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Democratic Backsliding in Poland: The Importance of the Values of Liberal Democracy and the Rule of Law in Polish-American Relations

Regres demokracji w Polsce: znaczenie wartości demokracji liberalnej i rządów prawa w stosunkach polsko-amerykańskich

• **Abstract** •

Reforms implemented in recent years by the Polish government of Law and Justice party are described as a manifestation of democratic backsliding. Changes in the judiciary and the media are seen as the main signs of departing from the basic values of liberal democracy and the rule of law. They met with strong international criticism, mainly from the institutions of the European Union and Western European countries. These changes are also observed with concern in the United States, but so far the US reaction has been moderate. This was primarily due to the limited interest of President Donald Trump's administration in promoting democracy. Later, this issue has been overshadowed by the destabilization of military security in the region. Anyway, the US reaction to the deviation of the Polish authorities from the principles of the democratic state of law must be decisive, but also constructive, based on dialogue, cooperation, clear criteria and a joint search for solutions. First of all, it must not violate the American security guarantees towards Poland.

• **Abstrakt** •

Reformy wprowadzone w ostatnich latach w Polsce przez rząd Prawa i Sprawiedliwości określane są jako przejaw regresu demokracji. Zmiany w sądownictwie i mediach postrzegane są jako główne przejawy odchodzenia od podstawowych wartości liberalnej demokracji i rządów prawa. Spotkały się one z silną krytyką międzynarodową, głównie ze strony instytucji Unii Europejskiej i państw Europy Zachodniej. Zmiany te z niepokojem obserwowane są również w Stanach Zjednoczonych, ale jak dotąd reakcja USA była umiarkowana. Wynikało to przede wszystkim z ograniczonego zainteresowania administracji prezydenta Donalda Trumpa promowaniem demokracji. Później kwestia ta została przyćmiona przez destabilizację bezpieczeństwa militarnego w regionie. Niemniej jednak reakcja USA na odchylenie polskich władz od zasad demokratycznego państwa prawa musi być zdecydowana, ale też konstruktywna, oparta na dialogu, współpracy, jasnych kryteriach i wspólnym poszukiwaniu rozwiązań. Przede wszystkim nie może ona naruszać amerykańskich gwarancji bezpieczeństwa wobec Polski.

Keywords: Polish-American relations; democratic backsliding; liberal democracy; rule of law; independent judiciary; free media

Słowa kluczowe: stosunki polsko-amerykańskie; regres demokracji; demokracja liberalna; rządy prawa; niezależne sądownictwo; wolne media

Introduction

In 2015, power in Poland passed to the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PiS) party under the leadership of Jarosław Kaczyński, which presents an illiberal legal and political philosophy, Polish-centric, conservative-national, quasi-authoritarian and populist ideology (Bunikowski, 2018). On May 10, its representative, Andrzej Duda, won the presidential elections, and on October 25, PiS won the parliamentary elections. With PiS coming to power, Poland began to implement a conservative agenda that runs counter to liberal values, including the basic principles of liberal democracy and the rule of law. The PiS party with a pursuit of illiberal conservative patriotism carries out far-reaching changes in Poland, including in the area of values and the political system (Jančoškova, 2017). Consolidating its electoral base under the slogan of “the good change” [Polish: *dobra zmiana*], PiS passes legislation dismantling key parts of the liberal democratic order, which was created during the post-socialist systemic transition. An element of this policy is the exchange of elites in the judiciary, public media, civil service, state-owned companies, cultural institutions, and other public bodies (Bill, 2020). These changes have reduced checks and balances, which so far mainly concerned the reduction of the independence of the judiciary (Lührmann et al., 2018). PiS also engages in majoritarian political tendencies, like accelerating the legislative procedure without proper parliamentary and public review and debate (Buchanan-Ponczek, 2021). The PiS government maintains high support, inter alia, thanks to the implementation of populist slogans, including the main election promise of an increase in social spending, through many social programs like the standard “500+” program for children (Toplišek, 2020). The ideological basis of its social policy are conservative and Catholic values (Yatsyk, 2019), including the preservation of traditional family and gender roles (Gwiazda, 2020). International institutions researching the quality of democracy, including the V-Dem Institute, Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders, confirm the significant democratic backsliding in Poland in recent years.

