

Research Briefing

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Countering Russian influence in the UK



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Summary

Despite diplomatic relations between the UK and Russia heading on a downward trajectory for the last few decades, Russian influence in the UK has grown.

In its long-awaited report on Russia, published in July 2020, the UK Parliament's [Intelligence and Security Committee called Russian influence in the UK “the new normal”](#).

In the build up to the current crisis in Ukraine, the Government said on several occasions that any Russian incursion into Ukraine would be a [“strategic mistake and subject to consequences”](#), including an “unprecedented” package of coordinated sanctions.

There have been widespread calls, however, for the Government to go beyond sanctions and bring forward the initiatives and proposed legislation on countering foreign influence in the UK, that have been promised in the last few years.

Russian wealth in the UK

Russian investment in the UK totals tens of billions, but it is not clear exactly how much because of the difficulty in tracing the beneficial (ultimate) owners of some assets, including UK property.

Government and Parliamentary Select Committee reports suggest that, in addition to the investor visa scheme, the UK has for decades been an attractive place for Russian investment because of perceived lighter regulation, strong capital and housing markets, a strong judicial and financial system, use of the English language, and global cultural brands like football clubs and universities.

Today, 24 Russian companies are listed on the London Stock Exchange, including gas giant Gazprom, oil company Rosneft, and Sberbank (Russia's largest bank), although prices have plummeted and trading in many of their shares has been suspended. The Russian Government has also raised billions in the UK by issuing sovereign bonds, but the UK Government has banned future issuances.

Anti-corruption organisation [Transparency International](#) estimates that £1.5 billion of UK property has been bought by Russians accused of corruption or links to the Russian Government, including £430 million of property in the City of Westminster alone.

Total UK-Russia trade stood at £15.9 billion in 2021, with Russia selling billions of pounds of oil and metals into the UK.

Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022

The Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill was introduced in the House of Commons on 1 March 2022. It was fast-tracked due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, so received Royal Assent in the early morning of 15 March. Our [briefing on the Act](#) explains the policy background and measures in more detail.

During the passage of the Act, the Government committed to introduce a further economic crime bill early in the upcoming (2022-23) parliamentary session.

Countering hostile state activity

Hostile activity by those acting on behalf of foreign states or entities has been a growing security concern.

After the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury in March 2018, which was attributed to the Russian state, the Government committed to introducing legislation to “[harden our defences against all forms of hostile state activity](#)”, including a power to detain those suspected of it at the border. The Government said it would also look at the need for new counter-espionage powers “to clamp down on the full spectrum of hostile activities of foreign agents” in the country.

The Government subsequently passed the [Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019](#). The Queen’s Speech in May 2021 promised further legislation to counter hostile activity by foreign states that would “provide the security services with the tools they need to tackle the evolving threat from hostile activity by states and actors”, including reform of the Official Secrets Acts and the creation of a Foreign Influence Registration Scheme.

The Government has said that counter state threats legislation will be introduced “[as soon as parliamentary time allows](#)”.

Closure of Tier 1 (Investor) visa scheme

On 17 February, the Government announced the immediate closure of the Tier 1 (Investor) visa to new applicants. The visa offered up to five years’ permission to stay in the UK and a route to permanent residence, in return for a minimum £2m investment. A review of all investor visas granted between

2008 and April 2015 was announced in 2018. The Government has said results will be published “imminently”.

Russians are the second most common nationality granted investor visas since 2008, although they accounted for a much smaller proportion of applicants since 2015. Just over 2,500 investor visas have been issued to Russians since 2008 (roughly one fifth of all such visas issued). People granted investment visas before 2015 may have now completed the residence requirement for permanent residence (and possibly British citizenship).

Election finance

The [Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament \(ISC\) 2020 report on the Russian threat to the UK](#) (PDF) noted that attempts at broader political influence and disinformation have been widely reported and that Russian oligarchs had used their business interests, donations to charities and political parties for broad Russian influence in the UK.

Donations to political parties and elected representatives are regulated. The main piece of legislation used is the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, as amended, (PPERA). The system of regulation is designed to prevent foreign money entering the political system and elections.

However, the current permissibility checks have been criticised. The Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) recommends PPERA should be updated to require parties and non-party campaigners to have appropriate procedures in place to determine the true source of donations. [The CSPL's most recent report on party finance](#), from July 2021, also included recommendations to limit foreign money entering political finance and campaigns.

The Government's [Elections Bill](#), currently before Parliament, includes measures to fulfil the Government's commitment to strengthen the integrity of UK elections. Measures include tightening rules on how much foreign third-party campaigners can spend on UK elections. Opposition amendments to the Bill have been introduced in the House of Lords to require individual and company donors to be based in the United Kingdom and makes persons running companies liable for donation restriction evasion offences committed by those companies. The Labour Party argue it would “close the loophole allowing the use of shell companies to hide the true source of donations to political parties by foreign actors”.

Review of RT (formerly Russia Today)

Calls were also made for the TV network Russia Today to be stripped of its broadcasting licence in the UK. The Government made clear that it is for Ofcom, as the independent regulator, to decide which media organisations to ban, and not politicians.

On 28 February 2022, Ofcom announced that it had opened 15 investigations into the impartiality of news programmes on the RT news channel. A further 12 investigations were announced on 2 March 2022.

Following those investigations, on 18 March 2022, Ofcom announced that it had revoked RT's licence to broadcast in the UK with immediate effect.

1 Background

Apart from a period of relatively cordial relations in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, diplomatic relations between the UK and Russia have been on a downward trajectory for the last few decades.

Despite this, Russian influence in the UK has been growing.

In its long-awaited [report on Russia](#), published in July 2020, Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee concluded that "It has been clear for some time that Russia under Putin has moved from potential partner to established threat, fundamentally unwilling to adhere to international law" and argued that the Government had underestimated the response required to the Russian threat.

