

Polish government uses Ukraine war to massively expand military spending

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The ultra-right Polish government of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) is playing a central role in NATO's proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. It acts as a provocative and aggressive ally of US imperialism in the region.

After the US and UK, Poland has promised Ukraine the third largest sum in arms deliveries, \$1.8 billion, although its gross domestic product is only a fraction that of the major imperialist powers. While large parts of the already impoverished Polish population are being thrust into penury by the rapidly rising inflation and the consequences of the pandemic, Warsaw is using the war in Ukraine to push ahead and expand long-cherished rearmament plans.

At the end of last year, PiS leader and then Minister of National Security Jaroslaw Kaczynski presented the "Plan for the Defence of the Fatherland." This revised the modernisation plan for the armed forces adopted in 2017. The defence budget was to be increased from 2.2 percent (about \$13 billion) to 2.5 percent of GDP by 2030. By 2035, some \$115 billion was to be invested in the army and its strength was to grow from 110,000 to 250,000 troops.

A few months after the start of the war, the pace of rearmament was then increased again significantly. Instead of 2.5 percent, the budget is now to increase to 3 percent of the GDP, and not in 2026, as was said, but in the coming year. In addition, there will be billions more from a special fund to support the armed forces.

The special fund is a centrepiece of the new law to ensure the financing of rearmament. It escapes parliamentary control and also circumvents the legal obligations (comparable to Germany's debt ceiling) to consolidate the budget. Its financing is fed from various channels—from government bonds and bonds issued by the national development bank BGK, from the state budget and the profits of the National Bank of Poland.

Since the government had a problem issuing government bonds due to economic reasons and high inflation, it rushed an amendment to the law through the Sejm (lower house of parliament) allowing for separate defence bonds. According to the government, the support fund will be worth 20 billion zloty (€4.2 billion) this year and around 50 billion zloty (€10.5 billion) next year.

The Defence of the Fatherland Act came into force on April 23. Prior to that, it had been adopted almost unanimously and without objection by both chambers of the Polish parliament (Sejm and Senate). The approval of all opposition parties makes clear that the war policy is supported both internally and externally by all sections of the ruling class. As far as there is criticism of the PiS, this is merely a matter of tactical differences.

The militarisation of society and strengthening of extreme right-wing forces

A central component of Poland's rearmament plans is the introduction

of a one-year voluntary basic military service. Poland had abolished its general conscription in 2010. Since then, NATO's nominally eighth-largest army has had problems finding enough personnel. The massive expansion of the military and paramilitary units goes hand in hand with the strengthening of Poland's longstanding state-sponsored radical right-wing forces.

The new system is clearly designed to exploit the abject poverty of large sections of the Polish working class, especially the youth. It relies on financial incentives to integrate young people into the murderous machinery of militarism. A full scholarship entices a commitment to a five-year service, and there is also supposed to be priority treatment when applying for jobs in public administration. Those who still hesitate are lured with the statement that "you can quit at any time."

After an extremely shortened basic training of 28 days, for which they receive a full soldier's salary of 4,400 zloty (€925), the recruits are sworn in and admitted into the reserve. Then they have the choice of completing voluntary military service after another 11 months of military training or being taken over by the professional army. Alternatively, they can join the Territorial Defence Forces (WOT) after the 28-day basic training.

The paramilitary WOT, which reports directly to the defence ministry, is a central component of the rearmament programme. Unlike the classic reserve, it is composed of soldiers and volunteers and is of a limited duration. It conducts exercises several times a month, with pay and corresponding time off work. According to government plans, the WOT will also grow from around 30,000 to 50,000 forces.

Like its Ukrainian counterpart, the Territorial Defence, where neo-Nazi formations such as the Azov Battalion and the International Legion set the tone, the WOT is also dominated by ultra-right forces.

It was created in 2016 by then Defence Minister Antoni Macierewicz, who is a militant anti-communist and anti-Semite with close ties to radical right-wing circles. Macierewicz has played a key role in the PiS's campaign to strengthen anti-Semitic forces, in particular, denying the responsibility of Polish nationalists for anti-Jewish pogroms such as those in Jedwabne and Kielce.

