

Poison allegations taint Russian relations.

By Francesca Eke

Reports of the poisoning of Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia have shaken Europe as allegations are made against Russia and nations unite with the UK. Skripal and his 33 year old daughter were poisoned by a potent nerve agent 'Novichok', meaning 'newcomer' in English, and found in critical condition on March 4th in Salisbury. The double agent was said to be found unconscious on a bench outside the Maltings shopping centre beside his daughter, also found in the same critical condition.

The deadly nerve agent Novichok was created under a Clandestine programme in the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War, exposing clear links between Russia and the lethal substance, despite international negotiations for a chemical weapons ban in which entered into force on April 29, 1997.

Novichok is said to be five to eight times more potent than the VX nerve agent which killed Kim-Jong Nam. It can therefore be suggested that interestingly, the strain used in the recent attack must have been a low dose, impure or not administered in a really efficient way. This raises further inquiries into the attack and the organisation responsible.

UK Prime Minister Theresa May commented on Monday 12th that it is 'highly likely' that Moscow is involved due to the connection between Russia and the development of the fatal nerve agent. Subsequently, May demanded Moscow release information regarding the Novichok program in order to make progress with the investigation and were given until midnight on Tuesday the 13th to respond and explain to the UK government why the nerve agent was used to poison the former Russian secret service agent.

The Kremlin failed to respond to this demand or give information to the UK and Moscow provided no explanation for the attack. Boris Johnson, the UK Foreign Secretary spoke his mind, suggesting "Russia is the only country known to have developed this type of agent. I'm afraid the evidence is overwhelming that it is Russia". Word was heard from Russia on Tuesday as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Russia was not involved and "had not been given access to materials". Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov reiterated that Russia had no involvement in the poisoning of former Russian spy and said that accusations against

the country were “baseless”. Johnson added “There is something in the kind of smug, sarcastic response that we’ve heard that indicates their fundamental guilt. They want to simultaneously deny it, yet at the same time to glory in it.”

The UK response to Russia’s silence came from the Prime Minister who used the one piece of leverage the UK public believes they have over Russia – the ability to freeze UK based assets of Kremlin connected Russian Elites. May also confirmed that there will be no official UK government presence at the World Cup this year; it was also suggested that a fully-fledged boycott is still possible depending on what is discovered in the Salisbury investigation and there is quite probably going to be a classical expulsion of Moscow involved.

The silence from Russia was deafening in the House of Commons where the decision was made by Theresa May to expel 23 Russian diplomats believed to be involved in espionage in the first wave of retaliation against Moscow. This act of vengeance will be followed by a halt to high-level meetings between British and Russian officials and the cancellation of a planned visit to Britain by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

As for international response, the European Nations including France, Germany, NATO’s General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg and outgoing U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson condemned the attack, expressed solidarity with the UK and pledged their support. U.S. President Donald Trump consolidates this and adds comment; “It sounds to me that it would be Russia based on all the evidence they have.”

Historian and politics academic Jane Wearing emphasised that “This action is quite a common diplomatic tool; it’s one of the early steps in a diplomatic crisis”

Wearing voiced her opinion on Russia’s role in the attack; “When you can actually trace it to be a Soviet era nerve agent, it’s got to be the Russian government that’s had something to do with it – and if it’s not then they’ve got extreme problems with their security in their chemical labs and that in itself is a breach of international rules.”

It was emphasized by the Foreign Secretary that “If it was a direct threat by Russia, this is simply not a threat to the UK but a clear violation of the chemical weapons convention, a breach of international law and a threat to those who abide by the rules-based international order as a whole.”

Unfortunately, this isn't the first investigation launched against Russia involving an attack of a civilian on British soil; the murder of Alexander Litvinenko in London 2006, a former secret service officer in Russia using radioactive polonium sparked suspicion and established foundations of distrust between the countries.

As for British civilians, the Foreign Office is warning tourists against 'anti-British sentiment or harassment' in Russia and encouraging vigilance. Heightened political tensions between the countries has raised reason for concern amongst British tourists due to possible protests or demonstrations; people are advised against publically commenting on these political developments.

Despite their initial silence, Russia has spoken and erupted with anger after Theresa May declared that the UK will impose new sanctions on the Kremlin, which was described by Russia as 'absolutely unacceptable'.

The Russian ambassador to the UK said that Russia was not going to respond to any ultimatums that had been issued by Theresa May. Alexander Vladimirovich Yakovenko also said Russia had "nothing to do with this incident" also mentioning that the nation had "nothing to fear. Nothing to hide". Mr Yovenko announced "Everything that has been done today by the British government is absolutely unacceptable and we consider this a provocation".

The British public await announcement of further response and future decisions regarding Britain's political relationship with Russia.