

US escalates anti-Russia campaign as contradictions mount in Skripal narrative

Mike Head
6 April 2018

The contradictions in the claims by the British and American governments around the March 4 poisoning of former Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, continued to mount yesterday. It was revealed that Yulia has been conscious for a week, and is recovering quickly, further casting doubt about the claims that a “weapons grade” nerve gas was involved in their poisoning.

The Russian government also called a special session of the UN Security Council last night, where its ambassador reviewed the discrepancies in the British government’s allegation that Russia was responsible for the poisoning, and accused the British and other intelligence services of being behind the incident.

With their campaign of lies falling apart, both the Trump administration in the US and the May government in the UK responded by stepping up their offensive against Moscow.

Two senior Washington officials told media outlets that Trump’s administration is expected to sanction “several” Russian oligarchs with ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin over alleged Russian “interference” in the 2016 US presidential election. The officials said the sanctions will likely come later this week.

Reuters, citing sources said to be familiar with the matter, said the sanctions would be “potentially the most aggressive move” the US has undertaken against Russian business people. The *Washington Post* said the final number of oligarchs under sanction was “fluid” but would include those with ties to Putin.

While the action formally is being taken over Russia’s supposed, unsubstantiated, election meddling, it comes as the US and British governments desperately seek to shore up their unravelling accusations over the Skripal affair.

The White House has already imposed significant sanctions and expelled 60 Russian diplomats, but a *Washington Post* editorial insisted that Trump go further: “The Trump administration should strike at the foundations of Mr. Putin’s regime—imposing asset freezes and visa bans on the network of oligarchs and officials who execute Russia’s aggressive campaigns against the West... The alternative is further emboldening a foreign power that has made clear its aim of undermining the foundations of the West.”

Yesterday, Viktoria Skripal, Yulia’s cousin, told the media that Yulia told her on the phone she was “fine, everything is fixable,” and indicated that her father was also recovering.

In a transcript of the conversation released by the “60 Minute” show on state-owned Rossiya 1, Yulia also said: “Everyone’s health is fine, there’s nothing that can’t be put right. I’ll be discharged soon. Everything is ok.”

In an attempt to block further revealing disclosures, the British police then issued a statement, ostensibly on behalf of Yulia, quoting her as saying: “I am sure you appreciate that the entire episode is somewhat disorientating, and I hope that you’ll respect my privacy and that of my family during the period of my convalescence.”

Speaking to Sky News earlier, British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn drew attention to Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson’s March 20 statement to German broadcaster Deutsche Welle that “the people from Porton Down”—the British chemical weapons base near Salisbury—were “absolutely categorical” that Russia was the source of the nerve agent used against the Skripals.

Johnson’s claim was exposed on Tuesday, when Gary Aitkenhead, chief executive of the Porton Down

facility, told Sky News that scientists had “not verified the precise source” of the material used. Corbyn suggested: “Either the foreign secretary has information that he’s not sharing with Porton Down or it was a bit of exaggeration.”

In a tweet, Johnson then escalated the government’s attacks on Corbyn, accusing him of “playing Russia’s game” and of having “chosen to side with Russia’s spin machine.”

The British government also tried to change its story. Rupert Murdoch’s *Times* cited anonymous “security sources” claiming that “Ministers and security officials were able to identify the source” of the novichok allegedly used against the Skripals within days of the March 4 poisoning. Moreover, the UK knew about the facility where the novichok was made even before the attack and “believed” that “the Russians conducted tests to see whether novichok could be used for assassinations.”

No evidence for this latest clam was offered, and the caveat was offered that “Security sources do not claim 100 percent certainty...”

Former British diplomat Craig Murray commented yesterday: “All of the UK media have been briefed by ‘security sources’ that the UK has a copy of a secret Russian assassin training manual detailing how to put nerve agent on door handles... Two questions arise. How credible is the British government’s possession of a Russian secret training manual for using novichok agents, and how credible is it that the Skripals were poisoned by their doorknob.”

Murray asked why, if novichok, an “instantly acting nerve agent,” was used, it left the Skripals’ “central nervous systems felt in such good fettle, and their digestive systems so in balance, they were able to sit down and eat a full restaurant meal.” He further asked why, if the British government had “a Russian manual on applying nerve agent to door handles,” it did not produce it to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) or “publish it now.”

In London, Russian Ambassador Alexander Yakovenko gave a 90-minute press conference in which he cited the Kremlin’s proposal, put to Wednesday’s OPCW meeting, for a joint Russian-UK investigation of the Salisbury attack. He said the 15 countries that voted against the proposal were all NATO and European Union countries, with abstentions

by states that were “pressured.”

Yakovenko said Russia had never possessed novichok, had started closing down its chemical weapons program in 1992, and completed the process last year. By contrast, the US would not get rid of all its chemical weapons until 2023.

At the UN Security Council, Russia’s ambassador, Vasily Nebenzya, stated: “Since the British authorities dare to state with a ‘high degree of probability’ that Russia is behind the Salisbury incident, we also, with a ‘high degree of probability’ assume that the intelligence agencies of certain countries are behind this mega provocation.”

Nebenzya said the UK had admitted it was in possession of the nerve agent. “Novichok is not copyrighted by Russia in spite of the obviously Russian name. It was a name that was invented in the West for a line of toxic substances, which is nothing new for experts and scientists. They were developed in many countries, including in the US and in Great Britain.”

Referring to the proven lies of “weapons of mass destruction” used by the US and British governments to invade Iraq in 2003, Nebenzya commented: “We all know what the worth of British intelligence is based on the experience of Tony Blair.”

In reply, the British and US ambassadors only stepped up the attack on Russia. Deputy US Ambassador Kelley Currie accused Russia of peddling conspiracy theories and reaffirmed Washington’s support for Britain. “The fact that a permanent member of this council was behind an incident like this is appalling,” she said.

As the Trump administration’s latest threatened sanctions underscore, the escalating anti-Russia campaign, in which the corporate media is completely implicated, is part of a wider drive toward war with Russia, which has cut across US plans in Syria and is regarded as an obstacle to US global hegemony.



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