

Poland: Right-wing extremists officially join government

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On May 5, two extreme right-wing anti-Semitic parties officially joined the Polish government. The small farmers and peasant party Samoobrona (Self-Defense) and the League of Polish Families (LPR) signed a coalition agreement with the Law and Justice Party (PiS), which had ruled up to now as a minority government. With a total of 245 of the 460 seats in the Polish parliament (Sejm), the new coalition now has an absolute majority.

The chairmen of Samoobrona and the LPR, Andrei Lepper and Roman Giertych, were appointed deputies by Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz (PiS). The 51-year-old Lepper takes over the Agriculture Ministry and 35-year-old Giertych the Education Ministry. Samoobrona members also occupy two further ministries, Labor and Construction, and the LPR one, the Fishery Ministry.

The entry of Samoobrona and the LPR into government represents a significant lurch to the right in official Polish politics. The PiS, led by the twin brothers Lech and Jaroslav Kaczynski—Lech is the Polish president and Jaroslav chairman of the PiS—is notorious for its nationalist, conservative Catholic standpoint. In this respect, both Samoobrona and the LPR are even more extremist. Giertych's appointment as secretary of education has already provoked demonstrations in Warsaw by students fearful of a clerical-conservative backlash.

While Samoobrona is dominated by the figure of its founder and chairman, the choleric, right-wing populist demagogue Andrei Lepper, the LPR has roots going back to the historical traditions of Polish nationalism and fascism. The party has close links to the Polish radio station Maria, which is notorious for its anti-Semitic tirades, xenophobia and chauvinism. Even the Vatican and some Polish bishops have expressed their fears that the station has gone too far.

Samoobrona Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej (Self Defense of the Republic of Poland) was founded by Lepper, a former member of the Communist Party, in 1992. With a mixture of social promises and nationalist, xenophobic agitation, combined with conspiracy theories, it sought to appeal to the numerous Polish small farmers and peasants who had been driven into economic ruin by the introduction of the free-market economy.

Samoobrona opposes the European Union and NATO, and demands protective duties for agricultural products as well as a tightening up of criminal law. It denounces Poland's widespread corruption and accuses the ruling elite of selling off the country's national wealth to foreigners, leaving many Poles in poverty. Lepper agitates in particular against Jews and Germans. "For us it is not the Jews who are the most dangerous people, but the Germans," he said at one meeting. He is, however, prepared to make an exception for one German and is on record praising Hitler's labor policies.

Lepper, a former boxer, made a name for himself with his loutish behavior, which has resulted in a number of prosecutions and detentions. He insulted his political opponents, organised violent peasant protests, beat up bailiffs and even shaved a Star of David into victims' scalps. Three days after his appointment to the Polish cabinet, he was condemned by a Warsaw court to 15 months' detention on probation for accusing two

ministers of corruption in 2001. An event which in most any other country would have led to an immediate resignation from office remained without consequence in Poland.

Despite Lepper's spectacular activities, Samoobrona led a shadowy existence in the 1990s. The party only came into the limelight with Poland's entry into the European Union. In 2001, the party was able to register more than 10 percent of the vote in parliamentary elections and became the third largest party. In the meantime, the party had largely ditched its social demands and adapted its programme to that of the government party. What remains is chauvinism and demands for increased authoritarian measures.

The league of Polish families (LPR) is younger than Samoobrona but has deeper roots in the historical tradition of Polish nationalism.

Along with the Law and Justice Party (PiS), the LPR emerged from the ruins of the Election Action Solidarity (AWS), which filled the post of head of government from 1997 to 2001 and then lost all popular support due to its disastrous social policies. While the Kaczynski brothers assemble in the PiS conservative supporters of a police state, the LPR founders orient towards anti-Semitic and extreme rightist circles, and the party has become a repository for the extreme right-wing fringe in Poland.

The LPR chairman, Roman Giertych, originates from a political dynasty. His grandfather Jędrzej Giertych was a close political collaborator of the Polish national democrat Roman Dmowski; his father Maciej Giertych helped to refound the National Democratic Party in 1989 and is still active politically. The role of the national democrats and Dmowski in Polish history casts a revealing light on today's LPR.

Born in 1864, Dmowski was regarded in the period between the two world wars as an opponent of Josef Pilsudski, who had organised a coup d'état in 1926 and governed the country dictatorially. Both men were right-wing nationalists. But while Pilsudski sought to expand the borders of Polish territory and was therefore prepared to accept people with other languages, cultures and faith into his version of a Polish state, Dmowski regarded the Polish language and the Catholic faith as the most important criteria for defining the Polish nation.

Dmowski was a social Darwinist and a hysterical anti-Semite who detected a Jewish world conspiracy everywhere. He regarded all national minorities as potential enemies of the Polish nation. In the book *Thoughts of a Modern Pole*, he wrote: "In the character of this race [the Jews], so many different values strange to our moral constitution and harmful to our life have accumulated that assimilation with a larger number of Jews would destroy us, replacing us with decadent elements, rather than with those young creative foundations upon which we are building the future."

Particularly after the Russian revolution of 1905, in which Dmowski fought on the side of the Tsar against rebellious Polish socialists, anti-Semitism played an increasingly important role in his programme. In 1912, he demanded the boycott of Jewish businesses in Poland and appealed for the confiscation of Jewish property and the emigration of the entire Jewish population.

The current programme of the LPR contains many elements stemming from the tradition of Dmowski: chauvinism, hatred of foreigners, anti-Semitism (under conditions where virtually all Polish Jews were exterminated by the Nazis!) and Catholic fundamentalism. The LPR is strictly opposed to the right to abortion, homosexual relationships and any legislation that counters Catholic moral teachings.

In 1989, the 18-year-old Roman Giertych revived the organisation All Polish Youth, which in the 1930s had functioned as the militant youth organisation of Dmowski's National Party (SN), characterised by its nationalist and anti-Semitic activities. At that time, the youth organisation used National Socialist symbols such as the Hitlerite *Sieg Heil* salute and was responsible for anti-Semitic excesses at several universities where it was able in a number of cases to enforce the complete exclusion of Jewish students.

Giertych's new edition of the All Polish Youth also employs fascist symbols. Last autumn, two 27-year-old LPR parliamentary deputies were photographed making a Hitlerite salute, causing a political scandal. Giertych's All Polish Youth is also known for the activities of the skinhead thugs in its ranks, who have used brutal methods to oppose demonstrations by homosexuals or art exhibitions that do not correspond to the extremely limited horizons of this organisation.

The LPR has received considerable propagandistic support from the radio station Maria, which has one of the largest listener audiences in the country. The station is headed by Tadeusz Rydzyk, a priest of the Catholic Redemptionist Order supported by sections of the Catholic episcopacy. Also belonging to the same Catholic media empire is Poland's most popular daily paper *Nasz Dziennik* (Our Daily News) and the television station *Trwam* (I persist).

Along with religious programmes, radio Maria also transmits very clear political messages. Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, as well as agitation against homosexuals and foreigners, are a firm component of the evening programme. According to Marek Edelman, the last surviving commander of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, the radio station transmits "xenophobia, chauvinism and anti-Semitism." A commentary by the station in March declared that while Poles were fighting for democracy in Ukraine and Belarus, they were being stabbed in the back by Jews. And another comment stated that under the cover of remuneration Jews were demanding "extortion funds" from Poland and humiliating the nation by presenting themselves as the main victims of Auschwitz.

In their election campaign last year, the two Kaczynski brothers had relied on the station to win support from the more backward layers in the rural areas of the country. They stressed their own religious beliefs and demanded the unity of the Catholic Church and the Polish nation. Radio Maria reacted by calling for support for the PiS in the parliamentary elections and for Lech Kaczynski in the subsequent presidential elections. Since then, the station has advanced to the status of a sort of court correspondent. Cabinet members give regular interviews, and exclusive information is repeatedly made public by the station.

The Vatican and Polish bishops vouchsafed the activities of radio Maria for many years. Even if the Polish Pope did not agree with all of the station's comments, Maria was willing to transmit his own conservative moral views to up to 4 million listeners. Only in November of last year did the successor to Pope John, the German Joseph Ratzinger, express some mild criticism for the first time—after being urged to do so by a handful of more liberal Polish bishops. Radio Maria reacted with an attack on the Pope, whom they accused of having a "terrible fear of being described as an anti-Semite," because he was German.

