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# How Russia 'positions' the United Kingdom

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## Foreword

Dr Andrew Foxall's comprehensive and thoughtful analysis of the way that Russia's rulers look at the United Kingdom's (UK) role in international affairs embraces the contradictions embedded in the Kremlin's by now engrained commitment to its self proclaimed rights as a 'Great Power'. Countries once under Soviet rule have however become protective of their independence, with Ukraine and Georgia as particularly important instances. The Baltic States and former Warsaw Pact members rely on NATO to defend themselves against Moscow's wish for hegemony over them. 'How Russia positions the United Kingdom' sets out the various attitudes and actions undertaken by President Putin's regime directed against the UK and its allies in response to their unwelcome and in Russian eyes aggressive efforts to sustain the post-Cold War international system.

The Kremlin's consistent preference has been to deal with individual member states of the European Union (EU), not the entity itself. Different states, such as Germany, France or Poland, have different historical memories of Russia and different interests to consider today, along with their common EU membership. The UK has been taken to recent account for its consistent NATO based support for opposing Russian aggression, as Dr Foxall explains. But the sorts of charges directed towards London have not been unlike those pointed at other capitals as opportunity and desirability have offered. Brexit might in principle have been seen in Moscow as an opportunity to exploit, but British policies have instead hardened.

The reader might like to ponder how far the harsh 'reforms' enacted in Russia over the past fifteen months could affect the way that country positions the UK, and others like it. Those changes have after all been imposed to meet threatening domestic pressures on the Kremlin, and Putin's rule. They will increase the regime's reliance on its security forces to enforce its rule, thereby in all probability reinforcing its present international convictions. But 'reforms' meant to cement Putin into place beyond 2024 cannot resolve the enigma of a divided Russia trapped in its past and in a fog about its future. The recommendations set out by Dr Foxall in this Policy Paper as to how the



UK should manage its relations with Russia over that uncertain time are apposite.

**Sir Andrew Wood GCMG**

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## Executive summary

1. Russia's leaders do not believe that the United Kingdom (UK) is their country's equal in the international order. For them, Russia is a 'great power', or one of the two or three most important countries globally. The UK, by contrast, is seen as a 'second tier' power, ultimately lacking the ability to act fully independently. Combined with Russia's 'zero-sum' understanding of power, this belief prompts Russia to engage in subversion and destabilisation of the UK. This has far-reaching implications for UK policymakers who seek to develop policy towards Russia.
2. Proceeding from their belief that Russia and the UK are not equals, Russia's leaders have sought to 'position' the UK and its role in the post-Cold War international system in ways that are beneficial to Moscow and detrimental to London. Over at least the last decade, Russia's leaders have sought to position the UK as: a potential partner if only it would see the world through Russia's eyes; an irrelevant and unreliable international actor; and, as a Russophobic country.
3. UK responses to its positioning by Russia have at times been stronger and at times weaker. In the early 2010s, the responses were defensive, and reflected a conventional wisdom that held the greater danger was of provoking Russia rather than appeasing it. This began to change in 2014, and the UK response is now more often offensive. This approach, codified in the Government's Russia Strategy, adopted in 2017, proceeds from a recognition that the bilateral relationship is fundamentally adversarial.
4. Maintaining the UK's current stance towards Russia is important, but it will be difficult. To implement an effective Russia policy, UK policymakers would do well to start by taking the focus off Russia and putting it on the UK. The period of political flux that has followed the Brexit referendum in 2016 could be used by the Government to renew the country's democratic values and principles, including by adopting legislation akin to the US' Foreign Agents Registration Act, and implementing



recommendations contained in the Intelligence and Security Committee's Russia report.

5. At the same time, the UK should recognise the continued importance of its alliances and its membership of multilateral organisations. If the UK wants, in the future, to be able to call on support similar to that it brokered following the Skripal poisoning in March 2018 then it has to make preparations now and be willing to help others. The UK's efforts should not focus solely on NATO, but instead should encompass the Northern Group, the European Union (EU), the 'Five Eyes', and others willing to collectively respond to Russian misdemeanours.
6. In responding to Russia's attempts to position the UK, the country needs leaders and statespersons who will defend and promote the national interest using frank but professional language. Meanwhile, the UK should be clear and precise about the Russia 'threat' itself – including the nature of Russia's current regime. The UK should use more appropriate language to describe Russia's political system – 'kleptocracy' would be a start – and, in doing so, begin to position the regime in a way that complements its offensive approach.



## 1.0 Introduction

‘A small island no-one pays attention to’ is how a Russian spokesperson reportedly described the United Kingdom (UK) in the days before David Cameron, then British Prime Minister, travelled to St. Petersburg for the G20 summit in 2013. Dmitry Peskov, President Vladimir Putin’s official spokesman, denied speaking the words, which the BBC first reported.<sup>1</sup> Whoever uttered the words, however, they read like an exaggerated summary of official views in Moscow. As such, they highlight a problem that has faced successive UK governments over at least the last decade: the ‘intrinsic difficulty of developing policy toward Russia when Russia’s leaders judge the UK to be a lesser power’, in the words of Duncan Allan, an Associate Fellow of Chatham House’s Russia and Eurasia Programme.<sup>2</sup>

This difficulty is compounded by the fact that Russia’s ruling elite view the world in terms that are very different to those familiar to us in the Euro-Atlantic community. Seen from the Kremlin, the post-Cold War international system is illegitimate and unfair, and has been forced on the world by the West. At the same time, it believes that the West, led by the United States (US), seeks to undermine Russia’s stability and to deny Russia its rightful place in global affairs. In contrast, Russia’s leaders have what is often described as a ‘nineteenth-century’ view of the world, in which great powers divide the world into ‘spheres of influence’ and everything is ‘zero-sum’.<sup>3</sup>

