

Polish president fails to secure absolute majority in first round of elections

By Clara Weiss
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In the first round of Poland's presidential elections on Sunday, incumbent President Andrzej Duda from the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) failed to secure an absolute majority of votes. As of this writing, he received 41.8 percent of the total vote. His main rival from the liberal oppositionist Civic Platform (PO), Rafał Trzaskowski, the current mayor of Warsaw, received 30.4 percent. The remaining votes went to nine other candidates. Duda and Trzaskowski will have to stand in a run-off election on July 12.

It was the first election held in the EU since lockdown measures against the coronavirus were put in place and lifted. Based on Polish media reports, the turnout may have been as high as 62.9 percent, which would set a record. By noon on Sunday, already 25 percent had handed in their votes.

The result is universally seen as a defeat for Duda and PiS. Duda received about 7.7 million votes. These are fewer votes than in the second round of 2015 and also less than PiS received in the 2019 parliamentary elections.

The elections had originally been planned for May 10. The PiS government had tried to insist on holding them even as the country went into a de facto lockdown. However, at the last minute, PiS was forced to delay the elections.

Fearing that any substantial delay would minimize the chances of Duda winning, they decided to hold them on June 28, under conditions where the virus is still raging in Poland and across Europe. The Polish president has the power to veto decisions by the PiS-dominated Senate and also has a say in the country's foreign and defense policy. PiS only has a shaky majority in parliament and keeping Duda in office is key for its ability to rule in the coming period.

The elections will most likely contribute to a renewed spike in cases in Poland which so far has recorded over

31,000 cases. In Duda's campaign events, people were standing in close distance of each other and not wearing masks. Duda took pictures with his supporters without wearing a mask.

The callousness with which PiS has pushed for the election to take place, without appropriate safety measures put in place—and the fact that the liberal opposition went along with it—speaks to both the criminality and the profound crisis of the Polish bourgeoisie. This crisis is driven by both the escalating class tensions in Poland and internationally, and the growing conflicts between the imperialist powers, most notably the US and Germany.

In an unprecedented move, Duda had made a visit to the White House on Wednesday, just days before the elections, to meet Donald Trump. It was the first visit of a foreign head of state to Washington since the US went into a lockdown.

At the meeting, Trump announced that the US will be sending some of the troops to Poland that it is now withdrawing from Germany. The Russian newspaper *Gazeta.Ru* commented, "Trump is exchanging Germany for Poland." The visit was a clear signal by both Duda and the White House as to which candidate in the election US imperialism will prefer.

Under PiS, Poland has oriented almost exclusively toward strengthening its longstanding alliance with US imperialism, while relations with the EU at large and especially Germany, Poland's largest economic partner, have significantly deteriorated. With the full support of Washington, PiS has pursued a strategy of establishing an alliance of far-right regimes in Eastern Europe that would be directed against both Russia and Germany.

To the extent that there are substantial differences between PiS's Duda and Trzaskowski, they center on these differences about Poland's foreign policy orientation. While both PiS and the liberal opposition are

oriented toward preparing for war against Russia, there are heated disputes about which imperialist country they should rely upon primarily in their foreign relations.

Trzaskowski was put forward as the candidate of the PO above all because of his very close relations to Donald Tusk (PO), the former Polish prime minister and president of the European Council, and the EU. Tusk, who still plays a leading role in the PO, is the Polish politician with arguably the closest ties to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and other German politicians. Between 2014 and 2015, Trzaskowski worked as the deputy minister of foreign affairs under Tusk, and was responsible for handling all key business with the EU.

While the high turnout in the election points to a growing politicization, both the advanced war preparations by the Polish ruling class and the coronavirus crisis and its devastating economic and social impact were systematically blacked out in the campaign.

Over 1 million people are now unemployed (5.8 percent of the population) as hundreds of thousands have lost their jobs in April-May. Among miners, unemployment stands at 9 percent. In the restaurant and dining sector it stands at 13 percent. Unemployment is set to rise to 8 percent by the end of the year. The economy is expected to shrink by 7.4 percent if there is no second wave, and by 9.5 percent if there is a second wave, which is almost inevitable given the premature reopening internationally and in Poland itself.

The impact of the virus on the health care system, which had been starved off funds for decades, was nothing short of catastrophic. Even the comparatively low number of cases and hospitalizations completely overwhelmed Polish hospitals. Entire cities were lacking in ventilators, which are needed to treat critically ill COVID-19 patients. As in other countries, there was a dramatic shortage of PPE and other basic medical equipment for health care workers.

The Western region of Silesia has been affected worst of all. Because mines were left open for months, even as the rest of the country went into lockdown, the virus was allowed to rip through the population of miners and their families. As of this writing, the Silesian voivodeship

accounted for 12,000 cases, more than a third of the national total. Miners have made up at least a fifth of all Poles infected.

In neighboring Germany, where two million Poles live and many thousands go regularly for work, Polish workers have been heavily affected by the outbreak in the meat-packing industry. A large portion of the workforce

at Tönnies in North Rhine-Westphalia, where over 1,500 workers were infected, is made up of workers from Poland, Romania and Bulgaria, countries that have been socially devastated by the Stalinist restoration of capitalism.

In an indication of the widespread social despair among the Polish working class at large, one Polish worker told the German magazine *Der Spiegel* that there could be no talk of social distancing at the plant, with workers standing 20 to 30 centimeters next to each other. Outside the factory, workers are crammed into overcrowded rooms. However, he had no choice but to accept this job, even at the risk of infection. His family had gone into debt because his daughter was sick, and there was no way for him to earn anything close to a living wage in Poland.

The enormous devastation caused by the virus, especially in Silesia, has significantly undermined the attempts by PiS to appeal to social discontent among the working class and layers of the rural population after decades-long austerity.

The liberal opposition, meanwhile, is widely hated in the working class for years of austerity that it implemented while in power. The liberal newspaper *Newsweek Polska* noted that his chance of getting elected in two weeks largely depended on the ability of his campaign to “eliminate major bomb shells” such as the raising of the retirement age, a widely unpopular austerity measure which Trzaskowski has supported in the past.

In his Twitter campaign video, Trzaskowski carefully avoided making any political statement whatsoever. Instead, he presented childhood pictures, pictures of his family, his dog, his books and workplaces. The only thing approaching a political statement were pictures of himself with Ursula von der Leyen, the former German defense minister and current president of the European Council, and a few other EU leaders.

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