

WHY DID VRBETICE NOT BECOME ANOTHER SALISBURY?

Why did only 6 countries expel Russian "diplomats" after the revelation that Russian GRU agents may have been involved in the Vrbetice explosion in 2014?



Photo credit: Corax za Medija Centar Beograd

Why did Vrbetice not become another Salisbury?

By Rasto Kužel

“Tourists” from Salisbury looking for a “cathedral” in Vrbetice

On 19 April, Czechia expelled 18 Russian diplomats suspected of being intelligence officers working at the Russian embassy in Prague, believed by many to be the center of Russian intelligence operations in Central Europe. Russia acted quickly and, in retaliation, expelled 20 Czech diplomats from the Czech embassy in Moscow, basically eliminating the Czech mission there. Consequently,

the Czech authorities decided to equal the number of staff at the Russian embassy in the Czech Republic with the number of staff at the Czech embassy in Russia. This number was unequal for many years, shortly before the recent expulsion with more than 110 Russians against some 44 Czechs, prompting questions why Russia needed so many people in a country like Czechia.

This diplomatic row unfolded in the aftermath of a press conference by the Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš a few days earlier during which he claimed that the Russian military intelligence service, GRU (Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravlenie), had been involved in a blast that took place in 2014 at ammunition depots in *Vrbetice* and in which two Czech citizens were killed, and extensive material damage was caused. It appears that the blast at the depots may have been part of a wider series of covert actions by Russia across Europe in recent years, the one in *Vrbetice* allegedly connected with the Russian efforts to prevent delivery of weapons to Ukraine so they could not be used in the armed conflict against the Kremlin-backed separatists.

The British investigative journalism website Bellingcat [identified](#) the identity of two GRU agents who poisoned the ex-Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia with a military-grade Novichok nerve agent in Salisbury in 2018, which led to the death of a British citizen. Following the revelation, both men were [shown](#) on Russian TV, claiming that they were only tourists visiting the famous Salisbury cathedral. Their “popularity” appeared to have helped the Czech investigators, who apparently recognized both men as those trying to visit the depot in *Vrbetice* shortly before the explosion, pretending to be hired by a client willing to purchase weapons from the depot.

Thirty after Salisbury and only six after Vrbetice

As many as 30 countries expelled suspected Russian intelligence officers in solidarity with Britain after the attempt on Skripals’ lives, whereas only 6 did so after the *Vrbetice* explosion. The poisoning of Skripals shocked the world, and some 150 Russian “diplomats” were expelled. It was probably one of the biggest coordinated responses ever done against Russian military intelligence agents, with the UK government wasting no time in forming such a big coalition of countries who demonstrated their clear support. As shown in the past, strong unity among EU countries is the best strategy against Russia when eliminating its destabilizing and subversive actions in Europe.

Why was such unity not achieved in the case of *Vrbetice*? There are probably several reasons, including not a very clearly communicated position of Czech officials, including Prime Minister Babiš, who initially referred to the explosion as an “attack on the goods” belonging to a Bulgarian businessman selling weapons (Babiš later apologized for this statement). This businessman is Emilian Gebrev, who was allegedly involved in selling weapons to Ukraine, a claim he denied.

However, he owns [Dunarit](#), which is a company selling weapons, including to Ukrainian companies. Gebrev was poisoned by Novichok approximately six months following the blast in *Vrbetice*, allegedly by the same GRU unit, which poisoned Skripals.

Moreover, President Milos Zeman, who is known to be very sympathetic to Russian president Putin, cast doubts about GRU’s role in the explosion and said that there were also other possible explanations. According to the Czech online portal [aktualne.cz](#), his speech was “misleading, dis-informative for Czechs and positive for Kremlin.”

EP resolution on Russia

The timing may have also played a role given the attempts to deescalate the situation at the Ukrainian border, with the considerable presence of Russian troops as well as further sanctions against Russia because of Alexei Navalny. On 28 April, the European Parliament passed a strongly

worded [resolution](#) on Russia, focusing on the case of Navalny, the military build-up on Ukraine's border, and Russian attacks in the Czech Republic.

The resolution called for the "immediate and unconditional release of the opposition leader Navalny, whose sentencing is politically motivated" and of all persons detained during protests in support of his release. Same as Skripals and Gebrev, Navalny, the most persistent critic of Putin, was poisoned with Novichok on his way from Novosibirsk last year, which provided the strongest indication that the Kremlin, which has denied involvement, was behind the poisoning. It is widely believed that only the Russian government would likely have access to such a dangerous weapon. The use of Novichok in all the above-mentioned cases indicates that the GRU was more interested in sending a message than maintaining a low profile.

Is it safe is to allow Russians to be present in strategic projects linked with infrastructural and energetic security?

The resolution also focuses on the current state of EU-Russia relations, criticizing Russia for its aggression and continued destabilization of Ukraine, as well as hostile attacks on EU countries. More specifically, it mentions "interference in election processes, the use of disinformation, deep fakes, and malicious cyberattacks." Following the revelation of the alleged GRU's involvement in the *Vrbetice* explosion, the Czech government decided not to invite Russia's nuclear energy company Rosatom to take part in a tender for a new unit at the Dukovany nuclear power plant. The Czechs now understand very well the security risks connected with allowing Russians to be present in strategic projects linked with infrastructural and energetic security.

This article was published by [Medija Centar Belgrade](#) on 31 May 2021