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Walls, warnings and worn-out promises

Despite heated debates, Poland's presidential candidates agree on one thing: migration

The first round of the Polish presidential election is scheduled for 18 May. Although the president has limited powers under the constitution, he can, as Andrzej Duda is currently doing, complicate the government's work. He has also traditionally played a vital role in shaping policy towards Poland's eastern neighbours, primarily Ukraine.

The two most promising candidates for the presidency are Warsaw's Mayor Rafał Trzaskowski of the ruling Civic Coalition and Karol Nawrocki, officially independent but de facto supported by the PiS. Nawrocki is currently the director of the Institute of National Remembrance. Six weeks ahead of the voting day, the real winner of the elections is already known, however: Sławomir Mentzen from *Konfederacja*. Securing the support of 15-20 per cent of voters, he made this far-right party a third political force in the country.

In general, Trzaskowski and Nawrocki's election campaign is a fight for Mentzen's electorate, which admires libertarianism, praises American-style capitalism and hates diversity, including migration. This is despite the fact that Poland's migrant population is increasingly diverse: one million are labour migrants from Ukraine who arrived before 2022, and 950 000 Ukrainians hold temporary protection status. The second largest diaspora is Belarusians, at approximately 300 000, and the number of migrants from India, Central Asian countries, Vietnam, Georgia and Moldova is growing steadily.

Illusion of difference

The election lacks a central theme; the ruling Civic Coalition has failed to develop a socio-economic platform that would capture people's minds and has also been unable to roll back the judicial reform introduced by PiS. PiS, for its part, has not come up with anything new since the 2023 parliamentary elections. Instead, the party's politicians try to stoke fears

of Germany, which they claim is on the verge of reaching an agreement with Russia, while at the same time quite willing to support Donald Trump's foreign policy initiatives.

Two years ago, the Civic Coalition still positioned itself as a pro-migrant party with deep respect for human rights and accused the PiS of violating international law at the Polish-Belarusian border. Today, a consensus has emerged among all political forces in Poland, with the exception of the left, around a sceptical (and sometimes hostile) attitude towards migration, including both labour and refugee migration. This shift is particularly striking, given that more than 80 per cent of adult migrants in Poland are employed. Unlike in Germany, they do not receive social security assistance. Instead, Poland's appeal lies in its relatively straightforward procedure for obtaining legal work and residence permits.

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In 2022, Poles demonstrated a heart-warming commitment to hosting Ukrainian refugees, with almost 90 per cent supporting state aid for Ukrainians. Today, 88 per cent support the idea of limiting family payments (€180 per month for each child) for Ukrainian refugees. Mentzen initiated this topic last year, and Trzaskowski and Nawrocki expressed their support in January.

According to Trzaskowski, only Ukrainians with temporary protection who work and pay taxes in Poland will be eligible to receive the funding. However, specific requirements, such as minimum annual income and tax payments, have not yet been disclosed. Although 70 per cent of Ukrainian refugees are employed and their tax deductions and contributions to the pension fund cover the costs of supporting them, the idea of limiting the funds became so popular among Poles who say they are tired of war and want to show their dissatisfaction with Ukraine, which, according to numerous opinion polls, does so little for Poland.

When PiS ruled the country, the Civic Coalition hardly criticised pushbacks of asylum seekers at the Polish-Belarusian border. And when opinion polls showed public support for harsh measures, the new liberal government adopted the hybrid war narrative from PiS and *Konfederacja* and started to build a higher wall at the border. Tensions have remained high since the summer of 2021, when the Lukashenka regime orchestrated unregulated migration to destabilise the EU. The crisis has not abated: between 1 January and 10 March 2025, approximately 1 200 people were caught crossing the Polish-Belarusian

border — a 25 per cent increase compared to the same period last year.

Tusk's government even temporarily suspended the acceptance of refugee applications at the Polish-Belarusian border, effective on 28 March. The law was adopted several weeks ago and the government promised that it would only be applied in extreme cases. However, the ban came into force the very next day, when the president signed the law. Protests by numerous human rights organisations have been described as 'naïve' and 'irresponsible'.

A migrant hoax

The EU Pact on Asylum and Migration, on the other hand, is a marginal campaign topic. Tusk refuses to ratify the pact due to the non-acceptance of the refugee relocation mechanism, despite the pact directly excluding Warsaw from this mechanism, while a significant number of Ukrainian refugees reside here under temporary protection status.

Despite the government's rejection of the pact and its critical attitude towards readmission mechanisms, *Konfederacja* sympathisers have repeatedly tried to block the border with Germany on the pretext that the Germans are sending migrants to Poland under the Dublin Protocol. The protests in Zgorzelec, for example, were led by Robert Bąkiewicz, an ultra-rightist who had previously organised anti-Ukrainian protests on the eastern border. The protesters demanded the introduction of permanent controls along the entire land border and used the topic of migration to pump anti-German and anti-EU sentiment.

In its search for issues that can attract the attention of the right-wing political electorate, the Polish government is promoting the story of large-scale migrant crime. Although the percentage of criminal offences among migrants in Poland is lower than among the local population, the issue of deporting those migrants who have been arrested and accused of crimes has become the flagship Tusk promo on social networks. The Ministry of the Interior has already specially arranged the deportation of several dozen Georgian citizens on specially prepared military planes for the cameras.

While experts stress that integration is key to successful migration politics and social cohesion, little is being

The government is also continuing to restrict the issuing of student and work visas to countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The deputy interior minister, Maciej Duszczyk, suggests that Poland has already reached its maximum capacity in terms of integrating migrants, so it would be irresponsible to

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increase the number of foreigners eligible to stay in Poland. In general, Duszczyk strongly advocates for Warsaw to adopt a very selective approach towards immigration, inviting doctors, medical staff, and essential low-skilled workers, while freezing other tracks. To boost payments to the Polish Retirement Fund, a proposal has been made to issue work permits only to migrants who work in Poland under a full employment contract, which currently accounts for less than 40 per cent of the workforce.

While experts stress that integration is key to successful migration politics and social cohesion, little is being done in Poland to achieve this goal. Before the presidential elections, the government planned to create a network of EU-funded 'Foreigners Integration Centres' throughout the country. For the first time, the Polish state would provide migrants with language courses, psychological assistance and legal advice. However, the project was delayed following criticism from PiS and *Konfederacja*.

Efforts to facilitate the adaptation of migrants in Poland still rest on the shoulders of the third sector, as they did during the PiS era. If Trzaskowski wins, the Civic Coalition may talk more calmly about migration and launch the promised integration projects. In the long term, however, the campaign rhetoric about migration as a 'threat' and a 'necessary evil' only strengthens the positions of the PiS and the *Konfederacja*.



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