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## Out of tragedy, normality

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**Poland's prospects look bright, despite the aeroplane crash that killed its president on April 10th. But Poles still have a lot to do to make the most of their chances**



COMMUNAL mourning after a national tragedy is deep but transient. People thought that the death in 1997 of Diana, Princess of Wales, would change Britain for ever. After a few weeks, things got back to normal. The same was true in Poland after the death in 2005 of the country's most famous son, Pope John Paul II. The sense of national solidarity and the kindness between strangers were overwhelming. But they didn't last.

And so, almost certainly, it will be with the great convulsion of grief that has swept Poland since the death of President Lech Kaczyński and 95 others in an aeroplane crash in Russia. After the funerals on April 17th, the media will doubtless resume its backbiting and excitability; politics will once again be bad-tempered, and people will ask hard questions about the crash.

Some of these will deserve answers more than others. It is not inherently scandalous, for example, that the Polish president was flying in a Soviet-made plane, recently serviced in Russia. The Tupolev 154 is thirsty and noisy, but robust and reliable. Nor do the conspiracy theories deserve a nanosecond's attention. It is true that Poland's wartime leader, Władysław Sikorski, died in a mysterious aeroplane crash in Gibraltar in 1943, just as he was demanding the truth about the newly discovered massacre at Katyn. But the terrible coincidence is just that: a coincidence. Russia's co-operation with the investigation cannot be faulted. It may even be the start of a deeper reconciliation between the two countries.

What does look questionable is the concentration of talent on the passenger list. The crash cost Poland's armed forces six of their top seven commanders, and killed dozens of other notables. Countries and big companies usually have strict rules about how many of their most vital people can fly in the same plane. The crash shows the wisdom of such practices.

The investigation may reveal other misjudgments, too. Mr Kaczyński publicly berated for cowardice a pilot who refused to fly him and four other heads of state to Tbilisi during a mission to support the Georgian leadership during the war in August 2008. (The pilot later got a medal for refusing to obey the president's reckless order.) The theory that on April 10th the pilot felt unduly pressured to get the president to the commemoration of the Katyn massacre, despite severe fog at Smolensk airport, deserves scrutiny. Some also wonder if it is overdoing things to give the late president, a divisive figure, the honour of burial in the crypt of the Wawel cathedral in Cracow, alongside Poland's greatest leaders.

But whatever combination of incompetence, recklessness and sheer bad luck turns out to have caused the disaster, the bigger picture of Poland is a bright one. Foreigners used to stereotypes about Polish disorganisation, backwardness and prejudice find plenty to surprise them.

The clearest success is the economy. Poland is not only doing well in the "ex-communist" region (already a dated category). It is doing well by any standard. Its economy was the only one in Europe to boast growth last year, of 1.7%. Though the budget deficit is a whopping 7% of GDP, outsiders are unbothered. Poland's banking system is solid, being largely unburdened by the rotten foreign-currency loans made in places such as Hungary and Latvia. Outside investors like Poland. It attracted more than \$10 billion in foreign direct investment last year. Debt, at 53% of GDP, is manageable. Countries such as Britain might drool at that.

Poland's success is partly a matter of luck. Its size (the biggest economy by far of the European Union's newer members) means that domestic demand cushioned a fall in exports. EU taxpayers' money for new roads, railways and other modernisation provided a fiscal stimulus at the right time. Growing interest by outside investors in Poland's big gas reserves has raised the prospect of both a bonanza and greater energy independence—a big deal in a country fearful of over-dependence on Russian gas.

There was also good judgment. Poland has used monetary and fiscal policy well during the crisis. It has made a stab at reforming the pension system—a weak point in all ex-communist countries. It is using EU money more effectively than in the past. One of the biggest successes of Donald Tusk, the prime minister, has been to push squabbling local politicians to agree quickly on road-building programmes. Transport bottlenecks were an infuriating and growth-stifling feature of Polish life.

The government now exudes confidence. Mr Tusk heads a stable coalition with a solid parliamentary majority (unknown in modern Polish history). Business

likes that. Among its prominent members are the finance minister, Jacek Rostowski, an economics professor from Britain; and Radek Sikorski, the foreign minister. A teenage refugee from communism, Mr Sikorski boasts a degree from Oxford and a high-profile American wife (who was a former *Economist* journalist). Both men have the connections and language skills to get Poland's message across in a way that stirs envy among other politicians, working in laboured English or through interpreters.

Under the previous government, led by the late president's twin brother Jaroslaw, Poland was turning into a laughing-stock. The Kaczynskis' policy seemed to be to pick noisy fights with Germany, Russia and the rest of the EU, over, for example, support of the beleaguered Georgians. Some of the criticism was no doubt grossly unfair but the twins' woeful tactics left Poland marginalised.

Since Mr Tusk's government took office in 2007, however, that has begun to change. The country has offered loans to stricken economies such as Iceland, Latvia and Moldova. Some wonder if it might help Greece, undermining the notion that Europe has a rich, well-run western half, and a poor, backward east.

Polish leaders have also made friends with Germany, seeing in Angela Merkel's leadership an opportunity for a powerful friendship. Many noticed when Guido Westerwelle, the German foreign minister, paid his first visit not (like his predecessors) to Paris, but to Warsaw.

