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157 POLAND: the “good change”

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“Poland is in ruins!” Anyone hearing this slogan in the summer of 2015 might have been excused for feeling somewhat surprised. The economy was booming, with GDP growth at 3.6% (up from 3.3% the year before), unemployment had fallen into single digits for the first time in years, and its Gini coefficient was declining. All of this with a budget deficit of 1.8% of GDP (Spain: 5.10%), and public debt stable at 43.3% of GDP (Spain: almost 100%). True, GDP PPP (purchasing power parity) per capita was still only \$26,210 (Spain: \$34,899; EU average: \$35,385) – but when the country joined the EU in 2004 it was only \$6,640. Furthermore, growth had been uninterrupted ever since the country’s post-communist transition ended in 1992; even the banking crisis of 2008-2009 left Poland unaffected. Projections were just as rosy: the president of the Polish Association of Economists assessed that the country would reach the EU average in 2039. What was there not to like?

Everything, apparently. The “Poland is in ruins!” slogan

was introduced by the opposition Law and Justice party (PiS, in its Polish acronym) in its parliamentary elections campaign. Greatly encouraged by the unexpected victory of their candidate, Andrzej Duda, in the presidential elections held earlier that year, the right-wing populists of PiS were closing in for the kill. The incumbent, liberal Civic Platform (PO) government was a spent political force, tired out after eight years in power, and compromised by a series of embarrassing if not fatal influence-peddling scandals it had done nothing to counteract. Yet its economic record had been excellent, and PiS *Greuelpropaganda* was clearly off the mark. The opposition’s candidate for PM, Beata Szydło, staged a press conference in a ruined factory building in a provincial town to prove her point. Outraged, the town’s mayor summoned the media to show that his town was actually booming, and even the derelict factory was in for a revamp. To no avail: the public only had ears for the populists’ message of doom.

Although Polish economy was booming, the “Poland is in ruins!” slogan was introduced by the opposition Law and Justice party (PiS) in its parliamentary elections campaign.

The low electoral turnout implied a widespread mistrust of the political system, regardless of who was in power, and a carefree belief that whoever holds power cannot do enough damage for citizens to care.

The government claims that it represents the sovereign, meaning the Polish people, while the constitutional court “tries to behave as an unelected third chamber of parliament”.

Anti-refugee propaganda turned public opinion, which was hitherto receptive to the need to extend help. In a poll over 50% of respondents said they had seen an increase of nationalism in Poland this year. The new government probably considers this a good thing.

Another important element of the ideological reorientation is the official endorsement of Christianity as the alleged core of Polish nationhood and statehood, and the concomitant rise of the public role of the Catholic Church.

Although Jarosław Kaczyński is formally just an ordinary MP, his position at the head of the party makes him the de facto leader of the country, albeit without any constitutional responsibility.

One reason was that the economic progress made by Poland was so striking that, by now, few remembered the dismal starting point. Instead of comparing their situation now with that of 25 years ago, or with Ukraine today (the two countries started from similar points after the fall of communism), many Poles compared themselves with their western, not eastern neighbours, and expressed outrage that their average wage was still only a third of what a German makes – a stark reminder of the road yet to travel. But western Poland is actually doing better economically than the eastern part of Germany that it borders, and more Germans than Poles cross the border in search of work. The sense of outrage, however, remained and targeted the government, which was seen as being crassly ignorant of the population's economic plight.

Promising the moon

Especially as PiS, desperate to return to power after a previous, disastrous two-and-a-half year stint in government, was willing to promise the electorate the moon and then some. Its campaign pledges included the flagship rollback of the retirement age – which PO had finally had the courage to fix, in an aging society, at 67 – to

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the original 65 for men and 60 for women. Other promises included “500+”, a monthly welfare payment of 500 zlotys, or \$130, per child to all families, and an increase in tax-free income. PiS also called for a law forcing banks to recalculate the loans taken out by hundreds of thousands of families in Swiss francs, when that currency seemed a safer bet, and convert them into zlotys at the exchange rate applicable at the moment of signing, before the franc rate soared. Miners in the deficit and pollution-producing coal industry were promised no mines would be closed down, senior citizens that medicines would be free. What was there not to like even more about that than what Poles already had and took for granted?