The aim of the paper is to analyze and evaluate the reaction of the United States to legal changes undermining the independence of the judiciary and the freedom of the media in Poland. In national and international literature, these changes are seen as the most important manifestations of democratic backsliding. It is not my

intention to settle the constitutionality of the reforms introduced by the ruling camp of the Law and Justice. I focus on the perception of these changes by the American authorities and their real and potential impact on Polish-American relations. The first research question is, how important are values of liberal democracy and the rule of law in Polish-American relations? The second question is, whether the US response to legal changes undermining the independence of the judiciary and media freedom in Poland has been sufficient? The third question is, how the United States could react to counteract effectively democratic backsliding in Poland? During the research I used the method of analyzing text sources.

Discussion on democratic backsliding

During the “third wave of democratization” in the 1990s, a wealth of literature appeared on the processes of democratization of political regimes, including in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. The optimism resulting from the overthrow of communism and the euphoria accompanying the liberalization of the world meant that very little attention was paid to the issue of democratic backsliding (Sönmez, 2020). Nevertheless, in the publications of that period there were warnings about threats to liberal democracy (Zakaria, 1997), but they were in the minority. This situation changed significantly in the 21st century, and especially in the second decade of the century. Democratic backsliding is gaining momentum and its range basically covers all regions of the world, becoming a global trend, which is clearly noted in the literature (Karolewski, 2021). However, there is no consensus among researchers around the world that pessimistic visions of the erosion of democracy prevail (Sönmez, 2020).

Democratic backsliding takes many forms and manifests itself as “little-noticed, incremental steps, most of which are legal and many of which appear innocuous” (Mickey, Levitsky, & Way, 2017). According to Richard Bellamy and Sandra Kröger (2021, p. 2), “democratic backsliding consists of a retreat by an incumbent government from democratic values and practices with the intention of curtailing criticism and inhibiting democratic opposition. As such, it involves a shift from democracy towards autocracy”. In turn, Haemin Jee, Hans Lueders, and Rachel Myrick (2019, p. 26) indicate that “democratic backsliding is any change of the formal or informal rules that constitute a political community which reduces that community’s ability to guarantee the freedom of choice, freedom from tyranny, or equality in freedom to its citizens or groups of citizens”. Backsliding concerns the processes through which elected rulers weaken checks on executive power, curtail political and civil

liberties, and undermine the integrity of the electoral system (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). Although the term ‘democratic backsliding’ is very broad, in practice it most often comes down to the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy (Bermeo, 2016). Anna M. Meyerrose (2021, p. 2) noticed that “in Europe specifically, cases of backsliding are characterized by populist leaders consolidating their power, dismantling courts, weakening the rule of law, encroaching on freedom of speech and the press, and limiting opposition and minority rights”. The democratically elected government weakens democratic institutions and affects their functioning. In the transitional period, this causes a departure from liberal democracy. However, the government’s desire to maintain itself at all costs may, over time, lead to the transition to full autocracy.

Edoardo Grillo and Carlo Prato presented a model according to which democratic backsliding can occur even if the majority of voters and incumbents intrinsically dislike violations of democratic norms. Incumbents, referred to as opportunistic authoritarians, increase the chances of their election success through challenging the norms of democracy. This is due to the way in which voters form retrospective judgments of incumbents, which can create an electoral reward for incremental forms of democratic backsliding. Voters would react negatively to sudden blows to democratic norms, but they are not opposed to gradual backsliding (Grillo & Prato, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated democratic backsliding in Poland. The legislative proposals that appeared at that time, including those concerning the election process, resulted in regular decline in the quality of the democratic institutions (Skrzypek, 2021). In the literature on the subject, the socio-political regime that is taking shape in Poland is most often referred to as the “illiberal democracy”, which is to stand in opposition to the liberal paradigm promoted by the West (Yatsyk, 2019). Another term is “electoral democracy”, in which reasonably free and fair multiparty elections are maintained (Lührmann et al., 2018). We can also come across the term “hybrid democracy”, that is, containing both democratic and authoritarian solutions (Harper, 2020). In national, European and world scientific literature, and even more often in journalism, the direction of changes in Poland is described as populist-authoritarian (Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016), neo-authoritarian, or even fascist (Follis, 2019). The last of these terms rather illustrate the possible general direction of changes than provide a description of the current political reality in Poland.

