

Duda wins Polish presidential election after campaign attacking Jews, LGBTQ rights and Germans

By Clara Weiss
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The incumbent Polish president Andrzej Duda of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party has won the second round of the presidential elections on Sunday. According to unofficial results, Duda received 51.52 percent of the votes. His rival of the liberal Civic Platform (PO), Rafał Trzaskowski, the mayor of Warsaw, received 48.79 percent.

With 67.9 percent, it was the second-highest turnout for a presidential election since 1989. In several places, voter turnout was at a record high. Compared to the 2015 election, Duda was able to increase his votes by 1.78 million. Trzaskowski won in most urban areas, but Duda dominated in the eastern part of the country and in the rural areas, where the influence of the Catholic Church is paramount.

The elections took place under conditions of a recession that is set to lead to contraction of Poland's GDP by at least 4.2 percent this year. The World Bank estimates that the eurozone, which is Poland's most important economic market, is expected to contract by over 9.1 percent. Over one million people are now unemployed, with hundreds of thousands having lost their jobs because of the coronavirus crisis.

Despite very limited testing, the country records hundreds of new coronavirus infections every day. The mining region of Silesia has been by far the most affected by the pandemic because the government has left the mines open even amid a national lockdown. PiS has been thrown into a serious crisis and was forced to postpone the election from May to June in order to avoid the fall of the government. In the first round of the election two weeks ago, Duda had failed to win an absolute majority and many polls saw Trzaskowski as the likely winner of the election.

The fact that even under these conditions, and after years of relentless promotion of far-right forces and assaults on democratic rights, PiS was able to carry the day, is above all the result of the policies of the liberal opposition. Avoiding any serious discussion of the far-right policies and war preparations of PiS, the opposition consciously chosen to

black out all major social and political questions concerning workers from the campaign.

Throughout the campaign, Duda and Jarosław Kaczyński, the de facto head of PiS, repeatedly alleged that Berlin was interfering in the elections. At one of his last rallies, Duda stated that there had been “a German attack in these elections. The Germans want to choose the president in Poland? I will not allow this!”

Duda's main rival, Trzaskowski, speaks for sections of the Polish ruling class that seek to maintain close ties with Germany, Poland's largest trading partner, fearing that an exclusive reliance on US imperialism will be unsustainable and harmful for Poland's foreign policy interests. Trzaskowski has worked closely with Donald Tusk, one of the main leaders of the liberal opposition, who has been an important ally of German chancellor Angela Merkel in the EU.

There is little question that the campaign by the PiS was conducted with the approval, if not direct involvement, of the White House. Days before the first round of the election, Duda had travelled to Washington as the first guest to be received by the White House since the lockdown in the US. In a move unprecedented for a US president amid an election in the EU, Trump effectively endorsed Duda's campaign, stating that he was doing a “terrific job.”

Trump also announced that many of the troops that he is now pulling out of Germany will be stationed in Poland. The already significant tensions between German and US imperialism have been further heightened in recent months, with Germany exploiting the crisis in the US amid the pandemic, as a pretext to escalate its own remilitarization. The outcome of the Polish election is set to significantly exacerbate these geopolitical tensions, and further deepen the political crisis of the Polish ruling class.

In addition to promoting anti-German sentiments, the PiS made a conscious decision to place appeals to anti-Semitism and homophobia at the center of Duda's reelection bid. The

state-owned TVP broadcaster, which is effectively controlled by the PiS, has aired reports suggesting that Trzaskowski was working for a “powerful foreign lobby” and “rich groups who want to rule the world,” and linked him to the Hungarian-American billionaire George Soros, who is one of the main targets of the anti-Semitic right in Eastern Europe. In another broadcast, Trzaskowski was denounced as hostile to Catholics and a believer in the “god of Spinoza” whom TVP described as a “Jewish philosopher.”

Polish state television also ran several features suggesting that Trzaskowski was preparing to sell out the country to “Jewish interests” because he had cautiously suggested that Jewish organizations should be “talked to” in the ongoing dispute over the restitution of Jewish property that had been plundered by the Nazis and Polish collaborators during German occupation of Poland in World War II. TVP stated that satisfying “Jewish claims” would stop “the stream of money that is flowing from the state budget into the pockets of Polish families.”

Before the war, Poland was home to the world’s largest Jewish community of almost 3.5 million; 90 percent of them were murdered during the Holocaust. While the Nazis bear primary responsibility for this genocide, they were aided by local fascist and nationalist forces across Eastern and southeastern Europe. Anti-Jewish pogroms by Polish nationalists occurred both during and after the war.

Just three days before Sunday’s election, Jarosław Kaczyński doubled-down on TVP’s anti-Semitic campaign in an interview with the far-right Catholic Radio Station Radio Maria. In the interview, Kaczyński said that “Only someone without a Polish soul, a Polish heart and a Polish mind could say something like that. Mr. Trzaskowski clearly doesn’t have them, seeing as he says that this [restitution of Jewish property] is open to discussion.”

Duda also denounced rights for LGBT as an “ideology” that was more dangerous than “communism” and proposed a constitutional amendment that would bar same-sex couples from adopting children.

Over the past years, the PiS government has systematically encouraged anti-Semitic sentiments. In 2018, president Duda signed a bill into law that bans discussion of Polish anti-Semitism and collaboration in the Holocaust. Government representatives have demonstratively participated in marches of the far-right. However, such open appeals to anti-Semitism had as yet not been such a central part of election campaigns.

In a staggering expression of political cowardice and spinelessness, Trzaskowski made virtually no effort to denounce the blatant anti-Semitism of the PiS. In response to Kaczyński’s attacks broadcast over Radio Maria,

Trzaskowski insisted on Twitter that he had “a Polish soul” and “a Polish heart,” and that the opposition would not let the PiS take away its “right to Polish patriotism.” He did not mention the term anti-Semitism.

While avoiding any serious criticism and even discussion of the ever more open appeals to fascist forces by the PiS, Trzaskowski and the liberal opposition also shunned any mention of the burning social crisis that has significantly deepened in recent months. In the eyes of Polish workers, many of whom have been pushed to the brink of financial ruin in recent months, the PO stands above all for policies of austerity. Trzaskowski himself has in the past advocated for the raising of the retirement age. His campaign was focused almost exclusively on appealing to layers of the upper middle class, emphasizing an orientation to the EU and issues like LGBTQ rights.

Underlying this political strategy is the fact that the opposition’s main fear is not the shift toward authoritarianism and the strengthening of fascist forces in Poland under the PiS, but an intervention of the working class in political life. When a national strike by over 300,000 Polish teachers shook the PiS government in the late spring of 2019, the PO-aligned teachers’ unions made every effort to quickly shut it down, thus helping stabilize the PiS government in one of its most severe crises. Moreover, just like the PiS, the PO stands for an escalation of the war preparations against Russia.

The outcome of the elections is a stark warning to workers internationally. The threat of fascism, dictatorship and war can only be countered through the intervention by the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

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