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Austria Says It Will Not Expel Any Russians Over Spy Case

By Reuters

November 15, 2018



Sebastian Kurz / European Parliament / Flickr (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Austria will not unilaterally expel any Russian diplomats in response to a case in which an Austrian army colonel is suspected of having spied for Moscow for 26 years, Chancellor Sebastian Kurz said on Wednesday.

The case, which was made public on Friday and is being investigated by prosecutors, is an embarrassment for Austria, arguably Russia's closest ally in the European Union.

While most EU countries kicked out one or more Russian diplomats over the poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Britain in March, Austria has hosted President Vladimir Putin twice since that nerve agent attack, including at its foreign minister's wedding.

"There will be no unilateral action by Austria in that direction," Kurz told a news conference

after a weekly cabinet meeting when asked if Austria would eject any Russians.

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Kurz has cited his country's tradition of neutrality as a reason for not expelling any Russian officials over the Skripal case, even though Vienna is a major diplomatic centre where more than 100 Russian diplomats are posted.

"The relationship between Russia and the European Union is regularly discussed in European forums. That is where this debate belongs," said Kurz, adding that spying by any country was unacceptable.

Britain blames Russia for the Skripal poisoning. Moscow denies any involvement and has also said it knows nothing about the recently retired Austrian colonel accused of spying for it.

"This will of course not lead to an improvement in relations between the European Union and Russia. And yes, nevertheless we believe that fundamentally a channel for communication with Russia is important," Kurz said.

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