Political Conditions

The 1990s

The Polish United Workers' (Communist) Party dissolved itself in January 1990, creating in its place a new party, Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland. Most of the property of the former Communist Party was turned over to the state.

The May 1990 local elections were entirely free. Candidates supported by Solidarity's Citizens' Committees won most of the races they contested, although voter turnout was only a little over 40 percent. The cabinet was reshuffled in July 1990; the national defense and interior affairs ministers (holdovers from the previous communist government) were among those replaced. In October 1990, the constitution was amended to curtail the term of President Jaruzelski. In December, Lech Walesa became the first popularly elected president of Poland.

Poland in the early 1990s made great progress toward achieving a fully democratic government and a market economy. Free and fair elections were held for the presidency in November 1990 and for parliament in October 1991 and September 1993. Freedom of speech, religion, assembly, and the press was instituted. Various political parties representing the full spectrum of political views were established.

In November 1990, Lech Walesa was elected president for a five-year term. From 1991 to 1993, three parliamentary coalitions of post-Solidarity parties governed in quick succession, none longer than 14 months. Jan Krzysztof Bielecki, at Walesa's request, formed a government and served as prime minister until October 1991. His government continued the Mazowiecki government's "big bang" package of economic reform, which introduced world prices and greatly expanded the scope of private enterprise.

Poland held its first free parliamentary elections in October 1991. More than 100 parties participated. No single party received more than 13 percent of the total vote. President Walesa first asked Bronislaw Geremek (a leader of the Democratic Union) and then Jan Olszewski (the candidate of a minority coalition of five parties) to attempt to form a government. Olszewski finally succeeded in putting together a coalition government that was ratified by parliament. After a vote of no confidence in June 1992, however, Olszewski and his cabinet were forced to resign over their efforts to purge alleged former secret police informers from political life.

Five weeks later, a new minority coalition government, led by Prime Minister Hanna Suchocka of the Democratic Union, was voted into office. Deep ideological differences created tension among the coalition partners, however, especially when a controversial anti-abortion law was passed in the "sejm." The Solidarity Union's decision to withdraw support for the Suchocka government, and a subsequent vote of no confidence, led President Walesa to dissolve the parliament in May 1993.

The Suchocka government continued to govern until parliamentary elections in September 1993. These elections took place under a new electoral law designed to limit the number of small parties in parliament by requiring them to receive at least five percent of the total vote to enter the "Sejm." The
Democratic Left Alliance, or SLD, received the most votes, with 21 percent, and the Polish Peasant Party, or PSL, with 15 percent, came in second. The largest post-Solidarity party, the Democratic Union, came in third with 11 percent of the vote. Most of the small center and right parties failed to enter the parliament, as did the Solidarity Union.

After the election, the SLD and PSL formed a governing coalition. Waldemar Pawlak, leader of the junior partner PSL, became prime minister. Relations between President Walesa and the prime minister remained poor throughout the tenure of the Pawlak government, with President Walesa charging Pawlak with furthering personal and party interests while neglecting matters of state importance. Following a number of scandals implicating Pawlak and increasing political tension over control of the armed forces, President Walesa demanded Pawlak's resignation in January 1995. In the ensuing political crisis, the coalition removed Pawlak from office and replaced him with the SLD's Jozef Oleksy.

In November 1995, Poland held its second post-war, free presidential elections. SLD leader Aleksander Kwasniewski defeated the incumbent president and Solidarity leader Lech Walesa by a narrow margin in a second round of voting, 51.7 percent to 48.3 percent.

Soon after Walesa's defeat, Interior Minister Andrzej Milczanowski accused Prime Minister Oleksy of longtime collaboration with Soviet, and later Russian, intelligence. In the ensuing political crisis, Oleksy resigned. For his successor, the SLD/PSL coalition turned to the deputy speaker of the "Sejm" (the lower house of Parliament), Wlodzimierz Cimoszewicz, who was linked to, but not a member of the SLD.

Polish prosecutors subsequently decided that there was insufficient evidence to charge Oleksy. In addition, a parliamentary commission decided in November 1996 that the Polish intelligence services might have violated rules of procedure in gathering evidence in the Oleksy case. After the September 1997 parliamentary elections, the Cimoszewicz government was replaced by a coalition of the "Akcja Wyborcza Solidarnosc" (Solidarity or AWS) and the "Unia Wolnosci" (Freedom Union or UW). Jerzy Buzek became prime minister. In those elections, "Akcja Wyborcza Solidarnosc" (Solidarity Election Action or AWS) received 33.8 percent of the popular vote and won 201 seats in the "Sejm" (the lower house of parliament). The "Unia Wolnosci" (Freedom Union or UW) received 13.4 percent of the vote and 60 seats.

The main opposition party was the "Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej" (Democratic Left Alliance or SLD), which received 27.1 percent of the vote and 164 seats in the "Sejm." Other opposition parties included the "Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe" (Polish Peasants' Party or PSL), which obtained 7.3 percent of the vote and 27 seats, and the "Ruch Odbudowy Polski" (Movement for the Reconstruction of Poland or ROP), which received 5.6 percent of the vote and six seats.

Throughout its tenure, tensions and infighting within the Solidarity electoral alliance, an alliance of over thirty political parties, and between Solidarity and the Freedom Union caused numerous problems for the Buzek government. Although the Buzek government pursued many of the economic reforms of the previous government, opposition to reforms from within the Solidarity alliance impeded the government's legislative agenda. In particular, farmers and public sector workers opposed many of the reform policies. Farmers feared that the European Union's agricultural policies would undermine the importance of agriculture to the Polish economy when Poland joined the European Union (EU). Farmers were also opposed to future changes in Polish law that would allow foreign nationals to own Polish farm property. Public sector workers opposed the massive layoffs and job losses that resulted from the restructuring and privatization of state industries.

