

Donald Tusk's Presidency of the European Council will present as many challenges for Poland as opportunities

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Poland's former Prime Minister Donald Tusk will become the new President of the European Council on 1 December. [Krzysztof Śliwiński](#) writes on the effect Tusk's Presidency will have on Poland, particularly in the areas of foreign and security policy. He notes that the country may need to moderate its stance toward Russia over the Ukraine crisis and that Tusk's performance could play a role in Poland's upcoming parliamentary elections in 2015.



The choice of Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk – the leader and founder of the country's [Civic Platform](#) party – for the post of the President of the European Council has been heralded as significant for both Poland and the European Union. Despite initial [opposition](#) from British Prime Minister David Cameron, as well as Europe's centre-left, EU leaders finally agreed to unanimously back his candidacy.

Several commentators have emphasised that the choice of Tusk reflected recognition of his skill as a politician. To govern Poland for four years and win re-election speaks for itself, and Tusk is, in fact, the longest serving Prime Minister in the history of Poland's Third Republic. However by the same token support was given to Tusk on the basis of his nationality. Ten years after joining the EU, Poland has undoubtedly begun to play a more prominent role in European politics, especially vis-à-vis Russia.

Moreover, as the biggest of all the ex-Communist states in Central and Eastern Europe, the country in some senses represents the whole of the region amid new challenges. It seems an apt moment, then, to take a closer look at the future challenges and opportunities that Polish foreign and security policies are likely to face following Tusk's appointment.

Poland's global challenges

On the face of it, this recognition should translate into more visibility for the country in global politics. After all, Tusk is now one of the faces of the European Union in international relations. Alongside the President of the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the President of the European Council personifies the European Union.

Formally, the nationality of the President should be irrelevant, yet the experience of his Belgian predecessor, Herman Van Rompuy, has shown that the role can help shine a light on smaller European countries in global affairs. Regardless of the Treaty framework's stipulations, the word 'Polish' will inevitably be attached to Tusk throughout his duties, inevitably raising the country's wider profile.

On the other hand, as some commentators in Poland – particularly those critical of Tusk and Civic Platform – have noted, the high profile of the post will also generate high expectations. Tusk's role in the limelight will focus attention on his mistakes, as much as his successes. Additionally, given that geopolitical issues are once again back on the agenda in the Kremlin, the EU's policies toward Russia will now bear a Polish imprint, informally or otherwise.

Regional challenges

At the regional level, it might be anticipated that Tusk's role will present numerous opportunities for Poland in the context of European politics. Among the many challenges the EU faces, three stand out: the crisis in Ukraine, the on-going economic problems in the Eurozone, and the UK question.

On the first issue, Poland has something of a reputation in western capitals as a 'hawk'. Poland's former Foreign Minister, [Radek Sikorski](#), was highly active in both attempts to [resolve](#) the [Euromaidan](#) conflict and to build support for the new government in Kyiv. He was also one of the architects of the [Eastern Partnership](#). For the time being, the sanctions implemented against Russia have appeared rather limited and ineffective, but this might change in the medium to long-term, particularly given the state of the Russian economy.

To a large extent, Poland's influence over the EU's position toward Russia in this context will depend on the skills of Polish diplomats. [Pragmatism](#) will be of paramount importance. The new government, headed by [Ewa Kopacz](#) with [Grzegorz Schetyna](#) as Minister of Foreign Affairs, has already appeared less emotional and more focused on domestic politics with a view to the country's upcoming elections in 2015.



Donald Tusk, Credit: European People's Party (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Such pragmatism will be vital given that many western EU members have extended economic interests with Russia, while some eastern members still have an element of dependency on Russia due to their Communist economic legacy. Unless Poland is able to persuade its EU partners that it can play the role of a competent and level-headed intermediary, there will be no consensus around giving Warsaw a leading role in shaping the EU's relations with Russia.

This role is crucial from Poland's perspective, as one of the traditional vectors in Polish foreign and security policy in the post-Communist period has been to serve as a 'bridge' between Russia and Western Europe. Perhaps some indication that France and Germany may be thinking along similar lines is the possible reactivation of the almost forgotten '[Weimar Triangle](#)' – the trilateral relationship between France, Germany and Poland which was originally established in 1991.

Unfortunately, however, for the time being it appears that there is still a fair degree of 'hot headedness' in Warsaw. The latest visit of the Polish President, [Bronisław Komorowski](#), to the 69th session of the UN General Assembly last month is a case in point. While in his [speech](#) the President only indicated a need to reform the Security Council, in an [interview](#) given to the New York Times a week ahead of his statement, he allegedly indicated that Russia's veto power should be limited.

If genuine, such a proposal would not only be naïve, but also counterproductive. It would be impossible for Poland to act as a 'bridge' between Russia and the EU if it also engaged in [strategic cooperation](#) on this level with the United States. By indulging in a distinctively 'hawkish' approach toward Russia, Poland therefore risks alienating its allies in the West. This could render its approach ineffective – or worse still, irrelevant. Under these circumstances, one might expect to see a gradual softening of the Polish position vis-à-vis Moscow.

Domestic challenges

Following Tusk's appointment, some commentators (including former President [Lech Wałęsa](#)) noted that the new President of the European Council and Poland itself might become a scapegoat – bearing symbolic responsibility for the anti-Russian rhetoric and policies of the EU. The next general election, which is due in October 2015, is [likely](#) to be contested between the two major parties: Tusk's Civic Platform and [Law and Justice](#).

The latter, which has a slight lead in the polls, is generally perceived in negative terms by the liberal part of society,

as well as many governments in Western Europe. Its staunch conservatism may, as in the past, steer Polish foreign policy into sentimental waters, further complicating the country's relationship with Russia and potentially affecting the recent progress in Polish-German relations.

Should Civic Platform win the elections for a third time in succession, it would most likely reflect support for the pro-European and relatively liberal propensities in Polish domestic politics and, by extension, foreign policy. It cannot be ignored that Civic Platform generates significant criticism among traditional liberal supporters within Poland. Yet the continuation of Tusk's course under Ewa Kopacz will almost certainly be seen as a positive development outside of the country.

After all, while many Poles would prefer not to acknowledge it, the Polish experience is now widely cited by political and economic experts alike as one of the foremost examples of a successful transition, which has produced a broadly stable political system and a productive economy.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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