An analysis of David Cameron's visit to Moscow

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David Cameron's mid-September visit to Moscow had three objectives: to revive the practice of top level contacts; to boost trade and investment; and to put down some markers about values. It was never likely that the Prime Minister could do more. Apart from anything else, Russia has begun its electoral cycle, with voting for the new Duma in December and the next President in March.

The Duma elections will be orchestrated and the result is confidently predicted to be what the authorities require for keeping Russia's parliament under control. And whilst there is some present doubt as to who will be in the Kremlin come Spring 2012, this is only because Putin has yet to make a clear decision as to whether it will be him or Medvedev. The electoral cycle as a whole has been eased by further increases in social spending, and by precautionary increases in budget funds for defence and the security forces.

But if the results of the elections are already pretty much known why could Cameron not have been more ambitious? While the UK-Russia intergovernmental relationship has been difficult other leaders have had resets, or certainly tried for them.. Starting again looked to be, on the surface at least, a plausible option. Part of the answer for rejecting that option is that while we may now have a pretty good idea of what the structure of Russia's government will be like next year, with the present ruling group remaining in charge, we cannot be clear as to what they will do in facing up to Russia's mounting problems. There is in particular no bankable evidence that it will include better courts, less corruption, and more accountability.

The particular instances usually cited for the mutual irritation of recent years include the asylum given by Britain to a number of Russian exiles and the refusal by Moscow to extradite Lugovoi – the man believed by Britain to be responsible for the murder of Litvinenko in London – to face trial in the UK. It may be that for Moscow, or at least for official Moscow, it is then considered hypocrisy for London to argue that Britain cannot extradite those individuals that Russia want, simply because the British courts choose not to be satisfied by the evidence that Russian authorities have produced nor to be persuaded to believe in the possibility of fair trials of these cases in Russia. After all Russian courts accept the guidance of powerful Russians, so why shouldn't the British obey the British Prime Minister? And Moscow has claimed that the Russian constitution prevents their extraditing Lugovoi in any case. The impasse over these issues has been built on a back history of differences over intelligence activities, the harrassment of the previous British Ambassador, and drastic Russian action against the British Council.

These particular problems are symptomatic of wider differences of principle rooted in the nature of British and Russian society. A highly disputable decision by a court in Tyumen – one that has made similar decisions before in relation to BP – led to a raid on BP's Moscow office just before the Prime Minister's visit. Violence against Russian lawyers, Russian journalists or Russian business figures is not something that the UK can simply ignore – in the notorious case of Sergei Magnitsky, the lawyer for Hermitage Capital, his treatment directly affected British interests. The Prime Minister could hardly forgive and forget these sorts of affairs, not least after his comments in welcoming the Arab Spring.

However, it is a mistake to focus on these particular questions – seemingly close to inherent in this relationship – as the primary reasons for irritation between the British and Russian governments, an irritation that is especially embedded in Moscow. Three factors may lie behind this:

– The UK, for Russia, is a secondary country that refuses to accept its proper role, whilst the continental European powers have a more accommodating set of habits from the Russian government's point of view. Germany is of critical importance for Moscow, and always has been. The cultural and economic links between the two nations are of long standing and deep meaning. The legacy of Brandt's Ostpolitik endures. So for that matter does France's habit of playing an individual hand. Berlusconi and Putin have a particular and quite personal relationship.

– The Russian regime is highly personalised. The British have not consistently courted Russia's rulers. There was Thatcher-Gorbachev, some attention was paid to Yeltsin by Major at the start of his rule, and Blair formed a close link with Putin as the latter's presidency got under way. But the effects in all three cases were limited, and ephemeral. It is arguable that had British Prime Ministers been more publicly supportive of their Russian colleagues, and their policies, the appearance might have been warmer.

– But that would have been to go against the developing British view of Russia's trajectory and to conflict with the imperatve, as Britain has seen it, of working the various groupings of its closest allies. If Britain is a secondary country for Russia, then so is Russia for Britain, and one all too capable, so far as London is concerned, of making a nuisance of itself. Russia seems, to the British, to be looking for a veto and not for give and take in Europe. Russia has also seemed determined to disappoint those who have hoped that it would evolve towards the democratic, market and liberal norms pursued by some other formerly Moscow dominated European countries.

My point is not to argue these ideas in detail, but to suggest them as constraints and, in particular to indicate the connection between Russian domestic developments, their foreign policy consequences and the relationship between Britain and Russia. There are of course other factors at work. One that is usually suggested, the relationship between London and Washington, seems to me to be unconvincing. At any rate, Washington has from time to time had warmer relations with Moscow than London, and US Presidents have been more persistent than British Prime Ministers in pursuing personal relationships with their counterparts in or near the Kremlin. But of course Russia fancies itself as a natural analogue to the United States, which also makes for a different dynamic than the one that applies to European states or institutions.

The Prime Minister was right to speak up for British business and to point out that Russian failures of governance harmed both British and Russian fortunes. In speaking of human values, he spoke to the feelings of many Russians. The intergovernmental relationship between Britain and Russia is only one relationship between the two countries and their peoples. One could argue that it is not the most important one. If one looks beyond the political relationship between the British and Russian governments, a warmer tone is evident. Our visa arrangements seem designed to disrupt contact, but the number of Russians living in the UK (and not only in London, by any means), visiting regularly, attending schools or colleges in Britain, pursuing research projects together with British experts and so on is very large. The British legal system plays a significant part in adjudicating matters that for one reason or another are not seen as suitable for leaving to Russian courts. London is a major financial centre for Russians. British investment in Russia is significant, along with the British presence in, for instance, financial and legal services. British charities and NGOs are committed and active. It would be wrong to underestimate such matters just because our governments are irritated with each other from time to time. Governments are only one reality and Russia is more than the president, the prime minister, and the groups around them.

The Carnegie Institute is shortly to publish a record of my discussions with Russian analyst Lilia Shevtsova about the interaction between Russia and the West since 1991 (Change or Decay – The Russian Dilemma and the West's Response) in which we look at the wider background and do our best to analyse the prospects. We argue for Western involvement, but for it to be directed as much as possible, despite the dangers and uncertainties, at liberal development rather than at promoting centralized control. David Cameron's short visit to Moscow fitted that pattern well enough. The ground for dramatic change was simply not there. Russia is at a moment of choice. Its future domestic trajectory will determine how the British-Russian relationship develops in the longer term, along with Russia's positioning with the rest of the world. There is a widespread if not always focused recognition at all levels that change, including institutional change, is needed. Choosing either greater central control or more liberal development has its risks. It is in the interests of Britain to work with Russia towards the second.

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