

Coronavirus spreads to Poland, threatening to upend presidential elections

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On Monday, Poland recorded its first confirmed corona patient. As the coronavirus spreads in Europe, it is set to significantly impact the Polish presidential elections in May, compounding an already severe social and political crisis.

Incumbent President Andrzej Duda, though earlier widely treated as the favorite, is no longer guaranteed to win the elections. Even before the corona virus spread to Poland, Duda's approval ratings fell by 6 percent down to 40 percent. If he fails to secure over 50 percent in the first round of voting on May 10, there will be a run-off election.

His main strength currently consists in the fact that main opposition candidate from the liberal party Civic Platform (PO), Małgorzata Kidawa-Blonska, is performing even worse, with her approval down to 23 percent in early March. The Civic Platform has led the pro-EU opposition to PiS in recent years but is widely hated in the working class after its governments implemented massive austerity, including in education and health care.

Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz from the peasant party PSL, a trained doctor who served under Donald Tusk's PO government as health minister, has recently been rising in polls to 11 percent.

Should Duda, who is aligned with the ruling far-right Law and Justice Party (PiS) lose the election, it would make it difficult for PiS to rule as it pleases. Since PiS lacks an overwhelming majority in parliament, the president can veto bills and PiS would not have the margin necessary to override the presidential veto.

As the election campaign gets into the final phase, the coronavirus outbreak is dominating Polish politics and news.

So far, there are five confirmed case of coronavirus in Poland. The first one, a 65-year old man, who had contracted the virus while in Germany, was confirmed in Zielona Góra on Wednesday. Four more new cases in two

other cities where confirmed on Tuesday. Two of them had contracted the virus in Italy.

As of Friday, there were 534 confirmed cases in Germany, 185 more than the day before. Cases have been registered in all but one of the German federal states. According to scientists who have traced the spread of the infection based on mutations of virus genome, a large number of infections in Europe can be traced back to Germany, and specifically some of the earliest cases in Munich in January, which were not properly contained.

Hundreds of thousands of Poles have close connections to Germany, where they either work or have family. Tens of thousands are regularly travelling back and forth between the two countries, making it more likely that the coronavirus will spread further in Poland. In the Czech Republic, which borders Poland to the south, confirmed coronavirus cases had risen to 12 on Thursday.

As of Friday, only 855 tests of coronavirus had been conducted in Poland; 500 people have been put in domestic quarantine and 4,459 placed under epidemiological supervision. Many hospitals, however, are unable to test patients for coronavirus, raising the possibility that many more may already be infected. In the eastern Polish city of Białystok, an 11-year-old boy and his mother were forced into quarantine at a hospital, as they showed symptoms of the disease while the hospital was unable to test them. The health care minister Łukasz Szumowski stated on Friday, "There will be new cases."

Newspapers report that people in Poland, as in many other countries, have already resorted to panic buying, emptying shelves of hand sanitizers, soap, and basic food staples, and buying large stocks of medicine. Following the first confirmed case, many cities began disinfecting their public transportation systems.

Like most governments, the Polish PiS government, which has been engaged in a massive campaign of far-right politics and historical falsification, for weeks denied

that the virus could spread to Poland, thus endangering peoples' lives. Elementary information about how to stop the spread of the virus was not distributed among the population. Then on Monday, Duda called an emergency meeting involving the prime minister, the interior minister, and the health care minister, and convened an extraordinary parliamentary session to discuss coronavirus. Duda also declared that a further spread of the disease might result in all big election meetings being cancelled.

The conservative *Rzeczpospolita* warned, "Chaos in the health care system could upend Polish politics and impact the outcome of the presidential elections in May."

As is the case all around the world, decades of austerity have devastated the Polish health care sector, which now counts among the worst in Europe. Under the PiS, cuts in health care have continued since 2015. This has created conditions where many young health care professionals leave the country searching for better wages and living conditions in other countries. In 2017, young doctors went on a hunger strike protesting the poverty wages and poor working conditions. Since then, more hospitals have been closed, while the number of patients has continued to increase.

About 30 percent of the Polish doctors who would treat patients with infectious diseases are themselves of retirement age, that is, the demographic most often and most severely affected by the coronavirus. The number of medical departments at hospitals specializing in infectious diseases was cut from 119 to 79 in the past few years, while Poland has a population of about 40 million.

Although technically there is public health care in Poland, the coverage is so poor that those left without additional private insurance often must wait months and years even for basic surgery, such as treatment of ruptures.

The average monthly salary in Poland is 1,234 euros, a little more than a third of the EU average of 3,080 euros (2018). Many workers live on significantly less. Pensioners, in particular, can barely afford additional medical costs, often living on only 250 euros a month. These poorest layers of the population, often the most vulnerable to the virus, will also be the hardest hit by the economic and social consequences by the international corona virus crisis.

Experts estimate that the worst-case scenario of the international development of the coronavirus spread could result in a 1-percent growth rate for the Polish economy this year, down from the predicted 3.6 percent. The last

months have already seen a slowdown in economic growth and rising inflation.

In addition to potentially triggering an economic crisis, the coronavirus will starkly expose the impact of capitalist restoration and austerity by both PO and PiS governments, further exacerbating the significant class tensions in the country. Last year, the government was shaken by a 17-day nationwide strike of 300,000 teachers. The strike ended in a naked sell-out by the unions. Poverty wages and horrendous working conditions continue to shape the everyday lives of hundreds of thousands of teachers and their students where anger over the sell-out runs high.

In February, the PiS government scrambled to prevent a strike by miners who had blocked roads and staged a two-hour warning strike to protest for higher wages. Again, working together with the union, the government struck a deal guaranteeing a 6 percent wage increase, which barely makes up for inflation, to prevent at the last minute a planned demonstration in Warsaw and a nationwide vote by miners on a strike.

The ruling PiS party and President Duda have responded to the growing social tensions by ever more aggressively resorting to the promotion of far-right nationalism, xenophobia and homophobia. Following a massive campaign by the government, earlier this year 100 Polish municipalities adopted resolutions declaring themselves to be "LGBTQ-free zones." In February, the leading scholar Dariusz Stola stepped down as the head of the Polish Jewish Museum (POLIN) in Warsaw, as an extensive campaign by the Polish state against his work made his position all but impossible. In 2018, Duda ratified a far-right bill banning mention of Polish anti-Semitism in the discussion of the Nazi-led genocide of European Jewry during World War II.

The government has also continued to undermine the judiciary. In early February, Duda signed into law a bill which bans judges from questioning judicial appointments by the president and from engaging in political activity. In addition, several scandals in recent months further exposed the authoritarian orientation of PiS. In a recent interview, Duda declared that national security had to take precedent over press freedom.



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