Russia’s Murderous Covert Operations

What is the issue?

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- Recently, a former Russia agent Mr. Sergei Skripal (now living in exile in U.K.) was attacked by unknown persons with a poisonous nerve agent.
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- The attack is suspected to have a high-profile Russian government involvement and has hence resulted in tensions.
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Who is Sergei Skripal?

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- Mr. Skripal is a former Army Colonel who was part of the Russian army’s intelligence wing and then worked in the Russian Foreign Ministry in Moscow.
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- Skripal was a double agent, who betrayed fellow army veterans, and provided information to Britain that considerably damaged Russian intelligence.
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- He was arrested in Moscow in December 2004 for spying for Britain, and sentenced to 13 years in prison in August 2006.
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- In July 2010, a spy swap was facilitated, which freed Mr. Skripal and exiled him to UK, where he has been living quietly since.
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- He and his daughter were recently attacked with a poisonous nerve agent, and the act is suspected to be a Russian state sponsored one.
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- This violates the “Cold War era espionage etiquette” of not disturbing pardoned spies and could also potentially escalate Russia - U.K. tensions.
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What gives credence to the suspicion?

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- The nerve agent used belongs to a family of deadly substances called Novichok, which is believed to have been developed by the Soviets in the 1970s.
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- Additionally, number of high-profile deaths linked to Russia has taken place in Britain and also Russia has had a history of murdering betrayers.
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- Several other high-profile defectors currently live in the UK and there have already been instances of similar high profile attacks on them.
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- **1978 -** Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov (erstwhile USSR) was poisoned and killed in London with a pellet containing ricin.
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- **2006 -** Alexander Litvinenko was a former officer of Russia's Federal Security Service and fierce critic of President Vladimir Putin.
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- He died due to radioactive polonium poisoning of his tea, but identified his killer as Russian MP Andrei Lugovoi (former KGB officer).
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- **2012 -** Alexander Perepilichny was a Russian businessman and whistleblower who died while jogging near London under suspicious circumstances.
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- An enquiry into his death is under way.
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- **2013 -** Boris Berezovsky is an exiled Russian billionaire was found hanging in his apartment in Berkshire in southeast England.
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How have the countries reacted thus far?

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- **UK -** Reactions to most previous attacks was muted for the fear of escalating tensions with Russia and thereby losing out on massive Russian investments.
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- But the current episode has stirred a hornet’s nest as there has been a clear and targeted string of attacks that has been going on unabated.
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- British PM Teresa May gave out a strongly worded statement and has called for stringent actions if the Russians don’t cooperate in the case.
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- **Russia -** The Kremlin spokesman denied that his country had any role in the Skripal incident or the other pervious murders.
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- Russia has maintained that the crime had taken place in British territory and that they have knowledge of the act to support an investigation.
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- Further, the spokesperson condemned the British PM’s speech as irresponsible and unnecessarily provocative.
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Source: The Indian Express

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