



## **UK-Russia Relations: a Bad Case of Mutual Misunderstanding (s)**

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The UK-Russia relationship is complex and easily misunderstood. Growing partnership since the end of the Cold War, particularly in business, on one hand has been beset by a series of important, high-profile problems that have contrived to suffuse the relationship with an air of controversy and hostility. In many ways, therefore, the UK-Russia relationship has mirrored the wider relationship between European and Euro-Atlantic organisations, particularly NATO and the EU, and Russia, which have suffered from an increasingly systemic dissonance over the last seven years.

Different conclusions have been drawn in Brussels, London and Moscow from the same body of evidence, and consequently divergent understandings of the evolution of Post Cold War European politics. At the wider regional level, this is reflected in the contrasting views of transformation: as seen by Brussels and London, a strategic transformation has taken place creating a Europe that is whole, free and at peace as never before. Yet in Moscow, as reflected in Moscow's foreign policy proposals (the "Medvedev proposals") for enhancing and reforming the Euro-Atlantic architectures, the view is more one of a Europe that is fragmented, bound by bloc mentality and insecure – emphasised by Moscow's opposition to NATO enlargement and what Russian officials see as Russia's exclusion from Euro-Atlantic decision-making. Equally, divergent views about political change in the Colour Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine particularly are underscored by differences about the means and methods of democracy promotion and humanitarian intervention.<sup>2</sup>

All of these issues feature prominently at the UK-Russia level over the same period – democracy support and humanitarian intervention, support for NATO enlargement (and membership of Ukraine and Georgia), and the lack of substantial support in London for the Medvedev proposals having been related features of UK foreign policy under the Labour government. The UK-Russia relationship has had its own troubles also, not least the murder in the UK of Alexander Litvinenko and the events surrounding the suspension of the activities of the British Council in Russia.

If some commentators thought that the relationship had thus hit a new post Cold War low in 2007, the Russo-Georgia War of August 2008 saw a yet further deterioration in the relationship. Parts of the British leadership, while acknowledging the range of responsibility for the conflict, both criticised Moscow for the disproportionate use of illegal force,<sup>3</sup> and lent political support to the Georgian government. Speaking in Kyiv, the then Foreign Secretary David Miliband said that

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<sup>2</sup> For more discussion of this dissonance, see Monaghan, A. (ed.) *The Indivisibility of Security: Russia and Euro-Atlantic Security*. NATO Defence College Forum Paper No.13, Rome, January 2010. available at <http://www.ndc.nato.int/research/series.php?icode=2>

<sup>3</sup> *Russia: a New Confrontation?*, 10<sup>th</sup> Report of Session 2008-09, House of Commons Defence Committee. London: the Stationery Office, July 2009. pp.3, 31.



the sight of Russian tanks had been a ‘rude awakening’, accused Moscow of unilaterally trying to re-draw the map and re-affirmed UK support for the NATO membership of Ukraine and Georgia. Russia needed to change course, he averred.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that it was not only the government that adopted such a position. David Cameron, then leader of the Opposition, sought to ‘stand by Georgia as a Democracy’, and criticised Russian actions as ‘unacceptable’, calling Russia a ‘bully’ and the ‘principal villain of the crisis’. He thus sought to persuade the EU to suspend talks on the future of the EU-Russia Strategic partnership, accelerate a free trade agreement between the EU and Georgia and tighten UK passport restrictions on Russian citizens.<sup>5</sup> His views received widespread support, and many in the Conservative Party were impressed with his resolve.<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, such criticisms were rejected outright by Moscow. Foreign Minister Lavrov, for instance replied that the UK was not in a position to criticise Russia, given its actions in the Falkland Islands. As a result of the difficulties, Sergei Prikhodko, stated that the temperature of the relationship had ‘dropped to a point close to freezing’.<sup>7</sup>

As Prime Minister Cameron and President Medvedev attempt to improve relations in 2010, then, it is clear that strong cultural and economic links often sit alongside a pronounced sense of political tension. This paper examines this complex relationship, charting three sets of misunderstandings in the relationship.

#### “The Long Arm of History, or Short Hand Understandings”

The first set of misunderstandings stem from a historical sense of rivalry, of each being “The Political Other” – particularly as often portrayed in an over-simplified, headline-based approach. Each appears to be a major target for the mass media of the other, which tends to emphasise and often exaggerate the conspiratorial element of the other, usually framed in spies, hostile intelligence operations, “cloak and dagger” intrigue and murder, and competition for international influence.

