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Johnson And Putin: Brexit Britain Meets Resurgent Russia, And They Don't Get On

The 2018 poisoning of a former Russian double-agent and his daughter continues to overshadow U.K.-Russia relations.

That was the conclusion of a first meeting between the two countries' leaders since the U.K.'s December 12 2019 election.

If the former British foreign secretary, Philip Hammond, was right when he suggested in 2016, that "the only country, if the truth is told, that would like us to leave the EU is Russia," then you might think that the man who delivered Brexit might be popular with the Russian leadership.

That's not the way it seemed when the British prime minister, Boris Johnson, met President Vladimir Putin at an international conference on the situation in Libya.

Johnson's Conservative party won a comfortable majority in the U.K.'s December poll. A new government might normally be seen as an opportunity to rebuild international relationships that had gone bad.

Not this time.

According to a statement from his office, Johnson, "was clear there had been no change in the UK's position on Salisbury, which was a reckless use of chemical weapons and a brazen attempt to murder innocent people on UK soil."

Poisoning Of The Skripals

He was referring to the poisoning in the English town of Salisbury of a former Russian double agent, Sergei Skripal, and his daughter, Yulia. The attack, in March 2018, led to the imposition of sanctions on Russia by the U.K. and numerous allies, including the United States.

Russia has always denied any involvement, despite the fact that two Russian citizens were named as suspects in the case. At the time, Johnson was the U.K.'s foreign secretary. He described Russia's response to the accusation as "smug sarcasm."

The fact that many in Russia seem to accept the Kremlin's denial show how far apart opinions in the two countries are. A poll conducted in 2018 by the Levada Center research institute found that only 3% of Russian respondents believed that the Russian intelligence services were to blame for the attack.

No Prospect Of Improvement In U.K.-Russia Relations

So there's not much prospect of any improvement in relations: this at a time when the U.K. is preparing to leave the European Union, and when the world is waiting to see what Putin's new plans for the Russian constitution will mean for his future at the summit of Russian power.

The Kremlin had little to say about the meeting, except to note that it had taken place "during a recess in the talks."

If there was no personal rapport between the two leaders, there may not have been much respect, either. It was only a month ago, during his showcase annual press

conference, that Putin was reminded of the time Johnson compared him to Dobby, character from Harry Potter.

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