Electorate concerns, if there were any, were political. PiS had been voted out of office in early elections in 2007 because their rule had been as incompetent as it was authoritarian. Witch-hunts of alleged former communist agents, years after the fall of that regime, affected the job security of hundreds of thousands of public officials, educators and journalists. Arbitrary arrests threatened real and alleged political opponents (an opposition MP shot herself when arrested on corruption charges that it soon became clear were trumped up), and Poland's relations with Germany and Russia soured in parallel, as Warsaw started demanding new contrition and compensation for WWII crimes. In opposition now, PiS made great use of the 2010 air crash in Smolensk, Russia, in which the country's then president, Lech Kaczyński from PiS, was killed along with 96 other members of the political elite. They were travelling to commemorate the victims

of the 1940 murder by the Soviets of 23,000 Polish officers interned after Poland's defeat in 1939. Just days earlier, PM Donald Tusk of PO (currently president of the European Council) had made a safe visit at the invitation of his then Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin.

Even though both Polish and Russian investigations convincingly blamed the crash on a concatenation of human errors, PiS immediately launched a darker theory. The crash was alleged to have been a murder by the dastardly Russians out for revenge after president Kaczyński supported Georgia in its 2008 war against Moscow. Not only that, but the PO government was accused of being somehow complicit, due to fear of the PiS president's popularity. That Poland's support for Georgia had been irrelevant to Moscow, that Kaczyński's popularity was on the wane, that all alternative explanations of the events advanced by PiS were crackpot – let alone the political and moral implausibility of a Putin-PO plot against Kaczyński – all of that was dismissed out of hand. As PiS chairman Jarosław Kaczyński, Lech's twin brother, famously said as PM in Parliament in 2007: “No amount of yelling and screaming will make us admit that black is black and white is white”. Most at that time had thought it was a slip of tongue. If only.

Leading Smolensk conspiracy theorist Antoni Macierewicz was made Kaczyński's deputy in PiS, and the campaign for the “truth about the murder” directed at the “PO traitors in power” eventually convinced about a third of public opinion, which either believed the conspiracy theories outright, or at least mistrusted the official explanations. This constituency was to form the hardcore PiS electorate, its faithfulness cemented at annual and monthly commemorations of the crash. But just as Smolensk drew them to PiS, it scared away the remaining two thirds. In order to win, the opposition had to neutralise that trend.

In the pre-election months, Macierewicz all but disappeared from public view and Szydło promised that he would not hold office in a future PiS government. Party leader Kaczyński never went on the record to conclusively say that crash had been a criminal act. PiS activists repeated that they had learned from past mistakes, and would no longer resort to divisive tactics and witch-hunts. “I will be the president of all the Poles” said Andrzej Duda after his inauguration. At the same time, however, the slogan of “recovering independence”, implying that under PO rule the country was anything but, went in parallel with “Poland is in ruins”. “Poland is now a Russo-German condominium under Jewish trusteeship” said an extreme right-wing documentary film director, Grzegorz Braun, succinctly expressing a widespread feeling of nationalist frustration. The church enthusiastically supported PiS, and in return the party strongly endorsed the concept of Poland as a “Christian nation”. Beyond that lay the glittering prizes of welfare redistribution, which PO denied to Poles out of sheer spite, as PiS propaganda had it. It worked.

