

Top EU Diplomat in Moscow Says Ties at 'Low Point' Over Navalny

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Josep Borrell and Sergei Lavrov met in Moscow amid growing geopolitical tensions. **Russian Foreign Ministry / TASS**

The European Union's top diplomat said on Friday that the bloc's ties with Russia had reached a new low following the poisoning and jailing of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny.

Josep Borrell was in Moscow for talks with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, as legal pressure mounted on Navalny and the Kremlin criticized "very aggressive rhetoric" from U.S. President Joe Biden.

"Our relationship is indeed in a difficult moment," Borrell said at the start of talks with Lavrov, describing ties between the two parties as being "under severe strain and the Navalny case is a low point."

His visit to Russia is the first by a senior EU envoy since 2017, following years of deteriorating

relations sparked by Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014.

European countries have sharply condemned Russia's detention of at least 10,000 people in response to a recent wave of nationwide anti-Kremlin demonstrations, and they have demanded Navalny be released.

He was handed almost three years in jail this week for violating the terms of a 2014 suspended sentence for fraud -- an initial conviction described as arbitrary by the European Court of Human Rights.

Lavrov told Borrell there was "a lack of normalcy in relations between Russia and the EU, the two largest players in Europe," saying the current state of ties "doesn't benefit anyone."

'Truth is on my side'

However, the diplomats said they wanted Russia and the EU to work together despite their differences.

"There are issues in which we can and must work together," Borrell told reporters at a joint news conference with Lavrov, who said that "both sides have confirmed their interest in maintaining and expanding channels of dialogue, including on issues on which our positions differ."

Navalny, 44, was arrested at Moscow airport last month on arrival from Germany where he had been recovering from a poisoning attack last August that he blamed on Russian leader Vladimir Putin.

After being imprisoned on Tuesday for two years and eight months, Navalny appeared in court on Friday on the first day of a separate trial for defamation.

The trained lawyer is accused of describing who appeared in a pro-Kremlin video — including a 95-year-old veteran — as "the shame of the country" and "traitors" in a June tweet.

The video backed constitutional amendments that passed last summer allowing Putin to remain in power until 2036.

Navalny in court accused the veteran's relatives of "selling him to make money" and said Russian state media was behind the case.

"It is clear to everyone that the truth is on my side," he said.

The slander charge carries a maximum penalty of two years but the court was not expected to return a verdict on Friday.

Navalny survived the attack with Novichok in August and returned to Russia last month even though authorities said they would seek his arrest.

'Malign' behavior

As well as discussing Navalny, Borrell was eager to sound out Lavrov on the chances of

cooperation on reviving the Iran nuclear deal and tackling climate change.

The high-profile visit has drawn criticism from some European capitals worried Moscow will spin it as evidence Brussels is keen to return to business as usual.

Calls in Europe are growing for the EU to slap new sanctions on Moscow. An EU statement said foreign ministers would discuss "possible further action" on Feb. 22.

US President Joe Biden has vowed to take a tougher stance on Russia than his predecessor Donald Trump, and officials promised on Thursday that Washington would take action against Moscow over Navalny and for other "malign" behavior.

The Kremlin hit back on Friday, criticizing "aggressive and unconstructive rhetoric" from the United States.

"We've already said that we will not heed patronizing statements of this sort," said Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov.

In a separate probe, Navalny faces a 10-year sentence for supposedly using \$4.8 million worth of donations for personal purposes including holidays abroad.

On Thursday, he called on his supporters to fight fear and liberate Russia from "thieves" in power, while his aides promised to stage large demonstrations later this year ahead of parliamentary elections.

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