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## JOHNSON LOOKS TO CEMENT UK LEADERSHIP LEAD AFTER SURVIVING TV DEBATE

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EurActiv (19 June 2019)

Brexit figurehead Boris Johnson will look to cement his stranglehold of the UK leadership race Wednesday (19 June) after emerging unscathed from a TV debate against his four remaining rivals.

The former foreign minister kept his cool and made no evident stumbles in a showdown that followed a second-round ballot in which he grabbed more votes than his three nearest challengers combined.

Johnson had ducked out of the first TV debate on Sunday and has carefully stage-managed his media engagements in a contest that remains his to lose.

He cast himself Tuesday as the one politician able to bring Britain successfully out of the European Union and therefore deliver the Brexit that UK voters called for three years ago.

We must come out on October 31 because otherwise I'm afraid we face a catastrophic loss of confidence in politics, said Johnson in the hour-long BBC question-and-answer session with voters.

### **I think the British people are thoroughly fed up.**

But neither he nor the others raised their hands when asked by the BBC to do so if they could guarantee that Brexit will happen by 31 October.

The field will narrow to four when the 313 Conservatives party lawmakers in the lower House of Commons hold their third secret ballot on Wednesday.

### **Frantic search for leader**

Tuesdays surprisingly even-tempered debate did little to alter a growing sense that Johnson would need to make an error of monumental proportions not to win at this stage.

The Guardian newspaper called Johnsons performance sober and sensible.

Still the clear front-runner, still almost certainly the next PM, it wrote.

Johnson picked up 126 of the 313 Conservative MPs votes cast Tuesday.

Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt won 46 votes and environment minister Michael Gove 41.

Moderate international development minister Rory Stewart continued his against-the-odds challenge by nearly doubling his support base to 37.

Interior minister Sajid Javid scraped through with exactly the 33 required to make the third round.

Britain is frantically searching for a leader after Prime Minister Theresa May stepped down last month over her repeated failure to deliver Brexit on time.

Her successor will be saddled with both resolving Britains deepest political crisis in generations and setting the terms of how it deals with the rest of Europe for decades to come.

An additional two rounds of voting will whittle the list of contenders down to just two on Thursday.

The finalists will face the ruling partys 160,000 grassroots members in a vote next month to decide who wins.

### **Not credible**

Johnsons lead is so substantial that some UK media say the others are simply fighting for a good spot in his future government.

Stewart fired the most direct barbs at Johnson on Tuesday by arguing that no-deal is not a credible threat.

Both Hunt and Gove repeated that a further delay may be required if a Brexit deal was within reach.

If we were nearly there, then I would take a bit longer, Hunt said.

But Javid said it was fundamental to get out by the new deadline no matter what.

Johnson has warned throughout that he is prepared to get Britain out of the European Union without an agreement — as long as it is done by the October 31 deadline.

But he has also called this tough talk a negotiating tactic designed to scare Brussels and force it to compromise on the nagging issue of the status of Irish border.

EU leaders have long ruled out re-opening the binding part of the agreement they all signed with May last year.

Only Stewart is openly trying to salvage Mays pact in the hope of pushing it through Britains splintered parliament on the fourth attempt.

The Daily Telegraph suggested that Stewart and Johnson had moved closer to a face-to-face showdown after emerging as the big winners from Tuesdays vote and debate.