Buying support

PiS won the elections on October 25 convincingly, increasing its share of the vote to 37.6%, which translated into 51% of seats in the Sejm, the lower house of the parliament. Now it could govern alone, without coalition partners. The defeat of PO was just as clear-cut, with the party losing almost a third of its votes from the previous election, and half its parliamentary seats. Still, at 24% of the national vote, it remained a force to reckon with; many of the votes it lost went to Nowoczesna (Modern), an upstart liberal party which came in fourth with 7.6%. Some might have gone to another upstart – Kukiz'15, a motley collection of protest vote politicians that included, for the first time since the war, an organised extreme right, which came in third with 8.8%. Both upstarts did especially well with the young. PO's erstwhile ally, the Peasant Party, barely cleared the electoral threshold of 5% and the left, bitterly split, was for the first time not even represented in parliament. Geographically, the conservative and economically underprivileged east of the country voted PiS, with the party's share declining and PO's increasing as one moved west. Demographically, the PiS vote declined with education and increased with age.

But the most important statistic was electoral turnout, which was slightly under 51%. Half of Poles could not be bothered to vote in the country's most important election since 1989 (when the turnout, among the highest since, was still only a surprising 63%). This implied a widespread mistrust of the political system, regardless of who was in power, and a carefree belief that whoever holds power cannot do enough damage for citizens to care. Objectively, this played into the hands of PiS, whose electorate was more disciplined and motivated than PO's. At the end of the day, however, PiS got only 18% of eligible votes. A mandate to govern, yes, but not to turn the country upside down, in what PiS called the "good change".

Yet the victorious populists proceeded to do just that. In a legislative flurry that left the opposition reeling, PiS took over the state. Massive purges cleansed the state apparatus, and new laws abolished the prerequisite of apolitical competition for civil servant positions, replacing it with arbitrary appointments. The boards of state companies were packed with the party faithful, regardless of their qualifications for the job. A new law on state media was passed, subordinating them directly to the minister of culture; 130 top journalists were fired or resigned. They included revered sports commentator Tadeusz Zimoch, who was fired for giving an interview in which he said that people in the state media are afraid to voice their opinions for fear of losing their jobs. State broadcast news reverted to party propaganda – and the main news programme lost 1.5 million viewers in six months. Still, the new head of state broadcast media, Jacek Kurski, praised his own accomplishments, pointing to the constant popularity PiS enjoys in the polls as proof.

That popularity is largely due to the fact that the party has (more or less) fulfilled one of its electoral promises: 500+.

Though the first-born child is not covered, contrary to earlier pledges, and the programme started in April 2016 rather than January, as promised, it has brought a tangible improvement to the economic situation of millions of Polish families. Lower income parents who had sent their children to orphanages because they felt unable to bear the burden of raising them began to retrieve their offspring in order to qualify. Not everybody appreciated it: one-child families were not eligible, unless they were below the poverty line. Asked what a single mother of one who is just above that line should do, the government spokesperson said she should get married, regularise her situation, have another child and then apply. Still, PiS claimed that the success of the programme shows the incompetence, or worse, of its opponents who said "it can't be done". Public approval rose and polls showed support for PiS at electoral levels or above, while that for PO crumbled.

In all fairness, however, it is unclear how it can be done. The cost of 500+ for the 3.7m children eligible is 17bn zlotys this year alone, for next year it will be 22.5bn. Funding for this year comes from: last year's state income being creatively accounted for as this year's (9bn); a new tax on banks (1bn); a new tax on supermarkets introduced in the summer, which will be challenged as a contravention of EU legislation, will provide an unspecified amount; and improved VAT and

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excise tax collection will contribute another unspecified amount. While it is true that tax collection has improved substantially under the new government, it is also true that by June the state budget was 13.5bn zlotys short – the entire deficit last year was 19.6bn. It seems that the deputy PM in charge of the economy, Mateusz Morawiecki, was right when he said the programme runs on credit. This raises the risk of its inflationary funding: banks have already increased charges to offset the new tax, and supermarkets are beginning to do the same. From an economic viewpoint it is clear that the government cannot continue to implement its electoral promises, and in fact all other pledges have been put on hold. From a political perspective, however, this might prove dangerous.

