

## Post-Brexit British foreign policy towards Russia: a test for ‘Global Britain’

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### **Abstract**

*This paper will assess the emerging trends in the bilateral relationship between the United Kingdom and Russia after 31<sup>st</sup> January 2020, the first post-Brexit year. The study will focus on three key dossiers, namely: the cyber threat, sanctions with a case study on the poisoning of Alexei Navalny and trade with a focus on the presence of Russian capital in Britain. During the analysis emerging convergence – or divergences- with established EU positions will be a key element assessing the bilateral relationship, as well as London’s references to a ‘global Britain’. The analysis seems to suggest that Britain, losing its place as a ‘pragmatic European’, sees in countering Russia a key step in the path to its global aspirations. But if in some areas the UK made significant progresses and seem capable of standing alone, in others its future relationship with European allies will remain central.*

### **Introduction**

“The bilateral relationship between the United Kingdom and Russia is at its most strained point since the end of the Cold war”<sup>1</sup>.

So began the 2017 House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) report titled “The United Kingdom’s relations with Russia”. At the time of writing, it seems that the situation has not improved, tensions may be on the rise again and this time, Britain might face them on its own. With Russia remaining “the most acute threat to [Britain’s] security”<sup>2</sup>. This paper will address the developments of the United Kingdom’s foreign policy towards Russia after 31<sup>st</sup> January 2020, Britain’s exit from the European Union. The paper will be structured as follows: after having briefly covered the traditional positions of the UK towards Russia, in a bilateral relationship often harsher than the one of the other European allies, it will move to the analysis of the post Brexit period. The article will trace key trends emerging in the bilateral relationship, namely: the ‘cyber threat’, the sanctions regime -taking as case study the Navalny affair- and trade, with a focus on the presence of Russian capital in London. During the analysis emerging convergence – or divergences- with established EU positions will be a key element assessing the bilateral relationship, as well as London’s references to a ‘global Britain’. From the analysis seems that, losing its place as a ‘pragmatic European’, Britain sees in countering Russia a key step in the path to its global aspirations.

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<sup>1</sup> Foreign affairs Committee (2017). The United Kingdom’s relations with Russia, report, 2017 Retrieved from [House of Commons- The United Kingdom’s relations with Russia - Foreign Affairs Committee \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/commons/research/2017/07/2017-07-20-foreign-affairs-committee-report-the-uk-relations-with-russia).

<sup>2</sup> UK Government (2021c). the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. Retrieved from [Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/94422/2021-07-27-Integrated_Review_-_Security_Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf).

But if in some areas has made significant progresses, in others its future relationship with European allies will remain central.

### **Traditional UK foreign policy positions towards Russia and ‘global Britain’**

Analysing official government’s positions and documents emerge that the UK has always been committed to protect a rules-based international order, of which it feels representative, founding member and guarantor. The, often recalled, “British values” reflected in this order and most cited in press releases and official positions are namely: democracy, human rights and rule of law. This idea is supported by the governments’ definition of ‘global Britain’ as a “force for good in the world defending openness, democracy and human rights” committed to protect an ‘open international order’, found in the just published Integrated Review<sup>3</sup>. These elements are used as base to frame UK’s foreign policy towards Russia, depicted as a threat to the international order described above and as an actor that sees foreign policy as a zero-sum game, where every damage to western institutions and democracies is automatically a gain<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, Britain’s foreign policy vis a vis Russia has traditionally been described as ‘hawkish’ with respect to the other European allies, and members of the European Union. These harsher positions are reflected in the tension that has characterized bilateral relations, exemplified in various ‘incidents’ such as the ‘Salisbury incident’<sup>5</sup> (2018) and the Litvinenko murder (2007). Both events allegedly involved the presence of Russian agents carrying out attempted murders of British citizens on British soil, the latter succeeding. For these reasons UK officials see their country as a forefront player in upholding the western rule-based order vis a vis Russia.

The following sections will develop the analysis around three dossier: starting from the cyber threat, that given the elements that will be presented, it is clearly perceived as a growing concern by the FCDO. Then moving to sanctions, a key test for Britain’s global aspirations and its relationship with European allies. Where, the response to the poisoning of the opposition leader A. Navalny will be considered as a case study. Lastly trade and the presence of Russian capital in Britain will be analysed assessing the government’s willingness to stand against Russia.

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<sup>3</sup> UK Government (2021c). Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Foreign affairs Committee (2017). Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> UK Government (2018a, October 4). UK exposes Russian cyber attacks, press release. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-exposes-russian-cyber-attacks>.

