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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin Rejects Retaliatory Sanctions in Cheeky 'New Year' Statement

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President Vladimir Putin makes his annual New Year address to the nation in Moscow. **Kremlin Press Service / Reuters**

Russia will not expel American diplomats from the country in retaliation for new American sanctions.

The decision, published on the Russian presidential website, rejects an earlier plan to expel 35 American diplomats proposed by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

In the official statement, President Vladimir Putin criticized the new U.S. sanctions as "provocation" and "intended to further undermine Russian-American relations." Nonetheless, he said, Russia would not take any further measures against the U.S.

"While maintaining the right to retaliatory measures, we will not lower ourselves to the level of irresponsible 'backroom' diplomacy," the statement said, emphasizing that further diplomatic steps would be based upon the policies of the incoming Donald Trump administration.

On Thursday, the United States issued a series of sanctions against Russia for its alleged hacking of American electoral institutions. The White House ejected 35 Russian intelligence operatives from the country and imposed sanctions on Russia's two leading intelligence services. The U.S. also sanctioned four intelligence officers who belong to a military unit Washington says ordered the hacking attacks on the Democratic National Committee.

Information stolen by the hackers, the U.S. government alleges, was later published by Wikileaks and in an effort to help Donald Trump win the Nov. 8 presidential election.

Earlier today, the Foreign Minister Lavrov proposed expelling 31 employees of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow and four employees of the General Consulate in St. Petersburg in response. Lavrov also proposed banning U.S. Embassy employees from using both a warehouse located on Dorozhnaya Ulitsa and a dacha in Serebryany Bor.

There were also unconfirmed reports that Russia would close the Anglo-American School of Moscow in retaliation for the new sanctions.

Putin's statement confirms that there will be no retaliatory measures. It also suggests that the Russian authorities are placing their hopes on the Trump administration as a chance to improve bilateral ties.

The Russian President ended his statement with a conversational message to American diplomats, inviting their children to attend the Kremlin New Year's celebration.

"It's a shame that the administration of President Obama is ending its work in such a way," the statement concluded. "Nonetheless, I wish [Obama] and the members of his family a happy new year."

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