

Poland Exhumes First Smolensk Crash Victim

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WARSAW — Poland exhumed on Monday the first victim of last year's plane crash in the Smolensk region that killed the country's president and 95 others because of concerns that the Russian autopsy may be faulty.

The Polish state plane carrying President Lech Kaczynski crashed while attempting to land in thick fog near the city of Smolensk. Disputes between Warsaw and Moscow over responsibility for the disaster have badly damaged ties.

"Today in the morning the exhumation has taken place, and the body of Zbigniew Wassermann was taken out of the coffin because of doubts over the autopsy prepared by the Russian side," said Zbigniew Rzepa, a spokesman for the Polish military prosecutor's office, which is conducting an investigation into the crash.

Rzepa said the body would be examined for several days, but declined to say whether more exhumations could follow.

Analysts say that if the exhumation proves the autopsy was deficient, it could further strain Polish-Russian relations and pile pressure on the cabinet of Prime Minister Donald Tusk ahead of parliamentary elections on Oct. 9.

Malgorzata Wassermann, daughter of the former member of the main opposition, the Law and Justice party, previously said she was certain that the autopsy documents were faulty because her father had different physical features.

Several relatives of the crash victims have decided to run in the fall elections, in which analysts say the crash is likely to play a prominent role. Wasserman said she would not run.

Law and Justice accuses Tusk and his government of betraying Poland's national interests in Warsaw's dealings with Russia after the crash and point to the fact that Polish officials were not present when the autopsies were conducted shortly after the crash as one of many examples of neglect.

Warsaw says the identification of the bodies was problematic because many were torn apart and badly charred in the crash.

Still, Tusk's defense minister quit after a government report in July chronicled a litany of errors and neglect by the plane's pilots, military trainers, the Defense Ministry and others, which it said led to the catastrophe.

Warsaw says the Russian ground controllers in Smolensk also contributed to the crash, which Moscow dismisses as false and puts the blame squarely on the Poles.

The dispute has hurt a fragile rapprochement between Poland and Russia, spearheaded by Tusk and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Relations have traditionally been difficult over history, energy and security issues and hit a nadir under Poland's previous government of conservative Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the late president's twin brother.

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