These beliefs prompt Russia to engage in subversion and destabilisation of countries it perceives as adversaries, including the UK, since it is only through weakening them that Russia can prosper. From the Russian perspective, of all the issues in its relations with the UK – and there are many, because these relations are underpinned by few shared values and few convergent interests – the most problematic is London’s commitment to, and leading role within, the post-Cold War international system. This fundamental divergence of views on the

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Robinson, ‘A small island no-one pays attention to’, BBC News, 06/09/2013, <https://bbc.in/3dl2kgI> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>2</sup> Duncan Allan, ‘Brexit Makes It Even More Difficult for the UK to Deal With Russia’, Chatham House, 13/12/2017, <https://bit.ly/3czZVQ5> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>3</sup> Keir Giles, *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019). See also, Stephen M. Walt, ‘Back to the Future: World Politics Edition’, *Foreign Policy*, 08/07/2015, <https://bit.ly/3djCFVS> (found: 01/04/2021).

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international system's nature ultimately shapes how Russia's leaders understand their relations with the UK and how they seek to position the UK and its role within the international system itself.<sup>4</sup>

## The Council on Geostrategy's national positioning series

This paper is part of a series produced by the Council on Geostrategy to shed light on the political operations undertaken by foreign governments which aim to redefine the United Kingdom's position and role in the world. These operations, part of a broader approach which might be defined as 'discursive statecraft', can be undertaken by friend and foe, either to nudge a target country towards a different course of action or to silence and subdue it. The series focuses on five of the most significant countries to the UK: two competitors – Russia and China – and three allies and partners – Germany, Japan and the United States. The conceptual and methodological paper for the series can be found on the Council on Geostrategy's website.<sup>5</sup>

To develop this argument, this Policy Paper proceeds in four sections. The first examines in greater detail how the current Russian leadership views the international system. The second analyses how Russia has positioned the UK in this system through political statements, policy documents, and the state-owned media over the last decade. During this period, the UK–Russia relationship has evolved from one broadly based on cooperation to one that is based on confrontation.<sup>6</sup> The positions used by Russia reflect this and include, but are not limited to, the UK as a potential partner if only it would see the world through Russia's eyes, the UK as an irrelevance to Russian thinking, the UK as an unreliable international actor, and the UK as a Russophobic country. The third section explores how the UK has responded to such positionings, and the fourth concludes with a series of recommendations for British policymakers going forward.

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<sup>4</sup> On this, see Richard Sakwa, *Russia against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> James Rogers, 'Discursive statecraft: Towards national positioning operations', Council on Geostrategy, 08/04/2021, <https://bit.ly/3moToN7> (found: 19/04/2021).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: Duncan Allan, 'Managed Confrontation: UK Policy Towards Russia After the Salisbury Attack', Chatham House, 10/2018, <https://bit.ly/3sHfJGI> (found: 01/04/2021).

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## 2.0 How Russia views the world

The current Russian leadership, including Vladimir Putin, Russian President, and those around him, view the world in terms that are very different to those familiar to us in the Euro-Atlantic community. Core elements of this worldview are likely to outlast the current leadership because they are assumptions around which there is a consensus amongst policymakers and politicians in Moscow. As Maria Lipman, a Moscow-born political analyst, explains, these include the assumptions that ‘Russia is a great power, and the West is hostile to it...; ‘might makes right’ is a legitimate concept, and injustice is an inevitable part of life which is taken for granted; [and] Russia has a special path...’<sup>7</sup> A key assumption – perhaps the key assumption – is that Russia is a ‘great power’, or one of the two or three most important countries in the world, alongside the US and (possibly) China. Russia understands that its ‘great power’ status means that it is exempt from the rules that ordinarily govern inter-state behaviour, and thus that it has greater rights than others. Moscow sees this status as both a source of pride and a potential guarantee of security in a world that, from its perspective, is increasingly hostile.<sup>8</sup>

A result of Russia’s belief in its own ‘great power’ is a tendency to see the world through the prism of great power relations. In September 2020, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, Putin proposed convening a G5-style summit of the five permanent members (P5) of the UN Security Council to reaffirm ‘the key principles of behaviour in international affairs’.<sup>9</sup> Putin has spoken warmly about the Yalta Agreement, which was struck after World War II and divided the continent between capitalism and communism,<sup>10</sup> and called for a ‘New Yalta’ in 2014 as a way to resolve the Ukraine Crisis.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Maria Lipman, ‘Putin’s “Besieged Fortress” and Its Ideological Aims’, *The State of Russia: What Comes Next?*, Maria Lipman and Nikolay Petrov (eds.) (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 111.

<sup>8</sup> Keir Giles, *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Putin, ‘Virtual address at the 75th session of the UN General Assembly’, President of Russia, 22/09/2020, <https://bit.ly/3cB5xjZ> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>10</sup> Vladimir Putin, ‘Address at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly’, President of Russia, 28/09/2015, <https://bit.ly/3fzkr1N> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>11</sup> Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr Putin: Operative in The Kremlin* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), p. 393.

