

DAVID GRODZKI

Implications of Polish Elections on Domestic and European Affairs

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Editor and typesetting:

Andrea Tevelyné Kulcsár

Editorial office:

H-1016 Budapest, Bérc utca 13-15.

Tel.: +36 1 279-5700

Fax: +36 1 279-5701

E-mail: titkarsag@hii.hu

www.kulugyiintezet.hu

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The ruling government party of Prime Minister Donald Tusk, the liberal-conservative Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO), secured a second term in office after seeing the national-conservative Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) of opposition leader Jarosław Kaczyński, brother of the late president Lech Kaczyński, come in second during the parliamentary elections on 9 October 2011. The biggest surprise of the election, despite the unprecedented back-to-back parliamentary victory of the PO, is the result of Palikot's Movement (Ruch Palikota, RP), founded by former PO renegade Janusz Palikot, which scored more than 10% of the vote. Another surprise, although a negative one, is the fall from grace of the Democratic Left Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej, SLD) party, which might signify the party's end.

What consequences will the re-election of the PO, and the probable continuation of the coalition between the PO and the Peasants' Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL), mean for Poland's European partners? Will the Tusk government undertake more radical, and badly needed, domestic reforms, or will it continue to choose the path of least resistance? How will the PiS react to the electoral defeat – the sixth in a row – and what role did Kaczyński's remarks in the last week of the campaign play? Two more issues need to be addressed: the future of the SLD and party leader Grzegorz Napieralski, and the question of whether the success of Palikot's Movement can be simply explained by the discontent of young voters, or whether it is going to establish the party as the most anti-clerical force in Polish politics.

THE ELECTIONS IN SHORT

The Civic Platform (PO) won the election with close to 40% of the vote, and thus secured a historic second term for the government. However, the biggest winner of the elections is not the Civic Platform of Prime Minister Donald Tusk but Palikot's Movement (RP), the new party of former PO renegade and entrepreneur Janusz Palikot. The party, founded only a couple of months ago, secured almost 10% of the vote, by running an aggressive anti-clerical campaign. Whereas RP thus provided the biggest surprise of the rather dull and emotionless campaign, both the Law and Justice (PiS) party of Jarosław Kaczyński and the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) will have to re-evaluate their strategies as well as their leaders' role in the defeat after failing to engage the minds of voters. The national-conservative PiS, which seemed to be closing the gap in the polls between the leading PO and itself, lost momentum in the last week of the campaign after a number of remarks revealed that Kaczyński had not changed his position with regard to European affairs and Poland's external relations. The party won less than 30% of the vote with its crude mix of anti-German rhetoric, warnings of the Russian menace and nationalist ideas. The liberal-left SLD, which has given post-communist Poland three prime ministers and a two-term president, recorded the biggest losses, however, securing only 8.2%, around half of its vote in 2007, and now faces tough times. Some even question whether the party will continue in its present form or whether it will break up into smaller parties to accommodate the various needs of Poland's left.

These figures translate into 207 seats for Tusk's PO in the Sejm. The PiS has taken 157 seats, whereas Palikot's Movement will have 40 representatives in parliament. The Peasants' Party (PSL), the coalition partner of the PO, has secured 28 seats, and the SLD 27. One seat is held by the party of the German minority. In the upper house of the parliament, the Senate, the liberal-conservatives of the PO will hold 62 seats, the PiS 31, and the PSL will provide two senators. Five senators do not belong to any of the major parties and will enter the upper house as independent candidates.

With 235 seats, the current government coalition could easily continue its work, and it remains likely that Tusk and Waldemar Pawlak will agree to do so. The cooperation between both parties has been smooth and without much drama in the past four years, and both party leaders have enjoyed working together. The opposition, consisting of the PiS (157 seats), Palikot's Movement (40), the SLD (27) and the German Minority (1), will hold 225 seats.

Compared with the 2007 election, all major parties have lost support; however, whereas the PO and the PiS have lost only between 1% and 2.5% of the vote, the liberal-left SLD has lost almost 5%, close to one third of its share four years ago. The PSL, campaigning for the support of the rural farming population, a rather narrow target group, maintained its share of around 8%. Most of the losses can be explained by the first-time appearance of Palikot's Movement, which scooped up support from all electoral groups, and in particular the disenchanted supporters of the left. However, the low turnout should be more troubling for the PO and all other parties than the success of the anti-clerical and somewhat radical Palikot's Movement. Less than 50% of Poland's eligible voters cast a vote. The final turnout of 48.8% is almost 5% lower than in 2007, when it stood at 53.8%.

