

## The Impact of the Smolensk Air Crash on the Attribution of Personality Traits to Political Parties

### Wpływ katastrofy pod Smoleńskiem na atrybucję cech osobowości ugrupowaniom politycznym

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#### Summary

*The aim of the study was to check whether and in what way the tragic death of the Polish political elite near Smolensk on 10 April 2010 affected the perception of politicians and political parties in Poland. A comparison was made between survey results concerning personality traits attributed to political parties two weeks before and two weeks after the crash of the presidential plane. During both stages of the study, 140 students described six Polish political parties using a list of personality descriptors. The results of the study showed that the experience of tragic events, the period of mourning, the mobilisation of society, and the insight that these afforded into the more human side of politicians changed the perception of parties on the Polish political scene. The most extensive of the changes observed were the increase of the parties' perceived openness for cooperation and the attribution of fewer asocial traits to them. The change concerned the major political parties, regardless of how many members each of them actually lost in the crash.*

#### Streszczenie

*Celem zrealizowanych badań było sprawdzenie, czy i w jaki sposób tragiczna śmierć polskiej elity politycznej pod Smoleńskiem 10 kwietnia 2010 roku wpłynęła na percepcję polityków i partii politycznych w Polsce. Porównano wyniki badań cech osobowości przypisywanych ugrupowaniom politycznym dwa tygodnie przed i dwa tygodnie po katastrofie prezydenckiego samolotu. W obu etapach badań 140 studentów opisywało sześć polskich partii politycznych za pomocą listy deskryptorów osobowości. Wyniki badań wykazały, że doświadczenie tragicznych wydarzeń, okres żałoby, mobilizacja społeczna i spojrzenie na polityków z bardziej ludzkiej strony zmieniło postrzeganie partii na polskiej scenie politycznej. Najbardziej rozległe zmiany obserwujemy w przypadku wzrostu postrzeganej otwartości na współpracę ugrupowań politycznych oraz przypisywanie im mniejszej liczby cech aspołecznych. Zmiana ta dotyczyła najbardziej liczących się partii politycznych niezależnie od tego, jak duże straty poniosły te partie bezpośrednio wskutek śmierci ich członków.*

*Słowa kluczowe:* cechy osobowości, partie polityczne, katastrofa pod Smoleńskiem, postawa

*Keywords:* party image, personality traits, political party, air crash

#### Introduction

A political party is a social organization with a specified political programme, seeking to implement it by influencing the decisions taken by legislative and executive authorities. Research conducted in different countries indicates that ideological differences between the programmes and views of politicians remain important to voters but their importance diminishes [1,2]. At the same time, there has been an increase in the significance of personality traits of politicians as perceived by voters. Since it is people that form political parties, it is no surprise that personality-related expressions dominate party perception. Analysis of the associations evoked by political parties reveals that human characteristics constitute 87% of all associations, and that 25% of this is personality descriptors [3].

While the attribution of personality traits to political parties is an empirical fact, the legitimacy of such behaviour from the normative point of view is a separate problem because parties are made up of people with diverse personality traits. Generalising individual characteristics to social groups has been a subject of interest in social psychology, which studies the processes of stereotype and prejudice formation that we also deal with in the reception of the political scene [4,5]. Voters also frequently perceive the personality traits of politicians from the angle of party image [6,7,8].

The second problem is the accuracy of the perception of politicians' personality traits. Reflection on whether opinions of the external observer concerning other people's personality traits are illusive or at least partly accurate led psychologists to distinguish two extreme possibilities [9].

The first one assumes that these opinions are inaccurate but still very important in human behaviour because they may create the illusion of predictability and thus satisfy the need for control. The second possibility assumes that the perceptions of the external observer are accurate, which enables making accurate decisions. Between these extremes there is the real observer. Kenny, Albright, Malloy, and Kashy [10] point to three possible sources of discrepancy between the opinions of different observers concerning the same person: (1) different observers may perceive different aims behind a given behaviour; (2) observing the same behaviour, they may ascribe different meanings to it; (3) opinions may be influenced by irrelevant or unconscious information – particularly negative attitude towards a person may cause bias in the selection of information and in the interpretation of the person's behaviour.

