



# BULLETIN

No. 46 (122) • March 23, 2010 • © PISM

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## Defeat of the French Right in Regional Elections: Consequences for President Sarkozy and French Foreign Policy

by Jakub Kumoch

*French president Nicolas Sarkozy's centre-right UMP party suffered a heavy defeat in the regional elections, a fact that lessens incumbent president's chances for re-election in 2012. Sarkozy may now focus on domestic affairs and try to rebuild his image. At the end of this period France may also limit its international activity. It will coincide with Poland's EU presidency.*

In the second round of the elections (March 21) Sarkozy's Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) was defeated in 23 out of 26 regions in France. The Left (socialists, communists and ecologists) won together 56% of the vote, thereby leading to one of the worst election defeats of the neo-Gaullist Right in history. Even in the first round (March 14) only 26% of the vote went to Sarkozy's party, which in comparison with the results of the parliamentary elections in 2007 (39.5%) meant a fall in support of more than one third. Between the two rounds an opinion poll showed that two years before the presidential elections only 36% of the French have favourable opinions about president Sarkozy.

The election campaign and accompanying opinion polls also revealed another dangerous trend for the president. Sarkozy is much less popular than his hand-picked prime minister Francois Fillon, and the majority of French people would prefer the latter to represent the Right in 2012.

**Long-term Reasons for the Defeat.** Sarkozy tried to build his popularity using three pillars. The first was a high level of activity in the foreign policy and its partial re-orientation, a move perceived as a spectacular increase in France's role in the world. The second was acceptance of some of the demands made by the extreme right-wing National Front, thereby winning over that party's electorate. The third was a change in political style: Sarkozy wanted to move away from the model of rule used by his predecessors, known as the "republican monarchy," and bring the state closer to the public.

In all of these three areas many methods can be listed. In foreign policy Sarkozy announced France's return to the military structures of NATO and managed to create the Union for the Mediterranean. At the same time he increased France's role in resolving international conflicts (in the Caucasus and Middle East), he raised the prestige of bilateral relations with individual countries (for example entering into a series of strategic partnership agreements for example with Poland) and put forward numerous initiatives to intensify Franco-German cooperation (among other things appointment of a joint Franco-German minister). In turn in European politics we can identify attempts to accelerate the process of ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon during the French presidency (VII–XII 2008), and an attempt to influence the Czech presidency shortly afterwards. France was also successful at bringing about the deployment of an EU mission to Chad and the Central African Republic in 2008–2009.

The shift in the president's party's image and a return to right-wing rhetoric was to be aided by the national debate held over the last few months regarding among other things methods of integration of Muslim minorities. It was also fuelled by France's unequivocal opposition to Turkey's membership of the EU and a disinclination towards immigration. Centre-right government also paid a special attention to security issues and battling crime.

The transformation of political style was symbolized by a certain directness of Sarkozy himself or enhancing the role of popular government figures (foreign minister Bernard Kouchner or Rama Yade,

who was human right, and later sport secretary). The president—in contrast to all of his predecessors in the times of the V Republic—has also not shied away from making his private life public.

This strategy has not brought about the desired effect in any of these three areas so far and under conditions of economic crisis even created an impact of a self-focused government.

The crisis in the Gaza Strip put on hold the process of creation of the Union for the Mediterranean, which was presented prior to the 2007 elections as one of Sarkozy's most important international projects. There was also no major development in relations with Germany. In relations with partners in Central Europe France's policy proved to be inconsistent. As opposed to the previous president, Jacques Chirac, Sarkozy made efforts for France to maintain more intensive relations with countries in the region. Nevertheless the credibility of France was to a certain extent undermined by Sarkozy's condescending attitude towards the Czech Republic's EU presidency, and also by talks held by the French government on the sale to Russia of the Mistral multi-task assault ship.

A similar inconsistency was a feature of the neo-Gaullist Right in its attempt to win over the ultra right electorate. Instead of marginalization of Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front, the debate about national identity paradoxically strengthened the nationalist formation further, which gained more than 11% of the vote in the first round of the regional elections.

The rejection of the "monarchical" style of the V Republic was also negatively perceived by a large part of the electorate as a decline in the country's image. According to many surveys French people were particularly critical of the president's publicizing of his private life. It could be supposed that the French public sees no need for a radical change in the image of the presidency, and considers the special nature of the office as an element of the country's *grandeur*. A recent opinion poll reveals typically that 54% of respondents believe that Sarkozy should adopt a "more presidential style."

**International implications.** The elections will not affect France's foreign policy. In the near future and the changes made in the government will not pose a danger to the position of Bernard Kouchner, who reached a high popularity. Despite the issues—described above—that are affecting Sarkozy's image, foreign policy did not play a major role in the March elections, and hence no changes should be expected in the major foreign policy areas within the next few months.

However the intensity of French involvement in international affairs may gradually decrease. President Sarkozy will probably have to concentrate on domestic and economic policy issues. This tendency will intensify a few months prior to the elections if Sarkozy is still doing bad in the polls.

This is unfavourable for Poland because preparations for an election campaign in France will come during a key phase in the latter half of 2011, i.e. during Poland's presidency of the EU. France is one of Poland's key partners in the debate about the future of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The weaker Sarkozy's chances to win the re-election are, the less value the declarations he makes on France's behalf will have.

It should be also noted that France's activeness in foreign affairs may decrease further if a conflict arises between Sarkozy and Fillon. At the moment the prime minister is loyal towards the president. Nonetheless the possibility cannot be ruled out that as the election campaign draws nearer both leaders of the French Right will begin to vie for power, as Chirac and the then Prime Minister Edouard Balladur did in 1995. This variant becomes more and more possible if Sarkozy keeps on losing his popularity.

The consequences of a possible defeat of Sarkozy by a candidate for the Left could in turn weaken the positive tendencies in the development of Polish-French relations. They improved considerably in 2009 when France repaired its relations with the United States and announced a return to NATO's military structures. The redefining of transatlantic relations since Sarkozy has been in power has made possible the process of bringing Poland and France's visions of Europe's security closer together. Meanwhile it is precisely Sarkozy's policy towards the US and NATO that triggered the criticism from the socialists. With regard to NATO they issued a statement saying that France's part in NATO's military structures would hinder the building of Europe's autonomous defence capacity. This is a different view to that taken by Poland and it is making a real consensus difficult.

The lack of great interest on the part of the French left in Central European issues also might not be conducive to the development of relations between Poland and France following a change of government in the latter, should it come about.