



AP Photo/Alastair Grant

A man works to untangle the national flag flown from the Russian Embassy, after it became entangled on its staff at the embassy in London, Wednesday. Britain announced Wednesday it will expel 23 Russian diplomats, the biggest such expulsion since the Cold War, and break off high-level contacts with the Kremlin over the nerve-agent attack on a former spy and his daughter in an English town.

Britain boots 23 Russian diplomats over spy poisoning

By JILL LAWLESS and DANICA KIRKA
Associated Press

LONDON — Relations between Britain and Russia plunged Wednesday to a chilly level not seen since the Cold War as Prime Minister Theresa May expelled 23 diplomats, severed high-level contacts and vowed both open and covert action against Kremlin meddling after the poisoning of a former spy.

Russia said it would respond soon to what it called Britain's "crude" and "hostile" actions.

While May pledged to disrupt Russian espionage and "hostile state activity," she gave few details about how hard Britain would hit Russian politicians and oligarchs where it really hurts — in their wallets.

"Expelling diplomats is a kind of a standard response," said Natasha Kuhrt, a Russia expert at King's College London. "I'm not sure it's going to make Moscow stand up and think."

May told the House of Commons that 23 Russians diplomats who have been identified as undeclared intelligence officers have a week to leave Britain.

"This will be the single biggest expulsion for over 30 years," May said, adding that it would "fundamentally degrade Russian intelligence capability in the U.K. for years to come."

May spoke after Moscow ignored a midnight deadline to explain how the nerve agent Novichok, developed by the Soviet Union, was used against Sergei Skripal, an ex-Russian agent convicted of spying for Britain, and his daughter Yulia. They remain in critical condition in a hospital in Salisbury, southwestern England, after being found unconscious March 4.

May said "there is no alternative conclusion other than that the Russian state was



AP Photo/Frank Augstein

Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May leaves 10 Downing Street to attend the weekly Prime Minister's Questions session, in parliament in London, Wednesday.

culpable for the attempted murder of Mr. Skripal and his daughter."

She announced a range of economic and diplomatic measures, including the suspension of high-level contacts with Russia. An invitation for Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to visit Britain has been canceled, and British ministers and royals won't attend the soccer World Cup in Russia this summer.

May also said Britain would clamp down on murky Russian money and strengthen its powers to impose sanctions on abusers of human rights, though she gave few details.

"We will freeze Russian state assets wherever we have the evidence that they may be used to threaten the life or property of U.K. nationals or residents," May said, promising to use all legal powers against criminals and corrupt elites, and to "increase checks on private flights, customs and freight."

"There is no place for these people — or their money — in our country," she said.

May said some of the measures "cannot be shared publicly for reasons of

national security."

The Russian Embassy in London said the expulsion of diplomats was "totally unacceptable, unjustified and shortsighted." Ambassador Alexander Yakovenko called Britain's actions were "a provocation."

Russia did not immediately announce retaliatory measures, but its Foreign Ministry said "our response will not be long in coming."

It said Britain's "hostile measures" were "an unprecedentedly crude provocation."

Britain called an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council in New York at which U.K. and Russian diplomats traded accusations, with Britain blaming the Russian state for the attack and Russia vehemently denying responsibility.

Some Russia experts said the measures announced by May were unlikely to make Russian President Vladimir Putin's government change its behavior. She didn't expel Russia's ambassador or announce sanctions against any individuals or companies.

Critics of the British government have long claimed that the U.K. is reluctant to act against Russia because London's property

market and financial sector are magnets for billions in Russian money.

"There does not seem to be any real appetite so far to investigate the ill-gotten gains of the Russian elite that have been laundered through London," said John Lough, an associate fellow in the Eurasia program at the Chatham House think-tank. "It is not clear to me that London's response will hit the Kremlin where it hurts."

Moscow has denied responsibility for Skripal's poisoning. It refused to comply with Britain's demand for an explanation, saying the U.K. must first provide samples of the poison collected by investigators.

Some in Russia have suggested that the nerve agent could have come from another former Soviet country.

