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**„The 2023 Polish Election: Implications for Poland, the UK, and Europe”**

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It is hard to talk about Poland and Europe without a broader context, crumbling world and transformative tendencies that make the economy a space for geopolitical competition.

The struggle between authoritarian regimes and democracies produces rivalry and threats to open and pluralistic societies. 2023 elections in Poland prove that there are also places where people demonstrate preferences pointing toward democracy.

Since 1989 Poles believed that democracy starts with free and fair elections. Then we got a tough lesson that elections are neither a guarantee nor the sole determinant of democracy.

We also learned that populism tends to be very effective in making voters look for authoritarian leaders.

Voters favouring such a world would be found in Russia, but also in the US, and we also see a growing opening to such choices in a number of European countries.

Such a shift toward non-meritocratic populism happened in Poland in 2015.

Out of discontent rage, nostalgia for old order, patriarchal and predictable old status quo with a big dose of fear of refugees, manipulated by nation.

People were offered a world where freedom of media did not matter, where rule of law, independence of judges and international legal norms did not matter.

Instead, what mattered was primitive patriotism, values of tradition, ethnic purity, nationalism.

Between 2015 and 2023 in Poland only half of the population was recognized politically, half of the society that voted for the democratic opposition was excluded

from political consideration by the ruling party, who claimed to be the only actor knowing how to listen to people, identify their needs and safety them.

Democratic opposition did not matter and the contempt for the opposition was the contempt for those who voted for them, the contempt for democracy and rule of law.

For 8 years we had a majority-based political system or in other words a powerbased zero-sum game system undermining the ethics of politics, rejecting any meritocratic rules of criteria for selecting people for offices. Political gatekeepers opened fully the doors to all sorts of political figures with very low moral ambition, which exacerbated kleptocratic risks and corruption. Only now, we can see the size of abuse regarding public funds and other country resources.

Through a strongly unfair electoral process, elected politicians promised to the sovereign to make democracy better for people. They promised to make the world simple, simplified the language and gave us 8 years of primitive simplicism. Generous social benefits followed.

During those 8 years, formally democratic parliament worked but not a single amendment was taken from the opposition, budget was adopted without letting the opposition enter the room to vote, people were not imprisoned en masse but illegally spied with Pegasus, detained for many months without formalisation of court procedures, illegal methods of provocation were used with dramatic consequences for the life of people, pregnant women were dying because doctors were afraid of helping them. President of the Republic became a PiS President.

Gradually, the situation was getting more spectacularly extreme. PiS moved quickly from populism toward clientelism. Public media were cemented as one party media. Citizens, especially women began to be brutally harassed for participating in demonstrations. Fear of the omnipotence of power was growing. The Constitution was captured by an illegal Constitutional Tribunal. For 8 years Poles were deprived of an independent judiciary and instances of control over the actions of state power disappeared.

Only now with the return of democracy we are discovering the atrocities and the depth of illegal actions against democracy and human rights. The killers of democracy were using non-democratic institutions in democratic outfit. They

appealed to a mythical will and wisdom of sovereign. For eight years democracy was dying, transforming itself into an autocracy of one party and one man, with the attitudes of an absolute monarch.

Political reality has been gradually abandoning European values and the rule of law, but the real damage to democracy was coming from deliberate attack on democratic institutions.

We had in Poland citizen movements fighting for human rights, including abortion, for the rights of minorities, for the independence of courts and judges. We saw people with disabilities claiming their rights. We discovered very quickly that democracy needs citizens to defend it. When democratic procedures were thrown out of the window, people invented innovative formulas to protect democracy. In a way democracy was realized every day as a moral commitment of citizens.

There were street walkers singing the Polish and European anthems, reading every Sunday for two years preamble to the Constitution of Poland, with thousands of citizens listening to it, there were teams of judges travelling through Poland explaining the Constitution to the public at large. The situation of non-governmental organizations was dire, those not at service of ruling autocrats were deprived of financial support.

The history of solidarity with a small s, between people, was written every day. There were heroic judges defending rule of law and European values, losing their jobs and positions.

