

Take 360: Poland's Turbulent and Consequential Presidential Election

GMF Experts

Ahead of the first round of presidential election in Poland on Sunday, the race is tightening with the incumbent President Andrzej Duda projected to win 43 percent of the vote and the candidate of the opposition Civic Platform, Warsaw Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski, just under 30 percent. The third contender in the race is the independent Szymon Holownia, who has been gaining in the polls and can count on around 12 percent. The turnout is projected to be high at over 63 percent. Unless all the polls are wrong, a second round will have to take place on July 12, and it will be the decisive fight between the candidates of the ruling PiS party, and the Civic Platform, the main opposition party. Below, GMF experts in Warsaw, Berlin, Bucharest, and Washington give their perspective on the importance of Poland's choice.

Continuity or Cohabitation?

It has been a long and tumultuous campaign for Poland's presidential election. The vote was originally to take place on May 10, but it was postponed to June 28 because of the coronavirus pandemic and after much of political drama. The last few days of the campaign were marked by the visit of President Andrzej Duda to Washington. This was an unprecedented move—no candidate has traveled internationally at such a late stage of a campaign, and no U.S. president in the past would have thought that it would be good idea to invite the head of state of an allied democracy four days before an election. The appearance of President Donald Trump meddling in Poland's democratic decision by offering support to Duda immediately before the vote drew a lot of criticism in Washington and in Warsaw.

When it comes to the substance of the visit, the expectations in Warsaw were high. The press reported the presidents would sign a long-negotiated Defense Cooperation Agreement that would provide the specifics of the U.S. presence in Poland—aka "Fort Trump." There were also reports of the possible moving by the United States of 30 F-16 jets and up to additional 1,000 troops from Germany to Poland, along with the decision to place in Poland the European component of the U.S Army V Corps. However, none of these agreements in security and defense materialized; the two presidents focused instead on reaffirming close U.S.-Polish ties and signaling closer cooperation in building a nuclear power plant in Poland, as well as on the issue of 5G infrastructure in the country. The lack of clear deliverables from Duda's extraordinary trip was met with much surprise in Warsaw, but it is unclear to what extent the visit and its results will impact the vote.

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The key contest will come on July 12 anyway. This is when two very different views of the presidency when it comes to both domestic and foreign policy compete directly. The stakes in the election are very high. A win for Duda will mean the continuation of a stable governing majority for the Law and Justice (PiS) party, which will likely continue its current foreign and domestic course. If the candidate of the opposition Civic Platform, Warsaw Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski (or somewhat less likely the independent candidate Szymon Holownia) emerges victorious from the vote, there will be a huge political shift in Poland.

A cohabitation between a President Trzaskowski and the PiS government will not be easy. The possible scenarios vary widely, but it is clear that a president coming from the opposition will be able to articulate a different vision of Polish foreign and domestic policies. He will also wield a veto power, which PiS will not be able to overcome in parliament, which means that only laws that gain support of both the president and parliamentary majority will be advanced—a situation very different to the current one of deep polarization. It is also quite possible that a cohabitation will not be stable enough to last, and thus there would be early parliamentary elections. Voters are deeply mobilized as Poland is about to enter one of the most important two weeks in its recent history, one in which the direction of the country truly hangs in the balance.

Michal Baranowski, director, Warsaw office

Cautious Hope in Germany

Germany, both political Berlin and informed observers broadly, looks at the presidential election in Poland with cautious hope. On the one hand, there is a clear understanding that whatever the outcome, the election will not lead to a change in the composition or conduct of the government. Nor will it magically remove the many contentious issues—from regional security and respect for the rule of law to Nord Stream 2 and Second World War reparations—that have long weighed down on Polish-German relations. On the other hand, many in Germany are hopeful that the upcoming ballot may, at the very least, help clear some of the bad air that has built between both countries. It may even signal an end to the four-year political stalemate between Warsaw and Berlin. A close result, whether a win by the incumbent or his main challenger, may herald an end to the political dominance of the national-conservative bloc in Poland led by the Law and Justice Party (PiS) party. Facing stiffer political headwinds, the government in Warsaw may feel inclined to moderate some of its policies at home. At the European and bilateral levels, official Polish positions may once again become less adversarial than in recent years. For Germany, not least at the onset of its Presidency of the Council of the EU during the second half of this year, this would be good news. It would provide a prospect that the key country on the EU's eastern flank and Germany's most important neighbor in the region might, once again, become more of a partner than it has been of late.

