

Polish presidential election expresses growing hostility towards Russia

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The first round of Poland's presidential election takes place tomorrow. The favourite is the incumbent, Brunoslav Komorovski from the conservative Citizens' Platform (PO), which is also the party of Prime Minister Eva Kopacz. His most significant challenger is Andrzej Duda from the nationalist and populist Law and Justice Party (PiS).

In February, Komorovski was considered invincible. However, since then his poll ratings have sunk dramatically. It is anticipated that a run-off will take place on May 24. The latest polls predict Komorovski with 40 percent of the vote and Duda with 30 percent. Nonetheless, presidential elections in Poland have frequently produced surprising results.

Although power in Poland rests with the government elected by parliament, the president has considerable authority. The president is supreme commander of the armed forces and, together with the foreign ministry, determines the country's foreign and defence policy. In addition, he appoints the head of the central bank and can reject draft laws submitted by the government. President Lech Kaczynski (PiS) blocked a number of important laws of the government led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk (PO) between 2007 and 2010.

The presidential election is also seen as a trial run for the parliamentary elections due in October.

The campaign has been characterised by agitation against Russia and the promotion of a military build-up. It focused almost exclusively on the question of who could best defend Poland against Putin. On this question, the two leading candidates barely have any differences.

Komorovski, the scion of a Polish noble family and a practicing Catholic, maintains close contacts within the army. He introduced a multi-billion rearmament programme with the government three weeks ago.

Billions are to be spent on US Patriot missiles and 70 French Caracal helicopters by 2022. The cost of the helicopters has been estimated at €4 billion, and the air defence missiles at €6.5 billion. Komorovski already proposed the establishment of a Polish missile defence shield in 2011. It is to be part of NATO's defence systems, and in emergency situations could be equipped with Patriot missiles from other European countries, which could be in Poland within 48 hours.

Along with the Baltic republics, Poland is among the most outspoken aggressors towards Moscow within the European Union. In this it has not only sought to outdo Berlin, but also Washington. Former Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who is now president of the European Council in Brussels, declared last year that, in the confrontation with Russia, Poland was "always a step ahead of the EU and a half step ahead of the US."

Komorovski recently indicated his support for the formation of a joint Polish-Lithuanian-Ukrainian army unit, the command of which is stationed in Lublin, Poland. It is to be composed of 4,500 men and be ready for deployment in 2017. The brigade is to take part in international operations and, as Komorovski explicitly declared, support Ukraine in its conflict with Russia.

The cost of the massive military build-up will be borne by the Polish population. After the election, Komorovski and the PO government intend to pursue the reform of the Polish coal industry. The coal concern Weglowa already announced plans in January to close four of 15 coalmines and eliminate 5,000 jobs. After two weeks of protests by miners, the Kopacz government temporarily postponed the coal industry reform.

Wide-ranging reforms of the pension and health care systems are also planned after the elections. There is a broad consensus between the PO and PiS on the issue.

The 42-year-old PiS candidate Duda was deputy justice minister in the government of Jaroslav Kaczynski. In addition, he was undersecretary at the chancellery of President Lech Kaczynski. The PiS, which has its base in poorer, strongly Catholic layers in rural areas and small towns, presents itself as being more socially concerned than the PO, which represents the elites in the larger cities and business. But Duda also supports social attacks and has announced a planned pension reform.

In their hostility to Russia, Duda and the PiS are attempting to outdo Komorowski. Former interior minister Ludwig Dorn, a founding PiS member, declared to the daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* that the abandonment of the 1997 NATO-Russia agreement was a strategic goal for his country. According to that deal, NATO promised not to station large military units any further east than Germany.

Of the 10 other candidates standing in the presidential election, only the rock musician Pavel Kukez is expected to obtain a double-digit result. He has mainly won support among younger voters with strong attacks on those at the top.

The other candidates demonstrate just how far the entire political spectrum in Poland has moved to the right.

Magdalena Ogorek is standing for the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), which emerged from the former Stalinist state party and, through Alexander Kwaśniewski, held the presidency between 1995 and 2005. The nonaligned church historian puts forward a neo-liberal programme and demands lower taxes for businesses. On the issue of military rearmament, she has complained that too much equipment is being purchased from foreign firms and not from the domestic arms industry. She has around 3 or 4 percent support in the polls.



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