

European
Elections monitor

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ANALYSIS

Rafal Kazimierz Trzaskowski leads the polls in the first round of the Polish presidential election

The Poles are heading to the ballot box to elect Andrzej Duda's (Law and Justice, PiS) successor as President of the Republic. Duda, who has served two terms, is not eligible to run again. If no candidate is elected on 18 May, a second round of voting will take place two weeks later, on 1 June, between the two candidates who came out ahead in the first round.

This presidential election could spell the end of the PiS's reign. Although the party lost power in the parliamentary elections on 15 October 2023, which saw the victory of the Civic Coalition led by Donald Tusk's Civic Platform (PO), it retained the presidency, its last bastion. The Civic Coalition also won the last European elections on 9 June 2024, with 37.06% of the vote and 21 seats in the Strasbourg parliament. The United Right, a right-wing alliance led by the PiS, came second with 36.16% and 20 seats.

Poland is currently experiencing a difficult period of cohabitation between President Andrzej Duda and Prime Minister Donald Tusk. The latter repeats that Andrzej Duda's presence at the head of state is preventing him from implementing the reforms he promised during his election campaign. It should be noted that in Poland, every law passed by parliament must be approved by the president, who has the right of veto. However, the Sejm, the lower house of parliament, can override the president's veto by a three-fifths majority in a vote in which at least half of the members must be present. However, the current majority does not have enough votes to override a presidential veto.

Andrzej Duda has vetoed four laws (including one giving free access to the morning-after pill and another recognising Silesian as one of the country's minority languages) and has referred 74 others to the Constitutional Court. The

head of state has also blocked several administrative appointments that required his approval to be validated.

While the PiS would like the presidential election to be a referendum on Donald Tusk's government, the Prime Minister wants to make it a referendum on the previous administration, i.e. the PiS's eight years in power. *'Either Law and Justice will find itself on a path that will lead it back to power, or it will be the end of Law and Justice as we know it,'* said Andrzej Bobinski, director of the Polityka think tank. *'What is at stake is the future of Donald Tusk's government and how long it can continue to lead Poland,'* said Aleks Szczerbiak, professor of political science at the University of Sussex.

It is clear that a victory for Karol Tadeusz Nawrocki, the candidate supported by the PiS, would be a major obstacle for Donald Tusk.

Andrzej Duda's second term will end on 6 August.

THE CANDIDATES

13 are candidates for the presidency of the Republic:

- Rafal Kazimierz Trzaskowski (Civic Platform, PO), mayor of Warsaw since 2018 and former Minister of Administration and Digitisation (2013-2014). He is also supported by Solidarity, the largest trade union;
- Karol Tadeusz Nawrocki, supported by the main opposition party, Law and Justice (PiS). Former director of the Second World War Museum, he currently heads the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), which is responsible for prosecuting Nazi and Soviet crimes against Poles;
- Slawomir Jerzy Mentzen, president of the libertarian New Hope (NN) party and member of parliament. He is the candidate of Confederation (K), a far-right alliance

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comprising his party and the National Movement (RN), the ultra-nationalist party of Krzysztof Bosak;

- Szymon Franciszek Holownia, president of the centrist Poland 2050 (PL2050) party, member of parliament;
- Magdalena Agnieszka Biejat (independent), senator. She is supported by the Left (L) alliance, which includes New Left (NL), the Socialist Party (PPS) and the Labour Union (UP);
- Joanna Senyszyn (independent), supported by the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), former Member of Parliament (2001-2009 and 2019-2023) and former Member of the European Parliament (2009-2014);
- Maciej Maciak, founder and leader of the Movement for Prosperity and Peace (RDiP), journalist;
- Grzegorz Michał Braun, president of the far-right monarchist party, the Confederation of the Cross (KKP), MEP;
- Artur Bartoszewicz (independent), lecturer at the Warsaw School of Economics;
- Marek Jakubiak, president of the right-wing Federation for the Republic (FdR) party, member of parliament;
- Marek Marian Woch, leader of the Non-Partisan Local Government Activists (BS)
- Adrian Tadeusz Zandberg (Together, Razem), member of parliament;
- Krzysztof Stanowski (independent), sports journalist.

