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POLAND'S TRAGEDY – THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The Shock of the Disaster...

Poland is still trying to come to terms with the implications of the Smolensk air disaster, which at one stroke has destroyed a significant part of the Polish political elite. Apart from President Lech Kaczynski and his wife, the list of fatalities include several ministers, Presidential officials, parliamentarians, the heads of all the Armed Forces and the head of the General Staff, a number of heads of other central institutions, as well as a selection of respected Poles such as the former head of the Polish Government in Exile. The delegation had been flying to Smolensk to take part in commemorations of the April 1940 massacre of 20,000 Polish officers and intellectuals by Soviet security forces. That 1940 massacre is seen as the destruction of Poland's pre-War elite – now another elite has met its end in the same place, exactly 70 years later.

The details of the cause of the crash are still unclear, although eyewitness statements are that the aircraft had made several circuits of the Smolensk airfield and had been having trouble landing. On the fatal approach its wingtip clipped trees just outside the airport and immediately disintegrated in flames. The TU-154 aircraft had just recently undergone repairs in Belarus and had been fitted with the latest ILS landing system. However, the airfield in Smolensk is not equipped with the appropriate equipment and half an hour earlier a Russian plane had been refused permission to land because of bad visibility (fog).

Nine days of national mourning were declared, and Poland will remain in deep shock in the days and weeks ahead.

...With Immediate Political Implications...

The political implications of the disaster are potentially profound. In the short term, the Polish Constitution lays down that in the event of the President's death, his functions are taken on by the Speaker of Parliament, in this case Bronislaw Komorowski. Although Presidential elections were planned for the beginning of October, now they will have to be announced within 14 days, and take place within 60 days of that announcement – so by 20th June at the latest.

The disaster has not only accelerated the Presidential elections but also removed two of the contenders – President Lech Kaczynski had been planning to run for a second term as the candidate of the opposition Law and Justice (PiS) party, and also killed was former Defence Minister and deputy Speaker of parliament Jerzy Szmajdzinski, who was the candidate of the left-wing Democratic Left Alliance (SLD). Both PiS and SLD will need to find replacement candidates and run an election in a two-month campaign period. It is unclear who the substitute candidates will be, or even whether there will be a substitute candidate in the case of the SLD.

...and a Delicate Balance for Komorowski to Consider

The position of Speaker (and Acting President) Bronislaw Komorowski is especially delicate. Under the Polish constitution the Acting President has all the prerogatives of an elected president, bar the ability to dissolve parliament. His rights therefore involve vetoing legislation, and nominating the head of the General Staff and the heads of the armed forces. But it remains questionable whether Komorowski will either want to or be able to exercise these prerogatives without a democratic mandate, and especially as he himself is the official candidate of the ruling Civic Platform (PO) party for the Presidency. This is especially true of several controversial pieces of legislation that it had been known that Lech Kaczynski would either have vetoed or sent to the Constitutional Tribunal in the coming weeks and months. Komorowski will have to be careful that any decision he makes will not open him to the accusation that he is exceeding his authority or exploiting his accidental political position for campaign purposes.

The Government Remains Relatively Unaffected...

The impact on the Polish government will not be great, as among the dead were only three actual government ministers, deputy minister of defence Stanislaw Komorowski (no relation to the acting President), deputy foreign minister Andrzej Kremer, responsible for Russia policy, and deputy minister of culture Tomasz Merta. The death of Komorowski is the most damaging to the Defence Ministry, in that he was responsible for strategic issues of military relations with NATO, the US, missile defence and the implementation for the agreement to station Patriot batteries in Poland. Defence Minister Bogdan Klich will find it difficult to replace him. And as Russia moves to the forefront of Polish foreign policy concerns, so also will Kremer's loss be especially costly.

...but the Armed Forces are the Hardest Hit...

The greatest blow is to the Polish armed forces, whose entire command – the Head of the General Staff and the top commanders of all the forces types - has been eliminated at a stroke, at a time when Poland is facing military action in Afghanistan, is partaking in a numerous NATO actions, and is also engaged in a range of bilateral military activities with the US. There are also armed forces modernisation programmes afoot that require leadership and decisions. The armed forces are by nature hierarchical and without leadership quickly become paralysed. The constitution allows Komorowski to nominate new heads of the forces and General Staff but it is unclear whether he will want to make use of these prerogatives without an electoral mandate. Conversely he may cite overriding issues of national interest and national security issues and nominate new heads of forces, for new full terms, prior to the Presidential elections. In this decision he will face the possibility of coming into conflict with Defence Minister Klich, who may have his own priorities in the proposed nominations.

