



BULLETIN

No. 51 (127) • April 8, 2010 • © PISM

COMMENTARY

Editors: Sławomir Dębski (Editor-in-Chief), Łukasz Adamski, Mateusz Gniazdowski, Beata Górka-Winter, Leszek Jesień, Agnieszka Kondek (Executive Editor), Łukasz Kulesa, Marek Madej, Ernest Wyciszkievicz

Ceremony to Mark the 70th Anniversary of the Katyn Massacre

Robert Śmigielski

Vladimir Putin's speech did not bring the breakthrough expected in Poland in Russia's approach to the Katyn massacre. Whether the Katyn issue can be closed in Polish-Russian relations will depend on the further steps taken by Russia, such as the full access to the files from the Russian investigation and archives for the Polish researchers .

The fundamental problem in the historical debate between Poland and Russia has for years invariably been the Katyn massacre. The maintaining of the seal of secrecy on most of the files from the investigation carried out by the Russian military prosecutor's office into the massacre, restriction of access of Polish prosecutors and academics to the Russian archives, classification of the crime by Russian courts, and finally the failure to vindicate the victims have prevented the symbolic closure of the issue. This has badly affected Polish-Russian relations, even if the disputes over the historical issues were rather a symptom—than a cause—of the crises in Polish-Russian relations. The setting up in 2007 of a Polish-Russian Group for Difficult Issues was intended to exclude the question of accountability for historical grievances from day-to-day politics, without obscuring historical truth and relativising responsibility. The Group was set the task of bringing Poland and Russia closer together by drawing up recommendations for both governments with regard to reduction of the potential for exploitation of historical issues in day-to-day politics.

The activities of the Group for Difficult Issues, highly valued by the Russian and Polish prime ministers, and this year's 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre, suggested that there might be a possibility of reaching a consensus with regard to not only the moral and historical, but also political and legal settlement of the difference in standpoints. These expectations fuelled the decisive condemnation of Stalinist crimes by President Dmitry Medvedev on the Day of Remembrance of Victims of Political Repression in October 2009, the showing of the film "Katyn" on the Russian television channel TV Kultura, and Prime Minister Putin's participation in the ceremony at the cemetery in Katyn.

Prime Minister Putin's speech was important rather with regard to the debate within Russia on Stalinism and it is hard to conclude that it is the breakthrough in Russia's position on Katyn that Poland was waiting for. By placing the reference to Katyn in a list of other Stalinist crimes: collectivization, the Workuta labour camps, and the Great Purge, Putin conceded at the same time that the authorities of the USSR were responsible for it. There was no express mention of the perpetrators of the murder of the Polish prisoners of war—the most senior Communist party leaders and those carrying out their orders directly in the ranks of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs. This confirmation of the USSR's responsibility would have been important, because opinions questioning who the perpetrators were and shifting the blame on Hitler's Germany have been expressed in Russia too frequently in recent years. Among the Russian public there is also slight awareness of the massacre, which is a result of relativisation of Stalin's times. The process of coming to terms with the past and appreciation of the scale of crimes committed in the name of the Soviet state, of which Russia is the legal successor, was blocked under President Putin's rule.

The mere presence of the Russian Prime Minister at the ceremony in Katyn is cause for hope that this will lead Russia to decide to take steps that are not only symbolic in nature. A decision to become fully open to cooperation with Polish prosecutors and academics and revision of the Russian judiciary's view of the recurring matter of justice for the descendants of the executed officers would be confirmation of Russia's readiness to truly close the Katyn charter in relations with Poland.

In the long-term, Polish-Russian relations will depend on the direction taken by Russia, the civilization choices it makes, and the values upon which it builds its identity. The issue of appraisal of the Stalinist period of its history is key in the making of this choice.