

Taking stock of the impact of Covid-19 on Polish politics

How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected Polish politics? Aleks Szczerbiak writes that although misgivings about the government's handling of the crisis contributed to a significant fall in support for Law and Justice, voters will want to quickly move on from the issue if the pandemic subsides. But if the crisis drags on beyond the summer, it could undercut the government's ambitious post-pandemic recovery plans and exacerbate tensions within the ruling camp.

Poland appeared to pass through the first phase of the pandemic in the spring and summer of 2020 relatively mildly, experiencing low rates of virus-related deaths compared to other European countries. The Polish government – led, since 2015, by the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party – introduced some of Europe's earliest and most radical 'lockdown' restrictions in March (even denying Poles access to woodlands and forests) but then started to relax these measures quickly. During the summer, the government's primary concern switched to the broader socio-economic impact of its restrictions, as it attempted to open up the economy and society and move on from the pandemic issue as much as possible before the holiday season got underway.

Moreover, with a crucial, delayed presidential election being held over two rounds in June and July – won, in the event, by Law and Justice-backed incumbent Andrzej Duda – the ruling party was keen to give the impression that it had dealt with the pandemic successfully. As the presidential campaign moved into full swing, Law and Justice tried to demonstrate that it was on top of the crisis and that life in Poland was returning to some kind of normality. In particular, in what was an extremely closely fought electoral race, Law and Justice wanted to encourage older voters – who comprised a core element of its electoral base, but felt especially vulnerable to the virus – that it was safe for them to come out and vote for Duda; exemplified by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's claim at a July campaign rally that the virus was 'in retreat' and Poles no longer had to fear it.

Indeed, even in the early autumn ministers were reassuring Poles that they had the crisis fully under control. However, in October both the government and Polish public were taken aback by the ferocity of the country's 'second wave' of the pandemic (and then, after a brief lull at the beginning of 2021, a 'third wave' in February) with sharp increases in the number of positive test results, hospitalisations, and deaths linked to the virus (Poland's levels were among the highest in the EU).

The issue moved back to the top of the political agenda and Law and Justice came under increasing pressure following widespread media reports that Poland's underfunded health service was not coping effectively with the crisis. The government increased the number of hospital beds and respirators for Covid-19 patients and built temporary medical facilities, including turning the national stadium in Warsaw into a field hospital. However, its critics argued that the biggest problem was not hospital capacity but shortages of trained staff and the fact that medical equipment was not in the right places.

Support for Law and Justice slumps

Last spring, Law and Justice benefited from what political scientists call the 'rally effect': an inevitable psychological tendency for worried citizens to unite around their political leaders and institutions as the embodiment of national unity when they feel that they face a dramatic external threat. However, while the government gained politically from the fact that it was judged to have handled the first phase of the crisis reasonably well – or, at least, no worse than any other country – there was a feeling that its response to the second and third phases was chaotic both in terms of decision-making and public messaging.

For example, the CBOS polling agency found that the number of respondents who approved of the government's handling of the crisis fell from 70% in May/June 2020 (25% disapproved) to 49% in the first half of October (43% disapproved) and only 38% in the second half of that month (45% disapproved). The number of Poles who felt that the government's restrictions were too harsh increased from 14% in July 2020 to 43% in February 2021 while those who felt they were not strict enough fell from 27% to only 7% over the same period.

The numbers who felt that government support for firms and workers affected negatively by the crisis was sufficient also fell from 42% in September 2020 (40% said it was insufficient) to only 30% in the second half of October (52% insufficient). Many Poles felt misled by the government's earlier optimistic statements, and Law and Justice's reputation for competence – which it had been working extremely hard to try and establish over the previous five years, to counter opposition claims that it was obsessively pursuing a narrow ideological agenda – was severely undermined as the administration often appeared rudderless in the face of an escalating crisis.

According to the 'Ewybory' website that aggregates voting intention surveys, Law and Justice saw its opinion poll support slump from an average of 40% in September 2020 to only 31% in November, still ahead of other parties but not enough to secure a parliamentary majority. According to CBOS, the government also saw its approval ratings fall from 44% in May/June 2020 (32% disapproval) to 38% in the first half of October (34% disapproval) and only 33% in the second half of that month (43% disapproval). The crisis undoubtedly contributed to these sharp falls in support as they coincided with the revival of the pandemic as one of the main political issues in Poland and concomitant loss of public confidence in the government's ability to tackle it effectively.

What about other issues?

However, it is difficult to know to what extent Law and Justice's autumn slump was due to the pandemic per se or to other political developments taking place in Poland at that time. Another important contributory factor here was an increasingly bitter internal conflict and lack of trust between the various competing factions within the governing camp, which raised serious questions about the cohesion – indeed, very survival – of the Law and Justice government.