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Another key assumption is that the post-Cold War international order has unfairly harmed Russia's development, undermined its national security, and reduced its international standing.<sup>12</sup> Seen from Moscow, the existing 'liberal world order' is a self-serving Western construct.<sup>13</sup> This view was articulated most clearly in Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007,<sup>14</sup> and has only been reinforced by events since then.<sup>15</sup>

A result of this is that Russia has adopted an aggressive foreign policy and has engaged in various activities that have variously been called 'hybrid warfare', 'asymmetrical warfare', 'new generation warfare', and, misleadingly, the 'Gerasimov Doctrine'.<sup>16</sup> In Georgia, it invaded Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and continues to occupy them to this day. In Ukraine, it annexed Crimea and invaded the Donbas. In Syria, it intervened decisively on behalf of Basar al-Assad's regime. In the US, France, and elsewhere, it interfered in democratic processes. That Russia seeks to undermine the post-Cold War international order has implications for its relations with other countries. Most obviously, Russia perceives any country that seeks to uphold – or, worse still, bolster – the existing international order as an adversary. Over the last decade or two, Russia's international behaviour has followed a consistent internal logic: for Russia to restore its rightful place in the world and for Russia to be able to defend its national interests while it does so, it is necessary to constrain Euro-Atlantic institutions in general and US power in particular.

Proceeding from this 'zero-sum' approach to international affairs, Russia only feels secure when other countries feel threatened. This view is evident in a number of statements by the Russian leadership, not least the complaint of Sergey Lavrov, Russian Foreign Minister, that the West has sought to strengthen its own security 'at the

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<sup>12</sup> Igor Ivanov, 'Russia's post-election foreign policy: new challenges, new horizons', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 28/03/2018, <https://bit.ly/3wawA6J> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>13</sup> Fyodor Lukyanov, 'Trump's defense strategy is perfect for Russia', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 24/01/2018, <https://bit.ly/2QZcvjL> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>14</sup> Vladimir Putin, 'Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy', President of Russia, 10/02/2007, <https://bit.ly/3m6hHOa> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>15</sup> Michael McFaul, 'Russia as It Is: A Grand Strategy for Confronting Putin', *Foreign Affairs*, 97:4 (2018), pp. 82–91.

<sup>16</sup> Oscar Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines Between War and Peace* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019).



expense of the security of others.’<sup>17</sup> It is a view that shapes Russia’s interactions with other countries, in particular those that it believes harbour hostile intent towards it – which includes those in the Euro-Atlantic community.

Russia’s current leadership perceives that their country is engaged in conflict with the West regardless of whether or not the West recognises this. The US cannot change Russia’s deep-rooted assumption about its aggressive intentions. Nor can the institutions that Russia perceives to be under American influence, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union (EU), and the countries that Russia perceives to be the US’ allies, including the UK.

In this conflict, as the Swedish foreign policy expert Oscar Jonsson has shown, information warfare is of central importance.<sup>18</sup> From the Kremlin’s perspective, such warfare is not just about getting its own message across (including, but not only, through the Kremlin-controlled RT and Sputnik), but also about confusing, distracting, dividing and demoralising the adversary (including through fake or real news media, Internet ‘troll’ campaigns, hacking-and-leaking, official statements, social media networks, and so on).

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<sup>17</sup> ‘Statement by Mr. Sergey Lavrov, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, at the Twentieth Meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council’, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 05/12/2013, <https://bit.ly/3fx5wZo> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>18</sup> Oscar Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines Between War and Peace* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019).

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### 3.0 How Russia positions the UK

Writing in 2017, Chatham House's Duncan Allan described 'the perception of Russia's leaders that the UK is not their country's equal. For the Kremlin, Russia was, is and always will be a great power. Supposedly on a par with the US and China, it is at the heart of a 'multipolar' or 'polycentric' world. Seen from Moscow, the UK is not part of this oligarchy.'<sup>19</sup> He goes on to explain why this is:

[The UK]...is important: a permanent member of the UN Security Council; a nuclear weapons state; a leading member of NATO; historically a close partner of the US; and the sixth-largest economy in the world (bigger than Russia's). Crucially, however, from Russia's perspective, the UK does not have the capabilities needed to conduct a genuinely independent foreign policy. Lacking the geopolitical autonomy that, in this worldview, is the hallmark of a great power, it is in the second tier of the global system.<sup>20</sup>

From the Russian perspective then, the UK is seen as a 'second tier' power. But it is a perspective that abounds with contradictions. On the one hand, the Kremlin appears to delight in dismissing the UK as 'a small island no-one pays attention to'. On the other hand, it seeks to include the UK in a so-called G5 to reaffirm 'the key principles of behaviour in international affairs'. Russia is quite content to emphasise the UK's irrelevance, including to the Euro-Atlantic's security architecture, but at the same time boasts about the power of Russian aircraft and naval vessels in the proximity of UK air- and sea-space.<sup>21</sup> By its actions and words, Russia demonstrates both an inferiority

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<sup>19</sup> Duncan Allan, 'Brexit Makes It Even More Difficult for the UK to Deal With Russia', Chatham House, 13/12/2017, <https://bit.ly/3czZVQ5> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example: Matthew Bodner, 'Russia's Syrian Naval Deployment: The Unofficial Post-Action Report', *The Moscow Times*, 10/02/2017, <https://bit.ly/2QKxnLd> (found: 01/04/2021).

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complex and a superiority complex. In a way, however, none of this is specific to the UK.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, there are specificities to Russia's view of the UK. Through a prism of the Kremlin's threat assessment, unrelated events over the past two decades can be combined to a single trajectory, revealing that the UK is unendingly hostile toward Russia. These events include: a UK court awarding asylum to the oligarch Boris Berezkovsky, in 2003; the UK accusing the Russian state of murdering Alexander Litvinenko, in 2006;<sup>23</sup> the UK arguing strongly for the imposition of EU sanctions on Russia, in 2014; and, the UK orchestrating an international response to the nerve-agent attack on Sergey and Yulia Skripal, in 2018.<sup>24</sup> Of course, the US-led intervention in Iraq in 2003, in which the UK actively participated, had a profoundly negative effect on Russian thinking, so too did the so-called 'colour revolutions' in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan between 2003 and 2005, which the Kremlin blamed on the US and, by extension, the broader West, including the UK.

From the Russian perspective, however, the issue that has most impacted relations between Moscow and London is the UK's commitment to, and leading role within, the post-Cold War international system. More than any other, this issue informs how Russia's political, strategic and media communities position the UK in the way that they do.

### *3.1 Positioning in political statements*

Speaking in August 2020, Andrei Kelin, Russia's Ambassador to the UK, suggested that 'Britain exaggerates, very much, its place in Russian thinking'. 'The scope and place of Great Britain in Russian politics', Kelin emphasised, 'is not that big.'<sup>25</sup> Rejecting suggestions that Russia had sought to intervene in the Brexit referendum, was responsible for

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<sup>22</sup> Kimberley Martin, 'President Trump, keep in mind that Russia and the West think about negotiations very, very differently', *Washington Post*, 25/07/2017, <https://wapo.st/3m5DJ3y> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>23</sup> Robert Owen, 'The Litvinenko Inquiry: Report', National Archives, 21/01/2016, <https://bit.ly/2PIrH3W> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>24</sup> Duncan Allan, 'Managed Confrontation: UK Policy Towards Russia After the Salisbury Attack', Chatham House, 10/2018, <https://bit.ly/3sHfjGl> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>25</sup> Larissa Brown, 'Russian ambassador's chilling warning: Vladimir Putin's man in London says "mud-slinging" means Britain's relationship with Moscow is "close to frozen"', *Daily Mail*, 04/08/20, <https://bit.ly/39vyFR4> (found: 01/04/2021).





the poisoning of the Skripals, or had carried out any cyber-attacks against the UK, Kelin said that London had thrown ‘a lot of mud ... in our direction’.<sup>26</sup>

Kelin’s comments encapsulate, to an extent, how Russian politicians habitually position the UK. One position, which is also evident in the quotation at the very start of this paper, holds that the UK is irrelevant to Russian thinking and that the UK overestimates its role in Russian thinking. Yet, as Mark Galeotti, a leading Russia analyst and Honorary Professor at University College London, remarks, ‘There is a deep conviction in Russia, one that goes back over a century, that Perfidious Albion is its most cunning and devious foe.’<sup>27</sup> That there is a persistent desire to ‘prove’ that the UK is irrelevant to Russian thinking suggests that it may not be true.

A second position is that the UK is to blame for negative developments in relations between the two countries, regardless of whether it is actually at fault. This is evident in Kelin’s lament, in February 2021, that ‘We [Russia] are still being portrayed as an enemy here [in the UK], although we are open for most friendly cooperation.’<sup>28</sup> It is also evident in Russia’s response to various events over the last decade, most obviously the Skripal poisoning. Much has already been written about Russia’s propaganda campaign(s). Still, for the purposes of the current argument, it is sufficient to note that one Russian narrative sought to blame the UK for the poisoning. Speaking in March 2018, Vladimir Yermakov, Director of the Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, explained:

Logically, there are only two possible options: it’s either the British authorities are incapable of ensuring protection against, figuratively speaking, a terrorist attack on their territory, or they directly or indirectly, I am not accusing anyone of anything, orchestrated the attack.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Galeotti, ‘Why the Kremlin sees Britain as its greatest foe’, *The Spectator*, 20/08/2020, <https://bit.ly/3mh2k5C> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>28</sup> ‘UK–Russia relations stabilized at low level – ambassador’, *TASS*, 10/02/2021, <https://bit.ly/3uaIgV6> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>29</sup> Henry Foy, ‘Russia says UK to blame for Skripal attack’, *Financial Times*, 21/03/2018, <https://on.ft.com/2Po7odN> (found: 01/04/2021).

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A third position holds that the UK, together with the Euro-Atlantic community as a whole, lies and cannot be trusted. This suspicion is deep-rooted amongst Russia's current leadership and pre-dates both the 'colour revolutions' of 2003 to 2005 and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.<sup>30</sup> Speaking in April 2018, Lavrov suggested:

Our Western partners, particularly, Britain, the US and a few countries blindly following them have dropped all decorum and engaged in blatant lies and blatant disinformation.<sup>31</sup>

Further examples of this position can be found in Russia's responses to any number of events over the last decade. For instance, in July 2020, following the release of the UK Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee's (ISC) report on Russia, Vladimir Dzhabarov, a member of the Russian Federation Council's International Affairs Committee, suggested that the UK 'periodically toss [sic] out some helping of lies about Russia'.<sup>32</sup>

A fourth, and final, position accuses the UK of double-standards. Since the early 2000s, Russia's leadership has adopted a strategy of false equivalence, in which it attempts to justify Russia's actions by drawing a parallel with something the West has done – even if the two things are, from a neutral perspective, not even remotely similar. In January 2021, when asked during a news conference about the UK's sovereignty over the Falkland Islands compared with its opposition to Russia's annexation of Crimea, Lavrov explained:

There is such a notion as double standards...We reminded the UK's representatives about this when they became overexcited

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<sup>30</sup> In his speech at the 2014 Valdai International Discussion Club's annual meeting, Putin voiced sarcasm that interventions in 'Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and Yugoslavia' were 'really all handled within the framework of international law.' See: Vladimir Putin, 'Meeting of the Valdai international discussion club', President of Russia, 24/10/2014, <https://bit.ly/3fx7IjA> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>31</sup> 'Vystupleniye i otvety na voprosy SMI Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S V Lavrova v khode sovmestnoy press-konferentsii po itogam peregovorov s Ministrom inostrannykh del Narodnoy Respubliki Bangladesh AH M Ali, Moskva, 2 aprelya 2018 goda [Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of Bangladesh AHM Ali, Moscow, April 2, 2018]', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 02/04/2018, <https://bit.ly/3weiLOp> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Roth, 'Russia accuses UK of "Russophobia" in angry rejection of report', *The Guardian*, 21/07/2020, <https://bit.ly/3rNKDfb> (found: 01/04/2021).

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about the March 2014 referendum in Crimea. We asked them whether the Islas Malvinas, located 10,000 miles away from the UK, had the right to self-determination, and whether the people of Crimea who have been part of this country all their life were denied this right. The answer was very simple; they replied that these were two different matters. Let this rest with their conscience.<sup>33</sup>

This perception of double-standards is not unique to the UK nor to the issue of Crimea. Instead, it is a rhetorical device used by Russia's leadership on issues as diverse as NATO enlargement, Catalan and Scottish independence, the War on Terror, and Pokémon Go.

### *3.2 Positioning in policy documents*

Russia has an unusually large number of official documents on various aspects of its foreign policy, including a Foreign Policy Concept, a Military Doctrine, a National Security Strategy (NSS), an Information Security Doctrine, and a Concept of Participation in International Development Assistance. These documents provide a picture of official Russian perceptions of the international system, Russia's place within that system, and the main challenges and opportunities facing the country. They also evidence how Russia positions other countries and its relations with them.

Despite its centrality to many of the developments in the international system that have affected Russia over the last decade, the UK is not specifically mentioned in the latest iteration of either the Foreign Policy Concept, approved in 2016;<sup>34</sup> the NSS, published in December 2015;<sup>35</sup> or the Military Doctrine, published in December

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<sup>33</sup> 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a news conference on the results of Russian diplomacy in 2020, Moscow, January 18, 2021', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 18/01/2021, <https://bit.ly/31zES9U> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>34</sup> 'Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016)', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 01/12/2016, <https://bit.ly/3sEeZBO> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>35</sup> 'Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of December 31, 2015 No. 683: On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation', President of Russia, 31/12/2015, <https://bit.ly/2PhkuYW> (found: 01/04/2021).

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2014.<sup>36</sup> This is not to suggest that the UK is absent from Russian thinking. Instead, throughout these documents, the UK is seen through the prism of its close relationship with the US, along with its leading role within NATO and the Euro-Atlantic system as a whole. Criticism of these entities, thus, can be read as an implicit criticism of the UK. The NSS is a case in point. According to the NSS, the conduct of Russia's 'foreign and domestic policies are being challenged by opposition from the US and its allies, who are seeking to maintain their dominance of international affairs'.<sup>37</sup> This reflects Moscow's unhappiness with what it views as the existing Western-centric order, as well as its opposition to US dominance of the international system. Speaking in October 2014, Putin criticised the US for throwing the international system into 'sharp and deep imbalance in pursuit of its own national interests':

If the existing system of international relations, international law and the checks and balances in place got in the way of these aims, this system was declared worthless, outdated and in need of immediate demolition.<sup>38</sup>

In this way, Russia positions the UK as an adversary, an upholder of a post-Cold War international system with which Russia is deeply unhappy.

The NSS claims that events in the mid-2010s, including the migrant crisis of 2015, have demonstrated 'the non-viability of the regional security system in the Euro-Atlantic region based on NATO and the European Union.' Elsewhere, the NSS is forthright in its criticism of the West as a whole, which it accuses of creating 'centres of tension' in Eurasia that threaten to undermine Russia's national interests. Here, the UK is positioned as an aggressor, and one that acts from a fundamentally weak situation, given that the order it seeks to uphold is no-longer viable.

At the same time, the NSS calls for greater cooperation with the EU and other European states, or, put differently, the 'harmonisation of

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<sup>36</sup> 'The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 29/06/2015, <https://bit.ly/3wggwRoF> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>37</sup> 'Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of December 31, 2015 No. 683: On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation', President of Russia, 31/12/2015, <https://bit.ly/2PhkuYW> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>38</sup> Vladimir Putin, 'Meeting of the Valdai international discussion club', President of Russia, 24/10/2014, <https://bit.ly/3fx7IjA> (found: 01/04/2021).



integration processes in Europe and the post-Soviet space'. It also calls for establishing an 'open system of collective security with a clear legal basis' in the Euro-Atlantic region. Here, the UK is positioned as a possible partner or ally, but only if it is willing to deconstruct the existing order and construct, in its place, an order reflecting Russia's view of the international system. For Russia's current leadership, 'cooperation' that goes beyond self-interest is anathema.

The UK was, to be sure, mentioned in earlier iterations of Russian strategic documents. The 2013 iteration of the Foreign Policy Concept uses the language of cooperation, stressing the 'mutually beneficial' nature of improved relations between Russia and the UK, particularly in 'advancing Russia's national interests in European and world affairs'.<sup>39</sup> The 2008 iteration of the Concept used similar language,<sup>40</sup> as did the 2000 iteration.<sup>41</sup> The UK was even mentioned in the first post-Soviet foreign policy concept, adopted in 1993.<sup>42</sup> In these earlier iterations, the UK was explicitly positioned as a potential ally. By the 2016 iteration, however, the UK's specific mention had been removed, and the countries listed regarding 'mutually beneficial bilateral ties' were Germany, France, Italy, and Spain. The list ended by mentioning 'other European countries', which the UK is of course one.<sup>43</sup>

### *3.3 Positioning in the media*

In an exercise undertaken in 2018, the Ukraine Crisis Media Centre (UCMC) and the Estonian Centre of Eastern Partnership analysed the content of news shows and political talk-shows aired on three major Russian TV stations – Channel 1, Rossiya 1, and NTV – over a three-year period, from mid-2014 to the end of 2017.<sup>44</sup> This analysis

