

How to tear down democracy - "I think this government hates the European Union"

By Gustaf Antell (Finland)

Polish experts doubt the Law and Order government has plans to ever let go of power. The systematic way the government is tearing down institutions seems to prove their point. The playbook is taken almost straight from Moscow, Budapest and Ankara.

In times when the anti-democratic minority is growing in almost every country in Europe, it might be time to look at how autocratic governments work to guarantee that they will stay in power longterm.

I will use Poland as an example, as it has a government that has started to tear down institutions that exist to safeguard democracy, but still has a long way to go before autocracy is completed.

The timetable and order of the steps may vary and mostly these changes are introduced opportunistically, ie when it's deemed politically possible without losing the support of the so called base.

As control over information and the media is the greatest enabler, the path to autocracy still has to go through the media.

I will not go into the wide area of silent propaganda and fake news that has been going on in Europe since the dawn of the third millennium (when FSB placed Vladimir Putin at the helm of the Kremlin), but there is no doubt that the basis for any turn to autocracy comes from disinformation.

I will, however, start from the day a new, anti-democratic government takes power in the country.

In Poland, Law and Order (PiS) won the parliamentary elections on October 25th, 2015 with 37,6 per cent of the votes. That gave PiS 51 per cent of the seats in the Sejm.

One month later, the new government started it's work.

Public media laws

Another month later, during the last days of December, the PiS pushed a new media law through parliament. The law basically gave the government control over the public broadcasting companies TVP and Polish Radio by designating them as national cultural institutions.

On January 1st, 2016, before President Andrzej Duda, also from PiS, had signed the law, the process of rolling heads started.

Some of them went more or less voluntarily - like four directors from TVP - but most were pressurized to resign.

Since then, more than 200 journalists have either resigned, been forced to resign or have been sacked from the two public broadcasting companies.

Constitutional court

Free speech is secured in the Polish constitution, so making the public broadcasting companies propaganda channels for the government wasn't easy.

As changing the constitution is both time consuming and might give a negative outcome, the second best thing worked better.

That meant taking power over the Constitutional Court. That is what the PiS government did already on December 22nd, 2015, less than six weeks after it was sworn into office.

The parliament passed a law that re-organized the composition of the court so that five already appointed judges were replaced by five new judges appointed by the government.

The voting rules within the court were altered so that no decisions can be made without the consent of government-associated judges.

The Summer of 2017

In July 2017 the attack on the Polish court system continued.

The government put forward three different bills to reform the courts:

1. The most controversial one would give the Minister of Justice the right to force all judges at the Supreme Court out of office and replace them.
2. The government also wanted to give parliament control over the National Council of the Judiciary (KRS), the body responsible for appointing judges for lower courts.
3. The last bill would have given the parliament the right to dismiss the members of the KRS and to appoint 22 of its 25 members.

Of these, only the second one was signed into law by the president, who used his veto to ask for amendments to the other bills.

Social policy puts family in the middle

When the PiS-government took power, they changed the name of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy to the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy.

- The government will support Polish families, hence the change of name, said Prime Minister Szydło.

Since then, the ministry's policies have promoted traditional families, anti-abortion stances (a bill to restrict abortion to very few specific cases was withdrawn after huge demonstrations on the streets) and no progress on making the role of mothers in the labour market easier.

These are of course value-based policies that are not by themselves anti-democratic, but they are significant as signals that liberal values are not to be accepted.

No NGOs with foreign funding

The role of NGOs in Western civil societies cannot be understated. Indeed, non-governmental organizations and institutions are part of the definition of what a civil society is.

Already in 2016, NGOs warned that the Polish government was preparing changes to the funding laws of NGOs. The government had openly criticized three categories of organizations that it deemed a threat to Polish societies and values:

1. Government-funded organizations that were furthering the political goals of opposition parties.
2. Organizations that were funded by foreign governments, but were not helpful for Polish society. The government focused a lot of attention on Norwegian grants and demanded bigger influence on how Norway funds civil society in Poland.
3. International or global organizations that - the government claims - are actually working for foreign governments to harm Polish independence.

The government used the newly hijacked public broadcasting companies to run an ongoing slandering campaign of NGOs. Experts from NGOs are nowadays rarely interviewed and when they are, they report that their words are often taken out of context or used to prove their incompetence or so called malign agendas.

Early in October 2017, new laws to reform the whole civil society makeup in Poland was put before President Andrzej Duda.

The purpose of the law is to create a centralized agency that will oversee the funding of all NGOs active in Poland. The agency will be attached to the prime minister's office.

On Friday, October 13th, President Duda signed the bill into law, taking effect immediately.

Thus Poland's 100.000 NGOs are now under government control. Norway has threatened to withdraw all Norwegian grants.

Private media laws

The Polish government is planning further changes to the current media law. The government wants to have a new media bill signed into law before the end of 2017.

The focus of the changes will be on ownership shares in privately owned media in Poland. More specifically, the government wants to limit the share of foreign ownership in the media.

Especially German and American ownership is quite widespread both in national and regional media.

This might lead to compulsory selling of shares of media companies to, for example, buyers loyal to the government.

The education system completes the circle

This autumn, the Ministry of Education proposed reforming the system of higher education in two significant ways:

- a) by decreasing the number of students in universities, the government wants to boost the level of education for those who get a degree, and
- b) by specifically decreasing the number of institutions that offer social sciences, the government wants to make higher education more focused on technology and natural sciences.

The government also wants to give vocational training a bigger role in the education system.

The new bill was less controversial than the critics had anticipated and has not met the same level of opposition as the other bills mentioned in this article.

However, there are strong voices within the PiS party that would like more drastic changes in higher education in Poland. Some NGOs have warned that there might still be an upcoming attack on academic freedom and a push for primarily result-driven research at the universities.

Another worrisome development can be seen in some school books, where discrimination, non-equal gender roles and nationalism is promoted in an unchallenged way.

As these kinds of school books have existed for a longer time than the current government, it's too early to say what the significance of new, highly conservative will be longterm.

The Polish government is not unique

From a democratic point of view, it's a dilemma when democratic means are used to turn society away from democracy. It's also important to remember that the Polish people have a right to vote for a party that is autocratic by its nature.

The main question is to what extent the government is honest to its beliefs and to the promises it has made to the electorate - and to what extent the government is using populism to further a small elite's interests by fooling its own supporters.

Or, on the other hand, do the motives matter when democracy is torn down in an EU member state?

The citation in the headline comes from an interview I made with the journalist Kamil Dąbrowa in August 2017.

"I think this government hates the European Union".

Dąbrowa was forced to resign as editor-in-chief of Polish public radio channel One (Radiowa Jedynka) just a few days after the government took control over public radio on January 1st, 2016.

Now he is awaiting trial in this case, but has low hopes as the government has taken control over the selection of judges to lower courts.

More Democracy for More Europe - project supported by EU - Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency



With the support of the Europe
for Citizens programme of the
European Union