

Polish government plagued by spying scandal

By Markus Salzmann
20 June 2015

Only a few months before parliamentary elections, new revelations about the spying scandal a year ago have plunged the conservative Civic Platform (PO) and government of Ewa Kopacz into a crisis that has the potential to intensify conflicts within the European Union.

A week ago, Kopacz announced the resignation of the president of parliament, Radoslaw Sikorski, the ministers of sports, health and privatization, as well as several state secretaries. The government is now pressing both the attorney general and the head of the anti-corruption authority to resign.

The so-called Kellner Affair, in which the private conversations of Polish politicians were monitored, was made public in June last year but with few political consequences at the time. According to the journal *Wprost*, which published extracts of the private comments of both former foreign minister Sikorski and former finance minister Jan Vincent Rostowski, both spoke in a vulgar and disparaging way about the alliance with the United States and European heads of state, such as British Prime Minister David Cameron.

Polish businessman Zbigniew Stonoga has now published extensive hearing reports and witness statements extracted from the comprehensive 2,500-page investigation papers, which he said he found two weeks ago on a Chinese server. Since then, the documents have become inaccessible.

The illegal spying operations on politicians took place in restaurants. The fact that up until now neither the intelligence agency nor the attorney general has made public the names of those behind the affair suggests that someone behind the scenes is pulling the strings. It is more than probable that the car dealer Stonoga did not publish the documents on his own initiative, but rather the task of publishing the documents was handed over to him.

It remains unclear who was behind the spying. The

national conservative opposition party Law and Justice (PiS) of Jarosław Kaczyński would be a clear beneficiary. According to public opinion polls, the party's popularity rating is 32 percent, well ahead of the leading PO, which stands at 24 percent. For this reason, the PiS has no interest in clearing up the spying scandal.

Several PiS politicians have already called for the immediate resignation of the government and for new elections. "We are dealing with the collapse of the PO," said Mariusz Blaszczak, head of the PiS fraction.

The election last month of PiS candidate Andrzej Duda for president was already a major blow for Kopacz and the PO. The right-wing Polish media is firing salvos at the government. For example, the conservative daily newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* said that the head of the government had subjected the "entire state to a stress test" and stated, with nationalist undertones, "This is a sign that the Polish state is extremely weak. This weakness will certainly animate others who are in a position to destabilize Poland."

However, liberal media outlets such as *Polityka Online* also believe the government is on the brink of collapse. The publication wrote that the PO "has become less important or even disappeared from the party landscape." The government has "shut itself down after eight years of rule."

Many observers view Kopacz's attempt to shake up the government and turn the tide before the elections as a panic reaction, dismissing ministers such as Health Minister Bartosz Arłukowicz, who may have had nothing to do with the spying affair. In summary proceedings, the government named doctor Marian Zembala as his successor, Andrzej Czerwinski as minister for privatization, and the former rowing champion Adam Korol as sports minister. None of the three have any political experience. Only Marek Biernacki, former interior minister of the Donald Tusk

government, has a political background. Reportedly he will now be responsible for the security department.

The sharp conflicts now breaking out into the open in the ruling circles in Poland have developed against the background of a deep political crisis. The PO has imposed brutal austerity measures since 2007 and is deeply hated by the population, and the social crisis in the country has continually deepened. Although Poland has suffered less than other European countries from the repercussions of the economic crisis, wages and retirements have stagnated for many years. On average, a former worker or government employee receives a pension of between €300 and €600 per month.

Most recently, Prime Minister Kopacz announced comprehensive cuts to retirement and a reform of the health care system after the elections. Mass layoffs in the state-run coalmines were temporarily postponed after massive strikes by the miners, but the PO has not given up on implementing the plans long term.

In terms of foreign policy, the Polish government crisis means an increase in tensions in the EU. The PO under Kopacz and predecessor Tusk has had a strong orientation to the EU and worked closely with Germany. Sikorski, who was toppled by the Kellner Affair, had already called on the German government in his speech in Berlin in 2011 to lead a fight against the collapse of the Eurozone.

The PiS is orienting itself more intensively to the US. When Kaczynski headed the government between 2006 and 2007, he blocked negotiations on the Treaty of Lisbon. His government is intent on building a strong Polish national state under the sponsorship of the US. The plans for stationing an American rocket defense system in Poland were also made while the party was in power. Duda's election for president was evaluated on this basis. The Russian daily newspaper *Nesawissimaja Gaset*a said, "Poland has elected an anti-Russian eurosceptic."

In an interview with the *Financial Times*, Duda said that Brussels should not be given any more authority and that the relationship with Germany should be reconsidered. Duda wants to build a number of NATO bases in Poland as quickly as possible. This week, he plans to receive US Republican presidential hopeful Jeb Bush in Warsaw.

However, the relationship with the US is not without problems. The fascist-backed putsch in Ukraine has

caused a civil war and led to a flow of refugees out of the country. More than 20 percent of all the refugees from Ukraine seek asylum in Poland. The PiS in the rural regions of Eastern Poland is opposed to accommodating these refugees.

Duda has already cancelled a meeting with Ukrainian head of state Petro Poroshenko. The immediate reason was the Ukrainian government's honouring of the leader of the fascist OUN/UPA, which has disturbed the nationalist base of the PiS. Amongst its many crimes the OUN/UPA carried out massacres of people of Polish origin during World War II.

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