Although there is a considerable history of alliance and cooperation between the UK and Russia – in the Napoleonic wars, in the Great War and in the Second World War to name three major episodes – competition for influence first between the two empires particularly in Central Asia, then between Great Britain and the Soviet Union has shaped what has become a more dominant historical narrative of rivalry between different political models, couched in the languages of the “Great Game” and the Cold War. On the one hand the UK was seen first as an Imperial and then (Imperial) Capitalist aggressor in Russian and then Soviet eyes respectively. On the other hand, Russia in British eyes as being an authoritarian and then totalitarian regime – ‘the enemy of every liberty we boast of’, as Bernard Shaw had it in 1914.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in “David Miliband Warns Russia Not to Start a New Cold War”, *The Times*, 27 August 2008.

<sup>5</sup> See “David Cameron calls for Tough EU Sanctions on Russia”, *The Guardian*, 1 September 2008.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, the discussion at Conservative Home website, available at:

<http://conservativehome.blogs.com/torydiary/2008/08/david-cameron-i.html>

<sup>7</sup> “Russia Hopes for Better Ties With Britain as Cameron Becomes PM”, *RIA Novosti*, 12 May 2010.  
<http://en.rian.ru/russia/20100512/158987965.html>



Such historical narratives of rivalry, couched as they often have been in significant domestic political opposition on both sides to developing a more positive relationship, are proving fertile grounds for conspiracy theories today. In the UK, there is a strong sense of (historic) Russian aggression and authoritarian state power. The murder of Alexander Litvinenko for many emphasised this insidious yet all powerful and aggressive role of the Russian state and state intelligence organs, fuelling many conspiracy theories loosely linked back though to the Cold War and the KGB. While such conspiracies feed into political campaigns, they often only serve to cloud understandings of today's Russia and prevent critical thinking about developments there.

At the same time, in Russia the myths that British intelligence services and intrigue sought to drive Russia and Persia to war, subjugate Iran to the UK (in comparison to Russian efforts which obviously only sought to contribute to the development of Russo-Iranian commerce), and lay behind both the murder of Alexander Griboyedov, resident Plenipotentiary in Persia and most of his diplomatic staff in Tehran in 1829, appear to feed a wider, underlying sense that the UK "gets others to do its dirty work".<sup>8</sup> (It is perhaps worth noting here that in the UK, Griboyedov's murder is not widely known – except to Russia specialists, who in any case reject Russian accusations of British intrigue in the tragedy.<sup>9</sup>) Other examples include senior Russian political figures and officials accusing the UK of provoking perestroika, and being 'the official enemy of Russia'.<sup>10</sup>

### A Bad Relationship?

The second misunderstanding, which results from this simplified approach, is that the relationship is uniquely bad. Indeed, one of the striking features of the UK-Russia relationship is the extent of cooperation across a number of areas. Perhaps the least well known is the military cooperation – not only have there been successful programmes for flying training and officer resettlement, there have been ship visits and projects to dismantle decommissioned nuclear submarines. There has also been (albeit low-profile) cooperation in the international counter-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden (which seems to have at least in part resulted from Russian cooperation with NATO in Operation Active Endeavour).<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the best example of UK-Russia military cooperation however, which resulted in a wider range of political

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, discussion in Costello, D. P. "A Note on 'the Diplomatic Activity of A. S. Griboyedov', by S. V. Shostakovich", *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 40, 1961. pp.235-244. Such views echo today in the Russian mass media and, apparently, some political circles. For other reflections on the 'permanent antagonism' between the UK and Russia as a 'red thread' of Russian international relations, see Demurin, D. "Russia and Britain in Persia 100 Years ago", *International Affairs, Moscow*, Vol.53, No.6, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Kelly, L. *Diplomacy and Murder in Tehran. Alexander Griboyedov and Imperial Russia's Mission to the Shah of Tehran*. London: Tauris, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Kampmark, B. "Bitten by the Bear: The British Council and Russia", *Contemporary Review*, Vol. 290, No.1689. Summer 2008. For further discussion of both the historical and contemporary conspiracy theories, see relevant chapters in Guseinov, V. & A. Monaghan (eds.) *Rossiia-Velikobritaniya: ocherednoe okhlazhdenie*. Moscow: Granitsa, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, HMS Cumberland, part of the NATO mission and the Russian frigate Neustrashimi cooperated in November 2008 to prevent the seizure by pirates of the Danish cargo ship the MV Powerful.



achievements agreed during then-President Putin's visit to the UK, was the UK-led mission to raise the submersible the AS-28 and rescue its crew in August 2005.<sup>12</sup> Equally, there is significant economic and financial partnership. For the last five years, UK-Russia trade has been growing dynamically. In 2005 and 2006 the UK was the largest investor in Russia, and over 1000 British companies are active in Russia. If the financial crisis had a significant impact on this aspect of the relationship, it is also clear that a desire to build partnership remains. Visits to the UK by senior Russian figures such as Anatolii Chubais, CEO of the Russian Corporation of Nanotechnologies (RUSNANO), reflect a Russian interest in collaboration with British firms to develop nanotechnology and the role that RUSNANO could play in such a relationship.<sup>13</sup>

Visits by senior British figures, including the Lord Mayor of the City of London Nick Anstee, Sir Andrew Cahn, the UK Trade and investment Chief Executive and HRH the Duke of York reflect a British desire to strengthen trade and investment, particularly in architectural infrastructure design and construction, notably in public transport projects and flood protection barriers.