Lawmaker Vladimir Gutenev, a member of Russia's state commission for chemical disarmament, said Russia had scrapped its stockpile of Novichok.

"It is hard to say what may be happening in neighboring countries," he was quoted as saying by the Interfax news agency.

Britain is seeking support from allies in the European Union and NATO in response to the use of an illegal chemical weapon on British soil. May's office said President Donald Trump told the prime minister the U.S. was "with the U.K. all the way."

But Britain faces an uphill battle in rallying international backing for any new measures against Moscow.

European Council President Donald Tusk said he would put the attack on the agenda at an EU summit meeting next week.

The U.N. Security Council — of which Russia is a veto-wielding member — was due to meet later Wednesday at Britain's request to discuss the investigation.

Pennsylvania wake-up call for GOP: Almost no one is safe

WASHINGTON (AP) — The message to Republicans from the Pennsylvania special election was simple: Almost no one is safe.

Rattled Republicans were hit with a day-after reality check Wednesday after the startlingly strong performance of a fresh-faced Democrat deep in Trump country.

House Speaker Paul Ryan privately warned his ranks that the election, still officially undecided, should serve as a "wake-up call" as the party tries to defend its majorities in Congress this fall. Democrats boasted optimistically of an impending wave, and produced a new list of races that suddenly seemed within reach.

Even as ballot counting dragged on with several hundred votes separating Democrat Conor Lamb from Republican Rick Saccone, it was clear the single, short-term contest in western Pennsylvania had sounded the started gun for the battle for control of the House.

Republicans looking for lessons found several. Candidates matter. Campaigns, too. And fundraising. President Donald Trump can't save them, it seems, not even in a coal-and-steel region he carried by nearly 20 percentage points just 16 months ago.

Trump won more than

100 districts nationwide by narrower margins than that, arguably making them comparably competitive now. Democrats produced an updated watch-list Wednesday of GOP representatives they suggested might want to think about retirement.

In Pennsylvania, the tally of absentee ballots ate into Lamb's lead slightly, though analysts doubt Saccone will make up the deficit. Officials have seven days to count provisional ballots, and either side can ask for a recount. The Associated Press has not declared a winner.

"Obviously, this is a very tough environment for Republicans," said Courtney Alexander, a spokeswoman for the Ryan-aligned Congressional Leadership Fund, which supports GOP candidates for the House. "Now more than ever, candidates and campaigns matter."

With so many Democrats revved up to run in so many House districts across the country, both sides are expecting a brutal primary season.

Republicans are counting on that ending up in their favor, with Democrats nominating more-liberal candidates who won't survive general elections against GOP rivals.

Trump picks camera-proven Kudlow as top economic aide

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump has chosen Larry Kudlow to be his top economic aide, elevating the influence of a longtime fixture on the CNBC business news network who previously served in the Reagan administration and has emerged as a leading evangelist for tax cuts and a smaller government.

Kudlow told The Associated Press on Wednesday that he has accepted the offer, saying the U.S. economy is poised to take off after Trump signed \$1.5 trillion worth of tax cuts into law.

"The economy is starting to roar and we're going to get more of that," he said.

Kudlow will join an administration in the middle of a tumultuous remodeling as a wave of White House staffers and top officials have departed in recent weeks. Trump on Tuesday dumped his secretary of state, former Exxon Mobil CEO Rex Tillerson.

Kudlow would succeed Gary Cohn, a former

Goldman Sachs executive who is leaving the post in a dispute over Trump's decision to impose tariffs on imported steel and aluminum.

With Trump's tax cuts already being implemented, Kudlow would be advising a president who appears increasingly determined to tax foreign imports — a policy Kudlow personally opposes. Kudlow said he is "in accord" with Trump's agenda and his team would help implement the policies set by the president.

Trump has promised to reduce the trade imbalance with China and rewrite the North American Free Trade Agreement with Canada and Mexico. Kudlow declined to say what advice he would give the president on trade issues, saying instead that Trump is "a very good negotiator."

Kudlow, 70, has informally advised the Trump administration in the past and spoke recently with the president so he is ready "to hit the ground running."



Kudlow

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