

What does the Litvinenko ruling mean for relations between Russia and the West?

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On 21 January, an inquiry into the death of former Russian spy Alexander Litvinenko in London concluded that the Russian government is likely to have had involvement in his murder. [Cristian Nitoiu](#) assesses what the outcome of the case could mean for Russia's relations with the West. He argues that the report itself will not lead to a severe deterioration in relations, and that the gradual shift in attention away from the Ukraine conflict that has occurred in recent months actually signifies there is potential for tensions to be eased between Russia and the West.



The [final report](#) of the inquiry headed by Sir Robert Owen on the murder of former KBG spy Alexander Litvinenko has once again sparked intense controversy over Russia's official involvement in the assassination. The report for the first time explicitly puts the blame for the poisoning of Litvinenko on the Russian state, and argues that Putin was probably aware of this. [Many considered Litvinenko](#) to be a thorn in the side of Putin, as he promised to present clear evidence that incriminated the Russian president for the apartment bombings in Russia in 1999, or highlighted Putin's connection's with the criminal world.

Almost ten years ago, when the assassination took place, Putin was still in the process of centralising power and bringing the state apparatus under his control, making the murder case one of importance for Russian public opinion. Currently, Putin enjoys record levels of popularity and support from the Russian people, and it is unlikely that the report [will have any significant impact on the Kremlin](#).

At the international level, the release of the report and the intense publicity around it might signal that relations between the UK (and the West) and Russia are returning to 'business as usual'. Before the Ukraine crisis, Russia and the West enjoyed a somewhat peaceful cohabitation, abstaining from strong criticism in order not to jeopardise economic relations. For example, in dealing with the post-Soviet states the West employed a '[Russia fist approach](#)', in that it adopted policies in the region only after considering their effects on relations with the Kremlin. The only points of contention arose in relation to the assassination of spies, [journalists and political activities](#), or commercial trials (for example the [Yukos affair](#)). Western criticism never really touched upon sensitive regional security or political issues.



Aleksander Litvinenko at the University College Hospital, London. From [Wikipedia](#)

The Ukraine crisis changed this dynamic, with the West and Russia completely freezing relations. Throughout the last two years the West and the Kremlin have openly challenged each other on a series of key regional and global issues. As such the resurrection of the Litvinenko case itself is not a sign that relations will deteriorate: coupled with the gradual silence that has fallen over the Ukraine crisis, there is arguably more evidence that the West is ready to start slowly cohabiting with Russia and return to 'business as usual'.

British foreign policy

Throughout the Ukraine crisis the UK had a rather timid response to Russia in comparison to the US or Germany. Britain was one of the guarantors of Ukraine territorial integrity according to the [Budapest memorandum](#), however it was virtually paralysed by the annexation of Crimea. Then when the Malaysian commercial airliner was shot down from rebel held territory it [mostly abstained from any practical actions](#).

This is particularly surprising as the UK has, for many years, been working to prevent non-state groups from getting hold of such weapons that could be used against civilian aircrafts. Recently, David Cameron also presented a view in favour of cohabitation with Moscow, [recognising that Russian presence in Syria cannot be ignored, and the West will have to live with it](#).

From the British perspective, turning public attention to a more low key, ten years old murder case could be a sign that cohabitation with Russia is on the horizon. It is also, however, an issue which badly damaged [the ego of the British secret services](#), who most probably vowed to protect Litvinenko, but failed.

The Ukraine crisis

The report comes against the background of intense fatigue in the West over events in Ukraine. The Ukraine crisis has utterly fallen off the radar, with both western and Russian leaders being keen to arrive at a settlement. Blaming Putin for the assassination of Litvinenko is a very mild accusation in comparison to the negative propaganda he received for the annexation of Crimea or the war in eastern Ukraine.

The extent to which the Ukraine crisis is now being overshadowed in the public sphere by the resurrection of the murder case, highlights that the British (and western) public has also lost interest in the events in Ukraine. The government in Kyiv will have, in this context, to either resign itself to the situation and make a deal with Russia, or find new ways in which to bring its plight back to the top of the international agenda.

Syria

Russia is currently much more willing to have a concrete military presence in Syria and work towards a solution to the conflict than both the US and the EU, who seem to be increasingly looking for a quick way out. Tensions in the Gulf between Iran and Saudi Arabia are certainly not helping the situation. Even though the outcome envisaged by Russia (i.e. the preservation of the Assad regime) differs from that desired by the West, it is unlikely that the report on the murder of Litvinenko will have much impact on the will of the US or the EU to challenge the Kremlin's presence in Syria.

Russian public opinion

The conclusion that Putin was aware of the assassination is if anything likely to have a positive effect on Putin's domestic popularity in Russia. Since he became President for the third time in 2012, Putin has moved Russia towards a more militaristic and paranoid atmosphere, where citizens are routinely told that Russia is concerned by western attempts to destroy it. The sanctions regime imposed by the West, the continuous criticism of Russia in western media over the last two years, and now the virtual incrimination of Putin for the murder of Litvinenko will only fuel this paranoia, and legitimise Putin's leadership as the only capable defender of the Russian nation.

More importantly, however, the shift from key sensitive European security issues caused by the Ukraine crisis to the low key case of the murder of a former KGB spy may signify the start of a shift towards 'business as usual' in relations with Russia. As Ukraine slips off the agenda, the potential for easing or even lifting sanctions becomes possible. The Litvinenko case may raise difficult questions about Russia's involvement in the assassination, but the fact we are even discussing it rather than Ukraine highlights how far the conflict has slipped from the attention of western governments.

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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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