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The Political Economy of Contemporary Populist Authoritarianism: The Examples of Poland, Serbia and Turkey

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Abstract:

English:

This policy brief, based on a panel discussion with experts on Turkey, Serbia and Poland, argues that competitive authoritarianism is resurging as leaders exploit crises, legalism and personalization to hollow out democratic checks while preserving a façade of elections; Turkey's Erdogan uses a legalistic veneer, clientelism and risky economic policy, Serbia's Vučić combines opaque high public investment, corruption and geopolitical ambiguity to maintain support, and Poland's PiS, who was running Poland for ten years altogether, used to fuse economic populism with cultural conservatism to capture courts and media. In all three cases authoritarian structures and strong men weaponize social spending and infrastructure investments to gain legitimacy. Governments in all three countries use social benefits and public infrastructure projects to boost support. However, these policies often mask structural issues such as debt (Turkey), inefficiency (Serbia), or inequality (Poland). While corruption and clientelism are systemic in Turkey and Serbia and were part of the system in Poland for the long time, the EU's responses vary and are inconsistent, which is at display in Serbia and Turkey today.

Deutsch:

Dieser Policy Brief, der auf einer Podiumsdiskussion mit Expert:innen für die Türkei, Serbien und Polen basiert, argumentiert, dass der kompetitive Autoritarismus wiederauflebt, da die jeweiligen politischen Leader Krisen, Legalismus und Personalisierung ausnutzen, um demokratische Kontrollmechanismen auszuhöhlen und gleichzeitig den Anschein von Wahlen zu wahren. Tayyip Erdogan in der Türkei nutzt eine legalistische Fassade, Klientelismus und eine riskante Wirtschaftspolitik; Aleksandar Vučić in Serbien kombiniert undurchsichtige hohe öffentliche Investitionen, Korruption und teils Repression mit einem geopolitischen Zick-Zack-Kurs, um sich Unterstützung zu sichern, und die PiS in Polen, die insgesamt zehn Jahre lang Polen regierte, verband ihrerseits wirtschaftlichen Populismus mit kulturellem Konservatismus und setzte ähnlich wie in Serbien oder der Türkei Gerichte und Medien unter Druck. In allen drei Fällen nutzen autoritäre Strukturen und „starke Männer“ Sozialausgaben und Infrastrukturinvestitionen als Mittel, um sich Legitimität zu verschaffen. Die Regierungen aller drei Länder nutzen Sozialleistungen und öffentliche Infrastrukturprojekte, um ihre Unterstützung zu stärken. Diese Politik verschleiert jedoch oft strukturelle Probleme wie Verschuldung (Türkei), Ineffizienz (Serbien) oder Ungleichheit (Polen). Während Korruption und Klientelismus in der Türkei und Serbien systemisch sind und in Polen lange Zeit Teil des Systems waren, bleiben die Reaktionen der EU unterschiedlich und inkonsistent, was sich heute vor allem in Serbien und der Türkei zeigt.

Panel discussion

Panelists:

Meryem Gökten

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Cengiz Günay

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Branimir Jovanovic

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Malwina Talik

IDM

Moderation:

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Tata Beraia is studying public policy at Central European University. Her research interests include hybrid regimes, corruption and development in Eastern Europe, and the European Union's external relations. She holds a bachelor's degree in journalism and worked as a correspondent for Radio Free Europe, where she reported on Russia, international affairs and conflicts (the war in Ukraine, Georgian-Russian relations, etc.).

