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Russia Bars EU Officials as Latest Row Escalates

By Maria Panina for AFP

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The Russian foreign ministry's list of European officials barred from Russia includes European Parliament President David Sassoli. **Alexander Sayganov / SOPA Images via ZUMA Wire**

Tensions between Russia and the European Union escalated on Friday as Moscow barred eight EU officials from entering the country and Brussels warned it could respond in kind.

In the latest row to strain relations, Moscow said its move was a response to sanctions imposed by the European Council last month against four top Russian security officials over the jailing of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny and a violent police response to protests in his support.

"The European Union continues its policy of unilateral illegitimate restrictive measures targeting Russian citizens and organizations," the Russian foreign ministry said in a statement.

"Such actions by the European Union leave no doubt that their true goal is to restrain the development of our country at any cost," it added.

The EU condemned the move and warned it could respond.

"This action is unacceptable, lacks any legal justification and is entirely groundless. It targets the European Union directly, not only the individuals concerned," a joint statement from the heads of the European Council, Commission and Parliament said, adding "the EU reserves the right to take appropriate measures in response."

'Not intimidated'

In March the EU barred high-ranking officials from entering the bloc and froze their assets, including head of the Investigative Committee of Russia Alexander Bastrykin and Russia's general prosecutor Igor Krasnov.

The Russian foreign ministry's list of European officials barred from Russia includes European Parliament President David Sassoli of Italy and Vice President of the European Commission for Values and Transparency Vera Jourova of the Czech Republic.

Speaking on Italian public television RAI on Friday Sassoli said the ban amounted to a political attack.

"This means that the European Parliament has done its duty in defending fundamental freedoms in denouncing violations of the rule of law in Russia and in many countries around the world," Sassoli said.

"But we will not be intimidated: we will continue to say that Alexei Navalny must be released," he added, promising an "adequate response" from Europe.

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Officials from France and Germany, as well as Baltic states Estonia and Latvia were also barred.

One Latvian official, Ivars Abolins, supported his country's decision to drop several Russian television channels in February.

Another official on the list, Asa Scott of the Swedish Defence Research Agency, helped confirm last year that Navalny was poisoned by the Soviet-era Novichok nerve toxin in August.

The opposition figure says the poisoning was orchestrated by Russian President Vladimir Putin, a claim the Kremlin denies.

Berlin prosecutor Joerg Raupach was also on the list, as well as French MP Jacques Maire, a special rapporteur on Navalny's poisoning for the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly.

"It has no effect on my mission concerning the poisoning and imprisonment of Alexei Navalny," Maire told AFP, adding: "On the other hand, the Russians are now in a more difficult position to be able to cooperate."

Navalny's arrest on his return to Russia in January from Germany, where he had spent months recovering the poisoning, has helped plunge Moscow's relations with the West to near Cold War levels.

The European Union and the United States have imposed a series of sanctions on Russia over the poisoning and jailing of the critic.

These latest sanctions come as several Western capitals have expelled Russian diplomats — moves Russia has almost systematically answered with their own expulsions.

Navalny, 44, is serving a two-and-a-half-year sentence in a penal colony outside Moscow for violating parole terms on old fraud charges that he says are politically motivated.

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