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Theresa May is weak prime minister – Lord Peter Truscott

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Lord Peter Truscott - a member of the UK's House of Lords and former member of the European Parliament

The controversy surrounding the poisoning of ex-spy Sergei Skripal has plunged relations between Moscow and London into another crisis. What is the way out of the deadlock? We talked to Lord Peter Truscott, a member of the UK's House of Lords and former member of the European Parliament.

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Sophie Shevardnadze: *Lord Peter Truscott, welcome to the show. It's really great to have you with us. The head of MI5 recently said that the Kremlin is "the chief protagonist" in the campaign to undermine the West. Why would the Russian government want that? I mean, the EU being Russia's number one trading partner means that Russia can't be strong with the West being weak...*

Peter Truscott: Well, you know this is sort of the position of not just the UK government, but other governments as well in the West. I think, unfortunately, it's part of this historic pattern of wanting to contain Russia and seeing Russia as an opponent. And this goes back to the formation of NATO really in the 1940s which was established as an anti-Soviet military pact in those days. And, of course, there was a hope that things would improve after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of the Soviet Union. But, unfortunately, that hasn't developed as many people hoped. You even had people like James Baker, the former Secretary of State, saying in 1993 that Russia could perhaps join NATO. Unfortunately, it never happened. And I think, there

was a lost opportunity there at the end of the Cold War and the breakup of USSR.

SS: *Right, but what's that point of Russia joining NATO if NATO was originally created to counter the Soviet Union and in big part Russia? I mean, NATO in itself with Russia in it is obsolete, it doesn't make any sense. Anyways, the Guardian has reported that the UK is planning to use upcoming summits - like the G7, G20, NATO and the EU gatherings - to tighten the diplomatic front against Russia. Do you think the Foreign Office will succeed?*

PT: Just going back to the whole NATO thing, I think, if NATO wasn't a pact designed to counter Russia and the Soviet Union there's no reason why as a collective security organisation that Russia couldn't join... I think, that was the point about Russia joining NATO and not joining NATO. And I think President Putin has talked about that. So it's not beyond the realm of possibility. You know, I think, times are changing. Since the Second World War the British foreign policy has basically been to keep as close to the United States as possible. And there were clear reasons for that. Britain relied on the United States, from their perspective, to defend themselves against the strength of the Soviet Union. That was the first thing. The British policy has always been - if we want to influence foreign affairs we need to stay close to the United States and try to influence them to our advantage. But the world has changed. I think that the world that existed before where you had one hyperpower after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of the Soviet Union, ie the United States, is no longer the case. You have the rising China - the population of China is almost one sixth of the world's population. It has already overtaken the United States in economic terms and in terms of spending power, in terms of the growth of standard of living in China and the growth of the economy. So the world is changing. And I think, the United Kingdom has to bear that in mind when it comes to assess the foreign policy for the future.

SS: *But also I feel like Russia being this infernal enemy is a very comfortable thing to have for many western countries for many reasons. For instance, UK Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson has recently appealed for more defence funding citing "Russia's resurgence under Putin". You may remember his predecessor Michael Fallon using the very same language when asking for increased defence spending. Does this Russia card work flawlessly every time here, are defence secretaries just happy about Putin's image feeding their budgets?*

PT: Well, the first thing is that UK's defence forces are underfunded. I mean, the army hasn't been as small since the time of the Napoleonic war, but I think, you need to get this in perspective. NATO's spending is already collectively 20 times that of Russia. So Russia in terms of its spending on military forces is still some way behind NATO. As I said, there has been this sort of ratcheting up of rhetoric in terms of the security threat that Russia poses. But I think, the world is facing a bigger threat from the international terrorism which we've clearly seen both on the streets of British cities and across Europe and indeed in Russia and notably, of course, in the Middle East. So I would say that the greatest threat, the existential threat to the West and other countries in the world is actually international terrorism. There are other areas that we need to work together at, for example, fighting the global trade of drugs, people trafficking, and there are areas where we need to work together to bring peace, notably in Syria, Iraq is still an issue, Afghanistan and the latest example in North Korea as well where President Trump and his administration are working to achieve denuclearisation on the Korean Peninsula. These are all areas that we should be working together, not focusing on what is effectively Cold-War rhetoric. And sometimes from both sides we need to actually move away from that, and some of the rhetoric hasn't been very helpful in terms of engagement and development a world peace.

