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Russia and the UK: How Labour can build on the Integrated Review

TOP LINES

- When dealing with the Kremlin, the Conservative Government is tough in rhetoric and weak in action – the worst possible combination. The Integrated Review was no exception to this rule and constituted yet another missed opportunity to provide an innovative strategy not only for the amorphous threats posed by the Kremlin but also to identify areas of – and terms for – engagement.
- Under Keir Starmer the Labour Party has shown it is willing to address issues such as illegal financial transactions. This marks a contrast with current and previous Conservative Governments, whose ability to respond adequately to Russian threats has been constrained by their refusal to take illicit finance and malign influence seriously.
- As Whitehall looks to implement the Integrated Review, this is a good chance for Labour to expose the Government's vacuity and demand concrete actions in five key areas:
 1. Engagement and UK soft power.
 2. Economic crime and illicit finance.
 3. Traditional defence.
 4. Cyberspace and Disinformation.
 5. The UK skill shortage: a lack of Russia expertise.
- Ultimately, there is very little the UK can do to influence what happens inside Russia, but the British Government can reduce its own vulnerability to the security threats posed by Russia and improve the image we project to the Russian population. Both areas desperately need to be addressed and both require a genuine commitment to embodying values rather than embellishing Britain's national ego, a skill the current Conservative leadership has yet to learn.

BACKGROUND

Across Whitehall, implementation groups are forming to turn the UK Government's 2021 Integrated Review (IR) into concrete plans of action. Described as the "biggest review of our foreign, defence, security and development policy since the end of the Cold War", in fact¹ – as Lisa Nandy astutely noted – the IR is a description of problems rather than a strategy in the sense of a long-term plan. This causes obvious implementation issues for a range of policy areas, among them how to approach relations with Russia, named in the IR as the "most acute threat to [UK]

¹ Written Statement, House of Commons, [Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#), 26 February 2020

security”.² In the absence of clear direction from the IR, or a coherent foreign policy from the Government, this briefing will suggest concrete policies on Russia that would align with Labour’s values and priorities.

Unlike current and previous Conservative governments, whose ability to respond adequately to Russian threats has been constrained by their refusal to take illicit finance and malign influence seriously, under Keir Starmer the Labour Party has shown it is willing to address thorny issues relating to illegal and corrupt financial flows. As Shadow Foreign Secretary, Lisa Nandy consistently held the Government to account for its failure to implement the long overdue Intelligence Security Committee Russia Report recommendations.³ All the signs suggest that the new Shadow Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, will continue her work. One example of how Labour can lead in this area is the conference announcement of an illicit finance taskforce to transform the UK into the most challenging environment for the world’s kleptocrats.

There are many other facets to the UK’s relationship with Russia that also need to be considered, as well as the broader framing of the relationship. When dealing with the Kremlin, the Conservative Government is tough in rhetoric and weak in action – the worst possible combination. The IR was no exception to this rule and constituted yet another missed opportunity to provide an innovative strategy not only for the amorphous threats posed by the Kremlin but also to identify areas of – and terms for – engagement. Now, as Whitehall looks to implement the IR, this is a good chance for Labour to expose the Government’s vacuity and demand concrete actions in five key areas:

1. Engagement and UK soft power.
2. Economic crime and illicit finance.
3. Traditional defence.
4. Cyberspace and Disinformation.
5. The UK skill shortage: a lack of Russia expertise.

1. Engagement and soft power

It is patently obvious that the Russian Government is a security threat to Britain, British citizens and British interests. Labour’s previous muted reaction to Russian Government crimes in Britain and Ukraine places an onus on the post-Corbyn Labour Party to prove its strength on Russia; however, Labour should not overcorrect by demonising Russians or shutting down all paths to (beneficial) cooperation.

In the IR, there is no mention at all of any possible cooperation with Russia on any issue, which is an oversight.⁴ Although bilateral relations will remain strained, the UK should be open to cooperation where it is appropriate, where it benefits the UK’s interests, and where it does not require us to undermine the UK’s allies’ security interests. This would include in the cultural and educational spheres, in particular.

