

Case Study

British-Russian Relations: The Modern State.

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1. Introduction

The history of British-Russian relations started in 1553 when the English merchant-adventurer Richard Chancellor accidentally arrived at the mouth of the Northern Dvina River while looking for a passage to China. Subsequently in 1555, the Muscovy Company was established by English investors and “Englishmen began to travel to Russia in ever larger numbers, and goods began to flow between the two countries”¹. Since that time however, relations between Britain and Russia have not remained static. They have experienced ups and downs, wars and alliances, disagreements and consensuses. What is the modern state of the British-Russian relations? Has there been any substantial development since the fall of the ‘iron curtain’? The purpose of this paper is to analyze the peculiarities of the issues in the relations between the two countries since the deterioration of the Soviet Union and, based on the ongoing diplomatic row over extraditions, to look at the grounds of existing misunderstandings.

2. From British-Soviet to British-Russian Relations

In the early and mid 1980s, the then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher pursued a strong anti-communist policy. The relations between the Soviet Union and Britain didn’t become warmer until Mikhail Gorbachev came to power and declared his ambitions regarding Perestroika to the world. During her visit to Soviet Russia in late March and early April 1987, Mrs. Thatcher spoke in favour of Gorbachev’s reforms and urged him to provide more evidence about the change of the Soviet foreign policy towards the Western World². She went even further by referring to Mr. Gorbachev as the one person who she could do business with, strong words that boosted his image as a reliable politician³. The objectives of the new relations between the Soviet Union and the West were not to be fully

¹ Marshall T. Poe. *A People born to slavery: Russia in early modern European ethnography, 1476-1748*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000), p.128.

² Archie Brown. *The Gorbachev Factor*. (Oxford: University Press, 1997), p.117.

³ Robert H. Donaldson, Joseph L. Noguee. *The Foreign Policy of Russia: changing systems, enduring interests*. Third Edition. (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc, 2005), p. 271.

reached however due to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 when relations with the new Russian Federation needed to be established instead⁴.

The first Russian President, Boris Yeltsin went further than Gorbachev in warming relations with Britain. He initiated the treaty on 'The Principles of Relations' with the United Kingdom, which was signed in November, 1992 and appeared to be the first treaty of its kind between the two countries since 1766⁵. Besides providing evidence of the beginning of a new chapter in relations with Britain in writing, Mr. Yeltsin pursued certain actions to prove his respect for Russia's new friends. Since the British and the Russian royal families were related, the subject of the assassination of Tsar Nicolas II and his family in Yekaterinburg in 1918 created a significant degree of tension in the relations between the two countries⁶. The royal visit of Queen Elizabeth II following Yeltsin's order to demolish the Ipatiev's house where the tsarist royal family was murdered however, proved to be rather effective in resolving this sensitive issue. Furthermore, during his first official visit to London in 1992, Mr. Yeltsin was the first Russian leader to visit the London Stock Exchange instead of Karl Marx's tomb⁷. The then British Prime Minister John Major declared that President Yeltsin had made a very good impression on him and, as an outcome of the meeting between the two leaders, Britain agreed to increase financial aid to Russia. During his second visit to Britain later the same year, Mr. Yeltsin signed a bilateral treaty, an economic agreement, and was given the possibility to address Parliament. Moreover, in 1994 there was an exchange visit between Major and Yeltsin. Not even the change of the British Government in 1997 altered the improvement of British- Russian relations. During his journey to Russia in October 1997, Tony Blair focused on the importance of economic cooperation between the two countries since. At that time, Britain was second only to Germany among foreign investors into the Russian economy⁸.

⁴ Andrew Langley. *The Collapse of the Soviet Union: the End of an Empire*. (Minneapolis: Compass Point Books, 2007), p. 98.

⁵ Stephen White. *Russia's New Politics: The Management of a Postcommunist Society*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 222

⁶ Shirley Elson Roessler and Reny Miklos. *Europe 1715-1919: from Enlightenment to the World War*. (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2003), p. 237.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Donaldson and Noguee, p. 271.

