

Autocratization in NATO: A Threat to Long-term Cooperation

Written Testimony by Nate Schenkkan

Director for Special Research

House Foreign Affairs Committee

Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment

“Democracy and the NATO Alliance: Upholding our Shared Democratic Values”

November 13, 2019

Introduction

Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Kinzinger, and members of the subcommittee, it is an honor to testify before you today. I ask that my full written testimony be admitted into the record.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is going through turbulent times. In certain ways, the alliance has become stronger since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine: there are no doubts about the relevance of the alliance’s mission in Europe, and the Enhanced Forward Presence initiated after the Russian invasion of Ukraine has helped reassure the easternmost members of the alliance that their security is indivisible from the whole.

The alliance still faces significant challenges, however. There remain disagreements among members about the appropriate stance towards Russia, with President Macron of France most recently advocating a policy of open-ended engagement that would let Moscow off the hook for its aggression in Ukraine. The current US administration has also undermined the alliance’s cohesion by sending mixed messages about its commitment.

But the gravest threat to the alliance is the assault on democratic institutions in some of its member states, which threatens the basis for long-term alignment and deep cooperation. In the case of one member, Turkey, this process of democratic backsliding, or better termed, autocratization, has already caused a major break with the alliance that is probably irreversible.

Autocratization is a serious problem for the alliance because if completed, it substitutes the interests of a party or an individual for national interests, and weakens transparency and accountability. Combined, these increase the risk that political leadership can be exploited by external powers intent on subverting the alliance, and makes it more difficult to sustain cooperation in the long term.

In the interests of time, I will limit my specific remarks to only Turkey, Hungary, and Poland, where the issue is most urgent, but I would note that these issues are relevant to all members of the alliance..

Turkey

Let me start with the most troubling case of autocratization within the alliance, that of Turkey.

Democratic rollback in Turkey dates back over a decade, but picked up in 2013 with the crackdown on the Gezi Park protests and against corruption investigations, then accelerated even further with President Erdoğan's drive to change the constitution to a super-presidential system. A crackdown on Erdoğan's former allies in the Gülen movement as well as on civil society and Kurdish activists was already well under way when there was an attempted coup in July 2016. The backlash to the coup attempt devastated Turkey's media, civil sector, and political scene: hundreds of media outlets have been closed, over a thousand civic organizations have been shuttered, the leaders of the Peoples' Democratic Party or HDP are in prison, well over 100 journalists and media workers are in jail, and civil society leader Osman Kavala will soon enter his third year of pre-trial detention, imprisoned without conviction.

In this atmosphere of repression, Erdoğan pushed through his constitutional changes, even while Turkey remained under a state of emergency. The result is a hyper-concentrated

system in which the president wields untrammelled authority over the military, the government, and the judiciary. Turkey's parliamentary system has been buried, and there is no effective check on executive power.

Turkey retains a pluralistic political environment, and the traditions of electoral competition are deep enough that the government was unable to prevent a wave of opposition from winning in many local elections this year—though not for lack of trying, as shown when the Supreme Electoral Commission (YSK) overturned the initial results of the Istanbul elections on technicalities, and when the government appointed “trustees” to replace elected mayors in 15 municipalities won by the HDP this year. The mayor of Diyarbakır, the largest city in the southeast, has been arrested.

Meanwhile the damage has already been done to Turkey's role in NATO. With the successful autocratization has come a turn to reliance on Russia that is troubling for a NATO member. Ankara has chosen to procure a Russian S-400 missile defense system, despite ample opportunities to purchase systems made by NATO allies that would be compatible with NATO's architecture. President Erdoğan's personal embrace of conspiracy theories and repeated, even daily, accusations against European and American allies, have made sustaining cooperation difficult. The fact that these decisions appear to have been taken on a personal basis, without transparency or accountability, and without an ability even at times to understand the rationale under which they are pursued, has made it even harder for the United States and its allies to repair the break with the alliance. The unfortunate truth is that as a result, although Turkey will remain a member of NATO because there is no expulsion mechanism, it is likely to become one in name only over the next several years.

Hungary

The autocratization in Hungary is not as complete nor as violent as Turkey's, but it is still deeply worrying, and still having effects on cooperation. Since 2010, a process of aggressive consolidation by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party has resulted in dramatic changes to the media environment, civil society, judicial framework, and opportunities for electoral competition. A slew of constitutional changes have left the judiciary subject to political control, and national electoral competition is heavily skewed in favor of the incumbent. As Fidesz expands its influence over more institutions inside and outside the state, we hear of self-censorship and fear among even those who do not work on sensitive political issues in Hungary.

Again, as in Turkey even, there remains political competition, as shown by the opposition's victory in Budapest local elections last month.

