

As tensions escalate, UK expels 23 Russian diplomats

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15 March 2018

Prime Minister Theresa May outlined sweeping measures against Russia during a speech to the House of Commons yesterday. She declared the Putin regime guilty of poisoning former double agent Sergei Skripal in Salisbury, after Russia refused to meet her government's 24-hour deadline to provide a "credible response" over the use of an alleged Russian nerve agent.

Railing against Moscow's "sarcasm, contempt and defiance," May proclaimed that use of the Novichok nerve agent on UK soil amounted to the "unlawful use of force" by Russia. The Russian state was "culpable" in the attempted murder of Skripal and his daughter, Yulia. Russian President Vladimir Putin had "chosen to act in this way" with May claiming his state has an undeclared chemical weapons programme in defiance of international law.

In response, Britain was expelling, within a week, 23 Russian diplomats who were "undeclared intelligence officers." Other measures outlined included:

- * Suspension of high level bi-lateral contacts between the UK and Russia.

- * Drafting new laws and unspecified measures to protect against "hostile state activity."

- * Increased checks on private flights, customs and freight to bar hostile entrants to the UK.

- * Freezing Russian state assets where there is evidence of their use to threaten the life or property of UK nationals or residents.

- * Magnitsky-type amendments punishing violations of "human rights," suggested by Labour to an existing sanctions bill.

- * A boycott by Ministers and the Royal Family of the Fifa World Cup in Russia and the revoking of an invitation to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to visit the UK.

Russia denounced the expulsion of its diplomats as "unacceptable, unjustified and short-sighted" and said it

will reciprocate. May made no reference to Russia's insistence that it be provided samples of the alleged nerve agent used, nor to Moscow's having pointed out that under international protocols it has 10 days to reply to such accusations. Instead, its "silence" was held up as "proof" that Russia had no credible explanation suggesting either that the poison attack was carried out by the Russian state, or proof that they had lost control of "their" nerve agent, and were therefore guilty.

On this basis, May appealed for "cross-party support." She spoke to the Labour Opposition benches which were almost universally behind her war-like rhetoric. In response, a chorus of Labour MPs made clear their hostility to their own leader, Jeremy Corbyn, whose generally supportive statement also cautioned over how far moves could go against Russia in the absence of actual proof of culpability.

The use of nerve agents "on British soil" was "abominable," Corbyn stated, and the attack had secured support for the UK from "our allies in the European Union, NATO and the UN." But what was being done through the OPCW to determine whether the nerve agent could have been obtained by others due to Russian government negligence, and had the government responded to Russian demands for a sample?

To cries of "shame," he asked whether there was any information about where the nerve agent came from, and whether May agreed with him that it was still necessary to maintain "a robust dialogue" with Russia.

To reassure everyone that he was not opposed to action against Russia, Corbyn asked what discussions had gone ahead with Britain's NATO partners and others on taking "multilateral action" and what assurance of safety could be given to Russians living in the UK. "Our response must be decisive and proportionate and based on clear evidence," he said.

May's response was to denounce Corbyn for his refusal

to “condemn” the “Russian state.” Consensus existed in the House and with Britain’s “allies,” but this did not extend to Corbyn.

Her attack was echoed by a succession of Labour MPs, beginning with Yvette Cooper who insisted that Russia’s alleged actions be met with “unequivocal condemnation.” May hailed Cooper’s comment as proof of views shared by many Labour MPs.

Chris Bryant accused the Russian ambassador to the UK of being a liar who should be kicked out of the UK. Pat McFadden hailed Labour’s “tradition” of “strength and resolve” when the UK is under threat, soliciting approving comments from May on Labour’s “acting in the national interest.” John Woodcock told May she would be “reassured to hear that a clear majority of Labour MPs, alongside the leader of every other party, support the firm stance she is taking.” Ben Bradshaw said, “most of us on these benches fully support the measures she has announced and, indeed, some of us think they could have come a bit sooner.”

In a press briefing, Corbyn’s strategy and communications director Seumas Milne questioned whether MI5 and MI6 may be wrong in identifying Russian culpability, given that “There is a history between WMDs and intelligence which is problematic, to put it mildly.”

When a Tory MP drew attention to a tweet on this subject, May replied that she was “surprised and shocked” and that Labour MPs would be “equally shocked.”

Reports emerged within minutes that two shadow ministers were considering their positions in response to Corbyn’s refusal to blame Russia. The BBC’s Laura Keunssberg, who played a key role in efforts to depose Corbyn as Labour leader by the Blairite right, was provided with a copy of an early-day motion already circulating supporting “unequivocally” May’s stand on Russia. There were already 16 Labour signatories.

Once again, warmongering is being used to push the domestic political agenda sharply to the right. In the process, Corbyn’s claims to have engineered a shift to the left by Labour have been brutally disproved. The right wing of his party, which Corbyn has done so much to shelter from potential expulsion, is once again preparing to move against him. His constant adaptations to their militarist agenda, including endorsing NATO and the Trident nuclear programme directed against Russia, has only whetted their appetite and given them confidence to proclaim an agenda of national unity with the Tories.

Divisions are even opening in Corbyn’s inner circle. Earlier Wednesday, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell once again demonstrated Labour’s trustworthiness to the ruling class, telling BBC Radio Four that the expulsion of diplomats was not enough: “We have to hit them hard where we can, and that’s in the pocket.” This followed his pledge Sunday that Labour MPs would no longer appear on RT, Russia’s state broadcaster.

May is leading an international offensive to reinforce demands for action against Russia, up to and including a military response, working in close collaboration with the US. These efforts are particularly directed against France and Germany, which have shown reluctance to embrace demands from the Pentagon and the Democratic Party for stepped up measures against Moscow.

In her speech, May cited support from US President Donald Trump, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron and “strong expressions of support from Nato and from partners across the European Union and beyond.” However, immediately following May’s speech, Macron’s office issued a statement insisting that France wanted firm proof of Russian involvement before taking any action, Government spokesman Benjamin Griveaux said, “We don’t do fantasy politics. Once the elements are proven, then the time will come for decisions to be made.”

The fight to secure a shift against Russia moved from the UK to New York later yesterday, at a special meeting of the United Nations Security Council requested by May. US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley urged action against Russia, stressing Washington’s “absolute solidarity with Great Britain” in its conclusion that the Russian state had targeted Skripal and his daughter.

Linking the alleged assassination attempt to the equally unproved use of chemical weapons in Syria’s civil war by the Bashar al-Assad regime, she threatened that the Security Council’s credibility “will not survive if we fail to hold Russia accountable.”



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