

Political crisis in Poland: the twists and turns of the Kaczynski government

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All across Europe, the bourgeoisie is brutally intensifying its exploitation of the working class and attacking longstanding democratic rights. In Poland, a country of 40 million people that joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, this process and the resulting social crisis have assumed explosive proportions.

Ever since the parliamentary elections of September 2005, in which the right-wing, nationalistic Law and Justice party (PiS) won just over a third of the vote, in an election in which only 40 percent of Poles participated, Polish politics have been characterised by a previously unseen scale of degeneracy and corruption.

The PiS won a plurality largely on the basis of populist promises that it has failed to fulfil. Having fallen far short of a majority in the Polish Parliament (Sejm), the PiS led a minority government for eight months. During this period, it attempted to form something of a grand coalition with the second-largest political grouping in the Sejm, the adamantly pro-European Union Citizens' Platform (PO), led by Donald Tusk.

The PiS failed at this endeavour, largely due to the PO's insistence on radical social welfare cuts in line with the EU requirements for economic "competitiveness." The PiS was apprehensive of the popular backlash that would result in its so quickly repudiating its demagogic election promises. Accordingly, it turned to a strategy of holding onto power by outmanoeuvring its parliamentary opposition.

The populist and chauvinist Farmers' Self-Defence Party, led by Andrzej Lepper, which obtained 12 percent of the vote in the September 2005 Sejm elections, and the rabidly nationalistic and hyper-religious League of Polish Families (LPR), led by Roman Giertych, which won 7 percent of the vote, soon emerged as the sole backers of the PiS minority government. After a few months of support for the PiS, the LPR and Farmers' Self-Defence grew dissatisfied with their role in providing parliamentary votes for the PiS, and began to demand a higher price for their continued backing.

Both parties had previously been largely disregarded by the official parties. There was widespread apprehension within ruling circles that the LPR and Self-Defence, with their nationalist-populist rhetoric, would scare off international capital and threaten Poland's entry into the EU.

Self-Defence up until then was known for staging spectacular protest actions against privatisations and austerity measures. The major parties considered it an unreliable partner in carrying through further pro-business attacks on the social conditions of the working class. The party's penchant for protest actions, capitalising on the anger of workers and sections of the middle class and peasantry, were considered to carry the danger of sparking social conflagrations that would prove difficult to control.

The PiS, seeking to avoid a new election, signed a coalition deal with the two political organisations in early May of 2006. This in the face of opinion polls showing that approximately 64 percent of the Polish public opposed a government that included the LPR and Self-Defence.

PiS European parliamentarian Konrad Szymanski tried to assuage the

fears of international capital, writing in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, "I can understand that a lot of people are distrustful of politicians like Lepper and Giertych. We in the PiS weren't so trustful of them either, but I'm sure that they will do their best to prove that they are responsible pro-European politicians, who will cooperate with other governments in the EU."

The two parties tried their best to do precisely that. *Radio Polonia* reported immediately after the formation of the coalition that Lepper and Giertych had already "toned down their opposition" and "EU scepticism." Such a turn was, for all intents and purposes, an economic necessity. Poland depends heavily on the EU, and especially its largest economy, Germany. Some 75 percent of Poland's exports go to EU countries, while 60 percent of imported goods come from Germany.

Lepper, the new deputy prime minister for agriculture and labour, assured Brussels that he would not fight for a renegotiation of Poland's Accession Treaty to the EU, despite his election campaign promises to the contrary. "It is crucial to fight for the best possible terms for Polish farmers," *Radio Polonia* quoted Lepper as saying after a meeting with the EU parliamentary farm commission in May. "But the interest of the EU 25 must also be taken into consideration."

The PiS, led by identical twins Lech and Jaroslaw Kaczynski (who are, respectively, the president and prime minister of Poland), is a nationalist bourgeois party that sees it as its most important duty the implementation of the austerity measures dictated by the EU's economic and financial elite in Brussels. For 2007 to 2013, the EU is dangling the carrot of approximately €60 billion in return for an improvement in Poland's investment climate.

