Eastern Europe split over Syria intervention

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Ten years ago, in the war against Iraq, almost all Eastern European countries supported the "coalition of the willing" led by the US and the UK. The bourgeois governments that had come to power following the fall of their Stalinist predecessors regarded the Iraq war as an opportunity to distance themselves from Russia, move closer to the US and put pressure on Germany and France. At that time, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld coined the term "old" and "new" Europe. "Old" Europe—France and Germany—refused to participate in a military intervention. Rumsfeld's "new" Europe—Poland, the Czech Republic and other Eastern European states—supported the intervention.

Most Eastern European governments are now reacting more cautiously to the preparations for war against Syria and reject any military involvement. The reason is the massive hostility to war among their own people, on the one hand, and their economic and political rapprochement with Russia, on the other. Both of these elements are bound up with both the deep economic crisis in southern Europe and tensions with EU headquarters in Brussels.

According to the Polish foreign ministry, Secretary of State John Kerry used a telephone call to ask his Polish counterpart Radoslaw Sikorski to participate in an international response to the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime. Poland's Prime Minister Donald Tusk declared, however, that Poland "did not plan to participate in an intervention in Syria." His government was not convinced that a war would "put a stop to the crimes".

Representatives of the Czech Republic have also declared their opposition to participation in a war against Syria. The transitional government of Jiri Rusnok declared that any intervention in Syria lacked a legal basis and would not solve the problems. "For us, Syria is a very sensitive country with which we have had long relationships," said Rusnok. "We are not happy about the conflict, but we do not believe that a solitary action can solve anything. We remain sceptical."

President Milos Zeman made similar comments. "In my opinion, in Syria, on the one side stands a secular dictator and on the other religious fanatics with al-Qaeda at their head," the president said. The Czech Republic is one of the few NATO countries that have opened a diplomatic embassy in Syria.

The Social Democrats (CSSD), whom current opinion polls predict will provide the next prime minister, have spoken out against military intervention. Party leader Bohuslav Sobotka said that a possible military strike could exacerbate tensions in the region and lead to the escalation of the conflict.

US government representatives are urging Hungary to support a military strike against Syria. The spokesperson of the Hungarian foreign ministry, Gabor Kaleta, commented that the government had already severed its diplomatic ties with the Assad regime and no longer regarded it as the legitimate representative of Syria, but Budapest would not currently participate with direct military support.

The Latvian government, however, spoke out in favour of a military strike against Syria. Latvian foreign minister Edgar Rinkevics said last week in a radio interview that Latvia would support a military intervention without the backing of the UN Security Council. He spoke openly in favour of a rapid military strike, to send President Bashar al-Assad a "message".

The governments in Warsaw, Prague and Budapest are also not fundamentally against a military attack on Syria. They supported the war against Iraq and are still participating to some degree in the occupation of Afghanistan. However, foreign policy changes are underway in the Eastern European countries.

Poland did not take part in the 2011 war against Libya. Given the parliamentary elections in the autumn

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of that year, both Tusk's right-wing Civic Platform (PO) as well as other parties refused to participate.

According to a 2011 survey, 88 percent of the Polish population was against sending troops. Recent polls show that rejection of foreign missions by the Army has continued to grow after 42 Polish soldiers have died in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the Czech Republic, Hungary, Bulgaria and other Eastern European countries the vast majority of the population opposes a military intervention in Syria.

Another reason for the reluctance of some Eastern European governments is a stronger rapprochement to Russia, which has so far opposed a military strike against Syria.

Hungary is currently deepening its economic relations with Russia. Especially since the right-wing government of Victor Orban came to office, conflicts between Hungary and the rest of the European Union have increased and his government is more oriented towards Moscow. Russia is now Hungary's largest trading partner outside the EU. An estimated €10 million is currently budgeted for the establishment of Hungarian trade centres in Russia.

Czech President Milos Zeman is also striving for greater economic cooperation with Russia. For the political leadership in Moscow, Zeman's victory in the presidential elections this year against the right-winger Karel Schwarzenberg came as a relief, according to Fyodor Lukyanov, Chairman of the Presidium of the Russian Council for Foreign and Defence Policy.

"The Czech left was mostly open to cooperation with Russia," said Kai-Olaf Lang of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. "Moreover, Zeman's circle enjoys close economic contacts with Russian companies. As president, Zeman would probably follow a policy of change towards Russia, towards greater cooperation."

Zeman has contacts with the Russian oil company Lukoil. One of his closest advisers, the lobbyist Miroslav Slouf, has long worked for Lukoil. The head of Lukoil's Czech office, Martin Nejedl, supported Zeman's presidential campaign.

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