

Chapter 13. Reactions of Polish emigrants in Iceland to the Smolensk disaster

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The research we carried out in April and May of 2010 in Iceland concerned the strategies invoked by Polish emigrants in adapting to a new social environment in a situation of economic crisis. However, since we found ourselves in Iceland directly following the Smolensk tragedy, we decided to also question our subjects about that event¹. We were interested in learning whether the disaster had integrated the Polish community in Iceland, and how Poles were affected by the death of the presidential couple and their entourage, and what was their reaction. We posited that the behavior of our compatriots in such a moment and their reactions to the disaster could serve as an indicator of their sense of community and force of national identity, and would provide us with data on the situation within the Polish community and about its capability for mobilization.

In addition to carrying out interviews we analyzed discussion threads related to the disaster on the web forum *iceland.pl*, highly popular among Poles in Iceland. This forum, in existence since 2004 and having over 7 thousand registered users, is a key place for virtual discussions among local Poles. Although the membership figure is hardly impressive when compared with other forums, it is still significant when set against the low degree of activity of Poles in Iceland in real life. The forum is constantly updated, which makes it a living and authentic meeting space, and therefore a valuable source for the analysis of social reactions and attitudes. By taking two sources together: the forum, and interviews, we

¹ We were very likely the first persons to inquire about reactions to the Smolensk tragedy as part of a sociological study. In Poland, due to the official mourning, the first study on the subject was carried out on the 19th April by the Center of Political Thought (Zukowski 2011).

have succeeded in obtaining a fuller description of the emotions felt by Poles in Iceland following the disaster.

Reactions following the disaster

Poles learned about the disaster on the morning of 10th April 2010, by way of text messages, TV, Internet, and phone calls from the home country. Initially, many of them were confused, realizing something had happened but had no clear idea what it was, because the Internet links were overloaded. One of our interlocutors had the following recollection of the atmosphere of that day at home:

“My God, what’s going on, I say it must be war in Poland. My husband says to me, go on the Internet. The problem was that we could find nothing at all on the Internet, because Polish portals were so overloaded nothing could be displayed, everything was hung or blocked” (interview 7).

On Saturday, 10th April, around noon, the first brief message appeared on the iceland.pl forum bordered by crosses: “+++ in relation with today’s tragedy near Smolensk +++”; nobody added anything, commented, nor used the forum for a public expression of grief for the disaster, or to summon others to mourning ceremonies.

On the same day in the afternoon, a Mass was held in a Catholic church to honor the victims of the disaster, attended by Iceland’s Prime Minister, the Speaker of Parliament, and the Polish Vice-Consul. This Mass was organized spontaneously – attendants came notified by text messages. According to witnesses, about 200 persons attended, though others set the number at around 400 – the church was full. Flashes of the Mass were shown on Icelandic television channels. One of the attendants to the Mass, asked whether Poles had come together in the face of the tragedy, responded “I guess so, because nobody was looking cross at anyone else, at the moment Bonus [a discount supermarket chain in Iceland] didn’t matter much” (interview 23). At the Polish school, teachers held an assembly for the children instead of regular classes.

On the next day (Sunday) there was a Polish Mass in the Catholic church, followed by a vigil in front of the Polish Consulate. Names of the victims were read, flowers were laid and lights were lit. About 40 persons attended, a small number considering the 11 thousand making up the immigrant community, but still more than at other Polish community

meetings. The Consulate put out a book of condolences, but the general feeling was that this was too little, what was expected was a statement and a stronger involvement in the organization of ceremonies. Our subjects said: “I saw a bit that people were indignant that there wasn’t a great amount of flowers in front of the Consulate, few candles, the Consulate didn’t release a statement, there was some ill talk about the Consulate there” (interview 7).

In neighborhoods inhabited by Poles one could see Polish flags or scarves in national colors in the windows, the Polish shop flew a flag at half-mast. Some Polish cars were decorated with black cloth.

According to our subjects, in the face of the tragedy, Poles wanted to be together, the tragedy united them – “we went there to be together”; “we talked a lot together”; “the disaster shook us”. However, this unity was present in declarations rather than in reality, as shown by the number of attendants to ceremonies or of signatures in the book of condolences.

Some Poles who knew of the Masses and the vigil by the Consulate did not attend, because they were at work, are not interested in politics, don’t attend church or live in distant locations. Some, however, did not know about the ceremonies, indicating a relatively weak flow of information and the lack of a Polish center to coordinate the minority’s actions and initiatives.

