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*Threats to Poland's Internal Security during the Fight against
the COVID-19 Virus Pandemic*

ABSTRACT

The analysis of threats to Poland's internal security during the first year of the fight against the COVID-19 virus pandemic was the aim of the article. The study was based on the theoretical assumptions of this phenomenon and the most important determinants in the area of the political system, social peace and public order, which led to the disruption of the existing social order. The research was based on the descriptive concept and qualitative data analysis, with the interpretation of information contained primarily in the literature on the subject, normative acts, recent scientific studies, as well as media reports. The article consists of six parts: introduction, theoretical assumptions on internal security, systemic stability, level of social peace, level of security and public order, as well as conclusions. The study ended with a positive verification of the following hypotheses: 1) Actions taken by the government during the fight against the COVID-19 virus pandemic posed threats to Poland's internal security, and 2) During the first year of the fight against the pandemic, events occurred that disrupted internal security in the systemic area, social peace and public order.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, Poland, safety, threats

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 virus pandemic was an unprecedented event affecting all areas of state functioning. In the first year of its occurrence, a number of factors which seriously impact the condition of internal security of Poland could be observed. Due to the specificity of solutions applied at that time and their strong influence on the functioning of society, this topic deserves special attention.

The purpose of the following study will be to analyze the most important – from the point of view of internal security – factors affecting the functioning of the country

and citizens. The study will present the most important events that threaten internal security, and, thus, the stable and effective functioning of the state. Particular attention will be paid to aspects related to systemic stability, social peace and public order.

The conducted study will be accompanied by the verification of the following two research hypotheses:

1) Actions taken by the government during the fight against the COVID-19 virus pandemic posed threats to Poland's internal security.

2) During the first year of the fight against the COVID-19 virus pandemic, events occurred that disrupted internal security in the area of the system, social peace, and public order.

The verification will be led by answering the questions of how the activities of policy makers during the pandemic affected internal security and what factors influenced this.

The research method will focus on the descriptive concept and qualitative data analysis, based on the interpretation of information contained primarily in the literature on the subject, normative acts, recent scientific studies, and media reports, concerning the analyzed situation in the Republic of Poland.

THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF INTERNAL SECURITY

To precisely and effectively solve the research problem, it is necessary to define the concept of internal security, as well as to present its crucial determinants. In this regard, it should be noted that political scientists agree on the lack of a single universal definition of this phenomenon [Majer 2009: 11–18]. In due to, the choice of nomenclature should be made primarily taking into account the context of the undertaken research and the specificity of the analyzed crisis. Thus, the author selects the theoretical assumptions, adequate to the problem of explication and research methods.

In accordance with the definition published in *Biała Księga Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego RP* and confirmed by the National Security Bureau (*Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego RP*), the assessed issue should be defined as: “a trans-sectoral area of security, whose content (objectives, conditions, ways and means) refers to the internal environment of the state (national environment)” [Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego 2013: 248]. As this is a definition created and approved by the public administration, it seems to be the most adequate and objective point of reference in this analysis. However, it is necessary to determine the objectives and conditions of its occurrence. Analysing various definitions of this phenomenon, researchers point out that in most of them public order and political certainty are indicated as determinants of security [Brzeziński 2009]. For example, among the essential determinants of Poland's security in the 21st century indicated by Arkadiusz Sekściński one may find: political order and institutional solutions, relative political stability conducive to the functionality of public institutions responsible for security, social

attitudes towards threats and state institutions, awareness of global and local threats, a moderate degree of trust in public institutions, democratisation and respect for human rights [Sekściński 2010: 10]. In their work, Ireneusz Dziubek and Włodzimierz Fehler identify the most relevant determinants as: the relationship with the external environment, the level of political stability, the level of social peace and the level of security and public order [Dziubek, Fehler 2010: 29–30].

In the context of the topic, these assumptions seem to be the appropriate determinants of the state of internal security of the state, and holistically include all the determinants presented previously. Due to the above-documented definition and the specificity of the discussed crisis, the first factor will be omitted.

