

# Why the 2015 presidential election in Poland could be closer than many expected

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*Poland will hold a presidential election on 10 May. **Aleks Szczerbiak** assesses the main contenders, noting that despite a shaky start to his campaign, the incumbent President Bronisław Komorowski remains a firm favourite to win. Nevertheless, the fact that he is projecting himself as a non-partisan candidate will limit the political momentum afforded to his party, Civic Platform, ahead of parliamentary elections later in the year.*



Last month the starting gun was fired on the Polish presidential election campaign. The vote is due to be held on 10 May with a second round run-off two weeks later if no candidate obtains more than 50 per cent of the votes. The President retains some significant powers, including the right to initiate legislation, refer bills to the Constitutional Tribunal, nominate a number of key state officials, and, perhaps most significantly, a suspensive veto that requires a two-thirds parliamentary majority to over-turn. However, the President's competencies are much less significant than those of, say, his French counterpart, and real executive power lies with the Prime Minister.

The presidential poll should, therefore, be seen as a precursor to the parliamentary elections scheduled for October which will determine the shape of the Polish political scene for several years to come.

Opinion polls currently show the two main parties – the ruling centrist **Civic Platform** (PO), led by prime minister Ewa Kopacz, which has been in office since 2007, and the right-wing **Law and Justice** (PiS) party led by Jarosław Kaczyński, which was in government between 2005-7 – running neck-and-neck.

The Civic Platform-backed incumbent, Bronisław Komorowski, is extremely popular and is odds-on favourite to secure re-election, possibly even in the first round. Polls conducted by the CBOS agency last month found that he enjoyed a 75 per cent approval rating, easily the highest of any Polish politician, and that 71 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the way that he was performing his presidential duties.

The choice of election date – which was determined by the Civic Platform-backed speaker of the Sejm, the more powerful lower house of the Polish parliament – is also felt to be advantageous to Mr Komorowski. In addition to the fact that there are a number of important national commemorations at the beginning of May, the presidential poll will take place two days after Poland hosts a high profile remembrance service to mark the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War in which the President will take centre stage (this is also the last day on which election campaigning is allowed).

As well as building support and influence in the media, Komorowski's political strategy has been based on projecting himself (opposition parties argue, disingenuously) as a non-partisan 'President of all Poles'. Poles prefer their



Bronisław Komorowski, Credit: PolandMFA (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

President to at least give the impression of being above the day-to-day political fray and, from the outset, Komorowski tried to project an image of his presidency as being based on co-operation and dialogue.

In setting out his bid for re-election, he thus presented himself as a non-partisan 'civic' candidate with a broad political and social base of support. The fact that he has tried to subtly distance himself from the ruling party was encouraged, no doubt, by the fact that many Poles have grown tired of a government in its eighth year in office. But it also limits the political momentum that Civic Platform might derive from his victory. Moreover, given that he enters the campaign with such high expectations, failure to secure a first round victory, or at least a decisive second round win with more than 60 per cent of the votes, will be seen as a disappointment and could also detract from the positive impact of his re-election for Civic Platform's prospects.

### **Andrzej Duda lays down the gauntlet**

Komorowski's main rival is Law and Justice candidate Andrzej Duda, a well-respected 42-year-old lawyer and MEP, but relatively unknown and untested in such a high profile contest. Mr Kaczyński decided not to stand this time, feeling that he was unlikely to repeat his relatively good result in the previous election when he lost narrowly, securing 47 per cent in a second round run-off. However, having been criticised initially as 'worthy but dull', Duda started to develop some traction last month following a barnstorming speech at the high-profile US-style convention launching his campaign.

Projecting himself as a young and energetic challenger, he promised to be an active President who would improve social dialogue, and made a specific pledge to try and reserve the government's extremely unpopular pension reforms which raised the retirement age to 67. At the same time, in order to consolidate his base of support among Law and Justice core voters, Duda said that he would model himself on President Lech Kaczyński, Jarosław's twin brother, whose term of office ended abruptly when he died in the 2010 Smolensk air crash and who is an iconic figure on the Polish right.

This contrasted starkly with Komorowski's ponderous and anaemic campaign launch held on the previous day at a Civic Platform party council meeting, where he gave the impression that the election was a foregone conclusion. As a consequence, having initially shown support for Komorowski at around 50-

55 per cent compared with 15-20 per cent for Duda, for the first time a number of polls suggested that a second round run-off was a serious possibility. Duda's strategic objective is thus to increase his support to around the 30 per cent level currently enjoyed by Law and Justice in the polls which, if the other candidates can also peel away enough of the President's support, should ensure that he goes head-to-head with Komorowski in the second round.

The chances of a second round were increased by the decision at the end of January by the agrarian [Polish Peasant Party](#) (PSL), Civic Platform's junior governing coalition partner, to stand its own candidate. Presidential elections have always been difficult for the party as this is the poll in which its supporters are least likely to vote – in the last two contests its candidates secured less than 2 per cent of the vote. Party strategists were, not surprisingly, extremely concerned that a poor presidential election result would damage morale in the run up to the parliamentary poll and some even favoured supporting Komorowski instead of standing their own candidate.

