

# INTRODUCTION

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## IN SEARCH OF THE TRUTH

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE POLISH-RUSSIAN GROUP ON DIFFICULT MATTERS

#### I

Times are changing. The same is true of people, countries, and the value systems guiding politicians in their endeavors at home and in relations with neighboring states. Twenty years after the start of the Great Transition and demise of the division of Europe into East and West, Poland and Russia have made a joint effort to clear their relations of the lies and deceit that have accumulated over the years. Our countries are trying to build a relationship based on partnerlike respect for national interests and on recognizing what is distinct and specific to each partner.

The current state of Polish-Russian relations carries the burden of history. Our memory of historical events significantly contributes to how we look at the world and how we perceive ourselves in the world around us. It is important to ensure that memory is not subject to manipulation and deliberate falsification of the past, that it resists attempts to obliterate the traces of what was shameful and deserves to be condemned.

Historical facts are indisputable. However, their interpretation may vary. Different nations have different assessments of the same events. Moreover, the passage of time makes new generations evaluate historical facts and events in a different way than their ancestors did. This is because the new generations are aware of the consequences of decisions made by their forebears.

Those who believe that it was not the Katyn massacre but the lie about the crime that put a divide between the Poles and Russians are right. Meanwhile, truth purifies, as Russian prime minister Vladimir V. Putin said on 7 April 2010 in Smolensk. Polish prime minister Donald Tusk added, "Truth not only purifies, but also illuminates." These words were uttered after the close of joint Polish-Russian commemorations in the Katyn Forest, organized to mark the passage of seventy years since the crime.

After the end of the mourning ceremonies, the two prime ministers met

with the co-chairs of the Polish-Russian Group on Difficult Matters. During the meeting, they voiced appreciation for the work of our group, without which the joint commemoration to remember the Polish officers shot and killed in the Katyn Forest probably would not have taken place.

Established by the governments of both countries, the group has played the role of a catalyst in Polish-Russian bilateral relations. One of the results of the work of the Polish-Russian Group on Difficult Matters is the joint volume titled *White Spots—Black Spots: Difficult Matters in Polish-Russian Relations, 1918–2008*, published both in Warsaw and Moscow (in Polish and Russian, respectively). This book is based on the expertise of Polish and Russian scholars who, over fifteen pairs of chapters, assess the most difficult problems in bilateral relations over ninety years, from 1918 to 2008, in a “mirror” approach incorporating both the Polish and Russian perspectives. This book is about our common history in the twentieth century—a history that the two countries were largely destined to share. Polish and Russian authors wrote this book together, with readers in both Poland and Russia in mind. They tried to do this in a way so as to distance themselves from the difficult but, we repeat, shared past of the two countries. They were doing so with the future in mind—so that it is based on truth and mutual understanding.

## II

The road to publishing this volume was not an easy one. It all began in 2002, when the leaders of our countries decided to create a mechanism unusual in the practice of international relations—the Group on Difficult Matters in light of Polish-Russian history. The group in its original makeup (which was entirely different from the current composition, as appointed in 2008) first met in 2005 and later held another meeting. These sessions, however, did not produce the expected results. This was in part due to political tension in Polish-Russian relations at the time.

A fundamental change in the lineup of the group took place in December 2007, when it acquired what in fact was a new status. Without going into the reasons behind that, we should note that in the early years of the twenty-first century, the concept of “historical policy” gained popularity, and that approach is not easy to assess. Problems arising from historical events affected interstate relations across Europe. The leaders of both our countries came to the conclusion that historical issues had in fact become an obstacle to the development of present-day relations between Poland and Russia, as well as between the Polish and Russian people. The focus was on the need to understand and explain how joint efforts can help deal with problems arising from historical events.

Such an effort can be successful only if both parties pay the utmost attention to each other’s arguments, are ready to seek a compromise, and express

a sincere desire to bring about a situation in which history is dealt with by historians and the truth is restored to the people.

Was this a difficult task? Not in strategic terms. We understood our goal in the same way: we wanted good relations and to relieve them of the burden of mutual historical grievances. But from a tactical point of view, this was not a simple task. We had to find a way of doing this.

The idea of giving the group a new status gained acceptance among political leaders and foreign ministry officials in both countries several months before the first meeting of the co-chairs, who at that time did not yet realize that such a role would be assigned to them. As a result, a decision was made to appoint new members and co-chairs of the group and to define a new mandate for the Group on Difficult Matters.

