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WHY PM TUSK IS NOT RUNNING FOR PRESIDENT

By Marek Matraszek

At the end of January 2010, Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced at a press conference that he will NOT be running for the Presidency in the elections planned for the autumn of this year, despite year-long expectations that he would be the natural Civic Platform (PO) candidate. He cited the need for a steady grip on government at a time when key welfare and fiscal reforms needed to be pushed through, and contrasted the office of the Prime Minister with that of President which he characterised as largely ceremonial without real power. Poland is doing relatively well in the global economic crisis and Tusk has calculated that only he can keep the Polish ship on an even keel – and if he achieves success, then victory in the 2011 parliamentary elections will assure him of the opportunity to be Poland's first two-term Prime Minister.

Tusk's decision reflects a rational calculation that apart from running for a largely ceremonial office, departing the office of PM and PO leader would unleash too many uncontrollable forces at a time when the Civic Platform party is being battered by political scandal. The so-called gaming scandal has already led to a swathe of resignations and dismissals of key ministerial colleagues of Tusk, leading to the greatest crisis of party confidence since the PO's inception. A free-for-all and public horse-trading over the party leadership and post of Prime Minister would have been hugely distracting and effectively would have paralysed government for the whole of this coming year, and to leave the party leadership at such a time would have potentially been fatal to party unity. At the same time, during the current parliamentary investigative hearings, Tusk could not be sure that some unknown information could come to light which would fatally damage the prospects of any PO candidate – thus again increasing the risk of his personal candidacy.

The focus now turns to who the PO will nominate for the post of President. The only two credible candidates are current parliamentary Speaker Bronislaw Komorowski and current Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski. Komorowski represents the party establishment, whilst Sikorski has a more independent image, having only joined the PO from the former Law and Justice government three years ago. The formal decision on the candidate will be made by the Civic Platform party congress in the spring, and it seems likely that the candidate will emerge through an internet ballot of the PO's party membership. Many suspect that Tusk favours Sikorski, precisely because Sikorski himself has no power base in the PO and no real ambitions to take part in day to day party politics – unlike Komorowski, who Tusk may suspect would seek to represent anti-Tusk party factions. But there are arguments that cut the other way, so the choice of candidate remains evenly balanced. Whoever it is, however, will not be best pleased to have been put on notice by Tusk that his job will be lacking in any real significance.

The wild card remains the popular former Prime Minister Wlodzimierz Cimoszewicz, who may see the withdrawal of Tusk as the excuse he needs to reverse his current refusal to run, and would be

tempted to take up the challenge of representing the Left in the elections (much more efficiently than the current SLD candidate Jerzy Szmajdzinski, who remains in the polling doldrums). The really smart move of Tusk would be to offer Cimoszewicz the job of Foreign Minister to replace Sikorski if the latter is the Presidential candidate – thus disabling the SLD prior to parliamentary elections next year.

How will these changes in the Presidential race affect investors and business? Much depends on what happens whether the Civic Platform candidate – whether Sikorski or Komorowski – wins the elections. Were that to happen, then at least for a year – until the end of 2011, when parliamentary elections must occur at the latest – a window of opportunity will open up for the current Tusk government to push forward economic reform legislation safe in the knowledge that the new PO President will be supportive and not veto the new proposals, unlike current President Lech Kaczynski. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to expect a wave of pro-reform legislation in 2011; paradoxically, the fact of impending elections will act as a brake on radical reform instincts within the government. Secondly, we should never lose sight of the fact that the current government remains dependent on its majority on the Polish Peasant Party (PSL), whose reluctance to support radical reform will be even greater in an election year.

The long-term implication however is more positive, if Donald Tusk succeeds in his three part political master plan. The first goal is to secure a Presidential victory for a supportive PO candidate. The second part of the plan is for the PO to win the 2011 parliamentary elections under his leadership; and thirdly, for this victory to be a landslide one, in which the PO alone would command a parliamentary majority in parliament and therefore have a free rein to pass laws without political limitation. Such a victory would be unprecedented in Poland, due to Poland's proportional representation electoral system that makes the achievement of an overall majority more difficult than in most political systems. Today, such a victory seems possible, because of the continued health of the PO's poll figures and the seeming inability of the leading opposition Law and Justice (PiS) party to break above the 30% vote threshold. But there remain almost two years of politics ahead of us during which any number of political earthquakes and seismic shifts may yet occur.

But if such a victory does come about in 2011, it will also represent the final test of Tusk's real reform intentions. Ever since 1989, politicians have excused the fact of the failure to implement deep economic and welfare reforms on the basis of having to make compromises with coalition partners, obstructionism from a hostile President, or due to impending elections. After 2011 none of these conditions – if Tusk's plan goes accordingly – will hold, and the ability to push through much-needed changes will be the responsibility of Tusk and the PO leadership alone.

It remains to be seen, however, if even the projected landslide victory of the PO will give the party the political majority to reform the Polish constitution, which requires a two-thirds majority in the lower house of parliament to be passed. Tusk and the PO leadership especially want to water down the veto power of the Polish President, and remove the curious situation that even with a parliamentary majority, governments cannot govern fully unless they can muster 60% of parliament to reject a Presidential veto. This is immaterial if there were to be a PO president, but remains a barrier to government in the event of the Presidency being held by a political opponent. Despite much public discussion, the truth is that the basic tenets of the proposed constitutional changes by the Civic Platform are supported neither by the PSL or PiS parties and it is unclear if enough consensus can be reached to allow for a constitutional reform along the lines proposed by Tusk.

Tusk's announcement about his decision not to run for President was guided by a desire to protect the flanks of the scandalised Civic Platform in the short term, and is above all a bold attempt to entrench the power of himself and the Civic Platform in Poland in the long term. The months to

come will show whether he succeeds, and whether the concentration of power that it produces will lead to the crucial welfare and fiscal reforms that Poland so desperately needs.

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