Today, Macierewicz is vice-chairman of the PiS, and the WOT is now under the leadership of Mariusz Błaszczak, his successor, who also holds ultra-right positions. For example, he described the march of 60,000 fascists in Warsaw in November 2017 as a "beautiful sight."

Propagating the views of the extreme right is also officially one of the tasks of the WOT, which is euphemistically described as "strengthening the patriotic and Christian foundations of the Polish system and armed forces." The WOT explicitly serves domestic security purposes.

Deputy Defence Minister Wojciech Skurkiewicz described the establishment of a 66-member WOT orchestra in Radom as "the beginning of a great project, the creation of a central institution in our city to popularise a defence culture and WOT tradition." In addition to the orchestra, the intention is to set up centres where the "popularisation of defence" will be carried out in cooperation with local authorities, NGOs

and social partners, he said. There is also to be a “centre for culture and tradition.”

In other words, the WOT serves as an instrument for the complete militarisation of society and as a vehicle for the massive social and political strengthening of radical right-wing forces.

What the militarisation offensive looks like could be seen from mid-May, when the recruitment campaign based on the new law began. Throughout Poland, 32 “military picnics” were organised, and 70 recruitment centres set up. On August 15, the traditional Army Day (marking the anniversary of the Battle of Warsaw in 1920), instead of the traditional military march, there was also a “Weekend with the Army” (Weekend z wojskiem) with extensive festivities and events.

The “military picnics” sought to entice visitors with “numerous attractions for children and adults,” getting hands on with military technology, military orchestras, stalls and presentations. The images of these are repulsive: Bouncy castles stand next to armoured personnel carriers; children pose with machine guns.

The Territorial Defence Forces also specifically advertise among schoolchildren, students and apprentices to use their summer holidays for the 16-day reception training course, which is cynically advertised as a “holiday with the Territorial Defence Forces.” Here, too, the lure is the equivalent of about €100 on completion of the course.

Tomasz Klucznik, press spokesman for the 7th Pomeranian Territorial Defence Brigade, even encouraged secondary school teachers take part in the training. “Teachers can brush up on their practical knowledge of how the force works and get to know our modern equipment,” Klucznik said.

The background to this is the change in teaching the subject “Safety Education” (EdB) ordered in March by Education Minister Przemysław Czarnek. From September onwards, defence education is to be part of the school curriculum in the eighth grade of primary schools and the first grade of secondary schools—including firearms training.

After two years of the pandemic, defence education replaces the previous module on health promotion, of all things. Other new learning content includes survival in hostilities, first aid during the use of conventional weapons and cyber security.

The whole thing is framed by a comprehensive right-wing education reform, also known as Lex Czarnek. In addition to the authoritarian surveillance and control of pupils and the work of teachers, the focus is on “national education.”

The textbook *History and the Present—1945-1979* (by Wojciech Roszkowski) for the new subject of the same name resembles a right-wing extremist pamphlet. Even representatives of the official opposition parties accuse it of being influenced by an ultra-nationalist and arch-Catholic view of society. It rails against atheists, communists, Greens, neoliberals, blacks, LGBTQ, artificial insemination and even rock music.

Should ideological indoctrination and aggressive advertising campaigns fail to produce enough “volunteers,” the defence reform also stipulates that all Polish citizens aged 18 and over will be required to register for the purpose of “keeping military records and military qualifications.”

In order to fill the military database, the army will have access to the entire data of all conceivable institutions “for any purpose, without control, without limiting the catalogue of data or the time of their processing,” according to Wojciech Klicki of the Panoptykon Foundation Against the Surveillance Society. “Thanks to the new regulations, the military authorities can check how often we are sick, what taxes we pay, whether we have been punished, whether there is a case for legal proceedings against us.” And this, Klicki continues, with direct access to the data servers. Through the law on the “defence of the fatherland,” the army itself thus becomes an unrestricted secret service.