THE PO'S ELECTION VICTORY EXPLAINED

The success of the PO can be attributed to a number of factors, most importantly the continued economic growth of the country and Tusk's popularity. However, other issues, such as the blunder of Kaczyński in the last week of the election campaign – the 'Merkel incident' or 'Merkelgate' – and the promise to secure up to €75bn from the EU's next financial framework for Poland, will certainly have contributed to the victory of the party. Last but not least, the coalition between the PO and the PSL has been almost free from drama, in stark contrast to the experience of PiS governments. The fact that both parties ran the country for four years without any major scandals or turmoil could have added to voters' confidence in the ruling coalition government and thus their support for the PO. Contrary to 2007, it seems that the election programmes and even more so the campaign itself had only very limited influence on voters' decisions to favour one or the other major party. The PO ran its campaign under the slogan "We are building Poland", referring specifically to the modernisation projects in the country in preparation for the European football championship in 2012. However, more generally the slogan referred to the task of aligning living standards and economic productivity with those of

its western neighbours, in particular Germany – a project that the PO has been working on for four years. Kaczyński's Law and Justice party entered the election race with the slogan "Poland deserves more". Just as uninspired as those slogans have been the campaigns of both parties. Whereas Tusk travelled Poland in the "Tuskobus" and enjoyed walks through crowds of supporters, chatting and enquiring about their needs and wishes, Kaczyński relied mostly on official rallies. Surprisingly he turned down an invitation to debate with all other party leaders on TV and chose to appear only at a one-on-one interview with political journalist and PO sympathiser Tomasz Lis. This is important, as it was during this appearance that Kaczyński, potentially unaware of the negative consequences, stumbled into what has been dubbed "Merkelgate". He hinted that the chancellorship of Merkel was far from being an accident but was the result of behind-the-scenes doings of the former East German State Security apparatus. The only somewhat inspired campaign has been run, not surprisingly, by Palikot's Movement. Its anti-clerical, pro-gay, libertarian message drew crowds of mostly young people to attend Palikot's rallies.

Economic success story: Poland has been the only country of the European Union that did not fall victim to the economic crisis and continued to record impressive economic growth rates throughout 2009 and 2010, when Greece, Ireland and Portugal almost defaulted and had to be bailed out by their eurozone partners. The country will host the European football championship next year (co-hosted by Ukraine) and has seen the modernisation of much of its infrastructure in the past few years. Airports, highways and railway stations have been upgraded, modernised or built. Even though delays have been frequent and concerns about meeting the deadline of various projects, especially highway construction, persist, many Poles feel that necessary investments have been made and will benefit the general public.

European integration instead of isolation: EU membership is another factor that contributed to the electoral success of the PO, as the government and especially Donald Tusk enjoy good relations with all major European powers. Many Poles believe that Poland will be able to secure a large share of EU funds only through good personal relations. Tusk is on friendly terms with Germany's Chancellor Merkel, and the Polish government has repeatedly stressed the importance of good relations with the EU's most influential member state. Many Poles still remember how the Kaczyński twins isolated Poland in the EU with their anti-German and heavily nationalist rhetoric. Indeed, Poles continue to support a deeper integration and stronger involvement of Poland in the EU. True, the enthusiasm for the introduction of the common currency has, at least for now, waned; nonetheless, it seems that the pro-European stance of the PO and the PSL has secured both parties the support of large parts of the population.

Anti-German rhetoric and "Merkelgate": The perhaps crucial factor that secured the victory of the PO in the election, however, seems to have been provided ironically by Tusk's main rival, Jarosław Kaczyński. The leader of the PiS, who after the tragic plane crash of Smolensk, seemed to have lost his edge, offered voters a stark reminder of how the country would be run under his rule during the last week of campaigning. His accusations that Germany under Chancellor Merkel was only waiting for the right moment to conquer Poland again brought back memories of the anti-German rants of the PiS government in 2005–2007. Later he hinted at the possibility that the chancellorship

of Merkel was actually the result of illegal actions conducted by the former East German secret service. Similarly he reminded voters that the PiS believes that Russia and Germany are conspiring against the country and its many (mostly liberal) intellectuals are actually willing accomplices. Before this incident it seemed that the PiS was finally closing the gap between it and the PO, which had enjoyed a comfortable lead in most polls.

Popular image of Tusk: Last but not least, there is Tusk's popularity in the country. Even though he is often considered to be boring, the prime minister is regarded as one of the nicest politicians in the country. This combination of being a nice but boring prime minister and his very pragmatic approach towards Poland's traditional allies, and also – perhaps especially – towards Russia, evokes a feeling of trust and safety. In turbulent times, such as Europe is experiencing, being considered cautious and pragmatic might thus actually have been an asset for the leader of the Civic Platform.

