



UK relations with Russia

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Author: Ben Smith

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A brief summary of UK political relations with Russia, which have been damaged by a number of problems, including the death of Sergei Magnitsky. See also the Library note [UK-Russia trade statistics](#), October 2012

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1 Alexandr Litvinenko

Alexandr Litvinenko was granted political asylum by the United Kingdom in 2000. While living in London, he had made some grave accusations about the Russian secret services, including that they had organised the notorious bombing of four apartment blocks in 1999. He was killed in London in 2006 by what proved to be radioactive polonium-210. The UK requested the extradition of alleged former intelligence officer Andrei Lugovoi, who was suspected of assassinating him. Russia refused the request, saying that the Russian constitution forbids the extradition of Russian citizens.

In September 2012, David Cameron visited Moscow for a one-day visit during which he was scheduled to meet the President, Vladimir Putin, and Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. Mr Cameron said in a speech at Moscow State University that the Litvinenko case was one of the “difficult issues that hamper mutual trust and co-operations.”¹ However, Mr Cameron said that while the UK was not trying to drop the Litvinenko case, Russia and the UK should go beyond that problem:

At the same time, we have a responsibility to recognise the many ways in which we do need each other... and find ways for us to work together to advance our mutual interests. The countries that will be successful in the 21st century will not be those that hunker down, pull up the drawbridge and fail to overcome their differences with others.²

Mr Medvedev said that My Lugovoi would never be extradited:

We all have to learn to respect our legal frameworks. That will never happen no matter what will be the circumstances.

The Litvinenko case will probably return to the top of the agenda in the coming months as a coroner recently said that an inquest would be held early next year and would consider allegations that the spy was murdered by the Russian state.³ It also emerged that the British authorities have formally accused another Russian, Dmitry Kovtun, of the murder.⁴ Dmitry Kovtun said in Moscow in February 2012 that he had received a letter from the Crown Prosecution Service seeking his extradition.

Russia has extradition requests in place for Boris Berezovsky, an oligarch accused of sedition and financial crimes, and Akhmed Zakayev, a Chechen separatist. The UK has denied the requests and both Russians have been granted political asylum in the UK.

2 British Council

In 2008, the Russian government ordered the closure of British Council offices in Russia, citing allegations of tax violations. The British Ambassador was summoned for a public rebuke when the British Council defied the instruction to close the St Petersburg office.

¹ “Cameron tells Russia: we must work together”, *Channel 4 News Online*, 12 September 2012

² *Ibid.*

³ “Litvinenko inquest to look at role of Russian state”, *Guardian*, 21 September 2012

⁴ “[Alexander Litvinenko poisoning: move to extradite second murder suspect](#)”, *Guardian*, 29 February 2012

Relations in 2008 were also strained by the Georgia conflict. The Russian invasion of Georgia and subsequent recognition of the statehood of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two breakaway regions of Georgia, were criticised by the UK.⁵

3 Human rights

The UK and other governments continue to accuse the Russian Government of complicity in human rights violations and these have been raised in Parliament. For example, Lord Judd brought up the matter of abuses in the North Caucasus. For the government, Baroness Warsi replied that human rights are discussed at the UK-Russia human rights dialogue:

We remain deeply concerned about grave human rights violations in the North Caucasus region, including allegations of extrajudicial killings, torture and disappearances of individuals. We have made clear to the Russian Government, most recently at the UK-Russia Human Rights Dialogue in July, that putting an end to human rights violations is a vital element in the achievement of a long-term solution to the North Caucasus problems.

We will continue to call for Russia to implement fully European Court of Human Rights judgements, including pressing on individual cases through the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers. To that end we will consider all of the tools at the Committee of Ministers' disposal.⁶

The jailing of members of the punk band Pussy Riot for hooliganism was also discussed at the UK-Russia human rights dialogue in July 2012.⁷

4 Syria

Perhaps the most important policy difference between the UK and Russia has been played out in the United Nations Security Council. Russia, along with China, has vetoed three draft resolutions supported by the British Government seeking to take stronger action in relation to the Syria crisis under the mandatory powers contained in Chapter 7 of the UN Charter.

Russian ministers say that they will not allow another situation like that in Libya to happen. There, the Russian government thinks that Western powers including Britain far exceeded the mandate provided by Security Council Resolution 1973 to protect civilians, taking it as permission to bring about regime change.

After the third of the Russian vetoes, on 19 July, on a British-sponsored resolution that would have imposed economic sanctions on Syria for failing to implement the UN-sponsored peace plan, the British Ambassador to the United Nations, Sir Mark Lyall Grant, said that he was "appalled" by the outcome. He said: "Frankly, it is impossible to understand why China and Russia felt it necessary to veto this text."⁸

5 Sergei Magnitsky case

Sergei Magnitsky was a Russian lawyer who was representing the interests of Hermitage Capital Management, a UK-based company accused in Russia of tax evasion and fraud.

