

Rattled by crisis, US-aligned Polish government steps up intervention in Belarus

By Clara Weiss
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On Wednesday, Polish President Andrzej Duda swore in Zbigniew Rau as the new foreign minister and Adam Niedzielski as the new health minister of Poland. The partial government reshuffle comes amidst a major crisis of the Lukashenko government in neighboring Belarus, which has been shaken by mass protests and strikes, and the resurgence of the coronavirus in Poland.

It follows an August 15 visit by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Warsaw, where he signed an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. The new foreign minister of Poland, Rau, is credited with particular expertise in relations with the US.

The Polish government has been beset by a mounting domestic social and political crisis. President Andrzej Duda only narrowly won the presidential elections in July on the basis of an anti-Semitic and ultra-nationalist campaign.

Last week, Health Minister Łukasz Szumowski resigned over allegations of misconduct in the procurement of medical equipment needed to fight the coronavirus. During the first wave of the pandemic, Polish hospitals, lacking the most basic personal protective equipment (PPE), were rapidly overwhelmed by patients. Entire cities had no ventilators. In Silesia, the coal mines were never closed. As a result, miners became the single largest group affected by the virus, accounting for over a fifth of all infections nation-wide.

Even as the virus continued to rip through mining communities, the government pushed for a premature full reopening of the economy. Now, cases are skyrocketing, with more cases registered on a daily basis than during the first wave of the pandemic. The country has now more than 63,000 confirmed cases, and out of those 20,000 were registered over the past month alone.

Under these conditions, the mass strikes and protests in Belarus, which borders Poland to the east, have raised significant concerns in Warsaw that strikes might spread

beyond the borders of Belarus. The work stoppages have already cost the Belarusian economy billions of dollars and sent the Belarusian ruble into free fall. The Grodno region on the Belarusian-Polish border has been one of the main centers of the strike movement.

On August 11, as strikes began to escalate in Belarus, the Polish government, after consultations with the trade unions, decided to delay the announcement of the closure of several mines, which threatened the layoff of up to 7,700 workers. The announcement was almost certain to provoke strikes and protests. In 2019, the government was shaken by a nation-wide strike of 300,000 teachers, and it has been scrambling to avoid large-scale protests and strikes by miners since the beginning of this year.

Under these conditions, the Polish government has responded to the strike movement in Belarus and the turn by Alexander Lukashenko to the Kremlin by increasing its support for the EU-backed opposition in Belarus. In conjunction with the imperialist powers and especially the US, Warsaw is seeking to exploit the crisis to further its geopolitical interests in the region, which has become the main staging ground for the NATO war preparations against Russia.

In this intervention in Belarusian politics, the Polish state is making use of its long-standing ties to the anti-Lukashenko opposition in Belarus, which date back decades. The 22-year-old blogger Stepan Putilo who runs the Telegram channel NEXTA, which has become one of the main sources of information about the protests and strikes, is based in Warsaw. Numerous leaders from the Belarusian opposition, in particular Pavel Latushko, who used to be a diplomat of the Lukashenko regime in Poland, also have close ties to the Polish elite.

Last week, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki revealed a “five-point program” to support the opposition and promised to spend over 50 million Zloty, more than €11 million, on the program “Solidarity for Belarus.” The

program is supposedly aimed at financially supporting oppositionists in Belarus to cover medical or legal fees. The Polish government also allows Belarusians fleeing their country to forgo visa costs and promises them financial support through NGOs. Moreover, the Polish state is increasing funding for the Warsaw-based oppositionist television station Belsat, which broadcasts in Belarusian.

The pretense of the Polish (PiS) government to support “democracy” in Belarus is absurd on its face. Since coming to power in 2015, the PiS government has dismantled democratic rights and institutions in Poland and has banned free speech on the crimes of Polish anti-Semites during the Holocaust. The promotion of anti-Semitism, homophobia and extreme right-wing nationalism have become central ideological pillars of its rule.

There is little question that all steps by Warsaw on Belarus are carefully coordinated and discussed with Washington and NATO. Since 1989, Poland has become one of the closest allies of the US in Europe and has played a critical role in the military build-up against Russia.

On August 15, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was in Warsaw to sign the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, which also paves the way for the redeployment of many of the American troops that had been stationed in Germany to Poland. On top of the already-stationed 4,500 US personnel, there will be an additional 1,000. US President Donald Trump issued a statement on the agreement, calling it “historic.”

During his visit, Pompeo also commented on Belarus, saying that the elections had been neither free nor fair and that the US would support Belarus’s “civil society.”

On August 18, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg discussed the crisis in Belarus directly with Polish President Andrzej Duda.

Under the PiS, Warsaw has openly adopted the strategy of the so called “Intermarium” or “Three Seas Initiative,” which involves setting up right-wing nationalist governments throughout eastern Europe that can be mobilized against Russia and other potential adversaries. The Trump administration has officially approved of this strategy. Along with Ukraine, the Baltics, and Romania, Belarus is considered an important component in such an alliance, which could be directed not just against Russia, but also other rivals of the US in Europe, including Germany and increasingly China.

During his tour of eastern and central Europe concluded

in Warsaw on August 15, Pompeo tried to rally countries behind the US’s campaign against China’s 5G networks and Huawei. The Atlantic Council, a think tank in Washington that is militantly anti-Russian, noted that “Beijing has been making inroads in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) with investments and economic incentives through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).”

The US, the think tank wrote, regarded these developments as “not only a geopolitical challenge but a concrete security threat.” It urged the US government to strengthen its alliances with eastern European countries more broadly and “leverage the Three Seas Initiative” that is spearheaded by Warsaw against China.

Much indicates that what is involved in the geopolitical scrambling over Belarus is not just the influence of Russia, which maintains extremely close economic and military ties with the country, but also the growing role of China in the Belarusian economy. Over the past decade, Lukashenko, while also balancing between NATO and the Kremlin, has deepened the country’s ties with China significantly.

China regards Belarus as a “gateway” to Europe and key component of its “Belt and Road Initiative.” As part of the BRI, China and Belarus have invested hundreds of millions of dollars into the Great Stone Industrial Park, which is set to house multiple factories, residential buildings, and research centers. The Park’s final worth is estimated at between \$2 and \$5 billion. Chinese President Xi Jinping has called it a “model project” of the BRI, while Lukashenko described it as the most important economic project in Belarus.

China has also provided large loans to the struggling Belarusian economy, including a \$15 billion line of credit to Belarus’s Development Bank. The *New York Times* noted in 2019 that the loan was 20 times larger than the current loans to Belarus by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

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