This was underlined by Jaroslaw Kaczynski's prime ministerial inauguration speech in July, in which he declared a reduction in the 30 billion zloty (US\$10 billion) budget deficit to be one of the central tasks of his government. (See: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/aug2006/pola-a09.shtml>.) This is one of the conditions that must be met if Poland is to join the euro currency union sometime in the future, though Poland is the only 2004 EU entry country that has yet to set an official date.

President Lech Kaczynski revealed the role of the Polish state in the era of capitalist globalisation quite clearly in a letter to the jubilee edition of *Polish Market*, a prominent Polish business journal. He wrote, "Poland is a nation with a large economic potential. Numerous entrepreneurs from the EU and other countries have noted the opportunities to be realised by investing in Poland. An economic policy friendly to domestic and foreign investors is a priority of the present authorities. Building a favourable international image for Poland and encouraging investment is the state's obligation."

Poland has topped the short list of new EU member states in foreign direct investment (FDI), and, according to the international consulting company A.T. Kearney, is the fifth nation state in the world in terms of "investor-friendliness." Poland has been achieving an increase in FDI of 9.8 percent per year, with €9 billion already recorded for 2006 as

compared to €6 billion in 2005.

Under these circumstances, it is all but impossible to keep the demagogic election campaign promises made by the PiS last year. As a sop to the electorate, the PiS introduced a single payment of 1,000 zloty (US\$330) for new parents in late 2005.

Since then, however, every proposal to ease the social misery that has gripped the majority of the Polish population has been brushed off, on the grounds that the budget deficit must be slashed in order to attract ever more private capital to the EU's new star economy—something that would be impeded by investor concerns about taxes to support what is left of Poland's social programmes. The Polish state is retreating daily from its prior social balancing act between the rich and the poor segments of the population, in order to ensure greater profits for the capitalist elite.

The coalition, however, was never stable, and its problems began to mount on September 2.

Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski on that day stated to the press that he would not give in to pressure from Deputy Prime Minister Lepper, who was reportedly asking for increased social spending in the budget for 2007, namely for higher pay for employees in the health and education sectors, indexation of old-age and disability pensions, compulsory insurance for Poland's farmers, and subsidies for agricultural fuel.

Lepper also argued that his party had not received the strategic government posts it had been promised upon entering the PiS-led coalition. The deputy prime minister warned that if the demands put forward by Self-Defence were not met, his party would not support the draft budget for 2007. Without the support of its largest coalition partner, the PiS would find itself in a political dead end.

The situation intensified when Second Deputy Prime Minister Roman Giertych of the LPR demanded a 7 percent pay raise in teachers' salaries for 2007, warning that if the raise (the cost of which is estimated at more than US\$500 million) was not provided, his LPR would leave the government coalition and Giertych would step down.

The PiS responded on September 12 that if the budget were not passed by the end of the month, the coalition would simply cease to exist. For the benefit of the EU's financial watchdog, the European Commission, government leaders declared that there could be no widening of the projected 2007 deficit of 30 billion zloty (US\$10 billion), and that the government could envisage only 240 billion zloty (US\$78 billion) in expenditures for the next year.

Lepper also disapproved of the PiS's decision on September 15 to send a further 1,000 Polish soldiers to participate in the NATO intervention in Afghanistan. These new troops are slated to come to the assistance of the American, British and Canadian forces in February 2007. In a radio interview, Lepper said: "[This deployment] will cost us 340 million zloty (US\$110 million), money which we today lack for pensioners, unemployed, health care."

The minister of defence, Radoslaw Sikorski, ordered the deployment without even consulting his coalition partners in order to forestall any public discussion of the move. "We have been among the decision-makers to send NATO forces to Afghanistan," he told *Radio Polonia*, "so we feel responsible for the success of this operation. It is in Poland's interest to make all potential enemies of the Alliance aware that when NATO goes to war, it goes through with it to a successful conclusion."

Lech Kaczynski boasted of Poland's growing imperialist credentials, saying, "We've been in Afghanistan and Iraq. We are and will be present in even greater numbers in Lebanon. Polish soldiers are in Congo, the Golan Heights, and the Balkans. Such is Poland's policy. It did not start with my term in office. This is a continuation of earlier policies."

Nevertheless, the Polish role in Afghanistan marks the first time Polish troops will be engaged in direct combat since the Second World War, and opinion polls show broad opposition within the Polish public.