It suggested the UK was one of Russia's top Western intelligence targets and that "Russian influence in the UK is the new normal", commenting:

Successive Governments have welcomed the oligarchs and their money with open arms, providing them with a means of recycling illicit finance through the London 'laundromat', and connections at the highest levels with access to UK companies and political figures.¹

The Government [published its response to the ISC](#) on the same day. In that report the Government argued:

The Government has long recognised there is an enduring and significant threat posed by Russia to the UK and its allies, including conventional military capabilities, disinformation, illicit finance, influence operations, and cyber-attacks. As such, Russia remains a top national security priority for the Government [...]

We have shown in recent years that the UK takes the threat from Russia extremely seriously and will respond to and call out Russian aggression wherever it occurs.²

In the build up to the current crisis in Ukraine, the Government stated on several occasions that any "Russian incursion [into Ukraine] would be a strategic mistake and subject to consequences",³ including an "unprecedented" package of coordinated sanctions".⁴ A rolling package of sanctions measures has subsequently been announced by the Government, in coordination with allies, since 22 February 2022. These are examined in

¹ Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, [Russia](#), HC 632, July 2020

² Cabinet Office, [Government response to the intelligence and Security Committee's 2020 Russia report](#), 21 July 2020

³ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Press Release](#), 8 December 2021

⁴ HC Deb 31 January 2022, c55

greater detail in House of Commons Library briefing, [Sanctions against Russia](#).

However, there have been widespread calls for the Government to go beyond sanctions⁵ and bring forward the initiatives and proposed legislation on countering foreign influence in the UK, that has been promised in the last few years. Calls had also been made for media outlet, RT (formerly Russia Today), to be banned from broadcasting in the UK.

1 Further reading

- Intelligence and Security Committee, [Russia \[PDF\]](#), HC 632, July 2020
- Cabinet Office, [Government response to the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament report 'Russia' \[PDF\]](#), CP275, July 2020
- Foreign Affairs Committee, [Moscow's gold: Russian corruption in the UK \[PDF\]](#), HC 932, May 2018

⁵ HC Deb 22 February 2022, [Sanctions](#)

2 Russian wealth in the UK

The scale of Russian investment in the UK is unclear. The Office for National Statistics assessed Russian investment in the UK to be £25.5 billion at the end of 2016, but this excludes investment into the UK through other countries or through structures where it is unclear who the beneficial (ultimate) owner is. It also excludes money flowing into Britain's Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies.⁶

Journalist Oliver Bullough estimated in 2018 that Russians could have undeclared holdings of up to £67.5 billion in UK assets, on top of the officially declared figures.⁷

2.1 Why is the UK attractive?

The Intelligence and Security Committee's (ISC) July 2020 "Russia" report said that Russian oligarchs have for decades viewed the UK as a "particularly favourable destination" for their money. Strong financial links "were forged with perhaps the best intentions after the fall of the Soviet Union", according to the Financial Times.⁸

As well as the UK's "investor visa" scheme (discussed below), the factors cited by the ISC as making the UK attractive are:

- a light-touch approach to regulation, with "few questions" asked about sources of wealth
- strong capital and housing markets providing good investment opportunities
- a strong rule of law and judicial system.⁹

A December 2020 money laundering risk assessment by the Treasury and Home Office also cites:

- the UK's easy company formation process (through Companies House) and growth of "e-money institutions" (such as fintech firms offering pre-paid cards), which provide mechanisms for transferring funds into the UK

⁶ The Guardian (long read), Oliver Bullough, [How Britain let Russia hide its dirty money](#), 25 May 2018

⁷ As above

⁸ Financial Times, [Kremlin ties to 'Londongrad' need to be cut](#), 23 February 2022

⁹ Intelligence and Security Committee, ["Russia"](#), July 2020, paras 49 to 62

- access to charities or cultural institutions (such as universities or football clubs¹⁰) that allow “individuals to launder their reputation, improving their standing and influence in UK society”.¹¹

In evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee, Vladimir Ashurkov of the Anti-Corruption Foundation also noted the English language and the UK’s status as a capital of finance and business as making the UK a “natural magnet” for Russians.¹²

2.2 The current situation

Today, Russian financial links to the UK includes:

- **UK capital markets.** 24 Russian companies are listed on the London Stock Exchange with a combined value of US\$515 billion in February 2022¹³ (although share prices have since plummeted)¹⁴ spanning sectors from energy to mining, retail and banking. They include three of Russia’s biggest state-backed companies: gas giant Gazprom, oil company Rosneft, and Sberbank¹⁵ (Russia’s largest bank).¹⁶ British energy company BP holds almost 20% of Rosneft’s shares, making it the second biggest shareholder after the Russian Government (although it announced on 27 February that it intends to sell its shares¹⁷).¹⁸

But the Financial Times notes that Russian use of UK capital markets is reducing. Since 2014 (the year of the Russian annexation of Crimea) only three Russian companies have listed in the UK, and far less money has been raised on UK capital markets by Russian companies.¹⁹

By 7 March 2022 the London Stock Exchange had suspended trading in 28 companies linked to Russia (including Gazprom and Sberbank), because of “sanctions and the ability to run an orderly market”. It warned that more companies could be suspended in future if affected by sanctions.²⁰

¹⁰ Foreign Affairs Committee, [Moscow’s Gold: Russian Corruption in the UK, May 2018](#), para 8

¹¹ HM Treasury and Home Office, [National risk assessment of money laundering and terrorist financing](#), December 2020, paras 4.23 – 4.26 and 17.7 to 17.8

¹² Foreign Affairs Committee, [Moscow’s Gold: Russian Corruption in the UK, May 2018](#), para 6

¹³ Financial Times, [Russia’s waning reliance on London markets reduces UK sanctions bite](#), 23 February 2022

¹⁴ See Yahoo! Finance, [Russian Stocks in London Wipe Out 98% of Value in Two Weeks](#), 2 March 2022

