

Polish ruling class divided over foreign policy in run-up to general election

Clara Weiss

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The Law and Justice (PiS) looks set to win about a third of the vote in the Polish general election on Sunday, ahead of the ruling Civic Platform (PO). It is also expected that a number of smaller parties will enter parliament for the first time. These include both ultra-right-wing groups and the United Left (Zjednoczona Lewica), an alliance of Stalinists, Social Democrats and Greens.

The growth of the right-wing conservative PiS and smaller parties such as the United Left and Razem (Together), a new pseudo-left formation that is modelled on Syriza, is primarily a result of the rejection of the PO, which has implemented massive austerity measures, including pushing up the retirement age and raising VAT (sales tax). Youth unemployment stands at around 25 percent and some 1.4 million of the country's 8.9 million children and young people under 24 are growing up in poverty.

At the same time, the growing political instability is a result of fierce clashes over the future course to be taken in domestic and foreign policy. The present government was thrown into a deep crisis by a wire-tapping scandal, which threw light on the attitude of leading politicians towards Poland's allies, especially Germany and the United States.

As part of the scandal, which the PiS had probably triggered deliberately, it was revealed that the then Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski had spoken about the alliance with the US in the most vulgar terms. As the pro-PiS magazine *Wprost* revealed, Sikorski had said the alliance between Poland and the United States was "worthless". It was even harmful, because it created "a false sense of security for Poland". According to Sikorski, Poland faced conflict "with both Russia and Germany" and could not count on the support of the United States. As a result, the Polish

cabinet was reshuffled in summer this year. Several secretaries of state and ministers were dismissed. Sikorski had to go as well.

Sikorski's comments are symptomatic of the foreign policy dilemma of Poland, which wants to establish itself as a major regional power and is fighting within the EU against the superior power of France, and especially Germany, but is dependent on the support of the US and Germany economically and in foreign policy terms.

In the Ukraine conflict, both the PO and the PiS have adopted an extremely aggressive position against Russia. The two parties differ mainly in their attitude towards the EU and Germany. While Ewa Kopacz, the incumbent prime minister and lead candidate of the PO, has been working to harmonize her policies with the EU and Germany, despite growing conflicts with Berlin, the PiS advocates a closer alliance with the US and greater political independence from Brussels and Berlin.

A central point of contention between the PiS and PO is the relationship with Germany. For more than two decades, Germany has been Poland's most important trading partner by far. According to figures from the Foreign Ministry, about a quarter of all Polish exports go to Germany. German companies are also the most important foreign investors in Poland. German investments since 1990 have amounted to €27 billion. But despite Poland's economic dependence on Germany, political tensions have increased in recent years.

Germany's return to an aggressive foreign policy is seen with concern by Poland's ruling elites. This was especially apparent in the Ukraine crisis.

First, ruling circles fear that an overly soft attitude by Germany towards Russia would be at Poland's

expense. And second, Germany's dominant role in the EU's policy towards Ukraine has unleashed unease in Warsaw.

Above all, the PiS has developed stronger anti-German rhetoric over the last two years. For example, in a parliamentary debate in which he railed against refugees, party leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski described the Germans as "mortal enemies" of Poland.

These questions also played a role in Monday's TV debate between the two leading candidates, Ewa Kopacz (PO) and Beata Szydło (PiS), which was watched by nearly 4 million viewers. In the debate, Kopacz defended herself against accusations her policies had weakened the position of Poland within the EU. She railed against Putin, described the crisis in Ukraine as an "attack on the sovereignty" of Ukraine by Russia, and stressed the importance of solidarity within the EU on this issue.

The chairman of the PiS, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, had previously publicly stated that Poland was only a "German-Russian condominium [territory]."

Szydło said, although the existing alliances are important, Poland must also build regional alliances and fight for a strong position in Eastern Europe. Within the EU, Poland only occupied a subordinate position, she said. As an example, she cited the expansion of the Nord Stream pipeline, which supplies gas directly from Russia to Germany, which had been negotiated "behind the back" of Poland.

Szydło spoke in favour of remaining in the EU, but insisted on more rights for the Polish government. She accused Kopacz of capitulating to German Chancellor Angela Merkel because she had agreed to accept a few thousand refugees in Poland.

Since coming to office Andrzej Duda, who was surprisingly elected president in the spring as the PiS candidate, has specifically sought to build a new alliance under the leadership of Poland in Eastern Europe, and advance the rearmament of NATO. Following his election, Duda announced the "founding of a partnership block, stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea and the Adriatic". Duda's first official visit was not to Paris or Berlin, but to Estonia.

Also being discussed is the creation of a joint military brigade by Poland, Ukraine and Lithuania named LITPOLUKRBRIG, which various analysts regard as a prototype for a joint military force. Moreover, Duda

wants to establish a Baltic-Black Sea association, in which countries like Ukraine and Moldova can participate who are not yet fully-fledged NATO members.

These plans build on the so-called Intermarium (Between the Seas), which was formed under the dictatorial regime of General Józef Piłsudski between the two world wars. The Intermarium was an alliance of right-wing nationalist forces in Poland, Ukraine, the Baltic countries and the Caucasus, which set itself the goal of destroying the Soviet Union and establishing national states in place of the Soviet republics, which would be oriented to the Western imperialist powers.

Given Western encroachment into Ukraine, a new version of the Intermarium is also supported by sections of the American bourgeoisie.

In domestic policy the PiS also sees the authoritarian Piłsudski regime as a model. Leading party members have for years vehemently argued for a constitutional amendment reducing the importance of parliament and significantly strengthening the powers of the president; currently, the division of power between the prime minister and the president is not very clearly defined.

In a 2010 draft constitutional amendment, the PiS sought to lift the separation between church and state. Duda and other well-known party representatives have also repeatedly expressed their admiration for Piłsudski, under whose regime thousands of communists were persecuted and imprisoned, and fascist forces experienced an upswing.



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