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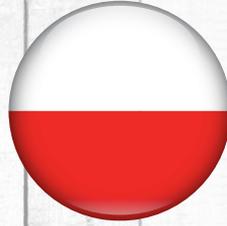
İSTANBUL POLİTİK ARAŞTIRMALAR ENSTİTÜSÜ

HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
DERNEĞİ TÜRKİYE TEMSİLCİLİĞİ

FOREIGN POLICY TALKS - I

Seminar Report

**Foreign policies of populists in power:
Hungary and Poland in focus**



How does extreme right in power affect domestic and foreign policies of Hungary and Poland ?

How does the influx of refugees the foreign policy of extreme right in power ?

Why are governments of Hungary and Poland as primary beneficiaries of EU funds rallying against the EU ?

Have Hungary and Poland turned to the East including China, Russia, and Turkey in their foreign policy agenda?

How does the EU respond to authoritarian regime building?

SPEAKER

Edit Zgut
Foreign Policy Analyst,
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MODERATOR

Seren Selvin Korkmaz
Political Scientist,
Executive Director of IstanPol Institute

The first of the Foreign Policy Talks, a closed-round table with experts, researchers, academics and journalists was held on November 14, 2018 with the participation of Foreign Policy Analyst Edit Zgut. Seren Selvin Korkmaz, the Executive Director of Istanbul Political Research Institute (IstanPol) moderated the seminar. Edit Zgut delivered a presentation on how the rise of extreme right in Hungary and Poland does and will affect foreign policies of these countries.

The presentation was followed by a discussion session with the participation of foreign policy experts, academics and journalists. Migration, EU funds, trade, the relations with Russia and Turkey and the future of Europe have been covered during the discussion.

In recent years, the extreme right is increasingly gaining support virtually everywhere in the world. The growing presence of populist politicians in parliaments and governments is consequently having a significant impact on both domestic and foreign policies of countries.

European Union has also been facing the challenge by rising extreme right across the continent. The discourse and policies of far-right parties threatens the very founding values of the EU.

Moreover, they have also been active in agenda setting on various topics including migration, European integration, foreign aid, trade, and international relations. Nowadays, in Hungary and Poland, where the far right is in the government, there has been a significant deterioration of both civil liberties and political rights.

Examining the case of Hungary and Poland will help understand the patterns of foreign policy of extreme right in power and analyze the response of the EU to these governments.

Democratic backsliding in Visegrad countries

While Visegrad countries will celebrate the 30th anniversary of the fall of the communism, the political landscape changed dramatically in the region. Democratic backsliding has captured a trend in the Visegrad countries with Orbán regime in Hungary and the Kaczynski regime in Poland. Edit Zgut defines both regimes as authoritarian populist. They are authoritarian and exclusionary in the sense that they reject pluralism and depict critical actors such as civil society, the opposition, and the EU as the enemies of the state.

Both Hungary and Poland follow various illiberal measures to suppress the opposition and control the overall institutional mechanisms of the state. First of all, both Orbán and Kaczynski have weakened democratic checks and balances. While Orbán systematically took over, weakened and eliminated all democratic institutions serving as **checks and balances**, the Polish governing Law and Justice Party (PiS) approved more than 13 laws which subjugate the judicial branch under the executive power, affecting the whole spectrum of the judiciary essentially. Secondly, in Poland under the guise of anti-communism, PiS took full **control of the judiciary**. In Hungary the judiciary is still independent of the government; however, Zgut underlines that with the constitutional amendments this trend might be changed too in Hungary.

The suppression of civil society is in an advanced stage in Hungary. “Stop Soros” law has practically criminalized humanitarian aid and securitized the civil society realm. On the other hand, while civil society in Poland seems to have a larger maneuvering space, some concerns have been raised that the centralization of funding leaves many NGOs in lack of financial resources since PiS came into the power.

Both the Hungarian and Polish governments successfully **control the media**. More than 500 media outlets under the control of Fidesz dominate the political discourse based on massive fake news and conspiracy theories. In Poland, the public broadcaster has been under the direct political control of PiS since 2015 but compared to the Hungarian case the Polish media market is still diverse.

Both countries have exposed to **clientelism and state corruption**. Edit Zgut explains that while Jarosław Kaczyński is instead an ideologue aligned with the Polish Catholic Church, Orbán is a pragmatic non-ideologue aligned with oligarchs loyal to him. According to Zgut, in Poland, a significant degree of clientelism is part of the local political culture. In contrast, systemic state corruption has become the main feature of the institutional design of the Hungarian regime.