In particular, the UK Government should make every effort to encourage the few remaining opportunities for people-to-people engagement and contacts, taking care to differentiate between the Russian people and the Russian state. This gives a future Labour government a foundation upon which to improve the UK’s soft power and image in Russia.⁵

² HM Government, [Integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy](#), 16 March 2021

³ Labour Party, [Lisa Nandy responds to the publication of the ISC report on Russia](#), 21 July 2020:

⁴ Carnegie Moscow Centre, [UK Security Review: Implications for Russia](#), 2 April 2021

⁵ Soft power is defined here as the availability and use of cultural influence and attraction to improve one country’s standing or image in another.

This constructive approach would stand in stark contrast to that of the Conservative Government, whose dismissive attitude towards the UK's alliances and unnecessarily confrontational approach to Brexit has left the UK with fewer friends. Moreover, despite the Integrated Review celebrating the UK's soft power superpower status, and declaring soft power as the new battleground with both rivals (Russia, China) and allied competitors (France, Germany), the Government has hypocritically set about reducing the UK's ability to enhance and exercise such power by opting to close twenty British Council offices this year.⁶

Recommendations

The current UK Government is not serious about soft power, but the Labour Party, as a future government, could offer thoughtful policy alternatives, such as:

- **Engaging with the Russian Government on certain global issues, such as climate change; public health; non-proliferation, most likely as part of a larger collective of European or Western governments.** Moreover, the UK should actively encourage UK-Russian engagement in (unsensitive fields of) science and technology, education, and culture.
- **Investing more in (strictly depoliticised) educational exchange and Chevening programmes targeted at Russians from non-elite backgrounds.** Many ordinary Russians want to study and live in the UK but only the elites can afford it. The UK should expand the opportunities available to bright but underprivileged Russians through a levy on international students' private school fees, using this to fund extra Chevening places.
- Working with cultural institutions like Pushkin House and area studies centres at universities **host an annual festival of Russian culture.** By celebrating Russian culture, historical achievements and identity, this initiative would undermine a key Kremlin narrative, reiterated in the recent Russian National Security Strategy, that Western countries are committed to destroying Russian national culture.
- **Creating a soft power analysis unit within the FCDO** to understand, and learn from, how the UK's adversaries use public diplomacy. There is a tendency in some quarters to think countries like Russia or China are incapable of soft power, but this is a mistaken assumption. The Soviet legacy and widespread use of the Russian language have endowed Russia with considerable residual soft power potential, which it has enhanced through innovative public diplomacy approaches, often sensitive to the lived realities of target audiences around the world. For example, Russia uses religious diplomacy to bolster its influence with(in) traditionalist regimes from Africa to the Middle East, or memory diplomacy to promote revisionist narratives that instil sympathy towards Russia's historical roles in World War Two or the Cold War. The UK must develop further expertise on these activities, respond to any narratives that undermine British influence, and adapt those elements that work well. There also needs to be real and comprehensive cross-Whitehall collaboration, e.g. with MoD Threat Analysis teams, to avoid duplication.
- **Establishing (or contributing to) an Eastern European university in exile for the numerous repressed academics and students who are no longer able to teach or study in Russia.**⁷ Eastern European university in exile for the numerous repressed academics and students who are no longer able to teach or study in Russia. The UK could make specialist visas available to leading academics and gifted graduate students in need of academic freedom. In its initial stages, an embryonic university structure could be set up within an existing hub, such as at SSEES at UCL, and in the shorter and longer-term, the UK could use such a university to train Britain's own budding Russianists.

⁶ Guardian, [British Council to close 20 offices across globe after cuts and lost income](#), 9 September 2021

⁷ Open Democracy, [Open letter: we need a new university for eastern Europe](#), 14 June 2021

