

PERSPECTIVE



JACEK BEDNARCZYK/EPA-EFE/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

Poles attend the funeral of Piotr Szczesny in Krakow on Tuesday. Szczesny died Oct. 29 after setting himself on fire to protest Poland's government and ruling party.

As Poland's nationalists take the spotlight, notice the protesters

BY MONIKA NALEPA

More than 2,000 people turned out in Krakow and Warsaw this week for services in memory of Piotr Szczesny, a man who recently set himself on fire in protest of Poland's populist government.

His act has been overshadowed by the tens of thousands of demonstrators who marched in Warsaw recently to coincide with Poland's Independence Day, carrying nationalist banners and torches while chanting chauvinist slogans. But the protest of the ordinary man should not go unnoticed. Focusing attention on the perpetrators of violence and supporters of authoritarian rule only emboldens those who stir up hatred while ignoring their victims and the voices raised in opposition.

Following Szczesny's death, the government-controlled media declared him mentally unstable but struggled to find evidence of a disease that could have urged him to take his life. Yet the disease that ravaged Szczesny is very much on the outside of his body.

Since 2015 Poland steadily but surely has been descending into authoritarianism. It started with ever-tighter control over news media and the court system, and the curtailing of reproductive rights. The centralization of government has gone hand in hand with giving in to nationalist and xenophobic sentiments.

This turn from liberal democracy has been well documented by Western media, but the self-inflicted death of Szczesny, in his own words a "gray, ordinary man," received less attention. His protest, ridiculed by the ruling elites, was also addressed to "ordinary gray" Poles who still have the ability to revoke the mandate to rule of the current government. He did not direct it to leaders of Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, who have already demonstrated



LESZEK SZYMANSKI/EPA-EFE/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

Candles form part of a makeshift memorial for Piotr Szczesny in Warsaw outside the Palace of Culture and Science, where he set himself on fire on the steps.

their defiance to powerful international organizations and contempt for grassroots protesters.

Before his self-immolation, Szczesny distributed a few dozen leaflets explaining his motives in 15 points — a list all too familiar to many Poles. He accused the PiS party of undermining the nation's constitution; silencing the opposition; denying basic human rights to women, minorities and immigrants; and using the media as a tool of propaganda and security apparatus to support its grip on power. He also accused PiS of tarnishing the memory of the founding fathers of Poland's constitution and isolating the country from the European Union and other international organizations.

Szczesny set himself on fire on the steps of the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, a place rife with symbol-

ism. Warsaw's residents have for generations called it "Stalin's gift" because it was erected in the 1950s and bears a striking resemblance to several buildings scattered across Moscow. May 1 parades and other Communist festivities would commence in the Parade Square that wrapped around the Palace of Culture. After the transition to democracy in 1989, it became popular with teenagers thanks to the staging of musicals such as "Metro," Poland's contemporary rendition of "La Bohème." Parade Square filled up with metal stalls, where sellers from the region traded everything from smoked cheese to Kalashnikov rifles.

Szczesny was 54 when he publicly killed himself. He came of age in the era when self-immolation had become the symbol of ultimate dissidence after Jan Palach, a Czech student, set himself on

fire to protest the pacification of the Prague Spring by Warsaw Pact troops. Differences between Palach and Szczesny abound. The former was protesting communism, a system that was forced upon East Europeans by the Soviets, with the Yalta Agreement sealing their fate.

Yet the government Szczesny was protesting came to power in democratic elections, on a purportedly anti-communist agenda. Furthermore, where Palach had no choice but to die or live under a closed and oppressive regime, Szczesny could have left Poland. In contrast to generations of East Europeans before 1989, he could have applied for a passport and moved elsewhere, no questions asked. Instead of being an act of desperation, the immolation sent a desperate message laden with irony: The regime that is currently in office in Poland is no better and perhaps worse than the autocrats who perpetuated communism throughout the region.

On the 100th anniversary of the October Revolution (the Bolshevik Revolution), Poles and other emigres from Eastern Europe are, no doubt, reflecting on the Communist era. For many of us, Communism was the regime that drove us out of our homes, in many cases all the way to Chicago and other American cities. And 28 years ago, when the Iron Curtain fell, we breathed a collective sigh of relief because surely the specter of authoritarianism was no more.

But perhaps we let our guard down too early. Otherwise, why would a 54-year-old man in good health burn himself alive in the center of the Polish capital?

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SCOTT STANTIS CAPTION CONTEST WINNERS



WINNER

Don't worry. Cutting pork doesn't mean our pensions.
Sheldon I. Saitlin, Chicago

RUNNERS-UP

Prepare yourself for more hogwash.

Pat Foley, Homer Glen

What goes on there is just not kosher.

Norman Kelewitz, Aurora

I don't feel so dirty anymore.

Allan L. Yusim, Lincolnshire

Scott Stantis Caption Contest is taking the day off.

QUOTABLES

"A president is entitled to proclaim a sunny day while everyone else is huddling under their umbrellas."

— Former diplomat Philip Zelikow, on President Donald Trump's speech Wednesday in which he boasted about his many foreign policy successes

"I see a crime and I have a responsibility to dial 911 immediately. I don't call and try to reach consensus with all my neighbors and all my friends and those whose opinion I might seek out."

— Rep. Luis Gutierrez, D-Ill., on joining five other Democrats in introducing articles of impeachment Wednesday against President Trump

"Steve (Bannon) is stuck between a rock and a hard place. If he stands by him, he'll be completely alone and he'll be known as the guy who stood by a child molester. Going forward, Bannon's endorsement will be about as useful as David Duke's with that kind of stigma attached to it."

— Kurt Bardella, a former Breitbart News spokesman, on Bannon's continued support of Alabama Republican U.S. Senate candidate Roy Moore

"The haters are out in force against this. Hijab is like a red flag to the Islamophobes."

— Ibrahim Hooper, spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations, on backlash against the newest Barbie doll, which is modeled after the Olympic fencer Ibtihaj Muhammad and has dark skin, is muscular and wears a hijab.