

US, UK and NATO allies ramp up anti-Russia offensive over “cyber spying” and Skripals

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The US Department of Justice is seeking the arrest of seven Russian nationals it claims worked for the GRU, the main Russian military intelligence agency. They are accused of hacking, with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) as the most important target, as well as wire fraud, identity theft and money laundering.

The announcement followed a coordinated blitz by the UK, the Netherlands and other NATO powers. To frame the demand for the seven arrests, the US used all the material gathered against Russia over the Skripal/novichok affair as a pedestal.

Seven months to the day since the still unexplained events in Salisbury that saw the poisoning of the Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia, and the later death of resident Dawn Sturgess, the US made use of an operation carried out by Dutch intelligence in April, first announced last month, when four Russians were expelled for allegedly trying to hack the OPCW.

The narrative of the imperialist powers is that the alleged Russian attack on the OPCW was mounted because it was conducting investigations into the poisoning of the Skripals and the alleged chemical weapons gas attack by the Moscow-backed Syrian regime in Douma earlier this year. Four of the seven listed in the US indictment, Aleksei Morenets and Evgenii Serebriakov, Oleg Sotnikov and Alexey Minin, are the Russians expelled from the Netherlands.

According to the *Financial Times*, British intelligence tipped off their Dutch counterparts that they suspected the Russians, who they said had been organising reconnaissance around the OPCW headquarters at The Hague, after arriving in the Netherlands on April 10. They were supposedly planning, according to the FT, a “so-called ‘close access hack’ of the OPCW computer

networks. This involves getting physically close enough to pick up the Wi-Fi signal of the building being targeted.”

The Dutch alleged that on April 13, the Russians parked a car in a hotel car park with its boot facing the headquarters of the nearby OPCW HQ. Counterintelligence officials reportedly arrested the four men and confiscated electronic equipment found on them, including mobile phones and laptops, and then took them to Schiphol airport to board a flight back to Russia.

Three of the defendants in the US indictment had already been charged in July by Robert Mueller, the special counsel heading a probe into Russian “meddling” in the US election and possible complicity of the Trump campaign. They were among a dozen Russians, alleged officers in the GRU, charged with hacking and leaking emails from senior Democratic Party officials and the 2016 Hillary Clinton presidential campaign.

The US indictment was preceded yesterday morning by UK Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt declaring that Russia was behind “reckless and indiscriminate cyber-attacks,” including the 2016 hacking of the DNC headquarters. Hunt based his allegations on an assessment by the UK’s National Cyber Security Centre who said it was “highly likely” that 12 hacking groups operating around the world were really fronts for Russian intelligence. Hunt said the attacks were “in flagrant violation of international law, had affected citizens in a large number of countries, including Russia, and had cost national economies millions of pounds.”

Attacks supposedly carried out included the hacking of confidential medical files of international athletes under the control of the World Anti-Doping Agency.

In the afternoon, Peter Wilson, the British ambassador to the Netherlands, took part in a press conference alongside the head of the Dutch military intelligence and security service, Onno Eichelsheim, and Defence Minister Ank Bijleveld. Wilson stated that Russia had attempted to hack the computer network at Porton Down, the UK's highly secretive chemical weapons laboratory—while it was investigating the attack on the Skripals just a few miles away—as well as UK Foreign Ministry computer networks.

According to the UK government statement, among the attacks organised by the hackers were ones hitting Russia's central bank and two Russian media outlets, Fontanka.ru and news agency Interfax.

The UK and Dutch prime ministers, Theresa May and Mark Rutte, issued a joint statement condemning Russia.

Speaking at a NATO summit in Brussels, UK Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson also ratcheted up the tensions, stating that “here at NATO we stand shoulder to shoulder with our allies in unity against such actions. What we have made clear is that we are not going to be backward leaning.”

Labour Party deputy leader Tom Watson joined the fray, writing to Hunt to demand details of any possible Russian “interference” in the 2016 Brexit referendum. He asked, “Can you... confirm whether any investigation is being undertaken by our intelligence services and other authorities into Russian interference in the UK? If it is not will you instruct the security services and other relevant bodies to begin one?”

The coordinated moves by the US and its NATO partners followed last week's threat delivered by Hunt via *Sky News* while at the United Nations General Assembly to his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, that if Russia used chemical weapons, then “the price will be too high.” He repeated this threat in a speech to the Conservative conference in Birmingham Sunday, adding that he intended to “close the net on the GRU.” Hunt used his August visit to the US to demand that the European Union (EU) follow Washington's lead in placing “comprehensive” sanctions on Russia.

As the Tory party conference opened, UK Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson told the *Sunday Telegraph* of plans to establish a new British military base in the Arctic circle, in northern Norway, to counteract Russian “influence.” The base will be manned by 800

marine commandos.

Tory MP Julian Lewis, head of parliament's Defence Select Committee, published an article on *Politics Home*, insisting, “The best response to the Salisbury outrage is to put an end to the relentless hollowing out—under successive governments—of our army, our navy and our air force. Salisbury shows that the downgrading of defence must now be reversed.”

The “deterrent power of Western nuclear weapons and the collective security provided by Article 5 of the North Atlantic treaty,” and confronting the Soviet Union “did not come cheaply” and neither does confronting Russia today. Lewis stressed, “Since 2016, the Defence Committee has been making the case for a defence spending target of 3 percent of GDP.” However, he made clear this was not enough. “In the early 1960s, UK defence spending accounted for 6 percent of our GDP—the same percentage as welfare. The current welfare budget is six times the size of the defence budget.”

The campaign to attribute the poisoning of the Skripals to the Russian government took a dramatic turn on September 26 with the “identification” on the Bellingcat website of Ruslan Boshirov, one of the named “novichok suspects,” as Colonel Anatoliy Chepiga. The site claims Chepiga is a decorated soldier who served with a Special Forces unit under the military intelligence department, the GRU, before being transferred to Moscow as an undercover operative. Bellingcat is run by Elliot Higgins, a senior fellow of the fanatically anti-Russian US geostrategic think tank, the Atlantic Council.



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