

European Union backs UK in accusing Russia of nerve agent attack

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Thursday night saw success for Prime Minister Theresa May's efforts to get the European Union (EU) to echo her charge that Russia was "highly likely" to be responsible for the nerve agent attack in Salisbury.

The formulation is a vital feature of the UK's diplomatic and media campaign blaming Moscow for the alleged attempted assassination of double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia—based on unsubstantiated claims that the nerve agent employed is "of a type" (a Novichok) once manufactured in the former Soviet Union.

May is using the Skripal case to ally the UK with powerful sections of the US political and military establishment who have been pushing for a more hardline stance against Russia. Reinforcing the "special relationship," she hopes, will strengthen her hand in negotiations over the terms of Britain's exiting the EU. Domestically, it helps unite a government deeply divided over Brexit and has served as a valuable bludgeon to be wielded against Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, who is portrayed by the media as a Kremlin stooge.

May has until now encountered significant resistance from Europe. Concerned at the economic impact of a further deterioration in relations with the government of Vladimir Putin, Monday saw a meeting of EU foreign ministers balk at adopting the UK's formulation. EU states, including Austria and Greece, did not want to identify Russia as guilty, and there were divisions on the issue in Germany and France—despite their expressing "solidarity" with Britain.

CNBC ran an article on the day of the summit asking, "Why Germany is sending mixed messages over Russia following the ex-spy attack?" It noted with obvious concern that "despite international sanctions on Russia for its annexation of Crimea and perceived role in a pro-Russian uprising in Ukraine, trade between Germany and Russia grew dramatically in 2017," citing the particular

importance of "increased demand for Russian natural gas and crude oil" and Germany's backing for the Nord Stream II pipeline "that would double gas supplies from Russia to Germany..."

Thursday evening was, therefore, an occasion for horse-trading and arm-twisting, centered on a three-way discussion between French President Macron, German Chancellor Merkel and May. As a result, the statement by the leaders of 28 EU states agreed regarding Salisbury that "it is highly likely that the Russian Federation is responsible and that there is no plausible alternative explanation."

Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council, indicated that there were still disagreements within the EU, telling the press that the continent's "political landscape... makes it not so easy to keep the 28 together."

But the next day saw a significant shift that the Russian Foreign ministry said signified the EU was "heading towards an anti-Russia campaign, instigated by London and Washington."

The EU ambassador to Moscow is being recalled for "consultations" over the Salisbury attack.

Merkel and Macron held a joint press conference Friday, with Macron pledging to lead a "coordinated" reaction "of the EU and of its member states... including France and Germany," against "an attack to all European sovereignty."

Merkel declared that sanctions "are necessary," but did not specify what they would be. Macron said it was "obvious" that France would itself take further action.

Collective sanctions could take until July to agree. But at least 10 EU member states, led by key UK ally, the Republic of Ireland, indicated that Russian diplomats could be expelled as early as Monday. Leo Varadkar, the Irish prime minister, was a key actor, alongside Macron, in proposing that the EU endorse Britain's accusations against Russia, describing Russian diplomats as "agents".

Others indicating similar measures included Denmark, Bulgaria, the three Baltic States, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Sweden.

In a press statement, the UK attributed the European Council “standing together” to May having provided “a detailed update on the investigation into the reckless use of a military nerve agent, of a type produced by Russia, on the streets of Salisbury.” May “said there had been a positive identification of the chemical used as part of the Novichok group of nerve agents by our world leading scientists at Porton Down.”

Former British Ambassador Craig Murray issued a devastating refutation of such claims on his blog Thursday. Under the headline, “Boris Johnson, A Categorical Liar,” Murray noted that a British court ruled Thursday that investigators from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) could take blood samples from Sergei and Yulia, to check against the analysis performed by the UK military’s Porton Down research laboratory.

Murray noted that in an interview Wednesday with *Deutsche Welle*, UK Foreign Secretary Johnson had claimed that Porton Down had now told him they had “positively identified the nerve agent as Russian.”

Their identification of the nerve agent as a Novichok, produced in Russia, was, Johnson said, “absolutely categorical... I asked the guy myself, I said, ‘Are you sure?’ And he said there’s no doubt.”

Murray wrote in response that the High Court judgement giving permission for new blood samples to be taken from the Skripals, by Justice Williams, included a summary of what Porton Down “have actually said.”

A Porton Down Chemical and Biological Analyst states that blood samples from the Skripals “tested positive for the presence of a Novichok class nerve agent OR CLOSELY RELATED AGENT.”

Murray writes, “The emphasis is mine... The truth is that Porton Down have not even positively identified this as a ‘Novichok’, as opposed to ‘a closely related agent’. Even if it were a ‘Novichok’ that would not prove manufacture in Russia, and a ‘closely related agent’ could be manufactured by literally scores of state and non-state actors.

“This constitutes irrefutable evidence that the government have been straight out lying—to Parliament, to the EU, to NATO, to the United Nations, and above all to the people—about their degree of certainty of the origin of the attack.”

The fact is that the EU heads of state know very well

that the UK is lying to them. That they are ready to endorse the lie indicates that they are moving towards what Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, described as “confrontational steps” due to fundamental economic and geopolitical considerations. These calculations are bound up, above all, with preventing an escalation of antagonisms with the US.

The run-up to the summit was dominated by frantic negotiations between the European powers, led by Germany, and the US to prevent \$60 billion in trade sanctions targeting Chinese steel and aluminium from also applying to the EU.

On Thursday, the Trump administration announced it was temporarily exempting the EU to allow trade talks to continue. May announced that she would now stay at the summit on Friday to discuss this important development.

That morning she all but claimed personal credit for the US decision, telling the media, “We have been working very hard to secure an EU-wide exemption to the steel tariffs that the Americans have announced... What I will be working with my fellow EU leaders today on is to see how we can secure a permanent exemption for the EU from these steel tariffs.”

Friday’s agenda timetabled a decision by the EU on approving guidelines for the negotiation of future relations with the UK after Brexit. The EU leaders reportedly took less than 30 seconds to agree the proposed text on trade, security and other issues, paving the way for the next round of talks before the UK is due to leave in March 2019.

May, who has faced widespread criticism on the terms proposed from both hard-line Brexiteers and Remainers, proclaimed a new “spirit of co-operation and opportunity” and a “new dynamic”, while Tusk spoke of a new “positive momentum.”



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