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RUSSIA-UNITED KINGDOM RELATIONS AFTER THE YEAR 2018. CONDITION AND PREDICTIONS

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ABSTRACT: The relations between the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation have a long history. Over centuries those relations were changing. At the beginning the countries were hostile and militant towards each other. Then, they became allies in World War I and World War II. However, never in the modern history bilateral relations between Great Britain and Russia have been so obscure and distant. Some scientists and politicians even suggest that relations between the United Kingdom and Russia are frozen. This thesis can be supported by the analysis of recent events in the 21st century history: from an attempt to murder ex-Russian agent in 2018 to firing warning shots at the British Royal Navy destroyer in the Black Sea by Russians in 2021.

INTRODUCTION

The Russia-United Kingdom bilateral relations have never been easy. Throughout centuries those countries alternately wage wars or built allies against common enemies. In the 20th century, during World War I and World War II, they were allies, but it ended up fast after World War II and at the beginning of the Cold War. After the collapse of the Union of Soviet

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Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991, Russia and the United Kingdom renewed their contacts, mainly thanks to the financial capital that was sent to London's economic institutions.

It all ended in the 21st century. The murder of the former Russian agent Alexander Litvinienko on British soil and the Ukrainian crisis are only the milestones of the beginning of tense and rather unfriendly relations between those two countries. The diplomatic conflict between Great Britain and Russia escalated in 2018 with an attempt to kill the next former Russian agent and his daughter. Since then, a lot of factors made the Russia–United Kingdom relations close to frozen and non-existing. It is worth to take a closer look at those events in order to better understand what has recently happened between those two countries and what direction it is heading.

In this paper such terms as ‘Great Britain’ and ‘the United Kingdom’, “the Anglo-Russian relations” and “the Russia-United Kingdom relations” are going to be used alternatively.

RUSSIAN ATTEMPTS TO MURDER ON BRITISH SOIL

On 4 March 2018, in Salisbury, the former Russia's GRU officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia were found by local authorities unconscious on a bench in the city. Very soon it was announced that the couple was poisoned by A234, a military-grade nerve agent from Novichok family developed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Two Russian officers were identified as assassins. Fortunately, Sergei Skripal and his daughter survived (local women who died after getting in contact with the poison did not have as much luck).

It was the second known accident on British soil in the past 10 years. In 2006 Alexander Litvinienko, the former officer of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), was assassinated by means of radioactive polonium. Even though, during a long British investigation, the assassins were pointed out, they was no longer in the United Kingdom. The British Foreign Office submitted a request to the Kremlin for extradition. The request was denied. In the next year the UK government wrote reports

and sent inquiries, but it did not take any legal and strong actions. The response and the actions taken by the British authorities (which took years) were perceived as weak and unacceptable.

London learned its lesson. After the next unsuccessful attempt of assassination on British soil, the UK government reacted rapidly and decisively. The Prime Minister, Theresa May, who was perceived as weak and accused of not being decisive enough towards the Russian Federation, expelled 23 Russian intelligence officer operating as diplomats in the UK and their families. As a form of solidarity, 29 countries expelled Russian officials and diplomats (e.g. the US expelled 60 Russian diplomats). As a response to those actions, the Kremlin expelled the same number of British, American and other diplomats.

Additionally, all planned and high-level contacts between the Russian Federation and Great Britain were suspended. Sanctions also involved such economic restrictions as cracking down the funnel of Russian money into the United Kingdom.

Nonetheless, some researches like Jonathan Eyal (international director at the Royal United Services Institute) said they expected much stronger reaction. Especially when it comes to economic matters. Russians would have been affected to a greater extent if British had frozen their financial assets or tightened up their laws and made it impossible to hide the ownership of Russian money and assets in the United Kingdom (Theresa May Expels Russian Diplomats. But now comes the hard part. The New York Times).

Theresa May's successor, Boris Johnson, met Vladimir Putin in Berlin during the Conference on Lybia, where world leaders met to discuss and find political solution to conflict in 2020. During the meeting the English Prime Minister maintained British position and thesis about Salisbury incident. "He said that such an attack must not be repeated. (...) The Prime Minister said there will be no normalisation of our bilateral relationship until Russia ends the destabilising activity that threatens the UK and our allies and undermines the safety of our citizens and our collective security" (Prime Minister's Office; 10 Downing Street, 19 January 2020).

