

After Trump visit to Poland: PiS government adopts new authoritarian measures

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Less than three weeks after US President Donald Trump's visit to Poland, the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) has dramatically escalated its drive toward dictatorship.

In his speech in Warsaw on July 6, Trump praised the policies of the PiS and appealed to Polish chauvinism and anti-Semitism. After his speech, Trump visited a conference of the "Three Seas Initiative" in Wrocław, thus granting open support to Warsaw's attempt to revive the far-right military alliance of the so-called Intermarium (Between Seas), which is directed against both Germany and Russia.

Last week, the PiS pushed through legislation that will effectively place the judicial system under its control. First, it railroaded through parliament a restructuring of the judicial system and the National Council of the Judiciary (KRS), which is responsible for nominating and promoting judges. The law gives the PiS far-reaching control over the appointment of judges.

A second bill provides for the current 83 Supreme Court judges to retire. PiS Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro will be put in a position to appoint new ones. The lower house of parliament approved the bill last Tuesday and the Senate ratified it on Saturday night. It is expected that Polish President Andrzej Duda will sign the bill soon, even though polls show that over 50 percent of Poles want him to veto it.

Given that the Supreme Court is responsible for monitoring and certifying elections, the continuation of nominally free parliamentary elections in Poland is doubtful.

Discussions of the bill in parliament last Tuesday were accompanied by shouting, vulgar insults and scuffles. The head of PiS, Jarosław Kaczyński, openly threatened dictatorial measures against representatives of the liberal opposition and accused them of treason and murder. When an MP from the liberal opposition party Civic Platform (PO) quoted Kaczyński's brother, the former president of Poland Lech Kaczyński, who died in a plane crash in 2010, Jarosław Kaczyński exploded, shouting: "Don't befoul my dead brother's name by letting it pass through your treasonous mouth. You destroyed him, you murdered him. You are scoundrels!"

For years, the PiS has been blaming the former liberal government for the plane crash, but never has a PiS politician so openly raised the accusation of murder.

Scuffles followed on the floor of the parliament. Kaczyński then summoned Witold Zembaczyński, a delegate from Nowoczesna, and threatened that "all PO politicians will be sitting [in jail]." A PO delegate later retorted on Twitter that it was the members of the PiS who would end up in jail.

The next day, Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski defended Kaczyński's outburst as an "honest and manly response." On her Facebook page, PiS parliamentary delegate Krystyna Pawłowicz threatened opposition politicians, writing that they would "sit [in jail] for the terror" they were allegedly creating "on the streets." In a parliamentary session, she admitted that she was "dreaming" of reopening the notorious Bereza Kartuska concentration camp.

The camp was set up in 1934 under the authoritarian Piłsudski-regime to detain people it regarded as posing a "threat to security, peace and social order." Thousands of people, including militant Ukrainian and Byelorussian nationalists, were imprisoned there and forced to perform forced labor, but the first victims were communists.

The PiS's latest measures mark a turning point in the breakdown of the limited bourgeois democratic framework that was instituted in Poland with the restoration of capitalism and the dissolution of the USSR. In the past two years that the PiS has been in power, the government has brought under its control the secret services and state-run television and radio. It has purged most of the Polish army leadership and numerous state-funded scientific institutions, passed legislation to step up police surveillance, stripped the parliament of its powers, and curtailed the already limited right to abortion.

At the same time, it has strengthened the far-right and built up paramilitary militias that are subordinate to the PiS's defense ministry. The threats by Kaczyński and other PiS representatives make clear that the government is now

preparing for the violent suppression of any dissent.

In recent days, tens of thousands of people have protested daily against the bills in demonstrations organized by the liberal opposition parties PO and Nowoczesna. Protests took place not only in Warsaw and other traditional strongholds of the liberal opposition, but also in smaller towns and cities that have so far barely been touched by the opposition movement. Reports suggest that a significant layer of youth participated in the protests. Even though the judicial system is unpopular and discredited as corrupt, many view the latest bills as an assault on democratic rights and the preparation for a full-scale dictatorship.

The hostility to the government's policies is much broader than the support for the liberal opposition. According to a poll by IBRiS, a stunning 82 percent of young people aged 19 to 29 consider themselves opponents of the government. Some 52 percent of all voters see themselves as opponents of the government, significantly more than would vote for both liberal opposition parties combined. Polls taken before the bills passed parliament showed 32 percent of voters in favor of the PiS (a drop of 4 percent), and 33 percent in favor of PO and Nowoczesna combined (23 percent, an increase of 1 percent, for PO, and 10 percent, an increase of 2 percent, for Nowoczesna).

Young people and workers who are opposed to the right-wing policies of PiS must not be fooled by the phony appeals of the liberal opposition to democratic sentiments. At the center of the power struggle between PiS and the liberal opposition are questions of foreign policy, as both factions of the bourgeoisie are preparing for war.

For the past 28 years, the Polish bourgeoisie has tried to balance between a military and foreign policy orientation toward US imperialism and close economic and political collaboration with the EU, and especially Germany. The escalation of the conflict between Germany and the US is pulling the rug from under the feet of the Polish bourgeoisie.

The attack of the PiS on bourgeois democratic institutions and rights and the strengthening of the extreme right are bound up with US war preparations against Russia. The liberal opposition is not in principle opposed to preparations for war. Rather, the conflict is about with whom and against whom the fight is to be conducted. Both the PiS and the liberal opposition have supported the preparations for war against Russia. The question is whether this should be done with or against Germany.

The PiS is placing its bets on a revival of the Intermarium project, an alliance of far-right regimes in Eastern and Central Europe that is directed against not only Russia, but also Germany. Trump's appearance at the conference of Three Seas Initiative in Wrocław earlier this month signaled that this policy now has the official blessing of Washington.

By contrast, the liberal opposition favors an orientation toward Germany and uses the assault on democratic rights by the PiS government to strengthen its cooperation with politicians in Berlin and Brussels. One of the liberal opposition's main media outlets, the weekly *Polityka*, published a lengthy piece in late June warning against the revival of the Intermarium.

It wrote that the invasion of Poland in 1939 by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union had proven the unviability of the project. *Polityka* argued that then as now Poland was essentially "weak" and should not count on the US and the "doubtful authority of Donald Trump." Moreover, *Polityka* argued, most states that now form part of the Three Seas Initiative are neither willing nor capable of turning against Germany.

Hostility toward the Intermarium project is also what motivates the EU's opposition to the PiS's authoritarian measures. The European Commission has threatened to evoke Article 7 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty against Poland for undermining the "rule of law." This could involve far-reaching sanctions, including the suspension of voting rights for Warsaw in the EU. German Justice Minister Heiko Maas threatened the Polish government with "political isolation" because of its violation of "the basis of the European Union," and encouraged triggering Article 7.

The author also recommends:

The strategy of the Intermarium

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