When it comes to politicians, it is more accurate to speak about their perceived personality traits and their images than about traits actually characterising them. The latter are not accessible to us, and their direct measurement – a rare thing in scientific research – is even more impossible [11,12]. This means that beliefs concerning the traits of politicians may diverge more or less from their real personality traits and may change as new information becomes available. We may expect that beliefs concerning traits characteristic for politicians belonging to particular political parties also undergo similar changes.

Apart from being affected by personality traits associated with politicians of a given party, dispositions attributed to political parties may also be influenced by events, celebrities endorsing the party (e.g. the former foreign minister Władysław Bartoszewski or film director Andrzej Wajda), and advertising [13]. The key intermediary in the process of creating specific associations with parties is the mass media, particularly their way of selecting the information presented. When it comes to psychological processes responsible for the attribution of specific personality traits to political parties, dispositional attributions and classical conditioning stand out prominent.

In the scientific literature there have been a few attempts to establish the perception dimensions of personality traits associated with political parties [14]. Since these attempts were made from the marketing perspective, they reflected the colloquial understanding of the concept of personality as the totality of personal characteristics (including demographic features), which disqualifies them from the psychological point of view. In order to construct a tool – one that would be adequate to the voters' perception – for measuring

personality traits associated with political parties, the inductive strategy was used in accordance with the lexical approach in the trait theory. In the study comprising several stages and conducted by Holewa and Gorbaniuk [3] and by Gorbaniuk, Krzyszycha, and Holewa [15], dispositional party image was defined as the totality of personality descriptors associated with a given political party. The dispositional traits of the party are linguistic categories employed by people in order to give meaning to the observed behaviours attributed to it in terms of permanent predispositions which make it possible to describe, explain, and predict the behaviour of the party in the future. Adopting this definition as the starting point, the authors compiled a natural lexicon of personifying associations evoked by parties and subjected it to Angleitner, Ostendorf, and John's [16] lexical taxonomy. Frequency of occurrence analysis allowed to isolate those adjectives describing human personality traits that are characterised by the highest availability in the voters' memory in the process of thinking about political parties.

Based on quantitative research on party image, including the most prominent parties on the Polish political scene and conducted on the sample of 503 individuals, a three-dimensional structure of personality traits attributed to political parties was identified. It was established that three equally significant dimensions dominate in the perception of parties: Openness, Strength, and Asociality [15]. Those dimensions that occur as independent ones in the perception of human personality – merge into one in the perception of political parties. This is the case with the Openness dimension, which combines elements of Agreeableness (non-confrontational, flexible, agreeable, cooperative) with elements of the Intellect dimension (open to novelties, intelligent, rational, long-sighted). The Strength dimension combines elements of Conscientiousness (consistent, hard-working, well-organized, solid) with the components of Emotional Stability (stable, constant in views, courageous, tough, irresolute, psychologically weak). Finally, the Asociality dimension comprises socially undesirable traits, and its core is constituted by characteristics belonging to the Honesty/Integrity dimension in the perception of human personality (deceitful, two-faced, conceited, dishonest, calculating, self-interested) and to a smaller degree by the asocial characteristics belonging to the Agreeableness dimension (quarrelsome, belligerent, aggressive, cynical). Confirmation research allowed to verify positively the factor structure and confirm the good psychometric properties of the scale for studying the dispositional party image.

### Research problem

A very important event that changed the political scene in Poland was the crash of the presidential plane on 10 April 2010, resulting in the death of Polish president Lech Kaczyński, his wife, and leading representatives of the Polish elite, including the political elite (a total of 96 people died, including the plane's crew). The tragedy left one of the political parties particularly affected – namely Law and Justice (PiS), which had the greatest number of representatives on board the plane.

The air crash provokes many questions. One of them concerns the scale of influence of this event on the political culture in Poland as well as on the perception of politicians and parties. During the mourning period, unprecedented in Poland's recent history, the inhabitants of the country had an opportunity to get to know the more human and less advertised side of politicians. Therefore, the question arises of to what extent the attitude towards political parties changed and whether there was a change in the personality features that voters tend to attribute to them. Because, by coincidence, two weeks before the tragic events the author of this article and his co-workers carried out research on personality traits attributed to political parties, it was possible to repeat the research in order to answer that question.

