

The kind of Poland the Pope has seen

by Anna Kaczor Wei

Weak is the people that accepts defeat, forgetting that it was sent to keep watch till the coming of its hour. And the hours keep returning on the great clockface of history.

—Pope John Paul II, “Thinking My Country,”
Krakow, 1974

When the Pope arrived in Poland on June 5 for an almost two-week tour, his native country was in a deep crisis which had been building up for nine years, and now has reached socially dangerous dimensions. Not only has the economy been destroyed by International Monetary Fund (IMF) free-market policies, but in addition, it has been destabilized by various IMF-inspired and badly designed “cost-saving” reforms, including in the health care system.

Although the government had managed to calm protests by coal miners and farmers just before the Pope’s visit, a group of desperate nurses continued their hunger strike in front of the Labor Ministry in Warsaw to protest massive cuts in health care envisioned by the reform, which is intended to begin the privatization of health care in Poland. The plan includes layoffs of 40,000 health care workers in 1999, the shutdown of many clinics and hospitals, and a sharp increase in the price of drugs and medical services. According to the new standards, a single nurse will have responsibility for wards with 30 to 40 beds, and also do the job of a nurse’s aide. This means that many people will not have any access to health care, which will lead to an increase in unnecessary deaths.

The Polish weekly *Mysl Polska* in its June 20 issue described one example, of a hospital near Warsaw where 22% of nurses will be laid off in the near future; because of difficult financial conditions, the number of doctors on duty have been cut back, and the use of certain anti-infection drugs given after operations has been curtailed. For many years now, hospitals (which are supposed to be free) have been depending on “voluntary” contributions from patients’ families to raise money to buy basic necessities, including electricity, drugs, and so on.

A similar “cost-cutting” reform has been prepared for education. As part of it, the government announced that because of a lack of money in the state budget, about 1,000

schools will be closed down. Some people reflected bitterly that, in 1965, a communist government announced construction of 1,000 schools to celebrate the thousandth anniversary of the Polish state (in 966, the Polish king, and with him the whole country, was baptized). That plan was fulfilled. Now, “democracy” and the “free market” are taking the country back to postwar levels of poverty.

Cannibalizing the productive potential

The lack of money for basic services is a direct result of the collapse of the industrial tax base. In a statement issued in February of this year, the Polish Industrial Lobby said: “The financial and tax policy implemented so far toward Polish industry, in the interest of international financial institutions, has not created conditions in which Polish enterprises could accumulate finances for development, and limited their access to credits for investment and modernization. . . . We demand that this policy, detrimental and dangerous for industry and society, be changed, and, mainly, we blame Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Leszek Balcerowicz for it.”

The statement pointed out the collapse of output in mining, steel production, light industry, and metal and chemical industries. “At the same time, when those branches are collapsing, Poland’s trade deficit is growing, the Polish market is increasingly more open to imports, often uncontrolled and dishonest, often subsidized by foreign governments and bordering on dumping (in light industry, but also in mining and steel production),” it said. The lobby also criticized the so-called restructuring of the armaments industry and steel mills, which simply means a sell-out to foreign companies, and revealed that in order to speed up the sell-out, “ruinous financial and tax policies are implemented, that lead to a growing indebtedness of enterprises in those branches and their bankruptcy in order to force them to accept privatization—at the lowest price, mainly with the participation of foreign investors, who want to take over their market.”

In order to cover growing holes in the budget, the government, whose economic policies are influenced by the Harvard-trained Balcerowicz, is moving to speed up privatization of the Polish banking system—which raises a lot of questions about Poland’s economic sovereignty. If the government’s plan is fulfilled, by the end of this year, foreign control of Polish banks will have increased to 56%. Another area out of which foreign “investors” hope to suck some money, is the energy system and steel mills. In the case of the biggest mill among the four assigned for sale, the “Katowice” steel mill, Chase Manhattan Bank has been brought in to prepare a “privatization analysis.” There is also a plan to reduce steel production, because the European Union thinks that Poland produces too much of it. Also, under pressure from the “Eurocrats” in Brussels, production of Polish coal will be reduced by 20% by the year 2002, which will be accompanied by mass layoffs of 138,000 miners, or more than 50% of the 230,000 miners currently.

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Balkans reconstruction discussed

The growing problems of the Polish economy are, fortunately, strengthening the resolve of those political leaders who for years now have been attacking International Monetary Fund policies. They see Lyndon LaRouche's economic program as a clear alternative to the disastrous free-market approach.

These political leaders expressed their concern when a Schiller Institute delegation visited Warsaw in May, to participate in meetings and seminars on the current strategic situation as well as on LaRouche's program for the reconstruction of the Balkans. They expressed their concerns again on June 17-18, at the conclusion of the Pope's visit. Despite the official government line fully supporting NATO intervention in Yugoslavia, the majority of the Polish population, political activists, and opposition press objected to the use of military force in the Kosovo conflict.

Sejm (Parliament) Deputy Jan Lopuszanski from "Nasze Kolo" (a parliamentary club) denounced the air war against Serbia on the floor of the Sejm as a violation of national sovereignty. In May, a prominent group of Polish politicians signed the call for the reconstruction of the Balkans issued by Helga Zepp-LaRouche and Faris Nanic (see *EIR*, June 11, p. 28, for the resolution, and June 18, p. 56 for the signers from Poland).

On June 18, the day the Pope left Poland, Marivilia Carrasco, head of the Ibero-America Solidarity Movement in Mexico, and Frank Hahn of the Schiller Institute in Germany, met with a group of government representatives. After Carrasco's briefing about the economic collapse of Ibero-American countries, which contradicted optimistic press reports coming to Poland, the door was opened to discussion of LaRouche's program for the reconstruction of the Balkans as a seed crystal for rebuilding the world economy and, naturally, the Polish economy.

Suffice it to say, the response was positive. Making the Danube River, now choked by debris from destroyed bridges, passable again, and building a long-planned canal linking the Oder River (on the German-Polish border) and the Danube, as proposed by Polish Deputy Wojcech Blasiak at a Schiller Institute seminar in Warsaw in 1997, would mobilize Polish machine-tool and construction industries, reduce transportation costs, integrate the Polish transportation network into western and southern Europe, and reduce the danger of flooding. The day before, this program was also discussed with a group of Polish Deputies representing various political parties.

Throughout her tour, Carrasco stressed that, with the Balkans peace effort now under way, we have had a narrow window of opportunity to get a major reconstruction program under way. In the framework of the Eurasian Land-Bridge, such a program would reverse the drift toward catastrophe. It is one of those "historical hours of trial" that call on nations not to accept defeat.