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Turmoil in Poland.

LSE Ideas

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On the morning of 10 April a Polish plane carrying the Polish President and a high ranking team of politicians and military men, due to land in Smolensk, crashed killing all those on board. The event marks the end of an estrangement between Poland and Russia which can be traced to the outbreak of the Second World War. It also might become the beginning of what most hope will be a period of constructive co-existence which will be marked by realpolitik rather than nationalist posturing.

On 1 September last year when the Poles commemorated the anniversary of the beginning of the war they had hoped that Russia would finally make an apology for the deaths of thousands of Poles killed by the NKVD during the war. This the Russian leadership was not prepared to do and instead hid behind the declaration that Poles – like the Russians – were victims of Stalinism. It was therefore a source of surprise when on 7 April when Tusk the Polish Prime Minister went to the Katyn to commemorate the death of Polish officers, Prime Minister Putin finally acknowledged the Soviet responsibility for the crime and apologised to the Poles unreservedly. The death of President Lech Kaczyński might well have set the clock back. But the opposite has happened. Putin and Tusk were photographed standing at the site of the crash, united in grief and horror at the enormity of the tragedy. And contained in that gesture is the full meaning of the transformation that is taking place in Polish-Russian relations, a transformation that has implications for European and US policies towards Russia and Poland. Poland has benefitted in recent years from the estrangement between the West and Russia, but these proved to be transient victories. Likewise it has always been obvious that for Russia to become a full partner in the international community, the Polish issue which carried emotional, even if not always political weight, had to be resolved. By responding sensitively and honestly to the tragedy Putin has made it possible for the present Polish government to declare that all previous misunderstandings have been resolved.

The crash has created a potentially dangerous vacuum in the Polish political landscape. President Kaczyński was accompanied by most of the leadership and key ideologues of the opposition PiS party. On the aeroplane were also the presidential candidates of the SLD left wing party and the PSL peasant party. The date of the forthcoming presidential elections was to be announced soon and a mood of pre-election rivalry had dominated recent political debates. The governor of the national bank and the head of the Institute of National Memory, where the secret service files have been deposited, both closely connected with Kaczyński, died with him in the crash. The presidential elections have now to take place by 20 June but only the candidate of the ruling PO party Bronisław Komorowski is there to stand. PiS is paralysed by the tragedy, but so are the SLD and the peasant parties. How will the ruling party behave? Will the electorate trust them to guide the nation through the period when PO politicians are likely to take over most decision making roles? At stake is not merely the hitherto healthy democratic system in Poland but the newly forged Polish-Russian reconciliation. Once the period of official mourning comes to an end there will be a need to ensure that no party exploits anti-Russian sentiments to steal a march on the ruling party. So far Russian politicians and the media have been helpful in creating that necessary mood of thoughtful contemplation. Polish leaders led by Prime Minister Tusk have likewise remained dignified and appreciative of all the aid given by Russian experts investigating the causes of the crash. Polish media have been determined not to allow speculation to take the debate in the direction where anti-Russian sentiments could be fanned. It is difficult not to conclude that both sides know that they are being observed by the European and US governments which would not support another round of squabbles.

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