Marek Belka is new Polish head of government

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As expected, Polish Prime Minister Leszek Miller resigned his post one day after the entry of the country into the European Union (EU) on May 1. The business of government has been taken over provisionally by former Finance Minister Marek Belka, who was proposed as alternative to Miller by the Polish President Alexander Kwasniewski. Within the next two weeks, the Polish parliament (Sejm) will have to decide whether Belka should assume the post of prime minister on a long-term basis.

Miller announced his resignation after 30 Sejm deputies and senators quit the ruling Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) at the end of April to found a new party, Polish Social Democracy. The rebels were responding to an enormous drop in support for the SLD, which had plunged in opinion polls to less than 10 percent. The main reason for this slump in popularity was the severe budget cuts adopted by the government, which was, at the same time, enmeshed in a series of corruption scandals.

During Miller's period in office, official unemployment rose to nearly 20 percent. The six poorest regions incorporated into the EU on May 1 all lie inside the borders of Poland. The country's social and economic crisis is a result of privatisation and restructuring policies undertaken by the government to comply with EU membership. At the same time, Poland's already fragile system of social welfare has been further weakened. Payment of meagre unemployment relief of around 110 euros per month has been limited to one year, after which the unemployed are left with nothing. Desperation has forced some to make a living by searching through rubbish heaps; others are forced into prostitution or dig for coal with their bare hands in abandoned coal mines.

Popular discontent with the government erupted in late summer and autumn of last year in the form of numerous demonstrations. In succession, miners, health workers, peasants and taxi drivers demonstrated through the streets of Warsaw.

Ignoring the protests, Finance Minister Jerzy Hausner drew up the so-called Hausner plan, which involved further brutal cuts in social and welfare programs—in particular, reductions in pensions amounting to 32 billion zloty (6.7 billion euros). The aim was to slash the budget deficit and thereby bring Poland in line with the criteria demanded for entry into European Union.

The Miller government also drew wide criticism following its participation in the occupation of Iraq, which, according to one opinion poll (CBOS), has been rejected by 75 percent of the Polish population. In addition, a series of corruption scandals came to light involving leading politicians, including Miller himself.

When he officially takes over as prime minister, economics professor Belka will do nothing to fundamentally alter this state of affairs. Instead, it can be anticipated that current tendencies in Polish politics and business will only intensify under his leadership. Like Miller and Kwasniewski, Belka was also a member of the former ruling Stalinist party, PZPR, but he did not take up membership in the successor organisation, SdPR, which later became the SLD. He has, however, won a reputation as an advocate of brutal neo-liberal reforms. In the 1960s and 1970s, he studied in the US, at Columbia University and the University of Chicago, including a period of study under the neo-liberal economics professor Milton Friedman.

Belka was brought into the government of the post-Stalinists for the first time in 1997 under Prime Minister Cimoszewicz. He replaced Grzegorz Kolodko as finance minister and immediately pressed ahead with unpopular reforms to pensions and welfare state

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provisions. In the same year, the government was voted out of office.

When the SLD was once again voted into power in 2001, Miller reappointed Belka as finance minister. He immediately implemented harsh budget cuts in social welfare benefits. The state budget deficit for 2003 was not to exceed 40 billion zloty (8.3 billion euros). Faced with widespread hostility, the Miller government gave way somewhat and agreed to a deficit of 43 billion zloty (8.9 billion euros). In addition, the cabinet drafted legislation restricting the powers of the central bank. Both measures were unacceptable to Belka. On July 1, 2002, he explained to the daily paper *Rzeczpospolita* that he would not wait 10 minutes to resign if he thought the government was not prepared to support his economic policies. He then did quit that same month.

Since June 2003, Belka has worked in the civil administration in occupied Iraq as economic advisor to Paul Bremer. Following the planned withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq, there has been renewed debate in Poland over the possible withdrawal of Polish troops. Such a decision, however, is out of the question with Belka as head of government. Shortly after his nomination by Kwasniewski, Belka made clear his stance in an interview with the radio channel *Deutsche Welle*: “We take our international responsibilities very seriously and will not withdraw our troops from Iraq.... Otherwise, the victims of terror in Madrid will have died in vain.”

Belka has made clear that he will continue the economic policies he left off as finance minister. In his first statement following his nomination, Belka stated: “The restoration of the budget is my most important task.” He has also made clear that Jerzy Hausner will remain finance minister under his leadership and will implement his policies fully.

Should Belka fail to be confirmed as head of government by May 15, a long drawn-out process will begin that should culminate in new elections. To prevent this, Belka is now lobbying for support in the Sejm. The existing governing parties (SLD and UP) have indicated their readiness to cooperate but still do not possess the majority necessary to secure Belka’s nomination.

The new SDPL has also signalled its readiness to make a deal. The party’s founder, Marek Borowski, has declared that he is in favour of new elections but that the SDPL is also ready to work together with the SLD. Both parties have a similar political programme. Belka is also looking for support in the Sejm from smaller groupings whose future would be threatened by possible new elections. The SLD has even begun consultations with the right-wing religious Polish Family League (LPR).

This entire process has nothing to do with accepted democratic norms. In every respect, Marek Belka stands firmly for exactly those policies that led to the Miller government losing its last vestige of popular support.

At the same time, the opposition has made clear that, under its current leadership, no change can be expected. The most important opposition party, the Citizen’s Platform (PO), has repeatedly declared that the planned cuts do not go far enough. For the European elections in June of this year, the party has put up a political has-been and former prime minister, Jerzy Buzek, who suffered a catastrophic defeat in the 2001 elections because of his own austerity policies.

Absent any viable political alternative, right-wing rabble-rousers have been able to exploit the situation by diverting popular discontent into backward and reactionary directions. For the first time, opinion polls show the right-wing populist party Samoobrona of Andrzej Lepper heading the polls with 30 percent.

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