The incident in Salisbury and Britain's determined and explicit reaction to it started a rapid chain of events that led to a crisis in bilateral relations

between the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation. A diplomatic dispute and mutual accusations only exacerbated the situation.

One thing is certain, Russia's aggressive and provocative actions on the soil of a foreign country creates a lasting threat for the security of any country.

BREXIT

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland officially left the European Union on 31 January 2020 (transition period until 31 December 2020). Main director of Brexit and biggest Brexitter was Boris Johnson.

After three attempts, the United Kingdom joined the European Communities on 1 January 1973. From the beginning it was a difficult partnership. Due to the insular nature of their state, the British people are Eurosceptic. The term "Euroscepticism" was created by the *The Times* magazine (European Sources Online, Information Guide Euroscepticism, p. 2) to describe the Britons' attitude towards organisation and to replace a negative term "anti-European".

Only after two years from joining the European Communities, the first referendum concerning leaving the Communities in Great Britain took place. The society decided they wanted to stay. On 23 June 2016 (this time when the Conservatives were a ruling party) the second membership referendum took place. However, this time with the opposite result. In non-binding voting, 51.9% of the votes were cast in favour of leaving the European Union. Theresa's May government (as a result of the Brexit referendum, David Cameron lost his position) decided to implement the result and in 2017 formally informed the European Union authorities about the intention of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. For the next three years Great Britain and the European Union negotiated the terms of Brexit.

In the process of long and demanding negotiations, one aspect reappeared in the British press, namely the Russian involvement in Brexit. In their investigations, journalists started to ask questions about the con-

nections between the Brexit campaign funding, politicians, media and the Kremlin.

The main story, described by the newspapers irrespective of their political preferences was the multimillionaire Aaron Banks and his donations to Nigel Farage and his party *United Kingdom Independence Party* (UKIP). Banks was also the biggest donor in a political campaign group Leave.EU. His multiple meetings with Russian officials, during which he was supposed to receive money for the donations, started raising questions about the Moscow's involvement in the Brexit campaign. The multimillionaire denied all the allegations.

Boris Johnson replaced Theresa May as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and as a leader of the Conservative Party on 24 July 2019. Johnson who held the office of the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (2016–2018) in May's cabinet, was known from his aggressive approach towards Russia, especially after an attempt to murder Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the United Kingdom.

According to public opinion poll, almost 60% of Britons perceive Russia as the biggest threat for Europe and 49% of Britons demand more aggressive and rigorous policy, towards Russia on the part of the European Union (Znaczenie Brexitu dla Rosji, Biuletyn PISM, 2019, p. 2). Boris Johnson detected the moods of British society very well and tightened his policy towards Russia even more. He also hoped to gain more support for his government.

Along with media articles, the Britons started to ask questions about the results of the Brexit referendum and the Russian influence on it. Boris Johnson had to react in order to dispel the doubts and to give public opinion answers they were demanding. The British government commissioned the preparation of "The Russia report". In October 2019 the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament delivered the report. What is interesting and controversial at the same time is the date of publishing the document. The Prime Minister decided not to publish the 50-page report before general elections in December 2019. This only raised suspicious about the intent. The Russia report was finally (after long and useless fight with the government) published in July 2020. The report stated that "the written evidence provided [...] had not seen or sought evidence of

successful interference in UK democratic process” (Russia, House of Commons, p. 13). Long awaited document did not give any answers. Public opinion was disappointed. It looked as if the UK government was not interested in finding any answers.

The report mentioned: “Russian influence in the UK is the new normal [...] the UK is clearly a target for Russian disinformation”. But there is no proof for it.

