

## The Czech President searching for the Novichok in the Czech Republic

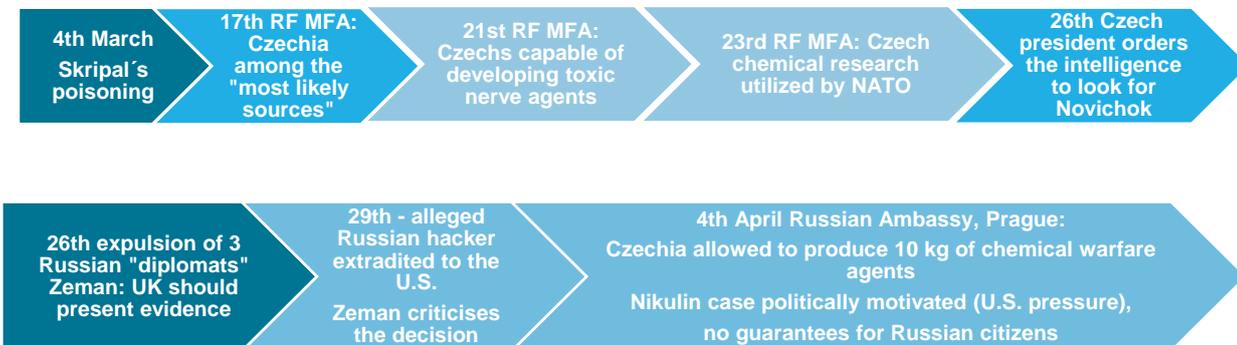


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Kremlin Watch is a strategic program which aims to expose and confront instruments of Russian influence and disinformation operations focused against Western democracies.

### Timeline of Czech “involvement” in Skripal’s poisoning



### The double agent

Sergei Skripal, retired Russian military intelligence officer sentenced to 13 years in prison in 2006 after being accused of “high treason in the form of espionage” in favour of Britain, was among the spies that Russia exchanged with the US in 2010. According to the FSB, the Russian security service, the former GRU’s colonel Skripal had been providing classified information about several dozen Russian undercover officers to MI6 since the late ‘90s. The materials were then used for expelling Russian agents from multiple European countries.<sup>1</sup>

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of March, officer Skripal was found by a police officer in Salisbury lying unconscious alongside his daughter Yulia Skripal. According to British authorities, the pair was poisoned with the deadly nerve agent Novichok, which was developed by Soviet scientists and probably applied to the front door of Skripal’s house. Since the accident, both persons are under intensive clinical care.<sup>2</sup> Although their health is said to be stable, according to various voices they may never fully recover.

The attack has significantly worsened relations between the West and Russia, which was accused of being behind the poisoning. On March 12<sup>th</sup>, British Prime Minister Theresa May told Parliament that “world-leading experts” at the Porton Down Lab confirmed the presence of the chemical. May also said “the Government has concluded that it is highly likely that Russia was responsible”.<sup>3</sup> Russia is also probably the only country known for assassinating its citizens in other European states, as was the case of former officer of the Russian FSB secret service Alexandr Litvinenko.

The attempted murder is still under investigation and it is expected to continue for months. However, Theresa May’s assessment is only part of the intelligence knowledge, which the United Kingdom has shared with its close allies within the European Union and NATO.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/05/who-is-sergei-skripal-ex-spy-exposed-substance-salisbury-hospital>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/29/world/europe/britain-yulia-skripal-hospital.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.polygraph.info/a/russian-ex-spy-poisoned-fact-check/29097171.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/salisbury-poisoning-russia-novichok-nerve-agent-porton-down-proof-evidence-mod-latest-a8286761.html>

In a show of solidarity, several Western countries have responded to the attack on British soil by expelling Russian diplomats suspected of spying. Days after, the Russian foreign ministry responded reciprocally.

As the row with Russia develops, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) is now considering the request from the Russian consulate staff members demanding access to Yulia Skripal in the hospital.<sup>5</sup> The “rights and wishes of Yulia” will be taken into account.

If the suspicions about Russian involvement are confirmed, Russia will have broken a spy game rule that dates back to the Cold War. The “spy swap deals” usually guarantee safety of the agents to ensure the possibility of future swaps.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, if Putin really has broken this unwritten rule, he must have had very good reasons to do so. Skripal might have been disclosing the Kremlin’s secret information about its operatives. In the context of US and UK investigations, it could also be a message for other agents to dare not speak out.

