

Scent of Shale Gas Hangs Over Katyn

By: *Yulia Latynina*

People attending a service held in memory of victims of Saturday's crash near Smolensk airport at the 1940 NKVD massacre memorial complex at Katyn on Sunday, April 11.

During Putin's rule, Katyn has become the main obstacle in Russian-Polish relations.

In 2006, relatives of the Polish officers killed in the Katyn massacre of 1940 filed a lawsuit to force the Russian government to release its archives on the tragedy, but the prosecutor general rejected the case. In 2008, Moscow's Khamovnichesky District Court threw out the same request, as did the Supreme Court in a 2009 ruling.

At the same time, the Kremlin-controlled media went on the offensive on two fronts. Russian readers were told that, first, it was the Germans who actually shot the Polish officers and, second, that the Katyn shootings were revenge for Red Army soldiers who had been killed in prisoner-of-war camps following the war with the "White Poles."

An interview with historian Natalya Narochitskaya published in Komsomolskaya Pravda just before Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's August visit to Poland caused a big scandal in Poland by suggesting that Polish prisoner-of-war camps served as a prototype for German concentration camps.

Then it all ended unexpectedly, as if on cue. Putin traveled last week to Katyn along with Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk.

What caused such a dramatic shift?

The Wall Street Journal on April 8 reveals the answer. According to the article, "U.S. [energy] giants will start

drilling for shale gas in Poland within the next few weeks."

There's your answer. All of Russia's neo-imperialism has been built upon the fact that it has "peaceful gas" (similar to the Soviet Union's "peaceful atom") and that it can shove its gas pipelines through Poland just like the Kremlin did with Ukraine. But what if Poland becomes a shale gas exporter?

The Kremlin realized that the question of how much shale gas Poland will be extracted will depend on which political party wins the next elections there. One option: the party of late Polish President Lech Kaczyński. He was an ardent nationalist, populist, anti-Communist and a man who experienced deep personal pain over the Katyn massacre. Kaczyński made a point of attending commemorations at the site every year.

The other option is the party of Prime Minister Donald Tusk, a pragmatist who is ready to be friends with everyone, except Kaczyński — the two refused to even speak to each other.

And then, three days before the commemoration, the two prime ministers — Putin and Tusk — met at Katyn. They especially came in advance so as not to invite Kaczyński and to outflank him.

Three days later, Kaczyński — the unpopular, bad-tempered and despondent man whom opinion polls indicated would lose his re-election bid to any other contender — flew to Smolensk. He took the entire Polish elite with him in hopes that his personal visit would outdo the pre-emptive showing by the archrival Tusk and the despised Putin.

And when he was told that dense fog shrouded the area and that flight controllers were attempting to reroute the airplane to an alternate airport, it was undoubtedly Kaczyński who gave the command to land anyway, suspecting that the fog was just a political ruse instigated

by Putin to disrupt Kaczyński's participation in the Katyn ceremony.

Putin and Tusk landed at the same Smolensk airport just three days before Saturday's crash to participate in their own Katyn commemoration ceremonies. For their arrival, special navigation equipment was brought to the Smolensk airport to provide additional safety. It is possible that this equipment was removed before Kaczyński's plane landed. That would add even more fog to the mysterious crash.

Yulia Latynina hosts a political talk show on Ekho Moskvyy radio. □

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