

Increasing tensions between Belarus and Poland

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On August 25, the press department of Polish Prime Minister Marek Belka announced that Belka had recently led a discussion with the prime ministers of Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine about the possibilities of overthrowing Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko. The previous week, Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski had held similar talks with the presidents of Ukraine, Georgia and Lithuania on the Ukrainian peninsula of Krim.

These unconcealed Polish threats against Belarus have been preceded by a series of diplomatic conflicts between the two countries. In May, Lukashenko sacked the recently elected head of the "Union of Poles in Belarus" (ZPB), Andzelika Borys, replacing him with former chairman Tadeusz Krukowski. With 25,000 members, the ZPB is the largest non-governmental organisation in Belarus. In contrast to Borys, Krukowski believes in keeping out of the country's political debates.

At the end of July, the conflict escalated and both countries recalled their ambassadors. Lukashenko had 20 leading members of the ZPD arrested. On August 28, the ZPD elected a government supporter, Jozef Lucznik, as its new chairman. The election, however, was conducted behind closed doors. Belarus police had cordoned off large areas surrounding the voting place and prevented some delegates from voting. After the results were announced, the Polish government refused to acknowledge Lucznik as the new chairman.

Even before this episode, and in particular after the so-called "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine last year, politicians and the media in Poland have campaigned heavily against the president of Belarus. Hardly a day has gone by without a report in the media about the "last dictator in Europe." In recent weeks, Kwasniewski, Belka and foreign minister Adam Rotfeld have been at pains to gain the support of the European Union (EU). Rotfeld told the Polish public broadcast network: "It's good that the EU takes an interest in many of the world's countries, like Burma, East Timor, various African regions, Burkino Faso and the Sudan. However, it would also be a start if they considered Belarus too."

The Polish government has long been an active supporter of the Belarus opposition. On August 15, Belka allocated 950,000 zloty (234,000 euros) in an attempt to finance a Polish radio broadcaster in Belarus. State technical employees are presently working on resolving outstanding technical issues to allow broadcasts to commence. Some opposition groups, such as various anti-Russian outfits and the extreme nationalist "White Russian People's Front," partly coordinate their work from within Poland. A large proportion of the opposition's newspapers and leaflets are being printed in Polish print shops.

If Belka is now talking about a possible overthrow of Lukashenko, his words are to be taken seriously. Concrete plans have already been drawn up for a putsch in Belarus in the same style as the "rose revolution" in Georgia and the "orange revolution" in Ukraine. All of these "coloured revolutions" have been organised according to a similar model: a lost election is disputed with various claims of irregularities which are then carefully promoted in the media and channelled into demonstrations,

combined with international pressure, thus compelling the incumbent ruler to stand down.

A significant role has been played in these events by various youth organisations that led the protests in these countries. In Georgia it was "Kmara," in Ukraine "Pora" and in Belarus the opposition movement is being led by the "Zubr" (bison) group. The members of all of these groups were educated by the Serbian organisation Otpor, which organised the overthrow of Serbian President Milosevic in 2000 with direct support from the US. These opposition organisations are financed through a network of various foundations, such as the National Democratic Institute, which is chaired by the former US secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, and the International Renaissance Foundation (IRF), which obtains funding directly from the US State Department and other Western nations.

A possible coloured revolution in Belarus is being planned for the middle of next year, when the next presidential election is to be held, and supposedly will take on the symbol of the blue cornflower. Whether it pans out the way its organisers foresee, however, remains to be seen. Lukashenko is relatively secure in office and the opposition is divided into various antagonist groups. What is certain, though, is that the Polish government will play a significant role in an attempted regime change.

Polish politicians already played a decisive role during the orange revolution in Ukraine. Without the massive support from the Polish government for Victor Yushchenko, the power struggle in Ukraine would hardly have been as quick and smooth.

Belka had already issued warnings several weeks before the Ukrainian presidential elections about possible election rigging and had threatened the government. A few days after the election, Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski travelled to Kiev as the government's official observer. Before departing, he spoke to both US President George Bush and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and developed a "three-point plan," the content of which largely coincided with demands of the Ukrainian opposition.

Kwasniewski used all his powers to prevent serious resistance against the toppling of incumbent President Viktor Yanukovich. On November 26, when 60,000 miners from the country's east made their way to Kiev to confront supporters of the orange revolution, Kwasniewski mustered all his diplomatic weight to prevent their arrival. After the demonstration was stopped, two of the three demands of the marchers were met on that same evening.

Two roundtable discussions were held, where the opposition laid out its demands. Kwasniewski played a decisive role here as well. After the second roundtable, Yushchenko and Kwasniewski spoke together to demonstrators in front of the Mariinski Palace. Yushchenko declared: "Without the Polish president, no solution would have been possible, or it would have been only a modest one."

Yushchenko was not the only one pleased with Kwasniewski's intervention. During a telephone conference with Kwasniewski, US President Bush said: "Aleksander, you did so well with the Ukraine, do

you have a bit of time for the Sudan?” The United States had long been campaigning for regime change in Ukraine.

