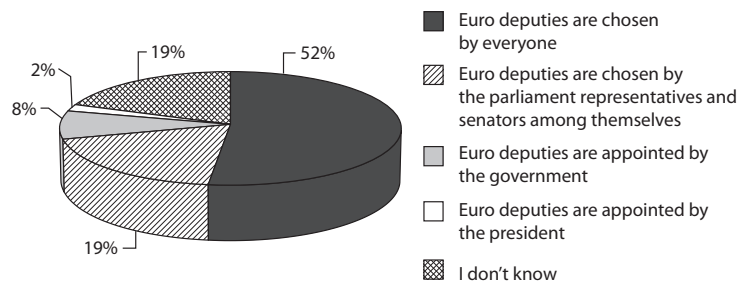
<sup>7</sup> A. Cybulska, *Wybory do Parlamentu Europejskiego*, CBOS survey results, April 2009

<sup>8</sup> See in detail: W. Peszyński, *Pierwsze wybory do Parlamentu Europejskiego w Polsce*, Toruń 2007, p. 150.

<sup>9</sup> W. Szacki, *Złe wieści dla PiS i eurosceptyków*, "Gazeta Wyborcza", 1 April 2009, p. 4.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from an analysis of another survey of public opinion conducted by the TNS OBOP.

**Chart 2: Who chooses the Euro deputies?**



Source: TNS OBOP survey, May 2009<sup>10</sup>

The results of a survey of another research centre GFK Polonia for “Rzeczpospolita” showed that only 25% of the respondents know that today Poland has 54 representatives in the European Parliament, and that a term of office of the body lasts for five years. Nearly a half of the surveyed did not know the right answer to this question. 18% of the surveyed claimed that the European Parliament controls the Euro rate of exchange in the countries of the EU, and 17% was of the opinion that the Euro body chooses the president of the EU.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, Poles do not vote in the EP elections because their knowledge on the subject is scarce. Even the ones that know a little more about the elections choose not to vote. However, in this group of voters it is possible to hear other opinions on absence on the elections, since the European Parliament is perceived as an institution that spends extensive sums only to finance its own existence. As a gathering that spends so much – it can do little.

Moreover, there is the extensive bureaucracy and complicated, often not understandable for the citizens methods of work that do not help in gaining

<sup>10</sup> *Polacy mało wiedzą o wyborach do PE*, [www.wiadomosci.wp.pl](http://www.wiadomosci.wp.pl), 7 May 2009

<sup>11</sup> *Mało wiemy o euro parlamencie*, [www.wiadomosci.pl](http://www.wiadomosci.pl), 7 May 2009

supporters either for the European Parliament or for other EU institutions. There is also a false belief that the EP is a place for “dying elephants”, a perfect place for politicians’ retirement. By politicians themselves it is treated as a body in which it is possible to sit through the worse years. Political parties often send to the EP their “inconvenient” members, whom the leaders want to eliminate for some time from the political scene.

It is worth mentioning here, that although the argument of the insignificant role of the EP and of the little importance of elections to this body has been numerously repeated in various comments, 60–80% of national legislation is created nowadays on the Union level, and it is the sphere where the EP can fulfil an extensive function. For the above reasons, it is necessary to continuously emphasise the importance of these elections. Therefore, it is significant to transfer this information to the voters, to make them aware that in the Euro elections they choose people that will constitute law for us. It is worth choosing, then, competent people, people who are well educated and know foreign languages.

Considering the reasons for the lack of interest in the EP elections, it is impossible to separate the analysis from the nature of their campaign. The campaign was local in character, and was conducted in a chaotic manner, so to say, without the flow. It was not substantial in character, often adopted the form of pushing around and squabble. Such a way of performing politics certainly does not improve the level of interest of society in the election. The well known names on party lists is not enough to encourage people to cast their votes. It is a rule that the ones who declare their lack of trust for Polish political class do not participate in the elections.

The low attendance in the EP elections has also other sources. The lack of a proper candidate in a district constitutes a similarly serious problem for voters, who usually abstain from voting (so called “parachuters”, perhaps their strengthen party lists, yet on the other hand they can lower the interest in their district). Moreover, as D. Uhlig rightly notes, the mediocre, not substantial election campaign results in a low level of information on elections transmitted to the voters.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> D. Uhlig, *Tylko co trzeci Polak wybiera się na eurowybory*, “Gazeta Wyborcza”, 29 April 2009, p. 6.