...With Significant Implications for Filling Key Institutional Posts

There is a significant consequence of the death of Slawomir Skrzypek, the head of the National Bank of Poland. Skrzypek had been at loggerheads with both the Ministry of Finance over monetary policy and also recently with the Monetary Policy Council (RPP) over issues of passing bank reserves to the Finance Ministry to alleviate the budget deficit. Skrzypek's death will allow the government to impose a more pliant National Bank head, although again it is not clear if Acting President Komorowski will use his power to propose a candidate to parliament prior to the elections.

The deaths of key heads of central state institutions – apart from the head of National Bank, also the Civic Rights Ombudsman (Janusz Kochanowski) and the head of the National Remembrance

Institute (Janusz Kurtyka) – afford the ruling PO the opportunity to push through parliament replacements that will be much more politically loyal to the PO, since the disaster victims were nominees of the previous parliament and much more politically identified with the opposition PiS party. In addition, the presence of Komorowski as the acting President will allow PO to dissolve and reappoint the National Radio and Television Council, long a thorn in the party's side also because of its being dominated by opposition nominees. Thus, if PO wins the presidential elections, then local elections in the autumn, it will in effect have established complete and total dominance of the Polish political and institutional landscape.

Law and Justice May Suffer Heavily...

The impact on the Polish political parties will be significant. The greatest instability may arise in the opposition Law and Justice (PiS) party, who had been looking to Lech Kaczynski to rescue their electoral fortunes through a reasonable (if not victorious) performance in the Presidential elections. Failure to find a credible candidate may well be a final blow to the party's confidence. Also, the disaster killed a range of PiS parliamentarians, many of whom were party leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski's close colleagues (such as right-hand man Przemyslaw Gosiewski) or represented the "new wave" of party leaders, especially younger women. Bereft of many of its leadership, the party's cohesion may suffer. The impact on Jaroslaw Kaczynski himself will be significant – he was very close to his brother, and the latter's death comes at a time when their elderly mother is herself fighting for her health in a Warsaw hospital. Many question if the death and illness of the two closest people to Jaroslaw Kaczynski will not finally end his enthusiasm for the political game. There is much pressure however for Jaroslaw to stand in place of his brother, although many observers – even those sympathetic to PiS – feel this would be a mistake, allowing PO to attack the party as seeking to exploit Lech Kaczynski's death for short-term party political gain.

...but Civic Platform Needs Also to Exercise Caution...

The implications for the ruling PO (Civic Platform) party are also significant. There were few senior PO politicians among the disaster victims, and thus far PM Donald Tusk has comported himself well in the crisis. Acting President Komorowski will have to balance his role as official PO candidate for the Presidential elections with a need to stay above the political fray at a time of national mourning.

More intriguing however is the fact that Kaczynski's death undermines one of the driving forces of the PO presidential campaign - and indeed PO identity itself – which was the removal of Lech Kaczynski from office. It was publicly expressed disdain of Kaczynski that was the rallying call for the PO presidential campaign, and in the party itself are several politicians (Janusz Palikot, Stefan Niesiolowski) who have made a career from bashing Lech Kaczynski. Kaczynski is now dead, and to attack him or his legacy is now politically impossible, as it would be decried as disrespectful. With that, and if PiS is neutered, what holds PO together? The lack of a solid core identity to PO may make itself felt fairly quickly, probably after the campaign, and a long slow process of political decomposition could possibly begin.

... as opportunities open for the SLD and PSL

As far as the opposition SLD is concerned, the death of its presidential candidate Jerzy Szmajdzinski (who was on the flight in his capacity as deputy Speaker of parliament) will be a significant blow. He had not been performing well in the polls but his candidacy was the only hope of a party already in the political doldrums. He himself had been a compromise candidate between the SLD's internal warring factions. It remains to be seen if another candidate can emerge in the short time available, or if the SLD will back the centre-left independent Andrzej Olechowski – yet

this too will risk the party's marginalisation. One significant alternative is a decision by former Prime Minister Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz to run in Szmajdzinski's place. Despite his protestations about not competing, the dramatic new circumstances may yet persuade him to run, and if he does so there is every chance that he could enter the second round of the elections, and possibly even have a chance of victory.

