

Offizielle Stellungnahme

Prime Minister of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin: «Pages of History – Reason for Mutual Complaints or Ground for Reconciliation and Partnership?» Article for Gazeta Wyborcza



We are already seventy years away from the tragedy that occurred on one dark day in the history of civilization - 1 September 1939 - the outbreak of the most disastrous and slaughterous war that Europe and the entire humanity have ever lived through.

Invited by Donald Tusk, Polish Prime Minister, to take part in the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Second World War, I did not hesitate to accept the invitation, I could not do otherwise: because the war took a heavy toll of 27 million lives of my compatriots, and every Russian family keeps both the sorrow of loss and the honor of the Great Victory, while each successive generation takes over the pride in their fathers and grandfathers fighting in the battlefield; because Russia and Poland were allies in that righteous battle. And we - people living today - ought to be moral enough to bow our heads to the fallen and praise the courage and firmness of the people from various countries who fought and eventually smashed the Nazi.

The twentieth century inflicted deep, non-healing wounds - revolutions, coups, two World Wars, the Nazi occupation of the bulk of Europe and the Holocaust tragedy, as well as the ideological divide in the continent. However, the European memory retains also the victorious May of 1945, the Helsinki Act, the demolition of the Berlin Wall, the tremendous democratic changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe at the turn of the 1990s.

All of the above are the elements of our intrinsic common history. No judge can give a totally unbiased verdict on what was in the past. And no country can boast of having avoided tragedies, dramatic turning points or state decisions having nothing to do with high morals. If we are eager to have peaceful and happy future, we must draw lessons from history. However, exploiting memory, anatomizing history and seeking pretexts for mutual complaints and resentment causes a lot of harm and proves lack of responsibility.

Half-truth is always a deceit. The past tragedies - not fully comprehended or interpreted in a double-minded or hypocritical manner - inevitably lead to new historic and political phobias, which result in collisions between States and peoples and affect the public consciousness distorting it for the benefit of unfair politicians.

The canvas of history is not a third-rate copy which can be roughly retouched or, following customer's orders, modified by the addition of bright or dark tints. Unfortunately, such attempts to rehash the past are quite common today. We witness the efforts to tailor history to the immediate political needs. Some countries went even further, making the Nazi accomplices heroes, placing victims on a par with executioners and liberators - with occupants.

Individual episodes are taken out of the general historical background, political and economic context or military and strategic considerations. The situation in Europe prior to the Second World War is considered fragmentarily, regardless of the cause-and-effect relationship. It is indicative that

history is often slanted by those who actually apply double standards in modern politics.

One cannot help but wonder to what extent such myth-makers differ from the authors of the memorable "Brief Course of Russian History" published in the Stalin period, where all names or events uncomfortable to the "leader of all nations" would be erased and stereotyped and completely ideology-based versions of reality would be imposed.

Thus, today we are expected to admit without any hesitation that the only "trigger" of the Second World War was the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact of 23 August 1939. However, those who advocate such a position neglect simple things - did not the Treaty of Versailles which drew the bottom line of the First World War leave a lot of "time bombs", the main of which was not only the registered defeat of Germany but also its humiliation. Did not the borders in Europe begin to crumble much earlier than 1 September 1939? What about the Anschluss of Austria and Czechoslovakia being torn to pieces, when not only Germany, but also Hungary and Poland in fact took part in the territorial repartition of Europe. On the very day when the Munich Agreement was concluded, Poland sent its ultimatum to Czechoslovakia and its army invaded Cieszyn and Freistadt regions concurrently with the German troops.

And is it possible to turn a blind eye to the backstage attempts of Western democracies to "buy off" Hitler and redirect his aggression "eastwards" and to the systematic and generally tolerated removal of security safeguards and arms restrictions system in Europe?

Finally, what was the military and political echo of the collusion that took place in Munich on 29 September 1938? Maybe it was then when Hitler finally decided that "everything was allowed". That neither France nor England would "lift a finger" to protect their allies. "The strange war" on the Western front and the tragic fate of Poland left without help demonstrated, regrettably, that his hopes were met.

There is no doubt that one can have all the reasons to condemn the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact concluded in August of 1939. But a year before, in Munich, France and England signed a well-known treaty with Hitler and thus destroyed all the hope for a united front to fight fascism.

Today, we understand that any kind of collusion with the Nazi regime was morally unacceptable and had no prospects of practical implementation. However, in the context of the historical events of that time, the Soviet Union not only remained face to face with Germany (since the Western States had rejected the proposed system of collective security) but also faced the threat of waging war on two fronts, because precisely in August of 1939 the flame of the conflict with Japan on the Halkin-Gol river reached its highest.

The Soviet diplomacy was quite right at that time to consider it, at least, unwise to reject Germany's proposal to sign the Non-Aggression Pact when USSR's potential allies in the West had already made similar agreements with the German Reich and did not want to cooperate with the Soviet Union, as well as to be confronted with the Nazi allmighty military machine alone.