### Muddying the waters as usual

Russia strongly rejects its involvement, citing the lack of evidence. Vladimir Putin commented on the accusations by suggesting that Britons should sort it out themselves and that there is an “information gymnastics” in the British media, which are not always known for their objectivity.”<sup>7</sup> His Press Secretary, Dimitry Peskov, added that Skripal is of „zero value“ for the Russian Federation since he was not a Russian, but a British spy. According to Peskov, if he was somehow important, Russia would not have exchanged him. He also criticised the fact that Russia was blamed for the attack only a couple of hours after the accident, despite that the OPCW’s experts had stated that it would take three weeks to examine the substance.<sup>8</sup>

Russian officials are trying to discredit international investigation by claiming that the UK is manipulating the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).<sup>9</sup> A very similar tactic was utilised during the Dutch-led investigation on the shooting down of MH17. MFA’s spokesperson Maria Zakharova complained<sup>10</sup> that the UK refused to cooperate with Russia on its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention and failed to provide Russia with any information. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov slammed the investigation as an unprecedented “mockery of international law”.<sup>11</sup>

Russian state media were even denying that Russia has ever held the Novichok chemical agent (news agency Interfax). Two Russian scientists, Vladimir Ugev and Leonid Rink, have contradicted these claims by saying that they were personally involved in the work to create the nerve agent in the Soviet era. According to Ugev, the particular substance was never declared to the OPCW, but its production in Russia had ceased after 2011.<sup>12</sup> However, British chemical weapons expert and former British Army

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/31/foreign-office-considers-russian-consular-access-to-yulia-skripal>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.businessinsider.com/sergei-skripal-poisoning-russia-spy-swap-deals-at-risk-2018-3>

<sup>7</sup> <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803121062444382-putin-skripal-uk/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAVjDiYyz1c>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.interfax.ru/world/604434>

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3120170#9](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3120170#9)

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0x0hs6Q\\_Uk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0x0hs6Q_Uk)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/novichok-nerve-agent-poison-soviet-russia-salisbury-attack-leonid-rink-vladimir-uglev-the-bell-a8265626.html>

officer Hamish de Bretton-Gordon says that information about its production in Shikhany (central Russia) was part of a report submitted by Russia to the OPCW several years ago.<sup>13</sup> Further investigation is now in the hands of OPCW, which has already confirmed the use of Novichok in Skripal's poisoning. If Russia insists that it really does not possess stockpiles of Novichok, it should call on the OPCW to visit the country and to verify whether the Novichok came from there.

Since the accident occurred, the Kremlin has triggered a disinformation campaign similar to the one that accompanied MH17. This push even has the similar goal of puzzling the audience and impairing its ability to make an opinion on worldwide chemical weapon stocks. To date, more than 20 different scenarios about the Scripal case have been circulating online (for a timeline see RFE/RL<sup>14</sup>). All signs indicate that the activities are controlled by the Russian state. The Kremlin's state media, like Russia Today and Sputnik (but also non-state media), are very active in creating a smokescreen. They provide unlimited space to "experts" and Russian political figures who claim that anyone but Russia could be the culprit since "many countries can produce Novichok".

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, the spokeswoman of the Russian MFA voiced<sup>15</sup> that the Skripal case was immediately used to escalate the "anti-Russian campaign" in the western media which is directed and aimed at complicating relations between the two countries. She has even inadvertently described how the Russian disinformation campaign works in an effort to stump Western media: "First, a media background will be stirred up, absolutely ungrounded and unsubstantiated accusations will be voiced, and then everything will eventually be classified. And neither journalists, nor the public nor officials will know what really happened there."

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, the state-owned news channel Russia 24 claimed<sup>16</sup> that it was an accidental exposure due to the proximity to the Defense Science and Technology Laboratory at Porton Down. This narrative was completed with RT's article<sup>17</sup> about the "Cold- War-era" chemical weapons testing which was later debunked by StopFake.<sup>18</sup> The same day state-owned TV channel Russia 1 said that it is an attempt to inflame Russophobia, however it couldn't decide who to blame first. While on March 11<sup>th</sup> it was the Britons who did it, the day after the United States was blamed and on March 13<sup>th</sup> even Ukraine became the culprit ("to frame Russia").

