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Why Poland Is Turning Away From the West

Ivan Krastev DEC. 11, 2015

Sofia, Bulgaria — DURING the recent electoral campaign in Poland, a constant question raised by pundits and politicians was not whether the country would go right, but whether it would go wrong.

Would the conservative Law and Justice Party, the expected victors in the poll, go the way of Viktor Orbán's increasingly authoritarian Hungary, or would it stay closer to the center? Given the nationalist, anti-liberal slant of the party's campaign platform, could Poland's seemingly consolidated liberal institutions reverse course? Law and Justice won decisively, and after only three weeks we have an answer: a distressing yes.

The new government has pushed forward three staggering changes. The man chosen to oversee police and intelligence agencies is a party stalwart who received a three-year suspended sentence for abusing power in his previous role as head of the anti-corruption office, signaling that political loyalty is above the law.

The government has purged European Union flags from government press briefings, demonstrating that it sees Polish national interests in opposition to European values.

And it has weakened the country's separation of powers by rejecting the previous Parliament's nominees to the constitutional court — and

instead appointed its own candidates, provoking a constitutional crisis.

Why has Poland, the poster child of post-Communist success and Europe's best economic performer of the last decade, suddenly taken an illiberal turn? Why, despite the profound public mistrust of politicians, are people ready to elect parties eager to dismantle any constraints on government's power?

For one thing, the Law and Justice Party bet on a form of illiberal democracy because it succeeded in Hungary. The Orban model of rebuking the European Union while accepting billions in aid money has worked. So have Mr. Orban's efforts to consolidate power by demonizing his political opponents. Hungary's economy has not collapsed as critics predicted; nor did Mr. Orban's party lose at the ballot box.

Of course, the more countries that follow Mr. Orban's lead, the less successful his model will become: At some point there will be no European Union to blame. Indeed, Poland's drift may result in a backlash by Western Europe; already, one hears rumblings in Paris and Berlin that it was a mistake to give the new, Eastern entrants the same power within the European Union as the established members of the eurozone.

But the core question is why Poles voted for a party that has a dismal governing record. After Law and Justice won its first term in 2005, its public standing dropped precipitously and it was forced into early elections two years later, and lost. (And Poles are hardly anti-democratic; a recent poll showed a majority are concerned that Polish democracy is in danger.)

The answer is simple, and it is a version of what we are seeing across Europe. Even a party as historically unpopular as Law and Justice can win these days by running not just against the left, but against liberal democracy. It is transparent in its aversion to independent institutions like the courts, the central bank and the media.

These populist and radical parties aren't just parties; they are constitutional movements. They promise voters what liberal democracy

cannot: a sense of victory where majorities — not just political majorities, but ethnic and religious ones, too — can do what they please.

The rise of these parties is symptomatic of the explosion of threatened majorities as a force in European politics. They blame the loss of control over their lives, real or imagined, on a conspiracy between cosmopolitan-minded elites and tribal-minded immigrants. They blame liberal ideas and institutions for weakening the national will and eroding national unity. They tend to see compromise as corruption and zealotry as conviction.

What makes anxious majorities most indignant is that while they believe that they are entitled to govern (they are the many after all), they never can have the final say. And so they are ready to blame the separation of powers and other inconvenient principles of liberal democracy for their frustration — and readily endorse parties like Law and Justice that run against those principles.

In a recent paper entitled “The Political Economy of Liberal Democracy,” the economists Sharun Mukand and Dani Rodrik argue that the question is not why so few democracies are liberal, but why liberal democracies exist at all. In the best of times, it’s an idle question. And maybe Poland will do the right thing, again, and throw the bums out after two years. Or perhaps the enigma of liberal democracy will cease to be an idle question, and become, for Europe, an existential one.

Ivan Krastev is the chairman of the Center for Liberal Strategies in Sofia, Bulgaria, a permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna and a contributing opinion writer.

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