SS: *So how far will London go in confronting Russia, can it afford to, for instance, cut financial ties with Russia, what with all the Russian investment in the UK? Do you think, they can do that?*

PT: Well, I mean, Russia is not a major inward investor to the UK, the United States is the major inward investor, France, for example, and other EU countries are major investors. But it will have a disproportionate effect if, for example, Russians do not invest in the UK. We've already seen that Roman Abramovich has said that he will cancel the one-billion-pound development of a football stadium in West London which will hit that local economy and London economy. So there will be a cost to take this sort of action. Of course, I'm not against the UK or any other countries fighting an influx of dirty money. We all know where the oligarchs in early 1990s got their money from with the breakup of the Soviet Union. And a lot of the wealth Russia had ended up in the hands of a few people.

SS: *Does it apply to Roman Abramovich, for instance? 'Cause you just brought him up as an example, because his money seems to be quite transparent and clean. What do you read into Roman Abramovich's work visa not being renewed in the UK - is this the very first of many more refusals to come?*

PT: Clearly, it's political. But, you know, what I've said to the government and the UK Security Minister, it's ok to tackle dirty money and to tackle criminality, that's fair enough, but you need to be objective and do it across-the-board. Not just Russian oligarchs, let's face it, virtually a lot of them acquired their wealth in dubious manner in the early 1990s, but also taking on maybe dubious Saudi princes, dirty money from Africa and China. So if we are going to tackle the influx of dirty money then we need to do it across-the-board. And it should be for moral reasons, for economic reasons. It shouldn't be politically motivated. The danger is to pick one or two individuals, it looks like political motivation.

SS: *Sure. Do we agree that in Abramovich's case it's politically motivated rather than tackling dirty money?*

PT: Well, they are not actually saying that Roman Abramovich's money was dirty. They were saying that they were merely looking into his case and there was no decision on that. They haven't said that Abramovich's wealth came from known sort of sources. They just say that under the new visa rules they need to look into his case in more detail. But I think it's pretty clear that a lot of oligarchs and other people who seem to be close to President Putin have come under increased scrutiny, and that has been for political reasons. So we need to separate the political motivation for some of the sanctions and the economic and moral reasons for this sort of action. I mean, the City of London needs to be seen to be very clean, and that's fair enough. But we need to do that on a rational basis, not on purely political basis.

SS: *Do you think there's any chance that economic pressure will force UK leaders to rethink the sanctions? Because right now the number stands at \$10 billion reportedly lost every year due to the anti-Russian measures...*

PT: I'm actually opposed to the sanctions against Russia entirely for the reason that I don't think sanctions work. Look at Cuba. Over the last 50 years the sanctions had no impact whatsoever in changing the policy of the leadership of Cuba. Sanctions are useful in terms of bringing people to the negotiating table. But there's no sign that the West has any desire to bring Russia to the negotiating table to discuss anything. And if you look at the sanctions as well, if you look at it European-wide, the EU countries have something like 14 times more trade with Russia than the United States. For the United States to impose sanctions against Russia is pretty much an economically light decision. It doesn't really have impact on their economy. It has a big impact

economically right decision. It doesn't really have impact on their economy. It has a big impact upon the European economy as a whole. And you have countries like Germany that is reliant on Russian imports of gas and do a lot of business with Russia, who are very concerned about the sanctions. Indeed, the new government in Italy who are frankly saying that sanctions against Russia should be dropped. So, again, the world is changing. The days when the United States could just turn around and say "We're going to impose the sanctions and everyone else needs to follow", those days are coming to a close. You even had the French Minister saying that Europeans are not fossil states to the United States, there's a different mood. Particularly with the Trump administration it's becoming more difficult for western powers to follow the United States blindly. You've had the United States pulling out of the Paris Climate Accord, you've had him imposing tariffs against EU nations and you've also had the United States pulling out of the Iran nuclear deal. In the past Britain always followed, as I said, since the Second World War (with one exception - the Vietnam War) the United States. But it's becoming increasingly difficult even for the UK to follow the U.S. in all these issues because the UK saying "Hold on, we don't actually agree". And it may well come to a point with the sanctions when it's the Europeans who say: "Look, we're not going along with these sanctions anymore". And if that happens, I think, it's going to be very difficult if not impossible for UK to try to go it alone with sanctions against Russia even if they have the support of the United States. And can I say about the United States and sanctions: it's interesting that I don't think it's Donald Trump's personal preference. It's pretty much to the preference of the military industrial elites in the United States to pursue sanctions and this sort of neoconservative policy against Russia. And you've got those people around Donald Trump like Mike Pompeo and John Bolton and Mad Dog Mattis who ironically is the moderate in the group who have generally a more hostile attitude to Russia than Trump would like. But Trump is bound by them, the State Department, the Pentagon and also by Congress that has a much more hostile attitude towards Russia. So even if Trump wants to change policy he'll find it difficult 'cause he's boxed in.

