



## **RUSSIA'S RELATIONS WITH FRANCE AND THE UNITED KINGDOM**

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## Russia–France: A Strained Political Relationship

Marie Mendras, Paris

### Abstract

While the French government seeks to build an economic relationship with Russia, French society is concerned about growing authoritarianism in the country. Additionally, there are differences in regard to energy, defense policies, EU relations to the Eastern Partnership countries (Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan), and UN resolutions against dictators' use of indiscriminate violence, as in Syria. Economic relations are unbalanced, given Russia's heavy reliance on exporting hydrocarbons, and there are few signs that the situation will change soon.

A particular bond links Russia and France, but is this longtime bond being consolidated or loosened in the current period? Will François Hollande try to instill a different content and tone to the relationship? Can Vladimir Putin take up French and European opportunities while he is embarking on an even tougher authoritarian course at home? The first meetings between the two presidents, on 1 June 2012 and 28 February 2013, were tense and did not break new ground.

A few key points illuminate the nature of the relationship, and current tensions, between Europe's second biggest nation and post-Soviet Russia.

First, the legacy of three centuries of friendship, and discord, does not secure a strong foundation on which to build a new impetus. It may even be counterproductive in the sense that the "good old days" are over and the more business-like relationship of today clearly lacks panache. "Economic diplomacy," to use the French government's motto, is not that easily combined with the kind of big power politics that both France and Russia wish to promote by engaging in bilateral security exchanges and economic cooperation.

Second, the two countries have a shared interest in pursuing dynamic economic cooperation, but they also display more asymmetries than common traits in their economic, social and political structures, as well as in their foreign policies.

Third, the French and the Russian leaderships strongly disagree on several issues: the response to the tragedy in Syria, energy strategy, the future of Europe and NATO.

Behind these openly-acknowledged disagreements lies a hushed up but crucial divergence: the political system is of a fundamentally different nature in Russia, where the authorities routinely violate public liberties and human rights, and do not always abide by their commitments in multilateral agreements. The overwhelming majority of the French public holds critical views of Putin's rule.<sup>1</sup>

### Bonds of History or Chains of the Past?

When an official visit looms, the Elysée Palace staff rummage through past speeches and figure out how to update former tributes to the greatness of the Tsarist empire and the vastness of modern-day Russia. Speech writers always fall back on the same quotations that one finds repeated in such oratorical rituals: the eternal friendship of the two countries, iconic novelists Pushkin and Balzac, Catherine II's correspondence with Voltaire and Diderot. It is not uncommon to hear the very same paragraphs in discourses over the years, from President Pompidou's visit to Moscow in 1970 to President Sarkozy's trip in 2007.

The problem today is that most Russians under 40 have hardly read Pushkin, do not know who Balzac was, and never give a thought to the Great Catherine. Only a tiny fraction of the general public know the name of François Hollande, not to mention Jean-Marc Ayrault, the French prime minister. In striking contrast, most people in France have an opinion about Vladimir Putin, about the man, his rough manners and authoritarian rule. They also know that Russia is rich in oil and gas, that the north Caucasus is engulfed in violence, and that the Sochi Olympics will take place in that part of the world. Putin's all-out repression against the opposition since he recovered his Kremlin post is a sensitive and widely discussed issue in French media.

In the Kremlin, advisers do not indulge in such reminiscences of past bilateral glory days. Russian speech writers are less inclined to look for literary compliments and more seasoned to realpolitik rhetoric and divide-and-rule tricks: France and Russia are two big nations, powers that count, and have a long history of getting over traumas and wars. They prefer to emphasize the heroic victory over Nazism in WWII, where France may be granted a small role. They also refer to de Gaulle's strategy of national independence in the 1960s. There may

1 To the question "In your view, how satisfactory is the current situation regarding public liberties and human rights in Russia?"

86% of French respondents answer "not satisfactory." IFOP Poll for Russie-Libertés, Institut Français de l'Opinion Publique, February 2013.

genuinely be a mythic vision of French destiny still alive in some post-Soviet nomenklatura circles, but probably not among the younger diplomats and officials.

Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of a "common European home" and East–West convergence, beyond the arms control diplomacy of the 1970s, remains a disagreeable subject for the Kremlin, hence most often dismissed. François Mitterrand, as well as Helmut Kohl and Bill Clinton, are not popular in today's official historiography: did they not "push for the fall" of the Soviet Union? Since Vladimir Putin solemnly declared the collapse of 1991 to be "the biggest geopolitical tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century," the rewriting of recent history is moving apace. The Gorbachev and Yeltsin policies of rapprochement and Europeanization, together with democratization, have fueled stern feelings of frustration and hostility, routinely conveyed by the government-controlled media.

