On the morning of April 10, 2010 a Polish Tupolev 154M, tail number 101, crashed and disintegrated while attempting a “go around” procedure at Severnyi (Northern) Airport near the Russian city of Smolensk. There were no survivors.

The catastrophe claimed 96 lives, including:

- the President and First Lady of Poland, Lech and Maria Kaczyński.
- Poland’s former President-in-Exile, Ryszard Kaczorowski.
- The President of Poland’s central bank, Sławomir Skrzypka.
- The “mother” of “Solidarity,” Anna Walentynowicz.
- The Spokesman for Civic Rights, Janusz Kochanowski.
- The director of Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance, Janusz Kurtyka.
- The chief of the country’s National Security Bureau, Aleksander Szyszglo.
- The senior commanding officers of all the branches of the Polish military; a delegation of parliamentarians; clergymen; representatives of the families of Katyn victims; and others.

These victims constituted the nation’s political elite. Their loss was considered a serious blow, particularly given the significance to the Poles of the location of the crash site.

After all, the tragedy occurred only 19 kilometers away from a former NKVD resort/killing field in the Katyn Forest. The presidential delegation was heading to Russia to commemorate the
70th anniversary of the Katyn Forest Massacre. This term is employed to describe a genocide of 26,000 Polish military officers, policemen, teachers, and other members of independent Poland’s prewar elite perpetrated by the Soviet NKVD at several locations throughout the European USSR in April and May 1940, on Stalin’s direct orders. The victims were shot in the back of the neck and buried in mass graves. Quite a few Polish families have a Katyn victim (or two) in their lineage, including some present here.

This act of genocide was an element within a concurrent German Nazi and Soviet Communist extermination of the Polish elites, with the objective of decapitating the Polish nation following the joint invasion and carving up of Poland by the Nazis and Soviets in September 1939, which launched the Second World War. Predictably, the Soviet Union denied their culpability in this wholesale butchery for decades, attributing it to the Nazis instead. Today, post-Soviet Russia no longer denies Stalin’s role. However, the significance of the crime is relativized and its genocidal nature unacknowledged. In Poland, however, Katyn functions as a powerful symbol and painful wound. Paranthetically, for the benefit of those accusing Lech Kaczyński of “Russophobia,” it ought to be stated that he president was bringing with him medals to award to Russians who struggled against communism. This historical background is indispensable for understanding not only the Smolensk Tragedy, but Polish-Russian relations in general.

It will also be worthwhile to say a few words about the late Prof. Lech Kaczyński. He was born into a family with patriotic traditions, the son of a Home Army soldier and Warsaw Uprising veteran. Kaczyński, along with his twin brother Jarosław, became active in the opposition movement to the communist regime. He was also a professor of law and, briefly, Minister of Justice, who became known for his uncompromising stance against corruption and
post-communist “good-old-boy” networks. From 2002 to 2005 Kaczyński served as the Mayor of the capital city of Warsaw, and was elected the country’s president in 2005.

On the domestic front Kaczyński undertook efforts at decommunization. For both ethical and national security reasons, he pushed for transparency and the vetting (lustracja) of former communist secret police collaborators. As part of the decommunization campaign, he accomplished a complete overhaul of Poland’s intelligence and counter-intelligence agencies by replacing them with new ones, and purging them of officers associated with Soviet and native communist intel and counterintel structures (e.g. WSI, GRU, KGB).

Another important plank of Kaczyński’s program was securing energy independence for Poland. The president sought to diversify energy sources to free Poland from natural gas and crude oil blackmail, the main tool of Russian “pipeline diplomacy.” For this reason he refused to endorse a natural gas deal negotiated by Poland’s liberal Civic Platform government with Russia’s Gazprom, which would effectively lock Poland in and render her dependant on Russian gas for almost 30 years.

Lech Kaczyński also made the first attempt, since 1939, to conduct a sovereign Polish foreign policy. He sought to turn Poland into an independent actor on the European and global stage, instead of one merely subordinating her policies to EU or other foreign agendas. He worked to solidify Poland’s alliance with the United States and to assume leadership in Central and Eastern Europe. This grand strategic vision entailed the political and diplomatic consolidation of the greater Intermarium (Międzymorze) area between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas, and, indeed, beyond, all the way to the Caspian and the Caucasus. Nota bene, this
was an updated version of an old Polish geopolitical conception, dating back to the Jagiellonian Dynasty and the fifteenth century.

Supporting the independence of post-Soviet successor states – particularly the Baltic states, Ukraine, and Georgia – was another major pillar of Kaczyński’s foreign policy. He viewed Poland’s survival as linked to checking what he saw as a resurgent Muscovite neoimperialism seeking to rebuild the old Soviet Empire. His attitude is perhaps best summarized by a speech made by Lech Kaczyński in Tbilisi, Georgia in 2008, during the Russian invasion of that country:

“For the first time in a while our neighbors from the north and the east have shown us a face we have been all too familiar with for centuries. These neighbors believe that the nations around them should be subordinated to them. We say NO! (…) This country is Russia, which believes that the old days of the empire which collapsed not so long ago are returning, that domination will be the characteristic of this region. It shall not! Those days are gone forever.”

Rather naturally, the interests of Kaczyński’s Poland and Putin’s Russia clashed.

