

Poland's Razor's Edge: Nawrocki's Victory and the Fragile Future of Tusk's Coalition

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Cover Image Attribute: Karol Nawrocki with supporters during his campaign trail (March 22, 2025). Elected President on June 1, 2025. Source: Karol Nawrocki's Facebook page.

Poland's presidential election on June 1, 2025, delivered a result that has sent ripples through the nation's political landscape, with right-wing historian Karol Nawrocki narrowly securing victory over Warsaw's liberal mayor, Rafal Trzaskowski. Nawrocki's win, with 50.89 percent of the vote against Trzaskowski's 49.11 percent, was a stunning upset, defying exit polls that had projected a slight edge for Trzaskowski. This outcome, described by Trzaskowski himself as a "razor's edge," marks a pivotal moment for Poland, intensifying the already fraught relationship between the presidency and Prime Minister Donald Tusk's fragile coalition government. As Nawrocki prepares to assume office on August 6, his victory signals not just a shift in leadership but a deepening of

Poland's ideological divide, with significant implications for governance, policy, and the nation's place in Europe.

The election was a tightly contested battle, reflecting Poland's polarized political climate. In the first round on May 18, Trzaskowski led with 31.4 percent, followed closely by Nawrocki at 29.5 percent, setting the stage for a runoff between two candidates with starkly different visions. Nawrocki, a 42-year-old conservative historian and amateur boxer, ran as an independent backed by the Law and Justice (PiS) party, previously led by outgoing President Andrzej Duda. His campaign leaned heavily on themes of Polish sovereignty, traditional Catholic values, and resistance to what he called *"leftist ideology and Brussels centralism."* Trzaskowski, a former Secretary of State for European Affairs and a key figure in Tusk's Civic Coalition, championed a pro-European Union agenda, emphasizing Poland's integration into the European mainstream through strong ties with Germany and France. The narrow margin of Nawrocki's victory brings to light the depth of division among Polish voters, with neither side able to claim a decisive mandate.

Nawrocki's campaign resonated with voters seeking a strong, consistent leader. *"People choose someone they see as strong, clear, and consistent,"* said Liliana Smiech, chairwoman of the Foundation Council at Warsaw Institute. She noted that Nawrocki's firmness contrasted with Trzaskowski's attempts to appeal broadly, which left him appearing indecisive. *"Trzaskowski tried to be everything to everyone and ended up convincing no one,"* Smiech observed, highlighting Nawrocki's ability to project resolve in a time of uncertainty. Surprisingly, Nawrocki also captured the 18-39 age group, a demographic expected to lean liberal. *"Some expected a wave of support for the left or liberal side, especially among young people. That didn't happen,"* Smiech added, suggesting that even younger voters prioritized sovereignty and tradition over progressive ideals. This unexpected support among the youth signals a broader cultural current that Nawrocki tapped into, one that values national identity and skepticism of external influence.

The new president's background as a historian, particularly his work at the Institute of National Remembrance, shaped his public persona. His academic focus on anti-communist resistance and his tenure at the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk from 2017 to 2021 positioned him as a defender of Poland's historical narrative. His removal of Soviet memorials, which provoked Russian ire, further burnished his credentials as a staunch nationalist. However, Nawrocki's campaign was not without controversy. In 2018, he published a book under the pseudonym *"Tadeusz Batyr,"* later praising the work without disclosing his authorship, raising questions about transparency. More recently, accusations surfaced that he exploited a pensioner by acquiring a second apartment at a discount in exchange for unfulfilled care promises. Nawrocki denied the allegations and pledged to donate the flat to charity, but the scandal lingered, casting a shadow over his campaign. Despite these challenges, his messaging remained unwavering, and his alignment with PiS, coupled with an endorsement from the U.S. Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), bolstered his appeal. *"We need you to elect the right leader,"* U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem urged at CPAC's

first Poland event, calling Trzaskowski *“an absolute train wreck of a leader”* and praising Nawrocki as the candidate Poland needed.

The significance of Nawrocki's victory lies in its potential to reshape Poland's political dynamics. While the presidency is often described as ceremonial, it wields substantial influence through the power to veto legislation and shape military and foreign policy. Nawrocki has promised to use this authority aggressively, vowing to block Tusk's pro-EU agenda, including the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum and the European Green Deal, which aims for net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. His opposition to Ukraine's NATO and EU membership, despite supporting continued aid, reflects a nuanced stance shaped by Poland's proximity to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The war, which began in February 2022, remains a pressing concern for Poles, heightened by incidents like the May 2024 Warsaw shopping center fire, which the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs attributed to Russian intelligence. Nawrocki's call to increase defense spending to 5 percent of GDP aligns with widespread anxieties about Russian aggression, a position shared by Trzaskowski and other candidates.