One of the forms of exerting influence and promoting ideas in a hybrid war is disinformation. Nowadays, disinformation uses technology and social media to enhance, disrupt and plant ideas. “According to research from 89up, the communication agency Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik published 261 media articles on the EU Referendum, with an anti-EU sentiment, between 1 January 2016 and 23 June 2016. Their report also showed that RT and Sputnik had more reach on Twitter for anti-EU content than either Vote Leave or Leave.EU, during the Referendum campaign. A joint research project by the Universities of Swansea and of Berkley, at the University of California, also identified 156, 252 Russian accounts tweeting about #Brexit messages in the last 48 hours of the campaign”. Those data were provided in the publication of the House of Commons: *Disinformation and ‘fake news’: Interim Report*. Thousands of Twitter and Facebook accounts were created to post “fake news” concerning the EU referendum and to spread misinformation. Those accounts were closed shortly after the voting. The connection between the usage of social media and posting news about Brexit is clearly visible. Nonetheless, making efforts does not prove that the Kremlin interfered with the domestic politics of Great Britain.

Brexit, from Putin’s and Russian point of view, was an opportunity to weaken the European Union’s policy and sanctions towards Russia. What is more, from the financial point of view, the Russian public authorities hope that it will help to prevent money from going down the drain. Oligarchs are well known from hiding their financial assets in the United Kingdom and in their overseas territories with less strict economic policy. But with Brexit and new stricter English law this might not be as easy as it used to be for Russians, which are still facing restrictions and problems due to the sanctions imposed (*Znaczenie Brexitu dla Rosji, Biuletyn PISM*, p. 2).

CONNECTIONS WITH RUSSIAN OLIGARCHS

According to the data of the UK's Department of International Trade from 19 August 2021, Russia was on the 21st position as the UK's trading partner. At the same time, Russia was the 5th European Union's trading partner (European Commission, data 2020). Consequently, Russia has no economic leverage on Great Britain.

Despite the fact that the economic connection between Russia and the United Kingdom is minor, there is one financial aspect that binds both countries tight, namely Russian business oligarchs and their wealth.

“The academic Karen Dawisha characterises the Russian system as a “kleptocracy”, and the model of statist capitalism that operates in Russia generates enormous rents that seek to find a safe berth away from official eyes” (Sakwa, 2018, p. 12). This safe berth for the richest businessmen in Russia is the United Kingdom and its overseas territories.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union a new Russian elite that made fortune in the 90's in different branches of industry was created. Due to rather unstable internal policy and corruption, the wealthiest invested and hid their assets by means of the London banking system. At that time the United Kingdom, thanks to its stability, banking sector and rather non-restricted economic law, was a perfect place. The UK economic system welcomed Russian money with opened arms and asked no questions. Not only financial sector benefited from new capital but also universities, cultural organisations, charities and politicians.

Soon it was discovered that Russian oligarchs treated the United Kingdom as one big laundromat. Thanks to their big donations they were able to control institutions and gain power. As mentioned in *The Russia report*: “there are a lot of Russians with very close links to Putin who are well integrated into the UK business and social scene, and accepted because of their wealth” (p. 15).

In the article *Moscow-on Thames: Soviet- born billionaires and their ties to UK's political elite*, published in *The Guardian* on 25 July 2020, Luke Harding and Rob Davies described in details the expensive lives of chosen Russians living on British soil. And this is only the tip of an iceberg. Russian oligarchs control newspapers (e.g.: *The Independent*, *Evening Stand-*

ard), Internet news portals, big chains of bookstores, football and more. Alexander Lebedev is a friend of Boris Johnson, who spent holidays in Lebedev's Italy mansion or attended his 60th birthday party, just a day after winning general elections in 2019. Lebedev supports Russian aggression and occupation of Crimea, which is unacceptable in terms of official British policy. But conservative politicians do not perceive it as an obstacle. Those close ties lead to big and generous donation for the Conservative Party. The party received almost £3 m (in the years 2012–2020). The biggest donors were: Lubov Chernukhin and Alexander Temerko. The last one supported Boris Johnson's policy regarding Brexit.

The former British Prime Ministers David Cameron and Theresa May also had contacts with Russian oligarchs.

Links between Russian money and the Conservative Party are undeniable. The British press even suggested that this is the reason why "The Russia report" was not able to prove the connection between Brexit and the Kremlin's influence.

