

It was clear that something unusual was happening when both [The Nation](#) and [the Wall Street Journal](#) denounced the Polish government.

Since taking power after elections last October, Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, or PiS) can claim at least one undeniable accomplishment: they have brought Poland back into the international spotlight.

Unfortunately, what got illuminated has been an unrelenting assault on the norms of constitutional governance and the principles of liberal democracy.

After years of being [hailed](#) as the shining example of post-Communist success and European integration, Poland is once again depicted abroad as a land where “[European norms](#)” are not respected, and people are once again evoking deeply unfair stereotypes of Polish “[backwardness](#)”.

What happened? And why is this significant for Europe?

Not representative

Let's begin with an easily overlooked fact: the Poles themselves did not fundamentally change during the past year.

It would be a mistake to search for any recent sociological trends, cultural shifts or economic developments that would explain why the Poles came to embrace the PiS worldview – because they haven't.

Yes, they increased their total number of votes since the previous parliamentary elections in

2011, but only by 81,914 (in a country of 38.5 million people).

The fact is that in last October's election, PiS won [just over 37 percent](#) of the votes cast, which amounts to 18 percent of the country's registered voters, thanks to Poland's persistently low turnout rate.

There was no groundswell of support for Jarosław Kaczyński's vision; instead, he was able to seize power because of the fragmentation and weakness of his opponents.

This is what must be kept firmly in mind whenever they claim that they have a democratic mandate to carry out revolutionary changes. They may have a legitimate majority in the Parliament, but they speak for just over a third of those who voted last October and fewer than 20 percent of the total electorate.

Radical change

Although PiS does not represent any significant shifts in Polish public opinion, they do exemplify a worrying trend in Europe, as far right parties threaten stability across the continent. Most egregiously, the authoritarian regime of Viktor Orbán in Hungary [gained power](#) in 2010 with a two-thirds majority, allowing him to rewrite the constitution.

As the Polish election results came in on October 25, many observers concluded that the Budapest scenario could not be repeated in Warsaw, because PiS lacked the votes needed for constitutional changes.

What has followed, however, has been surprising. PiS has managed to erode the foundations of liberal democracy even without formally changing the constitution.

The new Polish government has sidelined the country's [constitutional court](#), purged the [civil service](#) and (most worrying of all) radically transformed the public [media](#)

into a pro-government mouthpiece.

Although independent media outlets continue to operate, the state media [dominates the airwaves](#). The head of the party's parliamentary caucus [said](#), "If the media imagines that it will distract Poles with criticisms of our changes, then that must stop."

Historical roots

PiS belongs to a long ideological tradition in Poland known as National Democracy, though that label carries too much baggage to be used politically today.

Prior to the Second World War, this movement was infamous for its [vitriolic antisemitism](#), and while some of those views can still be heard in right wing circles today, this is no longer a major theme.

Hostility toward "outsiders" has, to a certain degree, been redirected toward refugees from the Middle East, sexual minorities, Polish liberals (derisively called "[Polish speakers](#) but not true Poles") and unspecified anti-Polish forces in Berlin, Moscow and Brussels.

More enduring than antisemitism is a political vision that emphasizes national cohesion, social discipline and cultural homogeneity. Though one might be tempted to label PiS "anti-democratic," it is vital to recognize that they want to dismantle *liberal* democracy in order to create *national* democracy.

A national democracy is one in which the nation is governed by a strong leadership that speaks with a single voice, unencumbered by parliamentary squabbling or legal technicalities. Once the people have selected that leadership, true patriots should rally behind them.

PiS supporters do not see themselves as antidemocratic. Quite the contrary, they stress that they merely advocate a different type of democracy.

Their ideal system is [best captured](#) by a claim made by one of their supporters in Parliament: “The good of the nation is above the law.”

What next?

Supporters of liberal democracy within Poland, along with the country’s many international friends, are left with few options.

The European Union cannot do much. Although technically Brussels could cut off aid or even suspend Poland’s voting rights, such moves have to be unanimous, and the Hungarian government has promised a veto.

Beyond that, there will be “investigations” and delicately phrased expressions of “concern” (a process that has [already begun](#)), but these will have little or no impact in Warsaw.

Even if the institutions of the EU had more power (and their leaders more determination), the possibility of a backlash within Poland against “outside interference” could undermine any attempt to help PiS’s opponents.

Those trying to save liberal democracy within Poland have joined together in a new movement called the Committee for the Defense of Democracy ([Komitet Obrony Demokracji](#) , or KOD), and their public protests have rallied tens of thousands of people [in every major city in Poland](#)

. This group, not the current government, represents a genuine majority: according to [a recent survey](#) 55 percent of Poles fear that democracy in their country is threatened .

But it would require mobilization on a far greater scale to challenge PiS’ power. They have long viewed opponents as enemies who must be defeated, not debated.

When party leader Jaroslaw Kaczyński declares that he speaks for the nation, he does not rely on elections or survey data. He believes that he has a responsibility to educate Poles, [to cultivate their patriotism](#) and to defeat those who, as he [put it recently](#), carry treason “in their genes.”

As the founder of the National Democratic movement, Roman Dmowski (whom Kaczyński considers his primary ideological inspiration), [put it in 1905](#) :

The National Democratic movement has for a long time given the impression that it was working for the future of society against the will of that society...This does not at all deprive us of moral strength, because the national movement draws its moral strength not from the contemporary generation alone, but also and above all from the best traditions of the past.

This is not the sort of movement that moderates its agenda because of popular protest.

A danger for Europe

Poland has been an oasis of [economic stability](#) and growth for a decade, even as the rest of the continent struggled with the Great Recession.

The Polish political system, for all its many inadequacies and petty corruption, had exemplified steady improvement toward a respect for the rule of law, even as [so many other](#) post-Communist countries battled endemic structural problems.

The norms of public life in Poland had been moving toward greater [respect for diversity](#), even as intolerance was growing throughout most of Europe.

But no longer.

Europe has lost its Polish anchor

Written by The Conversation USA

The country that was quietly (perhaps surprisingly) becoming one of Europe's anchors will no longer be playing that role.

Given the rough seas the continent must navigate over the next few years, we should all be very concerned.

Brian Porter-Szücs does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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