The societal insecurities that resulted from economic reforms and political scandals within the ruling coalition damaged the government's popularity among voters despite Poland's continued (albeit slowing) economic growth. Furthermore, splits between the free market Freedom Union and the pro-reform wing of Solidarity on the one hand, and the anti-reform wing of Solidarity allied with the ex-communist Democratic Left Alliance on the other, made it difficult for the government to pass its reform policies in the "Sejm" and threatened the stability of the government.
Political Overview

Political Conditions

Political Developments Since 2000

Frustrated by the lack of legislative discipline in the Solidarity alliance and the hesitant pace of economic reforms, the pro-market Freedom Union ministers in the Buzek government resigned their posts on May 29, 2000. At first, Prime Minister Buzek refused to accept their resignations, while the ministers insisted that Solidarity had to establish a parliamentary whip system to compel Solidarity members in the "Sejm" to vote with the government on economic reform policies. The Freedom Union also insisted that the government had to speed up the pace of economic reforms.

Rather than comply with the demands of the Freedom Union, including a new prime minister, Prime Minister Buzek replaced the Freedom Union members of government with others from the Solidarity alliance, establishing a minority government. The Freedom Union and the ex-communist Democratic Left Alliance in the "Sejm" supported the government on a case-by-case basis.

Then, in October 2000, as was expected, former communist Alexander Kwąsniewski won re-election as president against 11 other candidates, including the former president and former head of Solidarity, Lech Walesa. Kwasniewski received nearly 54 percent of the vote; no other candidate received more than 18 percent. The second-place finisher, independent Andrzej Olechowski, was something of a surprise - as it had been expected that Marian Krzaklewski, then leader of the right-wing AWS (Solidarity Election Action) alliance, would come second.

One candidate who fared poorly in the recent presidential election, Lech Walesa, retired from politics. After receiving a mere one percent of the vote, the famous founder of the Solidarity trade union, recipient of the 1983 Nobel Peace Prize, and former president of Poland (1990-95), said he had decided to step aside in favor of more popular leaders.

During spring 2001, most party activity, including defections from the Solidarity alliance, involved gearing up for the September 2001 legislative elections. The main opposition party, the Democratic Left Alliance, or SLD, led by former communist Leszek Miller, formed an electoral coalition with other center-left parties the Labor Union, the National Party of Old Age and Disability Pensioners, the Democratic Party, and the Peasant Democratic Party.

In addition, several parties joined a center-right coalition under the new Civic Platform [formed by former members of the Freedom Union and led by Andrzej Olechowski] including the Conservative Peasant Party, or SKL, and the Union for Real Politics, also known as UPR. The Law and Justice Party, led by former Buzek government Minister of Justice, Lech Kaczynski was formed in June 2001 out of right-wing groupings.

The September 23, 2001, Sejm elections resulted in the Democratic Left Alliance-Labor Union (SLD-UP) garnering 41 percent of the vote and falling 15 seats short of a majority. The election demonstrated voter dissatisfaction by its low 46 percent turnout, the lowest in a decade, and the poor showing by Solidarity, which received a mere 5.6 percent of the vote (below the seven percent threshold) and no parliamentary seats. In addition, Solidarity's previous coalition partner Freedom Union only received 3.1 percent of the votes and also received no seats. The previous government's dismal showing was a result of continued internal turmoil and decline in economic conditions.

The other five parties which received seats included: Citizens' Platform, Self Defense, Law and Justice, Polish Family League, and the Polish Peasants' Party. The second place Citizens' Platform has identified itself as center-right and considered itself to be an alternative to the SLD.

Voter dissatisfaction was also evident in the two protest parties, the radical Self Defense and the ultra conservative Polish Family League, gaining representation. Both parties were strongly anti-EU and were expected to remain in opposition.

After two weeks of difficult negotiations the SLD-UP formed a coalition with the Polish Peasants' Party, or PSL, giving the new government a combined majority of 258 out of 460 seats. The SLD and the PSL governed Poland in an uncomfortable coalition from 1993-1997. This was likely to be a smoother marriage between the parties because the PSL’s parliamentary standing was weaker. The
objectives of the new government included the implementation of economic reforms and the resumption of EU accession talks.

In January 2002, Poland was suffering from an 18 percent unemployment rate with the expectation that unemployment would rise over the course of the year. The country also witnessed a significant drop in overall economic growth from the previous three-year average of five percent to less than two percent for 2001, with little hope of the economy growing more than one percent in 2002.

In March 2003, Polish Peasant's Party were dismissed from the ruling coalition because they refused to vote in line with government on taxes. Despite this development and the resulting minority government in office, Leszek Miller continued as prime minister.

European Union Accession

Meanwhile over the course of the last few years, the issue of EU accession had become a key consideration. Prime Minister Leszek Miller intended to lead membership negotiations with the EU as head of the Office for European Integration. Miller appointed PSL leader, Jaroslaw Kalinowski, as Deputy Prime Minister and Agriculture Minister. This choice implied Poland would be taking a tough stance with EU talks regarding agriculture, which was one of its major priorities. Kalinowski insisted on Poland's full inclusion in the Common Agricultural Policy, or CAP. This meant Poland would demand subsidies for its farmers equal to those enjoyed by other EU members. Poland rejected any transition period being applied.

A number of minority political parties, namely the Self-Defense party led by the outspoken and dramatic Andrezej Lepper, were fiercely campaigning against Poland's entrance into the EU. In April 2002, the Warsaw Business Journal reported that only 55 percent of the public would support Poland's integration with the EU community. The Poles had many concerns in regard to EU entrance, including fears that the EU would make Poland an overproduction dumping ground of cheap goods against which local producers would not be able to compete. Another fear was that citizens from EU countries might buy up cheap Polish farmland, a very sensitive issue considering Poland's historic relationship with neighboring Germany. Many Poles were also angry over the EU's reneging of the amount of aid promised to farmers under the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP). The seven-year delay required before citizens from new member states would be allowed to look for work in Western EU countries had many Poles concerned that until Poland was fully integrated into the EU, receiving equal aid with full benefits, they would be given "second-class citizen" status within the EU community.