### Method

#### Measurement

The study used a questionnaire consisting of several parts. For the measurement of party image in terms of the personality traits associated with political parties, a list of 15 adjectives was used that allowed to measure the perception of parties on three dimensions: Strength (resolute, tough, courageous, strong, expressing views clearly; reliability  $\alpha=0,80$ ), Openness for cooperation (cooperative, tolerant, open to the world, capable of dialogue, flexible;  $\alpha=0,86$ ) and Asociality (deceitful, unreliable, two-faced, cynical, manipulative;  $\alpha=0,85$ ). Additionally, attitude towards the party (negative vs. positive attitude) was measured by means of a so called "feelings thermometer," on a scale from -50 to +50 "degrees."

Using the adjective list, subjects described 6 parties: PSL (Polish People's Party), PO (Civic Platform), SLD (Democratic Left Alliance), LPR (League of Polish Families), PiS (Law and Justice), and Samoobrona (Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland) (detailed descriptions of the parties have been provided in the appendix).

#### Sample and procedure

The study was conducted in the last week of March (25-30-March 2010) and in the last week

of April (26-30 April 2010), which was respectively two weeks before and two weeks after the crash of the presidential plane near Smolensk. The study was carried out on samples of students, identical in terms of place and field of study<sup>1</sup>. Each of the parties was described by 140 students in the period preceding the air crash and by 140 students in the period following it. The sample was 50,5% male and 49,5% female. 34% of both samples were students of the Silesian University of Technology, 41% were students of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, and 25% were students of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University and the University of Life Sciences in Lublin. In the period after the air crash near Smolensk, respondents were selected in a 1 to 1 ratio to those of the first sample with regard to the criteria mentioned above, in order to ensure the comparability of the studied samples.

### Results

A *t*-test was used, in order to compare the profiles of personality traits attributed to political parties before and after the Smolensk air crash, and the size of the difference was assessed using the standardised effect coefficient *Es*. The results of the analyses presented in Table 1 show that the perception profiles of two parties – PSL and LPR – did not change. The images of the remaining parties did change; in the case of PiS, PO, and SLD, the most prominent parties on the Polish political scene, the change had a positive character, whereas in the case of Self-Defence – the party characterised by the highest negativism of ideas propagated by its leaders – the image further deteriorated, particularly as regards openness for cooperation.

Two weeks after the air crash near Smolensk, Civic Platform (PO) – the ruling party – was perceived as more open for cooperation and associated with fewer asocial traits than it was a month before (Figures 2 and 3); in particular, it was perceived as more resolute ( $t_{278}=2,48$ ;  $Es=0,29$ ), more open for cooperation with other parties ( $t_{278}=3,82$ ;  $Es=0,45$ ), and more reliable ( $t_{278}=3,15$ ;  $Es=0,37$ ) than before.

The image of Law and Justice (PiS) – the party that lost the biggest number of members in the crash of the presidential plane near Smolensk – changed in terms of perceived Strength and Asociality: compared to the period before the crash, the party began to be perceived as stronger and at the same time as having fewer asocial traits (Figures 1 and 3).

<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful to Grzegorz Krzyszycha, Alicja Holewa and Ewa Dąbrowska for help in collecting a part of the data to the present study.

Table 1. The impact of the Smolensk air crash on the image of political parties in Poland and on attitudes towards them

