

The Ambassador Has Left the Building

Russia has had no ambassador in London since at least July 2026, and the Kremlin seems in no hurry to name one. By one count, only 35 of its 58 diplomatic posts remain, and its intelligence stations are reportedly close to collapse. Yet Moscow is threatening Britain with “catastrophic consequences”.

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On 3 September, the British Foreign Office summoned Russia’s representative to lodge a protest. Two days earlier, Berlin had formally accused Moscow of attempting a drone attack on Leipzig airport, and London had joined the accusation. The person who turned up was not the ambassador. As it emerged, Russia has had no ambassador in London since at least 21 July 2026. The man who came to the Foreign Office was Russia’s chargé d’affaires ad interim, Vasily Tsyganov. He called the accusations “unsubstantiated and absurd, constructed in the familiar British style.”

Tsyganov’s statements were indistinguishable from those of the former Russian ambassador, Andrei Kelin. That is probably why hardly anyone in London noticed that Russia is now represented in the United Kingdom by a different man, one without even ambassadorial rank. And no wonder. In practice, the function of ambassador to one of Europe’s key countries for Moscow had vanished long before Andrei Kelin formally left the post.

French Leave

That Kelin had gone for good was confirmed on 23 August, when *The Guardian* published the Russian embassy’s threats of unspecified consequences over the British drones Ukraine uses to strike Russia. The statement came from the former deputy ambassador, the same Vasily Tsyganov, who after his boss’s departure had become Russia’s chargé d’affaires ad interim in London (the head of a diplomatic mission when the ambassador is absent).

Mark Galeotti, one of the most widely cited Western experts on Russia’s intelligence services, security agencies and organised crime, noted in his column in *The Spectator* that Kelin’s recall might be explained by his age and imminent retirement. Later, however, it turned out that the Kremlin had not put forward a single candidate to the Foreign Office to replace its ambassador. The list of senior diplomats at the Russian mission now contained just one name: Tsyganov’s.

The British press took note. *The Guardian*, for one, saw hints of a downgrading of diplomatic relations. *The i Paper* and the well-known British columnist Edward Lucas saw a “psychological operation” along the lines of “don’t poke the [Russian] bear.” *The Telegraph* called the Russian embassy “a factory of lies and threats” and dismissed the question of what Kelin had actually been doing as rhetorical. The *New Eurasia Strategies Centre* observed that Kelin had been “practically invisible” anyway, so the effect of his absence was supposedly nil. *Brussels Signal* dug up insider information that the decision on Kelin’s departure had allegedly been announced inside the Russian embassy as early as 11 June. John Foreman, a former British defence attaché in Moscow, wrote on X (formerly Twitter) that he was “glad to be rid of the odious Kelin,” and wondered whether Moscow had this time decided to downgrade relations “quietly,” simply by appointing no one in place of the man who had left.

Galeotti and Foreman, in my view, are asking the wrong questions. The problem is not at all why Kelin’s foreign posting ended, or who will arrive to replace him and when. The right question is: what has happened to the post itself?

Horses Do Get Changed Midstream

Let us start with what is known for certain. Kelin is 69. In May 2027 he turns 70. On the one hand, that is indeed a venerable age. On the other, it is nowhere near the ceiling for Putin’s gerontocracy. Andrei Vladimirovich spent seven years in London. That seems a long stretch for a single posting, but again, for present-day Russia it is hardly unique. Sergei Kozlov, now in his tenth year in Saudi Arabia, can vouch for that. On his return home, Kelin is said to have been promised a comfortable old age: a senator’s seat in the Federation Council.

On 1 September, Maria Zakharova drew a thick line under the career of what appears to be an ex-diplomat: his mission, she said, had ended “as planned,” and a new ambassador to London would be appointed at an unspecified “appropriate moment.” When a *Reuters* correspondent asked Zakharova who would be appointed in Kelin’s place, she suggested he “calm down,” reminding him that appointing ambassadors is the president’s prerogative and that the procedure is not a public one. Translated from Russian diplomatese: the Kremlin clearly has something to hide, and it has no intention of revealing its plans for now.

On 24 August, the British prime minister, Andy Burnham, announced the transfer of Storm Shadow missile production technology to Kyiv. The next day, Kremlin adviser Andrei Fedorov hinted that British factories producing drones and missile components could come under attack. On 27 August, Zakharova likewise declared that British military facilities “in Ukraine and beyond” could become targets of Russian sabotage, that London was “one step away” from complicity in terrorism, and that “inevitable catastrophic consequences” awaited it. *Reuters* called this Moscow’s harshest threat against a NATO country in the entire course of the war in Ukraine.

Against the backdrop of such escalation, it seems obvious to me that Moscow, having in effect downgraded its diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom, has decided to save the formal announcement for later — as a news peg for an even greater escalation, probably already scheduled by the Kremlin for the foreseeable future. Speculation about the motives behind the personnel decision on Kelin, I think, can end there. The various explanations for his departure do not in fact contradict one another. He may well have left both because it was time to wrap up a posting that had dragged on, and because that time happened to coincide with the moment the Kremlin decided to keep sharpening its rhetoric towards Europe.

Why the Russian ambassador left London does not matter at all. What matters far more is that the Kremlin is showing no interest (at least for now) in replacing him. And there is, strictly speaking, something to replace. Whatever his detractors may think of him, Kelin is one of those outstanding Russian diplomats whose departure marks the end of an “era” they personified at the missions they led.

Who is Mr. Kelin?

Andrei Vladimirovich graduated from the journalism faculty of MGIMO. He joined the Soviet Foreign Ministry in 1979. In the 1980s he was part of the Soviet delegation at the Geneva talks that culminated in 1987 with Reagan and Gorbachev signing the famous Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. He served as deputy permanent representative to NATO (1998–2003), permanent representative to the OSCE (2011–2015), and director of the Department of Pan-European Cooperation (DOS, 2015–2019).

Any Russian diplomat who knows his ministry well from the inside will easily pick out the key point in the last line of the previous paragraph: DOS was always the most “intelligentsia” team on Smolenskaya Square. It was made up of people whose professional formation was the 1975 Helsinki Accords (the foundation of the future OSCE, which laid down the rules of coexistence between the USSR and the West) — people who knew how to reach agreements with Europeans and who did not hate them nearly as much as, say, the inhabitants of the Lubyanka or the Kremlin. Kelin was a man of exactly this breed: soft-spoken, correct, well-mannered and well-educated, with moderately pro-Western views.

Arriving in London as ambassador in November 2019, he found himself standing on the very ruins of relations between the two countries. Under his predecessor came the Skripal poisonings in Salisbury and the reciprocal expulsions of diplomats across virtually the entire West. He was presumably not tasked with restoring those relations. But under him they also deteriorated far more slowly than the Kremlin apparently wished.

None of Kelin’s public statements betrayed a committed hawk. Each of them reads as nothing more than the execution of instructions received from the “Centre”: diligent and careful, but with no personal investment. Hence, apparently, the double rejection of his figure on both sides

of the new Iron Curtain. The British (Foreman in particular) regarded him as an “odious character” in his role as the Kremlin’s mouthpiece. My sources in the Russian Foreign Ministry, by contrast, believe that what cost this man his post — too soft, and plainly a man out of his time — was precisely that he consciously refused to become anything more than an ordinary mouthpiece, confining himself to his immediate duties.

So if, as some analysts believe, further escalation is indeed planned on the London front, Kelin was certainly ill-suited for it. That said, this view does not contradict Galeotti’s version of a well-earned retirement; it merely complements it. Age simply became the pretext for an overdue personnel decision. And it may well be that Kelin is the last ambassador of the elite DOS school to serve in London under Putin. For the tasks the present Kremlin is now pursuing in the British capital, a highly professional diplomat and Europeanist is plainly surplus to requirements.

An Embassy of Diminished Capacity

The post of Russian ambassador in London seemed to evaporate from the local diplomatic corps for seven years running, layer by layer, like youth and beauty from the portrait of Dorian Gray.

First went access to the British parliament and local government. On 20 June 2022, the speakers of both houses notified the Russian side in writing that Russia’s accredited representative and all staff of the diplomatic mission would henceforth be barred from the Westminster estate “until further notice.” No such notice has been given to this day. The ban remains in force.

Next, virtually the entire diplomatic infrastructure around the Russian embassy fell apart. In May 2024, London expelled Russia’s defence attaché, calling him an undeclared intelligence officer, stripped several Russian properties of diplomatic status (including the trade and defence section in Highgate), and capped the length of time Russian diplomats could stay in the country. Kelin called this the destruction of bilateral ties that had existed for decades. And he was, in essence, right — though he hardly meant what the British heard in his words.

Then the people left. By Galeotti’s count, of the 58 diplomatic posts accredited at the Russian embassy in 2021, no more than 35 remain today. In February and March 2025, the Foreign Office summoned Kelin to announce the withdrawal of accreditation from his staff in response to similar moves by Moscow. Moreover, according to information that has reached me from confidential sources, Russia’s *rezidenturas* in London (the intelligence stations operating under diplomatic cover) are today in some cases critically weakened, to the point of being practically inoperative, and in others wiped out almost to zero. And the expulsions of Russian illegals from the United Kingdom continue. The diplomats, too, are said to be down to next to none. Evidently, far from all of those remaining 35 “diplomats” are Foreign Ministry staff; they are performing quite different tasks in London. In other words, by 2026 Kelin had effectively no one and nothing left to run.

