Polish President Lech Kaczynski dies in plane crash

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Polish President Lech Kaczynski died in a plane crash on April 10 near Smolensk, in thick fog. He was traveling to a joint commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre—the killing of 22,000 Polish officers, intellectuals, and public officials in and around Katyn forest, 12 miles west of Smolensk, on the orders of Joseph Stalin.

Kaczynski's plane—a 20-year-old, Russian-built Tu-154 lacking the equipment to navigate in fog—was carrying 96 people, including many top officials of the government and the national legislature, both the Diet (lower house) and Senate. There were no survivors.

In addition to Kaczynski and his wife, the victims include Diet Vice-President (and Democratic Left Alliance candidate for president in upcoming elections) Jerzy Szmajdzinski, Diet Vice-President Krzyzstof Putra, Senate Vice-President Krystyna Bochenek, Polish Central Bank President Slawomir Skrzypek, the heads of the Polish general staff and of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, the chief of the Polish Operational Forces (active in the US occupation of Afghanistan), several ministers and senators, and the heads of several associations promoting the memory of the Katyn massacre or World War II in Poland.

The Polish central bank, which intervened to buy euros on currency markets and weaken the Polish zloty against the euro on April 9, said it would fulfill its tasks as specified by law, despite Skrzypek's death.

Russian officials said the pilot of Kaczynski's plane ignored instructions from air traffic controllers in Smolensk to divert to nearby cities, such as Minsk or Vitebsk. Kaczynski was known as an aggressive flier, once ordering his pilot to land in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi during the 2008 Russo-Georgian war.

"The chief controller ordered the crew to continue flying, and when the crew did not follow the instructions, he ordered them several times to divert to a reserve airport," said Alexander Alyoshin, the deputy head of the Russian air force. "The crew continued to descend despite this."

Polish Speaker of Parliament Bronislaw Komorowski, also a presidential candidate, has taken over Kaczynski's duties as specified by Poland's constitution.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin visited the crash site together with Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk. Putin will head a joint investigation of the crash, together with Polish officials, who will also conduct a separate investigation. Putin and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev both made statements.

Kaczynski's coffin arrived in Warsaw yesterday and was displayed in front of the presidential palace. In an audio dispatch, a *Le Monde* correspondent in Warsaw described the public atmosphere as "strange" and "sad." She reported that tens of thousands of people were quietly gathering in front of the palace to place candles on the ground. She said Polish papers were issuing unusual Sunday editions to discuss the event, often in terms of a "double Katyn."

From Warsaw, Reuters reporter Agata Nalecz wrote, "Many of those who came, grieved for a double loss, the one from only hours before and the one from 70 years before, when 22,000 Polish officers were murdered by Stalin's NKVD secret police in the forest of Katyn, southern Russia."

This dual character of the grieving no doubt played an important role in the broad, subdued character of the popular reaction. Kaczynski's accidental death has unsurprisingly evoked sympathy in many people, especially as it is connected to an attempt to commemorate a horrific crime that flowed from Stalin's virulent, anti-socialist xenophobia. However, Kaczynski was not an immensely popular politician, but rather a right-wing nationalist expected to lose

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the presidential election to Komorowski, the candidate of Tusk's ruling Civic Platform party.

"You can look around the street here, and half the people would not be voting for Kaczynski," Aleksander Zborowski told the *Washington Post* at the presidential palace.

In 1977 Kaczynski joined the Committee for the Defense of the Workers (KOR); after that he was active in the right wing of the oppositional trade union movement. With Lech Walesa, he played a major role in subordinating the Solidarity movement to the Catholic Church. In 1989 he participated in the round table that organized the restoration of capitalism in Poland, with disastrous social consequences.

After falling out with Walesa, he left politics, but returned as justice minister of the unpopular Election Action Solidarity (AWS) government in 2000-2001, where he built up credentials as a law-and-order politician. He founded the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party in 2001, and was elected mayor of Warsaw in 2002. As mayor, he famously refused to grant permission for a gay rights march; after the march went ahead and was attacked by neo-Nazis, he criticized policemen who tried to protect the marchers.

He was elected president on a PiS ticket in 2005, and pursued an aggressive, pro-US foreign policy. A bitterly anti-Russian politician, he sent Polish troops to support the US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, and also agreed to host US "missile shield" bases aimed at Russia.

Kaczynski's death will move up Poland's presidential election, scheduled for October 2010, as Polish law specifies a replacement presidential election must follow no later than two months after the death of the incumbent. It is not yet clear how much sympathy for Kaczynski's death will affect the political atmosphere, but commentators generally noted that Komorowski had a comfortable lead over the incumbent before the plane crash.

Noting that Poland's presidency is a weaker office than the position of prime minister, and is to a large extent focused on foreign policy, the right-wing French daily *Le Figaro* expressed the hope that Kaczynski's death would not "open up a political crisis."

There were, however, some indications that joint commemorations of the Katyn massacre represented an improvement in Polish-Russian relations. The Stalinist bureaucracy continued to deny its responsibility in the Katyn massacre until 1990, the year before it liquidated the USSR, blaming the massacre on the Nazis. This has caused lasting resentments between Poland and Russia.

Some press sources suggested Putin's and Medvedev's reaction to the crash might win favor with the Polish population. "The behavior of Russia's leaders and citizens demonstrates that there's been real change," said Adam Rotfeld, Poland's former foreign minister. "Many issues can be resolved on the wave of the empathy toward Poles. This may turn out to be a breakthrough."

Such a breakthrough would face definite obstacles, however, notably the risks posed to ex-Stalinists in the Russian and Polish governments by focusing public attention on some of Stalin's crimes.

Moreover, an improvement in relations between Poland and Russia would pose problems for Washington, which has relied on Eastern European countries as a wedge to break up the development of ties between Russia and Germany.

In an article titled "Dramatic Impact on Polish Politics," the *Wall Street Journal* mourned a "tragic blow to the ranks of the Law and Justice Party." It praised Kaczynski and his surviving twin brother Jaroslaw, who "pushed unashamedly for conservative values and a righting of historical wrongs with 20th-century foes Russia and Germany in ways that ruffled feathers and often seemed out of step with the times." The *Journal* noted sadly that his loss will not be "easily rectified," though it might "simplify life" for Tusk and for other powers negotiating with Poland.

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