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Strategic dilemmas of pre-election marketing in the age of the mediatisation of politics: The case of the Warsaw referendum of 2013

Abstract: The referendum on the dismissal of the President of Warsaw Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz before the end of her term was a part of a series of political events that could affect the power arrangement on the Polish political scene, especially on the market position of the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska) and the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) parties. By analysing the actions taken by the main political actors in the pre-referendum period, two basic issues should be resolved: if political-market entities actually carry out their long-term political strategies and whether the adopted strategy translates into a specific and clear marketing concept of pre-election activities in the prevalent Polish political realm. Regardless, however, of the adopted strategic option, competing political entities should take into account the obvious fact that the mass media are responsible for delimiting the area of political discourse and for defining matters which are a subject thereof.

Key words: The Warsaw referendum, mediatisation of politics, political marketing

The referendum on the dismissal of the President of Warsaw Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz before the end of her term, set to take place on 13 October 2013, was a part of a series of political events that significantly affected or could potentially affect the power arrangement on the Polish political scene — especially the market position of the Civic Platform (PO) and the Law and Justice (PiS) parties. This does not, however, change the fact that from the perspective of almost all entities involved in political competition, the Warsaw referendum as well as all previous events (dismissal referendum and early elections of the President of Elbląg, by-elections to the senate in Rybnik and the Podkarpackie Province) can be considered extraordinary,

in this sense, complex endeavours, carrying relatively high political risk. They needed to be correlated with the political strategy then implemented. The level of the market risk involved (image-wise and based on the scale of engagement of party resources: personnel and material) was undoubtedly raised by the pre-election (election cycle of 2014—2015) context of the campaigns leading up to the dismissal referenda in Elbląg and Warsaw and the by-elections to the Senate.

While analysing the actions taken by the main political actors during the pre-referendum period, two basic issues need to be resolved: 1) if market entities actually carry out their long-term political strategies¹ and 2) whether the adopted strategy translates into a specific and clear marketing concept of pre-election activities in the prevalent Polish political realm. Assuming that a consequence of the evolutionary process of professionalisation of political parties is a clear (also in Poland) intention to achieve an orderly organisation of actions undertaken and carried out in the period between particular elections (between election campaigns to be precise) leads us to the conclusion that every unplanned event in an external political and non-political environment can serve as a basis for modifying, reorienting or changing the political strategy of a given entity. In other words, from the perspective of an entity involved in political competition such events can be considered as specific opportunities (market opportunities) which provide a chance to strengthen (stabilise support in the various segments of the electorate) or improve (extension of support) of the market position, taking into account the potential risks associated with undertakings going beyond the initial strategic considerations. Therefore, by modifying/changing the strategy, a distinction should be made between the risk that allows objectives to be determined and the chances of their achievement to be measured, and the risk where calculation of the potential effects is in fact impossible or very difficult to estimate.²

From the point of view of a particular political entity, evaluation of the market usability of the opportunities emerging from the external environment is strongly associated with the general scheme of creating political strategy — a higher level of strategic flexibility can be attributed to entities whose strategy is based on the correlation of pragmatic objectives and instrumental values, than to entities which form strategies based on preferred political

¹ Given that the long-term nature of the strategy means organising political activities during the period between elections, which are key for the market position of a political entity, in the context of the activities prepared and carried out by PO and PiS, it should be assumed that the time period for realising the strategy is until the consecutive parliamentary elections.

² See M. Kolczyński: *Strategie komunikowania politycznego*. Katowice 2007, p. 41; P.F. Drucker: *Skuteczne zarządzanie*. Warszawa 1976, pp. 292 ff.

values of a fundamental nature (not subject to marginalization, regardless of the market factors).

Also, one cannot forget that a modification/change of strategy is not (should not be) a sole derivative of setup modification of factors determining the scope of action of political actors in the external environment; in the process of strategy creation it is necessary to take into account the available resources: personnel (human potential: qualifications, skills, motivation and commitment of individual members of a political organization), material and technology. The essential dilemma of contemporary actors in political competition comes down to whether and to what extent an entity has a real capability to distance itself from the stimuli which are coming from the surrounding environment in a situation of excessive risk or limitations of an entity's own resources. The autonomy of decision in respect to the matching of strategy to the requirements of the environment, is limited by three groups of factors related to: 1) projects carried out by the competition, 2) expectations of potential voters, 3) activities undertaken by media broadcasters. The analysis and response of entities involved in political competition to the factors belonging to the first two groups, usually involves standard decision-making procedures; in the case of media interaction, the reaction is non-standard and is a derivative of: 1) the development of the media system (in quantitative and competitive terms), 2) the quality of the relationship between the individual entities and media broadcasters, and 3) the level of exposure of the content relating to political competition in the mass media.