Nevertheless, in May 2003, the Sejm passed a law that promised to increase the possibility for Polish approval on membership in the European Union. The law allowed the Polish Central Election Commission to publish the voter turnout on the first day of the referendum on European Union membership. Disclosing the degree of voter turnout would have an effect on the ultimate outcome of the referendum since less than 50 percent participation would effectively invalidate the referendum results and European Union membership would have to be decided by the Sejm by at least a 66 percent plurality. Information about voter turnout was expected to be useful in spurring more people to go to the polls on subsequent voting days, if it appeared that turnout might be inadequate. Poland was scheduled to hold a referendum on the matter in June.

In the first part of 2003, polls suggested moderate favorability for the notion of membership in the EU. Indeed, in the June 2003 referendum Poles voted in favor of joining the European body. Finally, in May 2004, Poland was one of 10 new states to join the EU.

Political Developments
Only a day after EU accession, Prime Minister Miller resigned. Poland's former Finance Minister Marek Belka was nominated to succeed him.

As the Prime Minister-designated, Marek Belka called on parliament to end the country's political uncertainty and to give him up to a year to introduce reforms aimed at poverty alleviation and ameliorated healthcare. Belka also asked for backing and time to consider Poland's involvement in Iraq where 2,400 Polish soldiers have been deployed. The Polish president also called on parliament to support the designated prime minister, cautioning that his approval as head of government would be preferable to early elections. Nevertheless, Belka went on to lose the vote in parliament, largely because of fragmentation within, and defections from the ruling coalition.

By June 2004, however, Belka said he believed he could gather sufficient support to be confirmed in his position by a parliamentary vote. In keeping with the Polish constitution, he would have to do so within two weeks. In the interim, he would function as caretaker prime minister. In late June, Belka was confirmed as Poland's new prime minister via a parliamentary confidence vote by a margin of 236 votes to 215, thanks to the backing of the SDPL party. The SDPL, however, agreed to give their support only if new elections were called by year's end.

In March 2005, the Polish parliament rejected a motion calling for the resignation of Belka. The motion was brought by a small nationalist opposition party. Earlier, Belka had broken ranks with the former communist party -- SLD -- by saying he might resign in May 2005, making way for elections a month later. The party leadership, however, was hoping to retain office until later in the year. Regardless, few experts expected the SLD to win the election, whenever it was held, as a result of corruption scandals over the course of the last year.

Elections 2005

In September 2005, Poland held its first elections since joining the European Union (EU) in 2004. In these elections, voters chose among candidates for the 460-member lower house of parliament. In October, the electorate was set to return to the polls to elect a new president.

In the parliamentary elections, turnout was less than 40 percent -- a 6 percentage point drop from 2001. Exit polls indicated that the conservative and center-right parties ousted the political left. Estimates placed the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in the lead at about 28 percent of the votes cast, followed by its centrist ally Civic Platform (PO) with about 24 percent of the votes cast. The Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) finished third with slightly better than 11 percent and the Self-Defence party had about 10 percent. PiS leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski sounded victorious as he said, "Everything points to us having won this election."

The two center-right parties have both found their roots in the anti-communist Solidarity movement but have philosophical differences on budgetary and taxation issues. The agenda of the PiS rested on tax breaks and strong Christian values. It has not been a fan of economic liberalism and has advocated state aid for the poor. The PO has been a strong promoter of free market policies and introduced the rather controversial idea of a flat 15 percent tax rate for income tax, corporation tax and value added taxes. It also has advocated deregulation, privatization, and the rapid adoption of the Euro. The SLD led Poland into the EU in 2004 but was plagued by corruption scandals and a high unemployment rate of almost 20 percent. No doubt these two issues led to their disappointing finish.
As the country shifted gears for the presidential election, the SLD was faced with another disappointment when its candidate, the former foreign minister Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz, withdrew as concerns increased about his share dealings. Two main contenders were PO's free market advocate, Donald Tusk, and another center-right candidate from the PiS.

On October 9, 2005, Poland was set to go to another round of voting after the first round failed to yield an outright winner. In the first round, turnout was low by Polish standards at less than 50 percent, prompting former president and Solidarity trade union leader Lech Walesa to criticize the Polish people for failing to take advantage of the democratic reforms he advanced in the 1980s.

With the votes counted, Tusk had a small lead with 35.8 percent over Lech Kaczyński, who had 33.8 percent. Behind in third place was populist candidate, Andrzej Lepper, with 15.6 percent. The other contenders trailed behind.

With neither of the two top candidates securing the required 50 percent majority, the second round of the presidential election between Tusk and Kaczyński was set for October 23, 2005. It was expected that the winner would likely have to acquire votes from Lepper, the third-place candidate. With his populist orientation, it was anticipated that Kaczyński might more likely be the beneficiary. Generally, Kaczyński and his Law and Justice Party, have attracted conservative Catholics and nationalists. Tusk and the Civic Platform have had a strong stance in favor of the European Union and, as such, he was thought to be more appealing to liberals and moderates.

Regardless of who ultimately won the presidency, both parties would jointly lead the government as a coalition in the aftermath of the parliamentary elections. Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz was already identified as the likely prime minister since the leader of the Law and Justice Party, Jaroslaw Kaczyński, is the identical twin brother of the presidential candidate, Lech Kaczyński. Jaroslaw Kaczyński had promised that if his brother won the presidency, he would not assume the position of prime minister, in order to preclude a conflict of interests.

By October 23, 2005, it appeared that conservative Lech Kaczyński was set to become the new Polish president. His success built upon the Law and Justice party's slim victory in the parliamentary elections held a month earlier. Election returns suggested that Kaczyński had garnered 54 percent of the vote while Tusk had acquired the remaining 46 percent. Kaczyński commended Tusk for "a splendid battle" and asked Tusk's Civic Platform to finish their joint talks on a forming parliamentary coalition.