¹⁵ The Times, [Unpicking Russia’s web of UK interests](#), 23 February 2022

¹⁶ Statista, [Ranking of Russian banks](#) as of November 1, 2021, by total assets

¹⁷ BP, press release: [bp to exit Rosneft shareholding](#), 27 February 2022

¹⁸ The Times, [Unpicking Russia’s web of UK interests](#), 23 February 2022

¹⁹ Financial Times, [Russia’s waning reliance on London markets reduces UK sanctions bite](#), 23 February 2022

²⁰ The Independent, [London Stock Exchange suspends trading in 28 Russian companies](#), 7 March 2022

- **Sovereign debt.** The Russian government can raise money by issuing bonds to investors in UK markets. According to Newsweek, Russia currently has around US\$57 billion of total sovereign debt outstanding, most of which was issued in the UK or Ireland. However, no further Russian sovereign debt has been issued in London since 2014.²¹

On 28 February 2022 Foreign Secretary Liz Truss announced that the Government will introduce legislation to “prevent Russia from issuing sovereign debt on UK markets” in future.²² This came into force in March 2022.²³

- **Trade.** Total trade between the UK and Russia was £15.9 billion in 2021. The majority of this (£11.6 billion) was UK imports of Russian goods and services and mainly comprised oil and metals.

The remainder (£4.3 billion) was UK exports to Russia. This included hundreds of millions of pounds’ each of cars, pharmaceuticals, and financial services.²⁴

- **Property.** Anti-corruption organisation Transparency International (TI) estimates that £1.5 billion of UK property has been bought by Russians accused of corruption or links to the Russian government, including £430 million of property in the City of Westminster alone.²⁵ TI says there is a network of hundreds of firms of lawyers, accountants, estate agents and PR professionals that help enable these purchases.²⁶

The BBC reports on a recent analysis of 700 offshore companies owning UK property, which found that 5% of them were beneficially owned by Russian citizens.²⁷

²¹ Newsweek, [The Financial War With Russia Will be Fought in London](#), If at All, 23 February 2022

²² FCDO press release, [UK hits Russian oligarchs and banks with targeted sanctions: Foreign Secretary's statement](#), 22 February 2022

²³ See [The Russia \(Sanctions\) \(EU Exit\) \(Amendment\) \(No. 2\) Regulations 2022](#)

²⁴ inews, [What does the UK import from Russia? How our gas supply and other goods could be affected by Ukraine sanctions](#), 22 February 2022

²⁵ Transparency International, [Stats reveal extent of suspect wealth in uk property and britain's role as global money laundering hub](#), 18 February 2022

²⁶ Transparency International, [Russia report urges swift action to tackle uk's role as 'laundromat' for dirty money and reputations](#), 21 July 2020

²⁷ BBC, [Ukraine crisis: How much Russian money is there in the UK?](#) 22 February 2022

2.3

The Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement Act) 2022

At Prime Minister’s Questions on 2 February 2022 Boris Johnson confirmed that an economic crime bill would be brought forward and “voted on in the third [ie. upcoming] Session of this Parliament”.²⁸ In a Commons statement on 24 February he said the Government “will set out further detail before Easter on the range of policies to be included in the full Bill in the next session – including on reforms to Companies House and a register of overseas property ownership”.²⁹

At PMQs on 23 February 2022, Labour leader Keir Starmer asked the Prime Minister to expedite the Bill and introduce it in the current (i.e. 2021-22) session.³⁰ On the same day, a (non-binding) motion was agreed (without a division) by the House of Commons at an Opposition Day debate, which asked for an Economic Crime Bill to be introduced by the end of March 2022.³¹

In his Commons statement on 24 February 2022, the Prime Minister confirmed that “measures on unexplained wealth orders” that were originally due to form part of the Bill will now be introduced before Easter 2022.

The Act

The Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill was introduced in the House of Commons on 1 March 2022. It was fast-tracked because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, so received Royal Assent in the early morning of 15 March.

The Act contains three main measures: it introduces a beneficial ownership register of Overseas Entities owning UK property and reforms the Unexplained Wealth Orders and Sanctions regimes to try and make them more effective. Our [briefing on the Act](#) explains the policy background and measures in more detail.

During the passage of the Act, the Government committed to introduce a further (second) economic crime bill early in the upcoming (2022-23) parliamentary session. It is expected to include reform of Companies House and limited partnerships, powers to seize crypto-assets from criminals, and information sharing on money laundering.³²

²⁸ [HC Deb 2 February 2022, vol 708, col 276](#)

²⁹ Prime Minister’s Office, [PM statement to the House of Commons on Ukraine: 24 February 2022](#)

³⁰ [HC Deb 23 February 2022, vol 709 col 311](#)

³¹ [HC Deb 23 February 2022, vol 709](#)

³² See the Summary in our [briefing on the Economic Crime \(Transparency and Enforcement\) Act 2022](#) for more information

3

Countering hostile state activity

Hostile activity by those acting on behalf of foreign states or entities has been a growing security concern in recent years.

After the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury in March 2018, which was attributed to the Russian state, the Government took a number of steps in response, including expelling Russian diplomats that had been identified as undeclared intelligence officers. The then Prime Minister, Theresa May, stated that this would “degrade Russian intelligence capability in the UK for years to come”.³³ She further committed to introducing legislation to “harden our defences against all forms of hostile state activity”, including a power to detain those suspected of it at the border, and consideration of the need for new counter-espionage powers “to clamp down on the full spectrum of hostile activities of foreign agents” in the country.³⁴

The Government subsequently passed the [Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019](#), which introduced powers to stop, question, search and detain people at ports and borders to determine whether they appear to be, or have been, engaged in hostile state activity. These are equivalent to powers which already existed in relation to terrorism related activity under the [Terrorism Act 2000](#).

