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New Division Lines in the European Union: How to Cope with Them?

Abstract

The situation in the European Union (the EU) is undergoing in recent years a very dynamic, if not dramatic, change. During the process current liberal mainstream has found itself under growing pressure of many anti-establishment forces, mainly of far-right, more and more frequently described as (what depend from the perspective of the analysis) as “counter-revolutionary” or “revolutionary change”. What are the reasons of those deep social and political controversies in the EU and what they can produce? Author of this study is coming to conclusion, that multiple crises need creative thinking. It is already more than obvious that Europe now is facing many complicated problems to be resolved. Especially by those, who are concerned about the future of the EU and its member states. Because, if they will not find a solution, their “populist” and “nationalist” opponents will prevail.

Key words: the European Union: Crises, Axiology, Integration, Disintegration, Right-Wing Forces, Liberalism, Illiberalism, Eurosceptic

Foreword: At the Crossroads

The European Union (EU) in recent years has been undergoing dramatic change. At least since 2005, when the citizens of France and Netherlands rejected the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe (or Constitutional Treaty) the EU institutions and leaders have lost their guidance and blueprint. The former vision of supranationality and federation,

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or even a United States of Europe, according to the neofunctional theory of international relations (Ernst Haas, Leon Lindberg) lost its attractiveness to many participants of the European integration process.

Then came the deep economic crisis of 2008, increasing the dissatisfaction of most social strata. It was expressed mostly by the younger generation, with a high degree of unemployment, but also the middle class, unhappy that their previous social achievements and guarantees were endangered. Finally, in 2014 and 2015, the Europeans (or the EU member states), suddenly discovered that their external security (due to the crisis in Ukraine, combined with the rise of ISIS/Daesh in different parts of the world) is no longer guaranteed. Further, the massive big wave of more than one million migrants from outside (mostly Muslims) next year has also proved that our internal or domestic security is now undermined. Suddenly, the Europeans living peacefully, “like donuts in butter”, for so many decades, discovered a kind of ring of fire on their external borders and started to feel insecure at the domestic scene. In effect, the famous motto of 1990’s and later, “it’s the economy, stupid”, has to be replaced by another one: “it’s the security, stupid”. Unexpectedly, refugees, migrants, terrorist attacks, and multi-ethnicity came to the fore in public discourse, instead of the former constant optimism of European progress.

The issues mentioned above are the major factors beyond the current problems visible in the EU. However, there are many more reasons for social tensions, public dissatisfaction, or even a clash of different values under the pressure of events. Some observers, like Jan Zielonka, see it as a “counterrevolution” and “decline of liberal order” in Europe, others, like Ivan Krastev, are describing it as an “illiberal revolution”;¹ some (William Drozdiak) see Europe as a “fractured continent”, while many, mostly economists (Thomas Piketty, Joseph Stiglitz, Branko Milanovic), define the major reasons of current discontent in the previous absolute domination of the markets (or even “market fundamentalism”) of the neoliberal school. According to them, as a result we have another phenomenon, wage and wealth inequality (both between the states and social strata inside of them). Thus, another issue emerged on the European agenda: differentiation (of all kinds, which will be explained later in this text).

What is obvious is that the events in the recent decade or so in the EU and its external neighborhood have proved that the European elites were mostly dreaming of a bright future, neglecting some fundamental issues and values, first of all, the creation of common, all-European identity (never created), the sense of social cohesion, and solidarity or guarantees

¹ I. Krastev, *Eastern Europe’s Illiberal Revolution*, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/hungary/2018-04-16/eastern-europes-illiberal-revolution> (10.06.2018).

for external security. The multiple crises after 2005 once again confirmed the original sin of the European project, which is the concept of the elites, where societies were left behind.

Thus, when in 2005 public opinion (in France and Netherlands in this case) was finally asked to express its will, it produced a surprise, if not a shock for the ruling elites. Since then, step by step, not only the European institutions and liberal governments, attached to the Copenhagen Criteria of the liberal order, market economy and rule of law, have found themselves to be under growing pressure. Since then we could observe more and more clashes and on this track, so soon even the fundamental system of values and fundamental requirements of checks and balances has been put under a question mark. Almost day by day and month by month a counterproposal to the current official policy line was created by politicians, sometimes new, sometimes wearing new feathers. They claim they have new proposals and vision, but according to the liberal elites, we have another new phenomenon: an upsurge of “populist” and “nationalist” forces, ready to change not only the current ruling elites, but also the value system. Why that is so?

