

Tens of thousands demonstrate against Polish government

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On Saturday, under the slogan “We are and will remain in Europe,” tens of thousands demonstrated in the Polish capital Warsaw against the Law and Justice Party (PiS) government and in favour of a stronger orientation to the European Union. According to opposition sources, around 200,000 people participated in the march through the city centre, which would make it the largest demonstration in Poland since 1989. With the support of the Catholic Church, the government organised counter-demonstrations, but could only draw between 3,000-4,000 people.

Campaigns using large placards took place in the Polish capital for several weeks in the lead-up to the demonstration. Warsaw’s mayor, Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, from the opposition Citizens’ Platform (PO), was among the most prominent figures in the opposition movement. Backing also came from figures like Adam Michnik, the former editor of the influential daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*. As an opposition intellectual during the Stalinist era, he helped prepare the way for capitalist restoration.

Compared to earlier protests, more young people participated, above all students and some entire families. Academics and members of the Warsaw middle class were clearly visible.

The opposition noted at the demonstration that the issue was defending democracy and the constitutional court against the PiS. But at the heart of the protest was the issue of the EU. In the sea of Polish and EU flags which dominated the protest, there were significantly more EU flags than at previous protests.

Ryszard Petru, chairman of the Nowoczesna (Modern Party), stated, “We are not in agreement with describing the EU flag as dirt and that Jarosław Kaczyński is leading us out of the EU.” Other opposition figures said the issue was defending

democracy and “European values” like “freedom” and “solidarity.”

Nowoczesna is involved in the committee for the defence of democracy (KOD) and played a central role in organising the protest. In the last election, the party managed to secure many votes from disappointed PO supporters. In recent polls, Nowoczesna, with 20.4 percent support, was in second place, behind the PiS (30.8 percent). Only 12.8 percent still support PO.

Nowoczesna represents the interests of large and small businesses whose operations are closely tied to EU membership. Petru, the party’s chairman, worked for the World Bank between 2001 and 2004, where he was involved in drafting austerity measures for Poland and Hungary to allegedly improve the climate for investment. He was thereafter active in management and as an economist for a number of important Polish banks. He has close ties to economist Leszek Balcerowicz, who heavily influenced the shock therapy for Poland in the 1990s, making him among those chiefly responsible for the social catastrophe produced by capitalist restoration.

The protests came in the wake of an intensifying constitutional crisis and growing conflicts over Poland’s EU policy. The PiS government has largely blocked the constitutional court and refused to publish its ruling against a new law which significantly limits the court’s powers. As long as the ruling remains unpublished, it does not come into force.

The EU has intervened in the conflict, and following proposals from the Venice Commission, it sided with the constitutional court. In response, Zdzisław Krasnodębski, who is responsible for EU affairs in the PiS government, proposed via Twitter a referendum over Poland’s continued EU membership.

However, this was met with opposition from among

the PiS leadership. Kaczyński, the party's chair, condemned those in favour of a referendum at the beginning of May as a "political plague." He emphasised that Poland would remain in the EU, even if it withdrew the freedom to oppose policies which contradicted national security. In January, President Andrzej Duda issued an urgent warning over the potential break-up of the EU resulting from a Brexit.

According to figures from the Polish economy ministry, Britain is the country's second largest export market. For British concerns like Tesco and Shell, Poland is the most important sales market in Central Europe. In addition, Britain is, after the United States, home to the second largest community of Polish immigrants. Around 850,000 Polish workers live in Britain. Many came to find better jobs, and support their families in Poland with remittances.

From the standpoint of the working class, the protests represent no principled opposition to the PiS' right-wing policies, which aim to construct an authoritarian state and are playing a central role in US imperialism's war drive against Russia. Instead, the opposition parties are attempting to divert the opposition to these right-wing policies behind the reactionary project of the EU.

The lack of interest among the opposition parties in defending democratic rights is shown by their fundamental acceptance of the government's new anti-terror law.

The EU, which the Polish opposition parties feel part of, is implementing ruthless attacks on the working class across the continent. The current government's predecessor, a coalition between PO and PSL (Polish People's Party), was responsible for social attacks backed by the EU.

The opposition speak on behalf of sections of the Polish bourgeoisie and urban middle class, who see their privileges threatened by the policies adopted by PiS. EU membership after the restoration of capitalism in Poland provided the basis for the emergence of a small but, in cities like Warsaw and Krakow, relatively substantial middle class.

While Polish heavy industry was largely dismantled and the country transformed into a low-wage platform for foreign, and in particular German, investment, the banks, non-governmental organisations and service companies which flourished in parallel to this offered well-paid positions for sections of the urban middle

class. At the same time, many Polish corporations have benefited from the European sales market.

The threatened break-up of the EU and the policies of PiS have thrown these layers into crisis. The latest edition of the liberal magazine *Polityka*, which is closely associated with the opposition parties, warned in its lead article of the danger of a break-up of the EU in the event of a "Brexit" or "Polexit." Despite the repeated assertions of Kaczynski and Duda, the opposition fears that Poland could leave the EU.

The magazine issued a dire warning over the impact on business of a break-up of the EU or a Polexit, writing: "Poland is still a poor country and does not have large amounts of capital of its own, the level of the standard of living is among the lowest in Europe. We need foreign investment and capital. Since joining the EU, Poland has received investments totalling €125 billion. Direct investment from EU states is around €110 billion. Polish exports have increased by 200 percent."

The article concluded: "We are in a situation which we wanted to avoid and should always fear like fire: neither aligned with the west nor Russia, we are in a grey zone. The Polexit has begun."



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