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Russia Expels European Diplomats Over Navalny Protests – Foreign Ministry

February 05, 2021

Valery Sharifulin / TASS

Russia will expel diplomats from Sweden, Poland and Germany over their alleged participation in recent "unauthorized" rallies in support of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, the Foreign Ministry said Friday.

The expulsions come amid European Union foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell's visit to Moscow, where he lamented to his counterpart Sergei Lavrov that ties between Europe and Russia had fallen to new lows over Navalny's poisoning and imprisonment.

The move was met with uproar in European capitals and Washington.

The unnamed diplomats, who are accused of attending the Jan. 23 protests in Moscow and St. Petersburg, have been declared personae non gratae and will be required to leave Russia in the near future, the Foreign Ministry said.

Tens of thousands of Russians nationwide took to the streets on Jan. 23 to call for Navalny's

release and to criticize President Vladimir Putin in protests that were not authorized by the government.

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“Such actions on their part are unacceptable and do not correspond to their diplomatic status,” the ministry said of the diplomats. It did not specify how many diplomats have been ordered to leave.

Russia "expects that in the future, the diplomatic missions of Sweden, Poland and Germany and their personnel will strictly follow the norms of international law," the ministry's statement added.

‘Arbitrary and unjustified’

European leaders and the U.S. heavily condemned Russia’s actions.

"We consider these expulsions to be unjustified. We believe it is yet another aspect that can be observed right now of Russia being quite far from the rule of law," German Chancellor Angel Merkel said.

Berlin also called the Russian Ambassador to the Foreign Ministry on Friday for “urgent talks,” in which “we made the German position very clear to him,” it said in a statement. Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said that the expulsions would "not go unanswered."

Poland warned the move could trigger a "further deepening of the crisis in bilateral relations" between the two countries. The Polish Foreign Ministry also said in a statement that it had summoned Russia's ambassador to Warsaw.

Embed:

> The U.S. condemns the expulsion today of three European diplomats from Russia for observing the January protests. This arbitrary and unjustified act is Russia's latest departure from its international obligations. We stand in solidarity with Germany, Poland, and Sweden.
>
> — Secretary Antony Blinken (@SecBlinken) February 5, 2021

The U.S. also voiced concern, hours after President Joe Biden said the U.S. would not be “rolling over” to the Kremlin any more under his watch.

“This arbitrary and unjustified act is Russia's latest departure from its international obligations,” said Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a post on Twitter.

After a video call with Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron said: "With regards to the Navalny affair, I condemn with the greatest firmness from start to finish what has happened,

from his poisoning... to today the expulsion of German, Polish and Swedish diplomats decided by Russia."

Russia's jailing of Navalny and rough crackdown on peaceful demonstrators sparked outcry from EU members this week, with the bloc weighing its options for new sanctions on Moscow in response. Navalny was sentenced to nearly three years in a prison camp on Tuesday over an alleged probation violation while he was recovering from a near-fatal poisoning in Germany.

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But Merkel said Berlin's stance on the controversial Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline with Russia remained "unaffected".

The German leader also stressed that it was important to keep a channel open for discussions with Russia, given that it was a key player on many geopolitical issues.

"Despite deep-reaching differences, it is nevertheless strategically advisable to stay in talks with Russia," said the German leader, noting that cooperation was required on many issues including Libya, Syria and Belarus.

AFP contributed reporting.

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