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The Battle Line for Western Values Runs Through Poland

By CHARLES A. KUPCHAN JAN. 10, 2018

WASHINGTON — The European Union is the West’s last line of defense. The United States has historically been the world’s anchor of republican ideals, but President Trump has abandoned the role, openly admiring strongmen like Vladimir Putin of Russia. As the temptations of nationalist populism spread, Europe has responsibility for holding down the Western fort. The primary battle right now is over Poland, which is deepening its descent into illiberalism. The European Union needs to take a firm stand in defense of Western values.

Since coming to power in 2015, Poland’s populist government has sought to control the news media, purged and politicized the civil service, and intimidated intellectuals and civil society organizations. Three weeks ago, Poland’s president signed into law legislation that compromises judicial independence, effectively clearing the way for the ruling Law and Justice party to stack the courts.

In response, Brussels has taken the right steps, warning Warsaw of punishment if it continues to pursue policies inconsistent with the European Union’s founding principles, which include “democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights.” In late December, the European Commission for the first time in the union’s history started a formal procedure that could lead to disciplinary sanctions, including the suspension of Poland’s voting rights in the

European Union's main decision-making body.

These measures have not gone unnoticed in Warsaw. This week, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki reshuffled his cabinet, replacing a number of ministers whose relationships with European leaders were particularly strained. And he flew to Brussels for dinner with Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European Commission. But these moves have yet to be accompanied by any concrete steps to reverse Poland's illiberal turn. The European Union must keep the pressure on.

Poland's trajectory is not unique within the bloc. Hungary has already gone down a similar path, and other member states in Central Europe are tilting in the same direction. But Poland's descent is particularly consequential: With a population of almost 40 million, it is Central Europe's standard-bearer.

Poland's leading role in the collapse of the Soviet bloc makes its illiberal slide all the more arresting. In the early 1980s, the Solidarity labor movement inspired widespread resistance to Poland's Communist government, setting the stage for the broader revolt across Central Europe that brought down the Berlin Wall in 1989. After the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Poland was at the forefront of the transition from Communist satellite to market democracy, joining NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004.

The European Union must hold the line against Warsaw's defection from the union's core values — not just for the sake of liberal democracy in Poland but also for the democratic credentials of the union itself. The project of European integration is under siege from the same forces of nationalism and populism that afflict Poland: Britain is negotiating its exit from the European Union. Anti-immigrant sentiment is testing multiethnic societies across the Continent. A far-right party now sits in the German Parliament; in Austria, another recently joined the governing coalition.

Under these circumstances, the European Union urgently needs to demonstrate to its citizens that it has the wherewithal to stand up for pluralism and the rule of law within its own family. A failure to do so will only undermine the union's effort to demonstrate that it is a civic community held together by democratic values, not just a distant, unaccountable bureaucracy — exactly what

the populists claim.

Brussels's moves so far have been encouraging. But now comes the hard part — shifting from talk to action. Hungary has pledged to veto a suspension of Poland's voting rights. And European Union members, when push comes to shove, have a history of shying away from sanctions against other members — as they have done recently with Hungary, and with Austria when the far-right Freedom Party was part of the governing coalition from 2000 to 2005.

But the European Union can no longer afford to treat wayward members with kid gloves. If Poland does not reverse course, Brussels should proceed with efforts to suspend its voting rights. This requires consent from all but the sanctioned party, but even if Hungary blocks these moves, the effort itself will send a strong message to Poles. And a Hungarian veto would give the European Union additional cause for taking overdue steps to discipline Budapest.

The European Union has other arrows in its quiver, too. Brussels should make clear its intention to divert to more worthy members the economic assistance that flows to Poland. European Union officials and their member-state counterparts should deliberately isolate Warsaw, keeping diplomatic contacts with the Polish government to a minimum. And as the union continues to strengthen its defense institutions, it should keep Poland at a distance. Collective defense is about protecting values, not just territory.

Such measures do not ensure that the Polish government will return to the liberal fold. Indeed, Warsaw may well double down and use “foreign interference” as an excuse for further infringements on civil liberty. So be it. The European Union needs to defend its own democratic credibility even if it cannot compel Poland to follow suit.

With the United States missing in action, it is up to the European Union to defend the principles and practices of democratic society. The fate of Poland, Europe and the West is on the line.

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