



Grassroots for Europe Round Table #42

Tuesday January 8th, 2024

Poland and Hungary: Democracy vs. Autocracy in Central Europe and beyond

With Prof. Danuta Hübner MEP, Wojciech Przybylski, Dr Edit Inotai, Szabolcs Panyi and Dr Peter Heil; Magdalena Williams [chair].



Summary Report

Background and aims. This first Grassroots for Europe Round Table of 2024 continued our series in which we examine different national European experiences and perspectives on contemporary challenges to democracy and developments in the EU and the UK. Following views from Germany and Spain, we were honoured to welcome a panel of leading political and media experts from Central Europe in the EU member states of Poland and Hungary, which have recently been in the news for very different reasons.

Our chair **Magdalena Williams** is a former Hungarian child refugee. Born in Budapest, she was eight when the revolution broke out and her family fled to Austria and then via Germany, to Britain; today she has family ties with both Poland and Hungary. Introducing the session, she referred to centuries-old traditions of fraternity between Poles and Hungarians whose survival has been evidenced through notable acts of solidarity in recent times, but are now sadly under strain due to the autocratic regression of Hungary's current

government.

Professor Danuta Hübner MEP is a Polish politician, diplomat and economist, since 1971 a professor at the Warsaw School of Economics and Member of the European Parliament. She has served as a government minister, as European Commissioner for Regional Policy (2004-9) and since 2009 in the European Parliament, where her roles have included the chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs.

Professor Hübner opened her remarks with a reassurance that the majority of members of the European Parliament have not changed their minds about the nonsense of Brexit and with an invitation for us to continue sharing our views and news with them.

The worldwide struggle between authoritarian and democratic forces generates increasing polarisation which is reflected within the European Union. However, although its principles of open and pluralistic society are under threat from certain states, the EU has so far been relatively resilient. The major risk to modern democracy is a systematic and deliberate attack on institutions and public discourse. Fortunately, Poland did not succumb to the total break up of liberal democracy, whereas Hungary has fallen victim to full-blooded authoritarianism. In Poland the last eight years saw a damaging assault on the way political parties function, leading to a deep polarisation of political forces and of society.

The destruction of democracy in Poland began with the classic assault on the judiciary and take-over of the media with laws being passed at night without public consultation, signed the following morning by the president and sent to the corrupted Constitutional Tribunal. However, there was still an ombudsman and Poland has local governments which united in defence of democracy, facilitating a strong rise in the role of civil society. Women with black umbrellas and young climate activists took to the streets and the democracy network which evolved through solidarity of different groups was the harbinger of a new practice of democracy. As Jacques Derrida said, democracy makes sense when it serves to defend other values, and this is the experience in Poland. When Ukrainians fled to the Polish border, there was a fully-fledged, organised civil movement ready to respond.

Professor Hübner sees grounds for optimism in the fact that civil society is now well organised and able to play a creative role in national politics and the reconstruction of democracy. Mass demonstrations in June and early October saw people of different views and ideologies standing united for democracy. But, before the October 2023 elections, it was not clear whether the majority shared fundamental values such as human rights and

democracy, even though democracy is a very broad space and able to accommodate a wide range of views. The election campaign succeeded in stimulating engagement and participation by using Mr. Tusk as a living example of democratic action to ensure basic values. Polish people have renewed hope in the possibility of terminating authoritarian regimes through elections. There is a clear message that Poland is back as a democratic player within Europe.

However, it is clear that winning elections is not enough. The political reality is that Poland faces many challenging issues. PiS (Kaczynski's Law and Justice Party) loyalists still occupy considerable space and can use both soft and hard vetoes. The Constitutional Tribunal of Poland, which has never recognised the primacy of EU law, is still in place. Furthermore, there are two parallel justice systems starting with the Supreme Court. One of the main concerns is how to systematically rebuild democracy and dismantle the legacy of the previous autocratic forces, how to right the damage done to the justice system, the rule of law, public media, and human rights. Poland wants to participate in laying the foundations of European reforms and geostrategic enlargement, with Warsaw playing a strong role in strengthening the EU.