But now, let us return to that fateful day of 10 April 2010. It is important to point out that the presidential mission was not the only Katyń-bound Polish delegation. Poland’s PM Tusk and Russia’s President Medvedev and PM Putin were not present. Instead, they preferred to organize their own, separate commemoration three days prior – on April 7. We should note that Tusk landed on board the same Tupolev aircraft, flown by Mjr. Arkadiusz Protasiuk, who would fly Kaczyński’s delegation three days later, at the same Severnyi Smolensk airport. The splitting up
of the Polish delegations demonstrated that the Poles were bitterly divided and failed to present a united front.

Ordinary Poles showed greater unity in the aftermath of the Smolensk catastrophe, as millions mourned in public and private. The plane crash was considered the single greatest tragedy to befall Poland for decades.

Throughout the world, 18 countries declared days of official mourning. This included Russia. Yet, the Poles felt they were the recipients of mixed messages.

On the one hand, the Russian leadership immediately offered embraces, condolences, and gestures of sympathy. Officially, the country’s government offered its full cooperation in the plane crash investigation. The catastrophe was to be investigated by the Russian-controlled, Moscow-based Inter-State Aviation Commission (Mezhdugosudarstvennaya Aviatsionnaya Kommisiya or MAK) headed by Airforce (KGB) General Tatyana Anodina. In addition, President Medvedev appointed a special government commission, chaired by PM Vladimir Putin.

On the other hand, the Russian government proved less than cooperative in the practical realm. The crash scene was not properly secured and was thereby contaminated. Crucial parts of the aircraft were damaged, destroyed, or removed (e.g. the cockpit). Moreover, Moscow refuses to hand over key items of evidence, including the original black boxes. Last but not least, the Russian MAK Report, published officially on 12 January 2011, pinned the blame squarely on the Poles. It was alleged that the pilots were improperly trained, lacked a satisfactory knowledge of Russian, and were pressured to land – at all costs – by the supposedly rash President Kaczyński.
and the allegedly intoxicated Gen. Błasik. In fact, “pilot error” was the official Russian explanation from the very outset.

The Polish government’s reaction to these claims was restrained, to say the least. Even so, the Polish comments on the MAK Report, released on the same day, deemed the Russian report “incomplete” and pointed out that the Russians ignored any possible fault attributable to the Russian airtraffic controllers at Severnyi Airport who, apparently, told the Polish pilots that they were “on the correct course, and on the correct path” … when they clearly were not.

Many Poles, including the opposition, felt that their government had been overly docile, and even pusillanimous, vis-à-vis the Kremlin throughout the entire investigation. Quite simply, quite a few people felt they were being rudely deceived. Hence, in addition to the official governmental “Miller Commission,” a parliamentary committee to explain the Smolensk Catastrophe was formed, under the leadership of Antoni Macierewicz, the former anti-communist activist, Interior Minister seeking to expose secret police collaborators, and intel and counter-intel vetting coordinator. Macierewicz believes that all possible causes must be taken into account – as it is handled in the West – rather than dismissing outright “politically incorrect”-sounding ones. Please note that among the parliamentary committee’s experts we may find a Russian: Mr. Andrei Illarionov, Putin’s former advisor.

It is most unfortunate that the actions of both the Russian and Polish governments have bred an unhealthy atmosphere, and numerous theories and speculations about the causes of the crash, both within Poland, and abroad.
Hence, 300,000 Poles have signed petitions calling for an independent international investigation of the crash. Demands were also made for an audit of MAK by the International Civilian Aviation Organization (ICAO), especially given the fact that Russian citizens themselves have accused the agency of cover-ups in cases of Russian plane crashes within the Russian Federation itself.

In the United States, some, but especially conservative circles, voiced concerns over these developments, esp. since Poland was a NATO ally. Congressman Peter King of New York has twice initiated House resolutions calling for independent international investigations: HR 1489 in the previous Congress, and House Concurrent Resolution 44 in the current one, which is still in committee, however.

On the other hand, the administration of President Obama, and the State Department headed by Hillary Clinton, have shown a lack of interest in the matter, perhaps fearing to antagonize Russia and spoil the “reset” policy.

In Europe, on 2 December 2010, EU Regulation 996/2010 on the investigation and prevention of accidents and incidents in civil aviation came into force. This provides the Polish government a tool to “internationalize” the investigation. However, Warsaw has as of yet failed to take advantage of this instrument.

Moreover, the UK MEP Charles Tannock has called for an international investigation following the publication of the MAK Report in January. In addition, on 21 March the European Parliament was presented, by organizations representing the victims’ families, with 400,000 signatures of Poles calling for such an investigation.
So far, these calls have gone unheeded, as they require the backing of the Polish government. However, Poland’s President Komorowski and PM Tusk, both politicians of the ruling Civic Platform party, appear fearful of incurring Russian displeasure. The official narrative is that the catastrophe has given birth to Polish-Russian “reconciliation.” Yet, this is a reconciliation on a purely government-to-government level.

Some of the Russian government’s actions have the potential to create an impression that Moscow has something to hide. Hence, the handling of the investigation by both governments may easily dampen the prospects for a more profound Polish-Russian reconciliation in the near future. In the long-term, sacrificing transparency at the altar of “good relations” can be counterproductive. This may leave a “bad taste” in the mouths of many Poles, for whom it might easily smack of Katyń denial.

Moreover, the situation creates an impression of Poland as a weak partner incapable of assertive action or safeguarding even its own interests.

On the Russian side, Moscow’s handling of the investigation may tarnish Russia’s image on the international stage.

We may only hope that, as the Bible states, “the truth shall set us free” … and provide closure to the victims’ families.

Paweł Styrna

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