However, the Russian officials have proven to be very active in promoting different stories. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of March, Russian PM Dmitry Medvedev suggested that Her Majesty's Government might have been behind the attack. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of March Sergey Lavrov said that Britain is taking actions against Russia to distract<sup>19</sup> from Brexit, **while on March 17<sup>th</sup> the MFA spokeswoman said<sup>20</sup>** that the West is trying to undermine Russia's role as a peacemaker after progress in Syria. She also added<sup>21</sup> that the poison could have originated from the UK, Sweden, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, which "are the most likely

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/14/nerve-agent-novichok-produced-russia-site-expert>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/timeline-deny-distort-novichok-russia-changing-stories-poisoning/29113561.html>

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3114528#20](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3114528#20)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/12/russian-state-tv-accuses-uk-of-plotting-spy-attack>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.rt.com/uk/420800-spy-russia-gas-facility/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-uk-s-secret-weapons-lab-chief-confirms-chemical-weapons-development/>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.businessinsider.com/sergei-lavrov-says-brexit-troubles-are-behind-uk-action-against-russia-2018-3>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.businessinsider.com/theories-russia-is-using-to-deflect-blame-for-sergei-skripal-attack-2018-3#9-western-countries-did-it-because-they-wanted-to-destroy-russias-reputation-as-a-peacemaker-in-syria-9>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.rt.com/news/421591-uk-produce-novichok-agent/>

sources". These countries were said to have been carrying out "intense research on the substances from the Novichok program, approximately, since the end of the 1990s until the present time, but the project is not the creation of Russia or the Soviet Union".<sup>22</sup> Mr. Putin repeatedly claimed that all stocks created under the USSR have been destroyed. Also, according to Russia's representative at the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, Aleksandr Shulgin, the program was smuggled from the Soviet Union and continues in certain countries.<sup>23</sup>

To sum up, the main narrative of the Russian disinformation campaign remains targeted against Britain, but Russia also actively seeks to divert attention from the fact that the chemical was manufactured on its territory. According to Russian media, the Prime Minister Theresa May could have even arranged the conspiracy herself since she is a friend of the recently appointed director of the CIA (claims TV Zvezda<sup>24</sup>). However, the Kremlin primarily points the finger at British intelligence, which is deemed by Moscow to be behind the attempted assassination.<sup>25</sup>

### The Czech footprint in the Skripal case

Although Russian Ambassador to the Czech Republic Alexander Zmejevsky claims that Russia is not accusing Czechs of possible involvement in the poisoning, statements from the Kremlin suggest otherwise. Since the 17<sup>th</sup> of March there were numerous stories from Russia with a clear objective to create the impression that Russia is a victim, not the culprit.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of March, Zakharova listed Czechia as one of the most likely source of origin saying that the Novichok program has been carried out since the end of the 1990s until the present time.<sup>26</sup>

On March 21<sup>st</sup>, the Russian Foreign Ministry posted on its website that "Clarifications are due as to why Russia was absolutely unfoundedly accused of being the perpetrator in the Skripal case at a time where activities under the conventional Western name Novichok were conducted in the United Kingdom, the United States, Sweden and the Czech Republic. The achievements of these countries in creating new toxic agents of this type are mentioned in more than 200 open sources from NATO countries."<sup>27</sup>

During a briefing in Moscow on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, Maria Zakharovova said she was not talking about some secrets, but "facts from open sources". It is no secret that the Czech chemistry industry is highly developed. Czech soldiers even liquidated the consequences of the use of chemical weapons in Kuwait.<sup>28</sup> What is more, Czech scientists have considerable knowledge on nerve agents production and are actively developing antidotes for the absorption of their nervous paralytic effect. Although she

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.rt.com/news/421591-uk-produce-novichok-agent/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.rt.com/news/421591-uk-produce-novichok-agent/>

<sup>24</sup> [https://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane\\_i\\_mire/content/201803131813-odpd.htm](https://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane_i_mire/content/201803131813-odpd.htm)

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/salisbury-poisoning-russia-novichok-nerve-agent-orton-down-proof-evidence-mod-latest-a8286761.html>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.rt.com/news/421591-uk-produce-novichok-agent/>

<sup>27</sup> [http://www.mid.ru/en/press\\_service/spokesman/briefings/-/asset\\_publisher/D2wHaWMCU6Od/content/id/3145417](http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/briefings/-/asset_publisher/D2wHaWMCU6Od/content/id/3145417)

<sup>28</sup> [https://www.lidovky.cz/rusko-znovu-obvinuje-cesko-vyznamne-misto-ve-vyzkumu-otravných-latek-v-maji-latky-typu-novicok-iza-zpravy-domov.aspx?c=A180329\\_155024\\_In\\_domov\\_gib#utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=feed&utm\\_campaign=In\\_lidovky&utm\\_content=main](https://www.lidovky.cz/rusko-znovu-obvinuje-cesko-vyznamne-misto-ve-vyzkumu-otravných-latek-v-maji-latky-typu-novicok-iza-zpravy-domov.aspx?c=A180329_155024_In_domov_gib#utm_source=rss&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=In_lidovky&utm_content=main)

dismissed that they are blaming Czechs, she suggested that the Czech Republic could be involved in the development of toxic agents with goals other than protection.