With relief, we welcomed the news about the names of the new members of the group. First, we knew each other, though not very well. Second, we had extensive experience under our belts and highly respected each other's research achievements. Third, as the co-chairs, we enjoyed considerable autonomy and freedom in making decisions. Fourth, senior officials and diplomats from both Poland and Russia demonstrated a willingness to help and showed great confidence in us.

The first meeting of the co-chairs was held on "neutral" ground, in Brussels (1–2 February 2008). We exchanged proposals we had prepared beforehand. They concerned the composition of the group, the range of issues requiring discussion, the procedures and frequency of meetings, and opinions on the desired and possible results of our activities. We then realized that the conditions had been created for us to go ahead with our work.

The composition of the Polish and Russian parts of the group was decided according to a rather complicated, but—as it turned out later—quite reasonable rule of thumb. It was obvious that historians familiar with the history of our two countries and aware of the European historical context of the last century should be present in both parts. However, the group was not intended to be a commission on history. It was important that those taking part in the group's work be experts who deal with contemporary affairs and realize how historical problems affect the present-day policies of our countries and how societies react to various historical issues taken up by the other party.

It was only natural that those who were responsible for solving the problems of history professionally—either as members of the legal profession or in their work as civil servants—had to be included in the group. This explains why lawyers and investigators, especially those focusing on the Katyn massacre, were invited to join our group. State archives employees also became members of the group. To work efficiently, the group needed people representing both countries' foreign ministries. Diplomats helped adapt our

work schedule to the state of official relations between our countries, and they sometimes made it easier to find tactical ways of reaching compromise and achieving success together.

At a fairly early stage, we clarified what range of problems the group should deal with. We decided against discussing issues in which we had no authority or authorization—such as the still-unresolved ownership issues left behind after a period of legal “nihilism.” This prohibition also applied to other economic and financial matters.

The group did not aspire to replace anyone or anything. To the best of our abilities, we filled those gaps in bilateral relations involving difficult historical matters that objectively existed and required resolution.

Neither did we aspire to formulate any new hypotheses or to make discoveries about history or a legal assessment of our past. To use official language, we took stock and systematized what other researchers before us had already found. This approach produced surprising results: it turned out that, in reality, there were not so many contradictions or major differences over facts. There was more emotion, which stemmed from a lack of desire or willingness to listen to or to hear what the other party had to say.

In this way the group embarked upon a historical retrospective covering almost a century—from the emergence of Soviet Russia and an independent Poland on the rubble of empires during and after World War I to the new breakup of the world order in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which marked another change of trajectory in the history of our countries.

### III

The first session of the group in its new composition took place in Warsaw on 12–14 June 2008. This meeting was preceded by a separate meeting of Polish and Russian members of the group, organized among themselves, during which both sides set out their expectations about the program and what course the work should take. A few weeks earlier, the co-chairs had preliminarily agreed on the schedule of work.

We admit we were rather nervous ahead of that first meeting. This apprehensiveness was due to public expectations and reports in the press, especially as some of the assessments and views presented in them introduced an additional feeling of nervousness and irritability. We note with satisfaction that the Polish and Russian participants of the group distanced themselves from the pressure and talk surrounding the event.

To begin with, the group adopted a “zero option”—no mutual prejudices and complexes. The start of the group’s meeting was not very formal in nature: most of its members met on 12 June 2008 at a reception celebrating a Russian national holiday and organized by the embassy of the Russian Federation in Warsaw.

The proper, active portion of the group's meeting took place in a palace owned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the courtyard of Przeździecki Palace, a building that has witnessed many international meetings and events, a group of journalists gathered. We were greeted by Radosław Sikorski, the Polish foreign minister, and Vladimir M. Grinin, the Russian ambassador to Poland. As the co-chairs of the group, we presented the positions of both parties, our visions, and the preliminary agreements we had made earlier. Then, with all members of the group taking part, a debate began with the aim of agreeing on a plan of work. This procedure later became routine in the work of the group.

When discussing our mandate and new tasks, we noted that neither the political aspect nor other aspects of relations between our two countries had met the expectations of the public in Poland and Russia in recent years. Members of the group said they were pleased to welcome an improvement in the political atmosphere, which is conducive to resolving the difficult and sensitive questions that history has left behind. They voiced the view that difficult problems of history should not be subject to political games; they require courage and responsibility from politicians and researchers in seeking solutions. In particular, this call for fortitude applies to the need to clearly explain all the circumstances and various aspects of the Katyn massacre, as well as to making the necessary political decisions in this area.

