

EUR-IFRI 's TUESDAYS



Poland in Europe: Change and Continuity after October Elections

Piotr Maciej KACZYŃSKI

Research Fellow - Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)

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Early parliamentary elections for both houses of Parliament (Sejm and Senate) were held in Poland on 21 October 2007 after the Sejm voted for its own dissolution on 7 September 2007. The election was won by the largest opposition party, the Civic Platform (PO), which soundly defeated the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS).

Piotr Maciej Kaczyński started his presentation by underlining the domestic changes brought by the October elections. Prime Minister and PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński stepped down from office on the 15th of November, and PO leader, Donald Tusk, was sworn in as Poland's Prime Minister the following day. According to Piotr Kaczyński, these elections expressed a profound change in the Polish society, a paradoxical continuity in policies, and lastly, some changes in policies.

Change in Society

The turnout of the elections was around 55%, an increase of 15% from the 2005 elections, and saw the highest voter frequency in Polish parliamentary election since the semi-free elections of 1989. This high increase in turnout was not expected.

This positive evolution can be explained both by the demographic boom that occurred in Poland in the eighties and by a change in education patterns. The young people represent a bigger part of the population than before. This young population takes more actively part in the votes. Besides, urban and educated electors outnumbered the uneducated and rural voters. Today 35% of young Polish people have higher degrees. Thus, the elections showed up the evolution of the country in a more liberal way.

Continuity in Policies

Although the two major Polish parties are opponents, both are conservative: Law and Justice is national conservative, whereas the Civic Platform is liberal conservative.

Their opposition rests mainly on domestic issues. But their external policies are similar in their objectives. For instance, the new government shares the same position than the previous one regarding energy issues or the relationship with Russia. Tusk is as critical of Russia as Jarosław Kaczyński was (though is more open to dialogue with Moscow). Both governments see the possible resuming of Russia's participation in the CFE Treaty (Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty) as a threat for Poland. It is essential for Tusk's government not to be seen in Poland as too soft towards Russia, as it must face a strong opposition led by Jarosław Kaczyński in the Parliament. Similarly, both governments rely deeply on their cooperation with the USA.

Nevertheless Tusk's government has a new political style and a more liberal rhetoric. This approach is based more on engagement and cooperation and less on veto.

Changes in Policies

One major difference between the two parties is their attitude towards bilateral relations and multilateral ones. Law and Justice strongly prefers bilateral relations, as shows its support for a stronger US presence on the Polish territory. The Civic Platform has not this preference for bilateral relations and uses both approaches. For the new government, there will be no need for a US-Polish agreement, if NATO is able to provide security to the country. Thus it is holding back the decision to allow US anti-missiles defense in Poland, despite the formal agreement given by Jarosław Kaczyński to the US in September.

The new government will remove Polish troops from Iraq in 2008. This is one of the issues that cause, and will continue to cause, tensions between the Prime Minister Tusk and the country's president Lech Kaczyński. This new constitutional argument of both leaders may result in limiting the capacity of the Polish foreign policy.

Another notable change is the new involvement of Poland in Georgia. The Polish government sent a negotiator to Georgia to negotiate more freedom of the media, which would have been impossible with the previous government strongly opposed to civic engagement. Tusk's government has a complete new method – more open, transparent and willing to let Polish personalities act next to the government.

Last but not least, the attitude of Tusk's government towards the EU is completely new. One reason why the Civic Platform won the Parliamentary elections was because it promised to stop the veto policy massively used by Law and Justice in the past few years. The Polish vetoes in Brussels were highly criticized in the public debate in Poland. Another promise of the new government was to remove the opt-out imposed by Jarosław Kaczyński's government on the Charter on fundamental rights. But Tusk was forced in the end to maintain the opt-out for fear that the opposition led by Jarosław Kaczyński withdraws its support for the modified Treaty. Indeed, the new government needs a two third majority in the Parliament for the new Treaty to be ratified in Poland. Law and justice could use any excuse to put an end to the Treaty. One has to wait to see the results of the debate within the Polish Parliament on the opt-out clause.