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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Translated Name of the Party	Original Name of the Party	Acronym
<b>United Kingdom</b>		
United Kingdom Independence Party	United Kingdom Independence Party	UKIP
Brexit Party	Brexit Party	Brexit Party
<b>Spain</b>		
Spanish Socialist Workers' Party	Partido Socialista Obrero Español	PSOE
People's Party	Partido Popular	PP
VOX	VOX	VOX
United We Can	Unidas Podemos	PP
Citizens	Ciudadanos	C's
<b>Italy</b>		
Go Italy	Forza Italia	FI
Brothers of Italy	Fratelli d'Italia	FdI
League	Lega	Lega
Five Star Movement	Movimento 5 Stelle	M5S
Democratic Party	Partito Democratico	PD
<b>France</b>		
National Rally	Rassemblement National	RN
Indomitable France	La France Insoumise	LFI
The Republic on the Move	La République en Marche	LREM
MODEM	MODEM	MODEM
Democrats and Independants' Union	Union des Démocrates et Indépendants	UDI
Socialist Party	Parti Socialiste	PS
Greens	Les Verts	EELV
The Republicans	Les Républicains	LR
<b>Germany</b>		
Alternative for Germany	Alternative für Deutschland	AfD
Federal Minister of Health	Bundesministerium für Gesundheit	BMG
Christian Democratic Union	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands	CDU
Christian Social Union in Bavaria	Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern	CSU
Liberal Democratic Party	Freie Demokratische Partei	F.D.P.
Green Party	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	Grüne
The Left Party	Die Linke	Linke
Robert Koch Institute	Robert Koch Institut	RKI
Social Democratic Party	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands	SPD
<b>Hungary</b>		
Fidesz	Fidesz	Fidesz
Christian Democratic People's Party	Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt	KDNP
Hungarian Socialist Party	Magyar Szocialista Párt	MSZP
For a Better Hungary	Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom	Jobbik
Democratic Coalition	Demokratikus Koalíció	DK
Another Politics Is Possible	Lehet Más a Politika	LMP
Momentum	Momentum	Momentum
Dialogue	Párbeszéd	P
<b>Czech Republic</b>		
ANO 2011	ANO 2011	ANO
Freedom and Direct Democracy	Svoboda a přímá demokracie	SPD
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia	Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy	KSČM
<b>Poland</b>		
Law and Justice	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	PiS
Confederation 'Freedom and Independence'	Konfederacja 'Wolność i Niepodległość'	Confederation
Civic Platform	Platforma Obywatelska	PO
Polish People's Party	Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe	PSL
Democratic Left Alliance	Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej	SLD

## CHAPTER 9

# POLAND: 'IF WE DON'T ELECT THE PRESIDENT, THE COUNTRY WILL PLUNGE INTO CHAOS'

### Abstract

The aim of the paper is to elucidate how PiS and Confederation, two right-wing populist parties dealt with the double challenge of the COVID-19 crisis and the presidential elections during a pandemic. The chapter argues that the COVID-19 crisis had a significant impact on the strategies undertaken by PiS during the presidential campaign. First, it prompted PiS to take unconstitutional and illegal measures to prevent the delay of the elections, a scenario promoted by the opposition. Secondly, the crisis also opened a window of opportunity for the governing camp allowing PiS to profit from the 'rally effect'. As for Confederation, the second populist actor, the crisis did not fundamentally affect its strategy for becoming more mainstream. The group used the pandemic to build the image of a competent and moderate actor. In addition, the restrictions of the crisis created an opportunity for the libertarian aspects of the party's agenda.

