



Commentary

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Awkward partner once again? Repercussions for Europe of Poland's elections

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A clear majority of Poles voted to end eight years of Civic Platform (PO) government on Sunday October 25th when they brought the previously ousted Law and Justice Party (PiS) back to power. Any sense of surprise was relative, however, given that Bronislaw Komorowski was replaced by the PiS candidate Andrzej Duda at the presidential elections in May. A warning had already been sounded during the European elections of 2014 when the PO lost several seats and the PiS managed to equal the PO's number of seats in the European Parliament.

This outcome nevertheless remains difficult to understand for Poland's West European partners and may confuse some EU officials observing developments in Poland since it joined the EU in 2004. The implications of these elections for relations with countries like Germany or France, and for Poland's own EU policy, are a source of concern. Do the results herald a return to the country Poland was during its early years as EU member? How might Poland change and how would this affect relations with its EU partners?

An election on national issues but with European consequences

The fact that Poland's government change is mostly related to internal politics might make it harder to understand from an external perspective. The main reason for the numerous falls of government in European countries in recent years does not actually apply to Poland: its economy has shown relative resilience to the crisis. Even in 2009, when all other European countries were facing recession, Poland managed to achieve growth. And despite a slowdown in 2012 and 2013, its growth rose to 3.4% last year, with similar levels expected in coming years.

But the fruits of this growth have not been equally or rapidly shared throughout the country, as emphasised during the electoral campaign and borne out by its results. Even though the unemployment rate has seen ups and downs, this should be nuanced by the high number of precarious contracts in force. These factors have led to resentment and explain why parties focused their campaigns on socio-economic issues.

After having been the first governing party to hold on to power in Poland since the fall of communism, the PO has now suffered the consequences of the electorate's fatigue. The scandals that led to the resignation of several of its key figures reinforced the public's perception that the party had become elitist and distant from the population. This time it is the PiS that is making history in modern Poland by being the first party to reach an absolute majority and thus able to govern without an ally. This puts

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the party in a strong position but it is also under pressure to achieve results; even more so if we consider that the president also comes from the same party.

In 2011, despite some dissatisfaction with its first mandate, Poles voted once again for the PO because it was seen as an anchor of stability and prosperity at a time of crisis. The potential consequences of a return of the Law and Justice Party inspired fear while other options were not considered as viable alternatives. At this time the personality of Donald Tusk made the difference because he enjoyed considerable public support, while Jaroslaw Kaczynski was seen by many as something of a liability. Nowadays, Polish politics is characterised by a curious battle between absent leaders: the PO's main leader Donald Tusk has – for now – left for Brussels and the longstanding PiS leader is pulling the strings from behind the scenes in order to hold on to voters. Under such circumstances Poland might be a complicated case to deal with at European Council meetings since its representative at the table is not the one in power. This prospect recalls the era of 2007 when the Kaczynski brothers irritated other European leaders by conducting Brussels-Warsaw phone calls before accepting any kind of agreement. Moreover, a possibly tense relationship with the president of the European Council is also foreseeable given the political rivalry between the two main Polish political parties, especially since the future of Tusk's political career is uncertain.

Not such an awkward partner...

The early years of Poland's EU membership were associated with negative feelings, on both sides. From the viewpoint of the older member states, fears about the influx of a cheap workforce into their national markets were high and, from Poland's perspective, there was also considerable Euroscepticism. More than 10 years have passed since the status of the country shifted from candidate country to member state. The divide between Eurosceptics and Europhiles has softened and Poland's image in Brussels has evolved positively. Poland is now a mature partner of the EU with political representatives and civil services that have learned from the EU's way of working and are thus less inclined to seek direct national confrontation. Poland and Germany developed close ties, fostered by the very good relations between Angela Merkel and Donald Tusk, and if relations have traditionally been rather more distant with France, Poland's image has started to improve in recent years.

Yet the latest election results suggest that Poland might revert to the status of 'awkward partner'. Poland has gained importance as one of the EU's main players but the risk of confrontation over its new leader's Euroscepticism is plausible. But despite the enduring and important influence of Jaroslaw Kaczynski, a new generation of leaders has emerged within a PiS that is less anti-EU and less anti-German. Furthermore, in contrast to feelings in some southern member states, Germany's current leadership is mostly regarded positively in Poland (and not only by the former Foreign Minister, Radoslaw Sikorski). It is thus far from certain that a new PiS leadership would try to capitalise on any direct confrontation with Germany, but it does not go without saying that it will pursue the PO's strategy of trying to increase national power through a close alliance with Germany.