In the vein of Soviet historiography, Charles de Gaulle continues to be the French leader most respected in Russia today. President from 1958 to 1969, he had offered the Soviets "détente, entente and cooperation." He had asserted France's sovereignty and independence from the United States thanks to the nuclear "force de frappe" and the sudden withdrawal of France from the integrated military organization of the Atlantic Alliance in 1966.

The Soviet leadership was ambivalent about France's military assertiveness because they also feared the rise of a European "power-center" that would jeopardize their policies in Eastern Europe. They criticized American supremacy over NATO countries, and rejoiced at any sign of ill feeling between allies. At the same time, they welcomed the lack of sovereign security policies in West European states. They were concerned with the rise of French military power and favored the relationship with Paris as long as they could not engage with Washington. "When East–West relations were at a low, in the 1960s and after Afghanistan, the Russians treasured their close friendship with France. But at the peak of détente, this *relation privilégiée* was no longer so important since the Americans, the West Germans, and the West generally also wanted to cooperate with the Soviet Union."<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, several decades later, a similar ambivalence shades the Franco–Russian relationship. Putin's government seeks to renew a "privileged relationship" with France, and to get special attention and rewards when possible. The sale of two Mistral helicopter-carrier

warships exemplifies this situation. The 2011 sale has been one of the most controversial deals signed by the two governments. Nicolas Sarkozy wanted to secure jobs at the Saint-Nazaire building site and seal his friendship with Vladimir Putin thanks to this "gesture of trust." Against the opinion of most NATO member-states, the French president explained that he meant to convince the Russians that he trusted them fully as a security partner and that he could sell them brand-new amphibious assault vessels, endowed with the latest technology. "The Cold War is over," Sarkozy proclaimed again and again. The ironic response of a Russian admiral, according to whom the Mistrals would have secured the victory over Georgia "in less than an hour in 2008," broke the spell. It was clear to everyone, in France and in Russia, that such armament deals always carry a loaded political message.

What is even more distressing about this sale is that many in the Russian military industrial complex and in the high command ferociously opposed the deal. The Internet buzzed about it for months on end. And the sale did not even yield the expected financial profits. Contrary to the original agreement, the Russian navy has so far stopped short of buying the promised extra two vessels.<sup>3</sup>

High-level diplomacy prefers past history to recent events, and carefully steers away from the troubled waters of domestic politics and neighborhood policies. The French sing the melody lauding "eternal Russia, important security pivot in Europe," embellishing it with the usual economic compliments. The Russians dwell on French prestige and culture and the importance of Paris as the leading military actor in Europe.

Consequently, the gap is widening between the romanticized relationship at the highest level, and the serious problems that spoil the bilateral dialogue, like energy, defense policies, the Eastern Partnership countries, or UN resolutions against dictators' use of indiscriminate violence. This two-tier approach complicates French positioning in such multilateral forums as the UN Security Council, the Council of Europe, OECD, or the EU–Russia Partnership, where the battle of wills with Moscow rarely abates.

2 M. Mendras, "The French Connection: an Uncertain Factor in Soviet Relations with Western Europe," in John Stremlau, ed., "Soviet Foreign Policy in an Uncertain World," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 481, September 1985, p. 30.

3 Amongst the Russian military experts who analyzed the Mistral deal, Pavel Felgengauer and Aleksandr Golts expressed views on the Internet. Julian Cooper, Professor at Birmingham University, spoke convincingly about the controversy inside Russia and the inadequacy of the Mistrals in the context of Russian naval defense (OSCE Vienna roundtable, 12 December 2010). In France, Sarkozy's decision was denounced by most Russia specialists and military strategy analysts, and criticized by the opposition.

## An Asymmetric Relationship

The two countries are different in many respects. France is an old democracy, a leading European Union state, a NATO member, and a nuclear power with relative world outreach (as the early 2013 military intervention in Mali illustrates). France has not suffered any major territorial loss since the Algeria war, which marked the end of the colonial era half a century ago.

Russia is ruled by an authoritarian leadership, is richly endowed in raw materials, and has nuclear power and military outreach too. It is a former superpower that failed and lost its imperial provinces only two decades ago.

Russia belongs to many multilateral organizations. It nevertheless has no longtime allies, comparable to Germany or the USA for France. The former Soviet republics, like Ukraine, Belarus or Azerbaijan, are not trusted friends, but semi-dependent partners whose sovereignty is in part subjected to Russian will and who rarely stand up to their bigger neighbor in international forums.<sup>4</sup>

The legacy of the Cold War weighs more heavily on Russia than on France because Russia had more to lose from the end of the East–West rivalry than France did. Russia has had to adjust to a considerable shrinking of its population and its territory, and to new borders west and southwest. Moreover, the proximity of huge emergent economies, most notably China and India, radically changes Russia's relative power on the Asian continent.

