



The Polish Presidential Elections 2010 in the Smolensk Tragedy Shadow

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- *Bronisław Komorowski of the Civic Platform of PM Donald Tusk won after the second leg of elections with 6 points ahead of Jarosław Kaczyński of the Law and Justice party, despite the sympathy vote for Kaczyński after the tragic death of his brother late President Lech Kaczyński;*
- *The main issue of the of first round of campaigns was the healthcare reform and then other issues appeared to the fore: the governmental response to the May floods, the territorial cohesion (slow economic development of densely populated Eastern regions), reform of the army, policy on Belarus, reform of the pension system;*
- *The elections held in June and July 2010 in Poland registered that the Polish society has polarized into two main camps, one represented by Donald Tusk, his government and now President Bronisław Komorowski, and the other by Jarosław Kaczyński and his party. This will be reflected in the critical upcoming parliamentary elections in the autumn of 2011;*
- *President Komorowski's foreign policy will be largely pro-European; possibly even less pragmatic (i.e. more idealistic) than the government's, which has to take care of daily business in the EU affairs.*

On 20 June and 4 July 2010 Poles elected their 5th president since 1989. Bronisław Komorowski, candidate of the ruling party of Prime Minister Donald Tusk, the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO), won with almost 9 million of votes, or 53%. He won over Jarosław Kaczyński, twin brother of the late President Lech Kaczyński, who was a candidate of the largest opposition party, the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS). The 2010 campaign was originally scheduled for the fall when the elections were scheduled to take place, but the Smolensk tragedy of 10 April has fast-forwarded the political calendar. The campaign was also strongly overshadowed by the April events, as two of the three then-to-be leading candidates lost their lives: Lech Kaczyński (supported by PiS) and Jerzy Szmajdziński, supported by the Democratic Left Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej, SLD).

The third candidate from the original set of candidates, Mr. Komorowski, apart from fast-forwarding his campaign, also had to rethink his strategy, as on 10 April it was him who replaced the deceased head of state as the acting President of Poland. Therefore, instead of challenging the incumbent, he was to be challenged by a new set of candidates. Among them, Mr. Jarosław Kaczyński was largely perceived in the country as the surviving brother and hence this new "sympathy" support was creating new sympathy votes for the candidate.

The campaign

The campaign has been strongly influenced by the events of 10 April and the subsequent week. In the aftermath of the Smolensk tragedy, the government of Donald Tusk and the acting President Komorowski provided for maximum respect for the victims and their orphaned families, openness and togetherness towards opposition in the light of the tragedy, transparency of the proceedings and cooperation with the Russian partners, on whose soil the accident occurred. This initial shock to the nation and to its political class has eventually created two new sentiments, which dominated the presidential campaign.

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1990

Lech Wałęsa (first direct elections)

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Aleksander Kwaśniewski

2000

Aleksander Kwaśniewski (2nd term)

2005

Lech Kaczyński

2010

Bronisław Komorowski

First, there was the process of changing of the image of the late President Lech Kaczyński. Highly unpopular before his death,ⁱ the late President was presented by his political peers as the best Polish President ever and the mainstream media previously negatively reporting on the head of state changed their tone and were showing images of a happy, decent and likeable Presidential couple. In short, the fight over the legacy of the statesman President Lech Kaczynski has begun.

In reaction to a radical shift to the image of the late President, an opposition rose. The clash between the two sides could have been observed already a few days after the accident, when the decision was taken to bury the President and his wife in the Wawel cathedral in Krakow alongside Polish ancient kings (i.e. Stefan Batory and Jan III Sobieski), statesmen (i.e. Józef Piłsudski, creator of the Polish statehood in early 20th century) and writers (i.e. Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki). The main argument against the burial was exactly the opposite one of those favoring the funeral: was the President "the best" Polish President in history or in fact he was "the worst" President and hence did not deserve to be buried in the most sacred of places.ⁱⁱ The proponents of the second perspective seem also to believe that the government reacted very well in those extreme conditions.

