Some Thoughts on Authoritarian Backsliding

Marcin Matczak

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In December I took part in a number of discussions, including at two interesting conferences – one in Nijmegen (the Netherlands) and the other in Berlin. Both of these conferences were on the subject of the return of authoritarianism in Central and Eastern Europe, and I believe the points raised at them are worth sharing:

1. Sadly, Poland's predicament has become hot topic around the world. Conference participants from leading universities in the US (Rutgers, NYU, Columbia) and Europe (LSE, Humboldt), and lawyers from India, South Africa, Turkey, Hungary, Germany, Macedonia and Australia were all asking the same question: how is it possible that Poland, which until recently was the embodiment of an open society, is descending into authoritarianism? Everyone is rooting for us, because they know from our past that we are specialists in the struggle for freedom.

2. In its approach, Poland's ruling *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* party (PiS) is an epigone, imitating worse enemies of freedom, among them Hungary's Orbán, South Africa's Zuma and Peru's Fujimori. PiS uses the same rhetoric as these demagogues and their respective coteries: we won the election, we can do anything we want, the judiciary are the people's enemy, the rule of law gets in the way of the pursuit of true justice. PiS uses this kind of propaganda as a smokescreen to disguise that it is dismantling the pillars that guarantee the existence of an open society.

3. One of the main means by which a law-abiding state is dismantled is the *hollowing out* of institutions which are responsible for safeguarding freedoms. Instead of functioning normally, those institutions are maintained as empty shells which have been rendered incapable of realising their purpose. The prime examples in Poland are the Constitutional Tribunal and the National Broadcasting Council (KRRiTV) – and, any moment now, the National Council of the Judiciary (KRS) and the Supreme Court (SN). The main method whereby the hollowing out of institutions takes place is familiar worldwide: *mediocre appointments*. This entails a lowering of the credentials required for appointments to the institutions, resulting in the selection of those who are inactive, mediocre, but loyal.

4. Erich Fromm's concept of the authoritarian personality provides an excellent basis for a diagnosis of reversion to authoritarianism. In essence, liberalism is a social notion for individuals who know how to lead their lives, but a large number of our fellow citizens do not know how to do so. When there is social unrest (threat of terrorism, immigration crisis, difficult labour market) a feeling of uncertainty and danger spreads and the government deftly kindles it (Islamisation of Europe, the threat of unemployment, and Jarosław Kaczyński's imagined and unidentified immigrant-borne bacteria). The broader social uncertainty reinforces the social masochistic component of the authoritarian personality – the wish to dissipate in something larger than oneself: in the idea of a nation, patriotism, in some grand plan imposed by a charismatic leader. This leader's plan brings order to the lives of those who cannot muster the strength to organise their own. By making their world more clearly defined, by making it clearer who is friend and who is foe, the leader's plan gives such individuals the impression of being able to regain control over their fate.

5. This diagnosis leads to important conclusions as to the practical measures that can be taken to recover from authoritarian backsliding. Though they are of particular relevance for Poles today, they are of general relevance wherever oppressive and authoritarian regimes seek to stifle free and open societies.

Firstly, take action to counter the propaganda of fear and danger which reinforces the authoritarian personality and increases support for the use of

authoritarian power. In Poland's case, this can be done by demonstrating the true successes of the country's post-transformation period.

Secondly, enhance the feeling of certainty in fellow citizens through daily behaviour – in bringing up children, in education, in relationships at work. Aggressive criticism of supporters of Kaczyński or Orban only increases their sense of danger; in confirming the existence of enemies it enhances trust in the leader who intends to combat them. When authoritarian powers want to divide us, we should unite: when Kaczyński divides Poles into the "better sort" and the "worse sort", and we confirm that division through conforming to type and vigorously (and elegantly) disagreeing with him, we drive people into his camp. Better to expunge such divisive terms from our active vocabulary.

Thirdly, create and participate in civil society organisations which unite people around constructive goals, providing fellow citizens who do not have their own ideas on how to give purpose to their lives an opportunity to find one. Instead of uniting around idiotic, negative, and abstract slogans such as "death to enemies of our homeland", citizens would be better off uniting around positive and concrete slogans such as "a home for every dog", "safety for our children on the way to school", "more trees on our housing estate", and "daily soup for the homeless". Better that civil society organisations give people a goal in life than leaving the field open to nationalist organisations alone.

Fourthly, bear in mind that our young people are a generation more interested in "freedom to" than "freedom from": unlike their parents and grandparents, they have never needed to fight for freedom from coercion, nor have they experienced captivity. As a result, they need values and tales which bring order and awareness to their lives. Old-fashioned though it may sound, patriotic values appeal to young Poles, but the patriotism peddled to them by our authoritarian powers is one of failure, death, struggle and hate. We cannot deny young people's right to patriotism, but let it be the patriotism of victory, of tolerance, of working together, and of openness. Young people can be reminded that the greatest moments in Poland's history occurred in the XVI century when it was an oasis of tolerance and home to many nations.Similarly, the Polish mathematicians who cracked "Enigma" are equally deserving of glorification in popular books and films as are the soldiers of the Warsaw uprising, and Marie Sklodowska Curie merits as much attention for her scientific achievements as King Jan Sobieski III does for his military ones.

Lastly, let us be patient and temper our yearning for revenge. One symptom of the fall of democracy is the incarceration of political opponents (PiS is currently prosecuting European Council President [and former Polish Prime Minister] Donald Tusk for treason), but retribution is not justice. An eminent professor proposed at the Berlin conference that when PiS lose the next election (or the one after that, presuming there will be any), we should find a symbolic way to punish them for their constitutional chicanery and to restore dignity to Poland, letting it retake its rightful place in Europe and the world; and we should then go for a beer to celebrate. Let the tricksters be forgotten by history.

This brings to an end the accounts of discussions between lawyers, sociologists, and psychologists which I witnessed and participated in. I hope that you find these notes and observations insightful, and that you never find yourself in a position to consider them useful.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcin Matczak

Prof. Dr. Marcin Matczak is an Associate Professor at the Institute of Theory of State and Law at the Law and Administration Faculty at the University of Warsaw and a partner at the law firm DZP, Warsaw.

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