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War with the Anglo-Saxons: How Britain became Russia's enemy number one

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Cover image: Activists stage a protest against the alleged involvement of 'British specialists' in a Ukrainian drone strike on the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea as British ambassador to Russia Deborah Bronnert is summoned to the Russian Foreign Ministry on 3 November 2022. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)

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Executive summary

- Since 2022, the Kremlin has recast the UK as public enemy number one, a shift rooted in long-term strategy and amplified by the Ukraine war, ensuring Britain remains central to Kremlin threat narratives. This stance reflects a deeper structural trend likely to endure beyond the present conflict and Putin's rule.
- Russian discourse draws on a long cultural tradition of hostility, intensified by post-imperial resentment. Political elites depict the UK even more than the United States as Russia's civilisational opponent – a distilled image of the 'collective West' and 'anti-Russia'.
- The *siloviki*, who form the ideological and institutional core of the Putin regime, sustain this Anglophobia. They circulate conspiracy theories about Britain's supposed quest to weaken Russia and attribute a 'British hand' to most adverse international developments.
- Cultural tropes such as the 'Anglo-Saxons' and 'perfidious Albion' have been revived; Britain is cast as a morally bankrupt enemy and a declining post-imperial power.
- Russian public opinion has hardened through crises from the Litvinenko poisoning in 2006 to the poisoning of the Skripals in 2018, with older cohorts adopting sharper hostility, while younger Russians remain more ambivalent.
- Russian policy extends anti-British confrontation across several levels. Officials spread hostile narratives domestically and abroad, dismantle British cultural and educational institutions, and restrict diplomatic presence. Security agencies mount hybrid operations through disinformation, espionage, and cyberattacks, while military planning increasingly treats Britain as a legitimate target, lowering the barrier to both nuclear and non-nuclear escalation.
- Traces of Anglophilia remain among Russia's educated classes, who regard Britain as a cultural and civilisational model. Yet as authoritarianism hardens into totalitarianism, such sympathies are branded as marks of the 'internal enemy' and are systematically repressed in cultural life and education.
- London faces layered threats – nuclear coercion, maritime and subsea risks, dangers to its armed forces deployed on NATO's front line, and alliance-splitting psychological operations.

Introduction

In recent years – particularly since the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine – Russian foreign policy and propaganda have undergone a notable shift: the UK has emerged as the country's primary adversary. The UK has displaced the United States, which had been Russia's and the Soviet Union's principal antagonist for the past 80 years, since the end of the Second World War. 'As the US under Donald Trump seeks to reset ties with Moscow and broker peace between Russia and Ukraine, Britain has been granted the status of Russia's public enemy number one,' Reuters reported in March 2025, citing sources within the Russian government.¹

In closed political regimes such as Russia's, the status of 'main enemy' goes beyond rhetoric. It is a core element of political governance: identifying the 'number one adversary' is a deliberate and meaningful strategic task. It impacts a wide range of political and administrative decisions – from ideological narratives and cultural agendas to security issues and foreign policy.

In a sense, the re-emergence of the UK as Russia's principal foe is not new because it represents a return to the past. For this reason, it does not appear to be a temporary or tactical move but rather the result of long-term trends: geopolitical shifts, entrenched cultural attitudes in Russia, changes within the Russian elite, and a deliberate strategy by the Kremlin. It is likely to have far-reaching diplomatic, military, and strategic consequences, and poses tangible risks for the UK.

This paper examines the contours of Russia's anti-British turn: its historical and cultural roots, its sociological dimensions, the relationship between Anglophilia and Anglophobia among the Russian elite, and the Kremlin's use of anti-British rhetoric in both domestic and foreign policy. The final section offers a strategic forecast for the coming years based on an assessment of Russian needs and intentions.

Historical roots of Anglophobia in Russia

At various points in its history, the Russian state has systematically constructed the image of a 'primary enemy' as a means of consolidating society and maintaining the internal stability of its authoritarian regime. The notion of an external threat has often been closely linked with the search for an internal enemy, a so-called 'fifth column' allegedly acting in the interests of foreign adversaries. This act of opposing oneself to an external 'Other' served as a powerful instrument in both domestic politics (to justify repression and mobilise the population) and foreign policy (to support a confrontational stance). The UK has frequently assumed the role of this civilisational 'Other'.

From the time of the Russian Empire to the present day, Britain has been associated with Western liberal-democratic values, often more consistently than continental European powers such as France, Germany, or Italy. In this context, the Russian government's attitude towards the UK has been largely pragmatic, shaped by domestic political dynamics. During periods when elements of the Western model attracted interest within society and segments of the elite, Britain was seen as a significant source of ideas and reference points for Russian liberals.^{2 3} However, at times of intensified anti-liberal policy and resistance to European influence, it often became a symbolic target. In such reactionary phases, its image as a 'citadel of liberalism' made it a convenient adversary – not merely a geopolitical opponent, but a culturally alien civilisation, a 'sworn enemy' opposed to Russia's traditional values.

Modern Russian identity was shaped through opposition to the West, particularly to Europe. For centuries, until the rise of the United States in the twentieth century, England was cast as the Western country most distinctively unlike Russia. As early as the eighteenth century, Britons were described in Russia as a people who 'sold their soul for money' and cared only 'for the benefit of the flesh, not the soul', alien in spirit. These themes – British mercantilism, deceitfulness, and immoral selfishness – became deeply embedded in Russian political discourse.

From the 19th century onwards, Britons took hold in the popular imagination as eternal enemies. Britain earned pejorative epithets such as 'perfidious Albion', 'decrepit Albion', 'the modern Carthage', and 'the gold metropolis'. A widely used expression also emerged – *anglichanka gadit* (literally, 'the Englishwoman defecates') – conveying the idea that Britain is constantly scheming or 'stirring' against Russia. This imagery served to deflect attention from domestic difficulties, justify authoritarian governance, and explain foreign policy failures. At the same time, the public was encouraged to believe that the regime's internal critics were mere puppets of London. As a result, a deliberate link was forged between an external enemy in the form of Britain and internal 'national traitors' allegedly serving its interests.

Throughout history, attitudes towards Britain in Russian society – and especially among ruling elites, whether imperial, Soviet or post-Soviet – have not been uniformly negative. Elements of Anglophilia persisted within these groups, reflected in interest in British culture, science, and political institutions. However, such views – from Peter the Great's reformers to the liberal *intelligentsia* of the 20th century – typically remained marginal and were often criticised for 'Anglomania' and a lack of patriotism. The dominant tone was shaped by official discourse, in which Britain was cast as an antagonist.

Only at certain pivotal moments – when the domestic power paradigm temporarily shifted – did attitudes toward London change dramatically. One such episode was the rapprochement during the Gorbachev–Thatcher era, which was accompanied by a partial reassessment of rhetoric and political perceptions of the UK.

Anglo–Russian relations before 1917

In the early history of the Muscovite state (16th–17th centuries), its relations with England were largely pragmatic and untainted by ideology. In 1553, the English established a maritime route to Russia via the White Sea, and Tsar Ivan IV granted privileges to English merchants through the Muscovy Company. English technicians and specialists were invited to serve in Russia: Ivan IV sought officers, engineers, and artillerymen not only from England but from across Europe.⁴

During his reign, Ivan IV also showed interest in political ties. He corresponded with Queen Elizabeth I and discussed a potential alliance. According to English diplomats, towards the end of his rule, fearing boyar conspiracies, Ivan even contemplated fleeing to England. The English side gave serious consideration to this unusual request. In 1570, Elizabeth formally agreed to offer the Russian tsar and his family asylum, guaranteeing their safety and freedom of worship.

In the 17th century, under Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich, English merchants traded through Arkhangelsk, and some foreigners served at the Russian court. A significant number of military officers from England, and particularly from Scotland, served in Alexei Mikhailovich's armies, many of them in positions of command. For pre-Petrine Russia, England was a distant land, known more for its goods, such as textiles and tin, and the tales of travellers than for any direct rivalry. It was perceived as an exotic place at the edge of the known world, from which master shipwrights and strange goods would appear.

A decisive turn in relations occurred under Peter the Great. The reformist tsar, having launched Russia's Westernisation, drew inspiration primarily from England. In 1697, during his youth, Peter visited London and spent several months studying shipbuilding and navigation. He was deeply impressed by the English navy and the scientific achievements that he saw. England became, for him, a model to emulate in many fields, from naval affairs to elements of state administration. This period marked the beginning of a fascination with all things English among the Russian aristocracy.

In the decades that followed, Anglomania – a fascination with British culture – spread throughout the court and noble circles. Under Catherine II, this phenomenon became especially pronounced. The Russian nobility read translations of English novelists and philosophers, established English gardens in their estates, and began teaching their children English alongside French. By the early 19th century, the English lifestyle had become fashionable in high society. 'English clubs' appeared in major cities, and English taste became a symbol of modern sophistication.