In other words, the new challenges of globalization have been incomparably tougher for Moscow than for Paris. And Moscow has not adjusted to those challenges as readily as European or Asian countries. It has resisted economic globalization<sup>5</sup> and adopted a rather protectionist stance, which its rising hydrocarbon export revenues since 2001 allowed. Because oil and gas revenues dominate its economy, Russian foreign policy has stopped short of making critical adjustments or adopting forward-looking strategies.<sup>6</sup> In particular, relations with Europe have suffered.

Russia is the successor state to the USSR, but smaller and weaker. This seeming continuity—Moscow is still Moscow—partly explains the ambivalent attitude of a former superpower struggling to become a “dominant regional power.”<sup>7</sup>

As for France, it is a major European country, a pillar of the EU and NATO (France rejoined the military command structure in 2009), but wavers between its ambitions as a national power with its own nuclear deterrent, on the one hand, and its pivotal position in transatlantic and European policies, on the other. The French elites still aspire to a key role in regional and world affairs, but it is not clear how they intend to consolidate a national power strategy and at the same time increase their influence and capacity in Europe.<sup>8</sup> Whatever the inclination of the ruling government, left or right, they keep up the tradition of seeking a special relationship with Moscow in order to “balance East and West” and gain more authority in Washington.

France and Russia are equally eager to be an important partner of the United States, although they pursue different aims. Russia absolutely needs to preserve a privileged strategic partnership with the dominant world power. It is vital in order to reassert its status of leading international actor, a status that Putin's leadership treasures. The dialogue with Washington, even with its ups and downs, is one of the three ingredients that make Russia more powerful than its actual low economic and technological competitiveness would allow. The other two factors are Russia's permanent seat in the UN Security Council and its hydrocarbon supremacy.

In the case of France, the relationship with Washington is complex and ambivalent. French elites are divided about America's leadership in military matters, as well as its impact on the world economy. French society also is torn between positive and negative views of America.<sup>9</sup> However, European affairs, and the dampening news about a lasting economic crisis, now draw prime attention and generate more divisions amongst society and elites than do attitudes toward the USA.

## Conflicting Views on Europe

Paris and Moscow claim to be key strategic partners in devising a new European security architecture, but they tacitly agree not to discuss the “countries in between,”

4 On Russia and CIS countries, see the series of Chatham House's briefing papers published in 2012, in particular James Nixey, “The Long Goodbye: Waning Russian Influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia,” Chatham House Briefing paper, June 2012, [www.chathamhouse.org](http://www.chathamhouse.org)

5 For example, Russia joined the World Trade Organization in 2012, many years after China or Ukraine became members.

6 Most Russian scholars, experts, and even spin doctors, agree on this reluctance to adjust to outside constraints. See, for example, Fyodor Lukyanov's editorials in the quarterly he edits, *Russia in Global Affairs*, Moscow, for example: “The West and Russia's ‘Undeserved’ Influence,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, August 2012, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/The-West-and-Russia-Undeserved-Influence-15632>

7 Marie Mendras, “Vingt ans après. La Russie et la quête de puissance”, *Commentaire*, N. 136, Winter 2011–2012, p. 891–899.

8 Cf. the new *Livre Blanc* on defense and national security, formally presented to President Hollande on 29 April 2013.

9 See French TNS Sofres opinion polls about America, [www.tns-sofres.com](http://www.tns-sofres.com), and Richard F. Kuisel, *The French Way. How France Embraced and Rejected American Values and Power*, Princeton University Press, 2011.

sandwiched between Russia and Europe, namely Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. It is a sign of weakness on each side. France does not want to “antagonize” Moscow and chooses not to bring up the subject. Russian leaders and diplomats clearly state that the countries belong to their “sphere of privileged interests” and look down on the European Union’s Eastern Partnership that groups the six countries since 2009. They refute the notion of a “common neighborhood” and clearly want to keep the former Soviet republics from entering the European and NATO spaces. They have embarked on a dangerous strategy of consolidating a buffer zone that belongs neither to Russia nor to the West, but is hostage to the current “balance of forces.” In their view, the in-between countries must never join a multilateral organization of which Russia is not a member.