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### Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Poland during the presidential campaign (elections had been scheduled for the 10<sup>th</sup> of May), all political parties were completely focused on the electoral competition and the health crisis was, to a large extent, overshadowed by other issues. The stakes were high. For Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PiS), the victory of its candidate, incumbent Andrzej Duda, would allow the party to advance its radical reforms (e.g. continue the controversial reforms of the judiciary and impose limits on media freedom); for the oppositional Confederation (Konfederacja), the smallest group in parliament, a good electoral result of its candidate Krzysztof Bosak could provide an opportunity to promote its party radical agenda (i.e. anti-LGBTQ, euro-rejectionist, anti-semitic and xenophobic slogans) and would be a good starting point for future parliamentary elections. PiS used the health crisis to present its leadership as skilful and competent and their decisions as non-political. They also tried to take advantage of the uneven political field created by the pre-emptive COVID-19 measures which had imposed limits on the campaigns of opposition candidates. However, the health crisis and its economic consequences also had drawbacks for the incumbents and opened a window of opportunity for all opposition parties, including Confederation.

The aim of the paper is to elucidate how PiS and Confederation, two right-wing populist parties who differed in their institutional positions, dealt with the double challenge of the COVID-19 crisis and the presidential elections during a pandemic. It presents the political context, the evolution of pre-emptive measures and policies used to prevent the spread of COVID-19, discursive reactions of the parties, and their strategic decision on how and when to introduce and construct the pandemic as a political issue.

### 1. Political context

The genesis of the dominant position of PiS on the Polish political scene may be traced back to its success in the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2005, which allowed it to form a government and decisively increased the salience of its right-wing populist message (Pankowski, 2011; Stanley & Czeńnik 2019). Since its very beginning on 2001, the core of PiS' agenda was constituted by the idea of a strong state and focus on fighting corruption which underpinned its calls for the 'decommunization' of the state (Lipiński, 2016). According to the party's causal story (Stone, 1989), the Polish transformation was a result of a collusion between the communist and liberal elites

in 1989, which not only affected the quality of the newly-born Polish democracy and free-market economy, but also brought about a climate of moral disease in social life. This agenda helped PiS get into parliament in 2001 and form a government in 2005. As the major opposition party, following its premature loss of power in 2007, PiS continued to employ the populist division between the nation and the establishment and constructed the crisis, particularly following the Smolensk catastrophe in 2010 (Moffitt, 2015). Incessantly accusing Donald Tusk's government of ruining the country and weakening its sovereignty in the international arena, they managed a double electoral victory in the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections, resulting in 235 out of 430 seats in the lower chamber of parliament. The extensive social spending programs implemented by the PiS-led government helped generate considerable political support and helped the party to portray itself as making good on electoral promises and proving more effective than its liberal predecessors.

In the 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections and in the subsequent parliamentary elections later that year, PiS and its minor coalition partners (the United Right) secured a dominant position (45.4% of votes, and 43.59% of votes with 235 seats, accordingly) thanks to a campaign filled with homophobic slogans and criticisms of 'gender ideology', assisted by generous social spending framed as a people-oriented 'revolution of dignity'. This was not, however, an out-and-out victory as PiS lost its majority in the Senate, the upper chamber of parliament with the power to slow down the legislative process. The loss of the Senate increased the importance of the presidential elections planned for May 2020 and the necessity to secure the re-election of Duda. Otherwise, challenged by the Senate and a president with veto power, PiS would not be able to continue its radical policies. At this time, it seemed that the political efforts of the ruling camp and the attention of the public would be entirely focused on this task in the forthcoming months. The emergence of COVID-19 and its potentially adverse outcomes for the incumbents only raised the stakes of the elections and determined PiS's resistance to delay the election date.

