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Grief after Smolensk Tragedy Unites Poles and Russians

Poland and Russia have been going through the pain and distress of Smolensk airport tragedy in unison. The climate of rapprochement between the two nations is conducive to closing historical problems in contemporary Polish-Russian relations.

The death of Polish President Lech Kaczyński and his entourage, among them many members of the Polish elite, in an air crash near Smolensk has perceptibly changed the tone of Polish-Russian relations. Contributing to this was the empathetic reaction of the top Russian leaders, and particularly President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's pronouncements addressing the people of Poland, as well as the effective operations of Russian services and the announcement of a day of national mourning in Russia. The fact that the Russian prime minister himself took the chair of a commission to investigate the causes of the catastrophe, his arrival in Smolensk and participation in a valedictory ceremony for the coffin with President Kaczyński's remains were received in Poland with recognition.

Also noticed here is the spontaneous reaction of the people of Russia. Expressions of grief and solidarity are observed, especially in Smolensk and in cities with Polish diplomatic missions, where many Russians lay flowers and light vigil candles. Memorial services are held in Orthodox churches. The catastrophe and the Polish mourning were the top news in the Russian media. Never since 1991 has Poland attracted so much attention in Russia, and never have the attitudes to this country been so warm as in recent days. In Poland, this meets with positive reception. Hope that the sense of a shared grief among Poles and Russians will lead to a historic reconciliation is the dominant theme in the Polish media, whereas opinions questioning the sincerity of the Russian authorities' intentions or auguring a deterioration in relations with Russia are absolutely isolated.

The Smolensk air crash of 10 April 2010 imprinted the Katyn massacre upon the collective memory of Russian society. The Russian media helped their compatriots to understand the importance of the tragedy of 70 years earlier and the symbolism of the present disaster. Andrzej Wajda's film *Katyń*, depicting the circumstances surrounding the 1940 massacre and the sufferings of murdered officers' families, was broadcast in prime time by the state-owned television channel Rossiya, which reaches 90% of the Russian population, whereas the Perviy Kanal channel showed a documentary about the murder.

In the present atmosphere, both countries' political elites may find it easier to finally cast aside historical encumbrances upon Polish-Russian relations. This would be helped if the Katyn victims were rehabilitated by the Russian administration of justice, and if a full documentation of the crime were made available to Poland. Russian government seems to increasingly understand that exposing the circumstances of Stalinist crimes will bring it no damage. And in Poland, a will is perceptible to finally close the historical issues in relations with Russia, and to work together towards a resentment-free Europe.