As a consequence two camps emerged, which eventually found their respective candidates. The first societal voice's choice was Jarosław Kaczyński, the orphaned brother and the best positioned person to guard the memory of the late President's legacy. The second voice was proud of how the state institutions reacted to the Smolensk event and rejected any accusations made towards the Russians or the Polish government as for the responsibility for the accident. Their choice was primarily represented by Bronisław Komorowski.

The rest of the candidates did not have an easy life. Eventually eight more candidates managed to collect 100,000 or more signatures supporting their candidacies. There was no female contender. Out of them only one made a difference in the first round held on 20 June, the new candidate of SLD replacing deceased Jerzy Szmajdziński, Mr. Grzegorz Napieralski. Mr. Napieralski's campaign was in fact a popularity test of this 36-year old politician, SLD's leader. His campaign was the most forward-looking, "smiling" campaign. He has also benefitted from the voters disappointed with a real choice limited to only two conservative politicians. In the end, Mr. Napieralski received some 13% of the vote in the first round. Other politicians' support did not exceed 2.5% each.ⁱⁱⁱ

Main issues on the campaign agenda and the first leg results

Before the first round of the elections the campaign was very timid. The main policy topic was the reform of the healthcare, where Jarosław Kaczyński stated that Bronisław Komorowski supported privatization of hospitals. This issue between two candidates was settled by an electoral court, which eventually said that it was untrue and Mr. Kaczyński had to apologise was his misstatement.

Another delay in the campaign was caused by the heavy rain flows, which resulted with floods throughout Poland in May. The candidates refrained from campaigning and concentrated on assistance to the victims of the floods. With time, the governmental reaction to the floods was more and more criticized by the opposition, but initially it was not any major topic of the campaign.

The campaign instead was focused on two other issues. The gaffes made by Mr. Komorowski (i.e. quoting from Wikipedia, or being unaware of who is an EU member state or saying the "Poland will leave NATO" which was a flip-flop, as he apparently meant that Poland and NATO will eventually leave Afghanistan) set some tone of the campaign, but eventually did not hurt the candidate. The other issue was the credibility of the "new face" of Jarosław Kaczyński, who tried to portray himself as a moderate politician with centrist views. I.e. he started his campaign with a video message to Russian friends issued on 9 May urging for Polish-Russian reconciliation.^{iv}

The first round of the election was held on 20 June. The results were the following^v:

Presidential Elections 2010, first leg, 20 June 2010:

1. Bronisław Komorowski	b. 1952	6.981 m votes	41.54%
2. Jarosław Kaczyński	b. 1949	6.128 m votes	36.46%
3. Grzegorz Napieralski	b. 1974	2.300 m votes	13.68%
Turnout			54.94%

Since the first leg of the election was inconclusive (to be elected President, a candidate needs to receive over 50% of casted ballots), a second leg was organized on 4 July.

After 20 June the speed of the campaign increased. Both candidates campaigned extensively in the country and beyond. Bronisław Komorowski visited soldiers in Afghanistan and Jarosław Kaczyński met with the British Prime Minister David Cameron in London. The main issue remained the healthcare reform and another one re-appeared – the governmental response to the May floods. New subjects emerged during two debates Mr. Komorowski and Mr. Kaczyński had. Among them most controversial were the territorial cohesion (slow economic development of densely populated Eastern regions), reform of the army, policy on Belarus (Mr. Kaczyński stated he would talk with Russians about the situation in Belarus, which was found offending by his interlocutor since many Poles are sensitive not to allowing other nations discussing Polish interests without Poles being involved), reform of the pension system, etc. The underlying determining question was this: in your opinion, which government was better, the one of Jarosław Kaczyński (2006-2007) or the one of Donald Tusk (since 2007)? The winner of the first debate was Mr. Komorowski. Mr. Kaczyński carried the second debate.