In its [July 2020 report on Russia](#), the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) also recommended that new legislation be brought forward to replace the Official Secrets Acts regime “that can be used by MI5 to defend the UK against agents of a hostile foreign power such as Russia”.³⁵

3.1

Counter state threats legislation

The Government’s [Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#), published in March 2021, announced its intention to introduce legislation to counter state threats when parliamentary time allowed.

The Queen’s Speech in May 2021 subsequently announced there will be legislation to counter hostile activity by foreign states. The purpose of a new

³³ [HC Deb 4 March 2018, c 856](#)

³⁴ [HC Deb 4 March 2018, c 856](#)

³⁵ Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, ‘[Russia](#)’, HC 632, 2020

bill would be to “provide the security services with the tools they need to tackle the evolving threat from hostile activity by states and actors”.³⁶

The Government said the main elements of the bill would:

- Reform the Official Secrets Acts 1911, 1920, 1939 and 1989 (“the OSAs”)³⁷
- Create a ‘Foreign Influence Registration Scheme’ to help combat espionage, foreign influence, and protect research
- Bring together new and modernised powers to ensure the security services can tackle hostile activity.³⁸

Following the Queen’s Speech, the Home Office published a consultation paper on [Legislation to Counter State Threats \(Hostile State Activity\)](#). The paper defines ‘State Threats’ as:

overt or covert action orchestrated by foreign governments which falls short of general armed conflict between states but nevertheless seeks to undermine or threaten the safety and interests of the UK, including: the integrity of its democracy, its public safety, its military advantage and its reputation or economic prosperity.³⁹

It went on to describe the threat as one which is “growing, diversifying and evolving” and suggests that states who engage in it are becoming emboldened and more aggressive.⁴⁰

In July 2021, the Director General of MI5, Ken McCallum, described the modernisation of state threats legislation as an important step towards boosting UK resilience, noting that the current legislation is “hugely out of date”. He said that “To tackle modern interference, we need modern powers”. He also identified Russia, China and Iran as the states that currently pose the greatest threat to the UK.⁴¹

When can we expect legislation?

The Government’s consultation concluded in July 2021, although no legislation has been forthcoming to date.

On 4 February 2022 the Home Office said that the Government was currently “reviewing responses to the Home Office Public Consultation on legislative proposals to tackle state threats”⁴² and in early March 2022 said that “the

³⁶ Queen’s Speech 2021, [Counter State Threats Bill](#)

³⁷ Proposals relating to reform of the OSAs are the Government’s response to a review by the Law Commission into the [Protection of Official Data](#). The review made extensive recommendations for reform of the regime contained in the OSAs 1911, 1920, 1939, and 1989.

³⁸ Queen’s Speech 2021, [Counter State Threats Bill](#)

³⁹ Home Office, [Legislation to Counter State Threats \(Hostile State Activity\)](#), p.5

⁴⁰ Home Office, [Legislation to Counter State Threats \(Hostile State Activity\)](#), p.5

⁴¹ Security Service, [Director General Ken McCallum gives annual threat update 2021](#), 14 July 2021

⁴² PQ116029, [National Security](#), 4 February 2022

Government will be introducing new legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows”.⁴³

2 Further reading

- House of Commons Library, [Counter state threats legislation](#), October 2021

⁴³ PQ131293, [Espionage: Russia](#), 8 March 2022

4 Visa reforms

4.1 New visa penalty powers

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Home Secretary announced plans for new powers to impose visa penalties on countries that pose certain threats to international peace and security. The Government has said it could apply those powers (if approved) to Russia.

The proposed new powers are reflected in Government amendments to the [Nationality and Borders Bill](#). They were introduced at Lords report stage and agreed to by the Commons without division on 22 March as Lords amendments 28-39 and 42.⁴⁴

The changes would affect nationals of a country whose government is considered by the Home Secretary to have taken action that “gives, or is likely to give, rise to a threat to international peace and security; results, or is likely to result, in armed conflict, or gives, or is likely to give, rise to a breach of international humanitarian law.”

Nationals of a country specified under those powers who applied for UK entry clearance would be subject to visa penalty provisions as considered appropriate by the Home Secretary. The visa penalty provisions would be specified in the Immigration Rules and do one or more of the following:

- Require that entry clearance must not be granted during a specified period.
- Suspend the power to grant entry clearance.
- Require the application to be treated as invalid.
- Require the applicant to pay an extra fee in connection with the application, in addition to any other fees payable.

There would be scope for different penalty provisions for different purposes, and for exceptions or exemptions.

The Government intends for the provisions to come into force upon the Bill's Royal Assent. Baroness Williams confirmed at Lords report stage that the Government intends to use the powers in respect of Russia. She explained:

The ability to suspend the granting of entry clearance for Russian nationals will send a strong signal to the Putin regime that they cannot invade their peaceful neighbour and expect business as usual. Although we do not believe this war is in the name of the Russian people, disadvantaging Russian nationals in this

⁴⁴ [HL Deb 8 March 2022 c1338-1340; c1414; HC Deb 22 March 2022 c305](#)

way, as part of our wider package of sanctions, will contribute to the pressure on the Putin regime.⁴⁵

Some Parliamentarians have raised concerns about how the powers might impact on people who are critics of their national governments.⁴⁶ Ministers have said that they will “carefully consider” that issue, and that “in any case, we will ensure that the most vulnerable individuals ... are exempted from the application of visa penalties.”⁴⁷

The absence of provisions for parliamentary oversight of exercise of the powers has also been criticised.⁴⁸ Ministers have argued that it would be disproportionate to adopt processes like those in the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018. They contend that the visa penalty powers are “tightly defined” and “limited” compared to the breadth and scope of sanctions act powers.⁴⁹

4.2

Closure of Tier 1 (Investor) visa scheme

On 17 February the [Government announced](#) that the [Tier 1 \(Investor\) visa](#) had been closed to new applicants with immediate effect.⁵⁰ Publication of a government review of historical investor visa decisions, announced in March 2018, is said to be imminent.⁵¹

The UK has had an investor visa category since 1994. It was repackaged as the Tier 1 (Investor) visa in 2008.⁵²

Briefly, the visa offered successful applicants three years’ permission to stay in the UK in return for at least £2m investment in the UK.⁵³ Successful applicants could subsequently apply to extend their visa. They become eligible to apply for permission to stay permanently (‘indefinite leave’) after five years. Reforms introduced in 2011 shortened the route to indefinite leave to three years for people who invest at least £5m and two years for those who invest at least £10m.⁵⁴ Obtaining indefinite leave is a pre-requisite for applying to naturalise as a British citizen.