In the Presidential race the fortunes of Polish Peasant Party (PSL) leader Waldemar Pawlak (deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy) may improve. Kaczyński would have competed for the rural vote with Pawlak, and Pawlak may now emerge as a more heavyweight contender in Kaczyński's absence.

The Long Term May Bring Deeper Changes

Finally, it should be noted that the tragedy may temper a political scene that over the last two years had become increasingly unpleasant and hate-filled. Lech Kaczyński had unfairly become a bogey-figure to the government and ruling party, as well as the media, and the level of inter-party invective had reached disgraceful proportions. This cathartic disaster may usher in a short period at least of some more reflective politics, commencing with the Presidential campaign itself, and hopefully migrating to a more congenial and thoughtful political culture in general. Yet in Poland that is an optimistic scenario, which few expect to hold for more than a relatively short period of time.

In conclusion, at first glance it seems that this disaster may result – in the most unexpected and tragic way – in a short-term strengthening of the Civic Platform on the political scene. If Tusk and Komorowski act as they should, above politics, and if PiS disintegrates in the aftermath of the disaster, bereft of leadership and hope, the Polish political scene will be dominated by the Civic Platform and its political nominees in central institutions for years to come. Conversely, the death of President Kaczyński might yet generate completely the opposite result. The grief over Lech Kaczyński's death shows there is a latent respect and appetite for what he stood for - decency, patriotism, a sense of social justice. If Jarosław Kaczyński takes this opportunity to retire from the immediate leadership of PiS and open up the party to younger and alternative leaders, propose a modernising candidate for the Presidency, and project PiS as the party of national unity with real beliefs, Law and Justice may yet in the future retake the political high ground from a rudderless Civic Platform.

But those are questions which will not be answered in the next few days or weeks – first, Poland must grieve.

Marek Matraszek, Warsaw, 11th April 2010

MAIN DISASTER VICTIMS

PRESIDENT LECH KACZYŃSKI

MARIA KACZYŃSKA, President Kaczyński's wife

RYSZARD KACZOROWSKI, last Polish President-in-Exile

KRZYSZTOF PUTRA, Deputy Speaker of Parliament

KRYSTYNA BOCHENEK, Deputy Speaker of Parliament

JERZY SZMAJDZIŃSKI, Deputy Speaker of Parliament

WŁADYSŁAW STASIAK, Head of Presidential Chancellery

ALEKSANDER SZCZYGŁO, Head of National Security Office

PAWEŁ WYPYCH, Secretary of State in Presidential Chancellery

STANISŁAW JERZY KOMOROWSKI, Deputy Minister of Defence
TOMASZ MERTA, Deputy Minister of Culture
MACIEJ PŁAŻYŃSKI, Former Speaker of Parliament, head of Poles Abroad Association
GEN. FRANCISZEK GAĞOR, Head of General Staff
GEN. ANDRZEJ BŁASIK, Head of Air Force
GEN. TADEUSZ BUK, Head of Land Army
GEN. WOJCIECH POTASIŃSKI, Head of Special Forces
VICEADMIRAL ANDRZEJ KARWETA, Commander of Navy
GEN. BRONISŁAW KWIATKOWSKI, Head of Operational Command
GEN. KAZIMIERZ GILARSKI, Head of Warsaw Garrison
MARIUSZ HANDZLIK, Undersecretary of State in Presidential Chancellery
ANDRZEJ KREMER, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs
PIOTR NUROWSKI, Head of Polish Olympic Committee
JANUSZ KOCHANOWSKI, Civic Rights Ombudsman
SŁAWOMIR SKRZYPEK, Head of National Bank of Poland
JANUSZ KURTYKA, Head of National Remembrance Institute
JANUSZ KRUPSKI, Head of Veterans Office
GRZEGORZ DOLNIAK MP
LESZEK DEPTUŁA MP
GRAŻYNA GĘSICKA MP
PRZEMYSŁAW GOSIEWSKI MP
ZBIGNIEW WASSERMANN MP
SEBASTIAN KARPINIUK MP
IZABELA JARUGA-NOWACKA MP
ALEKSANDRA NATALLI-ŚWIAT MP
ARKADIUSZ RYBICKI MP
JOLANTA SZYMANEK-DERESZ MP
WIESŁAW WODA MP
EDWARD WOJTAS MP
Senator JANINA FETLIŃSKA
Senator STANISŁAW ZAJĄC
Gen TADEUSZ PŁOSKI, Head Military Chaplain
Father ROMAN INDRZEJCZYK, Chaplain to the President