The weakening of Russia’s influence in Ukraine constituted an important step in reducing Russia’s geo-strategic role in Eurasia. “Without Ukraine,” wrote the American intelligence group Stratfor, which has close ties to the US intelligence services, “Russia is doomed to a painful slide into geopolitical obsolescence and ultimately, perhaps even non-existence.” The United States views Russia as a direct competitor over the strategically important oil reserves in the Caspian Sea region, and therefore is determined that Russian influence, dating back to the Soviet era, has to be weakened.

The calculated intervention of the Polish government opened the back door for the US in Ukraine. Poland aims to play a similar role with its current threats against Belarus. Here too, what is at stake are global geo-strategic interests and not the concerns of the Polish minority in Belarus or the democratic rights of that country’s population in general.

Belarus is the last ex-Soviet republic that retains close connections to Moscow. Russia accounts for over 68 percent of its imports and 50 percent of exports. Two of the most important gas pipelines from Russia to Germany, whose capacity of 42 billion cubic metres per year accounts for most of Germany’s gas imports, run through Belarus: the Jamal and the Northern Lights pipelines.

If Belarus were to distance itself from Moscow and seek closer ties to the West, this would have catastrophic consequences for Russia’s economy. Russia’s economic and political weight in Europe as a whole would be dramatically reduced. At the same time, trade possibilities for “new Europe,” that is, those Eastern European countries that stand closest to the US, would increase outside of Russia. Both are considered important aims of American foreign policy.

It is therefore no surprise that the United States has supported the pro-West opposition for years, both financially and logistically. In the 2001 presidential election in Belarus, private and government organisations and foundations from the US and other Western countries handed out, according to the German daily *Junge Welt*, \$40 million to the election campaign of opposition candidate Vladimir Gontscharik.

According to official figures from Belarus, \$24 million have already flowed from US coffers into the pockets of the opposition for the 2006 election. Although difficult to confirm, the Russian newspaper *Rian Novosti* reported that most of the opposition groups and media are financed from the US.

One can find numerous web sites of organisations that have connections to the Otpor group and its partners, including those who support the opposition in Belarus. Many of these groups, such as the “Students for Global Democracy” (SfGD), have close connections to government and semi-government organisations in the US. The SfGD is currently collecting donations for its “Bell Campaign” to fund the Belarus opposition.

The Belarus offshoot of Otpor, Zubr, whose motto is “Honour, Motherland, Freedom,” also has close ties to the US. In April of this year, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met personally with representatives of the group in the Lithuanian city of Vilnius. Rice explained that the meeting served to help the organisation achieve more freedom. She said the president of Belarus should understand that his behaviour was being monitored very closely. Representatives of the opposition then declared that, according to their assessment, irregularities would occur in next year’s election and that they are already planning demonstrations.

US President Bush has made it clear on many occasions that he would welcome a change in government in Belarus.

As with the Iraq war and the power struggle in Ukraine, the Polish ruling elite is taking on the role of a US pawn in Europe, helping Washington pursue its aims.

Behind this policy are vital interests of the Polish state itself. Poland can

only play a leading role in Eastern Europe and on the continent as a whole by achieving independence from Germany and “old Europe” on one side, and Russia on the other. Economically, Poland is closely tied to the EU: it accounts for 75 percent of Polish exports and 60 percent of its imports. At the same time, Poland is dependent on Russian gas and oil for its energy supplies.

The prospect of an alliance between Russia and Germany, for which German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has been campaigning for years, is viewed critically within Poland. The Polish weekly magazine *Wprost* referred to the recent agreement between Russia and Germany to build a gas pipeline through the Baltic Sea, in a none-too-subtle reference to the Stalin-Hitler Pact of 1939, as the “Schröder-Putin Pact.” The ruling elite in Poland fears that it will once more be ground between these two great powers.

The Baltic Sea pipeline is to channel Russian gas directly to Germany. By 2010 it will export up to 55 billion cubic metres of gas to the EU every year. The construction of this pipeline will largely cut off Poland from Russian gas, which is currently pumped into and through the country using the Jamal pipeline. Sejm Jan Rokita, a leading member of the opposition, said: “The pipeline through the Baltic Sea will cause injury to the common interests of the EU and individual states.”

Another problem confronting Poland’s energy supplies is the oil pipeline from the Ukrainian Black Sea port in Odessa to the Polish-Ukrainian border city of Brody. The pipeline was built to transport oil from Kazakhstan through the Black Sea directly to Europe and therefore to bypass Russian territory. Initially, the pipeline was planned to reach the northern Polish harbour city of Danzig, and would have allowed Poland to overcome its dependence on Russian oil. After the completion of the Odessa-Brody section of the pipeline, Russia increased pressure and finally managed to use the pipeline to pump its own oil for export in the opposite direction. With the change of government in Ukraine, Poland has achieved an important victory in this dispute.

These developments make clear that both the perspective espoused by German Chancellor Schröder and others—that an alliance between Russia and a united Europe can stand up to the United States—and the project of uniting Europe itself on a capitalist basis are doomed to fail as a result of the continent’s own internal contradictions.



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