

Bugging affair unleashes government crisis in Poland

By Sonja Bach and Christoph Dreier
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Just weeks after celebrations marking the 25th anniversary of the June 4, 1989 elections, which saw the Solidarity movement defeat the ruling Stalinist Communist Party, the Polish government faces a serious crisis. Its impetus was the publication of several recordings between high-ranking government representatives, throwing a spotlight on the economic and political situation in Poland.

On Monday, the Polish magazine *Wprost* published excerpts from a private conversation between foreign minister Radoslaw Sikorski and the former Polish finance minister Jan Vincent Rostowski (both members of Civic Platform, PO). In the recording, Poland's most senior diplomat speaks disparagingly about the alliance with the United States in the most vulgar language.

"You know," said Sikorski, "the Polish-American alliance is not worth anything. It is even harmful because it creates a false feeling of security. Total bullshit. We argue with the Germans, with Russia, and we believe everything is great, just because we have given the Americans a blow job. Boneheads. Utter boneheads. The problem in Poland is that we have too little pride and too few feelings of self worth. So niggerly."

The foreign minister was also scornful about British Prime Minister David Cameron. He had "fucked" the European fiscal pact "because he didn't get it." Sikorski also criticized aspects of the policy of the Polish government leader Donald Tusk (PO). *Wprost* announced it would publish the complete recordings in the next days. The location and the exact time of the conversation are currently still subject to debate, and the source is unknown. The magazine claims it comes from a businessman with the code name "Patriot". According to the editors, they are in possession of a total of 800 recordings of private conversations by

government officials, which they want to publish gradually over the next weeks.

Last week, *Wprost* already published a conversation between Interior Minister Bartolomiej Sienkiewicz and central bank chief Marek Belka. Over caviar and vodka in a swanky Warsaw restaurant, it was agreed that the central bank should purchase government bonds well before the next parliamentary elections in 2015, and so contribute to fiscal consolidation. This is actually illegal. In return, Belka demanded the dismissal of the unpopular Finance Minister Jacek Rostowski, who some months later cleared his desk.

On Tuesday, Tusk rejected carrying out a cabinet reshuffle. According to the prime minister, although the politicians had used vulgar language, no illegal business was discussed. He would only worry about the "evaluation of their style" when the law "had taken its course", and the "sense of the stability and security of the state institutions" was re-established.

Earlier, the prime minister had called the publication of the recordings an "attempted coup". According to Tusk, the judicial authorities would be investigating in all directions to find those behind the bugging affair.

On Wednesday last week, investigators from the State Prosecutor's Office and agents of the domestic intelligence service (ABW) entered the *Wprost* building and demanded chief editor Sylwester Latkowski surrender his laptop and other documents. Despite it coming to blows, other magazine staff present prevented this.

Even if there is wide-ranging speculation about the source of the recordings, from a conspiracy by waiters at swanky restaurants to the Russian secret service, the main one to profit is clearly the opposition leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski. For months, his arch-conservative Law and Justice party (PiS) has led in the opinion polls

over the ruling Civic Platform, and therefore hopes for new elections.

Kaczynski is presently seeking to muster a two-thirds majority for a no-confidence vote in the Polish parliament to force the government to resign. The government's continued existence is a scandal, he declared. "Therefore, anyone who in any way feels a responsibility towards his fatherland must strive to ensure that this government resigns."

Criticism also comes from within the government camp. President Bronislaw Komorowski, who like Tusk belongs to the PO, demanded Sikorski resign. "The main characters in the recordings should draw their own conclusions," the president said. Even prior to the bugging affair, Tusk has not been able to rely on his own parliamentary faction in important votes. Some of its MPs have voted with the opposition PiS several times against the government, which only has a slender majority of 232 of the 460 seats in parliament.

Already at the beginning of 2013, conservative voices within the PO had become increasingly loud, speaking out against Tusk's pro-European policy, and flirting with the PiS. The spokesperson was the then Minister of Justice, Jaroslaw Gowin. In April 2013, it officially came to a break, and Gowin was replaced by Marek Biernacki. In 2013, Tusk fundamentally changed his government, putting new people into several ministries.

The PiS advocates a line that is more closely aligned towards the US. In 2006 and 2007, when Kaczynski led the government himself, he blocked the negotiations on the EU's Lisbon Treaty for a long time. His government stood for a strong Polish nation-state under the auspices of the United States. During its rule, the deployment of an American missile defence system in Poland was also planned.

The PO, however, is oriented more towards Europe. It strengthened links with the EU and intensified cooperation with Germany. In his speech in Berlin in 2011, Sikorski urged the German government to take the lead in the fight against the collapse of the euro zone. "I'm probably the first Polish foreign minister in history that says this, but here it is: I'm less afraid of Germany's power, but am beginning to fear Germany's inaction."

The sharp conflicts within Poland's ruling elite, which have broken out with the bugging affair, are

developing against the background of a deep crisis. The putsch in Ukraine, which relied on fascists and was supported by the Polish government, has led to a civil war in the neighbouring country and has significantly destabilized the situation in Poland. According to a BP study, Poland draws 82.6 percent of its gas imports from Russia and would be hit hard by a boycott. For this reason, Tusk has called repeatedly since the beginning of the year for the creation of a European Energy Union, but so far this has fallen on deaf ears.

Moreover, social conflicts in the country are intensifying. Last year, the Tusk government raised the age of retirement to 67, and it has also extended the possibilities for precarious employment. Unemployment, however, remains high, amounting to 9.7 percent in April this year. At the same time, government debt rose significantly. Standing at 57 percent, it is already two percent above the level laid down in the constitutional debt ceiling. Tusk has already announced further austerity measures.

Kaczynski constantly raises the social question, and works with the main trade unions against the government. He is of the opinion that imposing austerity necessitates the construction of authoritarian state structures. With his nationalist demagoguery, he is seeking to win support for this programme among backward layers of the population.

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