However, serious political tensions between the two empires also began to emerge during this period. While Russia and Britain did not formally go to war under Catherine II, they competed for influence over weaker states. For example, during the 1770s, while Russia

was at war with the Ottoman Empire, British diplomacy favoured the Turks and sought to prevent Russia from dominating the Black Sea. In turn, Catherine refused to support Britain in its struggle against the rebellious North American colonies, instead declaring a policy of armed neutrality – a stance that angered London.⁵

Relations deteriorated sharply under Emperor Paul I. Offended by Britain's seizure of Malta (he had become the Grand Master of the Knights of Malta), Paul broke off the alliance with London in favour of closer relations with Napoleonic France. In 1800, he even proposed a joint Franco-Russian expedition to India, aiming to strike at the heart of British colonial power.⁶ The British grew alarmed: for the first time, Russian expansion threatened their global interests. This tension gave rise to conspiracy theories that British agents played a role in Paul's assassination during the 1801 palace coup. Although there is no concrete evidence of British involvement, the mere existence of such rumours is telling: by that time, the notion of 'perfidious Albion' – capable of plotting intrigues within Russia itself – had taken hold.

A significant episode in the history of Anglo-Russian relations was the period of the Napoleonic Wars. Russia and the UK participated in several anti-Napoleonic coalitions, including the Fourth (1806–1807) and the Sixth (1813–1814). Following Napoleon's defeat in Russia in 1812, Russian forces advanced further into Europe. Britain, for its part, resumed military action after a brief truce between Russia and France, focusing on the Iberian Peninsula. Both empires shared a common objective: to bring an end to French hegemony and reinforce their positions as leading European powers. This alignment of interests was later formalised at the Congress of Vienna in 1814–1815.

The 19th century marked the height of geopolitical rivalry between the two empires. Although they had been allies during the Napoleonic Wars, Russia and Britain soon became competitors for hegemony in Europe. By the mid-19th century, Anglophobic sentiment had taken root throughout Russian society. These attitudes peaked during the Crimean War (1853–1856), when Britain joined the conflict on the side of the Ottoman Empire and led the coalition against Russia. For many Russians, it came as a profound shock: 'enlightened England' had become the aggressor, shelling Sevastopol. The press and literature of the period depicted the British in a highly hostile light.

The writer Prince Vladimir Odoevsky remarked that British history was a lesson for nations that 'sell their soul for money', predicting Britain's inevitable downfall.⁷ Historian Mikhail Pogodin caustically observed that the Bank of England was the golden heart of Britain – and that it likely had no other.⁸ The Slavophile intellectual Stepan Shevyrev drew on Exodus, accusing the British of worshipping the Golden Calf. He claimed that they had placed materialism above spiritual values and would one day be held accountable by divine justice.⁹

The popular saying *anglichanka gadit* noted above, suggesting that Britain is always scheming against Russia, probably originated from soldiers' anecdotes or satirical newspaper columns. It became a widely accepted explanation for the country's foreign policy setbacks.

If Russia faced difficulties abroad, people would say it was surely because ‘the Englishwoman’ was once again meddling. In the conservative circles of pre-revolutionary Russia, Anglophobia became almost an official ideology. Monarchists and reactionaries known as the Black Hundreds¹⁰ claimed that British money and spies were behind everything from revolutionary terror attacks to Russia’s defeat in the Russo–Japanese War.

Nevertheless, in the final years before the revolution, there was a brief shift in tone. Faced with the growing threat from Germany, Tsar Nicholas II entered into an alliance with Britain. The Anglo–Russian Convention of 1907 ended the ‘Great Game’ and defined spheres of influence in Asia.¹¹ Britain – once Russia’s arch-rival – became, for a time, an ally in the Triple Entente, along with France. This softened official Anglophobic rhetoric, and newspapers spoke of the ‘kinship between two great empires’. However, underlying mistrust persisted. During World War One, German propaganda exploited these sentiments, spreading rumours among Russian soldiers that Britain had incited conflict between two fraternal nations – Russians and Germans – for its own benefit.

Anglophobia in the Soviet period

After the Bolshevik seizure of power, former wartime allies became enemies. The UK had actively supported the White movement: British expeditionary forces landed in Murmansk and Arkhangelsk, and British officers served as advisers to the leaders of the White movement that fought the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War. For the victorious Bolsheviks, this was seen not only as further proof of Britain's longstanding duplicity, but also as evidence of its new role as a pillar of the capitalist 'old order'. In Soviet propaganda of the 1920s, Britain featured as the vanguard of global imperialist reaction.

Anglophobia became a key component of official ideology. Political cartoons depicted John Bull, the archetypal capitalist, with a bag of money, stabbing the people in the back; newspapers condemned 'English gentlemen' who dreamt of strangling the land of the Soviets. At the same time – beyond official propaganda – a conspiratorial narrative emerged in the public consciousness and among émigré writers, suggesting that British intelligence had been involved in the execution of the Romanov family in 1918.

However, relations improved for a brief while. In 1924, the Labour government made Britain the first country to recognise the Soviet Union and grant it diplomatic status. Although ties were later broken off in 1927 before being restored in 1929, the act of recognition has left a curious feature: to this day British diplomatic vehicle number plates in Russia still carry the designation '001'.

After the Second World War, Anglophobic themes entered a new phase: the Cold War. Winston Churchill's famous 'Iron Curtain' speech in Fulton (1946) was interpreted in the Soviet Union as a declaration of ideological war. Churchill was demonised in the Soviet press and described as a 'warmonger'. His speech was swiftly translated and disseminated across the country to fuel hostility towards the 'Anglo-Saxons'. In 1950s caricatures, a menacing British lion loomed over Europe, goaded on by Uncle Sam. Although the United States later became the primary target of Soviet propaganda, Britain retained its image as a cunning, though declining, colonial predator up until the collapse of the USSR.¹²

Despite the strict official stance, elements of Anglophilia persisted in Soviet cultural life. Soviet citizens avidly read Shakespeare and Dickens, Walter Scott and Agatha Christie, and enjoyed Soviet-made films about Sherlock Holmes, though this was not openly framed as admiration for a foreign culture. After Stalin's death – particularly by the 1960s and 1970s – ideological confrontation eased somewhat: the English language, the Beatles (officially frowned on like other Western pop music) and dancing the twist became fashionable, while romanticised images of Victorian England appeared in literature. Nevertheless, openly admiring the British way of life or, especially, praising the British political system remained taboo and could raise suspicions of ideological disloyalty. Among the *intelligentsia*, Anglophiles were a marginal presence and were often criticised for being 'worshippers of the West'.

During the period of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika (1987–1991) and in the decade following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Anglo–Russian relations entered a period of thaw. The process had already begun under Gorbachev, even before his appointment as General Secretary, during a visit to the UK in December 1984. It is widely believed that Margaret Thatcher helped introduce Gorbachev to the world after meeting him in London. She is famously quoted as saying:

‘I like Mr. Gorbachev. We can do business together. We both believe in our own political systems. He firmly believes in his; I firmly believe in mine. We are never going to change one another.’¹³

In March 1987, when Thatcher visited Moscow, Soviet Central Television aired a live interview with the leader of a capitalist state, an unprecedented event. The British Prime Minister confidently outmanoeuvred the Soviet Union's three leading international journalists with wit and ease.

From ally to enemy number one in 25 years

After the collapse of the USSR, Britain's relations with Russia experienced a decade of unusual warmth. This was a result of the pro-Western orientation of the Yeltsin administration's foreign policy, which was based on the hope of building a partnership with the West. Despite Moscow's growing sense of disappointment with the US over issues such as NATO enlargement, the Kosovo conflict, and Washington's withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, relations with London suffered little by way of collateral damage.

When Tony Blair visited Moscow in 2000, he and Putin appeared interested in trying to build a personal relationship, each viewing the other as modern and open to new ideas. For Moscow, Blair had the added advantage of being on good terms with both the US and the EU.¹⁴ While the two leaders struggled to build a personal rapport, bilateral relations deepened, symbolised by BP's merger of its Russian assets with those of TNK to create the third largest oil producer in Russia.¹⁵ Putin made a state visit to the UK in June 2003, the first of this kind by a Russian leader since 1874. Earlier that year, Moscow directed its anger at the US-led invasion of Iraq principally at Washington rather than London despite Blair's enthusiastic backing for it.

During this era of cordial relations, sections of the Russian elite invested significantly in real estate in the UK, making it their foothold in the West. This gave rise to the notion of 'Londongrad'. The acquisition of Chelsea Football Club by Roman Abramovich, a Kremlin-connected businessman, in the summer of 2003 was the climax of the rapprochement between Moscow and London.

By the end of 2003, relations had entered a rapid downward spiral, and familiar antagonistic reflexes returned. Putin was incensed by the UK's decision not to extradite Boris Berezovsky, one of the top businessmen to emerge during the 1990s and his sworn enemy. This was quickly followed by a similar refusal by the British authorities to extradite the prominent former Chechen official Akhmed Zakaev. The British government was becoming uncomfortable with the restriction of democratic freedoms in Russia, while the Russian authorities started a campaign of sustained harassment against the British Ambassador. Regulatory pressure on key British investors such as BP and Shell formed part of a broader picture of deteriorating relations.

The nadir appeared to have been reached in 2006 when Alexander Litvinenko, a former KGB officer and outspoken critic of the Kremlin who had recently received British citizenship, was poisoned with polonium in central London. Despite the seriousness of the crime, which was quickly linked to two suspected FSB operatives, the UK authorities reacted with notable restraint.

