

Far-right opposition candidate wins presidential election in Poland

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According to the results of Poland's national election commission, Karol Nawrocki won the run-off election for president on Sunday with 50.89 percent of the vote. His opponent Rafał Trzaskowski received 49.11 percent. Nawrocki, who was supported by the extreme right-wing opposition PiS (Law and Justice) party, received 10,606,628 votes, while the candidate of the ruling PO (Civic Platform) party received 10,237,177 votes.

As in the first round, voter turnout reached another record high of 71.63 percent. The enormous politicisation reflected in this makes defeat for the government of Prime Minister Donald Tusk all the more difficult.

It is absolutely clear that the vote in favour of Nawrocki is first and foremost a vote against the Tusk government, which was able to form a coalition government after the 2023 parliamentary elections as the Civic Coalition. This is confirmed not only by the figures, but also by media commentators and members of the governing coalition themselves.

Trzaskowski has been a close political ally of the current head of government since at least 2013, when he was appointed by Tusk to his first government. He has been mayor of Warsaw since 2018 and was narrowly defeated by the then incumbent Andrzej Duda in the 2020 election. Trzaskowski, the man from the capital, exemplifies the political divisions in the country: While the government and PO are strong in the west and in the cities, the PiS dominates in the countryside and in the east.

Social differences are also reflected in voting behaviour: while the majority of better-off employees and managers voted for Trzaskowski, Nawrocki was particularly popular with farmers and the poorer working class voters.

The government camp has lost support in the urban milieu in particular since its 2023 election victory. If you place the votes of the anti-PiS coalition in the Sejm (parliament) elections two years ago in relation to the current turnout, Trzaskowski should have received over 11 million votes. He had plenty of support: officially, he was backed by all parties in the governing camp, as well as three eliminated

candidates from the preliminary round, five former heads of state or government (Wałęsa, Bielecki, Miller, Kwaśniewski, Komorowski) and numerous intellectuals and celebrities.

But nothing has remained of the former spirit of optimism surrounding the collapse of Stalinism. Even if it was always vague and filled with terms such as “democracy” or “rule of law”, many associated it with concrete hopes—for more equal rights, protection for minorities, humane migration policies. Instead, the Tusk government not only continued the PiS policies, but even massively tightened them in some areas, such as limiting migration and asylum.

Trzaskowski's election campaign also focussed on “shedding the ‘left’ label, and many of his statements were more similar to the PiS narrative than that of the Civic Coalition—both in terms of worldview and economic and social issues”, as Mateusz Baczyski commented for the Onet website.

Nawrocki's far-right agenda hardly came under attack. Instead, the election campaign focussed on his past as a boxer and bouncer—which probably made him even more attractive to many as an “underdog” and “anti-establishment figure”.

The rejection of the political establishment is particularly clear among young people. In the first round of voting, the far-right and supposedly “far-left” candidates Menzen and Zandberg together received around 56 percent of the vote in the under-30 age group.

The “Young people, vote!” campaign reviewed the voting behaviour and motives of young people. According to Paweł Mrozek, a member of the initiative, many young people did not vote for Nawrocki out of conviction, but out of rejection of Trzaskowski and the government camp.

The issues that are important to young people—such as education, mental health, housing, work and quality of life—hardly play a role in government initiatives, Mrozek continued.

Criticism is also growing within the governing coalition. Szymon Hołownia from Polska 2050 spoke of the

government being given a “yellow, partly red card”. Ahead of the coalition’s emergency meeting, he called for a new coalition agreement in order to “clearly tell the citizens what we intend to do in the next two years”. At the same time, he expressed doubts about Tusk’s plan to call a vote of confidence—a statement that he withdrew after internal criticism, partly because Polska 2050 is likely to be one of the biggest losers in any new elections.

Criticism from the right-wing conservative PSL (Peoples Party), which forms the Trzecia Droga (Third Way) alliance together with Polska 2050, was much harsher. Marek Sawicki, a former minister under Tusk, accused him of “laziness” and “disinterest in government work” and called for a constructive vote of no confidence to reappoint the head of government.

Włodzimierz Czarzasty from the social democratic Nowa Lewica (New Left) party also declared: “I think that we have simply messed up a lot as a government.” He also urged a vote of confidence in order to stabilise the coalition.

The coming weeks will show whether and to what extent the Tusk government faces a crisis as a result of the presidential election. In an eagerly awaited speech on Monday evening, Tusk announced that he would “not let up for a moment” and would call for a vote of confidence—as a signal to the country and abroad. In other words: he wants to stick to his right-wing and militaristic course. His government’s “priorities” included “building a powerful army,” a “strong economy,” the “re-Polandisation of industry” and “fighting crime.”

While Nawrocki’s election victory is undoubtedly also due to the government’s anti-social and disappointing policies, the role of the war in Ukraine should not be underestimated. Poland is the central NATO state on the border with Russia and—with broad support from all parties—has adopted a massive rearmament and militarisation programme. Sawicki’s accusation of “disinterest” on Tusk’s part probably also refers to his foreign policy trips, for example to promote a joint European arms offensive. A few weeks before the election, Tusk signed a friendship agreement with France on security policy cooperation.

However, the opposition is no less bellicose. Back in March 2022, PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński called for a “NATO peacekeeping mission” for Ukraine. Poland has been a logistical hub for weapons and intelligence support since the start of the war. However, shortly before being voted out of office, the PiS increasingly distanced itself from Ukraine—a reaction to growing tensions within NATO and the EU over the escalation of the war. These differences have intensified dramatically with Trump’s second term in office. It is no coincidence that US Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem openly called for Nawrocki’s election

at the far-right CPAC conference in Warsaw. During the election campaign, the latter repeatedly declared his rejection of EU or NATO membership for Ukraine.

Surveys show just how much the PiS is benefiting from growing opposition to the war: approval of arms deliveries to Ukraine has fallen by around 20 percent since the start of the war. At the same time, there has been an increase in agitation against Ukrainian refugees—even though most of them work in Poland and do not receive any state benefits.

The constant anti-Russia threat narrative is also meeting with increasing rejection. Only around a fifth of the population would voluntarily defend the country in the event of war—over a third preferring to flee abroad.

The elections in Poland shed light on the actual situation in a country that is often celebrated by Western economic commentators for its growth rates. However, despite all appearances of modernisation, social inequality has worsened since the restoration of capitalism and is increasingly undermining the foundations of democratic rule.

Poland is among the most unequal in Europe, with the latest data showing that the top 10 percent takes in more than 37 percent of income, while the bottom 50 percent accounts for less than 22 percent.

The high approval ratings for nationalist and in some cases openly fascist forces in particular show how unresolved historical issues weigh heavily on social consciousness.

Polish workers and young people must break with the nationalist myths and anti-communist images of history that are superimposed on key historical experiences—from Solidarność and the period of Stalinism, the Armia Krajowa (Home Army), the dominant resistance movement in German-occupied Poland during World War II, and the inter-war Sanacja regime to the first socialist parties SDKPiL and PPL founded in the late 1800s. A conscious reappraisal of this history requires a turn towards Trotskyism and the struggle for the establishment of a Polish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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