

Johnson government announces “ferocious” UK sanctions against Russia, steps up war preparations

Robert Stevens
24 February 2022

Britain’s Conservative government and opposition parties were unanimous in their bloodthirsty response to Russian President Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday chaired an early morning meeting of the government’s emergency COBRA committee to “coordinate the UK response”, including agreeing a “significant package of sanctions to be introduced immediately”.

In a televised address that morning Johnson said he had spoken to Ukraine’s President Zelenskyy “to offer the continued support of the UK.” He pledged “a massive package of economic sanctions designed in time to hobble the Russian economy... Our mission is clear; diplomatically politically, economically, and eventually, military, this hideous and barbaric venture of Vladimir Putin must end in failure.”

Ahead of Johnson’s speech in parliament, 10 Downing Street and all Whitehall departments flew the Ukrainian flag and were lit up in its yellow and blue.

In his 5pm speech, Johnson described Putin in terms used for those leaders killed in previous imperialist interventions: Iraq’s Saddam Hussein and Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi. Putin was a “bloodstained aggressor who believes in imperial conquest”, who was “always determined to attack his neighbour, no matter what we did.”

The prime minister announced a 10-point sanctions package, saying, “All major Russian banks will be excluded from the UK financial system and a full asset freeze is being imposed on VBT, Russia’s second-largest bank.”

Legislation will be passed next Tuesday prohibiting all Russian companies from raising finance on UK markets and the Russian state raising sovereign debt. New sanctions were levelled against more than 100 Russian

individuals, entities and their subsidiaries, including Rostech, Russia’s largest defence company. Limits will be placed on the amount Russians can hold in British bank accounts, with asset freezes extended to around 100 more people. The Russian airline Aeroflot was banned with immediate effect from flying into the UK. The sanctions include the “Intention to shut off Russia’s access to the SWIFT [global financial transactions] payment system”.

Nothing is off the table in the UK’s militarist agenda. Earlier Thursday, Tory backbencher and former party leadership candidate David Davis tweeted, “It is far too late to get boots on the ground but it is not too late to provide air support to the Ukrainian army which may neutralise Putin’s overwhelming armoured superiority.”

In Parliament two sets of MPs, Conservative and Labour, occupied either side of the chamber but stood as one party of war committed to militarism and imperialist conquest.

Throughout the Ukraine crisis, Labour has declared itself the “party of Nato” and the most fervent opponent of Moscow. In January, the Labourist blog published a joint article, “International unity against Russian aggression is crucial and must continue”, by Blairites David Lammy and John Healey, following their visit to Ukraine earlier that month.

On Tuesday, party leader Sir Keir Starmer insisted that Johnson, who had already shipped 2,000 anti-tank missiles to the Ukrainian government, send more weaponry. Yesterday he doubled down, saying the UK needed a “clean break” to the “failed approach” to handling Putin. “That means doing all we can to help Ukraine defend herself by providing weapons, equipment and financial assistance as well as humanitarian support for Ukrainian people.”

Johnson—whose government has been staggered for months by the “partygate” crisis, with his own premiership threatened—jumped to his feet in praise of Starmer declaring, “I want to say how grateful I am to the right honourable gentleman for the terms in which he has just spoken and the robust support he is offering to the government and to the western alliance at a very difficult time.”

Earlier Starmer gave a televised national address, flanked by two Union Jack flags as he insisted that the working class will be forced to pay the price for confronting Russia economically and militarily. “We must prepare ourselves for difficulties here—we will see economic pain as we free Europe from dependence on Russian gas and clean our institutions from money stolen from the Russian people. But the British public have always been willing to make sacrifice to defend democracy on our continent and we will again.”

Labour MP Chris Bryant, a longstanding anti-Russian warmonger, tweeted that people with dual Russian and British nationality should be forced to choose one. In parliament, another Blairite, Liam Byrne demanded that “every visa issued to a Russian dual national is now reviewed and where proximity to President Putin is proven that citizenship should be stripped away.” Even the arch reactionary Johnson, after declaring “we are doing that”, had to state, “not every Russian is a bad person”.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle, who identifies as a Labour “left”, said, “I do hope that we will be offering all the support that we can to those people who are likely to be shunned by the fascist imperialist Putin regime.”

No opposition to war will be tolerated. Conservative MP Tom Tugendhat, chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, asked Johnson to “look here, close to home at those who enable, who propagate the propaganda that is being used by Putin to undermine his own people and free people everywhere, and to update the Treason Act so that we can identify them and call them what they are: traitors.”

Labour is equally fervent in cracking down on opposition, no matter how timid. Yesterday it demanded that 11 of its MPs, members of the rump Socialist Campaign Group (SCG), immediately withdraw their names from a statement published February 16 by the Stop the War Coalition (STWC). The 11 committed the sin of backing the statement’s tame call that “Britain should be advancing diplomatic proposals to defuse tension and seek a solution to the crisis over Ukraine

rather than ratcheting it up.”

Less than an hour after their support for the STWC statement was criticised, all 11 caved in. These included John McDonnell, the former shadow chancellor of party leader and fellow SCG member Jeremy Corbyn, his former shadow home secretary Diane Abbott, and the SCG’s chair Richard Burgon. The only MPs now listed on the STWC statement are two who sit as Independents—Corbyn, who was booted out of the Parliamentary Labour Party over a year ago by Starmer, and Claudia Webbe, another former Labour MP.

Clive Lewis, one of the majority of SCG members who refused to sign the STWC statement, declared in parliament his support for Johnson’s anti-Russian measures, including “providing more defensive capabilities” to Ukraine. Lewis, a Royal Military Academy Sandhurst trained soldier who served in Afghanistan, politely asked of Johnson, “if you agree that we must have an end to this by a negotiated settlement and not by military means.”

Johnson dismissed Lewis, replying, “that opportunity has now gone. I’m afraid he’s [Putin] missed it. He’s chosen the path of overwhelming violence and destruction and I’m afraid that puts us on a very, very different course and we have to accept that reality.”

The reality means an even more rapid escalation of militarism and imperialist violence. Even before Johnson appeared in parliament, Downing Street announced that the UK is stepping up its “air policing contribution to Nato from RAF Akrotiri [on the Mediterranean island of Cyprus] and the UK”. A government spokesman said, “Two typhoons and a voyager for refuelling from the UK will support continuous Nato air policing over Poland’s border with Ukraine ... two typhoons and a voyager for refuelling from Akrotiri [will] also support continuous Nato air policing over Romania’s border with Ukraine.”



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