

Report Part Title: Conclusion

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Report Subtitle: Stuck on Autopilot

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using the country as a base outside Russia. Still, the outsized lobbying power of the UK financial, real estate, and corporate sectors has made it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to overhaul the existing regulatory framework or to make the United Kingdom a less welcoming jurisdiction for Russian petro-dollars and illicit funds.

The ISC report also draws attention to the weakness of the UK legal framework for responding to national security threats posed by Russia and other hostile foreign powers. It quotes then MI5 director general Andrew Parker, who said that the Official Secrets Act is “dusty and largely ineffective” because “it was drafted for First World War days and was about sketches of naval dockyards, etc.”⁷⁵ The law’s shortcomings are particularly acute in light of the extensive Russian presence that moves freely in and out of the United Kingdom: “Under the Official Secrets Act as it exists now, anyone who is not a British national or a public servant does not commit an offence if they engage in espionage against the UK while abroad.”⁷⁶ The ISC report also recommends that the United Kingdom develop a legal mechanism for disclosure by individuals acting on behalf of a foreign power modeled on the U.S. Foreign Agent Registration Act, which would be a positive step but hardly a decisive one.

Meanwhile, Brexit is having a significant impact on how the United Kingdom operates on the global stage even as it further aggravates internal political divisions. For decades, the country grew accustomed to leveraging its role within the EU as a means to institutionalize its policy ideas and priorities globally via a powerful multilateral mechanism. The United Kingdom’s impact is now being inexorably reduced as result of leaving the EU. The trusting relationship with key partners like Germany and France is also being severely tested by the increasingly acrimonious negotiations over the post-Brexit relationship with the EU.

Societal fault lines exposed by Brexit, such as the possibility of a renewed push for Scottish independence, are also likely to prove quite harmful. For its part, the Kremlin typically relishes watching longtime adversaries experience such turmoil. It is hard to imagine that Moscow will not use some of the tools at its disposal, including information and influence operations, to amplify the United Kingdom’s current misfortunes. It remains to be seen whether the Kremlin will go to great lengths to achieve its goals or simply decide to let the United Kingdom stew in its own juices.

Conclusion

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, Russia’s policy toward core Europe has appeared to be stuck on autopilot. Instead of nimbly trying to exploit Europe’s obvious internal divisions and ongoing tensions with the United States, the Kremlin has simply followed time-worn patterns, acting as

though its most important goals could be accomplished simply by sticking to its guns and waiting for Europe to fall apart under the weight of the pandemic and other burdens.

Yet this approach is not at all mindful of the galvanizing effect that the protests in Belarus and the attempted assassination of a major opposition political figure is having on German, French, and UK policy. Just as it was blindsided by the extent of Western unity in the wake of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Kremlin today seems oblivious—or simply indifferent—to what its actions will mean for relations with core Europe.

Nonetheless there is still considerable concern in some quarters in Berlin, Paris, and London that the Russian government may yet be able to capitalize on an approach that emphasizes strategic patience. After all, the Kremlin is betting, not unreasonably, that one of these days, the West will simply downgrade its long list of irritants and unresolvable disputes with Russia as it has in the past. In the meantime, the Putin regime is trying to intimidate European leaders, playing on perennial fears that things might get out of hand. The Kremlin also wants to convince Western counterparts that they have very little leverage over Russian behavior and to exacerbate the divisions that it believes can keep NATO and the EU bogged down in internal debates and disagreements.

What is missing from the Kremlin's analysis of the current state of affairs is much self-awareness about how its recent behavior is potentially creating an epochal moment comparable to the events of 2014 in Ukraine. The Navalny attack and the crisis in Belarus have stripped away, practically overnight, the credibility of voices in Europe that traditionally advocate on behalf of preserving the status quo. In Germany, for example, the greatest pressure will not be faced by increasingly marginal constituencies like the *Putinverstehers* but rather by Christian Democrat stalwarts like Merkel and Economy Minister Peter Altmaier who call for finding ways to continue cooperation with Russia. Following the Navalny attack the percentage of Germans polled who want to tighten sanctions on Russia more than doubled to 34 percent compared with June 2019, according to a survey conducted in September 2020.⁷⁷ It is increasingly unclear whether arguments in favor of the status quo will hold sway as the end of the Merkel era and the general elections draw nearer.

In France, these events are greatly complicating Macron's strategic dialogue with the Kremlin. It is hard to see how French officials can successfully argue within the Quad or in Brussels in favor of a more lenient approach on Russian matters at a time when Moscow's heavy-handed handling of the Navalny attack and the Belarus crisis generates such intense anger and frustration. In the meantime, Macron is gearing up for reelection in 2022 and appears to hope that he will once again face Le Pen, who has extremely limited ability to appeal to centrists or left-of-center voters. Still, if the impact of the pandemic continues to hang over French society and the economy, it is conceivable that Moscow will once again seek to play on societal divisions and amplify populist voices.

At best, Russia's relations with Germany, France, and the United Kingdom will stay as they are now regardless of whether or not large-scale projects like Nord Stream 2 are frozen. In the same vein, Merkel's long-standing approach of balancing a tough-minded approach with various types of economic and energy cooperation is becoming more contested. In the run-up to next autumn's German elections, the stage is potentially being set for an approach toward Russia that prioritizes hard security, treats the Kremlin as an irredeemably dangerous and kleptocratic regime, and supports the imposition of ever greater economic and political costs for Russian misdeeds. At the same time, it is unlikely that mainstream political leaders from Germany, France, or the United Kingdom will be all that interested in resetting ties or that Moscow will succeed in pushing the EU's post-2014 framework to the breaking point.

Still, Europe's leading powers remain challenged by their inability to mobilize the kind of hard power that matters most in today's world, especially for building leverage with Russia. It often appears that the leaders of Europe have forgotten how to play the game of power politics. As they find themselves being sucked once again into an era of so-called great-power competition, the Kremlin's *modus operandi* in foreign policy is likely to provide significant advantages.

Against this backdrop, it is questionable that the biggest challenge for the transatlantic relationship is to hold another arid debate between the United States and its European allies on whether it is necessary to push back on a more assertive Russia. As Macron frequently likes to point out, European leaders are not naïve. They have a very solid grasp of whom they are dealing with in the Kremlin. Rather the real question for Western policymakers is how best to devise a proportionate and sustainable response to the threat posed by Russia and to manage ongoing tensions skillfully while preserving the unity of purpose that has served previous generations of Western leaders so well.