

EUROPE

Poland's Ruling Nationalists Look Poised to Return to Power for Four More Years

Exit polls had the conservative Law and Justice party ahead in an election with the heaviest participation since the 1989 vote that ended Communism



People at a polling station Sunday in Warsaw, Poland. PHOTO: DARKO BANDIC/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Drew Hinshaw

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WARSAW—Poland's nationalist ruling party looked narrowly poised to return to power for another four years, according to exit polls from a general election that saw the highest turnout since 1989.

With 44 % of the vote, the governing Law and Justice party appeared set to continue in government, though it may have to form a coalition with a far-right Confederation party, a newcomer to parliament. The opposition gained on its previous results, after forming an ideologically diverse coalition, but fell short.

“We have managed to win despite this huge front against us,” said Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the Law and Justice party leader, in a televised speech. “We received a lot, but deserve more.”

Poland's election saw the heaviest participation since the 1989 vote that ended Communism and spoke to how closely watched the contest was both at home and in Europe. Law and Justice campaigned heavily on hot button cultural issues that have polarized Polish society, promising to halt the spread of gay rights, and defend the local Catholic church from the incursion of secular values.

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The government also rolled out generous social benefits, part of a playbook that has proven popular in Poland and a model for like-minded populists elsewhere on the continent. It has lowered the retirement age, announced plans to subsidize farm animals, and promises to double the minimum wage.

“They’re mixing pretty left wing policies when it comes to social welfare with right wing nationalism and identity issues, and that’s their winning formula,” said Alina Polyakova, the founding director of the Project on Global Democracy and Emerging Technology at Washington, D.C.’s Brookings Institution. “It works.”

The result was a major boost for the forces of nationalism in Europe, qualified by a result in Hungary, whose conservative government is closely allied with Law and Justice. There, the opposition to Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s Fidesz party won a mayoral race for Budapest, the Hungarian capital. Such a defeat would be the first significant electoral loss for Mr. Orban since he came to power in 2010.

“The results show this was a tough campaign,” Mr. Orban said in a speech on Sunday. “We accept the decision.”

Both Poland and Hungary have fought running battles with the European Union over charges that the two countries are becoming autocratic. The two governments have purged courts, and exerted government control over private and public media, prompting accusations that elections in each remain free, but are no longer fair. State TV in Poland runs nightly news packages praising government reforms and condemning the opposition.

“This was not a fair fight,” said Grzegorz Schetyna, head of the opposition Civic Platform party, in a postelection speech, Sunday “We did not have the feeling that we were fighting an equal partner.”

The result, if it holds, is likely to complicate the EU’s push to pressure Poland to back down on reforms seen as undemocratic. The party has proposed new laws to discourage foreign

ownership of private news media, and further reforms to put the country's supreme court under parliamentary supervision.

“Law and Justice will consider it a mandate for pushing ahead...and not without good reason,” said Aleks Szczerbiak, professor of Politics and Contemporary European Studies at the University of Sussex. “Somebody like [German Chancellor Angela] Merkel will say, right, Law and Justice is here for another four years, we’ve got to develop a pragmatic relationship, whatever the background noise is over rule of law.”

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