

# Is the European Union a Threat to the National Sovereignty of Its Members? A Case Study from Central Europe

by [Christopher Garbowski](#) (October 2022)



A great deal can be learned about an organization in extraordinary times. Likely the greatest war since World War II is currently taking place in Europe. On the surface there has generally been unity in the support of Ukraine on the part of the EU. However, in this strikingly new context it is also

worth considering some aspects of the European Union regarding the relationship of Brussels with its members, which can hardly be unaffected. Since the EU it is to a large degree a work in progress a number of its regulations and how they affect the community—it is an organization that gathers within its boundaries a number of sovereign states—are in a state of greater or lesser flux, and a number of issues are not fully clear.

Self-determination, which is what sovereignty stands for, is one of the primary prerequisites for a national community's well-being in a number of fields, not to mention it is considered a primary right. At this particular juncture in time, the question of the threat to Polish sovereignty posed by the EU has been raised in the Polish public sphere by the Law and Justice party politician Zdzisław Krasnodębski. During an interview for a conservative television station on August 24 he provocatively stated:

*The threat to our sovereignty is greater from the West than it is from the East. This is a paradox (. . .). Obviously, Russia is brutal, it can declare war on us. But Poles know, in the spiritual and psychological senses, how to deal with such dangers. The EU, on the other hand, uses other methods, rather enticements, money, soft power, certainly attractions.* [\[1\]](#)

This declaration raised a great deal of commotion, largely along party lines. Quite obviously there is a level of hyperbole within it, no doubt for rhetorical effect, but likely also inspired by the frustration of a politician that deals with what can best be called the prejudices of Brussels against Central Europe. Nevertheless, although raised in perhaps an overly polemical manner, the question is a serious one. Especially for those with any knowledge of the EU apparatus. What is the level of EU interference in the sovereignty of its member states? As we shall see and Krasnodębski's statement implies, especially after the Russian

invasion of Ukraine this has become a pertinent question for a number of EU member states. In my essay I will primarily focus on the example of Poland, since the question has been brought up there, but I will draw on fairly broad range of literature.

Certain divisions within Polish society that are worth looking at in a preliminary manner to introduce the broader discussion. The *Rzeczpospolita* newspaper journalist Jędrzej Bielecki claims that through Krasnodębski's statement the Law and Justice party can be accused of a lack of conviction in the strength of Polishness, if the party feels it can so easily be threatened by Brussels. He claims that, "It would be difficult to maintain that the identity of the French, Germans, Greeks is weaker than that of Poles. And they have been in the European Union longer than the Poles." National identity is one thing, but it can be argued that much like in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, some sovereignties in the EU are more equal than others, that of the French and Germans being only the most obvious.

If Bielecki is looking for Polish complexes regarding the EU then Rafał Woś points him in the right direction. The journalist is quite interesting since despite his more left wing convictions he is above party lines. He writes for Salon24, a fairly open national blogosphere, and his relevant piece predates Krasnodębski's interview somewhat. Woś recognizes the inclination of Eurocrats to use whatever means possible to break the resistance of those who go against their goals. This was evident, among others, when the Irish voted against the Lisbon Treaty in 2008 and were forced to repeat the referendum until they got it right. Citing this and other incidents, Woś declares, "one must be quite naïve to see the European Commission as simply a sympathetic hegemonic unit which honors the (guaranteed by union treaties) rights of its members to democracy, subsidiarity and self-determination." He indicates there are a growing number of Poles who are beginning to treat Brussels in a more normal fashion, among

those are also people in the current government. One might add that in EU theory subsidiarity—a secular version of a Catholic concept from its social teaching—is the principle that in areas in which the EU does not have exclusive competence, the ability of the member states to take decisions and action is safeguarded.