Another important result of the October 2019 elections was the relative success of Confederation, a radical right-wing party founded at the beginning of 2019 on the eve of an electoral campaign for the European and national parliaments, with 11 seats won in the latter (6.81% of votes). The party showed its ability to surpass PiS from the right flank and succeeded in forcing PiS to radicalize its message. Confederation's anti-systemic agenda makes it similar to many small and short-lived parties which appeared in Poland after 1989, using presidential elections as an opportunity structure to promote a radical message and relying on their 'newness' as an important symbolic resource (Sikk, 2012). In general, Confederation is a coalition of economic libertarians linked to the eccentric Janusz Korwin-Mikke and nationalists from the National Movement. During the 2019 EP elections, the coalition was broadened to include anti-vaccine and pro-life activists. The populist strategy of provocation was articulated through anti-Semitic slogans related to the alleged Jewish wartime reparation claims enabled by the American JUST Act of 2017. Moreover, the campaign resorted to anti-Semitic and Eurosceptic slogans to accuse PiS of undermining Poland's sovereignty by becoming servile towards the US and EU. Following a failure to reach the 5% parliamentary representation threshold for parties (they only received 4.6% of the votes), Confederation decided to significantly moderate its public image. In the subsequent parliamentary elections in October 2019, they presented themselves as the only integral right-wing force, in comparison to PiS who were shown as lacking in a real right-wing identity. Consequently, Confederation's focus on anti-establishment messages, tax reductions and other free market slogans coupled with careful avoidance of more controversial issues brought them 11 seats in parliament.

**Table 9.1 Poland's Main political parties (>5% in the last general election)**

Political party	2019 general election		2019 European election	
	Vote shares	Seats	Vote shares	Seats
<i>In power</i>				
PiS	43.59%	235	45.38%	26
<i>In opposition</i>				

Civic Coalition (PO, Modern, PL Greens) <sup>53</sup>	27.4%	124	38.47%	22
Democratic Left Alliance*	12.56%	49	-	-
Polish People's Party*	8.55%	30	-	-
Confederation 'Freedom and Independence'	6.81%	11	4.55%	0

\* Initially as a part of European Coalition

## 2. COVID-19 diffusion and political measures

In Poland, the pre-COVID phase which lasted until the 4<sup>th</sup> of March was already marked by the widespread awareness of the seriousness of the health consequences of contracting the virus and the strong strain this would put on health systems in countries affected by the epidemic. The crisis management team at the Ministry of Health met for the first time on the 29<sup>th</sup> of January. In February, the government took a number of precautionary measures, including formalizing the team monitoring the COVID-19 epidemiological situation<sup>54</sup>. A special act decreed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March outlined emergency powers and responsibilities for public servants and businesses<sup>55</sup>. Importantly, the law was voted for almost unanimously, with Confederation being the only party which opposed it. In general, the government focused on monitoring, informing and adopting a number of preventive measures. The second phase of the state's response to the pandemic was triggered by the first case of infection, announced on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March by the Ministry of Health. On March 10<sup>th</sup>, i.e. six days after the first case, the government introduced significant limits on mass events. Between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> of March, further lockdown measures were taken, including the closure of schools and universities. A state of epidemic threat was announced on March 14<sup>th</sup>, two days after the first death from COVID-19. It allowed the Minister of Health to introduce further measures to limit the movement of people. Declaring a state of epidemic threat allowed for an entry ban on foreigners, 14-day quarantine for Poles returning from abroad, limits on gatherings of over 50 people, and closing shopping malls, to mention but a few. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of March, given the steep growth in the number of people infected with COVID-19 which had already surpassed 400 cases, and the approaching Easter holiday which in Poland is a time of traditional family meetings, the government decided to introduce a state of epidemic. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of March, further limitations were imposed on gatherings which were limited to a maximum of two people. Exceptions to this were related to families, religious festivities, including masses in the Catholic Church, funerals and marriages (with a maximum of five people), and work places. Moreover, travelling was prohibited with the exception of travelling to your work or home, COVID-19 related activities or other 'necessary everyday activities' (e.g. shopping, visiting the doctor or pharmacy, and also jogging or walking). Importantly, these restrictions, broadened and prolonged several times through the regulations issued by the Minister of Health and Council of Ministers, were considered unconstitutional by the opposition, and many experts and civil society organizations. In their opinion, such restrictions could only be imposed within the extraordinary measures stipulated in the Constitution (i.e. state of emergency or state of natural disaster). However, due to the presidential elections scheduled for the 10<sup>th</sup> of May, the government decided not to use any constitutionally regulated, extraordinary measures, as this would delay the elections until 90 days after such a state was lifted. The ruling party did not want any delays, being fully aware that any unexpected consequences of the pandemic could undermine Duda's chances for re-election. All the opposition parties, including Confederation, PO and PSL were consistently and unanimously claiming that solutions adopted by PiS were unconstitutional and represented PiS as a party striving for power at any price. On the other hand, PiS and Duda enjoyed extraordinary support from the public media, resorting to polarizing discourse and portraying their opponents as a threat to national identity and interests.

