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Despite Poland's grief, there is much to celebrate ^[1]

APDS Blogger: Krysta Close

April 10 was a dark and painfully sad day—for the people of Poland, for the worldwide diaspora community known as *Polonia*, and for citizens everywhere—as the world struggled to grasp Poland's sudden and stunning loss on both a personal and international level. As Sunday dawned, however, and life and governance continued on without misstep, one could feel the mood shift. Such overwhelming grief, wreckage and death could have easily seemed a hollow echo of a senselessly tragic national history, entrenching an image of Poland as Europe's doormat, but this has not been the case. Amidst the loss, Poland's strength rather than its weakness has been the dominant perception, and the prospect of reconciliation between longtime enemies has prevailed over blame or the reopening of old wounds.


As the international media has shone its spotlight on the devastating deaths of Polish President Lech Kaczyński and the First Lady as well as the loss of scores of top political, military and civil leaders, clergy members and everyday citizens, it has also highlighted the dignity and calm with which this great but historically battered nation has handled the incident and ensuing political re-organization. It is, in fact, these unexpected moments of media exposure that often make the best inadvertent public diplomacy opportunities, and Poland's catastrophe has been no exception. As Poland emerges as a powerful modern nation, Saturday's devastation has provided one such unexpected occasion, shedding light on many facets of Poland's story to willing audiences around the world.

The Presidential plane crashed near Russia's Katyń forest, a geographical irony mentioned in nearly all articles or editorials about the event, and one that adds important historical context to the story. Katyń was the site of a massacre of roughly 20,000 Polish Army officers by the Soviet NKVD during WWII, and the fact that Russia had until recently denied responsibility for this atrocity has been a persistent sore spot in Polish-Russian relations. However it is merely one of many difficult issues in long history of mutual mistrust and repression, including the period of Partitions during which Russia and Poland's other neighbors divvied up Polish territory until it disappeared from the map of sovereign nations entirely. This antagonistic relationship has been described by Marek Zebrowski, director of USC's Polish Music Center, as "one neighborhood—in this case Central Europe—[that] cannot accommodate two political powerhouses, and the rise of one will be coupled with the demise of the other."

Saturday's disaster has drawn international attention to the fact that this antagonism may have finally started to shift. A few days before the crash, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was the first Russian official to attend a commemoration of the Katyń massacre on its 70th anniversary; although he did not use the opportunity to give an official apology as many Poles had hoped, it was viewed as a positive step in Poland and beyond. Despite ongoing disagreements with Kaczyński and his policies, Putin and his colleague, Russian President

Dmitri Medvedev, were among the first leaders to extend condolences after the fatal crash and subsequently declared Monday a Russian national day of mourning. Also, Andrzej Wajda's Academy Award-nominated film *Katyń* was screened for the first time on Russian state-owned television during Sunday primetime, making many Russians newly aware of violence that had been perpetrated on their own soil. While it is too early to know how these conciliations might affect inter-state relations in the long run, media coverage has burned this newfound cordiality between the nations into the international consciousness; one can only hope that citizens and fellow politicians will pressure Russian and Polish leaders to avoid reverting to their earlier positions of entrenched mistrust.

More important than history for public diplomacy, however, is positive action in the present, and this catastrophe has revealed a thriving nation to the world. It was the only European economy to exhibit growth during 2009, and not even the loss of President Kaczyński or Sławomir Skrzypek, head of the National Bank, could shake the stable Polish stock market this week. The nation's political institutions have displayed equal solidity, in what has been hailed as "a triumph of Polish democracy... [in which] animosities and political cleavages have been buried... [and] the presidency—at least temporarily—has passed [smoothly] from the Party of Law and Justice to its primary rival, Civic Platform." In a New York Times op-ed, Roger Cohen applauded Poland's emergence from its past political tribulations: "Poland should shame every nation that believes peace and reconciliation are impossible, every state that believes the sacrifice of new generations is needed to avenge the grievances of history."

As heartache abates and normalcy returns, Poland has the chance to practice another great virtue of successful public diplomacy: listening . This moment in the spotlight is a golden opportunity to digest international public opinion, and to capitalize on the emerging image of Poland as a powerful and stable nation with a vibrant economy and balanced politics. The message being transmitted back to Poland is clear and will endure beyond this moment of international empathy. There is no need to dwell on historical conflicts and repression, nor even Poland's former grandeur or cutting-edge political leadership of the past —Poland has arrived as a great nation of today, and as a respected contributing member of the European Union, it is expected to stay that way.

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