

# From Britain with caution

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The forthcoming visit of the British Prime Minister David Cameron to Russia – the second one after he crossed the country in Soviet times traveling from Hong Kong – marks the long-expected end of another intermediate chapter in history of British-Russian relations, which went into a nosedive in August 2008. That summer, when Moscow deployed its military forces in South Ossetia in response to Tbilisi's attack on Tshinval, the then leader of the Opposition was quick to grab the opportunity to demonstrate his ability to master foreign policy issues and rushed to the Georgian capital to express his solidarity with Saakashvili. Although with hindsight that move appears ill-considered, especially in the light of the following EU investigation into the causes and the sequence of events during that conflict, Mr Cameron showed himself if not yet experienced, at least a determined and pro-active politician aspiring to power.

In fact that episode did little to make relations between our countries worse. They had reached a freezing point much earlier – in summer 2007 when the then Labour Prime Minister, Gordon Brown and Foreign Secretary David Miliband expelled Russian diplomats from London in the wake of the controversy regarding the “Litvinenko affair.” Since then it was almost certain that damage done to bilateral relations would not be mended before a new general election. Of course that does not mean that under Labour attempts to improve situation were not undertaken. Already in October 2008 a member of the Cabinet, Peter Mandelson visited Moscow to develop economic ties with Russia. By that time the world economic crisis was in full swing, forcing both Russia and the UK to focus more on the benefits of mutual economic cooperation rather than on settling scores on other fronts.

Indeed the economy, the financial sector and trade had by that time become the main impetus for bilateral relations. For the past decade that has been the rule and appears set to remain so in the near future. Paradoxically, British-Russian interaction from year to year has followed diverging curves: economically we have becoming closer but politically we have been drifting apart. This would not be so absurd if Russia and the UK were not such important and influential regional and global actors, whose actions define the success or failure of responses to many international problems. Moreover these curves can intersect, in

which case political differences damage other spheres of relations. For example, the rough and unfair treatment of Russia by the new Labour government in July 2007 led to the winding down of British Council activities in Russia.

The burden of political recriminations were becoming increasingly heavy. 18 years after the break up of the Soviet Union, in 2009, the House of Commons Defence Committee issued a report: *Russia: a New Confrontation?* According to this, Russia did not represent a direct threat to Britain but the paper recommended that Britain should adhere to a tough line in dealing with Russia. Wiser considerations were, however, making headway. In October that year the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, Ed Miliband came to Moscow followed a month later by his brother, the Foreign Secretary. The visits indicated a shift in attitudes toward Russia among the British political establishment. But it would be fair to note that such events were triggered not so much by British internal political dynamics but by external factors. In the course of 2009 and more so in 2010, Britain was becoming increasingly isolated in its tough stance towards Russia. Washington and Moscow launched a “reset,” relations between Moscow, Berlin, Paris and Rome were booming and the tragedy of Smolensk miraculously started a slow process of reconciliation between Russia and Poland.

However, in 2009 the readiness of Russia and the UK to mend fences was limited. Improvement was acceptable only on issues of cooperation in multilateral formats, including on Iran, Afghanistan, the Middle East and within NATO. London went so far as to promise to explore the proposal of President Medvedev to sign the European Security Treaty although it was clear that Britain was sceptical of the idea.

Meanwhile the Conservatives were gearing up for a general election in May 2010. The legacy left after Labour was unviable. As to foreign policy the worst lacuna was relations with Russia. William Hague went to Moscow in January for a meeting with Sergey Lavrov behind closed doors. The circumstances of dire economic and financial conditions, in which the new coalition government found itself after victory, did not favour foreign policy initiatives. However, that did not preclude David Cameron and William Hague from implementing new British foreign policy

initiatives compatible with the necessary economic change back home. The core of this policy is a mix of pragmatism and idealism with an emphasis on the former. Hence the visits of the Prime Minister to India, China, the Gulf, etc., driven mainly by the idea of harnessing new opportunities which emerging multipolarity promised.

The four key speeches, which William Hague delivered in the second half of 2010 under the banner of “a networked world,” ditched the last traces of “ethical foreign policy,” initiated a decade ago by Robin Cook but dashed by the Iraq debacle, and underpinned the new coalition foreign policy with the principle of “enlightened national interest.” As to Russia, it was mentioned in the speeches twice and in the same context, when Hague lamented with good reason that by 2050 emerging economies, including Russia, would be up to 50 per cent larger than those of the current G7, including, of course, the United Kingdom. Yet the latest figures revealed that at the moment the UK exported more to Ireland than it did to India, China and Russia put together.

Moscow and London steadily followed steps to normalise their political relations. William Hague visited Russia in October 2010 and Sergey Lavrov paid a visit to Britain in February 2011. Dmitri Medvedev and David Cameron met several times during the G8 and G20 meetings. As usual these positive trends were not the only game in town: in December 2010 one diplomat was expelled by each side; there were local scandals regarding *The Guardian* correspondent Luke Harding and the Russian national Katia Zatuliveter, arrested over allegations of spying, which so far remain unproved.

Unlike the previous Labour government, the Conservative/LibDem coalition decided to put in order relations with Russia not only in multilateral fora but also in the bilateral ones. In light of the fact that both sides put forward demands that the counterpart considered unrealistic was in effect conceded by Moscow and London and issues such as extraditions in both directions, human rights, political freedoms, and double standards, were shelved for the time being for the sake of the overall progress in cooperation. Russia and the UK are looking for ways to resume cooperation in security matters, including antiterrorist activities and the fight against organised crime, especially in the light of the Olympic Games in 2012 and in 2014. It should be remembered that the tragedy in Domodedovo airport in January this year took the lives of citizens of six countries, including one from Britain.

The lack of a fully-fledged bilateral agreement on the visa regime is also an issue that remains to be addressed. The Prime Minister spoke in favour of introducing a visa-free regime for Russian citizens under the Schengen Agreement. Given the fact that

Britain is not a member, it remains to be seen if this declaration will be applied to bilateral relations.

Under all circumstances business and science are bound to remain the key foundations which buttress the whole spectrum of cooperation. This is a solid foundation. Institutionally it is supported by the UK-Russia Intergovernmental Steering Committee on Trade and Investment, co-chaired by Alexey Kudrin and Vince Cable, the British-Russian Trade Chamber and a dense network of academic and high school cooperation. There are more than 60 Russian companies listed on the London Stock Exchange. There are more than 1000 British companies, or companies with major British participation, operating in Russia including Rolls-Royce, Cadbury, British American Tobacco, Procter & Gamble, Royal Dutch Shell, etc. In 2011 the trade turnover may approach pre-crisis level (US\$15.9 bn in 2010 compared with the previous high of US\$23 bn). The UK remains one of the leading investors in Russia with accumulative investments of 21,6 bln in 2010. Within the framework of the “Partnership for Modernisation” programme the British capital has joined the “Skolkovo” project and a venture fund created together with the Russian ROSNANO corporation. Another venue for joint efforts – the signing of the Agreement on Cultural Centres, which will put on a modern legal basis the activities of the British Council in Russia and will enable Russia to set up a similar structure in the UK. TNK-BP in spite of all its ups and downs is one of the biggest projects on Russian soil with the involvement of foreign capital.

The unrivalled domain of interaction between Russia and the UK remains the sphere of culture. The deep-rooted admiration in Russia for British classical literature, other ways of life and the popularity of English language, as well as the widespread popularity of Russian culture in Britain, is a constant which does not drift at the mercy of political waves. In the last 20 years, apart from Germany, the UK has become the western European country with the second biggest Russian-speaking minority, in the range of 300-400,000 people. The Russian Old New Year, Maslenitsa and Pushkin in Britain festivals have become traditional events in London. Harnessing the experience of the British Council, the Russkiy Mir Foundation supports Russian language studies across the UK. In 2011 London is home to a range of events dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the first flight into space by Yuri Gagarin.

There will be no reset buttons in British-Russian relations, as they tend to follow an evolutionary route. However, the approaching visit of the British Prime Minister is the logical result of the painstaking work carried out by diplomats and politicians in both countries over the past few months. A reciprocal gesture may be expected after Parliamentary and Presidential elections in Russia in 2011-2012.

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