

Global Britain and the UK's Enhanced Role in Ukraine

Written by Alexander Brotman

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ALEXANDER BROTMAN, MAR 7 2022

One of the many paradoxical outcomes of Brexit is the enhanced role that the UK can play in the current crisis between Russia and Ukraine. The UK has shown itself to be a strong partner of Kyiv in providing defensive weapons and in supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity. Prior to the second Russian invasion of Ukraine, the UK's commitment was initially much stronger than its partners on the continent at both the EU level and amongst capitals from Berlin to Paris and Stockholm who have now made major foreign policy reversals. In extricating itself from the EU, the UK is able to view Ukraine solely through the prism of defence and security on bilateral terms, divorced from any grand ambitions of a continent-wide foreign and defence policy married with economic integration. The UK's interests are its own, and it doesn't risk falling victim to the elusive quest for a common European voice that can often stymie the EU's ability to respond to crises.

In contrast to Kyiv's other European partners, London's strength has never been because of or drawn from Europe, with European political or economic integration never a primary goal. However, London has never failed to fight for Europe and for the values of the transatlantic alliance, something the current government in Kyiv holds dear and has committed itself to in its constitution. Similarly to Kyiv, the UK acts as a bridgehead or borderland to Europe, and it long acted as the bridge to the United States within the EU, owing to its shared language and history. Likewise, Ukraine has long acted as a bridge to Russia despite its leadership and citizens confidently knowing what they do not want to retain or adopt from their more powerful neighbour. Consequently, in the present crisis, both nations may now be inextricably linked to Europe's core by virtue of their roles on its periphery.

While London is no longer an engaged stakeholder to Europe's future political development, it is a stakeholder and willing participant in the fight to support the ambitions and territorial integrity of sovereign states. The right to self-determination, previously the death knell of imperial powers, has become a principle championed by London as it seeks to master its post-Brexit role. What is most significant is that negative liberty was always the dominating force which drove the UK's relationship with the EU and the divisive, but successful campaign of the Brexiteers. For London to embrace the positive liberty of Ukrainians, after its own messy divorce from the EU, is a further testament to its longstanding institutions and traditions that are able to thrive and coexist independent of any relation to Europe.

Furthermore, unlike the EU, the UK is not fighting for power or for its place in the world as part of a larger geopolitical and values-driven competition with states like China. It is content with the power that it has, and while it may be prone to overextension or self-aggrandizement, it is rooted in the world as it exists and not as it can be. London will not gain power from this crisis, but it can gain the respect and admiration that comes with performing as a responsible actor with an ironclad commitment to Europe.

Much still remains to be tested as to the feasibility of many of the UK's 'Global Britain' prognostications, especially those outside of its immediate neighbourhood such as in the Indo-Pacific. The UK faces many challenges to its own union, including in the near-term with the Northern Ireland Assembly elections in May and a likely second Scottish independence referendum in 2023. However, in the current crisis, London is punching at or above its weight and earning the praise that was not expected of it as it sought to extricate itself from Europe and the EU's perennial battles.

Few would have imagined at the start of 2022 that Britain, along with the EU, and US, would personally sanction

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Putin, remove key Russian banks from the SWIFT messaging system, restrict Aeroflot from UK airspace, and commit to a transatlantic task force to identify and seize the assets of sanctioned Russian companies and oligarchs. This will include the many oligarchs with property in London and Surrey, and Russian companies traded on the London Stock Exchange, including VTB and Sberbank. From BP exiting from its stake in Rosneft to Roman Abramovich deciding to sell Chelsea FC, the UK's long and controversial relationship with Russia and the ill-gotten gains of its oligarchs is now beginning to wither.

As the UK takes these steps, the character of Putin has not changed, and his reign of terror is well documented. Putin's character was clear when former spy Alexander Litvinenko was fatally poisoned in London in 2006, leaving a trail of radioactive polonium across the city and on British Airways flights. His character was clear when Boris Nemtsov was murdered, Alexei Navalny was poisoned, and Yulia and Sergei Skripal were poisoned with the Novichok nerve agent in Salisbury, a chemical attack that could have killed hundreds of British citizens. For ardent Russia watchers it was even clear before Putin formally assumed power and the apartment bombings killed 300 people around Moscow in 1999, likely a false-flag attack perpetrated by the FSB but blamed on Chechen terrorists. Putin's founding act to restore Russia's place in the world was a false-flag attack that killed hundreds of Russian citizens all to help raise the power of one man. In many ways, Putin's whole tenure in the Kremlin has been a false-flag attack, guided by grievance and deception in order to lure the West, particularly the UK, into a position of supplication.

In supporting Ukraine and its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, the UK is also able to rehabilitate its own image as a nation that cares more about anti-corruption and the rule of law rather than welcoming dubious Russian money and asking few questions as to where it came from. In the process, both Ukraine and the UK can gain tremendously from one another. The stakes are incredibly high for Ukraine as it faces indiscriminate shelling of major cities, a large refugee crisis, and economic dismemberment that will require heavy Western assistance in order to proceed down the path of EU accession. However, with fewer oligarch-owned properties in London and assets linked to Russian state-owned, sanctioned companies, the UK might finally be able to assist a nation at the other end of Europe in its bid to assume its rightful place in the common European home.

Disclaimer: I am writing in my personal capacity and not through any professional affiliation.

About the author:

Alexander Brotman is a political risk and intelligence analyst with a focus on EU politics and security developments. He has written for Global Risk Insights and Foreign Brief, two political risk publications, and has provided direct research support to a leading scholar of Russia and Eurasia in Washington. Alexander received his MSc. in International Relations from The University of Edinburgh. He is currently based in Washington DC.

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