



UK-Russia Relations Post-Skripal Poisoning: An Assessment

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UK-Russia relations have had a chequered history. Both the countries tried to reach a semblance of normalcy in December 2017 when the UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met in Moscow to normalize relations. The occasion was the first visit of a UK foreign secretary to Russia in over five years. However, since the alleged usage of military-grade nerve agent novichok to poison the former Russian spy Sergei Skripal on British soil in March 2018, the relations have taken a tumble for the worse. This paper analyses the relations between UK and Russia post March 2018, highlighting the issues in the relations and the steps taken by UK against Russia.

UK-Russia Relations

The relationship between UK and Russia can be characterised as strained over multiple issues. They are strained in comparison to Russia's relations with other European countries such as Germany or France. UK strongly opposed Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in Ukraine and it supported tough UN and EU sanctions on Russia's economy as a result. Similarly, Britain has also strongly opposed Russia's support for President Assad's government in Syria. The chief source of tension is the use of veto by Russia on UN Security Council draft resolutions that aimed to take stronger action in Syria.¹

The major reason in deteriorating relations is that UK has been a place for refuge for political targets from Russia. The attempt to kill the former Russian spy Sergei Skripal was not the first of its kind. This issue had gained prominence with the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko, a former Russian spy, in London in 2006. The UK requested the extradition of alleged former intelligence officer Andrei Lugovoi, who was suspected of poisoning Litvinenko, but Russia refused the request on the grounds that Russian law forbids the extradition of Russian citizens. Similarly, in Skripal poisoning, UK alleged that two Russian military intelligence officers poisoned the ex-Russian spy and his daughter. However, Moscow's U.N. envoy dismissed Britain's evidence

as an invention from “thin air”.² On the other hand, Moscow has extradition requests in place for Boris Berezovsky, an oligarch accused of sedition and financial crimes, and Akhmed Zakayev, a Chechen separatist. London has denied the requests and both Russian citizens have been granted political asylum in the United Kingdom.³ Reciprocal accusations of espionage have further aggravated the situation.

Another key irritant in the relations is that UK has accused Russia for spreading misinformation and propaganda activities in British domestic space. Prime Minister Theresa May in November 2017 accused Russia of meddling in elections and planting fake stories in the media. The investigations into Brexit referendum also revealed that the Russians meddled in Britain's referendum to leave the EU. The report said that the Russians, with possible support from the Kremlin, bombarded British targets with social media tweets, and various posts were splashed on the nightly news and front pages in Britain.⁴ However, Russia has denied meddling in the Brexit vote and has suggested it is being used as a scapegoat. More recently in October 2018, the British government directly accused the Kremlin of responsibility for a series of cyber-attacks on British, American and Ukrainian targets between 2015 and 2017. The foreign secretary, Jeremy Hunt, said the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) had found that a number of hackers widely known to have been conducting attacks around the world were covers for the Russian GRU intelligence service.

What Now?

Although, Russia has denied its involvement in the Skripal poisoning, Prime Minister Theresa May sought explanation from Kremlin regarding the involvement of Russian government manufactured nerve agent. As Kremlin did not respond to her deadline, she announced at the House of Commons that the Kremlin was culpable for the nerve agent attack and that the government was expelling 23 Russian diplomats. She also revoked an invitation to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to visit the UK and suspended high-level contacts between the two countries. Britain also took the issue to the Security Council where the British envoy said that Russia was “in serious breach of the Chemical Weapons Convention through its failure to declare the novichok program.”⁵ The move was supported by UK's allies who also expelled Russian diplomats.⁶ In a tit-for-tat move, Russia announced expulsion of similar number of British diplomats. The Russian authorities also ordered the closure of the UK's consulate in St. Petersburg and the British Council in Moscow.⁷

What stands out is that UK has so far worked with allies to combat the Russian threat. Prime Minister Theresa May said she wanted the EU to follow the lead adopted by the US and extend sanctions to those Russians responsible for the use of chemical weapons, adding that it was something that the bloc had agreed in principle. So far, EU states have demonstrated their solidarity with the UK by expelling diplomats. The problem lies in the fact that Europe has been divided over their relations with Russia. This is because European policies toward Russia are based on the individual interests of member states. Many states are dependent on energy imports from Russia and individual interests of these countries effectively question the cohesion of EU policy on Russia. A case in point is Nord Stream 2, an \$11 billion project that would ship Russian gas across the Baltic. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has expressed support for the project and

Germany's foreign minister has suggested easing Russian sanctions⁸, while Poland has called for US sanctions on the pipeline.

With Brexit, it is going to become much difficult for UK to formulate a coherent Russia policy. This is because the process of Brexit is proving to be hugely complex and it risks doing lasting damage to UK's relations with other member states, thereby undermining its long-term standing and influence in Europe. Due to this, UK is bound to lose its leverage to help shape wider European policy and strategy directed at combating the threat posed by Russia.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnotes:

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³The Guardian, 6 August 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/aug/06/russian-suspects-salisbury-attack-extradition-request-zero-chance-success>, Accessed on 12 October 2018

⁴The Washington Post, 17 November 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/rising-alarm-in-britain-over-russian-meddling-in-brexit-vote/2017/11/17/2e987a30-cb34-11e7-b506-8a10ed1uecf5_story.html?utm_term=.c7d43e7494bc, Accessed on 14 October 2018

⁵The Guardian, 14 March 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/14/uk-spy-poisoning-russia-tells-un-it-did-not-make-nerve-agent-used-in-attack>, Accessed on 14 October 2018

⁶CNBC, 27 March 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/27/russian-diplomats-expelled-the-list-of-countries-punishing-moscow-grows.html>, Accessed on 15 October 2018

⁷The Moscow Times, 8 June 2018, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/british-consulate-st-petersburg-closes-after-26-years-operation-61723>, Accessed on 15 October 2018

⁸ Handelsblatt, 11 January 2018, <https://global.handelsblatt.com/politics/germanys-foreign-minister-suggests-lifting-sanctions-on-russia-873906>