



Trump Praises Putin's Decision Against Tit-For-Tat Sanctions

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Russian President Vladimir Putin says Moscow will not expel U.S. diplomats in response to sanctions imposed Thursday by U.S. President Barack Obama for interference by Russian intelligence agencies in November's U.S. national election.

"We will not create problems for American diplomats. We will not expel anyone," Putin said in a statement released by the Kremlin. "As it proceeds from international practice, Russia has reasons to respond in kind. Although we have the right to retaliate, we will not resort to irresponsible 'kitchen' diplomacy but will plan our further steps to restore Russian-U.S. relations based on the policies of the Trump administration," the statement continued.

A U.S. State Department official said in response, "We have seen President Putin's remarks. We have nothing further to add."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had suggested retaliatory action against the U.S., along with banning U.S. embassy personnel from using a country house and warehouse in the Moscow area.

Obama imposed sanctions on two intelligence agencies, expelled 35 Russian agents and closed two Russian compounds inside the United States. Russia immediately denounced the sanctions as unlawful and threatened to retaliate.

Obama called his actions "a necessary and appropriate response to efforts to harm U.S. interests in violation of established international norms of behavior."

The U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee will conduct hearings next Thursday on foreign cyberthreats to the United States. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper Jr. is among those scheduled to testify.

U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, who scoffed at allegations of Russian interference in the election, has said Washington should "move on to bigger and better things."

On Friday he praised Putin for his decision against expelling U.S. diplomats.

Trump, who has intimated he still has doubts about Russia's involvement, did say he would meet with intelligence leaders next week for a briefing on the situation. On Friday, a Trump spokesman said the president-elect had "nothing scheduled at this time" in terms of any talks involving Trump, transition staff and Moscow.

Obama's action coincided with the release Thursday of a **13-page joint analysis by the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security** that blamed Russia's intelligence agencies for hacks intended to influence the 2016 election and provided technical details, including samples of malicious computer code said to have been used in their hacking campaign.

Among the actions ordered by Obama are sanctions against nine Russian individuals and entities: the GRU — Russia's military intelligence agency; the FSB — its foreign intelligence service; four GRU officers; and three companies that provided material support to the GRU.

In addition, Evgeniy Bogachev and Aleksey Belan were sanctioned. The Treasury Department calls them "notorious criminals" who are responsible for the cybertheft of more than \$100 million dollars from U.S. banks, companies and other American firms.

Thirty-five Russian government officials in Washington and in the consulate in San Francisco were given 72 hours to leave the United States for "acting in a manner inconsistent with their diplomatic status and consular activities."

Russian officials also will be denied access to what the U.S. State Department calls two Russian government-owned recreational compounds in Maryland and New York. This is after U.S. diplomats in Moscow were harassed and physically assaulted.

"In addition to holding Russia accountable for what it has done, the United States and friends and allies around the world must work together to oppose Russia's efforts to undermine established international norms of behavior and interfere with democratic governance," Obama said in announcing the sanctions.

Russia's U.N. ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, criticized Friday the U.S. sanctions decision, saying it affects Russian children who used the compounds that have been ordered closed.

"I think it's quite scandalous that they chose to go after our kids," Churkin said. "They know full well that those two facilities which they mention in their notes, they are vacation facilities for our kids. And this is Christmastime. This is vacation time for our schools from the first of January to the 10th of January. This is the time when the kids go to those two facilities. So to block our access to them just while the holidays were starting, you know, to me was rather cynical of them. So here go their family values," he added.

Putin, for his part, has invited all children of U.S. diplomats accredited in Russia to holiday parties at the Kremlin.

Not the end

A senior White House official said Thursday's publicly announced actions are not the end of the American response. He said other measures will be taken but not made public.

The official said there has been no debate within the Obama administration over whether Russia indeed interfered in the presidential election, primarily by hacking Democratic party emails to harm the campaign of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and boost Trump's chances of winning the November 8 election.

The official said the White House believes Russia is going to try to interfere in elections in other countries.

Obama also said he has no reason to believe Russia will not try the same thing again in future U.S. contests. The next major American election will be in 2018, for the entire House of Representatives and a number of Senate seats.

Send a signal

Trump has made no secret of his desire for better ties with Moscow.

But Emma Ashford, a foreign policy expert from the Cato Institute, told VOA that Trump would face a lot of opposition from Congress if he tries to undo the sanctions.

"Part of why this has been so difficult for the Obama administration is they were also trying to find something that Trump could not on his first day in office undo," Ashford said.

She added that the Obama administration must "try to send a signal that no matter what Donald Trump might say about how much he likes Vladimir Putin and how we're going to improve relations with Russia, that there has to be some sort of penalty for what the Russians tried to do in the election."

A State Department official said Thursday that reversing Obama's orders would be "inadvisable," adding that it makes no sense to invite Russian intelligence officials back into the United States.

Some political analysts note Russian officials and state media are raising expectations for Trump, whose own Republican Party leaders supported U.S. sanctions and continued tough action against Moscow.

Trump is in a very tough position, according to Pavel Sharikov, of the Russian Academy of Science Institute for U.S. & Canada Studies.

"Since Russians still deny that they have anything to do with this hacking, they should suggest to the Trump administration full cooperation in [the] investigation [of] these hacking incidents and punishing whoever did this," said Sharikov.

Thirty-five is the second-largest number of Russian diplomats ordered out of the United States at one time since the end of the Cold War. President George W. Bush expelled 50 Russians in March 2001 for alleged spying. President Ronald Reagan deported a total of 80 Russian diplomats also suspected of spying during the fading years of the Cold War in 1986.

On the streets of Moscow Friday, Russians lamented the idea of tit-for-tat sanctions with the U.S. "We need to make the opposite — not to separate our people, but to unite them," said a woman giving only her first name as Yulia.

"I think that all the politics problems will be resolved and we will come to understanding," said a woman who also gave only her first name, Dasha. "I want the people from Russia and America to be friends."