The Government cited “longstanding concerns that the route has been vulnerable to exploitation by those seeking to transfer illicitly obtained wealth

⁴⁵ [HL Deb 8 March 2022 c1334](#)

⁴⁶ [HL Deb 8 March 2022 c1335-6](#); [HC Deb 22 March 2022 c277](#); [c285](#)

⁴⁷ [HC Deb 22 March 2022 c285](#)

⁴⁸ [HL Deb 8 March 2022 c1335](#)

⁴⁹ [HL Deb 8 March 2022 c1337](#)

⁵⁰ Statement of changes in Immigration Rules, [CP 632 of 2021-22](#).

⁵¹ [HL Deb 8 March 2022 c1331](#)

⁵² [HC 607](#) of 2007-08

⁵³ Minimum investment raised from £1m in November 2014

⁵⁴ GOV.UK, press release, ‘[Government rolls out the red carpet for entrepreneurs and investors](#)’, 16 March 2011

to the United Kingdom” as a key reason for its abolition.⁵⁵ It considered the route to be of small economic benefit to the UK, outweighed by concerns of abuse. The Government was also concerned that the visa’s “genuine investment” requirements could be circumvented by complex investment schemes. In May 2021 the Court of Appeal reluctantly found that an investment scheme that loaned migrants funds which were invested outside the UK was not in breach of the Tier 1 Investor rules, due to poor drafting of the Immigration Rules.⁵⁶

The visa will remain open to existing Investor visa holders, to enable them to extend their visas or apply for indefinite leave to remain over the next few years.

How many investor visas have been issued?

13,213 Tier 1 (Investor) visas were issued between 2008 and September 2021.⁵⁷

Russian was the second most common nationality granted. Since 2008, 2,581 Tier 1 (Investor) visas have been issued to Russians (roughly one fifth of all such visas issued). Tier 1 (Investor) visas made up 45% or nearly half of the 5,685 Tier 1 other ‘high value’ route visas issued to Russians during this time.⁵⁸

However, it is notable that Russians have accounted for a much smaller proportion of investor visa applicants since 2015 (when the minimum investment requirement was raised to £2m).

The most common nationality of people granted was Chinese, accounting for around one third of visas issued (4,247 in total). Including people whose nationality was listed as ‘Hong Kong’, and assuming them to be Chinese, this figure rises to nearly a quarter of visas issued (4,992 in total).

Other common nationalities were American, Kazakh, Pakistani, Indian and Saudi Arabian.

Previous scrutiny and reforms

The Tier 1 (Investor) visa is a type of [residence/citizenship by investment scheme](#). Many countries have versions of these. Some of these schemes have been controversial for reasons including doubts about their integrity and economic value.⁵⁹ They are sometimes characterised as ‘golden visas/passports or ‘passports for sale’.

⁵⁵ [Explanatory memorandum to CP 632](#), para 7.2

⁵⁶ [R \(Wang & Anor\) v SSHD \[2021\] EWCA Civ 679](#)

⁵⁷ Home Office (see [Immigration statistics quarterly, September 2021](#), table Vis_D02). This might be an over-count of the number of individuals who have been granted visas since individuals could have been granted them in more than one period.

⁵⁸ Home Office, [Immigration statistics quarterly September 2021](#), table Vis_D02

⁵⁹ LSE Blogs, [Are golden visas a golden opportunity for economic development?](#) 26 May 2021; Transparency International/Global Witness, [European Getaway](#), 2018; Migration Policy Institute, [Selling visas and citizenship](#), October 2014

There is a long history of concerns about the UK's investor visa offer.⁶⁰ The availability of investor visas, since 1994, has been identified as a key driver of London's appeal to Russian oligarchs.⁶¹

The Tier 1 (Investor) visa's rules and eligibility criteria were amended several times over the years (notably in 2015 and 2019), but critics continued to identify loopholes and vulnerabilities in successive iterations until its closure.⁶² The Joint Intelligence Committee's Russia report, published in July 2020, called for an overhaul of the visa to ensure a "more robust approach to the approval process for these visas". It considered this action a key measure needed to protect national security.⁶³

In December 2018 the visa was almost closed at short notice.⁶⁴ However the then Government changed its mind a few days later.⁶⁵ Instead, it introduced some changes to the visa's rules in March 2019. These were intended to further guard against financial crime and increase the benefits of investments to the UK economy.⁶⁶

2008-2015: the 'blind faith' period

The original design of the scheme, in place between its launch in 2008 and 6 April 2015 (described by campaigners as the "blind faith" period) has been identified as particularly problematic. During that period there was an absence of due diligence checks on applicants' wealth. Visas were issued to successful applicants before they had opened a UK bank account or transferred their funds. The Home Office expected that anti-money laundering checks would be conducted by the banks when they received the investment funds, but research suggested that banks considered the issuing of a visa as qualifying evidence when assessing the applicant's legitimacy.⁶⁷

In March 2018, following the Salisbury poisonings, the then Government announced a review of all visas granted during that period.⁶⁸ The Government's position, as at mid-March 2022, is that the review will be published imminently.⁶⁹