Due to changing bilateral relations, the deterioration of the situation between Russia and Great Britain and British sanctions, London's banks and institutions are very careful and double check the origin of Russian capital before accepting it. At least it is highly recommended by the UK's government.

Despite long-term implications and British sanctions, the outflow of Russian capital from British territories is highly unimaginable.

MILITARY RELATIONS

After leaving the European Union, the United Kingdom had to find new possibilities to strengthen their political position in Europe. One way for Great Britain to achieve this aim was empowering its position in NATO, especially in the Eastern part of Alliance. During the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw decision about the establishment of four multinational battalion-size battlegroups: Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and in Estonia, was made. Each eFP has a leading country. The United Kingdom agreed to take control over the multinational

battle group eFP in Estonia (due to sending British soldiers overseas, Britons use the term Operation Cabrit for the eFP Estonia). The main task of all four Enhanced Forward Presence units is to strengthen deterrence and military presence in the eastern and south-eastern part of NATO territory. By creating those battlegroups, NATO wants to be visible and ready to react quickly in case of a threat from the East. eFPs were deployed in 2017 and are under NATO Command through Multinational Corps North East Headquarters in Szczecin. For the United Kingdom taking a leading role in one of the battlegroups was a great opportunity to strength their position in NATO and to tighten their policy towards Russia. Great Britain, together with Poland and Baltic states, forced the European Union to impose an increasing number of restrictions on Russia, especially after its attack on Ukraine and the occupation of Crimea.

The United Kingdom not only sent its troops to the eastern flank of Alliance but also decided to secure their security by signing military bilateral treaties among others with Germany, France and Japan. The United Kingdom also signed a military treaty with Poland, which is known as one of the biggest Russian antagonists in Europe. The treaty between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Republic of Poland on Defence and Security Cooperation was signed on 21 December 2017 (The Treaty entered into force on 4 July 2018). In general “this Treaty provides a legal basis for the continuation, and development, of the defence relationship between the UK and Poland, which is a genuine partnership from which both countries benefit” (Explanatory Memorandum on the Treaty between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and The Republic of Poland on Defence and Security Cooperation, 2018, p. 1). The treaty standardises and describes: “areas and forms of cooperation; related arrangements; management of cooperation; deployment and employment of forces; access to facilities, equipment and support; transfer, access to the market and export licensing; financial arrangements; protection of information; jurisdictional arrangements; claims and liability; disputes and amendments” (Explanatory Memorandum on the Treaty between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and The Republic of Poland on Defence and Security Cooperation, 2018, p.1). The fact that Great Britain signed the

Treaty with Poland and other European countries shows its determination to keep power and position on the continent. The series of bilateral agreements also weakened the position of Russia, which was also a trigger factor for the UK.

However, even while signing military agreements or sending troops to protect the eastern flank of NATO, the United Kingdom did not expect to get involved in a real military conflict or even an accident. On 21 June 2021 the British Royal Navy's ship HMS Defender was conducting "innocent passage" through territorial waters of the coast of Crimea. According to the Kremlin, HMS Defender was given preliminary, warning shots. The British deny that such an event involving warning shots and bombs happened. The Ministry of Defence claims that Russians are deliberately creating a diplomatic row. The fact is that the British destroyer HMF Defender "peeled away" from other ships belonging to the Royal Navy which conducted operations on the Mediterranean Sea to visit the Ukrainian port on the Black Sea (Odessa) in order to sign an assistance agreement to upgrade the Ukraine's Navy. After the year 2014, the Russian aggression against Ukraine and as a result of losing the Crimea Peninsula, the United Kingdom is actively supporting Ukraine in the conflict.

As mentioned before, relations between the two countries have been frozen. This can be confirmed by the words of the General Mark Carleton-Smith. In 2018 the General Mark Carleton-Smith was appointed for the Head of the British Army. In an interview given to *The Daily Telegraph* he said that: "Russia today indisputably represents a far greater threat to our national security than Islamic extremist threats such as al-Qaida and Isis" (*The Daily Telegraph*, 23 November 2018). Those are very radical and important words coming out from the mouth of the Head of the British Army— a high rank officer who fought in the war against Taliban in Afghanistan. The General clearly implies that Russia poses a bigger problem for the United Kingdom right now than Isis or al-Qaida. The country which suffered from terrorist attacks, bombing and took part in the war against terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq perceives Russia as its biggest threat. We can interpret this statement not as a threat of a new conventional war but as a new hybrid and cyber-attack conflict.

