

POLAND: Duda's victory paves the way for PiS rule until 2023

According to preliminary data from the National Electoral Commission (PKW), incumbent President Andrzej Duda – supported by the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party – narrowly won the second round of the presidential election held on 12 July. With nearly all ballots counted, Duda secured 51.2% of votes, leaving his opponent Rafal Trzaskowski (Civic Platform, PO) behind with 48.8%. The fiercely contested presidential race attracted a nearly record turnout of 68.1%. The PKW is expected to announce the official results within few days. Trzaskowski has not accepted defeat yet and could still challenge the result in courts, although this appears unlikely.

An extremely divisive electoral campaign and a tight result reveal the deep polarization of Poland's society. Exit polls show that Duda was predominantly supported by farmers, senior citizens, blue-collar workers, and the unemployed based in smaller towns and villages in the eastern parts of the country. Meanwhile, Trzaskowski performed well among students and entrepreneurs, as well as highly-qualified professionals. He is also much more popular in large cities and the western parts of the country.

Duda's re-election is a major win for the ruling PiS, which is now relatively well-positioned to continue carrying out its policy agenda until the parliamentary election in the autumn of 2023. In terms of the government's policy priorities going forward, justice minister Zbigniew Ziobro (United Poland) has highlighted that it would further reform state institutions – including the judiciary – and continue implementing its generous social policies. The government could also target private media, especially after the emergence of accusations that it was interfering with the presidential race. Poland's relations with the EU will remain tense, creating the risk of reduced financial support in the 2021-2027 budget, as well as of limiting the country's chances of wielding greater influence in the bloc after Brexit.

Despite an important victory, the ruling party faces some challenges going forward. The lengthy pre-election period – interrupted by Covid-19 – has exposed significant divisions within the ruling camp. This means that just a few deputies moving into opposition could significantly weaken the government, as the United Right coalition holds only a slim five-seat majority in the lower house (Sejm) and does not have control of the upper house of parliament (Senate). As a result, Duda has proposed post-election talks with the center-right Polish People's Party and Kukiz'15, as well as with the right-wing Confederation to join ranks in a broader "Coalition of Polish Interests." So far, this initiative has received a lukewarm response from the intended partners. Moreover, Duda has blocked some of the ruling party's controversial policy initiatives during his first term in office, and he might become less cooperative in the second term as he no longer needs the PiS' backing for re-election.

Meanwhile, Trzaskowski's strong performance in the presidential race is good news for the opposition PO, which managed to find a new leader that can attract votes outside its traditional electorate. However, it will be challenging to maintain this momentum as the next electoral race (local polls) is scheduled only for the autumn of 2022. Also, unless the main

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opposition parties manage to unite under a wider “anti-PiS coalition,” they will find it increasingly difficult to challenge the ruling party.

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