However, regardless of the adopted strategy, competing political entities should take into account the obvious fact that the mass media of today are responsible for delimiting the area of political discourse and for defining matters which are the subject thereof. Media broadcasters actually decide when and which events require high media exposure — mass media often use facts which draw the audience's attention to create a specific (sometimes intense and surprisingly ephemeral) information performance involving a significant and temporary increase of interest (of the media and audience) in some issues or political events (hence the importance of knowing the criteria for selection of information).

By giving importance to individual pieces of information, broadcasters not only influence the direct individual recipients, but also the political organisations. By emphasising a given issue, they push politicians to take a stand (to make a decision on how to respond) — the communication relationship established this way between the political and media broadcasters naturally contributes to an intensification of publicity (modification of the public agenda) and an increase in the political importance of a given issue (structuring of the political agenda). In this context, the effectiveness of political actions is correlated with the ability to assess the course of transfor-

mation of the media environment and the capability of the political entities to adjust the strategic concepts to the requirements defined by the modified media environment. In practice, this means submission of the political strategy to the mechanisms of contemporary mass media — in particular, a modification of communication strategy which would take into account the trends visible in the actions of contemporary media (mainly informational media) resulting from the process of commercialisation of the mass media, such as: 1) domination of the interpretative and defining function over the information function, 2) a qualitatively new means (infotainment) of formatting information programmes (including current affairs programmes on political events), which would include a dramatisation and emotionalisation of messages.

In this understanding of the role of mass media in the process of creating (reorienting, changing) political strategy, it seems reasonable to conclude that the effectiveness of pre-election actions is correlated with obtaining of a real impact by a political entity on shaping the media agenda that would result in achieving the expected level of publicity/exposure of its own agenda. However, it should be taken into account that agenda setting is, in fact, a complex process, involving the mass media, political organizations and the audience, as a result of which the selection and media exposure criteria are determined for the individual political issues (the final political topics hierarchy is formed by the interaction between the particular entities of the media, politics and the public). With the assumption that the media is relatively independent, it is considered that agenda setting involves the publication of a certain type of political information at a specific place and time, with the right intensity and — in most cases — it is not synonymous with the intentional impact aimed at shaping opinions, attitudes and behaviours of the political audience.

The capabilities (measured by impact) and the extent of the interference of political entities into a thematic agenda of the media result primarily from: (a) the nature of events/political activities and, above all, their actual or implicit media attractiveness (which translates, from the point of view of media broadcasters, into a specific commercial value), (b) the quality of the long-term relationships between the political actors and the media (in the broad sense including: media owners, editorial boards and individual journalists).

Taking into account the reasons indicated, it can be concluded that the subsequent political developments which took place in 2013, met the basic criteria allowing them to be recognised as “defining moments” in the process of political competition between the main actors on the Polish political scene, and thus encouraged both modification (Civic Platform), as well as reorientation of strategy (Law and Justice) — and at least intensification of PR processes (mainly in the case of PiS). The developments also required deep reflection from the participating entities on how to meet the public expecta-

tions articulated by the mass media and how to medially capitalise on the actions taken, particularly with the approaching election cycle of 2014—2015 in mind.

The key contextual considerations were clearly market-oriented and were associated with the dynamics of competition between the Civic Platform (PO) and Law and Justice (PiS) (at a relative stabilisation of the polls of the other parties) — the dynamics reflected by public opinion polls.

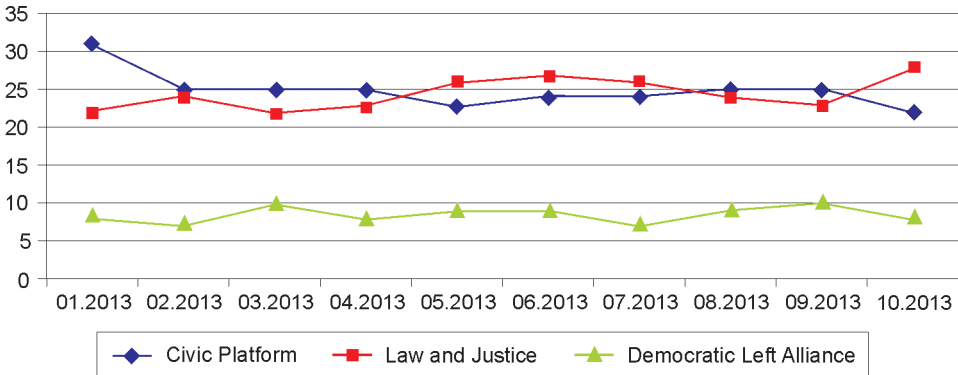


Fig. 1. Declared support for Civic Platform and Law and Justice, and the Democratic Left Alliance in the period January–October 2013 (%)

