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Kremlin slams new round of U.S. sanctions as 'absolutely unacceptable'

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Russia lashed out at the United States on Thursday for a new round of sanctions the Kremlin called "categorically unacceptable" and "absolutely unlawful," as tensions between the former Cold War rivals continued to intensify.

The White House on Wednesday announced the sanctions aimed at punishing the Kremlin for the March nerve agent attack on a former Russian spy in Britain.

The Kremlin has denied any involvement in the attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, who were poisoned by a Soviet-made nerve agent called Novichok. Russian lawmakers compared the sanctions to a lynching and even suggested the U.S. had masterminded the attack in Salisbury, England.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said there was no proof Russia was involved in the Novichok incident, and that imposition of more sanctions was viewed by the Kremlin as "absolutely unfriendly and can hardly be associated with the already uneasy, but constructive atmosphere achieved at the latest meeting of the two presidents."

President Trump and Putin met last month in Helsinki for their first one-on-one summit since Trump took office. The Kremlin hailed the meeting as a small but successful step in mending tattered relations between the two countries.

Meanwhile, Trump has received wide criticism from both sides of the aisle for not confronting Putin more strongly on Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Peskov told reporters that it was too soon to speak about how Moscow would retaliate against the new sanctions.

Russian stock markets tumbled Thursday after the sanctions' announcement. The ruble dropped to its lowest rate against the U.S. dollar since 2016. Aeroflot's stock traded lower on fears that the U.S.' threat to cut landing rights for the Russian flagship carrier could be revoked if Moscow did not meet the sanctions terms within 90 days.

The sanctions will ban U.S. exports to Russia of goods and technology considered sensitive to national security, the State Department said.

The restrictions take effect on Aug. 22 and will be followed by swifter actions, including a possible downgrade of diplomatic relations should Russia fail to prove that has discontinued the use of chemical weapons. The sanctions require Russia to allow international inspectors to assess if Russian scientific and security facilities are producing chemical and biological weapons in violation of international law.

Several prominent Russian politicians on Thursday said this round of sanctions proved Washington was set on continuing a Russophobic campaign against Moscow.

Konstantin Kosachev, the chairman of the foreign affairs committee in the upper house of the parliament, said that the U.S. sanctions showed Washington behaving like a "police state, threatening and torturing a suspect to get evidence."

He compared the new sanctions to "inflicting a punishment in the absence of a crime in the tradition of lynch laws," Russian media quoted him as saying.

One senator said the U.S. was the true mastermind behind the Skripal poisoning, which she described as a setup meant to frame Russia.

"The curtain has been drawn, it reveals who directed and masterminded this provocation," said Irina Yarovaya, the deputy speaker of the Duma, the lower house of parliament, according to Tass. "The Novichok operation was carried out by those who are not strangers to launching sanctions around the globe."

Leonid Slutsky, the chairman of the Duma's international affairs committee, told Tass that the sanctions mean Russia now has "fewer sensible and constructive politicians" to work with in the U.S., However, "we will continue to work with those who have not succumbed to collective insanity and try to restore the dialogue."

Earlier this week, Slutsky met with Republican Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky, who was in Moscow as part of a small congressional delegation arranged by the libertarian Cato Institute. Paul has been an outspoken defender of Trump policies, particularly his performance in Helsinki with Putin.

Paul met Monday with Russian senators and complained of "sanctions hysteria" in Washington among his colleagues in the Senate, Russian state media Ria Novosti reported.

During the meetings, Paul extended an invitation to the Russian senators to visit Washington as part of an effort to improve relations, Russian media reported.

While in Moscow, Paul also met with former Russian Ambassador to the U.S. Sergei Kislyak, who came into the spotlight last year for his meetings with several Trump campaign members, including Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law, and early members of the White House cabinet, such as Atty. Gen. Jeff Sessions and former national security advisor Michael T. Flynn. Those meetings are now being examined as part of a federal investigation into Russian election meddling.

On Twitter, Paul said that he had delivered a letter to Putin from Trump that “emphasized the importance of further engagement in various areas, including countering terrorism, enhancing legislative dialogue and resuming cultural exchanges.”