There were teachers on strike. There were schools celebrating the Rainbow Fridays, penalised by the authorities.

There were actions of independent local governments and there were local leaders engaged for democracy. One of them, the Mayor of Gdańsk, was murdered during the public charity event on the stage by a man, who was inspired by the language of hate against the Mayor on a public television under the control of the ruling party.

New style of legislating was consolidated and became a rule. It implied bringing new laws to the House not as government proposals, which required public consultation procedure, but presented as lawmakers proposals, where consultation was not

required. There were laws adopted during the night and signed into law by the President in the morning.

The good news was that Poles were not alone during those eight years of dying democracy. We were part of the European Union. We chose to join the Union in 2004 because history had never been good to a lonely Poland. And we fell in love with democracy. For the transition to market economy and democracy, accession to the EU was a light in the tunnel, was the guarantee that the past would not return. But it sort of did return. What happened in 2015, started gradual Polexit.

There were two levels of institutions theoretically protecting citizens, national and European. National institutions were, except the Ombudsman and the Supreme Control Office (NIK), at the service of political ruling majority. But the two institutions I mentioned were ignored by ruling majority. Opinions and rulings of the European institutions, Commission, ECJ and European Court of Human Rights, were rejected by the government as not respecting the Polish Constitutions. The so-called Constitutional Tribunal rejected in its ruling the supremacy of the European law.

With all the attacks on independent courts, the ECJ was reacting promptly, supported by the European Court of Human Rights judgements. But the Union was not equipped in instruments to cope with situations when member states response to ECJ rulings was „So what! We think differently”. Still the European institutions continued to react to each breach of the European law and substantial penalties were paid by Poland. The independent judges were asking prejudicial questions, many of them demonstrated de facto independence from autocratic authorities. But Poland didn't respect rules that would allow us to benefit from European funds (RRF, MFF).

You might be aware that when the issues of rule of law exploded in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, we could hear across the EU that the experiment with democracy in this part of the EU was failing. Superficial democratic tradition, weak culture of responsibility for the common good and of respect for minorities, short history of democratic institutions, strong conflict propensity were seen as our weaknesses. But I would claim that the countries of central and eastern Europe were part of a more general process. The shift away from democratic choice happened unexpectedly in 2015 with accidentally lost presidential election by a democratic candidate, which provided fuel to the plenary elections of the same year. At the same time across the

Atlantic, Donald Trump was elected, and you might remember that mainstream public opinion was shocked. Then we saw other cases of democratic electoral failures in mature democracies.

When the 2023 election started to loom on the horizon, in 2021 democratic opposition began its two years lasting travel to the victory. Across the country conversation with the citizens took place, an unprecedented march through small and big vilages, towns and cities, with meetings opened to anybody willing to enter, invited to ask any question, entirely different compared to „by invitation only” meetings of the ruling power.

And then on the 15th of October 223 we won the election. That was a victory comparable to 1989. There was an unprecedented electoral mobilization. The turnout was historical amounting to 74,38% Three quarters of those eligible to vote took part in the election. The turnout of the young people was very close to 70 percent. Women were another mobilized group (73,7%).

It was this mobilization that gave the democratic coalition its victory. After 8 years of watching, participating in protests and seeing the attitude of the regime to freedom and democracy, people understood that only the election could bring the breakthrough. After 8 years of listening to the language of exclusion and hate, of watching the destruction of what we achieved in 1989 and what we cherished. We got it allowing the non-democratic power to stay five more years was unimaginable and deadly dangerous for the future of Poland. People could no longer look at the collapse of the prestige of Poland, seeing that the EU was ashamed of us and many laughed at the President of Poland. People were threatened by the compromise of morals.

Victory was a triumph of civil society, of ordinary citizens. Their power cannot be now put aside to be activated only at another time of extreme danger. We must saper no effort to find a way to keep citizens involved in the process of rebuilding democracy and shaping the future.

The government was sworn in two months after the election which means two months ago. Seizing up the power by democratic forces was very painful for the previous government. Every possible trick was used to delay it.

