

# Shock, Suspicion Spread After Polish Leader's Death

by ERIC WESTERVELT



Katarzyna Mala/AP

Mourners take photographs of the hearse bearing the coffin of late Polish President Lech Kaczynski as it arrives at the Presidential Palace in Warsaw on Sunday.

April 11, 2010

text size **A A A**

Poland has declared a week of national mourning after a plane crash Saturday killed 96 people, including Polish President Lech Kaczynski and the first lady, as well as dozens of Poland's senior military, political and religious leaders. While many Poles are still in a state of shock, they're also asking questions about the government's fleet of aging aircraft.

Late into the evening Saturday night and Sunday, thousands of Poles continued to walk through the square in front of the president's residence. They lay bouquets of flowers, lit candles or just stood quietly, staring at the Polish flag fluttering at half-staff above the presidential palace.

The loss is devastating to Poland; in addition to the president and first lady, the rest of the dead include the head of the Polish central bank, the deputy foreign minister, the national security adviser; the deputy parliament speaker and several members of parliament, including two presidential candidates.

The military faced equally horrific losses: the heads of the Polish navy, air force, special forces, ground forces and the army chief of staff were all killed.

Slawka Spurek says she was stunned when she heard. Spurek is visiting Warsaw from a nearby town for the weekend, and was enjoying a museum with her family when a guard told her the news.

"The lady said, 'Have you heard our president is dead?' — and it was a shock. We still can't believe it. There are so many people under the presidential palace here in Warsaw, and so many candles," Spurek says. "There's an endless river of people, and I can't believe this."

President Kaczynski and the other VIPs were traveling to western Russia when their plane crashed in heavy fog while trying to land at an airport in Smolensk. TV footage showed the smoldering, twisted

wreckage of the Polish presidential jet, a Russian-made Tupolev-154, spread across a wooded area more than a mile from the airport.

Warsaw resident Alex Martin calls it Poland's biggest tragedy in its post-World War II history. "[We're] left without any commanders of the army and the president of the national bank, so it was really disaster for the country and the people."

The parliament speaker is now acting president, and the country will hold presidential elections sometime in June.



[Enlarge](#)

Mikhail Metzel/AP

Russian investigators work near the wreckage of the Polish presidential plane Sunday just outside the Smolensk airport in western Russia.

The pain of the loss is compounded by the fact that the president and his entourage were on their way to remember the 70th anniversary of a massacre in the forests of Katyn of thousands of Polish military officers and Polish intelligentsia by the Soviet secret police during World War II. Poles are now calling the plane crash the "second Katyn," and refer to the forests around the Russian town as "cursed," "haunted" and "damned."

There are already conspiracy theories circulating. One man standing in front of the presidential palace held a sign that said "the inhuman murderers have done it again," referring to Russia.

But investigators so far believe the accident was most likely the result of pilot error. Russian media report that the Polish pilot was warned several times by air traffic controllers to divert to another airport because of the dangerous fog conditions. Professor Wawrzyniec Konarski with the Warsaw School of Social Sciences says that despite the grief and sadness, Poles are asking tough questions.

"It has to be clarified why the plane, the staff, decided to land despite the fact that the fog was so strong," says Konarski. "If it was really true that the airport warned them or not, to what extent were they aware that it was so dangerous to land the plane? All of those things have to be clarified to avoid any further conspiracy theories."

Poles are also asking why so many VIPs were on one aircraft, and why the Polish government had not upgraded its fleet of aging aircraft.

President Kaczynski had been one of the leaders of the pro-democracy Solidarity movement that helped Poland overthrow the communist regime. His friend Lech Walesa, the dissident who went on to become president, said simply of the crash, "the elite of our country has perished."

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**Eliot Bernstein (iviewit)** wrote:

hmmmm, do I smell Obama's "Brain" Zbigniew, is he Polish, motivation, etc.?

Zbigniew Kazimierz Brzezinski (Polish: Zbigniew Kazimierz Brzeziński, pronounced [ˈzɓignɛv ɓzɛˈziŋski]; born March 28, 1928, Warsaw, Poland) is a Polish-American political scientist, geostrategist, and statesman who served as United States National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter from 1977 to 1981. Known for his hawkish foreign policy at a time when the Democratic Party was increasingly dovish, he is a foreign policy "realist".

