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POLAND'S SECOND RETURN TO EUROPE?

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SUMMARY

Donald Tusk, the new Polish Prime Minister, wants to bring Poland back to the heart of Europe, rebuilding ties with Germany and France to create a 'Weimar Triangle', lessening tensions with Russia, and trying to make the country a genuine player in European foreign policy.

The new Government will try to rebalance its relationship with the United States, slowing down the move towards missile defence and withdrawing its troops from Iraq.

Although there will be a change of style on contentious issues like Russia, the new government will still be an 'assertive partner' opting out of the Charter of Fundamental Rights; unlikely to join the euro; and likely to put up a fight against reform of the EU budget.

Co-habitation with President Lech Kaczyński will create tensions but the government has the constitutional powers and the moral clout to set the agenda.

The parliamentary elections on 21 October 2007 produced a new governing coalition between the Civic Platform and the Polish People's Party, prompting a sigh of relief in Warsaw's foreign policy establishment. The new government, headed by Donald Tusk, is set on changing the country's foreign policy profile and wants to erase memories associated with the self-centred style of their predecessors. The Kaczyński twins wholeheartedly believed that Poland needed to use every opportunity to assert its national interests, and eagerly used their veto power on a range of issues, including the new EU-Russia partnership agreement, the January 2006 tax package, the directive on the transfer of prisoners, and the European Day Against the Death Penalty. Donald Tusk's new team will follow a different logic, working more through discussion and persuasion rather than obstruction. The incoming government enjoys strong public support and has the necessary self-confidence to change Poland's position and perception within the EU.

Tusk's challenge

Poland has been through a rough ride in the past two years with the twin brothers, Lech and Jaroslaw Kaczyński, in two key positions. They focused on the past rather than the future and aimed to strengthen state institutions by weakening mechanisms of public accountability. They pursued an agenda that never quite fitted the rapidly modernising country, and notoriously believed in conspiracy theories.

It was not a surprise, therefore, that the Polish society used the opportunity of the early elections in October to vote their Law and Justice Party out of office. Voter turnout was one of the highest registered in Poland since 1989, displaying an impressive level of public engagement. Following the remarkably smooth formation of the new coalition government, the twin brothers' stint in power seems to many like a bad dream they just want to forget. However, in reality, the Kaczyńskis' legacy might linger on for much longer than most assume.

The journey of the Civic Platform as a political party is very reminiscent of the long and windy road that Poland has travelled since the end of the Cold War in 1989. The party's leader, Donald Tusk, is a post-ideological liberal who has absorbed strong traits of conservatism to become electable. He has worked hard to build a modern, forward-looking party structure, and never shied away from exerting leadership at the expense of prominent party figures. A familiar face in Polish politics, he has been a party politician and a parliamentary leader for years, but had never fought his way to the top. In 2005, he lost a presidential bid to Lech Kaczyński due to an apparent lack of passion for the job.

It might come as a further surprise to many in European political circles that prior to his election, Tusk did not show any interest in doing the political rounds in Brussels. He failed to show up at conferences and meetings organised by the European People's Party, to which the Civic Platform belongs in the European Parliament. Neither did he try to position himself as a *connoisseur* of world politics through publications and speeches. That may not necessarily be a disadvantage, if it means that Tusk will bring fresh and innovative ideas to the diplomatic table.

The guiding principles of Poland's new foreign policy are already clear. The government knows that putting national interests first would signal continuity with the previous government. They are also aware of the fact that a clear policy change would require new allies and tangible policy objectives. Tusk has a unique opportunity to design a foreign policy that matches a new era in Polish history – one that is no longer burdened with the aspirational agenda of the pre-2004 period. With Poland having joined the Council of Europe, OECD, NATO and the European Union (and scheduled to become member of the Schengen zone in December 2007), Tusk can now safely reflect on his own model of foreign and European policy.

The Tusk government has a genuine opportunity to formulate an altogether different framework for Poland's international engagement. At present, everything suggests that the government will adopt a pragmatic stance in foreign policy. However, a mixed picture is emerging about what

they can realistically achieve, especially in light of President Kaczyński's ambition to continue shaping the foreign policy agenda. Success will also depend on the personal ambition and competence of the newly appointed team of senior decision-makers and advisors.

New faces of foreign policy

Prime Minister Tusk made an interesting choice of foreign minister in Radek Sikorski, a colourful politician who has also been on a complex ideological journey. In the early 1990s, he started his career at the right end of the political spectrum and has gradually moved to the centre ground since. In 2005, Sikorski ran on the ticket of the Law and Justice Party to get into the Senate but he never officially joined the party. He served as defence minister between 2005 and 2007 and came out with an overall positive record. He made the case for an active Polish engagement abroad, including in Afghanistan and Congo but due to the briefness of his tenure, he did not manage to prevent the fallout from the lack of coordination in Afghanistan (which saw some Polish troops ending up under NATO and others under US command). At the same time, he was praised by the army for advancing much-needed modernisation programmes in the military. Sikorski studied at Oxford University, having left communist Poland in 1981.

