

#### **IV. DOSSIER: PIOTR SZCZĘSNY (1968-2017)**

Piotr Szczęsny (1968-2017) was a Polish chemist, a training officer, an NGO worker and a member of the Polish Mensa Society. In his youth, he took part in the Solidarity protests, but - according to his own assessment - his engagement with politics had been casual. He was never part of the formal opposition movements in Poland. On October 19, 2017, he self-immolated in protest of Poland's ruling party, PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [Law and Justice]). He died at the hospital ten days later. His self-immolation caused an emotional debate in the Polish media, with commentators on both sides of the political spectrum accusing him of being mentally ill. He is survived by his two children, both of whom were doctoral candidates at the time of his death, and a wife he spent thirty years with, who is a pharmacist.

## Leaflet of October 19, 2017

|Piotr Szczęsny

### Translator's Note

Translated here is **Piotr Szczęsny's** farewell letter (*list pożegnalny*), as Polish media called it; it is often referred to as a "manifesto." Szczęsny distributed it as a leaflet to passers-by before setting himself on fire shortly after 4PM on October 19, 2017, near the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw. On that day, a meeting of the Warsaw City Council was held at the Palace, with the participation of Jarosław Kaczyński, the chairman of PiS, whose policies Szczęsny wanted to oppose. In the leaflet, he addresses many of the recent policies of the Polish government, accusing them of authoritarianism and taking orders from the ruling party rather than following democratic protocols.

The translation is based on the original publication in *Oko.Press*, October 19, 2017, [www.oko.press/piotr-s-szary-czlowiek-zyje-czesc-pamieci](http://www.oko.press/piotr-s-szary-czlowiek-zyje-czesc-pamieci).

Bogna M. Konior

1. I object to the restriction of civil rights by the government.

2. I object to breaking the binding rules of democracy and to the factual destruction of the Constitutional Tribunal and of the system of independent courts.

3. I object to the government break

ing the law, especially the Polish Constitution. I object to any of those responsible (including the President) taking any steps whatsoever towards changing the Constitution - let them first respect the existing one.

4. I object to a model of governance in which those in the highest positions of power carry out the orders of a vaguely-defined organizational command center tied to the PiS party chairman, evading any responsibility for their decisions. I object to a legislative process in the Parliament in which bills are drafted hastily, without debate and appropriate consideration, often at night, and then are necessarily and immediately re-drafted.

5. I object to the marginalization of Poland in the international arena and to making a mockery out of our country.

6. I object to the destruction of the natural environment, especially by those who are supposed to protect it (the logging of the Białowieża forest and other environmentally precious territories, favoritism shown to the hunting lobby, promoting the use of energy derived from coal).

7. I object to creating or amplifying social divides. I especially object to the construction of the "Smolensk religion" and

using it to divide the population. I protest the seances of hatred that the monthly commemorations of the Smolensk events had become, and the language of xenophobia and hatred introduced by the government into public discourse.

8. I object to [the government] filling all possible positions with [party] affiliates, who, to a great extent, do not possess the necessary qualifications.

9. I object to the diminishing of the accomplishments and to the slander of authorities, such as Lech Wałęsa, or the previous chairmen of the Constitutional Tribunal.

10. I object to the excessive centralization of the state and to legislative changes that conform local governments and NGOs to the political needs of the ruling party.

11. I object to the government's hostility to immigrants and oppose the discrimination of various minority groups: women, homosexuals and other LGBT people, Muslims, and others.

12. I object to the complete incapacitation of the public television and almost the whole of the radio, and to turning them into tools of propaganda. I am especially devastated by the destruction (thankfully, not yet total) of Trójka, the radio station

I have been listening to since my youth.

13. I object to utilizing the special forces, the police and the prosecutor's office in the pursuit of one's own (party or private) interests.

14. I object to the careless, negligent, and ill-prepared educational reform.

15. I object to the ignoring of the enormous protests of our health sector professionals.

I could level many more objections at the current government, but I have concentrated on the most pertinent [issues] that threaten to undermine entirely the existence and workings of society and the state. I am not appealing directly to the current government because I believe that any such actions would be futile.

Many who were smarter and better-known than I am, as well as many Polish and European institutions, have already appealed to the government, requiring it to take various actions. These appeals were invariably ignored and those who made them were slandered. Most probably, I too, will be slandered for what I have done. But at least I will find myself in good company.

I would, however, wish that the chairman of PiS and PiS's high representatives understand that my death weights directly on them, and that they have my blood on their hands.

I address this call to all Poles who decide who governs Poland, to oppose the actions

of the current government, which I myself am protesting against. Do not be deceived by the fact that their actions might occasionally calm or have the appearance of normality (as has recently been the case) - in a few days or weeks they will continue with their offensive, and again break the law. They will not retreat or surrender what they have already acquired.

Although this saying is admittedly well-worn, it is fitting here: if not us, then who? Who, if not us citizens, is supposed to bring order to our country? If not now, then when? With every moment of delay, the situation in the country worsens and it becomes harder to repair the damage.

Most of all, I appeal to those who support PiS to wake up. Even if you sympathize with their postulates, consider that not every method of their realization is admissible. Realize your ideas within the bounds of the rule of law in a democratic state, and not as they are currently being realized.

I call to action those of you who do not support PiS, remain neutral or have other [political] preferences. It is not enough to wait and see what time will bring. It is not enough to express discontent to your friends. You have to act. There are possibilities for action, and those actions could take a lot of forms.

I implore you, however, to remember that the PiS electorate are our mothers, brothers,

neighbors, friends and colleagues. This is not about waging a war on them (this is what PiS would want) in order to "convert them" (that would be naïve), but to appeal to them to carry out their beliefs according to the rule of law and of democracy. Perhaps it would be enough to change the leadership of the party.

I, a common, ordinary man, just like you, appeal to all of you - do not wait any longer! This government needs to change as soon as possible, before it completely destroys our country, before it completely deprives us of freedom. And it is freedom I love above everything else. This is why I decided to self-immolate hoping that my death will shake the conscience of many, that our society will wake up and that you will no longer wait for politicians to do everything for you - because they will not!

Wake up! It is not too late!

It can be expected that PiS will attempt to diminish my protest and search for some kind of leverage over me. I had decided to make this task easy and point out the primary problem myself.

I have been suffering from depression for several years, which makes me a so-called "mentally ill" person. And yet, there are million people like me in Poland and they are able to live their lives more or less normally, often their illness not been known.

Furthermore, the term "mental illness" can also refer to ailments such as insomnia or

stuttering, therefore not directly signaling mental incompetence.

The issues certainly related to my illness are eating and sleeping disorders, low energy, the tendency to postpone everything (procrastination), and that I perceive reality as bleaker than most “normal” people.

But in this situation, it is fine, because it lets me notice worrying signals before others would and react to them in a more decisive manner. And perhaps it is also easier for me to sacrifice my life, even though, I assure you, it is not easy at all.

What else can I add - views such as mine are expressed by many in my surroundings, publicists, politicians, thus they cannot be rooted in my skewed view of reality.

And why such a radical form of protest? Because the situation is dramatic. This is not about the fact that the government makes many or some mistakes (every government does), but that this government shakes the foundations of our sovereignty and the functionality of our society.

Meanwhile most of the society is asleep, paying no attention to what is happening, and it needs to awaken from this slumber.

Translated from the Polish by  
Bogna M. Konior