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Russia Expels Dozens of European Diplomats

By AFP

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French Embassy in Moscow. **Moskva News Agency**

Moscow on Wednesday kicked out diplomats from France, Italy and Spain in retaliation for the expulsion of Russian diplomats from European countries as part of a joint action against Russia's campaign in Ukraine.

Russia's Foreign Ministry said in a statement it was expelling 34 "employees of French diplomatic missions" in Russia and gave them two weeks to leave the country.

Moscow made the announcement after summoning France's ambassador to Russia, Pierre Levy, and telling him that the expulsion of 41 employees of Russian diplomatic missions was a "provocative and unfounded decision," the statement said.

The ministry later said that 27 employees of the Spanish embassy in Moscow and the Spanish Consulate General in St. Petersburg "have been declared persona non grata" and will have

seven days to leave Russia.

The ministry told Spanish ambassador Marcos Gomez Martinez that the expulsion of Russian diplomats from Madrid "would have a negative impact on Russian-Spanish relations."

While there was no official statement, the Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman Maria Zakharova confirmed to Russian news agencies that 24 Italian diplomats had also been expelled.

The foreign ministry in Paris said France "strongly condemns" the expulsion of its diplomats by Russia, adding that this step from Moscow had "no legitimate basis."

It said the work of French diplomats in Russia "takes place fully within the framework of the Vienna Convention on diplomatic and consular relations" — whereas Paris expelled Russian staff in April on suspicion of being spies.

'Hostile act'

Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi condemned the expulsions as a "hostile act" but said diplomatic channels must remain open "because it's through those channels that, if possible, peace (in Ukraine) will be achieved."

Separately, municipal lawmakers in Moscow on Wednesday backed a decision to name a previously unnamed area in front of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow "Donbas Defenders Square."

The name refers to a majority Russian-speaking region in eastern Ukraine that Russia says it is liberating as part of its military campaign.

In February 2018, a street outside the Russian Embassy in Washington was named after Boris Nemtsov, an opposition politician who was shot dead outside the Kremlin in 2015.

President Vladimir Putin in late February sent troops into Ukraine, saying the campaign aimed to stop the "genocide" of Russian speakers in the pro-Western country.

In response Moscow has faced a barrage of international sanctions and growing isolation from the global community as relations with the West deteriorate to Cold War levels.

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