How can France and Russia seriously discuss European security without taking into consideration the domestic situation and the national security of each of the six “sandwiched states”? What common security structure can one talk about when a central region on the continent is falling into hollowness? The weak sovereignty of the six countries, worsened by the Russian show of force in Georgia in 2008, jeopardizes the security of all neighbors, West and South, for weaker states are generally ill-governed. Poland and the Baltic states regularly remind their EU partners of this source of instability.<sup>10</sup> As a Carnegie expert aptly summarizes: “Today’s Ukraine poses a security threat to the EU” because of its “democratic decline” and “poor governance.”<sup>11</sup> Energy security also is at stake. “Despite Russia’s attempts to redirect its gas supply to the EU through the Belarusian gas transit system and Nord stream pipeline, Ukraine remains the most important transit country for Russian gas going to the EU.”<sup>12</sup>

Moscow systematically plays down the attractiveness and reliability of Europe as a partner. Considerations about “the decline of Europe,” the euro crisis, and transatlantic divergences play a useful part in Putin’s discourse about the new global order and the increasing role of the BRICs and other emerging economies.

The Russian president hails multipolarity as the golden rule of the post-western world but, in his mind, multipolarity actually means the lack of poles, for he knows full

well that Russia cannot be a mighty pole in the near or long term. It is thus vital that Europe and the Atlantic alliance do not consolidate what Putin primarily reads as a North America-led pole. His open hostility toward the USA may be in good part explained by his concern about American economic recovery and expanded contacts with China, India and other big economies.

### Business First

France and Russia have an active economic cooperation, but quite asymmetric, at times unbalanced, and currently short of bright prospects for further expansion. This is the case for most European countries in their trade with Russia because of the latter’s heavy reliance on raw materials exports, driven by high demand for energy on all continents. There are variations in each country’s trade with Russia, due to national needs and specific arrangements. Germany buys more natural gas from Russia than France, but sells far more industrial goods, making the German–Russian trade balance more favorable, although the trend is downward since 2012.

Oddly, France is one of the European countries least dependent on Russian gas, yet it does not strongly lobby for a new EU common energy strategy and does not publicly regret the Putin regime’s drift away from rule-of-law politics. French companies encounter obstacles in exporting to Russia and in doing business there, yet the authorities push for more investments in Russia, and call for more Russian investments in France. Angela Merkel is now more critical of Putin’s rule than her French counterpart. Her anger at the harassment of German NGOs working in Russia came out in full strength when she hosted Putin at the Hanover Fair on 8 April 2013.

The *Compagnie Française d’Assurance pour le Commerce Extérieur*, COFACE, is a globally operating public institution in charge of insuring credit and supporting foreign trade. Its risk assessment carries weight in the decisions of French banks and companies. Lately, it has expressed serious doubts about Russian economic prospects. The 2012 report stressed the failures of the government’s strategy, highlighting:

- the intensification of the rent-seeking nature of the economy
  - the lack of competitiveness in the industrial sector
  - a fragile private banking system
  - underdeveloped infrastructure
  - declining demographic trends, and
  - persisting deficiencies in the business environment.
- The “deficiencies” are numerous, from corruption to weak institutions, a dependent judiciary and costly wages policies.

Among the “strong points” emphasized by COFACE, two happen to be double-edged swords since they accel-

10 Cf. Kinga Dudzinska, “The Baltic States’ Success Story in Combating the Economic Crisis: Consequences for Regional Cooperation within the EU and with Russia,” PISM Policy Paper, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw, N. 6(54), March 2013.

11 Olga Shumylo-Tapiola, “Why Does Ukraine Matter for the EU?” Carnegie Europe, Brussels, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2013/04/16>

12 Ibid.

erate the economy's focus on rents: abundant natural resources and "regional and energy power reach." The other two factors are significant, in view of the monetary and economic crisis in Europe, but not sufficient to pave the way for the much delayed modernization: a qualified labor force (but not competitive) and a low public debt rate, with comfortable foreign exchange reserves.<sup>13</sup> In their conclusion, COFACE experts stress that the national economy remains "very dependent" on oil prices, that growth has slowed down, and that the protest movement after the 2011–2012 elections has expressed rising dissatisfaction among the middle classes and the youth. The "tense political and social context" worsens the business climate.

The major Franco–Russian industrial ventures are in the fields of energy (Total, GDF-Suez, EDF), the automobile industry (Renault mainly, Peugeot), food products (Danone), transport (Alstom), retail and shopping malls (Auchan), and banking (Société Générale is the first foreign bank in Russia). Some joint research programs continue, like space research. However, France's trade deficit with Russia was up to 6.4 billion euros in 2011.<sup>14</sup> In the coming years, energy imports will remain higher than French exports to Russia.