Domestically, Nawrocki's presidency is poised to exacerbate tensions with Tusk's coalition, which lacks the three-fifths majority needed to override a presidential veto. Tusk's government, formed in late 2023, is an ideologically diverse alliance of the Civic Coalition, the Polish People's Party (PSL), and the Left, united primarily by their opposition to PiS. This coalition has struggled to deliver on key promises, such as liberalizing Poland's strict abortion laws and reforming the judiciary to reduce political influence. Outgoing President Duda already blocked similar initiatives, and Nawrocki is expected to take a more confrontational approach. *“This is a strategy of attrition,”* constitutional expert Professor Marek Chmaj noted, warning that Nawrocki's vetoes could stall not just major reforms but potentially every piece of legislation. Political scientist Rafał Chwedoruk echoed this, suggesting that PiS aims to *“harden its flank and wait for the government to unravel.”* Nawrocki's campaign rhetoric, framing his presidency as a *“barrier”* against liberal overreach, signals his intent to obstruct Tusk's agenda systematically.

The coalition's fragility is a critical vulnerability. The PSL, with its rural conservative base, has shown unease with progressive policies like abortion liberalization and climate reforms, while the Left has grown frustrated with Tusk's reluctance to push bold social changes. *“The bloc that brought Tusk to power in 2023 was never ideologically coherent,”* analysts note, and Nawrocki's veto power could exploit these fissures. The PSL, ideologically closer to PiS, might consider defecting if public support for the coalition wanes, while the Left faces a dilemma: stay in a government that compromises its values or risk ceding power to the right. Tusk's response has been to call for a vote of confidence in parliament, a move he framed as a demonstration of resolve. *“I want everyone to see, including our opponents at home and abroad, that we are prepared for this situation, that we understand the gravity of the moment but that we do not intend to withdraw a single step,”* Tusk declared. Yet, with the coalition's unity strained and legislative momentum stalled, this vote may serve more as political theater than a genuine solution.

Nawrocki's victory has also galvanized PiS, which lost power 18 months ago but now sees a path to challenge Tusk in the 2027 parliamentary elections. Opposition leader Jarosław Kaczyński called the result a "red card" for Tusk's government, proposing a technocratic cabinet to "*calm tensions*." While Tusk is likely to win the confidence vote, given his coalition's simple majority, the broader challenge remains: navigating a presidency determined to paralyze his government. Nawrocki's influence extends beyond vetoes; he can block judicial and diplomatic appointments and propose referenda, giving him multiple tools to disrupt Tusk's agenda. "*Expectations are high*," Smiech noted. "*People want someone who will defend Poland's interests, stay firm under pressure, and not give in to media or foreign influence. He's starting his term in a tough moment—exactly the kind of moment he was elected for.*"

The election also highlighted Poland's broader societal debates. Issues like abortion, with some of Europe's strictest laws, remain divisive, with Tusk admitting in August 2024 that he lacked parliamentary support to enact change. Economic concerns—taxes, housing costs, and public transport—also loomed large, alongside fears of Russian aggression. Nawrocki's pledge to lower taxes and prioritize national sovereignty resonated with voters frustrated by economic pressures and external mandates. His opposition to EU climate and migration policies reflects a broader skepticism of Brussels, contrasting with Trzaskowski's vision of a Poland integrated into the European mainstream.

Poland stands on the brink of change as Nawrocki prepares to take charge. His presidency could deepen gridlock, pushing Tusk's coalition toward collapse or early elections before 2027. Tusk's determination to press forward, as he vowed to continue "*fighting in the common struggle for the Poland we dreamt of at the dawn of independence—free, sovereign, safe and prosperous*," will be tested by Nawrocki's obstructionism. The new president's supporters, energized by his win, see him as a fighter for Poland's traditional values, as outgoing President Duda praised his "*incredibly courageous fight for Poland*." Yet, his critics fear a presidency that prioritizes division over unity, risking stagnation at a time when Poland faces pressing challenges at home and abroad. The "*razor's edge*" Trzaskowski spoke of may well define Poland's political future, as Nawrocki and Tusk maneuver through a delicate balance of power, with the nation's direction hanging in the balance.

With reporting by Al Jazeera, BBC, and TVP World.

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