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POLAND PLAYS STRATEGIC ROLE IN UKRAINE'S "ORANGE REVOLUTION"

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U.S. President George W. Bush has thanked Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus and Polish President Alexander Kwasniewski for their assistance in negotiating a compromise to resolve Ukraine's ongoing political crisis (Lithuanian Radio, December 9). Poland and Lithuania dragged a reluctant EU into holding three round-table negotiations that paved the way for the December 8 compromise between the Ukrainian authorities and opposition.

The peacefully negotiated settlement represents a particularly strategic victory for Poland in three respects.

First, Poland is the largest of the post-communist states that joined the EU this month, and one of the most pro-American. EU enlargement represents a fundamental challenge to EU "deepeners," such as France, who have always been the most lukewarm about the growing size of the EU. Other EU members, such as Britain, are lukewarm about "deepening" of the EU and see its enlargement as a way of overcoming demands to "deepen" the EU's level of integration. Not surprisingly therefore, Poland and Britain have forged a close alliance in the EU.

Second, Poland's pro-Americanism could be seen during the 2003 Iraqi crisis. Poland led most post-communist states outside the CIS in supporting the U.S.-British position on Iraq. Poland successfully lobbied for the right to run one of four sectors in post-Saddam Iraq, where Ukraine has 1,800 troops, the fourth largest contingent.

Third, Poland is very critical of the EU's traditional policy of "benign neglect" towards Ukraine (Wall Street Journal, November 29). Polish Prime Minister Marek Belka complained that the EU has "largely ignored the aspirations of Ukraine" (Bloomberg, November 30). Poland's participation in resolving Ukraine's crisis will allow Warsaw to "demand that Brussels acknowledge its competence" and force the EU to finally take note of Ukraine's membership aspirations.

Germany sought to anchor Poland inside the EU and NATO to secure its eastern flank. Likewise, Poland does not want a second "Belarus" on its eastern border. Thus it has sought a central role in resolving Ukraine's political crisis and, in the process, has pulled the EU along with it. Kwasniewski said, "I am going as the Polish president, but I hope with the backing of the European Union" (AP, November 25).

Poland's ruling elites express a remarkable consensus in their views of the dangers of Russian imperialism. Such views have only been reinforced by Russian President Vladimir Putin's blatant interference in Ukraine's elections.

The best way to keep a neo-imperial Russia at a distance is by having a friendly neighbor -- Ukraine -- standing between Poland and Russia. "A democratic and independent Ukraine is perceived in Poland as a guarantee against imperial tendencies from Russia," Public Affairs Institute Ukraine expert Tadeusz Falkowski commented (AP, November 25).

Poland has been Ukraine's main lobbyist within the EU and NATO, often with strong backing from the United States. Although Kwasniewski has attempted to play an impartial role by insisting only that Ukraine's presidential elections be "free and fair" such a demand, most observers understand, would benefit the opposition. The third round of the elections scheduled for December 26 should be the freest round yet and therefore more likely to lead to a victory for opposition presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko.

The Polish Sejm passed an appeal to the Ukrainian parliament to undertake everything it could to "make the truth, freedom and democracy win" (PAP, November 25). "We are convinced that Ukrainian citizens want to live in an independent and democratic state that is governed in an honest way. And such a Ukraine is needed by Europe and the entire world," the appeal stressed. "We have the feeling of sharing a common destiny with Ukrainians," declared center-right Civic Platform parliamentarian Bronislaw Komorowski (AFP, December 7).

During discussion of the Sejm's resolution on Ukraine, legislators wore orange ties and ribbons, a reflection of their allegiance in Ukraine's political crisis. Demonstrators in Warsaw and other Polish cities have supported Yushchenko. Four days after Ukraine's November 21 runoff, Warsaw's city government passed a resolution symbolically recognizing Yushchenko as Ukraine's elected president, which Komorowski explained was "to express solidarity with Ukraine" (Ukrainian News Agency, November 25).

Poland's ruling elites are sympathetic toward Ukraine's "Orange revolution" because they see echoes of their own communist-era opposition movement, Solidarity. In 1989 Solidarity activists attended the inaugural congress of the Ukrainian Popular Movement (Rukh) in Kyiv, a movement that eventually spawned Yushchenko's Our Ukraine.

Solidarity's original leader and former president, Lech Walesa, was one of the first foreign dignitaries to visit Ukraine and meet Yushchenko in the first week of the Orange Revolution. Demonstrators on Independence Square greeted Walesa with cries of "Polsha! Polsha!" (The Times, November 27). One Polish university student said, "Ukraine needs a Walesa. Maybe Yushchenko will be the new Walesa" (Los Angeles Times, November 30). The

main Solidarity monument in Gdansk, Poland, has been draped with an orange-colored shawl for the last three weeks.

Former Czech President Vaclav Havel, who came to power on the wave of his own popular Velvet Revolution, sent two messages of support to the demonstrators. Czechs, who traditionally lumped Ukrainians with Russians as lying outside Europe, have now changed their views. Thanks to the Orange Revolution, EU members now see Ukrainians as fellow Europeans.