

# The Washington Post

*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

## An isolated Trump receives an eager Polish president

By **Ishaan Tharoor**

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**President Trump has had a miserable week.** A weekend rally in Tulsa turned into a political dud as Trump's earlier boasts of vast crowds fell flat in the face of a sea of empty seats. Current polls show his reelection prospects are grim. On other fronts, Trump is failing to put out the fires: The toll of the coronavirus keeps rising across the country; his much-touted trade deal with China is near the brink of collapse; and, incapable of offering a unifying message to the nation, Trump instead panders to his base by fearmongering over Black Lives Matter protesters and pushing sweeping cuts to legal immigration.

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So when Polish President Andrzej Duda goes to the White House on Wednesday, Trump may welcome the chance to play statesman again. Duda leads the first foreign delegation to call on Trump since the onset of the pandemic and shutdown measures in the United States. His visit will mark the 11th time the two leaders have met — in 2017, the U.S. president delivered a vintage Trumpian speech in Warsaw, steeped in a blood-and-soil nationalism rarely articulated by American leaders abroad.

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Duda is an ally of Poland's ruling right-wing Law and Justice party, or PiS, which controls the country's legislature and has been rebuked by the European Union for its steady erosion of the independence of some of Poland's major institutions, particularly the judiciary.

“After devoting its initial years in office to an illegal takeover of the country’s constitutional court and the council responsible for judicial appointments, the PiS government started persecuting individual judges in 2019,” noted a recent report from Freedom House, a Washington-based think tank that tracks democratic progress and backsliding around the globe. “By early 2020, judges who criticized the government’s overhaul or simply applied European Union law correctly were subjected to disciplinary action. Such an attack on a core tenet of democracy — that there are legal limits on a government’s power, enforced by independent courts — would have been unimaginable in Europe before PiS made it a reality.”

**Though accustomed to lectures from Brussels, Duda and his allies are hoping for a boost ahead of a June 28 presidential election.** He faces a tougher-than-expected challenge from the opposition. Some polls show that he could lose to Warsaw Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski if this weekend’s vote yields a July runoff. “Emphasizing strong relations with Washington is particularly crucial for Duda, given Poland’s growing isolation within Europe as his government has become increasingly autocratic,” my colleagues reported. “The European Union has censured Poland for failing to uphold democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights, and has said his government’s judicial revisions threaten the independence of the courts.”

That doesn’t appear to pose much of a problem for Trump, who has found common cause with a global menagerie of illiberal nationalists over the past three years. Trump and his political allies see an emerging nationalist vanguard in central European countries such as Poland and Hungary. And Duda could present the White House with an opportunity to launch another shot across the bow toward liberal Europe: The two presidents are expected to finalize the details of a number of defense deals, which include discussions over the possibility of U.S. troop deployments in Poland.



**Notes from Poland**  
@notesfrompoland



According to @gazetaprawnapl's sources, Trump and Duda will tomorrow agree:

- 2,000 US troops to (double the planned number)
- Costs mostly covered by
- Broader legal immunity for US troops than in Germany and Japan
- 5 C-130 Hercules aircraft for

Fort Trump. Amerykańscy żołnierze zostaną objęci szerokim immunitet...  
Dwukrotnie więcej żołnierzy, niż planowano, dowództwo na szczęblu korpusu, a także 30 samolotów F-16. Obecność wojsk USA będzie w ...  
[wiadomosci.dziennik.pl](https://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl)

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Duda's arrival comes in the wake of Trump's decision to withdraw about a third of U.S. forces stationed in Germany, a decision prompted both by Trump's factually challenged insistence that Germany is "delinquent" in payments to NATO, as well as his personal antipathy toward German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The announced withdrawals from Germany set off alarm bells in Congress, where both Democrats and Republicans have issued stern statements warning Trump against undermining the United States' position in Europe.

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“We would like an increase in American forces in Poland,” a person close to Duda told the Guardian. “We aren’t happy that America is withdrawing forces from Germany, we want as many U.S. forces in Europe as possible, but it’s a separate issue, the more forces we have in Poland, the better.”

**Duda’s immediate concerns are ultimately not about geopolitics.** Once seen as a shoo-in for a second term, his lead in polls has slipped amid the economic toll of the coronavirus pandemic. Like Trump, he has opted to pander to a right-wing base, harping on the threat posed by “LGBT ideology,” which he recently declared worse than communism.

Hosting Duda now, critics say, is tantamount to a kind of election interference, an act similar to Trump’s explicit currying of favor with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu before general elections in Israel. “I am troubled by President Trump’s inappropriate efforts to insert himself into Polish domestic politics and boost President Duda’s reelection with a White House visit,” Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D-Ohio), who is Polish American, said in a statement. “I am especially concerned by Duda’s recent comments comparing the LGBTQ community to communism. It insults the very people who elected him and liberty lovers everywhere, who for decades struggled to lift the yoke of communist oppression from their shoulders.”



Human Rights Campaign   
@HRC



We have sounded the alarm about increasing anti-LGBTQ

sentiments and actions in Poland over the past year.

Now, Polish President Andrzej Duda President is visiting Trump — a clear and unambiguous attempt to amplify a hateful platform.



HRC Condemns Polish President's Visit to White House

Polish President Andrzej Duda will visit the White House this week in an effort to bolster his anti-LGBTQ re-election strategy.

[hrc.org](https://hrc.org)

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The White House visit “legitimizes Duda’s platform, which in the past few weeks has seen homophobic and anti-Semitic messages, and has scapegoated minorities,” Zselyke Csaky, research director for Europe and Eurasia at Freedom House, told Today’s WorldView. She emphasized how high the stakes were for Polish democracy: “What we see right now is that there’s no stopping for the ruling party. If it can go ahead unchallenged, then it’s really very difficult to fix the damage.”

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