## Cyber threat

“Whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will become the ruler of the world.”<sup>6</sup>

This quote by Russian president Vladimir Putin is often used to give an idea of how much importance Russia is giving to develop AI applications and implement cyber warfare in its foreign policy strategy. Despite the ‘response’ given in 2017 by former PM May<sup>7</sup> was clear - “we know what you are doing and you will not succeed”- it concealed a substantial disadvantage vis a vis Russia. Since then, Britain has largely invested in cyber security and founded the new ‘National Cyber Force’ (NCF), involving more than 2000 operatives – expected to grow up to 3000 in the next decade<sup>8</sup>- drawn from intelligence agencies, GCHQ and armed forces.<sup>9</sup> In September 2020 according to the Belfer Centre at Harvard University the UK ranked third in the world for international cyber power<sup>10</sup>, before Russia (4<sup>th</sup>)<sup>11</sup>. The creation of the new cyber unit was officialised by PM Johnson in November 2020, within the “biggest defence investment since the end of the cold war”<sup>12</sup> with a £16.5bn military spending boost. After Brexit and the Salisbury incident the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) - part of the GCHQ- was already on ‘heightened alert’ for Russian activities in what is seen as a campaign trying to undermine western institutions, as put by Ciaran Martin who heads the Centre<sup>13</sup>.

Following the formal exit of Britain from the EU, the UK had to face two ‘cyber related’ foreign policy issues originating from Russia. The first was related to Russian interference in ‘Georgian sovereignty’, assessed in a NCSC report<sup>14</sup> in February 2020, followed by a press release<sup>15</sup> by the Foreign Secretary, condemning the cyber-attacks on a sovereign and independent state as “totally unacceptable”. The second occurred in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. In March 2020 an EEAS report<sup>16</sup> warned the UK government of pro-Kremlin media

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<sup>6</sup> Pecotic, A. (2019, March 2019). Whoever Predicts the Future Will Win the AI Arms Race. Foreign Policy. Retrieved February 20, 2021 from [Whoever Predicts the Future Will Win the AI Arms Race – Foreign Policy](#).

<sup>7</sup> The Guardian (2017, November 14). 'We know what you're doing,' Theresa May tells Russia. Retrieved January 27, 2021 from ['We know what you're doing,' Theresa May tells Russia – video | Politics | The Guardian](#).

<sup>8</sup> Warrell, H. (2020, November 19). National Cyber Force will target UK adversaries online, Financial times. Retrieved February 20, 2021 from [National Cyber Force will target UK adversaries online | Financial Times \(ft.com\)](#).

<sup>9</sup> Bond, D. (2018b, September 21). Britain preparing to launch new cyber warfare unit. Financial times. Retrieved February 20, 2021 from [Britain preparing to launch new cyber warfare unit | Financial Times \(ft.com\)](#).

<sup>10</sup> Belfer Center (2020). National Cyber Power Index 2020, report, Harvard Kennedy school, Sep 2020, Retrieved from [https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/NCPI\\_2020.pdf](https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/NCPI_2020.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Despite Russia remaining ahead in offensive cyber capacity. Belfer Center (2020). Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Warrell, H. and Parker, G. (2020, November 19). Boris Johnson promises biggest UK defence investment for 30 years, Financial times. Retrieved February 20, 2021 from [Boris Johnson promises biggest UK defence investment for 30 years | Financial Times \(ft.com\)](#).

<sup>13</sup> Bond, D. (2018a, May 18). Security chiefs urge tougher cyber defences against Russia. Financial Times. Retrieved February 20, 2021 from [Security chiefs urge tougher cyber defences against Russia | Financial Times \(ft.com\)](#).

<sup>14</sup> NCSC (2020a). Foreign Secretary condemns Russia's GRU after NCSC assessment of Georgian cyber attacks, Feb 20 2020, Retrieved from [Foreign Secretary condemns Russia's GRU after NCSC... - NCSC.GOV.UK](#).

<sup>15</sup> UK Government (2020a, February 20). UK condemns Russia's GRU over Georgia cyber-attacks, press release. Retrieved from [UK condemns Russia's GRU over Georgia cyber-attacks - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#).

<sup>16</sup> Fleming, S. and Peel, M. (2020, March 17). EU warns of pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign on coronavirus, Financial times. Retrieved February 20, 2021 from [EU warns of pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign on coronavirus | Financial Times \(ft.com\)](#).

mounting a “significant disinformation campaign” targeting western response to the pandemic, in the framework of attempts to “subvert European societies from within”. Moreover, in July 2020 Russian-backed cyber attacks on British institutions involved in the covid-19 vaccine development were exposed by the NCSC. After the investigations by the Centre<sup>17</sup> - and its counterparts in Canada and the US- the Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab called out in a press release the Russian intelligence services, as perpetrators of actions “targeting those working to combat the coronavirus pandemic”<sup>18</sup>.

