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The Litvinenko Affair: An Anglo-Russian Exercise in Futility

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Alexander Litvinenko



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A British inquest on the murder of Russian defector Alexander Litvinenko has concluded that it was "probably" sanctioned by President Vladimir Putin. While the Kremlin's defenders have fastened on the minimal degree of uncertainty contained in that "probably," this is actually the strongest term the British judge presiding over the inquiry could have used. He could hardly have been more definite without a signed confession from the Kremlin.

Beneath the immediate sound and fury, though, it is hard to know what difference this verdict makes other than perhaps offer a little closure to Litvinenko's family. There has never been much doubt that a murder carried out in such an exotic way, with a vastly expensive radioactive isotope, was likely a state-sanctioned hit.

Nonetheless, it has led to renewed calls within Britain for some punitive response, but in this way the case illustrates the stark limitations of overt and covert power in the modern world.

Moscow could murder Litvinenko, seemingly with impunity — but gain very little in the process.

And London now has a legal and moral basis to take action against Moscow — but there is very little it can plausibly and meaningfully do.

At the time, Moscow was presumably pleased with what had happened. Admittedly in a thousand-to-one chance, the use of polonium had been detected, but all the same a man whom Moscow considered both a traitor and an outspoken critic had been silenced, and the wider Russian émigré and expat community had been warned.

I remember from conversations at the time with members of the so-called "Londongrad" set the chilling effect this had. Suddenly, they turned from political activism to charity balls.

But relations with London deteriorated dramatically. More to the point, so too did Moscow's image. If a Russian dies now, especially if in even faintly unexpected circumstances, everyone sees the Kremlin's radioactive fingerprints on it.

As for Litvinenko, a man who liberally spread all kinds of allegations against the Kremlin, from the truly ludicrous to the wholly likely, his painful death transformed him from fantasist to martyr, giving his words a posthumous plausibility.

Yet if Moscow cannot be that comfortable with the long-term effects of the murder, London is hardly any more happy with the inquiry's outcome, either.

Those who see this as some kind of propaganda stunt by perfidious Albion should remember that for years the British government twisted and shrugged, equivocated and stonewalled, as it tried to avoid having to convene such an enquiry.

Because, what can London do? It can huff and puff, and it has placed further sanctions on the two Russians accused of actually carrying out the killing. This is just symbolic, though.

Britain is already part of the European sanctions regime placed on Russia because of Ukraine. At the same time it is aware that Moscow could conceivably play a positive role both in the military struggle against the Islamic State and in the negotiations to bring peace to Syria. Or, perhaps more to the point, that if it wanted to, it could make both of those processes much harder.

Kick out suspected Russian spies at the embassy? Moscow will simply send more, ones that MI5's spyhunters will have to start investigating from scratch. Apply more travel bans? The kind of people involved are unlikely to be heading to London any day soon.

The measures which could really have an impact — not least cracking down on the influx of dirty Russian money flowing into British banks and property — will take time and, frankly, have little to do with Litvinenko. It's something London should have been doing anyway.

So here is the depressing irony. Moscow probably set out to kill a man, and did it, but has nothing to show for its ruthless 'success.' And in London an inquiry set up to find the truth probably found it, but it is hard to know what London can do with that knowledge.

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