The Democracy Playbook presents recommendations for the actions of individual national and international entities to counteract and reverse democratic

backsliding. It also indicates suggested ways of cooperation between these entities, including international organizations, national civil society organizations (CSOs), and non-government organizations (NGOs) (Eisen et al., 2019). According to Richard Bellamy and Sandra Kröger (2021), a constitutional pluralist (CP) approach can offer a theoretically coherent rationale for the actions of the European Union institutions to stop undemocratic changes by limiting EU funds and voting rights. The authors define these measures as “value” differentiated integration (DI). They refute allegations of two alleged weaknesses of CP and DI, i.e., that they could be used to give a spurious legitimacy to attempts by democratic backsliding member states to confront EU values with national political and constitutional traditions, and that they potentially subvert the uniformity and coherence of EU law.

Major reforms undermining liberal democracy and the rule of law in Poland

Reforms in the area of the judiciary

According to the president of PiS, Jarosław Kaczyński, the judiciary in Poland required serious reforms because it had been under the control of communists and their heirs (Nyyssönen, 2018). On October 8, 2015, the parliament dominated by the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska – PO) party elected five members of the Constitutional Tribunal (Trybunał Konstytucyjny – TK), which was annulled on November 25, 2015 by the PiS-dominated parliament, which elected another five judges a week later. President Andrzej Duda approved the new judges while refusing to approve those originally elected. This action was a beginning of the so-called “constitutional crisis”, manifested in legal disputes, fierce political struggle and social protests. The TK, chaired by Andrzej Rzepliński, found the appointment of judges inconsistent with the Constitution, for which the PiS community described him as a “main public enemy” (Bunikowski, 2018), and the government of Beata Szydło withheld the publication of the rulings of the TK. On December 20, 2016, Julia Przyłębska, a supporter of PiS policy, became the new president of the TK.

The second main field of political struggle for judiciary was the Supreme Court (Sąd Najwyższy – SN). President Duda vetoed the act on the Supreme Court passed by the lower house of parliament – Sejm – on July 20, 2017, and submitted his own bill, which was passed on December 8, 2017. At that time, the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission warned that the proposed changes were aimed at solutions used in the Soviet bloc, where the executive controlled the actions of judges

and prosecutors (European Stability Initiative, n.d.). The act, among other things, introduced the controversial Disciplinary Chamber (Izba Dyscyplinarna – ID) for judges. Pursuant to the Act on the Supreme Court in 2018, the parliament tried to shorten the tenure of SN judges who had reached retirement age. The attempt to shorten the constitutionally defined six-year term of the First President of the SN, Małgorzata Gersdorf, by two years was particularly controversial. On June 24, 2019, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled that the Polish legislation concerning the lowering of the retirement age of judges of the SN was contrary to EU law (European Court of Justice, 2019a). The pressure of international institutions forced the Polish authorities to reinstate judges (Anghel, 2020). Ultimately, in May 2020, Małgorzata Manowska, proposed by PiS, was appointed as the First President of the Supreme Court, with considerable political and legal controversy.

In the meantime, in mid-2017, Jarosław Kaczyński launched a sharp attack on judiciary and judges, referring to “the moral collapse”, “ineffectiveness”, and “formalism” (Bunikowski, 2018). On July 12, 2017, the Sejm passed the *Act on the National Council of the Judiciary* (Ustawa o Krajowej Radzie Sądownictwa – KRS), which was vetoed by President Duda. The new act on the KRS proposed by the president entered into force in January 2018. On its basis, the term of office of all members of the KRS expired, and in April 2018, in an atmosphere of considerable legal controversy, a new KRS was constituted. In September 2018, the European Network of Councils for the Judiciary (ENCJ) suspended the membership of the KRS due to failure to fulfil the condition of independence from the executive. On November 19, 2019, the ECJ issued a ruling that stated that neither the ID nor the new KRS offered sufficient guarantees of independence (European Court of Justice, 2019b). Despite this, in 2020, judges that were critical of government action and ones attempting to correctly apply EU law were subject to disciplinary action (Meyerrose, 2021). The ECJ ordered the suspension of the Disciplinary Chamber, which was ignored by the authorities (Anghel, 2020). Subsequent judgments of the EJC of July 15, 2021 (European Court of Justice, 2021) made the Polish government to announce the liquidation of the ID, but suggesting the establishment of an alternative model of disciplinary proceedings for judges and other lawyers.

