



# Russia: Poisoning of Alexei Navalny and U.S. Policy

Updated March 4, 2021

On March 2, 2021, the Biden Administration said Russian government agents were responsible for an August 2020 nerve agent attack on anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny. The Department of State [called](#) the attack an “attempted assassination” and determined Russia had used a chemical weapon in violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention. The White House [stated](#) the intelligence community (IC) “assesses with ‘high confidence’ that officers of Russia’s Federal Security Service,” or FSB, were responsible for the attack. The Administration [announced sanctions](#) in response, as well as for Navalny’s subsequent arrest and imprisonment.

## Navalny Poisoning and Opposition Crackdown

Russian authorities appear to have launched a campaign last year to silence Navalny, a one-time Moscow mayoral candidate. Navalny has demonstrated acumen in exposing government corruption and organizing anti-government actions, despite being [barred](#) from competing in elections since 2013. In August 2020, Navalny was poisoned and fell ill on a flight to Moscow. After public outcry, authorities allowed him to be evacuated to Germany for medical care. German officials later [cited](#) “unequivocal” evidence Navalny had been poisoned with an illicit nerve agent known as a Novichok. An investigation by independent researchers [implicated](#) several individuals linked to the FSB, Russia’s leading domestic security agency. Navalny, posing as a government official, later spoof-called an alleged operative who appeared to [provide](#) details of the attack.

Rather than seek asylum after recovering, Navalny and his wife, [Yulia Navalnaya](#), returned to Moscow, where Navalny was [detained](#) at the airport in January 2021. Authorities ostensibly arrested Navalny for having missed parole check-ins, including during his hospitalization abroad. Navalny’s parole was related to a 3½-year suspended sentence he [received](#) in 2014 on embezzlement charges, which the European Court of Human Rights [found](#) to be “arbitrary and manifestly unreasonable.” A Russian court [ordered](#) Navalny to be imprisoned for 32 months of his suspended sentence (the court subtracted time served during house arrest). Navalny reportedly has been [transferred](#) to a penal colony outside Moscow. He previously [received](#) several short prison sentences for participating in unsanctioned protests.

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After his latest arrest, Navalny continued efforts to expose corruption and undermine Putin's leadership. Navalny's team released a [film](#) purporting to present evidence of corruption under Putin, which has received over 110 million views online. In court, Navalny [said](#) Putin was a "thieving little man" who would go down in history as "Vladimir the Poisoner of [Underpants](#)." Navalny's imprisonment sparked mass demonstrations across Russia. Authorities forcibly [dispersed](#) protesters and [detained](#) thousands of participants.

## U.S. Policy

The United States, the [European Union](#) (EU), the [Group of Seven](#) (G7), and others have condemned the attack on Navalny and subsequent crackdown and have called for Navalny's release. In October 2020, the EU [imposed](#) sanctions on six Russian officials and a research institute in response to the attack on Navalny. On March 2, 2021, the EU imposed sanctions on four [more](#) officials in response to Navalny's imprisonment and other human rights abuses.

Also on March 2, in coordination with the EU, the Biden Administration [imposed](#) sanctions on seven of the officials subject to EU sanctions: Russia's prosecutor general, FSB and Federal Penitentiary Service directors, two deputy presidential chiefs of staff, and two deputy defense ministers. The Administration also imposed sanctions on the FSB (already subject to sanctions for election interference and malicious cyber activities) and on three research institutes for engaging "in activities to develop Russia's chemical weapons capabilities." Three other officials subject to EU sanctions are already subject to U.S. sanctions for other malign activities.

In addition, the Administration imposed sanctions on Russia's military intelligence agency (known as the GRU) and on two GRU officers in response to the 2018 nerve agent [attack](#) on former Russian intelligence agent Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom. The two officers are already subject to related sanctions, and the GRU is already subject to sanctions for election interference and malicious cyber activities. The Administration also expanded [sanctions](#) originally imposed after the 2018 nerve agent attack, pursuant to the Chemical and Biological Weapons Control and Warfare Elimination Act of 1991 (22 U.S.C. §§5601 et seq.), and other export [restrictions](#).

President Biden [addressed](#) Navalny's poisoning in a January 2021 telephone call with President Putin and [included](#) the issue in a tasking to the IC for a "full assessment" of key issues in U.S.-Russia relations (together with the [SolarWinds](#) cyber breach, interference in U.S. elections, and alleged bounties for attacks on U.S. forces in Afghanistan). Secretary of State Antony Blinken [said](#) the United States, together with the EU and others, seeks "to send a clear signal that Russia's use of chemical weapons and abuse of human rights have severe consequences."

Many observers expect the Biden Administration to maintain a firm response to various Russian malign activities. In addition to responding to Navalny's imprisonment, the Administration has broached the plight of U.S. citizens imprisoned in Russia. On February 3, 2021, the White House [called](#) on Russia to "swiftly release" U.S. citizens Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed.

On February 22, 2021, the Administration identified a Russian vessel and its owner, both previously subject to sanctions related to the construction of Russia's [Nord Stream 2](#) gas pipeline to Germany, as also subject to sanctions under the Protecting Europe's Energy Security Act of 2019, as amended (22 U.S.C. §9526 note). The State Department [indicated](#) an evaluation of other potential sanctions designations is ongoing.

On February 3, Secretary Blinken [announced](#) a five-year extension of the New START nuclear arms treaty with Russia. He noted, "Even as we work with Russia to advance U.S. interests, so too will we work to hold Russia to account for adversarial actions as well as its human rights abuses, in close

coordination with our allies and partners.” Members of Congress likely will consider additional measures in response to the Russian crackdown and assess the Administration’s review of policy toward Russia.

On related issues, see CRS Report R46518, *Russia: Domestic Politics and Economy*; CRS Report R46616, *Russian Military Intelligence: Background and Issues for Congress*; CRS In Focus IF10962, *Russia, the Skripal Poisoning, and U.S. Sanctions*; and CRS Insight IN10936, *Resurgence of Chemical Weapons Use: Issues for Congress*.

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