2. Economic crime and illicit finance

The UK's embrace of Russian culture and offer of friendship to ordinary Russians will send an even more powerful message if combined with a stark rejection of the ill-gotten gains that have been stolen from them. There is a staggering amount of Russian economic crime and illicit finance in the UK, with as much as 50% of dirty money from some post-Soviet laundromats flowing via UK corporate structures.⁸ Kremlin associates have long been able to park their money and mistresses in London, enjoying the same rule of law, property rights, and freedoms that they deny to Russian citizens at home. The Conservative Party refuses to do anything about this injustice, seemingly frightened about scaring off all the other dirty money. This only enhances the UK's role as a post-imperial butler for Russia's rich and powerful, a state of affairs that is rightly impacting the UK's reputation around the world, including in Russia where ordinary people ask why a country so rhetorically committed to liberal values is happy to accept such obscene amounts of money from, and give so many visas to, leading figures who repress the rights of ordinary people in Russia.⁹

By allowing the Kremlin to treat London as its playground, the UK Government not only works to keep Vladimir Putin and his acolytes in power, it also demonstrates that it is not serious about defending itself or its citizens. Unfortunately, the IR reiterates this lack of seriousness. While it contains eleven glib statements that the UK will tackle illicit finance, only on one occasion does the IR explain how: by passing the legislation needed to implement the Economic Crime Plan 'as soon as parliamentary time allows'. The Government has not provided Parliamentary time for this major plan. In fact, the legislation is so delayed that by now the Economic Crime Plan needs to be updated and upgraded.

Recommendations

Labour should call on the Government to:

- **Implement a refreshed Economic Crime Plan** which goes further than the 2019 version to include real action on the white-collar criminals who facilitate so much of global corruption and to ensure law enforcement units, from the police to the National Crime Agency, are properly resourced.
- **Immediately halt the golden visa scheme (Tier 1 Investor Visa) to Russian citizens.**¹⁰ This was discussed following the Salisbury attacks, and recommended by the ISC, but never implemented.
- The IR commits the Government to introducing a Foreign Agents Register, similar to that used in the USA; however, while it has some benefits, if applied too haphazardly this could impact friendly organisations, like the New Zealand Tourist Board. **Instead, it would be better to introduce a 'Funded by the Proceeds of Authoritarian Agents' register**, which revealed UK-based agents working for non-democratic governments who do not allow their publics free and fair elections. Needless to say, Russia would not be alone on this list and those working for the Kremlin or even less democratic regimes (Saudi Arabia, Iran, certain Central Asia republics) would need to include this label on their websites and on all relevant marketing and legal documentation.
- **Produce – and apply - more robust guidelines for the UK's political, sporting and cultural institutions and the conditions under which they can accept money.** Given the revelations of the Pandora Papers, the Labour Party should support a move towards **state funding of the UK's political parties.**

⁸ City A.M., [Top official warns of 'disturbing' amount of Russian money laundering in UK](#), 25 January 2021

⁹ Bullough, O., *Butler to the World: How Britain Lost an Empire and Found a Role*, Profile Books

¹⁰ Wired, [How the golden visa scheme let Russian money pour into the UK](#), 23 July 2020:

- In order to apply any current and/or future sanctions against corruptioneers, **billions of pounds are required in the form of resource financing funding for litigation budgets** billions of pounds are required in the form of resource financing funding for litigation budgets to support the work of the NCA's international corruption unit. Part of the money can be raised through an economic crime levy. Without this financial back up, the NCA unit will be toothless and unable to pursue the most powerful targets through the courts.

3. Traditional Defence

Russian illicit finance is directly connected to UK security and the British Government's continued willingness to allow in (ex)ministers and propagandists for a state that has used chemical weapons on British streets demonstrates a brazen lack of concern for Britons' safety. Yet, despite this, the Conservatives are still seen by many as the traditional party of defence; by contrast, Labour must contend with very real perceptions that it is weak on defence and that it is out of touch with those motivated to serve in the military. As such, for both electoral and security reasons, Labour must develop a clear-eyed and robust position on more traditional defence realms. As well as remaining committed to a 2% defence spending, this will inevitably touch upon Russia policy.

As a party with an internationalist outlook, but also one that needs to project a pro-European rather than pro-EU image of itself, there are weak areas to address in the IR relating to Russia. The IR rightly insists on the centrality of NATO to UK security interests and acknowledges the importance of Europe. However, its dismissiveness of the security contribution of the EU undermines the credibility of these statements.