In recent years, a number of other amendments to the law concerning the functioning of the judiciary in Poland have been introduced. Polish legal scholars are divided over the issue of the violation of the rule of law by the PiS government. The vast majority of them criticize the introduced changes and define them as violating the Constitution, while there are also those who legitimize the actions of the authorities (Bunikowski, 2018). There were a number of social protests against the changes in the judiciary, including those organized by the Committee for the

Defense of Democracy (Komitet Obrony Demokracji – KOD), established on December 2, 2015. The changes were strongly criticized by the Polish Ombudsman Adam Bodnar. The reform of the judiciary has been also criticized by a number of international institutions, including the European Union, the Council of Europe, and the European Court of Human Rights. The Polish authorities, however, question the right of these institutions to interfere in the legislative process in Poland.

Reforms in the area of the media

In 2015–2016, the PiS government also dealt with the reform of the media, which was to lead to their Polonization. On December 30, 2015, the so-called “Small Media Act” was introduced, which shortened the terms of office of members of the management boards and supervisory boards of public media – the Polish Television (Telewizja Polska – TVP) and the Polish Radio (Polskie Radio – PR). In the opinion of the authors, the act was to depoliticize the public media. In turn, in the opinion of critics, the change was supposed to politicize it and marginalize the role of the National Broadcasting Council (Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji – KRRiT), which was to be the guardian of media freedom in Poland (Surowiec, Kania-Lundholm, & Winiarska-Brodowska, 2020). The Constitutional Tribunal, led by Andrzej Rzepliński, ruled that the act was partially unconstitutional (Trybunał Konstytucyjny, 2016).

In the spring of 2016, when a new legislative initiatives appeared under the so-called “Big Media Act”, in the form of a three-tier regulation on national media, audiovisual fee and executive decrees, it has received heavy national and international criticism. Finally, on June 22, 2016, the *National Media Council Act* was adopted, which replaced the “Small Media Act”. The National Media Council, appointed by the parliament and the President, was given the power to appoint the boards and executives of public media (Surowiec et al., 2020). Newly branded “National Media” started promoting patriotic and Christian values by pitting them against liberal values. Critics believe that the PiS government uses tremendous propaganda in the public media it controls (Bunikowski, 2018). Public media receive multi-billion dollar support from the state budget. Controversies are also raised by the state subsidizing the government-friendly Catholic media led by Father Tadeusz Rydzyk – the “Radio Maryja” and the “Trwam” television, which have a significant potential for political mobilization (Potz, 2019). Through the public and church-owned media, PiS is conveying the narrative that before 2015 Poland was “in ruins”, lawlessness and corruption prevailed, elections were rigged, elites lived in prosperity at the

expense of oppressed society, and political opposition and trade unions were fought with the use of the police (Tworzecki, 2019).

On August 11, 2021, after a controversial reassumption of voting, the Sejm adopted an amendment to the *Act on the National Broadcasting Council*, which changes the rules for granting broadcasting licenses for media with capital from outside the European Economic Area. According to critics, the act targets the TVN Group, which is the owner of the largest private TV stations in Poland that criticize the politics of the PiS government. The entry into force of the law would force the American company Discovery to sell TVN, which is why its opponents call it “Lex TVN”. The TVN24 news station had to wait over 18 months for the extension of the broadcasting license, and its granting was formally blocked due to the participation of American capital. For fear of not obtaining a license in Poland, TVN24 obtained a Dutch license, which is enabled by EU law. Ultimately, on September 22, 2021, i.e., four days before the expiry of the Polish license, the KRRiT extended it for 10 years. At the same time, it called on the Americans to abandon the majority stake of shares in TVN Group. This did not end the attacks on the TV station, because on December 17, 2021, by surprise, the Sejm passed “Lex TVN”, breaking the statute of the chamber. President Duda, however, decided to veto the bill.