Monday, April 12, 2010 5:50:43 AM

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**Eliot Bernstein (iviewit)** wrote:

Imagine a coup, the plane story just a cover, murder of the cabinet in an instant, blame it on a plane crash that makes no sense. Can someone get our government to fly this airline???

Monday, April 12, 2010 5:47:35 AM

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**mateusz holewski (lothar\_ppt)** wrote:

I believe that he was forced to land. In 2008 president's pilot refused to land in Tbilisi, Georgia. Kaczynski said: "we will deal with this issue after returning home". One of parliament members from Law & Justice party connected with President L. Kaczynski informed attorney general, and his superiors. This happened during Russian invasion on Georgia.

Source (poorly translated):

[http://translate.googleusercontent.com/translate\\_c?hl=pl&ie=UTF-](http://translate.googleusercontent.com/translate_c?hl=pl&ie=UTF-8&sl=pl&tl=en&u=http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,6023779,Nie_bedzie_sledztwa_ws__pilota__ktor)

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Monday, April 12, 2010 3:37:30 AM

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**jeff snickelfritz (rocketball52)** wrote:

It does not take rocket scientists to know you do not put all your eggs in one basket just in case the basket gets dropped. My family owned a small plastics company and when we went on family vacations the controlling partners travelled on different planes always just in case of this type of issue. One thing is for sure in Poland new thinkers will be in power now and things will change.

Monday, April 12, 2010 3:18:46 AM

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**mateusz holewski (lothar\_ppt)** wrote:

There were two planes flying to Katyn. Smaller one took reporters two hours earlier. There was only one plane that could have taken official delegation while the other presidential plane is being renovated.

A huge mistake (maybe there isn't such a rule) was that all army leaders happened to be in one vehicle at the same time. I'm looking forward to knowing more about this.

Even big companies forbid members of the executive board to drive in one car, take the same flight.

Monday, April 12, 2010 2:17:19 AM

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**itkonlyyoupp lkfuewoi (fioew)** wrote:

This comment has been reported as inappropriate by the NPR community.

Sunday, April 11, 2010 11:47:04 PM

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**Ted Spisiak (tedejr)** wrote:

This is a tragic loss for any nation, regardless of what ideology they subscribe to. To lose so many of the top leaders at one time.

It is a testimony to the Polish system that their government is continuing unabated, and functioning, all thing considered, normally.

The really tragic thing is that I have heard that one reason so many top leaders were on a single aircraft, was that they were trying to save money by not having multiple flights. That's something you would not have heard from here. Trying to save the public an expense.

Sunday, April 11, 2010 10:05:44 PM

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**Donald E. Smith (theoldtimer)** wrote:

NPR deserves the thrashing it is getting over the declining quality of reporting on serious issues .

"All Things Considered" surely "ain't what it used to be". Now, instead of all meat and potatoes coverage of national and international affairs, it is increasingly devoted to lives and activities of flakey celebs and bad movies. PLEASE leave that to the trash mags at the check-out counter, lest more of us decide not to send \$\$ for support.

Sunday, April 11, 2010 9:56:51 PM

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**Jeff P. (J\_in\_Germany)** wrote:

I agree with most of what Mr. Gibbs wrote, I'm sorry to say. I used to rely on, or at least, think more highly of, NPR. Seems to me they're going the way of CNN & FOX, however I don't think BBC is much further behind.

Sunday, April 11, 2010 7:49:27 PM

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**mateusz holewski (lothar\_ppt)** wrote:

We still wait for the results of the polish and russian investigation. The fact is that there were many complaints last years about presidential and governmental planes. Kaczynski Chancellery however has bought new car fleet instead. The plane that crashed in Smolensk was overhauled a few months ago.

President Kaczynski who had different point of view, belived in traditional family, represented catholics, conservatists - he was constantly a subject of many jokes. Liberal polish media that mourn now just a few months ago critised him, used his every mistake against him.

I didn't vote for Kaczynski - however the level of hypocrisy is astonishing. I pay respect to my dead President because it is a tragedy and terrible loss - I know that he was very brave, intelligent man, a good husband, law professor, 'Solidarnosc' movement legend - but I still do not support his presidency - I feel that he wasn't prepared.

Sunday, April 11, 2010 6:33:12 PM

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