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1 Key Takeaways

- Competitive authoritarianism is on the rise. All three regimes, Turkey under Erdoğan, Serbia under Vučić, and Poland under PiS, demonstrate a hybrid model where democratic institutions remain formally intact but are strategically weakened, skewing the political playing field in favor of the incumbents.
- Authoritarianism exploits crisis. Across all cases, leaders have used political, economic, and identity crises as tools to consolidate power while presenting themselves as stabilizing forces. This reinforces their regimes' longevity despite rising dissatisfaction.
- Legalism masks repression. The Turkish and Polish regimes in particular use legal structures to legitimize authoritarian practices. Erdoğan maintains a facade of legality while spreading clientelism and corruption in the system, and Poland's PiS government undermined judicial independence triggering sanctions from the EU.
- Personalization of power centralizes control. In both Turkey and Serbia, political systems have become highly personalized, with loyalty to the leader replacing institutional accountability. This weakens checks and balances and allows autocrats to neutralize dissent and opposition through cooptation or repression.
- Economic policy is weaponized for legitimacy. Governments in all three countries use social benefits and public infrastructure projects to boost support. However, these policies often mask structural issues such as debt (Turkey), inefficiency (Serbia), or inequality (Poland).
- Geopolitical ambiguity aids regime survival. Serbia exploits EU aspirations while aligning with China and Russia. This strategic ambiguity helps Vučić maintain leverage over both domestic and international actors.
- Corruption and clientelism are systemic. In Turkey, this includes the “Gang of 5” conglomerates; in Serbia, emigration and poverty persist while elites profit from public funds. Domestic businesses struggle under such systems.
- EU responses vary. The EU has acted decisively against Poland by suspending recovery funds and imposing fines. In contrast, it remains largely silent on Serbia’s democratic backsliding, revealing inconsistencies in EU engagement with authoritarian trends.

- Opposition is fragmented and constrained. In all three countries, the opposition faces legal, media, and institutional disadvantages. In Turkey and Serbia, repression or manipulation ensures political rivals are neutralized or discredited.

2 Turkey

Authoritarianism under legal facade

Cengiz Günay opened the discussion by exploring Turkey's transition from liberal conservatism, (emphasizing political liberalization and modernization) to a competitive authoritarian regime under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. When coming into power in 2003, Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AK Party) called itself the "Anatolian revolution" to present its rule as a democratic, populist, and cultural shift from secular elitism to conservative-majoritarian governance. The idea was rooted in Anatolia's identity and values: rural, traditional, religious, and often marginalized in elite secular politics¹. While Erdoğan's government initially gained popularity through liberal economic reforms and promises of democratization, it has since evolved into a tightly controlled regime that masks autocratic practices behind a democratic facade. The distinctive feature of the "new authoritarianism" is its intransparency: in the modern world, the line between democracies and autocracies is not clear. The paradox of the Turkish model lies in its use of legality to dismantle the rule of law. The regime is extremely cautious in maintaining a legalistic appearance. However, this legality is manufactured through political control of the judiciary and parliament, making checks and balances ineffective. Such a regime is defined as competitive authoritarianism explained by Levitsky and Way² as a hybrid regime where democratic institutions exist and elections are held, but the playing field is heavily skewed in favor of the incumbent, preventing true democratic competition.

¹ Bilge, Y. (2022). *Religion, Nationalism, and Populism in Turkey Under the AKP*. Middle East Institute. https://www.mei.edu/publications/religion-nationalism-and-populism-turkey-under-akp?utm_source=chatgpt.com

² Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2010). *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press.

Under Erdoğan's regime, the ruling party became an instrument of maintaining power. His approach to state is marked by increasing personalization. Independent institutions have been undermined and replaced with loyalists, who depend on Erdoğan personally for their careers and political survival. This creates a governance model in which accountability flows upward, not outward (the public) or downward (courts, the media, or civil society). The oppression of dissent in Turkey has intensified with the recent arrests of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu in March and prominent journalist Fatih Altaylı in late June. A leading figure in the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), İmamoğlu, has long been seen as President Tayyip Erdoğan's most formidable rival. Fatih Altaylı is a 63-year old veteran journalist who was arrested for the publication of a video commentary on his YouTube channel. Cengiz Günay stressed out that the opposition mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu based his agenda on tolerance towards government voters and deliberately avoided using the term "change". However, even under these circumstances, he became a target of the regime and was used as a negotiation tool. The Turkish government treats political opponents as hostages and engages in negotiations with the opposition by suggesting: "We will release them, if they are not involved in politics". This way, according to Meryem Gökten, Erdoğan paralysed the opposition in Turkey.

