

Following death of Kaczynski, great powers vie for influence in Poland

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The volcanic ash cloud that has enveloped Europe and closed nearly all of the continent's airports forced world leaders, including US President Barack Obama, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, to abandon plans to attend the funeral of Polish President Lech Kaczynski.

The deceased president was interred Sunday at Poland's most esteemed burial site, situated in Krakow. Amongst those dignitaries who did take part in the funeral was Russian President Dmitri Medvedev.

International leaders sent their apologies and once again expressed their condolences over the death of Kaczynski, who was killed April 10 in a plane crash that also claimed the lives of his wife, other leading members of Kaczynski's Law and Justice Party, and senior members of the Polish national legislature and military.

The funeral of Kaczynski and his wife on Sunday was preceded by a state commemoration in Warsaw on Saturday for all 96 victims of the crash. The main speaker at the Warsaw ceremony was Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who paid tribute to the deceased president and called for the country to unite in a demonstrative display of nationalism.

There is an element of the grotesque in both the domestic and international efforts to sanctify the figure of the Polish president after his death. After the plane crash, world leaders rushed to pay tribute to the right-wing politician.

The US president immediately rang Prime Minister Tusk to express his condolences and the Russian prime minister hastened to declare his sorrow at Kaczynski's death. The French president paid tribute to the way in which Kaczynski "always battled with conviction for the values that underlay his entry into politics: democracy, liberty and the fight against totalitarianism," while German Chancellor Angela Merkel gushed over a man who had "devoted his life to the freedom of Poland and the freedom of Europe."

Similar comments were made by leading figures in the European Union and other world leaders.

Kaczynski was a rabid Polish nationalist who opposed

abortion, favoured the reintroduction of the death penalty, and adopted a series of measures strengthening the repressive apparatus of the Polish state. He was a fanatical anti-communist and Russophobe, whose chauvinist outbursts were often a source of embarrassment to deputies in the European parliament.

Kaczynski adamantly supported the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and agreed to host US missile shield bases aimed at Russia. Opinion polls at the time of his death estimated his level of popular support at just 20 percent. He had been widely discounted for reelection in presidential elections planned for later this year. Even his funeral unleashed protests, as Poles demonstrated in opposition to his burial at the site traditionally reserved for national heroes.

This is the man who is being hailed by the Polish establishment and international politicians as a freedom fighter and tribune of democracy.

The calculations behind Prime Minister Tusk's lavish tributes to his former political rival are not difficult to discern. It is well known that Tusk quarreled on many occasions with the president—particularly regarding the easing of tensions between Poland and Russia, which Kaczynski fiercely opposed. For his part, Tusk has made it clear that he is prepared to improve relations with Russia, and he has responded positively to a number of overtures made by the Russian leadership.

The Russian rapprochement with Poland commenced last year when Russian Prime Minister Putin paid a visit to Gdansk to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the German attack on Poland. Shortly before his visit, Putin wrote an article for the Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, in which he called the 1939 Stalin-Hitler pact that paved way for the German-Soviet invasion "immoral."

Putin's visit was followed by month-long negotiations for a new natural gas deal between Warsaw and Moscow. Russian overtures intensified when earlier this year Putin invited Tusk to join him in commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre. This was the first time

such a ceremony had been held since the killing of 22,000 Polish officers, intellectuals and public officials in Katyn forest on the orders of Joseph Stalin.

Kaczynski refused to attend the Russian-organized ceremony and planned to hold his own alternative meeting, where he would deliver a speech attacking the role played by the Soviet leadership in a manner designed to rekindle Polish-Russian antagonisms.

Kaczynski packed his plane with prominent cronies from his PiS Party and other members of the Polish elite. According to some commentaries, the crash occurred because Kaczynski and his military advisors insisted the pilot land in thick fog so as to ensure that the delegation arrived in time to hold its alternate Katyn meeting without asking for Russian assistance.

Such was the background to the commemorative speech Tusk gave at the weekend. He was aware that his own position and that of his Civic Platform Party had been strengthened by the death of his longtime rival as well as other leading members of the PiS. He was also conscious of the potential dangers to the stability of the entire Polish establishment arising from the sudden disappearance of many leading figures.

The man who has taken over as acting president is the leader of the lower house of the Polish parliament, Bronislaw Komorowski, a prominent member of Tusk's party and its candidate for the upcoming presidential election. Because of Kaczynski's death, the election is likely to be held earlier than previously scheduled—most probably in June—with Komorowski as the clear favourite. His victory would give the Civic Platform control of both the prime minister post and the presidency. There is some speculation that Tusk himself might stand as the party's presidential candidate.

According to the magazine *Foreign Policy*, recent Russian overtures to Warsaw are directly bound up with Moscow's economic interests in Europe. The journal writes: "Russian-Polish relations started to warm when Tusk, a pragmatic liberal, replaced Jaroslaw Kaczynski as prime minister. Political analysts say Russia is eager to keep that love-fest going, because Poland, the largest of the former Communist satellite states, is a major influence in the European Union and helps set the agenda in EU-Russian relations. And given that the EU is a key trade partner and the main consumer of Russian natural gas, friendly ties with Warsaw may help ensure billions of dollars' worth of gas revenues for years to come."

The so-called Russian charm offensive is part of attempts by Moscow to recover influence it lost in Eastern and Central Europe to the United States in the years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Beginning in the 1990s, the

US sought to expand its influence in the countries surrounding Russia.

This offensive included the US-led air war against Serbia in 1999, followed by the expansion of the NATO alliance into the Baltic states in 2004. It has included the US-backed "colour revolutions"—the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, and the 2006 Denim Revolution in Belarus. The US has also sought to base elements of an anti-missile defense system in Eastern Europe.

With the US tied down militarily and politically in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Kremlin has undertaken a series of initiatives to regain lost ground within its former sphere of influence in Europe and Central Asia. In January 2010, Moscow signed a customs union agreement with Kazakhstan and Belarus, and the collapse of the colour revolutions in Ukraine and most recently Kyrgyzstan has at least temporarily weakened US influence in these states.

The international media ascribed great significance to the START agreement for the reduction of nuclear arsenals signed by President Obama and President Medvedev in Prague on April 8, but the deal leaves both countries with sufficient nuclear capacity to destroy each other many times. Moreover, the agreement was made conditional on the Russian side, with Medvedev declaring that the accord could be nullified if the US proceeded with plans to base missile systems in Eastern Europe.

Obama made his own play for influence in Central Europe by hosting a dinner for Central European leaders on the evening of the day he signed the START accord with Russia. Western European leaders were angered over not being invited to the ceremonies in Prague.

Against this background of continuing tensions between the US and Russia, major European powers such as Germany and France are scrambling to rework their own foreign policy tactics and priorities. Behind the crocodile tears shed for the deceased Polish president, substantial shifts are being prepared in increasingly fraught international relations.



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