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Russia Defends Expulsion of European Diplomats

By AFP

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Russia on Friday announced the expulsion of diplomats from Germany, Poland and Sweden for allegedly attending Jan. 23 protests. **Sergei Bobylev / TASS**

The Kremlin defended Monday Russia's shock expulsion of EU diplomats during the high-profile visit of the European Union's top diplomat but insisted it remained interested in reviving relations with Brussels.

Russia on Friday announced the expulsion of diplomats from Germany, Poland and Sweden during the rare meeting in Moscow between EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

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The declaration of the three foreign diplomats as personae non gratae was a "consequence of

the actions of some diplomatic missions in Moscow against the backdrop of illegal riots," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists on Monday.

He added that Russia "has clearly demonstrated it does not intend to tolerate this."

In January, tens of thousands of Russians rallied for two consecutive weekends against President Vladimir Putin's 20-year rule and demanded the release of opposition politician Alexei Navalny, his most prominent critic who was sentenced to nearly three years in prison last week.

Borrell said he learned of the decision to expel the diplomats during his meeting with Lavrov and "strongly condemned" the decision.

Initially Borrell said there were no immediate plans for new European sanctions against Russia.

After his return, however, the former Spanish foreign minister said that Russia was rejecting constructive dialogue with the EU and that Europe must "draw the consequences," including possible new sanctions.

"Russia has been and remains interested in reviving relations between Moscow and Brussels," Peskov said on Monday, adding that Moscow did not initiate "the collapse" of the relationship.

Earlier Monday a spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry told Russian news agencies that Russia was "surprised" to learn of Borrell's comments as they "strongly contrast" with his statements during a press conference in Moscow.

Western leaders have slammed the expulsions, further straining ties that have worsened after Navalny was sentenced to two years and eight months in a penal colony for violating parole conditions while recovering from a poisoning attack in Germany.

Borrell is expected to meet with foreign ministers from the 27 EU states on Feb. 22 to discuss fresh sanctions against Moscow that would require an unanimous vote among the EU members.

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