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Boris Johnson and Putin's Unwitting Helpers

Sometimes it almost looks as if Putin's information warriors and political operators need not do anything, the West gladly does their work for them.

By Mark Galeotti

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Boris Johnson **Jess Taylor / UK Parliament**

News that the release of a report on alleged Russian interference in British politics is being delayed, likely until after the 12 December general election, has generated predictable anger, confusion and speculation — in itself a boon to Russia's political war.

Even by the standards of general election campaigns, the current political mood in Britain is feverish. Already there have been claims that Moscow tipped the balance in the 2016 Brexit referendum, hints of links to Prime Minister Boris Johnson or his allies, and even innuendo about the three years top Downing Street aide Dominic Cummings spent in Russia in the

1990s.

Moscow's Brexit bonanza

It certainly is hard to downplay the extent to which Brexit is convenient for Moscow. The Kremlin's aims are essentially to divide, distract and demoralize the West, and a narrow-majority referendum, years of self-harming wrangles and a presumed eventual Brexit could hardly have suited these goals better.

Britain is more acrimoniously and cannibalistically divided than ever, and faces the likelihood that, whatever happens, half its population will feel aggrieved and betrayed. The European Union is losing one of its most powerful members, which a number of smaller countries depended upon to resist the federalizing tendencies of Brussels, Paris and Berlin.

Although rhetorically everyone is committed to maintaining security cooperation, it is unlikely that this will survive any split undamaged. Britain will, of course, remain in NATO, but European ambitions to play a more robust security role will be much least plausible. Grandiose talk of a 'European Army' notwithstanding, future EU power projection operations will essentially have to lean heavily on the French, while the loss of intelligence capabilities will be serious.

Meanwhile, the British political elite have been so distracted by Brexit that it has had little time or oxygen to devote to much beyond the immediate needs of the moment. As one parliamentarian deeply involved in foreign affairs put it to me, "we still talk about strategy, but we have never been further from having any, in my experience."

This cannot help but having a draining, demoralizing effect on the U.K., at a time when European and indeed Western leadership is sorely lacking, stifled by domestic crises, lost in vainglorious posture or drowned out by twitterstorm.

Reality behind the rhetoric

That said, while Moscow may be happy with the outcome of both the 2016 referendum (a narrow majority for 'Leave') and the 2017 general election (a hung parliament), and is likely to have done what it could to bring them about, there is little evidence it truly had any impact.

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According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, a U.S. research institution, automated and inauthentic social media may have boosted the Leave vote by perhaps 1.76%. This could well have been decisive, but the Russians accounted for only a minority of these accounts: these days, everyone is in the bots and trolls game.

Likewise, despite suggestions that millionaire Arron Banks, the largest donor to the Brexit campaign, was induced to do so with promises of a lucrative gold deal, and donations to Johnson's Conservative party from rich Russians, there is still no evidence of Russia having made any substantive difference.

In fact, British policy towards Russia remains tough and unambiguous. The international round of expulsions of Russian spies after the Skripal affair was both a triumph of British diplomacy and an unprecedented rebuke to Kremlin adventurism.

Although there are real concerns as to whether the campaign will continue if a 'hard Brexit' hits the British economy badly — when the temptation will be to accept any money so long as it's not too visibly dirty — there have also been a series of measures enacted against Russian kleptocrats and their mysterious wealth.

Meanwhile, the U.K. remains a key player in NATO's presence in the Baltic states, and Defense Secretary Ben Wallace has announced that Operational Orbital, the British military training mission to Ukraine, is being extended for another three years.

Putin's unwitting helpers

Had the report offered a clean bill of health, then it is hard to imagine Number Ten would not have waved it through. If it doesn't say that the Russians successfully influence the outcome of recent polls, it is more likely to shine a spotlight on politically-embarrassing connections.

Maybe it isn't £160,000 ($205,000) Lubov Chernukhin, wife of a former Russian minister, paid to play tennis with him and former PM David Cameron (she appears to collect premiers: she paid £135,000 ($173,000) for dinner with Johnson's predecessor, Theresa May).

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Maybe there is some truth to the rumors of Russians providing funds to MPs' election chests and private office expenses. Maybe it is something personally embarrassing for Cummings, widely regarded as the strategist behind the Johnson premiership.

Maybe it's all of them. Or none of them.

The point is that such suspicions and speculation is deeply corrosive to a democratic order at the best of times. And the generalized legitimacy crises gripping the West, turbocharged by the Brexit issue, means these are hardly the best of times for British politics.

Instead, there are those who will look for and see the hand of Moscow behind every setback and schism. Already, to try and counter the claims of a cover-up, the Conservatives are instead trying to link the opposition Labour Party to Moscow. And the notion that anyone who lived and worked in Russia can be a Kremlin stooge.

Divide. Distract. Demoralize. Sometimes it almost looks as if Putin's information warriors and political operators need not do anything, the West gladly does their work for them.

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