

UK-led anti-Russia campaign used to hit out at Trump, pressure EU

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The US and British media ran scandalised commentary yesterday after President Donald Trump and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker both contacted Vladimir Putin to congratulate him on his re-election for a fourth term as president of Russia.

Neither mentioned the poisoning of British double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, March 4 in Salisbury, which Prime Minister Theresa May's Conservative government has blamed on the Russian state.

Trump confirmed that he had called Putin to "congratulate him on his electoral victory. ... We had a very good call, and I suspect that we'll probably be meeting in the not-too-distant future."

Juncker sent a letter to Putin, stating, "I have always argued that positive relations between the European Union and the Russian Federation are crucial to the security of our continent. Our common objective should be to re-establish a cooperative pan-European security order. I hope that you will use your fourth term in office to pursue this goal. I will always be a partner in this endeavour."

The reaction in Britain, Europe and the US was a mixture of hysteria and dismay.

Tuesday was the day the UK expelled 23 Russian diplomats and their families, while May chaired a session of the national security council to discuss further actions against Russia.

May had already determined not to take fresh reprisals against Moscow, other than declarations that Putin's associates in Britain would be targeted. She did not want to make it more difficult for a divided European Union (EU) summit meeting today to attribute to Russia responsibility for the use of a nerve agent on UK soil. May, who is expected to brief European leaders, is not seeking EU sanctions against Russia for the same reason.

EU foreign ministers on Monday agreed to tone down

the language criticising Russia, to placate sceptical member states, including Austria, and particularly at the insistence of Greece.

The statement contained the ambiguous formulation that the "European Union takes extremely seriously the UK Government's assessment that it is highly likely that the Russian Federation is responsible." Both countries insisted on reserving judgement until an independent investigation by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) is completed.

Juncker's statement made him a target of those forces in the US and UK pressing for action against Russia.

In the UK, the Tory Member of the European Parliament for South-West England & Gibraltar, covering Salisbury, Ashley Fox, seized the limelight by describing Juncker's note to Putin as "nauseating. ... The European commission president is appeasing a man who poses a clear threat to western security."

Guy Verhofstadt, the European Parliament's representative on Brexit, tweeted, "This is no time for congratulations. We will always need dialogue with Russia, but closer ties must be conditional on respect for the rules based international order..."

European Council President Donald Tusk let it be known that he had not sent a letter to Putin and likely would not do so.

Bill Browder, a shady American-born British financier who dedicates himself to urging sanctions against Russia in the name of his deceased former associate, Sergei Magnitsky, and who was convicted of tax fraud in absentia, denounced EU Foreign Affairs chief Federica Mogherini to the *EUobserver* for "craven appeasement" of Russia.

In the US, amid escalating political warfare uniting the Democrats, sections of the Republican Party and the military and security services focused on Trump's alleged connections with Putin, Senator John McCain denounced

what he called an “insult to every Russian citizen who was denied the right to vote in a free and fair election. ...

“An American president does not lead the free world by congratulating dictators on winning sham elections.”

The *Washington Post* leaked that Trump had been advised by multiple national security advisers, “DO NOT CONGRATULATE.”

“Leaking such information is a fireable offense and likely illegal,” another senior White House official told CNN Wednesday.

Former director of the CIA John Brennan, citing the Salisbury nerve agent attack and alleged Russian interference in the US presidential election, suggested yesterday that Trump was withholding criticism of Putin because the Kremlin might have compromising personal information on him. He told MSNBC’s “Morning Joe” that Trump has “something to fear and something very serious to fear.”

In a further embarrassment for the UK, the Russian Foreign Ministry asked the world’s ambassadors to attend a briefing on “the situation around the UK’s allegations on the use of a nerve agent on its territory.” The British, US, French and German ambassadors refused to attend.

Vladimir Yermakov, director of the ministry’s department for non-proliferation and arms control, told those assembled that all accusations directed toward Russia were “groundless” and “hysterical.”

Such a “gamble” was not in Moscow’s interests.

“Logically, there are only two possible options: it’s either the British authorities are incapable of ensuring protection against, figuratively speaking, a terrorist attack on their territory, or they directly or indirectly, I am not accusing anyone of anything, orchestrated the attack. There is just no third option.”

“I will say right away that none of the theories that we have heard stands up to scrutiny,” he continued. “Time goes on. They drove themselves into a deadlock. To the ever-increasing number of questions, they will eventually have to answer, but they have nothing in response.

“The British authorities don’t share any data they received following the probe [into the Skripal case] and don’t answer any questions concerning Yulia Skripal,” he added, insisting on being given “all evidence regarding a terrorist attack against Russian citizens [on] the territory of Great Britain.”

When an official from the British Embassy reiterated the UK’s assertion that “it was highly likely that Russia was responsible for the attempted murder of these two people,” Yermakov replied, “Then why don’t we carry

out a joint investigation, ensuring the transparency of all the data, rather than talk about some sort of Novichok toxic agent?”

The UK government has responded to these setbacks by doubling down on its anti-Russia rhetoric.

Giving evidence to parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson again declared that “No matter how exactly it came to be done [!], the pathway, the chain of responsibility seems to me to go back to the Russian state and those at the top.”

Johnson issued a barely veiled threat, stating that the Russians had deliberately struck at the UK in a way that avoids triggering NATO’s Article 5 on collective self-defence because “assassination attempts” are “below that threshold.”

Tory Bob Seely asked whether the government was gathering information on people responsible for war crimes in Syria, including Russians. Johnson said it was.

Determined to beat the Tories in jingoism and warmongering, Labour’s Ian Austin declared that “the government is not taking this seriously enough. ... Nothing you have said this afternoon is going to have boots quaking in the Kremlin.”

Austin said Putin was using the World Cup as a PR opportunity in the same way that Hitler had used the Olympic Games in 1936. This provided Johnson with his soundbite of the day, when he replied to Austin, “I think the comparison with 1936 is certainly right. ... I think it’s an emetic prospect.”

Austin’s previously most debased political moment came in July 2016, when he was reprimanded by the Speaker for shouting at his party’s leader, Jeremy Corbyn, “Sit down and shut up” and “You’re a disgrace”. This came after Corbyn criticised the 2003 invasion of Iraq following the publication of the Chilcot Inquiry. This inquiry had just found that the “intelligence” on weapons of mass destruction was hyped up, that the process of identifying the legal basis for war was flawed and that war was unnecessary.



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