

How Poland's Szydlo fought the EU and lost

By **ERIC MAURICE**  

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For a while on Friday morning (10 March) her 26 partners thought she would not show up.

But Polish prime minister Beata Szydlo was just late and she joined the discussion on the future of Europe that had started without her.

She was helpful in those talks, sources said. Much more so than in recent days, when she adopted what one top EU official called an "aggressive and counter-productive approach".

On Thursday, she had fought alone and in vain against the other EU leaders to stop [the re-election of Donald Tusk](#), another Pole, as Council president.

She had even claimed that Tusk, who in the past met with opponents of her Law and Justice (PiS) party, had endeavoured to overthrow her government.

[She tried to veto the conclusions of the EU summit](#), which covered unrelated issues such as migration.

But the document was still published under the piquant title "conclusions by the president" - the very man she had tried to block.

Poland's defeat on Tusk was probably a foregone conclusion, but the way Warsaw fought the battle mystified its colleagues.

The fight began on Wednesday, when Poland's EU ambassador tried and failed to strike the Tusk vote off the summit agenda.

It continued on Thursday morning, when EU delegations learned from Polish media that Szydlo might walk out of the summit if Tusk was chosen.

She was one of the first to arrive at Tusk Tower, the nickname of the new Council building, where she met with Poland's usual EU allies - the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia - who told her she was on her own.

She also met German chancellor Angela Merkel and, separately, Swedish prime minister Stefan Loefven.

It is unclear what was said, but sources credited Merkel with persuading Szydlo not to walk out of the event.

EU officials said that even if Poland had left an empty chair, the conclusions would still have been adopted.

The Polish leader was "emotional" in her arguments that the Council should not pick someone who was not backed by their member state, sources said.

She was also "very clear" that she was following instructions from Warsaw.

But the Maltese prime minister, Joseph Muscat, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency, called a vote just 30 minutes after the summit started that Szydlo lost by 27 to one.

Tusk entered the room to applause, and a glum-faced Szydlo listened to his speech, sitting next to Hungary's Viktor Orban.

She stayed on to participate in discussions on migration, economy, and trade.

Some EU diplomats voiced sympathy for her, saying she had no option other than to do what she was told by Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the PiS party head, whom many see as Poland's de facto leader.

Kaczynski, an anti-German right-winger, sees Tusk, a centre-right liberal, as his political nemesis.

He also blames Tusk for the death of his twin brother Lech in the Smolensk air disaster in 2010, when Lech Kaczynski was president and Tusk was prime minister.

Kaczynski has a "political, ideological, and psychological problem" with Tusk, a top EU official said.

'Bitter atmosphere'

As the summit went on, Szydlo, as well as Danish prime minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen, raised a point on Russia's Nord Stream gas pipeline project, saying the European Commission should do a report on its legality.

But the atmosphere turned "quite tense", an EU diplomat said, as it became clear that she would block the conclusions.

Poland saw the veto as "a political statement" designed to say that the Council had mishandled Tusk's election by ignoring the Polish government.

At a press conference before the EU leaders' dinner, Szydlo told journalists, in a veiled reference to Germany, that the Council served a coterie of countries and that leaders did not "respect each other".

The atmosphere got worse over dinner and "almost bitter at the end of the meeting" when Szydlo still opposed the text.

"There will be some kind of paper. Let's see what it's called," one EU source told EUobserver as Thursday night dragged out and tempers flared.

'Very positive behaviour'

In the end, the president's conclusions paper was published with a equally piquant caveat.

"The European Council deliberated on the attached document. It was supported by 27 members of the European Council, but it did not gather consensus, for reasons unrelated to its substance," the document said on its first page.

Szydlo and the other leaders left the building at midnight without speaking to press.

On Friday, when she came back, she was "very positive", according to an EU official with knowledge of the discussion.

"She said that Poland was willing to accept the final version of the Rome declaration, and she had rational demands and proposals," the official noted, referring to a text on the EU's future that leaders plan to unveil in the Italian capital on 25 March.

Friday's debate was "business as usual", a source close to Poland's delegation said, adding that Poland was "committed to showing unity".

EU officials thought the Tusk row had blown over and began to feel "more optimistic" than the night before about future dialogue with Poland, sources said.


'Blackmail'

At a press conference, Tusk said he was ready to work with Warsaw and that he hoped his "Polish colleague" would accept his olive branch.

But Szydlo surprised everyone again, this time accusing French president Francois Hollande of "blackmail" over EU funds, of which Poland is one of the main beneficiaries.

"Some leaders in Europe believe that everything and anything can be bought with money and I said that is not our opinion," she said.

With difficult talks ahead on Brexit and the future of the EU, Szydlo's willingness to cooperate with other EU leaders and with Tusk after the fiasco is uncertain.

 But many in Brussels believe that the key to Polish relations lies with Kaczynski anyway.

The PiS chief met Szydlo at the airport in Warsaw with red and white roses, the colours of the Polish flag, and said she had "fought bravely".

A handful of his ministers also came to talk about "Poland's success" in laying bare what they described as German EU bullying on Tusk.

Much will depend on Kaczynski's reaction, EU sources said, but the reclusive politician rarely meets European leaders face to face.

"We have no channel for dialogue. We don't know what he thinks," a top official from Tusk's EPP party said earlier this week.



**Poland
snubbed
twice
in EU
summit
fiasco**



**EU re-
elects
Tusk,
Poland
isolated**

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**Tusk
has
'overwhelming
majority'
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EU
leaders**