

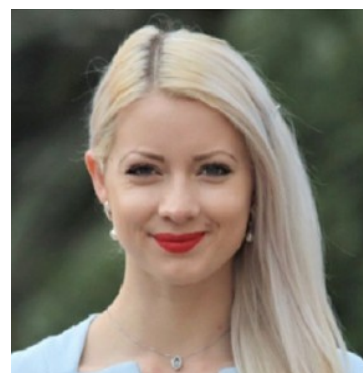
Grassroots for Europe Round Table #56, June 3rd 2025



Democracy updates from Poland and Hungary – setback and crackdown

Speakers: Wojciech Przybylski [[Visegrad Insight](#)], Dr András Kádár [[Hungarian Helsinki Committee](#)]

Chair: Cecilia Jastrzemska [[UK-EU Stronger Together Network](#)]



Summary Report

We were delighted to welcome back a former contributor, Dr Wojciech Przybylski, Editor in Chief of Visegrad Insight and President of the Res Publica Foundation, the leading current affairs observatory and think tank for central Europe. Poland elected a new President on June 1st, and we discussed the (surprise) outcome, while Poland also neared the end of its term in the presidency of the EU, one of the most turbulent geopolitical periods in Europe since WW2.

Meanwhile Hungary, where next year's elections look increasingly contestable, has been moving to enforce laws designed to paralyse or cripple the civil society human rights organisations which provide one of the last restraints on Orbán's illiberal autocracy. We had an update on the situation from the Director of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Dr András Kádár, who previously briefed us in 2022.

This session was originally announced under the title “The Polish fulcrum”.

1. Poland's election: a setback for democracy? - Wojciech Przybylski

Wojciech Przybylski is editor in chief of 'Visegrad Insight,' a leading Central European platform for debate and analysis. He is also President of 'Respublica,' an independent, non-partisan thinktank based in Warsaw. He is co-author of 'Understanding Central Europe' (Routledge 2017) and appears regularly in media throughout Europe. Wojciech was a panellist in our [Round Table #42 "Poland and Hungary: Democracy vs. Autocracy in Central Europe and beyond"](#) (January 2024) and his colleague Magda Jakubowska spoke in our RT 46 (June, 2024) "After the election, before the election: taking stock" [report forthcoming]

What does the 2025 Presidential election mean for Poland and the wider world?

Karol Nawrocki's victory in the Polish Presidential election has been welcomed by MAGA and Orbán circles of all kinds, and by far-right groups across Europe and in the USA. After so many failures (e.g., George Simion's failure in Romania) this was to be expected. The liberals lost the election primarily because of the public's negative perception of the Polish coalition government and its 'liberal' candidate Rafal Trzaskowski. Given the unfavourable opinion polls about the government's performance Trzaskowski performed quite well, but his fiercely negative campaigning discouraged the centrist voters he needed to win over from supporting an opponent whom the 'Sunday Times' described as a hooligan and a pimp.

Nawrocki's presidency will probably not be the easiest either for the ruling coalition or the parliamentary opposition. After the highest ever turnout in a Presidential election, Poland is more polarised than ever. Such polarisation will exacerbate structural and security difficulties, firstly in the context of war in Europe and Russian disinformation. And secondly, such domestic divisions will also reduce the possibility of further reform and the government's ability to take strategic decisions about key positions in the military, central bank, judiciary and diplomacy.

Poland is entering yet another period of cohabitation in which Parliament and President are mutually hostile. Poland is a parliamentary republic insofar as the Parliament decides the executive powers of the Prime Minister, and the President theoretically cannot defy the will of Parliament. However, the President is able to veto and freeze legal and political initiatives of the parliamentary majority: overturning such initiatives would require a parliamentary majority of over 60%. Furthermore, the President can also send any new legislation to the Constitutional Tribunal, which may also veto or freeze legislative proposals. This ability to veto and freeze has led many observers and political scientists to regard Poland as a semi-Presidential republic.

It is difficult to tell what kind of politics Nawrocki will espouse. Most commentators expect him to situate himself somewhere between PIS and the sometimes extreme right Confederation, whose votes, together with those of Mr Braun (a bigot, an anti-semitic and anti-Ukrainian, possibly a criminal, depending on the outcome of a potential pending prosecution) helped Nawrocki across the line to win the election.

