German Chancellor Merkel's state visit to Poland: you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours

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After making appearances in Paris, London and Brussels, German Chancellor Angela Merkel went on to pay her first official visit to the Polish capital of Warsaw on December 2. Owing to persistent tensions between Berlin and Warsaw in recent years, the visit aroused considerable interest.

Since the Warsaw government declared its open support for the war in Iraq and supplemented the US occupation with its own troops, Poland has become the flagship of the pro-American "new Europe" and consequently the leading opponent of the German-French-dominated "old Europe." The "strategic partnership" with Moscow, energetically promoted by Merkel's predecessor Gerhard Schröder, aroused distrust in Warsaw and resurrected longstanding historical tensions between the two nations. Poland protested fiercely against the construction of a Baltic Sea pipeline finally agreed upon early this year. The project was designed to bypass Poland, linking Germany directly to the Russian natural gas network. The pipeline has been seen as an attempt to cut Poland off from energy supplies from Russia. At the very least, it would give Russia political leverage over Poland.

Merkel has repeatedly announced that she wants to improve relations with the US. At the same time, however, she has expressly used her inaugural speech to promote a strategic partnership with Russia, firmly insisting she will not yield to Polish objections to the construction of the Baltic Sea pipeline.

During the Polish parliamentary and presidential elections in early autumn, the extreme nationalist law-and-order party, Law and Justice (PiS)—which went on to gain victories in both polls—adopted a tough anti-German and anti-Russian line. Previously, in 2003, the recently elected President Lech Kaczynski had backed the slogan "Nice [referring to the EU agreement worked out in the French city] or death," and Poland allowed the European Union (EU) referendum negotiations to collapse. As mayor of Warsaw, he had demanded Germany pay reparation—tendering specific cost estimates—for the capital's destruction in the Second World War. He also expressed his opposition to Polish participation in formal observances in Moscow marking the 60th anniversary of the end of the war, claiming that the Red Army had occupied rather than liberated Poland. In the election campaign, he characterised Russia and Germany as the main threats to Poland.

During Merkel's visit to Warsaw, there were no longer any signs of such tensions. The mood surrounding the meeting between Merkel and her Polish counterpart, Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz—a member of the PiS and trusted associate of Kaczynski—was extremely relaxed. She declared that Poland and Germany must find their way back to a trusting cooperation. "It was most necessary for us to pay Poland a visit very soon after the formation of the new government because we want to continue our friendly relations and because we naturally want to improve them," she said.

For his part, the Polish prime minister spoke of how the hour-long meeting had opened up a new chapter in bilateral relations between the two countries. "The lady chancellor's visit to Warsaw has been very successful," he claimed, later adding, "We agreed that it was necessary to increase dialogue in relation to economic issues in order to accelerate growth in both countries." Merkel's talks with President Lech Kaczynski also took a generally conciliatory course.

Merkel assured Marcinkiewicz that she would support Poland in its dispute with Britain over the EU budget. Moreover, she promised to establish a working group to oversee construction of the controversial Baltic Sea pipeline and ensure that countries like Poland could also benefit from the project.

The friendly climate surrounding the meeting between the two government leaders, however, failed to conceal underlying tensions. It also cast a revealing light on the new governments in Poland and Germany.

Despite all of its nationalistic demagogy, the Polish government wants to avoid spoiling relations with Berlin and Brussels. Not least among its reasons for this strategy is that Poland—already set to become the greatest net receiver of Brussels' EU funds—needs Germany's support in future wranglings over the EU budget. Germany is the greatest net contributor and has until now opposed British efforts to reduce financing for the new EU members states in eastern Europe.

Both the previous Polish government under the post-Stalinist Democratic Left Alliance (SDL) and the present one led by the

PiS have pushed for Poland's integration into the EU and the world market. The PiS's fanning of Polish nationalism is strictly for domestic consumption. It is not directed against the dominance of German, European and international companies and banks over the Polish economy and society. Instead, it is used to channel discontent about the devastating social consequences of this hegemony into reactionary channels and to divide Polish workers from their fellow labourers in Germany and Russia. This nationalism enjoys the official blessing of the Catholic Church and extends to all aspects of Poland's backwardness: anti-Semitism, homophobia and intolerance.

