

Poland re-elects president who creates 'dangerous' society for gays, advocates say



By Tim Fitzsimons
July 13, 2020

Andrzej Duda, a conservative who ran on an anti-LGBTQ platform, narrowly defeated Warsaw's liberal mayor Sunday to win a second, five-year term.



Protesters demonstrate against Polish president Andrzej Duda during his presidential campaign rally in Wieliczka, Poland, on July 9th, 2020.

Polish President Andrzej Duda, a conservative with the ruling Law and Justice party who ran on an anti-LGBTQ platform, narrowly won a second, five-year term in a bitterly fought weekend election, defeating the liberal Warsaw mayor, according to a near-complete count of votes.

Human rights and LGBTQ advocates warned that Duda's victory could signal a new assault on human rights, even as his razor-thin margin of victory shows how politically

polarized Poland has become — particularly over LGBTQ issues, according to Rafal Pankowski, a sociology professor at the Collegium Civitas in Warsaw.

“It is quite important to stress — it was a very close race,” Pankowski said. “The polarization is very, very strong, to the point where friends and family — within families — people stop talking to each other.”

The high voter turnout during a pandemic reflected the election’s huge stakes and the deep cultural divisions in this European Union nation. Even before Duda’s win, Poland’s divide over LGBTQ issues was on international display when a gay politician named Robert Biedron ran in an earlier round of Poland’s presidential election, drawing comparisons to former South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg’s U.S. primary run.

During his first term, Duda made headlines for saying LGBTQ ideology was worse than communism — comments he later walked back — and during this campaign he pledged to ban same-sex marriage and LGBTQ adoption rights.

Pankowski said that one homophobic catchphrase came to dominate Duda’s campaign: “LGBT are not people” — a shorthand version of a longer phrase that embroiled a Law and Justice member of parliament after he uttered it on TV: “LGBT are not people, they are an ideology.”

When Duda later said he supported the embattled lawmaker and repeated the phrase at a political rally, Pankowski said, “I think that was the highest level endorsement of homophobic hate speech we could imagine — and it was not a one-off thing.”

Philippe Dam, Human Rights Watch’s advocacy director for Europe and Central Asia, said that Duda’s first term drove polarization around the issues of women’s rights, sexual rights and LGBTQ issues more generally, all of which “move away from EU principles.”

“Even the rhetoric of local administrations establishing LGBT-free zones, the impact of the rhetoric used by the candidate for president, really created a context of demonization of LGBT people,” Dam said. “And that itself is really dangerous in a modern society.”

So-called LGBT-free zones — a conservative effort to pass nonbinding resolutions opposing “LGBT ideology” — have now been established in towns and municipalities covering roughly a third of Poland’s area, according to Pankowski. These “zones” were also publicized by *Gazeta Polska*, a right wing tabloid supportive of the Law and Justice party, in the form of stickers included with issues last year.

Last month, in the heat of the presidential election, Poland’s Jewish leaders condemned the growth of anti-LGBTQ rhetoric, saying, “We Jews — the descendants of Holocaust survivors — cannot and will not remain indifferent to words that would dehumanize LGBT persons.”

Also in June, Duda received an apparent endorsement from President Donald Trump with a last-minute White House visit, during which Trump praised the Polish leader, saying, “He’s doing a terrific job. The people of Poland think the world of him.”

Alphonso David, president of the Human Rights Campaign, an LGBTQ advocacy group, condemned Duda’s White House visit at the time, calling it “a clear and unambiguous attempt to leverage Trump’s anti-LGBTQ rhetoric in the Polish elections.”

Pankowski, who is also a member of Poland’s Never Again human rights group, said that Duda’s party exploits homophobia as a political weapon.

“In some ways it was a cynical calculation,” Pankowski said of Duda coming out against same-sex marriage — a political issue so controversial as to not even be under consideration in Poland. “I think in a way those issues were artificially put on the agenda in order to create polarization.”

Pawel Knut, a Polish human rights attorney, wrote in an op-ed for NBC News THINK that Duda’s campaigning against LGBTQ issues is “particularly effective in distracting public opinion and redirecting attention from other more important problems.”

“A recent example of this strategy occurred in April, when in the middle of the first wave of the pandemic, Law and Justice unexpectedly introduced a bill in parliament called the ‘Stop Pedophilia Act,’ which proposed penalizing members of the ‘LGBT lobby’ for providing reliable sex education,” Knut wrote.

“The bill caused quite a media stir, diverting public attention from COVID-related problems,” he continued. “It eventually became buried in parliamentary committees, its propaganda mission complete.”

Duda's second term runs until 2025.

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