

As usual I agree with almost everything in Michael's article but I would like to make a few comments concerning the situation in Poland, because Michael remarks on this topic (not of major importance in the article as a whole) can be misleading.

Let me start by saying that I am not a supporter of the present government of the "Law and Justice" Party (PiS) and in the last elections I voted for one of the opposition parties. I strongly oppose the present government's economic policies (which in the American context I would describe as somewhat to the left of Bernie Sanders), I am aghast at its treatment of the Constitutional Court, and I am annoyed by the obvious increase in bureaucracy particularly that most of the new bureaucratic appointees seem incompetent. On the other hand, I am much less critical of the new government's foreign policy and more of the attitude of much of the opposition so I am not actually sure how I would vote if an election were to be held now. However, let me address just specific points from Michael's article.

"A new government in Poland is following Orbán's footsteps with a restrictive media law..."

It should be pointed out that this law affects only the state run TV channels. It has no effect on the printed press, which is privately owned and mostly critical of the government or on privately owned cable and satellite television, or on private radio channels which also are mostly liberal and hence anti-PiS. The law gives the government even more control over the state media but even under the previous government these stations were generally pro-government and only token voices from the opposing side were heard. This was probably more due to the tendency of public media being generally liberal, which is a phenomenon familiar in the West and has similar roots, rather than due to direct government interference but the practical effect was the same. In a country like Poland, which has not had a modern tradition of respect for opposing view points, it is hard to expect a nationalist government to see a difference between "public media" and "pro-government media". Nevertheless, the Polish media remain fundamentally free and I would argue more pluralistic than in Western in some Western countries where there is not state interference but general conformism means that it's extremely rare to hear a dissenting opinion on almost any controversial issue.

"efforts to erode judicial independence"

The PiS government's behaviour has been criticized even by many of its own supporters but again it should be kept in perspective. According to the (rather poorly written) Polish constitution the composition of the Constitutional Court (which plays part of the role of the US Supreme Court) is decided by the Parliament, with judges appointed only for a fixed term. Since the previous government's was in power for a rather long time it managed to produce ideologically sympathetic court. In an attempt to preserve this state of affairs the outgoing Parliament appointed 5 new judges, when it was only entitled to appoint 3. After the election the PiS government responded by invalidating all five appointments, appointing its own judges, and changing the law governing how the Constitutional Court makes decisions. The Constitutional Court declared the new law unconstitutional but the government decided to ignore this decision. The whole affair is described quite objectively here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polish_Constitutional_Court_crisis,_2015

One thing that this illustrates is the value of appointing Supreme Court judges for life (as in the US and in pre-war Japan, where there was quite amazing degree of judicial independence considering the general political situation in the country). Unfortunately again, Poland has not had much modern tradition of respect for law and the behavior of PiS has only made it worse. Nevertheless, it would be going too far (so far) to see this as evidence of growing authoritarianism. Poland remains a very free country, in my judgement in some ways freer than many Western ones.

“defense minister who thinks the Protocols of the Elders of Zion are real”

This refers to a statement the current defense minister Macierewicz made 15 years ago when appearing on a program of the Catholic radio station Radio Maryja, whose director is a Redemptorist monk Father Rydzyk. The radio station takes an aggressively conservative catholic and nationalistic stand and a large part of its audience is clearly antisemitic (Father has been recorded making Rydzyk antisemitic statements in private although he and the radio generally avoids them in public).

Macierewicz was responding to a question from the audience. He did not literally state he believed the Protocols to be true, but said that not being a historian he could not decide such issue. However, he added, he knew that some (left-wing) Jewish groups in Poland had behaved in the way described in the Protocols.

When this issue was brought up after Macierewicz became Defense Minister he stated that he absolutely believed the Protocols to be a forgery. In any case, the statement he made on Radio Maryja was quite clearly a case of cynical pandering to the audience whose political support he needed. There is plenty of evidence dating back to Macierewicz's activities in the anti-communist underground that he never was (and is not) an antisemite. Using antisemitism, when politically useful, is another matter.

It is also worth noting that he is very pro-Israel and the current government is considerably more friendly to Israel than almost all Western governments in the EU (only the Czech government is more so).

So my conclusion is that these are complicated issues about which it's better to avoid jumping to conclusions.