2020 saw also the most important event by far in relations to Russian cyber threats, namely the disclosure of the so called “Russian report”, an Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) document<sup>19</sup> regarding the investigation on Russian meddling in the 2016 Brexit referendum. The ISC conclusion point out that “insufficient attention has been paid to Russian infiltration in British politics and public life”<sup>20</sup>, that Russian influence has become a “new normal” and that Russia is a “highly capable cyber actor” and its willingness to deploy such capabilities “is a matter of grave concern, and poses an immediate and urgent threat to [the UK’s] national security”. In terms of foreign policy, the report emphasizes that since the referendum the British Government “has made significant efforts to address this [threat], by being more ‘assertive’ in publicly admonishing Russia when attacks can be attributed to Moscow”, expressing the will to “lead international action” by “leverag[ing] (...) diplomatic relationships to develop a common international approach when it comes to the attribution of malicious cyber activity by Russia”. The same commitment to lead the international response is mirrored in the government’s reply:

“our response needs to be international (...) working with international partners to deter and publicly expose those states, including Russia, responsible for malicious cyber activity (...) the UK has played a leading role internationally in developing a co-ordinated approach to cyber deterrence, sharing our own cyber deterrence toolkit with over twenty countries and holding workshops on how to politically attribute and use all the tools of government to respond to state-directed malicious cyber activity”<sup>21</sup>.

The Government also mentions the need to work at UN level to create international regulations on ‘offensive cyber’, demonstrating not only the willingness to cooperate with international partners, but also to lead in norms promotion. This latter commitment is reflected in the Integrated Review, in the Government’s definition of Britain

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<sup>17</sup> NCSC (2020b). UK and allies expose Russian attacks on coronavirus vaccine development, Jul 16 2020, Retrieved from [Russian attacks on coronavirus vaccine development - NCSC.GOV.UK](https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/infrastructure/russian-attacks-on-coronavirus-vaccine-development).

<sup>18</sup> UK Government (2020b).

<sup>19</sup> ISC, Intelligence and Security Committee (2020). “Russian report”, Retrieved from [HC 632 – Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament – Russia \(independent.gov.uk\)](https://www.independent.gov.uk/news/parliament/2020-07-21-intelligence-and-security-committee-report-russia/).

<sup>20</sup> Sabbath, D. Harding, L. and Roth, A. (2020, July 21). Russia report reveals UK government failed to investigate Kremlin interference. The Guardian. Retrieved February 20, 2021 from [Russia report reveals UK government failed to investigate Kremlin interference | Foreign policy | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/21/russia-report-reveals-uk-government-failed-to-investigate-kremlin-interference).

<sup>21</sup> UK Government (2020c, July 21). Government Response to the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament Report ‘Russia’, report. Retrieved from [Government response to Intelligence and Security Committee Russia Report - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/government-response-to-intelligence-and-security-committee-russia-report).

as a “democratic cyber power”. Arguably, when it comes to countering Russia’s hybrid threat, post-Brexit Britain is willing to maintain its forefront role as norm maker. In this realm Britain’s ‘global aspirations’ may be fulfilled thanks to the investment made in cyber defence staffing and resources, which allows London to lead the way. If investments and reorganization of expertise in the new NCF support this role, coordination with European allies and their willingness to be led requires strengthened cooperation, including intelligence sharing and diplomatic efforts, for example in making joint declarations when attributing attacks to the Kremlin. This could be costly, but as pointed out by Stevens and O’Brian (2019), “there are reasons to be optimistic” as “too much is at stake” to abandon the close working ties already in place with EU partners. “Britain’s international cyber security networks and working relationships will not wither away after Brexit”, and for the moment this does not seem the case. As pointed out in a Research Paper<sup>22</sup> by Chatham House: defending the cyberspace is an objective where Britain’s global aspirations meet its resources, giving to the UK the possibility to embrace a leading role in this challenge.