CYBERATTACKS AND BRITISH ELECTIONS

On Thursday, 12 December 2019, general elections were held in the UK. As a result, the Conservative Party won the majority vote. They received 43.6% of the votes, thereby and receiving 365 seats in the House of Lords. With this result, the Conservatives achieved the highest percentage of support for any party since 1979. The Labour Party and their leader Jeremy Cobryn received 202 seats in the Parliament (32.2% of votes).

Before the elections, a series of hacking attacks took part and the discussion concerning the Russian involvement into the British politics started one more time.

In July 2020 Russia was accused by the British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab for hacking and then publishing in social media platform Reddit a 451-page document relating to the UK-US trade deal. The document was leaked few days before the general elections, which was suspicious and started domestic intelligence investigation by the National Cyber Security Centre. High important papers as not published trade documents and the negotiation process can change the results of the voting. The published document revealed that the Conservatives were ready to sell off the National Health System (NHS) just to reach a trade agreement with the United States. That trade agreement was used by Jeremy Cobryn in order to discredit the Tories' leaders. As expected, Russia denied all the accusations and asked Britain to provide proof rather than false accusations.

As mentioned by the UK government, it wasn't a separate case. But there was a series of cyberattacks regarding the United Kingdom. Most of them were stopped.

It was not the first time when a high-ranking politicians accused Russia for cyber espionage. In 2017 Theresa May "accused Russia of meddling in elections and planting fake news, in an attempt to 'weaponise information' and sow discord in the West" (Disinformation and 'fake news: Interim Report, 2018, p. 46). Unfortunately by saying that, the Prime Minister did not provide any evidence. The Secretary of State in the government, British society and some researchers agreed with Theresa May. As mentioned in the report of the House of Commons "*Disinformation and 'fake news'*":

Interim Report” – “there is a disconnect between the Government’s expressed concerns about foreign interference in elections, and tech companies intractability in recognising the issue”.

“Others do not share the UK’s concerns about Russia, or even if they do, they are not willing to take such an assertive approach towards Russia’s malign activities” (Russia, House of Common, p. 37). The Russia report (p. 36) ask a question “whether current legislation to protect the electoral process from malign interference is sufficient” and underline that “legislation should be in line with the latest technological developments”.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the Russia-United Kingdom relations are one of the most antagonistic bilateral relations nowadays. There is no single factor which led to this situation, but there are multiple incidents which led to a diplomatic row. The Kremlin as well as Boris Johnson’s government are extremely determined not to appear weak in public opinion’s eyes.

Russia perceives Great Britain through the prism of the UK’s special relation with the United States. The United Kingdom sees the Kremlin as an aggressive and hostile partner and as the biggest threat to its security.

Great Britain’s strategic position has changed after leaving the European Union. The country is still trying to redefine its position of power and wants to prove its importance in terms of multinational environment and global policy. The British government is afraid of becoming irrelevant and marginalised. This fear is used in a clever way by the Russian Federation. By underlying the UK-US ‘special relationship’ it is showing that the United Kingdom cannot create its own foreign policy and is not relevant in the global policy of the biggest country in the world. This strategy works so efficiently that when describing the Russian attempts to influence elections, Brexit referendum or cyberattacks, the Britons always mention the United States. Unfortunately, in most of the reports created by the UK, the Russian endeavours to interfere with the domestic policy of the US can be proven but the inference with the domestic policy of the UK cannot.

All Russian actions, starting from an attempt to assassinate Sergei Skripal on the soil of a foreign country, are disrespectful and show that Russia is not afraid of Great Britain.

This paper describes only the most significant events related to bilateral relations. The list of incidents undermining and exacerbating Russia-United Kingdom relations can be listed *ad infinitum*.

If it is possible to make a forecast based on the described events starting from 2018 and earlier, one should assume that the close future of the bilateral relations between Russia and the United Kingdom will not improve.

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