An onslaught on freedoms

This might be why the parliament has been passing one law after another with the purpose of increasing the powers of the state at the expense of civic freedoms. The hitherto independent prosecutorial branch has again been subordinated to the minister of justice, who now has the discretionary power to order the initiation, transfer or closing of proceedings, as well as to arbitrarily decide on the promotion – or lack thereof – of judges. The security services have obtained unlimited rights to control electronic communications through mobile phones and the internet without warrant, and with no effective post facto judiciary supervision. Illegally obtained information can now be used as proof in court, with the merciful exception

of information obtained through torture or murder. All this has been justified by an allegations of a growing terrorist threat, even if no acts of terror have been committed in Poland so far.

The terrorist threat has also been invoked to justify the government's obdurate refusal to take in refugees. The refugee scare has already been used in the elections, when the PO government stated its willingness to accept some 7,000 of them, as per EU agreements. Protesting against that decision, PiS chairman Kaczyński warned that refugees can be "bearers of parasites and bacteria, innocuous to them but dangerous to the host population". Jarosław Gowin, who changed parties from PO to PiS and is currently minister of justice, stated that "Poland should not take in Muslims". Anti-refugee propaganda turned public opinion, which was hitherto receptive to the need to extend help: a majority now opposes accepting refugees, and that percentage increases with age. Several dozen cases of physical violence against darker-skinned foreigners have already been recorded. And yet Poland takes in almost no refugees.

Not so, according to PM Beata Szydło, who last autumn stated in the European Parliament that Poland had in the previous year taken in 1.1m refugees from Ukraine. An

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embarrassed Ukrainian ambassador to Poland had to correct her, indicating that in 2014 Poland had issued 1.1 million visas to Ukrainians and granted asylum to exactly two of them. This number then skyrocketed in 2015 to all of sixteen; data for the current year are not yet in. Szydło never retracted her words.

Anti-refugee feelings quickly evolved into racist xenophobia tinged with antisemitism. While demonstrators who yell "Fuck Allah!", "White pride!", and "Great Poland, white only!" clearly target Muslims primarily, an antisemitic sideshow soon developed. An anti-refugee demonstration held in Wrocław to commemorate Poland's National Day ended with the burning of a dummy of a Hasidic Jew holding an EU flag. In April, the annual commemoration in Białystok of the founding of the ONR, a pre-war Fascist movement banned by the Polish government in 1934 and reactivated in 1989, started with holy mass in the city's cathedral, during which a priest used his sermon to warn uniformed participants about "Jewish cowardice" and "Jewish scum", and concluded with a march through the city's downtown, with the slogan "and in spring Zionists, instead of leaves, will hang from trees" (it rhymes in Polish) being chanted.

While the mayor of Wrocław and the chairman of the Catholic episcopate have both condemned these outrages, there has been no reaction from the central authorities. Police and judiciary authorities are investigating, but the hopes

of serious verdicts are low, as law enforcement is clearly uninterested in such cases. As a policeman wrote, justifying his refusal to open an investigation against an example of hate speech: "It is not clear who the Adolf being cited is, nor what job he is called upon to complete". And the government has abolished its council on hate speech anyway. To quote Kaczyński again: "there will be no legislation against hate speech, it would contravene freedom of expression".

Rewriting history

This obviously encouraged the radicals: in a poll over 50% of respondents said they had seen an increase of nationalism in Poland this year. The new government probably considers this a good thing. It had dedicated millions to "increasing Poles' pride in their history" and improving the country's image abroad. A new law to be passed in September will make it a crime punishable by up to three years in jail to use the term "Polish concentration camps" or to imply that the Polish nation was complicit in the Shoah. While the expression "Polish camps", occasionally used abroad, has mainly innocent geographical connotations, it is true that it can also imply co-responsibility, which would be contrary to the historical record – not that this justifies threatening users with jail. More broadly, such measures express a break with the alleged "pedagogy of shame" supposedly promoted by previous governments – by recognising and expressing contrition for crimes committed by Poles in the past.