The members of the group unanimously and clearly stated that one of the key objectives of their work was to remove obstacles to the adoption, at the highest level, of solutions that would become a solid foundation for partnerlike relations based on truth and mutual respect. The group once again confirmed that its aim is not to replace other state institutions and structures established with a view to developing mutual relations between Poland and the Russian Federation. The group's work is instead designed to support state institutions in addressing those problems from the past that hinder mutual relations and inhibit their development.

At the very beginning, during the first meeting, it was decided that the group and its co-chairs would be guided in their activities by two complementary principles. First, our task would be to draw up recommendations—which should be both principled and realistic—for the authorities of both countries on how to better and more quickly remove historical obstacles from the agenda of current politics. Another purpose of our work would be to prepare a joint historical/documentary publication that would reach the widest possible audience.

Our common concern was to make sure that the publication presented both the Polish and Russian points of view on key contentious issues from the twentieth century in relations between our countries and peoples. Some of these problems were preliminarily defined during the Warsaw meeting. It

was only natural that priority was given to issues related to the Katyn massacre and the war of 1920, as well as to the origins of World War II and to the development of the postwar world order.

Participants in the group proceeded from an assumption that including problematic and sensitive issues in a single publication would make it possible for those who revisit the political aspects of history in order to weigh their meaning to refer to this study in a formal way and with confidence.

To make the group's work as transparent, open, and interesting to the public and the media as possible, members decided that each meeting would end with a press conference. It was also decided that seminars involving experts focusing on current topics would be organized to accompany the meetings and that support would be given to organizing—under the auspices of the group and with the participation of its members—academic conferences and roundtable talks, as well as the preparation of joint publications.

Members of the group welcomed information from the co-chairs about their contacts with officials from the Roman Catholic Church in Poland and the Russian Orthodox Church. On this occasion it was noted that signals of readiness from both churches to actively join in social dialogue and ongoing efforts to bring about rapprochement between the Polish and Russian peoples would help add a spiritual dimension to relations between our two countries. The cooperation between the group and its co-chairs and church authorities continued, contributing significantly to the success of our work in the later stages.

An important event during the first meeting of the group was undoubtedly the participation of Prime Minister Tusk, who also provided a statement. That same day (13 June 2008), both co-chairs also were received by Lech Kaczyński, the Polish president. The presence of these high officials lent status to the meetings and was of significance because it encouraged the group's participants to continue constructively and productively working together.

One could be tempted to cite what the late president Kaczyński said at some length, but his approach was best reflected by one remark he made to us. Half jokingly, half seriously, he said, "It's often said that I'm supposedly a russophobe. That's not the case. Russian is the foreign language I know. Besides, both my great-grandfathers served in the Russian army."

The next day, 14 June, an open meeting of the group was held, and it was attended by the heads of the Federation of Katyn Families and other non-governmental organizations and the media. It is worth noting that Andrzej Sariusz-Skąpski, president of the Federation of Katyn Families, and Bożena Łojek, president of the Polish Katyn Foundation, while calling for rehabilitation of the murdered Polish officers' good names, clearly stressed that they were interested in the moral, ethical, and political—and not the financial— aspects of the issue.

Between the group's meetings, active work continued on the blueprint of the joint publication. In collaboration with historians and lawyers, group members worked out the details of decisions on its concept and shape. Members of the group engaged in direct talks with the co-chairs. Contacts also were maintained as part of the Polish-Russian Civic Forum, which was chaired on the Polish side by Krzysztof Zanussi, the famous film director, and, on the Russian side, by Leonid V. Drachevsky, former ambassador to Poland. This structure was a convenient channel through which to inform the general public about the work of the group.

#### IV

The second session of our group was held in Moscow on 27–28 October 2008. This meeting was slightly less formal, because we already knew each other, had told each other about our expectations, and had a sense of working on a joint project. The group's meeting was held at the Reception House of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a villa on Spiridonovka Street. Sergey V. Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, opened the meeting.

It is important to abandon a selective approach to historical discourse, the minister said. "Talks about history require a comprehensive approach, according to the principle: the whole truth and nothing but the truth," he added. "Selective truth is always dangerous, primarily for those who are willing to accept it as the ultimate truth. History does not begin with a specific date; it is a process that consists entirely of cause-and-effect relationships. The course of historical development teaches us that, if the past is treated superficially and—even worse—in a way that is openly speculative, it becomes the basis for new political myths that poison the atmosphere in relations between states and peoples."

