Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Poland presidential elections to overshadow its EU-presidency

Pro-European Poland has taken over the presidency of the Council of the European Union from enfant terrible Hungary in what must surely be a relief to many European politicians and officials.

But rather than the effect of this scheduled rotation on Europe, it's the impact on domestic Polish politics that will likely prove most important.

Presidential elections scheduled for May will help shape the political future of the country for the next couple of years, including its relations with Brussels, Berlin and Kyiv, as well as domestic questions such as judicial independence and the rule of law.

Prime Minister Donald Tusk and his centre-right Civic Coalition-led government in 2023 barely managed to take over after eight years of hard-right Law and Justice, PiS, rule.

His coalition faces pushback from the PiS-appointed part of the judiciary and, crucially, from PiS president Andrzej Duda who is still in place but cannot run again.

The presidency of the European Council will present Tusk both with opportunities and pitfalls in the run-up to the crucial presidential elections. While it can be good for him to be seen to take a positive role on the European stage, he'll keep an eye on Polish domestic concerns that can prove controversial in Europe, particularly immigration, trade with Ukraine and the sensitive matter of relations with Germany.

Focus on security

It was therefore not surprising to see the Polish presidency start out with a strong focus on the domestically relatively uncontroversial issue of European security. In his statement on Poland taking over the presidency Tusk called security his "top priority."

"We will do everything to ensure that Europe's security is a reality, not just an aspiration," he said. Yet, this is easier said than done, as many European economies are stagnating and money for additional investment in defence is currently in short supply.

> Poland would like all of Eastern Europe to be better prepared for Russian aggression

When Tusk, along with his Greek counterpart Kyriakos Mitsotakis, last year proposed an EU-air defence system, he was quietly shut down by Germany, which is leading a similar NATO-based initiative.

Poland would like all of Eastern Europe to be better prepared for Russian aggression and has itself launched a €2.35 billion scheme to beef up its border with Belarus and the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad called East Shield, or mockingly by critics, Poland's Maginot line.

Strong action against migrants

East Shield also allows Tusk to claim he is taking strong action against migrants, as it will help prevent streams from Russia via Belarus, which he has called part of Russia's hybrid war against Europe.

The migration issue is intensely political in Poland, as it is throughout Europe, with very strong sentiment running against not only asylum seekers but now also increasingly against Ukrainian migrants.

It is one of the fields in which Tusk's domestic pre-occupations can run afoul of European politics. Violent pushbacks of migrants on the Belarus border have received criticism, yet Tusk managed to bring EU leaders on board when he proposed temporarily suspending the right to apply for asylum in Poland in response to the refugee crisis created by 'a state actor'.

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Many Poles' tolerance for accepting more Ukrainian refugees also seems to be on the wane, dipping last year to only 50 percent support. Particularly the presence of men of military age among the almost one million refugees in the country, is becoming controversial.

Poland is still the strongest supporter of Ukraine within the EU, at least in terms of accepting refugees and providing military support, but the same does not go for trade, particularly in agricultural goods, which can play a role in the presidential elections.

Historical sensitivities

Tusk has failed to lift a Polish ban on the import of Ukrainian grain, instated by the previous government, which goes against EU policy. Significantly, in his statement on taking over the Council presidency, Tusk mentioned supporting Ukrainian security but left out any mention of the country's EU-accession talks that started last year.

His defence minister, Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, a few months ago even raised a major question mark over Ukraine's eventual membership, saying Poland would block it unless Kyiv cooperates on exhuming the victims of the WWII Volhynia massacre of Poles by Ukrainian nationalists.

Such historical sensitivities also play a role in relations with Germany. The previous PiS government made demands for German compensation for damage to Poland during WWII. When Tusk said in July that Poland had given up on such reparation payments, he was slammed by President Duda.

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It further plays into a perception, encouraged by the PiS, that Tusk is too pro-German, which can damage his party's candidate during the May elections.

Tusk's need to navigate such domestic political issues while presiding over the Council of the European Union might make for a less wholehearted break from Hungary's presidency than might have been hoped for.

On the other hand, he's a consummate European politician, a committed supporter of Ukraine and critic of Putin's Russia, in sharp contrast to Hungary's Viktor Orban, who opened his country's presidency with a solo diplomatic mission, even meeting with Putin.

But even Orban's contrarian and disruptive antics failed to significantly affect the EU's political agenda, let alone the day-to-day running of the bloc's political machinery, underscoring the relative lack of importance of the role nowadays.

US influence on Polish elections

One issue that might well crop up in the run-up to the presidential elections and that has a lateral connection to the EU, is Donald Trump taking over in the US.

On the face of it, Trump should be well-disposed towards Poland and Tusk, as the prime minister is raising the country's defence spending even further, from 4.2 percent of GDP last year, to 4.7 percent this year, chiming well with Trump's desire to see Europe pay its own way on defence.

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Yet, Tusk is pro-European and used to be one of the faces of the EU when Trump was last in power. The two appear to have had a contentious relationship, although Trump never singled out Tusk for criticism.

Relations between Trump and the current president, Duda, appear to be far more cordial and many in Poland might bet that a future PiS president is more likely to stay on the American president's good side.

But when it comes to US influence on Polish elections, Elon Musk could be a more significant presence. Last year he criticised a ban on the display of crosses in public buildings introduced by Warsaw's liberal mayor, Rafał Trzaskowski. Now, Trzaskowski is Civic Coalition's presidential candidate.