According to Zakharova “media publications about the activities of the research centres in the Czech Republic, which carry out research programmes on chemical warfare agents, allow experts to conclude that nerve agents have an important place in these studies and are named Novichok under the Western classification.” The research is allegedly led by the Department of Toxicology and Military Pharmacology of the Faculty of Military Health Sciences of the Defence University of the Czech Republic, the Institute for Defence Against Weapons of Mass Destruction at the same University, and the Defence against Weapons of Mass Destruction Section of the Military Research Institute.

Nevertheless, according to Zakharova the whole of NATO utilizes the scientific potential of the Czech Republic in the area of research of poisonous substances of the Novichok type.<sup>29</sup> She also pointed to the NATO Centre against Weapons of Mass Destruction in the city of Vyškov (CZE) which was helping the United Kingdom in the investigation of who and what attacked the former agent Sergei Skripal. She was challenging the Czech authorities’ awareness of the Centre’s activities suggesting that the Centre could possess “the unaccounted-for warfare agents”.

As the Czech Republic appeared among the Kremlin’s targets, Russian Trojan horses in the country started to work. Despite various signs that the Czech Republic has never possessed Novichok, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of March Czech president Miloš Zeman ordered the Security Intelligence Service to find out whether the nerve agent could be developed or deposited on Czech territory. Although he personally does not believe it, he thinks that “it is always better to have information from intelligence that this accusation is false than to live in the belief that there can be something [truthful] in it”.

Zeman also repeated the Kremlin’s storyline that the United Kingdom should “present some evidence that the Russians wanted to kill agent Skripal”. It comes as no surprise that his statements appeared in Russian media that endorse his pro-Kremlin view.<sup>30</sup>

However, Zeman’s steps do not correspond with the official position of the Czech Republic, which joined the Western countries and expelled three diplomats believed to be Russian agents under diplomatic cover. The Russian embassy in Prague is famous for its abundance with approximately 130 staff. According to sources from the Czech Information Security Agency (BIS), up to two thirds are Russian spies. The president, who considers it an “ineffective tool”, contradicted this view.<sup>31</sup>

On the same day, the Czech disinformation webpage “Aeronet”, which is known for its pro-Kremlin view (and non-transparency), published a story saying that within the political parties TOP09 and ODS there were voices pushing the Foreign Ministry to denounce at least 30 Russian diplomats, but thanks to Miloš Zeman the number remained at 3 officials. The webpage also claims that Zeman has information indicating that the Czech Republic has a sample of poison gas from a group of Novichok nerve agents. According to Aeronet, Russians have their moles within the MI6 so they know that the sample A-234

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<sup>29</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/ceskarepublika/201803297055447-ministerstvo-rf-nato-potencial-chemie-prumysl-ceskoslovensko/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803271062962071-zeman-czech-evidence-insufficient/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803271062962071-zeman-czech-evidence-insufficient/>

which was used in the Skripal case came to Britain from abroad, apparently from the Czech Republic, Poland or Sweden.<sup>32</sup>

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of March, Russian Ambassador to the Czech Republic Alexandr Zmeyerovsky held a press conference on convening a special meeting of the OPCW. He repeated that Czech experts were capable of working on the research into nerve agents such as Soman or Sarin and they continue in developing antidotes. He also said that under the OPCW agreement the Czech Republic was allowed to produce up to 10 kg of such a chemical.

On that occasion, he rejected the decision of the Czech prosecutor's office to extradite alleged Russian hacker Yevgeniy Nukulin to the U.S. as politically motivated. According to Zmeyerovsky the decision was influenced by the pressure from the U.S. which is fomenting anti-Russian hysteria. Consequently, the right to an impartial and just trial "is not guaranteed for the Russian citizens".<sup>33</sup>

President Zeman also criticised the decision of the Czech Minister of Justice Robert Pelikán as "unconventional". He condemned the fact that he did not know about the decision in advance, although the president has no powers in this way. Zeman was particularly interested in the Nikulin's case as evidenced by his invitation of Pelikán to Prague Castle twice in January and February. The purpose of these meetings was to lobby for Nikulin's release to Moscow.<sup>34</sup>

In reaction to the Russian negative stance, the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs posted on its website that it was a sovereign decision of the Czech Republic backed by the independent judiciary.<sup>35</sup> The MFA's Martin Stropnický also expressed his regret that the Kremlin manipulatively connects the Czech Republic with the use of the Novichok.