Bilateral exchanges are more modest than Russia's trade with Italy and Germany, but even the latter's trade with Russia is stumbling. In 2012, Russia ranked 11<sup>th</sup> in Germany's export destinations, and 7<sup>th</sup> in Germany's import providers. Russia's trade deficit with Germany was over 4.4 billion euros.<sup>15</sup> Many European experts have grown pessimistic about Russia's economic modernization prospects. Even EBRD economists do not hide their concern.<sup>16</sup> The overall Europe–Russia trade and investment picture looks more somber today, compared to the situation prior to the 2008 world crisis.

During his short visit to Moscow on 28 February 2013, François Hollande insisted on the Russians investing more in France. He promised that "all obstacles will be lifted." The problem, however, resides more in the behavior of potential Russian investors than in the friendly attitude of French administrations and companies. What could be powerful incentives for Russian financiers and businessmen who turn away from invest-

ing in their homeland, and do not want to face new constraints, such as "creating jobs in France"? Paris still thinks in terms of government interference in promoting company-to-company deals. The contradiction of France's dialogue with Putin's regime lies in this desire to strictly separate economic questions from political and social realities in Russia. Energy battles show that there is no such thing as a "politics-free" economic diplomacy with a big nuclear and energy power such as Russia.

When official spokesmen and analysts, in Russia and in France, take pride in the fact that mutually beneficial economic deals cannot be hindered by political differences and cannot be disturbed by wars, one may only conclude that "economic diplomacy" is a nice phrase for sheer pragmatism and mutual self-deception. Here is one example: "Jacques Chirac's two terms, however, were marked by particularly cordial relations with Russian leaders, and the disputes over Kosovo or Chechnya were not to cast any shadow on them."<sup>17</sup> On the Russian side, one can read such prose about US–Russia relations: "The emphasis should be shifted from politics to the economy, and Washington should be prepared to offer Russia substantial economic incentives in return for political concessions. (...) It is fruitless to continue emphasizing human rights and other sore spots with Moscow."<sup>18</sup> The rhetoric has been much the same for all western countries. But the G8 summit meeting in Northern Ireland in mid-June 2013 witnessed a change of attitude. The leaders of the G8-1 openly voiced their differences with the Russian president on Syria and human rights violations.

### Tense Relations at the Top Level

François Hollande and Vladimir Putin held their first official meeting in Paris on 1 June 2012. Both had just been elected president, with a major difference: Hollande was starting his first executive appointment (he had never been a minister, but had steered the Socialist Party between 1997 and 2008) while Vladimir Putin was about to start his fourteenth year in power.<sup>19</sup>

The two press conferences offer a good insight into the dissensions and the underperformance. On 1 June in Paris, the key discussion point was Syria. Consequently, the lack of agreement was to be expected. Hol-

13 "Russie. Principaux indicateurs économiques et appréciation du risque," COFACE website, coface.fr, April 2013.

14 A. Dubien, "France–Russia: revival and challenges of a strategic partnership," Note for the French–Russian Observatory, Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie France–Russie, N. 1, October 2012, 17 pages, online publication.

15 Statistisches Bundesamt (Federal Statistical Office), Wiesbaden 2013, 25 February 2013.

16 Erik Berglöl, ed., *Diversifying Russia*, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, London, December 2012.

17 Arnaud Dubien, art. cit., p. 10.

18 Vladislav Inozemtsev, "More Respect for Russia Would Go a Long Way," *The Moscow Times*, 29 March 2013.

19 Vladimir Putin became prime minister in August 1999 and never narrowed his real prerogatives even when his loyal ally, Dmitri Medvedev, occupied the presidential seat from May 2008 until May 2012. Cf. M. Mendras, *Russian Politics. The Paradox of a Weak State* (Hurst, London, & Columbia University Press, New York, 2013).

lande immediately reasserted the French, and western, position: no political solution may be attained with Bashar al Assad, the dictator's exit is a precondition. Putin retorted that the two sides shared equal responsibility in the violence and Russia would not let Assad be dethroned by violent interference from foreign governments.<sup>20</sup> He thereby reasserted his strong opposition to the "responsibility to protect" obligation.<sup>21</sup> During the press conference, there was unusual physical tension in the room as the two presidents avoided looking at each other.

The general context certainly accounts for this unproductive first meeting. The Pussy Riot case was in the headlines, and the French public had followed closely the controversial elections and unprecedented public protest of the previous winter. Another sensitive issue was, and still is, the Russian Orthodox church set to be built in Paris, a few steps away from the Eiffel Tower.

In Moscow on 28 February 2013, François Hollande did not intend to mention the Magnitsky Act, and remained very cautious about the question of political repression, judges' lack of independence, media control, anti-NGO laws, and more generally the lack of rule of law in Russia. A Magnitsky Act in France must be initiated by a group of dedicated deputies. This is unlikely, given the strong influence of Franco-Russian economic and political lobbies and networks. A few deputies expressed their concern about the authoritarian nature of the Putin regime, and denounced Russia's refusal to consider sanctions and measures to help quicken Bashar al Assad's fall. But as of today, they are unlikely to build a powerful platform in the National Assembly.