⁶⁰ Chatham House, [The UK's kleptocracy problem](#), December 2021; Spotlight on Corruption, [Red Carpet for Dirty Money](#), July 2021; Transparency International, [Gold Rush: Investor Visas and Corrupt Capital Flows in the UK](#), October 2015; Migration Advisory Committee, [Tier 1 \(Investor\) route: investment thresholds and economic benefits](#), February 2014

⁶¹ Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, [Russia](#), HC 632 of 2019-21, para 49

⁶² Spotlight on Corruption, [Red Carpet for Dirty Money](#), July 2021

⁶³ Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, [Russia](#), HC 632 of 2019-21, para 56

⁶⁴ BBC News, ['Investor visa scheme halted in money laundering crackdown'](#), 6 December 2018

⁶⁵ BBC News, ['Gold-plated' investor visa scheme 'not suspended'](#), 11 December 2018

⁶⁶ [JIN HCWS1388](#), 7 March 2018

⁶⁷ Transparency International, [Gold Rush: Investor Visas and Corrupt Capital Flows in the UK](#), October 2015, p.16

⁶⁸ [HC Deb 26 March 2018 c545](#)

⁶⁹ [HL Deb 8 March 2022 c1331](#)

6,312 main applicants and adult dependents are within the scope of the review.⁷⁰ Spotlight on Corruption, a UK-based NGO, has noted that this equates to 50% of all Tier 1 Investor visas issued, and that 85% of Russian applicants and 68% of all applicants from mainland China were granted during that period. It has also highlighted that many people granted visas during that period will now have completed the residence requirement for naturalisation as a British citizen.

The Home Office is unable to identify the number of Tier 1 (Investor) visa holders who have been granted British citizenship from available statistics for naturalisation as a British citizen.⁷¹

Reaction to closure of Tier 1 (Investor) visa

Spotlight on Corruption has welcomed the closure of the visa route. It continues to press for the publication of the 2018 review. It is also calling on the Government to publish the identities of Tier 1 (Investor) visa holders who pose a risk, and to set out how it will build capacity within the Home Office to prevent people with corrupt or criminal sources of wealth from being granted residency in the UK.⁷²

Some immigration law professionals have criticised the decision to close the Investor visa route entirely. Sophie Barrett-Brown, a leading UK immigration lawyer with specialist expertise in investor visas, has argued that “robust criteria, procedures and enforcement” would be a more appropriate response than action affecting the “compliant majority”.⁷³ She also highlighted that the Immigration Rules already contained broad grounds to refuse Tier 1 (Investor) applications where there were concerns about how funds had been acquired or the character, conduct or associations of people involved.

The Home Office does not collate or publish figures on the number of Tier 1 Investor visa applications refused in relation to concerns about corruption or illicit finance.⁷⁴

Other criticisms made by other lawyers include that abolishing the visa does not address underlying problems about the efficacy of the UK’s money laundering controls, and that it will have a “significant long-term impact on the UK economy”.⁷⁵ A Written Statement laid on 21 February gives some details about the Government’s plans for a replacement visa category. This is not expected to be launched until Autumn 2022.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Spotlight on Corruption, [Red Carpet for Dirty Money](#), July 2021

⁷¹ [JIN 111688](#), answered on 2 February 2022

⁷² Spotlight on Corruption, [Statement on news that the UK government will scrap ‘golden visas’](#), 17 February 2022

⁷³ Laura Devine Immigration, Insights, [Tier 1 \(Investor\) route: setting the record straight](#), 17 February 2022

⁷⁴ [JIN 148672](#), answered on 8 February 2021

⁷⁵ International Investment, [Industry reacts to UK plans to scrap Tier 1 golden visas](#), 17 February 2022

⁷⁶ [HCWS614, 21 February 2022](#)

The Immigration Law Practitioners' Association (ILPA) criticised how the closure of the route was communicated and brought into effect. It said that the Government's approach "undermines democratic procedures of accountability and any sense of legal certainty, stability, and predictability." The Government has said that providing prior notice for the route's closure would have triggered a rush in last-minute applications "most likely to feature a high proportion of applications from individuals that represent some degree of harm."⁷⁷

⁷⁷ [Explanatory memorandum to CP 632](#), para 3.2

5 Election finance

The Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (ISC) 2020 report on the [Russian threat to the UK](#) noted the highly dispersed paper-based voting and counting system of UK elections makes any significant tampering and cyber-attacks difficult. It also highlighted that GCHQ has undertaken a great deal of work to help ensure that the online voter registration system is safe.⁷⁸ The report noted that other attempts at broader political influence and disinformation have been widely reported and that Russian oligarchs had used their business interests, donations to charities and political parties for broader Russian influence in the UK.⁷⁹

5.1 Donations

Donations to political parties and elected representatives are regulated. The main piece of legislation is the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, as amended, known as PPERA. The system of regulation is designed to prevent foreign money entering the political system and elections.

Donations or loans over £500 to parties or campaigners must come from a permissible source. A permissible source is essentially someone registered to vote in the UK (including overseas voters) or a UK based organisation. Registered voters must be British, Irish or EU citizens who are resident in the country. Parties and campaigners are responsible for checking permissibility. The Electoral Commission's [Donations and loans pages](#) gives more detail.

Donations or loans over a certain level (£7,500 to a central party or £1,500 to local parties) must be reported to the Electoral Commission, who will then publish them [it's database](#) of donations and loans.

