In Praise of Foreign Intervention
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Our politicians seem to agree: International criticism of the Polish government amounts to a national tragedy. Jaroslaw Kaczyński [the leader of the ruling right-wing party] talks about “the treason gene” characterizing those who, like me, call for Poland’s allies to pressure the government to respect constitutional democracy. Ryszard Petru [the leader of the opposition] de facto concurs with Kaczyński when he claims that the international criticism has “brought Poland to its knees.” Journalists sympathetic with the liberal opposition accuse right-wing politicians of being “the greatest squealers of all”; they remind us about past appeals of the right to internationalize the investigation of the 2010 Smolensk plane crash or, more recently, comments of the president and the prime minister, who talked about social injustice in Poland during official trips abroad.

All these arguments are based on one entirely faulty assumption: that the good of the Polish nation and the interest of our political class are the same thing. Because let us be frank: it is not we, the citizens, or our country as a whole that is the object of the criticism. When Timothy Garton Ash writes about the disintegration of the Polish democracy, he does not attack each and every Pole. He very harshly assesses our ruling politicians. And because this assessment hurts, politicians really want to convince us to volunteer in defending them, in the name of some purportedly common, national interests. Such appeals should evoke our deepest skepticism, for three reasons.

First, international pressure acts as a fuse preventing our politicians from overreaching. Constitutional democracy means, by definition, limited government. And politicians do not like limits. Left alone, they will sooner or later dismantle constitutional constraints. The only way to stop this destructive tendency is to impose a cost on authoritarian urges. International pressure is precisely such an effective cost.

To see what happens when politicians do not need to face that cost, think about countries where rulers are by and large unaffected by international criticism. The effect is similar regardless of whether the Western passivity is caused by wariness of confrontation (Russia, Turkey) or if it stems from the lack of interest in a peripheral state (some Latin American countries or Belarus after 1989).

Second, it is a myth that the international criticism of our government infringes on our national sovereignty. Let us be honest with ourselves here: By accepting billions of euros from the EU, solving our structural unemployment by letting hundreds of thousands of our compatriots emigrate, or founding our defense doctrine on the support of NATO allies, we have already consciously accepted long-term involvement of other countries in our domestic affairs. The choice now is only which political option will benefit from this involvement.

When we do not protest on European or transatlantic forums, the EU money, the emigrants not drawing unemployment benefits, or the geopolitical safety naturally work to the advantage of the ruling party. If we protest effectively, and the West, apart from the aforementioned money, open borders, and security, imposes costs on our politicians (for instance by moving the NATO summit from Warsaw to Bucharest or Tallinn), then we do not really “prompt” foreign intervention, but rather affect the domestic consequences of the intervention already under way.
And finally, the treason narrative is a perfect example of the Polish scourge, which nobody else but Mr. Kaczyński himself aptly diagnosed as “the arrangement.” “The arrangement” is a clannish system in which loyalty to “our own” trumps our honest judgment. Mr. Kaczyński has long accused various sections of the Polish elites of preserving and protecting “the arrangement.” Children of attorneys mysteriously excel on entrance exams to the profession. A doctor will not stand up against a colleague whose negligence led to a serious injury of a patient. A journalist will not be criticized, even though he sexually harasses his employees.

But how do these cases differ from the expectation that we, the citizens, should sit quietly and cover for our politicians at the international stage? Is not the appeal to “solve Polish problems in Poland” a direct copy of an argument to “wash our dirty laundry within our legal/medical/journalistic elite milieu”?

I agree with Mr. Kaczyński that without a decisive break with “the arrangement,” Poland has no chance to escape the middle income trap. For, in fact, the clannish mentality is the legacy of our sad history. For centuries we had only our clan to rely on. Everything else belonged to outsiders, occupants, enemies.

But today we must have the courage to look ahead and build our social life on the principles of meritocracy and fair competition. In a normal country, devoid of complexes and phobias, it is a sacred right and duty of each and every one of us to protest loudly when we see someone cutting corners. It is the world where kids are taught that cheating on exams is not tolerated as a sign of respect to those who do not cheat. Where we do not favor an employee just because we went out together. And where politicians are taken to task—in Warsaw, Brussels, and anywhere else—if they break the ground rules of constitutional democracy.