## Sanctions

Within the EU, the United Kingdom was “widely recognised as (...) the most proactive and committed member” when it came to sanction Russia and it “has had an outsized influence on shaping EU sanctions policy” (Moret & Pothier, 2018), being the most important supplier of intelligence to the EU and also given its important financial sector<sup>23</sup>. Moreover, playing an “important political function in encouraging other member states to support new sanctions” (Moret & Pothier 2018) in the European Council and to renew existing ones, every six months in the case of Russia thanks to the EU’s ‘sunset clause’. For example Britain successfully coordinated the process of sanctions in 2014 (Martill & Sus, 2018), after having gathered information useful to the EU Commission to make the legal case against Moscow in the aftermath of the invasion of Crimea (Weilandt 2019). London played a substantial role in creating a complex and important sanction regime that Russia struggled to mitigate (Dijkstra, 2016). Indeed, sanctions policy coordination is (and was during the transition period) considered one of the main foreign policy issues to be addressed regarding future EU-UK relations<sup>24</sup>. At the same time, given that the CFSP was already intergovernmental, EU-UK foreign policy cooperation was one of the least controversial themes in the negotiations for the withdrawal agreement, and the expectations of cooperation regarding sanctions has been high. Britain has de facto incorporated the ‘EU sanctions acquis’ with the ‘Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019’<sup>25</sup> and has built on the ‘Sanction Act and Money Laundering Act’<sup>26</sup> (SAML) to allow UK-only legislations to implement UN and EU sanctions, as well as to set out its autonomous sanctions (Poli, 2020). Indeed,

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<sup>22</sup> Niblett, R. (2021b). Global Britain, global broker. Chatham House. Retrieved from [Global Britain, Global Broker | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank](#).

<sup>23</sup> Smith B. (2018). The future of sanctions, House of Commons, Research briefing, Retrieved from [The future of sanctions - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](#).

<sup>24</sup> Smith, B. (2020a). Eastern Ukraine – dashed hopes?, House of Commons, Research briefing, Retrieved from [Eastern Ukraine: dashed hopes? - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](#).

<sup>25</sup> With the “The Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019” that came fully into force on the Dec 31 2020.

<sup>26</sup> UK Government (2018b). Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 (SAML), Retrieved from [Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#).

in doing so the provisions against Russia elaborated at EU level have been transposed into UK-only legislation. The official text states that “the Regulations impose financial, trade, transport and immigration sanctions for the purposes of encouraging Russia to cease actions which destabilise Ukraine, or undermine or threaten [its] territorial integrity, sovereignty or independence”<sup>27</sup>.

A step forward was made with the ‘Global Human Rights Sanctions Regulations 2020’ that de facto introduced ‘Magnitsky style’<sup>28</sup> sanctions for the first time in the UK foreign policy toolbox. After years of debates<sup>29</sup> over the need for such an instrument, the first new sanctions created using this UK standalone regime represented a crucial step in the bilateral relationship with Russia. On 6<sup>th</sup> July 2020, the Government announced its first ‘Magnitsky style’ sanctions against 49 individuals and organizations “involved in some of the most notorious human rights violations and abuses in recent years”<sup>30</sup>, among which 25 Russian nationals involved in the death of auditor Sergei Magnitsky. After addressing the parliament Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab met Sergei Magnitsky’s family and colleague Bill Browder<sup>31</sup>, sending a clear message: “this is a demonstration of Global Britain’s commitment to acting as a force for good in the world”<sup>32</sup>, as also reclaimed in the Integrated Review<sup>33</sup>. We must note that when the UK-only sanction regime for human rights violation have been implemented for the first time, it was directed at Russian nationals and entities, along with Saudi nationals allegedly involved in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi- and this happened again in December 2020<sup>34</sup>. In this last occasion the Foreign secretary used again the narration of a Global Britain that “stand up for democracy, human rights and the rule of law as a force for good in the world”<sup>35</sup>. Interestingly among the new UK-only regulations are included provisions on cyber activity<sup>36</sup> and chemical weapons<sup>37</sup>, areas in which threats are often related with Russia.

As well described by Poli (2020) “the UK in the post-Brexit era has the power to adopt its own sanctions and also the capacity and the resources to do this; however, its economic sanctions are effective only if the EU and its Member States follow a similar policy”. For example, following the Salisbury incident a unilateral sanctioning

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<sup>27</sup> UK Government (2019). The Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, Retrieved from [UK sanctions relating to Russia - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/uk-sanctions-relating-to-russia).

<sup>28</sup>Smith, B. (2020b). Magnitsky legislation, House of common, Briefing paper, Jul 13 2020, Retrieved from [Magnitsky legislation - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/resources/briefing-papers/magnitsky-legislation).

<sup>29</sup> Smith, B. (2020b). Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, B. (2020b). Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> The first advocate for the introduction of Magnitsky style sanctions in the world.

<sup>32</sup> UK Government (2020d, July 6). UK announces first sanctions under new global human rights regime, Press release. Retrieved from [UK announces first sanctions under new global human rights regime - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/press-releases/2020/07/06/uk-announces-first-sanctions-under-new-global-human-rights-regime).

