

# **Stability in Instability**

## **The Situation in Poland Six Months after the Parliamentary Elections**

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### Executive Summary

Five months after its inauguration, the conservative minority government headed by Mr Marcinkiewicz appears to have made hardly any progress. Nevertheless, about 70 percent of the Polish population regard the prime minister as the country's most trustworthy politician. In the Sejm at Warsaw, his Right and Homeland Party (PiS) has so far been supported by the two nationalist parties, Self-Defence (Sam) and League of Polish Families (LPR), joined occasionally by the rural National Party (PSL).

As expected, the government of the left was voted out of office in the elections of September 2005. The performance of the PiS, the strongest party at 27 percent, came as a surprise, while the liberal-conservative Civic Platform (PO) obtained no more than 24 percent. The PiS now holds 155 of the 460 seats in the Polish parliament, the Sam party holds 56, the LPR 34, and the PSL 25. The election result supported a strong social-paternalist state as well as the ongoing struggle against post-communism.

Naturally enough, when a new president was elected one month after the general election, the candidate of the PiS, Lech Kaczynski, won against the candidate of the PO, Donald Tusk. From the beginning, Mr Kaczynski's party proved itself a stumbling block in the negotiations about forming a grand coalition. Having won the elections, the PiS thought there was no need for it to negotiate on an equal footing with a PO frustrated by defeat. The latter, in turn, refused to submit to the role of junior partner. In addition, the two parties diverged considerably on issues of substance in economic and social policy as well as elsewhere. Consequently, the talks failed, and the PiS formed a minority government.

The human resources of the PiS were not really up to staffing an entire government, so that the prime minister was constrained to include experts from outside. He did this not only to extend his own power base but also to weaken the position of the PO, which meanwhile concentrates entirely on its opposition role. Conscious of the problems raised by governing

with the support of fluctuating majorities, the PiS conducted sounding talks with all parties except the SLD when the time of the budget debate came round. With a view to forming a government coalition in the future, the PiS, the Sam, and the LPR concluded a stabilization pact in February 2006 which was euphorically hailed by Jaroslaw Kaczynski as the beginning of the 'fourth republic'.

However, quarrels and crisis meetings soon showed how fragile the pact was, and how unreliable its populist partners were. On March 21, the head of the LPR, Mr Giertych, announced the end of cooperation, raising the question of renewed elections.

Opinion polls show that, if this were to happen, the PiS and the PO would obtain 33 to 40 and 29 to 35 percent of the vote, respectively, while the Sam and the SLD could look forward to seven to ten percent. For the time being, however, we may expect the PiS to maintain the status quo until autumn. Until then, it will staff all major power centres with its representatives and go on pursuing its goal of implementing its projects in domestic and legal policy, fighting corruption and crime, and purging the state of post-communist elements. If this strategy should fail, the only alternative remaining to new elections would be a grand coalition with the PO.

Within the PiS, Mr Marcinkiewicz has been labouring pragmatically and deftly to make himself a stellar attraction whose popularity outshines even the president's. Even so, he did not follow up on his promise to launch a moral transformation: No decisions were made, and no concrete plans were developed.

The only option left to the PO is to sharpen its profile in opposition, and to turn the weak points of the PiS to its own advantage without, however, allowing the option of further talks with the PiS to lapse. Should the minority government fail, this option might assume considerable importance. The party is still smarting from the shock of its election defeat, and its current leader, Mr Tusk, whose candidacy for reelection is still an open question, has his work cut out trying to control the fermentation process within the party.

In the German media, the PiS is labelled a populist party. Similarly, Adam Michnik, a Polish journalist with leftist liberal leanings, argued in 2004 that after 15 years of transformation, Poland was confronted by a 'grand offensive of populist opinions and deeds'. At the same time, he did not include either the PiS or the PO among the populist parties because they 'merely use populist language'.

In Mr Michnik's opinion, Sam, the party of Andrzej Lepper, a rabid peasant leader with a criminal record, is the party that bridges all political rifts in Poland. Its platform is a blend of economic protectionism and nationalism with more than occasional splatterings of anti-Semitism, and it panders to a clientele that is rural, agricultural, nationalist, rightist, and paternalist, with occasional clerical overtones. At the moment, the party controls between seven and eleven percent of the vote.

Having evolved from national and Catholic groups, the LPR is a product of the protest movement against Poland's membership in the EU. Intellectually rooted in a kind of nationalism characterized by social conservatism and clerical Catholicism, the party's position is close to that of the clientele of Radio Maryja. Maciej Giertych, its founder, has meanwhile been replaced by his son, Roman Giertych, in the position of chairman. The LPR, which also cultivates anti-German resentments, aims for a homogeneous state based on Polish Catholicism. At the moment, the party controls nearly five percent of the vote.

According to the Polish constitution, the president represents the state in foreign relations, cooperating closely with the prime minister and the foreign secretary. As things stand now, the major impulses in Polish foreign policy will probably be provided by the Kaczynski brothers, intermingled with occasional dissenting overtones supplied by prime minister Marcinkiewicz and foreign secretary Meller. Under the Kaczynski brothers, we may expect certain Polish interests to be articulated more incisively on the European stage, all the more so as the country's foreign policy currently appears as a product of international inexperience, national

self-confidence, and subliminal pretensions. Both the constitutional treaty of the EU and the enlargement of the political union are rejected out of hand. Instead, the intention is to maintain the country's sovereignty in a 'solidary Europe of nations'.

Germany is regarded with extreme suspicion, especially because of German-Russian relations and/or Germany's 'behaviour' within the EU. There is no intention to enhance the level of reconciliation and rapprochement reached in the '90s; instead, relations are becoming as mistrustful as they ever were. Kaczynski's recent visit to Berlin speaks for itself: There was no appreciation of the former receptiveness, and no perspective of future cooperation and partnership emerged.

Suspicion similarly dominates the country's relations with Russia, whose hegemonial policy and undemocratic development are seen as a threat. Instead, priority is given to transatlantic relations. Hopeful signs are few and far between in Poland's budget. Once again, the country is about to overstep the European deficit mark of three percent of the GDP. Disregarding the opposition's proposals to economize, the PiS is stepping up government expenditure. Introducing the Euro is not a matter of urgency; as the government says, quickly joining the Euro-zone would run counter to Poland's interests. Plans for the re-nationalization of banks and insurances, tax reforms, and other things may cost as much as 18 billion Euros, which the government simply does not have. In view of all this, observers fear that Poland might be massively damaged as a business location, which the country can ill afford in view of its problems, such as lack of innovation, corruption, unemployment, and labour migration.

Adam Krzeminski, a Polish journalist, says that the country has undergone a 'tectonic shift' towards the right. To a certain extent, he is correct. But how will the country fare in the future, given that it is undoubtedly in a critical situation at the moment? A turnout of no more than 40 percent at the last elections, widespread doubts about the efficiency of elections as such, and growing political resignation are indeed sufficient reasons for concern. The expectations are still alive that were raised by the proclamation of the 'fourth republic', meaning a fundamental reform of the third republic and the abolition of post-communism and its cronyism. Should these hopes be disappointed, democracy in Poland will be threatened by delegitimization and degradation. From the way in which both the PiS and the PO behave at the moment, it appears doubtful whether they are aware of the urgency of the situation.