

Diplomatic row escalates tensions as US limits visa services in Russia

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The US Embassy in Moscow announced Monday that it will curtail the issuance of nonimmigrant visas in response to the Russian government's decision to expel hundreds of US diplomats and contractors late last month. The Russian move came after the US Congress, by an overwhelming majority, passed a new sanctions bill targeting the country.

A statement published on the embassy website of the US Mission to Russia announced that the curtailment of staff will result in the suspension of nonimmigrant visa operations from August 23 until September 1.

Nonimmigrant visa interviews are set to resume in September at the US Embassy in Moscow. However, these services will be suspended indefinitely at US consulates in St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg and Vladivostok.

Thousands of Russian citizens are expected to be impacted by the curtailment of the visa approval process. The US Embassy and its consulates issued 190,000 visas in 2016. Tourists, students and other travelers from outside Moscow who wish to visit the US will have to make the long trip to the capital for their visa interview.

The changes will also impact those applying for immigration visas, potentially delaying long scheduled interviews, extending the amount of time between the application and approval or denial by US authorities.

"You now have an entire nation's work coming through one office with far fewer staff," Matthew Morely, an American immigration attorney in Moscow, told Reuters. "This scenario would be like all of America suddenly only having one office in Los Angeles to process (visa applications from) New York, Chicago, DC, Boston and Miami."

At a press conference in Moscow Monday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov denounced the visa

restrictions as an effort to foment opposition in order to overthrow the government of President Vladimir Putin.

"The American authors of these decisions have come up with another attempt to stir up discontent among Russian citizens about the actions of the Russian authorities," Lavrov said. "Their logic is well known—the logic of those who organize 'color revolutions'—and it is the inertia of the Obama administration, pure and simple," he concluded.

The latest diplomatic maneuver by the US sets the stage for a response from the Russian government that can be framed as unjustifiably aggressive and used as justification for a further escalation of tensions between the world's two largest nuclear-armed powers.

Russian Senator Igor Morozov, a member of the Federation Council's International Affairs Committee, had warned at the end of July that a move by the US to limit visa approvals would be met by reciprocal measures impacting US citizens seeking approval to travel to Russia.

However, on Monday Lavrov seemed to rule out the possibility of a response that would involve limiting the visa process. "As for our countermeasures, as I've said, we should take a closer look at the decisions that the Americans have announced today," he told reporters. "We'll see. I can only say one thing: We won't take it out on American citizens."

US President Donald Trump begrudgingly signed the sanctions legislation, which also targets Iran and North Korea, into law earlier this month. Trump objected in two signing statements to the fact that the bill limited the administration's ability to negotiate any changes to the sanctions imposed on Russia by the Obama administration in December 2016 over Moscow's alleged interference in the US election.

While Moscow repeatedly denied any intervention in

the election, Obama ordered the expulsion of 35 Russian diplomats from the United States and closed two diplomatic compounds. This has been connected to the anti-Russia campaign that has been used to pressure Trump and ensure that tensions between the two countries remain high.

The anti-Russia campaign has been the all-consuming focus of the Democratic Party as it has sought to maintain the aggressive footing the Obama administration maintained towards Russia. Trump had made clear in his campaign and as president that he hoped to develop better relations with Putin, in order to focus attention on preparing for war with China.

To the sections of the American ruling class with which the Democrats are aligned, Russia is seen as the main barrier to US hegemony over the Eurasian land mass and the Middle East, particularly Syria, where Russian military intervention has frustrated American efforts to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad.

Significantly, the sanctions that Trump signed into law impact not only Russia, but also the European Union, straining diplomatic ties between the US and its ostensible allies. French, British, Dutch, Austrian and German firms all could face financial penalties for their involvement in the Nordstream2 pipeline, which transmits Russian natural gas to Germany. EU officials have warned that they are preparing countermeasures if the sanctions impact their economies.



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