

# [***Donald Tusk beat Poland's populists. Now Europe is looking to him for a blueprint***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:69VT-KYP1-JBSS-S3XK-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Much of Poland's 21st-century story has been shaped by a rivalry between two men. This week, the pendulum between them swung again.

Donald Tusk, a grandee of European ***politics*** who paved a Westward-looking path for the young democracy as prime minister from 2007 to 2014, completed a remarkable return to the seat of power when he was again sworn in as leader on Wednesday.

It followed a [*victory*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/15/europe/poland-election-voting-intl/index.html)for Tusk over Law and Justice (PiS), the populist party led by Jaroslaw Kaczynski, who in the eight intervening years had undone much of Tusk's vision, turning Poland into the troublemaker of Europe and orchestrating an authoritarian transformation of the country. PiSnarrowly won the most seats but fell short of a parliamentary majority in the October vote, allowing a Tusk-led coalition to [*dump the party from office.*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/11/europe/poland-pis-confidence-vote-tusk-intl/index.html)

But the handover back to Tusk was not a tidy one. He waited two months as PiS scrambled in vain to find a coalition partner. Finally taking to the stage on Monday after winning [*parliament's backing*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/11/europe/poland-pis-confidence-vote-tusk-intl/index.html) to become prime minister, Tusk thanked "all those who trusted in this new, wonderful Poland... and decided to make this historic change."

The celebratory air was punctured, though, when Kaczynski stormed to the parliamentary podium and exclaimed to Tusk: "You are a German agent!" - a repeat of a months-long effort to paint his archnemesis as a puppet of the EU powerhouse.

It was a reminder, if any were needed, that resetting the EU's fifth-largest nation from its populist course will be a tall order.

"There will be a lot of blockades, and a lot of obstacles, on the road to a fully fledged, rule of law-based system," Piotr Buras, the head of the European Council on Foreign Relations' Warsaw office, told CNN.

But if Tusk is successful in "dePiSifying" Poland, he will create a blueprint for Europe on how to remove the long-lasting effects of populist rule.

The excitement is palpable already; Tusk's trips to Brussels since becoming Poland's leader-in-waiting have had a celebratory air, and he was [*named*](https://www.politico.eu/list/politico-28-class-of-2024/donald-tusk/) by the Politico media company this month as "The Most Powerful Person in Europe."

"He's seen as a hope for Europe, in the sense that he showed it is possible to win against populists," Buras said.

"In the current political context, that's a very powerful message - one of the few optimistic messages that came from the European capitals in the last few years."

A bold agenda to roll back PiS reforms

Tusk's return to domestic ***politics*** was greeted in Poland "with relief in some corners, and disbelief and skepticism in others," said Jacek Kucharczyk, the president of the Warsaw-based Institute of Public Affairs think tank.

"People didn't believe that he could find the energy to make a difference."

Instead, Tusk united a disparate opposition coalition and waged what he termed as a battle for Poland's soul - a campaign message that intentionally chimed with US President Joe Biden's effort to topple the world's other influential Donald.

He had a "personal ambition" too, said Buras. "This rivalry, between him and Kaczynski, has lasted for a very long time," he said. "He (wanted) to show Kaczynski that he's the only politician who is able to win against him."

Tusk won the latest battle, but Kaczynski's party is already girding for a war over the future of the Polish state. Eight years of divisive reforms to Poland's judiciary, public media, state-run companies and cultural institutions are deeply embedded; reversing them all, while also undoing a crackdown on rights for women and LGBTQ+ people, will take money, energy and savvy political maneuvering.

Tusk has promised to undo changes to Poland's reproductive rights policy that essentially outlawed all abortions in the country. He has pledged support for civil partnerships for same-sex couples, too, and will hope to convince more conservative members of his coalition to back those changes.

But other parts of his agenda will be particularly complex. "PiS has many people in key positions in Poland's structures," Buras said. Legal and political experts have long decried many of the party's changes as unconstitutional, but much of the program has been baked into Polish law and upheld by courts, so Tusk "will face a challenge," he said, adding: "How to restore a rule of law system, without violating rule of law principles?"

Tusk must also learn to navigate Andrzej Duda, the PiS-aligned Polish president whose nominally symbolic role is expected to instead become a major hurdle for the new government.

