Dutch expel two Russian diplomats for suspected espionage

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AMSTERDAM (Reuters) -The Netherlands on Thursday ordered the expulsion of two Russian diplomats accused of spying on the Dutch high-tech sector, the AIVD national intelligence agency said.

The latest diplomatic incident will likely raise tension between the two states, already at odds over the murder trial in the Netherlands of three Russians for the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight 17 over eastern Ukraine in 2014.

The Dutch government would review legal options to fight espionage by foreign diplomats in the Netherlands, who currently enjoy immunity from prosecution.

One of the diplomats, working for the Russian foreign intelligence agency SVR, "occupied himself with spying in the technology and science fields," the AIVD said in a statement.

"The Russian intelligence service developed contacts with people with access to sensitive information in the high-tech sector," it said, sometimes paying the sources for information.

"The interest of the Russian intelligence officer went towards getting more information about artificial intelligence, semiconductors and nanotechnology. Many of these technologies have both civilian and military applications."

The Netherlands presented no evidence of unlawful acts by the Russian diplomats, Russia's embassy in The Hague said, according to the Interfax news agency.

Russia will give "an adequate and timely" response to the expulsion of the Russian diplomats, Leonid Slutsky, head of the lower house of the Russian parliament's foreign affairs committee, was quoted as saying by Interfax.

In April 2018, the Netherlands disrupted an attempt by Russian intelligence agents to hack the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague.

Four Russians who were caught with spying equipment at a hotel located next to the OPCW headquarters, were expelled.

The second spying incident in as many years has prompted the Dutch government to review ways to make foreign spying punishable, the AIVD said.

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