<sup>53</sup> In the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, it started as a European Coalition together with the Polish People's Party and Democratic Left Alliance.

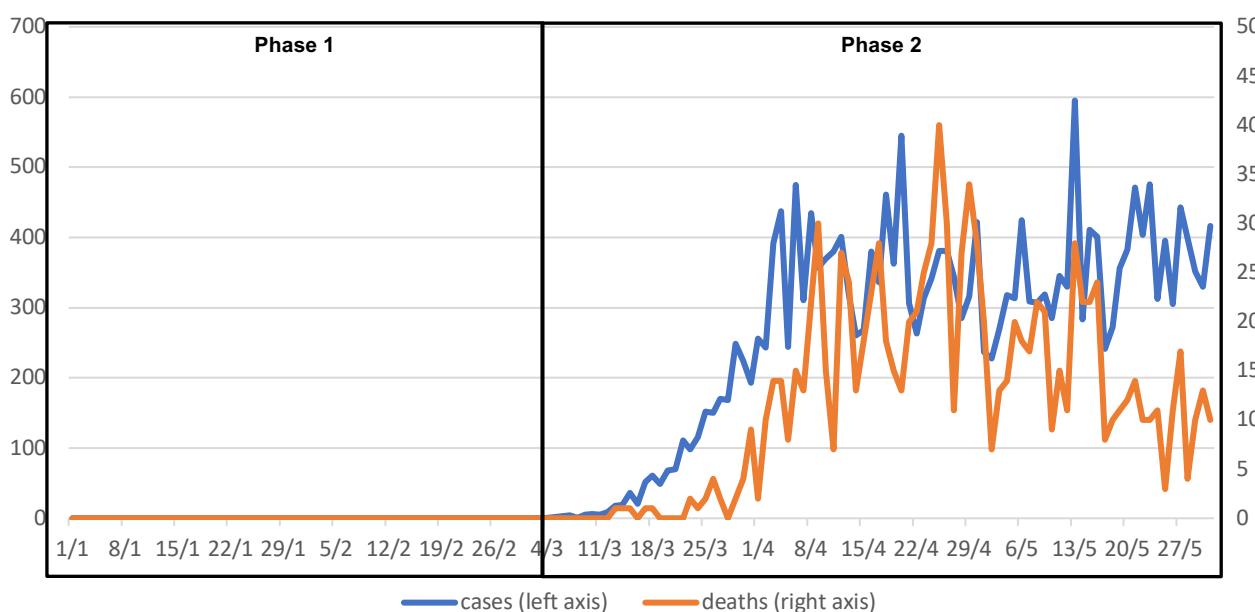
<sup>54</sup> A. Kublik, Jak rząd od 9 stycznia walczył z koronawirusem. *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 19/03/2020.

<sup>55</sup> Special act anticipating coronavirus outbreak passed in Polish parliament. *Notes from Poland*, 3/03/2020.



It is very difficult to distinguish the third phase of the government's response to the pandemic based on the death toll or the daily number of people infected which stayed at approximately same level during entire period under consideration. Strict precautionary measures introduced initially by the government kept the number of infections and the death toll at a relatively low level, but on the other hand they led to a considerable social backlash, widespread exhaustion with the restrictions and a growing suspicion that the risks of COVID-19 were exaggerated. This popular feeling was further strengthened by the government's decision, to lift a number of restrictions just after Easter. The government, unable to keep the country locked-down, announced its four-stage plan on April 16<sup>th</sup>. That decision, unrelated to the number of infections which still oscillated between 250 and 500 (with occasional peaks), only strengthened those suspicions and contributed to a more relaxed approach to the existing limitations among the general public. The most recent changes included lifting the obligation to cover the mouth and nose in some public places (since May 30<sup>th</sup>) or opening gyms or swimming pools (from June 6<sup>th</sup>). Accordingly, in Poland there was no clear mitigation of contagion phase which could be distinguished on the basis of the clear and visible drop of the number of daily cases of infection. Such state of affairs was exploited by PO and PSL and their candidates to emphasize the incumbent's inability to effectively deal with the crisis. The debate was fuelled on May by the revelations regarding the purchase of defective and overpriced medical equipment by Health Minister, Szumowski.

