

Pain in Poland

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On the morning of April 10th, the President of Poland Lech Kaczyński and 95 others, including senior government officials, political leaders and Polish patriots, were killed in a tragic plane crash near Smolensk, Russia. They were travelling to attend a commemorative ceremony in the Katyń Forest, where the Soviet secret police NKVD had slaughtered over 20,000 Polish military officers in 1940. The Soviet Union continued to deny responsibility for the massacres until 1990, when it officially acknowledged (although later with some equivocation) and condemned the killings as well as the subsequent cover-up. The remembrance of the truth about the Katyń murders was particularly important to President Kaczyński. It will become a part of his legacy now that the whole world will learn of the massacre and those responsible for it, ironically, as a result of his death.

The President's legacy

President Lech Kaczyński should be particularly remembered for his policy towards Eastern Europe. His steadfast commitment to protect the independence and sovereignty of Eastern European nations, such as Georgia and Ukraine, was sometimes regarded as exaggerated, but in fact it was a manifestation of his strong belief that freedom is the greatest of all values.

The late leader will be also remembered for his commitment to the diversification of energy imports, especially gas. He was a great protagonist of the Polish-Israeli reconciliation. Lastly, but not least importantly, he was a committed European. His vision of Europe might have been regarded as unconventional among other leaders in the EU, but he always had reasons for it and was open to dialogue with those who thought otherwise.

Before taking office in 2005, Lech Kaczyński had a long history of public service. He had been engaged in the opposition movements since the 1970s and was one of the most important advisors to the *Solidarność* leader Lech Wałęsa in the 1980s. In the 1990s, he served as a parliamentarian and between 1992 and 1995 and as head of the supreme auditing agency. In 2000 he became a very popular and successful Minister for Justice, nicknamed *the sheriff*. In 2002 he was elected Mayor of Warsaw; his biggest achievement was opening of the Museum of the Warsaw 1944 Uprising in 2004. On the wave of national sentiment following the death of the Pope John Paul II and a very successful campaign, he won the presidential elections in 2005.

His decline in popularity began the day he was elected, when he announced to his brother Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of a political party, "mission accomplished". Since then, critics have perceived him as "the president of his brother, not the country". By his supporters, he was regarded as a strong leader, the only true leader of Poland, but the President was not the most popular politician. In a poll conducted in Poland

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recently, 46% of the respondents express the hope that the President would “disappear from politics”; and only one politician was more disliked by the public, his brother Jarosław.¹ In February 2010, the President enjoyed an approval rating of only 26% and 62% actively disapproved of the President’s activities.² Yet, those statistics are now history. There is a tradition in Poland to only remember the good things about the dead. One can expect a lot of sympathy towards the families of the victims, especially towards Lech’s surviving twin brother, Jarosław. The low popularity of the late President is no longer a relevant factor. Poland has been orphaned by his death and this is the primary cause of my compatriots’ mourning, grief and among some, anger.

Polish-Russian relations

President Kaczyński’s appreciation for the importance of history is widely shared by almost the entire political class in Poland. The Polish view of Polish-Russian history is based on facts that are difficult for Russia to accept. Stalinist Russia is held responsible for enslaving Eastern Europe and committing mass murders in many nations, including its own. Stalinist Russia is in fact jointly responsible for the tragedy of the Second World War; for many Poles, WWII ended only in 1989 and 1945 did not mean liberation, but a change in the occupying power. The Soviet Union, before turning to the Allies, had been in alliance with Nazi Germany and had invaded Poland and the Baltic states two weeks after Germany did, on 17 September 1939. This bitter truth, which is obvious for any Pole, is difficult for the average Russian to acknowledge.

There were two approaches a Polish politician could take in the country’s bilateral relations with Russia and its input into EU-Russia relations. President Kaczyński’s approach was confrontational: to try to limit Russian influence in Eastern Europe by engaging with other countries in the post-Soviet area and to demand an apology and compensation from Russian leaders for the mistakes of the past. During the government of Jarosław Kaczyński (2006-07), Poland vetoed the opening of negotiations over the EU-Russia agreement.

The elected in 2007 Prime Minister Donald Tusk from the Civic Platform (PO) had a different approach: to engage in dialogue, despite the differences with Russia. His policy of rapprochement ended with the lifting of the Russian embargo on Polish meat and the withdrawal of the Polish veto on EU-Russia negotiations; a Polish-Russian Group on Difficult Matters was resuscitated in 2008, inter alia. Three days before the accident, on 7 April 2010, the Katyń commemorations attended by Prime Ministers Tusk and Putin brought another important development; for the first time, the Russian leadership publicly acknowledged that there was no justification whatsoever for the 1940 massacre.