According to the latest opinion poll conducted by the United Surveys opinion institute and published on 23 April, Rafal Kazimierz Trzaskowski is well ahead in the first round of the European elections with 31.7% of the vote, followed by Karol Tadeusz Nawrocki with 27.6%. Sławomir Jerzy Mentzen is in third place with 11.3%. The far-right candidate is particularly popular among young voters: nearly one in two (44%) plan to vote for him on 18 May. Szymon Franciszek Holownia is expected to win 6.60% of the vote and Magdalena Agnieszka Biejat 5.60%. The eight other candidates are expected to win less than 4% of the vote each.

THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN

Rafal Kazimierz Trzaskowski was nominated as a candidate for the presidential election on 22 November. An unsuccessful candidate in the last election, he lost by a narrow margin to Andrzej Duda in the second round on 12

July 2020 (422,385 votes separated the two candidates out of a total of 20,458,911 votes cast).

The PiS likes to portray Rafal Kazimierz Trzaskowski as anti-clerical, a representative of the urban and liberal elite who does not understand and looks down on the inhabitants of small provincial towns. It reminds voters that Rafal Kazimierz Trzaskowski banned religious symbols, including the cross, from the offices of Warsaw City Hall employees. 'This type of message is part of the divide between urban and rural areas in Poland. Rafal Kazimierz Trzaskowski is trying to avoid being labelled a *'typical Warsaw man'* *'who does not understand the concerns of voters in small towns,'* analysed Jarosław Flis, a sociologist at Jagiellonian University in Krakow.

In this presidential election, Rafal Kazimierz Trzaskowski faces the following challenge: to rally more conservative Poles without losing his usual supporters. This is why he is taking an increasingly firm stance on migrants, pledging to deport foreign criminals and reject the migrant quotas imposed by the European Union, as well as on Ukrainian refugees. The liberal candidate has thus backtracked on the monthly allowance of 800 zlotys (€190) granted to Ukrainian refugees for each child, stating that he would like this to be conditional on the refugees having a declared job. According to a study carried out by the Polish Central Bank (NBP), 70% of Ukrainian refugees living in Poland are in employment. The challenge is difficult to meet, but the Civic Platform candidate does not really have a choice: he cannot limit himself to addressing his own camp and must absolutely succeed in reaching as many Poles as possible. Furthermore, the high level of uncertainty caused by the international situation has certainly diverted voters' attention away from the government's domestic policy, which, according to opinion polls, is unsatisfactory for the majority of Poles.

The election of Rafal Kazimierz Trzaskowski as president would remove the obstacles to the judicial reforms sought by Donald Tusk's government. The latter believes that the reforms introduced by the previous administration have significantly undermined the independence of the judiciary. The liberal candidate has also promised to liberalise abortion laws, support renewable energy and launch a long-term plan for the adoption of the single currency.

The latter issue has almost completely disappeared from public debate in Poland. By putting it on the agenda, Rafal Kazimierz Trzaskowski wants to put Europe at the heart of Polish politics.

Karol Tadeusz Nawrocki was nominated as a candidate on 24 November. Little known to the general public (as was Andrzej Duda when he was first elected on 24 May 2015), he is not a member of the PiS and describes himself as an independent candidate and citizen. However, he is struggling to make his mark; on the contrary, controversy continues to rage around him. *'The mistake in choosing Karol Nawrocki now seems obvious. As a "citizen candidate", he was supposed to broaden the electoral base of Law and Justice. However, after four months of campaigning, his voting intentions are lower than those of the party: he is not even convincing all Law and Justice supporters,'* said Antoni Dudek, a political scientist and historian at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw.

PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński has therefore decided to play down his candidate with the aim of turning the presidential election into a referendum on Donald Tusk's government. Nevertheless, Karol Tadeusz Nawrocki has surprised observers with his strong performance in the first televised debates against his opponents, notably by adopting a strongman stance, which appeals to more and more voters in Poland and elsewhere in these uncertain times.

Security and migration are the main issues in the election campaign. Karol Tadeusz Nawrocki has adopted a tougher stance towards Russia. *'My position is that maintaining diplomatic relations with a barbaric state is not good for Poland,'* he said in an interview with Radio Zet. He criticised Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who, according to him, is behaving indecently towards his allies, including Poland, when he claims that Ukraine was left alone at the start of the Russian armed forces' invasion of its territory in February 2022. Karol Tadeusz Nawrocki also said that Volodymyr Zelensky *'cannot afford to succumb to the pressure of the rebellion against the United States, which is active within the European Union and in which our country's Prime Minister Donald Tusk is also involved.'*

'There is a visible rise in anti-Ukrainian sentiment in Polish society. Perhaps Karol Tadeusz Nawrocki's team has

concluded that the key to electoral success lies in radical language,' said Bartosz Rydlins, professor of political science at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University. The PiS candidate congratulated Donald Trump on his efforts to bring peace to the region and end the war in Ukraine, even though the American president has been criticised for aligning himself with Russia. Karol Tadeusz Nawrocki is also opposed to Ukraine joining NATO and the European Union at this stage.

THE PRESIDENTIAL FUNCTION

Although mainly ceremonial, the role of the Polish head of state is nonetheless significant. Elected for a five-year term, he has the right of veto. The President of the Republic can decide alone to hold a referendum, although this procedure is rarely used due to low turnout rates in the country for such elections. He is the head of the armed forces, ratifies international agreements, appoints and dismisses ambassadors, and has the right to pardon, which allows him to overturn court decisions on appeal. Under the Constitution, he may not serve more than two consecutive terms.

All candidates for the presidency must be at least 35 years old, and those born before 1 August 1972 must have fulfilled the lustration requirements. The so-called 'lustration' law came into force on 15 March 2007. It requires all senior civil servants, teachers, lawyers, school principals and journalists born before 1 August 1972 to answer the following question: *'Did you secretly and consciously collaborate with the former communist security services?'* The answer is then forwarded to the Institute of National Remembrance, which is responsible for checking the past of these individuals. If their collaboration with the communist services is proven, those working in the public service are automatically dismissed. Those who refuse to answer, or who are proven to have lied, face a 10-year ban from practising their profession.

To stand for election, a candidate must first collect 1,000 signatures from voters and submit them to the Polish Electoral Commission. They then have 10 days to form an electoral committee and collect a further 100,000 signatures of support.

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Results of the presidential elections in Poland on 28 June and 12 July 2020

Turnout: 64.51% (1st round) and 68.18% (2nd round)

Political parties	1st round		2nd round	
	Number of votes	% of votes cast	Number of votes	% of votes cast
Andrzej Duda (Law&Justice, PiS)	8 450 513	43.50	10 440 648	51.03
Rafal Trzaskowski (Citizen's Coalition, PO)	5 917 340	30.46	10 018 263	48.97
Szymon Holownia (independent)	2 693 397	13.87		
Krzysztof Bosak (National Movement, RN)	1 317 380	6.78		
Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz (Farmers' Party, PSL)	459 365	2.36		
Robert Biedron (Spring, W)	432 129	2.22		
Stanislaw Zoltek (Congress of the New Right, KNP)	45 419	0.23		
Marek Jakubiak (independent)	33 652	0.17		
Pawel Tanajno (independent)	27 909	0.14		
Waldemar Witkowski (Workers' Union, UP)	27 290	0.14		
Miroslaw Piotrowski (Real Europe Movement)	21 065	0.11		

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