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<sup>39</sup> 'Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 18/02/2013, <https://bit.ly/3wgxrTn> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>40</sup> 'The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation', President of Russia, 12/01/2008, <https://bit.ly/3rNMFvP> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>41</sup> 'The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. Putin June 28, 2000', Federation of American Scientists, 28/06/2000, <https://bit.ly/3uc94UU> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>42</sup> 'Printsipel vnesheyn politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii [Principles of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation]', Russia Matters, 23/04/1993, <https://bit.ly/3wj6bU4> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>43</sup> 'Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016)', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 01/12/2016, <https://bit.ly/3sEeZBO> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>44</sup> 'Image of European Countries on Russian TV', Ukraine Crisis Media Centre, 28/04/2014, <https://bit.ly/3ugpf3L> (found: 01/04/2021).



focused in particular on how the TV stations portrayed European countries. The UK, the analysis found, is positioned as ‘Europe’s most Russophobic country’.<sup>45</sup>

This is nothing new. Russian media has sought to position the UK as ‘Russophobic’ since at least the Litvinenko poisoning, and this position has been rolled out in response to major events since then. In the immediate aftermath of the Skripal poisoning in March 2018, a commentator with the state news agency Sputnik suggested that ‘The relentless Russophobia serves to condition the British public to be receptive towards more anti-Russian hostility.’<sup>46</sup> Dmitry Kiselov, dubbed ‘Russia’s chief propagandist’ by *The Economist* and perhaps the country’s most famous television presenter, even got in on the act.<sup>47</sup> Host of Rossiya 1’s flagship current affairs show *Vesti Nedeli* (‘News of the Week’), Kiselov has a reputation for extravagant tirades demonising the West. Speaking in the aftermath of the Skripal poisoning, he said:

They immediately tried to pin it on Russia...But if you think about it closely, the only people who stand to gain from the poisoning of the former GRU colonel are the British. Just to stimulate their Russophobia.<sup>48</sup>

Rossiya 1 is one of several state-owned media outlets in Russia. Upon coming to power in 2000, Putin set about regaining the Kremlin’s historic control over Russia’s major media outlets. He had achieved this by the mid-2000s, and in the years since he has exploited the strategic heights of the Russian information sphere. Over the last decade or so, this has involved transmitting an anti-Western message. Today, nearly all major Russian television, radio, and newspaper outlets are under direct or indirect Kremlin control. The most important sector is television, where almost three-quarters of Russians still receive some portion of their news.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> ‘Image of Great Britain on Russian TV’, Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group/UCMC, 10/04/2018, <https://bit.ly/3cCoJH5> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>46</sup> Finian Cunningham, ‘Who Gains From Poisoning a Russian Exile in Britain?’, *Sputnik News*, 08/03/2018, <https://bit.ly/39wxG2G> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>47</sup> ‘Russia’s Chief Propagandist’, *The Economist*, 10/12/2013, <https://econ.st/2PMoQns> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>48</sup> Andrew Roth, ‘Russian state TV accuses UK of plotting spy attack’, *The Guardian*, 12/03/2018, <https://bit.ly/2QWBu7a> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>49</sup> ‘TV Still Russia’s Biggest News Source, but Trust Plummet – Poll’, *The Moscow Times*, 13/09/2018, <https://bit.ly/3sHwy3Q> (found: 01/04/2021).

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Russia's media also positions the UK as a country that is particularly dangerous for Russians. In the aftermath of the Skripal poisoning, Kiselov referred to the UK as a 'deadly place' for his fellow citizens.<sup>50</sup> Again, this built on a positioning already in wide circulation. In March 2018, Kirill Kleymentov, a presenter on Channel One's flagship *Vremya* news programme, said:

Whatever the reasons, whether you're a professional traitor to the motherland or you just hate your country in your spare time, I repeat, no matter, don't move to England.<sup>51</sup>

The UCMC and the Estonian Centre of Eastern Partnership's analysis also found that the UK was portrayed by Russian media as an 'insidious, unreliable partner'. This is a positioning also identified in a study entitled 'Weaponising news: RT, Sputnik and targeted disinformation', published by academics at King's College, London (KCL) in 2018.<sup>52</sup> The study analysed English- and Russian-language content published by RT and Sputnik in 2017 and 2018, and argued that one of the most common narratives was 'Many countries didn't join diplomatic expulsions [that followed the Skripal poisoning] as they don't believe UK [sic]'.<sup>53</sup>

The KCL study also found that 'political dysfunction is a key overarching narrative' in RT and Sputnik's coverage of politics and society in the West as a whole, and in the UK in particular.<sup>54</sup> Of the almost 1,000 articles published by the two entities on UK domestic issues, 90% contained at least one narrative referring to this, the most common of which were 'government failures' and 'political party failures'. This echoes the findings of the UCMC and the Estonian Centre of Eastern Partnership's study, in which the UK's politicians were positioned as 'weak and false'.<sup>55</sup> For example, reporting on the speech of Theresa May, then Prime Minister, at the Lord Mayor's Banquet, in

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<sup>50</sup> Steve Rosenberg, Tweet, 11/03/2018, <https://bit.ly/39ty42g> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>51</sup> Andrew Roth, 'Russian state TV accuses UK of plotting spy attack', *The Guardian*, 12/03/2018, <https://bit.ly/2QWBu7a> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>52</sup> Gordon Ramsay and Sam Robertshaw, 'Weaponising news: RT, Sputnik and targeted disinformation', The Policy Institute: King's College, London, 01/2019, <https://bit.ly/3fwTrDI> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> 'Image of Great Britain on Russian TV', Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group/UCMC, 10/04/2018, <https://bit.ly/3cCoJH5> (found: 01/04/2021).