The entry of two right-wing extremist parties into the Polish government is not the product of a right-wing or fascist mass movement. Although the new government in the Sejm has the majority of seats, it won support from less than a fifth of the electorate at the parliamentary elections held seven months ago. The majority of voters simply stayed at home. With a

total voter turnout of just 40 percent, the LPR received only 8 percent of the vote—Samoobrona 11 and the PiS 27 percent. According to a current opinion poll, 64 percent of the population are opposed to a government that includes the LPR and Samoobrona.

The right wing has been able to exploit the political vacuum that has resulted from the discrediting of the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), which led the government from 2001 to 2005 and filled the post of president for a decade with its candidate Alexander Kwasniewski. Having emerged as the successor organisation to Poland's ruling Stalinist party, the SLD represented the interests of a corrupt layer of new wealth that made a fortune from the dismantling of former state property.

In so doing, this layer proceeded with utter ruthlessness against the ordinary masses. The restructuring of agriculture and the privatisation of state-owned enterprises—both requirements for Poland's entry into the European Union—led to official unemployment of almost 20 percent. In Poland, this statistic covers up unbridled misery. The country's already meagre social and health provisions have been further cut by the government in recent years, as part of the so-called Hauser plan. Millions of families were forced to fight for their existence while the SLD made headlines with a series of new corruption affairs.

Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that the extreme right was able to increase its influence amongst layers of desperate voters on the basis of a combination of social promises and attacks on the European Union.

None of the promises made by these parties will be kept by the new government. The PiS has already shown in the last months that it is intent on continuing the policy of social cuts its predecessors while brutally suppressing any resistance. The government's budget for 2006 differs only insignificantly from the budget cuts initiated by the preceding government. The new budget contains just a few cosmetic changes. The one-time payment of child allowance of 500 zloty (around 126 euros) has been doubled, and expenditures on social housing projects and other charitable measures slightly increased.

After the finance minister took the social demagoguery of her own party too seriously and declared that foreign trading companies were not welcome in Poland, she was forced to step down and yield her post to Zyta Gilowska. Gilowska advocates a uniform tax rate of 15 percent and even accused Jerzy Hausner, who was notorious for his tough austerity policies, of seeking to reintroduce socialism.

The coalition agreement now agreed upon declares that the budget deficit should not exceed 30 billion zloty (around 8 billion euros) and is to be further reduced in the medium term. Further cuts are therefore on the agenda. Market analyst Janusz Jankowiak said that in government nothing will remain of the demagogic promises made by Lepper. He commented: "The entry of Lepper into the government does not in the slightest signal the implementation of his utopian economic programme."

The real emphasis in the policy of the new government lies in strengthening the state apparatus. As well as numerous police actions, carried out on the basis of "fighting corruption," the PiS has already introduced a revision of the country's broadcasting law, which makes possible the party's complete control of the national broadcasting council. At the same time, this council has been authorised to interfere in public broadcasting reporting on the basis of the "protection of journalistic ethics."

There are also plans to tighten up criminal law and extend the powers of the president. The new official for Citizen's Rights in the Sejm is none other than Janusz Kochanowski, a fervent advocate of the death penalty. According to the new coalition agreement, corruption and graft are to be fought while traditional values and the family will be strengthened. In addition, an anti-corruption police, a kind of secret state police with extensive authorities, and a "National Education Institute" are to be created.

There have already been several student demonstrations against conservative interference in the field of education. “We fear that an atmosphere of nationalism, chauvinism and radical clericalism along the lines of the ideas propagated by radio Maria will now penetrate into all schools and that the already limited pluralism will be completely erased,” the pupils wrote in a statement. The *Gazeta Wyborcza* called the appointment of Giertych as secretary of education “a slap in the face for all Polish teachers.”

The entry of Lepper and Giertych into the Polish government is comparable to appointing the boss of the fascist National Front, Jean Marie Le Pen, to the post of deputy head of the French government or entrusting the neo-fascist German NPD in Berlin with ministerial offices. Nevertheless, the recent developments in Poland have led to little international reaction.

A speaker for the French State Department merely stated: “We naturally hope that we can continue our work with Poland, in order to further the European Union and our bilateral relations.” Not a word about the anti-Semitism of the LPR or the nationalism of the Samoobrona.

When Jörg Haider’s extreme-right Freedom Party entered the Austrian government six years ago, 14 European Union states froze their bilateral relations with the country, because they feared political destabilisation following the integration of the right-wing populists. Today’s silence on the part of governments speaks volumes for the real nature of European politics. The increase in social tensions has now made Haider-type politics internationally acceptable.



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