Questioned at a joint press conference with Merkel about his anti-German tirades in the election campaign, Marcinkiewicz—who studied at university with a German scholarship—simply denied ever having made them.

For her part, Merkel is well aware of the symbolical meaning of these nationalistic tirades. Nevertheless, she avoided any criticism of the reactionary character of the Polish government, which bases itself on extreme right-wing and transparently anti-Semitic forces.

After a record 60 percent abstention rate in the parliamentary elections, the PiS received just 27 percent of the ballots cast, thereby coming to power with the support of a mere sixth of those entitled to vote. It went on to form a minority government, supported in the Sejm (Polish parliament) by the right-wing populist rural party Samoobrona (Self-Defence) and the clerical-nationalist League of the Polish Family (LPR). The LPR emanates from the ultra-right-wing Radio Maryja and has become the focal point for extremism in Poland. It demands the integration of the Catholic Church into the Polish state and regards Russians and Germans on the same level as Jews, homosexuals and blacks as enemies of such a state. Fascist organisations like All-Polish Youth (Mlodziez Wszechpolska) are active along lines similar to those of the LPR.

The PiS also defends extreme right-wing views—even compared to the politics of other conservative parties in Europe. It had its origins in the right wing of the Election Movement-Solidarity (AWS) that formed the government from 1997 to 2001. It aims to establish an authoritarian state and promotes reintroduction of the death penalty. During the election campaign, designated President Lech Kaczynski and his identical twin brother and chairman of the PiS, Jaruslav Kaczynski, heralded the arrival of a Fourth Republic that would finally overcome "communism." Lech showed what they mean by this when, as mayor of Warsaw, he banned a demonstration by homosexuals and criticised the police for protecting the demonstrators from attacks by neo-Nazis.

The fact that the PiS is now following a course similar to that of the LPR is a clear sign of the advancing destruction of democratic rights. The less support Poland's elite receives from the population, the more aggressive and authoritarian its rule becomes. Fifteen years after the so-called "democratic revolution," democracy has sunk to the level epitomised by the LPR. The new government also recently announced its intention of establishing an anti-terror authority to centralise and coordinate the "fight against terrorism"—which will entail a further dismantling of democratic rights, as in the US, Britain and Germany.

When Austria's Christian Democrats invited Jörg Haider's ultra-right Freedom Party (FP) to join the government at the beginning of 2000, there was still international protest. The 14 members of the EU at the time suspended bilateral relations with Austria, and Nicole Fontaine, president of the European parliament, declared that the European community should manifestly dissociate itself from the "insulting, xenophobic and racist remarks of Jörg Haider." Of course, such statements are not to be taken seriously in view of the EU's own hostile policies towards foreigners, and the sanctions were largely symbolic. Nonetheless, they did express a degree of concern within the European political elite that the participation of the Freedom Party in the Austrian government could lead to political destabilisation.

Scarcely six years later, Poland is being ruled by a party that far exceeds Haider's FP in its right-wing demagogy and its authoritarian ideology. It is a party that bases itself on forces even further to the right, and one whose dismal election results render it devoid of democratic legitimacy. Nevertheless, not a single European government has protested against it.

That Angela Merkel, like her European colleagues, completely ignores these facts says a lot about the state of European politics. Because social tensions are increasing at an alarming rate in every European country, Haider's methods have become acceptable everywhere. French Interior Minister Sarkozy calls rebellious young people in the suburbs "scum" and "rabble," while former German Trade and Economics Minister Clement refers to the unemployed as "parasites." Basic democratic rights are being demolished by the new anti-terror laws in Britain, while a state of emergency is being enforced for three months in France. Merkel herself has only become chancellor through a political conspiracy in which the highest organs of state disregarded the provisions of Germany's constitution.