Generally speaking, Poles in Iceland are not well organized – this is their own opinion, as well as that of the Consulate, few of them attend Polish community functions (the only successful undertakings were a charity collection and a call-up of fans for a Poland-Iceland game), instead they meet more frequently in smaller groups of relatives or acquaintances. One may say that the Polish minority in Iceland possesses a large social capital understood in the sense of the ability to use social networking towards ends like finding a job or a home – social capital as defined by Bourdieu, however. its social capital in Coleman’s terms is weak – meaning a weak capability of self-organization. In the latter meaning, social capital has to do with the level of trust and sense of unity, and this is something Poles in Iceland lack. They haven’t brought along with them from Poland an experience of self-organization, they lack solidarity and mutual trust, and there is no single institution to coordinate their actions. In Reykjavik there presently exist three quasi-centers of Polish life: the Consulate, a Polish store, and a church (or strictly speaking, two Polish priests) and,

moreover, there exists a Saturday Polish school – operated privately by several young Polish women, without official recognition, but which is slowly becoming the main focus of Polish activities². The school’s impact is, however, limited since initiatives born there reach only those who have children at school age (until recently there was also a bar under the name “Polonia”, which served as a meeting place for some Poles, however, others tended to avoid it).

The Smolensk tragedy to some extent served to overcome the weak organization of the Poles, and caused them to “feel together” and manifest their nationality in public, by displaying flags, wearing distinctive scarves and ribbons; however, this eruption of national feeling in the face of the disaster was rather brief, died down before long, and did not involve all members of the community.

Reactions of Icelanders to the Smolensk disaster

All the subjects called attention to the numerous expressions of sympathy which they received from average Icelanders – their acquaintances, neighbors and coworkers, and a wide majority found this pleasantly surprising, although it should be noted that some were critical, and pointed out they found those reactions out of tune with the situation: “To me it was strange... when they approached me with condolences, while I did not feel personally affected by some great tragedy, you know. National mourning, okay I understand, and I join in it, but it’s not a personal matter that would be grounds for condolences to myself” (interview 47).

Our interviewees recalled that Icelandic politicians saw a need to address Poles in Iceland with personal recollections of the Polish president: “Iceland’s president gave very fond recollections of Lech Kaczyński, saying how he felt him to be a friendly person towards himself, and how the Poles offered that loan to Iceland, that supposedly Lech Kaczyński spoke about needing to come to visit Iceland because of the large number

² Official recognition would be under the terms of “consultive facility” approved by the Polish Ministry of Education, and would allow certificates issued by the school to be recognized in Poland. The Polish school in Reykjavik does not hold such status, in spite of being very large by the standards of emigrant community schools. It was founded in 2008 and is currently attended by nearly 200 children of diverse age, and operates classes at the levels of elementary, middle school and high school.

of Poles here, and wanting closer relations between Poland and Iceland. He spoke with great warmth” (interview 18).

A majority of subjects noted, however, that Icelandic media showed relatively little interest in the Smolensk tragedy – with a half-page report in the newspapers, and TV reports only on the days of the accident and of the funeral – in stark contrast with highly detailed accounts for instance in the Finnish press or on British television. Poles bitterly remarked that the media paid little attention to the disaster: “(...) here it’s like that they can write day by day about all sorts of things, while of the disaster they made only a single mention. I was a bit surprised not to see more reporting on this topic” (interview 7).

Many of our interlocutors stressed the superficial character of the interest in the tragedy, with no attempt being made to understand the situation in the context of the Katyń anniversary: “They don’t really see the relation between Katyń 70 years ago and the present tragedy. All they saw was the crash of this specific airplane. They don’t really grasp any of the complexity of the issue of Katyń” (interview 7).

It’s possible that this lack of interest in the disaster and the situation in Poland (in spite of the large number of Poles in Iceland) has deeper roots in Icelandic culture and history – the nation’s long isolation, and applies more generally than just to Poles and Poland. As stated by Kirsten Hastrup, a Danish anthropologist who spent many years studying life in Iceland, Icelanders have learned to live solely by their own history, treating their ancestors from the period of initial settlement as the “others” in relation to whom national identity is shaped and as the point of reference for all the history of Iceland (Hastrup 2008). Traditionally, in Iceland interest was focused on the country’s own medieval history, there was a lack of strong influence from other cultures or of exchange with other communities on a scale like it took place on the continent. This separateness, independence and lack of stronger bonds with Europe continues to be felt today.