Both countries have adopted **anti-Western rhetoric**. Edit Zgut remarks that the anti-EU stance fits into a broader discourse on sovereignty, which is based on the idea that there is a potential cultural conflict between the Hungarian and Polish nations and the decadent West that has been unable to protect its values from migration. As a result, both Fidesz and PiS follow an anti-Brussels agenda, and Fidesz was also hostile towards the US during the Obama administration. PiS recently clashed with Brussels over Poland’s controversial judicial reforms and its rejection of the European Commission’s quota system for migrants.

Edit Zgut emphasizes that although both Poland and Hungary are exposed to the authoritarian populism, they are in different stages regarding institutionalization of authoritarianism. While the institutional arrangements of Orbán-regime represent authoritarian axis, according to Zgut, the Kaczyński regime is still in the infancy of illiberal state building and can be described as a watered-down democracy where some institutional checks and balances are still somewhat functioning.

Extreme right and foreign policy

The foreign policies of Hungary and Poland have a particular impact on their relations with the EU and other international partners such as China, Russia, the US, and Turkey. Moreover, their nationalistic agenda challenges globalism and EU's multilateral liberalism and accelerates the anti-immigrant policies.

First of all, Edit Zgut describes the anti-EU stance of Hungary and Poland as post-colonial peripheral populism. It works both in Hungary and Poland, since both countries share the sense of victimhood, feeling of limited sovereignty, a peripheral position within the EU and a negative perception of superpowers in the West and the East. Orbán and Kaczynski depict themselves as the only defender of national identity and sovereignty against "external threats" such as the EU, which want Hungary and Poland "on their knees".

Edit Zgut remarks that "exit" is not considered as an option, as far as the standpoint of Hungarian and Polish governments towards the EU is concerned. The primary goal of Orbán and Kaczynski is not to leave the union but to change its nature. Rather than following Western European liberalism, they aim to create a European politics that is to promote the religious and national self-identification in which societies would increasingly be characterized by ethnically homogenous, Christian, traditionalist values. Moreover, Orbán aims to undermine the legitimacy of the EU institutions and stop any further attempts by them to interfere in internal and judicial affairs of the country.

Zgut mentioned the efforts of Hungary and Poland to affect the EU affairs with their veto power, which they use with a nationalist and anti-institutional approach. According to Zgut, while Orbán is striving to become a relevant actor at the international level, Hungary has a limited influence within the European Council. He thus resorts to the veto power to affect EU decision-making on migration more and more frequently referring to the protection of national sovereignty. Orbán has highly praised Trump's rejection of multilateralism: "We have received permission from the highest position in the world so we can now also put ourselves in the first place."

The role of migration

Zgut and participants covered the place of migration in the populist rhetoric and anti-immigrant policies of Hungary and Poland during the discussion.

Edit Zgut argues that in both Hungary and Poland, politicians benefit from “platonic xenophobia.” In other words, although these are among countries that accepted the fewest number of refugees within the EU, they use anti-immigrant sentiment by frequently mentioning the migration as a threat to their culture, traditions, and society. Anti-immigrant rhetoric helps Orbán polarize and mobilize society by presenting enemies and amplifying fears. According to Zgut, Orbán has been using the migration consciously as a pretext to transform his political system by relegating human rights.

Likewise, PiS has created a social climate of xenophobia in Poland where extremism is socially accepted. During his campaign in 2015, Kaczynski’s anti-immigration stand found a receptive audience in Poland, which is a mono-ethnic country and has almost no experience with multiculturalism.

Relations with China, Russia and Turkey: Friends or foes?

Anti-EU rhetoric of Hungary and Poland also affect their relations with other countries in the East. According to Zgut, Orbán is openly idealizing Eastern regimes, including the Russian, Turkish and Chinese political models of power.

The primary goal of his “eastern opening” is to reduce the dependency of the Hungarian economy on trade with Western Europe. Hungary by turning towards the East has increasingly developed its relations with China, Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan. Hungary is the first country in Europe that signed an intergovernmental memorandum with China on the “One Belt One Road” (New Silk Road) in June 2015 and is the only EU member state that did not sign the EU’s highly critical statement against the Chinese government’s “One Belt One Road” Initiative.