Their response was limited to expelling four assumed intelligence officers from the Russian embassy and breaking off links with the FSB. Russia replied by expelling four British embassy staff, but Putin expressed confidence that the 'mini crisis' in relations would be overcome.¹⁶ However, a subsequent campaign of intimidation led to the closure of the British Council's offices in St Petersburg and Yekaterinburg in 2008.

The so-called 'Magnitsky case' had a significant impact on UK–Russia relations. In 2008, a group of lawyers and auditors representing the interests of Hermitage Capital – an investment fund founded by British national William Browder – uncovered large-scale embezzlement from the Russian state budget. In response, the Russian authorities arrested one of the fund's lawyers, Sergei Magnitsky, who died in pre-trial detention in 2009.¹⁷

His death marked a turning point in Russia's relations with the West. In 2012, the US Congress passed the Magnitsky Act, imposing personal sanctions on individuals suspected of involvement in his death. This led to the creation of further sanctions lists targeting Russian officials and members of the security services. The UK was drawn into the crisis not only due to Browder's citizenship, but also because Hermitage Capital's assets were managed through HSBC, an institution headquartered in London.¹⁸

The Obama administration's 'reset' of relations with Russia left its mark on the UK's Russia policy after the coalition government led by David Cameron assumed office in 2010. Tensions were dialed down and the atmosphere in relations improved to the point where a meeting of UK and Russian defence ministers took place in 2013, in a new 'strategic dialogue' format that aimed to strengthen bilateral cooperation on international security issues. However, the UK was stung by a comment allegedly made by the Kremlin spokesman later that year that Britain was a 'small island' to which 'no one paid attention.'¹⁹

The improvement in overall relations was cut short in 2014 by the annexation of Crimea. This was an overdue wake up call for British policymakers. They had closed their eyes to the significance of the rapidly growing political repression in Russia and the hardening of attitudes towards the West. Moscow blamed the US for instigating a coup in Ukraine after the Revolution of Dignity that ousted the Yanukovich regime.²⁰ Encouraged by the prospect of comprehensive reform, the UK showed renewed interest in Ukraine, with which it had built strong relations in the 1990s. London was party to the decision by the EU to impose sanctions on Russia, and to Russia's expulsion from the G8 as punishment for the annexation of Crimea. It also played a strong role in shaping the agenda of the NATO Summit in Wales that marked the Alliance's return to its core mission of collective defence after more than two decades of focus on building security partnerships. For Moscow, the UK was firmly back in the 'awkward squad' and was using inappropriately strong rhetoric to criticise Russia's behaviour.

In line with the US, the UK chose to leave the task of negotiating a ceasefire in Donbas to France and Germany. The result was the flawed Minsk agreements, which were heavily biased towards Russia but proved impossible to implement and merely postponed Russia's efforts to forcibly reorientate Ukraine towards Moscow.

Despite the tensions over Ukraine and increased realism about Russia's intentions, British officials still hoped that there would be space for cooperation with Russia on common threats such as combating radical Islam. However, the brutality of Russia's intervention in support of the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war in late 2015 killed off these hopes. Relations slid further downhill after a belated official inquiry in 2016 into Litvinenko's assassination concluded that Putin and his close associate, Nikolai Patrushev, had 'probably' approved the murder.

However, UK–Russia relations plunged into a much deeper crisis in 2018 after the Novichok (nerve agent) poisoning of Sergey Skripal, a former Russian military intelligence officer convicted of spying for Britain and released as part of a spy swap in 2010. Skripal's daughter, Yulia, was also poisoned but she and her father survived, unlike a British woman, Dawn Sturgess, who handled the discarded chemical agent. This was the moment when the UK began to displace the US as Russia's 'enemy number one' despite dissatisfaction in Moscow with aspects of US policy towards Russia, including its decision to withdraw from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

Moscow mocked London's claims that two Russian military intelligence agents had carried out the poisoning and accused the UK of a provocation to destroy bilateral relations.²¹ London expelled 23 Russian embassy staff and Moscow reciprocated by expelling the same number of British diplomats. At this point, Donald Trump was two years into his first term and was trying to befriend Putin while fending off accusations of collusion with Moscow to secure his election. This meant that London was an easy target for Russian propaganda that depicted the UK as weak, isolated and politically divided after the 2016 Brexit vote. Suspicions remain that Russia interfered in the Brexit referendum, although the government chose not to investigate the allegations. However, it did acknowledge Russian interference in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum.²²

By January 2019, Moscow had concluded that the UK was the 'standard bearer' of an anti-Russian campaign waged by the West.²³ Relations were strained but not frozen until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Moscow believes that the UK's firm response in support of Ukraine played a significant role in persuading the Biden administration that Ukraine should fight to defend its sovereignty and independence rather than capitulate to Moscow's demands. Since then, the UK has been blamed by the Kremlin for wrecking the negotiations that took place between Russia and Ukraine in April 2022. Putin regularly cites the role of former Prime Minister Boris Johnson in subverting the talks.²⁴

The UK's defiant rhetoric in support of Ukraine and its continued political and military backing, including its despatch of Storm Shadow missiles that have been used against targets in Russia, has angered Moscow. The new British government's approach to Ukraine has not deviated from its predecessor's. Russian state media have paid particular attention to Keir Starmer's role in establishing a 'Coalition of the Willing' to continue backing Ukraine after Donald Trump's return to the US presidency.

Trump's desire to rebuild US–Russia relations has led the Kremlin to seek a European country which it can label as its chief enemy. Despite Moscow's current antagonism towards the Baltic states, France, Germany, and the Nordic countries, Britain is a convenient scapegoat because of the perception that it retains the ability to influence decision-making in Washington. Of course, this runs counter to the traditional narrative that the UK – as the junior partner of the US – takes orders from Washington and slavishly carries them out.

In March 2025, Russia's foreign intelligence service noted that Britain was again acting as 'the main instigator of global conflict' as it had done previously on the eve of two world wars.²⁵ The same month, Russian officials told journalists that Moscow now considered the UK to be its principal enemy.²⁶

Regardless of exactly when the UK achieved this status in the view of Russian officialdom, the Kremlin propaganda machine has been working hard since the start of the full-scale war against Ukraine to undermine the country's reputation.²⁷

The distinction of being Moscow's 'enemy number one' has been held for the most part by the US in recent decades, although there have been moments when other countries have come to the fore, notably Georgia after the 2004 'Rose Revolution', and Estonia after the removal of the Bronze Soldier monument in 2007. Nevertheless, the UK finds itself the object of particular attention from Moscow because of several factors that go beyond its relationship with the US. These include exaggerated Russian assessments of its international influence that paradoxically sit alongside more realistic perceptions of its post-Brexit isolation, its economic weakness and its limited defence capabilities. As the 2025 Strategic Defence Review makes clear, Russia is probing the UK's defences.²⁸ Its readiness to use military force and threaten the use of nuclear weapons is a central factor in the UK's perception of a 'new era of threat and challenge'.²⁹

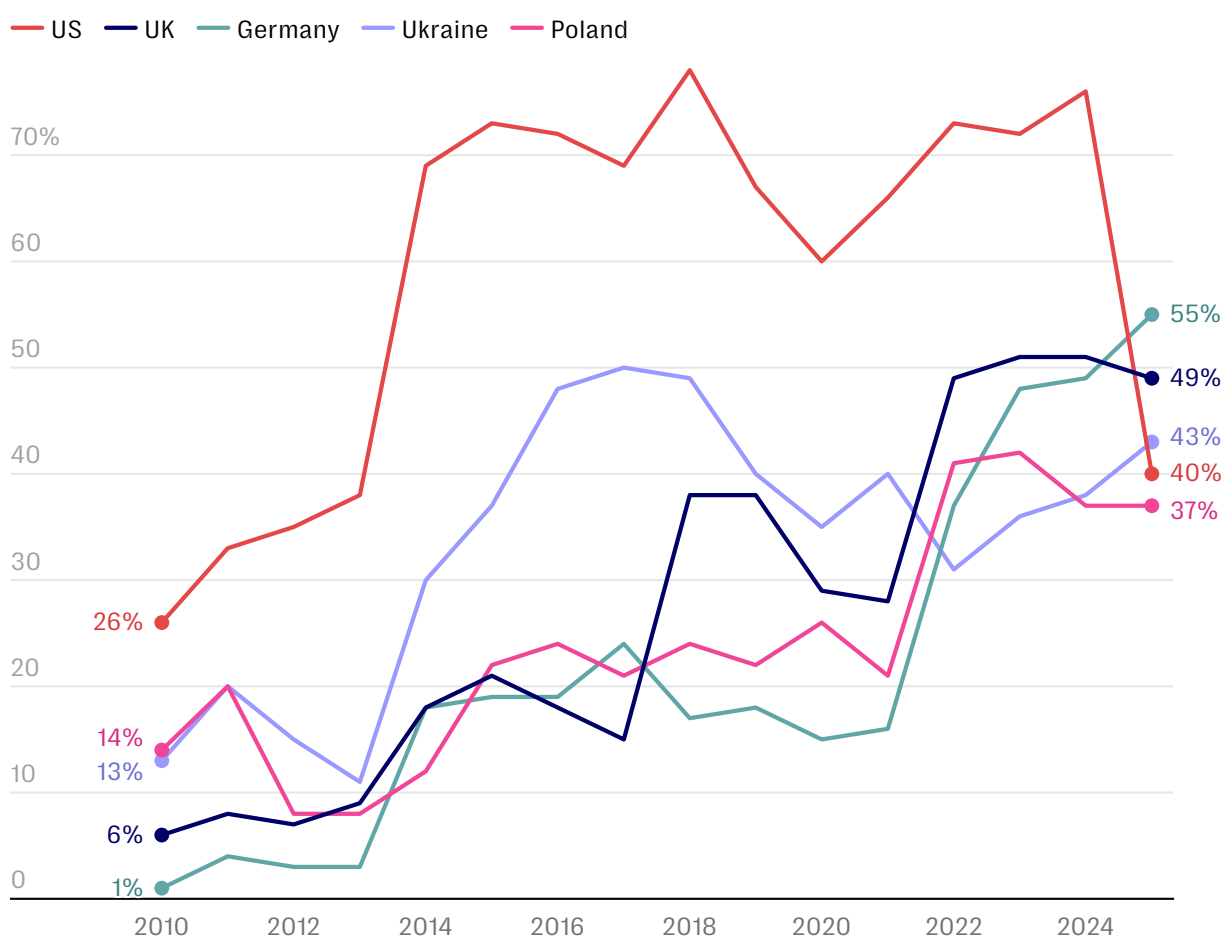
For as long as Russia remains locked on a course of confrontation with what it calls the 'collective West' and there is a US administration ready to accommodate Russian interests, Britain with its traditional approach to Russia is likely to remain Moscow's top public enemy. Russia has a long memory.