At the same time, such visits suggest British support for Russia's economic development and emergence as an international financial centre. As Sir Andrew Cahn noted during his visit to Russia in June 2010, there is scope for sharing the UK's experience of economic diversification and modernisation with Russia – in essence seeking to support President Medvedev's modernisation agenda. As economies emerge from the financial crisis and 'seek to develop a sustainable and solid recovery, it will become even more important for economies in countries such as the UK and Russia to work together to build a recovery based on coordination, transparency and sensible regulation', he stated.<sup>14</sup> During Nick Anstee's visit in June and July 2010, he proposed that Moscow's rise as a regional and global centre for financial services offers a significant opportunity for London and Moscow to work in partnership.<sup>15</sup>

Prime Minister Cameron has reiterated such views during meetings with President Medvedev at the G8 and G20 meetings in June and November 2010. Mr Cameron pointed to 'good discussions' on the G20, where he thought the UK and Russia 'share many aspects of the agenda. We both want to see important moves forward on trade and on dealing with the imbalances of the world economy'.<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting here that this reflects important strands of thinking in both Russian and British policy

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<sup>12</sup> For in depth discussion of the rescue, see the account of Commander Ian Riches who led the mission in "Saving the AS-28", in Monaghan, A. (Ed.) *The UK & Russia – a Troubled Relationship. Part I*. Swindon: Defence Academy of the UK Paper 07/17, May 2007. For further details of other military cooperation, see the chapters "UK-Russia Military Cooperation" by Major General Peter Williams and "The UK & Russia – a Divergent Relationship", by Andrew Monaghan in the same volume.

<sup>13</sup> See

[http://www.london.edu/newsandevents/news/2010/01/Anatoly\\_Chubais\\_speaks\\_about\\_Russia%E2%80%99s\\_Nanotechnology\\_Industry\\_to\\_Students\\_and\\_Faculty\\_1057.html](http://www.london.edu/newsandevents/news/2010/01/Anatoly_Chubais_speaks_about_Russia%E2%80%99s_Nanotechnology_Industry_to_Students_and_Faculty_1057.html)

<sup>14</sup> <http://ukinrussia.fco.gov.uk/en/about-us/working-with-russia/012-visits/andrew-cahn>

<sup>15</sup> <http://ukinrussia.fco.gov.uk/en/about-us/working-with-russia/012-visits/lord-mayor>

<sup>16</sup> Meeting with Prime Minister of the United Kingdom David Cameron', 11 November 2010, <http://eng.news.kremlin.ru/news/1288>



– the rise of the G20 in turn underscoring new, wider systems of decision-making and relationships beyond traditional international architectures.<sup>17</sup>

### **“Misunderstanding The Other”: Different Models, Different Definitions**

Alongside these elements of partnership, there are efforts to improve the political relationship – again noted by the Prime Minister and President when they met on the fringes of the G8 and G20 meetings. William Hague visited Moscow twice in 2010 – first as Shadow Foreign Secretary in January and then Foreign Secretary in October.

At the same time, certain differences and problems continue. Some of these are well known and hardly require further detailed examination here: the different approaches to values and societal structure – the separation of powers and the ideal of holding power to account are less visible in Russia.<sup>18</sup> Equally, the role of the state in society is a prominent difference: if in Russia the role of the state is large, David Cameron seeks to reduce the scale of such a state role in the UK.

It is clear also that a number of problems in the bilateral relationship have not been resolved. Russia’s extradition requests, particularly regarding Boris Berezovsky, remain denied by the UK judiciary. The UK has also sought Lugovoy’s extradition to face trial for the murder of Litvinenko in the UK without success. It is not clear that either will be resolved in the near future – not least since there are well known domestic legal obstacles to them.

