
'Time running out': Moscow warns it may expel US diplomats over seized Russian property

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Moscow warned that it may take retaliatory measures and expel US Embassy staff unless Washington does something to break the stalemate in the closure of two Russian diplomatic compounds in the US.

Russian Foreign Ministry stated that it is hard to cooperate with the US in the light of diplomats' repatriation and confiscated Russian property, which was under diplomatic immunity during its illegal seizure by the Obama administration in 2016.

"The seized objects have not been returned. Washington has not only failed to cancel the decision to expel our employees, but also refuses to issue visas to those who are to replace them," Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said on Friday.

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She added that at least Washington could have given access to Russian diplomats to the compounds while the issue is stalled.

Moscow is ready to retaliate unless the situation does not change, Zakharova warned.

"We have something to retaliate with: the personnel of the US Embassy in Moscow greatly exceeds the number of our embassy staff in Washington," she said.

Zakharova did not elaborate on an exact time when Moscow would take retaliatory measures. She noted that everything depends on coming talks in Washington, but “time is running out.”

“For now we have the date of consultations on the issue and a clear position that time is running out,” she said. She added that Moscow did not react immediately as it considered the move of the Obama administration as “provocative” and an attempt to disrupt bilateral relations under the new authorities.

Zakharova stressed that the US had enough time to deal with the “disgusting legacy and to start building relations based on mutual respect,” but still nothing has changed.

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“It's been half a year, but we do not see concrete steps. However, nothing impedes the new administration from showing independence and doing it. We have repeatedly raised this issue during bilateral contacts, we were ready to consultations, negotiations, an exchange of possible options, but this also did not happen.”

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The statement came on the heels of US President Trump’s assistant, Sebastian Gorka, who said in an interview that the compounds may be handed back to Russia if the US sees “acts of good faith” from the Kremlin, similar to the recently-brokered ceasefire in Syria.

Moscow will not negotiate any conditions to get the diplomatic property back, as the situation is “unacceptable” and the seizure violates international law, according to Kremlin spokesman

Dmitry Peskov, who responded to Gorka's statement.

"Taking the diplomatic property back to Russia cannot and should not be conditional on anything, it vehemently violates international law," Peskov said.

"So far the head of state, who determines Russian foreign policy principles, has not taken any decisions. However, we have repeatedly stressed that the situation with the diplomats, the diplomatic property continues to be unacceptable," the Kremlin spokesman stated, adding that it *"is a serious test of Russia's patience."*

Earlier, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov condemned the unresolved situation with the Russian diplomatic property, calling it *"shameful."* Lavrov also mentioned that Russia is preparing retaliatory measures, while Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov warned that if Washington continues to drag its feet on the issue, there will be a *"tough response."*

At the end of 2016, the US expelled 35 Russian diplomats and denied Russian diplomatic staff access to the New York and Maryland compounds.

Then-US President Barack Obama justified the move as a response to alleged Russian meddling in the US election. Denying the allegations, Moscow was outraged with the situation, as it believes the property had diplomatic immunity and was thus confiscated in violation of the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.