In addition, the Czech State Office for Nuclear Safety, the supervisory body of the OPCW, made a public statement that there has never been any Novichok within the Czech territory.<sup>36</sup> According to the former head of the Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology at Charles University, Jiří Bajgar, within the former Czechoslovakia, Novichok can only be found in the literature. In Czechoslovakia a laboratory in Zemianske Kostolany (currently Slovak Republic) synthesized the nervous paralytic substances (among others) aiming to develop medical antidotes. However, it was in no case the production of chemical weapons. According to Bajgar, Novichok was not among the synthesized substances because its exact structure is unknown to researchers.

This is also supported by the Slovak ministry of defence, which denies any presence of Novichok or its production in the country.<sup>37</sup> The head of the NATO Centre against Weapons of Mass Destruction

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<sup>32</sup> <https://aeronet.cz/news/zdroj-z-okoli-hradu-chteli-po-nas-vyhostit-30-ruskych-diplomatu-nakonec-ale-tu-nulu-za-trojkou-museli-skrtnout-dalsi-politicke-vitezstvi-prezidenta-milose-zemana-neocon-se-nazral/>

<sup>33</sup> [https://czech.mid.ru/cs\\_CZ/-/press-konferencia-posla-rossii-v-cehii-a-v-zmeevskogo-v-svazi-s-sozyvom-special-noj-sessii-ispolnitel-nogo-soveta-organizacii-po-zapreseniu-himiceskog?inheritRedirect=true&redirect=%2Fcs\\_CZ%2F](https://czech.mid.ru/cs_CZ/-/press-konferencia-posla-rossii-v-cehii-a-v-zmeevskogo-v-svazi-s-sozyvom-special-noj-sessii-ispolnitel-nogo-soveta-organizacii-po-zapreseniu-himiceskog?inheritRedirect=true&redirect=%2Fcs_CZ%2F)

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.respekt.cz/politika/zeman-lobbuje-za-vezneneho-ruskeho-hackera-nikulina>

<sup>35</sup> <https://twitter.com/mzvcr/status/981466899396616192>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.sujb.cz/aktualne/detail/clanek/vyjadreni-k-udalostem-ve-velke-britanii/>

<sup>37</sup> [https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/jed-novicok-ceska-republika-ceskoslovensko-jiri-bajgar\\_1803290600\\_hm](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/jed-novicok-ceska-republika-ceskoslovensko-jiri-bajgar_1803290600_hm)

Vratislav Osvald also rejects the presence of Novichok or any other offensive chemical substances on Czech soil.<sup>38</sup>

According to Markéta Bláhová from the State Office for Nuclear Safety, there are specialized offices in Czechia possessing the license from the authorities to handle chemical samples. Nevertheless, these substances serve only for peaceful purposes in various industries from agriculture to pharmacy. The supervisory body of OPCW also confirms that “the Czech Republic does not own, manufacture or develops chemical weapons” and it never did in the past.<sup>39</sup>

In conclusion, there is no reason to think that the Czech Republic is involved in Skripal's poisoning by creating or handling the Novichok. The Czech president, who is notorious for his pro-Kremlin stance, again proved that he will serve its interests and go against the official Czech position. He was already condemned by a Security Committee in the upper chamber of the Czech Parliament for helping to spread the false allegations and challenging the credibility of Czech allies.<sup>40</sup> After the OPCW's confirmation of the use of Novichok and with more and more evidence resurfacing, it is becoming harder for Russia to imply Czech involvement.

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<sup>38</sup> <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/zahranici/kdo-otravil-skripala-amater-to-byt-nemohl-kreml-o-novicoku-z/r~522fca36332911e880d30cc47ab5f122/?redirected=1523121252>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> [https://zpravy.idnes.cz/zeman-senatni-bezpecnosti-vybor-bis-jed-novicok-nikulin-pk2-/domaci.aspx?c=A180403\\_152529\\_domaci\\_dtt](https://zpravy.idnes.cz/zeman-senatni-bezpecnosti-vybor-bis-jed-novicok-nikulin-pk2-/domaci.aspx?c=A180403_152529_domaci_dtt)

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