Poland's democratic recovery faces two important sets of elections this year – locals in April and European in June. The question arises whether democratisation will be blocked by President Andrzej Duda, (closely aligned to PiS), and by those public institutions loyal to the former regime. Another aspect is the speed of reconstruction of institutions and the inclusion of citizens in rebuilding democracy through a deliberative process. People have expectations and dreams, but how long will they wait? Also in this context is the major issue of non-governmental organisations because PiS passed acts which bypass and exclude public consultation. In effect, PiS created its own alternative world of NGOs, the so-called Institutes, in order to legitimise its policies. A democratic Poland must reject this political depravity and restore dignity to civil society. The good news is that there is unprecedented public interest in the proceedings of Parliament and fresh opportunity for active participation in politics. The October 15 elections demonstrated the political strength and unprecedented mobilisation of civil society with, for example, pizza outlets bringing food to those queuing to vote.

It is imperative to activate this participatory democracy, offering a mechanism for dialogue which can influence future decisions. There is continuing involvement in the Conference on the Future of Europe with a growing civic awareness of the common public interest and public good at a European level. According to a recent survey, young people see

democracy as a way of living and functioning together in a society which guarantees them freedom of speech and life choices. For young people, politics is a matter of a shared common network of response. They are aware that engagement is the way to counter authoritarian politics and restore democracy. In recent years civil society has played a major role – signing petitions, singing the Polish and European anthems in the streets and every Sunday listening in silence to the preamble to the Constitution. At a time of rising populism across Europe, the huge potential of civil society which helped to win the election in Poland must be exploited. If the right wins the European elections, they will be able to block reforms and the geostrategic enlargement that it is hoped will be finalised by the end of the decade. Some political groups within the European Parliament have a tendency to reach out to far-right parties in the hope of taming them. But alliances with non-democratic parties can undermine the rule of law and adversely affect the system of checks and balances.

Evidence suggests that there are trends in people's attitudes which work in favour of democracy. There is a recognition that aspirations can only be achieved if we are all on the path to democracy, if we talk about democracy if we act in a democratic way.

There is still much to be done in Poland. We need democracy across our world. We must do everything we can to help neighbours who have to fight for their democracy. I hope one day Hungary will follow. Slovak democrats tell us that if they had had their elections after Poland's, they would also have won. I hope that Hungary too will be an example of democracy, recovered through elections, even though that may be a rare thing.

Q: We note that new EU recommendations for treaty change are in preparation to accommodate enlargement to include Ukraine, Moldova and others. One of the problems, as we all know, is the veto system - unanimity, as opposed to qualified majority voting. What chance do you think there is that the EU will adopt fairly quickly the changes proposed by Guy Verhofstadt and others?

Prof Danuta Hübner: Yes. Political leaders have been using since 2009, I think since the Lisbon Treaty, this argument that citizens do not want treaty change, and the stories such as the Irish having to vote twice, have been used in opposing any treaty changes. But then during the Conference on the Future of Europe, citizens very clearly said that if there is a need to have a treaty change, to improve Europe and provide what European citizens need, then it's a normal thing to change the treaty. So this argument is gone. So the

