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US sanctions target Russian officials and businessmen

The US government imposed a new round of sanctions against Russia on Friday, targeting seven Russian businessmen and 17 government officials in the latest provocation against that country.

The move follows the expulsion of more than 100 Russian diplomats by the US and its allies in the wake of the alleged poisoning last month of Sergei Skripal, a double agent living in England, and his daughter.

In announcing the latest measures against Russia, the US government made no mention of the Skripal case, instead claiming the new sanctions were retaliation for alleged Russian “meddling” in the 2016 election.

The US has good reason to be circumspect in this regard. In recent days, the US and British narrative of the alleged poisoning by Russia has fallen apart. Both Sergei and Yulia Skripal are recovering from their alleged poisoning by a nerve agent supposedly ten times more powerful than VX nerve gas, leaving their pets, who were starved by UK authorities, the only casualties of the incident.

In an interview with Russian television, Viktoria Skripal, a relative of the two who lives in Russia, cast doubt on the British version of events and said she was afraid that the Skripals were not being allowed to communicate and move freely by British authorities. Earlier this week, Russian TV ran a telephone interview between Yulia and Viktoria taped by Viktoria in which Yulia said both she and her father were recovering, were in good health and had suffered no lasting harm from the incident.

Viktoria told Russian media that the phone conversation was cut off abruptly and she has had no further communication from her cousin.

On Friday, the British Home Office announced that it had rejected Viktoria Skripal's application for a visa to visit her relatives at the hospital in Britain where they are being held.

The US press has largely ignored these developments, as well as this week's statement by the UK's Porton Down chemical weapons laboratory that it had "not verified the precise source" of the material used, contradicting claims by UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson that Porton Down had definitively identified the source as Russian.

The breakdown of the official narrative has done nothing to slow the US campaign against Russia. This is because Washington's actions have nothing to do with the alleged poisoning—a completely concocted provocation—or with supposed Russian "meddling" in the US elections, another entirely unsubstantiated fabrication woven by US intelligence agencies and dutifully disseminated by the US corporate media.

Rather, they are rooted in the growing conflict between the US and Russia on the world stage, particularly in Syria, and efforts to use the conflict with Russia, which threatens to escalate into a shooting war at any moment, to suppress domestic political opposition.

Hinting at the real issues animating the anti-Russian campaign, US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin declared Friday in his announcement of the new sanctions: "The Russian government engages in a range of malign activity around the globe, including continuing to occupy Crimea and instigate violence in eastern Ukraine" and "supplying the Assad regime with material and weaponry..."

After Trump speculated last week about withdrawing US troops from Syria, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, speaking for the US intelligence agencies and the Democratic Party, opposed any such action, declaring that such a course would empower Russia.

In an editorial titled "Trump's Approach to Syria Is No Way to Run a War," the *Times* wrote that Russia would "benefit from the president's apparent desire to retreat from the Middle East." It continued, "Already, Mr. Trump is letting Russia take the lead in Syria, ceding to Vladimir Putin the crucial diplomatic work of forging a political agreement between Mr. Assad and the Syrian rebels."

The *Washington Post* said a continued US presence in Syria would be necessary to prevent "Russia from entrenching in the country at the expense of US allies including Israel and Jordan."

Both newspapers warned that Trump's policy was creating the conditions for the consolidation of an alliance between Turkey, Iran and Russia, which held a high-profile meeting to discuss Syria this week. On Thursday, Turkey, a NATO member, reported that it would purchase an advanced Russian missile defense system, reportedly capable of shooting down any US aircraft.

The latest sanctions announcement has also been accompanied by a new push to censor the Internet in the name of combating Russian "meddling" and "fake news." On Friday, Facebook announced that it would require users who purchase ads on the platform to verify their identities, a major step toward ending the anonymous use of Facebook, something long demanded by the US intelligence agencies.

The move, coming ahead of Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's scheduled testimony before the US Congress next week, was accompanied by the announcement that Facebook would hire tens of thousands of censors to moderate content, and that it had had deleted thousands of allegedly "fake" accounts.

With the growth of the class struggle in the US coming together with bitter political warfare at the heights of American politics, all factions of the political establishment are seeking to project internal tensions outward by demonizing Russia and China.

The Democrats, in particular, working in alliance with the intelligence agencies, are focusing their efforts on exerting maximum pressure to ensure that Trump does not back down from the conflict with Russia.