

Following Litvinenko, UK-Russia relations are now at their lowest point since the 1980s

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*On 21 January, an inquiry into the death of Alexander Litvinenko in London published conclusions implicating the Russian government in his murder. **Alexey Gromyko** writes that it will be impossible to know the full details of the case until classified information is released, which could take decades. He argues that the case is nevertheless of secondary importance to the wider issue of UK-Russian relations, with events in Syria, Ukraine and the outcome of the US presidential election likely to be the key factors moving forward.*



A long time ago, before the Syrian crisis erupted, not to mention the Ukrainian crisis, the Litvinenko case turned into a politicised affair which had little prospect of being resolved in the short-term. The intelligence services of several states, foremost those of the UK, Italy and Russia, were involved in the case, and we will never, or at least not in the foreseeable future, get to know what pieces of the story have been classified in the UK and other countries.

What we currently have on our hands are accusations and counter-accusations, which without access to the classified material, have no chance of being substantiated or refuted. Until then, what we can do is merely ponder on the case, taking sides according to our own personal conclusions, inclinations and political allegiances, but with no possibility of properly addressing the case while maintaining a presumption of innocence. Even family members of the late Alexander Litvinenko have conflicting interpretations of what happened.

Previous cases illustrate how long the wait for classified information can be. Fifty years were required for the release of the British classified materials which ultimately proved that in 1956 Lionel Crabb was indeed working for MI6 while scuba-diving under the Ordzhonikidze new-class cruiser (which brought Nikita Khrushchev to Portsmouth for the Soviet-British summit). We wouldn't have got to know the real story behind the so-called "spy rock" for the next 46 years if not for revelations made by Jonathan Powell, the former head of staff under Tony Blair. In 2010, after numerous official denials, he confirmed that British operatives in Moscow had been caught red-handed while conducting a foiled operation involving equipment camouflaged as a stone.

We should also take into account the nature of the relationship between the state and the law. British courts are reputed to be of a high quality and level of independence. However even in the UK they are not free from political interference. In Britain, as in most countries, the notion of national security is a sacred cow. From time to time British authorities evoke national security to halt judicial procedures. For example, in 2007 Tony Blair cited national security grounds in halting a bribery investigation conducted by the Serious Fraud Office in relation to BAE arms sales to Saudi Arabia. The Litvinenko investigation itself was stopped in the past by the UK authorities for reasons which also became a target for speculation. We simply don't know, and are unlikely to know any time soon, the degree of national security considerations in the Litvinenko case.

The nature of this kind of public investigation is such that those who conduct it have to rely on assumptions and guesses rather than on hard facts and trustworthy evidence. Common sense dictates that this form of investigation is open to distortions and bias, even if nobody tries to manipulate it. For example, in the Litvinenko case this has occurred due to the fact that only certain witnesses have taken part in it, with some key witnesses having since died, like Boris Berezovskiy, or others simply not being present, like those who in the UK are thought to be key suspects.

Moreover, what is of paramount importance in any investigation, especially as in this case which encompasses a British public investigation plus an investigation involving nationals of several countries and several intelligence

services, is close cooperation among those countries and their intelligence services. In other words, there needs to be a high level of trust, although there is no necessity to go beyond the issue itself into the general level of trust between the UK and Russia. Furthermore, the court system does not function in a void but within a particular context. Against the backdrop of negative public sentiment towards Russia, one can speculate on the degree of impact this might have on the mindsets of those people involved in the investigation.

Political relations between Britain and Russia are at their lowest level for a quarter of a century. This downward curve can be traced back to 2002-3 when the two countries experienced a rupture in relations over the invasion in Iraq. Few people now remember that prior to Iraq, Putin and Blair were openly enthusiastic about each other. Since then there have been ups and downs in British-Russian relations, with the downs coming to dominate. Moscow and London were in opposing camps over events in Georgia in 2008, events in Libya in 2011, and developments in Ukraine since 2014. Russia has also experienced harsh criticism from the UK over its actions in Syria, even after Moscow de facto joined other countries (and de jure Damascus, Baghdad and Tehran) in a bombing campaign against Islamic State and affiliated terrorist organisations. Even Russia's central role in the chemical demilitarisation of Syria and its contribution to the success of "5+1" negotiations with Iran have had no visible effect on London's stance towards the Kremlin.

In comparison with all these developments, the Litvinenko case has been losing its importance and appeal and, significantly, its level of public interest. Regardless of the fact that the investigation has been running its own independent course, leading to the recent interim conclusions, and irrespective of whether the investigation's dynamics have been influenced by political calculations from the British authorities; the significance of the case for UK-Russian relations is now of diminishing and secondary importance. Therefore it does not matter a great deal whether London has been interested in bringing the investigation to a swift conclusion to draw a line under the issue, or whether it has been used for tactical purposes to keep pressure on Russia.

The future of the two countries' bilateral relations will ultimately be decided by other factors. Among them: the role of Moscow in the military and political settlement of the Syrian crisis, the further evolution of the Ukrainian crisis and Minsk-2 negotiations, the shifting positions of other leading European capitals towards issue of anti-Russian sanctions, and, above all, the impact of the presidential campaign and forthcoming election in the United States and its results on the foreign policy of London and its continental allies.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author

Alexey Gromyko – *Russian Academy of Sciences*

Professor Alexey Gromyko is Director of the Institute of Europe at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

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