

Poland Prepares 'Absolutely Huge' Welcome for Trump



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WARSAW—Like many of his fellow Polish pro-government lawmakers, Dominik Tarczynski is sending a busload of constituents to Warsaw on Thursday to cheer for President Donald Trump. The buses are being provided by a foundation close to the governing party.

“It’s going to be huge — absolutely huge,” Mr. Tarczynski said of the coming welcome for Mr. Trump. “They just love him, the people in Poland — they just really love him.”

Poland is working to put on a hero’s welcome for Mr. Trump as he prepares to give a major speech to thousands of Poles in a Warsaw square. Behind that effort is a recognition across the continent that Mr. Trump has the potential to change the balance of power in Europe.

President Barack Obama formed a close bond with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and backed her liberal worldview, her acceptance of immigrants, and her support for a deeply integrated European Union. Now it is nationalist governments such as Poland’s that hope Mr. Trump will see them as ideological kindred spirits and back their push to loosen the European Union and rebalance it away from Berlin.

“There’s this new success — Trump’s visit,” Jaroslaw Kaczynski, chairman of Poland’s ruling Law and Justice party, said at a party congress over the weekend. Tweaking European officials who are nervous that Mr. Trump’s visit could deepen the divide on the continent, Mr. Kaczynski went on: “They’re envious of it!”

Poland, where the conservative Law and Justice government took over in 2015, is locked in an escalating feud with the EU’s executive body in Brussels and with Western European capitals. The European Commission has said the government’s changes to the Polish judicial system, including appointing its own judges to the Constitutional Court, undermine the rule of law.

French President Emmanuel Macron suggested Poland was rejecting European democratic principles and treating the bloc like “a supermarket,” implying it is taking advantage of the EU without following all of its norms.

German politicians often slam Poland for failing to take in refugees and for reducing press freedoms.

In Mr. Trump, some Polish politicians and commentators see a leader who has campaigned against accepting refugees and criticized the EU and Germany’s influence in the bloc.

“Regarding refugees, the Polish government has the same position as Americans — we want strict restrictions on refugees,” said Krzysztof Mróz, a Law and Justice lawmaker who plans to dispatch two buses full of Trump fans — 98 people — from his district at 2 a.m. on Thursday morning for the 300-mile drive to Warsaw.

In lobbying for Mr. Trump’s visit in recent months, Polish officials made a promise of a positive reception for the president part of their pitch. Polish Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski said in an interview Wednesday with the Wall Street Journal that he told Mr. Trump, on the sidelines of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization summit in Brussels in May: “Please visit us, your soldiers are already here, you can follow, and you can visit a country which is friendly.”

Mr. Trump responded, according to Mr. Waszczykowski, that “Polish Americans helped him win” the presidential election.

“I said, ‘Well, we can help you once again ... if you visit us and cooperate with us,’” Mr. Waszczykowski recalled.

But some critics of Poland’s government are wary of Mr. Trump’s trip. Bartosz Wieliński, foreign editor of the liberal *Gazeta Wyborcza* newspaper, said the government appeared to be turning Mr. Trump’s speech into a “partisan spectacle” and that his public reception would amount to a “Potemkin village.”

“This visit, I think, is a kind of opportunity for the ruling government party to show that Poland is not completely isolated internationally,” said Rafal Pankowski, a Warsaw political scientist.

In Western Europe, some officials worry that Mr. Trump will fan the flames of anti-immigrant, anti-European Union sentiment just like he endorsed Brexit ahead of the British referendum on leaving the EU last summer.

“It’s clear that what the Poles want is to turn their back on France and Germany,” a senior EU official said. “Trump is surely not helping.”

Polish officials say Mr. Trump’s visit isn’t about deepening the east-west gulf in the EU, but about backing up Poland on issues including countering Russia and on energy security.

“I don’t think there is a justification to connect the visit of President Trump in Poland to the concept of dividing Europe,” Mr. Waszczykowski said. “He’s going, just by his presence, to appreciate our efforts, appreciate our achievements.”

To be sure, many Poles are wary of Mr. Trump, in part because of his calls for closer cooperation with Russia — a country that some of them see as an existential threat.

According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted this spring, 23 percent of Poles are confident that Mr. Trump will do the right thing in world affairs, compared with 11 percent across the border in Germany.

The preparations for Mr. Trump’s visit — a welcome that Mr. Tarczynski said will be far more “emotional” than Warsaw’s receptions for Mr. Obama — are the latest example of countries jockeying for advantage as the U.S. president puts past American foreign-policy tenets into question. In addition to speaking to Poles at a public square, Mr. Trump will address 12 central European, Baltic, and Western Balkan leaders who are gathering in Warsaw.

Several organizations close to the Law and Justice party are also drumming up supporters to cheer for Mr. Trump. One of them, the nationalist *Gazeta Polska Clubs*, is touting Mr. Trump’s address in Warsaw on Thursday as comparable to John F. Kennedy’s “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech of 1963.

Mr. Kaczynski, Poland’s most powerful politician, even posed in a red “Make America Great Again” baseball cap in April, a Trump trademark. He did so in a meeting with Matthew Tyrmand, a Polish-American journalist who has written about Poland for the conservative U.S. outlet *Breitbart News*.

“You’re dealing with a political dynamic in Poland on the ground that understands Trumpian populism,” Mr. Tyrmand said. Mr. Tyrmand said, “has huge implications for reshaping the geopolitics in a new presidential era.”

U.S. officials say Mr. Trump’s trip will be about strengthening trans-Atlantic bonds and supporting one of America’s staunchest allies. Poland is one of the few North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies to meet the organization’s target of spending 2% of its gross domestic product on defense, White House national security adviser H.R. McMaster said last week.

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