

Russia's restrained reaction to British report on Litvinenko's death

Witold Rodkiewicz

On 21 January, Judge Robert Owen published a report presenting the results of an independent investigation ordered by the Government of the United Kingdom into the death of the Russian political emigré Aleksandr Litvinenko in 2006. According to the report, Litvinenko was poisoned with polonium-210 by two Russian citizens who are most likely to have been acting on behalf of the FSB, with the approval of President Vladimir Putin.

Russian reaction to the report has so far been purely verbal, and limited to questioning its objectivity and issuing warnings that if Britain continues to raise the Litvinenko case, bilateral relations will suffer. As Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov stated on 22 January, not "the Litvinenko case" but "the spectacle" around it would "seriously complicate" relations. The Russian Ambassador in London, Aleksandr Yakovenko, said on 21 January that there would not be any further Russian reaction to the publication of the report, and the presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov reiterated that Russia would provide the British with "all the necessary responses" to questions about the Litvinenko case.

Commentary

- The Russian government usually reacts sharply to actions taken by other governments when it perceives them as damaging to their interests, and as a general rule it applies the principle of 'symmetrical retaliation'. Examples of this include visa sanctions on the USA and a ban on adoptions after the passing by the American Congress of the so-called Magnitski list (November 2012); the beating of a Dutch diplomat in Moscow after Dutch police detained a Russian diplomat in the Hague (13 October); the detention of athletes from Qatar in Moscow after authorities in the Gulf state arrested Russian agents accused of the murder of a leading Chechen separatist, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev (February 2004).
- In the light of these practices, the Russian reaction should be considered as quite restrained. The Kremlin has chosen neither to restrict political contacts, nor to reduce security cooperation, nor to take openly retaliatory steps against persons involved in preparing the report. Instead, Russian diplomacy has been trying to suggest that the Litvinenko case should not prevent dialogue on such essential matters as the Syrian and Russian-Ukrainian conflicts.
- It seems that this rather moderate response from the Russian authorities results from a sense of the weakness of their own position, due to the economic situation and Russia's

strained relations with the West. At this point Russia is not interested in escalating conflict with the West, and particularly not with London, which serves as an important centre of financial services for the Russian elite. Nor does it wish to harm its efforts to escape, on its own terms, from its relative political isolation from the West. Especially since last autumn, these efforts have begun to bring some results. However, in the future we cannot rule out informal Russian retaliation against Britain in a manner which would allow Moscow to disassociate itself from such moves (such as leaking information likely to embarrass high British officials, or the harassment of citizens and British companies on Russian territory).