He covered the conflicts in Afghanistan and Angola as a reporter from 1986 to 1989, and moved into politics, serving as deputy defence and foreign minister in the 1990s. Following a change of government, he joined the neo-conservative American Enterprise Institute in Washington. His views evolved during his tenure as defence minister, when he was confronted with the US's unwillingness to help Poland modernise its armed forces. Sikorski is married to Anne Applebaum, the celebrity Washington Post columnist and writer.

During the October elections, he won a parliamentary seat on the Civic Platform ticket. He only became a party member on 2 December, two weeks after his appointment as foreign minister. His nomination is a sign of Prime Minister Tusk's considerable trust in Sikorski. Having said that, the arrangement may also be connected to the 2010 presidential elections for which Tusk will need Sikorski as a supporter rather than a contender.

Sikorski's foreign policy will be markedly different in style from that of his predecessor, Anna Fotyga. It is not yet clear what the overarching formula will be, but Sikorski has indicated a more engaged and less introverted approach. He is a shrewd analyst of international relations, but as a politician he still needs to establish a brand name. In an interview in 2007² he said the transatlantic community

² Łukasz Warzecha, "Strefa zdekomunizowana – wywiad rzeka z Radosławem Sikorskim", 2007.

had two major geo-strategic challenges to tackle. The first task was to support the transition of new democracies in the post-Soviet space, while the second was to democratise the Middle East. He reaffirmed this commitment by making a trip to the Annapolis Middle East peace conference last November.

These two objectives are likely to define Sikorski's foreign policy. A strong presence in Eastern Europe and Central Asia has always been a priority for Polish governments. Equally, no politician has dared to question publicly Polish support for Ukraine's European aspiration. If Sikorski is to succeed, he will need to go beyond these objectives and contribute to the battle of ideas about the future framework of the EU's relations with its neighbours – coming up with an Eastern European answer to President Sarkozy's plan for a Mediterranean Union. He will also need to back up his pledges with financial support, and increase bilateral assistance. Sikorski's interest in the Middle East will be tested through his skill to design a distinctive and innovative strategy.

Sikorski is not the only foreign policy professional in Tusk's team. In the Prime Minister's immediate entourage, Władysław Bartoszewski, an Auschwitz survivor, has been appointed as foreign policy advisor in charge of mending relations with Germany. In his mid-80s now, Bartoszewski played an important role in the election campaign, delivering a powerful critique of the outgoing government and its foreign minister Anna Fotyga. He often commented that the Kaczyński brothers had shaken the foundations of Polish foreign policy and turned the country into an unpredictable partner in Europe³. Bartoszewski is a political heavyweight, whose appointment will increase Tusk's personal authority on international affairs. It will be a drawback for Tusk, however, that Bartoszewski has little to say on major topical issues such as globalisation, climate change or international terrorism. Tusk will need a team of professionals familiar with the workings of the EU and NATO, as well as key issues of the day, to be successful in foreign policy.

Another person to watch in the new government is Defence Minister Bogdan Klich, an experienced, ambitious and dynamic politician, former Member of the European Parliament and founder of the Kraków-based Institute for Strategic Studies. Klich, a medical doctor by training, has accumulated solid foreign and security policy experience. He served as deputy defence minister in 1999-2000 in Jerzy Buzek's government.

The Civic Platform's record

The Tusk government's number one challenge will be to return Poland to the EU's centre of gravity. The government, however, will be constrained by the Civic Platform's previous record on Europe. It was Civic Platform leader Jan Rokita, now temporarily out of politics, who famously coined the "Nice or death" slogan in a speech to the parliament in 2004. This tied the hands of the then social-democratic government in the negotiations on the Constitutional Treaty. Early in 2007, it was the Civic Platform that launched the controversial idea of an alternative voting system to be introduced in the European Union, based on the square root of the population. The Kaczyński government duly adopted the proposal, even though it never carried any chance of getting through. Regardless of the political realities of the time, it was the Civic Platform that orchestrated a parliamentary resolution a week before the June 2007 European Council to make sure the government stood firm on the square root position.

Like most other Polish political forces, the Civic Platform has never been overly enthusiastic about EU-related or foreign policy-focused debates. At the party's February 2007 convention, for example, only two speakers talked about the EU. In general, the party's pro-European instincts are not as strong as those of their electorate, who – surveys show – would wholeheartedly embrace Brussels on most policy fronts.

