

Little Improvement Shown in U.K. Ties

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Britain and Russia still disagree profoundly on issues like the poisoning of Kremlin critic Alexander Litvinenko, but despite this both governments will work on improving relations, their foreign ministers said Wednesday.

On his first visit to Moscow, British Foreign Minister William Hague said he hoped that cooperation would widen even though controversy remains.

"We are not saying today that we have abolished all the differences," he told reporters after talks with President Dmitry Medvedev and his counterpart, Sergei Lavrov.

Hague's two-day visit has been called a test of whether the ice is melting between London and Moscow, which saw relations sink to post-Cold War lows after the murder of Litvinenko in London in 2006.

A former Conservative party leader, Hague was appointed foreign secretary in May when David Cameron became the first Conservative prime minister after 13 years of Labour

governments.

Both Hague and Lavrov made it clear Wednesday that their governments' stance on this issue remained unchanged.

"We are not here today to announce any change in that position," Hague said.

Lavrov said Moscow was ready to cooperate with London in the Litvinenko case but "on the basis of Russian law." He added that Russia was ready to investigate allegations that the Federal Security Service was involved in the murder if British police handed over evidence.

Britain has sought the extradition of State Duma Deputy Andrei Lugovoi on charges of poisoning Litvinenko, which Russia has staunchly refused because the Constitution forbids the extradition of citizens.

Moscow has demanded in turn that businessman Boris Berezovsky and Chechen separatist Akhmed Zakayev be extradited from London.

Lugovoi reiterated that he would never travel to Britain to stand trial.

"The British press has trampled on my reputation. My family and I have suffered great unpleasantness. I'm not going to compromise. The only trial I'll accept is one in Russia," he told Britain's Guardian newspaper in an interview published Wednesday.

Analysts said that while it was natural for a new government to take a fresh look at relations, improvements would be incremental at best.

"It will be very difficult as long as the Litvinenko affair remains unsolved," said Fraser Cameron, director of the EU-Russia Center, a Brussels-based think tank.

Vladislav Belov, an analyst with the Moscow State International Relations Institute, said that while "dead-end matters" remain, both governments would have to focus on issues like economic ties.

Hague said London welcomed Russian investors and would support British investors willing to enter Russia. He also stressed that Britain was among the biggest sources of foreign direct investment in the country and that Russian companies had made more than £30 billion (\$47.5 billion) in floats on London's stock exchange.

Both ministers signed a joint declaration pledging their governments' cooperation over Afghanistan and helping the government in Kabul in its fight against terrorism and drug trafficking.

"We are two normal countries, two normal governments interested in discussing all issues including those in which our positions do not coincide," Lavrov said, according to a transcript on the Foreign Ministry's web site.

Edward McMillan-Scott, a member of the European Parliament's human rights committee for Britain's Liberal Democrats, who formed a coalition government with the Conservatives, complained that Hague had only paid lip service to the Litvinenko affair.

"I am surprised that the foreign secretary wrapped his concerns about the Litvinenko case in platitudes about U.K.-Russian relations," he said by phone from Brussels.

McMillan-Scott, who left the Conservatives last year in a dispute with Hague, then the shadow foreign secretary, over the party's political positioning in the European Parliament, said it was his "primordial concern that Russia failed to satisfy world opinion that it is not operating KGB-style tactics in the modern age."

Lavrov also said Moscow was ready to start a dialogue on visa facilitation with Britain, especially for businesspeople and artists. Britain is not a member of the EU's Schengen group of states that are in lengthy talks with Russia about visas.

Tatyana Khoreshok, a representative for the Visit Britain tourism agency, said there were plans to introduce express visas that would be issued within three days as opposed to the seven to 14 days for normal visas. The price for the faster visas has not yet been fixed, Khoreshok told Interfax.

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