<sup>33</sup> UK Government (2021c). Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> UK Government (2020e, December 10). UK announces travel bans and asset freezes for human rights violators, Press release. Retrieved from [UK announces travel bans and asset freezes for human rights violators - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/press-releases/2020/12/10/uk-announces-travel-bans-and-asset-freezes-for-human-rights-violators).

<sup>35</sup> UK Government (2020e, December 10). Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> UK Government (2020f). UK sanctions relating to cyber activity. Retrieved from [UK sanctions relating to cyber activity - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/uk-sanctions-relating-to-cyber-activity).

<sup>37</sup> UK Government (2020g). UK sanctions relating to chemical weapons. Retrieved from [UK sanctions relating to chemical weapons - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/uk-sanctions-relating-to-chemical-weapons).

action by the UK wouldn't have had an impact, instead the EU implemented a new themed sanctions regime against Russia aimed at countering the proliferation of chemical weapons, that, along with the coordinated expulsion of Russian diplomats, was seen as a diplomatic triumph. As correctly pointed out by the European Union committee at the House of Lords<sup>38</sup> the UK can choose to align with EU sanctions without formal influence on their design, or could be the case that Britain, given its reputation and stance against Russia, may try to 'lead from outside the room'. Another concern, as pointed out by Smith<sup>39</sup>, regard the possibility for the EU to become "less enthusiastic about sanctions in general", having lost the political push from the UK, resulting in less space for Britain to vary to any significant degree from EU policy. Especially in the case of Russia could be more difficult to reach unanimity in the Council, given "competing political, commercial, ideological or historical links to the targeted country among member states"<sup>40</sup>. The game over sanction cooperation is perceived by both the EU and the UK as vital, therefore a sort of co-implementation regime could be a win-win solution. Surely, sanctions against Russia are a good test for the vision of a 'global Britain', and the degree to which the UK would diverge from European allies will be a key point evaluating this strategy, as we will see in the next section.

### **The poisoning of Alexei Navalny**

If Russia's relations with the west can be summarized as a "policy pendulum oscillating between phases of engagement and diplomatic hostility"<sup>41</sup> characterised by sanctions, the last issue that led to western, and firstly British, sanctions was the poisoning of the opposition leader Alexei Navalny, in late August 2020. Sanctions on the Navalny affair, even if possibly ineffective, help us analyse the emerging trends of Britain foreign policy towards Russia compared with the EU. On 15<sup>th</sup> October 2020 the UK enforced sanctions – travel ban and asset freeze- on six individuals responsible for the poisoning. The press release by FM Raab was clear: "the UK and its partners have agreed that there is no plausible explanation (...) other than Russian involvement and responsibility (...) we are determined to hold those responsible to account."<sup>42</sup> The act was characterised as a 'criminal poisoning' that 'violates international law' and 'undermines the rules based order'. This response is fairly representative of how appears that Britain led the way, with sanctions framed in a harsh narrative, and the EU followed suit. On 18<sup>th</sup> January 2021 FM Raab, following the arrest of Mr. Navalny, called for his "immediate and unconditional release" from an "arbitrary detention"<sup>43</sup>. On 2<sup>nd</sup> February, after the sentencing of the opposition leader, a similar press

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<sup>38</sup> European Union Committee (2017). Brexit: sanctions policy, House of Lords, report, Dec 17 2017, Retrieved from [House of Lords - Brexit: sanctions policy - European Union Committee \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/european-union-committee/committees/european-union-committee-reports/2017-18/eu-sanctions-policy/).

<sup>39</sup> Smith B. (2018). The future of sanctions, House of Commons, Research briefing, Retrieved from [The future of sanctions - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/business/research/research-briefings/cross-party-research-briefings/the-future-of-sanctions/).

<sup>40</sup> Smith B. (2018). Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Popescu, N. (2021). How Russia and the West try to weaken each other. ECFR. Retrieved from [How Russia and the West try to weaken each other – European Council on Foreign Relations \(ecfr.eu\)](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary/how-russia-and-the-west-try-to-weaken-each-other).

<sup>42</sup> UK Government (2020h, October 15). UK sanctions Alexey Navalny's poisoners, Press release. Retrieved from [UK sanctions Alexey Navalny's poisoners - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-sanctions-alexey-navalny-s-poisoners).