High value donations to the Conservative Party from donors with Russian links have been criticised by Opposition MPs.⁸⁰ The Conservative Party has defended the donations. It says the donations have come from British citizens "received in good faith after appropriate due diligence".⁸¹

⁷⁸ Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, [Russia, HC632 \(PDF\)](#), 2019-21, p10

⁷⁹ As above, p9 and p15

⁸⁰ Guardian, [Labour challenges Tories over checks on Russia-linked donations](#), 17 November 2021

⁸¹ Independent, [Wrong to tar all Russian-linked Tory donors with the same brush, Government says](#), 23 February 2022

5.2

Improving permissibility

However, the current permissibility checks have been criticised. In July 2021, Lord Hodgson highlighted the concerns to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. He has undertaken several reviews for the Government on various aspects of the voluntary sector and charities. In his evidence he pointed out that charities are required to carry out anti-money laundering checks on donations but political parties and campaigners are not.⁸²

The Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) recommends PPERA should be updated to require parties and non-party campaigners to have appropriate procedures in place to determine the true source of donations. The Committee says “this may involve incorporating some aspects of anti-money laundering requirements into electoral law” but also recommends that all donations over £500 to be donated only through the banking system.⁸³ The House of Lords Select Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies and the APPG on Electoral Campaigning Transparency both heard evidence that expressed concerns about donations made online that might be at risk from evading the permissibility rules.⁸⁴

5.3

Recommendations to amend PPERA

The CSPL most recent [report on party finance](#), from July 2021, also included recommendations to limit foreign money entering political finance and campaigns. These included explicitly banning foreign organisations or individuals from buying campaign advertising in the UK and ensuring donations from companies should not exceed net profits after tax generated in the UK within the preceding two years. This mirrors recommendations made previously by the Electoral Commission.⁸⁵

The Committee considered the current rules are insufficient to guard against foreign interference in UK elections.⁸⁶ It was also concerned that the rules around unincorporated associations needed tightening, saying “they are neither easy to follow, nor do they provide sufficient confidence in the original sources of donations”.⁸⁷

⁸² Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, [Oral evidence: The work of the Electoral Commission](#), Q177

⁸³ Committee on Standards in Public Life, [Regulating Elections Finance, July 2021](#), p58

⁸⁴ House of Lords Select Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies, [Digital Technology and the Resurrection of Trust](#), HL 77 2019-20, June 2020, p97 and APPG on Electoral Campaigning Transparency, [Defending our Democracy in the Digital Age](#), p12

⁸⁵ Electoral Commission, [Digital campaigning increasing transparency for voters](#) (PDF), p19, June 2018

⁸⁶ Committee on Standards in Public Life, [Regulating Election Finance: report](#) (PDF), 7 July 2021, p51

⁸⁷ As above, p53

The [Government response](#) to the CSPL report said “rules that apply to political donations are already strong and based on the right principles”. It went on to say it keeps the rules on donations under review and the CSPL’s recommendations “will be considered carefully in detail to assess their viability in practice”.⁸⁸

5.4 Elections Bill 2021

The Government’s [Elections Bill](#), currently before Parliament, includes measures to fulfil the Government’s commitment to strengthen the integrity of UK elections.⁸⁹ This is one of the elements of the Government’s Defending Democracy programme.⁹⁰

Measures include tightening rules on how much foreign third-party campaigners can spend on UK elections. The Bill will remove the scope for any legal spending by foreign third-party campaigners above £700.

The Bill will also require new political parties being set up to declare if they have assets or liabilities over £500 when registering with the Electoral Commission. This is designed to ensure foreign funding is not used to set up new parties.

The Bill will also introduce a UK-wide digital imprint regime for political campaigning. Imprints inform voters who has produced and paid for campaign material. The Government says this will give more transparency around digital campaign spending. Imprints are already required on printed material (and on digital material for devolved elections in Scotland). The Electoral Commission has called for digital imprints for some time and welcomed the Government’s proposals. The Commission’s view is it will improve public trust and confidence in digital campaigns and would help UK voters understand who is paying to target them online.

The Labour Party has introduced amendments to the Bill in its stages in the House of Lords to require individual and company donors to be based in the United Kingdom and makes persons running companies liable for donation restriction evasion offences committed by those companies. This mirrors a recommendation made by the CSPL.⁹¹

The Opposition has also introduced amendments to prevent registered overseas voters (British citizens living overseas who can register to vote in UK Parliament elections) donating to political parties. The Labour Party argue it would “close the loophole allowing the use of shell companies to hide the true

⁸⁸ Cabinet Office, [Government response to 'Regulating Election Finance'](#), 15 September 2021

⁸⁹ Commons Library briefing CBP 9304, [Elections Bill 2021-22](#)

⁹⁰ Cabinet Office, [Defending Democracy - Policy Exchange Speech](#), 15 June 2021

⁹¹ Committee on Standards in Public Life, [Regulating Election Finance: report](#) (PDF), 7 July 2021, p51

source of donations to political parties by foreign actors”.⁹² The Government does not support either amendment and they are likely to be unsuccessful.

⁹² Labour List, [Back Labour amendments to counter “Russian influence”, Starmer urges PM](#), 23 February 2022

6 Media

6.1 RT (formerly Russia Today)

On 2 March 2022, the EU suspended the broadcasting activities of RT (formerly Russia Today).⁹³ As satellite companies in Luxembourg and France provide the RT feed to Sky, Freesat and Freeview, the EU suspension means that RT is not available on any broadcast channels in the UK.⁹⁴

18 March 2022: Ofcom revokes Russia Today's licence

On 28 February 2022, Ofcom announced that it had opened 15 investigations into the due impartiality of news programmes on the RT news channel.⁹⁵ A further 12 investigations were announced on 2 March 2022.⁹⁶ Ofcom said that, as it progressed the investigations, it was considering whether RT should retain a UK licence.⁹⁷

3 Role of Ofcom

Ofcom is the UK's communications regulator. Broadcasters are required by the terms of their licence to comply with Ofcom's [Broadcasting Code](#) (December 2020). [Section 5 of the Code](#) is "designed to ensure that news, in whatever form, is reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality".

Ofcom has a range of powers to deal with non-compliance. Depending on the nature of the breach of its Code, Ofcom can:

- publish a breach finding.
- require the licensee to broadcast a summary of Ofcom's decision.
- impose a financial penalty.
- revoke the licence.

