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EU Moves to Restrict Travel of Russian Diplomats Amid Espionage Fears – FT

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Vladimir Smirnov / TASS

European Union member states have agreed to restrict the movements of Russian diplomats traveling within the bloc amid growing concerns over suspected Russian espionage and sabotage operations, the Financial Times reported Tuesday, citing officials familiar with the matter.

Under the new restrictions, which are part of a broader sanctions package over the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russian diplomats based in EU capitals would need to notify their host governments in advance if they plan to travel outside their country of accreditation.

The move comes in response to a rise in suspected sabotage operations — including arson, cyberattacks, drone incursions and infrastructure damage — that European intelligence agencies have blamed on Russia.

EU security officials have warned that Russian intelligence operatives frequently use diplomatic cover to conduct operations across borders, complicating surveillance efforts once

they leave their host country. The FT cited one senior EU diplomat as saying that suspected spies are difficult to monitor after crossing internal EU borders.

For example, in the Czech Republic, which first proposed movement restrictions in 2023, several Russian diplomats accused of espionage were expelled. However, many of those same diplomats reportedly remain accredited in neighboring Austria, allowing them to move freely across the border into the Czech Republic.

The Kremlin on Tuesday vowed to respond to the movement restrictions but did not provide further details.

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Authorities in Prague previously advocated for banning Russian diplomats from traveling outside of their host country altogether.

"There is no 'Schengen for Russia,'" Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský told the FT, arguing that Russian diplomats should not enjoy unrestricted access to the bloc's open-borders area.

Hungary, previously the main opponent of movement restrictions, has now reportedly dropped its objections, clearing the way for inclusion of the measure in the EU's next sanctions package.

The bloc's 19th sanctions package, however, still faces potential delays due to disagreements over Austria's Raiffeisen Bank International, which has sought to recover damages it paid in Russian courts.

Vienna has proposed unfreezing around 2 billion euros ($2.3 billion) in assets once linked to sanctioned tycoon Oleg Deripaska to reimburse the bank — a move that at least a dozen EU diplomats have warned could derail the broader deal.

Further discussions about the sanctions are reportedly scheduled for Wednesday.

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