The two best known examples are mass murders of Jews: in the small town of Jedwabne in 1941 under German occupation (several hundred victims) and in the city of Kielce in 1946, when the war was over (42 victims). The historical record of these events, unrecognised under communism, is unambiguous, as has been their subsequent recognition by Poland's democratic governments. But education minister Anna Zalewska recently said that she "does not know who killed the Jews in Jedwabne and Kielce", while the new head of the Institute of National Remembrance (an Orwellian institution dedicated to the study of Nazi and communist crimes, commemoration of their victims and prosecution of perpetrators), has already stated – contrary to the earlier findings of the Institute – that Jedwabne was "a German crime, with possible incidental Polish participation".

Such statements might indicate antisemitic leanings (though Kaczyński, Duda and Szydło have all unequivocally condemned antisemitism in public), but are more indicative of a general attempt to rewrite recent Polish history to suit the ruling party's expectations. Thus Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa, a bitter critic of the Kaczyńskis, is being accused of having been an agent of the communist secret police, and his whole opposition history of being a sham. Though documents have emerged proving that in 1970 he did in fact sign a commitment to cooperate, and made reports to his handlers for several years (Wałęsa denies their authenticity), it is clear that by the mid-70s he made a clean break with the secret police and became its victim, as an underground trade

unionist. The attempt to besmirch him is in part personal vengeance, and in part an effort to denigrate the entire historical leadership of the anti-communist opposition, which (Macierewicz being the most prominent exception) is today largely critical of PiS. This goes hand in hand with the rehabilitation of former communist officials who “have seen the light”. Thus PiS made a former political prosecutor under the rule of General Wojciech Jaruzelski chairman of the Sejm commission on human rights.

Another important element of this ideological reorientation is the official endorsement of Christianity as the alleged core of Polish nationhood and statehood, and the concomitant rise of the public role of the Catholic Church. Public officials and institutions, such as the armed forces and the police, routinely participate in Church functions, and the Ministry of Defence, under the leadership of minister Macierewicz (electoral promises be damned), has announced the creation of a volunteer paramilitary Territorial Defence Force. It is supposed, in the words of the ministry’s official announcement, to “strengthen the Christian and patriotic character of the Polish armed forces”. Even more worryingly, the fascist ONR has announced that it wants to be part of the new formation; the ministry sees no problem with that.

Breaking the constitution

Interestingly, this turn by PiS towards traditional Catholic nationalism seems to be dictated less by political expediency than by the personal convictions of the party’s leader, who in the past has voiced opinions critical of such commitments, even if he later went on to endorse them. This matters, because although Kaczyński is formally just an ordinary MP, his position at the head of the party makes him the de facto leader of the country, albeit without any constitutional responsibility. He can dismiss legislation (a law liberalising hunting had already cleared the 1st reading in the Sejm when Kaczyński opined that he “does not even like hunting” and the law was duly shelved) and decide on top positions in the state (when in an inter-party factional struggle the head of state broadcast media, Jacek Kurski, was toppled by the National Media Council he made a last-ditch appeal to Kaczyński and was immediately reinstated).

He has been publicly dismissive of the PM (ordering her, with a gesture of his hand, to return to her seat when she wanted to take the rostrum in a parliamentary debate; she complied) and of the president (ignoring his extended hand at a public function in a scene captured by a press photographer). Both serve at his pleasure. His extraordinary position is a result of both the bylaws of PiS, which guarantee the chairman the final say on policy, and the fantastic skills he has shown in the past when dealing with real or imaginary challengers to his rule, of which none exist at present.

For all of its aspirations to thoroughly remake the country, PiS is limited in its efforts by the fact that it lacks the two-thirds

parliamentary majority to change the constitution which, with its classic division of powers, sets a limit on what an activist government can do. The constitution also stipulates the strong position of the constitutional court, which has the power to strike down as unconstitutional any law submitted to its review. Judges are elected by the Sejm, but in a staggered manner, making domination by a current majority difficult. Before last year’s elections, the then PO majority elected five new judges – three for positions that would be vacated before the current parliament’s term of office is over, and two for positions which would open slightly later that year, but possibly before the new parliament could fill them.

