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„This is not Budapest”

“This is not Budapest, this is Warsaw!” chanted the Polish demonstrators, protesting against the appointment of new constitutional judges. Many believe that the new Polish center-right government aims to override the strongest opponents of their legislative activities by changing the composition of the Constitutional Court. The opposition says that the government is adapting Viktor Orbán’s methods to Poland. Our analyses looks at how well founded this position is.

Following Hungary, an authoritarian tendency is beginning to dominate in Poland as well, according to the Democracy Protection Committee. This organization coordinates protests against the rightist President Andrzej Duda and the government. In the 2015 elections, two center-right, conservative parties competed against one another in Poland: the moderate, conservative-liberal oriented Civic Platform and the more conservative Law and Justice party (Polish abbreviation: PiS). The latter is led by Jarosław Aleksander Kaczyński, former Prime Minister of Poland (2006-2007). The Polish left, which has been persistently weak since the late 1990s, was not a serious threat for the two center-right parties. The elections were won by PiS. Polish analysts expressed fears as in their view PiS considers the Hungarian Orbán government among its role models.

The new government has the majority in both houses of the Parliament. 51% of the 460-seat Sejm and 62% of the 100-seat Senate belong to PiS. Currently both the President and the Prime Minister of Poland come from PiS, namely Andrzej Sebastian Duda and Beata Szydlo. Therefore, just like in Hungary, one party gives both the head of state and the prime minister. In this situation, the 15-member Constitutional Court is this party’s main counterweight. However, President Duda called the actions of the previous parliament (electing five new members to the
Constitutional Court) unconstitutional. The new president arbitrarily annulled said decision and the new PiS-dominated parliament appointed five other members to the Court. After this, demonstrations began against the Polish government. Protesters drew a parallel between the Polish and the Hungarian governments, with banners inscribed “This is not Budapest, this is Warsaw”.

PiS has a friendly relationship with Fidesz. The two parties think similarly about fundamental cultural issues, both consider the family and Christianity as the basis of the nation. Both believe in the so-called “Europe of nations” concept. According to this, sovereign nation-states are the basis of the EU, and there is no need for a United States of Europe either now, or in the future. They reject the multicultural model and are against a compulsory quota for the resettlement of refugees. Both Kaczyński and Orbán respect the US. Kaczyński considers it important to maintain a close political and military alliance with the US, justifying it by the threat of Putin’s Russia.

On national holidays many supporters of PiS participated in the so-called peace marches in Budapest organized by an NGO close to Fidesz. These visits helped to make the relationship of Fidesz and its Polish sibling closer. On March 15, 2014, in front of the National Museum, Viktor Orbán welcomed the rightist Polish opposition visiting in large numbers with the first lines of the Polish national anthem: „Poland has not yet died, So long as we still live. What the alien power has seized from us, We shall recapture with a sabre.” Orbán did not inadvertently quote these lines: he has also warned the EU against the impairment of sovereignty. Later some of the supporters of PiS stated: "We would like to have a Prime Minister similar to Viktor Orbán." Orbán’s independent politics seemed attractive in the eyes of people who were dissatisfied with the Civic Platform government. While the Polish Donald Tusk’s cabinet privatized, the Orbán government nationalized the private pension funds, stabilizing the public pension system. The Tusk government partly acknowledged the success of Orbán’s model when they introduced the overhead reduction. Due to the
two parties’ similar traits, many people were afraid of the time when PiS comes to power.

If the Polish government seeks to attain the Orbán model, it might encourage the reorganization of the Polish left. Let’s not forget that in the Polish society, unlike in the Hungarian, political self-organization has a long history. This may also provide an example for the Hungarian NGOs and the opposition. But international political processes may even strengthen the position of PiS. If the Ukrainian conflict escalates, and Putin’s influence continues to grow in Central Eastern Europe, the majority of the Polish society may unite behind PiS, given that their fear of the Russian imperial plans overrides their internal political conflicts. The European Union is occupied with the refugee crisis, and it did not even manage to effectively act against the Orbán government. Brussels could take even less actions against the Polish government, because Poland is a medium-sized country with 40 million citizens. The West has no interest in creating another Central European crisis, in addition to the conflicts in Ukraine and in the Middle East, so, for the time being, PiS has nothing to fear.