Parliament started to work towards the proposal for treaty change practically the day after the Conference finished. And we voted also in the European Parliament on the proposal, it was very difficult because on many issues, the political groups were divided; many member states were also not yet ready to support the proposals of the Parliament. But on the issue that you raised, which is the question of unanimity, you will be surprised that among Member States, there are those who understand the importance of getting rid of unanimity for most of the issues where it is currently required, and especially in foreign policy. We have sent the documents to the Council informing them that we would like to see the Convention started to launch the treaty change, but among the majority of members we don't yet see an appetite for working on this now. This is an important issue in the context of the enlargement: we believe that for our enlargement, we need this change to the Nice Treaty on the voting system, among other things. It's nothing strange that an enlargement would require changes that would be better done through treaty change, especially given that if you compare the world and Europe in 2009 when the Lisbon Treaty entered into effect, with the world and Europe in 2024, it's strange that we can still work and function on the basis of the old treaty, and the pandemic showed that we needed to stretch the treaty, we had to change a lot of things in the legal framework of the European Union, but we managed, we didn't have to resort to treaty change at that point. But now I personally believe that to be on the safe side with the possibility of bringing in new member states, finalising the bulk of the Western Balkan enlargement and having Ukraine and Moldova, it will be much better if we introduce the changes needed not only to accommodate the required institutional changes, but also in policies regarding the budget. So it would be safer if we made the treaty change. So let's hope that Council just feels that we should wait for the elections and after the elections we can proceed. The new Council can make a decision on how we proceed, whether they want to have the Convention or whether they want to have the group of wise men and women, but I hope that there will be an opening for the treaty change. I can openly say that the Donald Tusk was not until now in favour of pushing towards treaty change because we didn't yet know where we would be standing in Poland today. Bringing the European issue immediately into the whole difficult situation in post-election Poland, was probably not the best idea and could also have impacted negatively on deliberations about Polish positions regarding European integration. So I think it's a better solution for us that we finalise the recovery of democracy in Poland, and then we do this step by step and we will support the necessary changes in the European Union. My feeling that this is the way to the leadership in Poland intends to

proceed.

Q: There has been a recent suggestion that Biden is now using Poland in place of the UK as the preferred channel for messages from the US to Europe. Is that a move by Biden to support and reinforce Tusk, do you think it is true and could you comment?

Prof Danuta Hübner: : I have no idea whether it's true or not, but I know that the European Union's relationship with the US, as you know, has recovered after these dysfunctional relations with President Trump, and Poland has just recovered its democracy and created a strong foundation also for good relations with the US which can see a transatlantic partner in Poland; also in the context of Ukraine: even the old government, the non-democratic Polish government had in the context of Ukraine to be a partner for the US too, because the US has been playing a fundamental role in supporting Ukraine in all vital respects. And that was just a normal thing. But now, for us, I think Poland is also a new partner that is committed to the same set of values; you might remember that Joe Biden after his election organised a summit on democracy. So for him, democracy is a vital US concern. And now, it is the same for Poland as well. It's extremely important. Poland has always been a close partner for the US, but I was always saying to colleagues in Warsaw that we are important for the US as a partner in so far as we have a strong position in the European Union, as we support the European Union; if we are on the margin of the European Union, the previous government, the previous parliament, the previous majority in Poland were actually very clearly an anti-European political force on the European continent. For Americans, that did not make Poland any kind of useful conduit between the US and the European Union. So I trust that now we are going to play a much more important and relevant role, also in trying to influence forces in the European Union now, for example, in support for Ukraine. But I don't think that UK will ever lose its role as a transatlantic link. I was very often unhappy when I realised that it was the British narrative shaping the attitude of the American government or Congress, or Americans in general towards Europe, because the British attitude was never really I think, one of love. What Americans heard from the Brits about Europe was mostly about criticising Europe. But I am still somebody who dreams of a tripartite relationship, America, UK and European Union working on many things together, on legislation, on standard-setting, and we have a major common enemy, or difficult partner, or rival, whatever you like to call it, which is China. So we have to stick together, especially now for the business community, to

improve growth and investment; it's better that businesses across the Atlantic and the Channel work to the same set of standards, especially on AI and high tech in general. So I hope Poland will be a good partner for the US. But I always think that our place, our home is the EU, and we are part of the EU. And even as a partner for US, we will be a partner speaking from within the EU.

Dr Edit Inotai, Hungarian journalist for a long time at the leading daily newspaper *Népszabadság* and fellow at the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Development. She is now the Hungary correspondent for ARD-TV (Germany).

The way democracy was restored in Poland last year is enviable because it is unlikely to happen in Hungary any time soon. After 13 years of the Orban government Hungary has sunk to an extremely low level of genuine democracy, which makes one wonder how the situation can improve, and whether future Polish-Hungarian relations will play a part in any improvement.

In the elections of 3 April 2022, the Hungarian opposition parties had tried the successful Polish strategy (October 2023) of combining behind a single candidate, but had failed quite markedly, with Orban gaining a very big victory again.

These contrasting outcomes can be explained by certain **fundamental differences between the two countries**.