Election turnout for the runoff was slightly higher than in the first round at just over 50 percent.

Looking Ahead

Lech Kaczyński was expected to be sworn in as president on Dec. 23, 2005. Kaczyński pledged to combat corruption in Poland, which has the dubious distinction of being one of the most corrupt countries in the European Union, according to the Transparency International. Kaczyński's Law and Justice Party (PiS) was also involved in the process of forming a cabinet together with the Civic Platform, as suggested above.

In terms of policy, the PiS has shown eagerness at becoming the key European partner for the Bush administration's "son of Star Wars" missile defense shield. More than the radar sites, the Polish authorities want to have a missile interceptor site, a reinforced underground silo from which long-range missiles would be launched to intercept incoming rockets. Should both sides manage to form an agreement, such a site would make Poland the host of the biggest United States missile defense site.
outside the terrain of the United States. The drawback would be that Russia, Poland's neighbor, is very wary of the notion of a missile defense plan.

Meanwhile, in late 2005, Poland was under international pressure as a result of allegations that it was home to some of the United States CIA's "black sites" -- secret camps used by the United States intelligence agency to interrogate suspected al-Qaida members. Poland has denied these allegations. Regardless, the European commission has said it will continue to investigate the matter further to determine the veracity of the claims. Officials from the European body have warned that such a site would be against the European convention on human rights and the international convention against torture. If the sites are discovered to be in existence, Poland could be found in breach of Article 6 of the Treaty of Nice, which calls on all member states to uphold basic human rights.

Also in late 2005, despite public opposition to the deployment of Polish troops in Iraq, the newly-elected conservative Polish government said it would extend the country's military deployment in Iraq until the end of 2006. The decision by Polish Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz effectively reversed the decision by the previous government to withdraw Polish troops from Iraq in early 2006. Polish troops have been the fifth biggest foreign contingent in Iraq, after the United States, the United Kingdom, South Korea and Italy.

Recent Developments

In late March 2006, prosecutors filed charges against the last communist leader of Poland. Charges against General Wojciech Jaruzelski were issued by Poland's Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) with a trial expected in the near future. The actual charges involved the Jaruzelski's imposition of martial law in 1981, which sought to stop the pro-democracy activities of the famed trade union, Solidarity, which was led by Lech Walesa and supported by the late Pope John Paul II.

During the early 1980s, the communist authorities sought to curtail the rising support for the Solidarity trade union, which quickly became a national democratizing movement. Attempting to stem Solidarity's rising tide of popularity, Jaruzelski declared martial law in December 1981. Soon thereafter, leaders of Solidarity as well as thousands of other pro-democracy activists were jailed and sent to internment camps. Despite detention and being forced to operate underground, Solidarity continued to operate and was the driving force behind the end of communism in Poland in 1989. For his part, Jaruzelski has argued that he was only doing what was necessary to maintain the stability of Poland's Communist state and prevent the violence that was sure to follow, if the Soviets decided to intervene. In this regard, he said, "This was our own sovereign decision - but one which took into account the realities of those times. At that time the Socialist system was the reality of that state - its backbone. And toppling that reality would have meant both civil war and foreign intervention."

In late April 2006, Polish Foreign Minister Stefan Meller announced his resignation to protest the new conservative government's formation of a coalition with smaller parties. Meller had earlier threatened to resign if Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz's government joined a coalition with Self-
Defense, an anti-European Union party. The coalition also included members of the ultra-Catholic Polish Families' League who had broken away from the original grouping. Meller said that his resignation would be formalized on May 5, when a cabinet shuffle was due to take place in order to accommodate the new coalition.

In June 2006, Finance Minister Zygita Gilowska was dismissed amidst allegations that she covered up Communist-era collaboration. While Poland (at the time) allowed former Communists to hold public office, they were not allowed to lie about the details. The issue emerged when a special prosecutor commenced court proceedings against her. For her part, Gilowska disputed the allegations and declared that she was being blackmailed. Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz said at a news conference that he had called on Glowska to resign saying, "The principles accepted by this government mean that her resignation must take place." In her place, he named economic adviser Pawel Wojciechowski. Educated in the United states, Wojciechowski led the Polish pension fund section of the Allianz insurance company.

A month later in July 2006, the lower house of the Polish parliament passed legislation intended to remove former Communist collaborators from participating in public life. The proposed legislation would go into effect pending approval by the upper house and the president. The bill could potentially affect hundreds of thousands of people employed not only in government, but also in media and business, who may have worked with the secret service prior to the fall of Communism. Only priests would be exempt from the law in a country where at least 10 percent of priests were believed to have worked with the Communists.

Poland had not, until now, been a country that carried out political purges. Indeed, as intimated above, former Communists could hold public office, so long as their participation in Communist activities was admitted by written declaration. The new proposed law has been regarded as controversial because of the sheer number of people from across the professional spectrum who could be affected.

Also in July 2006, it was announced that Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the twin brother of Polish President Lech Kaczynski, had accepted his ruling party's nomination for the position of head of government. Thus, Jaroslaw Kaczynski was set to replace outgoing Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz, who tendered his resignation and said that he intended to run for the position of mayor of Warsaw later in 2006. There were reports that Marcinkiewicz had resigned partially due to differences with the Kaczynski brothers over economic policy.

Jaroslaw Kaczynski had initially rejected the idea of becoming Poland's head of government following the 2005 elections. At the time, he said that it would be problematic for brothers to hold the two top posts in a country. Indeed, there is no other country in which twins hold the two very highest elected offices. That said, with the resignation of Marcinkiewicz, and given Jaroslaw Kaczynski's position as a leader of the ruling Law and Justice Party, the opportunity presented itself for him to finally take on the role of prime minister.

