

Yulia Skripal “improving rapidly”: The unravelling of the Russian Novichok narrative

By Chris Marsden
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When placed in the context of the global anti-Russia propaganda campaign spearheaded by Britain’s Conservative government, Thursday saw the greatest Easter miracle since Christ rose from the dead.

For weeks, the world’s media has cited uncritically government claims that double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, were poisoned March 4 with a “weapons grade” nerve agent, known as a Novichok.

The agent was described as so deadly that the comatose Skripals were unlikely to ever recover, and that if they did they would be brain damaged and physically compromised. On Wednesday there were even media headlines that their life support might have to be turned off.

Yet Thursday saw reports from Salisbury NHS foundation trust that 33-year-old Yulia is no longer in a critical condition and was “conscious and talking.”

Yulia’s apparent recovery blows a hole in an official narrative that, by rights, should sink it forever. Instead, as has happened on repeated occasions, the story will no doubt be modified as required. Nothing must be allowed to prevent the UK, in alliance with the United States, from continuing its push for further economic sanctions and the expulsion of diplomats to justify pre-existing plans for military aggression on Russia’s borders and in the Middle East.

There are innumerable inconsistencies, contradictions and flat out lies in the case made against Russia. Above all there has been no convincing political explanation advanced as to why Russia would target the Skripals.

Nor is there anything linking the attempted murder of the pair to anyone—least of all the Russian state and the government of President Vladimir Putin. For the government, everything hangs on the single assertion, based on undisclosed “findings” from Britain’s Porton Down chemical weapons facility, that the Novichok

nerve agent used was “of a type” developed in Russia and was so sophisticated, and its delivery so complicated, that a “state actor” must have been involved.

Maintaining this lie has involved an accumulation of smaller lies, which depended on their being accepted without question by the media. Even before the news regarding Yulia, this web of deceit was in danger of unravelling.

Initial reports after the March 4 discovery of the Skripals reported as the likely cause of their illness a “white powder” that was identified as the “opioid fentanyl.” It was not until March 6 that Russia was officially suggested for possible involvement and March 7 before the Metropolitan Police first stated that a nerve agent was used.

On March 8, it was announced that a police officer, later named as Sgt. Nick Bailey, was seriously ill in hospital because he was one of the first responders to the incident. Police added that 21 people had received (unspecified) treatment.

Four days later, March 12, with hundreds of police and military personnel roaming Salisbury dressed in biohazard suits, sealing off the bench area where the Skripals were found, cordoning off the Zizzi restaurant at which they had dined earlier, etc., Prime Minister Theresa May told Parliament that Porton Down had identified the nerve agent as of Russian origin. It was therefore “highly likely” that Russia was responsible for the poisoning.

Russia has repeatedly denied possession of Novichoks, which were developed in the former Soviet Union. It has pointed out that other states now hostile to Russia, including Ukraine, could have possession and that its formula and the scientists involved are now both available to the UK and the US.

However, the issue raised by recent events is whether there is any proof whatsoever that a military-grade nerve agent was involved in the assassination attempt. Three related issues are of significance —what a Novichok is, how it is delivered and what it is supposed to do.

After its supposed identification, Novichok was described as being “five to 10 times more lethal” than VX and sarin and, like them, either a liquid or a gas.

One of its creators, Vil Mirzayanov, who defected to the US, was interviewed March 16 by the *Guardian*, describing it as the “most powerful and unique chemical weapon in the world.”

No non-state actor had the capability of “weaponising” Novichok. “You can kill yourself ... it is impossible without high technical equipment... No one country has these capabilities like Russia, because Russia invented, tested and weaponized Novichok.”

“I believe they brought [in a] binary version,” Mirzayanov said. “It’s two ampules, small containers, like a big bullet, put them together in a spray or something, and after that, some mechanism which is mixing them, a couple seconds and after that you’re shooting... It could touch any skin and in a couple minutes would take effect.”

Upon exposure “the effects are fast and dramatic.” The nervous system is hit, victims are unable to breathe, they “cough and foam at the mouth,” the “effects on the digestive system trigger vomiting,” “muscles convulse... Many of those affected will wet themselves and lose control of their bowels.”

Given this account, the story of white powder naturally had to be abandoned. And it had to be explained how a Novichok was delivered in a way that allowed for such complexities and still meant that the Skripals left home for seven hours, during which time they went to the local pub, had a meal at a restaurant and only then collapsed.

The first story was that Yulia had unwittingly brought the agent into the country after it was planted in her suitcase. The second story is that it was placed on the Skripal’s clothes—supposedly accounting for the delayed impact. The third was that it was pumped as a gas through the air conditioning of the Skripal’s car.

None of this made sense and things worsened after no one else suffered any ill effects. Various figures were given of hospital attendees, but all were released

without treatment. On March 22, DS Bailey left Wiltshire Hospital—making his own recovery several days in advance of Yulia.

Amid this debacle, May spoke in Parliament Tuesday boasting of the expulsions of 100 Russian diplomats by 18 nations, including 60 told to quit the US.

Speaking at the start of a debate on national security and Russia, May declared that Sergei and Yulia Skripal “remain critically ill in hospital. Sadly, late last week, doctors indicated that their condition is unlikely to change in the near future, and they may never recover fully.”

If Yulia’s recovery two days later were not embarrassing enough, the police also chose that day to announce that the delivery of the Novichok to its intended victims had been carried out by smearing it on the front door of Sergei’s house!

No explanation was offered as to how this unsophisticated ruse remained undiscovered for weeks, or why no one other than the Skripals and DS Bailey had been impacted. Instead, the Metropolitan Police terrorist unit announced that it was now cordoning off a children’s play area near the Skripal’s home, while handing back control of the London Road cemetery, where Sergei’s wife and son are buried, the Maltings shopping centre and the Ashley Wood complex to the Wiltshire police.

All over the world there is deep skepticism regarding the claims made by the UK government. This is more than justified. The faces may have changed since Blair’s Labour Party produced its “dodgy dossiers” to justify war against Iraq in 2003, but not the hypocrisy, scheming and intrigue that the British bourgeoisie have developed to a fine art.

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