SS: *There are calls from your colleagues like Lord Waverly and Lord Kilclooney in the House of Lords to end verbal escalation aimed at Russia and to engage in more co-operation and dialogue with Moscow. Are their voices being heard? Or are they considered as marginals?*

PT: I think, at the moment, unfortunately, they are still in the minority. Their voices are being heard. But you know, one encouraging thing for me is that there are more people now than a couple of years ago - a couple of years ago the things were pretty bad in terms of Russophobia and the rhetoric which was used against Russia. And it has improved, noticeably in the House of Lords. I think, in the House of Commons it's a bit more of an uphill struggle, and nevertheless there are people increasingly speaking up and saying: "You know, this is all very well, but where it's going to lead us? Where are sanctions going to lead us? Where is this rhetoric going to lead us? Do we want to end up in a conflict with Russia? What's the endgame? It doesn't really make sense." And at the end of the day we should have a dialogue, there are many areas where we need to engage.

SS: *And then there's also the culture of discourse, like the language that countries use to confront each other. Why has the diplomatic language used by the United Kingdom deteriorated so badly? I mean the British defence secretary saying Russia should "shut up", the foreign secretary comparing the World Cup to Hitler's Olympics - those are moves that can only result in annoying and outraging the other side, is that London's true goal in this game, or are these just random blunders?*

PT: I agree that that sort of language is totally unacceptable. Anyone who knows anything about

Russian history would find those remarks, particularly about comparing Russia to the Nazi Germany, beyond the pale. I think that those ministers should be reined in, and that sort of language is not acceptable. I think, it's all about political posturing. You have Boris Johnson and Gavin Williamson, the Defence Secretary, posturing and really trying to put themselves at the head of the party and in the public limelight. I think, that's really what it's all about when it comes to the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary - it's about political posturing rather than anything else.

SS: *So like you're saying, while the UK is adopting a confrontational stance, talking tough and gathering backers against Moscow, some of its allies, like Italy, are adopting a more pragmatic strategy - confrontation on one issue, cooperation on another, like in the Middle East. Is the UK shutting itself out of solutions to global problems by antagonising the Russians to the point of not being able to work with them at all on anything - even on mutually beneficial issues?*

PT: I think, it is to a certain extent, and that is something that I've been saying for quite a while. If you want to have a serious influence on events in places like Syria then you need to constructively engage with Russia. And I think, all this sort of rhetoric that we've heard from the Defence Secretary and the Foreign Secretary doesn't really help that. We should be working together to solve international issues. Ok, we should be frank where we disagree, if we think of the things that we don't approve of, then we can say that. This one thing about being frank and you can use diplomatic language and be frank. And this is another thing about using hysterical rhetoric and not engaging at all. And I think, UK at the moment is rather inclining towards the latter than the former.

SS: *How does Theresa May's forging a European league of anti-Russian measures go with her taking the UK out of the EU? How easy will it be for the UK to persuade other European nations to follow London's line after it makes a "hard Brexit", which is the course now?*

PT: Well, "hard Brexit" or "soft Brexit" - we'll have to see. Some people are saying that there won't be Brexit at all because it's in shambles. But let's see how that one goes. What is clear is that Britain in the end of the day is a medium-sized power. It punches above its weight at the moment. But it also has a certain amount of influence because it's in the EU. When it leaves the EU, as I'm pretty sure it will do next year, it's going to be on its own without the weight of the EU behind it. So it's going to find it more difficult to have influence in the world, and if it tries to isolate countries like Russia and doesn't engage with them, it will be that its own position is weakened. At the end of the day, Russia is a nuclear state and member of the permanent five in the UN Security Council and it makes sense to engage with Russia. The whole thing about Brexit is that UK has to find a new role in the world. And in that case it has to be engaging with emerging economies. It has to be engaging with countries like Russia and some countries that quite frankly in the past it hadn't really taken much care about when it comes to diplomatic relations.

SS: *You know, funny enough, but many officials in the current UK government have said that the UK is safer in the EU because of Moscow, can this Russian threat be used to justify slowing down, or even doing a complete U-turn on Brexit?*

PT: No, I don't really see that happening at all quite frankly. If we stay within the EU it will be for other political reasons. This is unlikely but it will be because the government falls in the UK because it doesn't have the votes needed to push for its version of Brexit, whatever that comes to be, and then there's another general election where other parties promise a second referendum on EU membership. Were that to happen and that to take place and the British

people vote not to come out of the EU, then we would stay within the EU as a result of that. But I think, the likelihood of that happening is not probable at the moment, but it is still possible. And it is the only way UK will stay in the European Union.