As a member of the European Conservative and Reformist Party (ECR), along with the British Conservatives, the PiS vehemently questions the EU's current development and further integration projects but nevertheless supports the idea of European cooperation. Does this same partisan affiliation imply possible common interests with the UK's re-evaluation of its relationship with the EU and the forthcoming British referendum? Poland's change of government may in fact not change much on this issue. Unlike the United Kingdom, Poland does not favour treaty change due to the risk of being isolated and ending up with a less advantageous deal. A new negotiation may indeed lead to a deeper distinction between eurozone and non-eurozone countries and thus marginalise Poland. Until now Poland has managed to prevent a clear separation between the two zones, thanks to its intermediary status of 'pre-In' and its contractual perspective to adopt the euro when it is ready. This at least allows Poland a seat at the table, even if it cannot take part in the decisions. The nomination of Donald Tusk as President of the eurozone summits, despite the fact that he is a national of a non-eurozone country, was already a sign of openness regarding this intra-EU frontier.

On this particular issue of the adoption of the euro by Poland, the PiS victory also portends another backlash. The PiS strongly opposes adoption of the euro and Beata Szydło, the expected incoming Prime Minister, promised to start by deleting the post of negotiator for Poland's euro accession. This will be another step but by no means a radical change, as the PO was already delaying any prospect of adopting the euro until further notice.

Economically, the PiS is in fact more leftist than the PO in that it advocates a strong state that has to intervene (or even nationalise) in order to defend national interests, while it is politically more to the right on cultural and social issues. The PiS indeed used to be known for its conservative and authoritarian values, with religious undertones. Such a state-centric tendency can be observed in several other European countries, notably in the current success of the *Front National* in France or the arrival on the German political scene of eurosceptic movement like the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, AfD).

The refugee issue and the Visegrad response

Following these election results (and also to a certain extent the Swiss elections one week earlier), political leaders in France are concerned about the electoral consequences of the refugee crisis. Just one day after the Polish elections the official campaign for country-wide regional elections began in France, to be held in early December. Even if the electoral system might temper the end-result, another victory for the extreme-right *Front National* seems likely and its leader Marine Le Pen is in a strong position to win the northern region, formerly known as the 'electoral land' of the Socialist Party.

Migration issues were among the main electoral issues in Poland. The campaign debate centred around incoming refugees but also on how to keep Poles in the country or give incentives to Polish citizens to come back. Regarding the refugees, the PiS tried to capitalise on the religious issue as they did 10 years earlier by defending the Christian foundations of the EU during discussions on the treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. The fears aroused by this refugee question and the electoral context made it hard for the PO Prime Minister not to oppose the refugee quotas at the September European Council. This crisis put the PO-led Poland in a difficult position, torn between its desire to remain at the big member states' table and its Eastern solidarity with the Visegrad countries – the latter being more in line with its own national opinion. Under a PiS government regional ties, especially in the framework of the Visegrad group, will certainly be strengthened. Does this mean a risk of 'Orbanisation' for Poland? The PiS is indeed close to the Hungarian Prime Minister on several issues but not on the relationship to Russia, which is a key foreign and security policy issue for Poland. At the height of the Ukraine crisis, Poland voiced strong concerns and adopted a leading role alongside France and Germany. However, the 'Normandy format' was adopted from June 2014 onwards and Poland has since been sidelined. The current evolution towards an opportunistic strategic cooperation with Russia is crystallising the situation. This carries the risk of isolating and alienating Poland and will probably be more difficult for a PiS government to accept than for its predecessor.

What is possible – with the current anti-immigrant stance already adopted by the Hungarian, Slovakian and Czech Prime Ministers – is a transformation of the Visegrad group into an opposition group led by Poland. The Polish political alliance's strategy is indeed likely to shift from trying to sit with the big member states to confronting those same leaders with the support of the Visegrad Group. This could re-open the divide between Eastern and Western member states, with the refugee crisis as a backdrop. The different perceptions, due to their respective histories of migration, are already a fertile ground for this divide.

Angela Merkel, who did not use up much of her political capital on the Greek crisis, has decided to use it up now on the refugee crisis. She could encounter real difficulties of strong internal and external opposition, and the potential loss of support from partners such as Poland. Germany's image has also taken a hit from the Volkswagen scandal. As Chancellor Merkel celebrates 10 years in her post, she is losing public support while the CSU Bavarian Ministerpräsident, Horst Seehofer, is gaining support

with his anti-refugee discourse. With the German anti-Islam Pegida movement also regaining strength, the change of Poland's government puts Chancellor Merkel in an even more uncomfortable position.

On a completely different topic: the forthcoming climate negotiations might also distance Poland from its two Western neighbours. France will push for a success at the COP 21, while under a PiS government Poland will strongly defend its industrial and coal interests. While France is close to Germany on climate targets, Poland is diametrically opposed here with its focus on securing independent energy supply and on defending its growing economy.

These two live issues – refugees and the climate negotiations - will be serious challenges for relations between the new Polish government and its European partners. The troublesome partner Europe once knew will most probably not be back in quite the same way, but nevertheless a strong player with nationalistic concerns has surely to be expected. Even though the Polish elections did not focus on EU issues they highlighted some of the fundamental concerns facing the EU, such as being able to sell, politically, the benefits of European integration; of narrowing the gap between Western and Eastern member states; and, more urgently, of finding a solution to the refugees crisis and its unforeseen consequences.