
POLAND DENIES PRESIDENTIAL SNUB BY US

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Poland's foreign minister has used some ripe words rebutting claims that President Duda has been snubbed by his US counterpart. As Poland's international image nose dives, this may not be the most diplomatic way to go.

Andrzej Duda is traveling to Washington for a security summit on Thursday and Friday and reportedly has no meetings scheduled with US President Barack Obama or any key US leaders.

Although not alone in this (the White House has so far announced only three will have one-on-one meetings with Obama: the leaders of China, Japan and South Korea), the notion that Duda has been snubbed as a reprimand over the Polish government's allegedly anti-democratic actions since coming to power last year has been mooted in Poland.

"Barack Obama's rejection of Andrzej Duda's request for a meeting is the biggest failure of Polish diplomacy under the conservative ruling party that gained power in last year's elections," commentator Jędrzej Bielecki wrote Wednesday in Rzeczpospolita, a daily newspaper in Warsaw.

Poland's top security official, Paweł Soloch, said that Duda was "essentially" prepared for a meeting with Obama, but that it would be up to the US side to organize it. So far, it hasn't.

The "N" word

Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski was quick to deny the non-meeting was a snub, but ran into some linguistic issues on the way.

"We are coming out of the impasse that we had under previous governments, when the previous minister said Polish-American relations were based on *murzynskosc* [literally meaning 'niggerness']," Waszczykowski told commercial television station TVN 24 Wednesday.

'Murzynskosc' is a word that is hard to translate into English, but loosely implies inferiority, backwardness and resignation to fate. It does not have the same negative power as the word 'nigger' in English, but is nonetheless far from diplomatic language, observers said.

"The language used is offensive and racist and should never be used by a leading member of the government, whatever the context," Gavin Rae, a professor of sociology in Warsaw, told DW.

Asked its ranking on a scale of one to ten in terms of its offensiveness, a Polish professional woman in Warsaw replied: "11!"

"'Murzyn' in Polish culture might be read as slave, someone treated badly, or perhaps a vassal. In this it fits into the PiS narrative of Poland regaining her merited position, indeed her rights, on the international stage," Joanna Srednicka, a Polish businesswoman, told DW.

The unusual word was used by Waszczykowski's predecessor Radoslaw Sikorski in a secretly taped and then published conversation in 2014.

Toward the end of the previous (Civic Platform, PO) government's 8-year term in office, Sikorski was recorded saying: "You know that the Polish-US alliance isn't worth anything. It is downright harmful, because it creates a false sense of security ... Complete bullshit. We'll get in conflict with the Germans, Russians and we'll think that everything is super, because we gave the Americans a blow job." He went on to describe Warsaw's attitude towards the US using the word 'murzynskosc.'

Waszczykowski referred to the tapes twice, the first on public television TVP on Tuesday evening, later reiterating his words on TVN24. He seemed to have been attempting to suggest that Poland under the Law and Justice (PiS) government was no longer a supine partner for the US.

Asked if the word was acceptable to use in public statements, Waszczykowski replied, "He [Sikorski] used worse."

Washington's concerns

Washington has made no secret of its concern about the PiS government's actions since coming to power after a general election in October 2015.

The government has undermined the constitutional tribunal, stacked public media and civil service with placemen, and overseen changes in Polish fiscal policy that have frightened off foreign investors and lowered the country's credit ratings. Various international commissions have looked into the state of Poland's democracy in recent months.

"Duda clearly wants to gain some mandate for the government's actions," Mateusz Kijowski, head of the opposition movement, the Committee for the Defense of Democracy (KOD), told DW. "But it would be very difficult for Obama to give this while Poland is breaking so many of the principles of democracy," Kijowski said.

Turning up the diplomatic pressure

Officials in Washington have started putting pressure on Poland to end the constitutional crisis or face more distant relations with the US.

US diplomats visiting Poland in early 2016 told government officials, for example, that they expected Poland to implement EU recommendations to reverse its recent moves curtailing the powers of the highest court.

In February Secretary of State John Kerry hosted Waszczykowski in Washington, referring to the issue as one of Poland's internal challenges.

Poland hosts a NATO summit in July and Polish officials hope to get the alliance to agree to

increase its military presence on the bloc's eastern flank to deter aggression by Russia. Poland has for years sought a permanent NATO military presence.

PiS leader, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, has said that Poland's allies were making a very grave mistake by siding with the opposition and demanding that the Venice Commission's recommendations be implemented, adding that they are in no way binding for us.

End of the affair?

Many suggest that the non-meeting is not really a snub at all, even if it highlights the asymmetry of Polish-US relations and the hyper-sensitivity of the new government to criticism.

"I doubt that the USA will intervene in matters concerning Poland directly," Rae said. "Poland and the USA will keep formal good relations, although it is doubtful now that the USA will agree to permanent NATO bases in Poland or lift visa restrictions."

Others said Obama and PiS were not natural bed-fellows, but that this shouldn't affect bilateral relations.

"Obama is no real friend of the Catholic Church so it may also have been an implied comment on PiS's conservative social policy, but I wonder if we are reading too much into this," says Nicholas Richardson, a lawyer based in Warsaw.

Richardson noted that the US does have a lot of influence over Poland in terms of defense and security policy and Poland has supported the US and NATO in the Middle East, most recently with the jets sent to Syria to provide reconnaissance. "Of course, the US is key to Poland's ambition for an operational NATO base to be sited in Poland and if this was promised, no doubt Poland would be prepared to pay quite a high price," Richardson told DW.

Bad PR or something deeper?

Polish-US relations have always been at a key policy focus for all post-communist Polish governments.

"Although all Polish governments have tried to hide the clear asymmetry of these relations, Washington has remained an important factor in Poland's security system," Jan Mus, a foreign policy analyst at the Vistula University in Warsaw, told DW.

"PiS forgot to take into account or simply ignored the connections and influence that Polish liberal opposition parties (PO and Modern.pl) enjoy in Euro-Atlantic structures and capitals. Their leaders have been able to convince Washington that the PiS government might threaten political stability and the rule of law in Poland," Mus went on.

It remains to be seen if America is acting to protect its direct economic and political interests in Poland, or is using an opportunity to downgrade its sometimes troublesome relationship with Warsaw and subsequently downgrade its presence in Poland, Mus noted.

"Whatever the reason, PiS's inability to meet with US leaders has been noted in Poland and Europe and will further deteriorate the international position of Poland," says Mus, although adding that the recent affair will do Waszczykowski himself very little good, in Poland or outside.

Kaynak/Source: