

ФЕДЕРАЛЬНОЕ ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОЕ БЮДЖЕТНОЕ УЧРЕЖДЕНИЕ НАУКИ

**ИНСТИТУТ ЕВРОПЫ
РОССИЙСКОЙ АКАДЕМИИ
НАУК**

125009, МОСКВА, МОХОВАЯ УЛ., 11-3
ТЕЛ.: +7(495)692-10-51/629-45-07
ФАКС: +7(495)629-92-96
WWW.INSTITUTEOFEUROPE.RU



**INSTITUTE OF EUROPE
RUSSIAN ACADEMY OF
SCIENCES**

125009, MOSCOW, MOKHOVAYA STR., 11-3
TEL.: +7(495)692-10-51/629-45-07
FAX: +7(495)629-92-96
WWW.INSTITUTEOFEUROPE.RU

Working paper №8, 2016 (№22)

Britain has no perpetual enemies

Elena Ananieva

Candidate of Sciences (Philosophy), Head of IE RAS Center for British Studies

After nearly a decade of the UK's sharp criticism of Russia's policy, there are finally signs that the British government may be willing to engage with Russia once again.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and UK Prime Minister Theresa May have agreed to meet at the G20 Summit in China on September 4-5. Via a telephone conversation, both leaders expressed dismay at the state of UK-Russian relations. The decision to meet, which came at the initiative of the British, could be a sign of a future thawing in UK-Russian relations. Britain's spokesperson stated that both leaders came to the conclusion that citizens in both UK and Russia face similar threats that are connected to terrorism. The Kremlin reported that Putin and May agreed to work together and communicate in the spheres of intelligence and flight safety in order to ward off future threats from international terrorists.

Turns in relations

Tensions between the two countries started to deteriorate back in 2007 due to the Alexander Litvinenko case, which involved the mysterious radioactive poisoning of a former Russian KGB official seeking asylum in the UK. At the time, the Labour government of Gordon Brown broke off contact with Russia relating to international terrorism, and put in new restrictions on cooperation. The government also implemented visa restrictions and other harsh measures. Cooperation became even more difficult in light of Russia's conflict with Georgia in 2008, which the UK interpreted as an act of Russian aggression. Meanwhile, worldwide problems demanded the cooperation of both nations as members of the UN

Security Council. The world financial crisis in 2008 forced Gordon Brown to send one of his trade ministers to Moscow on official business. In November 2009, David Miliband, the British foreign minister, made the first official visit to Russia in five years. In the course of talks, three main deals were signed, including agreements on Iran, Afghanistan, and the Middle East. However, overall tension between the countries remained.

Economic cooperation between the countries was not affected until the Ukraine crisis in 2014. Despite this crisis, according to the Ministry of Economic Development, the UK remains one of Russia's largest trading partners. At the end of 2015 Great Britain ranked 13th in terms of trade and export with Russia. The amount of trade amounted to \$11.2 billion, which was 42 percent less than in 2014. In January-March of 2016, the decrease in trade continued. The amount of bilateral trade amounted to \$2.4 billion, which is 14 percent less than at the same time in 2015. Britain also ranks 11th (\$7.2 billion) in terms of investment in Russia. It also ranks 8th in foreign direct investment (\$8.7 billion).

Moreover, British businesses continue to work in the Russian market. Cooperation is still excellent between companies like BP, Rosneft and Gazprom. In addition, there are new projects being launched, such as those in the medical field. In 2016 the countries celebrate the 100th anniversary of Russo-British Chamber of Commerce.

When it comes to the political sphere, a reset in relations was attempted under the administration of Prime Minister David Cameron, which caused problems for him at home. A testament to this is a letter signed by a number of former Labour ministers, who voiced their disapproval of better relations with Russia. In 2011 and 2012, provocative material continued to appear in the British press on account of the Magnitsky List, which resulted in restrictions being placed on certain Russian officials. In 2013, David Cameron tried to act as an intermediary between Washington and Moscow on Syria, but his mission failed. In the beginning of the «Ukrainian crisis» the coalition government did not propose strict measures against Russia¹, but soon joined the determined position of the US, and the EU was insisting on anti-Russia sanctions as well.

But even after Sir Robert Owen's report about the Litvinenko case in January 2016, Britain did not pass any legislation against Russia, despite strong anti-Russian rhetoric. At that time, David Cameron's position was that there were more pressing issues than the Litvinenko case. From his perspective, it was important to work together with Russia on such issues as Syria and Iran, and coordinate efforts against ISIS (terrorist organization, prohibited in Russia). There are also other international cases that require UK-Russian cooperation. Despite this, David Cameron and his foreign minister, Philip Hammond, again turned to anti-Russian rhetoric – this time in order to guarantee a positive result in the UK's EU referendum. They stated that a Brexit would benefit Putin and Russia by creating a weaker Europe. But the British public remained unfazed, eventually voting to exit the EU².