In keeping with the previously adopted practice, Jerzy Bahr, the Polish ambassador to Russia, took the floor during the session. On the Russian side, Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir G. Titov also attended the meeting of the group. Along with his Polish counterpart, Deputy Foreign Minister Andrzej Kremer, he showed support for our work at all stages. The opening part of the group's Moscow meeting, with the foreign minister in attendance, was open to the press. As a result, the Russian media received more extensive information about the group's work.

During the Moscow meeting, the specific nature of the group's activities—based on almost continuous consultations during the group's stay in the host country—was finally approved. It was important to collect and take into account the views of all individuals who could contribute to the work of the group, thus making each other aware of the approach of both parties and settling emerging problems as a routine procedure.

A significant part of the Moscow session was spent discussing the con-

cept of the joint publication. Participants formulated goals about the content specific chapters and those issues that should absolutely be reflected in the joint collective work. We agreed that members of the group would come up with the first, preliminary versions of their texts by the spring of 2009.

The group welcomed a plan to prepare a separate publication focusing on the seventieth anniversary of the outbreak of World War II. The institutions responsible for preparing the book were the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM, in Polish) and the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO, in Russian). The coeditors of this publication were Sławomir Dębski, PhD, on the Polish side, and Prof. Mikhail M. Narinsky, on the Russian side. Among the contributors were many members of the group, who in this somewhat smaller circle managed to work out the practical aspects of cooperation on a joint text. Much like the “big” book now being presented to the reader, the publication on the origins and outbreak of World War II featured a “mirror” approach whereby two separate texts were prepared on the same topic, by Polish and Russian authors, accompanied by a joint introduction by the editors.

During the meeting in Moscow, members of the group pointed to the need for wider access to archival materials, which would help speed up work on the aforementioned publications. Participants welcomed Foreign Minister Lavrov’s readiness to take action to facilitate access to the Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation. The archive’s resources were used during the preparation of the book about the outbreak of the war.

During the debate and in its final statement, the group noted that many issues related to archival resources could be solved in a routine manner, in accordance with established interstate procedures.

The group’s participants once again highlighted the need to step up efforts to properly explain all the circumstances of the Katyn massacre, which was carried out by the Stalin regime, and they asked the authorities of both countries to somehow remove this matter from the agenda of present-day relations between our societies and states. The group discussed possible concrete steps to achieve this goal.

The next day, after the official meeting, a seminar focusing on Poland and the European Union’s eastern policy was held at the MGIMO Rector’s Auditorium. From the Russian perspective, this policy is often seen as a set of difficult issues related to the relationship between Russia and its neighbors in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Foreign ministry officials from both countries took an active part in the seminar. Of special note was detailed information from the director of the Eastern Department of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jarosław Bratkiewicz.

An important event that preceded the third session of the Group on

Difficult Matters was the co-chairs' meeting with Archbishop Hilarion of Volokolamsk and the heads of synodical sections of the Moscow patriarchate (Moscow, 24 April 2009). The church officials expressed their support for the work of the group and said they were ready to support social dialogue on historical topics.

## V

The third plenary session of the Polish-Russian Group on Difficult Matters was held 28–29 May 2009, in Kraków. Members of the group ultimately agreed on the content and editorial details of the joint publication. The authors exchanged the prepared texts. They discussed these materials in considerable detail, and an agreement was reached on informing the public and the press about the mutually approved structure and subject matter of the upcoming publication. At a press conference at the end of the meeting, these materials were made available to the public.

One of the most important and undeniably most memorable moments of the third session was when members of the group met with Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz, archbishop of Kraków.

Members of the group welcomed with satisfaction the constructive nature and results of an international conference on the origins of World War II. This conference was held in Warsaw 26–27 May 2009, on the eve of the meeting of the Group on Difficult Matters. Members of the group took an active part in the Warsaw conference. The work of academics from Poland, Russia, Germany, and other countries was a concrete example of productive academic dialogue and efforts to prevent attempts to falsify history.

The spring and summer of 2009 in Polish-Russian relations were marked by an expected meeting of both countries' prime ministers during commemorations of the seventieth anniversary of the outbreak of World War II. This created a unique opportunity for the constructive cooperation of academics in solving historical problems.

The co-chairs, in line with decisions made by the group, prepared a joint letter to the foreign ministers of both countries. The letter contained specific recommendations on some rather delicate matters. For this reason, we felt it appropriate that these specifically targeted suggestions should not be presented to the press. The leaders of both countries were expected to decide which of our proposals deserved their support and which should be adopted.

We notified the leaders of our countries that “the group's work on the issue of the Katyn massacre has reached the limits of what is possible in terms of the group's powers, and the group cannot guarantee further progress without proper support from the foreign ministers and leaders of both countries.” As the co-chairs, we noted that “the upcoming seventieth anniversaries of the outbreak of World War II and the Katyn tragedy may become an ad-

ditional factor stimulating negative sentiment around historical issues and hinder the development of relations between our countries.” Therefore, we proposed that the efforts of the parties be “given a lasting and institutional dimension and that the Katyn issue should be jointly and finally taken off the agenda in bilateral relations.”

This letter marked the first appearance of the idea to create two shared-history centers in Poland and Russia that would deal with issues such as “the maintenance of burial sites in a proper condition, both those related to the Katyn massacre and other Polish and Russian cemeteries [for] those killed on the territory of both countries.” These centers “would counter attempts to falsify history by supporting research into history” and would deal with “educational activities, primarily those aimed at the young generation.”

On 1 September 2009, a historic (for many reasons) meeting between Prime Minister Tusk and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, took place in Sopot. Everything that was said and done by both leaders meant that a fundamental breakthrough had occurred in the assessment of our common history. For us, this encounter was a signal that we, the group, would find it easier to reach agreement and that, in a way, we were entering the home-stretch leading to the finish line.

## VI

On 9 November 2009, the fourth session of the Polish–Russian Group on Difficult Matters was held in Moscow in an atmosphere of hope. On behalf of the Russian foreign minister, Deputy Minister Aleksandr V. Grushko welcomed the participants of the meeting.

Both co-chairs, in accordance with the established practice, presented a brief overview of the group’s activities in the interval between the meetings and noted positive changes in the dialogue about history between the Polish and Russian peoples. In particular, they drew attention to the results of Prime Minister Putin’s visit to Poland (on 1 September 2009) and to a video statement by Russian president Dmitry A. Medvedev (on 30 October 2009), in which he explicitly stressed the need to “examine the past, overcome indifference, and strive to move beyond the tragic chapters” of history.

The co-chairs also pointed to the importance of the social dimension of the group’s work and its openness, including the publication by the Polish Institute of International Affairs and the Moscow State Institute of International Relations of a bilingual volume titled *The Crisis of 1939 as Interpreted by Polish and Russian Historians*, focusing on the origins of World War II. At the same time, a special edition of *Vestnik MGIMO*, marking the seventieth anniversary of the outbreak of the war, was presented. Many of the articles were authored by researchers from the Group on Difficult Matters.

The participants of the group focused on reaching final agreement on

the text of the joint publication. In the debate, a lot of attention was paid to detailed consultations on issues of historiography, relations between our countries during World War II and immediately after its end, and “historical policy.” Group members also discussed concrete steps to implement the decisions contained in the statements of the prime ministers of both countries, which concerned the establishment of centers dedicated to common history.

The most important issue was discussing specific aspects of organizing ceremonies in April 2010 marking the seventieth anniversary of the Katyn massacre. On the basis of this discussion, the co-chairs submitted their proposals to the leaders of both countries.

We also decided that it would be appropriate to notify the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland and the Russian Orthodox Church about the ceremonies being prepared and the possibility of jointly commemorating the victims of the Katyn massacre and other victims of the Stalin regime buried at Katyn.

During the meeting of the group, participants emphasized the necessity of paying special attention to the ninetieth anniversary of the Polish-Soviet war of 1920 and the need to organize ceremonies to honor the burial sites of those who were killed or died in captivity. Group members also decided that it was necessary to present a collection of documents dedicated to Russian prisoners of war and to consider organizing a conference focusing on historical issues.

During the Moscow meeting, we agreed that, in April 2010, a special meeting of the group would be held in Smolensk, combined with memorial ceremonies at Katyn. Some participants of the group and its co-chairs also were actively involved in the preparation of a historical meeting of the two prime ministers at Katyn on 7 April 2010.

In the run-up to this meeting, and also later in Smolensk, the co-chairs had an opportunity to communicate the position of the group to the prime ministers on matters concerning our activities, as well as to express their views on the need to establish “Centers of Dialogue and Understanding” in both countries.