The election outcome leaves the liberal camp in a bad situation. Like most Poles, they are emotionally exhausted after such a polarised campaign. The situation is further aggravated by the fear that they might lose power in 2027. So a number of their unpopular decisions on the reformist agenda might be postponed. The government is also likely to start showering voters with lots of benefits without much regard for fiscal discipline or restraint. This could spell trouble for Polish public finances, if not for the economy, because Poland

is the leading spender on defence, and much of that defence spending goes abroad. It is quite possible that voters may see Nawrocki as ineffective, or come to dislike him so intensely as to produce a better result for liberals in the 2027 elections than is currently expected. In a different scenario, however, Nawrocki, who is ideologically positioned to be able to build bridges with Trump, might turn this to pragmatic value by persuading the US administration to provide greater support for the war effort in Ukraine and the defence of Europe. Promises of such support were indeed made at the CPAC before the Polish presidential election by Trump's Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem. If Nawrocki succeeded in winning the US over, he could then become an electoral asset.

Q and A

Q: What is your assessment of Poland's Presidency of the Council of the EU? Do you feel like it's achieved its aims? I've seen analyses that have said that even as part of a joint presidency, Poland has delivered on some of its key initiatives, facilitating dialogue: a security-centric agenda, enhancing joint procurement for European security and defence, reaffirming commitments to transatlantic has been widely approved of.

Wojciech Przybylski: Maybe from a UK perspective this Polish presidency reminds people of significant presidencies of the past. It sounds like an exciting time, but in reality it is a largely bureaucratic function and not such a big event. We're service providers to the rest of the EU in a process of coordinating policies. Poland has been quite well regarded in terms of its performance so far by the partners. There has been no complaint. Anything that Poland has been doing so far has been evaluated in the positive light. Anything we have not delivered is excused because we are the first of the current trio of presidencies, with after us Denmark and finally Cyprus. We're going to blame all the all the things we didn't deliver on Cyprus, obviously. So we're kind of in a good spot. Denmark is going to deliver a lot of the things that we hoped probably to deliver, like progress on health legislation in the EU. Poland had high hopes and ambitions for it, but we do not have as high stakes in the game as Denmark. So I think the Danish will deliver, simply because of the industry issues at stake in Denmark. The mood in Poland is not to end this presidency with big bangs or celebration, also because of the Presidential election. Donald Tusk doesn't want to give the impression of hubris, he wants people to be reconsidering. Probably he too needs to reconsider what just happened, and why and how, and what is the way forward. So we'll do our job. This is not as festive for us as the previous presidency, when it was celebrated as the first of its kind, it's more about doing our job and getting it done.

Q: Do you see Sikorski as a future leadership player?

Wojciech Przybylski : Yes, absolutely. Mr. Sikorski is well positioned currently for potential future presidency bid in 2030 as well as the. Rising and unfulfilled potential within the party as a especially in the international scene, but I think also importantly in the domestic theatre of politics, where, contrary to Mr. Tusk, who has played the polarisation game, he was able to have a beer with Mr. Trzaskowski and Mr. Mentzen over the weekend before the elections. He could have been a stronger candidate for the presidency than Mr. Trzaskowski.

He had twice contested primary election campaigns in the party, first in 2010 I think, and then again very recently, although he lost both, he has gained more support in the second

bid in the Civic Platform. I think he's building a momentum within the party, for a leadership position domestically. He has served as the Speaker of the House, speaker of the Sejm, the lower chamber, and as a foreign minister; he's been Minister of Defence, and his qualities and personal record might count in his favour. There some problems also. He doesn't tend to hold back when he wants to say something, which is sometimes not the most desirable habit domestic politics. He's also considered as someone who seems to be standing above other politicians. And that might be true. He's a politician of a much bigger format than than we are used to, comparable to Tusk in terms of his capabilities.

Q. Will Tusk have a problem winning his scheduled vote of confidence following this election?

Wojciech Przybylski: What will be interesting is to see what will happen after the ending of the duopoly of dominance of two parties that have gathered 60% in the first round of this presidency in terms of voter base: two dominant parties, one controlled by Kaczynski and one controlled by Donald Tusk. There is a change of guard coming, and we haven't seen that for over 20 years now. It might be that Tusk is a great communicator who just sometimes forgets to communicate with his coalition partners before he communicates to the wider public. But Tusk doesn't look to be at risk of losing the confidence vote. On the Civic Coalition side it is in no one's interest to have him lose this vote. And the Confederacy also called the bluff of PIS which demanded a technical government and new elections, because simply, the numbers for that don't add up.

