

European Union threatens to impose sanctions on Poland

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The European Commission announced December 20 the imposition of sanctions on Poland under Article 7 of the European Union treaty. The Polish government, led by the nationalist Law and Justice Party (PiS), had prior to this effectively abolished the independence of Poland's courts. The conflict between Brussels and Warsaw is an expression of the ongoing breakup of the European Union.

The PiS' laws, which subordinate the judiciary to the government, have provoked bitter conflicts for two years between the PiS and the European Union and stoked liberal opposition within Poland. The two latest laws concern the Supreme Court and the National Judicial Council. One of the laws enables politicians to determine membership of the Council, which, in turn, appoints judges throughout the country. The second law reduces the retirement age for judges on the Supreme Court, making 40 percent of its current occupants no longer eligible to serve.

Polish President Andrzej Duda vetoed aspects of the latest laws last summer because domestic and foreign policy tensions had risen sharply. However, he fell into line with the government in the autumn and signed the new laws in December.

Małgorzata Gersdorf, chair of the Polish Supreme Court, compared the laws in an open letter to a "coup."

In its 20 December statement, the EU Commission warned of the judicial reforms' consequences for foreign investors and the European single market. The EU gave Poland three months to rescind the laws. If this fails to occur, the EU member states will discuss the initiation of a package of sanctions described by the German daily *Die Welt* as a "partial ejection" from the EU.

Poland could lose its right to vote in the EU as a result. To initiate the sanctions, the EU requires the

votes of 22 of the EU Council's 28 members.

The European press' use of military terms to describe the conflict gives an indication of the EU's internal state. *Die Welt* described the sanctions as the "nuclear option." France's conservative newspaper *Le Figaro* spoke of the use of "heavy artillery." The Spanish newspaper *ABC* wrote, "Brussels is launching a war with Poland over attacks on the rule of law."

German media outlets such as *Die Welt* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* have applauded the measures as a tough but necessary step. However, Stefan Kornelius warned in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that in the aftermath of Brexit, a Polexit could be the last resort.

The Polish media responded with panic to the EU Commission's announcement. *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the most important mouthpiece of the pro-German and pro-European liberal opposition, referred to "judgement day." The conservative *Rzeczpospolita*, which often supports the government, was no less horrified. An initial comment stated, "The worst is yet to come." The newspaper compared Polish politics to a speeding car "which has been driving towards a wall for months and has now spectacularly crashed into it."

Rzeczpospolita also warned of the withdrawal of foreign investors from Poland and predicted severe economic consequences for the country. Another commentator wrote in the same newspaper, "Some colleagues are already discussing where would be the best place to emigrate following a Polexit. We hope that these discussions are groundless." He then listed a number of factors that could prevent Poland's exit from the European Union, including the geographic isolation of the Baltic states that would result from them having no border with the European Union after a Polexit.

The fact that the EU has initiated sanctions against Poland that could ultimately result in the country

leaving the EU is a symptom of bitter national divisions within Europe and the advanced state of the EU's breakup. Nationalist movements are on the march throughout Europe. In Ukraine, they were supported directly in their seizure of power by Berlin, Brussels and Washington. In several European countries, including Hungary and other Eastern European states, as well as Austria, right-wing nationalist forces are in government.

Like the PiS, these governments frequently pursue domestic and foreign policies that run counter to the interests of Germany and the EU. Over recent years, the PiS has pursued a so-called "Intermarium" strategy, which involves the establishment of an alliance of far-right, anti-Russian nationalist forces in Eastern and Central Europe. This alliance, which has been promoted with particular vigor this year, aims to create political, economic and military structures to compete with the EU.

During his visit to Warsaw in the summer, US President Donald Trump assured the Polish government of his full support, encouraged its nationalist agenda, and indicated that he views Poland as an instrument to combat Germany as well as Russia.

The British government is also trying to exploit the Polish-EU conflict for its own nationalist interests. Prime Minister Theresa May traveled with her chancellor, Philip Hammond, State Secretary Amber Rudd, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson and Economy Secretary Greg Clark to Warsaw to conclude wide-ranging bilateral accords.

May and the new Polish prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, who replaced Beata Szydło just a few weeks ago, signed an agreement on security and defence cooperation. In it, Poland agreed to assist Britain against the "very dangerous" EU protectionism following Brexit. May declared at a press conference, "I am determined that Brexit will not weaken our relationship with Poland. Rather, it will serve as a catalyst to strengthen it."

Even prior to the Brexit referendum, Britain was one of Poland's closest allies, since it not only pursues the same hard line anti-Russian policy as Warsaw, but also opposed the dominance of France and Germany in the EU.

The EU, which imposed brutal austerity measures on

Greece, Spain and other countries without even the semblance of democratic mechanisms, is now seeking with its sanctions program to whip Warsaw into line. Britain's *Independent* welcomed this by stating, "It is becoming increasingly clear that the nationalists of Europe lack a deep understanding of and commitment to liberal values or economic progress in equal measure. Time for them to be taught a lesson: you cannot have your cake and eat it."

The PiS' initiatives in domestic and foreign policy in Poland over the past two years were thoroughly reactionary and represent a serious threat to the working class. PiS has assumed control of the intelligence agencies, effectively abolished independent courts, weakened the Polish parliament's powers, placed public media outlets under government control and taken major steps to enforce the militarisation of society. The demonstration of some 60,000 fascists in Warsaw in November was a direct product of the policies adopted by the PiS, which has promoted right-wing and outright fascist tendencies since coming to power and propagandised on their behalf.

But the PiS did not emerge out of the blue. The forces united in the party grew out of capitalist restoration, which was encouraged by Western European states and the United States. They have been strengthened by the social catastrophe bound up with capitalist restoration and Poland's entry into the EU, which have transformed Poland into a cheap-labor paradise for European, and in particular German, big business. The establishment of Poland as a NATO bulwark in Eastern Europe, which has led to the militarisation of Polish society, was part of a deliberate policy.

The same forces in Brussels now attempting to bring Warsaw to heel by means of sanctions bear responsibility for the rise of PiS and similar forces in Europe. The EU's response to this crisis will strengthen these forces and fuel the rise of the nationalists throughout Europe.



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