United States reaction to democratic backsliding in Poland

Actions taken so far

At the end of the presidency, Barack Obama expressed concern about the legal changes in Poland concerning the Constitutional Tribunal. He did this both during telephone conversations with President Duda and during the meeting accompanying the NATO summit in Warsaw on July 8, 2016. President Obama emphasized the respect for Polish sovereignty, but at the same time expressed his hope that legislative work would be undertaken to maintain the independence of the TK. He stated that democratic institutions were the core of democracy, therefore he emphasized the importance of “the rule of law, independent judiciaries, and a free press” (Prezydent.pl, 2016).

President Donald Trump’s administration did not pay much attention to upholding democracy and the rule of law in the CEE countries. President Trump has challenged the importance of many democratic international organizations and institutions, including NATO, the EU, and the WTO. He supported illiberal and Eurosceptic political groups in Europe, including PiS (Appel, 2019). Despite

international disapproval of the illiberal shift in Poland, the PiS government was able to maintain very good relations with the United States during the presidency of Donald Trump. This was manifested, among others, by increasing the US military presence in Poland, or hosting a Middle East summit in Warsaw (*Poland's Politics*, 2019). The tightening of the PiS government's relations with the Donald Trump administration was supposed to be an antidote to the accusations from the European Union of violating the principles of the democratic state of law, which was to help maintain Poland's credibility in the international arena.

Despite the fact that the previous American administration was usually restrained in the face of systemic changes in Poland, there were some exceptions. The Department of State (DoS), while it was led by Rex Tillerson, issued several press statements criticizing the legal changes in Poland. On July 21, 2017, during the adoption of the *Act on the Supreme Court*, the DoS expressed concerns about legal changes that “undermine judicial independence and weaken the rule of law in Poland”. The DoS called on the Polish authorities to respect “democratic institutions and system of checks and balances”. It also stated that “a strong and healthy democracy in Poland is vital to relations between our two countries” (Department of State, 2017a). In turn, on December 12, 2017, the DoS expressed concern about the fine imposed by the National Broadcasting Council on TVN for alleged biased reporting of demonstrations outside Parliament in December 2016 of people opposing changes in the judiciary. The statement stated that the decision “undermine media freedom in Poland” and that “free and independent media are essential to a strong democracy” (Department of State, 2017b). Also during various press conferences, DoS spokesman Heather Nauert informed that the American administration was anxiously watching the legal changes in Poland and stressed that “healthy and strong democracy in Poland is a vital component of U.S.-Polish relations” (Department of State, 2017c). During Mike Pompeo's office as Secretary of State, the DoS no longer issued official statements criticizing legal changes in Poland. In its expert opinions, however, the DoS noticed international criticism concerning the restriction of the freedom of the judiciary and the independence of judges, as well as the persistent progressive bias in state media and the campaign by the governing party against opposition media (Department of State, 2020).

Legal changes affecting the independence of the judiciary and the freedom of the media caused considerable anxiety in the US Congress. On February 10, 2016, the bipartisan group of the US Senators – John McCain, Dick Durbin and Ben Cardin – in a letter to Prime Minister Beata Szydło expressed their concern about the legal changes “that could infringe on fundamental values including freedom of the press and an independent judiciary”. They called on the Polish government to

“reinforce its respect for universal human rights, the rule of law, and adherence to liberal democratic principles”, which would “restore Poland’s position as a leading democracy in Central Europe” (Cardin, McCain, & Durbin, 2016). A number of American organizations tried to draw attention of Congress to the disturbing legal changes in Poland. For example, the New York City Bar Association in its letter of June 27, 2018 to United States congressional leaders on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations expressed concerns about “the impending final step in the politicization of the Polish judiciary” (New York City Bar, 2018).

The democratic Senator Bob Menendez – Chairman of the Committee – was particularly active in defending the freedom of the media. On May 3, 2018, in the statement on media freedom, he indicated Poland, along with Sudan, as examples of countries that pursue legislative efforts to restrict media freedom and free expression (Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2018). On February 1, 2021, he issued the statement expressing concerns regarding proposed advertising tax targeting independent media in Poland (Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2021). Similar statements were also made by other members of the Committee. While work on “TVN Lex” was carried out in Poland, on August 4, 2021, Bipartisan Group of US Senators – Jeanne Shaheen, Dick Durbin, Chris Murphy, Chris Coons, Ben Cardin and Jim Risch – issued a joint statement warning Polish Government against pursuing legislation that targeted free media and jeopardized American investments. They accused the Polish government of “continued democratic backsliding” and “undermining media freedoms”. They announced in a statement that these and other actions detrimental to jointly held democratic values could have “negative implications for defense, business and trade relations” (Shaheen et al., 2021).