**Figure 9.1 Daily death toll and new cases in Poland**



Source: European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control  
Phase 1: pre-Covid-19; Phase 2: spread and containment measures

**Table 9.2 COVID-19 pandemic in Poland by 10 June 2020**

Cases	27,842
Total deaths	1,206
Total recovered	13,411
Cases per 1 million	736
Deaths per 1 million	32

Source: [www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/](http://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/) (update 10/6/2020)

### 3. Populist discourse at the time of COVID-19

Political discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland has been determined by two contextual factors. The first was the difference in institutional position. PiS, as a major government party, was expected to design and implement an efficient response to the spread of the virus. Confederation, the smallest party in parliament, with no prospects of changing its place as the opposition in the nearest future, had more room for radical criticism. The second factor was the struggle between PiS and the rest of the parties over the date of the presidential election, which coincided with or even overshadowed any debate on COVID-19.

The ruling party attempted to use the discourse about COVID-19 to strengthen support for PiS, which in turn was intended to produce public support for Duda. The discursive construction of *the people* was based on references to the nation, Poles or the citizens. Particularly in the first two phases, PiS deliberately withdrew the antagonistic aspects of its discourse, emphasizing the necessity to keep national unity. The Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, referred to the topos of the national history: *'The coronavirus threat is a matter beyond all divisions – at this moment political disputes have no meaning and I will categorically stop all such narratives. In the face of the coronavirus, Polish society should be and is one. [...] Let us remember that the history of Poland teaches us one thing – when we are divided, we are vulnerable to external threats, but when united in a common fight, we have always emerged victorious from all the trials we have been faced with as a nation'* (Morawiecki Facebook page, 11/03/20). Moreover, the discourse on COVID-19 provided an opportunity to bolster national pride through permanent references to other countries, particularly in Europe. Poland was represented not only as able to help Italy in its critical situation, but as an example for other states: *'Today, Poland is at the absolute top of the world when it comes to the speed and efficiency of decisions. We prefer to prevent than cure. [...] Economic powers such as the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States have followed the path we have set out'* (Morawiecki Facebook page, 24/03/20). References to the people and Poland were used to portray the government as an advocate of the people, listening to its opinions, responding to their problems and making proper decisions. Unsurprisingly, such references were used many times to legitimize a government package of economic measures known as the Anti-Crisis Shield.

As regards Confederation, although the party decided to moderate its image and resigned from the most controversial forms of *othering*, its oppositional status was expressed through unrelenting anti-elitism. Accordingly, the people were mainly represented as victims of inadvertently or deliberately incorrect decisions made by the elites. The people's health was neglected by PiS pushing towards the elections despite the pandemic: *'Security and human life is of little importance to them, as is equality of citizens before the law, all that matters to them is political interest and election victory, at any cost'* (Confederation Facebook page, 6/04/20). According to Confederation, the people's needs and interests were fully disregarded by the elites conspiring over the people's heads. One notable example of this conspiracy was the government's anti-crisis' measures derided as *'a lifebuoy made of concrete'* (in Polish, this expression denotes apparent help which in practice makes the situation of the receiver even more difficult – AL) and a *'bureaucratic catastrophe'* (Confederation Facebook page, 1/04/20). The simultaneous occurrence of the pandemic and the elections attenuated the willingness of PiS to resort to anti-elitism. Contrary to the previous 2019 elections, PiS initially strived to moderate its image to avoid being perceived as focusing merely on political matters instead of existential health-related issues. Consequently, in the first two phases, PiS suspended its criticism of the elites. This changed with the growing tension over PiS' reluctance to delay the elections coupled with the fact that the liberal party, Civic Platform (PO), replaced its presidential candidate Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska with the mayor of Warsaw, Rafał Trzaskowski. Trzaskowski could easily be targeted as part of the urban, well educated, and liberal elite. Anti-elitism was employed not only by the incumbent President Duda, but also by the Prime Minister Morawiecki: *'Is Poland supposed to be the Poland of elites [...] who want to serve foreigners in a comprador manner, or is it supposed to be the Poland of all Poles, even those who were forgotten, left on the margins of the transformation process? For us,*

