



## CEC SPECIAL UPDATE

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### Polish Presidential Elections – Duda Wins?

By Marek Matraszek, Chairman, CEC Government Relations

Exit polls just announced at 9pm show incumbent President Andrzej Duda winning the Polish Presidential election with 50.4%, and opposition Civic Coalition candidate and current Mayor of Warsaw Rafał Trzaskowski gaining 49.6%. By 17:00 the State Electoral Commission informed of a 52.1% turnout. According to the IPSOS Exit Poll, a record high-turnout of 68.7% is possible.

This is an exit poll only, and we will need to wait until Monday morning to see if the result holds on the basis of actual votes; even then there will be some uncertainty, with substantial overseas votes yet to be fully counted. On the other hand, the exit poll at the time of the 28<sup>th</sup> June first round of elections underestimated Duda's vote by 1.7%, and this could also be repeated now. Even so, tonight, it seems the tactic of Duda's campaign to focus on mobilizing the President's core electorate has paid off, as initial data suggests an improved turnout in rural areas, small towns and also the elderly – an important part of Duda's constituency. The result is extraordinarily close to that of 2015, when Duda won the Presidency against the then incumbent PO President Bronislaw Komorowski – in over five years, Poland's national politics have moved almost not a jot, with the only difference that a million more voters have been mobilized reflecting the same divide.

The political implications of the victory are hugely significant, for the current government and the opposition alike. For the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, it represents the culmination of a brutal political campaign where the stakes were the future of the current government, the unity of the PiS party, and most likely the ability of the Polish right to win the 2023 parliamentary elections. Duda's victory, albeit narrow, ensures that in the short term at least Prime Minister Morawiecki's government will remain in power; although the PM did not have a central role in the campaign, a loss would have undermined his authority and increased factional pressure in PiS for his rapid removal. As it is, he seems secure in the short to medium term, and a Duda Presidency ensures that even controversial government legislation will not face a Presidential veto, as would have been the case had Trzaskowski won. That does not mean Morawiecki is entirely safe – PiS leader Jaroslaw Kaczyński may yet decide to install a different Prime Minister at some point in the run-up to the 2023 elections, especially if the effects of the current economic crisis start to erode the government's popular support.

Duda's victory may also for a time stymie the centrifugal forces already evident in PiS, between the

core leadership faction of the party directly under the control of Kaczyński, and the two technically independent satellite parties in alliance with PiS, Solidary Poland and the “Agreement” party. Both are led by strong personalities, respectively Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro, and former Higher Education Minister Jarosław Gowin. A defeat for Duda would have seen the Ziobro and Gowin factions blaming each other, with the Ziobro faction also including Morawiecki as a factor and calling for his removal. As it is, for the time being, internal political balance in PiS will be preserved, although in the longer run it seems inevitable that the Gowin faction will be slowly eased out, given the breakdown of trust between Kaczyński and Gowin following the latter’s rebellion in the spring over the abandonment of the original 10<sup>th</sup> May election date, when Duda was riding high in the polls.

Duda’s victory increases the chances of PiS retaining power in 2023 parliamentary elections, although three years remains an eternity in politics. Nonetheless, a relatively united party, a favourable President entrenched for another five years, and an inevitably demoralised opposition is a good starting point for PiS to build its political strategy for the future.

Attention will now turn to the impact Duda’s victory will have for government policy. The strategy that led to Duda’s victory was based in the mobilization of PiS’s core voter base, and eschewing any movement to the centre. During a controversial campaign, Duda - as well as PiS forces in government-controlled media - played openly nationalist cards directed at Germany, Brussels and international “liberal” forces in culture, as well as stressing the continued need for expanded welfare and social policies. This has strengthened the hand of those in PiS who are arguing for a “second push” in media and judicial reform to further marginalize their political and ideological opponents, as well as for a continued expansionist and statist economic policy. Now that President Duda is back for five years, PiS and the government will be tempted to push in this direction too, knowing that even an opposition-controlled Senate will not be able to prevent more radical policies being enacted.

In foreign policy, Duda’s victory means that Poland will continue on its Eurosceptic and pro-US path, although in the latter case much depends on the fate of Donald Trump in the US Presidential elections. A Democrat victory will likely shift US policy on Europe and Poland, and Poland may yet find itself in the position of lacking support in both Washington and Brussels for its domestic and foreign policies. On the other hand, wiser hands in the US, even under a new administration, will recognize that Poland remains a crucial partner in the face of a resurgent Russia, and that with no chance of a change of government before the end of 2023 it makes sense to work with the government there is. And in the EU too, despite the distaste of the Brussels elites towards Poland’s unashamed conservatism, the requirements of European stability in the face of Brexit, COVID, economic crisis, and the twin challenges of Russia and China, will mean little appetite for opening up another front of division in Europe against Poland.

For Rafał Trzaskowski and the opposition Civic Platform the result represents a mixed bag. On the one hand, Trzaskowski and PO can be satisfied that they ran Duda so closely, and that the votes garnered for their candidate represent significant capital in their longer term plans for PO – recall that in the aborted May 10<sup>th</sup> elections, their then candidate Malgorzata Kidawa-Blonska had collapsed to below 10% before being replaced by Trzaskowski. The latter has single-handedly rescued the PO as a political force, energized its activists, and mobilized a significant voter base. Trzaskowski’s near success, and the large number of votes he has garnered, will also make it difficult for independent candidate Szymon Hołownia, who achieved almost 14% of the vote in the first round and has now created his own political movement, to make headway in the next three years. Even in defeat, Trzaskowski has emerged as a new leading PO politician, and although he now returns to his job of being Warsaw Mayor, it is not inconceivable that in 2025 he will try again – as did Donald Tusk, who remains his mentor – and perhaps then he will be able to claim the grand prize.

Conversely, however, it might not take long for the “glass half empty” school of critics within and outside PO to start shaping the narrative, which can easily be spun to PO’s disadvantage: namely, that PO failed to beat Duda not once but twice, fielding two different candidates, and that polls had consistently shown that Hołownia would have stood a better chance of beating Duda in the second round. Trzaskowski’s campaign tactic of gaining support by appealing to a range of diverse constituencies and support of the spectrum of failed first round candidates was probably the only one to follow, but ultimately it proved insufficient when faced with the clear and focussed messages of Duda. Above all, criticism will be levelled at PO that this result shows that it has still to find the “magic keys” to the hearts of a majority of Poles, and that the core constituency of PiS – Catholic, conservative and somewhat nationalist – is not going to go away. Unless and until the anti-PiS opposition finds a way of further moderating its message to appeal to this not-so-silent majority, it seems unlikely to succeed in the 2023 parliamentary elections when it will again be divided across a range of parties, whilst PiS remains a united bloc.

Overnight, real votes will be counted rather than the results of exit polls, and perhaps tomorrow it will be Rafał Trzaskowski celebrating. But the further reality is that the narrowness of the victory of Duda (or perhaps Trzaskowski) confirms that Poland is – for now – divided almost equally, between not just political rivals or competing governmental policies, but in a much deeper sense – almost tribally, between two civilizational and ideological visions of Poland, laced with bitter emotions and fed by increasing levels of rhetoric on both sides. How this affects governance remains to be seen – and perhaps it is only now, after the elections, that real policies will be debated and decided.

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**Marek Matraszek, Chairman, can be contacted on:**



e-mail [mm@cecgr.com](mailto:mm@cecgr.com)



mobile +48 601 336 040