*The **first** difference is the **size** of the countries. Unlike the very centralised Hungary, which can be run easily from Budapest, Poland was just too big to be centralised and is more regionalised, allowing remnants of democracy to survive around the country.

* The **second** main difference is the **media**. Journalists like Edit understand how the Orban government captured the media, creating through state advertising a closed media with very harsh propaganda which shaped the mentality of Hungarian citizens. The Polish media had been turned into state media to some extent, but some strong independent media outlets remained.

- A **third fundamental** difference was Polish **civil society engagement**, especially the women who took to the streets. Very few Hungarians are willing to demonstrate, especially not the middle or the older generations. The demonstrations for education reform in 2023 by teachers and young people were exceptional, but they never really became mass protests and soon died out. This impression that Hungarians have given up hope of restoring

democratic institutions is a huge problem for Europe. The lack of internal civil and democratic resistance allows Hungary to easily and openly export illiberal and undemocratic recipes, not just to the Western Balkans but to the whole of Europe. Orbán is telling everyone quite blatantly how to create an authoritarian state, and in doing so is helping his political allies in other countries, such as Serbia, Slovenia, and Slovakia and further afield.

Wojciech Przybylski is Editor-in-Chief of *Visegrad Insight* and President of the Res Publica Foundation. Wojciech concentrated on how the present situation in Poland and Hungary will affect the future of Europe and Visegrad, the cultural and political alliance re-started in 1991 between Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia which shaped Central European perspectives. Opinion polls reflect a strong demand for co-operation which will further strengthen Europe and bilateral relations between Hungarian and Polish societies. This demand is not shared by governments, however, as structural, political and strategic differences now hinder further rapprochement.

In addition to the societal demand for pan-European co-operation, there is the pan-European trend for adjacent societies to compare themselves to each other as a result of growing regional networks and collaboration across Europe. Over the last year, Central Eastern European media have increasingly been comparing states of national democratic progress or regress. Such comparisons may involve elements of nationalism or even isolationism, but the Visegrad declaration of 1991 contained the strongest pro-European and pro-Western declarations by societies in that part of Europe. The declaration expresses hope, good neighbourly relations, the overcoming of nationalism, respect for minorities and protection of nature and the climate. This common geo-strategic outlook was confirmed by successfully co-ordinating the withdrawal of the Red Army. That in turn led to a shared ambition to join NATO and the EU. The shared beliefs of Visegrad did not materialise immediately, but rather nurtured a coming together of nations with a difficult past and a desire to overcome national differences.

Visegrad has often been condemned as redundant or useless, but it remains functional because of the EU. The regionally-co-ordinated nature of EU decision-making operating at different levels is a good model for the Visegrad countries, and resuscitated them in 2008 when they mobilised with the EU against the energy crisis initiated by Russia. That in turn gave impetus to the Eastern Partnership Initiative for future enlargement of the EU. That impetus lasted even after Orbán saw the Visegrad as an opportunity for an ostracised

Hungary to exist within Europe. He began shifting the emphasis by his stress on migration in 2000, so that by 2014-2015 he was branded as anti-EU even though other EU countries were revising their position on migration. Orbán gained more leverage once Poland started following his playbook for dismantling domestic democracy. Since the Polish election last year, however, there is far less appetite for co-operation with Orbán. Ostracism, especially by Poland, may well be the future for Hungarians, notwithstanding of Visegrad's personal, emotional and symbolic significance.

Despite some hopeful signs in opinion polls and civil society, diverging political strategies are erasing shared cultural memories. Polish and Hungarian cultures have been shaped by anti-imperialism and the fight for national independence, values which Orbán is no longer prioritising. Poles scratch their heads at Orbán's huge election wins and wonder whether the two countries have ever been 'Brothers in Arms.' Hungarians in their turn wonder why Poles are not such good friends anymore. Overcoming this fundamental cultural disconnect and restoring the healthy co-operation of the Visegrad Declaration will require the demise of Orbán's government.

Szabolcs Panyi

The Hungarian investigative and anti-corruption journalist and editor ([Direkt36](#), [vSquare](#)) **Szabolcs Panyi** was equally pessimistic about Hungary's ability to emulate the Polish opposition's electoral success of October 2023, adding a few more distinctions between the two countries.