Poland’s orgy of rearmament and the growing tensions in Europe

The scale of the rearmament shows that Poland has greater ambitions than just playing one of many violins in the NATO war orchestra. The country has long been a key ally of the US in Europe. The Three Seas Initiative, which Ukraine officially joined in June, blatantly harks back to the Pilsudski regime’s *Intermarium* project from the time between the two world wars and has been officially supported by Washington since 2017. Then as now, the Polish bourgeoisie dreamed of playing the role of a great power in the shadow of the US, at least regionally.

PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński made clear that the ruling PiS is using the NATO alliance to position itself against Germany as well. On the fringes of a press conference, he remarked that he was not at all sure whether the upgrading of the Bundeswehr (armed forces) initiated by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz was really directed against Russia—or perhaps against Poland after all. At the beginning of August, Kaczyński had publicly railed against the “German plan for domination” in Europe and worldwide.

It is therefore not surprising that Poland’s long shopping list does not include a single German product.

In the last six months alone, Poland’s Defence Minister Błaszczak has signed arms purchases worth over \$11 billion. That is almost half the size of all arms purchases in the last seven years combined. In addition, there are other purchase announcements and signed framework agreements.

The biggest items among them are:

- Three *Miecznik* frigates for the equivalent of about \$2 billion, to be built under British licence in Polish shipyards. The last of the three ships is to be handed over to the Polish Navy in 2034.

- 250 M1A2 Abrams tanks including support vehicles, bascule bridges and a logistics and training package for \$4.75 billion from the American company General Dynamics, expected to be completed by 2026. To date, this is the largest purchase in the history of the Polish army. In mid-July, the purchase of 116 used M1A1 Abrams tanks was also announced.

- A battery of the Polish short-range missile defence system *Narew*, based on the British CAMM surface-to-air missile from MBDA for \$360 million. In the long term, the *Narew* programme is expected to cost over \$13 billion and comprise 23 units. It is part of the “Shield of Poland,” a multi-layered missile and air defence programme announced back in 2015, which in addition to *Narew* also includes the *Wisła* medium-range defence system and the *Pilica* anti-aircraft gun. *Wisła* consists of US Patriot batteries, two units of which were already purchased in 2018 for \$4.75 billion. At least six more batteries are to follow.

- Serial production for *Pilica* started this year. It consists of a 23mm anti-aircraft gun supplemented by two *Piorun* missiles and radars. Six batteries of this type are to be delivered to the Polish army this year for \$160 million by the Polish state-owned company *Mesko*.

- The *Piorun* missiles are also produced as a shoulder-launched variant. Poland has also delivered an unknown number of them to Ukraine. According to the manufacturer, the production quantity is to be doubled to 600 this year and increase to 1,000 from 2023. Poland had ordered 3,500 more for \$750 million in June.

- Four modules of the *Gladius* unmanned drone system from the Polish WB Electronics Group for \$440 million. It includes several hundred reconnaissance and suicide drones.

- Three *Kormoran*-class mine hunting vessels worth about \$800 million, built by a shipyard of the state-owned defence company PGZ in Gdansk.

- 32 AW-149 multi-role helicopters for \$1.8 billion from Italy’s Leonardo Group. Production is to be taken over entirely by the Polish subsidiary PZL-Świdnik.

- 70 ZSSW-30 gun turrets for the Rosomak wheeled tank for \$370 million. This order will also be taken over by the state-owned PGZ

armament group. At the same press conference, B?aszczak announced that the final tests are underway for the new Borsuk infantry fighting vehicle, which is also scheduled to go into series production by the thousand in 2024.

In addition to these already sealed purchases, there are other, much larger purchase plans.

- 32 Kruk combat helicopters for an estimated \$2.3 billion. According to the Ministry of Defence, the US companies Boeing and Bell are in the final selection for cooperation partners.

- Three new Orca-class submarines for around \$2.6 billion. In 2019, Poland received German, French and Swedish offers, but has not yet decided.

- In May, Defence Minister B?aszczak announced that the acquisition of a total of 500 HIMARS missile systems would be examined. The self-propelled multiple rocket launcher system has been blamed for sensitive Russian army losses since the Ukrainian army has had it. Poland already has 80 units and had ordered 20 more in 2019 at a cost of \$414 million, which are due to arrive next year.