On November 3, 2021, an independent US government agency – the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), also known as the US Helsinki Commission – held a meeting on the regression of democracy in Poland and Hungary. A commission made up of representatives of the US Congress, the administration, and leading think tanks helps formulate the US government’s policy towards countries violating democratic standards. During the sessions, there was consensus that these countries violate democratic norms and weaken the cohesion of the European Union, and in the case of Hungary, also of NATO. However, there was no consensus on what steps should be taken with these countries. Only Heather A. Conley from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) advised the application of sanctions in the event of continuation of anti-liberal policies by the Polish and Hungarian governments. According to her, sanctions could consist in limiting economic cooperation and transferring US troops to other countries in the region (Zalewski, 2021). The meeting of the committee, however,

generated limited attention in the US Congress and in the press. A month later, a hearing by the US House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber of the presidents of Warsaw, Budapest, Prague and Bratislava, as signatories of the so-called Free Cities Pact, took place. The President of Warsaw, Rafał Trzaskowski, spoke about the authoritarian and populist program of the Polish government, which undermines democratic institutions and builds an undemocratic regime.

Georgette Mosbacher, the US ambassador to Poland, repeatedly defended the TVN. In April 2020, TVP launched a series of media attacks on TVN, describing it, inter alia, as a “fake news factory”. It was mainly TVP’s reaction to the information presented on TVN on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the plane crash in Smolensk, in which President Lech Kaczyński died. In response, Ambassador Mosbacher wrote on Twitter about TVN Facts that they were “committed to transparency, freedom of speech, and independent, responsible journalism. To suggest otherwise is simply false” (Notes from Poland, 2020). At the beginning of July 2020, there was a sharp exchange of views via Twitter between MEP Beata Mazurek and Ambassador Mosbacher. Criticizing the participation of presidential candidate Rafał Trzaskowski in the debate on TVN24, the former called this station “WSI24”, claiming that it had close ties with the Military Information Services (Wojskowe Służby Informacyjne – WSI), liquidated in controversial circumstances in 2006. Ambassador Mosbacher wrote that Beata Mazurek “spreads absolute lies” and “should be ashamed” (PAP, 2020). On December 1, 2021, the US Senate organized a hearing of Mark Brzezinski, candidate for the US ambassador to Poland. Brzezinski emphasized the importance of democratic values and the rule of law as the basis of US-Polish cooperation: “Respect for enduring constitutional arrangements became a central test of the effective operation and growth of free market democracy. It still is, and if confirmed, I will continue to promote our shared commitments to uphold fundamental freedoms and the rule of law as essential to democracy and central to the U.S.-Polish relationship. In particular, I will continue to underscore to Polish authorities the importance of an impartial judiciary, independent media, and respect for the human rights of all, including LGBTQI+ persons and members of other minorities” (Brzezinski, 2021). For Ambassador Mark Brzezinski, son of Zbigniew Brzezinski, United States National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter, these values are of the highest importance.

During the election campaign, Joe Biden, speaking of the growth of totalitarian regimes, juxtaposed Poland, Hungary and Belarus, saying: “you see what is happening from Belarus through Poland and Hungary and the rise of totalitarian regimes in the world” (cm/kb, 2020). This statement, unfair towards Poland, showed Joe

Biden's attitude towards democratic backsliding in the country. During telephone conversations with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Zbigniew Rau, Secretary of State Antony Blinken emphasized the need to defend democratic values, including media freedom, and informed that the US government was closely monitoring legislative changes in Poland. On August 11, 2021, Secretary Blinken issued an official statement in which he expressed concern about the adoption by the Sejm of an act against TVN. He stated: "This draft legislation threatens media freedom and could undermine Poland's strong investment climate". He considered it to be detrimental to democratic values, while calling for the defence of these values not only with words but also with deeds (Department of State, 2021a). In turn, Discovery itself called the law as "an attack on core democratic principles of freedom of speech, the independence of the media" and as "directly discriminatory against TVN and Discovery" (Florkiewicz & Charlish, 2021). The US government is closely monitoring the media legislation in Poland. In a statement of August 16, 2021, Secretary Blinken expressed his satisfaction with President Duda's statement to "support of freedom of expression, the sanctity of contracts, and the shared values that underpin our relationship" (Department of State, 2021b), which in Poland and the US was read as the president's readiness to veto "Lex TVN". After the bill was adopted by the Sejm on December 17, 2021, DoS expressed concern over this decision and called on President Duda to fulfil his earlier statements regarding his readiness to defend media and economic freedom (Department of State, 2021c). Eventually, President Duda vetoed the bill, which was received very positively by the US administration and the US Congress.