*the answer is clear*<sup>56</sup>. Another line of criticism was directed against the EU, accused of showing a lack of interest and having a slow response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These fallacious assumptions were subsequently used to construct an argument supporting the concept that a loose network of nation states ('The Europe of the fatherlands') would be more suited to dealing with the crisis<sup>57</sup>.

Contrary to PiS, the discourse of Confederation was entirely based on the antagonistic representation of the elite, the system and the establishment, frequently referring to the other parliamentary parties as 'the gang of four'. Confederation attempted to pit the people against the elites by exploiting the health crisis and PiS' efforts not to postpone the elections. According to Confederation, the other parties and their candidates were only interested in petty political games. They ignored the real problems of the people, were unwilling to represent their interests, and used the COVID-19 pandemic to strengthen their power and pursue their own narrow interests. Their discursive construction of the crisis was based on emotionally charged labels and arguments, frequently resorting to extremely negative blame attributions. Sometimes Confederation went as far as to imply the betrayal of the people by the elites: 'Companies go bankrupt, workers are laid off, millions of Poles worry about their future, and POPiS (acronym for PO and PiS, suggesting their collusion – AL) ignores this and instead of helping citizens in this difficult time, they turn their backs on entrepreneurs and workers, condemning them to difficult months and years ahead. Is this still the Polish government?!' (Confederation Facebook Profile, 1/04/20). Interestingly, in their attempts to moderate the image of the party, they portrayed the elites as careless, ignorant, and provoking panic, in contrast to Confederation who are sensible, meritocratic, and focused on people's interests instead of power games.

Accordingly, contrary to previous electoral campaigns, references to the 'others' were virtually non-existent in Confederation's discourse. The same applied to PiS in the first two phases of the crisis. In the third phase, however, when confronted with Trzaskowski who was known for supporting the rights of the LGBT community, Duda decided to present himself as a defender of traditional family values through attacks on the LGBT community. Interestingly, the aim of PiS to protect Polish families from COVID-19 was occasionally articulated together with homophobic discourse defining LGBT as an 'ideology' that was 'worse than communism'<sup>58</sup>.

#### **4. The politicization of COVID-19 issue by populists**

The context of the electoral campaign and PiS' reluctance to delay the elections has contributed to the rapid politicization of the issue by the opposition. Initially, PiS was interested in securing the broadest support and legitimacy necessary to successfully implement radical pre-emptive measures and build an image of competence and professionalism in dealing with the epidemic. As time went on, they increasingly resorted to polarization, a politics of fear and adoption of the law in a majoritarian fashion.

Confederation's strategy was much more ambiguous. On one hand, they were interested in shaking off their image as an ideologically driven party of radicals and eccentrics and win the electorate over as a group with a perfectly normal, mainstream, right-wing identity. On the other hand, as the main rival of PiS on the right, they aimed at attacking the government and President. Consequently, the strategy was based on calculated ambivalence where rhetorical appeals to sensibility, common sense, and constructive proposals on how to combat the epidemic were accompanied by a fierce criticism of the incumbents.

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<sup>56</sup> M. Morawiecki, Sprawozdanie Stenograficzne z 12. posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniu 4 czerwca 2020 r.