Such leniency towards Vladimir Putin is at odds with the general mood in the French public, which is concerned with human rights violations and arbitrary rule in Russia. The anti-Putin mass demonstrations and subsequent repression of the opposition, along with Russia's arming the Syrian dictatorship, have profoundly shocked the French public, which was already quite suspicious of Putin's methods. The lack of independent courts, corruption inside the leadership and administrations, and violent repression are seen as the darkest

features of the regime. French society has a real interest in post-communist Russia and is one of the best-informed societies, compared to America, Italy, Spain, or even Germany. Books, television documentaries, articles, joint cultural events are devoted to Russia, and the French draw a clear line between Russian culture and people, and Putin's regime.

In February 2013, on the eve of President Hollande's Moscow visit, the *Russie-Libertés* association commissioned a survey by the Institut français de l'opinion publique. The results are crystal clear. 86% of respondents viewed the situation regarding public liberties and human rights as "not satisfactory." 72% said that they wished Hollande would express concern for human rights violations during his conversation with Putin.<sup>22</sup> Amnesty International and FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights) put pressure on the French leader. The French president made a small discreet gesture. He briefly met with a few "representatives of civil society" at the residence of the Ambassador. The encounter, reminiscent of Soviet times, was kept discreet.

French public opinion, intellectuals and journalists do not have much influence because of the lack of French foundations and NGOs (there is no equivalent of the MacArthur, Ford or Friedrich Ebert foundations) and because of the powerful resources of the "Russian lobby," by which we mean the many French, Russian and other actors who have a vested interest in keeping relations with Russian companies and organizations to themselves. Diplomacy is never in the way. One clear sign in October 2012 was the appointment, by Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, of former Defense, and former Interior, Minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement, known to be keener on Russia and China than on the USA, as his "special representative" for Russia.

French politicians, together with most other European leaders, make the wrong bet if they believe that they can better secure their long-term interests with Putin's Russia by censoring themselves on rule-of-law imperatives. On the contrary, to assert the paramount importance of transparency and accountability, in domestic as well as in international affairs, is the only productive strategy for Europe in the long run.

The main cause for disenchantment on each side is that France and Russia have changed, and their positions on the continent and in the world have changed. Neither one can shape the world to its needs and ambitions. They have to fit in the rapidly evolving regional and international contexts. Their capacity to impact international developments has diminished. They both are less relevant in the larger world picture than thirty

20 As argued in another RAD issue, "Russia is a profoundly conservative power, upholding traditional understandings of sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention along with its allies from other emerging powers, such as China and India" Roland Dannreuther, "Russia and the Arab Revolutions," *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 98, 6 July 2011, p. 1

21 Roy Allison, "From Kosovo to Libya. Russia and Intervention," presentation at the Observatoire de la Russie, CERI-Sciences Po, 6 July 2011, and *Russia, the West, & Military Intervention*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

22 IFOP poll, art. cit., see note 1.

years ago. In the case of post-USSR Russia, the loss in influence and power is far greater because it was a superpower and because it does not belong to an alliance or a union of states that would make up for the loss. Russia is a lonely power<sup>23</sup> in a world where exchanges and competitiveness bear more significance than traditional

instruments of power, like conventional arms or territorial control. For all these reasons, in the longer term, Europe and Russia will need to come closer on many issues of mutual interest, and France can be a key actor in this rapprochement. The timing will depend heavily on political evolutions inside Russia.

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23 Lilia Shevtsova, *Lonely Power. Why Russia Has Failed to Become the West and the West is Weary of Russia*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington D.C., 2010.

## ANALYSIS

### The UK and Russia—Towards A Renewed Relationship?

Andrew Monaghan, UK

#### **Abstract**

Relations between the United Kingdom (UK) and Russia present a complex and interesting subject for analysis. The relationship offers fertile grounds for cooperation and partnership in numerous areas. But particularly since the mid 2000s they have been beset by prominent—and recurring—disagreements and scandals, with the result that there is a profound imbalance between areas of substantial practical cooperation, for instance in economic and business relations on one hand, and almost no state-to-state political relationship on the other. This short paper first sketches the broader contextual environment in which current relations should be understood. It then outlines aspects of cooperation, before turning to consider the more problematic elements. The paper concludes by reflecting on the current status of the relationship and prospects for its development.

