

Politicians stoke racism against refugees in run-up to Polish elections

Clara Weiss**17 October 2015**

Parliamentary elections will take place in Poland on October 25. In the election campaign, the current opposition PiS (Law and Justice) party and the governing Citizens Platform (PO) are exploiting the refugee crisis in Europe to stoke racism and push Polish politics further to the right. At the same time, differences between the PiS and PO over the country's foreign policy orientation are being fought out.

The Polish elections take place under conditions of a severe social and political crisis. Earlier this year, the political unknown Andrzej Duda (PiS) surprisingly won the presidential election on a right-wing nationalist and anti-European Union platform, defeating incumbent Bronisław Komorowski (PO). A spy scandal in the summer involving Polish politicians, who spoke in the most vulgar terms about relations with the US and EU, led to a deep crisis for the government of Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz. It is generally accepted that the scandal was made public by sections of the ruling elite close to PiS. (See "Polish government plagued by spying scandal")

Polls predict that PiS will win the parliamentary elections with 37 percent of the vote, with PO obtaining roughly a quarter of the vote. In addition, the newly founded United Left, a coalition of Stalinists, trade unionists, social democrats and pseudo-left tendencies, could win 10 percent of the vote and hold seats in the Sejm.

As in Hungary, where a fence has been constructed and the army deployed to deter refugees, Poland is pursuing an extreme right-wing refugee policy. President Duda has repeatedly spoken out against the acceptance of all refugees and the introduction of quotas within the EU. Kopacz also resisted quotas in EU negotiations for some time, but then softened her opposition under pressure from former President

Komorowski and the EU.

In total, the Polish government intends to accept just 7,000 refugees over the next two years, a minuscule sum considering the fact that several million are seeking refuge in Europe and Poland is a large country with a population of 38 million.

In addition, successive governments led by the PO and PiS have supported all US-led imperialist interventions in the Middle East, which are responsible for the flight of masses of workers and their families from the region. From the outset the political establishment has accompanied its war policy with a racist anti-Muslim propaganda campaign.

The refugee issue is being used above all by the PiS in the election campaign to channel social dissatisfaction into reactionary channels and push politics further to the right. Anti-Muslim propaganda and the encouragement of a militant Polish nationalism and Catholicism are at the heart of this. The party's chairman, Jarosław Kaczyński, warned in a September parliamentary debate against accepting any Muslim refugees. He justified this with the absurd assertion that there are so many Muslim refugees in Sweden that the national flag can no longer be hoisted. In addition, he claimed, Swedish schoolgirls no longer felt comfortable wearing short skirts and Sharia law ruled in parts of the country.

Lech Wałęsa, the first leader of the Polish republic and long-time leader of the Solidarność trade union, spoke out in favour of the rejection of refugees in an interview at the beginning of September. In typical right-wing populist style, he sought to incite an impoverished Poland against refugees. "In Poland, we have small apartments, low wages and modest pensions. When I saw refugees on television, I noticed that they look a lot better than us. They are well

nourished, well dressed and perhaps even richer than us.”

Yet the vast majority of those seeking to flee to Poland are not from the Middle East, but from Ukraine. In 2014 alone, Poland officially accepted 300,000 refugees from its eastern neighbour. The overwhelming majority did not come from the war zones in the country’s east, but rather from western Ukraine. It is estimated that around 800,000 Ukrainians are living and working in Poland. Most have no permanent right to reside.

In Poland, there are no significant ethnic or religious minorities. After the Holocaust and a mass exodus following World War II, only a few thousand Jews live in the country. The largest minorities come from Ukraine, Russia, Vietnam and Belarus. With the exception of war refugees from Chechnya, none are Muslims.

The refugee crisis is being used above all by PiS to direct anger among the working population over the cuts imposed by the PO government into right-wing channels. Under the PO government, the sales tax was increased from 22 to 23 percent, and a law passed raising the retirement age to 67 for men by 2020 and for women by 2040.

Social tensions are mounting ahead of the election. Miners began a new strike on October 6. The state-owned Kompania Weglowa, the largest coal producer in the EU, previously declared that it may not be able to pay 400,000 workers this month.

Foreign policy considerations are also playing a role in the anti-refugee agitation. PiS combines its vehement opposition to accepting refugees with sharp criticisms of Germany and the EU. Kaczynski concluded his anti-Muslim tirade in the Sejm with a swipe at Germany, and stated that only Poland’s deadliest enemies were in favour of accepting Muslim refugees. PiS is oriented even more strongly than PO towards US imperialism and appeals for greater Polish independence from the EU, and especially Germany. (See “Poland rearms against Russia”)



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