Law and Justice's junior partners within the 'United Right' (ZP) governing camp – the right-wing conservative 'Solidaristic Poland' (SP) and more liberal-conservative 'Agreement' (Porozumienie) groupings, both of whom have enough deputies to deprive the government of its slim parliamentary majority – continually and openly contested key elements of the administration's programme, leaving many Poles feeling that the ruling party was increasingly self-absorbed at a time when it should have been focusing on the pandemic.

The revival of the pandemic also coincided with a bitter political dispute over the Polish constitutional tribunal's hugely controversial October 2020 ruling that abortions as a result of foetal defects were unconstitutional. Given that the vast majority of legal abortions carried out in Poland were in such cases, the ruling effectively meant a near-total ban. Although it is a socially conservative party that draws inspiration from Catholic moral teaching, Law and Justice's electorate includes many Poles with more liberal views on moral-cultural issues (in Polish terms at least, compared with the West European liberal-left cultural mainstream they are still quite conservative) who support the party largely as a result of its socio-economic policies, and who were strongly opposed to the tribunal ruling.

Law and Justice argued that the tribunal is an independent body and that the abortion ruling was a sovereign decision clearly in line with its earlier judgments on the issue in the mid-1990s (when it was dominated by justices who later became harsh critics of the current government). However, the government's opponents argued that the tribunal was under the ruling party's control and its decision was influenced by political calculations.

Consequently, the less socially conservative elements of Law and Justice's electorate may have interpreted the abortion ruling as giving credence to opposition claims that the governing party was increasingly dominated by 'religious right' ideological extremists. The fact that this controversial ruling coincided with last autumn's slump in support for Law and Justice also makes it difficult to clearly pinpoint the precise causal effects of the pandemic on shifts in public opinion compared with other factors and issues.

Focusing on the post-pandemic recovery

It is obviously extremely difficult to predict how the pandemic will play out over the next few months. However, since April the epidemiological situation in Poland has improved significantly, with falls in positive test rates, hospitalisations and (although more slowly) virus-linked deaths. As Poland's vaccine roll-out has accelerated, the government has steadily lifted restrictions and opened up more spheres of economic and social life.

If the crisis continues to subside and there is a rapid and sustainable further easing – and, ultimately removal – of remaining restrictions, then the Polish economy could bounce back quickly and decisively. This will both significantly improve the public mood and, as most Poles are likely to want to move on from the crisis as quickly as possible, make them less inclined to dwell on any misgivings that they have about the government's earlier handling of it. Most Poles also know that Poland was not the only country to struggle with the virus and many also feel that the opposition failed to put forward a credible alternative approach to tackling it.

Moreover, although Law and Justice has a clear run, with an overall parliamentary majority and control of the presidency until the next legislative elections (scheduled for autumn 2023), the all-enveloping nature of the pandemic has meant that the government has been in crisis management mode for most of the last year, forcing it to put many of its planned reforms and policy initiatives on hold. The ruling party is now hoping that its flagship 'Polish Deal' (Polski Ład) stimulus programme for the post-pandemic recovery, which was formally launched in May (originally scheduled for before Easter but postponed due to the 'third wave'), will help it to win back support by providing the government with a renewed sense of purpose and momentum for the remainder of the current parliament.

The 'Polish Deal' includes ambitious plans to cut taxes for Law and Justice's less well-off core electorate; significantly boost spending on the health service and support for house-buyers, young families, and pensioners; and expand investment in infrastructure and development projects, especially in sectors of the economy that have been weakened by the pandemic. These spending plans will be partly financed by the EU's recovery fund, which has earmarked 58 billion euros in grants and loans for Poland. Interestingly, following the launch of the 'Polish Deal', Ewybory showed Law and Justice's average poll support ticking back up to around 34% at the end of May.

A fourth wave?

However, there are also much less optimistic scenarios for the government which involve the pandemic dragging on if there is a problem with the vaccine rollout or its effectiveness (the main issue in Poland now appears to be one of take-up as much as supply), and a 'fourth wave' once again putting the Polish health service under severe pressure. This could mean the government maintaining, or reintroducing, restrictions prompting both societal frustration and a slowdown, or even reversal, of economic recovery.

If the crisis drags on beyond the summer this could also undercut the government's ambitious post-pandemic recovery plans set out in the 'Polish Deal' and further exacerbate underlying tensions and instability within the ruling camp. Indeed, whatever the progress of the pandemic, and even in an optimistic scenario where any 'fourth wave' is manageable, the government will struggle to move on from it decisively while there is still a deeply rooted lack of trust between the governing camp's various component parts, and if Law and Justice's junior partners continue to assert their autonomy and openly contest key elements of its programme.

Note: This article first appeared at Aleks Szczerbiak's [personal blog](#). It gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)