- In July, a framework agreement was signed for the delivery of Poland's new Ottokar Brzoza anti-tank vehicle in unknown numbers. Its armament—British Brimstone guided missiles with a range of 12 kilometres—comes from MBDA.

- The climax of the armaments orgy so far was reached a few days ago: On August 6, the conclusion of a framework agreement for the purchase of 1,000 main battle tanks from South Korea's Hyundai Rotem Group was announced, with 180 K2 tanks ordered immediately for \$2.2 billion. The remaining 820 are to be manufactured in Poland as a modified licence build (K2PL) from 2026. In total, the purchase is likely to cost well over \$10 billion.

In addition, further South Korean purchases are being discussed. For example, 672 K9A1 self-propelled howitzers and 48 FA-50 light combat aircraft, both of which are to be built under Polish licence. The self-propelled howitzers alone are estimated to cost another \$2.5 billion.

Officially, the massive arms purchases are being justified by the fact that Poland, which has made extensive arms deliveries to Ukraine, needed to restore its defence capabilities. In fact, Poland is the third largest supplier of military equipment to Ukraine after the US and the UK. According to the international military portal Oryx, it has supplied 230 T-72M tanks, 40 APC 1 infantry fighting vehicles, 20 T-72 Go?dzik self-propelled howitzers, 20 Grad BM 21 multi-lead rocket launchers, 100 air-to-air R-73 missiles, 10,000 Grot assault rifles and FlyEye reconnaissance drones.

Behind the Polish military purchasing policy is also the unconditional solidarity with the US Army. In the case of several purchases, Defence Minister B?aszczak explained that the decisive factor was the greatest possible compatibility with the US military. The South Korean army is already closely integrated with the US military.

This became clear at the opening of the Abrams Academy in Poznan. This is to train Polish soldiers on borrowed Abrams tanks under the guidance of the 5th US Corps until the newly ordered tanks arrive.

The Corps previously provided the Forward Rotation Command of the US armed forces but became the permanent headquarters a few months ago after President Biden announced it. In doing so, Biden openly violated the 1997 NATO-Russia agreement that ruled out a "permanent" deployment. Commanding General John Stephen Kolasheski praised Poland as a bulwark and declared: "Soon no one will be able to distinguish between a Polish and an American tank. Only the strongest military alliance will be visible."

Defence Minister Blaszcak resurrected anti-communism à la Ronald Reagan and pathetically declared that "the evil empire" had already been stopped once. "Today, the rulers of the Kremlin want to rebuild the empire of evil, but the free world" would win. In reality, the Reagan era

saw the beginning of an international wave of social counterrevolution that bloodily suppressed all resistance with the help of far-right paramilitary forces.

In this respect, the minister has indeed chosen the appropriate comparison. While Poland is using the Ukraine war to prepare for a new world war, the massive militarisation and build-up of right-wing paramilitary forces are primarily directed against the working class of Poland and Europe.

According to experts, Poland is on the verge of a recession after its GDP slumped by 2.3 percent in the second quarter of 2022, more than other countries in Eastern Europe. At 15.5 percent, inflation in Poland is one of the highest in Europe and by far the worst since 1989 and is expected to rise further to 18.8 percent by next year.

Three-and-a-half million refugees from Ukraine have found asylum in Poland, which itself has a population of almost 38 million. In some cities, the high number of refugees has increased the population by 15 to 20 percent, in Gdansk by as much as 34 percent. From the beginning, almost all the aid for the refugees has come from working people, although their own living conditions are rapidly deteriorating. The PiS government refuses to provide any significant help to the refugees.

For the autumn, many commentators predict a wave of workers' protests and strikes, especially among the 500,000 teachers whose nationwide strike in 2019 was betrayed by the unions.

The working class is the only social force that can and will confront growing militarism, fascism and the huge threat of another catastrophic expansion of war. The central task is to build the necessary leadership and political and organisational framework for these struggles. This means the expansion of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and above all the construction of a Polish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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