A country's size usually translates into the **size of the media market**. The small scale of Hungary's media market facilitated Orbán's fairly quick take-over of more than half of the media industry, whereas the Polish government's attempts to copy some of Orbán's methods failed to achieve the Hungarian scale because of greater media variety.

Historically, Hungarian attitudes have more **similarity with Russian resentment** about losing the grandeur of their previous empire. Parts of Hungarian society feel victims of history, robbed of a national future by external powers. So Western Europe and the USA can be presented as enemies (or at least not as friends) who will not help Hungary get its just deserts.

This in turn translates into reduced **levels of civil activity**. Polish culture is more active, there are healthy NGOs with a broad nationwide network of contacts which go beyond Warsaw. The average Hungarian citizen is not part of a civic association, and religion plays no civic role: the Catholic Church, for example, is a political tool without influence.

It is easier to politically influence an atomised society, to play with its fears and resentment. Hence Orbán regularly creates a new bogeyman, portraying himself as sole leader and defender against migrants, a globalist elite, and more recently against Brussels bureaucrats and the USA, culminating in outright anti-Western propaganda.

Orbán's elaborate strategy to gradually and steadily take over the media has succeeded to the extent that a story about corruption or Russian influence will not reach more than a couple of million people. Most electors, especially those working for Orbán, do **not consume real news**, they stick to their old newspaper or broadcast media that Orbán took over in the 2010s. Facebook's now huge readership has also been taken over by government-sponsored adverts, which are cheaper than in newspapers or broadcast media. Millions of Euros a year are spent on this kind of propaganda, either by government or government proxies.

So despite Orbán's minority support, he has created an essentially **passive society** which is just **not interested in civil society**, and whose attention span is growing shorter.

Corruption and other political scandals are now so regular and widespread that investigative journalists struggle to catch society's imagination or to stir interest.

Dr Peter Heil

Dr Peter Heil is International Secretary of the largest Hungarian opposition party, the Democratic Coalition (DK), a policy adviser to the European Parliament, and previously a long-serving senior official in the Hungarian government. He added comments on

- Similarities and differences between Poland and Hungary
- Hope versus a long, dark future under the present Hungarian government
- EU - responsibilities, possibilities and role.

Similarities and differences between Poland and Hungary

In terms of Hungary and Poland, there are significant links between Fidesz and PiS. Before PiS came to power in Poland, Hungarian government officials organised formal sessions in Brussels to train Polish embassy staff on how to resist the EU. Historically there is a long list of shared anti-democratic measures adopted by both Polish and Hungarian governments. Now, with the first pro-democratic steps being taken by Donald Tusk's government, there is much interest and positive expectation from the Hungarian opposition. Two immediate crises face Polish politics – on the one hand, there is control of public media and on the other the ability of the PiS-aligned President Duda to subvert the

budget of the new government. Clearly, greater obstacles exist in Hungary where there is not the remotest possibility of the opposition achieving the supermajority required to change laws. Nevertheless, the Hungarian opposition is very attentive to what is being done in Poland. Going forward, Poland will have a very significant role to play both within the EU and on the international stage when it comes to political discussion of Article 7 (the provision in EU treaty law for a member state to be deprived of its voting rights). Although it is well known that Hungary is not in line with EU founding values, the discussion has been ongoing for five years without significant progress. The position taken on this in the European Council by Donald Tusk's government will be decisive, not just for Hungary but for the European Union as a whole.

