

# Growing criticism of the EU in Poland after the re-election of Tusk

By Clara Weiss  
20 March 2017

Leading representatives of the ruling party Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland and many Polish media outlets have reacted with outrage at the re-election of Donald Tusk as president of the European Council at the EU summit on March 9.

For months, the PiS-government had tried to prevent Tusk's reelection. Tusk led neo-liberal opposition party Civic Platform (PO) from 2003 to 2014 and was the Polish prime minister from 2007 to 2014. Last year, PiS even began legal actions against Tusk. One day before the EU summit, the current Polish Prime Minister, Beata Szydło, published an open letter calling for the replacement of Tusk.

At the EU summit Poland was the only country to vote against the re-election of Tusk. In order to prevent his election, the Polish government advanced a rival candidate, Jacek Saryusz-Wolski. However, with the votes of all other 27 EU member states, Tusk's presidency of the EU council was prolonged until the end of 2019.

The opposition of the PiS-government to Tusk is rooted in differences about both domestic and foreign policy. Even though Tusk gave up his position as head of PO when he moved to Brussels in 2014, he is still regarded as its informal leader. PO is now the largest opposition party in Poland and involved in a bitter conflict with the PiS-government, which peaked last December with an opposition-led blockade of the Polish parliament (Sejm).

The EU supports the PO's criticism of the authoritarian measures of the PiS-government, especially the latter's de facto stripping of power from the constitutional court, and has even threatened Poland with sanctions.

At a press conference in February, the head of PiS, Jarosław Kaczyński, accused Tusk of violating the

“basic principles of the European Union”. According to Kaczyński, Tusk is violating the principle of neutrality and even “goes so far as support an opposition that calls itself totalitarian and seeks to overthrow the government by extra-parliamentary means.”

In foreign policy, PiS is oriented primarily toward the United States, whereas PO is advocating close collaboration with the EU and particularly Germany. The Polish government has repeatedly described Tusk as a “German candidate.”

In his first term as president of the European Council, Tusk has supported the line of German Chancellor Angela Merkel in basically every question. In an article from last year, the journal *Politico* cited an advisor to the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) as follows: “You can trust him, he is reliable, he can keep secrets to himself. Everyone knows that Merkel desperately needs Tusk to keep the Eastern European countries quiet and under control. She will never let him fall.”

The so called Visegrad countries—Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic—which usually ally in the EU against Berlin, were split over the election of Tusk. Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic declared their support for Tusk early on.

According to media reports, the right-wing Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, whose party maintains friendly relations with PiS, had tried for some time to find a compromise with Poland on the issue, but apparently to no avail.

The election of Donald Trump as US president has escalated the conflicts within the Polish bourgeoisie, which finds itself in a dilemma. While it has worked closely with the US in restoring capitalism in 1989 and the military build-up against Russia, the Polish bourgeoisie is also dependent on the EU and especially

Germany, which is by far Poland's most important trading partner.

The Trump presidency has dramatically sharpened the conflict between the US and the EU and Germany. At the same time, it is not clear to what extent Warsaw will be able to rely on the support of Washington in foreign policy matters in the future. Under these conditions, tensions in Warsaw about foreign policy are running high.

Remarkably, right after the inauguration of Trump in January the PiS-government undertook an effort to improve its strained relations with Berlin. During Merkel's visit to Warsaw in February, both sides tried to downplay the sharp conflicts of the past one and a half years.

Regardless of these efforts, however, there still remain fundamental differences between the PiS-government, which fears a German dominance of Europe and Berlin. One moot point between PO and PiS was that the former had, like Berlin, advocated a "hard Brexit." By contrast, PiS has been trying to strengthen Polish-British ties.

For these reasons, Polish politicians reacted with anger and outrage to the re-election of Tusk and regard it as a turning point in relations between Poland and the EU.

Thus, Polish defense minister Witold Waszczykowski said in an interview with the Polish *Sunday Express*, Tusk had been elected because of "dictates from Berlin." Now Poland had to expect an "enormous wave of blackmail and pressure" and "a coalition against Poland".

He threatened that Poland would now pursue a more independent policy within the EU. In his words, Warsaw had "to dramatically lower its level of trust in the EU" and start blocking initiatives of other member states. At the same time, Waszczykowski rejected the idea of Poland leaving the EU as "nonsense..We are in the Union. We are still part of the game."

While media outlets close to the liberal opposition such as the *Newsweek Polska* greeted the re-election of Tusk as a "defeat for Kaczyński", the conservative *Rzeczpospolita* published a commentary under the title "The ugly face of the union". The commentator of the influential newspaper assessed the election of Tusk as a deliberate "humiliation" of Poland and concludes: "We often hear that the European Union is one big family.

Perhaps it is, but above all a dysfunctional one."

The Polish president Andrzej Duda congratulated Tusk on his election only after 24 hours—an unusually long period of time.

In a press conference after the summit, prime minister Szydło openly attacked Germany and France. She declared that the election of Tusk marked a "sad day" and was in violation of EU principles. She demanded that the rules for the election of the president of the European Council be changed so that no candidate could be elected without the approval of his or her own country.

Then, Szydło attacked the concept of a "Two-speed Europe" propagated by Paris and Berlin and called for strengthening the rights of national parliaments within the EU. The PiS government is particularly opposed to the building of an EU army, a plan pursued by Berlin, and a "hard Brexit."

The fierce reactions in Poland against the re-election of Tusk are yet another symptom of the crisis of the EU which is disintegrating under the pressure of deep economic crisis and growing national tensions.

In a commentary, the German newspaper *Die Welt* warned that Poland would "take a bitter revenge for its defeat." The issue, so the newspaper said, would have far-reaching consequences for Poland and the European Union. "Poland is of enormous significance for European cooperation. And Warsaw has means to pressure the European Union—as a veto power."

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