However, in the event the party decided that it was too risky to absent itself from an electoral process that will



Andrzej Duda, Credit: Piotr Drabik (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

dominate the political scene for the next couple of months. Consequently, it nominated Adam Jarubas, the party's articulate and up-and-coming 40-year-old deputy leader, who is nevertheless little known outside of his home province of Świętokrzyskie where he has been regional assembly leader since 2006; his poll ratings are currently in the 1-3 per cent range.

### A weak challenge from the left

Much will also depend on the vote share obtained by left-wing candidates. The main grouping on the Polish left is currently the [Democratic Left Alliance](#) (SLD), the once-powerful communist successor party that governed Poland from 1993-97 and 2001-5, but which has been in the doldrums since its support collapsed in the 2005 parliamentary election and is now struggling for its future survival.

Knowing that they faced almost-certain defeat, the Alliance struggled to find a high profile, party-aligned figure willing to contest this election. Party leader Leszek Miller – a wily political operator who, in his heyday during an earlier stint as Democratic Left Alliance leader, served as prime minister from 2001-2004 – ruled himself out, knowing that a poor result would weaken his already precarious grip on the leadership.

In the event, in January the party selected a political unknown, 35-year-old historian and TV personality Magdalena Ogórek, as its candidate. Ms Ogórek lacks any real political experience and her programmatic statements include controversial policies such as a pledge to re-write Polish law from scratch. Her candidacy has generated huge media interest, but much of it is due to her striking appearance and controversial private and family life. However, while she lacks appeal with the Alliance's traditional core constituency of older voters linked to the previous communist regime, she has tried instead to position herself as an anti-establishment candidate who can articulate the concerns of alienated Polish youth.

Nonetheless, she has drawn much derision for her refusal to answer questions in press conferences and media interviews, and it will be difficult for her to

remain a credible candidate if she keeps this up for the rest of the campaign. At the moment, most polls put her in third place, but with only around 5 per cent of the vote – and if she does not secure at least 10 per cent Mr Miller could well face a leadership challenge.

Another presidential challenger on the centre-left is Janusz Palikot, a controversial and flamboyant businessman whose anti-clerical liberal [Palikot Movement](#) (RP) came from nowhere to finish third in the most recent 2011 parliamentary election with just over 10 per cent of the vote. However, in spite of re-branding itself as a more economically and socially liberal centrist grouping now called '[Your Movement](#)' (TR), his party saw its support slump and most of its parliamentary caucus defect.

Although Mr Palikot is running an energetic campaign, he is only registering around 2-3 per cent in the polls and unless he can think of a way of once-again radically re-inventing himself, he appears to be finished as a major actor on the Polish political scene. Moreover, two former members of his parliamentary caucus also announced that they would be contesting the election: Anna Grodzka, Poland's first trans-sexual parliamentarian who will be the candidate of the minuscule [Green party](#) (Zieloni); and veteran feminist campaigner Wanda Nowicka who is supported by the small [Labour Union](#) (UP).



Magdalena Ogórek, Credit: [www.sld.org.pl](http://www.sld.org.pl)

The big challenge for minor party candidates such as these is to collect the 100,000 signatures required for their names to appear on the presidential ballot paper. One who is likely to cross this threshold easily is the economically libertarian and socially conservative MEP Janusz Korwin-Mikke, a veteran eccentric of the Polish political scene whose radically Eurosceptic [Congress of the New Right \(KPN\)](#) party came a surprise fourth in last May's [European Parliament election](#) with 7.2 per cent of the vote. However, Korwin-Mikke will struggle to repeat this success after he was deposed as party leader at the beginning of the year and forced to set up his own grouping. An alternative candidate who could emerge as the 'dark horse' of the election is charismatic, union-backed rock singer and social activist Paweł Kukiz.

### **Komorowski: still the odds-on favourite?**

The presidential election is proving more difficult for Komorowski than Civic Platform strategists originally anticipated. Duda has got off to a good start and the prospects of a second round run-off now look much more likely, especially as there are several minor candidates who could peel support away from the incumbent. Moreover, even if he does not win, Duda may still give Komorowski a fright and establish himself as a rising star of the Polish right.

However, while the Law and Justice candidate has developed some momentum he is still polling below the levels of support achieved by his party. With the situation in neighbouring Ukraine so unstable and security issues remaining high on the political agenda, Komorowski's experience may also count in his favour and encourage voters to play safe. Paradoxically, a tightening of the presidential race may also help to mobilise his more passive supporters who could otherwise think the election outcome is a foregone conclusion.

Although Komorowski clearly needs to change gear and realise that the kind of passive, almost non-political, approach that works well for an incumbent President does not always succeed in an election campaign, his approval ratings are so high that, barring some major and unforeseeable political game-changer, he still remains the odds-on favourite to win.

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*Note: A version of this article originally appeared at Aleks Szczerbiak's [personal blog](#). The article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: Arkadiusz Sikorski (CC-BY-SA-3.0)*

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