Rebooting the liberal democracy is not a walk in the park. There are also ahead of us two more elections, in April a local one, which in Poland matters strongly and will be seen a confirmation of people's commitment from October 15 and solidifying the political mandate of the democratic coalition. In June, there is European election.

What happened relatively quickly was to get Poland back to Europe. Poland is back in the Weimar triangle with France and Germany. David Cameron has already paid a visit to Poland and the meeting of the President and Prime Minister with Joe Biden will take place in March. Laying the grounds for the European security and geostrategic enlargement, engaging in stronger, united and globally acting Europe in a leading place with Poland onboard.

Next January Poland starts its six-month Presidency of the Union. You probably can imagine what a lost election in Poland in October would have meant for the EU with Hungary in the second half of this year and then Mr Kaczyński's Poland in charge of Europe and Ukraine's challenges.

Bringing back the democratic institutions and structures across the state at all levels of governance, and the legal system in its entirety is a real challenge in the democratic recovery. Here the question popping up every day is how to achieve it when re-democratization is blocked by the loyalty to the former regime openly expressed by the President and other public institutions under control of minions of the former regime. An existential dilemma is whether democracy can be built with non-democratic tools or PiS's methods and explicit announcement by the President of the intention to veto legal acts. Last but not least challenge to be mentioned in this context is that actually the ancien regime has not been willing so far to admit that the elections have been lost.

The main question is about the choice of the political path toward rebuilding democratic Poland in a systemic way, its damaged justice system and rule of law, public media, bringing back human rights, gradually discovering the legacy of all the wrongdoing of the previous forces in power. PiS is anarchizing the situation. They are stirring up emotions, provoking fights to keep the party together. After 8 years, hundreds of thousands of people have come to believe that they are entitled to what they got. And their leader continues to assure their voters that the old days will return.

Special parliamentary investigative committees have started to work with a view to eradicate the roots of the evil and to bring those guilty to the justice. People expect this. There are and there will be many tough and unpopular decisions to be taken and democratic institutions will have to be futureproofed. For that the government will need the support of the civil society to a much larger degree than ever before.

And after that electoral triumph of civil society, they cannot be put back in some niche again, to be activated only at times of extreme danger. We also saw the strength of the organized civic movements in Poland when Putin invaded Ukraine. Refugees, hundreds of thousands of them were taken care of not by the Polish government but by strong civic organizations tested and strengthened during the years of the non-democratic regime in Poland.

But at the same time, there were non-governmental organizations at the service of ruling autocrats. Actually many of the civil society organizations deeply entered party politics. PiS, in fact, created its own alternative world of various NGOs, special „institutes”, and foundations to legitimize its policies. But it was often fake activity and sheer political depravity. That was also the territory, where kleptocracy flourished.

We need to restore the dignity of political process at all levels of governance. The current unprecedented public interest in the proceedings of the Sejm, provides an opportunity for people to refresh their desire to participate in politics not only as passive observers. But there are also opinion polls pointing to the importance of making public all information about the wrong, doing of previous officials and politicians of PiS and not giving up on justice. We are not giving up.

Elections won by democracy in Poland took place in times when, a wave of a hard right, populism is haunting Europe. This year, the far-right anti-European populist parties could gain in the European election. Marine Le Pen can win the presidential in 2027 in France. Italy is already run by a hard right.

All that presents a challenge to Europe, can block European reforms and the geostrategic enlargement. And here comes another question. Should the democrats try to exclude the non-democratic parties from public debate and government or rather engage with them? There are those who believe that becoming part of government and taking responsibility for governing can moderate the radicals. Others do not see it that way.

The EU has been traditionally building its majorities among the centrist parties. The European Parliament provides a lot of evidence on it. Some mainstream parties today, EPP in particular, have developed a tendency to reach out to the far-right parties. There are of course risks there. This can provide a trampoline for the far-right and push aside the centrist parties.

That is why I think politicians have to be very cautious in bringing the radicals into the political power, expecting their attitudes to be softened. The contrary can happen. Such alliances can soften the rule of law commitment. The active check and balances system can be watered down. Of course, we all know that effective disinformation campaigns mean that the hard right does not need to join ruling coalitions to affect policy making.