Specifying the theoretical assumptions and the research problem, it should be stated that political stability is understood primarily as the observance of the constitutional order, the principles of democracy and the rule of law, as well as the legitimacy of the actions of authorities. The second factor refers to the level of satisfaction of social needs, social structure, as well as the existence and intensity of social protests. The last determinants are associated with the level of citizens' adherence to certain norms of conduct that are adequate in a given situation, as well as internal and legal conditions of the state's functioning [Dziubek, Fehler 2010: 29–30].

The concept of threat needs to be clarified, which is defined primarily as “the opposite of security, which is understood as a state of peace, security” [Drabik, Soból 2007: 907]. In a broader sense, it is also “the subjective (therefore dependent on the perception of the perceiving subject) or/and objective (actual) occurrence of danger to the values important to the subject included in its security” [Kaufmann 1970: 167]. Among the comprehensive catalogue of internal security threats mentioned by researchers, special attention should be paid to those caused by: nationwide riots, political crises, events threatening the constitutional order, as well as economic crises and natural disasters [Dawidczyk et al. 2015: 101–102].

In the face of the COVID-19 virus pandemic, they were put to a special test, which was related to the political situation in the Republic of Poland and the ongoing fight against the pandemic. These criteria, although by no means exhaustive of the theoretical foundations and determinants of internal security, will form the basis of the study undertaken, because in a holistic, universal and adequate manner to the topic undertaken, they will allow for an analysis of the exemplification of threats to Poland's internal security over the first year of the fight against the pandemic.

In the further part of the work there will be made an interpretation of the factors threatening the internal security of Poland in relation to the matter: political stability, the level of social peace and the level of security and public order. However, these factors are intertwined and, despite the division, some events may pose a threat in more than one category, which will be further mentioned in the summary of the results of the analysis. The evaluation will be accompanied by the contextualization of the cited events in relation to the aforementioned theoretical assumptions.

SYSTEMIC STABILITY

In light of Art. 126 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, which is the most important document regulating the functioning of the state, the president is: “the highest representative of the Republic of Poland and the guarantor of the continuity of state power, as well as the guardian of the sovereignty and security of the country [Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 2 kwietnia 1997]. Due to the necessity of carrying out the election for this office, the political situation of Poland during the first coronavirus wave was a phenomenon which particularly determined the activity of the government and a factor which strongly influenced the level of systemic stability.

The failure to impose a state of emergency and the strenuous attempt to hold elections on the originally scheduled date forced the government to take extraordinary measures. Faced with the need to organise elections, the authorities initially decided to use a new form – correspondence voting. The postal voting was an element which was particularly positively presented in the Polish public media. From May to April, the “Wiadomości” daily aired materials demonstrating the advantages of this form of voting [Kocjan 2020: 109]. Initially, under the Act on Special Principles for the Conduct of General Elections for the President of the Republic of Poland, introducing universal correspondence voting, it was planned to cede the rights of the State Election Commission to the Ministry of State Assets [Ustawa o szczególnych zasadach przeprowadzania wyborów powszechnych na Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej zarządzonych w 2020 roku z możliwością głosowania korespondencyjnego, wprowadzającej powszechne głosowanie korespondencyjne, Dz.U. 2020 nr 979]. A series of technical shortcomings and strong opposition led to the cancellation of the elections scheduled for 10 May, but this event was preceded by a heated public debate. The leak of specimen ballots was another factor that undermined the competence of the new organisers. The then presidential candidate Stanisław Żółtek disclosed the incident at a press conference organized on 29 April 2020, thus, highlighting the problem of a lack of organisation in the executive structures [Czuchnowski et al. 2020]. The event posed a major problem for the country’s security. It questioned not only the competence of the Ministry of State Assets, but also led to questions about the protection of citizens’ personal data and the transparency of the results.

Four days before the elections were to be held, that idea was abandoned. Lawyers were doubtful about the formal basis for the cancellation of the election. This was because of the Supreme Court verdict, which declared the vote invalid, motivating this decision by the fact that the election had not taken place. Subsequently, the State Electoral Commission adopted a resolution which recognised the situation as being identical to the lack of candidates [Uchwała nr 129/2020 PKW z dnia 10 maja 2020 r. w sprawie stwierdzenia braku możliwości głosowania kandydatów w wyborach Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej]. This was an unprecedented situation, based primarily on the interpretation of existing regulations, from which controversies arose in the final settlement of the legality of the actions.