⁹³ ["EU imposes sanctions on state-owned outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik's broadcasting in the EU"](#), European Council press release [online], 2 March 2022 (accessed 17 March 2022)

⁹⁴ ["RT: Russian-backed TV news channel disappears from UK screens"](#), BBC [online], 3 March 2022 (accessed 17 March 2022); [HC Deb 3 March 2022 c1196](#)

⁹⁵ ["Ofcom launches 15 investigations into RT"](#), Ofcom News [online], 28 February 2022 (accessed 17 March 2022)

⁹⁶ ["Ofcom launches further investigations into RT"](#), Ofcom News [online], 2 March 2022 (accessed 17 March 2022)

⁹⁷ ["Ofcom launches further investigations into RT"](#), Ofcom News [online], 2 March 2022 (accessed 17 March 2022)

On 18 March 2022, Ofcom announced that it had revoked RT's licence to broadcast in the UK with immediate effect. An [Ofcom news release](#) explained:

We have done so on the basis that we do not consider RT's licensee, ANO TV Novosti, fit and proper to hold a UK broadcast licence.

Today's decision comes amid 29 ongoing investigations by Ofcom into the due impartiality of RT's news and current affairs coverage of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We consider the volume and potentially serious nature of the issues raised within such a short period to be of great concern – especially given RT's compliance history, which has seen the channel fined £200,000 for previous due impartiality breaches.

In this context, we launched a separate investigation to determine whether ANO TV Novosti is fit and proper to retain its licence to broadcast.

This investigation has taken account of a number of factors, including RT's relationship with the Russian Federation. It has recognised that RT is funded by the Russian state, which has recently invaded a neighbouring sovereign country. We also note new laws in Russia which effectively criminalise any independent journalism that departs from the Russian state's own news narrative, in particular in relation to the invasion of Ukraine. We consider that given these constraints it appears impossible for RT to comply with the due impartiality rules of our Broadcasting Code in the circumstances.

We recognise that RT is currently off air in the UK, as a result of sanctions imposed by the EU since the invasion of Ukraine commenced. We take seriously the importance, in our democratic society, of a broadcaster's right to freedom of expression and the audience's right to receive information and ideas without undue interference. We also take seriously the importance of maintaining audiences' trust and public confidence in the UK's broadcasting regulatory regime.

Taking all of this into account, as well as our immediate and repeated compliance concerns, we have concluded that we cannot be satisfied that RT can be a responsible broadcaster in the current circumstances. Ofcom is therefore revoking RT's licence to broadcast with immediate effect.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ [“Ofcom revokes RT's broadcast licence”](#), Ofcom news release [online], 18 March 2022 (accessed 18 March 2022)

6.2

Social media and disinformation

On 3 March 2022, the Secretary of State said that the DCMS' counter-disinformation unit had been working to identify and remove Russian disinformation online.⁹⁹ She also explained:

...Alongside the US and others, we have been working closely with platforms to take pre-emptive action against Putin, and to demonstrate the consequences of his brutality in real time to the Russian people. Apple has paused all sales in Russia, Google has added new safeguarding features to Google Maps and Search, and WhatsApp is hosting a helpline for Ukraine's state emergency service that sends people information and critical news about the local situation.

While big tech has stepped up in a really positive way, we are also encouraging and supporting platforms to go even further to tackle certain challenges, including disinformation, service disruptions and the humanitarian crisis triggered by the conflict...¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ [HC Deb 3 March 2022 c1196](#)

¹⁰⁰ [HC Deb 3 March 2022 c1196](#)

7

Roman Abramovich and Chelsea Football Club

On 10 March 2022 the Government announced that Chelsea's owner, Roman Abramovich, had been added to the UK Sanctions list and his assets frozen.¹⁰¹ On the same date, the DCMS announced that the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI) had issued a licence to Chelsea so that a number of football-related activities could continue.¹⁰²

[The licence](#) allows the Club to pay various costs, including remuneration and allowances of employees of the Club. It also allows the payment of fees, dividends or other allowances to directors of the Club, payable under obligations which pre-date the date of the licence and are due in the period of the licence, but not any fees, dividends or other allowances to Roman Abramovich.¹⁰³ A [DCMS press release](#) gave this summary of the scope of the licence:

Sale of the club

While the current licence does not permit the sale of the club at this time, the Government is open to a sale of the club and would consider an application for a new licence to allow for a sale. Proceeds from any sale could not go to the sanctioned individual while he is subject to sanctions.

Transfers

Under the current licence the transfer or loan of players in and out of the club is not permitted. This applies to all of Chelsea's teams. Transfers are also not possible at this time in the season anyway because the transfer window is closed.

Matchday tickets

Fans who have already purchased a ticket for a future fixture or have a club season ticket can use their existing tickets or resell them within the boundaries of the law. Under the current licence no new or additional tickets can be purchased. This includes tickets for home matches and tickets bought from the club for away matches.

Matchday catering

¹⁰¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/abramovich-and-deripaska-among-seven-oligarchs-targeted-in-estimated-15bn-sanction-hit>

¹⁰² ["Chelsea FC granted licence to continue operating"](#), DCMS press release [online], 10 March 2022 (accessed 17 March 2022)

¹⁰³ OFSI, [GENERAL LICENCE – Football Matches, INT/2022/1327076](#).

The licence permits home ground ‘hosting transactions’ including stewarding, catering and security but none of the proceeds can go to the designated individual.

Merchandise

The licence does not allow the club to undertake any new revenue raising activity including selling merchandise. The club’s physical and online store cannot operate. This restriction does not apply to the sale of existing stock held by third parties such as high street sports retailers.

Champions League and FA Cup

The purpose of the licence is to permit the club to continue with the necessary activity to ensure that it is able to fulfil its upcoming fixtures. As such the licence allows footballing activity and travel to continue which would permit the club to play European fixtures and the FA Cup.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ [“Chelsea FC granted licence to continue operating”](#), DCMS press release [online], 10 March 2022 (accessed 17 March 2022)

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