Initially, Bronisław Komorowski's campaign was designed for him to win in the first round. The primary reason for it was that was the difficulty in winning during summer holidays, when many of his supporters would be out of their place of residence and hence unable to cast a ballot (i.e. students, parents of kids in school age, urban holiday goers). This is why the PO strongly supported a traditionally NGO-driven pro-participation campaign.^{vi} The issue at stake could be up to 1 million of votes. To make it possible to vote abroad the Ministry of Foreign Affairs made it possible to cast a ballot in places like Alaska, the Canary Islands (both Palma de Mallorca and Las Palmas de Gran Canaria), Crete, and Antalya in Turkey and over 40 locations in the United Kingdom. In the end over 200,000 votes were casted abroad, compared to almost 50,000 back in 2005 presidential race.^{vii}

Still, it was not the foreign votes which were central to the result. In the final days of the campaign Bronisław Komorowski concentrated on the rural (hence taking the urban vote in majority for granted) and female voters (promising a parity – at least of 35% – on electoral lists). Jarosław Kaczyński concentrated on mobilizing his own base of traditional conservative voters in central and South-Eastern Poland as well as trying to win support of some of the left-wing voters, who supported Mr. Napieralski two weeks earlier. He made controversy when he first declared not to call the Polish left "post-communist" anymore and later praising elements of policy of one Communist ruler in 1970s, Mr. Edward Gierek.

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There are several important and striking elements in the result. First, Mr. Komorowski electorate consists of better-educated, richer, younger and living in bigger cities people. Mr. Kaczyński electorate is poorer, older, and more frequently comes from countryside or small towns. Support for both candidates is also determined geographically (see graph attached at the end. Mr. Komorowski supporters come from large cities as well as from Northern, North-Western, Western and Southern Poland. Mr. Kaczyński's support was concentrated in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Poland.

The final results

The result of the vote was a 6 percentage point victory for Mr. Komorowski. The details look the following:

Presidential Elections 2010, second leg, 4 July 2010:

1. Bronisław Komorowski	b. 1952	8.934 m votes	53.01%
2. Jarosław Kaczyński	b. 1949	7.919 m votes	46.99%
Turnout			55.31%

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Second, the 2010 results reflect the 2007 parliamentary elections almost precisely. It shows how little has changed since; how strong the two main conservative parties remain and how difficult it is for third parties to emerge as winners anywhere else in the country. This is also a very strong signal ahead of the local and regional elections to be held in the fall 2010.

The consequences

Internal Politics

There are a few important messages from the elections held in June and July 2010 in Poland. For one, the Polish society is polarized into two main camps, one represented by Donald Tusk, his government and now President Bronisław Komorowski, and the other by Jarosław Kaczyński and his party. Both sides have their vulnerabilities and at this stage it is impossible to predict how they will play out ahead of the fall 2011 parliamentary elections.

The PO main vulnerabilities stem from the fact that it is now solely responsible for the Polish executive branch of government. The Tusk government was accused in the past for inactiveness; the popular response was it was due to President Lech Kaczyński vetoes or potential vetoes. This reply is no longer valid and some important reforms need to be undertaken especially in the domain of the public deficit and the healthcare reform.

There is also a risk of corruption which comes with having so large majority of one political block. The threat and the strength of the opposition party, PiS was an important element of consistency of the PO. With opposition significantly weaker as they have just lost country's presidency the unity of the PO could be challenged, too. Yet another risk comes from the junior coalition partner of PO, the PSL, which is worried about its future. PSL has participated in two other coalition governments before (parliaments elected in 1993 and 2001), but withdrew from the government before the end of the term in both cases. Should the party leaders decide it would be more beneficial for them to run in elections being in opposition to the government, then it means the minority government scenario or early elections cannot be ruled out at this stage.

The vulnerabilities of PiS are also numerous. For one, large proportion of Jarosław Kaczyński support comes from the sympathy votes towards him as personally affected by the 10 April tragedy. With time there will be fewer of those supporters. Opening towards the centre was another largely beneficial factor for the party candidate in 2010.