New Division Lines in the Wake of Several Consecutive Pro-National Impulses

It seems that we are observing in recent years in the EU a certain sequence of events, which broadly can be described as “pro-national impulses”. It looks that each consecutive episode is giving more and more to say to the social and political forces (also parties), mostly from the right, or even extreme-right part of the scene (less frequently from the left) to demand intergovernmental instead of supranational cooperation and integration. Instead of earlier promoted values of federalism, solidarity and – at least verbally – European identity, step by step new values and demands were put on the agenda: to “return to sovereignty,” to fight for “national interests,” to have its own identity. Those are the countermeasures and new (rather old by content) concepts towards previous federal and supranational mantra.

In effect, we can observe some New Division Lines on the European continent, created by the following sequence of events, when each of them was giving another impulse for national, nationalistic or even native force to rise:

- Lack of vision and strategic confusion of the elites in the wake of the French and Dutch national referenda of 2005. For the first time we could observe a spark of revolt against the ruling elites and the emergence of

social movements and political forces openly undermining previous institutional foundations and the obligatory norms of the liberal order. It was the first pro-national impulse.

- Social and economic divisions as a result of the deep economic crisis of 2008, which came to the EU from the US after a short time, and originally were identified with Grexit, that is, the deep economic crisis and high indebtedness of Greece, with the dangerous scenario of leaving the Eurozone, or even the EU by this country. Simultaneously it was also identified with the economic problems of almost all countries of the Mediterranean, colorfully described as PIGS (Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain, but Cyprus also can easily be included here, if not France). It was the second pro-national impulse, which, unfortunately, later went so far to create another division, between the creditors and debtors. The latter put on the agenda another important issue, that of “German hegemony” within the EU. Thus, the next division line was created on the continent, on the North – South axis, with social and economic inequalities, and disparities in its background, leading towards open dispute and contention, if not feud along this line.

- External and Internal security crisis. The first one is strictly linked to the problems in Ukraine, which started in autumn 2013 and led not only towards internal upheaval, but also the forced annexation of Crimea by Russia (March 2014) and later to occupation and open conflict in the region of Donbas (unfortunately, still on the agenda until today). Thus, the Eastern border of the EU (and NATO) was put on fire. Further, in the same year of 2014 another issue emerged as dangerous for Europe (and the world), that is the emergence of so called Muslim state of ISIS/Daesh with its brutal impact and behavior. Constant conflict linked to ISIS’s appearance, combined with domestic war in Syria and destabilization of Iraq, produced, as is well known, another challenge for the EU and its member states, which is an unprecedented wave of migrants which came to Europe, mainly from the Middle East, but also Africa and partially Asia in 2015. It almost immediately produced the second, internal security crisis, as well as further controversies among the ruling European elites. As is known, Chancellor Angela Merkel came out with her *Willkommen Politik*, which clashed with another approach, promoted by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, in power, almost uncontested on domestic scene, since spring 2010. It was he who decided to bring back to Europe the walls and barbed wires. And later, when the European Commission came out with an idea of quotas for the member states to absorb the refugees and migrants coming to the continent, not only Budapest, but also Visegrad Group (V-4) countries (Czechia – the Czech Republic, Poland and Slova-

