

Letter from a correspondent in Poland

15 December 2006

The following letter on recent political developments in Poland was sent by WSWs correspondent Cezar Komorovsky.

Greetings comrades,

This is what has transpired in Poland this last week (and a little bit beforehand).

At a tense summit with the European Union (EU) in Helsinki, Finland on November 26, Russia agreed to cancel the fees that EU airlines pay for flying over Siberia. (Flights over Siberia are the best routes between Europe and destinations in China, Japan, Hong Kong and South Korea. The fees were introduced by the Soviet Union in 1986 to compensate for the air traffic that state-owned Aeroflot lost to foreign airlines.) Russia will start reducing the fees in 2010, and will completely phase them out by the end of 2013.

“This is a big success,” said European Commission (EC) Vice President Jacques Barrot. “The agreement will significantly improve the competitive situation of our European airlines.”

However, Russia refused to drop its ban on Polish meat, which has existed since its introduction in November 2005. Speaking about Polish meat, Russian President Vladimir Putin sardonically stressed its high quality, while at the same time saying that “they [Poland] shouldn’t link this entirely technical issue with the overall status of Russian-EU relations. Such economic selfishness does not help, and it will not help.”

“After our discussion, we now understand that the issue is absolutely technical, not political,” chimed in Finnish Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen, in an attempt to defray the obvious political nature of the matter.

“We shouldn’t over-dramatize this,” said EC President Jose Manuel Barroso. With humor that was as misplaced as is humanly possible, he added, “Everyone agrees that Polish meat is good. Maybe at the next summit we will be served a good Polish steak for lunch.”

On another subject, Putin rejected a request for Russian energy company Gazprom to be split up into separate production and distribution companies, and said that the company would remain one as long as domestic gas prices differed from world prices.

On November 29, extreme right-wing Polish education minister Roman Giertych condemned a video showing a neo-fascist party organized by the All-Poland Youth (the youth wing of his League of Polish Families [LPR]), wrote the German Press Agency. The video, made public by Poland’s *Dziennik* daily, shows a group of All-Poland Youth members shouting “Sieg Heil” against the backdrop of a swastika. The night party in question was apparently held outdoors in the Silesia region of southern Poland two years ago. The public propagation of totalitarian ideologies (in which category “communism” is included) is illegal in Poland. And this law from the likes of a supposedly “non-totalitarian” state!

“Anyone who propagates the swastika in Poland is not only an idiot, but also a criminal,” Giertych said, conveniently forgetting his own history in the anti-Semitic outfit. Yet a young woman who the video shows enthusiastically participating in the neo-Nazi party is believed to be Leokadia Zwiazek, who is the assistant to Roman Giertych’s father Maciej in the European Parliament. She has since been fired.

Wprost carried a story on Poland’s coal dependency, writing that Poland is the most coal-dependent country in the world. It ranks top in the amount of electric energy produced by coal-fueled power plants, with a 95 percent rating. South Africa follows with a 92 percent rating, Australia with 79 percent, and China with 78 percent. Countries such as the US or Germany have reduced their numbers to 50 percent or 49 percent, respectively.

One or two nuclear power plants could allow an economically justified closure of some high-risk coalmines, according to *Radio Polonia*.

On December 2, the Polish government indicated that though the criteria for joining the EU Growth and Stability Pact could be met by Poland by 2009, a referendum on whether to join the EU single currency will not be taken before 2011. This is the latest date to be suggested yet by what is seen by many as a “Euro-skeptic” government.

“We are obliged under the terms of the membership treaty to adopt the euro,” said Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski. “But there is no fixed date. We could do it when Poland’s level of economic development is closer to that of other EU members.” In an opinion poll released December 1, 61 percent of the population expressed negative opinions about the single currency.

On the same day, Polish President Lech Kaczynski expressed unease about the political cooperation between Germany and Russia, suggesting in remarks that Germany’s leaders should be more critical of Moscow’s growing assertiveness.

Russia is undertaking “gigantic arms expenditures,” said Kaczynski, and an “enormous expansion that is being carried out despite large social problems.”

“I cannot believe that German politicians see no differences between countries like France, Germany, and Poland on the one hand and today’s Russia [on the other],” he continued. In Russia there are “phenomena that occur nowhere else. Not all facts are openly known. But nobody denies that Ms. [Anna] Politkovskaya [a Russian journalist associated with an anti-Kremlin line] was murdered, and that the [Alexander] Litvinenko case [whereby a defector from Russia was poisoned in a London hospital] is highly suspicious. At least in Poland no opposition figure has lost his life in recent years,” he concluded. *Radio Polonia* featured a short article on December 4 that spoke of Polish mining, saying that in

recent years Polish mining has undergone major “restructuring.” Thirty-four of the original 70 collieries are still operating. The industry employs approximately 120,000 people, which is less than a third of the original number.

