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THE BATTLE CONTINUES: POLISH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION ANALYSIS

With almost all electoral districts declared in Poland's Presidential elections, the candidate of the Civic Platform (PO) Bronislaw Komorowski has failed to secure a first round victory, scoring approximately 41% of the vote. However Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the Law and Justice (PiS) has obtained a respectable second place with 37% of the vote. Third place is taken by the leader of the post-communist SLD (Democratic Left Alliance) Grzegorz Napieralski, with approximately 14% of the vote. The result means that Poland is heading for a runoff election between Komorowski and Kaczynski on Sunday July 4th.

The result will be a bitter disappointment to Komorowski and PO, which had hoped to avoid another two weeks of campaigning and facing the runoff in July, when many voters – disproportionately PO – will have left for their annual vacations, leaving behind a much more PiS inclined electorate. The result today does however have significant implications for the future of the Polish political scene, regardless of the final result on July 4th.

Firstly, the high vote for Kaczynski is a signal that Law and Justice – despite being in the doldrums for much of the period after its parliamentary defeat in 2007 – has a chance to return to the ascendancy. For Kaczynski to score as much as he did, despite not having prepared for the campaign prior to the death of his brother on April 10th, and despite being regarded as the less electable of the Kaczynski twins – and also suffering the psychological trauma of his personal loss - is a significant achievement. Even if Kaczynski fails to win in two weeks time, his vote is encouraging for PiS prior to local elections in November this year and parliamentary elections next year.

The result also cements Kaczynski's leadership within PiS after voices had been raised within the party about the need for change. Many however suspect that Jaroslaw Kaczynski has a natural electoral glass ceiling that will prevent PiS from obtaining clear electoral victory in parliamentary elections, and that this relative success is a Pyrrhic one, preventing necessary changes in the party leadership. Nonetheless, moves that had been afoot in the party to effect leadership change will now be put on the back burner, at least until the end of next year.

The vote for Grzegorz Napieralski is a significant success for the SLD leader, who at the beginning of the campaign – himself replacing Jerzy Szmajdzinski, who also died in the Smolensk disaster – had been regarded as a no-hoper. To the surprise of many, Napieralski conducted an energetic campaign and impressed during the Presidential television debate, and proved to be an attractive alternative for a significant part of the electorate of left-wing inclinations, dissatisfied with the dominance of the Polish political scene by two centre-right parties, PO and PiS. As with Kaczynski inside PiS, Napieralski's vote will stymie the voices of those calling for him to be removed as SLD leader, and the result in general will be seen as a defeat for the more social-democratic faction

represented by figures such as Ryszard Kalisz, Wojciech Olejniczak and former President Aleksander Kwasniewski.

Napieralski's performance will be especially painful for PO, who by courting the moderate left vote during the campaign (through the nomination of former SLD Prime Minister Marek Belka as head of the National Bank, and the support for Komorowski by another former SLD PM, Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz) had hoped to extend their own vote and also undercut the left. Yet Napieralski's result has generated the prospect of PO facing a challenge not only from the Right in the form of a revived PiS but also a resurgent Left, led by a young and now increasingly popular leader. Napieralski will probably never be "Poland's Zapatero", but it places him in a position of being a potential kingmaker after the next parliamentary elections if PO fails to gain an absolute and is forced to turn to the SLD as a potential coalition partner. His relatively high vote also marks a defeat for PO's tactic of co-opting leading centre-left figures into the PO project in an attempt to establish compete political hegemony in their "big tent" political project. These figures, such as Belka and Cimoszewicz, but earlier former SLD EU Commissioner Danuta Hubner, and SLD Economic Minister Jerzy Hausner, have been absorbed into the broad PO establishment – thus neutralising their own ability to operate independently – but the effect in limiting the growth of the Polish traditional Left under Napieralski has if anything been counterproductive.

The biggest loser of the election is PSL leader and Deputy Prime Minister Waldemar Pawlak, who polled a miserable 2% of the vote and was beaten into fifth place by the radical libertarian Janusz Korwin-Mikke. This result will further weaken Pawlak in the current Tusk government, where he is already sidelined and ignored in key policy decisions. He now faces the uncomfortable choice of hanging on in coalition with the PO, and facing further humiliations in government until the next elections; or taking the PSL out of government under some pretext in order to try to rebuild PSL support in opposition to the PO. Either tactic does not seem to hold out any hope for PSL recovery, and perhaps is the precursor of PSL being eliminated from parliamentary politics altogether. Pawlak will also surely face a leadership challenge in the PSL itself. It will be interesting however if Pawlak, frustrated at the PO, will call on his supporters to vote for Komorowski in the second round, or delicately suggest a vote for Kaczyński. Many predict that Pawlak's support for Komorowski will be bought off, for example, by the promise of making him parliamentary Speaker in place of Komorowski.

Now attention focuses on the second round for which Komorowski is still the favourite – but only just. Memories are strong of the 2005 Presidential election which Lech Kaczyński then won, having started the second round from a similar vote disadvantage to the then favourite Donald Tusk. Kaczyński's major disadvantage however is his high negative rating among significant parts of the electorate. Komorowski will seek to exploit this, by focussing on personality rather than policy and attempting to effect a mobilisation of the anti-Kaczyński electorate. Much will hinge on the degree to which the natural PO electorate will have left for their summer holidays on the day of the elections.

Also, Napieralski's strong showing will add a new element to the game. His voters despise both the PO and PiS, and it is unclear how they will shift. Logic would dictate that they would veer more to the PO because of PiS's strong anticommunist rhetoric. But Kaczyński has recently toned down his public anticommunism, and by stressing social policy Kaczyński may yet attract a significant part of the post-Napieralski vote. Napieralski's long-term ambition is squeeze PO from the left, and it is in his interest that the party weaken, not strengthen over time – so paradoxically, it will be in his interest to see Kaczyński, and not Komorowski, installed as President. A weakened and humiliated PO will make for much easier pickings after the next parliamentary elections, when possibly without PSL as a coalition partner, PO will have no choice but share power with the SLD – on the latter's terms.

It had been hoped by some that July 4th would represent an opportunity to re-establish stability in Polish politics after the April 10th Smolensk disaster. Instead, regardless of who wins on that day, the defeated candidate's party will face the next local and parliamentary elections knowing it must win order to maintain long-term credibility. That will in turn make the next year a very bumpy political ride.

Marek Matraszek, Warsaw, 21st June 2010