

Central Europe Digest

Poland: Resilience in Tragedy

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by Anna Nadgrodkiewicz

CEPA Associate Scholar Anna Nadgrodkiewicz looks at Poland in the tragic aftermath of the April 10 air disaster near Smolensk, Russia.

Shock. Grief. Disbelief. Those were the emotions that swept Poland and the international community in the wake of the disastrous plane crash in Smolensk, Russia that killed Polish President Lech Kaczyński, his wife and nearly 100 dignitaries. There will be ample opportunity for analyzing what went wrong after the forensic investigation concludes. But it is appropriate to reflect now on what this tragic event means for Poland's future. As candle-carrying crowds fill the streets of Poland and well-wishers lay wreaths in front of Polish embassies around the world, one is hard-pressed to find a silver lining in this senseless tragedy. Yet, there are a few important implications to consider. In an ironic twist of history, those on the plane died commemorating the Soviet massacre of thousands of Poles in the Katyń forest 70 years ago. That trip was their final calling.

Russia had not formally acknowledged responsibility for the killings until 1990 and still refuses to declare the Katyń executions a war crime, casting a shadow over Polish-Russian relations. Prime Minister Putin's attendance on Wednesday at the first joint commemorative ceremony was an important symbol in setting the record straight and represented a significant step toward reconciliation. President Kaczyński was on the way to pay his respects on Saturday when the plane crash occurred. However, tragically, this event seared Katyń anew into the collective memory of Poles and reminded the rest of the world of what happened there in April 1940.

The immediate aftermath of the catastrophe testifies to the strength and maturity of Poland's democratic institutions. Although the loss of the head of state and key leaders in the country is monumental, no power vacuum or chaos ensued. In accordance with constitutional provisions, Speaker of the House Bronisław Komorowski took over the functions of President, Prime Minister Donald Tusk continues to head the government, and deputies – from army generals to the governor of the National Bank of Poland – swiftly stepped into the positions of power vacated by their deceased superiors.

It is also noteworthy that the outpouring of mourners was not simply an expression of personal grief after President Kaczyński's death. In fact, many Poles who took to the streets to mourn him were not supporting him in the upcoming presidential elections. Still, the mourners showed up in force to honor the office as much as the man, proving that Poland's strength rests in the resilience of its people and in lasting institutions, not particular individuals in power.

A horrible tragedy has occurred, but this profound loss can also make way for Polish-Russian reconciliation over a historical grievance, less politicized and more issue-focused presidential campaign in Poland and a sense of unity and common purpose as the country deals with the void left by those who perished. The outpouring of international sympathy shows that Poles are not alone in their hour of national sorrow. Despite the grief, this tragedy can create new opportunities for Polish-Russian reconciliation and a renewed sense of unity and common purpose.

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The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Center for European Policy Analysis.