| Party        | Dimension  | Before air crash |           | After air crash |           | <i>t</i> -test          |            | <i>Es</i> |
|--------------|------------|------------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|-------------------------|------------|-----------|
|              |            | <i>M</i>         | <i>sd</i> | <i>M</i>        | <i>sd</i> | <i>t</i> <sub>278</sub> | <i>p</i> < |           |
| PSL          | Strength   | 2,69             | 0,68      | 2,63            | 0,68      | 0,68                    | 0,497      | 0,08      |
|              | Openness   | 3,14             | 0,83      | 3,22            | 0,70      | -0,83                   | 0,409      | 0,10      |
|              | Asociality | 2,93             | 0,84      | 2,80            | 0,76      | 1,35                    | 0,177      | 0,16      |
|              | Attitude   | -0,60            | 22,06     | -0,65           | 16,63     | 0,02                    | 0,984      | 0,00      |
| PO           | Strength   | 3,32             | 0,79      | 3,39            | 0,79      | -0,67                   | 0,503      | 0,08      |
|              | Openness   | 3,28             | 0,86      | 3,52            | 0,76      | -2,47                   | 0,014      | 0,29      |
|              | Asociality | 3,37             | 0,99      | 3,15            | 0,89      | 1,97                    | 0,050      | 0,23      |
|              | Attitude   | 2,21             | 30,20     | 7,64            | 25,50     | -1,63                   | 0,104      | 0,19      |
| SLD          | Strength   | 2,85             | 0,73      | 2,96            | 0,67      | -1,29                   | 0,197      | 0,15      |
|              | Openness   | 3,20             | 0,70      | 3,20            | 0,77      | -0,01                   | 0,995      | 0,00      |
|              | Asociality | 3,34             | 0,94      | 3,13            | 0,75      | 2,05                    | 0,041      | 0,24      |
|              | Attitude   | -10,58           | 21,94     | -5,03           | 21,96     | -2,12                   | 0,035      | 0,25      |
| LPR          | Strength   | 3,03             | 0,88      | 2,91            | 0,83      | 1,14                    | 0,257      | 0,14      |
|              | Openness   | 2,43             | 0,86      | 2,28            | 0,88      | 1,46                    | 0,147      | 0,18      |
|              | Asociality | 3,18             | 0,95      | 3,19            | 0,87      | -0,08                   | 0,937      | 0,01      |
|              | Attitude   | -12,24           | 23,79     | -16,92          | 24,08     | 1,60                    | 0,111      | 0,20      |
| PiS          | Strength   | 3,26             | 0,86      | 3,62            | 0,85      | -3,61                   | 0,001      | 0,42      |
|              | Openness   | 2,57             | 0,93      | 2,71            | 0,98      | -1,24                   | 0,216      | 0,15      |
|              | Asociality | 3,19             | 0,97      | 2,92            | 1,02      | 2,35                    | 0,019      | 0,28      |
|              | Attitude   | -6,11            | 27,84     | 0,56            | 29,67     | -1,96                   | 0,050      | 0,23      |
| Self-Defence | Strength   | 2,91             | 0,87      | 2,77            | 0,91      | 1,38                    | 0,168      | 0,17      |
|              | Openness   | 2,64             | 0,87      | 2,25            | 0,83      | 3,85                    | 0,001      | 0,46      |
|              | Asociality | 3,54             | 0,89      | 3,73            | 0,90      | -1,76                   | 0,080      | 0,21      |
|              | Attitude   | -16,99           | 25,20     | -22,52          | 22,66     | 1,92                    | 0,056      | 0,23      |

Figure 1. Perceived Strength of political parties before and after the Smolensk air crash