In other words, should the PO come victorious from the next parliamentary elections, this might bring an end to the bipolar conservative Polish politics and even a disintegration of the Law and Justice.

Yet opening to the centre leaves the "right flank" vulnerable for re-emergence of far right parties, such as the League of Polish Families (Liga Polskich Rodzin, LPR, in parliament 2001-2007 with about 7% of vote, eliminated from the Sejm in 2007 as its original electorate shifted to PiS).

Hence the next big battle is scheduled now for fall 2011 (or earlier) parliamentary elections. There will be yet another difference then with the 2010 presidential race. To take a military comparison, since 2005 there are two "generals" in Polish politics: Jarosław Kaczyński and Donald Tusk. If 2010 one "general" lost a battle with a "lieutenant" of the other side; what chances does he have vis-à-vis the other "general"? In other words, should the PO come victorious from the next parliamentary elections, this might bring an end to the bipolar conservative Polish politics and even a disintegration of the Law and Justice.

If this was the case, it should be relatively simple for President-elect to keep his promise to be a "unifier" with a friendly government until the following elections in 2015.

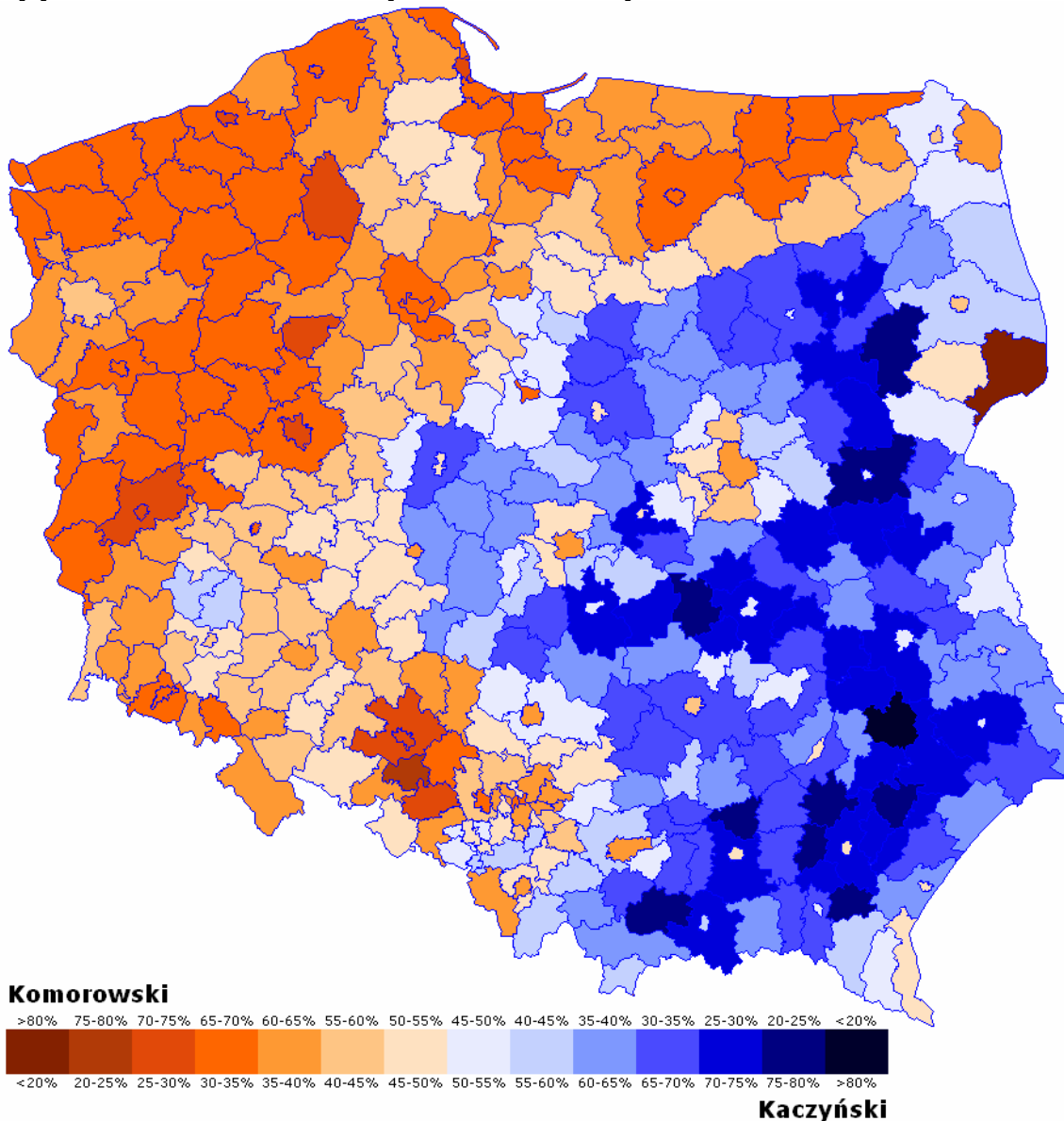
External Policy

The Polish president has two main prerogatives. Apart from having a veto power in internal policies he enjoys a public mandate and a constitutional power to influence foreign relations. All Polish Presidents since 1990 had major international portfolios. President Wałęsa negotiated withdrawal of Soviet troops and gained Russian consent to Polish NATO aspirations in 1993. President Kwaśniewski oversaw Poland's joining NATO in 1999 and EU in 2004. He also mastered a peaceful resolution of the post-electoral conflict in Ukraine in late 2004. President Kaczyński promoted an innovative policy of strong Polish engagement in the Caucasus and he included energy security in the traditionally understood "hard security" matters. He also had a major negative impact on the development of Polish relations with Germany, Russia and within the EU.

