



SSEESing the Russia report

Press briefing

29 July 2020

BACKGROUND

On 21 July, the UK Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee released its long-awaited report on Russia.

This briefing document provides a summary of an online panel discussion hosted by UCL SSEES on 27 July 2020, during which three panellists assessed the report.

RUSSIAN RECEPTION

Emma Burrows – ITV News Editor, ITN

KEY POINTS The report was criticised by Russian official as 'Russophobic.' These officials used similar language and techniques to deny the report's accusations as they did with, for example, allegations of meddling in the US election. Comparatively, the response to this report appeared more apathetic than the response to accusations of interference in US internal affairs or the aftermath of the Skripal poisoning. At the same time, Russia will probably have been satisfied insofar as the report projected the Kremlin's reach into the heart of Westminster.

1. Officials and state media used familiar techniques and stock language to respond to the accusations contained in the report, although the response was more apathetic compared to the

Salisbury poisonings and the DNC hacking. The report was denounced as Russophobic. While denying the content of the report, officials sought to amplify what they saw as a lack of evidence in the British allegations. At the same time, alternative narratives were also proposed. These included the Russian ambassador not ruling out the possibility that independent Russian actors were behind cyber-attacks on the UK.

2. Although the report's findings were dismissed, its portrayal of Russia as an 'accomplished adversary with well-resourced and world-class offensive and defensive intelligence capabilities' will probably have appealed to the Kremlin. The conclusions contained in the report and the idea that Russia helped the US president get elected are very powerful, satisfying a sense of self-belief and self-pride.
3. The depiction of a powerful Russia on television, however, glosses over the challenges Russia faces in the fight against coronavirus, the budgetary impact of the drop in the price of oil, and the postponement of a national billion-dollar spending plan. Against this backdrop, the Kremlin probably profits from the idea Russia can sow discord abroad and the characterisation on state television of the West as a place of turmoil. This is

suggestive, reminding Russians why they may be better off with Putin, who offers them stability rather than chaos. However, with increasing penetration of the internet and the coming of age of a generation that does not remember the chaos of the 1990s, state media may be an area of increasing weakness for the Kremlin.

UK CONTEXT

Dr Pete Duncan – Associate Professor of Russian Politics and Society, UCL SSEES

KEY POINT While the report is entitled ‘Russia’, it appears to be more about the UK and the UK’s perception of Russian interference in British affairs than about Russia itself and its goals. The report does a good job of explaining that there are groups in Britain who benefit from Russian interference (e.g., relating to investment and money laundering) and have a vested interest in limiting investigation into these affairs. What it fails to explain is the present government attitude toward Russia.

There are three main motivations for Russian involvement in British affairs:

1. To keep the London ‘laundrette’ (or ‘laundromat’) open and working. Putin and his cronies have been linked to organised crime since Putin was deputy mayor of Saint Petersburg in the 1990s. Much of their wealth is exported to, and safeguarded in, London – and the oligarchs want to keep this status. For this, they need Britain to, at least in some areas, continue to function well.
2. Russia wants the power to control or eliminate the opposition to Putin who work in or are based in the UK. This goal does not necessarily require that Putin’s opponents in the UK be killed. Russia merely wants to prevent the opposition from interfering with Russia’s interests and its agents’

ability to act with impunity in Britain. Boris Johnson’s complacent attitude, and de facto agents in the House of Lords, can help facilitate this.

3. Russia also has wider international goals, which would benefit from interference in the UK – or at least the perception of such interference. Putin’s Russia has the goal of weakening the UK and its alliances. Within the UK, one example is the support of Alex Salmond and the Scottish referendum, which, if successful, would have weakened the British state, economy, and its international position. Britain also sits in a pivotal position as a link between the EU, EU NATO members, and the US. Russia benefits from the UK being outside of the EU, since the UK would still be this connection, but the coherence would be disrupted.

SOLUTIONS?

Professor Mark Galeotti – Honorary Professor, UCL SSEES

KEY POINT The report’s lengthy hibernation period meant expectations were unrealistically high, but the report does pose a lot of the right questions about Russian influence. However, it does not contain much by way of solutions.

1. One of the key pillars of the report is the issue of Russian oligarchs and their vast wealth – likely laundered – flowing into London. It’s not clear how successfully rich Russians are able to influence UK politics. This also raises the question of whether Russian money should be treated differently than that of wealthy Saudi, Chinese, or, for that matter, British political donors and lobbyists. Should we be tackling the global laundromat in London, or just the Russian one?
2. Discussions about disinformation and political influence tend to focus on sites with minimal viewership, such as RT,

which do not pose any real danger to British democracy. We need to broaden our understanding of disinformation to consider the 'laundering' of information that occurs across social media sites. The report suggests a greater role for MI5 in solving this. Ultimately, though, the real threat of misleading information is nothing to do with Russia: it is the crisis of legitimacy among some alienated communities. The solution will lie in reintegrating them into society.

3. The report's harshest criticisms were reserved for the intelligence agencies, who, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, have shifted focus away from Russia and are only now slowly rebuilding their capacities in that area. However, we should remember that the intelligence agencies' priorities are set by government. The report recommends that the agencies maintain their existing focus while also reprioritising Russia, but it is naïve to think that this can be done through 'smarter working'. If we want to do better, greater investment will be required.