

In British Elections, a (Non) Debate on Russia

Neither Labour nor the Conservative Party is willing or concerned enough to spend political capital to prioritize reviving U.K.–Russia relations.

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Alberto Pezzali / AP / TASS

On Thursday, Dec. 12, Britons will elect a new parliament. The general election — the U.K.'s third since 2015 — has become a referendum on Brexit as well as the management of Britain's National Health Service.

Yet a surprising amount of oxygen has been taken up by Russia in what might appear at first glance to be a debate on what to do about a deeply troubled relationship.

The reality is that neither Labour nor the Conservative Party is willing or concerned enough to

spend political capital to prioritize reviving U.K.–Russia relations, to the extent that neither party has offered a real plan for doing so.

But that has not stopped them from aggressively trading accusations that the other party has been compromised by, and is presumably soft on, Russia.

There was no reason for Russia to become a political football until early November, when it emerged that the release of a parliamentary committee’s report on Russia — its interference in U.K. politics, its poisoning of the Skripals in 2018, and its “[poison\[ous\]](#)” money — was being blocked by Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

Its authors cried foul, noting that review by Downing Street was essentially a formality, that any delay risked postponing the report’s release until well into 2020, and that its contents were of especial public importance in the lead-up to an election. Downing Street, for its part, claimed nothing was out of the ordinary.

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What the report actually says remains unknown. Some news reports have claimed it [confirms](#) allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 Brexit referendum; some insist it [refutes](#) them. It seems likely that the report details some ties between the Conservative Party and Russian donors, though it cannot be assumed that all Russian donors are equally suspect, much less necessarily acting as agents, and on the orders, of the Kremlin rather than simply supporting their party of choice. And it may very well be that the report’s release was blocked to deny Johnson’s rivals ammunition on the campaign trail.

Somewhat predictably, Johnson’s decision to postpone the report’s release created as much fallout as (if not more than) any revelations of ties between the Tories and rich Russians would have.

His secrecy — along with the [links](#) journalists were able to document without access to the report and questions about the three “[mysterious](#)” years Johnson aide Dominic Cummings spent in Russia — has allowed Labour and its supporters to present the prime minister, who is widely [distrusted](#) anyway, as a man with something to hide (or even a “[Kremlin project](#),” according to Paul Mason) and his party as in the Kremlin’s pocket. Even Hillary Clinton weighed in, calling Johnson’s actions “[damaging](#), inexplicable, and shaming.”

Labour’s attacks on Johnson over Russia have put it in an awkward position, however. The [position](#) of its leader, Jeremy Corbyn, is that NATO is too tough on Russia, a platitude that amounts to a moderate stance for a socialist firebrand with a history of calling for NATO’s disbandment and Britain’s withdrawal from the 70-year-old alliance (and one that is now shared by France’s president).

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Officially, Labour has [pledged](#) to keep Britain in NATO and to continue to meet the alliance’s target of spending 2 percent of GDP on defense.

Johnson and his allies have focused their response not on Corbyn's proposal for an improved U.K.–Russia relationship but on the Labour leader's comments on the Skripal affair, [asserting](#) that at the time of the ex-spy's poisoning, the Labour leader "sided with Vladimir Putin" by refusing to acknowledge Russia's guilt.

Corbyn [wrote](#) in March 2018 that the Russian state had either committed "a crime" or "allowed these deadly toxins to slip out of the control it has an obligation to exercise," the latter a possibility entertained by many Russia watchers when the Novichok news first broke. The Conservative rebuttal to Labour's accusations, then, is symmetric, targeting the party leader's character and their judgement on Russia, not the party's Russia policy, real or proposed.

British voters are hearing more about Russia than any other foreign country (save the EU, obviously) yet learning little about what, if anything, the only parties capable of installing someone in 10 Downing Street would do to change that relationship. If, as analyst Oscar Jonsson has argued, the choice facing Western states is between a focus on deterrence or one on de-escalation, what Britons have been presented with instead is denigration, by and of their political leaders.

It would be one thing if the status quo was acceptable, but it is not. Indeed, it has not been for a while: visiting Moscow in December 2017, several months before the Salisbury attack, then foreign secretary Johnson was told that the relationship was at a "[low point](#)," while in November 2018 Prime Minister Theresa May declared that "[this](#) is not the relationship with Russia that we want."

Since that time, the U.K.–Russia relationship has not markedly improved, while the challenges facing the two countries and their relations have only grown. The unraveling of key arms control agreements — the INF treaty met its [demise](#) this year and, as things currently stand, New START is [set to expire](#) in 2021 — threatens Britain's security as well as that of Russia and the United States.

Moreover, despite the great attention paid to Russia and foreign interference in this race, the most the Tory manifesto has to say on these issues are vague promises to "stand up to foreign countries that threaten the stability of Europe, or commit state-sponsored murder on British soil," and take "measures to [prevent](#) any foreign interference in elections." [Labour's](#) refers only to the fact that the Russia report has not been released, one of several foreign policy failures attributed to the Tories.

Reasonable people can disagree about how best to deal with Russia and what balance of dialogue and deterrence to strike in relations with it. But those running for the job of prime minister seem to be content with the U.K.–Russia relationship remaining in crisis and the U.K.'s Russia policy remaining on autopilot, a bipartisan indifference equaled only by the bipartisan enthusiasm for Russia's use as a political football.

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