THE SLD AND THE PiS – THE FUTURE OF NAPIERALSKI AND KACZYŃSKI AT STAKE?

The weak result of the Democratic Left Alliance, which obtained only 27 seats in the Sejm – half of its 53 seats in the previous parliament – will certainly have consequences for party leader Grzegorz Napieralski. The charismatic and seemingly ever-smiling Napieralski, who came in third in last year's presidential election with 13.7% of the vote, will have to bear the responsibility for the party's failure to capture the support of the electorate. The SLD, which is more progressive than the PO and rather critical of the role of the Catholic Church in Poland, was unable to convince voters that it offered a real alternative to the modestly progressive Tusk party. More importantly, though, it came under pressure from the radical Palikot's Movement, which shares many of the Democratic Left's positions, such as support for the governmental reimbursement of in-vitro fertilisation, a liberalisation of the abortion law or same-sex unions. However, it seems that voters favoured the more radical approach offered by Palikot – if they indeed supported liberal ideas and did not decide to give their vote to the PiS in protest against the PO. The majority, though, as indicated by the 70% of votes given to the PO and PiS, moderately conservative and very conservative respectively, clearly remains attached to more conservative ideas.

The Law and Justice (PiS) party of Jarosław Kaczyński has lost in the elections for the sixth time in a row, and even though there is as of yet no talk about a new chairman, it remains not unlikely that the defeat will have a severe impact on the structure of the party. The party, which faced internal disagreements and split over them in 2010, when dissatisfied party members decided to establish a new party, Poland Comes First (Polska Jest Najważniejsza, PJN), has mostly its anachronistic campaign to blame for the electoral defeat. For most of the campaign the party trailed behind the PO; however, in the last few weeks it closed the gap and a head-to-head competition between both parties could have been the outcome. However, due to Kaczyński's revival of old anti-German rhetoric, many Poles will have found Tusk's warnings that a return of the PiS to government

would harm the country to appear accurate. Other moves, such as “Kaczyński’s Angels”, a group of attractive young women that the party hoped would attract voters, have proven both an embarrassment and a tactical failure, as none received enough votes to enter the Sejm.

In 2008 Kaczyński had declared that he would step down as party leader if his party failed to win the 2011 elections; however, currently the party does not seem to have any suitable successor, as obvious candidates such as Zbigniew Ziobro have fallen from grace in the past.

A NEW POLITICAL FORCE OR SIMPLE PROTEST? PALIKOT’S MOVEMENT

The big surprise of the elections is certainly the success of Palikot’s Movement, which had only been registered as a party this year. It seems that the party succeeded in particular in winning the vote of young male voters who support the radical programme of the Movement. RP has been running a very anti-clerical campaign, demanding the abolition of the privileges that the Catholic Church enjoys in Poland, such as its exemption from paying taxes. Furthermore the party supports a lot of initiatives that run counter to the teachings of the Church, such as legal partnership status for gays and lesbians, governmental reimbursement for in-vitro fertilisation and a liberalisation of the abortion law.

The party consists of political no-names and first-timers, with the exception of founder Janusz Palikot, the former PO renegade who was excluded from the party after making inappropriate remarks about Lech Kaczyński just days after the plane crash at Smolensk. He had previously queried Jarosław Kaczyński’s sexuality, leading to an enquiry into his behaviour by the PO. However, it is due to Mr Palikot’s support for homosexuals that a gay parliamentarian and even a transsexual will sit in the new Sejm. Although more radical than any other party in the Sejm, it remains likely that the Movement will support the probable PO–PSL coalition in its pro-European policies. However, Palikot is not without reason the *enfant terrible* of Poland’s political scene, and the new government will surely have to face strong criticism and heavy attacks from RP if it fails to tackle issues for which the new party campaigned.

One problem, though, will remain: the party ran a campaign focused on Palikot; however, it will take more than one prominent member to ensure its popularity over the next four years, and with no experienced party members it seems likely that RP will have to learn many hard lessons.

DIVISION BETWEEN AGES, PLACES OF LIVING AND EDUCATION LEVELS

Some established assumptions seem still to hold true in the 2011 election, whereas others, most notably that concerning a link between age and party support, seem to have become less important. Three major observations can be made with regard to voters' behaviour, namely that age matters (to a certain degree), the old division between rural and urban votes for the PO and the PiS continues to be significant, and education levels determine to a large degree which party is voted for.

The Young Vote for the PO, the Elderly for the PiS?

When the Civic Platform won the parliamentary elections in 2007 it was to a large extent because it swept up the votes of first-time voters and university students, and the majority of votes from the group of voters younger than 40 years old. This picture has changed during the last elections, mostly because Palikot's Movement has been able to rally support from many first-time voters and the group of disenchanted people in their mid-twenties. Despite this, the PO secured close to 33% of all votes among those aged 18–25, whereas the PiS came in second with only around 24% of the vote in this group. Palikot's Movement trailed only slightly behind the PiS after securing an astonishing 23.3% (see *table 1*).

Support for the PiS continues to grow among the older groups of the electorate, and a somewhat similar picture emerges for the Civic Platform, whereas Palikot's Movement seems to be attractive only to the group of young voters. Its liberal-libertarian, anti-clerical message does not seem to go down well with voters older than 25 – a problem that the party will have to address during the next four years if it wants to repeat its electoral success. The Civic Platform was able to secure more than 40% of the votes from those aged 26–39, and close to 40% from all other groups (40–59, and 60+), leaving the PiS behind in all categories. This is surprising, as the national-conservatives have usually been able to rely especially on the support of the older population, and indeed, close to 40% of those about to retire have given their support to the Kaczyński party.

It remains to be seen if the shift of young voters to RP will be problematic for the Civic Platform, or if it simply was a warning for the party to not forget about the country's youth, which continues to struggle to find well-paid jobs (the youth unemployment rate reached close to 23% last year). It seems likely that without the involvement of RP, the Civic Platform would have gathered around 50% of the vote among the youngest group of voters, which, it seems have largely bought into Palikot's message of a freer, more open-minded, less clerical Poland.

Table 1: Share of votes received by the PO and the PiS from different age groups

Age	18–25	26–39	40–59	60
Civic Platform (PO)	32.70%	43.50%	39.40%	39.50%
Law and Justice (PiS)	23.80%	23.90%	31.70%	38.00%

Rural Votes no Longer Exclusively for the PiS, Urban Votes Locked with the PO

Rural voters tend to support the PiS and PSL. While the PSL relies naturally on the votes of the rural population, the PiS too has usually seen much stronger support outside the cities than the PO. However, the gap seems to be closing, with the PiS securing only 36% of the rural vote. The PO took close to 29%, its coalition partner PSL around 15%. Overall the PiS continues to rely more on rural voters than the PO does, with more than 40% of its votes coming from rural areas, whereas rural votes only make up close to 25% of all votes that the PO received.

The downward trend of the PiS continues also in the cities. An interesting phenomenon can be observed there. Not only does the PO prevail in the urban vote, but it wins regardless of the population number. In cities up to 50,000 people its lead is close to 12% (PO: 41% to PiS: 30%), but already reaches almost 20% in bigger cities (population: 50,000–200,000), and almost 25% in those with a population between 200,000 and 500,000 people. There the PO secured almost half of the vote (48%), the PiS only 24.5%. In even bigger cities, such as Warsaw, the PO wins the overall majority of votes, locking in almost 52% of the vote!

It seems that, looking solely at the figures, the PO will not have to worry much about future elections, as more and more people leave the countryside to settle down in the city. However, even though living standards have greatly improved in the cities, it would remain foolish to assume that this will be a self-fulfilling prophecy. People in the city tend to be more open-minded and less conservative, and do not buy into Kaczyński's scare tactics of evil Germans and Russians, mostly because they interact more often with their European counterparts than those in the countryside do. However, should RP be able to consolidate its position and abandon its fixation on Palikot, one might see problems arising for Tusk's party, as the urban population, especially those aged 18–40, tend to look for more radical measures to improve their living standards, better employment (a particular problem for the youngest group of voters) and career advances.

The Better-Educated Give Their Vote to the PO

However, part of the success of the Civic Platform in cities can be attributed to the bigger accumulation of people with higher education diplomas. Whereas the party is supported very strongly by those with at least a secondary or post-secondary education,

often holding a university degree or even a higher one, the PiS gathered many votes from those with vocational training or only a primary education. The typical Civic Platform voter has at least a secondary or post-secondary qualification or university diploma (among those groups the PO secured more than 40% of the vote) and thus tends to be rather intellectual, whereas people with only a primary education hardly register among the party's supporters (only close to 4%). This is not to say that the PiS cannot compete with the PO in this regard; however, even though it secured around 40% of the vote in the group having a secondary or post-secondary qualification, it falls short among those with a bachelor's degree (26%). The assumption that the Civic Platform is thus more attractive to the more intellectual part of the Polish population holds true. However, the party will have to ensure that it does not disappoint its supporters, as especially RP might potentially offer a somewhat plausible alternative to many dissatisfied PO voters.

POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF THE 2011 ELECTIONS

The continuation of the PO–PSL coalition government is good news for Poland's European partners. The government, led by the harmonious Tusk/Pawlak duo, has been a reliable and somewhat predictable partner. European leaders will therefore be relieved to be spared additional trouble, something that a government change would certainly have entailed.

On the one hand a continuation of the coalition will mean that Poland will continue to push for further integration in the EU. It will try to keep enlargement on the EU's permanent agenda, especially with regard to its eastern neighbours, Belarus and Ukraine. Its commitment to joining the common currency and its enthusiasm for a common European defence policy will continue to drive forward closer cooperation and integration, most probably on a regional level first. On the other hand this will also mean that the government, which claimed to be able to secure a large share of EU funding for the country, will fight stubbornly to secure as much funding as possible, potentially to the detriment of its neighbours, which might result in less harmonious relations, especially with the Czech Republic and Hungary. However, also more geographically distant partners, such as Greece, Spain or France, all of which receive large amounts of EU funding under the CAP framework, might clash with Warsaw. Similarly, because of its very pro-integration position, Poland might increasingly find itself at odds with other member states: this could be the case most prominently with the UK, but also Berlin or Paris might object.

However, despite its clear victory at the ballot box, domestic trouble might be looming on the horizon for the Civic Platform. Many of the government's previous efforts to reform the country have been only half-heartedly undertaken and rather limited in scope, whereas the potentially critical reforms of the pension and health care system still need to be tackled. The country's budget, predicted to be balanced by 2015, will also need attention, while further reforms on the labour market and the tax system will have to be addressed soon, too. With a second term in office secured, it might be the right time for the coalition to move ahead and undertake those reforms in the first half of its

four-year tenure, otherwise parties like Palikot's Movement will be able to gather even more support, and then potentially to the detriment of the Civic Platform.

One last word on the success of Palikot's Movement. Even though it might suggest that the country is increasingly shifting towards a more secular position, one should not exaggerate matters and believe that this is the first step towards the demise of the Church in Poland. The programme is certainly anti-clerical in nature; however, it offered many proposals that could be found also with the SLD. Therefore, it seems unlikely that it was solely this that explains the success of the party. More likely two other factors have contributed to its good result: the charm of Mr Palikot and its message of radical protest against the establishment. Whereas the latter certainly includes a variety of protest elements, such as support for in-vitro fertilisation and a liberalisation of the abortion law (both clearly directed against the Church in Poland), legalisation of soft drugs (an issue that certainly went down well with the youngest electoral group) and support for gays, lesbians and transsexuals (which gathered support from those groups and parts of the more cosmopolitan and open-minded electorate), the former ensured the support of those former PO voters that backed Palikot during his time with the Civic Platform.

The conclusion that the country is becoming more secular, though, seems to hold true, as the influence of the Catholic Church and especially controversial figures, such as Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, founder of the ultra-conservative Radio Maryja station, seems to have diminished in the past few years. Whereas Rydzyk and other hardcore conservative priests and bishops were successfully "conducting" election campaigns for Law and Justice in 2005, and to some extent in 2007, by advising their congregations to support the more conservative parties, their impact on voters seems to have weakened in the last four years. This might be in part explained by the fall-out between Kaczyński and Rydzyk after the unsuccessful tripartite coalition government in 2005–2007, but it seems more likely that most voters have begun to suspect that the Church's radical conservatism does not serve the country, and thus themselves, well.

To conclude, the election has bolstered the pro-European forces in Poland, whilst dealing a severe defeat to the more national-minded conservative parties. Voters have decided that the country is on a good path and the government should continue its work; however, the results also indicate that not all voters, especially among the youngest group of first-time voters, are happy with the achievements and character of present-day Poland. A more progressive, somewhat more cosmopolitan state seems to be the goal of especially those younger groups of voters, whereas the older and better educated, often highly qualified, majority of people seems to be content with a more incremental modernisation of the country. The latter development will thereby certainly ensure that the country will not be rocked through dramatic developments; however, it also means that potential for other parties, building on the discontent of those dissatisfied with slow progress, exists. This is essentially what will decide the future of the election's surprise success RP and a possible third term for the Civic Platform.

The author is a freelance research intern at the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs.