

Finland Not Afraid to Criticize Russia — New Foreign Minister

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Finland's Justice and Employment Minister Jari Lindstrom (L) and Foreign Minister Timo Soini, both from The Finns Party, participate in their swearing-in ceremony in Helsinki, Finland May 29, 2015.

Finland's government aims to maintain good relations with neighbouring Russia, but it condemns the annexation of Crimea and will comply with European Union positions on the Ukraine crisis, its new foreign minister said.

Recent Russian air force and naval activity in the Nordic area, combined with a pro-Russian insurgency in eastern Ukraine, have encouraged the new government to assess the pros and cons joining NATO.

However, Timo Soini, the new foreign minister and leader of the euro-sceptic The Finns Party, underlined continuity in foreign and security policy.

"Russia is an important neighbor and trade partner, but if there is reason to criticize, we will

do that. We do not accept the annexation of Crimea," he told a press conference after the inauguration ceremony of the new government.

Finland, a militarily neutral EU state, has long walked a fine line with Russia, its former ruler and important trade partner, with which it shares an 1,340 km border.

Last month, the Nordic countries issued a surprise joint statement on cooperating on defense and directly cited the Russian "challenge" as grounds as their reason. Moscow responded by saying it was a "special concern" that Finland and Sweden might move towards closer ties with NATO.

Finland's new center-right coalition said in its government program that "Finland is a militarily non-allied state which is engaged in a practical partnership with NATO and maintains the option to seek NATO membership."

The government plans to prepare a report on security and defense policy that would assess the effects of a possible NATO membership. It also plans to boost the defense spending amid wide cuts in most other sectors.

At the moment, polls show a majority of Finns are against joining NATO, and politicians have said a decision to apply for full membership could require a referendum.

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