

Polish President Kaczynski visits Berlin

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The new Polish president Lech Kaczynski has not had much luck so far with his trips abroad. He has found little support among both the political elites and the populations of the countries he has visited, if the latter noticed his visits at all.

Four weeks ago, when he met the French president in Paris, Jacques Chirac merely sent his spokesman to the concluding press conference.

The Polish president returned from the US empty-handed in February this year. Although Poland had extended the deployment of its armed forces in Iraq by a additional year shortly before Kaczynski's visit, President Bush was not ready to grant any concessions. Bush agreed neither to the promised modernization programme for the Polish army, nor to an agreement over economic cooperation between the two countries. Despite Kaczynski's vehement demands, Poles travelling to the US will still be required to visit the American embassy to obtain a visa.

More recently, Kaczynski visited Germany on a two-day trip, but his luck was no better in Berlin. Last week he met with Chancellor Angela Merkel, Federal President Horst Köhler, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Bundestag (parliament) President Norbert Lammert, in quick succession. All of the German politicians strove to set a polite tone, but none of them were prepared to grant any concessions to the Polish president. Against all diplomatic traditions, at the end of their discussion Merkel even refused to hold a joint press conference.

His last appearance, a public lecture about "European solidarity" at Berlin's Humboldt University, ended in uproar. Several dozen gay and lesbian activists managed to get into the barely guarded hall and berated the president as an "anti-democrat" and an anti-gay "rabble-rouser."

As mayor of Warsaw, Kaczynski had banned several demonstrations by gay groups, several times forcibly dissolving the protests. At Humboldt University he reaffirmed his distain for homosexuals by saying: "There are no grounds for allowing the promotion of homosexual views, because if they won the upper hand in society, then mankind would become extinct."

Lech Kaczynski comes from the right-wing, nationalist party "Law and Justice" (PiS), which is led by his twin brother Jaroslav. The PiS forms a minority government, which relies in parliament on two extreme right-wing and openly anti-Semitic parties, Samoobrona (Self-defence) and the League of Polish Families (LPR).

Kaczynski embodies a Polish nationalism that unites virulent anticommunism and Catholic bigotry with the conviction that Poland has for centuries been a victim of its neighbours, and should now be compensated by the entire world. He does this with a provinciality and worldly innocence which the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* called "unique in the European Union" Although the border to Germany has been open for 15 years, last week was the first time in Kaczynski's life that he had visited the neighbouring country.

The new president represents those sections of Polish society that hated the Stalinist regime not for its authoritarian methods but because it stood in the way of their own personal enrichment, power and influence.

Even among the right-wing politicians he meets, who would otherwise stand close to him ideologically, the combination of nationalist egoism and overblown demands that Kaczynski uninhibitedly displays encounters rejection. The general tenor of numerous press comments about Kaczynski's visit is that he makes demands of the European Union, but is not prepared to make compromises to contribute to its success.

In an interview with the newsweekly *Der Spiegel*, Kaczynski expressly defended these views. "Perhaps some in the West thought that Poland no longer has any interests of its own, but would simply follow the opinion of others. That is certainly not the case," he stressed. He added that other countries in Europe defend "their own interests bitterly".

He accused France of "economic patriotism," and Germany of building a Baltic Sea pipeline supplying Russian natural gas to Germany directly excluding Poland. This is "a project which blatantly contradicts Polish interests," Kaczynski said. "We are allies of Germany, are joined together in NATO and the European Union. Why is this pipeline bypassing Poland?" His discussions with Chancellor Merkel on this topic have so far not been "satisfying for Poland."

In order to ensure European energy supplies, the Polish president proposes an "energy-NATO," in the framework of which "European Union and NATO states provide mutual support in energy matters, in any form, but without the use of force" It is no accident that Kaczynski invokes the name of NATO, the Western military alliance that arose in the Cold War against the Soviet Union; this has military overtones and is directed against Russia, with which Poland maintains extremely strained relations.

In Berlin, as previously in Paris, Kaczynski's proposal met with rejection. The German and French governments have no intention of sacrificing their good relations with Russia to Polish-Russian animosities, in particular because Washington would be the winner in any worsening of their relations with Moscow.

In their discussions, Angela Merkel gave Kaczynski the cold shoulder, making no significant concessions. Even before their meeting, government spokespersons had already excluded the possibility of anything like the "energy-NATO" Kaczynski proposed. There was no shift concerning the volatile question of the pipeline. The pipeline branch to Poland promised by Chancellor Merkel during her visit to Warsaw in December is now to be referred to a German-Polish commission.

Kaczynski would probably have been treated more courteously if he had had something to offer, but his brash behaviour cannot hide the fact that the Polish elite is far more dependent upon its powerful

Western neighbours than it is on Poland.