Q: To what extent has Tusk's government managed to reverse the previous democratic backsliding in Poland and dismantle the state control of Law and Justice appointees in the judiciary and media? And what are the prospects of any of this progress being maintained under the new President between now and next parliamentary election?

Wojciech Przybylski: I will say first of all that there hasn't been anything that fits the term democratic backsliding in what we have experienced. It's not that Polish democracy didn't go into deep decline in terms of all possible indices and that democratic health wasn't damaged, but the backsliding metaphor assumes that there was some unintentional regression from an effort towards building democracy, whereas there was nothing of that kind: in the previous government, there was a crystal-clear, intentional state capture, and that has been reversed. That has occurred not just in terms of institutional features like rule of law, the proper process of legislation and the drafting of bills, these things definitely help, but what has changed has been also the personal and collective quality of the group that controls the agenda, and Donald Tusk's agenda has been from day one within a perspective that might seem at times too bureaucratic, but actually follow the code of the existing law, including respect for the EU regulation, and the work of the Justice Minister Adam Bodnar. Here the government has worked by issuing ordinances that are specific instructions how to follow the law, with a clear instruction for the justice system to follow the rules of the European Union. That's one thing. The other example is that ministers do not hand out cash to the people in their entourage. Similarly we haven't seen anything like the distribution of state assets to private actors, which we witnessed at times under the previous government. So that has changed, and what changed in the public TV is, similarly instructive in terms of how it was changed, how it was accomplished. What the Tusk government did was to remove players who were, by no means passively backsliding into autocracy, but intentionally turning a taxpayer-funded public TV service into a party propaganda machine. This was done essentially by a kind of legal device, but still acting

within and according the letter of the law.

Q: How do you assess the effect of the recent CPAC event [Conservative Political Action Conference] What is the credibility of claims of foreign interference in these elections? (Victor Orbán is reported to have described Tum as a 'truth serum'.

CPAC in the USA is essentially an instrument of MAGA, the [dominant] Trump wing of the Republican party. In Europe it is an instrument to spread the MAGA agenda and in large part supported and funded, directly or indirectly, by Victor Orbán. In the USA, PACs [Political Action Committees] are election campaign-funding devices with private and corporate donors. Funding of civil society entities by corporate donors happened on both sides in the Polish election, some of it in forms embarrassing for liberals. These things happened and such influencing, including via the CPAC event, needs to be still investigated. The CPAC events were in overt support of the PIS party campaign, and offered international actors a platform in Poland during the election. This happened but, based on the voting numbers, I don't think it had that much influence. What I'm worried about is not the public interventions by foreign politicians in support of one party or the other, but what is referred to by the term FIMI [Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference], which is action not so much to help one party as to undermine democracy itself by covert interventions to destabilise and polarise society, including the use of disinformation as a means of waging or preparing to wage war. These may have influenced around or just above 1% of total votes. In the first round of the Polish Presidential election, 3 or 4 of the 13 candidates ran on a platform that was clearly based on Kremlin narratives. 100,000 signatures were required to qualify as a candidate, gaining the opportunity to use public broadcasting to communicate their message. So there was some FIMI within the recent election process, but in this case on a relatively limited scale.

2. Hungary: Orbán's crackdown - Dr András Kádár

András Kádár is an attorney-at-law and Co-chair of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee. Besides providing representation before domestic and international forums, including the European Court of Human Rights, he has been responsible for the HHC's various research projects, training programs and advocacy activities. He was a member of the Independent Police Complaints Board, a civilian oversight body elected by and operating under the Hungarian Parliament, and is the Hungarian member of the European Network of Legal Experts in the Non-discrimination Field.

Dr Kádár previously briefed the Round Table session # 37: "Cross-Europe civil society collaborations to defend democracy" in June 2023 – see:

https://grassrootsforeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/rt37_summary-report-and-questions_20230609.pdf

Introduction: Hungary is at a critical juncture, with Human Rights Organisations under increasing pressure from the Orbán regime. Its law prohibiting foreign support for civil society organisations has prompted an unprecedented letter of censure from 20 EU states.