Hope versus a long, dark future

Is there hope, or not? Peter thinks the question is irrelevant: there is a task. The Hungarian opposition has in any case definitely not resigned itself to hopelessness. There is no alternative to the task of trying to achieve change through peaceful, political means. Through serious, practical work results are being achieved which will find expression in political programmes. Speaking on behalf of the Democratic Coalition, they have resources and are doing an incredible amount of legwork, going out to the country meeting voters and getting a positive response. As a member of the opposition team at the last elections, Peter has mixed feelings and memories. There was a genuine sense of responsibility and cooperation across all seven opposition parties with a clear determination to concentrate on what we have in common. At the Primary Election to find a candidate to oppose Viktor Orban, the opposition had a potentially winning lead in the opinion polls. With hindsight, they clearly chose the wrong candidate and the wrong approach. Sections of the opposition espoused a traditional approach, believing that an "Orban-lite" candidate – someone without the corruption and with fewer undemocratic elements – would attract voters. In the event, this was not the case and there are two clear lessons to be learnt. Firstly, the opposition candidate must be someone completely and credibly different from Orban. Secondly, there must be an end to internal bickering over rights and responsibilities. These internal disputes occupied too much of the public space and even when faced with questions from journalists, were more newsworthy and consumed more media time than the opposition's political programme.

EU – responsibilities, possibilities and role

The Hungarian opposition accepts that the European Union cannot change the Hungarian government nor can it get rid of Orbán. But the EU does have responsibilities and has tools at its disposal. How these tools are used will be critically important, if not decisive. Having worked with European funds as a commissioner for regional policy, he is acutely aware that these funds have been misused by Orbán to cultivate and support the present regime. This makes the European Union partly responsible for the present state of Hungary. Secondly, without going into details here, the EU must use the tools at its disposal. As a very proud member of, and advisor to the European Parliament, Peter is only too aware that after three major reports and numerous smaller ones, the EU knows exactly what it needs to do to deal with Orbán. Unfortunately, although the European Commission has done a lot over the last couple of years to change Hungary, it is not enough. The Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation process was conceived in far too narrow an area. Last May's decision to free approximately 10bn euros of cohesion policy money in return for judicial reform in Hungary went through the European Parliament prematurely and without consultation. However, the EU will soon have a new Commission with very powerful means to be proactive. The Council and indeed the entire political culture of the EU is based far too much on consensus and a very high level of respect for states as sovereign nations. This is not compatible with the EU's aspirations to be a decisive actor in defence of its interests on the world stage. Qualified majority voting is one of the main problems but changing this would involve the very difficult task of changing the Treaty. A possible solution could be the creation of multi-speed integration, with the EU restructured into different groups of countries pursuing varying levels of integration. However, this would create a fundamentally different EU, one which would inevitably be weaker on the world stage. So, all three EU institutions, all heads of state and government, MEPs and Commissions, present and future need to recognise that there needs to be a fundamental change following the direction indicated by the Conference on the Future of Europe. The Council will have to act on the reports to prevent Viktor Orbán from adversely affecting the required level and quality of reform. Unfortunately, there is a Catch-22 situation in that to move away from unanimity, unanimity is required. Viktor Orbán needs to save his regime and sees the EU as an enemy. The EU must use the tools it has, for, as history shows, appeasement leads to failure. Members of the Hungarian opposition see themselves as European citizens fighting, not just for Hungary, but for the European Union as a whole.

Q: If the UK government became politically centrist rather than right-wing, who in the EU would be our allies, who would vote to let us back in and who would vote to keep us out? Who would be our natural allies, say among Poland and Hungary, given the two divergent ways you've gone?

Wojciech Przybyski: Very briefly from the Polish side, it doesn't matter. Britain overall, is our strategic partner, primarily in terms of our security and Europe, of European security architecture. Secondly, and importantly, within the European Union, whatever government the UK would have, the UK being part of the EU would be to the Polish benefit and central European benefit, because it would allow Polish Government to manoeuvre between the two dominant governments in the EU, judging by their number of votes, which is France and Germany. So these are the very concrete, you know, non-partisan reasons for overall support for any UK government that would want to be more integrated in the EU. However the size and disruptive potential of the UK, on the other hand, would not necessarily make it an easy partner for Poland. So I wouldn't necessarily see a political ideological alignment there, simply because the potential of the country is different, and it's hard to build a strong relationship or common initiative. If, there are differences, this is relative to the context of a very basic fundamental alliance that we already have, on the question of security with Ukraine and the the initiative to repel the Russian invasion.