⁵ For more on the Georgia dispute, see the Library note [Georgia: the conflict with Russia and the crisis in South Ossetia](#), August 2008

⁶ HL Deb [24 September 2012, c357WA](#)

⁷ HC Deb [9 July 2012, c15W](#)

⁸ "Friction at the U.N. as Russia and China Veto Another Resolution on Syria Sanctions", *New York Times*, 19 July 2012

Magnitsky had made revelations about an alleged multi-million pound fraud on the part of the Russian authorities and died after spending almost a year in prison without trial, during which time he was allegedly mistreated and denied essential medical treatment. The case has caused deterioration in relations between the UK and Russia, and has been highly controversial in other countries.

On 7 March 2012, a resolution was moved by Dominic Raab MP:

That this House notes the passage of the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Bill through the United States Senate, the Bill to condemn corruption and impunity in Russia in the case and death of Sergei Magnitsky in the House of Commons in Canada, the approval of the resolution of the Dutch Parliament concerning Sergei Magnitsky dated 29 June 2011, and paragraphs I and 20 to 21 of the resolution of the European Parliament of 14 December 2011 on the EU-Russia Summit; and calls on the Government to bring forward equivalent legislative proposals providing for a presumption in favour of asset freezes and travel bans for officials of the Russian state and other countries, wherever the appropriate UK authorities have collected or received evidence that establishes that such officials:

- (a) were involved in the detention, physical abuse or death of Sergei Magnitsky;
- (b) participated in efforts to conceal the legal liability for the detention, abuse or death of Sergei Magnitsky;
- (c) committed the frauds discovered by Sergei Magnitsky; or
- (d) are responsible for extrajudicial killings, torture or other gross violations of human rights committed in Russia or any other country against any individual seeking to obtain, exercise, defend or promote basic and internationally recognised human rights, including those set out in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966.⁹

The motion was passed on a question.

The Government's position is that existing rules provide for refusals of visas to those who have committed human rights abuses:

The immigration rules allow for the refusal of entry in cases where there is independent, reliable and credible evidence that an individual has committed human rights abuses. In such cases, the individual will be routinely refused entry to the UK. The UK has a long-established practice of not commenting routinely on the details of individual visa cases.¹⁰

Reportedly partly as a result of the Magnitsky row, Vladimir Putin announced that he would not be attending the Olympics in London. Later it was reported that he would visit briefly to see a judo match. During the visit, Putin met David Cameron to discuss the situation in Syria and bilateral relations, including prospects for developing trade, economic and energy cooperation and investment opportunities.¹¹

On 3 September, the minister concerned, David Lidington, held a meeting with Russian officials during which he raised the Magnitsky case. Mr Lidington said:

⁹ HC Deb 7 March 2012, c951

¹⁰ HL Deb 4 July 2012, c180WA

¹¹ "Russia's Putin In London To See Cameron, Olympic Judo", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 2 August 2012

The UK remains seriously concerned about the lack of progress in the investigation into Sergei Magnitsky's death, and has set out these concerns to the Russian authorities at the highest levels.¹²

6 Espionage

Newspapers have reported comments from British intelligence sources to the effect that the Russian state continues to dedicate important resources to espionage in the UK.¹³ According to Jonathan Eyal of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), the UK is interesting to the Russian intelligence service, particularly because of the close relationship with the US. Russian agents are said to hope that breaching British security gives it access to US secrets. The Russians are also said to be interested in the activities of the large number of wealthy Russians who spend some time in the UK, including oligarchs such as Boris Berezovsky and Roman Abramovich. The Russian intelligence service is also suspected of industrial espionage on behalf of Russian companies.

The question of spying also came up when Katia Zatuliveter, research assistant to Mike Hancock MP, was accused by the Home Office of spying for the Russian Government. Mr Hancock used to serve on the House of Commons Defence Select Committee. The Home Office lost its case, as the court found that there was insufficient evidence to show that Ms Zatuliveter was spying for the Russian Government. Much of the court's deliberation was carried out in secret.

The UK has also spied on Russia. In 2006, the British Government was accused of putting a plastic rock filled with communications equipment in a Russian street. At the time the Government denied the accusation. Earlier this year, Jonathan Powell, Number 10 Chief of Staff in 2006, admitted that the accusation was true.

7 Russian Arctic medal

Veterans have been campaigning since 2001 for those who served in the allied Arctic convoys to be allowed to receive the Arctic Defence Medal from the Russian Government.¹⁴

Allied veterans of the convoys have already received the 40th Anniversary of Victory Medal from Russia after permission to receive and wear them was granted by the Queen in 1994. As a battle decoration, the Arctic Defence Medal is of a higher standing than the Anniversary of Victory Medals and the rules on the acceptance and wearing of foreign medals are therefore more strictly applied.

