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‘Don’t Play With Fire,’ Russia Warns After U.S. Navalny Sanctions

March 03, 2021



Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova **Russian Foreign Ministry / TASS**

Russia has warned the United States not to “play with fire” after it imposed sanctions Tuesday in response to the poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

The U.S. froze assets and criminalized transactions with seven senior Russian officials, including the head of Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB), and blacklisted 14 companies and entities for export controls.

Related article: U.S., EU Sanction Russia Over Navalny Poisoning

An official on Tuesday said U.S. intelligence concluded with “high confidence” that FSB officers had poisoned Navalny with the nerve agent Novichok in August 2020. Russia, which imprisoned Navalny upon his January return from months of treatment in Germany, denies its role and casts doubt on whether the anti-Kremlin activist was poisoned.

“The U.S. administration has taken a hostile anti-Russian attack,” Russia’s Foreign Ministry said in a late Tuesday statement. “We urge our colleagues not to play with fire.”

The ministry promised a “reciprocal but not necessarily symmetrical” response to President Joe Biden’s first major action against Russia, which was coordinated with the European Union.

It accused the White House of “cultivating the image of an external enemy” and plunging U.S.-Russian ties “to the point of complete freezing.”

The Kremlin echoed the ministry’s vow to reciprocate the U.S. sanctions during Wednesday’s press briefing, slamming them as “unacceptable” interference in Russia’s affairs.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov called the U.S. accusation of FSB officers behind Navalny’s poisoning “outrageous” and called on the West to share its findings.

Biden’s administration has indicated that it is “not seeking to escalate, not seeking to reset” relations with Russia.

U.S. officials said they plan to roll out in the coming weeks intelligence assessments on Russia-related issues including a massive hack of government agencies and alleged bounties on U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

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