Russian attitudes towards the UK: Survey data

The crises that have marked Moscow's relations with London over recent decades have been reflected in the evolution of Russian public attitudes towards the UK. According to data from the Levada Center, in 1991, 75 per cent of Russians said they had a positive view of the UK, while only five per cent expressed a negative opinion. By 2024, the share of those with a positive attitude had declined to just one-sixth (17 per cent), while negative views had risen to 70 per cent, including 25 per cent who felt 'somewhat negatively' and 45 per cent who described their attitude as 'very negative'.

Fig. 1. Which five countries would you name as the most unfriendly, hostile towards Russia?

in % of respondents, Top 5



Source: Levada Center

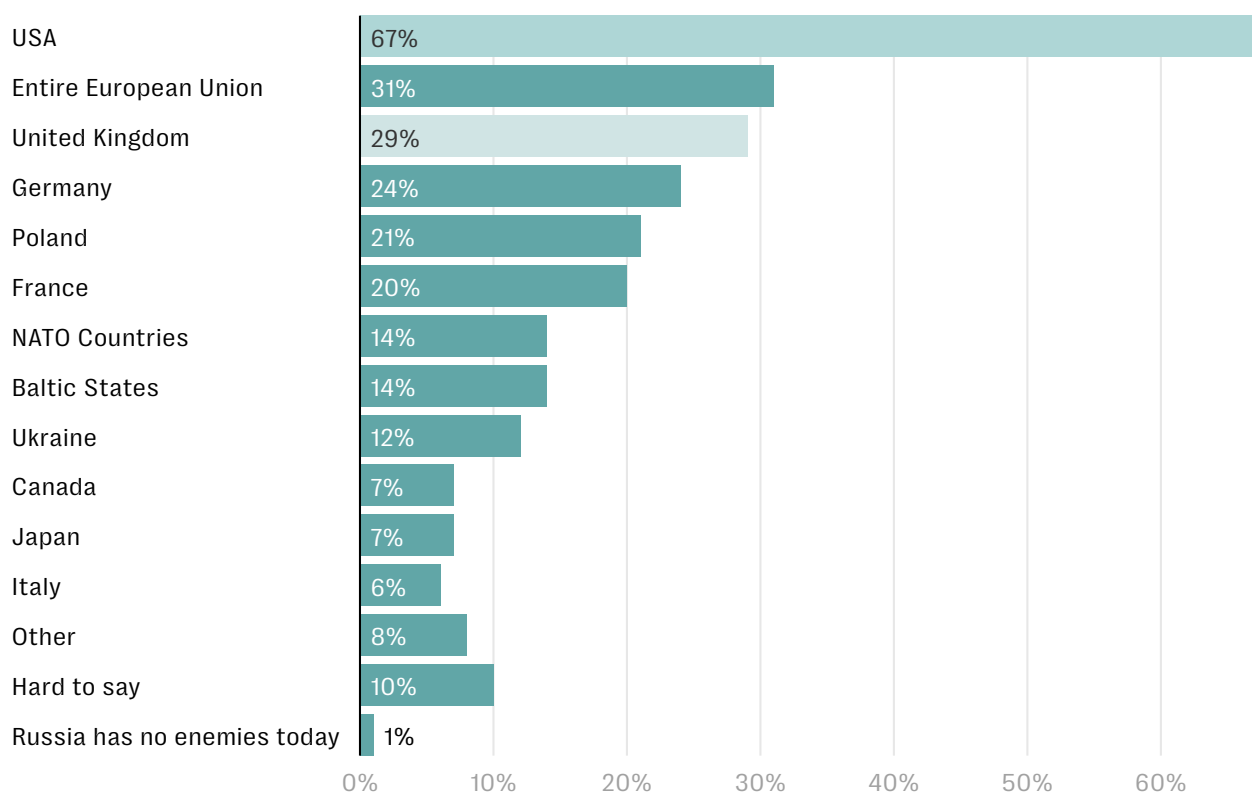
Russian attitudes towards the UK: Survey data

In 2005, the UK ranked tenth among Russia's perceived 'unfriendly' countries. Following the annexation of Crimea, it rose to seventh place. After the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and through to 2024, it consistently occupied second place (51 per cent), behind only the United States (76 per cent).

In 2025, after Donald Trump's return to the White House, which was greeted with optimism in Russia, the share of Russians viewing the US as the main adversary fell to 40 per cent. However, negative attitudes towards the UK remained broadly unchanged (49 per cent), keeping it in second place. Germany rose to first place (55 per cent), likely due to breaking news (at the time of the survey) that Germany would begin supplying Ukraine with long-range missiles.

Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that public opinion may soon regard the UK as Russia's primary enemy. If public disappointment with Trump does not materialise and the United States does not reclaim its former position as Russia's chief adversary, Britain is likely to become firmly established – possibly alone, but for now alongside Germany – as the leading Western power perceived as hostile to Russia (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 2. Which countries are currently Russia's enemies on the international stage? (2022)

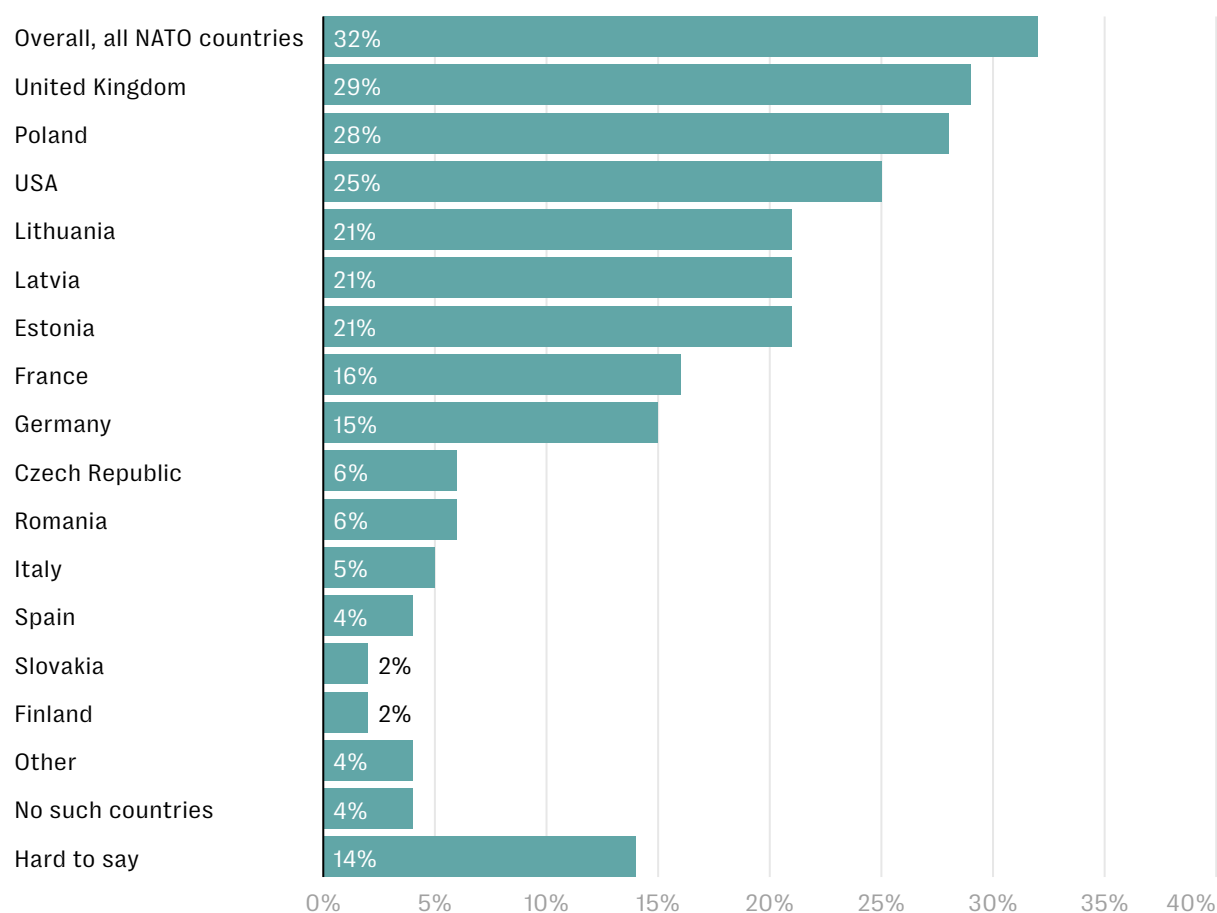


Source: Institute for Conflict Studies and Analysis of Russia (IKAR)

