

EU Today Podcast 13 Transcript

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[Intro music in theme of piano playing Ode to Joy]

Katie Lindner: Hello, and welcome to EU Today, a podcast from the Center for European studies, a Jean Monnet Center of Excellence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Thank you to the Erasmus+ program of the European Commission, the EU Delegation to the U.S., and the U.S. Department of Education for supporting our center and its programs. On this podcast, we sit down with scholars and policy leaders to discuss pressing issues facing the EU. We hope you enjoy it.

On this podcast, we will be interviewing professors Jennifer Fitzgerald and Marc Helbling. They visited UNC-Chapel Hill to participate in a panel entitled “The Political Divides that are Transforming the EU” on March 20, 2019. The panel was organized by, and also featured, UNC Professor Rahsaan Maxwell, a Jean Monnet Center of Excellence key faculty member. Jennifer Fitzgerald is Associate Professor of political science at the University of Colorado- Boulder. A specialist in comparative political behavior, much of Fitzgerald’s work examines the ways in which social context shapes political attitudes and vote choice in advanced democratic societies. Marc Helbling is Full Professor in political sociology at the department of political science at the University of Bamberg and a research fellow at the WZB, the Berlin Social Science Center. He works on immigration and citizenship policies, nationalism, national identities, xenophobia and islamophobia, and right-wing populism. Interviewing professors Fitzgerald and Helbling, is Stephanie Shady, a PhD candidate here at UNC in political science.

[Ode to Joy fades back in and plays for appx. 4 measures]

Mackenzie Hansen: Hello, and welcome to EU Today. My name is Mackenzie Hansen, and I am a Contemporary European Studies major at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In this episode, I speak with Professor Milada Anna Vachudova.

She is an Associate Professor of Political Science at UNC-Chapel Hill who specializes in the study of democratization in Europe post-communism, EU enlargement, and the influence of international politics at the domestic scale. She received her Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Oxford in 1997. In 2020, Professor Vachudova published an article entitled *Ethnopolitism and democratic backsliding in Central Europe*. She spoke about her research in the March 9th symposium RACE, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND POPULISM IN POLAND, co-sponsored by the EU center at the University of Illinois and the UNC Jean Monnet Center of Excellence. I spoke with Professor Vachudova following the event:

Okay, so thank you so much for meeting with me today Professor Vachudova. I just have a couple of questions for you and I think we'll just get started. So first off, why do you study the trans-Atlantic relationship? On that vein, how do or could politics in Europe/ the EU inform or resonate with American trends?

Milada Vachudova: That's a great question. I started studying European politics and American politics a bit separately, like most of us do. As a college student before the fall of communism I was interested in American politics both domestic and foreign, and governance issues especially surrounding the government and fighting social inequality. I had actually studied abroad in France as a high school senior. I had visited Czechoslovakia for the first time in the summer of 1987 when it was still communist. I was able to travel all over Europe myself as a 17-year-old. So, I was studying in Paris as a junior in college when the wall fell. Then, of course Eastern Europe became much more interesting, and the question of 'how do you put East and West Europe together again in terms of the institutional architecture and the United States had a huge role to play in this. The United States after 1989 is guiding policy about how to manage the end of the Cold War, we were actually quite respectful in terms of managing the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the loss of the empire by Moscow, and then we're of course also guiding NATO and how the East/Central European countries who want to join NATO - how they're going to be treated. More broadly, the whole question of how the European Union is going to position itself as an actor on the world stage, is really related to its relationship with the United States. I think that there is tremendous opportunity for the United States (and the EU) to work together. In fact, I think if we don't work together there's no chance of solving a lot of the challenges, especially climate change.

Mackenzie Hansen: Absolutely. Yeah, so thank you so much. There was talk during the symposium, kind of surrounding these "two Poland's," which was sort of a comparison between Poland's liberal aspects of civil society, to the increasingly illiberal current government fronted by PiS. What is your assessment of the current

state of the struggle between these movements? And then, does liberal democracy stand a chance in Poland, and under what conditions?

Milada Vachudova: No, I think it absolutely does stand a chance. What stands out about Poland is that prior to PiS taking power in 2015, it had, and still has, an incredibly vibrant civil society. There are many, many different points of view, many different civic organizations, and many different political parties. What the Law and Justice party has managed to do since taking power in 2015 is this kind of polarization that we're familiar with in the United States, unfortunately, of saying "there is the real Poland, the true Poland," which is based on the traditional values based on a very "traditional" version of the Catholic faith, and then othering everybody else, and saying these "others" are culturally harmful, they're outsiders. But Poland is 95-98% homogenous, so these culturally harmful "outsiders," are actually many of them Polish citizens, they're feminists, they're members of the LGBTQ community, or simply people who hold cosmopolitan, European values. So as the PiS party moves further and further to the right, I feel like eventually it will start losing the center. We already have an incredible divide between women and men—men are much more likely than women to support PiS, older people are much more likely to support PiS than women. But what Poland has to do is find a way to create a coalition among all these different political parties and civic groups that favor a pluralistic Poland, even if they disagree on many other things such as how to regulate the economy, or even may disagree on some social issues, they still want to have a liberal democratic Poland, a pluralist society. And so, it's almost like a repeat of 1989, I think the next elections much like the last, will be an umbrella of political parties and groups who want to save liberal democracy in Poland coming together despite their differences. And I'm an optimist, but that could still happen, and PiS could be unseated.

Mackenzie Hansen: Thank you. How has the EU played a role in calming—or fomenting—this populist and ethnopopulist movements, and what tools does—or did—it have via the accession process, for example?