#### **The Wider Context**

UK–Russia relations should be seen in a triple overlapping context. First, both the UK and Russia are comparatively low on each other's overall list of international priorities, as reflected in the strategic documentation of both parties. Russia is notable by its absence in the UK's National Security Strategy, for instance, while the UK has a low profile in Russia's Foreign Policy Concepts and National Security Strategies. Moscow believes Anglo-Saxon influence in global affairs is declining, while London asserts a post Cold War agenda that no longer sees Russia as the main international focus. For neither side, therefore, does the relationship have a central strategic profile; both parties focus on other international priorities.

Second, relations between UK–Russia reflect the wider trends of Russia's relationships with Euro-Atlantic institutions. While there was some warmth until

2003, there has been a growing sense of dissonance in the relationship, caused by disagreement about the roots, nature and results of developments in international affairs. Indeed, the list of such disagreements is lengthy, from the broader evolution of wider European security since the end of the Cold War, including NATO enlargement, to the Iraq war, from the wars in Chechnya to Russia's war with Georgia in 2008, from the Yukos case to the energy disputes between Gazprom and Naftogaz Ukraini. In each case, the British and Russians found themselves on opposing sides of the argument. If the relationship is not one of strategic importance, therefore, nor is there a sense of the warmth that might be found in Russia's relations with some continental European states such as Italy.

The third context, more specific to the UK–Russia relationship, is one of general mutual suspicion. Conspiracy theories in the UK about the roles of the KGB and

its successor organisations in international affairs and even in the UK itself find their mirror image in Russia, where the hidden hand of British intelligence, particularly MI6, is seen by many in Russia to be behind all kinds of nefarious activities both on the international stage and in Russia. Critics exhume and reinvigorate the cadavers of history to reinforce the image; thus the echoes of the murder of Russian diplomat Alexander Griboyedov in 1829 (the work, according to conspiracy theories in Russia, of British intelligence who roused the mob in Tehran to fulfil their purpose) and the murder in London of Georgi Markov in 1979, have found their resonance in the conspiracy theories about the murder of Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006.

The result is that, in “atmospheric” terms, London and Moscow believe each to represent “the other”, arguing that it was ever thus: a permanent antagonism of first imperial competition in the Great Game then ideological friction between the UK and the USSR. These three contexts pervade the contemporary relationship.

### Flourishing Practical Cooperation?

This sense of contextual dissonance often masks a developing and, in some areas, flourishing relationship. Though not prominent, military cooperation has included a range of activities. If the officer decommissioning programme in which the UK assisted the Russian armed forces in retraining and preparing Russian officers for civilian life was seen positively in both London and Moscow, it was the UK’s leading role in the successful effort to save the AS28 submersible off the coast of Kamchatka in 2005 that reflected the positive aspects of such cooperation. Often forgotten now, the success of this operation was the result of naval exercises in which the relevant military personnel had become acquainted, and created a positive atmosphere in UK–Russia relations. Vladimir Putin visited the UK (even being the first foreign leader to visit the Cabinet Office Briefing Room A, COBRA) and a number of agreements were signed, including cooperation on measures to address terrorism. The rescue of the AS28, however, was the pinnacle of such cooperation. Since then, the officer retraining project has come to a close and not been revived and counter terrorism cooperation was suspended after the murder of Litvinenko.

More familiar is the cultural and educational interaction between Russia and the UK, with regular exchanges of art, literature and film festivals. High-level exchanges have also taken place in education, as Ministers seek to build cooperative “knowledge partnerships”. These have included nuclear physics and energy conservation projects and appear to be about to spread to other areas of academic endeavour including history. This, of course,

builds on a growing societal base which has seen increasing numbers of British citizens visiting Russia and a growing number of Russians moving to live in the UK.

Senior officials on both sides regularly emphasise the depth and frequency of cultural contact as a means of strengthening interaction between individuals, societies and even governments, and as an important element in the establishment of a bilateral relationship. Similarly, Paul de Quincey, head of the British Council, has suggested that culture provides a ‘relatively painless’ way of doing business together despite the ‘fractious’ nature of relations. Cooperation in culture and education has grown since 2011, and 2014 has been designated the UK–Russia “Year of Culture”, with numerous cooperative projects planned.

The most prominent cooperation, however, is in business. This is in part because of the high profile energy relationship, with major British companies cutting deals with, and sometimes tensions with partners in Russia, recently illustrated by BP’s activity, the tensions with its partners in TNK and BP’s deal with state oil champion Rosneft.