A similar picture is presented by the Institute for Conflict Studies and Analysis of Russia (IKAR). In its surveys conducted in late 2022, the UK was perceived as less hostile to Russia than the United States and Poland among NATO member states (see Fig. 2). However, by January 2025, the situation had shifted (see Fig. 3): 29 per cent of respondents identified the UK as the most hostile country towards Russia, second only to the general category of 'all NATO countries' (32 per cent).

Fig. 3. Which NATO countries are primarily hostile towards Russia? (2025)

Respondents could choose more than one answer



Source: Institute for Conflict Studies and Analysis of Russia (IKAR)

Data from the Levada Center and the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) provides more detailed insights into how different segments of the Russian population view the UK. The key factors influencing attitudes are gender, education level, and age.

Men are more likely than women to express negative views of Britain (75 per cent and 67 per cent, respectively). Among those with lower levels of education, the proportion of respondents who are unable to express a view – due to lack of knowledge – is twice as high as among those with higher education.

However, this group also displays somewhat less hostility: 61 per cent express negative views, compared with 73 per cent among highly educated respondents.

Age is another significant factor (see Table 1). The starkest contrast is between the youngest group (18–24) and the oldest (55+). Among younger respondents, the answers ‘somewhat negative’ and ‘very negative’ were given in nearly equal shares (26 per cent and 28 per cent, respectively – a combined total of 54 per cent). Among the oldest group, the share who answered ‘very negative’ was more than double that of ‘somewhat negative’ (54 per cent and 25 per cent, respectively – totalling 79 per cent). Nearly one-third of young respondents reported a ‘positive’ view of the UK; among the oldest, this share was below 10 per cent.

A similar generational divide appears in a 2018 FOM survey that asked: ‘In your view, is the UK a friendly or unfriendly country towards Russia?’

Table 1. In your view, is the UK a friendly or unfriendly country towards Russia?

Age	18–30	31–45	46–60	60+
Friendly (%)	38	21	13	10
Unfriendly (%)	34	49	65	68
Don’t know (%)	28	30	22	22

Source: Public Opinion Foundation (FOM)

These responses show that even in 2018 – when relations between Russia and the West had already been damaged by the annexation of Crimea, the occupation of parts of Donbas, and the downing of a Malaysian airliner over Ukraine – younger Russians retained substantial potential for a positive view of Britain.

This is further confirmed by answers to a separate question: ‘Which country is developing more successfully – Russia or the UK?’ For younger respondents, Britain’s superiority appears self-evident; for older groups, the preference for Russia reflects a more ideologically driven stance: that Russia is inherently better than ‘capitalist’ Britain. Nevertheless, a third of older respondents chose not to answer at all (see Table 2).

Answers to the direct question ‘Would you like or not like to visit the UK?’ reveal markedly different generational attitudes towards engagement with Britain. Two-thirds of young respondents said they would like to visit the country. Their interest was not diminished by the fact that Britain condemned Russia’s policies and had imposed sanctions. In contrast, among older respondents, the desire to visit Britain was confined to a small minority (see Table 3).

Table 2. Which country is developing more successfully – Russia or the UK?

Age	18–30	31–45	46–60	60+
Russia (%)	30	35	40	43
United Kingdom (%)	53	43	32	24
Don't know (%)	17	21	27	34

Source: Public Opinion Foundation (FOM)

These age-based differences are not limited to perceptions of the UK but reflect broader attitudes towards the West as a whole. The data also shed light on the extent to which negative views of Britain reflect individual convictions versus attitudes shaped by state propaganda.

Table 3. Would you like or not like to visit the UK?

Age	18–30	31–45	46–60	60+
Would like to (%)	62	45	35	15
Would not like to (%)	35	51	61	81
Don't know (%)	1	2	2	2

Source: Public Opinion Foundation (FOM)

In 2024, among the majority of respondents who fully agreed with the direction in which Russia is heading, 76 per cent expressed a 'negative' or 'very negative' attitude towards the UK. Among the minority who stated that Russia was heading in the 'wrong direction', that figure dropped to 55 per cent. This suggests that while anti-British sentiment is widespread, its intensity is closely linked to alignment with the Kremlin's political narrative.

Cognitive warfare: Anti-British narratives in Kremlin propaganda

The deterioration of the UK's image in Russia, and Britain's elevation to the status of Russia's principal enemy, is not solely the result of cultural antagonism, longstanding mistrust, or widespread prejudice. Rather, it reflects a deliberate and strategic construction of an enemy image through a system of targeted narratives. These narratives are disseminated to both elites and the wider public through a variety of propaganda formats, from television talk shows to academic articles and school textbooks. Yet, as British scholar Jade McGlynn has noted, they share a common strategic goal: to undermine the UK's international legitimacy, to shape the perception of Britain within Russia as a toxic and hostile actor, and to lay the groundwork for hybrid or kinetic confrontation.³⁰

The Kremlin has previously employed similar rhetorical strategies, invoking historical grievances, threats, and a sense of moral righteousness, in the lead-up to its attacks on Georgia in 2008 and its two phases of military intervention in Ukraine (in 2014 and 2022). Such narratives, which ridicule, dehumanise, and demonise the adversary, serve to lower the threshold for escalation, expand the perceived scope of possible actions, and prepare both elites and the public to accept – and even support – any form of aggression against the designated enemy.

Anti-British narratives in Russian propaganda can be grouped into several categories:

1. Civilisational confrontation between Russia and Britain

This category of texts emphasises the idea that Britain is the most hostile embodiment of Western civilisation. It frequently employs the term 'Anglo-Saxons', a label that echoes the language of Nazi propaganda, where the same term was used as an ethnophaulism: a derogatory designation for a people or group. The confrontation is framed in existential terms and cast in eschatological and moral language – a struggle between good and evil.

Prominent voices in this discourse include Orthodox nationalists, Russian chauvinists, and figures associated with Russophile movements, such as Aleksandr Dugin, Yegor Kholmogorov, and the Orthodox organisation *Sorok Sorokov*. Representatives of the latter have claimed that 'the Anglo-Saxons, in alliance with the Jews, are the ones shaping worldwide processes of globalisation today. And for the Anglo-Saxons, Russia stands as a major obstacle to the establishment of a New World Order (...). The Russian people, along with other indigenous peoples of Russia, are engaged in an existential struggle against the Anglo-Saxons.'

2. Historical hostility and alleged inherent 'Russophobia'

One of President Putin's close allies, Sergei Ivanov, has publicly endorsed the conspiratorial claim that the UK has always been Russia's 'eternal enemy'. Citing historical examples, Ivanov referenced the case of prominent Russian émigré and publicist Aleksandr Herzen who famously lived in London and conducted anti-tsarist agitation from there. The new official interpretation recasts this history, portraying Britain as having secretly orchestrated revolutionary unrest in Russia, from Herzen to Lenin.

Propaganda efforts seek to frame the current confrontation as a continuation of this deep-rooted historical tradition: according to this narrative, the 'Anglo-Saxons' have either directly attacked Russia (as in the Crimean War or the 1918 intervention in Arkhangelsk), or incited others to do so. Sergei Shoigu, the former Russian Minister of Defence and current Secretary of the Security Council, has claimed that Britain encouraged Hitler to expand eastwards.³¹ Sergey Naryshkin, Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), has asserted that Britain and France themselves were preparing to attack the USSR in early 1940.³²

Accusations of British 'Russophobia' are most frequently voiced by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Maria Zakharova, as well as in public statements by the Russian Embassy in London.³³

3. Britain's imperial and colonial essence

Russian officials regularly invoke Britain's colonial past. State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin has cited the three million slaves transported by Britain across the Atlantic between the 16th and 19th centuries as 'the most monstrous crime in its entire history'.³⁴ The pro-Kremlin political analyst Sergey Markov³⁵ has referred to 'tens of millions of victims' among Black, Asian, and Indian populations.³⁶ Zakharova has called Britain the 'world champion of genocide', citing, for example, the claimed extermination of 90–95 per cent of Australia's indigenous population during colonisation.³⁷

The cover of a new Russian school history textbook, devoted to the 19th and early 20th centuries and edited by Vladimir Medinsky, a key ideologue of the Putin administration, features a painting by Russian artist Vasily Vereshchagin depicting British troops executing sepoys by cannon fire during the Indian Rebellion ('the Devil's Wind'), reinforcing the image of British colonial cruelty for Russian schoolchildren. The textbook was introduced into the national curriculum in September 2023.