The Orbán government views Human Rights organisations and NGOs as enemies of the state. However, until now, although there has been a considerable chilling effect, the

government has not been sufficiently determined or efficient to actually threaten their very existence and some independent media and civil society organisations still exist. Now, with increasing danger internally and with increasing support externally, the government's opponents are taking legal measures and looking at the possibility of increasing their domestic funding. But the situation is as dire as it has ever been, with the Orbán government being willing to use the banning law, whereas it had previously preferred to preserve a façade of democracy by not crossing certain lines.

Results of the Polish and Romanian elections may provide Orbán with the belief that now is the time to finally remove any constraints on his power. It is a very difficult time for Hungary but the opposition's 15 year old fight for democracy will continue.

In the light of Orbán's attempts to systematically dismantle funding for the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, the suspension of Hungarian citizenship and banning of freedom of assembly – for example the banning of Pride – the Hungarian Helsinki Committee is contemplating legal counter measures outside the domestic constitutional and institutional framework. For example, we have initiated pilot demonstrations with LGBTIQ themes – although not actually Pride – to ascertain police reaction and to determine how we can challenge bans. With one of our demonstrations being banned just today, we have a clear test case in advance of the Pride event with which to challenge the ban in the Hungarian Supreme Court and the Hungarian Constitutional Court (a special court making judicial review of Acts of the Hungarian Parliament). Our aim is to have domestic remedies and also to go to the Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg to seek interim measures. We are also exploring ways of advocating with the European Commission as there are ongoing proceedings where interim measures may be possible. One course of action would be to remove these cases from the captured domestic system and take them to European forums, either through advocacy or strategic litigation, neither of which would be bound by Hungary's domestic policy.

The Hungarian Constitution shows that law is no longer law in Hungary but rather the government's tool for communication, propaganda and hate speech. Although as a lawyer it is difficult to accept, by writing bans into the Constitution, the system still has a legalistic nature with one of the legitimising themes being that things happen according to the rules and that the Constitution is being obeyed. However, the government can change the law at will. Removing cases from the Hungarian system and taking them into the European legal framework demonstrates a symbolic power with which to combat the regime in forums where the government can be held accountable. It is very important for people to see that we are fighting the chilling effect of hostile legislation and the rhetoric of hate. We are not afraid of announcing a LGBTIQ rights demonstration, of fighting the police ban and perhaps facing the consequences of attending a banned event. This action will empower people to oppose and stand up against the bullying regime, which is ultimately the only way to beat a bully.

Q and A

Q: who are you referring to when you say that you have an upcoming, new and capable

leader?

Q: Do you think Peter Magyar has a serious chance next year, despite Orbán making changes to election rules that make it more difficult for other parties to win elections?

András Kádár: Yes, I was referring to Peter Magyar. Public opinion polls show that his party has a statistically significant lead. On that measure, he would certainly have a chance to win. I think this is, this is an interesting thing about an illiberal regime: when you eliminate the controls, when you eliminate the checks and balances, and when loyalty is the only criterion, when you don't care about expertise and professionalism any more, and you don't listen to those who disagree, I think you are bound to fail when it comes to policy, and this is just what happened in Hungary.

If you look at the economy, if you look at the rate of inflation, if you look at health care, if you look at education, we are really lagging behind, especially when we look at where Hungary was two decades ago compared to some of its neighbours and where Hungary is now, you can see that there is a challenge to the survival of the regime unless it goes into a full fledged autocracy. And now the question is whether within the ranks of the European Union, still being a member of this community, you can do that, because what we see is an intensifying of the oppressiveness of the regime. But still, I can talk to you now, sitting in my car, no one is stopping me doing that. The question is whether there is now a will of this regime to go further down this road, and what the European reaction to that will be, something what looks uncertain according to some analysts that I regard to be reliable.

Chair: I like your phrase "turning up the oppressometer"! The Hungarian Helsinki Committee's website is an impressive record of public action. In conclusion, how do you see the need for the EU and for all of us to upgrade our agenda to counter the autocratic offensive?