Source: CBOS announcement BS/171/2013

From the perspective of PiS, 2013 brought about a significant improvement of market trends (actually a change of trend, namely that of the clear dominance of PO, which had remained stable since the last parliamentary elections of 2011), strengthening the position of the party as the main opposition group and creating a solid foundation preparing PiS to start in the next elections, and ending, at least in theory, the party's painful series of electoral defeats. In the case of the Civic Platform, the polls of February 2013 definitively ended its chances of continuing the existing market narrative ("PO has no real rival on the Polish political scene") and necessitated the need for a more active response to the undertakings of PiS. However, the rather stable market position of Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), accompanied by the falling polls of PO and the relatively low polls of Polish People's Party (PSL) (5–8%), meant that the party was not only the leader on the left side of the political spectrum, but also gave this party a chance to take over the role of a major participant in potential coalition rivalry.

Without any doubt, the observed changes also had important media-related effects. They caused the ongoing political competition to prompt a new way of formatting messages prepared for the Polish political market, putting issues relating to the upcoming elections in the spotlight.

The dynamics of political competition before the Warsaw referendum were affected by the impact of the political clashes between PO and PiS concerning the referendum on the dismissal of the President of Elbląg.³ On 4 April 2013, with a turnout of 24.67% (and with the vast majority supporting the initiative) Grzegorz Owczak of PO was eventually dismissed. The pre-term presidential elections announced as a consequence of the results of the referendum (first round — 23 June, second round — 7 July⁴) were a scene of a spectacular battle between the main parties, with the intense involvement of party leaders (D. Tusk visited Elbląg three times: before and immediately after the first round of the elections and before the second round; J. Kaczyński personally supported the campaign of the local candidate Jerzy Wilk directly before the first and second rounds of the elections), who utilised political marketing resources and were accompanied by unprecedented (given the election level) interest of the mass media. The offensive actions of PiS, which had a well-formatted competitive electoral offer (albeit a heavily demagogical one⁵) produced an unexpected result in the form of the PiS candidate's victory, who achieved the best electoral result in Elbląg ever (a city considered the “political bastion” of PO). The mediality of the campaign was not only increased by the involvement of the most prominent politicians, but by its sharp/negative message — very attractive from the point of view of media broadcasters (for example the so-called “Wilk's tapes” — recorded private speeches of the PiS's candidate, in which he attacked his competitors and some allies in an unrefined way). More importantly, the victory of PiS in a symbolic way broke PO's monopoly and visibly dynamised the actions of J. Kaczyński's party.

The victory of Bolesław Piecha (PiS) in the by-elections to the senate in Rybnik (21 April 2013) also carried a similar, symbolic meaning — as every success in the province of Silesia in which it is difficult for PiS to win, this victory was of particular importance (especially when this involved taking over PO's mandate). However, it should be pointed out that the results of the elections (in particular the voter turnout — 11.14%) point to a limited mobilisation potential of the leading political parties (including PiS — despite the personal participation of J. Kaczyński in the campaign — a visit in Rybnik on 15 April 2013).

³ The referendum was initiated by the local citizens committee “Free Elbląg” which accused the president of incompetence, arrogance and loss of social trust.

⁴ Voter turnout, largely due to the personal involvement of party leaders, was higher than in the referendum: 36.56% in the first round, 34.60% — in the second round of the elections. In the second round, J. Wilk won 51.40% of votes; according to: www.elblag.pkw.gov.pl.

⁵ There were, e.g. proposals to: make a passage to the sea on the Vistula Spit, create conditions to expand the port of Elbląg (fourth largest port in Poland), or make changes involving determination of the administrative region the city belongs to.

