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Putin Showed His Weakness With Poland

By Alexei Bayer

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The citizens' awakening in Russia dates from the disputed State Duma elections on Dec. 4 and the first protest held on the following day on Chistiye Prudy. But to my mind, the first sign that Vladimir Putin's regime is tottering emerged 20 months earlier, on the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre. The ceremony commemorating the 22,000 Polish officers and intellectuals murdered by Stalin's security forces and the 2010 plane crash that killed the Polish president and a number of government and military officials marked a rapprochement between Moscow and Warsaw. The Russian government went so far as to finally take responsibility for the Stalin-era crime, which it had previously tried to explain away or justify. For an oppressive Russian government to express anything but hostility toward Poland is a sure sign of weakness — most importantly, as it concerns confronting the democratic opposition at home.

Back in the 1960s, poet Bulat Okudzhava wrote a song about the bond between Russia and Poland. Titled "Farewell to Poland," it talks tenderly and evocatively of "our common destiny," a history of false hopes and the duty (or the curse) of every new generation to leave home to fight for freedom. To many people in Russia, Poland represents the West, but it also

symbolizes grim, relentless resistance. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the Poles never accepted the loss of nationhood and kept rebelling against Russian rule. Poland was, in a way, Russia's Ireland.

Nor did Poland ever acquiesce to its colonial status in the Soviet Empire. It was always restive, and the 1956 Hungarian Revolution actually began with strikes in Poznan, Poland. The Poles taught pro-democracy Russians that Russia could never be free as long as it kept oppressing other nations and depriving them of freedom. Soviet dissidents adopted a Polish slogan — "For Freedom, Yours and Ours!" — when a small group came out to protest the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

The Polish film "Ashes and Diamonds" by director Andrzej Wajda, who also made the 2007 epic "Katyn," sympathetically portrayed Polish fighters who fought the Nazis and then turned their guns on the Soviet occupiers. It was almost as influential among Soviet intelligentsia in the 1960s as Alexander Solzhenitsyn's novella "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich."

The weakness of Soviet communism was exposed in its death-throe years of the 1980s, when it failed to crush the independent Solidarity trade union and tolerated dissent in Poland for a full year. And even when martial law was finally declared in 1981, the regime no longer had the guts to mete out severe punishment to the movement's leaders.

The realization that Putin's Russia was nondemocratic and anti-Western was made clear in Putin's 2004 decision to replace the Nov. 7 national holiday, marking the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, with National Unity Day, celebrating the expulsion of Poles from Moscow in 1612. Sure, the holiday marks a national rising against a foreign invader, but the decision to drag out a forgotten conflict with Poland is highly symbolic.

Vladimir Lenin once said a revolutionary situation consists of two components. It is not enough for the people to be unwilling to live in the old way, but the ruling elite must also be unable to govern in the old way. Although the people in Russia began to stir late last year, the ruling elite showed that it no longer had the stomach to crush the demonstrators much earlier when it began its rapprochement with Poland.

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