However, Woś notes there are still those in Poland who feel that Brussels is always right. “For them,” he observes, “the continuous blackmailing of Poland with money for its post-covid recovery plan is a sign of the wisdom of Brussels and the ill will of Polish politicians. Especially if those politicians are from the hated Law and Justice party.” A major Polish survey concerning the issue confirms the journalist’s intuition. Almost half of the respondents felt the European Commission is playing unfair in refusing Poland funds for the recovery program, while only a quarter accepted their stance.

This raises the question of who are those that support the edicts of Eurocrats above their national interest? That a political division exists in Poland is obvious and even normal in a democracy. What is more specific and disquieting about this division, as I sense it, Poles are developing their own version of a meritocracy that Michael Sandel argues in *The Tyranny of Merit* is a key factor in the divisions in advanced societies, and detrimental to fostering the common good. Thus if Poland was liberated from communism to no small degree by a workers’ revolution, what the country is witnessing now is the onset of “the reign of technocratic merit” that, as Sandel puts it, “has reconfigured the terms of social recognition in ways that elevate the prestige of the credentialed, professional classes and depreciate the contributions of most workers, eroding their social standing and esteem.”[\[2\]](#) As he further claims: “Today, the common good is understood mainly in economic terms. It is less about cultivating solidarity or deepening the bonds of citizenship than about satisfying consumer preferences as measured by gross domestic product.”

This has negative effects on relationships within a community and how people relate to each other at different levels, since among other things it leads to “an impoverished public discourse.”[\[3\]](#) This process that has been going on for some time can be detected in Poland and other Central European countries. As a result, Tomasz Zarzycki observes,

*The Euro-enthusiastic camp, which tends to be most critical of its own conservatives, sees the persistent reproduction of “cultural backwardness” (supposedly resulting in backwardness in all other spheres) as caused by the reliance on the rhetoric of national pride, defined by historical specificity as argued by the conservative right.*[\[4\]](#)

If, as is highly likely, the Eurocrats also largely belong to the meritocracy, then we see one of the roots of the conflict between the Polish government and Brussels, since the electorate of the parties creating the former belongs to it in a very limited fashion. While the fact that much of the opposition belongs to the meritocracy, buttressed by neophyte complexes, to a high degree explains why it clings to the myth of the virtual inerrancy of EU decisions. Their complexes are highlighted in that according to the research of Michał Gierycz from Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University published in 2017, most members of the European parliament vote in accordance with their national interests when necessary regardless of the parties they belong to. This is no longer the case with its Polish members from parties in opposition to their national government.

But this impatience of the Eurocrats with democratically elected governments does not automatically lead to the endangered sovereignty of those governments, or does it? It's an open question but there is a rich literature of those who feel this is the case. To some extent the European meritocracy is afraid of the nation state as a hot bed of radical nationalism. Among other things there is a fear that to some

degree the specter of National Socialism is bound to arise within its adherents. In contrast, Israeli scholar Yoram Hazony argues that despite the appearance of the word “national” in Hitler’s party, the dictator was certainly not its advocate. In *The Virtue of Nationalism* he argues Hitler paid a great deal of attention to the nation state, but saw it “as an effete contrivance of the English and French, and vastly inferior to the German’s historic imperial legacy.”[\[5\]](#) Hazony sees the EU as a reconstitution of the German medieval empire, with Germany at its center, and warns: “Any international federation will be ruled by officials with views of their own as to the appropriate limits that are to be placed on the self-determination of subject nations.”[\[6\]](#) Unfortunately, this does ring a bell with regards to the conflicts between the current Polish government and the Eurocrats. It is commonly acknowledged the center bullying the periphery is among the hallmarks of empire, and that is what we largely see occurring between Brussels and Warsaw—this will be looked at more closely shortly—along with a few other nations. Has the fear of radical nationalism propelled the EU elite in the direction of another form of imperialism? Hazony thinks so and there is certain evidence for his argument.