Joerg Forbrig, senior fellow and director for Central and Eastern Europe, Berlin

A Choice between Antagonistic Values

Poland's presidential election is interesting or even spectacular if one closely follows the rhetoric and events, yet it is in no way unique. It has followed a pattern already familiar in the region, and increasingly so in the

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transatlantic space. Voters do not merely choose between two (male, in Poland's and most other cases) candidates, they choose between two civilizations: one based on fear of the different, disrespect for rule of law and human rights, and nationalistic values, and another based on tolerance and respect, diversity, and democratic beliefs. Such a level of antagonistic values is reflected in and also feeds a high level of polarization within societies, which is further fueled by the virulent rhetoric of electoral campaigns. President Andrzej Duda's visit to Washington days before Poland's citizens vote also falls in what seems to be an established pattern: ahead of elections leaders in the region go to Washington (for Central European ones), Brussels (for Eastern European ones), or Moscow (for the in-betweens) and come back to their countries bearing gifts in the form of association treaties, funds, or U.S. troops.

Polish society is united around its fear of Russia and its aggressiveness, and takes security seriously (as it should), so the decision by President Donald Trump to transfer there a few thousand U.S. troops may well have an impact on the outcome of election. Should Duda be reelected, the EU will need to deal with an erratic Poland for four more years, and the populist rhetoric will only get stronger in the region. While this is of concern, more worrying is that Poland's election fits into a regional and transatlantic trend in which voters are faced with a choice between two sets of antagonistic values, and the side believing in illiberal principles too often wins.

Alina Inayeh, director, Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, Bucharest

An Election with Consequences for the United States

With days to go before the presidential election in Poland, a confident incumbent in a normal contest would focus close to home on solidifying support and energizing voters. But the pre-election period in Poland has been anything but normal. The election was rescheduled after a chaotic period of brinkmanship between the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party and opposition parties in May as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. President Andrzej Duda, faced with the late-breaking popularity of opposition candidate Rafal Trzaskowski, Warsaw's liberal mayor, gambled that the only vote of support he needs is from President Donald Trump with his last-minute official visit to Washington on Wednesday to boost his prospects.

Trzaskowski, the candidate for the opposition Civic Platform party, is viewed as having a pro-Europe orientation and appealing to urban elites. Duda relies on rural supporters of the conservative-nationalist PiS. Both sides argue that the stakes are high and Poland's future as a democracy may hang in the balance. Certainly, another term for Duda as a rubber-stamping president would give PiS a clear path to consolidate its illiberal rule.

The important thing for the United State is whether Poland holds a free and fair election that produces a legitimate outcome. No matter who wins, it will continue to be a valued bilateral and NATO ally. But Duda placing so much hope in Trump and participating in Trump's apparent ploy to play allies off each other (for example, punishing Germany with a troops withdrawal and potentially rewarding Poland with more troops) is risky for Poland's European and U.S. relationships in the long term. Under a Democratic administration from 2021, there will likely be less bilateral favoritism and a greater emphasis on strengthening multilateral institutions.

For example, the United States must show support for the EU's efforts to hold its members accountable to EU commitments. Issues that impact NATO such as deployment of U.S. troops to Poland's "Fort Trump" and repositioning of U.S. troops out of Germany should be handled within NATO, not in the bilateral realm.

If Trzaskowski wins, he would have presidential veto power and could act as a brake on PiS's move toward authoritarianism and help restore ties within the EU. And it would mean that the United States would have a counterweight to PiS, who believes again in multilateralism, the transatlantic alliance, and shared values.

Susan Corke, senior fellow and director, Transatlantic Democracy Working Group, Washington

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