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Russia-Poland Relations to Stagnate Under New Polish President, Or Worse

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A supporter applauds Andrzej Duda, presidential candidate of the Law and Justice Party after the exit polls on the second round of presidential elections in Warsaw, Poland, May 24.

At best, Andrzej Duda's triumph in the Polish presidential vote could foster stagnation in Moscow and Warsaw's already tense relations, while at worst further deterioration may be in store, political analysts told The Moscow Times on Monday.

Duda, a member of the European Parliament who ran in the presidential race as a candidate for Poland's conservative Law and Justice party, received 52 percent of the vote, according to the exit polls and early vote tallies, beating incumbent Bronislaw Komorowski in the second and final round of polling held Sunday. Though in Poland the president's role is largely ceremonial, the elected official is vested with the power to propose or veto legislative initiatives.

Poland has been among the most virulent critics of Russia's annexation of Crimea and its

alleged role in fueling strife in eastern Ukraine. The tensions in bilateral relations between Russia and Poland — already envenomed by centuries of intermittent conflict and spells of occupation — have been further exacerbated by their clashing perspectives of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine.

Poland has not signaled that its stance on Russia will let up any time soon, according to both Polish and Russian political analysts. President-elect Duda, known for his harsh rhetoric regarding Russia and his proposal to arm Ukrainian forces to assist them in their fight against pro-Russian separatists in the country's east, is unlikely to revert the current course, they said. Duda has also called for the permanent stationing of NATO forces on Polish territory to deter Russian military activity in eastern Europe, Polish media has reported.

"One thing is certain with the arrival of the new president: relations [between Russia and Poland] are not going to improve anytime soon," said Larisa Lykoshina, a scholar of Polish politics at the Russian Academy of Sciences. "The degree to which he follows the conservative line set out by his party will be up to him. We just have to wait and see."

Duda, 43, hails from the party of former president Lech Kaczynski, who perished in a plane crash in Russia in 2010, along with other high-ranking Polish officials. The Polish air force aircraft had been headed to Smolensk to take part in the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre, a series of mass executions of Polish nationals perpetrated by the Soviet secret police. The massacre, and the subsequent plane crash, continue to plague the countries' bilateral relations.

Kaczynski had been known for his staunch anti-Russian rhetoric.

According to Lykoshina, the differences between the incumbent's party — the Civic Platform — and the Law and Justice party are likely to inspire only a slight change in relations with Russia, if any. The Civic Platform, in power since 2007, had toiled to revert the anti-Russian policies made by previous Law and Justice governments. In 2008, Russia and Poland reactivated a joint Group for Difficult Issues, a consultative body to work on contentious historical issues. The joint commemoration of the Katyn massacre, although it ended in disaster, had been part of the rapprochement initiatives.

Other observers were likewise skeptical of the prospect of any stark changes in Poland's approach to Russia under Duda, although they noted that his stances tend to be more hard-line. Real changes in Polish policy toward Russia could take place after the parliamentary elections, which are scheduled to take place in October.

"If the Law and Justice party [Duda's party] wins the parliamentary elections, they [Russian-Polish relations] will indeed deteriorate even further," Ignacy Niemczycki, a senior analyst for European affairs at Warsaw-based think tank the Polityka Insight Center for Policy Analysis, wrote in e-mailed comments to The Moscow Times on Monday. "Civil Platform and [former president Bronislaw] Komorowski are critical of the Kremlin, but they favored establishing people-to-people contacts with Russia."

Marcin Domagala, vice president of the European Center for Geopolitical Studies, an online political news portal based in Warsaw, said that Duda's presidency could set the tone for the future of Russo-Polish relations but would not affect the nature of the countries' relations.

"Duda will not be a decision-maker, this is not his role as president," Domagala said. "His role will be to set the tone for foreign policy. His views are more radical than that of his predecessor, but we should not expect great change from Duda's arrival alone. Polish policy toward Russia has two directions: negative and very negative."

President Vladimir Putin congratulated Duda on his victory, sending him a telegram in which he said that building bilateral relations "based on principles of good neighborly relations and the mutual respect of interests" would bolster European security and stability, according to the Kremlin's website.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said Monday that the country hoped to build "unbiased" relations "free of stereotypes" with all countries, including Poland, the Interfax news agency reported.

Duda will assume office on Aug. 6.

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