So what was left in the arsenal of the Russian ambassador in one of Europe's most influential capitals by the summer of 2026? Appearances on the BBC, Sky and HARDtalk, a lecture at Oxford? In other words, activity available to any Russian émigré oppositionist without any diplomatic accreditation whatsoever. The right to write notes? On the Skripal affair alone, Kelin's embassy sent the British side dozens of notes and, it is said, never received a reply to a single one. One might just as well have written any papers at all for the drawer without leaving one's office on Smolenskaya Square in Moscow (the address of the Russian Foreign Ministry). What else? Regularly receiving protests from the host side? Voicing empty threats through one's own press service? That, I think, is about it. In other words, the activity of one of Russia's largest diplomatic missions has shrunk to the function of a letterbox. And for that, Vasily Tsyganov, Kelin's 49-year-old deputy, is more than enough.

Vasily is a hereditary diplomat, the son of an ambassador. Galeotti calls him a promising specialist but "not experienced enough" for the London post. On 3 September 2026, Tsyganov publicly put the presumptuous Galeotti to shame, proving that for whatever function Russian diplomats in London still have, his experience is quite sufficient. As we recall, he arrived at the meeting in a thoroughly professional manner, answered every complaint with memorised phrases from the Kremlin talking points, and left just as professionally, without lingering a single extra minute in the corridors of power of the "decaying West."

At the same time, it is admittedly hard to resist the temptation to underline the scale of what is happening. Moscow is threatening a NATO country with "catastrophic consequences" and prophesying strikes on its military facilities — with a half-empty diplomatic mission, no serving ambassador and, if my sources are to be believed, an almost non-existent intelligence presence.

Field-Testing in London Conditions

Pausing before appointing a new ambassador after recalling the previous one has its advantages. First, freedom of manoeuvre. A head of mission can be appointed at any moment when a striking foreign-policy gesture is needed. Second, the signal costs nothing in terms of strictly regulated diplomatic protocol. An announced downgrade has to be justified somehow. The expiry of a term of office, by contrast, is perceived as natural, as a routine event. Third, there is no legal fact to which Britain would be obliged to respond. Which means that as long as the British ambassador, Nigel Casey, remains at work in Moscow, the asymmetry will work in Russia's favour. For Putin, obsessed with an outward status-consciousness inherited from his criminal past, that matters far more than any practical consideration. Fourth, Russia incurs no responsibility whatsoever for its statements. Zakharova can, in one and the same speech, both deny any downgrading of relations with London and call it an accomplice to terrorism. Both theses will remain formally consistent with the Kremlin's declared positions.

In January 2023, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that, in response to cuts to the staff of the Russian embassy in Tallinn, relations with Estonia were being reduced to the level of chargés d'affaires. The Estonian ambassador was given two weeks to leave. Tallinn responded in kind. Latvia joined in solidarity. Lithuania had done the same back in April 2022, after the atrocities committed by Russian soldiers in Bucha came to light. In June 2024, Dmitry Peskov, answering a question about a possible downgrading of diplomatic relations with the West, supplied the theoretical basis for this instrument: it is, he said, “standard diplomatic practice for a state that encounters unfriendly and even hostile behaviour” (quoted in [RBC](#), 07.10.2024).

The same model of what Putin considers controlled escalation between Russia and the collectively conceived “West” is apparently now being road-tested on London, only at a more serious geopolitical level. If the threats against British facilities materialise, or if a new Leipzig occurs with a direct accusation from the United Kingdom, Moscow will announce the downgrade of diplomatic relations officially, on the Baltic model — thereby forcing London to respond in kind.

The present situation, paradoxically, stabilises the conflict. A chargé d'affaires cannot be officially recalled in protest (no one sent him; the position is filled automatically). He cannot be downgraded (there is nowhere lower to go). His credentials cannot be refused (he presents none). A chargé d'affaires has nothing to lose in any situation whatsoever.

At the same time, it is clear that the European wing of the Russian Foreign Ministry, which produced both Kelin and Tsyganov, is exhausted as a talent pool for developing relations with the West. The next ambassadors there — as, apparently, on many other fronts — will now be selected from among people with closer ties, both formal and informal, to other agencies. So the ambassador's chair now standing empty at 6/7 Kensington Palace Gardens (the address of the Russian diplomatic mission in London) is perhaps not yet the saddest image of the Kremlin's relations with the United Kingdom and the developed democratic world as a whole. The worst, I am certain, is still to come.

ABOUT

I am Sergey Konyashin, a former Russian diplomat. I spent nearly a dozen years in the Russian Foreign Ministry, with postings in Yemen (2010–2013), Sudan (2014–2018) and Algeria (2019–2021), and left Russia in 2022, after Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

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