Reaching out to key partners

The new government's declared goal is to break with the past and reposition Poland in Europe. Donald Tusk stressed that he wants Poland to be "a key actor on the European and the global stage"⁴, and he listed all big EU member states as key partners. He has pledged to improve relations with Germany, and wants to strengthen the 'Weimar Triangle', which has brought together leaders of Germany, France and Poland since 1991. He also plans to refresh old alliances within the framework of the Visegrad Group (made up of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia). Hopefully, the government will soon make the most of Poland's position at the centre of a number of political families inside the EU, with further groupings including the 3+3+2 Baltic formula or the Regional Partnership (Visegrad Four plus Austria and Slovenia). It can take advantage of these frameworks to promote new ideas and solutions, especially when it comes to the most difficult tasks such as the EU budget review.

³ Władysław Bartoszewski quoted in "Gazeta Wyborcza", 24 September 2007.

⁴ Opening address to the Parliament on 23 November, 2007 by Prime Minister Donald Tusk.

While moving closer to Europe, the new government has signalled that it will cool Poland's relations with the US. It largely agrees with its predecessor on the importance of the US' strategic role in the world and promotes a strong US presence in Central and Eastern Europe. However, the Tusk government will refuse to play the role of poodle, and will try to re-balance the Poland-US bilateral relationship in Poland's favour. Just days after taking office, the Tusk government announced a middle-ground solution to the controversial issue of hosting US missile defence installations in Poland, and envisaged consultations with NATO (read EU) partners and Russia. This will give the Tusk government sufficient time to figure out what the new US president will mean for the missile defence project.

The shift on missile defence will go hand-in-hand with a realignment in the government's approach to missions abroad. In the course of 2008, troops will be gradually withdrawn from Iraq - although the government is planning to increase the size of its contribution to the EU-led police mission in Afghanistan. This will be a hard sell, as public support for the Afghan mission has been plummeting following a recent incident in which Polish forces allegedly opened fire on Afghan civilians. In a sign of Poland's desire to boost its European credentials, the government has also pledged to send 350 troops to the EU mission in Chad, honouring an earlier commitment.

Dealing with Russia and enlargement

The Tusk government has made positive overtures towards Russia with the new prime minister describing relations with Moscow as the biggest foreign policy challenge. During one of its first sessions, the new government decided to lift its objection towards Russia's membership in the OECD. This was a friendly signal towards Moscow, but the Kaczyński government may not have been entirely wrong on this issue given that Russia is not yet even a member of the WTO. However, the aim was to get rid of the Russian embargo on Polish agricultural produce, and then to lift the Polish veto on the European Commission's mandate to start talks on a new agreement with EU. In the meantime, the Law and Justice Party criticised the new government for disregarding the human rights situation in Russia and for giving a positive signal just as opposition protests were being crushed on the streets of Moscow.

At present, little is known about the new government's thinking on the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policies, although one can assume that the traditional Polish support for both processes will continue. This would also be a welcome change from the Law and Justice Party's conflicting stance of formally supporting enlargement to Turkey, while defending an extremist, negative position on Turkish progress in the European Parliament. Given that the EU's Neighborhood Policy has been one of the key points of reference in Polish foreign policy, it is likely that 'business

as usual' will continue in this field. This will, however, have to be coupled with more tangible commitments to bilateral projects in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, and an attempt to devise an 'Eastern-facing' answer to Nicolas Sarkozy's ideas on the Mediterranean Union.

Handling the Treaty of Lisbon

The incoming Tusk government was lucky that the Treaty of Lisbon was practically a done deal. If this had not been the case, the government may have found itself torn between different influences. The most immediate challenge has been the status of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. The Kaczyński cabinet decided to join the British protocol limiting the Charter's application to social rights – a dubious move given the Kaczyńskis' image as self-nominated heirs to the Solidarity movement. The Civic Platform announced immediately after the October elections that it will allow the Charter to be fully applied in Poland. Such a position made a lot of sense given the party's aspirations to be a civic movement and its wish to appeal to the widest possible electorate.

However, Donald Tusk had to rethink his stance when it became clear that the Law and Justice Party would not support ratification of the Treaty if the government were to give up the British protocol (the opposition's endorsement is required to get a qualified majority vote in parliament). Tusk, therefore, had to reverse his own promise and keep Poland signed up to the text. The government has resorted to making a political declaration that it is in favour of the Charter "in principle", and that it will sign up to it at the earliest possible opportunity (read when President Lech Kaczyński is gone). By not subscribing to the Charter, Poland will contribute to the phenomenon of weakening the EU through opt-outs and rebates.