András Kádár: Indeed, and if you look at the trends, they are not very reassuring with AfD in Germany, Le Pen's party in France, and Romania only just dodging the bullet. Even in places where eventually the the far right has not broken through, you can see that the numbers are climbing up and and, I think, for that reason, what is happening in Hungary, which of course, is a small country, not as big a player as Poland, is a laboratory, I think, for all the other upcoming and would be autocrats. So I think it is a very important test for the European Union, how quickly, how firmly and how efficiently it can, for instance, address what is happening to us. And I'm not saying it because it's happening to us, but because these are very important red lines that Mr. Orbán is crossing on a daily basis. And if this is not addressed, it's going to be a an encouragement for for all the others. So I think we are heading into a very difficult period when I think resilience and resolution from the actors will be needed.

Q: how do you think we could help, if we could help?

András Kádár: Part of the regime's plan is precisely to ensure that you can't help, for instance with funding and other things. Any kind of sanction, acts of solidarity, alerting your contacts and friends about the issue would be of great help to us. Exactly because this is a small country on the one hand, and on the other hand, there is the danger of Hungary fatigue, that people get tired of the same issue and decide it's a lost cause, it's hopeless, so let's focus on other challenges, let's focus on Poland, let's focus on Romania. It is

important, if you can keep us in in your focus, and you can tell your friends and contacts that Hungary must remain in focus, I think it's very important exactly because Hungary, I think, is, is an experimental site for oligarchs and autocrats, or those who would be autocrats in other bigger countries where they could make bigger problems, as what is happening in the US very clearly shows.

Chair: So essentially, let's not catastrophize, let's continue our efforts, let's keep up the collaboration, ensure that everyone is mindful and cognisant of these aggressive actions by the Hungary regime, and keep raising the awareness.

Q: I'm based in Brussels, and when the Brexit referendum happened, we were told to keep out of the debate in Britain, because we were told, you're based in Brussels, so you don't have credibility. What do you think about in relation to the Hungarian debate. Would it be helpful for us to circulate articles written about Hungary that are written elsewhere, that could be circulated in Hungary, or for actors from the UK or from Brussels to be saying more? I'm, frankly, extremely frustrated with the European institutions because I think we've been far too soft on Hungary,, I actually don't understand why they've been so soft on Hungary, but I would welcome your your views about how our kind of foreign influence could would it be helpful or not, or whether it would it just be rejected? Because in England, I don't think it would have actually been rejected as strongly as we were told it would be.

András Kádár: this is what the government will say, that this is just foreigners trying to tell us what to do. But I think if you look at the alternative that is remaining silent and being soft and not interfering, I think that that certainly wouldn't help. The feeling that we are kind of left alone, and this is not something that raises interest in other parts of the world, can be very disheartening. Of course, the government can try to use this to support their own narrative, but at the same time, I don't think that's a valid argument against people outside Hungary taking an interest in us, because we are members of this joint venture called Europe, some of us here in European Union, but definitely all of us in Europe and the Council of Europe. So I think it's very easy to see why, in such an interconnected world, we do have a stake in what is happening in neighbouring countries and to members of our alliances. So I think you have the counter arguments, and the pushback from the other side confirms that this attention does help to protect us, even if the government will try to twist its meaning.

Q: If one is a dual UK-Hungarian citizen, could campaigning to support Magyar potentially lead to deportation?

András Kádár: Yes, there is a draft law that makes it possible to suspend the citizenship of dual citizens. It's hasn't been passed yet. It's going to be, I think, adopted also next week. So the very sad and bizarre answer is that in principle, this possibility could be there. Though when I think about the practical plausibility of this, maybe I'm overly optimistic, but I I hardly see that happening. But then again, I see things now which a few years ago that I could hardly imagine happening. As far as the draft law, the bill stands the in principle, this is not this is not impossible. However this law affects those who have dual citizenship where the other citizenship is an EU citizenship. However, there is case law before the CJEU, which says that when you deprive a dual citizen of their European citizenship, as would be the case in if someone is deprived of their Hungarian citizenship and the other one is not an EU citizenship, then the case falls under European Union law

exactly because one not only deprives the person of the Hungarian citizenship, but of EU citizenship as well. So actually, for that reason, I can't really see the government wanting to test this. But as I said, in principle, this could happen. I hope we are not there yet.