Economic Lens

Meryem Gökten shared an economic perspective. After the 2001 financial crisis, the Turkish government embarked on a wave of neoliberal reforms: it introduced privatization, tight monetary policy, universal healthcare, strengthened the pension system, expanded credits, and reduced labor protections. These policies initially led to economic growth and an inclusion of the large share of population in the financial system, particularly through debt-fueled consumption. However, the downside has been a heavily indebted population, widespread inequality, and a state increasingly reliant on clientelist networks. Municipalities have been repurposed as engines of patronage, especially in Istanbul, where construction projects serve both economic and political functions. One of the examples is "the gang of 5", a group of five Turkish conglomerates that have been heavily involved in large-scale public infrastructure projects in the country. Exchange-rate

regimes under President Erdoğan implemented unconventional monetary policies: interest rates were kept low (despite surging inflation), and reserves were significantly reduced in an effort to support the lira (an estimated \$128 billion drained between 2019 and 2020)³. As a result, foreign investors began seeing Turkey as high-risk and unstable, causing them to pull out capital or withhold new investments. Meryem Gökten emphasized that for these reasons, economic prospects are called into question.

3 Serbia

Branimir Jovanovic related to the failure of predecessors commenting on the political landscape of Serbia. After the fall of Slobodan Milošević, Serbia's transition was marred by economic stagnation, corruption, and disillusionment. Vučić seized this moment to present himself as a stabilizing force who could bring order and prosperity. Much like Erdoğan, Vučić uses a combination of economic propaganda and legal manipulation to retain control. Public investments in infrastructure are showcased as evidence of success, even when they are inefficient and corrupt. Indeed, the level of public investments in Serbia has exceeded 7 % of GDP in 2024, which is the highest level of public investments in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and a rare phenomenon on the global level. The main setback behind this high rate is that it lacks efficiency, transparency, and long-term economic impact. According to Serbia's Fiscal Council, despite high public investment, Serbia's infrastructure quality and economic returns remain moderate, pointing to inefficient project selection and implementation⁴.

The government highlights nominal wage increases and inflation-driven GDP growth while ignoring poverty, inequality, and mass emigration. According to Jovanovic, 40,000 to 50,000 people leave Serbia every year, yet the regime uses immigration rhetorically to claim global relevance. The latest numbers regarding emigration in Serbia are found in the database of the

³ (2021, April 16). How did the '128 billion dollars' debate begin? What is the status of Türkiye's foreign exchange reserves?. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-54871552>

⁴ Fiscal Council of the Republic of Serbia. (2024). *Public Investment Policy In Serbia: Situation Analysis And Recommendations For Possible Improvements*. National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia. https://www.fiskalnisavet.rs/doc/ocene-i-misljenja/2024/FC-Summary-Public_Investments_Policy_in_Serbia_2024.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

National Statistics Office of Serbia. It registered more than 50,000 people having left Serbia in 2023⁵. The share of people at risk of poverty in the country stood at 19.9%, as for 2023, which is a concerningly high figure⁶. Jovanovic pointed out that domestic enterprises in the country are not given a chance to develop which, again, shows the roots of the corrupt system.

The geopolitical strategy of the Serbian government is one of deliberate ambiguity. Vučić simultaneously presents himself as a partner to the EU while fostering close ties with Russia and China. The EU-Serbia strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials is so important for the EU because of its ambition to meet European Green Deal goals (climate neutrality by 2050). Serbia's Jadar lithium deposit is believed to hold enough of the soft white metal to meet as much as a quarter of Europe's demand⁷. It represents the largest lithium reserve on the continent and plays a key role in the EU's strategy to ensure access to essential raw materials for moving away from fossil fuels. A part of the Serbian population is concerned about environmental harm and accuses their leaders of corruption and cronyism. This risks weakening support for EU membership, which already stood at 40% in 2024, according to the International Republican Institute⁸. Political wrongdoing and environmental criticism have been so strong that they are harming Serbia's relations with Brussels and endangering its aspirations to join the EU.

4 Poland

Malwina Talik explored the case of Poland, where the Law and Justice Party (PiS) blended economic populism with cultural conservatism. Inspired by Viktor Orbán's Hungary, the PiS government has sought to create what some refer to as “Dudapest” — a hybrid between Warsaw and Budapest in terms of political structure. The roots of Poland's populist turn lie in the uneven

⁵ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2023). *Emigration*. <https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/18060402?languageCode=en-US>

⁶ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2023). Poverty and Social Inequalit. https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-us/vesti/statisticalrelease/?p=15328&utm_source=chatgpt.com.