kia) openly refused to adjust to this decision. In response, in wide Western European political elites and even wider media coverage, especially in Germany, the V-4 countries started to be described as a “gathering of renegades” or “doubtful member states”. Thus, the so well-known and so badly remembered East – West axis has unfortunately re-appeared on the continent. Meanwhile, both external and internal security crises gave as a result the third and fourth pro-national impulses, probably the strongest one could imagine, with the biggest impact on events to come. How strong and important was this “refugee factor”, was seen perfectly well in several following elections in the EU member states, which in some cases, like Austria, Czechia, Italy and Slovenia, brought about the same kind of anti-migration governments as in Budapest. No surprise then, that Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz has come up with the idea of “anti-migrant coalition of willing,” or even an “axis” of Rome – Vienna and Berlin.² The latter came to this agenda due to Orbán’s old friend, Horst Seehofer of Bavaria, who became the new interior minister in re-created German Grand Coalition and is constantly threatening to implement his anti-migration platform without Chancellor’s Merkel approval. The situation in Germany is so dynamic at this writing that the media is openly afraid of undermining the stability of the government in Berlin, not even excluding the dramatic scenario of bringing down the Coalition, which could put Mrs. Merkel’s rule even further in doubt.³

• When migrants and refugees, in some cases equalized with a danger of terrorist attacks, which took place at that time in Europe,⁴ were already dominating the public sphere, the year of 2016 has brought about another unexpected (by ruling elites) event: the British referendum on Brexit with the decision to leave the Union. This popular vote in the UK, instigated by Nigel Farage and his (at that time) United Kingdom Independence Party, UKIP, has shown the world public not only a new charismatic leader, who is ready to fight against the establishment, but especially that he and his like are supported by a political force ready to change the system. Among many new features exposed by Brexit, it is easy to detect many

² V. Golod, *Austria’s Kurz wants ‘axis of willing against illegal immigration*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/austrias-sebastian-kurz-wants-axis-of-willing-against-illegal-migration/> (15.06.2018).

³ J. Delcker, *Bavaria’s man in Berlin pushes Merkel to brink*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/horst-seehofer-bavarias-man-in-berlin-pushes-angela-merkel-to-brink-on-migration-policy/> (15.06.2018).

⁴ See their description until the mid of 2017: A. Foster, *Terror attacks timeline: From Paris and Brussels terror to most recent attacks in Europe*, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/693421/Terror-attacks-timeline-France-Brussels-Europe-ISIS-killings-Germany-dates-terrorism> (15.06.2018).

new domestic dividing lines: for instance between England and Scotland, major cities and provincial ones, better and less educated parts of society. Simultaneously all of this is combined with mixed feelings and in some section of society with strong distrust towards the migrants (not only Muslims, but also those from Central and Eastern Europe, mainly Poland, who arrived on the island after 2004 enlargement of the EU). This way the previous slogan of “ever closer Union” has to be replaced by another one: “ever looser Union”. What is worse, the previous uninterrupted integration process for the first time ever was replaced by another option: disintegration. It was the fifth pro-national impulse, with a clear-cut message: national interests are more important than regional or continental.

• Then came the year 2017 when once again the US, as in 2008 has produced another factor with special meaning to the EU: election of anti-establishment Donald Trump as the American president. He came out with his strong anti-immigration and national agenda, encapsulated by the loud slogan: *America First*. As president, Donald Trump invigorated not only a farewell to already advanced process of creating TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership) with the EU, but also created some real disruptions in relations with the Community (with Germany especially) and also other G-7 member states.⁵ “The Trump factor” has produced a big split in the transatlantic relationship, until now treated in Europe as the cornerstone of its security. Former high-ranking Clinton administration official Strobe Talbot is harsh with his judgments: Trump “is the democratic world’s worst nightmare. He has crippled NATO, the North Atlantic community, the European Union and now the G7. In Putin’s zero-sum worldview, that is a dream come true”.⁶ In effect, in the EU once again the security factor emerged as crucial on the agenda. For the Europeans it was the sixth pro-national impulse with another very important message to all nationalistic forces everywhere: even the United States of America, the cradle of liberal democracy and the neoliberal course in economy has rejected them, why shouldn’t we?

• Finally parliamentary elections in Italy in spring 2018 have produced another shock wave in the European elites. Mark Leonard, the head of the European Council of Foreign Relations, is probably right, when he writes: “An Italian government combining two very different strands of populism will pose a serious threat to the European project, because it could form the core of a new federation of populists and Euroskeptics that

⁵ S. Talbot, *Trump just ruined G7. Now what*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/trump-just-blew-up-the-g7-now-what/> (12.06.2018).

