



## Hungary and Poland: What Next for Europe's "Illiberal Vanguard"?

*By Joerg Forbrig, Edit Zgut, and Wojciech Przybylski*

In 2019, the European Union could face its most serious trials yet. At the May elections to the European Parliament, a stronger-than-ever showing is expected of political forces that oppose a politically integrated Europe of liberal democracies. Among those illiberals and Euroskeptics, the ruling parties of Hungary and Poland play a prominent role. How consequential the politics of both countries will prove for Europe has been signaled in a major recent study – “Central European Futures: Five Scenarios for 2025” – that was published by the German Marshall Fund and Visegrad Insight. Hence, a closer look at both countries, and their domestic and European dynamics is warranted, as the EU enters this crucial year

### Hungary in 2019

Since the Fidesz party came to power in Hungary nine years ago, one of the most important questions has been whether there will ever be a consolidating point where the regime will switch to a less combative approach. What we have learned so far is that this is not going to happen. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán feels more secure than ever.

In fact, the regime has entered a new authoritarian phase where the space for the divided opposition has been restricted even further as the State Audit Office

is trying to undermine it financially. The remaining democratic and independent institutions have less space to maneuver. For example, the government is putting the research institutes of the Academy of Sciences under direct political control by controlling its research budgets. All in all, the playing field is so uneven that even a strong and unified opposition would struggle to keep Orbán's regime from staying in power.

To do so, the opposition would need to leave behind the modus operandi of the last two parliamentary terms and to cooperate in a coordinated way. Recently, there seemed to be a window of opportunity for that. The so-called “slave law” became a catalyst issue for the otherwise fragmented opposition that showed unprecedented unity. It has triggered protests for the past month and also prompted trade unions to organize the first general strike since the fall of communism. But the demonstrations are running out of steam already.

The real risk for Fidesz would be a large-scale national resistance movement that could redirect the public's focus from the government's single issue of fearmongering about migration before the coming European Parliament and local elections. From the long-term perspective of the opposition, the local elections will be much more crucial since the European Parliament ones do not induce much cooperation



among parties. In October's local polls, they have an opportunity to put aside shortsighted political considerations to combat Fidesz. The problem is that they have to operate in a system in which even an efficiently cooperating opposition would struggle to stand a chance.

## *Anti-Imperialist Euroskeptic Populism*

Orbán is striving to become a relevant international actor. He is aiming to polarize the national and the European scene by claiming that anyone who criticizes the government for its increasing authoritarianism undermines national sovereignty, is willing to destroy nation states, and advocates pro-immigrant sentiments.

What could be described as his anti-imperialist Euroskeptic populism is based on the revival of a discourse taken from the Hungarian far-right against the "West." Orbán is basically blaming Western European countries for harboring colonialist sentiments towards Central European countries that are performing better than them economically. The government has spent €216 million on anti-Soros and anti-EU campaigns; this Pandora's Box can not be closed now it has been opened. Due to the nature of the regime, it has a permanent need for external enemies.

While Orbán used to be good at tactical retreats, he has shifted gears lately. The government has announced that it will not participate in the rule of law debate on Hungary organized by the European Parliament. One of the longstanding justifications of the conservative European People's Party (EPP) for the lack of action against Fidesz was the fact that Orbán at least was willing to negotiate – unlike the Polish government.

Moreover, Orbán is openly aiming to become the

leader of the continent's populist, far-right forces in order to transform the EU from the inside. Fidesz is openly advocating an anti-immigration majority in EU institutions to emerge after the parliamentary elections. This says a lot about Orbán's vision of a future architecture the EU in which the EPP takes a harsher anti-immigration stance and cooperates with the far-right Euroskeptic parties to a much larger extent.

## *Further Isolated in a Multispeed EU*

France and Germany have just confirmed with the Aachen Treaty that a "coalition of the willing" is about to move the EU project into a faster lane by binding eurozone members closer together. Although they are going to keep the door open to them, there is a long-term risk that the members states that are not part of the inner circle will have less chance to shape and influence the debate on the economic architecture of the EU. In Hungary, there is hardly any substantial discussion on relevant EU policy issues. When it comes to the future of integration, the government claims that the EU is being divided between those who are against migration and want to preserve national sovereignty and those who are on the side of "open society", migration, and a United States of Europe.