In that sense, China stands as a desirable alternative partner for Hungary in case EU ceases to provide financial support. Besides, the construction of the Budapest-Belgrade railway development was funded by Chinese loan.

Edit Zgut emphasizes that Hungary and Poland are not on the same page concerning the relations with Russia. While Hungary is the only country in the EU that uses Russia as a model in terms of ideological, economic and political leadership, Poland perceives Russia as the biggest geopolitical threat for historical reasons.

Orbán depicts himself as a mediator of peace between the East and the West and claims that Hungary, as a NATO and EU member state, is a “flagship” for Russian energy in Europe. Moreover, Hungary blocks every issue that is important to Ukraine in international organizations, including Ukraine’s European and NATO integration - which ultimately helps Russia’s geopolitical agenda.

On the other hand, according to Zgut, Warsaw may be turning away from the European Union but it does not mean that it is turning toward Moscow or China. Poland is the only country in the region where pro-Russian voices are deeply marginalized. Recently, Poland’s state-run gas company PGNiG signed a long-term contract to buy liquefied natural gas from the United States as part of efforts to reduce the country’s dependence on Russian deliveries.

Despite their anti-Islam and anti-immigrant rhetoric, both Hungary and Poland are supportive of Turkey’s EU access even if it is not being discussed domestically. Turkey is not accepted as a weak state by Hungary and Poland because of its “refugees welcome” policy, but it is counted among countries that can stop the migrant influx to Europe.

Turkey stands as the most positively evaluated partners of Hungary according to Zgut. Orbán sees Turkey as a role model economically and politically and respects President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for his political philosophy and governing techniques, as indicated in numerous interviews.

According to Orbán, the European Union is “insincere” towards Turkey on its efforts to join the bloc. Andrzej Duda, the PiS-backed Polish President, has also supported Turkey’s accession to the European Union.

Moreover, Visegrad countries tend to view Turkey as a highly relevant actor for energy security aspirations and diversification goals of the whole of Europe.

EU's response to the extreme right's authoritarian policies

Edit Zgut argues that traditional, legal and political mechanisms of the EU has not been able to prevent authoritarian regime-building so far.

European Parliament resorted to Article 7 against Hungary and Poland. Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union is an infringement procedure to suspend certain rights from a member state committing fundamental rights violations.

In September 2018, EU Parliament triggered the Article 7 against the Hungarian government condemning systemic violation of the rule of law in Hungary. Brussels triggered Article 7 against Poland in December 2017.

Hungary and Poland protects each other against the EU sanctions. Zgut underlines that the Article 7 procedure is “symbolically important but nothing more than a political quarantine.”

What should be done?

Both Edit Zgut's remarks and the following discussion have raised some policy recommendations regarding the authoritarian regime building in the European Union.

1. International efforts to preserve multilateralism may block the nationalist agenda of populists. For Orbán, constructive cooperation and active contribution in the multilateral institutions are still important, although he follows sovereign foreign policy rhetoric with short-term interests. Because Hungary as an export-oriented open economy depends on German automotive industry, it does not benefit from the Hobbesian sovereignty concept and could not stand against globalization. Thus, economic sanctions and pursuing globalism still matter.
2. European Commission should change the dynamics of the long-lasting infringement procedures that leave too much room for system-changing actions.

3. The Commission should bind payments of the EU funds to certain requirements. Poland and Hungary are the biggest beneficiaries of the EU subsidies. Poland has received up to 86 billion euros in the current financial cycle, and 95% of the public investment in Hungary could not have been implemented without EU co-funding. If the independence of the judiciary or the risk of fraud involving EU funds is at stake, financial sanctions should be implemented. It could be based on Article 322 of the EU treaties, which already oblige member states' authorities to manage EU funding legally and adequately. The EU should develop a system of rules that applies to all EU countries and cover all aspects of the EU budget.

4. While anti-immigrant rhetoric and disinformation about migration is so prevalent and used as a practical tool by the extreme right, the EU should not tie the funds to the mandatory relocation of refugees. For instance, Orbán is building his whole narrative on the conspiracy that Fidesz government is not exposed to punishment because of its authoritarian governance but because it is anti-migrant. Thus, the EU should not put the migration issue in the first place to implement sanctions towards Hungary and Poland.

* This seminar report has been authored by Seren Selvin Korkmaz.

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