¹ URL: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/03/uk-seeks-russia-harm-city-london-document>; <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2572544/Files-Britain-NOT-support-military-action-against-Russia.html>

² E. Russia and the Brexit: Be careful of simple solutions to complex problems. URL: <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/russia-and-brex-it-be-careful-simple-solutions-complex-problems>. Jun 30, 2016.

Will the common interests prevail?

The Telegraph reported that, according to British diplomat Tony Brenton, who served as British Ambassador to Russia from 2004-2008, «We have led the demand for tough EU sanctions, and excluded ourselves from Franco-German efforts to find a negotiated solution to the Ukraine problem. And while even America is looking for a way forward with the Russians on Syria, we seem to be standing pat on the simple demand for Assad to go». He notes that other Western nations already began restoring their relations with Russia. More and more ministers and even prime ministers are trying to fly to Moscow for meetings. As a result, the support for sanctions is weakening. «It is time for us also to rethink our positions», acknowledged Brenton.

The seasoned diplomat also sees a problem in the popular perception that the rift between Russia and the West will result in a «New Cold War». He states that, «This dangerous nonsense has to stop. The picture we are building up in our minds of a revanchist Russia is as absurd as their picture of an aggressive and encircling West.» Russia spends ten times less on defense than NATO, and Russia's economy is one-twentieth the size of the combined Euro-Atlantic economy. Russians, according to him, have no desire to start any losing wars.

Tony Brenton created a plan of improving relations with Russia that focused on stabilizing Ukraine and reaching an agreement with Russia about Syria. Working to solve the Syria crisis will help everyone focus on the common foe of ISIS. According to him, Foreign Minister Philip Hammond was stubborn in his approach to Russia, and demanded the impossible: the return of Crimea to Ukraine. The new foreign minister, Boris Johnson, has a more pragmatic approach. He is also more critical of EU foreign policy, which he sees as involving Britain in the Ukrainian mire³. In 2015, Britain's House of Lords said that Cameron's administration had sleepwalked into the Ukraine crisis⁴.

It's important to keep in mind that one of the final acts of the Cameron cabinet was a parliamentary vote on the modernization of the Trident defense system⁵. Theresa May at that time stated that nuclear threats to the UK included Russia and North Korea.

It is also noteworthy that UK's defense ministry no longer has Russian-speaking specialists⁶. However, it is good news that one of the goals of the ministry is to learn more about Russia⁷. Of course, knowledge of Russia does not mean that the national interests between the two

³ Brenton T. It's time for a thaw in our relations with Russia. URL: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/08/10/its-time-for-a-thaw-in-our-relations-with-russia/>.

⁴ The EU and Russia: before and beyond the crisis in Ukraine. URL: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldselect/ldecom/115/115.pdf>

⁵ Ananieva E. Brexit, Russia and the fate of the British nuclear deterrent. URL: <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/brexit-russia-and-fate-british-nuclear-deterrent>. Jul 22, 2016.

⁶ Oral evidence: The UK's relations with Russia, HC 661 1 Oral evidence: The UK's relations with Russia, HC 661 Tuesday 3 May 2016. URL: <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/the-uks-relations-with-russia/oral/32880.pdf>

⁷ National Security Strategy and Strategic Defense and Security Review 2015 A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom. Chapter 5. Para 5.5. P.48. URL: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/523410/52309_Cm_9161_NSS_SD_Review_web_only.pdf

countries will align. However, the psychologically subjective challenge of trying to understand Vladimir Putin is becoming less prominent, which will allow the UK to understand Russia more objectively.

Before the ascent of Theresa May, the British government was more interested in less politicized spheres of cooperation, such as education, culture, medicine, healthcare and energy efficiency. Interestingly, 2016 is the year of the Russian language in Great Britain.

UK-Russian relations are reminiscent of a rollercoaster ride, with sudden ups and downs. In Britain there is a constant battle between idealists and pragmatists on the Russia question. Even in just the past decade, one can see the internal battles on the subject of Russia, even within the same cabinet under the same ruling party.

Let's hope that Britain will recall the fundamental thought of Lord Palmerston: «We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow». Perhaps, our countries will be able to find a common language in the political realm also, but at present the Russian vector of the British policy remains unpredictable.

Date of initial release in Russian: August 17, 2016.

This publication can be downloaded at: <http://en.instituteofeurope.ru/publications/analytics>

Originally published in English at: <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/britain-and-russia-alls-well-ends-well>