

Polish parliament approves creation of paramilitary militia

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The Polish parliament (Sejm) approved the establishment of an army for territorial defence (WOT) in mid-November made up of 53,000 personnel. The parliament thus gave the green light to a project pushed by far-right Defence Minister Antoni Macierewicz.

The new military organisation will be under the direct control of the Defence Ministry. It will support the Polish army in fighting Russia in the event of war, and suppress social and political opposition domestically. Motions by the opposition that the WOT ought to be apolitical, and not be deployed against Polish citizens, were explicitly rejected by the Sejm.

Macierewicz already announced his intention to establish a militia along the lines of the American National Guard in the summer. The Sejm has now voted in favour of this by an absolute majority. By 2019, the force will be comprised of 53,000 people. The first units in the east of the country will be established before the end of the year. By 2019, the government plans to spend 3.6 billion zloty (around €800 million) on the WOT. The monthly remuneration for the militiamen will amount to around 500 zloty (€120).

Macierewicz stated in a television interview, “These units are the most effective way to expand the strength of our armed forces and its defence capabilities. It is also the best response to the dangers of a hybrid war like those we saw in the wake of Russian aggression over Crimea.”

Each of Poland’s 16 provinces is to establish a defence unit of between 3,000 and 5,000 men. The units will be recruited from volunteers, who will be given military training at the government’s expense. Most of the units will be constructed in the eastern regions of Podlachien, Lublin and Podkarpathen, which border Ukraine and Belarus. The east of Poland is the

poorest and most economically backward part of the country and is comprised of large forested areas. Given the social catastrophe produced by the restoration of capitalism, fascist forces and the PiS (Law and Justice Party) have been able to transform the region into a stronghold.

The WOT mandate voted for by the Sejm is extraordinarily wide-ranging and openly orients to right-wing nationalism. It states that the WOT is responsible for “anti-crisis, anti-sabotage, anti-terrorist and anti-disinformation deployments, to defend the security of the civilian population and the cultural heritage of the Polish people.” The Defence Ministry, which will command the WOT, will have a free hand to define what amounts to a crisis, sabotage, terrorist attack or disinformation.

Politicians from the governing PiS explained to a parliamentary committee prior to the vote that the WOT had the goal of “strengthening the patriotic and Christian fundamentals of Poland and the armed forces.” The “patriotism and belief of the Polish soldiers” was “the best guarantee of our security.”

They were thereby making an appeal to far-right forces to join the WOT. Several leaders of right-wing parties and citizens’ militias have already indicated that they will encourage their members to join the WOT.

Since taking office just over a year ago, the PiS government has repeatedly strengthened far-right and anti-Semitic forces in Poland. The government has cooperated closely in this with the Catholic Church, which historically has intimate ties with fascism. Defence Minister Macierewicz, who has a fascist and anti-Semitic past, played a central role in the promotion of far-right forces and their integration into the state apparatus.

The construction of an ultra-right militia in Poland

also enjoys international support. The US think tank Atlantic Council advanced proposals in a strategic paper published in July to establish Poland as a bulwark against Russia. Among the concrete measures suggested for the military build-up were an increase in the regular army from 100,000 to 150,000 and the expansion of paramilitary forces under government control. According to the authors of the paper, the various paramilitary groups, including private ones, already comprise some 400,000 personnel.

It is significant that, according to *Polityka* magazine, the Krakow-based paramilitary organisation Stowarzyszenie Jednostka Strzelecka 2039 participated in NATO's Anaconda training exercise. A number of these units now intend to join the WOT. Other right-wing and fascist organisations like Falanga and Zmiana plan to participate in the WOT.

The WOT bears similarities to the paramilitary organisations in Ukraine, which have not only fought pro-Russian separatists in the east of the country, but also taken action against opposition throughout the country within the Ukrainian population. Some of the right-wing paramilitary organisations, which played a leading role in the overthrow of Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovitch in February 2014, were trained in Poland. Similarly right-wing forces are now to be trained and established in Poland itself.

The liberal opposition has criticised the founding of the militia from a right-wing bourgeois standpoint. Considerable disquiet has been created by the fact that the militia will not be under the command of the military general staff, but rather the Defence Ministry. The deputy chair of the opposition Nowoczesna Party, Katarzyna Lubnauer, described it as Macierewicz's "private army."

Within the Polish army, opposition has emerged to the course pursued by Macierewicz. At the beginning of the year, several high-ranking generals resigned in protest at Macierewicz's military reforms and agitated in the press against the government.

General Janusz Bronowicz attacked the minister and his military reforms publicly. In an interview with *Polityka* magazine, he warned that PiS's policies could lead Poland to a catastrophe like 1939. Bronowicz was one of those who resigned in protest against Macierewicz's policies earlier this year.

The liberal newspaper *Newsweek Polska* in a column

expressed the fear that the WOT could be deployed by the Defence Ministry against the liberal opposition. This concern is not without justification. There have already been violent attacks on members of the Committee for Defence of Democracy (KOD) by right-wing radicals, which were quite openly supported and promoted by PiS.

In addition, the opposition does not want to lose its influence over the direction of the military. There remain several generals and officers in the leadership of the army who support the liberals' domestic political programme.

But the liberal opposition has no objections to the strengthening of the armed forces against Russia and its deployment against the working class at home. Some liberal commentators even attacked the parliamentary vote from the right. Some expressed the fear that several fascist organisations seeking to join the WOT pursue an anti-American stance and advocate a closer alliance with the Kremlin.

Others argued that the money allocated would be insufficient to establish well-equipped units by 2019. Like other NATO states, the government should therefore concentrate its resources on equipping its armed forces with modern weaponry and technology, they argued.

Bogdan Klich, who was defence minister under the PO (Citizens Platform) government of Donald Tusk, complained, "The majority of NATO states are investing in an expansion of the potential of existing forces, not in the creation of a territorial defence force. The priority for investments should be the purchasing of new technologies for the waging of modern wars."



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