The Smolensk discourse

After the initial shock caused by the tragedy, on Sunday, 11th of April, debate started on iceland.pl about how the victims of the disaster should be commemorated – whether by external signs of mourning, such as lit candles, black ribbons on cars, or national flags; or whether mourning

is an individual and personal matter and need not be publicly displayed. Some were openly disappointed by the small number of lights lit in front of the Consulate: “I feel distaste for what I saw by the Consulate. There were at most 20 lamps. Congratulations, I’m at a loss for words to say how I feel”. Others argued that it’s not the number of torches that proves the depth of grief and sadness: “grief is in the heart and not on your car, public display is pointless, it’s better to spend time on silent reflection and prayer” (iceland.pl). It should be admitted that the exchange of posts did not take an aggressive turn and was quite polite by the standards of Poland’s Internet sites. Some people stressed that those who died were traveling to commemorate those murdered in Katyń 70 years ago, and now it’s our duty to light a lamp in their memory, to ensure the memory is passed on.

“Our President of the Republic Lech Kaczyński died wanting to pay homage and light a lamp in honor of those murdered in Katyń, so now it’s our turn for all the POLES to display SOLIDARITY in honoring the memory of all those who died in that plane accident” (iceland.pl).

The greatest attention was devoted on the Polish forum to discussions about the possible causes of the accident. As usual in the case of air accidents, conspiracy theories surfaced, and this is hardly surprising considering the lack of detailed information and the scope of the tragedy, which triggered a need for explanation – an airplane crash is strong food for the imagination. The thread on iceland.pl titled *Discussion on the causes of the Smolensk disaster* has 16 pages of posts, while other threads usually grow to two or at most three pages.

Another topic that appeared on iceland.pl was the debate about the burial of the presidential couple at the Royal Castle of Wawel. The forum’s administrators set up a poll asking for the users’ opinion on this subject. The result of the poll was that 57 persons were against this burial, and 33 supported it; a total of 90 persons answered the poll, which we can take to mean that interest in the topic was not very high. The Wawel topic failed to ignite major emotions and died down rather soon. By that time, many Icelandic Poles were already tired of the subject of Smolensk and of the extended mourning. At the same time there was a lot happening in Iceland: a volcano eruption paralyzed air traffic, cutting Iceland off from a half of the world (flights to and from America continued), relations with the UK became yet more strained after the March referendum on

the payment of the debts made by Icelandic banks – within the context of Iceland those events were of greater importance.

In Poland this led to a kind of national depression rather than to a national mourning (...) people got hot-headed... In my opinion, it could be felt in Poland that this went on too long and became terribly tiresome. When we switched on a Polish channel it was all about who is going to be there and who won't, all yet before the funeral, so I ended up switching to CNN. You see, I need to watch something else, I can't go on getting more and more depressed all the time. So what I think is, this went on for too long, and became too theatrical (interview 15).

What is notable is the lack of discussion about the role of the media in its prior presentation of Lech Kaczyński, and a complete lack of any attempts to give an appraisal of his presidency. Not a single post appeared with commentary on the late president's activities, which could have been a trigger of further debate. Such an appraisal requires some reflection and deeper analysis, which is something Poles in Iceland usually have no time for.

To summarize, the Smolensk disaster united Poles in Iceland only to a certain degree; a few initiatives referring to this event did appear. Following Tomasz Żukowski (2011) we may classify them as religious activities (mourning Masses), national activities (exhibiting flags, wearing ribbons, lighting candles), and civic activities (the vigil by the Consulate, school assembly for children). Participation in ceremonies devoted to the disaster was not universal: many Poles did not attend, and some were not aware of such acts at all. On the iceland.pl forum discussion following the disaster was focused on two topics: the possible causes of the accident, and forms of commemorating its victims. Opinions among the forum's users were split, but not to the same extent as in Poland, stated less aggressively and free of derogatory terms and insults. The distance from Poland and the different issues that Poles in Iceland deal with appear to have mellowed the disputes concerning events in Poland; one might say metaphorically that the icy waves of the Atlantic served to cool down emotions.

Most of our subjects were not indifferent to the situation in the home country. They followed the events in Poland as they developed by reading web portals, and some of them – by watching Polish television and from

news obtained from relatives; however, they followed the events without a great involvement, preoccupation or nostalgia: “I like Poland, but I’m not such a great patriot”. Concern was present with respect to family who remained in the home country, or within the context of the economical situation, which might persuade the emigrants to return. Our interlocutors were reserved in their feelings towards the home country and highly critical of Polish politics and politicians. One of the subjects questioned about his appraisal of the situation in Poland responded: “I’m glad to be an onlooker and that it doesn’t concern me” (interview 32).

Generally speaking, Poles in Iceland are not forthcoming with their nationality and refrain from publicly displaying it. To recall words by Michael Billig, it may be said that in everyday life Poles avoid “flagging their nationality”, and the extraordinary situation that followed the Smolensk disaster was an exception.

Translated by Robert J. Budzyński

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