⁷ Weizman J., & Ahmatović Š. (2025, April 18). Is Serbia turning into an EU mining colony? *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/serbia-lithium-reserve-eu-mining-colony-electric-vehicles/>

⁸ (2024). Western Balkans Regional Poll February-March 2024. *International Republican Institute*. <https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-february-march-2024-full/>

transition from socialism to capitalism. The 1990s brought massive unemployment, the collapse of traditional industries, and growing inequality. These changes created a reservoir of resentment (the same as in the case of Turkey and Serbia) that PiS effectively tapped into. As a result, Poland came to be the only country without the recession after the 2008 financial crisis. As for today, reforms such as raising the retirement age and introducing new taxes by the ruling party Civic Platform, further alienated the working and middle classes.

Using the economy as both a weapon and a shield, the PiS government has implemented generous

family benefits, launched large-scale infrastructure projects, and tightened control over public media.

These initiatives are framed as restoring dignity and sovereignty to the Polish people, who are depicted as victims of foreign elites and domestic traitors⁹. Talik noted that even when people criticize the system, they often credit the government for trying, a testament to the regime's narrative control.

Institutionally, there has been a deliberate attempt to undermine judicial independence in Poland. The Constitutional Tribunal has been packed with loyalists, and efforts to politicize the Supreme Court have led to conflicts with the European Union. In contrast with the silence regarding Serbian protests, the EU imposed several sanctions on Poland such as a daily fine of 1 million euros (for failing to suspend the Disciplinary Chamber of the Supreme Court) and a blockage of €36 billion in recovery funds ensuring court independence¹⁰. The PiS narrative positioned Brussels as a neo-colonial power trying to subvert Polish sovereignty, a claim that resonates with nationalist voters. According to Malwina Talik, two far-right parties gained 20% of the votes at the last elections in 2023, reflecting growing dissatisfaction even within the populist camp. While Civic Platform initially presented a humanitarian approach to migration (especially during the 2015 refugee crisis) Tusk

⁹ Cadier D. (2021). Populist politics of representation and foreign policy: evidence from Poland. *Comparative European Politics*, 19(6), 703–721. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-021-00257-2>

¹⁰ (2022, September 8). Poland vows fiery response over blocked EU funds. *Deutsche Welle*. https://www.dw.com/en/poland-vows-fiery-response-over-blocked-eu-funds/a-62761280?utm_source=chatgpt.com

and his party have hardened their stance in the 2023 election campaign. In the 2023 parliamentary campaign, the party aired advertisements warning against “illegal migrants” and claimed PiS was secretly bringing in large numbers of foreign workers¹¹.

5 Conclusion

The experts’ contributions collectively reveal the troubling normalization of competitive authoritarianism across Turkey, Serbia, and Poland. Cengiz Günay illustrated how Erdoğan dismantled Turkey’s liberal institutions through a legalist facade, replacing democratic mechanisms with personalist rule and using opposition leaders as bargaining tools. Meryem Gökten emphasized that Turkey’s economic model, while initially inclusive, has deepened inequality and clientelism, raising concerns about long-term viability. Branimir Jovanovic highlighted how Vučić exploited Serbia’s post-Milošević disillusionment, using legal manipulation and investment propaganda to maintain control, while also using deliberate ambiguity to hinder EU integration. He underlined that Serbia’s high emigration, inequality, and corruption expose the limits of its model. In Poland, Malwina Talik noted how the PiS government has fused economic populism with cultural conservatism, captured the judiciary, and manipulated narratives to retain power.

Although, as a participant from the audience noted, the political economy in these regimes seem to be “a complete jungle”, the discussion illustrated the similarities and differences between paths towards autocracies. The panel underscored that across all three cases, illiberal leaders exploit crises and institutional weaknesses to maintain power while displaying democratic legitimacy. Together, these analyses highlight the urgency of reassessing EU responses, learning from the failures of past transitions, and countering the erosion of democratic norms with more consistent and principle-driven engagement.

¹¹ Strzelecki M., Stezycki K., & Pempel K. (2023, October 6). Poland election campaign polarised by anxiety over migration. Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-election-campaign-polarised-by-anxiety-over-migration-2023-10-06/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

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