That was an obvious attempt to stack the court, and the court itself ruled in December that the election of the two judges was unconstitutional. But president Duda had by then refused to swear in all five, as the new PiS majority had elected five replacements, and Duda, in a clear breach of the constitution, had immediately sworn them in. Thus began the government’s war on the court: Sejm passes laws designated to paralyse its functioning (three at the latest count, with a fourth one being prepared), and the court (which has accepted as full members only the constitutionally elected PiS judges, who still do not have the majority) strikes these laws down as unconstitutional. The government then, in violation of the

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constitution, refuses to publish these verdicts, which would make them law.

Arguing its case, the government claims that it represents the sovereign, meaning the Polish people, while the court “tries to behave as an unelected third chamber of parliament”. Since the government has decided its verdicts are unconstitutional, the PM says, it does not have the right to publish them, as that would violate the constitution. Furthermore, the prosecutorial branch has launched an investigation of the chairman of the court for “dereliction of duty” by failing to seat the judges unconstitutionally elected by the Sejm. In brief, the government claims its electoral mandate gives it the right to override the court and, in fact, the constitution which established it.

Civil society reacted to this subversion of the rule of law. A grass-roots movement, the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (KOD) emerged to coordinate mounting protest movements. Thousands of people repeatedly took to the streets. The largest demonstration in support of the court gathered over 200,000 participants, making it the biggest demonstration since the fall of communism. In a poll, 5% said they had participated in demonstrations against the government, an obviously inflated figure representing public outrage, not real participation. Other polls showed that a majority of public opinion – and even a majority of PiS supporters, whose numbers have not declined – believes the

government is in the wrong in its war on the court. Kaczyński responded by calling demonstrators “a worse sort of Poles”, “communists and thieves”, and compared them to Gestapo collaborators.

Out of the mainstream

The onslaught on the rule of law has been repeatedly condemned by the Venice Commission (the Council of Europe’s constitutional body), by the European Parliament and the European Commission, which – in a historical first – has ruled that the rule of law is threatened in Poland and initiated a corrective procedure. Visiting Warsaw in June for the NATO summit, President Obama also voiced his “concern” about the rule of law in the country.

These foreign reactions have elicited howls of outrage in Warsaw. Responding to criticism by the President of the European Parliament, German social democrat Martin Schulz, justice minister Zbigniew Ziobro said that “as a grandson of a fighter of the Home Army [the Polish WWII resistance]” he would not be “lectured to by children of Nazis”. Foreign minister Witold Waszczykowski declared that European criticism was both “illegitimate” and “irrelevant”. This

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has been Warsaw’s consistent reaction. Obama got gentler treatment: his comments were first censored by state TV then explained away as criticism of the opposition, not of the government.

The government’s anti-European rhetoric (the PM has banned the EU flag from government offices) is consistent with its slogan of “recovering Poland’s sovereignty” from those who infringe it at home and abroad, but flies in the face of public pro-EU sentiment. In a recent Eurobarometer poll, Poles, at 75%, were the nation most satisfied with their country’s membership of the European Union. At the same time, however, public opinion believes that the government has been successful in defending Poland from the refugees Brussels allegedly wanted to flood it with. Yet Poland’s stark refusal of solidarity has not only marginalised the country within the EU, it has gravely undermined its security, which is based precisely on Euro-Atlantic solidarity. If the war in Ukraine flares up and massive numbers of Ukrainian refugees arrive, Warsaw will presumably demand from other member states the same solidarity it has denied them in regard to the influx of refugees from Syria.

Even more importantly, NATO solidarity is based on common values. The alliance’s June summit in Warsaw endorsed the deployment of four battalions to its members’ exposed eastern borders. The deal, negotiated by the previous government, fell short of the more radical demands made by

PiS, but it markedly strengthens Poland’s security vis-à-vis an aggressive, authoritarian Russia. Yet Poland’s subversion of its own rule of law and high-handed dismissal of foreign criticism might adversely impact the practical support extended to it in the case of an increased threat. And it does not help that Minister Macierewicz has gone on the record defining the Smolensk crash as “an act of war by Russia against a NATO country”, nor that he ridiculed criticism of Poland by “countries established barely 200 years ago, while we have a tradition of democracy from the 13th century onward” in the presence of the US ambassador.