Possibilities of the US reaction

In recent years, the governments of many allied and partner states of the United States have taken notable steps away from the principles of democracy and the rule of law, mainly including Turkey, Hungary, Poland, and the Philippines (Toosi, 2020). The US should maintain its role as an active promoter of democracy in Europe, both in bilateral and multilateral relations, including through NATO. The American administration should very clearly show that relations with the US will depend on the directions of systemic changes in individual countries (Toosi, 2020). It should make it clear that accountable governance through rule of law and democratic norms is essential for maintaining stability and partnership. With the use of diplomacy, it should set the conditions that will safeguard its relationships with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where these principles are most endangered. Benchmarks or metrics to gauge violations of the principles of democracy and the rule of

law and their impact on the strategic interests of the US should be introduced. The US should also develop a phased response plan to these changes to ensure a non-ad hoc response. More serious breaches of the rules should therefore have consequences in the form of limiting bilateral political cooperation or economic support. These rules would have to be transparent and understandable to allies and partners of the United States (Buchanan-Ponczek, 2021). At the same time, however, there cannot be legal interventions or prohibitive measures that target partisan political activity, because this could undermine the principles in which the defence occurs, i.e., the free and egalitarian political process (Wolkenstein, 2020).

The United States has many levers by means of which it could pressure Poland to return to liberal democratic values. Poland and the US have particularly close military cooperation, which is a consequence of the efforts of the Polish political elite of the last three decades to tighten the alliance. This was due to the belief that only the United States could defend the country against possible Russian aggression (Doeser, 2018). Poland has become not only the closest American ally in CEE, but is also seen as the US client state in the region (Sylvan & Majeski, 2009). One of this manifestations is the base located in Redzikowo near Słupsk, which is part of the American Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) system implemented within the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) (Steff, 2016). As a consequence of the crisis in Ukraine, the United States took a number of steps to strengthen NATO's eastern flank, including Poland. Since 2017, various types of US forces are stationed in Poland, including the Armored Brigade Combat Team and NATO enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) multinational battalion battle group, whose framework nation is the United States. Poland also made efforts to locate a permanent base for the US Armed Forces in the country (Ministry of National Defence, Republic of Poland, 2018). Ultimately, the administration of President Donald Trump decided to send an additional two thousand American soldiers to Poland on a permanent rotation basis, who are to join the currently stationed 4.5 thousand soldiers. This was despite the fact that it also announced the withdrawal of 9.5 thousand American soldiers from Germany.

There is a danger that the Joe Biden administration, for which the issue of adherence to the principles of democracy and the rule of law is of particular importance, may make the proximity of allied cooperation dependent on the respect for these principles. Also, the constant deterioration of the opinion about the state of democracy and the rule of law in Poland among representatives of the US Congress in the future may translate into reluctance to finance individual initiatives, including in the area of military (Zaborowski, 2018). There are already suggestions that the US should make the deepening of its military relations with Poland dependent on

compliance with the fundamental principles of the democratic state of law. However, withdrawing troops from the eastern flank and stopping arms sales to the countries of the region could be counterproductive. It would be detrimental not only to the security and stability of the region, but also would negatively affect US strategic and economic interests (Buchanan-Ponczonek, 2021). Even if the US would reach for some limitations in this regard, it cannot be done at the expense of security guarantees for the countries of the EEC. The United States, however, could promote military cooperation and locate forces in those countries of the region where democracy is not regressing. In this way, they would be able to fulfil allied obligations of defence and deterrence on NATO's eastern flank, and at the same time apply a system of incentives and punishments in the matter of compliance with the principles of a democratic rule of law.