November 2017, Rossiya 1 referred to May's 'pale, tired flesh' and hinted that she had a drinking problem.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

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## 4.0 The UK's response to being positioned by Russia

David Cameron responded to the description of the UK as 'a small island no-one pays attention to' with a robust and patriotic defence of the country. Citing sport, literature, military, and its part in the abolition of slavery among Britain's many triumphs, Cameron, speaking in 2013, said:

Britain may be a small island, but I would challenge anyone to find a country with a prouder history, a bigger heart or greater resilience.

Britain is an island that has helped to clear the European continent of fascism – and was resolute in doing that throughout World War Two.

Britain is an island that helped to abolish slavery, that has invented most of the things worth inventing, including every sport currently played around the world, that still today is responsible for art, literature and music that delights the entire world.

We are very proud of everything we do as a small island – a small island that has the sixth-largest economy, the fourth best-funded military, some of the most effective diplomats, the proudest history, one of the best records for art and literature and contribution to philosophy and world civilisation.<sup>57</sup>

Cameron's comments were very much 'of the time' and reflected the West's general approach to Russia. Two years earlier, in 2011, Cameron had visited Moscow and, on his return, announced that the UK would 'try to build a better relationship with Russia across a whole

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<sup>57</sup> Cited in: Patrick Wintour, 'David Cameron: UK may be a small island but it has the biggest heart', *The Guardian*, 6/09/2013, <https://bit.ly/2QXD7l1> (found: 01/04/2021).

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range of issues' despite Litvinenko's murder.<sup>58</sup> The greater danger, the conventional thinking held, was of provoking Russia rather than appeasing it. The UK's approach to Russia began to change in 2014, together with that of the Euro-Atlantic community as a whole. Since then, relations between the UK and Russia have become steadily more antagonistic, and these days the UK finds itself in disagreement with Russia over most major international issues.

In the years since Cameron's comments, there have been occasions when UK ministers have used rather more intemperate language toward their Russian counterparts. In March 2018, Gavin Williamson, then Secretary of State for Defence, said that 'Russia should go away and shut up', in response to a question about how Russia should respond to the UK expelling 23 of its spies. Such a response, as Chatham House's Duncan Allan notes, betrays 'a lack of gravitas that demeans both the individual making the remarks and the UK.'<sup>59</sup>

Whatever the truth, particular UK actions over recent years appear to have been designed, at least in part, to trigger a response, or retaliation, from Russia. This is part and parcel of the more assertive approach the UK has taken with regards Russia, and is evident in the public announcement of Jeremy Hunt, then Foreign Secretary, on 3rd October 2018 that the UK and its allies had identified a campaign by Russia's GRU (main intelligence service) of cyber-attacks targeting public institutions, businesses, media, and sport – including attribution of the attempted hacking of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in The Hague.<sup>60</sup>

This more assertive approach is explained in the UK's cross-government Russia Strategy, which was implemented in 2017. The strategy combines, in the Government's own words,

the UK's diplomatic, intelligence, and military capabilities, its hard and soft power, to maximum effect. We act in concert with our allies, seeking to lead the West's collective response to hybrid threats to our societies and values. This includes concerted

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<sup>58</sup> 'Oral Answers to Questions – Volume 352: debated on Wednesday 14 September 2011', Hansard, 14/09/2011, <https://bit.ly/3m8azRj> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>59</sup> Duncan Allan, 'Managed Confrontation: UK Policy Towards Russia After the Salisbury Attack', Chatham House, 10/2018, <https://bit.ly/3sHfJGl> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>60</sup> 'Reckless campaign of cyber attacks by Russian military intelligence service exposed', National Cyber Security Centre, 03/10/2018, <https://bit.ly/39wG2aL> (found: 01/04/2021).

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campaigns to counter disinformation, as well as to bear down on illicit finance, combat influence operations, and fend off cyber-attacks.<sup>61</sup>

An excellent example of the UK's desire 'to lead the West' is Theresa May's speech at the 2017 Lord Mayor's Banquet. In her speech, May highlighted 'the scale and nature' of Russia's attempts to undermine Euro-Atlantic institutions, describing Moscow's behaviour as 'threatening the international order on which we all depend'. She said:

I have a very simple message for Russia. We know what you are doing. And you will not succeed. Because you underestimate the resilience of our democracies, the enduring attraction of free and open societies, and the commitment of Western nations to the alliances that bind us.<sup>62</sup>

Within Whitehall, it appears that a metric used for measuring the Russia' Strategy's success is whether the UK's actions draw a response from Russia – whether in words or deeds. As Mark Galeotti observes, 'the more they [Russia] complain, the more consequent it generally means we [the UK] are.'<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> 'Government Response to the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament Report "Russia"', Cabinet Office, 21/07/2020, <https://bit.ly/3dpKide> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>62</sup> Theresa May, Speech: 'PM speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet 2017', 10 Downing Street, 13/11/2017, <https://bit.ly/39uZRPR> (found: 01/04/2021).

<sup>63</sup> Mark Galeotti, 'What Boris should do about a problem like Putin's Russia', *The Spectator*, 04/01/2021, <https://bit.ly/3rGtfIS> (found: 01/04/2021).

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## 5.0 Conclusion

This paper opened with a quote from a Russian spokesperson in 2013 that sought to position the UK as a geographically marginal and politically irrelevant actor in international affairs. Although the spokesperson's identity is unknown, the quote reads like a summary of the views of the country's current leadership. It was not the first effort by Russia to position the UK in ways intended to disadvantage London and benefit Moscow, and nor was it the most recent. The Kremlin acts like this for a number of reasons, all of which follow on from its belief that the insecurity of other countries makes Russia more secure. This belief itself follows from the Kremlin's worldview, in which the international system is seen as illegitimate and unfair, and, as a result, which Russia actively seeks to challenge.