At the same time, it is claimed that Britain has not shed its colonial mindset. The Falklands War of 1982 is often cited as proof: 'The British government is willing to kill and die for colonies,' said Zakharova.³⁸ This colonial lens is extended to British institutions such as the British Council and the BBC, to the global spread of the English language, and even to the influence of English law, which former president Dmitry Medvedev has described as 'a political time bomb'.³⁹

Accordingly, the war in Ukraine is portrayed as a continuation of the imperial and colonial policies of the ‘Anglo-Saxons’. It is clear that this strand of the propaganda narrative is aimed not only at domestic audiences but also at countries in the Global South. Much like the Soviet Union in the 1960s–1980s, the Russian government is attempting to project itself as a champion against global imperialism, embodied by Britain and the United States.

4. Decline and humiliation of Britain

This narrative is marked by a schizophrenic dualism: on the one hand, the UK is portrayed as a dangerous enemy; on the other, as a weakened power, a puppet of the United States, and a society in moral and social decay. Zakharova, the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, talks about the ‘domestic collapse of the British monarchy amid endless conspiracies, crises, and corruption scandals’;⁴⁰ Sergey Markov refers to ‘a group of thugs who have seized power in what was once Great Britain’;⁴¹ Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov claims that London ‘wags its tail before its American master’; and former Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev declares that the Commonwealth is falling apart.⁴²

This portrayal of total disintegration is not so much intended to emphasise the threat posed by Britain as to delegitimise, devalue, and dehumanise the adversary – to establish a narrative of moral superiority, and perhaps even to justify intervention. Historically, similar propaganda narratives about the ‘puppet regime of Saakashvili’ or the ‘Kyiv junta’ preceded actual military incursions.

5. The hypocrisy of ‘perfidious Albion’

Another prominent theme centres on alleged British hypocrisy – the gap between Britain’s declared values and its real-world actions. President Putin has repeatedly invoked Britain’s betrayal of Czechoslovakia alongside France on the eve of the Second World War. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accuses the UK of double standards, comparing the referendums on self-determination in the Falkland Islands and Crimea.⁴³ The Russian Foreign Ministry’s Telegram channel speaks of ‘Britain’s ecosystem of lies and provocation’.⁴⁴

This effort to discredit Britain’s moral authority serves to justify questionable actions by Russia and promotes one of the Kremlin’s core narratives: ‘nothing is as it seems’ and ‘everyone lies’. By undermining the notion of a rules-based international order, the narrative creates a moral equivalence in which Russia’s actions are framed as no worse – or even more honest – than those of the West.

6. Britain as the instigator of wars – including the war in Ukraine

From a historical perspective, as noted above, Russian propaganda frequently depicts the UK as responsible for triggering the Second World War and many subsequent global conflicts. In today’s context, this is projected onto the war in Ukraine, where Britain is portrayed not merely as a supporter of Kyiv, but as the architect and main driver of the conflict.⁴⁵

This narrative is especially prominent among security officials and institutions: Nikolai Patrushev, the former Secretary of the Security Council, Aleksandr Bortnikov, the Director of the Federal Security Service (FSB), State Duma Deputy Leonid Slutsky, who is closely aligned with the security services, and the press service of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR).⁴⁶ They advance a conspiratorial vision in which Britain is not acting as Ukraine's ally but rather as the mastermind behind a proxy war, persuading Europe to 'fight to the last Ukrainian'⁴⁷ (Vyacheslav Volodin) and even allegedly orchestrating specific incidents such as the shelling of Belgorod close to the Ukrainian border (according to Leonid Slutsky).⁴⁸

In this framework, Russian propaganda reinforces one of its central messages: this is not a war *in* Ukraine or *for* Ukraine, but a broader confrontation between Russia and the 'collective West', led by a fictionalised 'Anglo-Saxon' force, with the UK at its helm. Ukraine is cast as a proxy of London in what is portrayed as Britain's centuries-old mission to destroy Russia.

7. Accusations of terrorism and sabotage

Russian propaganda also routinely accuses the UK of involvement in terrorist attacks and acts of sabotage targeting Russia or Russian nationals.⁴⁹ These include the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko, the blowing up of the Nord Stream gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea,⁵⁰ and the terrorist attack committed by Islamists at the Crocus City Hall concert venue in Moscow in March 2024 (cited by Aleksandr Bortnikov).⁵¹ These incidents are presented as evidence of Britain's active engagement in hybrid warfare against Russia.

As these statements show, the most extreme accusations are voiced by members of the security establishment, where conspiratorial thinking is especially entrenched.

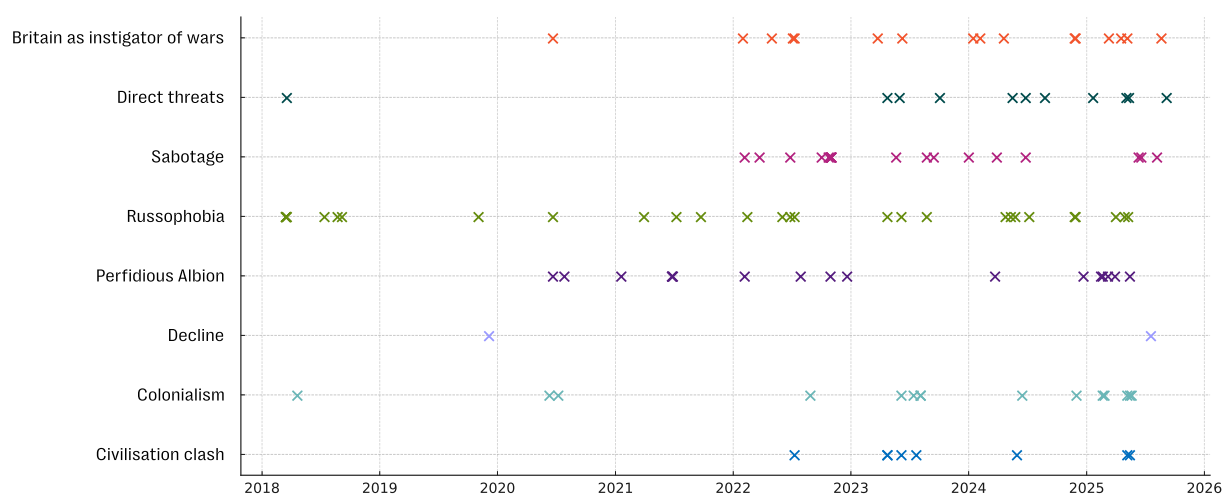
8. Open threats of destruction

A striking feature of Russia's anti-British propaganda is the frequency of open threats directed at the UK, including its complete annihilation. Dmitry Medvedev has fantasised about the 'damp and miserable island' sinking 'into the depths of the sea from a wave generated by Russia's latest weapon systems', praising the RS-28 *Sarmat* strategic missile.⁵² Talk show hosts on the state television channel *Rossiya* have claimed that the *Sarmat* 'can carry 15 warheads and wipe out a territory the size of the UK in a single strike'. State Duma deputy Andrei Gurulyov has called on Russian scientists to 'develop biological weapons to eliminate the Anglo-Saxons'.

While such statements are often dismissed within Russia as political trolling or crude sarcasm, their effect is nonetheless serious: they normalise the language of war, lower the threshold for escalation, and familiarise the audience with the idea of armed confrontation. Within this discourse of violence, calls for the destruction of the UK are a routine, ritualised utterance, delivered automatically and functioning as an act of rhetorical aggression in itself.