The third major event in the pre-referendum period was the by-elections to the senate in the Podkarpackie Province (8 September 2013), in which PiS's candidate Zdzisław Pupa won in a spectacular way (60.48% of the votes),⁶ confirming the regional dominance of the party, and depriving other right-wing politicians of any political illusions "along the way." Given PiS's significant involvement in the Warsaw referendum, the level of voter turnout (15.48%) in the region where PiS and its political initiatives were always popular is considered as rather troubling.

In a situation of intensive dynamics of political events, a politically and strategically interesting clash took place in Warsaw in the context of referendum on the dismissal of H. Gronkiewicz-Waltz. No doubt the results of the referendum in Elbląg were a major impulse which activated the social and political forces present in the opposition (and taking advantage of the dissatisfaction of a major part of the inhabitants of Warsaw) against the quality and style of governance of H. Gronkiewicz-Waltz. The body that initiated actions aimed at holding the referendum was the Warsaw Self-Government Community (WWS), and the main character (in the initial phase of activity), its leader, was the Mayor of Warsaw's Ursynów district, Piotr Guział. The basic allegations were of a local, Warsovian nature, and concerned: increase in the price of public transport tickets, garbage collection system arrangements and the lack of supervision over investments (especially in those events which affected the inhabitants — in particular supervision over the work on the second subway line). After rejection of the April (22nd) demands for withdrawal of the criticised regulations, on 16 May, WWS started collecting signatures for a petition to launch a referendum for dismissal (the actual petition was submitted on 23 May).

The initiative of WWS/Mr. Guział could be treated as a serious strategic challenge for most organisations — the leaders of every major party existing on the political market were contextually obliged to take a decision whether, to what extent, and in what way, to participate in the Warsaw referendum campaign.

It must be assumed that the final decision was based on the analysis of the contextual conditions, taking into account: 1) the basic parameters of the market (in static terms — the current situation and in dynamic terms — given the challenges of the 2014—2015 electoral cycle), and 2) a given entity's own abilities (organisational, human resources, financial) in the pre-election year.

⁶ The political and media potential to capitalise on this success were put out by publications of the *Wprost* weekly (in print and on the web) attacking the "immoral" behaviour of some of PiS's activists (including Adam Hofman) in preparation for these elections.

The analysis of the factors in the first group should include:

- the assessment of current market polls, with particular attention to the visible trends (long-term), changes/stabilisation of support for a given party entity;
- determination of the impact of the current extraordinary events (Elbląg, Rybnik, Podkarpackie Province) on change/stabilisation of support;
- execution of a similar evaluation for entities directly competing with each other for electoral support in various segments of the electorate;
- definition of a party's market position in Warsaw (and thus the possibility of exerting a real impact on the referendum events);
- simulation of potential consequences (positive and negative) of the political involvement in the nation's capital;
- the assessment of the ability to correlate activities related to the referendum with the needs of the first election campaigns in 2014 (of particular importance, at least in terms of planning, are the local elections and the election of the President of Warsaw).

On the other hand, an analysis of an entity's own resources should resolve the following key issues:

- in the pre-election year, if the entity has the financial resources required to carry out activities which involve a relatively high level of risk;
- which politicians (either individually or as a group) should represent the party in the referendum campaign;
- in case of a successful referendum, if the entity is prepared (again: organizationally, financially, and in terms of human resources) to carry out the campaign preceding the early elections and, which has had to be considered in particular, who would be the candidate with serious chances of winning the election (maximum option), or to ensure a result that would not weaken both (a) the current polls of the party and (b) the election chances of the entity in the upcoming 2014 elections (minimum option).

Of course, the key dilemma for all participants of the referendum battle was to estimate the chances of achieving the desired result — for this to be possible, it was necessary to convince 29.10% of the eligible voters (389,430 votes) to vote. The task was extremely difficult, especially given the various demobilising actions which were organised by the city authorities (e.g. their promise to fulfil some of the demands of the inhabitants) or actions backed by the leading politicians of the Civic Platform — especially D. Tusk.

The basic, mutually related reasons against the involvement of party forces and means in the referendum campaign include:

- continued high support in Warsaw for PO and H. Gronkiewicz-Waltz (according to a few publicly available polls on the potential presidential elections in Warsaw, H. Gronkiewicz-Waltz was in the first place, and could count on support of about 30—40%; taking into account her elec-

- tion result of 2010 at 53.67% and the relatively bad social atmosphere in Warsaw, these poll results may be considered as very good);
- uncertainty if the eligible voters in Warsaw would participate in the referendum;
 - the difficult to assess method of broadcasting the referendum events in the mass media (especially by television broadcasters).

