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Britain's Russia Report: Propaganda for authoritarianism and war

The UK's Intelligence Security Committee (ISC) report into "Russian interference" in British politics has been released in significantly redacted form, after a year's delay.

What was built up by the most fervently anti-Russian sections of the media as a political bombshell is a dud. Besides brief repetitions of previous claims of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential elections and 2017 French elections—asserted as proven facts—the report adds a few new allegations and nothing in the way of evidence.

A single throwaway reference is made to "credible open source commentary suggesting that Russia undertook influence campaigns in relation to the Scottish independence referendum in 2014." This is justified with a reference to a study by Ben Nimmo, a member of the imperialist think tank, the Atlantic Council.

The report's sole case study, on the 2016 Brexit referendum, is less than three pages long and begins, "There have been widespread public allegations that Russia sought to influence the 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the EU. The impact of any such attempts would be difficult—if not impossible—to assess, and we have not sought to do so."

It states, "Open source studies have pointed to the preponderance of pro-Brexit or anti-EU stories on RT and Sputnik, and the use of 'bots' and 'trolls,' as evidence of Russian attempts to influence the process," but admits, "HMG [Her Majesty's Government] had not seen or sought evidence of successful interference in UK democratic processes or any activity that has had a material impact on an election, for example influencing results."

Furthermore, “We have not been provided with any post-referendum assessment of Russian attempts at interference.”

None of which stops the report declaring, on the say-so of British officials and special contributors like anti-Russia hawks Anne Applebaum and Christopher Steele, that Russia poses a serious “threat to the UK.” The government and intelligence agencies are scolded for failing to provide the proof for this narrative. “Had the relevant parts of the Intelligence Community conducted a ... threat assessment prior to the referendum,” it is “inconceivable” that “Russian intent” to interfere would not have been discovered, it asserts.

Realising how thin their “evidence” is, the report’s authors also decided to discover the presence of Russian oligarchs rubbing shoulders with Britain’s ruling circles. They are accused of developing a “new normal” of “Russian influence,” having “invested in extending patronage and building influence across a wide sphere of the British establishment—PR firms, charities, political interests, academia and cultural institutions.”

The ISC has concocted a way of presenting no evidence of Russian interference in elections as proof of Russian interference in elections. As to referencing Russian oligarchs, no one needs convincing that the super-rich of many nationalities dominate British politics. The idea that this is evidence of a Machiavellian Russian plot is absurd.

As for the allegations of biased coverage on RT and Sputnik, where is the national media that does not represent its own ruling class’ interests abroad? The report approvingly references the UK’s military Fusion Doctrine which explicitly lists the BBC’s World Service as an instrument of UK “soft power.” It lists as a source of its findings the Integrity Initiative, described as “a UK-based think-tank and charity, aimed at countering Russian disinformation campaigns,” but which is a government-backed psy-ops operation. It describes the UK’s “offensive cyber capability” as “essential.”

The only thing the report proves is that British politics is ever more closely mirroring American politics, where conflicts within the ruling class are fought out through the prism of anti-Russian hysteria, with anti-democratic and militarist implications.

The ISC Russia report has been a central mechanism through which pro-EU, Democratic Party-aligned sections of the British bourgeoisie have carried out their opposition to Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his Brexit policy. Johnson sought to impede its publication to prevent any undermining of the 2016 referendum vote on which his government depends.

Such differences on foreign policy orientation notwithstanding, raising the “threat” posed by Russia allows both wings of the ruling class to pursue the goals they have in common—the suppression of political dissent in the working class at home and the preparation for aggressive interventions abroad.

One of the most sinister sections of the report reads, “Whilst we understand the nervousness around any suggestion that the intelligence and security Agencies might be involved in democratic processes ... that cannot apply when it comes to the protection of those processes. ... In our opinion, the operational role must sit primarily with MI5. ... The policy role should sit with the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism (OSCT).”

The authors also advise “a requirement for social media companies to co-operate with MI5 where it is suspected that a hostile foreign state may be covertly running a campaign.”

These are arguments for McCarthyism and a police state, where accusations of foreign interference can be used to outlaw facts and opinions the ruling class finds inconvenient. Russia is held responsible for “fomenting political extremism” and a “general discrediting of the West.”

The report quotes the Integrity Initiative’s view that “When people start to say ‘You don’t know what to believe’ or ‘They’re all as bad as each other’, the disinformers are winning.” It quotes British journalist and security specialist Edward Lucas saying, “If you believe that the West is run by hypocritical, incompetent, greedy politicians, then it becomes much harder to take any kind of moral high ground about Russia which really is.”

An indication of the use these recommendations will be put to was given by Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab’s allegation last week that Russia had interfered in the 2019 General Election by “amplifying” a leaked government document on a potential trade deal with the US, which then Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn revealed at a press conference—long after it had been circulating freely on the Internet. The pro-Tory media denounced Corbyn as Russia’s “useful idiot,” passing over the fact that the leak revealed the fact that Johnson’s government was preparing to sell off sections of the National Health Service. News reports on the Russia report crowded out reports of a vote by Tory MPs against a Labour motion barring foreign private companies securing control of UK health care services.

The turn to censorship and authoritarianism is intimately bound up with Britain’s attempt to spearhead an international war drive against Russia. The report argues as one of its key themes, “More broadly, the way forward lies with taking action with our allies; a

continuing international consensus is needed against Russian aggressive action. The West is strongest when it acts collectively and that is the way in which we can best attach a cost to Putin's actions. The UK has shown it can shape the international response, as it did in response to the Salisbury attacks. It must now seek to build on this effort to ensure that momentum is not lost."

Support for this policy is now near universal in the corporate media and capitalist parties, with the sole difference that some believe the focus should be on China as the main danger. The *Telegraph* argued in its July 22 editorial, "it is now beyond obvious that Russia is a rogue state that must be confronted robustly." The *Financial Times* wrote on July 21, "With so much focus on a potential 'new cold war' with China, the report is a salutary warning of the challenge still posed by the main foe in the last one." The same day, the *Guardian*, which has led the anti-Russian sabre rattling, labelled Russia a "hostile state," having previously editorialised, "what will the government do to halt [Putin's] ongoing assault on Britain?"

Labour's Shadow Foreign Secretary Lisa Nandy said in an interview with the LBC radio station, "There have been repeated concerns that the Russian government have been interfering in British democracy. ... We don't need this Russia report to know that we've got a problem here and we've got to be much tougher in our approach."

Confronted with a crisis of British imperialism after Brexit and, more importantly, increasingly explosive domestic social tensions, the ruling class is relaunching an anti-Russian campaign. The strategy is to maintain Britain's geostrategic position by placing it in the front rank of an international confrontation with Russia and China, led by the US, urge "national unity" against global enemies and justify domestic censorship and repression.

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