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Russia-Poland Tensions Rise with Crash Report

By Simon Shuster / Moscow

It looked at first like the chance of a lifetime, if not a millennium. On April 10, when Polish President Lech Kaczynski and his entourage died in a plane crash in eastern Russia, the flood of grief from the Russian people struck such a chord in Poland that the long history of war, betrayal and oppression between the countries finally seemed to turn a corner. For the first time since anyone could remember, the two nations' leaders began to call each other brothers, a show of amity that would have been hard to imagine before the crash.

But over the past few days, a new cycle of recriminations has begun, helped along by a lack of tact on both sides. The Russians, having closed their official investigation into the tragedy, are stonewalling urgent questions from the Poles, while the Kaczynski family is calling the accident an assassination carried out by Russia. The two countries had the chance to make amends, but now the moment has passed. ([See photos of Poland mourning the loss of its President.](#))

That became clear on Jan. 12, when Russia's Interstate Aviation Committee held a press conference in Moscow to reveal the causes of the plane crash. With none of the Polish investigators in attendance, the head of the committee, Tatyana Anodina, launched into a stone-faced monologue that cleared the Russian side of all responsibility. All of the blame, she said, fell on the Polish flight crew, which her report accused of ignoring warnings from ground control and making other "absolutely illogical" mistakes. According to the report, for some reason they failed to heed the automated system that was screaming "Pull up! Terrain ahead!" inside the cockpit, and at one point a crew member — also inexplicably — pressed a button that skewed the altitude gauge, leading the pilot to believe he was about 525 ft. (160 m) higher than he actually was. Why the Russian control tower did not point out this mistake was not clarified in the report.

Most shocking of all to the Polish public, however, was the claim that the chief of the Polish air force, Andrzej Blasik, who was on board as part of the President's entourage, had been drinking (a point that Anodina took pains to emphasize) when he allegedly barged into the cockpit and demanded the pilots to

land despite the heavy fog. The report also alleged that in August 2008, during the war in Georgia, President Kaczynski had insisted that the pilots change course at the last minute and land in the capital Tbilisi, instead of at an airport further away from the war zone, in order to save time. After the pilot refused, he was allegedly banned from flying the President's plane. ([See TIME's first report on the plane crash that killed Kaczynski.](#))

But two years later, the co-pilot on that flight to Georgia went on to fly Kaczynski and other prominent Poles to the Russian city of Smolensk. This time, says the Russian report, when his superiors insisted they land, the pilot obeyed. "If we don't land here, he'll give me trouble," he is heard saying on the flight recording that Russia released last week, allegedly referring to the President. The tape ends minutes later with chilling screams from inside the cockpit.

"This was very painful for the Polish people to hear," Polish parliamentarian Tadeusz Iwinski tells TIME. "Nobody in Poland is really questioning the great blunders committed by the Polish side, but the Russians could have admitted to some fault of their own. Instead, they didn't even use one word to say that of course some things could have been done better on their side." Why, for instance, wasn't the Russian airport closed if the weather conditions were so awful? And on the flight recording, why does the control tower keep telling the pilot that he is "on course, on the glide path" until seconds before the collision? ([Comment on this story.](#))

Without addressing these questions, Russian investigators pronounced the case closed, only to be confronted with an entirely different version of the facts on Tuesday, when the Polish Interior Minister Jerzy Miller placed much of the blame for the crash on the Russian control tower. At a televised press conference in Warsaw, he said the flight controllers were "working under intense pressure and made many mistakes ... They failed to support the crew during their approach." As evidence, he cited a control-room recording in which the plane is guided to a height of less than 330 ft. (100 m) before being told to pull up. This command, Miller argued, should have been given sooner. But as if to call his bluff, Russian investigators published a transcript of those recordings on Tuesday night. They appear to confirm Miller's account, but no one has explained why they were not disclosed in the first place.

[See more on the history of Poland's relations with Russia.](#)

[See TIME's 2007 story on the Kaczynski brothers.](#)

These discrepancies, and the blame game they have set in motion, have helped push the notion of a Russian plot to murder Poland's President out of the realm of conspiracy theory and into the Polish mainstream. On Monday, the late President's son-in-law, Marcin Dubieniecki, told Poland's TVN24 news channel that "there are many things that indicate an assassination of Lech Kaczynski." In particular, he named the anti-Russian activism that defined Kaczynski's political career, as well as his support for Georgia in its 2008 war with Russia.

Poland's main opposition party, Law and Justice, which is led by the late President's twin brother

Jaroslav Kaczynski, has now begun accusing Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk of treason for trusting the Russians to lead the inquiry. With the public outcry over its findings, Tusk is on the brink of a political crisis. On Wednesday, he will go before a session of parliament devoted to the Russian crash probe, and Polish MP Iwinski says the least Tusk could face is a no-confidence vote against one of his ministers as lawmakers look for someone to take the fall. At worst, he could be pushed out of power in the next parliamentary elections later this year. ([See more on how Poland mourned the loss of its President.](#))

Ironically, this would rob the Russians of their greatest Polish ally. At the crash site on April 10, Tusk knelt down beside Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in front of a makeshift memorial, and then the two men embraced. But now the Russians are keeping a guarded distance from the political storm their investigation has caused in Warsaw. Putin has made no comment, while his Transport Minister, Igor Levitin, said on Jan. 13, "I see that our Polish colleagues still have questions, but I don't want to be drawn into polemics."

This caginess is only likely to draw more fire from the Poles, popularizing the view that Russia's inquiry was merely a cover-up, says Andrei Illarionov, an analyst at the Cato Institute think tank in Washington, D.C., who was Putin's top economic adviser between 2000 and 2005. "Not only has the investigation failed in its attempt to put all the blame on the Polish pilots, it has had the opposite effect," he says. "The suspicion has now turned toward the Russians." ([See why there was hope that the crash would strengthen ties between Russia and Poland.](#))

Yet Evgeny Minchenko, a Russian political strategist and spin doctor, says it could not have been handled any other way. Russia had to keep the Poles away from the Jan. 12 press conference in order to avoid a confrontation, Minchenko says, and once Warsaw's anger subsides, it should still be possible to steer relations toward higher ground: "Putin is a very talented communicator ... He charmed Tusk so much [at their first meeting] that the latter fundamentally changed his tone, and that will remain an important factor going forward." ([Comment on this story.](#))

But in the face of the public fury surrounding the Russian investigation — 46% of Poles believe it was falsified, according to a survey conducted last week by TNS OBOP — succumbing to Putin's charms may mark the end of Tusk's career. So don't hold out for Russians and Poles to hug and call each other brothers again. The wait could last another lifetime.

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