The statements of the prime ministers at the graves of the victims of Stalinism in Katyn were extensively reported in the media. For the first time, the leaders of the new Poland and new Russia were together at a site that had divided our countries for many years. A process of historical reconciliation started.

We thought that this would be a clear landmark crowning the work of our group. The working meeting in Smolensk proceeded in this mood, continuing late into the evening. We agreed on details of the joint publication and discussed concrete steps related to the creation of historical-memorial Centers of Dialogue and Understanding, which the prime ministers had decided

to establish. We also discussed some technical aspects of our work. We left a few matters unfinished. We planned to finalize them a few days later, when some of the Polish participants of the group would come to Russia again.

Then, on 10 April, disaster struck.

Two members of the group—Andrzej Kremer and Andrzej Przewoźnik, the author of one of the chapters of this publication—lost their lives in a plane crash along with the president of Poland, his wife, and many well-known people who were close to us.

## VII

The events of 7–10 April became a turning point in relations between our countries. This shift occurred not only because a web of lies that had been woven for nearly seventy years was torn down but also, and more importantly, because these events made millions of Poles and Russians realize that thousands of other, nameless victims of Stalinist atrocities are buried in the mass graves in the forest near Smolensk alongside the Polish officers. Innocent people of different nationalities and ethnicities—Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Jews, and representatives of many other nations of the former Soviet Union who suffered from repression and terror during the period of Stalinist purges—were killed there by NKVD executioners. Poles and Russians believed that a common plight and truth are together the cornerstone of a new type of relations between our nations.

The work of our group and the decisions of the leaders of both countries caused the truth about the Katyn massacre to reach millions of Russians. Andrzej Wajda's film *Katyn*, shown on the main channel of Russian public television, made the multimillion-member audience in the Russian Federation aware of why the truth about this crime is so important to Poles: it removes one of the main stumbling blocks on the road to reconciliation.

Prime Minister Tusk referred in his statement to the words of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: "One word of truth shall outweigh the whole world."

"Today I want to believe that one word of truth can pull together two great nations so painfully divided by history," the Polish prime minister said, "nations that today are looking for this simple and short road to reconciliation." On this road, two signposts were erected on 7 April at Katyn: memory and truth.

The airliner tragedy near Smolensk triggered a wave of empathy among millions of Russians, who spontaneously expressed goodwill and a readiness to break the ice that had cooled relations between our countries for years. During the meetings at the highest level, at Wawel Hill, Kraków, in the Royal Castle (on 18 April) and at the Kremlin (on 8 May), President Medvedev responded with understanding and sympathy to Polish requests to declassify the Katyn files and rehabilitate the victims of this crime. He stated that he

would instruct his people to gradually declassify these files and work out an appropriate means of rehabilitating the victims to meet the expectations of the families of those killed in Katyn. Certified copies of sixty-seven volumes of files were handed to the Polish side when Bronisław Komorowski, who was Speaker of the Polish Sejm, the lower house of the Polish parliament, as well as acting president, paid his first visit to the Kremlin, at the invitation of Medvedev.

Official statements, meetings of leaders, and gestures pointing to a willingness to reach agreement—until recently treated as unusual events—are now becoming commonplace. But it would be naïve to believe that all the main obstacles to Polish-Russian reconciliation have been removed. A mindset steeped in stereotypes, conservatism, and the inertia of some administrative authorities, deeply rooted in both societies, along with the need to preserve an “external enemy,” do not help the leaders of either country to achieve their objectives. It is important that the chosen direction of the march has met with the approval of millions of Poles and Russians.

What happened in the spring of 2010 presents an opportunity, but this opportunity can be taken advantage of only by reaching out to each other in a permanent and institutional manner. The culture ministers of both our countries have made steps toward creating Centers of Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding, the establishment of which has been announced by the two prime ministers. These centers will be a platform for efforts to build multifaceted contacts between Poles and Russians. Unprecedented, intense dialogue is in progress between the Russian Orthodox Church and Poland’s Roman Catholic Church. It is difficult to overestimate the spiritual dimension that the two churches—which represent Eastern and Western Christianity—can give to the nascent process of reconciliation. In one of his essays, Kirill, the patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, referred to the holy martyr Ignatius of Antioch, who said, “Consider the conditions of the times.” This is as profound and important an idea in our era as it was in his.

What was unthinkable twenty years ago is now becoming the new mindset of society before our very eyes, and this in turn determines the new political reality in relations between Poland and Russia.