<sup>43</sup> UK Government (2021a, January 28). UK condemns arbitrary detention of Alexey Navalny, Press release. [Russia: UK condemns arbitrary detention of Alexey Navalny - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-condemns-arbitrary-detention-of-alexey-navalny).

release added the concern for all the “peaceful protesters and journalists” arrested, while stating that: “Russia is failing to meet the most basic commitments expected of any responsible member of the international community”. Lastly, on 21<sup>st</sup> February the Foreign Secretary addressed the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, reiterating the positions just listed and adding concerns regarding the rule of law<sup>44</sup>, concluding that “Russia is failing to meet its international obligations”<sup>45</sup>.

On the other side of the channel, the Navalny affair seemed to have set in motion the EU, that ‘caught up’ with the UK on sanctioning Russia. For the first time the European Council agreed to use Magnitsky style sanctions<sup>46</sup>. Just like for Britain, the EU created the necessary tools just in December 2020<sup>47</sup>, and applied them for the first time against Russia. This is relevant given the historical lack of unity and diverging interests of the 27 regarding Moscow. Therefore, the case of Sanctions for the poisoning of A. Navalny is exemplificative of the possible future coordination between the UK and the EU, and as a result give a hint on the future stance of Britain towards Russia. On this issue the UK moved earlier than the Union -according to the Integrated Review<sup>48</sup> thanks to the new gained ‘agility’- but both actors used the same Magnitsky ‘tool’ and coordinated their efforts<sup>49</sup>. But the politics of Brexit imposes an ad hoc approach in foreign policy and “detachment from any appearance of cooperation with Brussels”<sup>50</sup>, even when, as in the case of sanctioning Russia, “policies do align and, therefore, both sides have an incentive to cooperate”<sup>51</sup>. In the future UK-EU foreign policy cooperation may assume different shapes: a sort of European Security Council<sup>52</sup> based around the E3<sup>53</sup> or a ‘Norwegian style cooperation’ with consultation without integration (Tonra, 2019). When it comes to sanctions, a 27+1 co-implementation could be seen as a win-win formula (Moret & Pothier, 2018). In the end, sanctions towards Russia, regardless of their effectiveness - especially

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<sup>44</sup> The FM Raab mentioned: “legislative amendments and constitutional changes” and added that Russian authorities must respect “the right to freedom of expression, the right to a fair trial, and the freedom from torture”. UK Government, (2021b, February 22). Foreign Secretary calls on Human Rights Council to address human rights violations in Myanmar, China, Belarus and Russia, Press release. Retrieved from [Foreign Secretary calls on Human Rights Council to address human rights violations in Myanmar, China, Belarus and Russia - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-calls-on-human-rights-council-to-address-human-rights-violations-in-myanmar-china-belarus-and-russia).

<sup>45</sup> UK Government, (2021b) .Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Boffey D., (2021, February 22). EU to sanction Russians responsible for Alexei Navalny's detention. The Guardian. Retrieved February 22, 2021 from [EU to sanction Russians responsible for Alexei Navalny's detention | European Union | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/22/eu-to-sanction-russians-responsible-for-alexei-navalny-s-detention).

<sup>47</sup> Before December the EU lacked the authority to impose travel bans and, that laid in the member states. Koutsokosta, E. (2020, December 8). EU agrees its own 'Magnitsky' regime to sanction human rights abuses, Euronews. Retrieved February 20, 2021 from [EU agrees its own 'Magnitsky' regime to sanction human rights abuses | Euronews](https://www.euronews.com/en/eu-agrees-its-own-magnitsky-regime-to-sanction-human-rights-abuses).

<sup>48</sup> “Our departure from the EU means we can move more quickly than through multilateral channels where it is in our interests to do so, while continuing to coordinate closely with a range of like-minded partners”, UK Government (2021c). Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Balfour R., (2020). After Brexit: Recasting a UK-EU dialogue on foreign policy, Retrieved from [After Brexit: Recasting a UK-EU dialogue on foreign policy - The Foreign Policy Centre \(fpc.org.uk\)](https://www.fpc.org.uk/publications/after-brexits-recasting-a-uk-eu-dialogue-on-foreign-policy).

<sup>50</sup> Balfour R., (2020). Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Korteweg, R. (2020). Can the EU and UK cooperate on foreign policy and sanctions?, in Towards an ambitious, broad, deep and flexible EU-UK partnership?. European Policy Centre. Retrieved from <https://epc.eu/en/Publications/Towards-an-ambitious-broad-deep-and-flexible-EU-UK-partnership~348744>.

