

EU in Stress: the German-Polish Clash

The strains on Europe from neocon-devised policies of “regime change” in Syria and Ukraine are resurfacing historical divisions and reviving old animosities among European states, including a war of words between Angela Merkel’s Germany and Poland’s new right-wing government, as Gilbert Doctorow explains.

By Gilbert Doctorow

It may have been a foregone conclusion that Poland under the control of Jaroslaw Kaczynski’s Law and Justice Party because of its Euroskeptic and nationalist positions would quickly join Viktor Orban’s Hungary as a “bad boy” of the European Union.

In recent months, especially since the Law and Justice Party’s electoral victory last October, Poland has stood out as a leading naysayer to the E.U.’s calls for sharing the burden of receiving the wave of refugees arriving from Syria and the Middle East. Polish criticism of the open borders policy championed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel has been stinging.

For instance, before the election, Kaczynski raised alarms about the possibility that the Mideast refugees might carry diseases. “There are already signs of emergence of diseases that are highly dangerous and have not been seen in Europe for a long time: cholera on the Greek islands, dysentery in Vienna. There is also talk about other, even more severe diseases,” he said, though European health authorities have not reported any widespread outbreak of infectious diseases connected to the migrants.

Poland also has been quick to take a “we told you so” stand on the New Year’s Eve mass violence and sexual assaults allegedly perpetrated by youths from North Africa and the Middle East, including asylum seekers, outside the Cologne main train station in Germany. Polish media cited the five-day blackout in Germany on news about the New Year’s Eve violence to question the autonomy and social responsibility of German journalism.

There are other reasons behind Polish vehemence on the refugees. First, from the standpoint of its population, Poland is already overrun by refugees and economic immigrants from Ukraine, which has suffered from civil war and economic collapse since February 2014 when a violent putsch toppled the government of President Viktor Yanukovych and created a crisis with Russia.

Official statistics put the number of Ukrainian refugees in Poland at about 400,000, as of May 2015, but unofficial estimates are much higher, more than a million today. The Ukrainians are putting pressure on the local job market at a

time when there is still a net outflow of ethnic Poles going abroad in search of work. Secondly, admitting Muslims runs directly against the new government's stress on protecting and nurturing traditional Catholic religious values.

But Merkel's allies are hitting back against Poland's new leadership for its apparently anti-democratic actions to tighten government control over the public news media. A controversial new law allows the Polish government to appoint the directors of the public TV and radio services, as well as civil service directors.

This control of public media will be the subject of a European Commission examination into Poland's possibly violating the E.U.'s Rule of Law provisions, scheduled for Jan. 13 in Brussels. The charges are being pressed by a *German* commissioner-designate, Guenther Oettinger, who is taking charge of European Digital Economy and Society.

If a determination is made that Poland's law violates Europe's rules, the penalty could be to suspend Warsaw's voting rights in the European Council. That would be particularly awkward because Poland's own former premier, Donald Tusk, from what's now the opposition party, happens to be the Council's president.

To be sure, such an outcome would come only after a period of "supervision" during which Poland's conduct of affairs would be subject to ongoing review by the Commission. But the notion of such European supervision raises hackles in Warsaw, as reported by the country's leading daily newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

It also should be noted that suspension of Poland's voting rights is unlikely given the vocal support for Poland now coming from Hungarian President Viktor Orban. Resolutions in the E.U. institutions must pass unanimously, which Orban's veto threatens.

The more likely penalty that Poland could face is a cutback in E.U. financial assistance to the great variety of Polish infrastructure projects now benefiting from the largesse of Brussels. Poland is, in fact, the single largest beneficiary. Any cutbacks could be made simply as an administrative matter.

Poland also was scolded by President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz, a German Social Democrat and thus representative of Merkel's ruling coalition. He decried the new Polish government in Russophobic terms, meant to insult Poland's leaders by comparing them to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In statements about Poland's new press laws, quoted by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* newspaper on Jan. 9, Schulz hurled the following grenade: "The Polish government treats its electoral victory as a mandate to subordinate the wellbeing of the state to the interests of the victorious party, including

personnel. This is controlled democracy à la Putin, a dangerous Putinization (*Putinisierung*) of European politics.”

The underlying resentments and condescension expressed by Schulz’s remarks come from historically tense relations between Germany and Poland, even if those conflicts now play out not on battlefields but in the non-violent universe of European institutions in Brussels, a system that many Member States view as German-controlled. Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European Commission (from Luxembourg) and Donald Tusk, the ex-Polish premier at the Council, both owe their positions to the strong backing of Angela Merkel. And Schulz at the European Parliament comes from her coalition.

But the image of German hegemony in Europe is something that Berlin strongly rejects. On Monday, Merkel’s spokesman explained to journalists that the Chancellor hopes for continued good working relations with Poland and looks forward to the forthcoming visit to Berlin of Poland’s new prime minister. Any differences over policy are with the European Institutions, he said, where Germany is just one of 28 Member States.

Both founders of the 14-year-old Law and Justice Party, Jaroslaw Kaczyński and his brother Lech, the Polish president who died in a plane crash outside Smolensk in 2010, often vented publicly their bitter feelings towards Germany going back to World War II atrocities. Relations with Berlin were fraught under their administration last decade, and their party’s return to power in 2015 was based on campaign promises to free the Polish economy from foreign, meaning German, domination.

The net result of the growing public row may be to unravel one of the key foreign policy achievements of Merkel’s 10 years in power consolidating her country’s hold over Central Europe. It also has implications for the E.U.’s current anti-Russian stance and sanctions, all of which have depended on Germany’s explicit support for adventurous Polish-written policies to woo Ukraine at the expense of Russian interests.

The passions of the Old World also have spilled over to the United States, where Polish-Americans have taken a close interest in the contest of wills between Warsaw and Berlin and Brussels. One political association in New York, the Polish Patriotic Discussion Club, issued Open Letters to the presidents of the European Institutions, and to Dr. Oettinger, sounding the alarm over what they see as “interference in the matters of the Republic of Poland as a sovereign country.”

Gilbert Doctorow is the European Coordinator, American Committee for East West Accord, Ltd. His latest book *Does Russia Have a Future?* (August 2015) is

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