Lepper's stance is not a genuine expression of the opposition amongst

working people to the Polish government's anti-democratic policies. Rather, he fears he would lose credibility among his voters if he supported the anti-social government course without any resistance. His party could rapidly decline into insignificance.

A brief meeting of government coalition leaders held September 19 did nothing to resolve the internal conflicts. The meeting was organised after a number of press revelations concerning Lepper, which culminated in his official statement on September 18 that an early election should be held November 26.

The crisis within the government coalition reached a new stage the next day when Lepper accused the PiS of attempting to convince Self-Defence members of parliament (MPs) to switch their allegiance. Marek Kuchinski, the head of the PiS parliamentary faction, provocatively responded with an appeal to Self-Defence MPs to join the PiS majority, or else face new elections in the near future.

On September 22, Lepper was finally dismissed from his agriculture and labour cabinet post and from his position as deputy prime minister. Ending the coalition formed in May between the PiS and Self-Defence, Prime Minister Kaczynski told *Rzeczpospolita* that having received a chance to "participate in a good government, Mr. Lepper failed to use this chance and returned [instead] to trouble-making." The LPR remained in the coalition.

The following day saw the prime minister declare that his PiS government had taken steps to secure a parliamentary majority after the ditching of Self-Defence. He stressed that he would not retreat from pledges to "reform state structures" while forming a government alliance with any other political party. "Retaining power is not a goal in itself for the PiS," he said. "We want to govern in order to change Polish reality." He further declared that should majority backing in the Sejm prove impossible to attain, early elections would be announced.

But on September 25, *Radio Polonia* reported that "following the sacking of Deputy Prime Minister Lepper of Self-Defence, the PiS-led government is pulling out all the stops to ward off early elections." It was revealed that the right-wing Polish Peasant Party (PSL), with only 25 seats, was likely to join the coalition, once again giving the PiS majority support in the Sejm.

It was further disclosed that the PiS was considering introducing a new electoral law which would award an automatic majority to the party that wins the most seats, "counteracting the tendency towards unstable coalition governments arising from Poland's multi-party system," according to the *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*.

"It's a total mess," said political analyst Bartosz Weglarczyk of *Gazeta Wyborcza*. "Poles are totally fed up with the [political] process. If we have new elections in November or December, I would expect no more than 20 percent of the voters to actually go vote."

The PiS's prospects for enticing the PSL to join its coalition were jeopardised when startling revelations of PiS corruption surfaced in the media on September 27. Poland's TVN channel aired secret tapes showing leading PiS politician Adam Lipinski asking Self-Defence MP Renata Berger her price for jumping to the PiS. No apologies were forthcoming from the highest ranks of the PiS, which indignantly brushed the incident aside, declaring it merely a case of politics as usual.

As a result, leading PSL figure Jaroslaw Kalinowski said that negotiations with the PiS on a coalition agreement had been suspended. In his opinion, the "Beger Tapes" were a provocative action that showed Polish politics in a very bad light. This did not prevent him, however, from raising the prospect of further negotiations in the future.

On October 3, Prime Minister Kaczynski further jeopardised his government's chances for a coalition. Speaking at the Gdansk Stocznia shipyard, he declared, "You are either with us or you are in the ZOMO." The ZOMO was the notorious Stalinist-era paramilitary riot police.

The prime minister then stressed in several interviews on October 11

that early elections “would not be a good solution at the moment,” saying they would “derail the government’s efforts to clean up public life.” This statement was made in the face of opinion polls across the board showing that the vast majority of Poles supported early elections.

Two days later, the Sejm voted to suspend debate on a motion to shorten its term. It was announced that the PiS was seeking to rebuild the coalition with Self-Defence in order to avoid new elections.

On October 17, the Sejm rejected a motion to dissolve itself by 242 votes to 180. This time, however, the ruling PiS reached a deal with Self-Defence, reappointing Lepper to the post of deputy prime minister and agriculture minister three weeks after he had been unceremoniously removed.

