

Poland in the run-up to presidential elections

Brigitte Fehlau
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Presidential elections are scheduled to take place in Poland on October 8. About a dozen hopefuls have announced their candidacy to date, including a number of right-wing nationalists and well-known figures.

Over a month ago the Polish ruling coalition of the AWS (Election Campaign-Solidarity) and the UW (Freedom Union) fell apart after three and a half years in government. The head of that coalition, Jerzy Buzek of the AWS, went on to form a minority government.

The end of the coalition was preceded by a long period of dispute between the AWS and the UW. The UW accused Buzek of being incapable of keeping AWS representatives in the Sejm (the Polish parliament) in line with governmental policy. AWS representatives had continually blocked legislation the government was determined to see passed. Indeed, widely varying interests (including some promoting and others opposing entry into the European Union) exist within the AWS—an alliance of about 30 small right-wing parties, all stemming from the Solidarity movement.

The government's chief aim was to fulfil the conditions set by the European Union (EU) for Poland's entry in 2003. But this invariably led to mass protests because "reforms" in the health sector, the coal and steel industries and in agriculture were seen to exacerbate poverty and unemployment. Due to these protests, the government was forced to back-pedal, creating enormous pressure as the time limit for fulfilling EU conditions nears.

The result was that all five ministers from the UW—among them Finance Minister Leszek Balcerowicz and Foreign Minister Bronislav Geremek—resigned at the end of May, leading to the collapse of the coalition.

The current AWS minority government, again with Jerzy Buzek at the helm, now confronts the task of passing by year's end about 180 remaining laws, designed to introduce European standards into Poland.

Vladislav Bartoszewski, the newly appointed foreign minister, has announced his intention of forming a "Grand Committee for European Law" along the lines of the one envisaged by Buzek and his predecessor, Geremek. With the help of this special committee, the required laws are to hurriedly pass through the Sejm. To this end Buzek has announced the implementation of a so-called "omnibus" procedure, by which the desired changes in legislation will be made, not by treating each bill separately, but by dealing with relatively few special laws combined in a package.

Severe cuts in social programs have led to widespread protests from a population already debilitated by unemployment, poverty and rural backwardness. This anger has been focused primarily against the AWS/UW ruling coalition. The Democratic Party of the Left (SLD), the organisation which arose out of the former Stalinist ruling party, PVAP, has been able to take advantage of the governmental crisis and could receive well over 40 percent of votes in the presidential elections, according to current polls.

Not least because of the unpopularity of the Buzek government, incumbent President Alexander Kwasniewski of the SLD, currently leading in the polls with a 70 percent approval rating, appears to have a good chance of being re-elected.

Alexander Kwasniewski, who had a career in the United Polish Workers' Party (PVAP), replaced Lech Walesa as president of Poland in 1995 with the help of a highly effective media campaign. He presented himself at the time as a "modern" and "socially just" man favouring "reform". During his term in office, he vigorously pursued his aim of securing Polish membership in NATO and the EU. Poland has been a member of NATO since March 1999, and its entry into the EU has been the central concern of Polish politics in recent years.

Despite the SLD's rhetoric, Kwasniewski's position is

no different than the government's in relation to these key issues.

Marian Krzaklevski, chairman of the ruling AWS and its founder in 1996, is also standing in the presidential election. Orienting himself towards the nationalist Catholic vote, he began his political career in the trade union movement Solidarity. In 1991 he succeeded Lech Walesa as chairman of Solidarity, a post he holds to this day. During the governmental crisis a month ago he was briefly regarded as the likely successor to Jerzy Buzek. But according to the latest polls, support for his candidacy now stands at only 5 percent.

Andrzej Olechovski, a party-independent representative of the business sector, is another candidate. His popularity rating currently lies around 10 percent. A university-trained economist, Olechovski was already active in economic activities abroad in the 1970s. In the late 70s and early 80s his work in Geneva with UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) included a project concerning multilateral trade relations.

In 1985 Olechovski moved to Washington to work with the World Bank. In 1987 he returned to Warsaw as advisor to the president of the National Bank of Poland and played a leading role in coordinating relations between it and the World Bank. From 1989 he was vice-president of the National Bank, later serving as Finance and Foreign Minister in various governments. In 1994 he was suspected of being involved in corruption. He has always maintained the most cordial relations with Lech Walesa, having been a member of his team of advisors at one time.

Lech Walesa has also announced his candidacy, but this has gone largely unnoticed.

Yet another presidential candidate is Jaroslaw Kalinowski, the chairman of the Country Party (PSL), who was premier and Minister for Agriculture for six months in the Cimoszевич government in 1997. Also contesting the election are the former minister president, Jan Olszevski, from the Movement for the Reconstruction of Poland (ROP), P. Ikonowicz from the Socialist Party of Poland (PPS) and Lopuszanski, chairman of a nationalist-Catholic grouping called the Union of the Right (PP).

Andrzej Lepper, chairman of the farmers trade union "Samoobrona", has also announced his candidacy. Last year he organised radical farmer protests, often

resorting to nationalistic and fascistic slogans. Lepper, who admits to having "studied the social methods of Goebbels", was a member of the Stalinist PVAP until 1989.

A few years ago, the overwhelming majority of the Polish population was still in favour of entry into the European Union. However, the social consequences of preparations for EU entry have led to a change in mood. The EU is demanding attacks on the Polish people which will barely begin to be compensated for by the country's limited financial assistance from EU coffers. Problems are greatest in the agricultural sector, where hundreds of thousands of small farmers face ruin upon entry to the EU. At most, only a third of the existing 2 million commercial enterprises in the country will be able to survive against Western European competition.

In the past, Polish political parties in government have always hoped for subsidies from the EU, but these will not be available. In the meantime, the EU has been signalling ever more openly that the date for Poland's entry into the EU—already postponed several times—will most likely be delayed still further.

Faced with this situation, it is increasingly the case that it is not only the most extreme right-wing demagogues who are playing the nationalist card. Lech Walesa, as well as high-ranking representatives of the Catholic Church, have also been making inflammatory speeches.



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