Poland has always been a military heavyweight by European standards, able to deploy its 100,000-strong armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. America likes that, seeing a sharp contrast with the feeble efforts of some other NATO allies. In return, Poland has gained the main role in America's anti-missile plans. The Obama administration clumsily ditched a scheme promised by the Bush administration but says the new programme will be bigger and better. American energy companies' interest in Polish gas reserves may make the connection even stronger. Poland has also earned NATO attention on what was once the neglected home front. The alliance developed contingency plans to defend Poland, and is extending them (using mainly Polish troops) to protect the vulnerable Baltic states.

But Mr Tusk's biggest diplomatic achievement since taking office has been to steer Poland towards a rapprochement with Russia. The biggest sign of that was the participation of the Russian prime minister, Vladimir Putin, at a ceremony on April 7th to mark the anniversary of the Katyn massacre. The Russian government's reaction to the deaths of Mr Kaczynski and his entourage seems designed to take the process further (see [article](#)).

This is a big change. Poland used to be the most forthright critic of Mr Putin's regime. The Russian leader said that Poland would be a nuclear target in wartime.

The countries' reconciliation still has a long way to go. Mr Putin has expressed sympathy for the victims of Katyn. But he has not publicly condemned their executioners. And in a response to a lawsuit at the European Court of Human Rights brought by relatives of Katyn victims, Russia still claims that it is not clear who perpetrated the massacre. Many Poles find that outrageous: it is as if, they say, modern Germany were to admit the Holocaust was not a myth yet still hesitated to condemn Hitler outright.

Such feelings brought Mr Kaczynski, along with almost the entire foreign-policy leadership of his party, the commanders of the armed forces, senior intelligence veterans and top historians, to board the plane that crashed on April 10th. They were paying their own unofficial visit, an alternative to the (in their eyes, phoney) reconciliation of the earlier event attended by Messrs Tusk and Putin.

In many countries, the destruction of so great a part of the top echelon would have precipitated a crisis, domestically and on foreign-exchange markets. It is hugely to Poland's credit that this has not happened: the country's institutions and constitution have passed the test almost serenely.

But it has taken a great tragedy to remind Poles of this achievement because, for many of them, too little has changed in daily life. A million or more have gone to work in other EU countries, chiefly Britain and Ireland. Despite the downturn there and Poland's economic success, they are so far mostly not coming back.

The reasons are complex. Poland has little tradition of internal labour mobility, so shortages in Warsaw and the country's booming western crescent can coexist with deep joblessness in the east. It can be easier, with a budget airline, to commute weekly to Britain than to drive to a job 100km away. Petty corruption in health care and education is endemic. Perhaps most worrying, social mobility is stagnating. After the collapse of communism, a bright young person could aim high. Now many feel that without good connections, it is best to head abroad.

The suspicion lingers that the country's old communist elite and their children have morphed into a new nomenklatura. Poles call this idea the *Uklad*, an all-but-untranslatable word meaning "deal", "arrangement" or "system". The price of the communist surrender in 1989 was that the old elite was able to turn its power into wealth, using connections, slush funds and privileges to gain a head start in the country's shift to capitalism.

The Kaczynskis found that idea repellent. They wanted a fresh start and called it a "Fourth Republic". But during their ill-starred government of 2005-07, the atmosphere was more reminiscent of Robespierre than Benjamin Franklin. Prosecutors conducted trial by press conference, denouncing victims live on television on what often seemed the flimsiest of grounds. Overzealous sleaze-busting was matched by an apparently obsessive focus on reforming the over-mighty military-intelligence service.

Disquiet about the brothers' vengeful, chaotic and weird reputation led to their downfall in 2007 and the election of Mr Tusk's Civic Platform party. The big criticism of his government is that presentation outweighs substance. Poland's prosperity rests on a surprisingly narrow base. It needs structural reforms to deal with, for example, a rapidly ageing workforce, only just over half of whom are economically active.

The deaths of Mr Kaczynski and many of his closest allies leave a big political hole but also create an opportunity. The late president was already facing a tough challenge from Mr Tusk's party in the presidential race that was due in October. That election will now be in June. Bronislaw Komorowski, who is acting president by virtue of his position as speaker of the lower house of parliament, the Sejm, is also the Civic Platform candidate. A victory for him would make Mr Tusk's efforts to consolidate the centre-right of the Polish political spectrum start to look unstoppable.

The most powerful candidate for Law and Justice would be Mr Kaczynski's twin, Jaroslaw. His intentions are unclear. If he stands, he could gain a big sympathy vote. But he might also remind Poles why they voted him out of office as prime minister. Some Poles believe that a cross-party candidate would be the right step.

One of Mr Tusk's biggest excuses for his government's cautious approach to reform is that anything radical might be met with a presidential veto. That was not a complete excuse. But if Mr Komorowski or a non-partisan figure is elected, it will be no excuse at all. Poland has done a tremendous amount to make up for five decades of sometimes bestial misrule after 1939. But it has more to do if it is to establish a position as one of the powers of Europe.