Given its rather limited influence within the European Council, Hungary vetoes or slows down decision-making on migration more and more, frequently referring to the protection of national sovereignty and its anti-EU freedom fight. But this obstructionist approach might not be sustainable given the movement toward more qualified-majority voting in the council. Orbán might want to influence the debates at the highest levels of the EU, but yet he fails to commit Hungary to further coordination within the Economic and Monetary Union, which would allow him to have a greater say.

## **Poland in 2019**

This year Poland will see new opportunities to improve its position in the EU. The ruling Law

and Justice (PiS) party hopes for a good result in the European Parliament elections and securing an important portfolio in next European Commission. The last phase of the current EU budget negotiations will sharpen that focus. The government will also moderate its domestic agenda ahead of parliamentary elections in the autumn.

Much will depend on the international context. Poland's foreign policy over the coming months will be shaped by two crucial factors. First, the outcome of Brexit, which will determine the role of Central Europe in the EU. Second, the foreign policy agenda set by Democrats in the U.S. Congress.

The government has already shown that its domestic agenda is more and more receptive to firm pressure from Poland's partners. Three key examples from 2018 show this.

First, in the battle over judicial independence the government quietly backed away from its attempt to take over the Supreme Court when the European Court of Justice issued an injunction on implementing new laws.

Second, the infamous memory law adopted last February was cancelled after harsh criticism from Israel, the United States, and Ukraine. This was despite the nationalist politics of memory being a core element of the government's narrative.

Finally, a much anticipated takeover of the media did not take place, in part due to the U.S. ambassador taking a clear position on the issue. This was the third core promise of PiS that was broken. Despite its best efforts the party decided to retreat ahead of the coming election year.

## *Election Year*

Ahead of the coming elections PiS wants to present itself as moderate and to keep its radical elements in the background. Yet it truly believes that it plays on a field that is not level when it comes to media pluralism and that it needs to change media system in order to win again. This was the conclusion of PiS

drew from its disappointing performance in last September's local elections.

In 2019, Poles will go to the polls twice and have their minds also set on one more key election in May 2020. The European Parliament elections this spring will be a trial contest ahead of the parliamentary elections in the autumn. Therefore PiS will not use most of its Euroskeptical repertoire in the European poll, where there is usually a low turnout, so as not to alienate voters later in the year in the more important one. It needs to show itself as more centrist to win a second term in government and only then will it openly pursue a more radical agenda. This is why in the coming months the government should show signs of moderation and will become more susceptible to a pro-EU agenda.

“ *It is crucial to provide Poland incentives to be in the mainstream of the European politics.* ”

While the opposition fights mostly battles set up by the government, the only strong message on global and European questions has come so far from European Council President and former prime minister Donald Tusk. Last November, on the eve of National Independence Day, he spoke of the EU as the only answer to the global challenges and uncertainties for his country. Some saw this as a prelude to a potential run in the 2020 presidential elections. But, even if he does not run, he is so far the only political figure capable of shaping the narrative of the opposition.

## *International Relations*

Against all odds, Poland's foreign policy still surprises many observers. The recent announcement that it will host and organize with the United States a conference on Iran in February puts it against the position of most of the EU members when it comes to dealing with that country. This shows that Warsaw tries to accede to any request by the Trump administration ahead of a feasibility study

# Transatlantic Take

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on a permanent U.S. military base in Poland, which is expected in the spring.

Brexit will also make its mark on Poland. It will strive to demonstrate its commitment to protecting the rights of Poles in the United Kingdom. At the same time its best strategy will be to play along with EU partners and fill the vacant place left by the United Kingdom. In this scenario, the Number One European partner for Poland could again be Germany. But, since anti-German sentiments are an essential part of the PiS identity, this would require much effort on behalf of the current government.

Germany was a very important partner for Poland until 2015 when PiS pivoted to prioritizing the relationship with the United Kingdom. But Brexit has complicated that strategy just as much as Germany's lack of decision on Nord Stream 2 complicates rapprochement between the two neighbors.

Lack of legal and political action from the German government despite admitting that the project brings ecological and geopolitical dangers to Europe will hamper a closer partnership.

Poland has the potential to influence and lead in Central Europe only when it is influential in the EU. It gave this up by fighting with the EU on the rule of law, allowing Hungary to dominate the Central European narrative. Therefore it is crucial to provide Poland incentives to be in the mainstream of the European politics. In all probability it will moderate its positions and try to demonstrate a more solution-oriented approach, even should PiS remain in government after the elections. On the other hand, should Poland be sidelined it may fall under influence of radicals and it would be much more disruptive in Europe.

## About the Authors

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