The government's inconsistent policy of simultaneously tightening restrictions (for example, the controversial closure of forests) while planning to hold a vote for the president also had a stimulating effect on the country's internal security. The use of a new formula – universal postal voting – did not find a large number of supporters, but eventually it was possible to use this form of balloting as a supplement to the traditional way of electing voters.

Although the Constitution of the Republic of Poland prepared the country for this type of extreme situation, political decision-makers did not agree to introduce a state of natural disaster, which meant the necessity to prepare new, previously untested solutions. The lack of unanimity on the part of the opposition also had a stimulating effect on the political crisis. They decided unequivocally neither to join the election, nor to boycott it altogether. This was another factor undermining the confidence of political opinion in politicians and an element of destabilization of the constitutional order in the country.

Moreover, at the time of this analysis, on the initiative of the Supreme Chamber of Control (NIK), proceedings are underway concerning the legality of the preparation for the postal election and the large expenses incurred for this purpose, which already at this stage of the proceedings indicates serious doubts about the legality of the said procedure.

The problem with the organization of elections during the pandemic, allegations of an unconstitutional attempt to hold them, as well as the exposure of citizens to illnesses were a model examples of a threat to Poland's political stability, but also to public order and constitutional order. The deliberations concerned the election to the most important office in the state, which according to constitutional provisions, guarantees the territory's sovereignty and security. While the problem was solved in a way that can be considered as a compromise, the long-term effect of the actions taken may be a loss of trust in the authorities. Therefore, the circumstances undoubtedly posed a threat to the internal security of the country.

LEVEL OF SOCIAL PEACE

A series of other extremely important events that took place during the first year of the fight against the coronavirus pandemic were numerous strikes of women, which took place in autumn following a ruling by the Constitutional Tribunal of 22 October 2020, declaring the provision enabling abortion in the case of severe and irreversible embryo disability or incurable disease threatening its life to be unconstitutional [Wyrok Trybunału Konstytucyjnego z dnia 22 października 2020 r. sygn. akt K 1/20, Dz.U. 2021, No. 175]. The judgment was a violation of the so-called abortion compromise, which triggered numerous demonstrations. A factor which exacerbated the situation was the timing of the publication of the ruling at a time when there was a ban on gatherings due to the pandemic situation in Poland. The activists raised arguments that the

authorities were using the pandemic to restrict civil rights [Kamińska 2020: 161–162]. This is because it was impossible to legally, traditionally manifest one's position.

Referring to the scale of the protests, it is worth mentioning that over the course of several days, numerous demonstrations took place across the country. For example, on October 28, 2020, 410 protests were reported, numbering approximately 430,000 people [Kuźniar 2020].

This situation is clearly one of the issues that are threatening local security. Abortion has been a divisive issue in Polish society for years and social opposition to such a solution was obvious. In this regard, the arguments of the demonstrators about the inadequacy of the circumstances for undertaking reform in this matter may be considered correct. In a purely practical aspect, numerous manifestations taking place in many Polish cities, in the face of the pandemic, naturally aroused the risk of spreading the disease among the gathered crowds. In this situation, in the face of accusations by part of the public opinion about the lack of apolitical character of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal, the publication of the judgment may be considered, in a way, a provocation towards the opponents of tightening the law regulating the issues of abortion.

Extremely significant in this matter, however, is the ruling of the Supreme Court of 1 July 2021, declaring the ban on assembly illegal [Wyrok w imieniu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 1 lipca 2021 roku w sprawie osób ukaranych za udział w protestach, ref. no. IV KK 238/21]. The justification for this ruling was the fact that there was no proper legal basis for enacting this restriction, as it was introduced by way of an ordinance and not a statute, and was inconsistent with Art. 57 and 31(3) of the Polish Constitution. This precedent-setting judgment proved the illegality of the authorities' actions, which certainly has a negative impact on their authority and trust in public authorities.

Another issue worth mentioning, connected both with the subject of protests and with the previously mentioned possibility of satisfying social needs, were the winter protests of entrepreneurs.

An example is the protest of entrepreneurs from the tourism sector and taxi drivers, which took place in December 2020 in Szczyrk [Szafrński 2020]. At that time, the demonstrators disagreed with the closure of the tourism sector and gastronomy, as well as with the uniform timing of winter holidays for the whole country. They justified their position by the lack of sufficient aid from the government and the drastically deteriorating economic situation.

