

Poland builds up military against Russia

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Poland's conservative government led by Ewa Kopacz (Civic Platform) is significantly building up the country's military for a confrontation with Russia. At the same time, major cuts in social spending are being prepared to finance the war drive. However, the cuts are only to be implemented fully after the presidential elections on May 10 and parliamentary elections in October.

On the border with Kaliningrad, the Russian enclave on the Baltic Sea, Poland intends to build six 50-metre watchtowers, a spokeswoman for the Polish border police told the PAP news agency. Three quarters of the cost of 14 million zloty (€3.7 million) will be financed by a European Union (EU) fund for the securing of external borders.

The 200-kilometre border connecting Poland with Kaliningrad has a number of popular crossings. Last year, 3.2 million Poles and 3.3 million Russians used them. To justify their belligerence, Polish officials said the new watchtowers were to maintain surveillance around the clock so as to detect potential Russian aggression.

Lithuania's right-wing president, Dalia Grybauskaitė, whose nation also shares a border with Kaliningrad, declared in March that Russia had stationed nuclear-capable, short-range ballistic Iskander missiles in the enclave. These missiles could "even reach Berlin," Grybauskaitė claimed.

In March, the head of Poland's security council, General Stanisław Koziej, warned that his nation had to adjust to the alleged threat of Russian attacks. He called upon other European states to follow Poland's example and increase their defence budgets. The most important thing in the current crisis, the general asserted, was that Poland maintain the "unity" of the Western countries and strengthen the EU in the area of security.

The Polish government has announced plans to send

military units to the borders with Ukraine, Belarus and Kaliningrad. Around 12,000 reservists were recently called up for exercises. Neo-fascist paramilitary associations have officially been integrated into the Polish military.

Between 2005 and 2014, Poland increased military spending by 38 percent, by 13 percent last year alone. For this year, the government plans a 19 percent increase.

The military build-up in Poland and throughout eastern Europe is directed ever more openly at Russia, and increases the risk of a nuclear conflict between Moscow and the NATO powers. Lithuania has increased military spending by 50 percent and plans to reintroduce military service. Latvia, Estonia and Romania have also increased their defence budgets.

The fifth anniversary of the Smolensk plane crash, in which Polish president Lech Kaczyński and some 100 other high-ranking officials died, has also become part of growing tensions with Russia. The Polish government only sent a small delegation, led by the minister for culture, to the official commemoration in Russia. Prime Minister Kopacz took part in a separate commemoration in Poland. "A visit by the Polish Prime Minister to Russian territory would not be advisable at present," her spokesman said.

Lech's brother, Jarosław, head of the conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS), is portraying his twin as a martyr in the cause of Poland's freedom and independence. Several PiS politicians and Polish media outlets have blamed Russian intelligence for the April 2010 plane crash.

Poland's chief military state prosecutor even opened investigations recently into the activity of two Russian air traffic controllers for possibly causing the crash because they neglected their duties. It is generally accepted that the accident was the result of pilot error.

At the same time as it builds up the military against

Russia, the Polish government is preparing sweeping cuts at the expense of the population. Three high-ranking government representatives who did not want to be named told Reuters news agency that major economic and social “reforms” would be postponed until after the presidential and parliamentary elections. Kopacz would not take on the reform of the coal industry and the crisis-ridden health sector prior to the elections. In the face of major strikes by miners in February, the government temporarily withdrew plans for mass layoffs.

Parliamentary elections are expected to take place in October. Polls suggest the Civic Platform will lose votes and will be compelled to reach a coalition agreement with several other parties. In the approaching presidential election in May, the government party’s candidate, incumbent president Bronisław Komorowski, is also under pressure. This is preventing the government from “taking more decisive steps,” noted analyst Alexander Smolar.

Although Poland achieved slow economic growth in recent years, the outlook for eastern Europe’s largest economy is now quite bleak. According to Reuters, many economists fear that “the factors which have driven growth, including EU assistance and low wages,” will not continue to offer any benefits in the coming years. Poland will have to make spending cuts and privatise unproductive industries. A further increase in the budget deficit, currently standing at 3.2 percent of GDP, would be irresponsible, according to these anti-working class experts.

One of the main factors having a negative impact on Poland is the drastic breakdown in economic relations with Russia due to the EU-imposed sanctions. Trade between the EU and Russia dropped by 34.3 percent in the space of a year, and trade between Poland and Russia by 48.9 percent.

While no date has been set for Poland to join the euro zone, it is a major issue in the presidential election. Komorowski promised that if he were confirmed in office, he would proceed rapidly to introduce the euro. Last year, he spoke out in favour of only beginning the debate on the euro after the elections.

According to an opinion poll carried out by TNS Polska, only 15 percent of respondents believe the euro will have a positive impact on Poland, while 52 percent believe it will not. Some 67 percent expect the buying

power of Polish households to decline if the euro is introduced.



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