<sup>52</sup> Korteweg, R. (2020). Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> As was already the case for informal consultation within the EU, Moret & Pothier (2018). Ibid.

if diplomatically framed with a [harsh narrative](#)<sup>54</sup> - may be considered as a *per se* policy goal, used to take a stance and send a signal. This is in line with what stated in the Integrated Review, where the “attribution of Russia’s hostile and destabilising activity” is mentioned as an example of renewed diplomatic efforts aiming at “building international coalitions for attributing (...) state threats” and implement sanctions. ‘Smart’-Sanctioning some Russian individuals allows the UK to maintain its hawkish position towards Moscow in the face of European allies, momentarily legitimizing itself as a leader and projecting the image of a ‘global Britain acting as a force for good’.

### **Trade and Russian capital in London**

In the post Brexit world, according to the Integrated Review, trade will be ‘at the heart of global Britain’, indeed the perspective of a ‘global trading state’ (Oppermann, Beasley, & Kaarbo, 2020) has been very present in the government’s narrative, becoming a “primary frame through which it depicts Britain’s new foreign policy orientation”. Indeed, for Britain the prospect of being recognized as a global trading power passes through, as the politics of Brexit requires, the signing of free trade agreements with non-EU countries. Total trade between the UK and Russia stood at £15.8 billion in the year to March 2020, with an increase of circa £290 million over the previous, with UK exports to Russia in the same period amounting to £5.9 billion and Russian imports totalling £9.9 billion<sup>55</sup>. However, given the state of the bilateral relationship, in July 2020 there were “no plans to attempt to negotiate a free trade agreement with Russia”<sup>56</sup>. Even if, the Minister of State for Investment expressed the believe that trade which is not covered by sanctions is “stable” and can “be a lever for stabilising relationships” by “supporting deeper ties and binding Russia to the rules-based international order”<sup>57</sup>. Unsurprisingly, as of March 2021, the prospect of signing an FTA with Russia has not changed according to the Government’s figures on UK trade agreements with non-EU countries<sup>58</sup>, in line with the commitment to a ‘values-driven trade policy’, declared in the Review.

In the context of the economic relationship, a point worth considering – and where some contradictions may be found- is the presence of Russian capital in Britain. Given its big financial sector the City has always been flooded with foreign capital, that alongside legitimate business, led to the creation of “mechanisms by which illicit finance could be recycled through what has been referred to as the London laundromat”<sup>59</sup>. A trend that is not slowing down

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<sup>54</sup> A video from the official Twitter account of the FCO for the 7 years of the annexation of Crimea. Retrieved February 20, 2021 from <https://twitter.com/i/status/1363080965862658050>.

<sup>55</sup> House of Lords (2020). debate, Jul 28 2020, Retrieved from [Russia: Trade - Tuesday 28 July 2020 - Hansard - UK Parliament](#).

<sup>56</sup> Lord Grimstone of Boscobel, Minister of State for Investment. House of Lords (2020). Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Lord Grimstone of Boscobel, Minister of State for Investment. House of Lords (2020). Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Updated in March 2021. Retrieved from [UK trade agreements with non-EU countries - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#).

<sup>59</sup> Murphy, S. (2020, July 21). UK report on Russian interference: key points explained. The Guardian. Retrieved February 20, 2021 from [UK report on Russian interference: key points explained | Foreign policy | The Guardian](#).

with Covid-19<sup>60</sup>. With regards to Russia this issue was raised in the aforementioned Russian report<sup>61</sup>, and of course is more than just ‘Oligarchs shopping on King’s Road’. The ISC stated that “the new normal” of Russian influence in the UK is enabled by the illicit economic penetration. This was favoured by the UK’s investor visa scheme, that combined with London’s investment opportunities attracted Russian capital. The flood of Russian money<sup>62</sup> created an ‘industry of enablers’ that de facto lobby for the Russian elite in London, extending Russian influence by promoting the Kremlin’s interests. In terms of foreign policy, the ISC report issued concerns on Russian influence on British domestic politics that “cannot be untangled”, posing serious threats to democracy and the rule of law. The report concluded that “any measures now being taken by the government are not preventive but rather constitute damage limitation”<sup>63</sup>.

In the context of the post-Brexit world, how willingly the Government will try to hamper these financial mechanism, traducing in political influence, will be crucial in assessing Britain’s stance vis a vis Russia. If the SAMLTA legislation and the ‘UK Global Human Rights sanctions regime’ represent a first step in this direction the ISC report evaluated them as ‘too restricted’ and proposed amendments to this legislation. In the government response<sup>64</sup> the presence of illicit Russian capital in the country is framed as a “priority” that led to the set up the National Economic Crime Centre (NECC) within the NCA and the introduction of public registers of beneficial ownership of companies. The effects of these measures in the long-term remain to be seen. For the moment the Government added, in the Integrated Review, that is planning to: increase dedicated staffing in both the police forces and the NECC to tackle ‘high-end money laundering’; to reform the Companies House registration and limited partnerships and to “introduce a register of overseas entities owing properties in the UK”<sup>65</sup>, while “promoting action on corporate transparency and accelerating asset recovery”. Moreover, the Government, while acknowledging the fact that “tens of billions of pounds [are] likely to be laundered through the UK every year”<sup>66</sup>, envisages the creation of “a second global sanctions regime on corruption” to tackle illicit finance.