A similar situation took place in January 2021 in Krynica Zdrój, where entrepreneurs from the catering and tourism sectors urged people to open their businesses despite bans. The highlanders gathered around the "Góralskie Veto" initiative announced that regardless of the government's position, their business would reopen on 18 January. This time the justification was similar to the previous situation – the lack of support and the difficult economic situation. When asked about the legal consequences, they pointed out that their doubts were raised by the source of the restrictions, which was an ordinance and not a bill [„*Musimy ruszyć...* 2021].

The situations illustrate the threats to social peace caused by the protests presented, but also undeniably expose the lack of trust in the authorities, whose actions were undermined and considered inadequate to the situation. Due to the context of the considerations – the crisis situation involving the spread of an infectious disease – these events posed a particular threat. Moreover, they also permeated the next analyzed area – security and public order – as they led to the spread among the public of attitudes inadequate for dealing with this type of crisis.

THE LEVEL OF PUBLIC SAFETY AND ORDER

Developing the above-mentioned topic and aiming to demonstrate the threats to public order in Poland, it is necessary to briefly present the background to these activities. At that time, an important element of the introduced restrictions was the high dynamics of changes. During the first phase of the pandemic in spring 2020, it was decided to take radical measures. Among the most important were the complete closure of public places such as museums, cinemas, libraries and shopping malls. Gatherings such as artistic performances and concerts were also banned.

During the second wave, the legislative background to the measures and thus the formal status of the epidemic was maintained [Ustawa z dnia 5 grudnia 2008 r. o zapobieganiu oraz zwalczaniu zakażeń i chorób zakaźnych u ludzi, Dz.U. 2008 nr 1570]. However, the nature of the regulations changed. Despite the higher incidence of disease and mortality (compared to the first wave), the regulations applied had a softer tone [Ważna 2020]. Nevertheless, the second wave was also marked by social discontent and numerous protests.

The dynamics of the introduced restrictions, the clear differences between the first and second wave, as well as the inconsistency in the introduced measures caused great social confusion and difficulties in complying with the existing norms. However, due to the specificity, the problem of crisis management in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic was conditioned by a high degree of uncertainty related to such factors as the inability to prepare in advance for the crisis, limited information on the disease itself, the divergence of opinions of medical experts, the varying confidence in public institutions, as well as public reactions, experiences, tools at their disposal, and the speed and growth of the disease [Capano et al. 2020: 285–308].

The narrative used by the government during pandemic management should be one of the most important elements of crisis management. Past research clearly illustrates that populations without adequately communicated scientific knowledge conveyed by policy makers are characterized by greater susceptibility to believing conspiracy theories and violating restrictions [Stecula, Pickup 2021: 1–9].

Relating the above assumptions to their practical view in Poland in the first year of the fight against coronavirus, it must be said that experts and politicians responsible for the health sector did not justify their decisions and positions in a factual, research-based

manner. There was also an apparent deficit of updating the message in relation to new research and clearly identifying reliable scientific sources. Analysing the message in the majority of Polish media, it is easy to observe many irregularities in the area of wearing protective masks. The statements of the former Minister of Health, Łukasz Szumowski, are an example of spreading disinformation in this area. On 26 February 2020, during a radio interview on RMF FM, the politician stated: “Masks do not help, they do not protect against the virus. They do not protect against the disease [...] WHO does not recommend it. Experts do not recommend it...” [Mazurek 2020]. Nevertheless, just a few weeks later, after introducing the obligation to wear masks on 16 April, he announced that the order would remain in force until a vaccine had been invented [Rogacin 2020]. This extreme image created information chaos and great confusion among citizens. However, this was not the end of the confusion, as already a month later the obligation was lifted – in publicly accessible spaces at an appropriate distance. Leszek Świeca from the Institute of Media Journalism and Social Communication at the Jagiellonian University undertook a study of Internet users’ reactions to the message presented by those in power. On 27 May, the day of the press conference announcing the lifting of the restrictions, a YouTube video of the government members’ speech was commented on 1,294 times. As a result of the analysis, the following conclusions were drawn. The discussion among Internet users lacked substantive arguments, and the formed positions were chaotic. In addition, confusion about the applicable regulations and even the invocation of conspiracy theories were observed. One of the main reasons for such a phenomenon can be considered: “manipulation of medical information coinciding with political ambitions of politicians and experts, which led and still leads to unreliable information of the public about the possibilities of counteracting the epidemic” [Świeca 2020: 61–62]. As a result, concerns about validity of the methods used, a problem with adherence to the restrictions emerged.