Since 2013, the UK has adopted a more assertive approach to its relations with Russia, both in its words and its deeds. This is evident in its actions since 2014, and in particular since 2018. This approach, codified in the Government's Russia Strategy, proceeds from a recognition that the bilateral relationship is fundamentally adversarial and that the basis for 'cooperation', let alone 'partnership', does not exist – nor is it likely to do so for the foreseeable future. Maintaining this stance is important, but it will be difficult. From the Russian perspective, if a country is internally divided, then it is externally weakened. The same holds true for international organisations, including those in the Euro-Atlantic region where the UK is a member or ally and which Russia seeks to undermine.

### 5.1 Recommendations

To implement an effective British response to Russia's positioning operations, UK policymakers would do well to:

1. **Start at home.** Russia's efforts to destabilise and subvert the UK rely on highlighting shortcomings, inconsistencies, and divisions in the UK itself. Resisting these efforts requires the UK to strengthen its societal cohesion. It follows that London's response to the spectrum of threats that Moscow poses should begin by taking the focus off Russia and putting it on the UK.



Britain's extraordinary political upheaval since the Brexit referendum in 2016 has thrown into sharp focus questions around the country's economic inequalities (giving rise to the current Government's 'levelling up' ambition), its role in international affairs (evident in the 'Global Britain' vision), and all manner of other issues. The Government could use this period of flux to renew its democratic values and principles. It might follow through on its promise, made in the Queen's Speech of December 2019, to adopt legislation akin to the US' Foreign Agents Registration Act,<sup>64</sup> as well as implement those recommendations contained in the ISC's Russia report regarding more stringent regulations in the financial system and reforming regulations to ensure that hostile actors cannot exploit public discourse in open societies.

- 2. Recognise the continued importance of alliances.** Alliances matter in responding to both military and non-military challenges. Following the Skripal poisoning, the UK successfully brokered a campaign in which 130 suspected Russian spies were expelled from 28 countries, plus NATO. With the country's leadership possibly believing its own propaganda about the UK's 'isolation', Russia was surprised by this. If the UK wants to call on similar support in the future, it has to make preparations now and – this is key – be willing to help others. The UK's efforts should not focus solely on NATO. Instead, it should work with the Northern Group (an informal cooperation format bringing together NATO members bordering the Baltic or North Sea), the EU, the 'Five Eyes' (the UK, the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), and others willing to collectively respond to Russian misdemeanours.
- 3. Use language frankly, but professionally.** Language matters in responding to the spectrum of threats that Russia poses both to the UK and its allies. The challenge is long-term and high-stakes, and to meet this, the UK needs leaders and statespersons who will defend and promote the national interest. The use of childish language ('Russia should go away and shut up') should be

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<sup>64</sup> See: 'The Queen's Speech December 2019 – Background Briefing Notes', 10 Downing Street, 10 Downing Street, 19/12/2019, <https://bit.ly/3cEXSKM> (found: 01/04/2021).

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avoided. In contrast, frank but professional language should be adopted ('I have a very simple message for Russia. We know what you are doing. And you will not succeed.')

4. **Call a spade, a spade.** Language also matters in explaining to the public the threat that Russia's actions pose. The UK should continue with its assertive approach, which involves publicly calling-out Russia, but it is necessary to be clear and precise about the threat itself – including the nature of Russia's current regime. Until 2014, many UK politicians continued to refer to Russia as a 'democracy' even though it had ceased to be one by most measures in the previous decade. Even when Russia could more legitimately call itself a 'democracy', the term did not imply quite the same as it does in a Euro-Atlantic context. Russia has borrowed Western terms to describe its own system, and simply repeating these provide fertile ground for misunderstanding, miscommunication, and miscalculation. It follows that the UK should use more appropriate language to describe the nature of Russia's political system – 'kleptocracy' would be a start – and, in doing so, begin to position the regime in a way that complements the UK's assertive approach.
5. **Use clear and direct messaging.** Together with its allies, the UK has undertaken a number of actions since 2014 that were intended to signal to the Russian leadership that its behaviour was unacceptable. These include, most obviously, the imposition of economic sanctions. Together with other Euro-Atlantic capitals, London has tended to think that such actions are a way to avoid escalation. However, they have been understood to the contrary in Moscow, which sees them as escalation by non-military means. This is because Russia's leadership believes itself to be at war with the West, albeit in a non-military sense for the time being. The same is undoubtedly true in reverse, wherein the Kremlin lacks understanding about the drivers of Western decision-making. It follows that messaging to Russia must be clear and direct.
6. **Engage with the Russian people.** Efforts to contain the current leadership's aggressive approach to foreign policy must be



balanced with a sustained and meaningful attempt to engage with Russians. As during Soviet times, when Winnie the Pooh, Miss Marple and Sherlock Holmes were embraced as English icons, there is a strong vein of Anglophilia in Russian culture. According to Peter Pomerantsev, the British-Ukrainian author, one reason for this is that 'England is adored for allowing Russia to reconnect to its 19th-century identity'.<sup>65</sup> As such, the UK should consider arranging celebrations of its historical ties with Russia, organising dialogues between UK and Russian nongovernmental organisations, and promoting student and cultural exchanges. These may have limited impact today, as the Kremlin actively seeks to limit such opportunities, but will pay dividends in the future.

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<sup>65</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, 'In Londongrad', *London Review of Books*, 09/12/2011, <https://bit.ly/3ubMig1> (found: 01/04/2021).

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