

Europe wades into debate over Poland's constitutional crisis

Written by The Conversation USA

Poland's prime minister Beata Szydło recently found herself summoned to the European Parliament in Strasbourg to defend her government over accusations that its commitment to democratic values is on the slide.

This was an unprecedented meeting. The parliament had called a debate under the auspices of a law introduced in March 2014, giving it the right to question a national government if it thinks a systemic threat to democracy is about to take place in a European country.

In Poland's case, concerns were raised over government plans to limit the power of the national constitutional court, and change the way the media is governed and civil servants hired.

The aim of a meeting is to have a constructive conversation about concerns but if that fails, Brussels can move to suspend a country from taking part in EU decision making (although this is an unlikely scenario).

Among the post-communist states that joined the EU in 2004, Poland has generally been seen as a success story. While Hungary and Romania, and candidate countries such as [Macedonia](#) and Bosnia and Herzegovina seem to be dragging their feet over democratic reform, Poland has blazed the trail.

But in October 2015, the new social national conservative government, led by Szydło (Law and Justice party, PiS) won an outright majority in parliamentary elections and quickly set about making [significant changes](#) .

At the meeting with Szydło, Frans Timmermans, first vice-president of the European Commission, noted that he had sent two letters to Poland raising concerns about these changes but that neither had been satisfactorily answered. He warned that the EU is concerned that the values of liberal democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law are being eroded in Poland. Without these three elements, the democracy for which the country had long fought would come to nothing.

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Szydło argued that the government had a mandate from the Polish public to implement reform and argued that the government was respecting both the Polish constitution and the [EU treaties](#).

Guy Verhofstadt, leader of the parliament's Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and former prime minister of Belgium, was not convinced. He warned Szydło that her government had won a mandate to make changes with its victory in the election but not to "use or abuse this huge majority to dismantle checks and balances".

Esteban González Pons, a centre-right MEP from Spain, reminded Szydło that authoritarianism often grows from the inside. It passes through the media and thrives on a lack of political pluralism. Europe seems to have failed to learn that lesson, it was said, despite the relatively recent experiences of countries like Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Greece.

Throughout her meeting with the parliamentarians Szydło argued that Poland's sovereignty should be respected by European organisations.

But with protests in Poland increasing, it seems not everyone trusts the government to handle that sovereignty with good grace.

This European Parliament meeting should serve as a warning to Szydło that the EU is watching. But that warning could also help PiS to garner more support at home. Whether the European Union institutions and Poland can actually open a constructive dialogue is another matter altogether.

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