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Russia Retaliates Against Europe With Mass Expulsions

By AFP

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The building of the Embassy of the Netherlands in Kalashny Lane, central Moscow. **Valery Sharifulin / TASS**

Russia said Tuesday it was expelling diplomats from three European countries in retaliation for similar measures taken against Moscow's envoys over the Kremlin's military operation in Ukraine.

The Russian Foreign Ministry declared 15 diplomats from the Netherlands "persona non grata," giving them two weeks to leave.

Moscow gave the same deadline to the embassy staff of Belgium for its decision to kick out 21 Russian envoys last month.

Although Russia had warned at the time that it would retaliate by following the "principle of reciprocity," the Russian statement did not spell out how many Belgian staff had been ordered

out.

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Moscow further gave four Austrian diplomats until Sunday to leave Russia, underscoring a break in relations with a country that had enjoyed relative neutrality since the Cold War.

Moscow's announcement came a week after Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer became the first European leader to visit Russian President Vladimir Putin since the Kremlin launched its military operation in Ukraine on Feb. 24.

The expulsions are the latest in a series of measures taken between Moscow and Western countries in the wake of Russia's military campaign.

The offensive has thrown Russia into international isolation and broken many of its economic ties with the West.

But Russia has still not responded to decisions by Germany and France to each send home 40 of Moscow's envoys, meaning that more expulsions were likely soon.

Moscow on Tuesday also summoned Luxembourg's envoy, warning him that Russia may decide to take reciprocal measures following the tiny European state's expulsion of Moscow's ambassador.

The Russian foreign ministry called a decision by the Netherlands to expel Moscow envoys "groundless" and the step taken by Belgium "provocative."

The ministry said Austria's expulsion of four Russians "seriously damaged both bilateral relations and Austria's international prestige."

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