

Polish Crash Families Want Cross Moved to Smolensk

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Poles rallying at the cross on Friday. **Alik Keplicz**

WARSAW — The families of people who died with Poland's president in a plane crash in April have proposed moving a cross honoring the victims to the site of the disaster outside Smolensk in western Russia in order to defuse a bitter political dispute.

The simple wooden cross, erected in front of Warsaw's presidential palace shortly after the April 10 crash, has become the object of a fierce tug of war between Poland's authorities and supporters of the late President Lech Kaczynski.

Nationalist, staunchly Catholic supporters of Kaczynski want the cross to remain in place and have fought efforts to move it to a nearby church, accusing the authorities of failing to show sufficient respect to the 96 crash victims.

"We could take the cross with us ... to Smolensk, the site of the most tragic event in Poland's contemporary history," the families of 28 crash victims said in an open letter published in Friday's *Gazeta Wyborcza* newspaper.

"The cross would remain there to sanctify the place where 96 people tragically died," said the letter, which was addressed to Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski's wife, Anna.

The families asked Anna Komorowska to join them on a planned "pilgrimage" to Smolensk next month, an invitation she said in a statement posted on the presidential web site that she would be happy to accept.

President Komorowski, keen to defuse the strong political emotions still swirling around the cross issue, swiftly backed the families' initiative.

"I am heart-and-soul behind this initiative. I think this might put an end to the dramas and conflicts involving the families of the victims of the catastrophe," Komorowski told reporters during a visit to southern Poland.

The three-meter-high cross has become a rallying point for supporters of Kaczynski and his twin brother, Jaroslaw, who heads Poland's main opposition party, Law and Justice.

The authorities want the cross removed because they say it is time to draw a line under the tragedy. Protesters against the cross, including many younger Poles, say its presence undermines the official secularism of the Polish state.

After clashes between the "cross defenders," police and protesters, the authorities put up metal barriers at the site.

Not all the victims' families back the idea of moving the cross to Russia.

"The cross is a symbol of what was happening here, at the presidential palace during the national mourning, not of what happened in Smolensk," said Magdalena Merta, widow of Poland's deputy culture minister, Tomasz Merta, state news agency PAP reported.

Lech Kaczynski and his entourage had been traveling on April 10 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the murder of Polish officers by Soviet forces in the Katyn forest near Smolensk.

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