SS: *While London is searching for support inside the EU, many voters who put the current government in place are distrustful towards the bloc, how will Theresa May deal with that contradiction?*

PT: She's finding it difficult at the moment. I don't think she can - that's the problem. There are so many different views at the moment on how this should be dealt with. I mean, the Brexiteers within the Cabinet want basically to cut free of the EU, the customs' union, the single market, and for Britain to go on its own to make straight deals across the globe. I think, the problem is that the majority of our trade is with the European Union. Some of these other countries that we supposedly should go and make deals with, like the United States, are already showing us that they are going to push us to make very tough deals, to accept a lot of things that we don't want to accept. So I think, there's this problem at the heart of the debate at the moment that the Brexiteers wanting a future for Britain that is very difficult to achieve, and other pragmatists saying we need to maintain strong links with the UK, say, through the customs union which the Brexiteers won't accept. That is within the Conservative Party and within the Cabinet. And then you look at the Parliament as a whole and there are divisions there. So it is something that is very difficult to achieve for this Prime Minister who is at the end of the day also a very weak Prime Minister.

SS: *Boris Johnson said that with Brexit, the UK will no longer be some spear-carrier on the world stage and will be a global player, a protagonist. Yet we see that in times of crisis, the UK is still rushing for EU support. Is the UK really a global player in its own right, like Mr. Johnson claims it is?*

PT: Well, I think, probably Britain is a global player because it has its position in the United Nations Security Council and the Commonwealth. It is one of the largest economies in the world, say, number six. So it is a global player. I don't think that we should get above ourselves. I mean, I'm proud to be British, but we're not a superpower. And we shouldn't pretend that we are a superpower. We haven't got an empire anymore, nor should we have one. So I think there's a limit to what Britain can achieve on its own. What we can achieve is work together to build world peace working with other countries. We aren't going to do it as a little Britain of our own. So I think, if Boris Johnson is saying that then he's wrong.

SS: *Even inside Theresa May's cabinet there's no single vision on Brexit itself with some ministers differing over the divorce and it's all become quite public. How has Mrs. May failed to keep her cabinet in line, and how can it impact on the Brexit negotiations for the UK?*

PT: I think, she failed to keep her Cabinet in line because there's this fundamental split in the Cabinet that I described. And also her majority in the House of Commons is so small that she can't really afford the major resignations from the Foreign Secretary. There's also the talk about David Davis, the Brexit Secretary, resigning over the last few days. So if that were to happen and her government were to fall apart and she lost her majority in the Commons, then she finds herself in a very difficult position. So she is a weak Prime Minister, and it's very difficult for her to keep all these desperate Cabinet ministers and even parliamentarians together singing from the same hymn sheet. It's not happening at the moment. And it is starting to make Brexit look like a bit of all around shambles actually.

SS: *Thank you very much for this insight and for your thoughts. Lord Truscott. We were talking to*

... Thank you very much for the insight and for your thoughts, Lord Truscott. We were talking to Lord Peter Truscott, member of the UK's House of Lords, discussing the latest chill in the relations between Moscow and London and other challenges UK is facing today.

Conversation (4)



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Joel Klink Leader · 20h

Obvious ingroup-outgroup-thinking: All russians, who became rich, managed this in one or another dirty way, an accusation that's always held against them, repeated over and over again. - But western rich people also became rich through dirty methods, stealing ideas, exploiting employees (also robbing the world's riches from poor held countries in an neo-imperialistic manner with countless deaths), abusing their market dominance, forging scientific studies, manipulating elected governments with lobbyists and donations to political parties, and so on.

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Kundorfer Leader · 1d

As a European I can't wait for Britain to leave the EU. Had they not voted for Brexit maybe the EU should have voted for chucking them out. After all they always behaved as if they were only partially in the EU as well as partially outside.

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Terence Franks → Kundorfer

The British were never gung-ho about EU membership,as they have never considered themselves to be part of Europe ! Many British people in daily life have almost complete disdain for the European people !

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Michael Apanian Influencer · 1d

Dear Sophie ,Love & Prayers to you Always, Heart to Heart..Again Just now on 08/06, 19.55 ST ,08/06 12 55 MT my ring finger of my right hand was itchy, When you captured me you captured my Heart .,If I am Late , I'm Sorry Forgive me.

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