In 2004 the Government said the Russian authorities "made known that they were no longer considering conferring the medal for the Arctic Defence Medal on foreign war veterans."¹⁵

However, the matter came up again in 2012. In May, the Russian government requested permission to grant the British veterans the Ushakov Medal, a high-status naval medal, in recognition of their service in the Arctic Convoys.

In October 2012 the *Daily Mail*¹⁶ reported that the Foreign Office had blocked the move by the Russian Government. The newspaper said the Russian Embassy has written to survivors

¹² HC Deb [6 September 2012, c422W](#)

¹³ "Number of Russian spies in the UK back to Cold War levels, say security services", *Daily Telegraph*, 7 April 2012

¹⁴ Also referred to as the Soviet Arctic Region Medal.

¹⁵ HC Deb 22 January 2005 c1087W

of the sea campaign to inform them it intended to award them with the Medal of Ushakov as a symbol of the country's gratitude.

The *Mail* provides a statement from the Foreign Office:

The rules on the acceptance of foreign awards state that for permission to be given for an award to be accepted, there has to have been specific service to the country concerned and that that service should have taken place within the previous five years.

Additionally, permission cannot be granted if they have received, or are expected to receive, a UK award for the same services.¹⁷

The Russian Embassy in London said that it deeply regretted the fact that Russia is at present not allowed to recognise the veterans of the operation, some 3000 of whom died. It also noted that the authorities in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA have granted permission for their veterans to wear the medal.¹⁸ Caroline Dinéage MP said that there was no time for delay:

Every minute that you waste on this is important. The worst case scenario is that we finally go through all this procedure and it is decided that the veterans are worthy of a medal and then there is nobody left alive to receive one. That would be a hollow victory.¹⁹

A review of the rules on accepting medals, including foreign medals, issued an interim report in July 2012,²⁰ and is due to issue its final report before the end of the year.²¹

Library Standard Note [Medal Campaigns](#) examines the process by which campaign medals are instituted, the rules governing the acceptance and wearing of foreign medals, and some of the medal campaigns that are currently underway, including the Arctic Convoy medal campaign.

8 Visas

One of the most important questions for Russia is visa-free travel to the EU for Russian citizens.

Russia was hopeful that the Cypriot presidency of the EU in the second half of 2012 might be an opportunity for progress on the issue. Visa-free travel has not yet been granted, but negotiations with a view to changing the present requirements are continuing.

9 Economic interests

Despite the high-profile issues between the UK and Russian Governments, there is a sense that UK and Russian interests will be served by maintaining cordial relations. Trade between the UK and the Russian Federation has grown strongly as a proportion of all UK overseas trade,²² and the UK had £29 billion invested in Russia in 2011.²³ One of the most important

¹⁶ "Fury as government bars Britain's Arctic heroes from accepting Russian bravery medal for their role in perilous WWII campaign", *Daily Mail*, 13 October 2012

¹⁷ "Fury as government bars Britain's Arctic heroes from accepting Russian bravery medal for their role in perilous WWII campaign", *Daily Mail*, 13 October 2012

¹⁸ Russian Embassy in London, "On UK Arctic Convoy Veterans: Ushakov Medal", 10 October 2012

¹⁹ "How long do Arctic Convoy heroes have to wait for a fitting honour?", *Independent*, 14 October 2012

²⁰ Sir John Holmes, *Military Medals Review*, July 2012

²¹ HC Deb 22 Oct 2012, c609W

²² See the Library Standard Note [UK-Russia trade statistics](#), October 2012

economic interests is BP's energy activity in Russia. On 22 October 2012, it was announced that BP would sell its stake in TNK-BP, a joint venture with Russian oligarchs that gave BP access to some of Russia's enormous reserves. Rosneft, the state-controlled oil giant, will be buying the BP stake for \$12.3 billion in cash, plus shares constituting 18.5% percent of Rosneft, raising BPs holding to 19.75 percent.²⁴

The deal will give Rosneft access to BP's exploration and production technology, as it seeks to exploit new Russian reserves in the Arctic and elsewhere. It means that BP will continue to be able to access Russia's enormous reserves, which were an important source of revenues through TNK-BP. Some have wondered about the wisdom of taking a 20% stake in the Russian firm, now one of the most important in the world, when the Russian economy is subject to political influence. One Russian analyst said: "Whenever there is a political component to decisions, they always go against the grain of boosting efficiency and market capitalisation."²⁵

With the present British Government focussed on encouraging trade and exports, a high-level delegation visited Moscow in September 2011, including Prime Minister David Cameron, Foreign Secretary William Hague, Minister of State for Trade and Investment Lord Green and a business delegation. Mr Cameron had meetings with the then President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin, as he still was at the time. The trip underlined the need to keep relations on a relatively even keel and the desire on both sides to foster mutual economic interests.

²³ Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Russia: Country profile](#) [visited 25 October 2012]

²⁴ "Rosneft beefs up with TNK-BP purchase", *Reuters*, 22 October 2012

²⁵ "Deals that turned wheel of fortune for Rosneft", *Financial Times*, 23 October 2012