When examined over time, it becomes clear that the frequency of these narratives has grown steadily – particularly since the launch of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, during which Britain emerged as one of Kyiv’s most consistent allies and a leading advocate of a hardline approach towards Moscow. The trend is illustrated below (see Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. The rising frequency of anti-British narratives across Russian propaganda platforms



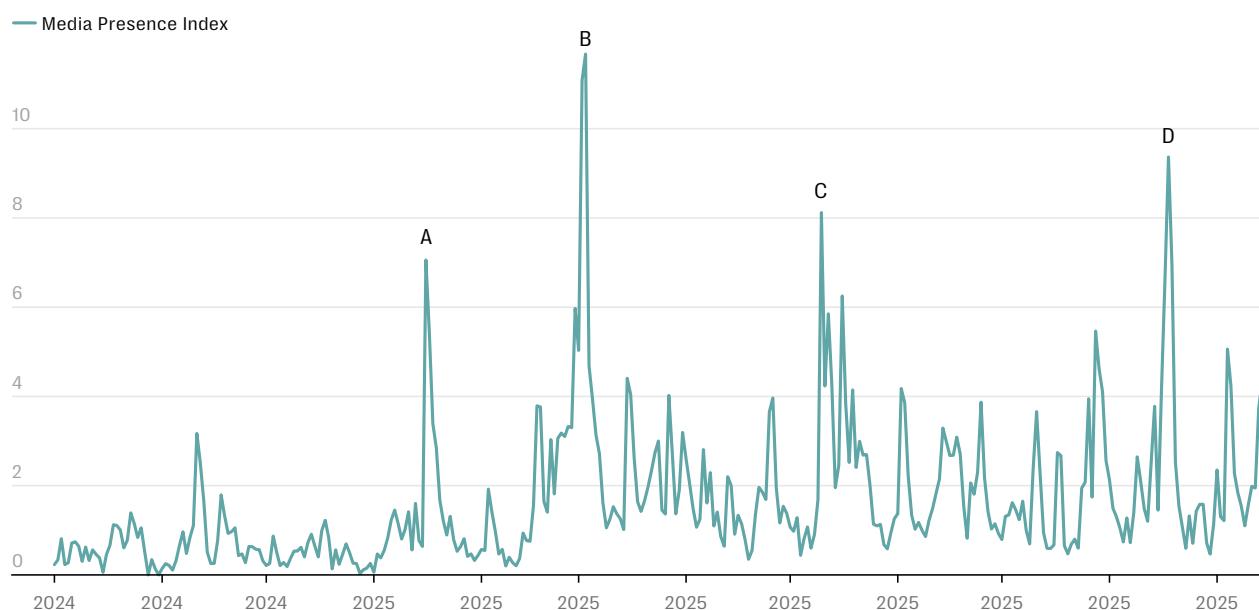
Source: NEST Centre

The same correlation can be observed in the frequency of mentions of Prime Minister Keir Starmer in Russian media (see Fig. 5). Monitoring data compiled by the NEST Centre shows that peaks in media coverage during his first year in office align with key developments related to the war and Western support for Ukraine.

The most significant spike in anti-British coverage occurred during the London summit on Ukraine, when, on 2 March 2025, Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced the formation of a ‘Coalition of the Willing’. Other notable peaks included 16 January 2025, when the UK and Ukraine signed a 100-year security partnership agreement, and 10 May 2025, when Starmer joined Volodymyr Zelensky, Emmanuel Macron, Friedrich Merz, and Donald Tusk to discuss a proposed ceasefire deal between the United States and Russia.

As NEST Centre data analysts have noted, there were moments when the British Prime Minister received four times more coverage in the Russian press than Russia’s own Prime Minister, Mikhail Mishustin. This reflects the exceptional role assigned to the UK in Russian propaganda narratives surrounding the war in Ukraine.

Fig. 5. Keir Starmer's media presence index (Russian sources)



Media coverage spikes:

A – Signing of the 100-year agreement (16 January)

B – Formation of the Coalition of the Willing (3 March)

C – Coalition of the Willing summit (10 May)

D – US visit in support of Volodymyr Zelensky (18 August)

Chart: The Media Presence Index is a proprietary NEST Centre's metric that captures how prominently a person features in Russian-language media on a given day, weighing both their centrality to each story and the reach of the story. Higher values signal greater visibility.

Source: NEST Centre

The Kremlin's anti-British propaganda can be seen as operating across three layers:

- First, ideological voices – particularly those from patriotic, Orthodox, and ultranationalist circles – portray Britain as Russia's eternal enemy and the leading representative of a hostile Western civilisation. Within this discourse, the conflict is cast in eschatological, existential, and religious terms.
- Second, officials and bureaucrats amplify themes of British decline, moral decay, and the hypocrisy of the 'Anglo-Saxons', often focusing on double standards and strategic cynicism. This layer of the narrative is presented in diplomatic language but remains highly adversarial.
- Third, the most aggressive rhetoric originates from the security establishment, which appears to view the UK as the centre of terrorist operations, proxy warfare, and direct provocations against Russia, and as the principal instigator of the war in Ukraine.⁵³ It is evident that this same sector is likely involved in formulating strategies for countermeasures and pre-emptive actions against Britain.

A distinct subgenre of propaganda also exists in the form of political trolling, where the nuclear or biological annihilation of Britain is discussed with flippancy and sarcasm. This rhetorical style fosters an atmosphere of impunity and cynicism in Russia's information war.

As Jade McGlynn notes, 'The image of the UK portrayed in Russian state and quasi-state discourse bears no resemblance to reality. It is a constructed adversary: declining, hypocritical, colonialist, secretive, and morally degenerate. But the aim is not accuracy – it is utility. This image is part of Russia's cognitive warfare infrastructure, designed to legitimise hostility, prepare domestic audiences, and justify escalation.'⁵⁴

Cultural warfare: Confronting British soft power

Russia's cognitive and rhetorical campaign against the UK is accompanied by a targeted assault on British soft power. Over the past decade, beginning with the annexation of Crimea and the introduction of Western sanctions, the Russian authorities have pursued a systematic policy of reducing Britain's diplomatic, legal, cultural, and educational presence in the country.

The most notable development was the closure of the British Council's operations in Russia in March 2018. This was presented as a retaliatory move following the expulsion of Russian diplomats from the UK in response to the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal.⁵⁵ In June 2025, the British Council was officially declared an 'undesirable organisation' under Russian law, a designation that criminalises any cooperation with it, past or present, and places at risk anyone who has ever participated in its programmes.⁵⁶

The implications are wide-ranging. Among other roles, the British Council served as an official organiser of the IELTS English-language examination, which is required by many Russians seeking to study abroad. Under the new designation, Russian authorities could interpret payment for the test as involvement with an 'undesirable' organisation, potentially exposing individuals to criminal liability.

Also in 2018, the British Consulate in St Petersburg was closed, and 23 British diplomats were expelled.⁵⁷ Limitations on the UK's diplomatic and consular activities intensified further in 2022, when Britain was formally added to Russia's list of 'unfriendly states'. From 2023 onwards, restrictions on the movement of British diplomats within Russia have become increasingly tight, often on the basis of allegations by the Foreign Ministry that the UK and the US were involved in decisions to strike the Crimean Bridge. Diplomatic expulsions are also frequently justified by Moscow in response to Western discussions about expanding strikes deeper into Russian territory.

For the past decade, Russia has steadily expanded its so-called 'stop lists' and imposed entry bans on representatives of British educational and analytical institutions, consulting firms, NGOs, and media outlets. These measures have affected hundreds of individuals, including politicians, officials, policy experts, and staff at universities and research centres such as Forward Strategy Limited, the Institute for Statecraft (dissolved in 2023), the Media Diversity Institute, Toro Risk Solutions, Chatham House, the Open Knowledge Foundation, Privacy International, the Aga Khan Foundation, and Peace Child International. In 2022, Chatham House was formally designated as an undesirable organisation in Russia.

Between 2022 and 2025, Moscow publicly announced sanctions against British citizens on 17 occasions: six times in 2022, four times in 2023, six times in 2024, and once in 2025.

The largest such announcement came on 27 April 2022, when 287 Members of Parliament from the House of Commons were subjected to Russian travel bans.⁵⁸ The list also includes former Prime Ministers Boris Johnson, Theresa May, and Rishi Sunak, current and former Cabinet ministers (including Foreign and Defence Secretaries), MPs, senior officers of the British armed forces, and numerous other figures.

Britain's cultural presence has also been steadily rolled back. This process began with the effective boycott of the UK–Russia Year of Culture in 2014 and continued with the cancellation of the British film 'The Death of Stalin' in 2018. Most recently, in 2025, the Garage Museum in Moscow cancelled planned exhibitions of British artists. It is worth noting, however, that many cultural initiatives have been suspended at the initiative of British artists, institutions, and curators themselves, as acts of protest against Russia's war in Ukraine.

This radical reduction in Britain's cultural, educational, legal, humanitarian, and diplomatic footprint in Russia is part of a declared campaign against 'British colonialism' and 'cultural imperialism'. More broadly, Russia is actively purging its educational and cultural sphere of any Western influence. It has withdrawn from the Bologna Process, the International Baccalaureate (IB) programme, and joint university degrees with Western institutions. Given that British institutions – and the English language itself – held a dominant role in many of these programmes, they have suffered the greatest losses.

For centuries, Britain has been a principal force in shaping and expanding Western civilisation. Now that Russia is deliberately and demonstratively distancing itself from that civilisation, the UK has become one of the first – and most prominent – targets of that withdrawal.

