

Frozen diplomacy

More of an update than a reset.

Ever since the new American administration popularised the phrase, it has been fashionable to talk of a “reset” with Russia. Few relationships have needed resetting more than the one between Russia and Britain. It has been all but frozen since Russia refused to hand over Andrei Lugovoi, an ex-KGB officer suspected of murdering his former colleague (and British citizen), Alexander Litvinenko, in London in 2006. Diplomats have been expelled, contacts between security services severed and visa restrictions imposed.

On November 1st David Miliband, Britain’s foreign secretary, flew to Moscow for talks with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov. It was more of an update than a reset. His host was courteous, which is progress. The two men signed joint statements on nuclear non-proliferation, Afghanistan and the Middle East. Yet none of the sticky bilateral issues was resolved—nor was any expected to be. Mr Miliband repeated Britain’s request to hand over Mr Lugovoi, only to hear, yet again, Moscow’s response that this would be against Russia’s constitution (which is sacred unless for lengthening presidential terms). For now, at least, Mr Lugovoi will carry on as an elected member of the Russian parliament.

Britain’s policy towards Russia stands out among other European countries, including France, Germany and Italy, which do not like to rattle the Kremlin and disrupt good business ties and gas supplies. Russia has mobilised politicians, academics and businessmen to lobby for it, with Gerhard Schröder, a former German chancellor who works for Gazprom, Russia’s gas monopoly, as a prime example. Britain has its fair share of Kremlin apologists, too.

Yet Britain does not depend on Russia for gas. And although it is one of the biggest investors in Russia, thanks to BP’s 50% stake in the TNK-BP oil company, the rough treatment the British firm received in its dispute with Russian shareholders left the aftertaste of a broken lip. In some areas, such as Russia’s war with Georgia, Britain has been especially vocal. This has infuriated the Kremlin. Whether Mr Lavrov actually exploded with the outburst, “who are you to fucking lecture us?”, the phrase summarises the feelings in the Kremlin remarkably accurately.

But though it is an irritant, Britain is also a great magnet for Russia’s elite, who like to buy expensive properties in London and to send their children to smart private schools. What makes Britain attractive to them and to the 250,000 Russians who live there is exactly what makes it so awkward to deal with: its obsession with laws and freedoms.

Indeed, Britain has long been viewed in Russia as a haven. Ivan the Terrible, who proposed to Elizabeth I, contemplated it as a possible refuge; Russian political émigrés like Alexander Herzen chose it as their home. As soon as any Russian businessman senses the first whiff of the Kremlin’s wrath, he heads for Heathrow. London is full of Russian business “refugees”, as well as the children of the Russian political elite. Diplomatic rows seem to have little effect on this. Indeed, for many people the less contact there is between the Russian and British security services, the more attractive Britain becomes.

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