

Why Trump May Want to Watch Poland's Election

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Populists took power in Poland a year before the U.S. election. Now the country is a litmus test for what this year may hold.

A month before Donald Trump launched his election campaign in June 2015, Poland held its own presidential vote. It marked the start of a series of events that would sweep the Law & Justice party into power with its promise to kick out the “elites” and put “Poland first.”

This weekend, President Andrzej Duda will aim to secure a second term in a vote that just months ago looked like a done deal. But in a warning sign for populists across the Atlantic and beyond, the coronavirus pandemic and its economic fallout are changing the political calculus.

Polls show Duda is neck-and-neck against a centrist rival ahead of Sunday's presidential election runoff. What may turn out to be the closest race in Poland since the end of communism 30 years ago is a “fight for everything,” Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said this week as he sought to shore up support for the incumbent.

Poland has much in common with Trump's America as the us-against-them rhetoric redrew the electoral landscape in the countries. Trump has been a vocal supporter of Law & Justice and was welcomed in Warsaw after becoming president. Now Duda, who visited the White House during the campaign last month, has found that what helped him and his party take power in 2015 isn't working as well during the pandemic.

Earlier this year, Duda, 48, was cruising for reelection, with 60% support, record low unemployment and Law & Justice in control of the public narrative after winning a second term in parliamentary elections in October. Duda came out on top in the first round on June 28, though without the majority needed to avoid another ballot.

“The pandemic showed that simple answers by populists are lacking credibility,” said Piotr Buras, head of the Warsaw bureau of the European Council on Foreign Relations, or ECFR. “At first it seemed the pandemic would blow wind in the sails of populists, but the reality turned out to be reverse.”

In Poland, as in the U.S., the leadership has doubled down on its culture war, and Duda has the support of public broadcasters. He hurled insults at Germany, the gay community, independent journalists and even took a swipe at mandatory vaccinations. On Thursday, Duda returned to the topic of Jewish demands for compensation for property lost during World War II. He repeated that Germany, not Poland, should pay damages.

But the coronavirus is proving the game-changer. While the Polish economy is forecast to shrink the least among the European Union's 27 countries, the crisis is making Polish citizens more skeptical over whether the government is sharing with them all necessary information on the virus, according to a survey by the ECFR.

The survey also shows that the crisis is stoking pro-EU sentiment. That would be bad news for Law & Justice, which has been in conflict with Brussels on issues ranging from judicial independence to climate change and immigration.

Europe is increasingly becoming seen as “a community of fate that must cling together to take back control over its future,” according to the ECFR study.

Duda’s opponent, Warsaw Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski, also 48, has tapped into voter anger with his “We’ve had enough” slogan, and for the first time in years, Law & Justice’s message is wavering.

When Law & Justice leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski visited a family grave during the brunt of the lockdown in April, at a time Poles were barred from non-essential travel, a satirical song titled “Your Pain Is Better Than Mine” topped local charts. Public radio accused the disc jockey running the countdown of manipulation, and he quit in protest.

As the election race tightened, state-controlled media has painted the president as the savior of Poland, the sole guarantor of social benefits, patriotic values as well as the government’s handling of Covid-19. At the same time, Trzaskowski was depicted as close to “foreign financial circles” and eager to sell out to the Germans, Jewish groups and “radical” LGBT activists.

The “Never Again” Association, a non-government organization that fights against racism, said that malice toward the Jewish and LGBT communities is an integral part of the “ideology of the Polish far right.”

“It’s a shame that this hostility is entering the mainstream,” said Rafal Pankowski, a sociology professor and co-founder of the association. “In the heart of Europe, in the 21st century, we have an election campaign that focuses so much on attacking and humiliating minorities.”

As well as the prime minister and powerful party leader, Duda has the backing of the government machine. When the country’s best-selling tabloid, owned by a Swiss-German media group, printed a critical article about the president’s pardon of a child molester, Duda thundered at a campaign stop that he won’t allow Germany to interfere in Poland’s election. A German embassy official was summoned to explain the report to the Polish Foreign Ministry.

Hours before Duda met Trump in Washington, public television’s flagship nightly news program listed the Polish president’s strengths as “Pride, dignity, respect, tradition and history, responsibility and credibility.”

Election monitors at the OSCE, a multi-national pro-democracy and human rights group, said the state broadcaster “failed in its legal duty to provide balanced and impartial coverage.” In a column for the Guardian newspaper last month, British historian Timothy Garton Ash wrote that “Polish state television makes Fox News look like the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.”

Should Trzaskowski prevail this weekend, it would not only be a defeat for Duda. Law & Justice has enough seats in parliament to pass laws, though not enough to override a presidential veto. It would also send a message to Brussels and Berlin that Poland still has one foot in the European mainstream at the critical time for the continent.

For the U.S., the question is whether Poland again is a forerunner for the fortunes of populism ahead of the American presidential election in November. As Buras at the ECFR put it: “The thesis that the pandemic would uplift populists hasn’t proved right.”

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