A fairly rich literature exists on the democratic deficit in the European Union which Poles seem mostly unaware of. This research has gained further significance by the fact of Brexit. Among the more recent studies is *Ever Closer Union?* of 2021 by Perry Anderson, a former editor of *New Left Review*. Anderson goes over the history of the EU and its institutions in great detail and with a critical eye. This includes his criticisms of the European Court of Justice that has given Poland so much trouble. In the climactic chapter wherein he studies the reason for Britain’s departure from the organization, he outlines a number of the weaknesses of his homeland, but concludes “the fact remains that British governments can only survive if they enjoy a majority in the Commons.” He pertinently adds:

*In the EU, by contrast, executives are appointed by governments, not put into office by the votes of citizens; legislative elections yield neither a government nor an opposition; proceedings at every institutional level of the Union, including its judicial and financial arms, are shrouded in secrecy; decisions of the supreme court are immutable. In post-modern style, all this is presented as the last word in an up-to-date polity: in practice, it is the simulacrum of a sentient democracy.* [\[7\]](#)

Even if they are not fully accepted, such criticisms as Hazony and Anderson put forward cannot be ignored. There is also a crucial issue raised by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. But a few words are necessary about the earlier attitude that existed toward Central European countries within the EU. In his perceptive study *Populism and the European Culture Wars*, Frank Furedi points out that post-traditional and post-national sentiments, propagated by the likes of Jürgen Habermas, exercise substantial influence over the cultural elites and institutions of Western societies. This attitude tends toward certain aberrations, for instance the author observes that a testimony to “the narrow technical vision of contemporary cosmopolitanism is that its worship of heterogeneity has contributed to the cultural valuation of parochial identity politics.” [\[8\]](#) The above helps explain why, according to Furedi, the refusal of Central European societies “to reject an identity rooted in national sentiment and a ‘past centered on national history’ is perceived as a malady that needs to be cured by enlightened social engineers.” [\[9\]](#) It might be added this phenomenon largely stemmed from the drastically different history and tradition of Central Europe, among other things experiencing two totalitarian regimes, each with its own ideology, that alternately devastated their societies in the last century, and not one regime as was the case of Western Europeans (obviously Italian fascism differed from the German version, but they were much closer to each other than to communism).

But this hardly mattered to the Western elites, as could be seen, for instance, at the House of European History in Brussels where besides the most obvious ones of Stalinism the crimes of communism are given short shrift: for instance, the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia are skipped. Nevertheless, the axiological thrust of the Western European narrative was substantially absorbed by Central European members of the meritocracy and how they subsequently viewed their own traditions. And obviously a good number of such "social engineers" were to be found among the Eurocrats, coloring their attitudes and actions toward the relatively new member states: a number of the conflicts that arose must at least partly be seen in this light.

How has Russia's invasion affected all this? As Andrew Michta, an expert at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, has indicated, Ukraine's stubborn resistance has pushed the importance of national sovereignty front and center: "After three decades of post-Cold War institutionalism and globalism, we are back to the fundamentals of national security: only a sovereign Ukraine can provide its citizens with a secure homeland." [\[10\]](#) Patriotism and qualities such the willingness to die for one's country are included in this: qualities generally rather weak in EU countries, but of course never tested after World War II to the degree they have been in Ukraine. Quite probably NATO membership for the country would have prevented the invasion, but that was not to be.

From the above, one of the fundamental fields of a national community's well-being that its self-determination should foster is its security adequate to the circumstances. This applies even in the case of Central European members of NATO, which is important, but at least during the initial period countries under attack are on their own. In the opinion of a number of experts if Russia is not fully defeated a negotiated peace will simply put off a subsequent invasion by a number of years while the country recuperates its strength. Worth



noting, this is also what the Ukrainian population feels. A survey found that if there is simply a negotiated peace then fifty percent of the population would wish to emigrate from the country; that is, understandably one war is enough for them, and Ukrainians are horrified by the thought of a likely future one. Moreover, it is quite possible despite their membership in NATO Russia would also attack the Baltic states or even Poland at some juncture, in part because these countries have helped Ukraine considerably—also understandably, since they had all been subordinated to the Russians (i.e. the USSR) and understand the stakes involved.