Jaroslaw Kaczynski acknowledged possible conflicts associated with the notion of twin brothers in the two top leadership roles saying, "There is a certain risk for the president and prime minister to be brothers, that was the major roadblock." He went on to state, "But for various reasons, we came to the conclusion that, at this time, putting forward a different candidate - of which we have many good ones - would be a worse way out than recommending me. The party leadership put forward a proposal, and I accepted it." He also noted that finance reform would be one of his top priorities once he assumed his new duties.
Meanwhile, in a move presumably oriented toward countering any monopoly of power in the hands of the Kaczynski duo, three political parties said that they intended to form a coalition. The three parties came from varied political backgrounds and shared associations with the anti-Communist Solidarity movement as well as the former Communist party.

In early 2007, a reported dispute between the ruling Kaczyński brothers and the defense minister led to Radosław Sikorski's resignation from office. At issue was Sikorski's handling of talks with the United States regarding the establishment of a missile defense system in Poland. As well, tensions between Sikorski and the head of military counter-intelligence, Antoni Macierewicz, did not help the situation. Soon thereafter, the head of the Polish Presidential Chancellery, Aleksander Szczglo, was selected to be the new defense minister -- a position that he accepted.

Also in early 2007, Polish Interior Minister Ludwik Dorn submitted his resignation, which was accepted by the government. According to a government spokesperson, Dorn was expected to keep his position as deputy prime minister in the cabinet. The reason of Dorn's resignation was unclear, however, it was believed to be linked to tensions with the prime minister. Dorn was quoted as saying that he had a "difference of opinion" with the Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczyński. Poland's Chief Prosecutor Janusz Kaczmarek was set to become the new interior minister.

In mid-2007, following the resignations of two cabinet ministers earlier in the year, there was further dissonance within the Polish government, as illustrated by the dismissal of the Deputy Prime Minister Andrzej Lepper by Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczyński. Lepper, the leader of the Self Defense Party, which was a junior partner in the coalition government, had been embroiled in a bribery scandal.

Following his dismissal from office, Lepper removed his party from the ruling coalition -- a move that evoked speculation about whether or not fresh elections would have to be called two years ahead of schedule. That is to say, without the Self Defense Party in government, Kaczyński could only command 203 votes in parliament, while 231 parliamentary votes were required for a majority. Without a working majority, Kaczyński would have a difficult time presiding over a stable and productive government. To that end, Prime Minister Kaczynski noted, "The aggression of the opposition makes it impossible to have a minority government."

There was no immediate effect as two ministers from the Self Defense Party remained in the cabinet. However, by August 2007, Lepper said that the ministers from his party would be withdrawn from cabinet, and that the party had approved its decision to leave the ruling coalition in a party vote of 61 to eight. As well, Lepper accused Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski of having a poor attitude toward political partnership and blamed him for the collapse of the coalition.

For his part, the prime minister said that he was sacking the ministers from the Self Defense Party, along with those from the other coalition partner, the League of Polish Families. The result was the effective dissolution of the coalition. Complicating matters was the decision by the Self Defense Party to join with the League of Polish Families to form a bloc called the League and Self Defense. Together, they said they were filing a motion to replace Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczyński with former Interior Minister Janusz Kaczmarek, who had, himself, been sacked a week earlier.
The possibility of early elections being called appeared more imminent after the opposition Democratic Left Alliance issued a statement asserting that it would seek a vote of non confidence vote, for the purpose of compelling fresh elections. In the background was the pro-business opposition party, Civic Platform, whose popularity experienced a quick surge, according to the polling data, presumably in reaction to the ongoing political turmoil.

Meanwhile, in other developments, the issue of "black sites" returned to the political purview when Dick Marty, an investigator for the Council of Europe, said that he had evidence to prove the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) directed clandestine prisons in Poland and Romania for the purpose of interrogating "war on terror" suspects. Marty noted that the secret prisons or "black sites" in Europe had been administered "directly and exclusively by the CIA."

Marty named Poland and Romania as host countries of these secret prisons. While the governments of both Poland and Romania denied hosting such "black sites," the CIA issued a statement noting, "The CIA's counter-terror operations have been lawful, effective, closely reviewed, and of benefit to many people - including Europeans - by disrupting plots and saving lives." United States President Bush acknowledged the existence of CIA prisons overseas, but did not specify host countries.

Elections of 2007

Polish voters went to the polls on October 21, 2007 to vote in parliamentary elections in that country. Turnout was higher than the previous election of 2005 and required voting to be extended for several hours so that people could cast their ballots.

Elections had been imminent since the dissolution of the ruling coalition months earlier. That dissolution occurred as a result of political turmoil and infighting over a corruption investigation, ultimately leading to the exit of coalition partners from government as discussed above. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski was hoping that his conservative Law and Justice Party would be able to gain the most votes again and forge a new ruling coalition. Such an end would mean that he would remain as head of government while his twin brother, President Lech Kaczynski, held the position of Poland's head of state.

But the time of twin rule in Poland came to a close when the votes were counted. The pro-business opposition party, Civic Platform, whose popularity experienced a quick surge before the election, secured a plurality of votes. Results were in line with the exit poll data and showed that Donald Tusk's center-right Civic Platform won 41 percent of the vote share while Jaroslaw Kaczynski's Law and Justice Party garnered 32 percent. The centrist Polish Peasants Party won eight percent and the leftist alliance, the Left and Democrats, took 12 to 13 percent.

Together with its likely coalition partner, the Polish Peasants Party, the Civic Platform was in line to command a majority in the lower house of parliament, having won 31 seats and 209 seats respectively for a total of 240 seats in the 460-seat Sejm. Also at stake was the representation of the 100-member Senate.

Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski conceded defeat saying that his party had "failed against a wide front" but promised tough opposition in parliament. He also congratulated his rival saying, "I wish Donald Tusk every success and I congratulate him." For his part, Tusk addressed his supporters at his campaign headquarters saying, "I thank everyone who, in an impartial way, has helped restore hope among Poles." He was set to commence coalition talks in anticipation of forming the new Polish government.
Following coalition talks, Civic Platform leader, Donald Tusk announced in November 2007 the formation of a government with the centrist Peasant Party. Tusk said that he had forged an agreement with Peasant Party leader Waldemar Pawlak, in which the Civic Platform would hold nine ministerial portfolios, the Peasant Party would hold three ministerial portfolios, and five would be given to independent experts.

With Tusk at the helm as prime minister and head of government, Pawlack was to be one of two deputy prime ministers. The Secretary-General of the Peasant Party, Grzegorz Schetyna, would become the other deputy head of government. The two deputies would control the ministries of economy and interior respectively. In other key cabinet appointments, Radek Sikorski, the former defense minister, was mentioned as the likely foreign minister, while independent expert, Jacek Rostowski, was slated to become the finance minister.

The inauguration of the Prime Minister-elect Tusk and his government was scheduled for later in the month (November 2007).

Editor's Note:

Jaroslaw Kaczynski's conservative Law and Justice Party has put forth a nationalist agenda marked by skepticism for the European Union, traditional Catholic values, and legal action against former communists. Donald Tusk's center-right Civic Platform has taken a business-friendly approach and endorses close ties with the European bloc.

More Recent Developments

In 2008, Poland's former leader, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, who served as the last communist strongman, went on trial for the imposition of martial law in 1981. Jaruzelski took a hardline approach to the Solidarity trade union movement. To date, his policies are a source of debate among Poles, some of whom believe he extended the communist era and other of whom believe he prevented Poland from being invaded by the Soviets.

Also in 2008, the Polish government signed on to a plan with the United States to host an American missile defense system. The matter caused consternation on the part of the Russians who rejected the plan. But that plan was placed on hold indefinitely in 2009 when the new Obama administration came to power in the United States and said that it did not plan on going forward with the controversial program.
On October 10, 2009, Poland's president completed his country's ratification of the European Union reform treaty. President Lech Kaczynski signed Poland's ratification of the Lisbon Treaty at a ceremony attended by European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso and other European Union officials. At Poland's presidential palace, Kaczynski said, "I'm deeply convinced that this next great experiment will be a success." He continued, "Within the framework of cooperation among sovereign states, we will achieve even better results - in the interest of individual states, in the interest of Europe as a whole and in the interest of the world." Poland's parliament approved the treaty in 2008, however, the ratification process was not complete without the president's signature.

Upcoming:

Poland hopes to enter the euro zone by 2012.

National Tragedy

Polish President Kaczynski and several national leaders perish in catastrophic airplane crash in Russia

On April 10, 2010, Polish President Lech Kaczynski, his wife, and several other senior Polish officials died in an airplane crash in Russia. The Polish delegation, led by the president as head of state, was traveling from Russia to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre of thousands of Poles by Soviet forces during WWII. As stated by the Russian Emergency Ministry, the aircraft carrying 88 passengers and eight crew members crashed as it attempted to land amidst thick fog at the Smolensk airport. The regional governor of Smolensk, Sergei Antufiev, confirmed in an interview on Russian television that there were no survivors.

According to Polish and Russian officials, the airplane -- a Soviet era-designed Tupolev 154 that was more than 20 years old -- apparently hit the tops of trees as it was on its final approach into Smolensk, ultimately falling to the ground and breaking up into pieces. There were reports that Russian air traffic controllers had advised the Polish crew to divert to another airport due to the poor visibility. However, the Polish crew decided to try to land the airplane anyway. In an interview on Russian television, a spokesperson for the office of the Smolensk regional governor said, "Flight controllers... suggested that the plane be forwarded to Minsk but as far as we know the crew took an independent decision to land the plane in Smolensk."

As aforementioned, along with the president and his wife, Maria Kaczynski, scores of other Polish leaders were aboard the ill-fated airplane, and perished. Among them were Alexander (no spelling suggestions), chief of the Office of National Security; Army Chief Franciszek Gagor; Wladyslaw Stasiak, the chief of the president's chancellery; the country's central banker Slawomir Skrzypek, several parliamentarians, including Jerzy Szmajdzinski, the deputy speaker of the lower house; Andrzej Kremer, the Foreign Ministry's undersecretary of state; Stanislaw Komorowski, the deputy minister of national defense; Przemyslaw Gosiewski, the Law and Justice party deputy chair; and national historians, including Andrzej Przewoznik, the head of Poland's Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites; and Tomasz Merta, the chief historical conservator of Poland.