In this context, the petition for the referendum may be considered as a certain kind of test of strength or assessment of the market. The petition proceeded smoothly, with the declarative and organizational support from various political entities (ephemeral coalition of the political forces that are in opposition to PO: from the Palikot Movement to Zbigniew Ziobro's Solidary Poland) and civic associations. A total of 232,000 signatures were collected, almost over a hundred thousand more than the number required by law. It should be noted, however, that the initiators of the referendum (WWS) — who copied the ideas of PiS used in the presidential campaign of 2010 — desired to make it a campaign event (collection of 400,000 signatures), which would have a mobilisation effect (it would show the existence of a stable population within Warsaw determined to dismiss H. Gronkiewicz-Waltz).⁷

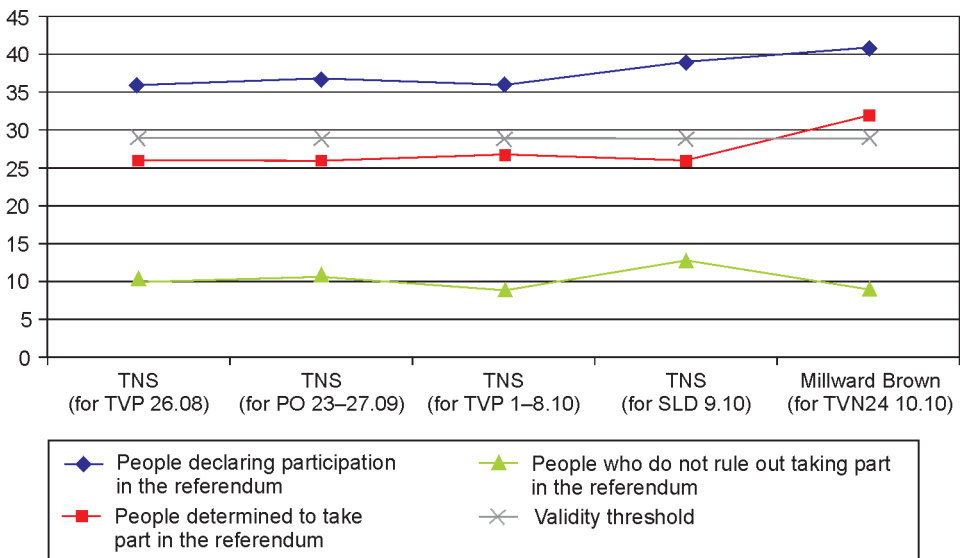


Fig. 2. The number of people declaring participation in the referendum in Warsaw (%)

Source: Own work based on the results of TNS Poland and Millward Brown, as shown in the media

⁷ The vacation time certainly did not favour the campaign, but the final result put into question the professional preparation of the activities.

A lot of confusion (and *de facto* decision-making uncertainty) was caused by the polls shown in the media that forecasted voter turnout in the referendum. The very superficial reporters' interpretation failed to take into account two very important matters: 1) the tendency to overestimate the expected number of voters in the turnout polls, 2) joint treatment of two different groups of respondents — those who were determined to participate in the referendum and those who did not rule it out. It should be noted that only in one of the published surveys the percentage of people determined to participate in the referendum exceeded the required validity threshold of 29.10%.

The presented data clearly show the relatively low persuasive and mobilisation effectiveness preceding the referendum — the subjects pushing for the dismissal of H. Gronkiewicz-Waltz were unable to cause a permanent increase in the number of people declaring participation in the referendum because of the limited dynamics of the campaign and effective counteractions of the opposing side.

The difficult task of influencing the thematic agenda of the media was certainly a failure for the entities participating in the campaign; despite a relatively high interest in the referendum campaign, its media coverage was divergent: from local interpretative frameworks (rather in the case of the defensive measures taken by the H. Gronkiewicz-Waltz) to party competition frameworks (in the case of actions taken by opposition parties).