The country’s foreign minister seems not to mind. Having made his priorities resisting refugees (he has declared himself in public to be an “Islamophobe”) and promoting historical revisionism (“we need to tell the world the Smolensk catastrophe did not happen the way it happened”), he is happy to pour ridicule on the decadent West and to find Poland “a place outside the European mainstream”. Gone are the days of the Warsaw-Berlin tandem; instead, Poland wants to become a leader of central Europe. Unfortunately for these aspirations, other countries in the region seem not to be interested. They have clearly, like the Czech Republic, stated that they value their relations with Germany more, or else, like Hungary, they are clearly more pro-Russian than Warsaw can accept.

And yet Hungary remains the only true ally the Poland of the “good change” still has. PM Victor Orbán, who has implemented a similar domestic political transformation (albeit with a constitutional majority), and has weathered political storms from Brussels (albeit with much more flexibility), has promised that Hungary will veto any EU sanctions against Poland – and such measures need member states’ unanimity to pass. He has also promised to veto any new sanctions against Russia, which puts Poland in an exclusive club of two states that Hungary protects from the EU.

Orbán is indeed the only foreign leader Kaczyński consults. Poland’s de facto ruler has almost never travelled abroad, nor does he speak a foreign language. His knowledge and understanding of the world comes from what he reads and what he is told; paradoxically, hearing the opinions of the more urbane Orbán might actually broaden his own perspectives. And the Hungarian’s tilt towards Moscow does not seem to worry Warsaw too much: historical rhetoric aside, Poland has not done anything – outside of supporting NATO’s new measures – that might incur Putin’s wrath. On the contrary, the country’s hitherto activist support of Ukraine has been replaced with passive indifference.

At the same time, the Polish parliament passed a resolution condemning the “genocide” of Poles at the hands of Ukrainians in WWII. While ethnic Poles in what is now western Ukraine (and was eastern Poland until 1939) suffered dreadfully during Ukrainian ethnic cleansing under the German occupation of those areas (some 100,000 were murdered), no court had pronounced these mass murders to be genocide. The passing of the resolution, just days

after Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko laid a wreath in Warsaw at the monument to the Polish victims, was sure to enflame passions (the Ukrainian parliament is preparing a counter-resolution, claiming genocide at the hands of the Poles) and plays into Moscow's hands.

The harbingers

As the first anniversary of PiS's parliamentary victory approaches, the country's future remains clouded. As long as the currently favourable economic situation holds, the ruling party's popularity will abide, solidified by welfare transfers, nationalistic propaganda and Church support. But if it fails (and the government has already announced that growth forecasts for next year are being revised downwards) – all the inherent political contradictions will come to the fore, with the possibility of increased political persecution of the former elites (Tusk has agreed to testify in Parliament about a Ponzi scheme under his rule) and even outright violence (which is where the new Territorial Defence Force might come in handy). Yet in a country as bitterly polarised as Poland is today, popular discontent might be successfully redirected against political scapegoats and deflected from government targets. If confrontation happens, the government is unlikely, however, to use exceptional measures; it will more probably opt for early elections, which should still be expected to be fair, and their result respected. If, however, the situation remains stable, then PiS can reasonably expect to win regular elections and rule for four more years.

This scenario assumes that external, mainly EU, pressure, will prove insufficient to change the government's policies. Overburdened with a proliferation of crises, from refugees and Brexit to Turkey, and operating in the shadow of an unpredictable Russia, Europe will probably not have the time and energy to discipline Warsaw. And with the political tide on the continent changing, it might well be the case that, as more nationalist parties take power in member states, Poland and Hungary will no longer be the outliers, but rather the harbingers of things to come.

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