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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

New NATO Official After Spy Dispute

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NATO has appointed a new head of its Moscow Information Office, ending an almost 18-month vacancy caused by a spy scandal last year.

The politically sensitive post will be filled by Robert Pszczel, a senior press officer at NATO's headquarters in Brussels, the alliance said in a statement on its web site.

Pszczel told The Moscow Times on Monday that he would take up his new job toward the end of the month.

A Polish national, Pszczel has been working for NATO since 1999, when Poland joined the alliance. Before that, he served nine years in the Polish Foreign Ministry.

NATO's Information Office made headlines in May 2009 when the Foreign Ministry decided to expel it leader, Isabelle Francois, and her deputy, Mark Opgenorth. The two Canadian diplomats left the country one month later.

The move was a tit-for-tat response for the expulsion of two Russian diplomats from Russia's NATO mission in Brussels.

The NATO Information Office was set up in Moscow in 2001 to develop greater public understanding within the country on Russia-NATO relations.

Pszczel said Monday that he would not have a deputy.

Also as of December, the alliance's communications department will be headed by a woman for the first time, when BBC presenter Oana Lungescu takes over from James Appathurai.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen visited Moscow last week in the latest effort to improve relations. President Dmitry Medvedev will attend a NATO summit in Lisbon later this month.

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