The foreign policy of the PiS government focuses on making CEE a key reference point that could balance the power of not only Russia, but also Western Europe, mainly Germany (Raś, 2017). PiS wants to oppose “younger, poorer, more conservative and more dynamic East against an older, richer, more liberal and more stagnant Western Europe” (Jančoškova, 2017, p. 232). Poland is trying to strengthen its position as the leader of Central and Eastern Europe, including through the Three Seas Initiative (TSI). Twelve countries between the Baltic Sea, the Adriatic Sea, and the Black Sea cooperate under the TSI, mainly in areas of energy and infrastructure development (Varga & Buzogány, 2021). However, the CEE is too weak economically and politically, and too diversified in terms of interests to balance the eastern and western powers on its own (Zięba, 2018). For this reason, US support for TSI is needed, which was successfully sought by the Polish authorities in the Trump administration. By joining the work of TSI, Washington wanted to strengthen its influence in the strategically increasingly important CEE and increase the possibility of trade, including the sale of LNG (Kowal & Orzelska-Stączek, 2019). The involvement of the US altered the potential weight of the TSI and gave it international publicity. In the field of TSI, cooperation should not be limited, as it is an important element of the energy security of Poland and CEE.

At the beginning of President Joe Biden's term of office, there were symptoms of a partial US withdrawal from Central and Eastern Europe, which put the region's integration project into an impasse. This was confirmed by the lower interest in the Three Seas Initiative, and the withdrawal from the sanctions against the entities building the Nord Stream II gas pipeline, which is harmful to many countries in the region. The American administration was giving greater freedom of action in the CEE region to the European Union and Germany, which dominates in the organization. This gave rise to the assumption that for the US the EU could be the

main platform for slowing down anti-liberal changes in Poland and CEE. Due to the increase in Russian military activity in Ukraine at the beginning of 2022, the United States, however, sent several thousand additional soldiers to Poland and the region. The issue of democratic backsliding in Poland has been overshadowed by Russian recognition of the independence of the separatist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk and sending Russian troops to them. Anyway, Poland is the largest recipient of EU funding, so cutting it off from European financial support would have serious economic consequences (Pech & Kelemen, 2020). In Western Europe, it is also often postulated to suspend the voting rights in EU institutions, including the Council of the European Union, of states departing from democracy (Bellamy & Kröger, 2021). If the EU institutions decided to take such actions, they would, however, have to create a way that would be comfortable for Poland to return to the values of a democratic state of law, with a guarantee of reallocation of the lost funds. It would have to be an element of constructive multilateral and bilateral diplomacy so that the Eurosceptic tendencies in Poland and the risk of the country's withdrawal from the EU would not deepen. Political support for this approach by the United States would be essential.

Conclusion

In recent years, the Law and Justice government has introduced a number of controversial legislative changes, including those concerning the functioning of the judiciary and the media. In the opinion of numerous researchers at home and abroad, they are a manifestation of democratic backsliding because they undermine the basic principles of liberal democracy and the rule of law. These reforms are strongly criticized by numerous international bodies, including the institutions of the European Union. The process of democratic backsliding in Poland is also noticed and monitored with concern in the United States. So far, however, the reaction of the American authorities has been limited, which was mainly due to the low interest of the Donald Trump administration in promoting and maintaining democracy in the world.

With President Joe Biden taking power in the US, expectations arose among the parliamentary opposition in Poland and the leaders of Western European countries for a more decisive reaction from Washington to democratic backsliding in Poland. However, the United States had been limiting the interest of CEE and transferring greater freedom of action to the European Union and Germany. Anyway, the current American administration has expressed concerns about the directions of legislative

changes in Poland several times, as well as stressed the threat to cooperation between states, including in the economic area. This issue is periodically overshadowed by Russia's intensified military operations in Ukraine. For the United States, the military security of CEE and the contribution of the Polish army to its maintenance is now a priority. Anyway, the further US response must be constructive, based on dialogue, cooperation, clear criteria and a joint search for solutions. It cannot consist in ill-considered punishing Poland, especially in limiting American security guarantees. This would be a threat to transatlantic cohesion and the security of Poland and the CEE region. On the other hand, a clear signal must be sent to Poland that violations of the fundamental principles of democracy and the rule of law will be met with a response from the US. This, in turn, should be precisely tailored to stop negative tendencies and be implemented together with the European Union.

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