President Komorowski's foreign policy will be largely pro-European; possibly even less pragmatic (i.e. more idealistic) than the government's, which has to take care of daily business in the EU affairs. He has also already indicated his commitment to withdraw Polish troops from Afghanistan, though he did not give a clear calendar for that. Under his leadership, improvement of Polish relations with Russia should be expected as well as more convincing (than predecessor's) commitment to human rights and democracy defense in the global affairs.

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Appendix: Electoral map of the 2010 presidential elections in Poland



Endnotes

ⁱ In one poll conducted in Poland in February 2010 46% of the respondents express the hope that the President would “disappear from politics”; and only one politician was more disliked by the public, his brother Jarosław; Opinion poll by TNS OBOP for ‘Fakt’, February 2010. In another February 2010 poll the President enjoyed an approval rating of only 26% and 62% actively disapproved of the President’s activities; Opinion poll by CBOS, February 2010.

ⁱⁱ The latest previous Polish leader to be buried in the Wawel Cathedral is General Władysław Sikorski, who died in 1943 and his body was moved to Kraków in 1993.

ⁱⁱⁱ Among the 8 candidates were once prominent politicians, such as Waldemar Pawlak, former Prime Minister, current Vice Prime Minister and leader of the junior coalition party, the Polish People’s Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL); Andrzej Olechowski, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, who campaigned for President in 2000 and came 2nd with 17% of the vote; and Andrzej Lepper, former Vice Prime Minister and Minister for Agriculture, who campaigned for President in 2005 and came 3rd with 15% of the vote.

^{iv} The video is available in Polish and Russian on: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjfUm6mbBv4>.

^v Source: National Electoral Commission, 21 June 2010, available at: <http://prezydent2010.pkw.gov.pl/PZT1/EN/WYN/W/index.htm>.

^{vi} S==(you have a voice).

^{vii} National Electoral Commission data. Also, in 2007 parliamentary elections almost 150,000 votes were casted abroad.

^{viii} Graph prepared by Mr. Robert Wielgórski and published by Wikipedia at: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/54/Wyborzy_prezydenckie_2010_II_tura_pow_BK.png



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