Economically, the country depends strongly on the European Union and in particular Germany; 75 percent of its exports go to the EU and 60 percent of imported goods come from Germany Poland is also the largest net recipient of EU funds, receiving €26 billion annually.

With regard to foreign policy, Poland needs the EU, and in particular NATO, to provide security against Russia, depending on its oil and gas for its energy supplies. The fear of being crushed between Russia and Germany is a perpetual spectre hanging over Polish politics, which has already been divided up four times in its history under the great powers—the last time in 1939 between Germany and the Soviet Union.

Domestically, the corrupt, scandal-prone, and divided upper social layers, which the restoration of capitalism brought to the levers of power in politics and business, depend on financial and political support from abroad. The entire political elite is highly unpopular, and it clings to power only because the working class lacks an independent political perspective. The electorate has so far shown its displeasure by voting out every government after only one term of office. In this way, right-wing and supposedly left-wing governments have constantly alternated, without any significant change in the general political course.

It is characteristic that Kaczynski is pursuing the same course in foreign policy as his predecessor Alexander Kwasniewski, the leader of the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), which emerged out of the former Stalinist party of state, and about whom he normally does not have a good word to say.

In the long-run, the course of foreign policy is determined by objective conditions. The Polish elite confronts a dilemma: on the one hand, it strives for national grandeur, but on the other, it is surrounded by more powerful neighbours, whom it can match neither economically nor politically.

Three years ago, Kwasniewski used the conflict between “old Europe” and the US over the Iraq war in order to position Poland as an important ally of Washington. In the “Orange revolution” in the Ukraine he played a key role in installing a US-friendly regime.

But Poland’s foreign policy value has plummeted over the last months. Since the Christian Democrats narrowly won government power in Germany, Washington and Berlin have moved closer together. The US is seeking European support for action against Iran, and the overall increasing instability in the Middle East means France and Germany are ready to cooperate more closely with the US. Under these circumstances, Poland has lost its significance as an American ally; the rapprochement of the great powers means Poland’s room to manoeuvre in foreign policy has shrunk.

Moreover, the Polish government has isolated itself by its numerous manoeuvres within the EU—its blocking of the EU constitution in December 2003, its threats to Germany in 2004 regarding reparations, and the dispute over the EU budget with Britain at the end of 2005.

Kaczynski was far more reserved in his lecture at Humboldt University than might have been expected from the interviews he had previously given. In the end, he decided not to bite the hand that feeds him.

He opposed the development of the EU into a federal state and pleaded for a “union of sovereign states” Kaczynski argued that European culture had developed in the shape of nation states, which must form the bedrock for all European policy. The population had grown accustomed to this state of affairs. Thus a Finn, even if he is interested in politics, does not usually know what is taking place in

Portugal, and vice versa, he claimed. Nevertheless, the Polish president said there still had to be further efforts to integrate Europe. But too much integration was wrong; one should not have “too much of a good thing”.

The entire lecture was very dreary and, to a large extent, remained abstract and general.

The only concrete comments made by Kaczynski were about Poland’s eastern neighbours. The Ukraine should join the EU as quickly as possible, he said. His own country would, if necessary, also be prepared to go without certain EU subsidies. He also called on the other EU states to take a clear stand against Alexander Lukaschenko, the president of Belarus, and to support the opposition there in the election campaign.

Kaczynski hopes that the fall of Lukaschenko will help to isolate Russia, which is closely allied with Belarus. His calls for democracy in Belarus are cynical, because he is busy attacking democratic rights in his own country. In the election campaign he had declared that he wanted to reinforce the criminal law and strengthen the position of the president. His aim is to create a “Fourth Republic,” cleansed of all socialist influence.

Since entering office, it has become clear what Kaczynski means by this: the restriction of democratic rights and the development of the power of his own party, the PiS. With the support of the two extremist right-wing parties, the government has introduced a number of laws strengthening their own position and the state apparatus as a whole. Thus on December 16, the Sejm (parliament) adopted an amendment to the broadcast laws, giving the PiS de facto control over all public broadcasters. The National Broadcasting Council, which indirectly appoints the directors of the individual broadcasters, will in future consist of only five persons, two of whom are appointed by Kaczynski, two by the Sejm, and one by the senate (where the PiS has over 46 percent of the seats).

Purges are being carried out among senior police officers as well as in diplomatic circles. Members or sympathizers of the former government party SLD have been given their marching orders. An “anti-corruption office,” which is not subject to any parliamentary control, is to systematize the purges. The Sejm has appointed Janusz Kochanowski as the chamber’s new citizenship commissioner, who is known to be a PiS supporter and is an enthusiastic advocate of the death penalty.



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