

May deploys anti-Russian propaganda to distract from Brexit crisis

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15 November 2017

Prime Minister Theresa May used her speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet—a gathering of the City of London—Monday evening to launch an attack on Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Describing Russia as a threat to “open economies and free societies,” she accused the Putin regime of “seeking to weaponise information” and planting “fake stories” so as to “sow discord in the West and undermine our institutions.”

A Downing Street source acknowledged that she was not responding to “any specific event” and May herself gave no evidence to back up her assertions.

Her claims underscore how unsubstantiated allegations of Russian “interference” and “fake news” have become the refuge of choice for crisis-ridden politicians the world over.

May's Mansion House speech was made on the eve of the return of the European Union Withdrawal Bill to parliament. Eight days of “line by line” examination of the bill—aimed at incorporating EU legislation into British law—will take place between now and Christmas, in what has been likened to “guerrilla warfare” as each clause is bitterly contested.

Her tirade against Russia must be seen in this context. Its aim was to conceal the divisions within the British bourgeoisie over Brexit, which threaten the downfall of her own government, and to direct social and political tensions outwards, against “foreign” powers.

May did not accuse Moscow of interference in the 2016 EU referendum, which returned a narrow Leave majority. To do so would contradict her repeated claim that Brexit is the “will of the people”—a self-serving mantra that reflects the dominance of hardline Brexiteers within the Tory Party and her own cabinet.

A majority of the ruling elite, however, including substantial sections of the City, are gravely concerned

at the impact of EU withdrawal on the interests of British imperialism. Represented politically by the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party—especially its Blairite wing—these layers are toying with trumped up allegations of Russian meddling to overturn the referendum result.

For May to play fast and loose with anti-Russian propaganda, despite its potential damage to her own cause, illustrates the scale of the crisis she confronts. Having lost two cabinet ministers to scandals in the space of a week, May announced Friday she would put an amendment enshrining in law the date Britain leaves the EU—at 11 p.m., March 29, 2019.

It became clear that this move was in line with demands of leading Brexiteers when a secret letter from Environment Secretary Michael Gove and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson to May, marked “for your eyes only,” was leaked at the weekend.

The joint by-line is significant given that it was Gove who publicly torpedoed Johnson's bid for Tory party leadership last June. With the clock ticking on Brexit, they have joined forces to oppose any retreat from or dilution of EU withdrawal.

Their letter, *EU Exit—Next Steps*, complained of “insufficient energy” on Brexit in parts of the government, demanded that any transition period be concluded by June 2021, and pressed May to ensure maximum support for this among the UK's negotiating team by “clarifying their minds” and helping them “internalise the logic.”

The result has been to fuel the cross-party, pro-Remain opposition. Led by Labour and the Liberal Democrats, some 300 amendments have been tabled to the bill, including a number by Tory rebels.

These centre on the use of so-called Henry VIII clauses giving ministers executive powers to force

through legislation, the role of the European Court of Justice during any transition period and the constitutional position of the devolved administrations after Brexit—especially in Scotland and Northern Ireland which voted to Remain.

May's exit deadline only added another bone of contention to this list, with pro-EU Tory MP Dominic Grieve describing it as "thoroughly stupid" for limiting Britain's room for manoeuvre in EU negotiations. Labour, for its part, wants "exit day" to be after an unspecified transition period of several years, while the Liberal Democrats favour a second referendum.

Should any of the amendments get the support of more than 11 Tory MPs the government faces defeat. The prospect of this is reinforced by reports that 40 Tory MPs have put their name to demands for May to resign—just eight short of the number needed to force a leadership challenge.

It was to forestall a Tory rebellion that Brexit Secretary David Davis announced a last-minute concession Monday—just prior to May's Mansion House speech—that parliament could vote on a final deal between the UK and the EU. But this is a take-it-or-leave-it vote, with rejection meaning the UK will exit without agreement—precisely what the Remain faction fears most of all.

As a result, Davis' "olive-branch" only ratcheted up tensions further, with Tory MP Anna Soubry describing it as "insulting," "meaningless" and only adding to the government's "grave difficulty" over Brexit.

While Britain's parliament tears itself apart over whether it can vote on a final deal, there is no guarantee that the EU is even prepared to offer one. Last week the EU's chief negotiator, Michael Barnier, again ruled out any progress to talks on future UK-EU trade relations without agreement on the "divorce" terms.

The EU summit on December 14/15 will decide whether "real and sincere progress" has been made regarding the UK's outstanding financial contributions—estimated at about €60 billion (£53 billion), the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic and the rights of EU citizens in Britain.

May's weakness is only strengthening the resolve of Germany and France that no concessions can be made. They are not prepared to help a prime minister in hock to a hardline anti-EU faction, especially when she—and indeed her government—might not be around for much

longer.

Barnier acknowledged that the EU was making "technical preparations" for a collapse of negotiations, while on Tuesday Manfred Weber, a key ally of Germany's Chancellor Merkel, warned "the clock is ticking." Speaking in advance of talks requested by May in London today, Weber said it did not look as if the EU would be "entering into the second phase" of negotiations in December, adding "we need to warn the British government... to put proposals on the table."

Sections of the EU are recklessly stoking the factional infighting within British political circles—nowhere more so than regarding the Irish border. The EU has suggested that Northern Ireland could remain in a customs union or the single market after the UK exits, obviating the restoration of a "hard border" between north and south.

This was rejected by Davis who said it would only create another new border instead, this time within the UK, between Northern Ireland and the mainland. Britain would not accept any arrangement that cost the UK's "constitutional and economic integrity," he said.

Dublin denounced Britain for trying to dictate Ireland's future, while leading EU officials accused May of placing her political survival—her government is kept in power by the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland—above the interests of the Irish people.

In the *Observer* Sunday, European parliament's Brexit coordinator Guy Verhofstadt referred to the 1998 Belfast agreement that ended The Troubles in Northern Ireland by bringing Sinn Féin into a power-sharing executive. He warned that avoidance of a hard border was "crucial to safeguard peace and to preserve the Good Friday Agreement, which was brokered with the active participation of the European Union. ... I hope the British government will do what is right for all the people of Northern Ireland. The peace process should transcend domestic party politics."



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