

Speech: Putin's sinister threats and lies extend far beyond his own country: article by Boris Johnson

To understand why 3 people lie stricken in Salisbury, look at Vladimir Putin's actions inside Russia.

Yesterday he was proclaimed the winner of an election that resembled a coronation, complete with a triumphant ceremony outside the walls of the Kremlin. Mr Putin's leading opponent had obviously been banned from standing and an abundance of CCTV footage appeared to show election officials nonchalantly stuffing ballot boxes.

One loyal functionary in Siberia used balloons in Russia's national colours for the novel function of covering up a prying camera. "A choice without a real competition, as we have seen in this election, unfortunately is not a real choice," was the verdict of the observer mission from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

As he extends his grip on power, Mr Putin is taking his country in a dangerous direction. Throughout his rule he has eroded the liberties of the Russian people, tightened the screws of state repression and hunted down supposed foes.

When a leader starts behaving in this way then no-one should be surprised if many of his compatriots feel drawn to the example of countries that observe a different scale of values. They will notice that plenty of nations hold elections where no-one knows the result in advance. They will see how free societies in Europe, America and elsewhere thrive and prosper precisely because people are able to live as they choose, provided they do no harm.

They will understand how an independent media exposes the failings or evasions of democratic governments. And they will wonder why Russia cannot have the same? Mr Putin cannot give the straight answer, which is that he must deny Russia those freedoms in order to guarantee his perpetual rule. Instead, he has to send an emphatic message that asking awkward questions or turning against him carries a terrible price. Which brings us back to Salisbury. The use of a Russian military grade 'Novichok' nerve agent against Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, was very deliberate.

As Ken Clarke pointed out in Parliament last week, the obvious Russian-ness of the weapon was designed to send a signal to anyone pondering dissent amid the intensifying repression of Mr Putin's Russia. The message is clear: we will hunt you down, we will find you and we will kill you – and though we will scornfully deny our guilt, the world will know that Russia did it.

There was a hint of this in Mr Putin's first public response to Salisbury. He denied Russia's culpability – of course – while carefully injecting a note of

menace. "If it was military grade agent," he said, "they would have died on the spot, obviously."

Obviously. After all, he had already told state television that traitors would "kick the bucket" and "choke" on their "pieces of silver". Yet the Kremlin, accustomed to a tame official media, is clearly struggling to get its story straight.

Since the Skripals and Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey were struck down on March 4, Russian officials and the state media have claimed variously that 'Novichok' never existed, or the stockpiles were destroyed, or they weren't destroyed but mysteriously escaped to other countries.

Russian disinformation

Alexander Shulgin, the Russian Ambassador to The Hague, told Sky News: "I've never heard about this programme, about this Novichok agent. Never." But his memory suddenly improved when he appeared on Russia Today and said that Novichok had been developed by the Soviet Union. "There never was such a programme under such a codename in the Russian Federation," he said. "However, in Soviet times research began to produce a new generation of poisonous substances."

This seemed to wrongfoot the Russian foreign ministry, whose spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, declared on the same day that neither Russia nor the Soviet Union had created Novichok. "This programme is not the creation of Russia or the Soviet Union," she said, before disgracefully pointing the finger at Sweden, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, America – and inevitably the UK.

Meanwhile, other Russian officials have sought to conjure doubt and suspicion out of thin air. Alexander Yakovenko, the Russian Ambassador in London, questioned the absence of photographs of the Skripals in their hospital beds.

His counterpart in Brussels, Vladimir Chizhov, accused Britain of breaking "consular conventions" because Russian officials had not been able to visit the Skripals.

The response to the 2 envoys is so obvious that I can scarcely believe they require instruction. Sergei and Yulia Skripal have been in a coma since 4 March – as you would expect from victims of a nerve agent attack. They cannot give their consent to be photographed or receive visitors. Under the NHS Code of Practice, hospitals must have their patients' permission before allowing this to happen.

And I will make the point as delicately as possible: it is not obvious that the Skripals, of all patients, would welcome a visit from Russian officials. The Russian state is resorting to its usual strategy of trying to conceal the needle of truth in a haystack of lies and obfuscation.

But when I met my European counterparts in Brussels yesterday, what struck me most is that no-one is fooled. Just about every country represented around the table had been affected by malign or disruptive Russian behaviour. Most had endured the kind of mendacious propaganda onslaught that the UK is

experiencing today.

This is how Mr Putin behaves at home; we should not expect anything different abroad.