

# Putin confirms expulsion of US diplomats from Russia

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In a major escalation of tensions between the world's two largest nuclear powers, Russian President Vladimir Putin confirmed Sunday that 755 US diplomats and contractors would be expelled, bringing to 455 the number of US diplomatic staff in Russia, equal to the number of Russian diplomatic personnel in the US.

The Russian measures were taken in response to the decision by the US Congress last week to invoke new sanctions against Russia and the indication by President Trump that he will sign the measure into law.

Speaking Sunday on state television, Putin indicated that the sanctions and Trump's decision not to block the legislation represented something of a tipping point in relations with the US. Last December, when the outgoing Obama administration chose to expel 35 Russian diplomats, Moscow did not respond in what was described as a gesture of goodwill to the incoming government.

In his television interview, Putin pointed to a course change, saying that Russia had to "show that we can't let anything go unanswered."

Referring to the sanctions legislation, the Russian president said the measures had been taken because of "ungrounded" allegations by the US—the claims of Russian interference in the US elections. The legislation imposed "illegal sanctions" aimed at "trying to press other countries, including [US] allies, which are interested in the development and maintenance of relations with Russia."

Putin continued: "We waited quite a long time for something to maybe change for the better and entertained the hope that the situation would change somehow. But all things considered, if it changes, it won't be any time soon."

He said Russia would refrain from any additional response because that would harm US-Russian

relations and impact on Russia's interests, but he did not rule out further measures in the future if US action against Russia increased.

"Theoretically," he said, "there might come the time when losses from attempts to exert pressure on Russia would be equal to the negative impacts stemming from certain restrictions on our cooperation. Well, when such a moment comes, we will look at other options of responses. But I hope such a moment will never come. As of today, I am against," he said.

But Putin's hopes, like his belief that the advent of Trump would mean a shift for the better in US-Russian relations, may prove to be very short-lived because of the unrelenting push against Russia emanating from the US political establishment and the military and intelligence apparatus.

Last Thursday, in the wake of passage of the sanctions bill in a 98-2 vote by the US Senate, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in a telephone call that the Russian moves had been provoked by "unlawful sanctions against Russia" and "slandorous accusations against her."

Moscow, he said, had tried to improve relations with the US, but recent events showed that US politics had been left "in the hands of Russophobes pushing Washington on the path of confrontation."

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted on Saturday, the belief that the US is pursuing a path of confrontation will guide not only Moscow's assessment of the situation and its policy statements. "It will also guide the force posture and readiness status of military forces engaged in explosive proxy wars and military stand-offs in countries surrounding Russia—from North Korea on Russia's eastern border to Ukraine and the Baltics on its western border and Syria

to the south.”

Speaking on the ABC News “This Week” program in advance of Putin’s television interview, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov described the US sanctions as “completely weird and unacceptable.” He said Russia could respond to a further escalation by Washington with “all sorts of things, both symmetrical or asymmetrical, to use a very popular word in the world of diplomacy.”

At one level, the American actions, heightening the dangers of a military confrontation between the world’s two major nuclear-armed powers, are certainly “weird” and irrational. But it must be emphasised that this insanity arises from the objective logic of the profit system and the position of the US within the framework of the global capitalist economy.

Faced with a worsening economic position, both absolutely and relative to its main imperialist rivals, the US is seeking to maintain its position of global dominance by asserting control over the Eurasian landmass. The present Russian regime is viewed as an obstacle in the achievement of that objective.

It is significant that the US sanctions are aimed not only against Russia, but impact as well Washington’s present allies within Western Europe, above all Germany, and are intended to disrupt the formation of closer economic ties between European Union nations and Russia.

The sanctions could affect European companies seeking to invest in Russian energy supplies. Last week, the chairman of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, warned that “America-first cannot mean that Europe’s interests come last.” He said the US legislation could have unintended consequences.

The biggest concern is the Nord Stream 2 gas project, which is being co-financed by a group of German, French, British, Dutch and Austrian firms. As the *Financial Times* reported last week: “Germany is gravely concerned by what it sees as a US claim to extraterritorial rights over the European energy market and about the clear aim of US legislation to protect US economic interests.”

It cited a joint statement issued by Germany and Austria a month ago that condemned the US legislation for introducing a “new and very negative quality” into transatlantic relations.

It was reported that Angela Merkel’s government in

Berlin had been hoping it would be able to persuade the Trump administration to step back from the legislation. But all such hopes have been dashed, along with those of the Putin government, leading to a major escalation of tensions not only between the US and Russia, but also between the US and Europe.



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