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Russia Expels 2 Bulgarian Diplomats in Tit-for-Tat Move

By AFP

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The Bulgarian Embassy in Moscow **Denghu / Wikicommons**

Russia's Foreign Ministry on Tuesday said it had expelled two Bulgarian diplomats in a tit-for-tat move after Sofia kicked out two Russian diplomats over a suspected spy network.

Bulgaria last month expelled the diplomats after prosecutors said six people had been arrested on suspicion of spying for Russia, including several defense ministry officials in the EU and NATO member state.

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The Russian Foreign Ministry said the first secretary of Bulgaria's consular service and the first secretary in charge of trade and economic affairs had been declared "persona non grata."

It added that they had been given 72 hours to leave Russia.

"This measure is a response to the baseless decision made by the Bulgarian side in March this year to declare 'persona non grata' two employees of the Russian Embassy in Sofia," the Foreign Ministry said.

The move comes as a host of European countries in recent months accuse Moscow of stepping up increasingly aggressive espionage tactics.

In addition to Bulgaria, Austria, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden have all recently expelled Russian diplomats over suspected spying.

Russia's tensions have soared in particular with the Czech Republic in recent days, with Prague on Saturday expelling 18 Russian diplomats who were accused by local authorities of espionage.

Russia on Sunday responded by announcing 20 employees of the Czech embassy in Moscow "persona non grata."

Moscow has seen its relations with Sofia deteriorate after a series of spy scandals in recent years.

Between October 2019 and the end of 2020, five Russian diplomats and a technical assistant at the Russian embassy were expelled from Bulgaria.

The rows have soured relations between the two former allies, which had maintained their close cultural, historical and economic ties even after the fall of the communist regime in 1989.

Moscow's response to the latest spy scandal comes as ties between the European Union and Russia have grown increasingly strained over the deteriorating health of President Vladimir Putin's imprisoned critic Alexei Navalny.

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