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THE RISK REPORT BY IAN BREMMER

A boost for Poland's democracy, and the E.U.



IN POLAND, AN UNEXPECTED surge of voters ready for change has ousted a populist coalition government in favor of a pro-E.U.,

more moderate group of leaders. The Law and Justice Party, in power since 2015, won the most parliamentary seats. But its coalition partners didn't perform well enough to allow current Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski to form another government.

It's a striking win for politician Donald Tusk and his Civic Coalition. It's also great news for the European Union, which can expect a new government in Warsaw that will respect E.U. rules on democracy and rule of law. The biggest surprise on election day was a turnout estimated at 73%, the highest figure in postcommunist Poland's history. It's a result all the more striking given Kaczynski's unapologetic use of state media to boost his party's support.

Once in place, Poland's new government will work on making the changes its leaders have promised, and the E.U. has called for. In particular it will move to restore the political independence of the judiciary and media in line with E.U. rules. These reforms, in turn, will help Poland access as much as possible of the €35 billion that Poland can claim as part of the so-called Recovery and Resilience Facility, money that Brussels set aside for member states to help with pandemic recovery and the E.U.'s ambitious green- and digital-transition plans. The E.U. withheld that money from the previous government in response to its bid to bring judges and journalists under government control.

For the past several years, a populist government in Warsaw has boosted its popularity by demonizing the union, its rules on democracy, and its social policy. It has turned state-media outlets into a tool of government propaganda and stacked the country's courts with political cronies. It did all this secure in the knowledge that E.U. punishment depended on unanimous support and that its ally in



Tusk, leader of the Civic Coalition that will replace Poland's illiberal government, on election night in Warsaw

Hungary would veto any punishment. The E.U. has withheld badly needed funds to pressure Poland's government for change, but that strategy was undercut by the need to help Poland absorb Ukrainian refugees following Russia's invasion in February 2022.

IT'S NO WONDER THEN that Brussels is delighted to see Poland's voters eject that government and replace it with one that will be led by Tusk, a former head of the European Council. This political shift in Poland is especially timely for the E.U. given a recent election victory for populists in Slovakia and strong poll numbers

for populist parties in Germany, France, and Austria.

Caveats apply. President Andrzej Duda, a former Law and Justice Member of Parliament, will first invite the current ruling coalition to try to assemble a new government. That effort will fail, but it will take weeks to do so. Only then will Duda give the victorious opposition alliance its turn, meaning it's unlikely to have a

government in place before December. Even then, Kaczynski's Law and Justice Party will hold enough parliamentary seats to limit the new government's options, and both President Duda and conservative judges on Poland's top court will create obstacles too.

Finally, the new governing coalition will have internal divisions as well, particularly on social-policy questions like abortion restrictions and the political influence of the Catholic Church. The Civic Coalition must contend with both the Third Way's moderate conservatives and some

progressive hard-liners in the Left. The leaders of this new coalition will also face tough economic conditions, including low growth, high inflation, and a debt problem made more complicated by its plans to keep some of the more generous social benefits offered by the outgoing populist government.

But for Poland's winning alliance and its fans in Brussels, these are problems for another day. For now a major source of division between the E.U. and one of its biggest member states is on its way out thanks to an unexpectedly large surge of Poland's voters.

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