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Eastern Europe comes together to mourn Poland's President



(Janek Skarzynski/AFP/Getty Images)

A mourner prays outside the Gothic Basilica of Our Lady, where a mass was held for the late Polish president

Roger Boyes in Krakow

At precisely 17.07 yesterday, the 18-tonne bell of Saint Sigismund pealed out and Poland fell silent.

The 16th-century bell is rung only at moments of national joy or national tragedy. Yesterday it marked the end of a week of mourning for President Lech Kaczynski, long days of public grief that have set Poles thinking about their future in Europe and their uneasy relationship with Russia.

"Today the bell knells for the reconciliation of Pole with Pole," said Bronislaw Komorowski, the Speaker of parliament, addressing dozens of leaders at the funeral mass in St Mary's Basilica in Krakow. "And it rings for reconciliation with the Russian nation in the name of the extraordinary tragedy of Katyn."

Earlier prayers had been said not only for the President and the 95 others who had died in the April 10 air crash in Smolensk but also for the people of Russia. The President had been leading a delegation to the Katyn forest to mark the 70th anniversary of the shooting of thousands of Polish officers and intellectuals.

"Shot," Mr Komorowski reminded the worshippers, "with a bullet to the back of the head." Not that the Poles present needed reminding. But the words were aimed at President Medvedev, the most prominent head of

state to attend the funeral, and to Russian viewers watching the ceremony.

Poland is using the untimely — and still not fully explained — air crash to send a message to Moscow: speak the truth about history, accept blame, and the relationship between Warsaw and Moscow can be transformed. In theory, at least, the death of the President, a passionate anti-communist, could help to end centuries of enmity and change Europe's political landscape.

It was significant then that the late President was seen off largely by two dozen Central and East European leaders rather than the Western heavyweights who had promised to attend. The plume of volcanic ash forced President Obama to call off his trip.

Although it might have been feasible for some leaders to fly in a small plane — a delegation from Morocco travelling in a small Cessna touched down in Krakow without problems on Saturday night — many were worried about a new, intense ash-cluster stranding them in Poland.

The German Chancellor Angela Merkel, on her way back from the US last week, found herself re-routed to Lisbon. She found a way of flying to Rome and ended up taking a convoy of cars from Italy to Germany via South Tyrol. Back in Berlin, she cancelled the trip to Krakow, though Germany was represented by President Köhler. President Sarkozy of France, the Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, the NATO secretary-general Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy, the Prince of Wales and the crowned heads of Norway, Denmark, Spain and Sweden all stayed at home, grounded by Icelandic ash.

Some of the west European-based leaders refused to be deterred. The President of the European Parliament, Jerzy Buzek, for example drove across Europe: many European deputies crowded into eastward-bound trains.

"It was supposed to have been a geopolitical occasion," said the veteran Polish commentator Maciej Wierzynski. "You could tell that by the fact that President Obama agreed originally to come as soon as Russian President Medvedev said he would be there."

But the character of the funeral changed: it became a chance for Eastern Europe to show its sympathy for Mr Kaczynski who could be counted on for support whenever there was a flare-up over Russian interference or energy supplies.

The President had helped to make Poland the leader of the region, from the Baltic states to the Balkans, but it was a leadership based on a common distrust of the Kremlin. That has been changing over the past 18 months and nothing illustrated the shift better than the fact that Mr Medvedev, in the absence of Mr Obama, was the centre of attention.

The ash cloud helped him in another way: Georgian President Saakashvili's plane was delayed, diverted through Rome, and the Russian leader was spared the embarrassment of sitting next to his arch-enemy in church. Mr Saakashvili counted himself one of Mr Kaczynski's closest friends — the Pole had travelled to Georgia to demonstrate his support in the conflict with Russia — and arrived in Krakow in time to kneel at the new tomb in the Wawel.

In the end, after the 21-gun salute and the departure of the leaders, the Poles were left alone with their late President. Hundreds of thousands had hitch-hiked across the country, crowded into trains to reach the ancient city with its ancient fortress. As the gun-carriage hauled his flag-draped coffin from the market square in Krakow, up the Wawel hill, they shouted "Dziekuemy!" Polish for "We thank you".

And the bell stopped ringing.

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