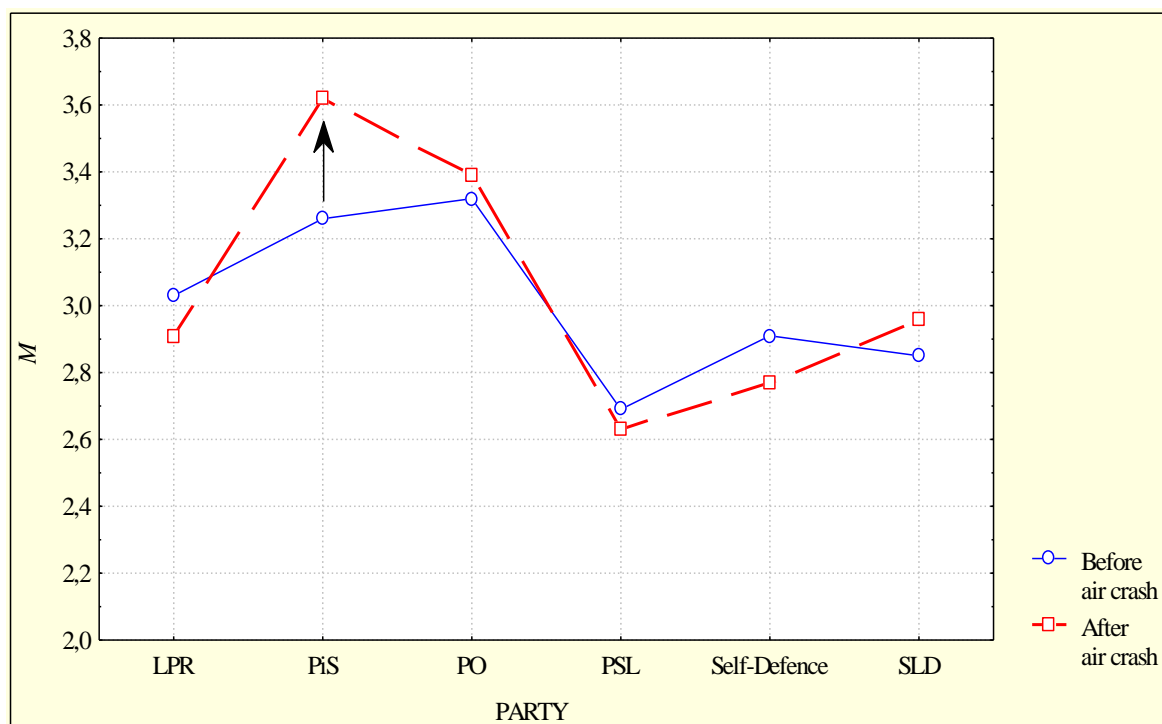


Figure 2. Perceived Openness of political parties before and after the Smolensk air crash