⁶ *Ibidem*.

have hitherto operated separately”.⁷ However, there is even something deeper than that. After Hungary with Mr. Orbán since 2010 and Poland ruled (from the back seat) by its “strongman” Jarosław Kaczyński since late 2015, some other countries followed their “populist” and “nationalist” footsteps: Czechia and Austria in late 2017 and Italy with Slovenia in the first half of 2018. Thus, we have not only the populism which reached Rome, as the influential *Foreign Affairs* magazine has observed,⁸ but we have also a group of countries openly Euroskeptical and national by content. As a result yet another division line has appeared in the EU: between federalists and inter-governmental cooperation proponents, as well as liberals versus illiberal forces. Since then, not only commercial or trade and economic issues were under dispute, but also the political systems, institutional frameworks, and the system of values. Thus the final, until now, pro-national impulse has come to the fore.

• All episode, incidents or occurrences described above lead us to probably the major and most important division lines as we can detect in the EU now: on the domestic scene of every EU member state (to a different extent), where liberals are fighting with “illiberal” forces (mostly right-wing conservatives), proponents of federalism with believers in inter-governmental cooperation, rich versus poor, educated versus less educated, Christian versus non-Christian, citizens of big cities with countrymen, etc. Due to this upheaval, a whole palette of new leaders has emerged, openly contesting the current elites. To mention just the most important, emblematic ones: Beppe Grillo and Matteo Salvini in Italy, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland, Hans-Christian Strache, Sebastian Kurz, and Norbert Hofer in Austria, Nigel Farage in the UK, Marine Le Pen in France, Timo Soini in Finland, Geert Wilders in Netherlands, Andrej Babiš and Tomio Okamura in Czechia, Andrej Danko in Slovakia, Janez Janša in Slovenia. Of course, the line is much longer than that. However, what has to be said in this respect: all of them are strong, charismatic leaders: sometimes even in their governments and countries, but without exclusion in their political movements or parties. Thus we have another list, which seems to be as rich and colorful as a rainbow. Some of them are already ruling in their particular countries: Five Stars (leftist) and Northern League (right wing) in Italy (ruling since June 2018), Fidesz in Hungary (since May 2010), Law and Justice (PiS in its

⁷ M. Leonard, *Will Italy's Populists Upend Europe?*, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/italy-five-star-league-government-by-mark-leonard-2018-05> (10.06.2018).

⁸ E. Jones, *Italy's Revolt Against the EU*, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/italy/2018-05-24/italys-revolt-against-eu> (10.06.2018).

Polish abbreviation, since November 2015) in Poland, ANO in Czechia and Freedom Party and Austrian People's Party in Austria (since Fall 2017), and the Slovenian Democratic Party since June 2018. We also have those, who had or have an enormous or at least an important role in the political landscapes of their particular countries, like United Kingdom Independence Party, National Front (recently National Union) in France, the Finns Party in Finland, Sweden Democrats, People's Party in Denmark, Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) in Belgium, the Party for Freedom in Netherlands, Freedom and Direct Democracy in Czechia, Slovak National Party or Slovenian Democratic Party. Only few, like Five Stars in Italy, Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain, are left-oriented. All the others are right-wing or extreme-right political groupings, sharing the same anti-immigration platform, doubtful in the shape of the European integration process, ready to fight for sovereignty and national interest. Following the footsteps of Donald Trump they are constantly ready to shout in big public meetings or rallies: Italy, Hungary, Slovakia, or Slovenia – first.

What Is the Future?

Observing the current European scene in the middle of 2018, one thing seems to be more than obvious: nothing can be resolved within the EU and Eurozone without German involvement and engagement. To combat this “German hegemony,” which obviously has grown also due to the Brexit and recent domination of Italian domestic scene by Euroskeptic forces, probably the only good scenario for their Euro-enthusiastic opponents is re-creation of the (so effective for so long) Berlin – Paris axis, especially after the double win (presidential and parliamentary) of Emmanuel Macron in France in 2017. It is even more relevant because the new French president has exposed himself as a strong believer in European integration in its liberal and open form, as it was known for decades.