Moreover, lack of economic stability as a result of the world crisis, the soaring prices, rising inflation, unemployment, weak pension system, and problems in healthcare also seriously contribute to the decreasing interest in the European elections. Provided that the European Union showed that it can deal with the negative trends in European economy, the activity of society as far as electing is concerned would undoubtedly grow.

Discussing the level of attendance in Poland and the interest of society in participating in elections, the above cannot be performed without mentioning Polish experiences of the PRL (People's Republic of Poland) period. Nowadays, Poles do not have to vote, so they do not do it – as Ireneusz Krzemiński notices.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the June elections to the European Parliament were very calm in Poland, with only some incidents, such as fire in a polling station, or a blocked door. Poles chose 50 Euro deputies of 1301 candidates in 13 electoral districts.

According to the election rules, the attendance in the elections in Poland had a special meaning. Not only a prestigious one, from the point of view of the place of our country in the European Union. The attendance in a given voting district decided whether any, and how many Euro deputies will represent the region in the EP. The higher the attendance in a given district, the more mandates to share.

The level of interest in the election to the EP was not improved by politicians that appealed to take part in the voting until the last ours before the electoral silence was pronounced. The Prime Minister Donald Tusk stated that *participation in the elections is an act of freedom that does not require a lot of effort, and by improving the attendance, we can improve the reputation of Poland*.<sup>14</sup>

The former President Aleksander Kwasniewski appealed the voters claiming that *democracy is strong in its involvement, without the voters it is weak and withers. Poles, who 20 years ago were the first that won democracy, cannot turn their backs on it*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Grozi nam kompromitacja w wyborach do PE*, www.wiadomosci.pl, 16 April 2009.

<sup>14</sup> *Niska frekwencja tez dobra*, www.tvn24.pl, 7 June 2009

<sup>15</sup> *Niska frekwencja tez dobra*, www.tvn24.pl, 7 June 2009

Władysław Bartoszewski noticed that we should not talk and write too soon about low interest in the EP elections. *It is a psychological mistake*, he claimed. People should be continually informed that they should vote early in the morning, otherwise they will not be able to vote. Then, people would even push through the windows. *What, I won't push in? – That's what we are*, concluded Bartoszewski.

There was a specific fight for attendance. The Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki convinced that participation in the elections is a civil duty. Polish Primate Cardinal Józef Glemp and Metropolitan Archbishop of Warsaw Kazimierz Nycz suggested that taking part in the elections is a duty of a citizen and of a Christian.<sup>16</sup>

As the National Electoral Commission announced on 7 June 2009, 24.53% of the entitled to vote participated in the elections in Poland. It was more than predicted, and more than five years earlier, however, Poles still merely pass the exam in democracy. For the large part of voters, the day of elections in Poland is not a holiday of democracy, but another Sunday and time for shopping in supermarkets.

The most important reason for the lack of active attendance in the EU elections is undoubtedly a lasting disappointment with the political situation in Poland. Political parties became interested in the matter of the Euro elections only in May. The campaign promoted predominantly political parties, European subjects, if present in debates, were only discussed in the background. More often than not, it was possible to get the impression that a mandate of an Euro deputy, number one on a party list, is a political banishment. Nevertheless, in these elections there were fewer voices that they were a laboratory before parliamentary elections. The voting in 2004 showed unquestionably that these elections cannot be perceived in such a way, it is attendance that matters more, which shows the shape of Polish society. And it is not the best, as it appeared.

The lowest attendance recorded is nowadays a problem of the whole Union, which is too distant from the citizens. Even though the European Parliament has achieved in struggle quite a meaningful position among the Union organs, i.e. a significant influence on the shape of the Union's legisla-

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<sup>16</sup> *Walka o frekwencję, www.rp.pl of 7 June 2009*

tion, it is still vaguely visible. Commentators state that the media are largely to blame, which usually speak so little about the EP and its role.

What now – once the elections finished, a storm in the media which was connected with the electoral campaign finished as well. Similarly, quite a shallow debate ended, one on the reasons of the lack of interest of Polish society in the elections. This subject will most certainly be back in five years, when once again the results of of public opinion surveys will be quoted. Then, once again, temporarily and without deepened reflection, the results will be evaluated by full-time commentators of public life in Poland.