

The West Is Outraged By Navalny's Novichok Poisoning. That's No Guarantee of Tough Sanctions

Looming U.S. elections and disparate EU interests could translate into a symbolic response.

By [Jake Cordell](#)

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The EU and U.S. are likely to slap some asset freezes and travel bans on those they can pin to the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, analysts expect. **Roman Pimenov / TASS**

Lawmakers across Europe and the U.S. are scrambling to respond to the revelation that Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny was [poisoned with Novichok](#) — a lethal Soviet-era military nerve agent — with the possibility of fresh sanctions against Russia on the cards.

In Germany — where Navalny remains in a medically induced coma in intensive care after being transferred from a Siberian hospital in August — [calls](#) have grown for Chancellor Angela Merkel to drop her long-standing support for the almost-completed Nord Stream 2

gas pipeline project, while both the EU and U.S. have [pledged](#) to punish those involved in the attack.

Related article: [Novichok, Feared Soviet-Designed Poison](#)

The Russian ruble and stock markets have plunged in anticipation of a potentially tough western response.

Asset freezes

Despite the shock and outrage, the most likely reaction, analysts say, is a new round of so-called “personal sanctions” against a handful of individuals seen as responsible for the poisoning.

“Many countries could slap on asset freezes, visa bans and travel restrictions very easily. They’re always available as an off-the-shelf option,” Richard Connolly, director of the Center for Russian, European and Eurasian Studies at the University of Birmingham told The Moscow Times.

“But that’s all at the very low-grade end of the scale. We’re talking about sanctions that aren’t really going to have any impact beyond those specific individuals,” he added.

The bigger question is whether the EU or the U.S. might mount a more stringent response through harder-hitting financial, economic, or so-called “sectoral sanctions” — the kind [introduced](#) in retaliation to Russia’s annexation of Crimea and interference in the 2016 U.S. election that restrict deals with parts of Russia’s financial, energy and defense industries

Analysts are unconvinced.

“I am deeply skeptical that the Donald Trump administration will impose new sanctions on Russia of any significance over the Navalny poisoning,” said Brian O’Toole, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and former adviser to the U.S. Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), which administers and enforces U.S. sanctions around the world.

“The U.S. is hugely distracted by the election at the moment, and with Trump unwilling to cede to the real hints that the Kremlin is a malign actor for fear it will be a domestic political weakness, it's hard to see him approving any sanctions,” he added.

European leadership

While the U.S. Congress — which has demonstrated bipartisan support for sanctions in the face of a reluctant White House — could pick-up one of the already-drafted [sanctions bills](#) currently stuck in the [legislature](#), the EU is expected to be the driving force in the West’s response, with Washington D.C. following Brussels’ lead.

And with under two months to go, there might not be a decision before the U.S. election — the result of which will color the U.S. position, said Cyrus Newlin, associate fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

“Trump has been reluctant to confront Russia on a range of alleged transgressions — he has yet to raise with Putin reports that Russia [paid bounties](#) to the Taliban for killing U.S. soldiers. We should expect this pattern to hold if he wins a second term,” Newlin said.

He added that sanctions would be much more likely under a Biden presidency, but said that in the case of Navalny a new administration would likely throw its weight behind an existing EU initiative rather than embark on a unilateral track.

The EU is also “extremely unlikely” to roll out tougher sectoral sanctions, said Connolly. He pointed out that even the poisoning of Sergei Skripal — seen as a Russian attack on foreign soil that resulted in the death of a British citizen — did not push Europe to introduce new broad economic penalties on Russia.

And if there was any desire from the more hardline European countries, dynamics among the EU’s 27 members are likely to thwart a more robust reply.

“You’d need to have unanimity among the member states, and that’s not going to happen over a poisoning inside Russia,” said Connolly, highlighting countries like Hungary and Greece which have taken a softer stance towards Moscow in recent years.

Europe could even face a challenge enforcing the more limited personal sanctions, says Maria Shagina, a fellow at the University of Zurich and member of the Geneva International Sanctions Network.