The campaign preceding the referendum in Warsaw put the Law and Justice in a particularly complex strategic situation. Hypothetically, from the perspective of this entity, it could be conceived that in the favourable context (growth and stabilization of polls results, local elections successes) the referendum initiative created the possibility of another opportunity to strengthen the market position and focus the attention of potential voters and mass media on the political offer of this party. The fundamental problem of J. Kaczyński was the difficulty in calculating the risks associated with his intense involvement in activities preceding the referendum and it stemmed from the complexity of the context. Secondly, the situation of “a strategic crossroads” was a direct consequence of the contextual limitation of decision-making autonomy caused largely by the way coverage of political competition in Poland was carried out by means of mass communication. Paradoxically, PiS was a strategic “hostage” of its earlier successes, which were formatted by the media as the “rebirth of PiS” (or at least as the “troubles of PO”), positioning PiS as a market leader having — at a given moment — political initiative. Failure to become involved in the referendum campaign would immediately alter the media narrative (to an unfavourable one again). However, the party's involvement in the campaign resulted in its engagement in activity, which PiS was not prepared for conceptually.

Even if we accept that: 1) contextual considerations did not prevent action, 2) WWS (as the initiator) created the opportunity for a flexible joining to the referendum initiative, and 3) PiS had adequate resources, it is difficult to determine what objectives were pursued by PiS's politicians: forcing H. Gronkiewicz-Waltz to resign would be merely symbolic, since PiS did not have a candidate with a real chance of winning in the possible presidential elections (in the polls Piotr Gliński was clearly behind not only H. Gronkiewicz-Waltz, but also Ryszard Kalisz). In other words, the PiS campaign lacked a basic strategic consideration, namely that of the primary objective in its engagement in the campaign preceding the referendum:

1. If the objective was a symbolic victory (dismissal of H. Gronkiewicz-Waltz), there was clearly no answer to the question how to mobilize the residents of Warsaw: by reference to local values or by stressing party values.
2. If the strategic objectives were connected with the upcoming election cycle, then the actions taken should be clearly aimed at:
 - a) the mobilisation of its own electorate (domination of party values in its messages);
 - b) investing in the future by attempting to present P. Gliński as a future (2014) candidate in the election of the President of Warsaw (a “long march” strategy).

Failure to form a stance with regard to the fundamental strategic dilemmas resulted in a professional, but not very dynamic, campaign, which in spite of making references to very noble values, lacked mobilisation potential and was directed at an undefined audience. It can thus be concluded that only in the TV spot “W as in Great Warsaw” it was possible to maintain a balance between references to instrumental values (with an attempt to indicate both problems requiring solutions, as well as the target groups of the campaign) and the difficult to grasp ideological values (a reference to the vision of the Great Warsaw did not fit the context of the campaign preceding the dismissal referendum). The problems of Law and Justice were aggravated by the fact that, apart from the Warsaw Self-Government Community,⁸ other political groups did not organise any activities during the referendum campaign, reinforcing the negative media image of the campaign as yet another clash between PiS and PO.

However, the Civic Platform chose the simplest, and one of the most inexpensive, strategic options — to take actions aiming to reduce turnout in the referendum and thereby maintain power in Warsaw. Two main strategies were adopted:

⁸ WWS took active measures in the last two weeks before the referendum, mainly via the Internet (and outdoor advertisement of questionable quality), exposing the current issues of the high prices of tickets for public transport, budget cuts in education, growth of the administration, poor investment oversight).

1. Making use of the potential of the system of power in Warsaw, notably to increase the activity of H. Gronkiewicz-Waltz and introduce some of the demands of the inhabitants of Warsaw.
2. Reducing the motivation to participate (a well thought-out Internet campaign entitled “I choose to vote next year,” with a precisely selected target group: hesitant voters and PO supporters). This campaign was strongly supported by messages communicated in the media by D. Tusk (16 July) and President Bronisław Komorowski (7 August), which clearly undermined the point of holding a referendum.

Surprisingly, despite the high media coverage, the referendum on the dismissal of the President of Warsaw Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz before the end of her term in office, turned out to be an event of relatively small significance. In marketing terms, the result of the referendum is considered as unresolved: H. Gronkiewicz-Waltz kept her post⁹ (PO's gain), but as many as 94.86% of voters were in favour of dismissing the president (PiS's gain¹⁰). The main reason for this state of affairs was the low level of professionalism of the pre-election campaign, resulting largely from the absence of a conviction about the crucial importance of the long-term (in-between-election) political strategy in the process of the rational management of political parties, including organization and execution of campaigns and projects not directly connected with the elections, which should be aimed at improving, maintaining or defending the current market position.

⁹ The turnout of 25.66% meant that there were more than 50,000 votes missing to recognize the validity of the referendum.

¹⁰ It is difficult to assess whether the result was worth spending nearly 400,000 PLN in the pre-election year. See: http://wyborcza.pl/1.75478.14781556.Ile_kosztowało_referendum (accessed 10.7.2014).