Recommendations

In stressing the centrality of Eastern Europe to the UK's strategic defence role in Europe, Labour should remember that the most important element here is to avoid conflict with Russia at all costs by presenting smart, as much as strong, deterrence, rather than aggravating Russia for the sake of it. The Defence Command Paper (DCP), released a just one week after the Integrated Review, provided more detail as to what the IR would mean for traditional defence but also shone further light on gaps or flaws, as addressed below:

- **Labour should oppose the proposed cuts to the Army.** The DCP signals significant personnel and materiel cuts to the Army which would have repercussions for NATO's Eastern Flank.¹¹ For example, after these cuts, it would be difficult for the British Army to field a full warfighting division as part of the implementation of the NATO Defence Planning Process commitments, which try to show how NATO countries would support Eastern Europe in the event of a conflict with Russia. While such conflict must be avoided, doing so requires demonstrating a credible deterrence of Russia through the ability to reinforce NATO's small battalion-size battlegroups on the Eastern Flank, an initiative to which the UK should contribute.
- The IR and DCP contain eloquent explorations of interoperability, interdependence and integration in combined operations with allies, but this is depicted as one-sided when it comes to Eastern Europe. **While the UK should continue -and expand where appropriate - its commitments to NATO allies like the Baltic States and Poland (e.g. through the Joint Expeditionary Force), Britain should also envisage more of a two-way relationship** by forming defence partnership exchanges with allied partners. This would allow the British military to learn from their more experienced Eastern European peers about sub-threshold warfare spanning cyber operations and disinformation campaigns, without causing

¹¹ Centre for Eastern Studies, [The UK's Integrated Review and NATO's north-eastern flank](#), 6 October 2021

tensions among NATO members as to the appropriate, or safe, amount of support to provide to non-NATO members who are allies.

- Freedom of navigation in the Black Sea is under direct threat following Russia's annexation of Crimea, with important repercussions for food security, as well as many other forms (human, energy, economic, etc.). As well as developing a framework for cooperation with all Black Sea littoral states, **the UK should bolster its existing commitments to Ukraine, laid out in the 2020 Strategic Partnership Plan.** In particular, it should do so by expanding the UK's capacity building mission in Ukraine in order to strengthen the country's resilience to Russian aggression. This could include investing in Ukraine's own domestic capabilities; e.g. rebuilding shipbuilding facilities in Mikolayiv. The emphasis should be on building strong bilateral relations and support rather than on advocating NATO membership, which is currently not realistic.

4. Cyberspace and Disinformation

To justify the personnel and materiel cuts listed above, the UK Government has pointed to its promised investments in cyber warfare, robotics and drones. In the IR, cyberspace was mentioned 31 times explicitly and there was a clear diagnosis of the issues at hand. However, there are no clear solutions. Bland commitments from the UK Government to "seek good governance and create shared rules in frontiers such as cyberspace"¹² signify very little without a clear idea of what is needed to realise these objectives, especially when set against a tangible Russian threat to sensitive industries and global supply chains.¹³

Moreover, at points the IR appeared to conflate cyberattacks and disinformation as part of the same spectrum of threats, whereas in fact they are quite different. While hacking into private domains and leaking information is a crime, spreading propaganda is not. Differentiating between the two is important because ultimately Russian disinformation efforts are not so impactful that they can deeply undermine British society on their own – instead they rather exacerbate cleavages that already exist. Ironically, the amount of attention placed on Russian disinformation can sometimes even fuel polarising narratives, such as the insistence by some that Russian bots played a decisive role in the 2016 Brexit referendum. The Labour Party should practice and encourage more careful discussion of 'disinformation' – often really just propaganda - so as to work against divisions, rather than fuel them.

Ultimately, blaming the UK's societal divisions on Russian malign activity reflects a lack of confidence in Britain as a country, in its national idea(s), and in the population's critical thinking skills. While the IR reiterates the Government's intention to introduce Counter-State Threats Legislation (including a new Foreign Agent's Registration Bill) and the Online Harms Bill, these are largely rehashed ideas. Even when taken together, they are inadequate to 'combat all the threats we now face', especially as the IR seems to suggest that Russian hybrid warfare is a relatively new development, rather than Russian Government tactics since at least 2007 (arguably even since the Primakov Doctrine of 1999). As a result, the document is peppered with references to 'detering' Russia's hybrid threat when it is far too late for such discussions.

