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## Russia and Eurasia Programme Paper REP 2011/02

# Britain and Russia

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**In September, David Cameron will make his first visit as Prime Minister to Russia. The relationship between London and Moscow has often looked scratchy. Why? How far is that perception justified? Does it matter?**

The particular instances usually cited for the mutual irritation of recent years include the asylum given by Britain to a number of Russian exiles, and the refusal by Moscow to extradite Andrey Lugovoi, the man believed by Britain to be responsible for the murder in London of Alexander Litvinenko, to face trial in the UK. It may be that for Moscow, or at least for official Moscow, it is hypocrisy for London to argue that the British cannot extradite the people they want because the British courts are not satisfied by the evidence that the Russian authorities have produced, or believe that the accused will not receive fair trials in Russia. Russian courts listen, after all, to high level guidance, so why should not the British? And Moscow claims that the Russian constitution prevents their extraditing Lugovoi in any case. The impasse over these issues has built on a back history of differences over intelligence activities, the harassment of the then British Ambassador, and drastic Russian action against the British Council.

These particular questions do not however satisfactorily explain the irritation that seems close to inherent in the relationship between the British and Russian governments, and which is especially embedded in Moscow. Three factors may lie behind this:

- The UK, for Russia, is a secondary country that refuses to accept its proper role. The continental European powers have in Russia's view a better defined set of habits. Germany is of critical importance for Moscow, and always has been. The cultural and economic links between the two nations are of long standing and deep meaning. The legacy of Brandt's Ostpolitik endures. So for that matter does France's habit of playing an individual hand. Berlusconi and Putin have a particular and quite personal relationship.
- The Russian regime is highly personalised. The British have not consistently courted Russia's rulers. There was Thatcher-Gorbachev, some attention was paid to Yeltsin by Major at the start of his rule, and Blair formed a close link with Putin as the latter's presidency got under way. But the effects in all three cases were limited, and ephemeral. It is arguable that had British Prime Ministers been more publicly supportive of their Russian

colleagues, and their policies, the appearance might have been warmer.

- Such an approach would have been to go against the developing British view of Russia's trajectory, and to conflict with the need, as Britain has seen it, of working in the first place through the various groupings of its closest allies. If Britain is a secondary country for Russia, then so is Russia for Britain, and one all too capable, so far as London is concerned, of making a nuisance of itself. Russia seems, to the British, to be looking for a veto, and not for give and take in Europe. Russia has also seemed determined to disappoint those who have hoped that it would evolve towards the democratic, market and liberal norms pursued by some other formerly Moscow dominated European countries.

My point is not to argue these ideas in detail, but to suggest them as constraints, and in particular to indicate the connection between Russian domestic developments, their foreign policy consequences, and the relationship between Britain and Russia. There are of course other factors at work. One that is usually suggested, the relationship between London and Washington, seems unconvincing. Washington has from time to time had warmer relations with Moscow than London, and US Presidents have been more persistent than British Prime Ministers in pursuing personal relationships with their counterparts in or near the Kremlin. But of course Russia fancies itself as a natural analogue to the United States, which also makes for a different dynamic from the one that applies to European states or institutions.

If one looks beyond the political relationship between the British and Russian governments, a warmer tone is evident. Our visa arrangements seem designed to disrupt contact, but the number of Russians living in the UK (and not only in London, by any means), visiting it regularly, attending schools or colleges in Britain, pursuing research projects together with British experts, and so on is very large. The British legal system plays a significant part in adjudicating matters that for one reason or another are not seen as suitable to be left to Russian courts. London is a major financial centre for Russians. British investment in Russia is significant, along with the British presence in for instance financial and legal services. British charities and NGOs are committed and active. It would be wrong to underestimate such matters just because our governments are irritated with each other from time to time. Governments are only one reality, and Russia is more than the president, the prime minister, and the groups around them.

It is always nice to be nice, and the atmosphere around the British Prime Minister's September visit to Russia will, one can reasonably hope, be constructive. But it would be wrong to expect much more than that. There is a range of subjects that will no doubt be discussed at the official talks like for instance WTO, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Libya, Syria, the future of the EU, frozen conflicts, perhaps Belarus or even Ukraine, European security, anti-missile defence and so on. These are important but also involve others, which puts them beyond the bilateral decision making agenda. The Russians will no doubt want to talk about modernisation, and investment issues, as will the British. There may be fruitless exchanges about Russian exiles in the UK, and the murder of Litvinenko. There are plenty of human rights matters to raise, the Magnitsky case not least. But again, movement is improbable. This is not a reset moment, and it is in any case difficult to see quite what that might entail in this context.

The British Prime Minister will visit as the 2011/2012 Russian electoral cycle moves into higher gear. Britain has some moral capital to deploy. What the PM says, or for that matter fails to say, in public or to those whom he may meet outside the governing elite will have its resonance. The British line on changes in the Arab world has been noted in Russia.

Over the longer term, there may be scope for wider debate to be encouraged beyond official circles on social questions like inter-ethnic tensions, housing, road safety, pensions, family stability, policing, or demographic issues, where quiet exchanges between experts could be useful. Improved dialogue between Russia and Britain is possible, but a reset is neither in prospect nor, given present circumstances, necessarily desirable.