Edit Inotai: From the Hungarian point of view, I think it's very similar to what Wojciech said about Poland: the Hungarian government would probably support any kind of British government if it wanted to re-enter the European Union, although it's not on the agenda now. But it's interesting that it was actually Viktor Orban who put an advert in a British tabloid, before the Brexit vote, urging British people to stay inside the EU. I don't know if that made a difference, for the better or possibly even for the worse. But there is this strategic interest, I think, for Central European countries, which are often caught between the French and the German governments and their different notions of the future of Europe. And Britain could be a natural ally. And of course for Viktor Orban, Britain is a country, which is not entirely interested in the deepening of the European Union. Nor indeed probably in joining the euro. So in that sense, Hungary would support the UK. Definitely.

Q: I would be interested in Professor Hübner's view on the prospects for success of the

letter that's been sent today by a Finnish MEP on behalf of 120 MEPs, calling on the Commission to launch the Article 7 procedure to strip Hungary of its voting rights.

Prof Danuta Hübner: Firstly can I quickly make one remark on the question, if the UK decides to come back to European Union, who will support or will not? You must remember that there was nobody supporting Brexit in the European Union. Of course at that time there were fears of a domino effect that might follow. Nothing happened, of course, but I think that in European Parliament, while we respected the will of the UK people, if it had been up to us, that would have been no Brexit. But what I would like to say is if there was a question of rejoining, it will have to be the normal accession process via Article 49. So UK would have to apply, and then go through the whole procedure. And most likely, it will be difficult, I think, for UK to get the same derogations. I don't know about the Euro, but there were many other things, because as you know, UK was also the champion of derogation and special treatment. And so it might not be that easy, I can't imagine that anybody would be against, but unfortunately, you might have heard also that the Labour Party is saying that there will be no new referendum, no accession, no single market, no Customs Union. So it looks like at least before the elections, the worry is that the public, in spite of the opinion polls favourable to rejoin, would probably not be very prepared for any commitment to future action. But having said that, I keep my fingers crossed, and you never know. There can always be surprises. But the process and conditions set out in Article 49 will have to be taken seriously by the UK.

I didn't know about the MEPs' letter you mention. I am not sure that the Parliament was unhappy with the approval of the request for the 10 billion for Hungary. But in general, I think there might be also now an additional factor, which is the prospect of the Council presidency being held by Hungary. And there are also many colleagues across the political groups who are very unhappy about this. Because there was a moment a year ago when there were ideas floating around about how to avoid or manage Hungary's presidency of the European Union. We'll see. There might be now an openness to do something that would surprise Mr. Orban in a negative sense, so that we could start moving forward, but that is strictly just speculation. I have no idea, so you will have to wait probably too, until the detail is addressed and we start the discussion on this. But certainly Hungary has not been forgotten. And in the context of the victory of democracy in Poland, I think there might be additional support in the European Parliament to put pressure on Mr. Orban regarding

the rule of law in Hungary before he takes over the presidency. That is speculation, but one can say that Mr Orbán has not become a person that Parliament just smiles upon.

List of participants

Chair

Magdalena Williams (EM-UK, GfE, Kent & Surrey Bylines)

Panellists

Dr Peter Heil

Prof. Danuta Hübner MEP

Edit Inotai (ARD TV)

Szabolcs Panyi

Wojciech Przybylski (Visegrad Insights)

Trevor Andrews (Leeds for Europe)

Valerie Chaplin (Bremain In Spain)

Luke Cooper (Another Europe is Possible)

Richard Corbett (EM-UK)

John Fisher (Seahaven Staying In)

John Gaskell (Chair, GfE)

Fiona Godfrey (British in Europe)

Jane Golding (British in Europe)

Jason Gold (IPDV West Balkans)

Mark English (EM-UK)

Chris Hammond (EM-UK East Kent)

Nick Harvey (CEO, EMUK)

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Sharon Leclercq-Spooner (Pro Europa)

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Ginny Smith (Sussex Bylines)

Valeria Toth (Journalist)

R A Watt (Glasgow Loves EU)

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Colin Gordon (GfE Vice chair)

Helen Grogan (GfE/EM-UK)

Jonathan Harris (EM East Kent)

Dr Monica Horten (Independent policy advisor)

Caroline Kuipers (Open Britain Reading)

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