
POLAND IN RESPONSE TO EU: RULE OF LAW NOT UNDER THREAT

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Poland appeared to dismiss on Monday demands that it implement judiciary reforms deemed essential by the European Commission to uphold the rule of law, raising the danger that Warsaw could be stripped of its voting rights in the 28-member bloc.

The Commission had given Warsaw two months from December to implement measures to protect the powers of the Constitutional Court, after a series of new appointments and reforms appeared to weaken its independence.

The unprecedented monitoring procedure that the Commission launched against Poland more than a year ago could end in Warsaw losing its voting rights in the 28-nation European Union if all other EU leaders agree to that.

Tensions between Warsaw and Brussels have grown steadily since the eurosceptic Law and Justice (PiS) party swept to power in late 2015 and moved to change the way rulings are made at the top court and to exert more control over state prosecutors.

The Polish Foreign Ministry said in a statement on Monday that it had submitted a response to the Commission's concerns.

In a separate statement on its website, however, it said the changes Poland had implemented had been in line with European standards and had created "the right conditions for a normal functioning" of the Constitutional Court.

"Once again, Poland stressed that the existing political dispute around the principles of functioning of the Constitutional Court cannot be the basis for formulating the claim that there is a systemic threat to the rule of law," the ministry said.

"STIGMATIZING"

It also accused Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans of "stigmatizing" Warsaw. Timmermans had urged other EU members to support Brussels in its dispute with Poland.

"It is clear that the Commission cannot do it alone," Timmermans told Reuters in an interview on Saturday. "The member states and the Commission have to stick together. Everybody has to take their responsibility."

"(Timmermans's call) on other member states to create a common front with the European Commission against Poland are a glaring example of violation of these rules," the ministry said.

Warsaw said a dialogue between the Commission and a member country should be based on rules of respect for sovereignty, objectivity and national identity.

"We urge the Vice-President of the European Commission to stop such actions," the ministry said.

A spokeswoman for the Commission said it had received the Polish response and would study it. She also defended Brussels' motives and actions.

"The Commission is politically color blind when it comes to the rule of law," she said, adding that its concerns on Poland were shared by the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, the United Nations human rights body and other EU governments.

"When the rule of law in any member state is in question it is an issue for all member states," the spokeswoman said. "Such is the nature of being part of the European Union."

(Additional reporting by Andreas Rinke in Berlin and Alastair Macdonald in Brussels; Writing by Lidia Kelly; Editing by Gareth Jones)

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