Milada Vachudova: So that's a huge question. If we go back to the 1990s, these countries in East/Central Europe, as well as Southeastern European countries too, really wanted to join the EU. You had Austria joining, you had Sweden joining. There are tremendous benefits from being inside the EU. And Poland, and other new post-communist members, have benefitted quite tremendously, both geopolitically, having a seat at the EU table, and also economically being a part of this huge market. And today Britain is learning the hard way, that it should have known: that there are a lot of costs being outside the European Union. And most Poles actually—it's very interesting, it's like a split ticket—people are voting for PiS, which is quite an anti-EU party, even suggesting the EU is not what it should be, because it's not based on these traditional Christian values, and everything associated with the EU are these

suspect feminists and cosmopolitans. And they even accuse the EU of being communist, which is amusing in its crazy hypocritical way. But there are a lot of these split ticketers, so there are so many voters who vote for PiS but say on opinion polls that they do support membership in the EU. In fact, some 80-85% Polish citizens support membership in the EU, which is the highest in the EU. So, I think they see the EU as a safeguard against PiS, and PiS as a safeguard against the EU. The narrative that PiS has spun, that the EU is a part of these culturally harmful outsiders that are trying to create this revolution in Poland where all that is good is destroyed by feminists and the LGBTQ community and so forth—I think that this narrative has a limit. The problem is the EU has very few tools to come in and say, “these are the ways in which PiS is violating liberal democracy.” In fact, when they do that, it does risk a kind of backlash. So, it is quite difficult because the tools aren’t there, and the tools that do exist are being blocked... SO to make a long story short, I think this is something that ends to be sorted mostly at a domestic level, through domestic politics. The only thing I could imagine is if things got really bad—well, they are really bad—and the EU said to Poland and Hungary, and others, “If you don’t and change and undo this democratic backsliding, we will throw you out of the EU.” That, I think would have an impact on Poles, but I don’t think will happen in the next few years.

Mackenzie Hansen: Of course, right. So, you mentioned in your article on democratic backsliding, that there is a sort of contradiction that exists in Hungary, Czechia, and Poland, in which voters are able to perceive the EU as both a threat to identity and culture, and as the best place for the state economy and individual to hang their hat, so to speak. Can you talk about how this phenomenon has arisen, and the reasoning for it?

Milada Vachudova: It’s interesting, because the EU offers a lot of benefits. And I think in some ways, you stop appreciating some of these benefits once you have them. Like the freedom to travel, which was such a big issue for many post-communist citizens: finally, the wall comes down, they haven’t been able to travel, they haven’t been able to leave since the 1940s. And suddenly you join the EU, and there’s these tremendous benefits in terms of mobility, but also in terms of business, education, etc. But once people have those benefits, they get used to them, and so they take the EU for granted, and they’re open to these politicians who use the ethnopopulist us vs. them language, who associate the EU with the privileged elite, cosmopolitan elite, that is somehow looking out for its own interests, and not looking out for ordinary people. And so, it’s very easy to criticize the EU, and politicians do it all the time. Everything that’s going well, you take credit for it. Everything that’s going poorly, you blame it on the EU. And in some of these countries where the EU is associated with refugees and cosmopolitan values that are somehow foreign or

unwanted, that kind of narrative has sunk in deep. And yet! These countries aren't lining up to leave the European Union.

Mackenzie Hansen: Right, right. So, are these trends of rising populism unique to Europe? Are there different rulebooks for these movement sin an EU vs an American context?

Milada Vachudova: So first of all, I would say one question is always the difference between the rising support for ethnopopulism and right-wing populism in eastern and western Europe. So, a lot of scholars observe—accurately—that democratic backsliding, so far, has only happened in eastern Europe, so in the new members of the EU. Now, I personally see Brexit as a form of democratic backsliding, as well as a few of the things the current British government is doing, so there's that. And there's also the case that these kinds of ethnopopulist parties have been in government in Austria and in Italy quite recently. But in both cases, they kind of overplayed their hand, and their time in office was short. But you could really imagine them coming back into office in Austria or Italy as coalition partners, and there could be potentially democratic backsliding. But there's certainly something about these post-communist states that they have weaker institutions, and that these ethnopopulist parties are both able to get a majority, as has happened in Poland and Hungary, and then once they have the majority, they essentially alter the political playing field. So, no one should ever be impressed when an ethnopopulist party that's in power wins an election, because they will have had four years or so to twist that political playing field and create all kinds of advantages for themselves. SO, when Orban in Hungary wins elections, it's not because so many Hungarians support him, and I think that's important, but also dangerous, and that makes us wonder about Poland. How many more election cycles do we have until PiS destroys any chance for the opposition to win?

Now is it different from the United States? There are many similarities in terms of the rhetoric. I've been surprised by how many similarities there are. What I find most astounding and similar is how the ethnopopulist themselves, who say that "We represent the ordinary citizens, and we're going to protect them from culturally harmful outsiders" they are so often themselves deeply a part of the establishment. And another thing that they have in common is that when they get in power, they don't actually implement policies that help the ordinary people. They tend to implement policies that actually do the opposite, and help the rich get richer. And this is similar—there's really two playbooks. One for what you do to appeal to voters to get votes, and there, I see more variation in the substance. But what you're in power, that playbook for concentrating power is so similar, whether you're in Brazil, Turkey, the US, Britain, Poland. The difference is how do domestic institutions push back, how strong are they? And there you have a great variation.

Mackenzie Hansen: Absolutely. Well, that concludes our questions for today, thank you so much for sharing your work and taking the time to talk with me for this podcast.

Milada Vachudova: Thank you so much, it's a pleasure!

[Ode to joy plays in the background]

Katie Lindner: Please note that any opinions expressed in the EU today podcast are solely those of our guests and our hosts, and not of the UNC Center for European studies, which takes no institutional positions. Be sure to tune in for more episodes, and subscribe to *EU Today* wherever you listen to podcasts.

[Ode to Joy fades out]

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