
RISING NATIONALISM AND THE EU'S SPLIT WITH THE EAST

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What's wrong with the EU? Poland and Hungary, who only joined the bloc 13 years ago, are increasingly turning to nationalism. DW examines a phenomenon that has been smoldering for some time.

Once upon a time, the European Union was a desirable destination for former Eastern Bloc countries. Twenty-five years ago, to be exact. Today, the European alliance faces major difficulties with some of its most recent additions □ and vice versa. Poland and Hungary enjoy the EU as a money machine, but reject any kind of centralism emanating from Brussels. They also view Western Europe's multi-cultural aspects as a threat.

Instead, Warsaw and Budapest have begun to define new old values: the fatherland, the Christian faith, family. Similar political and social ideals have emerged in the Czech Republic and Slovakia: a counter-movement to the relatively open societies of Western Europe.

The idea is to grant the nation priority in a borderless globalized existence. That's how Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his Fidesz party have redefined the values for Hungary, attempting to simplify an increasingly complicated world that is also increasingly collectively regarded as threatening. Poland's Jaroslaw Kaczynski, leader of the ruling PiS party, is headed in the same direction. Both men are autocratic rulers who make no bones about their reservations toward Western models of society. Orban has christened his Hungary an "illiberal state" and Kaczynski calls his reforms "dobra zmiana," a "good change."

The idea of Europe, it would seem, is currently being redefined in the East.

Neoliberalism follows Socialism

As a result, there has been a clear shift to the right on the EU's easternmost border □ and it has little to do with economic problems. Assumptions that a crisis-ridden economy and high unemployment fosters nationalist attitudes are proven wrong by the example of the Czech Republic. Economic growth of almost 5 percent and a spectacularly low unemployment rate of 3 percent □ the lowest in the EU □ hasn't kept the country from shifting to the right under Prime Minister Andrej Babis.

Poland has seen a similar development. In 1990, the average Polish citizen earned one-twelfth of what an average German citizen earned. By 2016, that figure had improved to one-third. All the

same, nationalism is on the rise.

One reason is that none of the eastern transformation states had a Social Democratic era after 1990, explained leading Polish political scientist Piotr Buras. Nearly unchecked, neoliberalism hit a society atomized by Communism, he said, adding that since there was no welfare state, and the unions were weak, capitalism moved in uncushioned. That has left scars, including a minority complex that is still noticeable to this day.

People in Poland still view themselves through the eyes of the West: "Slightly poor, slightly backward and not as efficient," according to Polish writer Ziemowit Szczerek.

Nationalistic tendency

His first official foreign visit took Poland's new Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki not to Brussels, but to Budapest. That is a clear political statement. Hungary is more important to Poland than the EU. Afterwards, he visited his colleague in Slovakia. Few demand that the country turn its back on Brussels, but with regard to domestic European ties, Warsaw has been behaving like a stranger within the EU family. Many people feel the EU is "robbing them of their dignity," said Polish writer Inga Iwasz, adding that all the West has to offer are "limitations, problems and moral relativism."

Social issues the West agrees on including equality, secularization and minority rights never made it to Poland, she said.

Instead, the Polish people are busy navel-gazing in times of the right-wing populist PiS. This tendency toward nationalism is particularly evident as Poland celebrates the 100th anniversary of its National Independence this year. The nation is the measure of all things, and Warsaw refuses to tolerate instructions from Brussels or Berlin. The judiciary □ according to PiS logic □ must bow to the "people's wishes." This recent phenomenon of the shift to the political right is also due to the Polish people's feeling that throughout history, they were almost always victims. The answer to that is patriotism and nationalism.

Uncertain identity

The situation in Hungary is similar. Prime Minister Orbán systematically positions supporters in the judiciary.

It was wrong to think that in the wake of the political changes in the 1990s, Hungary would follow the Western ideals of a democratic constitution, a market economy and multiculturalism, said Michael Ignatieff, President of the Budapest-based Central European University (CEU).

Orbán recently visited the German conservative CSU's party conference to promote his anti-refugee policies

Co-founded and financed largely by Hungarian-American investor George Soros, the renowned university is a thorn in Orbán's side. As the German news magazine Spiegel wrote in December 2017, "the international elite that studies there are the ones the Hungarians mistrust." Soros, the magazine wrote, is a "figure symbolic of the financial capitalism that right-wing populists claim is a

threat to traditions."

Hungary is a young nation that is still working on its identity after emerging from the Habsburg Dual Monarchy and first achieving statehood in 1920. To many Hungarians, Orban's return to "Hungarian values" suggests security, a world without "foreigners, health food hipsters and Brussels officials," wrote Spiegel.

Twenty-five years ago, most leading Europeans had no idea what would happen on the EU's eastern fringes. They were confident that democratic standards and a free market economy, with or without a social component, would be adopted within a matter of years.

German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf disagreed back then, saying it takes 60 years to create a democratic society. Of the EU's more recent members, it appears Poland and Hungary are confirming the prediction that the path to European harmonization is long .

Kaynak/Source: