

Moral Equivalence? You've Got to Be Joking Mate!

By Professor Alex de Ruyter

As the fighting continues to rage in the Ukraine – a war in which the estimates of those killed already range in the thousands (with at least 900 Ukrainian civilians as at March 20th[1] and 2,000 – 4,000 Ukrainian soldiers[2]; and from 3,000 to over 10,000 Russian soldiers, depending on estimates[3]), Boris Johnson saw fit to compare Ukraine's struggle to Brexit:

"I know that it's the instinct of the people of this country, like the people of Ukraine, to choose freedom, every time. When the British people voted for Brexit in such large numbers, I don't believe it was because they were hostile to foreigners. It's because they wanted to be free to do things differently and for this country to be able to run itself."

So said our Prime Minister to an audience at the Conservative spring conference over the weekend.[4] There are many levels at which one can dissect this statement in terms of its factual accuracy (not least the fact that Ukraine desires to join the EU), but the galling notion that there is some kind of moral equivalence between the UK leaving the EU and a sovereign state fighting for its survival against a repugnant authoritarian regime is one I find utterly repulsive.

Donald Tusk said it well when he remarked "Boris Johnson likens Ukrainians fight to British People voting for Brexit. I can still remember the enthusiasm of Putin and Trump after the referendum. Boris, your words offend Ukrainians, the British and common sense".[5]

And this is the individual who is Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. I have to keep telling myself this every time he utters some cringeworthy comment. And unlike in a bad dream, there is no way I can pinch myself to wake up from this moment. Whilst Johnson's proclivities for outrageous remarks have a long extant track record, one can only but help think that Putin has inadvertently saved Prime Minister Feelgood's skin – for now.

Although, it has been claimed that Russian interference (via social media for example) during the Brexit referendum, helped deliver the Leave victory[6] that ultimately propelled Johnson to power. And as Tusk's remarks above allude to, the only person to have done more to aid Putin's agenda to undermine "the West" by sowing discord between the UK, EU and US than Boris Johnson, was Donald Trump.

I could also throw in Z-minus-grade celebrity wannabe and refugee-basher Nigel Farage for good measure, who until recently was uttering remarks claiming that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was somehow the fault of the US and EU[7], except that Johnson and Trump do or have held high office, whilst Farage has not (and most likely never will).

How such people have proven themselves to be useful idiots on the pathway to what will have been the most destructive conflict in Europe since the Second World War – and a conflict which still has the potential to escalate to a direct NATO-Russia confrontation. For Johnson to utter anything that somehow equates the Ukraine conflict with Brexit, then, deserves to be treated with nothing but derision.

Meanwhile, behold the spectacle yesterday of two of Johnson's most senior Cabinet ministers, the Home Secretary, Priti Patel, and Defence Secretary Ben Wallace nonetheless, seemingly duped by Russian state operatives into thinking that they were having a phone call with the Ukrainian Prime Minister, Denys Shmyhal.[8] One can only hope that a cross-Whitehall review will indeed result in more effective security procedures.

As this Government's ineptitude and proclivity for attaining new lows continues unabated, it will be interesting to see whether the Conservative Party's current recovery in the polls (only 4% behind Labour as at March 17th according to Politico[9]) will subside once the unfolding tragedy in Ukraine ceases to provide a political shield for the Prime Minister.

For the London Metropolitan Police enquiry into Johnson and his entourage's conduct during "Partygate" in seeming violations of his own lockdown protocols, is continuing. More than 80 questionnaires from the Met have been received by Downing Street officials, aides and politicians as at March 9th.[10]

It remains to be seen whether any prosecutions arise out of this inquiry, but if that doesn't damage the Government (and I think that prospect unlikely) the cost of living crisis – now severely exacerbated by Putin's war of aggression – will. And it will be in this context that Johnson will face his first significant electoral test since 2019, with the local elections due in May; one for which the Prime Minister and his party could well pay the price.

[1] A figure likely to be a severe underestimate, see <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/20/1087781833/ukraine-deaths-casualties?t=1647870481142>

[2] <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/russia-ukraine-war/story/how-many-ukrainians-and-russians-have-died-in-putin-s-war-1926514-2022-03-17>

[3] <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/17/europe/russian-casualties-ukraine-military-readiness/index.html>

[4] As reported in the London Evening Standard; <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/boris-johnson-brexit-v-ukraine-war-comparison-criticism-b989482.html>

[5] <https://twitter.com/donaldtuskEPP?cn=ZmxleGlibGVfcmVjcw%3D%3D&refsrc=email>

[6] Whilst the evidence here is unclear, what is damning in this regard is the UK Government's response to these claims. Indeed, the 2020 'Russia Report' (as commented on by Rachel Ellehuus at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies) accuses the UK Government of "making a deliberate effort not to find out how Russian influence may have affected the June 2016 vote. This is all the more incredulous because the government admits there was Russian interference in the 2014 Scottish referendum, declaring it the first time that Russia directly interfered in a Western election. The government also admits that Russia interfered in the December 2019 general election. This information makes the lack of preparedness for 2016 (and 2019) and lack of response all the more stunning..." See <https://www.csis.org/blogs/brexit-bits-bobs-and-blogs/did-russia-influence-brexit>

[7] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/nigel Farage-ukraine-russia-eu-b2022400.html>

[8] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/mar/21/russia-responsible-for-hoax-calls-to-wallace-and-patel-says-no-10>

[9] <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/united-kingdom/#97380>

[10] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-60620289>