The move re-launched the three-party coalition, accounting for 230 seats, just one seat shy of a parliamentary majority. If Lepper hadn’t been brought back, polls widely showed that the PiS would have stumbled to a distant second place behind the PO in new elections. Thus, while the possibility of a snap general election in late November has been averted, the coalition is more unstable than ever.

Prime Minister Kaczynski declared on *Radio Polonia* that the return of Self-Defence to the coalition was the best solution for Poland. He said that he had analyzed all possible alternatives, and, in quasi-Orwellian fashion, concluded that this was the best means of ensuring the stability of the Polish government. Otherwise, he said, the only way out of the crisis would have been a coalition of the PO and the post-Stalinist Alliance of the Democratic Left (SLD). That, he declared, would mean a return to the unwanted past.

The coalition does not have even a semblance of broad popular support. The ruling PiS has less than 30 percent support, and Self-Defence less than 10 percent. The LPR, meanwhile, wouldn’t even achieve the 5 percent threshold required for representation in the Sejm if elections were held this month, underscoring the fact that its primary social base consists of little more than fascists and the most backward workers. The PO, on the other hand, represents the most concentrated sections of capital, and was largely behind the initiative for early elections.

The social and political crisis in Poland is bound up with the economic crisis of European and world capitalism. It should come as no surprise that most of the criticism of Poland by the European Union is directed not against the Polish state’s creeping authoritarianism, but rather against the “sluggish” pace of economic “reform.”

The underlying contradiction between a globalised economy and the nation-state finds a stark expression in the case of Poland. In the name of competition for international capital, the European Union is grooming its new member states in the art of imperialist-style *Realpolitik*.

There were no significant protests from Brussels when Polish Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro created the Central Anti-Corruption Bureau (CBA). It was said that the new institution would “enjoy a wide range of powers to fight corruption” and “crimes against Poland’s economic interests.” According to *Radio Polonia*, “Its officers will have the powers of secret services,” including a mandate to monitor bank accounts and transactions as well as telephone conversations. They will also be allowed to spy on corporate and private premises and vehicles. All that is required is suspicion of a crime of “corruption.”

PO leader Jan Rokita made a mild criticism of the programme, even though his party voted for its creation in the Sejm. “They are above the prosecutors, the police, and the state financial inspectorate,” he told *Radio Polonia*. He continued: “I had been a proponent of establishing a Central Anti-Corruption Bureau in the past, but in a form that limited operations to a legal framework guaranteeing the rights of individual citizens. Extra care should have been given to this.”

The EU chooses to criticise and pressure Warsaw to intensify its “reform” programme in the interest of international capital. From the anti-terrorism laws passed in Britain to the ruthless actions of the French

police, the European bourgeoisie has demonstrated its own turn towards authoritarian methods of rule.

According to the European Commission, Poland is “lagging behind” all other member states because of long-term unemployment, which is still at 16 percent (approximately 2.5 million people), as well as protectionism, an aversion to foreign investment, and “complicated” business regulations. Brussels asserts that the overcoming of these hurdles will decrease the 18.4 percent poverty rate in Poland.

The EU on October 2 criticised Poland’s slow rate of privatisation, after the Polish Treasury announced that revenue from privatisation in the first three quarters of the year had reached only €128 million (US\$162 million). The targeted figure had been €1.42 billion (US\$1.79 billion).

For the past 17 years, the members of the new ruling elite that emerged from the collapse of the Stalinist regime, including significant sections of the old state and party bureaucracy, have amassed their personal fortunes from the plunder of denationalised enterprises and the country’s resources as a whole. They have transformed Poland into a paradise for capitalists.

The richest Pole, the owner of the Polsat television network, Zygmunt Solorz, has a personal fortune of US\$2 billion, which places him at 282 on *Forbes* magazine’s annual list of the wealthiest individuals in the world. Other social parasites such as Leszek Czarnecki, president of Gettin Holding, and Jan Kulczyk, head of Kulczyk Holding, also personify this elite.

Meanwhile, large parts of the population lack even the most elementary requirements of civilised life.

This elite is facing a new period of social and political instability. Not one Polish government has survived an entire legislative term. Right-wing and “left-wing” governments have alternately held majorities in the Sejm, but without any significant change in the general political course. Only one constant has remained over the years—the fleeing of Poland’s workers and farmers.



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