## **Conclusion**

From the analysis of these three key dossiers -cyber threat, sanctions and trade & Russian capital- although each with its peculiar reasons, the UK arguably aims to maintain and if possible relaunch its position as a guarantor of the western rules-based international order, by being a forefront player vis a vis Russia. This is a position in line

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<sup>60</sup> Financial times (2021, March 16). How the pandemic has fuelled money laundering. Financial Times. Retrieved March 16, 2021 from [How the pandemic has fuelled money laundering | Financial Times \(ft.com\)](#).

<sup>61</sup> ISC (2020). Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> The problem was already well known and was addressed by the National Crime Agency. NCSC (2018). The cyber threat to Universities Assessing the cyber security threat to UK Universities, Retrieved from [The cyber threat to Universities - NCSC.GOV.UK](#).

<sup>63</sup> ISC (2020). Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> UK Government (2020c). Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> UK Government (2021c). Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> UK Government (2021c). Ibid.

with the aspirational ideals of a ‘global Britain’, upheld by the conservative government and reflected in the Integrated Review. In the document, as pointed out by commentaries from Chatham House, notwithstanding the much discussed ‘tilt to the pacific’, “the UK’s continuing commitment to Europe’s security and defence is predominant”<sup>67</sup>. Accordingly, Russia is acknowledged as the ‘most acute threat to the UK’. While Britain’s foreign policy towards Russia is ideologically driven<sup>68</sup> and characterised by a harsh narrative, it is nonetheless substantially in line with EU allies, despite the “conspicuous blind spot”<sup>69</sup> represented by the absence of ideas on future relations. The hawkish approach towards Russia is explained by both specific elements in the bilateral relationship and the ‘search for a role’ (Oppermann et al. 2020) in the post Brexit world, which passes also through being (re)accredited as a ‘western champion’ vis a vis Moscow. To be relevant in a multipolar system Britain must make itself an “indispensable member”<sup>70</sup> of the coalition it wishes to join. In countering Russia the emerging trends seem to suggest that this might be the case in the ‘cyber world’, where Britain has the resources to lead. However, in the wider world of diplomacy, as suggested by the case of sanctions, if a ‘global Britain’ will successfully emerge it remains to be seen.

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<sup>67</sup>Whitman, R. B. (2021). UK’s vision is confident, but success is a long way off, but EU missing in action. Chatham House. Retrieved from [UK’s vision is confident, but success is a long way off | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank](#).

<sup>68</sup> Balfour (2020). Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Niblett, R. (2021c). Global Britain lays out its stall, but EU missing in action. Chatham House. Retrieved from [Global Britain lays out its stall, but EU missing in action | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank](#).

<sup>70</sup> Niblett, R. (2021a). How to Turn ‘Global Britain’ from a Slogan to Reality. Chatham House. Retrieved from [How to Turn ‘Global Britain’ from a Slogan to Reality | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank](#).

## **Timeline**

**Jan 31 2020** – Formal exit of the UK from the EU, beginning of the transition period

Mar 2020 – EEAS report on Russian backed covid-19 disinformation campaign

Jul 6 2020 – first UK only ‘Magnitsky style’ sanctions on Russian nationals

Jul 16 2020 – Russian backed cyber-attack to institutions involved in vaccine research, FM Raab statement

Jul 21 2020 – Disclosure of the ‘Russian report’

Aug 20 2020 – Alexei Navalny is poisoned with a Novichok-type nerve agent

Oct 15 2020 – UK sanctions the responsible for A. Navalny poisoning

Nov 19 2020 – PM Boris Johnson announce the creation of the new National Cyber Force (NCF)

Dec 10 2020 – New sanctions on Russian nationals

**Dec 31 2020** – End of the transition period, ‘Sanctions Regulation 2019’ came into force

Jan 18 2021 – UK condemns A. Navalny arbitrary detention

Feb 2 2021 – UK responds to A. Navalny sentencing

Feb 21 2021 – Foreign Secretary Raab addresses UN Human Rights council

Feb 22 2021 – EU Council agrees on first use of ‘Magnitsky style’ sanctions for A. Navalny detention

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