



## **WHO GOVERN EUROPE? POLAND**



### **POLISH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2011** **BRIEFING**

The Republic of Poland operates under a bicameral multiparty parliamentary system. The two houses of the Polish legislature, known as the National Assembly, are the Sejm and the Senat. The Sejm is the lower house of the National Assembly and is comprised of 460 Deputies elected to 4 year terms. Deputies are elected based on proportional representation, in which parties win seats based on the total votes for their candidates in a constituency. Moreover, there is a threshold of participation for the distribution of seats and in order to win seats a party list must win at least 5% of the vote, while a coalition party list must win 8% of the total vote. Like the Sejm, members of the Senat are elected to 4 year terms. This upper house, however, is comprised of 100 senators who are directly elected on a provincial basis. All Polish citizens 18 years or older are afforded the right to vote, however not all Poles decide to exercise this right. In the 2007 Parliamentary elections, 53.88% of Poles came out to vote, while in 2005, only 40.57% of Polish citizens voted. Based on recent data compiled by TNS OBOP, 34% of Poles claim they are definitely voting in the October election, 29% are probably voting and 26% claimed they are definitely not voting. The remaining 11% is undecided whether they are going to vote or not.

Like many other European nations, Poland has a dual executive. The Prime Minister serves as the head of government and is appointed by the President, although the President usually delegates this task to the party or coalition with a majority of seats in the National Assembly. The Prime Minister runs the government with a handpicked Council of Ministers that is approved by the Sejm. Unlike the Prime Minister, the Polish President is elected by popular vote and serves a five year term, acting as head of state and commander and chief of the armed forces. Another major responsibility of the President is the calling of elections and it is the President's duty to decide when, within the four year parliamentary term limit, an election is to be held. This year has seen considerable controversy over when the upcoming elections should be held, stemming from Poland's occupancy of the European Union presidency in the second



half of the year. Opposition parties, mainly the Law and Justice Party (PiS), argued that an autumn election would distract the government from its presidency of the European Union. The ruling Civic Platform Party (PO) argued against this position, and ultimately, the President sided with the Civic Platform Party.

Since October 2007, Donald Tusk has been Poland's Prime Minister, having won an early election that was called after former Prime Minister, Jaroslaw Kaczyński, dissolved his coalition between PiS and the Samoobrona and the League of Polish Families (LPR). Tusk ran as the pro-Europe candidate, promising to improve relations with countries in the European Union, Germany in particular. Subsequently, Kaczyński lost the reelection bid in 2007 to Donald Tusk. In order to take office, Tusk formed a coalition between his Civic Platform Party and the Polish Peasants Party. The new coalition government has served a full term of four years, a rarity in Polish politics, although during this time there have been serious scandals and crises. In 2009, three of Tusk's high ranking government officials resigned after they were accused of accepting bribes from Polish casino owners, which obviously caused embarrassment to the Prime Minister. Then on April 10, 2010, the Polish President, Lech Kaczyński (the twin brother of Jaroslaw), and dozens of the country's top political and military leaders died in a tragic plane crash in Russia. A Russian report attributed blame for the accident to the Polish pilots who decided to land in unsafe conditions despite warnings from crew members at the Russian airport.

During his four years as Prime Minister, Tusk has improved relations with both Germany and Russia and has also made promising cultural reforms by allocating more funds to projects, such as a new Shakespeare theatre, through the Pact for Culture. As far as economic reform, in 2011 alone Tusk was able to lower the budget deficit by zł.10 billion and boasts significant improvements in communities through infrastructure projects like new motorways. The opposition, however, claims that Tusk has done nothing but lead Poland into stagnation. To combat this claim, Tusk has adopted the election campaign slogan, "Poland under construction", which he hopes will convey the message that change is occurring in Poland, albeit slowly. His



vision for the future of Poland deals mainly with modernization and if reelected, Tusk claims that he will modernise all aspects of Polish life including the economy, infrastructure, education, culture, and social policy. In doing so, he hopes to make Poland a stronger player within Europe. The main opposition party is the Law and Justice Party (PiS). Led by Jaroslaw Kaczyński, the conservative PiS is campaigning under the slogan, "Poles deserve more". Kaczyński promised to provide more justice, truth, integrity, security, and wiser management of funds than the current administration has. His campaign is focusing on three main topics: the economy, education, and health care. As an outspoken anti-communist, however, Kaczyński has also been openly critical of Tusks foreign policy and he sees the West as Poland's most valuable allies, not Russia or Germany. Kaczyński expressed this view in a 2011 article written in the *Gazeta Wyborcza*, in which he said:

*"The current government is unable to recognize the threats to Poland's existence as a nation: none of our big neighbors, meaning Russia and Germany, have resigned from their expansive foreign policies, in fact after the year 2000, they have both intensified such policies and redefined them...but under Donald Tusk, Polish national interests have dissolved in EU and NATO membership and in the blissful illusion that the current status quo is permanent."*

If elected, Kaczyński promised not to raise taxes and has proposed amending constitutional law in order to allocate five seats in the Senat for representatives of citizens living abroad. Currently, it seems unlikely that the Law and Justice Party will be able to win a majority of seats in the National Assembly. Based on a survey released in September by TNS OBOP, 46% of Polish citizens intend to vote for the Civic Platform Party, with this poll showing minimal change from the previous TNS OBOP poll taken in August. Although some recent polls have suggested that this gap may be closing, it is generally held that Tusk is likely to win reelection, albeit narrowly. Even if the PO were to finish second, the lack of suitable coalition partners for the PiS would in all probability see Tusk able to manage to muster a majority over them anyway.

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