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Poland at a crossroads... again

With a new president, a surging far-right and a fractured left, Donald Tusk's governing coalition finds itself increasingly backed into a corner

On 6 August, Poland's new President Karol Nawrocki, who is supported by the national-conservative PiS party, was sworn in, marking a turning point in the country's political dynamics. Prime Minister Donald Tusk now has an open enemy in the presidential palace, with only two years until the next parliamentary elections to reverse the situation. Moreover, the far right is gaining ground, reflected not only in the stable position of *Konfederacja*, but also in the rise of the openly anti-Semitic conspiracy theorist Grzegorz Braun.

In a society undergoing such a sharp shift to the right, where does the Polish left fit into this puzzle?

Tusk's waning fortunes

Not only was Nawrocki, who is formally independent, backed by the PiS party, but he also received support from the outgoing President Andrzej Duda, a PiS affiliate. Despite numerous scandals being revealed during the campaign, Nawrocki managed to win by a narrow margin of just under 370 000 votes in a country of 38 million. His victory has confirmed the sarcastic remarks of some observers that PiS seems to be 'scandal-proof', much like Donald Trump. Another similarity with Nawrocki's American counterpart is ideological affinity. The new Polish president visited Trump during his campaign, and, in return, the American Conservative Political Action Conference was held in eastern Poland just weeks before the election. An official US presidential delegation attended the inauguration ceremony in Warsaw.

During his campaign, Nawrocki openly attacked Prime Minister Tusk. He blamed the government for causing multiple crises, for example in the judiciary, and presented an openly Eurosceptic agenda, opposing the European Green Deal, a common European migration and asylum policy and joining the Eurozone. He presented himself as a conservative devoted

to defending national and Christian values. Most importantly, he announced from the outset that he would lead a presidency in fierce opposition to the government.

This is indeed a major headache for Tusk. His fortune has turned. There is little left of the initial enthusiasm with which he managed to form a liberal–centre-left coalition in December 2023, after eight years of PiS rule. According to July surveys, Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of PiS, remains the most distrusted politician (56 per cent distrust, 30 per cent trust), but he is closely followed by Tusk (52 per cent distrust, 35 per cent trust). Moreover, public approval of Tusk's government is declining, with 48 per cent of the population holding negative attitudes towards his cabinet. In an effort to appeal to the general public, Tusk has been leaning into anti-immigration sentiments, introducing border controls and announcing limits to welfare for Ukrainian refugees in the country. However, these populist tricks do not seem to be working. Tusk's cabinet is tanking.

A sharp turn to the right

Meanwhile, alongside the everlasting polarisation of the Polish political scene – which is divided into two opposing camps (PO-PiS) – a new phenomenon is emerging. The presidential election saw very good results of the far-right. Sławomir Mentzen of *Konfederacja* (an ally of the German AfD) won almost 15 per cent of the votes, coming third in the first round. To everybody's surprise, Grzegorz Braun came fourth, with over six per cent of the votes. The conspiracy theorist was once stripped of his immunity by the European Parliament for hate crimes committed in Poland. Only recently, he publicly denied the Holocaust had happened — without suffering any loss of support.

Poland has clearly taken a sharp turn to the right. Mentzen appealed particularly to young men (yet not exclusively). Both Mentzen and Braun enjoyed success in eastern Poland, in rural areas and in small towns, managing to mobilise non-voters in the process. Most importantly, they attracted the anti-establishment protest votes of those tired of the never-ending PO-PiS duopoly. This all may sound quite familiar to German readers, as it resembles the recipe for electoral success of the AfD.

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In this regard, the PiS skilfully read the room by choosing a presidential candidate who resonated well with this changing mood. A political outsider who speaks the language of the new right, combining cultural conservatism with economic liberalism and fighting off endless

accusations from the establishment — again, just like the self-image created by Donald Trump, the AfD and other similar formations.

Meanwhile, the left in Poland remains weak and fragmented. In the presidential race, the three left-wing candidates won a total of less than 11 per cent of the votes. A schism has become evident within the left-wing camp. The 'post-communist' centre-left, led by the SLD party, managed to keep its traditional electorate, appealing to voters in smaller towns and industrial areas. In contrast, the candidate of the more radical Razem party appealed to the youngest voters in Poland's metropoles, who are disappointed with the current political status quo. This is somewhat reminiscent of the recent electoral success of *Die Linke* in Germany.

In today's opinion polls, both *Lewica* and *Razem* are hovering around the five per cent electoral threshold. Forming electoral alliances was a successful strategy in the past. Indeed, their manifestos overlap to a large extent. But the main point of contention is participation in the current government and the compromises that this entails on traditional left-wing issues. It remains to be seen if the left will sort itself out and can find its place in Poland's increasingly right-wing political landscape.

The campaign starts now

Following Nawrocki's electoral victory, Tusk's cabinet's reform plans are off the table. Although the president's role is much weaker than that of the prime minister in Poland, he can still effectively obstruct government actions, either by using his veto power and refusing to sign proposed bills or by referring them to the Constitutional Tribunal for judicial review — a body that remains partisan and biased towards the PiS party. Nawrocki's bold announcements to stand firm against the government were met with a response from Tusk: he would welcome cooperation with open arms, but be 'ruthless' if need be.

This confrontational rhetoric becomes more understandable when considered in the context of the electoral cycle. The next parliamentary election in Poland is scheduled for 2027. Donald Tusk and his Civic Coalition are facing the enormous task of turning the tide in the country and winning back the hearts of disappointed Poles. With government reconstruction underway, Tusk may even be forced to make way for a new leadership in order to neutralise his polarising effect.

In the opposite corner, the PiS party is preparing to reclaim power, orchestrating a great comeback and using the president-elect as a strategic asset in this battle. The far right sits and waits, calculating which alliances

to enter without losing their anti-establishment charm. And the left is (once again) fighting for survival. They must avoid a repeat of 2015, when no left-wing lawmakers made it to the Polish parliament.

A crawling election campaign is about to begin now, and Poland is set to face turbulent times.



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