Probably an even better concept for whole of Europe would be the reemergence of Weimar Triangle, of Germany, France and Poland, unifying major forces of “old” and “new” Europe (to use Donald Rumsfeld's famous formula from the beginning of this century).⁹ However, the current strongly Euroskeptic authorities in Poland, engaged in open debate with Brussels on the rule of law and legal overhaul, and after triggering infringement proceedings by the European Commission of art. 7.1. of

⁹ *US: Rumsfeld's “Old” and “New” Europe Touches on Uneasy Divide*, Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty, January 24, 2003, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1102012.html> (10.06.2018).

the EU Treaty,¹⁰ are not ready to reinvigorate this triangular cooperation, initially instigated, by the way, by Warsaw. Especially that after the year of sometimes passionate, and not only legal, debate, in June 2018 the Commission has triggered a second step, that is a disciplinary hearing on the rule of law in the country (another candidate for this procedure is Hungary).

It is a pity, because the new, or rather after a long debate reincarnated, Grand Coalition in Germany has declared in its program readiness to re-invent the Weimar Triangle. This is important statement, as Germany and France seem to have different opinions what to do next, under the pressure of so many challenges and direct threats towards the dominant (until now) liberal order. Germany, and Chancellor Merkel herself are openly stating that they would like to have a “multi-speed Europe” scenario, which means: we want as many participants of the integration process, even including the Western Balkans, to keep the continent under the same umbrella and system of values. It is in German best interests as well, as the borders of Poland and Czechia are so close to Germany’s center and capital city.

Emmanuel Macron, on the other hand, is sympathetic to an old French idea of “concentric circles,” where there is of course a hard core inside. The problem is not only who belongs to it (Eurozone, initial six “forefathers” of integration, or even a “Versaille Four” of France, Germany, Italy and Spain – and how to get it with the current Italian government?), but also that it almost automatically creates some other division lines, among the core or center and periphery, with some countries in the Eastern part of the continent or Mediterranean basin as obvious candidates for a “second category” of membership, if not outcasts immediately.

On the other hand, the major problems with all the proposals given by such diversified national forces in the EU now is their unilateralism. In their vocabulary and value system, national interests obviously prevail, with solidarity and collective identity overshadowed by “sovereign state rights”. Unfortunately, these kinds of narrow minded programs, full of particular interests and egoistic instincts, create nothing else than a European continent divided and fragmented or fractured, if not split. As such, the EU is not a candidate for a major power-center anymore, even in the meaning of its strengths until now, such as its pioneering nature in normative or institutional framework or soft power hub status.

¹⁰ Initiation of the process: <http://www.thenews.pl/1/10/Artykul/318027,EU-launching-proceedings-against-Poland-over-legal-overhaul>. Current state of affairs at the time of writing this text: D.M. Herszenhorn, J. Barigazzi, M. De La Baume, *Poland will face disciplinary hearing on rule-of-law dispute with EU*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-rule-of-law-will-face-disciplinary-hearing-on-with-eu/> (15.06.2018).

In these circumstances, for all the other power centers, from the US, through Russia to China, the EU presents an open invitation to again impose a (in)famous divide and rule formula. It is more than obvious that especially in the current globalized era of strictly united markets, and of multiple links among the people, Europe can be strong and effective only as a united force, not fragmented into several smaller or larger nation states, loosely linked by their intergovernmental cooperation. The EU is in crisis, but its need to be re-invented, as soon as possible, is obvious.

What is to be done, however? Even for this simple question, we have no one approach. Once again liberal elites are clashing with illiberal forces, each of them producing their own proposals and solutions. Liberals are still ready to fight for an open continent, ready to accept foreigners, which was confirmed by Chancellor Merkel's words: "I consider illegal immigration to be one of the biggest challenges for the European Union and think that we therefore should not act unilaterally, without consultation and at the expense of third parties".¹¹ Her opponents, however, in Bavaria and elsewhere, are ready to act exactly unilaterally, to close the frontiers and their domestic scene (just to have it for themselves), and to stage a showdown with "those ugly liberals," ready to fight a "rotten democracy" and "decadent life-style," as it goes in their rich and colorful vocabulary.

