

Government crisis in Poland—prime minister to resign

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Ten months after taking power, the Polish government, led by Prime Minister Marek Belka (Democratic Left Alliance—SLD), threatens to collapse. Belka announced that he will resign on May 5 and has spoken out in favour of new elections on June 19. From this point onwards, he wants to engage himself actively in the election campaign on behalf of the newly created Democratic Party (DP).

This latest development was preceded by the withdrawal of Economics Minister Jerzy Hausner from the governing Democratic Left Alliance and increasingly hostile criticism by the parliamentary president and SLD member Włodzisław Cimoszewicz of the governing party. Belka explained that he no longer considers it possible to support a stable government based on the SLD.

Even if it appears strange for the head of government to quit the governing party and attack it in sharp tones, such manoeuvres in fact have long been an integral element in everyday political life in Poland. The dominant elite of Poland is extremely unstable. Since 1989, when the first non-Stalinist head of government, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, took power, no Polish government has survived an entire legislative period.

From 1989 to 1993 Poland was governed by no less than five different governing constellations drawn from the Solidarity movement and Catholic political parties. These right-wing forces rapidly lost any support in the population as their “shock therapy” began to bite—measures aimed at the rapid introduction of the free-market economy, the privatisation of national enterprises and the dismantling of social rights. The Democratic Left Alliance first emerged as a real force out of the elections in 1993, as an electoral alliance in which the successor organisation to the former Stalinist state party played the leading role. Together with the former coalition bloc/PSL, it won nearly two thirds of the mandates during an election with a turnout of approximately 52 percent.

After a short period of hesitation, the new government continued the course of privatisation. The former Stalinists began an orientation aimed at the country’s membership in the European Union. To this end, agriculture and industry had to be restructured, with accompanying wage cuts and mass redundancies. To implement this policy in the face of popular resistance, the SLD majority in the Polish parliament (Sejm) exhausted no less than three heads of the government—Valdemar Pavlak, Józef Oleksy and Cimoszewicz.

At the same time, the right wing reformed and established the Election-Action Solidarity (AWS) as well as the Freedom Union (UW). In light of the unpopular social policy of the former Stalinists, these two parties were able to secure the majority of seats in the elections of 1997. In the meantime, however, election turnout had sunk to 48 percent.

The AWS and UW seamlessly took over their predecessors’ policy of attacks on the country’s welfare system. They limited national pension insurance, dismantled the health system and continued the wave of comprehensive privatisations. In the summer of 2000, the UW left the government but continued to support the AWS. The UW was fearful it would lose all of its seats in parliament in the event of new elections.

When it became clear that both the AWS and UW would have no more chance in upcoming elections, the right wing reorganised itself once again and founded two new parties: the Citizen Platform (PO) and the “Law and Justice” party (PiS). Together, both organisations won less than 25 percent in the 2001 elections. The AWS and UW failed to win any representation in the new Sejm.

The SLD, on the other hand, was able to profit from the situation, having in the meantime transformed itself into a party and standing in elections in alliance with the Labour Union (UP). This electoral alliance won 41 percent of the vote. Election turnout fell once again—this time to just 46 percent.

Leszek Miller became the new prime minister. The SLD had planned to finally lead Poland into the European Union and impose all of the necessary restructuring and privatisation measures. Miller’s politics led to a rise in unemployment to almost 20 percent. At the same time, social security systems were smashed and the public health system has been shattered. Any national support for unemployed persons is minimal and in most cases is not even disbursed.

In the late summer and autumn of 2003, the government came under pressure. Miners, health service workers, farmers and taxi drivers took to the streets of Warsaw in successive demonstrations to express their hostility to the government’s antisocial policies. As opinion polls indicated a collapse of any public confidence in the government, 30 deputies withdrew from the SLD and created the Polish Social-Democracy (SdPL). Then, Miller resigned on May 2, 2003—one day after Poland’s entry into the European Union.

The instability of the ruling elite in Poland is typical of the political situation throughout eastern Europe. The elite consists partly of old Stalinist apparatchiks, who during the collapse of the Stalinist system were able to help one another take up key positions in the denationalised enterprises. The other influential layers of the ruling elite are those who have made fortunes virtually overnight, accumulating huge wealth based on criminal energy policies and the right connections. Both layers are utterly hostile to the interests of the population as a whole. During the past 15 years, they have transformed Poland into a paradise for big business and the wealthy, while large parts of the population lack the most elementary basic needs.

Every Polish government, and that of Leszek Miller in particular, has been embroiled in corruption scandals. In the initial years of the existence of the Polish Republic, the majority of parliamentary work consisted in changing laws in such a way as to ensure that the governing clique could best profit from restructuring and privatisations. In many cases, close relations were established with the underworld. Connections between the government party and criminal elements became clearly visible—e.g., in Starachowice, where it was revealed that the SLD parliamentary deputy, Andrei Jagiello, had warned SLD local government officials that the central police authority was preparing to take action against the party.

When it became clear a year and a half ago that the SLD would not

survive the next elections, a fresh round of regrouping took place within the political caste. While the opposition beat the drum of nationalism to exploit widespread fears of the consequences of European Union membership, the government camp was considering how it could prevent new elections and its imminent loss of power.

The newly founded SdPL also fared badly in opinion polls and opposed new elections, offering a coalition to the SLD, from which it had broken only few weeks previously.