The late President and Prime Minister Tusk did not consciously synchronize their approaches to dealing with Russia, but the end result was an effective ‘good cop-bad cop’ routine. Criticism by Kaczyński would be accompanied by the softer policy of Tusk, and then the Tusk policy would be strengthened by the President’s position. In short, there would have been no success of the Tusk policy of rapprochement without the President’s tough stance on Russia.

The terrible catastrophe can act as a catharsis in the difficult Polish-Russian relations. United in the tragedy, the two great European nations have been long divided by a history of war, domination and mistrust. History cannot and will not be forgotten, but it needs to be comprehended by both nations. There is a lot of new good will in Russia and in Poland to engage with each other and to address those misperceptions and historical responsibilities. Russia’s response to the tragedy – with transparency and openness, with assistance and genuine sympathy – has been welcomed by many in Poland. Both the Russian President and Prime Minister have addressed the Polish nation, characterizing the accident as both nations’ tragedy. The previously banned, Oscar-nominated movie directed by Andrzej Wajda, *Katyń*, was aired on Sunday on Russia’s main TV channel.

The consequences for the mutual relations – not only the inter-state relations, but also between the societies – remain largely unknown. Who knows, maybe the tragedy will have a transformative impact on Russia’s internal debate on its own history, too? For the moment, one thing is sure: for the first time in decades there are people in Poland speaking of “friends from the East”.

¹ Opinion poll by TNS OBOP for ‘Fakt’, February 2010.

² Opinion poll by CBOS, February 2010.

The continuity of power

Poland is a stable democratic country. A massive tragedy like the one of April 10th does not undermine the stability of the state or the chain of command. Within hours of the crash, the Speaker of the Sejm (the Parliament) Bronisław Komorowski became the acting head of state. He has 14 days in which to call for early presidential elections, which have to take place within the next 60 days. Deputy Chiefs of the National Central Bank, the Institute of National Remembrance and the Ombudsman Office took up their respective acting roles. A new head of the National Security Bureau had been already appointed the following Monday. New members of the Sejm will be sworn in according to procedure; three new Senators will be elected in the by-election.

As in a parliamentary democracy, the prerogatives of the President are limited by the Constitution. It is the government with its Prime Minister who are the primary actors with executive powers. The cabinet lost three deputy ministers: of defence, foreign affairs and culture. None of the sitting government ministers were on the ill-fated plane. It is now the responsibility – in the absence of the President – of the *de facto* country leader Donald Tusk, the Prime Minister, to ensure the continuity of governance and stability of the system.

Every political party in the country lost important members. The Law and Justice (PiS) party lost the leadership of their parliamentary club, as five leading MPs and two senators went down with the plane, including former ministers Gęsicka, Gosiewski and Wassermann. The late President, together with his brother, established the party back in 2001. His death may have significant consequences for the future of the party. The governing Civic Platform (PO) also lost important figures (three MPs and the Deputy Speaker of the Senate Bochenek). There were also three MPs of the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) who lost their lives in the tragedy, including the party's candidate for Poland's presidency, Jerzy Szmajdziński. The Polish People's Party (PSL) also lost three MPs. The 15th parliamentarian was none other than Maciej Płażyński, an independent MP, who was one of the co-founders of the PO back in 2001 and Speaker of the Sejm 1997-2001.

For the moment, the country is united in mourning and grief, but attention will soon turn to the political consequences and impact of the tragedy on the political stability of the system. Will it cement the domination of the ruling PO? What will be the impact on the PiS and its leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, who lost his identical twin brother? What will happen with the SLD, who also lost leaders on Saturday? Who will be Poland's next President and what will the campaign look like? Will there be a campaign at all? All those relevant questions are going to be answered when the political life of the country comes back to grapple with the changed reality.

The first task for the next President – whoever is elected – will be to represent the united Polish nation, as there is limited appetite for partisan fighting. It will be his or her first duty to commemorate the memory of the late President and other victims of the Smolensk tragedy. Their next task will be to ensure that no tragedy of this magnitude is ever repeated. Beyond the aftermath of the massive disaster, the main task of the new President will be to lead the nation into the new decade, as Poland faces the same problems that confront most other nations in the world, namely global economic recession (even if Poland's economy was the only EU country to record growth last year), the challenges of climate change (with difficult reconstruction of the Polish energy system based on coal) and further internal modernization.