“The EU can impose travel bans and asset freezes on those deemed responsible for the poisoning, but the crux is to gather evidence. As the poisoning happened on Russian territory, evidence gathering will be complicated and thus vulnerable to potential litigation that could undermine the credibility of EU sanctions,” she said.

To aid that process, officials have called on Russia to launch a proper investigation to determine who is culpable — and, therefore, who it can sanction — but are not expecting results.

“Navalny is not the first one who became a victim of such a cowardly and inhumane attack or assassination attempt,” the EU’s foreign affairs spokesperson Peter Stano said Thursday.

“We have seen other people being killed in Russia, other opposition voices being silenced: Anna Politkovskaya, Sergei Magnitsky, Boris Nemtsov. Did we have satisfactory results from the investigation of their assassinations? The track record is not very satisfactory.”

U.S.-Germany relations

Another element of the west’s response is increasingly [vocal opposition](#) to Nord Stream 2 from the U.S., a project which has Merkel’s high-profile support.

“It is unhelpful that this has become such a difficult issue between the U.S. and Germany. It doesn’t make handling this easier,” said Nigel Gould-Davies, a former British diplomat and senior fellow for Russia and Eurasia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

“The paradox here is that the White House has been very concerned about Nord Stream 2, but

not on issues like Navalny. And it's Merkel who's concerned about Navalny, but not about Nord Stream 2.”

Related article: [Navalny Case Poisons Ties Between Germany, Russia](#)

Germany has made painstaking efforts to keep the issue of Nord Stream 2 distinct from the rest of its Russia policy. For instance, the existence of the project did not prevent Merkel from marshalling a tough European response to the downing of MH17 over eastern Ukraine or from backing widespread diplomatic expulsions after the Skripal poisonings.

“Merkel reiterated just a few days ago that Nord Stream 2 should be considered a separate issue, but that was before we knew about the Novichok angle. This makes it a live issue again,” Gould-Davies said.

Domestic opposition has also increased in recent days, with opposition politicians and the Bild tabloid paper urging the chancellor to back out of the project, which is more than 90% complete.

Virtue signalling

Another round of personal sanctions against a handful of Russian secret service or military figures is unlikely to alarm Moscow.

“It’s a nice bit of virtue signalling, but that’s it. It won’t have any tangible impact. [Kremlin spokesman Dmitry] Peskov will shout ‘don’t interfere in our country,’ then the Europeans and Americans will say ‘you’re a dreadfully-run authoritarian country.’ Plus ça change,” said Connolly.

“This isn’t something that will fundamentally change relations between Russia and the west. They’re bad already. I don’t see Navalny being the issue that makes them worse. This will be a minor blip in the recent history of Russian-western relations,” he added.

But despite their limited scope, personal sanctions do have a wider role to play, said Shagina.

“The EU is no longer under the illusion that sanctions will change Russia's behavior. However, it is important for Brussels to react to what happened to Navalny and send a clear message to the Kremlin. This symbolic message of sanctions is equally important and a non-reaction is seen as unacceptable — and even detrimental to the EU as a global advocate of human rights.”

As the recent [falls in the ruble](#) and Russian stock markets have shown, the mere possibility of further sanctions — stricter restrictions on Russia’s energy sector or government debt, for instance — can be influential.

“Russia knows there are steps that the West — particularly the U.S. — has not yet taken, but could. And looking at the Russian press, there is concern that more pain could well follow,” said Gould-Davies.

For Navalny, the symbolism and threats of western sanctions in recent years weren’t enough.

He [urged](#) governments to get tougher on corruption, and take a stricter approach to Russian oligarchs' "dirty money" in their own countries.

When asked how the West should respond now, Navalny's chief aide Leonid Volkov called for the most traditional of symbolic gestures, stressing the [moral](#) and ethical elements of the case.

"I really want the international community to make sure that nobody, under any circumstances, ever shakes hands with Vladimir Putin again."

AFP contributed reporting.

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