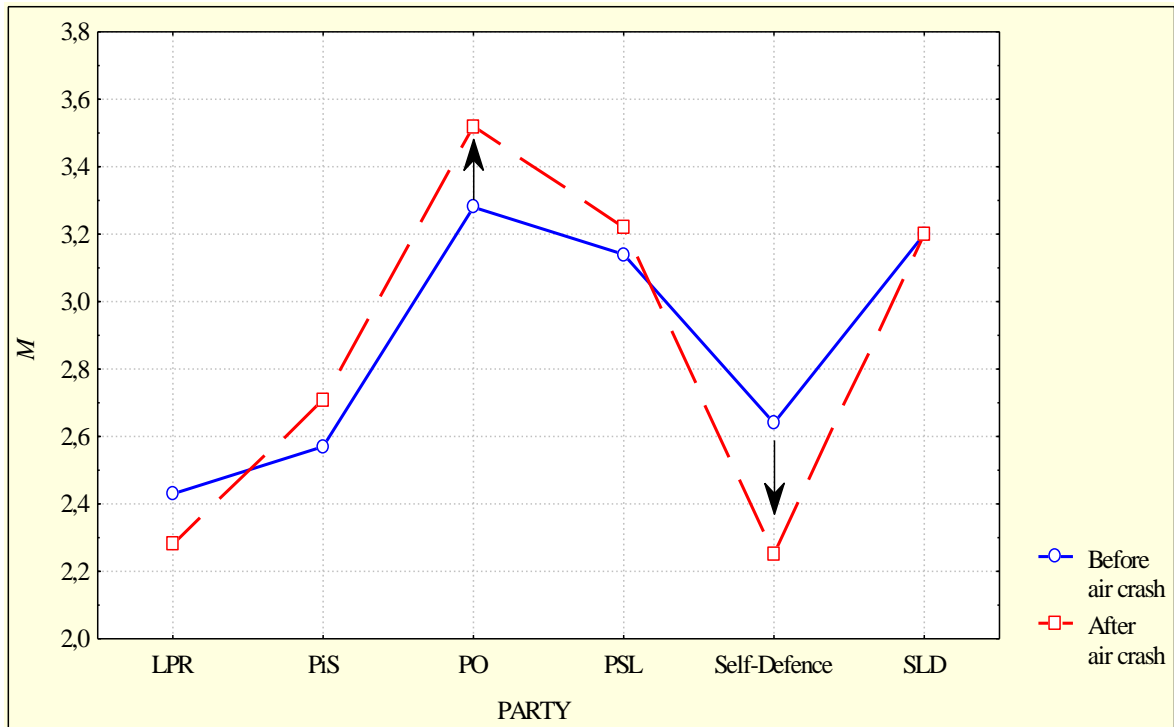
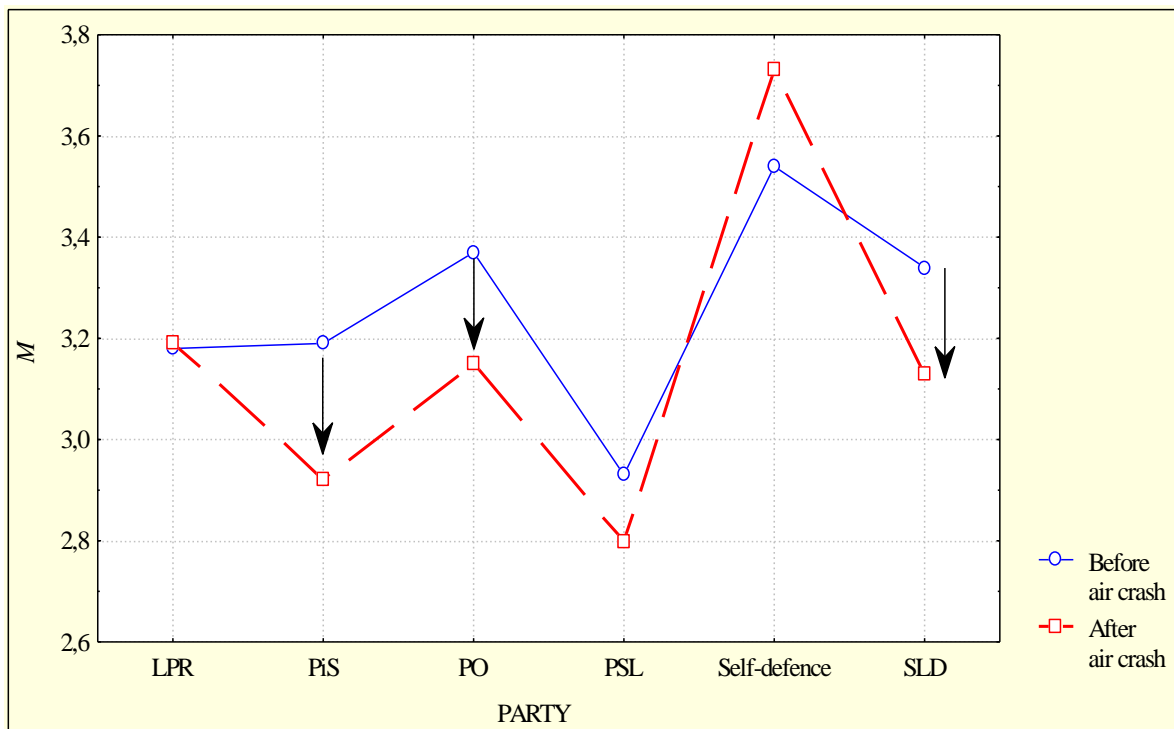


Figure 3. Perceived Asociality of political parties before and after the Smolensk air crash



Particularly significant and extensive changes were observed in perceived Strength, where statistically significant changes were noted in all the items constituting this dimension. In the period after the plane crash, PiS was perceived as more courageous ( $t_{278}=3,77$ ;  $Es=0,44$ ), tougher ( $t_{278}=2,34$ ;  $Es=0,27$ ), more resolute ( $t_{278}=1,97$ ;  $Es=0,22$ ) and clearer in expressing its views ( $t_{278}=3,34$ ,  $Es=0,39$ ). The simultaneous change of perception in terms of asocial

traits consisted in the attribution of a lower level of cynicism ( $t_{278}=2,54$ ;  $Es=0,30$ ) and two-facedness ( $t_{278}=1,98$ ;  $Es=0,23$ ) to this party than previously.

The change in the perception of Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) concerned only the Asociality dimension (see Figure 3). Like PiS, also SLD was perceived as less two-faced ( $t_{278}=2,35$ ;  $Es=0,28$ ) and less manipulative ( $t_{278}=2,55$ ;  $Es=0,30$ ) in pursuing its goals after the air crash.

