

Central European democracies hang tough

Poland's restoration of its coalition government Tuesday is the latest sign of the region's resiliency.

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BRATISLAVA, SLOVAKIA AND BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

As peoples who have been subjugated for much of their history, Central Europeans aren't exactly known for embracing the spirit of Monty Python's ditty, "Look on the bright side of life."

Yet today it's the foreign observers who are all gloom-and-doom, warning that the political crises rippling through some of the European Union's youngest democracies signal "instability" and "backsliding."

But from last month's riots in Hungary to the collapse of Poland's controversial government, the locals don't see democracy at risk. Instead, 16 years into the transition from Communism, they see democracy in action.

"If you're more of a pessimist, you see it as my friends in Germany, who said, 'We thought you had already mastered the transition,' " says Laszlo Csaba, a leading Hungarian economist. "But democracy is also about managing conflict. So while the system is certainly under strain, it stands the test. And this is absolutely good news."

After slipping the Soviet yoke, the peoples of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic had a strong desire to assume their "rightful place" in Europe. As those nations - known as the Visegrad Four - pushed for EU membership, the unstated consensus among political elites was to put their best foot forward. But now the internal political debates that were kept under a tight lid during the accession process are coming to the surface, causing regional turbulence.

"A lot of differences were swept under the rug," says Brian Whitmore, managing editor of the Prague-based Transitions Online, which analyzes the evolution across the ex-Soviet orbit. "Now they're in the EU, so the differences are coming to the surface." To wit:

- Poland's conservative coalition government collapsed last month after months of intense criticism - both domestic and from the EU - especially over its stand on hot-button issues such as homosexuality

and the death penalty. The coalition was restored Tuesday when the ousted agriculture minister and vice premier was reinstalled.

- In the Czech Republic, June elections produced a deeply - and nearly equally - divided parliament. The stalemate drags on as a no-confidence vote last week sparked the resignation of the month-old, minority government.
- In Slovakia, summer elections swapped a center-right coalition praised in the West for its economic reforms with a Socialist-led coalition whose far-right elements were derided by observers as "populists, racists, and ultranationalists." The European socialist alliance last week expelled the Slovak party for its unseemly bedfellows - reportedly the first such expulsion from the bloc.
- And in Hungary, which erupted in hooliganistic violence last month when Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany was caught lying about the economy's health, a small tent city of demonstrators remains camped out outside parliament - nourished by entrepreneurs selling pretzels and strudel. Four weeks later, daily protests are still demanding Mr. Gyurcsany's resignation. But he refuses, buffered by a narrow vote of confidence in parliament recently.

"What we have are democracies without democrats," says Jiri Pehe, a political analyst and former adviser to ex-president Vaclav Havel in the Czech capital of Prague. "Democracy is not just an institution, like the rule of law and system of checks and balances. People have not fully internalized the democratic attitudes, especially the older generation marked by Communism. It doesn't change overnight, but more slowly than institutions."

With EU accession pressure over, and multiparty elections the norm, politics is now a bare-knuckles affair, with some politicians seeking - not always successfully - to manipulate democratic pillars like independent courts and media. But while the transition from Communism to democracy may be taking place gradually in Central Europe, it is steadied by relatively positive models and influences in its neighborhood - not least of all Brussels, the seat of the EU.

In early September, for example, a nationalist spat erupted between Slovakia and Hungary over reported Slovak attacks on its Hungarian-speaking minority. With an eye toward Brussels, the Slovaks condemned "all extremism."

Such incidents suggest the Visegrad countries are no longer nascent, but more confident teenage democracies. Still, they grumble about their perceived "second-class" EU status. In 2003, when several of them - by then NATO members - protested French and German resistance to war on Iraq, French President Jacques Chirac chided the newcomers for having "missed a chance to shut up."

Their economies are motoring along nonetheless. "If we don't mess things up, we'll be like Asian tigers over the next 15, 20, 25 years," says Jan Winiecki, president of the Polish Society of Economists. That prospect is little consolation, however, to those struggling to keep up with the rising cost of living and finding themselves on the wrong side of a widening rich-poor gap.

Some politicians have sought to tap into such discontent for their own means. But while populism is clearly on the rise across the region, so, too, is political accountability. Societies long under the thumb of oppressive one-party rule eagerly discard governments every election cycle if they don't live up to promises.

"The public used to think, 'Up there, they will decide for us and we have nothing to say,' " says Balazs Aron Kovacs, a program officer at Freedom House in Budapest, which consistently ranks the Visegrad Four among the freest of ex-Communist countries. "What we're seeing now is the process of citizen empowerment, where they learn they are an integral, vital part of the body politic."

Though the voice of extremists occasionally rises to the fore - some Hungarian protesters have taken to waving a flag also adopted by the fascist regime in 1944 - no one of any standing advocates a return to dictatorship.

"People may complain about those they choose, or may not go to the polls, but they don't want to be deprived of the right to decide," says Mr. Winiecki.

Meanwhile, as some political observers, financial analysts, and foreign journalists now question whether Central Europe was allowed into the European Union too soon, or should have been at all, some say they resent the double standard.

"It's a bit ridiculous, sometimes, being preached to here in post-communist Europe on the merits of a well-established democracy by the French with their [right-wing politician Jean-Marie] Le Pen, the Belgians with their national populists, or the Austrians with theirs," says Adam Szostkiewicz, the deputy foreign editor of Polityka, Poland's leading political weekly. "I can see no major differences between the political emotions here and there. People think they deserve a better government, a better policy, and a decent political class. If the bell tolls for anyone, it tolls for corrupt or unable politicians in all democracies, East or West."