After Miller's resignation, the SLD and SdPL, with the support of some non-affiliated parliamentary deputies who feared losing their seats in new elections, selected Marek Belka to be the new head of the government. Contrary to claims made by Belka, this latest manoeuvre had nothing to do with a new start, but was rather a desperate attempt to prevent dissolution of the Sejm.

Accordingly, Belka pressed ahead with the policy of the SLD. Economics Minister Hausner, who was hated for its policies cutting social programmes, remained in office, and the privatisation course was maintained.

In January of this year, a strike by railwaymen against the closure of additional lines was only prevented at the last moment with the help of the trade unions. Miners are currently preparing protest actions against the continual privatisation of their pits, and broad sections of medical personnel have been striking for weeks because of the catastrophic situation of the health service.

In this situation, some government representatives have realised that they only have another chance at the next elections if they terminate the government now. The first to resign from the SLD was Hausner at the beginning of February. In the meantime, he has offered his resignation and wants to concentrate his energies fully on building the Democratic Party. Then, Cimoszewicz explained at the beginning of March that he could no longer recommend a vote for the SLD, describing the party as "a formation that is beset by illnesses." As parliamentary president, he will ask the Sejm on May 5 to agree to its own dissolution in order to free the way for new elections.

Finally, Belka also indicated he was preparing to leave the SLD. "My party membership book lies somewhere at home," he said in an interview. "However, I have probably not paid any contributions this year." He was in no hurry. "In reality, the SLD is only waiting for its own death." Belka announced that he would resign on May 5 and declare then whether he will join the Democratic Party.

The majority of SLD and SdPL deputies have announced that they intend to vote against the dissolution of parliament on May 5. Furthermore, they hope that President Kwasniewski will refuse to accept Belka's resignation and that the government can thereby remain in office until the official end of the legislative period in the autumn of this year. According to Longin Pastusiak, the senate leader, the government has been carrying out good work and still has the task of arranging a referendum over acceptance or rejection of the constitution of the European Union. As was the case in the last legislative period, it is clear that the overriding concern of the AWS and UW is how to cling on to their mandates.

For their part, the announcement by Belka, Hausner and Cimoszewicz to dissolve parliament has just as little to do with democratic convictions or any sensitivity with regard to continuous popular protests. Their actions are based purely on tactical political considerations. When the government seeks its own dissolution and creates a new party, it is doing so in the hope of preventing its being voted out of office.

The founding of the DP, like the SdPL before it, is an attempt to sell voters an old and tired commodity with a new label. In fact, it has very little to do with the founding of a party in a real sense and more in common with a regrouping within the political elite. New, however, is that former Stalinist cabinet members are being supported in this enterprise by

sections of the former Solidarity movement.

Taking part in the preparations for setting up the new formation are not only former members of the SLD, but also the Freedom Union (UW) and other smaller parties. The UW is home to considerable numbers of former Solidarity intellectuals. Their political orientation differs only minimally from that of the SLD. At the initial meeting of the DP, the chairman of the UW, Vladislav Frasyniuk, explained: "Mr. Premier Belka, we are waiting for you. Your place is among us, we understand you and are ready to support your work." For Frasyniuk, the founding of the DP represents a chance for a return to the political life.

The founding of a party that for the first time unites former Stalinist bureaucrats and Solidarity activists under one roof shows the extent of the alienation of this political caste from the population at large. Parties such as the SLD or the AWS still had a certain basis in the policies they represented 25 years ago. Their modern-day equivalents are merely bureaucratic nonentities completely remote from everyday life.

It still remains inconclusive whether new elections will take place in June or in the autumn. Parliament would have to make such a decision with a two-thirds majority when it meets on May 5. In light of resistance from within the ranks of the SLD and SdPL, such a majority remains uncertain. If Kwasniewski actually rejects Belka's resignation, elections in the autumn become more likely.

Whenever elections take place, they will not offer any political alternative to the Polish population. According to polls, it is probable that the Citizens Platform (PO) and Law and Justice (PiS) will form the new government. In the past, PO and PiS have made clear they will pursue the policy of cuts and privatisation to the hilt. If they have made any criticisms of the government over these points, it is only to object that the laws did not go far enough.

With regard to foreign policy, they are charting an extremely nationalist course. The slogan "Nice or death" (referring to terms laid down for membership of the EU agreed in the French city of Nice), with which Miller sabotaged the summit held in the winter of 2003 to discuss the European Union constitution, was first articulated by PO Chairman Jan Rokita. A further controversial request by the Polish parliament, that the government demand reparation payments for war damage from Germany, was also based on a motion by the opposition. At the moment, the PO and PiS have inaugurated a debate over whether President Kwasniewski should participate in anniversary ceremonies in Moscow to commemorate the liberation of Poland from the Nazis. The invasion of the Red Army, according to their arguments, did not bring freedom but rather decades of suppression for Poland.

The Polish population will not be able to oppose the wiping out of social gains through new elections. It will remain confronted with a political caste that has transformed Poland during the last 15 years into a paradise for capitalists and a hell for ordinary people. Although economic growth is stable at 5 percent, and even the old coal mines are showing a profit for the first time in years, unemployment remains constant at around 20 percent, privatisation policies are being advanced and the last remains of any sort of social provision are being demolished.

It is therefore not surprising that many Poles are turning their backs on the political establishment. Barely one in five took part in the European elections held in June of last year.



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