Duda, whose party faces a tough presidential election in the first half of 2025, has the power of the veto and will be under pressure from the party that campaigns on his behalf to stifle Tusk's accomplishments.

He "will most likely oppose any changes conducted through legislative means," Kucharczyk predicted.

Tusk's next major obstacle will be the courts, where PiS dramatically altered the system to give itself far greater control over appointing and removing judges.

So-called "neo-judges" - new judges appointed with the involvement of the National Council of the Judiciary, a body that PiS imbued with increased powers, to the chagrin of the EU - still sit on the country's highest courts.

"The changes were made in breach of the constitution, and (Tusk's) ruling coalition doesn't have a sufficient majority to change the constitution," said Jaroslaw Gwizdak, a former court president who quit his role in protest at PiS' changes to the judiciary.

PiS has long defended its judicialreform as a much-needed change to sweep out lingering communist influence in Poland's courts. But Gwizdak told CNN that PiS had for years focused on building an "army" of "diehard supporters in the judiciary (and) in the prosecutor's office" - an effort that will be difficult to untangle.

A vocal opposition

October's election was greeted with a rare joy in Europe; the victory of Tusk, a titan of EU ***politics*** who led the European Council from 2014 to 2019, promised to usher in a new era of cooperation between Poland and the bloc.

It could also accelerate a shifting of the balance of power eastwards from Paris and Berlin.

"He's got very big plans for Europe," Mujtaba Rahman, the managing director for Europe at the Eurasia Group, told CNN of Tusk. "Of all of his counterparts, Tusk has a bigger mandate, lots of agency and a strong pro-European vision that he's going to seek to promote."

Tusk promised on Monday that "Poland will regain its position as a leader in the European Union" during his tenure. He will be expected to secure the release of billions in funding that Brussels had blocked over Poland's changes to the rule of law.

Warsaw will be expected to continue its role as a key advocate for Ukrainian aid, a priority Tusk outlined in his maiden speech Monday. That will make him a crucial ally of the Biden administration, which is facing a battle to keep funding flowing to Ukraine at home while trying to persuade Europe to keep up its commitments.

His warmth towards Brussels will meanwhile further isolate Hungary, the authoritarian member with whom PiS had united in spats with EU leadership.

But how much scope Tusk has to play statesman could be dictated by events at home.

He will face bitter opposition from PiS, a party that will remain a formidable force in ***politics***, over his supposed subservience to Europe - a key battle line drawn during the election that has remained since. PiS is the largest single party in Poland's parliament, and its nationalist talking points that promote Catholicism, Polish traditions and sovereignty still reverberate through the country's media ecosystem.

"The opposition will be very strong," said Buras, predicting that PiS and the far-right Confederation "will try to outcompete each other when it comes to anti-European rhetoric."

Already, parting blows have been attempted. The former government's panel on Russian influence - a much-derided body that critics said was created solely to criticize Tusk's previous premiership during the campaign - recommended last month that Tusk be barred from office, [*PAP reported*](https://twitter.com/PAPinformacje/status/1729894909119779131), a conclusion that was widely anticipated and generally ignored.

And whatever Tusk's achievements, he will struggle to win the public narrative if he cannot reverse the transformations PiS made to state-owned media.

State-run networks like TVP have become essentially a government mouthpiece in recent years, in the vein of Hungary and even Russia, where the successes of the ruling party are touted ad nauseum.

TVP's "distorted and openly partisan coverage" favored PiS during October's election, according to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which monitored the vote.

Tusk pledged on the campaign trail to reset public television in just "24 hours," an impossibly ambitious promise that may come back to haunt him.

In reality, reversing a conservative, nationalistic bent that has seeped through Poland's airwaves will take time. Tusk will need to take on the PiS-created and dominated National Media Council, which was given oversight of Poland's media sector by the former government.

"(Tusk) is a very ambitious politician," Buras said, adding that few political agendas in the new year will be as complex as his.

But when making the calculation to return to Polish ***politics***, Buras said, Tusk had "reason to believe that he's the one who can rescue his own party, and also polish democracy.

"The jury is still out on how he manages to do that; there are lots of pitfalls and problems ahead of him."

Analysis by Rob Picheta, CNN

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