Recommendations

The hybrid threat is already here - fighting it requires that the UK develop societal resilience and cyber capabilities. To do this Labour should call for the following:

- **Increasing media literacy and critical thinking skills, especially in young people.** Labour should consider introducing a new subject of Communication Analysis in schools from

¹² British Council, [Global Britain in a competitive age](#), March 2021

¹³ White House, [Imposing Costs for Harmful Foreign Activities by the Russian Government](#), 15 April 2021

years 5 through to 11. This could combine the following core content: teaching students media ownership profiles and structures; identifying propaganda, disinformation, and misinformation; assessing bias; general critical thinking.

- **To ensure strategic consistency, the Government should create (and Labour should create a shadow) Deputy National Security Adviser for Cyber¹⁴ and a Deputy National Security Adviser for Disinformation**, both of whom will be ultimately responsible for streamlining the Government's strategy. In the UK Civil Service, topics such as cyber and disinformation are spread across several departments, which leads to inefficient reproduction of responsibilities and a lack of coherence in vision. Instead, one ministry should assume overall responsibility for each topic and, where possible, teams working on this should be moved so that their work is spread across a maximum of two or three ministries.
- **The Government should initiate channels of dialogue with the Kremlin on questions of cyber security**, following the lead of President Macron after the Russian state interfered in the 2017 French presidential elections.¹⁵
 - First, this would involve establishing a confidential 'deconfliction line' to discuss cyber incidents.
 - Second, it would involve sustained diplomatic contact on cyber issues, useful because it would also provide an opportunity to better understand Russian cyber doctrine and to identify relevant stakeholders in Moscow responsible for dealing with this complex issue.
 - Third, the UK should particularly reach out to the Kremlin to establish shared norms in areas where this is feasible, e.g. on engaging against cyberterrorism.

5. The UK skills shortage: a lack of Russia expertise

Part of the reason that the IR provides an insufficiently nuanced response to the challenges posed by Russia is because the UK Government's understanding of Russia has been inadequate for some time. While the IR's analysis is largely astute, it is outdated, reflecting on what Russia has done, rather than predicting what it will do. The UK has been unpleasantly surprised by Russian offensive measures again and again, from Crimea to Salisbury. As such, most worrying of all the issues raised above is the IR's total lack of recognition of - or strategy for remedying - this deficiency in expertise when it comes to Russia and its actions. Developing the strategic and tactical agility to predict or at least react better to Russia's opportunism requires specialist knowledge of Russia; an appreciation of the domestic context in which Russian doctrines, strategies, and decisions are made; an understanding of the historical legacies that inform such decisions; and an ability to read original language sources.

Understanding Russia is essential to the UK's defence as a nation as well as to its ability to spot opportunities to engage. Yet, while there are pockets of excellence, the country expertise in the Government and Civil Service, especially the FCDO, is insufficient. The Civil Service prizes generalists over specialists; it is shocking to many outside Westminster to learn that those developing government policies to respond to serious Russian threats often do not speak a word of Russian or have any specialist knowledge of Russia. By contrast, in the Russian system, they have seasoned specialists, fluent in English, conversant in the UK's culture and history, who will dedicate their professional lives to understanding Britain's systems and values.

Recommendations

¹⁴ Offensive Cyber Working Group, [The National Cyber Force that Britain Needs?](#), 21 April 2021

¹⁵ Centre for Strategic & International Studies, [Cyber Dialogues with Russia: Lessons from France](#), 13 July 2021

The UK must change approach urgently, Labour should consider calling for the following:

- **Wholesale reform of FCDO subject expertise and recruitment.** While the UK has a linguist shortage, there are many budding Russianists who would jump at the chance to work for the FCDO and who would come with knowledge of the language and culture ready-made. Instead, the FCDO prefers to set generalist ‘policy advisers’ to work on Russia for twelve months, before moving them on to some other part of the world. Policy officials in Whitehall rarely have the necessary language skills; even those in-country struggle as the FCDO language programme does not provide for full fluency. Embassy staff at several former Soviet Union states are frustrated by the FCDO’s lack of understanding and expertise in their dealings with them. **The best and most immediate way to tackle this issue would be to open up FCDO recruitment**, which has been a closed shop for far too long. At the moment, it does not even advertise most of its roles to current Civil Servants in other departments with relevant language and country expertise: this should change immediately but it should also go further. All FCDO positions requiring country expertise and specialist knowledge should be open to – and prioritised for – anyone with those skills and the necessary citizenship requirements. Dismantling the FCDO’s ‘in the club’ approach to recruitment is a matter of urgency, especially when partnered with its lack of socioeconomic diversity.¹⁶
- Looking to the future, the UK also needs to enhance its own talent pool of linguists, especially in sensitive languages:
 - One way to do this is to create a **British version of the USA’s National Defense Education Act**, which promoted Modern Languages alongside STEM subjects, recognising the importance of the former for national security¹⁷. As part of this, the Government, via the FCDO or Research Councils, could offer fellowships for budding specialists in the post-Soviet space to spend time in Russian-speaking areas like Kharkiv, Odessa, Narva, and Almaty, where they could learn the language and experience similar cultures without affecting security clearance possibilities. Fellowships would be paid for by the UK Government, but Fellows would agree to work at the FCDO, or another relevant ministry, for two years afterwards (or to pay back costs).
 - **The UK Government should also make funding available for the development of specialist expertise** on topics where there is a knowledge gap that it would be useful for the UK Government to fill (e.g. paradiplomacy, Russian policy- and decision-making processes). This could take the form of the Government providing PhD funding with the proviso that the PhD researchers would spend periods of time working on other projects at the FCDO. This would be financially very beneficial as the latter would cost much less than is currently spent on outsourcing research reports to think tanks and consultants: such in-house expertise would pay for itself in as little as two reports. Moreover, it would also contribute to expanding the FCDO Eastern Research Group’s own research capabilities. Currently, the Group conducts excellent work, including in partnership with academia, but is stretched in terms of resources.

In many ways, this future planning for expertise is the most important of all policies, especially if **we look at the history of earlier reviews, two of which (in 1997/98 and 2015) were soon rendered**

¹⁶ Social Mobility Commission, [Action plan to increase socio-economic diversity in the Civil Service](#), 20 May 2021

¹⁷ British Council, [Global Britain in a competitive age](#), March 2021

obsolete by international and domestic events.¹⁸ Given the magnitude of the Russian security challenge, and the global and regional importance of that country, we must build on the UK's Russia expertise to anticipate these turns and their potential impact on UK-Russia relations.

Conclusion

In 2020, the Russian Government introduced a raft of new constitutional changes that provide for a parliamentary system, clearly with an eye to the post-Putin era. It is difficult to assess what that might look like and what it might mean for the UK. At best, it is reasonable to assume there will always be some tension between UK and Russian interests – in part this stems from an inevitable divergence of security interests and concerns. The aim for the (post-Putin) future, then, is to create a partnership that allows for a reasonable discussion of these contrasts, informed by universal and democratic values as opposed to might is right triumph. This is a hopeful scenario. At worst, Russia after Putin is facing an era of instability in which the UK will need nuanced and quick-witted expertise more than ever. It is sadly worth remembering that personalised autocracies like Russia are always more likely to end in violent transfers of power – whether to democracy or disorder.

Ultimately, there is little the UK can do to influence this chain of events, or what happens inside Russia more broadly, but the British Government can reduce its own vulnerability to the security threats posed by Russia and (at least try to) improve the image we project to ordinary Russians. Both areas desperately need to be addressed and both require a genuine commitment to embodying values rather than embellishing Britain's national ego, a skill the current Conservative leadership has yet to learn. Implemented well, the policies listed in this briefing could provide the blueprint for such a path, as well as a realistic response to the threats posed by the Russian Government and the opportunities presented by the Russian people.

¹⁸ RUSI, [The UK's Integrated Review: How Does It Stack Up?](#), 24 March 2021

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