Nor is it clear that the leadership of either side would be able to “sideline” these differences, even if they so wished, given the roles of other actors in formulating or implementing policy. If the tensions over the British Council may have eased, it may prove difficult for the new UK government to try to overlook the problems caused in the relationship by the Litvinenko murder. Furthermore, there are regular related irritants to the relationship that serve to emphasise the troubles: the most recent at the time of writing being Moscow’s request for the extradition of businessman Yevgeniy Chichvarkin,<sup>19</sup> and the detention and questioning (and possible deportation) of Katia Zatuliveter on charges of espionage.

If it is true that there are a number of common priorities (the threat of nuclear proliferation, the Middle East peace process and instability in Afghanistan, for instance) there is a sense also that, in terms of international affairs, the UK and Russia use different languages. If such issues are “common” to both parties, it is not necessarily clear that they are “mutual” in the sense of definitions of the problem, their prioritisation and approaches to them.

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<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Moscow’s proposals to the G20 for the reform of the international financial architecture in spring 2009 and the recently published UK National security strategy, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: the National Security Strategy*. London: The Stationery Office, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> See Monaghan, A. “The UK & Russia: A Divergent Relationship?” and Bacon, E. “The UK-Russia Political Relationship”, in Monaghan, A. (Ed.) *The UK & Russia – a Troubled Relationship. Part I*.

<sup>19</sup> “UK-Russia Relations Face Fresh Strain Over Contested Extradition”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 September 2010.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/7999864/UK-Russia-relations-face-fresh-strain-over-contested-extradition.html>



Representatives of both sides often use the phrase “we’ve moved on”, though this means different things to each. When used in Moscow, it appears to mean that the world has moved on from the post World War II international settlement and establishment: essentially that the Anglo-Saxon world is losing influence and the post World War II institutions are no longer appropriate or effective. The phrase when used in London appears to mean something rather different – particularly as moving on and away from Cold War era priorities (including, for some, Russia and the questions Russia poses, particularly in Euro-Atlantic security issues) to other international regions and questions.

There is a very fine line between the two definitions, but the dual definition reflects different approaches and priorities. The UK tends both to reject the Medvedev proposals to reform European security architecture and to support many of the Euro-Atlantic processes that Moscow argues against: NATO and EU enlargement, the EU’s Eastern Partnership and support for former soviet states including Ukraine and Georgia. It also opposes, for instance, the idea that Moscow has a legitimate “sphere of influence” in the former Soviet Union which risks compromising the sovereignty of states in the region.

### **Conclusions: In Through the Open Door?**

It may be then, that Russia is a ‘key partner’ for the UK, as stated by Foreign Secretary William Hague and that Moscow seeks to enhance its relationship with the UK. Certainly the last few months have seen a significant increase in meetings at senior levels. And it is right and proper that President Medvedev and Prime Minister Cameron have asserted the need to set the relationship to a ‘new footing’ – tension has dominated after Litvinenko’s murder, the diplomatic relationship has been notably curtailed and increasingly contradictory. Given similar financial and economic interests, and some other common (if not mutual) interests, it makes sense to improve the other elements of the relationship. Foreign Ministers are to stay in touch and President Medvedev has invited Cameron to Moscow in 2011.

Nevertheless, while it is clear that a major effort on both sides is necessary to achieve a sustainable improvement in relations, it is less evident that either side is prepared for such a sustained effort. Neither the broader Conservative nor Coalition agenda is particularly pro-Russia. The background agenda from 2007-2010 was not favourable, as indicated above, and the British government currently has many other priorities, not least domestic ones. It also seems clear that there is a widely held view in the UK that the absence of shared values makes cooperation difficult.

Equally on the Russian side, there are many “distractions”. The absence of the UK from the draft Foreign Policy Doctrine leaked in spring 2010, coupled with the significant foreign activity of President Medvedev elsewhere (for instance leading a huge delegation to China), indicate that Moscow has many other priorities even beyond its own busy domestic agenda.



It is also noteworthy that each tends to blame the other for the poor state of relations on the one hand, and thus offers the other the opportunity to improve relations – placing the responsibility for the sustained improvement on the shoulders of the other. Foreign Minister Lavrov stated ahead of Hague’s October visit to Moscow that he ‘expects Britain to take steps to rebuild the relationship’.<sup>20</sup> Hague too has stated that he hopes the UK’s invitation to Russia to improve the relationship will be taken up.

An interesting image therefore emerges of both sides holding the door open to a new relationship, each expecting the other to walk through the other’s open door. UK-Russia relations, therefore, are at a similar stage to Russia’s other relations with the Euro-Atlantic world: at the beginning of a “reset”. This is positive, but much work remains to be done.

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<sup>20</sup> Cited in “Moscow Expects London to Improve Bilateral Ties – Lavrov”, RIA Novosti, 12 October 2010.  
<http://en.rian.ru/world/20101012/160925210.html>