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Germany is expelling Russian diplomats

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On 22 April, a Russian government plane from Moscow landed in Berlin with a special permit to fly back home on the same day. According to information from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 50 Russian diplomats were expelled from Germany and took the flight back to Russia. Also on the same day, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation published a communiqué on the expulsion of German diplomats, as well as on limiting the maximum number of employees of German diplomatic missions in Russia. Its spokeswoman said that in response to "another mass expulsion of employees of Russian diplomatic missions in Germany", more than 20 German diplomats would have to leave the country. The German ambassador to Moscow, Géza Andreas von Geyr, had reportedly been informed about this during a conversation at the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs on 5 April. The German magazine *Focus* reported at the end of March that Germany was planning to send 30 Russian diplomats back home.

The decision to expel the Russian diplomatic personnel outraged the government in Moscow. In a statement, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs "resolutely condemned" Berlin's move "which continues to aggressively demolish the entire system of Russian-German relations". It also recalled that the German side had on numerous occasions reportedly stated its reluctance to publicise such cases, but did not keep its promise.

So far, German politicians have been reluctant to comment on the events, and only the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has reacted to the Russian announcement. In response to a question from ARD television, it merely stated that the statements of the spokeswoman of its Russian counterpart had been read. In recent weeks, the federal government has allegedly held talks with the Russian side about staffing foreign missions "in order to reduce the presence of Russian intelligence in Germany".

Commentary

- Germany decided to expel the Russian diplomats because more reports had been received about the large-scale activity of Russian secret services on its territory. Annual reports from the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) have revealed a high level of activity of Russian intelligence in Germany. German counterintelligence has hired more personnel in response to the growing threat of espionage, but it is underperforming because for a long time it has focused on economic espionage and radical movements. The report about the expulsion of Russian diplomats coincides with the publication of an article in the *Washington Post*, according to which Russia has supported some circles in Germany that want the war in Ukraine to end as soon as

possible, has made efforts to weaken pro-Ukrainian sentiments, and has given aid to both far-left and far-right groupings.

- Russian espionage operations are being unmasked more and more often in Germany. Probably the most important recent achievement in this area was the detention of the head of the technical reconnaissance department of the Federal Intelligence Service (BND) in Berlin last December on charges of providing the Russian secret services with data concerning Ukraine, among other information. The BND is tasked with radio-electronic intelligence and collecting data from the Internet. The Germans received information about the BND employee's contacts with Russian intelligence from friendly services (most likely the US). A person who drew up a list of Bundestag properties in 2017 and tried to hand it over to a Russian spy who was working undercover as a worker of the Russian embassy in Berlin was sentenced in 2021. In the same year, a Russian employee at the University of Augsburg was arrested on charges of passing information to Russian intelligence.
- Germany's credibility as an allied nation may be undermined if the level of activity of the Russian secret services in its territory remains high, especially since the exposure of the BND spy scandal. According to estimates by the BfV, as many as a third of the Russian embassy's personnel in Berlin (around 180 people) are intelligence agents operating as diplomats. It is therefore possible that the German government wants to show that it is responding actively to the threat of Russian espionage. Proof of this is that this not Berlin's first such decision; it first moved to expel so many Russian diplomats (40) back in April 2022. At that time, Germany was one of the few European countries to take such a step.
- At the same time, the lack of a firm German reaction to the Kremlin's communiqué and the sparse information from the German foreign ministry about the diplomats' expulsion may suggest that Germany wants to limit the political costs of this decision. Berlin does not intend to loosen relations with Moscow and wants to maintain existing channels of communication, as they will increase its role in potential negotiations to end the war in Ukraine. It is possible that it also does not want to worsen the already difficult conditions in which German diplomatic missions have to operate in Russia, especially at the embassy in Moscow. Another reason for Germany's subdued response to the Kremlin's accusations is the planned staff reshuffle in the Moscow embassy; the incumbent ambassador will be replaced this year by FDP deputy Alexander Graf Lambsdorff. A tough response from the German government could make it even more difficult, or even impossible, for him to start his work in Russia.