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ANALYSIS

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Presidential elections or referendum on Tusk's government?

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Summary

Poland has a new president. Well, it will have one, in August. It will be Karol Nawrocki, who narrowly won the presidential election. The opposition Law and Justice candidate defeated his rival Trzaskowski. The turnout was a record: more than 70%. On the other hand, the close result with such a large number of people once again shows the deep polarization of Polish society. Nawrocki's victory is unlikely to have a significant impact on the direction of foreign policy. Problems for the Tusk government are to be expected mainly on the domestic scene.

Key takeaways

- Karol Nawrocki is the winner of the Polish presidential election, winning 50.89% of the vote. He was voted for mainly by people living in small towns, the less educated, the elderly and, surprisingly, also by young voters.
- The close result and the record turnout testify to the polarization of Polish society.
- The election can be interpreted as a vote on Donald Tusk's government. The victory of the opposition candidate means a postponement of key reforms. Tusk will ask for confidence in the Sejm.
- The direction of foreign policy is likely to remain unchanged, with an emphasis on security, strengthening ties with the United States and strengthening the role within the European Union.

It was a fight to the last minute, and one of the closest elections Poland has ever seen. Conservative Karol Nawrocki beat his rival Rafal Trzaskowski by less than two percentage points (1.78%). “For participating in the presidential election. For fulfilling your civic duty. For taking responsibility for Poland. Congratulations to the Winner! Stay strong, POLAND," the winner wrote on the social network X (Karol Nawrocki, 2025). A record number of voters took part in the second round of the presidential election, which took place on Sunday, June 1. 10.6 million people voted for Nawrocki, while 380,000 fewer Poles cast a ballot for Trzaskowski. Nawrocki will succeed his party colleague Andrzej Duda as president.

Who is Karol Nawrocki

The image of a tough guy, an amateur boxer and until recently someone virtually unknown - this is the new Polish president Karol Nawrocki. A historian who ran with the support of the opposition national-conservative Law and Justice party.

Nawrocki was born in 1983 in Gdańsk. He has a PhD in history and an MBA in program and project management. He was the director of Gdansk's World War II Museum and now heads the Institute of National Remembrance. He is also the author and editor of several books and dozens of scholarly and journalistic articles. He concentrates on the topics of Polish anti-communist opposition, organized crime under communism, and the history of sports.

The polarization of Polish society as a result of the elections

This year's presidential election was a record in terms of voter turnout. 71.63 percent of all eligible voters went to the polls. In absolute numbers, Nawrocki received the second highest number of votes in a presidential election held after the fall of communism. Only Lech Walesa had more in 1990.

But the presidential elections once again highlighted a long-standing phenomenon of Polish society, its polarization. Defacto, a 50% victory for one candidate with such a high turnout means that a good half of the people think something completely different. At first glance, one can see the gap between the more liberal big cities and the conservative smaller towns and rural areas. Then there is the gap between the EU supporters and the favourites of a strong nationalist state, or if you like, between the liberals and the followers of traditional values and a strong Catholic Church.

If we look at more detailed statistics, we get the following results (National Election Commission, IPSOS, 2025):

The government candidate Trzaskowski won more votes in cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants. He was voted for by people with a high school and university education. He leaned more towards women than men. He won the sympathy of businessmen and managers, but completely lost out to farmers. Students and middle-aged people wanted him as their president.

The election winner Nawrocki won over the inhabitants of small towns and villages. People with a primary education or an education certificate voted for him, and most of them were men. He received overwhelming support from the farmers (probably because of his attitude towards Ukraine and stopping its membership). He leaned more towards workers, pensioners, and the unemployed. In terms of the voter base by age, he got votes from young people, and voters under 39 as well as those 60 and over.

Political congratulations from around the world

In the first days after the elections, congratulations addressed to the new Polish President came from all over the world. Hungary is among the first. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán openly supported Nawrocki before the election, and his victory is “a victory for patriots,” the head of diplomacy there wrote on Facebook (Péter Szijjártó, 2025). President Peter Paul believes that “Poland will continue to develop its democratic and pro-Western orientation and that our countries will continue mutually beneficial cooperation.” (Petr Pavel, 2025). Very similar messages - especially emphasizing the strengthening of the rule of law and democracy - were heard from Germany and France.

Karol Nawrocki has US President Donald Trump as his role model. The latter expressed his support for him by, among other things, hosting him at the White House two weeks before the start of the election and a joint photograph gave the outlines of his entire campaign. After his ally's victory, Trump said that the win had shocked everyone in Europe. “Congratulations Poland, you picked a WINNER,” he wrote on Truth Social (Donald Trump, 2025). The secretary of state, Marco Rubio, touted that this would be “the most ambitious alliance in our shared history in defense, energy and trade,” (Marco Rubio, 2025).