On the basis of the facts, it should be stated that forming the message in such a way leads to decreasing trust towards the authorities and also lack of legitimacy of the actions taken. The result of such reactions may be, first of all, a boycott of the introduced measures.

The necessity to apply restrictions and the problem in the public perception of the restrictions were illustrated by the situation that took place in Zakopane in February 2021. After resigning from some of the restrictions, the city experienced a siege, and the observance of social distances and other rules of the sanitary regime were not fully respected. The apogee was a gathering in Krupówki, during which, more than 500 tourists gathered without any distances or masks. At that time, the police applied as many as 164 fines for disobeying the rules [Makarewicz 2021]. This situation proves that relying only on human responsibility cannot be considered an effective method of action. It also highlights the social need for interaction and “fatigue” with the prevailing restrictions.

The examples illustrate the difficulty of citizens adhering to specific and desirable norms of conduct in a pandemic situation. They also illustrate social doubts

about the actions taken by decision-makers and in practice undermine their validity, which undoubtedly posed threats to the internal security of the state in the matter of security and public order.

CONCLUSION

Concluding the considerations, the analyzed events allowed for a positive verification of the two above hypotheses.

First of all, the actions taken by the government during the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic posed threats to Poland's internal security, which is proven by the presented events and their juxtaposition with the theoretical assumptions presented at the beginning of the paper.

Moreover, during the first year of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic there were events disturbing the internal security in the area of the political system, social peace and public order, because these fields are the strategic determinants of internal security, and the analysis proved the existence of a serious breach of stability and common functioning in this area.

The functioning of public administration bodies and citizens during the first year of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic was certainly an event that was not easy and required extra-coordinated measures. The specific political situation in the country, the need to hold elections, the prevailing restrictions, the initiatives outlined above, as well as the method of communication with the public translated into social insubordination and also posed a risk to the development of the COVID-19 pandemic itself. Confidence in the public authorities and the legality of the measures they used was also undermined.

In order to obtain a full and coherent view of the above threats, it is necessary to relate them directly to the theoretical assumptions included in the paper.

Firstly, all the events subjected to analysis and interpretation had their source in the territory of Poland, which undoubtedly allows for their contextualization in the matter of internal security.

Secondly, the presented events were part of the concept of threat, as they significantly and negatively affected the level of peace and security, and, thus, constituted the opposite of security. They also posed a danger to the existence of the important values mentioned above.

Third, on the issue of constitutional stability, it should be stated that the controversial attempt to organize postal elections, the manner in which the elections were declared invalid, the leakage of ballots, and the NIK investigation, but also the court ruling declaring the ban on gathering illegal, created a threat to the constitutional order, the principles of democracy and the rule of law, and undermined the legitimacy of the actions of the authorities.

Fourth, on the issue of social peace, it is worth noting the significance and size of the protests caused by the Constitutional Court's ruling, as well as the timing and circumstances of its announcement. These events could certainly have been avoided and the discussion of the problem could have been held in later and safer circumstances. Also, the above-mentioned court judgment is not without significance, in a way confirming, from the perspective of time, the legality of the protests. Moreover, numerous protests prove insufficient assurance of the level of satisfaction of social needs and a low level of trust in the authorities.

Fifthly, in terms of security and public order, it must be said that both the aforementioned disparity between the measures introduced during the first and second waves of the pandemic, the protests of activists and entrepreneurs, as well as the social reactions to the messages from the authorities and the non-compliance with the sanitary regime, constituted a threat to internal security. This is because they were an exemplification of the negation of the existing norms of conduct and questioned the validity internal conditions of the state's functioning at that time.

The above factors, in holistic terms, posed a threat to the political order in Poland, manifested themselves through the display of attitudes unfavourable to the institutions of the state and negating the validity of measures taken, as well as undermining trust in public institutions. These examples also fit perfectly into the catalog of threats to internal security most often mentioned by researchers.

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