The array of victims -- from political, economic and even cultural spheres -- meant that Poland was struck with an unprecedented tragedy rarely endured by any nation state. Indeed, as noted by Polish
Prime Minister Donald Tusk -- the head of government -- the crash was the most tragic event of his country's modern post-World War II history. Accordingly, the international community closed ranks in sympathy for the Polish people. World leaders such as United States President Barack Obama, United Kingdom Prime Minister Gordon Brown, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, expressed their condolences to Poland. Prime Minister Putin also attended a memorial service near the crash site in Russia for the late President Kaczynski, and declared a full day of mourning in honor of the late Polish leader who had died on Russian soil. On the streets in Warsaw, the Polish capital city, thousands of people gathered outside the presidential palace to pay their respects and to lay wreaths, flowers, candles and Polish flags. By April 11, 2010, the body of President Kaczynski arrived back in Warsaw; crowds of solemn Poles lined the streets as the car carrying the red and white flag-draped casket drove to the presidential palace. At Krakow Cathedral, church bells tolled. The sound was a plaintive reminder that the bells toll only for gravely solemn occasions, the last being on the occasion of the death of the Polish pope, John Paul II, five years earlier. Despite his controversial politics -- ultra-Catholic and against free-market reforms -- that did not always resonate with the country's younger generation, the Polish citizenry was unified in grief and shock over the death of President Kaczynski. Even across party lines, there was shared grief. As expected, the president's twin brother who had once served as prime minister, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, was described as being "devastated" by the tragic news. And the man who defeated him in the last Polish parliamentary elections, Donald Tusk, was also described as being grief-stricken by the news. Indeed, that sense of grief and shock was particularly amplified given the number of national figures who were among the victims. There was a pervasive feeling that Poland had been painfully struck at its very core by tragedy. Still, in the face of this catastrophe, Polish Prime Minister Tusk convened an emergency cabinet meeting and promised that the government would continue its duties. He said, "The Polish state must function and will function." He also declared there would be a week of national mourning and that the president's body would lie in state for that same period of time. On the ground at the crash site in Smolensk, Russia Prime Minister Vladimir Putin promised to personally oversee the investigation into the crash. He said, "Everything must be done to establish the reasons for this tragedy in the shortest possible time." The investigation would be helped by the fact that all the bodies had been recovered from the crash site and were being transported for identification. As well, as reported by Russia's Emergency Minister, Sergei Shoigu, both of the aircraft's flight information recorders had been found and were being examined. Attention was also quickly focusing on the age of the aircraft, which had endured steering problems in late 2008 when President Kaczynski was traveling home from Mongolia. At the time, he said: "Any flight brings with it a certain risk, but a very serious risk attaches to the responsibilities of a president, because it is necessary to fly constantly." Early indications were that there were no technical problems with the aircraft in this case, though. Nevertheless, there was an emerging clamor to upgrade the Polish air fleet. As well, two outstanding factors were still being considered, such as the decision of the flight crew to land during fog, as well as the fact that there were so many key officials traveling on one aircraft. Days after the fatal airplane crash, a state funeral was held for President Lech Kaczynski and his wife, followed by their burial in a crypt of the historic Wawel Cathedral in Krakow. Many world leaders had planned to attend the funeral but were prevented from traveling to Poland due to volcanic ash that grounded flights across the continent. However, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev was in attendance having defied air restrictions.
Primer on 2010 Presidential Election in Poland

Following the death of Polish President Lech Kaczynski and several other Polish leaders in a catastrophic airplane crash in Russia on April 10, 2010, he was buried in a crypt of the historic Wawel Cathedral in Krakow. Meanwhile, in accordance with constitutional provisions, the speaker of the lower house of parliament, Bronislaw Komorowski, was functioning as the country's acting president. Soon, however, early elections would be held to fill the position of president, who is the head of state in a country where that role is separate from the prime minister's role as head of government. To that end, it was announced that the first round of the Polish presidential election would be set on June 20, 2010, with a second round, if necessary, to be held on July 4, 2010.

Parliamentary Speaker and acting President Bronislaw Komorowski of Civic Platform was favored to win the elections. Viewed as more pro-Europe and more conciliatory toward Russia than his predecessor, Komorowski has been regarded the internationalist choice of head of state with a centrist political orientation. His main opponent was Lech Kaczynski's twin brother, former Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski of the Law and Justice party, who has been viewed as an outspoken conservative hard-liner. Eight other individuals also contested the election. If no one garnered a majority with 50 percent of the vote share, then a run-off election would be held, as noted above, among the top two vote-getters.

On election day, with the votes counted, exit polls indicated that Komorowski would win the most votes -- 46 percent -- but just short of the 50 percent needed for an outright victory. He would contest the second round on July 4, 2010 against Kaczynski who garnered second place with 36 percent. During the second round or run-off election on July 4, 2010, as expected, Bronislaw Komorowski, candidate of the Polish ruling party Civic Platform, claimed victory with 53.01 percent of the vote. Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the twin brother of late President Lech Kaczynski and leader of the conservative Law and Justice Party, garnered the rest of the votes.

Political analysts were attributing Komorowski's success at the polls to the positive image of the ruling Civic Platform of Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who was also party leader. Under Tusk's leadership, the Civic Platform has guided Poland through turbulent economic times. Indeed, Poland was the only European Union to see its economy grow since the global financial crisis of late 2008. As well, under Tusk's leadership, the Civic Platform improved bilateral ties with Germany and Russia, and demonstrated a more productive orientation within the European Union. In the past, Poland under the conservative Law and Justice Party had taken a more hardline and nationalist approach to foreign affairs, which complicated relations with other countries in Europe.

But Komorowski was also the author of his own fate with political analysts pointing to his electoral platform, which emphasized a willingness to work with the cabinet. This position was welcomed by the Polish people who were exhausted from the ongoing power struggles between the presidents and prime ministers' governments through the years. Komorowski's role as acting president after the death of Lech Kaczynski also helped cement the public's confidence in him. He demonstrated a moderate in the stewardship of national affairs, which was a sharp contrast to his predecessor's more hardline positions.

Going forward, with Tusk as head of government, and Komorowski as head of state, it was expected that there would be some progress on a progress on a proposed plan to reform the country's political structure. At issue has been Prime Minister Tusk's proposal to recraft the constitution, weaken presidential powers, and accentuate the role of the cabinet. It was believed that Tusk would find an ally in Komorowski to move forward with some of these changes. As well, on the international front, it was hoped that Komorowski could move Poland away from its "trouble maker" image.
Note that Komorowski was inaugurated into office as president a month after winning election victory. During his inauguration speech, the new Polish president promised to work for national unity. Foreign visits oriented toward showing Poland's European roots were announced for Belgium, France and Germany. At the same time, the new president emphasized that positive relations with Russia would also be a priority for him in the realm of foreign relations.

