

European Union joins UK in ratcheting up anti-Russia campaign

Chris Marsden
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A meeting of 28 European Union foreign ministers yesterday pledged “unqualified solidarity” with the UK in condemning the “reckless and illegal” poisoning of double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia on March 4 in Salisbury.

The UK has declared the Kremlin and Russian President Vladimir Putin “highly likely” to be responsible for the Salisbury attack. Their entire case hinges on the unproven assertion that the Skripals were targeted with a “Novichok” nerve agent “developed” in the former Soviet Union.

A statement issued by the 28 EU foreign ministers employed the same carefully worded phrases introduced by the British Foreign Office and repeated ad nauseam by the entire media and political establishment. They took “extremely seriously” “the UK government’s assessment” that it was “highly likely” Russia was guilty of the attack using a nerve agent “of a type developed by Russia.”

The EU foreign ministers accepted the existence of a programme Russia denies even exists. They urged the Kremlin to “provide immediate, full and complete disclosure of its Novichok programme” to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

However, while backing the UK’s stance, the statement stopped short of blaming Russia directly, reflecting divisions within the EU over relations with Russia.

Prior to the EU meeting, Austrian Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl, representing the right-wing Austrian Peoples Party/Freedom Party coalition, said that accusations against Moscow were premature until an investigation has concluded. “In our view, first there is the need to carry out an expert-level investigation to establish a full picture of events before voicing any accusations, ideas and deliberations,” Kneissl said.

It took eleven days and a great deal of arm twisting for Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni to finally support UK Prime Minister Theresa May’s identifying Russia as “culpable” in the Skripal’s poisoning. Moreover, the Democratic Party government looks set to give way to a coalition that would possibly include the 5-Star Movement

and the Liga, formerly the Northern League—both of which are friendly towards Putin’s administration.

Even the most vocal backers of the UK, Germany and France, are reluctant to go as far as the UK would wish in its anti-Russian offensive.

The Skripal affair has been used by the UK and powerful voices within the US political and military establishment to push the two major European states away from Russia.

Even so, breaking relations with Moscow, just as Putin has won another six years in office, would cut across major political and commercial interests.

At the EU meeting, Polish deputy foreign minister, Konrad Szymanski, called on Germany to cancel the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline being built to send Russian gas to Germany and Europe. Germany refused to discuss cancelling the \$11 billion private sector project.

Divisions over how to respond to Russia are apparent in Germany’s numerous contradictory statements.

The new Social Democratic Party foreign minister, Heiko Maas, urged support for the UK, stating that “there is no other plausible explanation than that there is a co-responsibility of the Russian side.” However, former SDP foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel, whom Maas replaced, yesterday supported the lifting of sanctions against Russia and took up Putin’s offer to allow UN peacekeepers into Ukraine. Last week he said of the Skripal poisoning, “Someone is innocent until the contrary is proven,” declaring the allegations against Russia “scurrilous accusations” and “conspiracy theories.”

Maas himself still described Russia as a “difficult partner.”

Following Putin’s election, Chancellor Angela Merkel congratulated him, while calling vaguely for “sustainable solutions” to international challenges.

In contrast, French President Emmanuel Macron called on Putin to “shed light on the responsibilities for the unacceptable attack” in Salisbury and urged Moscow to “firmly regain control of any programs that have not been declared” to the OPCW.

Macron will nevertheless take a large business delegation to St Petersburg in May and will hold meetings with Putin in Moscow.

Despite these differences between European states, and within Europe's states, the general trajectory of events is towards an ever more bellicose anti-Russian posture.

On taking office after elections on Sunday, Putin told reporters that Russia "has no such" weapon as a Novichok. "It's complete drivel, rubbish, nonsense that somebody in Russia would allow themselves to do such a thing ahead of elections and the World Cup," he said, adding, "'We have destroyed all our chemical arsenals under control of international observers.'"

If the agent used had been "military grade", "people would have died instantly... We are ready for cooperation and said that immediately...but the will of the other side is needed for that. So far, we see none."

A statement issued to coincide with the EU meeting by presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, "Sooner or later these unsubstantiated allegations will have to be answered for: either backed up with the appropriate evidence or apologized for."

Johnson's response, on behalf of the UK government, has been to ratchet up his rhetoric and to embellish his earlier claims.

Appearing on the BBC's *Andrew Marr Show* Sunday, and in a subsequent written statement, Johnson claimed, "We have information indicating that within the last decade, Russia has investigated ways of delivering nerve agents likely for assassination. And part of this programme has involved producing and stockpiling quantities of novichok. This is a violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention."

Former British Ambassador Craig Murray called out Johnson as a liar. If the British government were in possession of any such information from MI5, MI6 or GCHQ, they would be under legal obligation to report this to the OPCW. The source must therefore be unreliable.

Johnson's claim also related to an unspecified time "within the last decade," which Murray pointed out was "twisting words to convey the impression that we have known for a decade, whereas in fact the statement does not say this at all."

"We should be extremely sceptical of this sudden new information that Boris Johnson has produced out of a hat," Murray wrote, given that "the UK Ambassador Sir Geoffrey Adams was last year fulsomely congratulating the OPCW on the completing of the destruction of Russia's chemical weapons stocks, without a single hint or reservation entered that Russia may have undeclared or secret stocks."

To every exposure of a lie, the media responds with more unfounded claims.

Sky ~~Report~~ yesterday Murdoch's announcement "exclusive" that now claims the nerve agent was administered as a gas through the ventilation system in Sergei Skripal's car—flatly contradicting earlier reports of the discovery of a "white powder" unwittingly brought into the country by Yulia Skripal.

Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper alleged that Yulia, as well as working at the US Embassy in Moscow, was having an affair with an unidentified "high ranking" Russian security service agent "said to belong to Vladimir Putin's intelligence network." The agent's mother is said to be an even more "high ranked" agent who "may have planned the Novichok gas attack."

Such is the constant piling up of contradictory claims, plot twists and lies that the *Financial Times* yesterday felt obliged to post a late-night article, "Unanswered questions about the poisoning of Sergei Skripal."

Its strapline read, "Two weeks after attack, very few details of investigation have been released."

This is an understatement. The longer the Skripal affair proceeds, the less it appears is actually known about what happened. Only unsubstantiated allegations against Russia are issued by the UK's government, uncritically regurgitated and amplified by a pliant media and Britain's imperialist allies in the US and Europe.

Yet each day the demands grow more strident for "decisive" action against Russia. And inevitably, the calls for diplomatic measures, sanctions and the like spill over into discussions of possible military confrontations with Russia—above all in Syria.



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