3. Row over Extraditions

The Relations between Britain and Russia cooled significantly when Vladimir Putin became President in 2000⁹. Under the rule of Yeltsin, there was a number of so-called ‘oligarchs’ who rose to substantial power and wealth and thus were considered a threat to the policy of the new Government. Boris Berezovsky was exactly one of those ‘oligarchs’, who went into exile in the UK in 2000 after facing politically-motivated convictions in Russia¹⁰. In 2003, Russia sought to get Mr. Berezovsky extradited from Britain so that he could be charged and face trial, but UK authorities granted Mr. Berezovsky “political asylum on the grounds that the charges against him were politically motivated”¹¹. In 2007, at the London Hilton there was an assassination attempt on Mr. Berezovsky. He accused the Russian Government and President Putin himself of making an attempt on his life, setting off a high-profile discussion between the authorities of both countries¹².

Mr Berezovsky proved to be the first of many unsuccessful extradition inquiries stemming from both Britain and Russia. Another such case is that of Akhmet Zakayev, an official representative of the former Chechen separatist movement president, Aslan Maschadov. Mr. Zakayev is to face criminal and terrorist charges in Russia. In 2003 however, a UK court rejected a request to extradite him. Mr. Zakayev was also granted political asylum which created quite a significant strain in British-Russian relations. Representatives of the Russian Government accused officials in London of employing double standards when addressing terrorist issues¹³.

Next, the recent extradition case involving Yevgeny Chichvarkin, the co-founder and former CEO of Russia’s biggest mobile company, Euroset, might cause further strain in British-Russian relations. In Russia, Mr. Chichvarkin was accused of kidnapping an employee and blackmailing. He managed to flee the country however and successfully reached the UK in December 2008. In June 2009, the Russian Prosecutor’s General Office

⁹ Alex Pravda, ed. *Leading Russia- Putin in perspective: essay in honour of Archie Brown*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 106.

¹⁰ House of Commons. *Global Security: Russia. Second Report of Sessions 2008-2009*. (London, Foreign Affairs Committee, 2009), pp.45-46.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, p.45

issued a request for his extradition, but Britain did not rush to satisfy the inquiry. Mr. Chichvarkin is now awaiting a UK court decision on the call for his extradition and on July 21st of this year, the hearing was postponed until September 13, 2010¹⁴.

It is not only Russia that is failing to succeed in the diplomatic row over extraditions however. Another controversial case serving to cool down relations between Britain and Russia is the case of Alexander Litvinenko, a former agent of KGB and its successor, the Federal Security Service (FSB). Mr. Litvinenko fled to the UK in 1998 after publicly announcing he was ordered to kill Mr. Berezovsky and being charged for attempting to do so afterwards. In 2006, Mr. Litvinenko- already a UK citizen- died in London's hospital from poisoning. The investigation brought Scotland Yard to Moscow, to Andrey Lugovoy, a former FSB agent. The official request to extradite Mr. Lugovoy to the UK to face a fair trial was rejected on the grounds that the Russian Constitution does not permit the extradition of its citizens. The then UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband called Russia's position 'extremely disappointing' and expressed his concerns about the cooperation between the two countries¹⁵.

4. Conclusion

Relations between the UK and Russia from the dwindling years of the Soviet Union to the present continue to fluctuate. . There is no strong anti-Russian position within the UK government comparable with Mrs. Thatcher's anti-communist policies. Both the last leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, and the first president of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, sought to establish a strong and reliable friendship with Britain. However, the change of Government in Russia in 2000 along with the beginning of the so-called 'Putin-Era' brought significant changes to the country's foreign policies. The list of candidates for extradition started with the Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky in the early 2000s and continues to grow, remaining a significant issue creating strains in British-Russian relations. Diplomatic rows over extraditions do not stop businesses between the

¹⁴ *London court adjourns Chichvarkin extradition hearing until September.* RIANovosti August 2, 2010 (<http://en.rian.ru/world/20100802/160039831.html> last accessed August 9, 2010)

¹⁵ HC, pp. 47-50.

two countries however, as Britain continues to be a reliable and highly desired partner for Russian businessmen. Russia in its turn has many resources to offer and investment continues to be both successful and beneficial for both parties. Since businesses are involved, the governments of both the UK and Russia cannot afford to apply any harsh measures in order to achieve their ambitious extradition goals.

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