

**The Picture of
the European Parliament Elections
(2009) in the Polish Media.
Analysis of the Media Content**

The Picture of the European Parliament Elections (2009) in the Polish Media. Analysis of the Media Content

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Introduction

Considering the models of political rivalry which are dominant on the Polish political market since 2005, the flow of the campaign that preceded the elections to the European Parliament in 2009 can be regarded as surprising due to at least three significant reasons:

- 1) the visible strategic minimalism of the leading political entities,
- 2) the relatively small interest in the campaign on part of the media broadcasters,
- 3) the clear lack of involvement of the citizens in the electoral process.

Relatively small dynamics of the activities that were performed during the campaign by the electoral commissions as well as visible distance of the citizens towards the undertakings that were implemented as part of the campaign (which resulted in low voter turnout: 24.53%) suggest that the elections to the European Parliament play a peripheral role both in the process of shaping of the Polish political scene (including the attitude of Polish voters towards the entities which participate in the elections) and in the process of political/European socialization of Poles.

Undoubtedly, such state was to a large extent a derivative of two types of contextual circumstances:

- the circumstances that are external towards the political market – the world economic crisis defined/or should define an area of the campaign discourse and to a large extent of the media discourse (and thus naturally push the electoral issues into the background),
- the circumstances that refer to the situation on the political market – in 2009, despite the undertakings which were implemented as part of the European elections and the pre-electoral campaign, which was run in the later period, there was no record of significant fluctuation of support for the major entities of political rivalry in Poland; at the same time as far as evaluation of the market context of the campaign is concerned, we can speak not so much about stabilization of the market situation, but more about petrification of a given set of market positions¹ (the following can be treated as the basic contextual indices: the continuous and relatively constant support for the individual political entities as well as the conviction – which results from the analysis of public opinion polls, that the preferences in the European elections correspond to a large extent to the declared support for the political parties in the possible parliamentary elections).

Importance should also be put to the fact, that due to the placement of the European elections in the schedule of national elections (in the middle of the parliament's term of office), it was difficult to treat them as a peculiar pre-campaign before the elections, which are regarded as politically crucial both in terms of the system and of the social reception. Even so, it seemed that the presidential and the local self-government elections which will be held in 2010 should motivate the entities of political rivalry to take initial market positions – the European elections,

¹ For more details see: M. Kolczyński, *Eurowybory 2009 – meandry kampanijnej postpolityki*, [in:] R. Głajcar, W. Wojtasik (red.) *Wybory do Parlamentu Europejskiego w Polsce 2009*, Katowice 2010.

which in the social reception are treated as n-th order elections, create a unique opportunity to begin the process of strategic reorientation or market testing of new political concepts. In principle, apart from the pre-campaign attempt to modify the image of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, the remaining political entities preferred to use the already well-tried action models, despite their limited effectiveness.

As a part of the selected routine strategic options, two significant dimensions of the electoral competition should be put to attention: the personal as well as the media dimension of the strategy. The radical personalization of the transmission (which was trivially reduced to two basic issues: who will be at the top of the electoral lists [in the pre-campaign phase] as well as what will be the flow of the rivalry of the party 'number ones' [during the fundamental part of the campaign]) as well as the aggressive advertising orientation were supposed to – in the intention of the party strategists – attract elementary interest in the flow of the campaign (as well as in the result of the elections and its possible political consequences) not only by the potential electors, but by the media broadcasters in the first place.

During the campaign, the Polish media broadcasters faced a truly Hamletan dilemma as to how to form and position (i.e. to give media importance to) the materials which referred to the European elections:

- whether, due to their social obligations and actual political status of the elections to the European Parliament, they should provide the electoral information with an adequately high media exposure,
- or whether, considering the low dynamics of campaign undertakings and above all the minute interest in the campaign on part of the citizens (vide: results of almost all public opinion polls), they should treat the electoral subject-matter in a marginal manner,
- a third option was also taken into account – i.e. active involvement of media in formation of the politically, socially or commercially demanded picture of the campaign.

In the presented study, the authors try to answer the key questions concerning the role of mass media in the campaign that preceded the elections to the European Parliament. To this end an analysis was performed of the materials that were presented in the television, press and Internet in the period from 1st February until 5th June 2009. The analysis covered two areas:

- 1) broadcasts controlled by mass media (analysis of the content of TV news programs in the public TV ['Wiadomości' TVP1] and commercial TV ['Fakty' TVN, 'Wydarzenia' Polsat, of daily press ['Gazeta Wyborcza', 'Rzeczpospolita', 'Fakt', opinion-forming weekly papers ['Polityka', 'Wprost'] as well as Internet portals [Onet.pl, Interia.pl, Wp.pl])
- 2) transmissions controlled by political actors (analysis of the content of the electoral teams' own materials which were broadcasted in TV and on the Internet).

The results allow to define the logic behind the activity of the Polish media² during the electoral campaign, and in particular the manner in which the electoral news materials were formatted. In some sense, they also allow the formulation of interesting conclusions regarding the neutrality/objectivity and political involvement/partiality of media.

Mariusz Kolczyński

² The meaning of the term 'media logic' is as proposed by D.L. Altheide, R.P. Snow, *Media Logic*, Beverly Hills 1979.

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