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UK Targets Russian Spies with Sanctions Over Malicious Activity

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— Categories: Breaking News

The United Kingdom (UK) has announced its most extensive sanctions package to date against Russian intelligence operatives, targeting 18 individuals and three military intelligence units over a series of hostile acts including cyberattacks, sabotage, and attempted assassinations. The move aims to publicly expose and curtail the reach of the Kremlin's military intelligence agency, the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU).

According to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the sanctions include asset freezes and travel bans against GRU officers involved in internationally condemned operations. Two key GRU divisions were singled out: Unit 26165, known as “Fancy Bear,” was implicated in hacking campaigns including interference in democratic elections and surveillance of Yulia Skripal before the 2018 Novichok poisoning in Salisbury. Meanwhile, Unit 29155 was linked to sabotage efforts and the devastating 2022 Mariupol theatre bombing, where hundreds of civilians were killed.

The UK also imposed sanctions on GRU Unit 74455, tied to persistent cyber threats targeting British infrastructure. The campaign forms part of what the government describes as an ongoing hybrid warfare strategy by Russia, combining cyberattacks, disinformation, and covert action to destabilise the West and support the Kremlin’s geopolitical ambitions.

Foreign Secretary David Lammy stated the UK would not tolerate such malign activities. He stressed the importance of working with international allies, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU), and the United States (US), to counter Russia’s influence. Joint condemnations were issued, with NATO describing Moscow’s cyber operations as a direct threat to the security of its members.

In addition to targeting GRU officers, the UK sanctioned the African Initiative, a Russian-funded propaganda outlet accused of spreading anti-Western narratives and undermining public trust in health services across West Africa.

While officials acknowledge that many of those sanctioned are unlikely to travel to the UK, the public naming and restriction of assets serve to limit their international freedom and disrupt operational capabilities. Intelligence services, including the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), part of the UK's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), confirmed that Russian malware, such as X-Agent and Authentic Antics, had been used to infiltrate political institutions and critical infrastructure.

The action reinforces the UK's broader defence strategy under the National Security Act 2023, which aims to protect the country from espionage, sabotage, and foreign interference.