Image changes were partly reflected in the change of attitudes towards the political parties. A statistically significant and positive change of emotional attitude was noted in the case of PiS (-6,11 vs. +0,56;  $t_{278}=2,12$ ,  $E_s=0,25$ ) and SLD (-10,58 vs. -5,03;  $t_{278}=2,12$ ,  $E_s=0,25$ ).

### Conclusion

The experience of the tragic events of 10 April 2010, the period of mourning, the mobilisation of society, and the insight that these afforded into the more human side of politicians changed the perception of parties on the Polish political scene. The most extensive changes observed were the increase of the parties' perceived openness for cooperation and the attribution of fewer asocial traits to them. The change concerned the major political parties, regardless of how many members each of them actually lost in the crash. This should be treated as a change – perhaps a temporary one – in the perception of political parties in Poland. The situation is different in the case of the parties' perceived Strength. A (positive) change on this dimension was observed only in the case of Law and Justice (PiS), whereas the perception of other parties did not change on this dimension. The consistency of this party's policy so far and its lack of flexibility on a number of issues was again reinterpreted not only as a sign of relatively low openness for cooperation with other parties but also as a sign of strength and endurance – despite the fact that, objectively, the party suffered considerable losses with the death of its hard core politicians.

The research conducted has a number of limitations resulting from the specificity of the events, which were impossible to predict, making it also impossible to plan the research properly. By coincidence, we were in possession of the results of a study conducted shortly before the crash of the presidential plane; therefore, after waiting for the first two weeks after the crash until the powerful emotions connected with the tragic events subsided in the media and until the early presidential election campaign started, we conducted another study, on a different sample but on one that was characterised by the same demographic features, in order to learn about the impact of the events experienced on the perception of political parties. There was no possibility of conducting the second study on the same individuals because, when carrying out the first study, we did not take it into account that there would be any further studies to conduct. For this reason, the subjects being anonymous, it was impossible to assign the results of the second study to any respondent from the first study. Thus, the choice of

research scheme should be considered optimal under the circumstances.

Another limitation to the possibility of generalizing the results of our research is the age and education of the respondents. Students are a special group, even if their voting preferences do not diverge significantly from those of the entire population. It is possible that in a sample with a complete age profile deeper and more extensive changes would have been found.

As regards the prospect of future research, we may consider repeating the study again in order to check the permanence of the changes observed. An appropriate time for repeating it would be the period after the presidential election, whose first round is to take place on 20 June 2010. The election may bring about another change in the perception of political parties, which would also mean a change in their image. When conducting another study, it would be advisable to ensure the comparability of the sample in terms of social-demographic features, in keeping with the research procedure followed so far.

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**Appendix**

- PO (polish: Platforma Obywatelska) – Civic Platform – Central right-wing party, rather conservative in social issues and liberal in economy. The leader – Donald Tusk is the current Prime Minister of Poland. Member of European People’s Party in EU.
- PiS (polish: Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) – Law and Justice – the biggest right-wing party, established in 2001 by Kaczynski twin brothers. Conservative in social issues and socialist in economy (against privatization). Member of European Conservatives and Reformists in European Parliament.
- SLD (polish: Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej) – Democratic Left Alliance is a Polish social-democratic political party. Most important members drew from Polish communists (former Polish United Workers Party). Members of European Socialists Party in EU.
- PSL (polish: Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe) – Polish People’s Party – the party represents mostly the interests of farmers. Nowadays, in coalition with Civic Platform (PO). The leader – Waldemar Pawlak is the current Deputy Prime Minister. Members of EPP in EU.
- Samoobrona – Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland – agrarian party. It combines left wing populists in economy with right-wing religious conservative social policies. Between 2005 and 2009 members of EUDemocrats – EU-critical party in EP.
- LPR (polish: Liga Polskich Rodzin) – League of Polish Families – ultra-catholic, radical nationalist party. It combines social conservatism with isolationism (anti-EU) and left-wing economic policies, based upon its own interpretation of Catholic Social Teaching.