<sup>57</sup> A. Mierzyńska, Unia bierna wobec koronawirusa? Manipulacje i ignorancja wiceministra Kowalskiego, *OKO Press*, 17/04/2020.

<sup>58</sup> A. Szczęśniak, Świat patrzy na homofoba Andrzeja Dudę i puka się w czoło. Raport z kampanii, *OKO Press*, 14/06/2020.

In the *emergence phase*, the governing PiS strived to depoliticize the issue of the pandemic by emphasizing its own efforts to manage the situation, assuring the public that Poland is fully prepared to face COVID-19, providing detailed information about what steps have been and will be taken, and appealing to political parties for national unity: *'Calm and professionalism – this is what we need the most today. So let's not get caught up in attempts to politicize this problem. [...] As Prime Minister, I will not allow the health of Poles to be a matter of political games!'* (Morawiecki Facebook page, 2/03/20). Significantly, attempts to take the issue of the pandemic off the political agenda were coupled with messages highlighting the problem of fake news about COVID-19 and how it might provoke panic in society. However, already at this phase, PiS and President Duda attempted to use the health crisis as an opportunity to present the incumbent president as a leader in the battle against the virus.

Although Confederation rejected the special act on COVID-19 adopted in the emergence phase, it portrayed itself as a meritocratic party, willing to debate the technical issues related to the threat of COVID-19, and refraining from blame games. During a special session of Parliament, its presidential candidate, Bosak, was even admonishing the oppositional PO for spreading conspiracy theories. In line with its calculated strategy of ambivalence, the group took an even more radical stance on Facebook by attacking the parliamentarians for conspiring against society and using the threat of COVID-19 as an opportunity to limit civic freedom and undermine the free market (Confederation Facebook page, 1/04/20).

The *confrontation phase* started on March 28<sup>th</sup>, triggered by PiS' attempts to hold the elections despite serious doubts about its safety. PiS decided to push through amendments to the electoral law which would allow it to organise elections while still being able to refute accusations of exposing Poles to danger. The amendment, part of the Anti-Crisis Shield, would allow people over 60 and those in quarantine or self-isolation to use postal voting. Importantly, the amendment infringed on the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal according to which significant changes to the electoral law should be made at least six months before elections are called<sup>59</sup>. In its efforts to secure the re-election of its candidate before the expected economic consequences of the lockdown affected public support for Duda, PiS went a step further. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of April the Sejm (the lower chamber of the Polish parliament) adopted a bill that would allow people to vote in the May election exclusively by postal vote. In the meantime, PiS politicians were threatening that the consequences of not having an election would be dire and accused oppositional parties of wreaking havoc and breaking democratic rules. As Duda put it: *'If we don't elect the President, the country will plunge into chaos'*<sup>60</sup>. The critical comments and legal response of EU officials and institutions were met with similarly inimical reactions, with the EU being accused of interfering with internal democratic processes<sup>61</sup>. Ultimately, due to the split in the governing coalition, the bill was not approved. Subsequently, the Polish parliament adopted a new electoral law that allowed Poles to either vote traditionally or through postal voting. Moreover, the first round was rescheduled for the 28<sup>th</sup> of June, which opened a new and even more polarized phase of the campaign. The parliamentary debate over the law provided the oppositional parties the opportunity to criticize PiS for the legal chaos and alleged willingness to introduce authoritarian system.

During the confrontation phase, Confederation consistently demanded the delay of the presidential elections, aware that a drop in the public opinion polls for Duda might easily translate into support for their own presidential candidate. Consequently, Bosak was among the first to announce the claim: *'Let's postpone the election, let's not use the pandemic to make politics! [...] Calling millions of Poles to polling stations during the #coronavirus pandemic is a recipe for mass infections and deaths'* (Confederation Facebook page, 15/03/20). Moreover, the strict epidemic measures and a difficult

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<sup>59</sup> D. Tilles, Changes to electoral code paving way for May presidential elections passed by Polish parliament, *Notes from Poland*, 28/03/2020.

