

Hypocrisy and double standards during Russian President Putin's London visit

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Russian President Vladimir Putin chose London for his first foreign visit since winning last month's elections. He was accorded, literally, the red-carpet treatment by the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair, culminating in an audience with the Queen at Windsor Castle.

During his visit, Putin was bellicose in his defence of Russia's offensive in Chechnya. At a joint press conference with Blair, he described it as "a struggle against extremism".

"We have seen European countries and European leaders not able to support the Russian fight because they are afraid of a reaction among the Moslem inhabitants of Europe, but that's the wrong conclusion.... Western Europe could pay heavily for this," Putin said.

Blair dismissed all protests against Putin's visit. At the joint press conference, he said, "Some say that because of our concerns about Chechnya we should keep some distance from Moscow. I have to tell you that while I share those concerns I believe that the best way to register those concerns and to get results is by engaging with Russia and not isolating Russia."

The Russian media was delighted by events. The *Kommersant* newspaper wrote, "Russia has been accepted into high society.... Putin and Blair chatted (calling each other Vladimir and Tony), smiled, cheered each other up all the time." "Putin and Blair like each other and they don't hide it," wrote *Izvestia*, "Russia is seen as a long-term partner of Britain."

Blair's comments angered many of his liberal apologists, who have endorsed his military offensives against Serbia and Iraq on the basis of the government's supposed humanitarian motives and "ethical foreign policy". Far from advocating a policy of "engagement" in other instances, Blair is a fervent supporter of

continued sanctions and isolation of Iraq and Serbia despite the appalling cost in human lives and suffering this has caused.

The *Guardian's* Hugo Young was provoked to comment; "He [Blair] was going to be a different sort of leader, standing for something new in the grammar of foreign policy, an ethical dimension. He raised expectations. These have been betrayed many times over.... He is wholly pragmatic, ruthlessly focused, hard-as-nails committed to the supreme relevance of his own persuasive role. The outrage expressed by many sincere people against this premature welcoming of Putin into the embrace of the Western powers meets Blair's own passionate unconcern."

There is no conflict of substance between Blair's advocacy of sanctions against Serbia and Iraq, and dialogue and "engagement" with Russia. In both instances, he acts as the representative of Britain's interests.

Putin has the support of Britain and the Western powers not in spite of, but because of his willingness to resort to brutal repression. Previous claims that the restoration of capitalism in the former USSR would bring democracy in its wake now look increasingly threadbare. The West regards Putin as the type of strongman necessary to push through pro-market reforms in Russia against the opposition this will provoke amongst working people.

And Putin knows this very well. His first stop was the National Liberal Club in Whitehall to meet representatives from the Confederation of British Industry, where he promised to ensure that ownership of property was sacrosanct. He urged British businessmen to invest in Russia and promised sweeping reforms, including tax changes and a battle against corruption, in order to attract foreign investment.

"The members of the British government have said on many occasions that the Russian angle is very important for your economy. On our side, we have a similar perception and a similar determination to develop our cooperation even further," he said. "You would, with your business acumen, be able to seize new opportunities opening in Russia, and we are very optimistic about improvements in our bilateral relationship."

His newly appointed economics adviser Andrei Illarionov has said, "The optimal level of state spending to free conditions for economic growth is 17 percent to 20 percent of GDP," echoing the demands of the World Bank and other institutions for massive cuts in state expenditure. Officially, state spending is presently around 37 percent of Russia's GDP, though unofficial estimates range as high as 50-70 percent, if perks to the nomenklatura are factored in. At the moment, one quarter of state expenditure goes toward paying wages for nearly 2.6 million state employees. Putin's plans would lead to further poverty and mass unemployment.

It is this programme that has earned Blair's endorsement for Putin. He described him as "a leader who is ready to embrace a new relationship with the European Union and the United States, who wants a strong and modern Russia and a strong relationship with the West".

Britain was chosen as Putin's first port of call because for many years it has played a key role as America's most loyal ally in Europe. President Clinton will meet Putin in Moscow on June 4-5, to discuss arms control, economic reforms and Russia's offensive in Chechnya.

According to a *Pravda* correspondent, talking to Blair was a "bridge to the United States". Blair acknowledged this in his own comments that Britain could act as a "bridge of understanding" between Russia and Europe, and Russia and the US. British ministers were reported to be delighted that Putin chose London for his first overseas trip, rather than Germany, which has far more substantial economic links with Russia.

Putin, for his part, was keen to use the occasion to demonstrate to the US that Russia is still a force to be reckoned with. He entered the prime minister's official residence at 10 Downing Street flanked by two leading military personnel carrying a briefcase presumed to contain Russia's nuclear codes. He also informed Blair

of his continued opposition to US plans for a new missile defence shield, involving Britain's radar stations, and warned that Russia would withdraw from the Start II nuclear missile treaty if the project went ahead. It was this that prompted the Russian journal *Sevodnya* to note that Putin's visit gave him "the chance to play a more marked role in the European arena, and to leave the shadow of the big American brother".



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