Of course, congratulations also came from Ukraine. Warsaw is one of Kiev's closest allies in the war against Russia. President Volodymyr Zelensky wrote in a Polish-language commentary on the X network that he was counting on fruitful cooperation. Indeed, it is possible that this will shake out a bit in the future. Nawrocki does support giving aid to the invaded country. But he also says that Poland must first help itself and then others. This is a clear reference to the generous aid being given to Ukrainian refugees. At the same time, the new head of state does not agree with Ukraine joining NATO.

Poland is considered the strongest - key - player in Eastern Europe. After all, not only does it border Ukraine, Belarus and the Kaliningrad region are right next door. Warsaw has (therefore) long invested exceptionally high amounts in defence, and this year has committed to allocating 4.7% of its gross domestic product. This is also why Nawrocki will be attending various key NATO meetings. Secretary General Mark Rutte congratulated him on his election and is said to be looking forward to the forthcoming meeting of the eastern wing countries in Vilnius.

The political problem inside Poland

While Nawrocki was celebrating, tears were flowing in government circles. The victory of the opposition party candidate means a big defeat for Donald Tusk's government and his efforts to push through key reforms will be forgotten. Nawrocki can be expected to block many of the cabinet's efforts with perhaps even more zeal than his predecessor Andrzej Duda. If Prime Minister Tusk was expecting change and looking ahead to a brighter tomorrow, his hopes have faded.

The effort to restore the independence of the Polish judiciary, which Tusk and Trzaskowski had planned, resonated most abroad. According to domestic and foreign critics, the system came under the control of politicians under the previous Law and Justice governments. Nawrocki's victory means the end of the chances of restoring the rule of law, according to Bartlomiej Przymusiński, head of the Iustitia judges' association. “The courts will continue to be in a gigantic crisis, their situation cannot be healed without new laws and these will be vetoed by the president,” he said (CT24, 2025).

However, it must also be said that the new president and the government agree on a number of issues. In particular, on the need to strengthen security or on the fact that Russia is the main enemy.

And there is also the need to maintain a strong transatlantic link. There is also agreement on the need for Poland to be active and to have a strong voice in the European Union. But the problem is - although not so pronounced, because the country has traditionally been largely united on foreign policy - that the two camps are already diverging on how to achieve all this.

The end of Donald Tusk?

The elections can also be seen as a referendum on the Tusk government. The Poles knew that if they chose a conservative candidate, they would be giving the cabinet a red card. While Trzaskowski had the support of most of the media in the campaign, he also had the support of the state, and he is an experienced politician, mayor of Warsaw, etc. etc., he still lost against a relatively inexperienced man. It is obvious at first glance that the Poles are not happy with the Tusk government. The reckoning with predecessors as the main political agenda no longer appeals, on the contrary, people see that state institutions are not functioning as they should and, for example, key projects (nuclear power plant, transport) are stalled or running only with difficulty.

Opposition leader Jaroslaw Kaczyński has called on Tusk to resign over the vote. Although he does not want to quit at first, he announced in a televised speech that he will ask parliament for confidence in his government. "The first test will be a vote of confidence, which I will ask the Sejm for in the near future. I want everyone - including our opponents at home and abroad - to see that we are prepared for this situation, that we understand the gravity of the moment and that we do not intend to retreat even one step," he said (Ceske Noviny, 2025).

If the cabinet can withstand this extraordinary meeting, it will face difficult times. The new President will not give his political opponents anything for free. And fear of coalition fragmentation and eventual collapse looms. Early parliamentary elections may well be in the cards. Ordinary ones would not take place until 2027.

Conclusion

The presidential election is a big win for conservatives and a tough defeat for liberals. Or to put it another way: the presidential election is a crushing debacle for Donald Tusk's government. Karol Nawrocki may have won, but his mandate will be very weak. A good half of Poles will not see him as their president, to put it with exaggeration. The close election result has once again highlighted a phenomenon typical of Polish society, namely its fragmentation, which has been evident within Poland since at least 2010.

Donald Tusk must prepare for a very difficult period. He can probably forget all the key reforms he has ever planned. For Nawrocki, under the influence of the opposition Law and Justice party, will do everything he can to dismantle the cabinet so that early elections can be called.

The Earth is in for a challenging few months of bickering, fighting and sticks thrown at it. At a time when a strong leader is needed on NATO's eastern flank, and when the European Union is looking for a leader, Poland is in danger of paralysis and stagnation.

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