<sup>60</sup> A. Duda, Bez wyborów kraj będzie w chaosie, *Gazeta Polska*, 22/04/2020.

<sup>61</sup> M. Pankowska, Diagnoza Kaczyńskiego: chce słabszej Unii, bo silna Europa stoi mu na przeszkodzie, *OKO Press*, 16/04/2020.

economic situation opened a discursive window of opportunity for Confederation's radically libertarian agenda. Initially, it politicized the crisis by criticizing PiS' response to COVID-19 as too slow, and then went on to reveal the weaknesses and oppressiveness of the allegedly socialist state built by PiS as too restrictive towards ordinary citizens and overly bureaucratic towards small entrepreneurs.

The *managing phase* was inextricably linked to previous phases. PiS quite rapidly started to blame the opposition for trying to destabilize the country and undermine democracy, and boasted of its efforts to manage the economic ramifications of the health crisis. The measures implemented by the four editions of the 'Anti-Crisis Shield' were key. The most important of these included the temporary exemption of micro-entrepreneurs and the self-employed from obligatory monthly social security payments, financial benefits for the self-employed, subsidies for employees' wages, and enabling CIT and PIT taxpayers who bore the negative consequences of COVID-19 to deduct the loss incurred in 2020 from operating income generated in 2019. Confederation, striving to present itself as a constructive opposition during parliamentary sessions and through social media communication, consistently listed a number of measures which should have been taken by the government and insisted their demands be taken into account by the governing majority. Moreover, in line with its libertarian agenda, Confederation demanded an immediate lift of lockdown-related restrictions, huge tax reductions for entrepreneurs, and the compensation of salaries not paid by companies whose operations had been stopped by the government.

## 5. Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis had a significant impact on the strategies undertaken by PiS during the presidential campaign. Initially, given the weakness of the original Civic Platform candidate and the high level of public support for the incumbent Duda, PiS had reason to believe that Duda was on track for an inevitable landslide victory. The outbreak of the epidemic opened a public discussion on the possibility of delaying the elections and prompted PiS to take unconstitutional measures to prevent such a scenario. The party feared the unforeseen consequences of the crisis, which could negatively affect Duda's chances of re-election. However, the crisis also opened a window of opportunity for the governing camp. In the first phase, preceding the outbreak of the crisis, PiS strived for depoliticization to strengthen the 'rally effect', with worried citizens united behind government calls for national unity. In addition, restrictive measures against the epidemic created an uneven political struggle, evidently strengthening the incumbent president. This, however, entailed fierce political antagonisms in the subsequent phases, strong politicization of the dispute, and the use of all possible means to push through the elections as scheduled. As a result, PiS could now be criticized as a party that wanted to use the epidemic for political purposes, and the issue of postponing the elections revealed divisions in the United Right coalition power camp.

As for Confederation, the crisis did not fundamentally affect its strategy for becoming more mainstream. The group used the pandemic to build the image of a competent and moderate actor able to offer concrete policy solutions. In addition, the restrictions of the crisis created an opportunity for the libertarian message of the Confederation. Moreover, the Confederation skilfully used its calculated ambivalence to secure the support of its radical electorate. With regard to the polls, in the period under consideration, there was a clear and steady increase in support for both Law and Justice and Duda. During the containment phase, Duda even saw his poll rating exceed 56%. Finally, the crisis did not significantly improve the social support for Confederation, which oscillated between 6% and 9%<sup>62</sup>. The first round of elections held on June 28 confirmed the electoral support for Bosak and his party, providing him 6,78% of the votes. The prolonged, exhaustive campaign, legally doubtful (to say the least) decisions of PiS and scandals over medical equipment purchases coupled with the dynamic campaign of the new PO candidate Trzaskowski contributed to the relatively weak

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<sup>62</sup> Source: <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/poland/>

result of Duda. Although he was able to secure 43,5% of the votes in a first round of elections and Trzaskowski only 30,46%, in a second-round run-off he won only with a narrow margin of 51% to 49% for Trzaskowski.

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