

Trump Cracks Down on Russia For Election Tampering Amid Major Rumors

U.S. President Donald Trump has signed into law new sanctions against Russia that were passed overwhelmingly by Congress last week and that run counter to his desire to improve relations with Moscow.

A White House official said on Wednesday he had signed the bill, and White House adviser Kellyanne Conway confirmed this during an interview with Fox News.

Given the delay since Congress approved the legislation last Thursday, there had been speculation that the Republican president might be resisting signing a bill that has already provoked countermeasures by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Congress, controlled by Republicans, approved the sanctions to punish the Russian government over interference in the 2016 presidential election, annexation of Ukraine's Crimea and other perceived violations of international norms.

Trump, who has long said he would like better relations with Russia, grudgingly accepted the new sanctions, which also include Iran and North Korea. The bill had enough support in Congress to override a presidential veto.

There were conflicting signals from the administration in recent days about the sanctions. U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told reporters on Tuesday that he and Trump did not believe they would "be helpful to our efforts" on diplomacy with Russia. Vice President Mike Pence said that the bill showed Trump and Congress were speaking "with a unified voice."

Any efforts by Trump to forge better ties with Moscow have been hamstrung by findings of U.S. intelligence agencies that Russia interfered to help the Republican against Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. U.S. congressional committees and a special counsel are investigating. Moscow denies any meddling and Trump denies any collusion by his campaign.

The new sanctions measure, the first major foreign policy legislation approved by Congress since Trump took office in January, includes a provision allowing Congress to stop any effort by the president to ease existing sanctions on Russia.

The legislation will affect a range of Russian industries and might further hurt the Russian economy, already weakened by 2014 sanctions imposed after Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine.

It also cracks down on Iran and North Korea for activities including their missile development programs and human rights abuses, including seeking to punish foreign banks that do business with North Korea.

The Russian trouble weakened slightly following the initial report that Trump had signed the bill.

Russia Ordered Cuts to Diplomats

After Congress approved the sanctions last week, the Kremlin ordered the United States to cut about 60 percent of its diplomatic staff in Russia.

Putin said on Sunday that Russia had ordered the United States to cut 755 of its 1,200 embassy and consulate staff by September, and was seizing two diplomatic properties.

Several provisions of the new sanctions target the Russian energy sector, with new limits on U.S. investment in Russian companies. American companies also would be barred from

participating in energy exploration projects where Russian firms have a stake of 33 percent or higher.

The bill includes sanctions on foreign companies investing in or helping Russian energy exploration, although the president could waive those sanctions.

The bill would give the Trump administration the option of imposing sanctions on companies helping develop Russian export pipelines, such as the Nord Stream 2 pipeline carrying natural gas to Europe, in which German companies are involved.

Besides angering Moscow, the legislation has upset the European Union, which has said the new sanctions might affect its energy security and prompt it to act, too. {eo}

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