Poland is likely to become a team-player on many other issues. On energy policy, for instance, the Polish government will strongly support the European Commission's efforts to consolidate the European market and move ahead with liberalisation. The government intends to depart from its predecessors' preference for a hierarchical integration of the energy sector and will open it up for privatisation. Hence, it will be more likely to align itself with the EU plans on ownership unbundling in the energy sector. Poland will continue to support a diversification of supplies and transit routes, and will campaign for a coordinated European approach on the gas and oil pipeline networks from producer countries.

Poland will also have to develop a view on wider global challenges. In 2008, the country will host the next UN Convention meeting on climate change which will force the government to get clarity on the commitments which Poland itself is ready to undertake as part of the EU effort to limit greenhouse gas emissions.

The EU budget and the euro

The new government is unlikely to join efforts to modernise the EU budget. Instead, it will put up a big fight to maintain its own share of EU funds beyond year 2013. In the current seven year budget, Poland is the biggest beneficiary of EU cohesion funds, and Polish farmers will begin to receive direct CAP payments once transition arrangements end. In addition, the Tusk government is likely to be cautious on entering the euro zone. The issue could seriously hurt Tusk's standing in Europe, just as it weakened Tony Blair's when he shied away from a clear decision. The opportunity never presented itself again for the British Prime Minister, and it may well be the same for Donald Tusk. Although Tusk's finance minister, Jacek Rostowski, is a British-born economist who used to be in favour of a unilateral adoption of the euro, he has since changed his mind and now talks about the importance of prudence. Many Polish economists argue that Poland should have introduced the euro when the country's macroeconomic indicators looked substantially better. Rising inflation, the volatility of international markets and the zloty's appreciation will all make Poland's adoption of the euro more complicated. Rostowski himself has already criticised the requirement to simultaneously fulfil the inflation and exchange rate stability criteria. His rhetoric tends to be close to that of British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and it would not be surprising if he copied Brown's adoption of economic tests to judge the country's progress towards joining the euro.

A double-headed foreign policy?

Poland's Prime Minister and President will compete for influence over their country's international orientation. The Constitution makes clear that the main body responsible for decision-making in foreign policy is the government. However, this will undoubtedly become a difficult area of cohabitation with the country's president, Lech Kaczynski. The President nominates and recalls ambassadors and 'cooperates' with relevant ministers, which is generally interpreted as a mandate to play an important but supportive role. But if he wishes, the President has every opportunity to remain influential in the region and the world. After all, he is the natural interlocutor of foreign heads of state, from Washington via Paris on to Moscow.

The opening shots have already been exchanged on the Charter of Fundamental Rights and on dealing with Russia. Kaczynski has begun to carve out a space for himself by skipping the Prime Minister's opening speech to parliament and turning up at Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's party convention in Tbilisi as the first Western leader after the turmoil in Georgia started. Tusk, on the other hand, has reciprocated by failing to discuss the Russian OECD decision with the President, and allegedly failing to inform him.

The relationship has been further poisoned by the recent nomination of former foreign minister Anna Fotyga as head of the Presidential Chancellery, one of the key posts in the presidential administration. Fotyga is so close to Lech Kaczyński that the media sometimes refer to her as the third twin. In her new role, she is likely to continue with the prickly attitude towards Poland's key partners and allies which characterized her style as foreign minister. Since President Kaczyński has good contacts in Georgia, Ukraine, the Czech Republic and Lithuania, it is likely that he will develop a geographical specialisation focusing on countries of Central and Eastern Europe. He is also likely to occasionally make life difficult for the government by blocking ambassadorial nominations.

Cohabitation has never been very easy in Polish foreign policy. In the 1990s, Aleksander Kwasniewski, the left-wing president, often quarrelled with his centre-right prime minister, Jerzy Buzek, but their arguments were constrained by the need to meet NATO and EU accession requirements. The pressure on Poland is now different. Poland's leadership now has to prove to the EU that it is a worthy member of the club, especially in light of the country's upcoming Council presidency, currently scheduled for 2011. The Prime Minister called this opportunity the "crowning of the country's European and international aspirations".

All in all, the new Polish government will have a business-like approach to the European Union. It understands that compromise is an essential element of the EU's decision-making process. It will build alliances and accept the notion of collective interests – an approach entirely absent from Poland's European and foreign policy in the last two years. Although the new government has strong feelings on issues such as the review of the EU budget, it will think twice before vetoing EU decisions. Poland's change presents other EU capitals with an opportunity to engage Warsaw as a constructive partner on the European stage. They should capitalise on Poland's new openness and its determination to return to the European mainstream.

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