But also as in Turkey, we see threats in terms of divergence from the alliance's shared interests. Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Orbán have met more than once a year since 2016, and Orbán has frequently criticized the alliance's and the EU's tough stance against Russia since the invasion of Ukraine. In November, Hungary extradited two Russian arms dealers sought by the United States to Russia instead. Hungary is allowing Russia to open a development bank in Budapest despite concerns that it could serve as a hub for espionage activities. And Hungary has raised obstacles to deepening NATO cooperation with Ukraine by instrumentalizing the issue of the Hungarian minority in that country.

None of these rise to the level of divergence that has already taken place in Turkey. But they raise questions about whether Orbán and Fidesz are pursuing a "multi-vector" policy more commonly seen in Central Asia, playing to different patrons in order to maximize advantage. The difference is that Hungary is doing it from within the alliance, which makes the implications much more serious.

Poland

Last, let me speak about Poland. I should emphasize that Warsaw remains strongly committed to NATO, and that by virtue of its geographic position and history, Poland is far less likely to entertain either a departure from the alliance of the type that Turkey is embarking upon, or a multivector approach like what Hungary is attempting.

Nonetheless, significant democratic erosion in Poland in the last several years raises real concerns for the future. In Poland, the Law and Justice (PiS) party has made de facto changes to the constitution of the country, but without a constitutional majority. The judicial “reforms” undertaken since PiS won office in October 2015 involved a slew of unconstitutional maneuvers that undermined the independence of the Constitutional Tribunal, the Supreme Court, and then the National Council of the Judiciary. The result has been a dismantling of the previous constitutional order through extraconstitutional means, leaving one party firmly in charge of all institutions and removing carefully constructed checks and balances designed to protect minority rights and preserve democracy. These have been accompanied by aggressive moves to turn the state broadcaster into a government mouthpiece, and to pressure independent media like the private broadcaster TVN. The product of that pressure is an atmosphere of intense polarization, increasingly without the mediating influence of democratic institutions.

All of this places Poland’s future as a state with rule of law in limbo. Cases related to the judicial changes are still winding their way through the European legal system, but the damage has already been done. No matter what happens now in Poland politically, undoing the damage of these extraconstitutional steps will require extreme measures.

Beyond Poland, the brazenness of the changes may provide a roadmap for other parties who wish to dismantle checks and balances and reduce accountability and transparency.

This is the deeper threat to NATO that the undemocratic trends in some alliance members present. If it becomes normalized that a single party can remove the principles of liberal democracy from the system of government, we could see single-party states become ensconced throughout the alliance. Where the party merges with the state, national interests are replaced by the individual interests of those in power. And this makes durable, long-lasting alliances more difficult to sustain because cooperation comes to depend on following the whims of a leader instead of long-term alignment based on values.

Recommendations

Let me end with some recommendations. These are broad given the topic and I hope we will have more chance to discuss in the time that follows.

Regarding Turkey, we do not support new sanctions initiatives tied to the most recent incursion into northern Syria. These sanctions will not stem the violence in Syria, and will not dent President Erdogan's popularity. Indeed, they are more likely to contribute to it, while also harming regular Turkish citizens.

- Instead, the US should follow through on its existing sanctions already in law, namely those under the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) that pertain to the S-400 missile defense system, and those that pertain to the violation of Iran sanctions in the HalkBank case. If the administration is unwilling to follow the law in these cases, Congress should force its hand with clarifying legislation.
- In addition, Congress should make a major investment in *supporting* democracy in Turkey by creating a significant fund to support democratic activists, civil society, and independent media.

- Meanwhile, the US will have to continue its patient efforts to shift military and security assets away from Turkey, and to replace them with others in the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East.

Regarding Poland and Hungary, and indeed all of the alliance, the situation as stated above is far from the crisis in Turkey. But there should be no complacency.

- Congress should urge the administration to speak out on fundamental matters of democracy involving allies. Members of Congress should show solidarity with civil society activists and with officials who seek to sustain democracy, especially when they come under threat.
- The US should be firm and consistent about what it stands for and what its values are. “Freezing out” antidemocratic leaders with non-engagement will not work, but neither will coddling them by ignoring attacks on democratic institutions.
- To buttress that engagement, the United States should return to democracy promotion activities in Central and Eastern Europe, which it “graduated” from assistance at the time of EU accession.
- Lastly, the United States should speak with one voice—we cannot have different messages coming from the White House and the State Department, for instance, if we want to be effective.

Make no mistake. Geopolitical competition is real. NATO and the United States face strategic threats from Russia and China. But upholding democratic institutions strengthens, not weakens, our ability to compete. Our strength is the transparency, accountability, and adaptability of our system of government. It will never be perfect but it is definitely superior: because it is inclusive, because it is accountable to its citizens, and because it allows us to find deeper forms of cooperation that go beyond zero sum calculations.