If liberal forces want to prevail and not to give power to their vocal and ever-stronger opponents, probably the first thing they should do is to come back to *demos*, to the people, so deeply disappointed and ready to support new charismatic leaders, promising anything, any miracle and short-cuts just to achieve their particular goals, starting from money and power (prime minister Andrej Babiš is the second richest man in his country, he is also accused of alleged frauds of stemming from misuse of EU sources; one of Hungarian authors, Bálint Magyar, describes the new regime in his country as "post-communist mafia state").¹²

Yes, we can arrange a regime change, but it doesn't mean better than before. The case of Hungary and Poland, until Italy's new appearance the most spectacular cases of the triumph of "illiberal regimes," only confirms that what is going on under this "counterrevolutionary" umbrella, is mainly the a change of elites, with the new one already corrupted or un-transparent at the very beginning. What the new regimes produce, is not necessarily better governance, since the rule of law is frequently un-

¹¹ M. Karnitschnig, *Angela Merkel's political near-death experience in Bavarian brawl*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkels-battle-with-bavaria-refugees-migration-masterplan/> (15.06.2018).

¹² B. Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State: The Case of Hungary*, Budapest 2016.

dermined or replaced by the rule by law of one party, or its leader. At the same time the new state media is not public, but partial and ideologically biased, the budget and decision making process is highly centralized, and checks and balances replaced by charismatic leaders and the principle of one man rule. Is that what we want on the whole continent?

Europe should be a continent of inclusive politics, of moderate (not without borders) tolerance, and not another example of power politics (of Donald Trump on the one hand, or some famous autocrats, starting from Vladimir Putin or Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on the other). Once again, we need equal – political, social, economic – rights for all, with a social safety net, and public pension, education and health systems as countermeasures to the previous domination of markets and the private sector. Yes, liberals must sound partially like social-democrats if they want to survive in power under the new wave of populism.

Simultaneously, liberal forces, not so good in their self-criticism, have to say one thing openly: after the previous domination of “market fundamentalism” and the private sector, which were promoting mostly the rich, and what is proved in rather wide literature already, it is time to come back to some traditional European strong points, like public values overwhelming individual egoism and narrow interpretations. Thirdly, social justice must be back on the agenda as soon as possible. At the same time, liberal elites cannot retreat from some of their fundamental principles, and especially those concerning freedoms, instead of coercion, centralization and narrow nationalism.

Without that effort, without self-examination of liberal mainstream, the European scene soon would be or even will be soon dominated by real populists and demagogues, centralizing their power, dismantling the separation of powers into strong domination of the executive branch, and explaining all current problems in narrow nationalist terms, blaming for troubles and problems all the others (refugees, migrants, Islamic terrorists, foreign powers, or even colonial centers, starting from Brussels, not Moscow).¹³

Mitchell A. Orenstein is absolutely right, coming to this conclusion: “Those who care about democracy in Poland, Hungary, and elsewhere in Europe and beyond should acknowledge that many voters are buying into the nationalist right’s vision of a social state that advances national priorities, cares for the poor, and supports families. Liberal democrats cannot out-xenophobe the nationalist right. But they can and should slip their

¹³ As prime minister V. Orbán has done in a public speech in March 2012, claiming: “Nem leszünk gyarmat” (We will not be a colony again), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_yVAobI2d0 (in Hungarian, 12.06.2018).

own ideological blinders and learn a thing or two from their adversaries about policies that work for the people”.¹⁴

The EU and its institutions have two major exams in front of them: the finalization of Brexit negotiations and process, with the UK as a first piece of disintegration on the European landscape, followed by the next elections to the European Parliament in May 2019. As of now it has some 220 out of 751 parliamentarians which qualify themselves as Euroskeptics. How many of them we will have afterwards? It is a game of highest possible stakes, no doubt about it. Instead of sharing values and interests, the divided EU (also the G-7), as described in this study, is producing a gathering of clashes and open disputes. Each side, liberal and anti-liberal, is accusing each other of producing “false statements”. Can the EU survive this polarization?

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¹⁴ <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/socialism-and-populism-in-poland-by-mitchell-a--orenstein-2018-06> (15.06.2018).

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