Editor's Note:
Poland has both a president and a prime minister within its executive branch of government. The president is the head of state and is elected to power for a five-year term by popular vote. The president is limited to two terms in office. The president's power is limited in regards to the day to day operations of government; the president is nonetheless central to foreign policy, and possesses the power of legislative veto. Of course, a two-thirds majority in the lower house of parliament can overturn a presidential veto. The prime minister is the head of government. Typically, the leader of the party that controls parliament, the prime minister sets and administers the governing agenda of day to day affairs at the helm of a cabinet. That cabinet is proposed by the prime minister but must be formally appointed by the president, and approved by the parliament.

Foreign Relations Spotlight

On September 16, 2010, Chechen separatist leader Akhmed Zakayev was arrested in Poland. He was in that European country to attend a two-day Chechen summit when he was detained. Zakayev was then subject to several hours of interrogation by Polish police, who were acting on the basis of an international arrest warrant issued by Russia, which sought his extradition on terrorism, murder and kidnapping charges. For his part, Zakayev has denied being involved in terrorism, and indeed, could be considered something of a moderate since he has called for negotiations with Russia -- a position not embraced by most extremist Chechen separatists. Since being granted asylum in the United Kingdom in the first part of the 2000s, Zakayev has been known to travel within Europe. But in this case, he was arrested by Polish authorities who had no choice but to act on the decision by Interpol to place Zakayev on its most wanted list, at Russia's request.

Attention was soon focused on the question of if Zakayev would actually be extradited to Russia to face charges. Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said that although the Chechen separatist leader had been arrested, there was no guarantee that Polish courts would rule in favor of extradition to Russia. Meanwhile, the head of the international affairs committee of the Russian Duma or lower house of parliament, Konstantin Kosachev, applauded Poland for taking its international obligations seriously. A day later on September 17, 2010, a Polish court ruled that Zakayev could be released pending its decision on the matter of extradition. But even if the Polish court eventually ruled in favor of extradition, according to Polish Finance Minister Jan Rostowski, the government of Poland still had the power to intervene on behalf of Zakayev. Russia responded to events unfolding in Poland in a less than favorable manner this time. Konstantin Kosachev warned Poland that its failure to act in accordance with international law would yield deleterious consequences.

Primer on 2011 Parliamentary Elections in Poland

At the start of August 2011, Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski set Oct. 9, 2011, as the date for the country's parliamentary elections. At stake in these elections were the seats in the bicameral "Zgro-
madzenie Narodowe" (National Assembly), which consists of the "Sejm" (Diet, lower house) and the "Senat" (Senate, upper house). Members in the 460 seat Diet are elected under a complex system of proportional representation to serve four-year terms. Members in the 100 seat Senate are elected by a majority vote on a provincial basis to serve four-year terms. The last elections were held in October of 2007. In those elections, the Civic Platform of Prime Minister Donald Tusk won the most seats; the prime minister and his party were seeking a renewed mandate in the 2011 vote. Ahead of these elections in 2011, polling data showed Prime Minister Tusk's centrist Civic Platform leading the conservative opposition Law and Justice Party.

On election day -- Oct. 9, 2011 -- Polish voters went to the polls to cast their ballots in the country's parliamentary elections. Voter turnout was around 50 percent. With the votes counted, it was clear that the Polish citizenry had affirmed their support for Prime Minister Donald Tusk, whose Civic Platform was granted a decisive election victory. It was the first time since Poland made the transition from communism to democracy that a prime minister had enjoyed re-election victory. In a post-election speech, Prime Minister Tusk said, "I believe the next four years are an even greater challenge. We will have to work twice as hard and act twice as fast. Poles have the right to an increasingly high quality of life."

Civic Platform won close to 40 percent of the vote share while the Law and Justice Party of former Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski lagged with just under 30 percent. The newly-formed and secular Palikot Movement had 10 percent, while the Polish People's Party and the Democratic Left Alliance respectively garnered just over eight percent. The German Minority was far behind with just under a percent of the vote share. These results would give Civic Platform 207 seats in the lower house of parliament, while the Law and Justice Party would have 157 seats. The Palikot Movement would control 40 seats, the Polish People's Party would control 28 seats, and the Democratic Left Alliance would control 27 seats. The Germany Minority secured one seat. In the upper house, Civic Platform would have 63 senators while the Law and Justice Party would have 31 senators. Other parties and independent representatives claimed the remaining senate seats.

Consistent with the Polish Constitution, the first sitting of the new "Sejm" would be held between Oct. 10, 2011, and Nov. 8, 2011, when the outgoing prime minister would submit the resignation of his cabinet. Then, the president would appoint a new prime minister -- usually, the leader of the party that won the most seats in the parliamentary elections. The new prime minister would then form a new government, which would be subject to a parliamentary vote of confidence.

On Nov. 8, 2011, President Komorowski delivered a special address to members of the Polish parliament in which he said that Prime Minister Tusk would administer the country at the helm of an interim administration until a new government was formed in weeks.

In his address, President Komorowski said, "Only wise and prudent action by the government will allow Poland to continue its stable economic development." He continued, "Poland has avoided the economic crisis due to both the policies of recent years and as the result of a long-term, consistent construction of the Polish economy on sound principles." After his address, Prime Minister Donald Tusk attended a formal ceremony at the presidential palace where he formally submitted his resignation and was charged with heading the interim administration. Prime Minister Tusk was also tasked with forming a new coalition government by Nov. 22, 2011 with his first policy speech containing the government's policy agenda to be given by Dec. 6, 2011.

Note: The next elections in Poland were expected to be held in 2015.

-- January 2013
Political Risk Index

The Political Risk Index is calculated using an established methodology by CountryWatch's Editor-in-Chief and is based on varied criteria* including the following: political stability, political representation, democratic accountability, freedom of expression, security and crime, risk of conflict, human development, jurisprudence and regulatory transparency, economic risk, and corruption. Scores are assigned from 0-10 using the aforementioned criteria. A score of 0 marks the highest political risk, while a score of 10 marks the lowest political risk. Stated differently, countries with the lowest scores pose the greatest political risk.