I believe that it is the Munich Agreement that led to disunity among the natural allies in the fight against the Nazis and made them distrust and suspect each other. While looking back at the past, it is necessary for all of us, both in Western and Eastern Europe, to remember what tragedies can result from cowardice, behind-the-scenes and armchair politics, as well as from seeking to ensure security and national interests at the expense of others. There cannot be reasonable and responsible politics without a moral and legal framework.

In my view, the moral aspect of policies pursued is particularly important. In this regard, I would like to remind you that our country's parliament unambiguously assessed the immorality of the Molotov - Ribbentrop Pact. This has not been the case so far in some other States, though they also made very controversial decisions in the 1930s.

And there is another lesson to be drawn from history. All experience of the prewar period - from the Versailles Peace Conference to the beginning of the Second World War - provides strong evidence

that it is impossible to set up an efficient system of collective security without involvement of all countries of the continent, including Russia.

I am sure that Europe is able to give a joint impartial assessment of our common tragic past and to avoid repeating the same mistakes. Therefore, we cannot but be encouraged by the fact that the international history conference held in Warsaw in May with the participation of many Russian, Polish and German historians provided a lot of balanced and unbiased assessments of the causes of the Second World War.

For the peoples of the Soviet Union, Poland and other countries it was a war waged for survival, for the right to have one's own culture, language and future itself. We remember all those who fought together with the Soviet people. We remember the Poles who were the first to oppose the aggressor, defended courageously Warsaw and fortifications at Westerplatte in September of 1939 and after that fought in the ranks of the Anders Army, the Polish Army, squads of the Army Krajowa and the People's Army. We remember the Americans, British, French, Canadians and other fighters of the second front who were liberating Western Europe. We remember the Germans who did not fear repression and offered resistance to Hitler's regime.

Establishment of the Anti-Hitler Coalition is, without exaggeration, a turning point in the history of the 20th century, one of the most important and determining events of the previous century. The world saw that countries and peoples, despite all their differences, diverse national aspirations, tactical discords were able to stand united for the sake of the future, for the sake of countering the global evil. And today, when we are united by the common values, we simply must take advantage of this experience of partnership to counter efficiently common challenges and threats, to widen the global space of cooperation, to get rid of such anachronisms as the dividing lines - whatever their nature may be.

It is obvious that the recurrent heritage of confrontation of the Cold War era and narrow bloc-based approaches to the key problems of our times do not in any way fit in such a logic. A truly democratic multipolar world requires strengthened humanistic principles in international relations and implies rejection of xenophobia and attempts to be above the law.

But, at the same time, we may say that Europe and the world as a whole are moving towards a greater security for all, towards understanding of all the importance of working together, towards cooperation, and not to more discords.

The historic post-war reconciliation of France and Germany opened the way to the establishment of the European Union. At the same time, the wisdom and generosity of Russian and German peoples, as well as the foresight of statesmen of the two countries, made it possible to take a determining step towards building the Big Europe. The partnership of Russia and Germany has become an example of moving towards each other and of aspiration for the future with care for the memory of the past. And today, the Russian-German cooperation plays a major positive role in international and European politics. I am sure that Russian-Polish relations will, sooner or later, come to such high level, to the level of genuine partners. It is in the interests of our peoples and of the whole European continent.

We are deeply grateful that Poland, the land where more than 600 thousand soldiers of the Red Army lie, those who gave their lives for its liberation, shows care and respect to our military burial places. Believe me, these words are not simply for the record, they are sincere and heartfelt.

The people of Russia, whose destiny was crippled by the totalitarian regime, fully understand the sensitiveness of Poles about Katyn where thousands of Polish servicemen lie. Together we must keep alive the memory of the victims of this crime.

Katyn and Mednoye memorials, just as the tragic fate of the Russian soldiers taken prisoners in Poland during the 1920 war, should become symbols of common grief and mutual pardon.

Shadows of the past can no more cloud this and, all the more, the next day of cooperation between

Poland and Russia. Our obligation to the past and gone, to the very history, is to do everything in order to make the Polish-Russian relations free from the burden of mistrust and prepossession, which we have inherited. To turn over the page and start writing a new one.

Today, recalling the first day of the World War II, we are thinking about its last day - the Victory Day. We have been together during this battle for the future of mankind. It depends only on us that all the best and kind that links the peoples of Poland and Russia could be strengthened by new actions and multiplied in the new 21st century that has already come.

It is important that such logic, a constructive one, is beginning to emerge in the Polish-Russian relations. After the unreasonably long pause, the key mechanisms of bilateral dialogue resumed their work both at the state and public levels. The bilateral contacts are developing, cultural, educational and other humanitarian exchanges are increasing.

2008 was successful for the trade and economic ties between our countries - the mutual trade increased by more than one and half times. Under current complicated conditions of the global crisis we intend to exert every effort in order to overcome the influence of the unfavorable world business environment and start new promising projects. Those could embrace energy, transport, investments in industry, agriculture and infrastructure. To put it plainly, the promising perspectives for the partner work, for building relationships worthy of the two great European nations are opening before Poland and Russia.

In conclusion, I would like to extend the warmest wishes to all Polish people and, first of all, to the veterans of the Second World War of peace, happiness and prosperity.