

# Countdown to Poland's entry into the European Union

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On March 1, 2004, Poland, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta and Slovakia will become members of the European Union (EU). Of these countries, Poland has by far the largest population and the biggest economy. With a population of 36 million, Poland will also be entitled to proportionate representation within the bodies of the EU.

The EU's eastward expansion aims to secure access to markets and resources of cheap labour as well as to increase Europe's political and economic weight. Poland is currently the fourth largest foreign trading partner of the EU.

The Polish population regards EU membership with mixed feelings. Many Polish workers have relatives in EU countries or travel there on a regular basis. EU countries appear wealthy in comparison with Poland's eastern neighbours. Younger Poles in particular have illusions regarding Polish EU membership. In the referendum on European Union membership on June 7-8, 77 percent voted in favour of membership, with a 59 percent turnout.

At the same time, however, support for the populist right-wing peasant party Samoobrona (Self-defence) and the National-Clerical League of Polish Families (LPR) is growing. Both reject EU membership and are attempting to utilise widespread resentment against attacks on social gains and the impoverishment of wide layers of society for their own nationalist ends. According to recent opinion polls, the ruling SLD (Alliance of the Democratic Left), the former Stalinist party—which has consistently advocated EU membership—is opposed by 70 percent of the population.

The social situation for ordinary people has worsened dramatically since 1989. This is mainly a result of the measures carried out in recent years to meet the requirements dictated to the Polish government by the EU as a precondition of EU membership. In March 1998, Poland was accepted as an applicant for membership, and certain "priorities" were mandated. Among other issues, privatisation was to be brought to completion, progress was to be made regarding the structural reform of fishing, and farming and financial transactions were to be liberalised.

Poland's out-of-date industry and agriculture cannot

compete with its EU rivals. Ongoing privatisations and rationalisations have led to horrendous levels of unemployment and social destitution. In mining alone, 250,000 jobs have been destroyed since the reintroduction of capitalism. Official unemployment has long since exceeded the 18 percent mark, while unemployment benefits are low and are only granted to few. This directly results from the privatisation of the health and the welfare sector.

The situation facing farmers is especially bleak. While the contribution of the agricultural sector to gross national product is only 3.3 percent, about 20 percent of the Polish workforce is still employed on the land. On average, it takes 26 people to cultivate one hectare of land, meaning that Polish farmers cannot compete on the world market. At the same time, cheap subsidised products from western Europe are increasingly available on the Polish market.

Although many large and modern agricultural concerns were created during the recent structural reforms, 55 percent of all Polish farms still make up less than five hectares of land. Such farms occupy 21 percent of agricultural land. On the other hand, 19 percent of the large-scale farms cultivate 56 percent of the agricultural land. Studies have revealed that more than half (56 percent) of the farms cannot be developed and—now faced with competition from the EU—are doomed to close down. Many farmers are already only producing for their personal use, and their farms are their only protection from complete destitution. The latest structural reforms are certain to ruin millions of people.

In recent years, the cost of consumer goods has nearly risen to the level of prices within the EU, while wages have remained low. A recent study by the Economics School and the University of Warsaw established that 40 percent of Polish households have an income insufficient to meet basic needs. One quarter of the Polish population is living below the official poverty line.

The various governments that have ruled Poland since the collapse of the Eastern Bloc have had considerable difficulties pushing through their anti-social measures in the face of widespread popular opposition. The coalition of the

right-wing “Election Action Solidarity” (AWS) with the liberal “Freedom Union” (UW), which came to power in 1997, fell apart in the summer of 2000 because of conflicts within its own ranks. Conservative sections of the AWS, based on rural layers, refused to support the reforms demanded by the EU because they feared losing their last vestiges of influence. These conflicts continued during the subsequent period of rule by the minority government of the AWS.

Following elections in September 2001, both the AWS and the UW suffered devastating defeats and failed to be re-elected to the Polish parliament. The election was won by the SLD, which together with the considerably smaller Workers Union (UP) won 41 percent of the vote. The SLD and the UP formed a coalition with the Peasants Party (PSL) led by Leszek Miller. The SLD is the only major party to have consistently advocated Polish membership in the EU.

The political circles in Poland upon which the EU relies for its eastward expansion consist mainly of criminal elements that have emerged from the former Stalinist bureaucracy. When the political system in Poland collapsed at the end of the 1980s, the leadership of the Stalinist state party PZPR made a remarkable transformation. The old bureaucrats became neoliberal opportunists, who sought to line their own pockets from the coming changes. They manoeuvred themselves onto the boards of the newly privatised companies, banks and the most important media and state institutions. This is the origin of the so-called “red directors,” who today own a considerable number of Polish companies.

When the SDRP (later the SLD) was re-elected in 1993, it continued its neoliberal course, which was tailored to satisfy the interests of its clientele. At the same time, it abolished laws that had been passed by the Solidarity government. These laws were aimed at revealing the extent of connections between politicians and the former Stalinist secret police, the KGB. The old elite also re-established its positions with the state authorities and the media.

The ruling president, Alexander Kwasniewski, began his political career in the Stalinist youth organisation before rising to the highest levels of the party. In 1990, he became the chairman of the SDRP. The head of the government, Leszek Miller, was secretary of the Central Committee of the SDRP and was renowned as a Stalinist hardliner. Today he is calling for voters to support Poland’s EU membership.

The character of the ruling government became clear in the course of last year’s revelations of widespread corruption. In June of last year, Miller was suspected of having urged actor Lew Rywin to undertake bribery amounting to \$17.5 million. Although this could not be proven, during the investigation into the allegations it became apparent that the

SLD largely consists of people intent on using the party as a starting point for their own careers in big business. The fact that Miller rebuilt his cabinet after this affair did nothing to improve the government’s image.

Another revelation affected Health Minister Mariusz Lapinsky, his deputy, Waldemar Deszynski, and the head of health funds, Aleksander Naumann. It emerged that preferential treatment had been given to certain pharmaceutical companies after forms of recompense had been made to officials. After the affair became public, Lapinski was removed from both the government and the SLD.

The connections of the ruling party to criminal elements became apparent once again in Starachowice, when it was revealed that the SLD MP Andrzej Jagiello had warned the local SLD council that the central police agency of Poland was planning a specific operation. Members of the local council had established relationships with organised crime.

At the beginning of March 2003, the ruling PSL-SLD coalition fell apart. The PSL could no longer walk the tightrope of basing itself on rural layers and at the same time carrying out attacks against the weakest layers of society. In opinion polls, the PSL had increasingly lost ground to Samoobrona. Since then, the SLD has been running the country with a minority government that has little popular support. The corruption incidents have once again demonstrated the gap between the criminal elements at the top of Polish society and the majority of the population.

Poland’s EU membership will not bring social security and democracy for the Polish population. The country is being run by corrupt layers that have enriched themselves at the expense of the majority. Millions of people have been impoverished by structural reforms and privatisation. On the other hand, the ruling elites of western Europe will use the social conditions of the Polish workers as a lever to lower the living standards of their own working class. The unification of the European states is an important basis for the welfare of the Poles and all other Europeans. However, it cannot be organised by the ruling elites of the EU, but only in opposition to them based on a broad popular movement.



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