

Poland's Presidency and the polling booth

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In July, Next Europe covered (<http://next-europe.info/2011/07/04/poland/>) the ascension of Poland to the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Here, we look at what this will mean for Poland at home, and what impact it will have on Prime Minister Donald Tusk and the upcoming elections.

For Poland, assuming the Presidency of the Council of the European Union is of huge symbolic value. This symbolism was not lost on Polish authorities who commissioned Jerzy Janiszewski, the author of the famous 'Solidarność' (Solidarity) logo to design the official logo of the Presidency. The 'Solidarność' movement started the long route towards freedom and the Presidency marks the incredible progress Poland has made since the dark days of the early 1980s. For a country which experienced a tragic history during the 20th century – first brutal Nazi occupation during WW2 and then decades of Soviet-imposed communism – this all is a source of pride. But Poland, as every other country, does not exist in some elusive land of symbolic values. The Presidency has very real implications for country's politics, both at home and in relation to its place in Europe.

The parliamentary elections, announced by President Komorowski to be held on 9th October, place the EU Presidency in the battlefield of Polish election campaign. This is a chance for Prime Minister Donald Tusk to present himself as an important European leader and prove his foreign policy skills, which came under heavy fire from the opposition after his poor handling of the Smoleńsk tragedy inquiry. The main opposition party, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS – Law and Justice) led by the late President's brother, Jarosław Kaczyński, was particularly vocal in criticizing the Prime Minister for allowing Russians to dictate the terms of the inquiry. One of Tusk's objectives will be, therefore, to present the accomplishments of Polish Presidency as a victory for Poland's national interests.

The current opinion polls suggest that the ruling Platforma Obywatelska (PO – Civic Platform) is to hold on to power which means that the government mid-term change during the EU Presidency is unlikely, although not impossible. Nonetheless, if PO wants to win an outright majority, without the need to form a coalition government (as is the situation now), it needs to up its support. European presidency, if well conducted, offers Tusk a perfect opportunity to do just that; a point noted by the opposition expressing the view that the presidency will be more of an election PR exercise than anything else.

The relationship between President Komorowski and Prime Minister Tusk is also worth looking at. The Polish Constitution is ambiguous in dividing who does what in relation to foreign policy and Tusk frequently clashed with late President Lech Kaczyński over who should assume leadership on Foreign Affairs. Tusk and Komorowski have the benefit of representing the same party (PO) and sharing broadly similar ideological positions; however, this does not mean all is well. Komorowski is sometimes considered to offer a more left-wing alternative to Tusk's perceived 'fraternization' with the church hierarchs and his drift towards the centre to please the maximum number of the voters. While the President stated he does not intend to get involved in oncoming election campaign, the Prime Minister will attempt to boost PO's chances with achievements on European front.

The crisis of the single currency obviously will be one of the focal points of the Polish Presidency. This simultaneously poses a challenge and an opportunity. The focus on the euro creates a risk that Poland will be sidelined and excluded from the important decisions made within the euro club. The key Polish objective is to prevent the split of the EU into 'Europe of two speeds' in which non-euro states would have a very limited influence and most structural funds diverted away from them. So far Tusk's insistence on Polish participation in the summits of the Euro Group has met with a cold shrift from France and Germany. But the scale of the crisis is also an opportunity. This is not a time of 'business as usual' but a moment when the EU faces questions not only on its future direction, but on the very purpose and aims of its existence. Poland with its vision of 'European solidarity' can offer an important contribution to the debate.



Lucasz Krebel is a Polish born student currently studying History and Politics at Queen Mary, University of London, where he devotes his time to debating and student societies. He writes for the stylistic enjoyment coupled with some focus on improving his knowledge on contemporary affairs. He is interested in all things European: politics, philosophy, the EU and the Champions League.

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