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How to transform the fear

Emotions and the struggle of diverging interpretations regarding the nature of the crisis that grips Poland will be of key importance for the 2023 parliamentary election campaign. Neither the political programmes nor interests of certain socio-economic groups will be crucial, rather it will be about the ability of politicians and other social actors to transform emotions and create a narrative framework on how to overcome the current crisis. For this reason, the case of Poland will be an important test of to what extent progressive social and political forces can beat the parties which are hostile to liberal democracy in conditions of instability.

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic pushed many to believe that we were dealing with an extreme event that nothing could outperform for a long time to come. From the perspective of the start of 2023, this belief can almost be remembered with some nostalgia. The last two years have seen Belarussian president Alexander Lukashenko's hostile hybrid actions against the EU on the borders of Poland and Lithuania, Russia's attack on Ukraine, hence a full-scale war in Europe, the influx of millions of refugees, and a radical increase in energy costs and inflation. The overlapping of several crises caused the dominant emotions at the beginning of the election campaign to be fear and a sense of uncertainty.

While in the case of positive emotions – joy or hope, for example – politicians compete to strengthen and express them, in the case of fear, they are socially obliged to overcome it. They have to do it by amplifying feelings close to fear and offering responses that trigger other emotions.

If we look at the strategy in recent months of Poland's governing party Law and Justice (PiS), we can see several main lines of action. Firstly, PiS criticises the European Union for withholding money from the reconstruction fund for Poland. Secondly, it alleges that the West, and especially Germany, was wrong about Russia and still does not show due support for Ukraine. Thirdly, PiS politicians emphasise Poland's preparation for the crisis through the construction of the Baltic Pipe, the gas pipeline connecting Norway and Poland, and financial shielding measures prepared by the government that reduce energy costs for households.

We are dealing with a conscious transformation of fear into anger towards the European Union and Germany. On the one hand, the government represents angry citizens, for example when it criticises Germany for its soft attitude towards Russian president Vladimir Putin and the construction of the Nord Stream pipelines. On the other hand, PiS is trying to build a sense of pride in Poland's achievements, both in terms of aid for Ukraine and anti-crisis measures. Fear and uncertainty are to be overcome by a sense of agency.

Over the past few months, opinion polls indicate that if elections were held now, the opposition parties could jointly achieve an advantage over the ruling party. PiS has support in the range of 30 to 35%, while democratic opposition parties have Civic Platform at between 25 and 29%, PL2050 (neo-Christian democratic party) between 10 and 15%, Left from 8 to 11%, and PSL (an agrarian political party) between 5 and 6%. In terms of the distribution of seats, according to the current polls, PiS could win about 200 seats out of 460, and would have no chance of an independent majority. The opposition could count on about 250 seats. An important factor determining the post-election dynamics could be the low results of the Confederation – the alliance of the far-right parties consisting of nationalists and libertarians. The Confederation would be a likely PiS coalition partner, but even if it exceeds the electoral threshold of 5% (which, according to many polls, it does not), it would only win about ten seats: still not enough to provide PiS with a majority in parliament.

If current opinion polls were to decide the outcome of the elections, the opposition parties could already start negotiating the formation of a future government, but ultimately it is the campaign that decides the outcome. And in the campaign, individual parties have to face the issue of dominant emotions and prove that they will cope with the crisis better than those holding power.

Like PiS, opposition parties seek to transform fear into anger. It is not anger at the Germans and the EU, but at the ruling party. People have reasons to be angry. Their wages are shrinking despite the government's promise that inflation will not affect real wages. There is a growing feeling that the government has not been prudent when it comes to the green energy transition. It opposed the development of wind farms and did not create the right conditions for the development of photovoltaics. In addition, there are scandals related to the financing of party campaigns by government representatives working in well-paid positions in public enterprises, which bears the hallmarks of political corruption. All these issues are hotly debated in Poland.

However, the opposition also has an additional task to perform: building hope that the crisis can be overcome. Fear can be overcome through the emotions of solidarity and cooperation. The opposition's attitude towards the EU and European partners works to the advantage of the opposition, as well as the situation in the opposition itself, which is diverse, but willing to cooperate. Over the last few years, opposition parties have made clear that the government's conflictual attitude towards the EU will cost Poland dearly. Today, when problems with disbursing funds from the reconstruction fund are related to the rule of law, the opposition not only gains credibility, but also becomes a guarantor of reaching for these funds in the future and rebuilding good relations with the EU.

The second issue is related to the functioning of the opposition itself. Unlike PiS, which is built around the central position of its leader Jarosław Kaczyński, the opposition remains diverse in terms of programme and leadership. However, it has managed to agree on a common catalogue of basic values, is able to cooperate in specific matters and promises to create a joint government after the elections. This lends credence to the narrative of cooperation. While the government constantly looks for new enemies against which it mobilises its supporters, the opposition mobilises various electorates that are not reduced to the common denominator of their aversion for Kaczyński. Should it be able to form a government, it will be one based on the search for compromises.

The 2023 campaign will show whether it is possible, during the crisis, to inspire hope, integrate societies in solidarity, and focus on social and economic transformation. The alternative is already materialising in the activity of the PiS government: a policy of hatred and hostility, as well as actions aimed only at mitigating the symptoms of the current crisis without introducing deeper reforms. The opposition is determined that the policy of hope and cooperation will prevail.