

Conservative wins presidential election in Poland

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Andrzej Duda, the candidate of the right-wing Law and Justice party (PiS), emerged as the victor after two rounds in the Polish presidential election. The election is regarded as a significant indication of the outcome of the parliamentary election due this autumn in which the PiS under Jaroslaw Kaczynski hopes to take power.

Duda, who narrowly led in the first round of the election, got about 52 percent of the votes. His opponent in the election, current president Bronislaw Komorowski of the ruling Civic Platform party, received 48 percent of the votes. Turnout in the second round was 56 percent. While higher than in the first round, it was still one of the lowest turnouts in a presidential election since 1989.

The return of the right-wing conservative PiS to the presidency and possibly also to parliament marks a shift to the right in Polish politics and a deepening of the crisis in the European Union (EU). Duda won the election on the basis of pursuing a confrontation course with Russia, rejecting the membership of Poland in the EU, social demagoguery and an appeal to the ultraconservative Catholic base of the PiS.

Duda's election victory will not be met with enthusiasm in Berlin and Brussels. The previous president, Komorowski, and the previous Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, who now heads the European Council, work closely with German chancellor Angela Merkel and favour a close alliance between Warsaw, Berlin and Brussels. Duda is an outspoken opponent of membership in the Eurozone, and the PiS is clearly more nationalistic and skeptical in regard to the EU.

Radoslaw Markowski from the Institute for Political Studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences remarked in the *New York Times* that the result would probably be difficulties for the EU. It emphasised that the PiS will cultivate a rather distant attitude to the EU. According

to Markowski, the PiS has a "deeply rooted euro-skepticism." He concluded, "If it wins, the PiS will build an alliance with Lithuania and Ukraine and neglect Germany and France."

Duda's election victory represents above all a rejection of the ruling Civic Platform (PO), which has pursued a brutal austerity course since 2007. As a consequence, the social crisis in Poland has deepened. Although Poland has suffered less as a consequence of the economic crisis than other European countries, wages and pensions are stagnating. A former worker or public employee receives on average a pension of between €300 and €600 per month.

Most recently, Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz announced comprehensive retirement cuts and a reform of the health care system after the elections. Mass layoffs in state-run coal mines have been put on hold for the time being after massive strikes, but the PO still plans to implement them eventually.

In this context, Duda was able to win support mostly in the impoverished eastern part of the country. In some regions—for example, Podkarpackie (Subcarpathia)—Duda received more than 50 percent of the votes in the first round of elections. By contrast, Komorowski only received 18 percent. Podkarpackie belongs to so-called Poland B, an area that is predominantly rural and economically devastated. Only the regional capital Rzeszów has more than 100,000 residents. In some places, the unemployment rate is almost 30 percent.

Duda appealed to social discontent by promising social improvements, more support for families with children and the reversal of the raising of the retirement age to 67, which Komorowski had approved. To win religious support from its base, the PiS opposed artificial insemination and the EU Convention on

Combatting Domestic Violence. He accused Komorowski of moving “away from the teachings of the Holy Father John Paul II.”

Even though Prime Minister Kopacz said immediately after the election that she will strive for the “best possible collaboration” with the president, everyone expects trench warfare between the government and the president. In addition to representative responsibilities, the president only has a say in foreign and defense policy and can issue a veto against legislative proposals.

The 43-year-old Duda has been a member of the European Parliament since last year and maintains close contact with the Catholic Church. He was secretary of state in the cabinet of former president Lech Kaczynski, who died in a plane crash in Smolensk in 2010. Duda has said that he sees himself as the “spiritual legate” of Kaczynski.

In the television debates before the second election, Duda unambiguously played the nationalist card. Poland must preserve its national identity in the EU and pursue national interests, he repeatedly emphasised.

Duda’s right-wing politics also appeal to the Polish unions. Both the former-Stalinist federation of trade unions OPZZ and Solidarnosc backed him and called for his election.

The OPZZ sees “many demands” in the election programme of Duda for which it had fought for many years, said a high-ranking union representative after a meeting with the presidential candidate of the PiS. For his part, Duda said he is in favour of “dialogue with the unions.” As the PiS seeks to implement ever deeper cuts, the unions will be brought on board even more in order to carry them out.

Duda also spoke out in favour of strengthening the country’s relationship with NATO and the US. He recently said, “The best solution for Poland would be the stationing of US troops on its land. This is the only means of guaranteeing security.”

Duda supports the building of a joint Polish-Lithuanian-Ukrainian military unit initiated by the PO. It is to include 4,500 men and would be completely operational in 2017. The brigade would take part in international operations and support Ukraine in its struggle against Russia.

Both the PiS and the PO represent a hard line with regard to Russia and President Vladimir Putin. During

the election, Duda demanded an increase in the military budget. At the same time, he spoke in favour of good relations with all of Poland’s neighbours—with the exception of Russia.



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