

PiS's Latest Coup de Grace: Scapegoating in Poland

In its blind effort to reinvent Poland's past, the current government turns former employees of the country's security services into scapegoats.

Ever since I can remember, I've felt a deep-seated hostility to Communism. In the fall of 1939, when I was a new-born, the Soviet Union invaded my hometown.

Officers from the Soviet secret service took away my father, who had been a prominent prosecutor in Free Poland before the war. My dad, Stanislaw Milczanowski, along with thousands of other Poles, was subsequently executed in the forests of Ukraine.

Later on, I followed in my father's footsteps and became a prosecutor myself and then an activist in Poland's Solidarity trade union movement. After martial law was imposed on my country in 1981, I was sentenced to five years in prison and adopted by Amnesty International as a "prisoner of conscience."

The organization uses that term for people who have not used or advocated violence, but are imprisoned because of who they are (sexual orientation, ethnic, national or social origin, language, birth, color, sex or economic status) or what they believe (religious, political or other conscientiously held beliefs).

Defending my former colleagues

Against that backdrop, it may seem a bit ironic today that I am writing in defense of my former colleagues who had served in Poland's Communist-era security services. But the actions of the current Polish government make my blood boil.

Under a law that went into effect on October 1, over 38,000 former employees – from spies, to police officers, to janitors — of the Communist-era security services have seen their pensions cut to below the poverty line.

Understandably, after the right-wing populist [Law and Justice Party](#) won a mere 37.58% of the vote in Poland's 2015 elections, the main focus among our country's friends in the West has been on the dismantling of our country's independent judiciary.

As the Solidarity government's first intelligence chief, I feel a special obligation to talk about the treatment of those people who served in the once fearful Communist security services.

An epochal choice

Entering office in May 1990, I and my colleagues in Poland's first freely-elected government were faced with an epochal choice: Clean out the Communists who worked in the security forces – or conduct a vetting process to keep those who were professionals, while ridding our services of those who had violated human rights.

We chose the latter route, in part, I have to be honest, because the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency requested us to do so. Simply put, America's spies knew our spies — and they recognized Polish tradecraft. They wanted these spies on America's side.

We also understood that if we had gone for the "year zero" option, we would have immediately created an army of well-trained opponents that can go rogue and freelance.

That lesson was learned the hard way by the United States in Iraq, after it disbanded the Iraqi army and fired all the members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party.

For that reason, we decided to vet the men and women who had served in Poland's security services. And we passed a law assuring that those

who continued with us would not lose their government pensions.

Guaranteeing future pensions

From 1990 on, as deputy and then chief of the Office of State Protection, I personally guaranteed future pension benefits to officers who had served Communist Poland, but who were now on my orders risking their lives in the service of Free Poland.

We ran numerous operations with the Americans. One daring mission in 1990 even resulted in Polish officers, who had worked for the Communists, saving the lives of six American intelligence officers. After 9/11, we stood shoulder to shoulder with the United States for the all the challenges that created.

But now, any officers who worked during Communist times and passed through Free Poland's vetting process all of a sudden face grave difficulties from a government that seriously seems to believe that Poland's independence began only when it took power in 2015.

Under such circumstances, my former colleagues' years of service, their readiness to offer their lives in the best interests of the country, often in close cooperation with our U.S. partners, no longer count for anything.

Losing their pensions will reduce many to poverty. Already there are reports of suicides and homelessness among their ranks.

Just as for years they faithfully served Free Poland, so today, frail and aged, they serve as scapegoats, demonized by politicians and blamed for the faults, crimes and oppression of the entire Communist era.

About Andrzej Milczanowski

Andrzej Stanislaw Milczanowski was the first director of Poland's civilian intelligence agency in the Solidarity government from 1990-1992.