Hybrid warfare: Sabotage and cyber espionage against the UK

As the UK has risen to the top of Russia's list of geopolitical adversaries, it has increasingly become a target of hybrid warfare, a core element of the Kremlin's strategic doctrine since the early years of Vladimir Putin's presidency. Sabotage operations against the UK – both on its territory and in digital space – have been documented for at least two decades. These operations can be broadly grouped into three streams:

1. Sabotage, poisonings, and the establishment of espionage networks

- **November 2006:** Former FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko was poisoned with radioactive polonium-210 in London. According to the findings of an official British inquiry, the operation was conducted by the FSB and 'probably' authorised personally by then FSB Director Nikolai Patrushev and President Vladimir Putin.⁵⁹
- **November 2012:** Russian businessman and whistleblower Alexander Perepilichnyy died suddenly in Surrey. Traces of the rare gelsemium toxin were found in his body. Although the official cause of death was reported as natural, experts and media sources have raised the possibility of an assassination orchestrated by Russian intelligence services.⁶⁰
- **March 2018:** Former GRU (Russian military intelligence) colonel Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia were targeted in Salisbury using the military-grade nerve agent Novichok. A police officer was also injured in the attack, and a local resident, Dawn Sturgess, later died after incidental exposure to the same substance.⁶¹
- **February 2023:** Five individuals were arrested in London by counter-terrorism units on suspicion of espionage for Russia. In March 2025, a jury found three Bulgarian nationals – Katrin Ivanova, Vanya Gaberova, and Tihomir Ivanchev – guilty of acting as agents for Russian military intelligence. According to the prosecution, the Bulgarian cell (dubbed 'the Minions') operated under the direction of Jan Marsalek, a former senior Wirecard executive who fled to Moscow. The network conducted surveillance on journalists, dissidents and military facilities. Two of its leaders – Orlin Rusev and Biser Dzhambazov – pleaded guilty in court.⁶²
- **March 2024** (verdict delivered July 2025): A fire was deliberately set at warehouses used by Ukrainian companies in Leyton, East London. The investigation linked the attack to a Russian contract and to operatives affiliated with the Wagner Group. Three individuals were convicted. The British authorities also uncovered additional plots attributed to the same group, including plans to set fire to a restaurant and wine shop in Mayfair and to kidnap their owner, millionaire and Russian dissident Yevgeny Chichvarkin.⁶³

2. Disinformation campaigns and social media manipulation

Russia has made repeated attempts to influence British public opinion through information warfare and digital propaganda. According to the UK Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee, the Kremlin sought to interfere in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. Pro-Kremlin bloggers and online activists promoted Scottish secession, comparing the referendum to Russia's staged 'votes' in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. While the effort failed to impact the final result, it demonstrated Moscow's growing interest in destabilising Britain's domestic politics.

Notably, former Scottish National Party (SNP) leader Alex Salmond, who stepped down following the 2014 vote, later became the host of a show on the Russian state channel 'Russia Today' (RT). This symbolic association with Kremlin media has been a source of controversy in the UK, particularly given that the SNP strongly supports Ukrainian sovereignty and consistently calls on the British government to intensify its assistance to Ukraine.

More recently, Russian-linked bloggers and accounts traced to Russian IP addresses were actively involved in spreading disinformation during anti-migrant protests that took place across several British cities in July–August 2024. These campaigns amplified xenophobic narratives, promoted conspiracy theories, and aimed to deepen polarisation within British society.

3. Cyber espionage and hacking operations

Russian cyber operations targeting the UK became more visible after 2014. In the summer of 2015, the email accounts of one of the UK's television stations were hacked. In October 2017, servers in the UK and other countries were infected by the VPNFilter malware. In March 2018, shortly after the Skripal poisoning, a spear-phishing attack was carried out against the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). Later that year, an attempt was made to gain access to the UK's Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL). According to the National Cyber Security Centre, these attacks were 'almost certainly' conducted by cyber units of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (GRU).⁶⁴

Another Russian agency, the Federal Security Service (FSB), and its affiliated groups, Star Blizzard and Centre-18, also engaged in cyber operations against British democratic institutions. Between 2015 and 2023, a sustained spear-phishing campaign targeted MPs, civil servants, NGOs, and journalists. In 2019, there was a cyberattack and pre-election leak of confidential documents on UK–US trade negotiations. In 2018, the accounts of Chris Donnelly, one of the co-founders of the Institute for Statecraft think tank, were compromised and sensitive data was released.⁶⁵

Finally, attention should be drawn to Russia-linked hacker groups such as Cozy Bear and APT29, which conducted global cyberattacks that included targets in the UK.

These operations included attacks on COVID-19 vaccine developers in July 2020, and the SolarWinds IT company in December of the same year. Cyber operations remain a strategic priority for Russia and its capabilities continue to grow more sophisticated each year.

UK vulnerabilities to Russian military pressure

The most significant threat to the UK comes from Russia's nuclear arsenal. Moscow's intimidatory information operations regularly refer to the possible use of nuclear weapons. A worst-case scenario could conceivably involve Russia using nuclear weapons to escalate or de-escalate a crisis in which the UK is singled out as a target.

In the case of Russia's military planning for full-scale war, the UK remains the top priority in Europe as it was during the Cold War because of the need to stop the US using its military bases in the UK to send reinforcements to the European theatre.

Like many of its other European allies in NATO, the UK significantly reduced investment in its armed forces after the collapse of the USSR and re-configured them for conflicts with non-state actors outside Europe. Following the Strategic Defence Review published in June 2025, the focus of British defence policy is now on re-building the capacity to deter full-scale war by demonstrating warfighting readiness.⁶⁶

Beyond the UK, there is a threat to British forces based in Estonia as part of NATO's enhanced forward presence. In the event of war with Russia these units would be particularly vulnerable since they are a generation behind Russia in terms of ground war tactics involving the mass use of drones.

The UK also faces a number of indirect military threats. These include:

- The expansion of Russia's Northern Fleet, and the lack of UK naval capacity to respond effectively by blocking its movements, as was the Royal Navy's role during the Cold War.
- Potential attacks on British civilian and military vessels in the Baltic Sea. These could be targeted as a provocation or as part of escalatory action.
- Threats to subsea infrastructure, including internet and communications cables and electricity interconnectors. Severe damage to these would effectively isolate the UK prior to any conventional war or nuclear exchange. Sabotage could also include severe cyber-attacks aimed at crippling infrastructure.

Russian efforts to drive wedges between Britain, the US, and the EU could place further pressure on the cohesion of NATO and affect the development of the 'Coalition of the Willing' led by the UK and France, whose aim is to provide defence support to Ukraine. This Russian policy may also impact intelligence sharing with the US, including through the 'Five Eyes' alliance that groups the UK alongside Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the US. Since Trump's return to the White House, there have been reports that some US allies are considering reducing the intelligence they share with Washington.⁶⁷

Russia's development of closer links with China, Iran, and North Korea as a result of the war in Ukraine is being monitored closely by London, as is the cooperation of these countries among themselves. There is no indication so far of an alliance forming between them but Iranian exports of drone technology to Russia and China's supply of electronics, for example, have made it possible for the Russian defence industry to establish its own substantial drone production capacity. Russian battlefield tactics have also quickly absorbed this new weapon to considerable effect. Russia's 'first mover advantage' in this area currently poses a major challenge for the British Army and its NATO allies.⁶⁸

Conclusions

- Russia's framing of the UK as a principal adversary reflects a long-term strategic trend. While it is clearly tied to the current war in Ukraine and the UK's strong support for Kyiv, the shift is more fundamental in nature, and is likely to persist beyond the current conflict and the rule of Vladimir Putin. Even as Moscow exploits every opportunity to belittle Britain and point to its alleged weaknesses, this behaviour paradoxically signals an overestimation of the UK's importance.
- The roots of this shift lie in a longstanding cultural tradition of hostility towards Britain, intensified by post-imperial resentment. The UK – even more so than the United States – is perceived as a civilisational alternative to Russia, a concentrated expression of the 'collective West', a kind of 'anti-Russia'. The confrontation is often framed in civilisational and even eschatological terms, as a battle between good and evil.
- The special relationship between the UK and the United States – reaffirmed most recently during Donald Trump's visit to London in September 2025 – reinforces Russia's perception of Britain as a key adversary since the Kremlin has no reason or wish to depict the Trump administration as hostile to Russian interests despite its concerns about the residual influence of the US 'deep state'. Echoing Soviet-era rhetoric, the British Isles are once again portrayed as an 'American aircraft carrier' – a forward base of US political and military influence in Europe.
- The epicentre of Anglophobia in Russia lies with the security and intelligence agencies – the ideological and structural core of the Putin regime. Within these circles, conspiracy theories about Britain's supposed eternal mission to undermine Russia enjoy particular popularity. Russian officials frequently claim to detect a 'British hand' behind global developments perceived as threatening to Russian interests.
- Russia's anti-British turn manifests across multiple levels of confrontation: a cognitive and rhetorical war (propagating anti-UK narratives at home and abroad); a cultural and diplomatic war (dismantling British cultural and educational institutions in Russia and reducing Britain's diplomatic presence); a hybrid war (sabotage, disinformation operations, spy networks, cyberattacks); and escalating risks of kinetic conflict, including both nuclear and non-nuclear scenarios. Britain's image in Russia is being steadily stigmatised, demonised, and dehumanised, presenting Britain as a legitimate target for potential military action, thereby lowering the threshold for escalation.
- Traces of traditional Anglophilia persist among segments of the Russian educated class, where Britain is still regarded as a cultural and civilisational benchmark. In the future, this residual sentiment might provide a basis for renewed engagement between the UK and a democratised Russia. However, as the present regime tightens control over public and private life, including intellectual and cultural expression, Anglophilia is increasingly treated as a subversive inclination and a potential marker of an 'internal enemy'.

About the authors

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