Thus the need for military preparation is not a short term project: even if it is along the lines of the adage of preparing for war to guarantee peace. Consequently, an EU institution that limits a member nation's sovereignty, also affects the security of the national community which must build up its defenses. And so, as Slovenian scholar [Žiga Turk](#) put it—within a discussion of EU structure complementary to Michta's concerns—"Particularly now, when Poland is literally on the frontline and accepting millions of Ukrainian refugees, the virtue-signaling resolution of March 10 of the European parliament, asking the Commission to punish Poland and Hungary for their democratic transgressions was not timed well." That is a mild way of putting it to be sure.

A related issue stems from the fact that various EU bodies and their elites have negligible virtue to signal, with the democratic deficit they implicitly foster, while as of yet they have absorbed very little of the necessity of strengthening the endangered national communities. Moreover, one can add it would better if a significant number of so called European values were reworked to strengthen communities, and thus more effectively contribute to the common good. I won't go into detail on the values of the normative empire, as it has been called: suffice it to say this is not founding father Robert Schuman's EU. But to give

one example of their communal effect, it turns out that in Nordic countries which are both highly secular and gender equality is very high, there is a much higher level of partner violence than in Poland. In the study *Violence Against Women: An EU-wide Survey* published 2014, Scandinavian countries were at the top of the list for women reporting past abuse, ranging from 52% to 46%, while Poland was at the bottom with a couple of other countries at 13%. It has been [argued](#) the cause for this is likely connected with the high rate of cohabitation in Nordic countries: that is, relationships where partner turnover is comparatively rapid with all the heated emotions involved. And while religion is not mentioned as a reason for the low rate of abuse in Poland, it plays a role in the continuing popularity of marriage, with all the incumbent benefits, to the couple and also to the community.

Altogether, in the context of the dangers an eastern flank NATO country like Poland faces, the European Commission seems grossly unresponsive and, as we have seen, unfortunately holds back necessary funds for national programs, such as the country's post-covid recovery plan, not to mention other programs. And while Poland may yet see some of these funds, the obscene resistance of the EC is quite telling. Obviously even though the funds in question are not for military expenditures, they would allow the government to divert more of its own funds to the latter. The crude philosophy seems to be to never let a crisis go to waste to move toward the "ever closer union" or some other current Eurocrat initiative. But in light of the potential danger eastern members of the EU face which Brussels implicitly disregards, its stance can only be seen as extremely irresponsible. Now the degree to which these actions indeed limit national sovereignty is still a matter of debate, yet in the context of the current crisis it is fair to ask where is the EU's vaunted sense of solidarity toward its own most endangered members when it is needed? And this does say quite a bit about the organization.

[1] Since they are not particularly useful for non specialists without a command of the language, I will not give Polish language sources of quotes in this essay.

[2] Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), 29.

[3] Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 29

[4] Tomasz Zarycki, *Ideologies of Eastness in Central and Eastern Europe* (Abingdon, UK, and New York: Routledge, 2014), 43.

[5] Yoram Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 39.

[6] Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism*, 154

[7] Perry Anderson, *Ever Closer Union: Europe in the West* (London: Verso Books, 2021), 228.

[8] Frank Furedi, *Populism and the European Culture Wars: The Conflict of Values between Hungary and the EU* (London: Routledge, 2018), 72-73.

[9] Furedi, *Populism and the European Culture Wars*, 35.

[10] Andrew Michta, "Russia's Invasion Of Ukraine Is Transforming Europe," [19FortyFive](https://www.19fortyfive.com/2022/05/russias-invasion-of-ukraine-is-transforming-europe/), May 8, 2022, <https://www.19fortyfive.com/2022/05/russias-invasion-of-ukraine-is-transforming-europe/>.

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