While the hydrocarbon business is the most prominent feature, the relationship is broader, and it is worth noting that, although economic and business cooperation was affected by the global economic crisis, and despite some tensions, it has been less affected by political dissonance. Indeed, despite a dip in 2009, trade has grown significantly. Official figures suggest that British investment in Russia has grown 21% year-on-year since 2001, and British exports to Russia increased to £5.5 billion by 2012. Regular visits to Russia by figures such as the Lord Mayor of London and the UK Trade and Investment Chief include meetings with senior Russian officials to seek to enhance such contacts.

More than one thousand British companies are active in Russia in areas as diverse as architectural and infrastructure design and construction, real estate, communications, financial and economic services, and public relations. Similarly, Russian companies—even those connected with the state, such as Gazprom—are active in the UK, and more than sixty Russian companies are listed on the London Stock Exchange.

### State-to-State Relations: Tensions and Difficulties

Despite this practical relationship, political dissonance and tension was such that for an extended period from 2006 there was almost no state-to-state relationship between London and Moscow, and the list of problems is lengthy. If the cultural relationship is deep and wide, not least because of the facilitation of the British Council, Russian hostility towards and pressure on the offices and personnel of that same British Council has

had a lasting negative political result, remaining strong in the memory of British public and official institutions.

In 2006 then Ambassador Tony Brenton and colleagues faced months of harassment following public demonstration of support for Russian opposition figures. Another long running problem is the friction over extradition. Moscow long sought the extradition of Boris Berezovsky for trial in Russia, refusing to accept the British government's position that the government is unable to oblige the British judiciary to acquiesce to the demand. Berezovsky died in March 2013, but there are numerous other Russians sought by Moscow who have been granted political asylum in the UK, which means that the question will continue.

The shroud of mistrust in the relationship about intelligence service activities has found practical expression in spy scandals. In 2006, Russian television aired accusations of British espionage in the spy rock scandal (first denied and then, in 2012 acknowledged by the British authorities). In 2010, Ekaterina Zatuliveter, a Russian citizen working for British member of parliament Mike Hancock, was accused by the British authorities of espionage.

To this—incomplete—list of problems should be added the frequent recriminations caused by a significant “values gap” between the UK and Russia. The British government regularly accuses the Russian government of human rights violations, particularly in the North Caucasus. But other criticisms of human rights abuses feature in the dialogue between the UK and Russia, including the jailing of members of punk band Pussy Riot.

Nevertheless, it is the murder of Litvinenko that has had the most important and lasting ramifications for the relationship. The murder, and the subsequent fractious requests for cooperation in the investigation and British demand for the extradition to the UK for trial of the Russian suspects, rejected by Moscow, not only resulted in mutual expulsions of diplomats, but has created a block in the relationship that seven years later remains unresolved.

### **Towards Resuscitating the Political Relationship?**

If the period 2006–2009 marked a nadir in the state-to-state relationship, high-level contacts began to resume in 2010 and have become increasingly frequent. A delegation led by Prime Minister Cameron, including Foreign Secretary William Hague and Minister of State for

Trade and Investment Lord Green visited Moscow in September 2011, and subsequently Cameron has met both Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev on several occasions in both bilateral and multilateral meetings. In March 2013, British and Russian foreign and defence ministers met in a “2+2” format in London.

Phrases such as “reset” are avoided, and the approach on both sides is cautious, but both the UK and Russia have stated their readiness to resume relations—primarily to sustain and develop economic ties on one hand but also because both face the same challenges in international affairs—Afghanistan, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism.

### **Conclusions**

Each side blames the other for the deterioration in relations, and thus each expects the other to make the first steps towards resolving the problems—which hampers the resumption of relations for conceptual and practical reasons. First, conceptually, Moscow and London remain divided over international questions, most clearly illustrated by their approach to Libya and now Syria. Defining the problem and response to it differently, in the wake of the UN sanctioned intervention in Libya, Moscow has vetoed UN resolutions on Syria tabled by the UK, USA and France. William Hague has condemned Moscow's vetoes as “inexcusable and indefensible”, and House of Commons report in October 2012 called it ‘perhaps the most important policy difference between the UK and Russia’. Similarly, the values gap will remain pronounced, with the likely result of more disagreements over human rights.

Second, on practical problems in the relationship, neither side appears willing or able to alter their position on the main points of tension. This is most particularly the case regarding the Litvinenko murder, but the other disagreements will not simply disappear. London recently granted Andrei Borodin former head of the Bank of Moscow, political asylum in early March 2013, and accusations of espionage and harassment of British officials in Russia have continued, most recently of the deputy head of the British Embassy Denis Keefe.

As a result, if the economic relationship appears likely to continue to grow, and cultural exchanges flourish, particularly in 2014, the attempts to rebuild political, state-to-state relations are slow and uneven, with continued tension and regular setbacks.

#### *About the Author*

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**ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST**

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