On the same day, Poland’s chief prosecutor ordered an investigation into allegations that deputy Prime Minister Andrzej Lepper solicited sex from a woman in exchange for giving her a job with his political party.

Exemplifying the sleaziness of official Polish politics, *Gazeta Wyborcza* published an interview with a woman who said she was given a job in 2001 with Lepper’s Farmers’ Self-Defense in return for sex with Lepper. The woman (identified as Aneta K.) was quoted as saying she was also required to have sex with another member, a Stanislaw Lyzwinski.

Lepper denied the allegations on TVN24 television, calling them “totally untrue” and a “provocation” meant to damage him politically and bring down the government, which is composed of a coalition between his Farmers’ Self-Defense, the Law and Justice Party (PiS), and the right-wing LPR.

Lepper suggested that somebody may be trying to bring down the coalition, though he wouldn’t say who. He also noted that it seemed suspicious that these allegations were published less than a week after the other junior coalition partner (the LPR) came under fire for alleged links to neo-Nazis. The threat to what passes for a “free press” in Poland nowadays couldn’t be clearer.

If the allegations are true, Lepper could be charged with abuse of public office, which is a crime that carries a maximum eight-year sentence.

On December 5, President Kaczynski met French president Jacques Chirac and German chancellor Angela Merkel in the ancient abbey of Mettlach in Germany. The meeting of the Weimar Triangle (a consultative group formed in 1991 consisting of France, Germany, and Poland) was originally canceled in the summer.

The talks mainly concerned the German presidency in the EU starting in January 2007, the still-standing Polish veto in the recent EU-Russia talks for a renewal of an energy contract between the two entities, the crisis of the pending EU constitution, and “energy security.”

“We recognize the importance of Russia as a strategic partner,” the three said in a joint statement. “We will further support the development of a long-term partnership with Russia based on common interest and equal rights, in particular in the trade and energy sector.”

Speaking of the pervasive Polish veto in the EU-Russia talks, French President Jacques Chirac said in perfect diplomatese that he hoped “to see this dispute resolved as soon as possible.”

On December 6, pro-EU and vociferously pro-business Polish opposition party the Citizens’ Platform (PO) elected a new parliamentary leader. Bogdan Zdrojewski will step into the shoes of Donald Tusk. Tusk himself, however, had recommended a different candidate for the post. The election of Zdrojewski is Tusk’s defeat, said prominent PO leader Jan Rokita.

On December 7, German media giant Axel Springer purchased a 25 percent stake in Poland’s second largest commercial TV network, Polsat.

Springer has already captured a significant chunk of the print market in Poland. It launched the *Fakt* tabloid two years ago. It has already surpassed its closest rival, Super Express. *Dziennik* appeared at newsstands in 2006. It forced closest competitor *Gazeta Wyborcza* to lower its retail price by 50 percent.

“No monopolies,” said Polsat executives in an attempt to reassure customers. “Today Poland has five main channels. Polsat has only 18 percent of the market. To talk about a monopoly we would have to have a minimum of 30 percent, which is impossible.”

Poland’s broadcast media market is relatively new. A decade ago legislation was adopted allowing foreign investors to buy no more than 33 percent of a given company, but Poland had to abolish this law when it joined the EU in 2004.

Polityka carried an interesting story on the same day about Polish suicide rates, saying that every day of the week sees several young Poles committing suicide. Since 1991, the number of suicide attempts has been dangerously growing, with recent research figures showing every third Polish child considers suicide at some given phase of their life.

Yet again on the same day, a Roman Catholic radio station that has been accused of anti-Semitism and even criticized by the Vatican was praised by Polish Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski as a source of “comfort and hope” for Poles.

Joining the 15th anniversary celebrations of extreme-right-wing *Radio Maryja*, Kaczynski said, “I’m standing here with the feeling that I’m taking part in something important. I’m taking part in the 15th anniversary of an institution . . . that has played a great role in Poland’s history,” reported Polish TV station TVN24.

On December 9, deputy Prime Minister Lepper said that the sex scandal currently making front-page news in Poland is an attempt to carry out a *coup d’état*. This was confirmed as the DNA paternity test proved that his deputy was not the father of the child at the center of the scandal.

Lepper then attacked the media, saying that they had published untrue information. With absolutely no democratic compunction whatsoever, he declared that media legislation should be made “stricter and quicker” in the future.

Best regards,

Cezar Komorovsky



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