

Changes to British Immigration Policy in the Context of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

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Abstract: Before the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the UK announced the permanent abolition of the T1 Immigrant Investor Visa to prevent Russian citizens from "transferring their illegal wealth" to achieve the goal of sanctioning Russia. The UK's move was purely to balance the powers of the European continent and to gain the support of the US to maintain its position as a major power in the face of Northern Ireland and Scotland running towards independence; at the same time, it was the British government's usual operation of deflecting conflicts when the economy is in the doldrums and its rule is at a disadvantage. In short, it was a diplomatic means of defending British national interests.

The current Russia-Ukraine conflict is the biggest crisis the world geopolitics is facing since the end of the Cold War, the general outbreak of the crisis in the relations between Russia and the West, and the biggest war in Europe since the Second World War. As the war progressed, NATO member states, led by the United States, imposed a series of sanctions on Russia, with the United Kingdom following the United States and strongly calling for sanctions against Russia. Even before the outbreak of the conflict, on 17th February 2022, it was announced that the T1 Investor Visa (Tier 1), known as the 'golden visa', would be permanently closed because it would curb the influence of Russian capital on the UK.[1] It is recognized around the world that the British economy has lost so much since Brexit. As Richard Hughes, a representative of the UK's Department of Responsibility predicted that Brexit would be even more devastating to the British economy in the long term than COVID-19." His comments to the BBC came only hours after the OBR responded to Rishi Sunak's latest Budget by saying it expected inflation to reach 4.4 percent while warning it could hit "the highest rate seen in the UK for three decades".[2] Common sense dictates that the UK is in desperate need of massive investment at this time. Why would the British government permanently cancel the T1 Immigrant Investor Visa at this critical moment and cut off its own "fortune"? It is clear that the UK's initiative is based on "far-reaching" considerations for the future of the country, not simply "to maintain the European financial order" and to impose sanctions on Russia, which can be broadly divided into the following three aspects.

1. European Continental Balance of Power Policy

Firstly, this sharp change in the British immigration policy is part of its long-held European

Continental Balance of Power Policy. In his book *Memoirs Of The Second World War*, the former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill mentioned that British foreign policy for four hundred years had been to oppose the presence of the largest, the most aggressive, and domineering country on the continent and that Britain had always joined forces with the weaker side to defeat the military supremacists on the mainland.[3] For example, when France was strong, it joined together with Germany and the Netherlands to oppose France, as in the famous seven "Wars against France" in history; conversely, it would join forces with France to resist Germany. This passage is the best summary of British diplomacy of the balance of power. At the core of this policy was the idea that Britain must at all times counter the political dictatorship of one of the most powerful nations or a combination of nations. This policy was adopted by Britain to maintain its hegemony and rely on its economic and military power to keep the powers on the European continent competing with each other to prevent one country from dominating Europe. In essence, it was a policy undertaken by Britain to manipulate the political balance of Europe, safeguard British overseas interests in the European continent, and maintain its maritime supremacy.

Therefore, when it has been reported that 96 of the top 100 wealthy Ukrainians have fled with huge sums of cash ahead of Russia's special military action against Ukraine[4], most of whom have been attracted by the British T1 Immigrant Investor Visa. While this could boost the UK's short-term economic growth, it would result in a drain of the Ukrainian capital and a subsequent inability to fight Russia, a situation the UK does not favor. To balance the power of both Ukraine and Russia, the UK has skillfully adopted the European Continental Balance of Power Policy by closing the investment migration route to support Ukraine at minimal cost, forcing its assets back and thereby containing Russia. On the other hand, after the NATO countries, led by the United States, announced a series of sanctions against Russia and economic and military assistance to Ukraine, the United Kingdom, fearing that Ukraine would therefore grow more powerful in the war, refused to accept Russian investment migrants, in the name of "imposing sanctions on Russia", but in fact "counterbalancing Russia and Ukraine". As the war between the two countries continues, Russia now has the upper hand militarily. The special military operation launched by Russia against Ukraine has been going on for almost three months, starting on 24 February. Currently, as regards the military aspect, Russian forces have made significant progress. Until 20 May, the Russian army declared full control of the Azov steel plant and the city of Mariupol where it is located. The city is an important port in south-eastern Ukraine, an economic center, and an essential defense center for the Ukrainian troops. This means that, on the one hand, the Russian army has built a link between Crimea and the Donbas region and then to the Russian interior, and on the other hand, the Russian army can free up a large number of units to accelerate its tasks in the Donbas region. Since then, the British government's "anti-Russian voice" has not been as strong as it was when the conflict first broke out. This "flexible" British foreign policy is a remarkable manifestation of its "balance of power policy" on the European continent.

2. British Crisis Awareness

In recent years, the forces of division within the UK have grown stronger. Early on in the process of the UK's exit from the EU, to resolve the hard border that existed between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, the UK and Ireland reached the Northern Ireland Agreement, which allowed Northern Ireland to remain in the EU economic system. This agreement resulted in goods shipped from the British Isles of Great Britain to the Northern Ireland sector being subject to inspection and therefore caused much resentment from the British government. And to the further detriment of the UK, Sinn Fein, which has been seeking independence from the UK, recently gained a majority in the Northern Ireland Regional Assembly elections, signaling that Northern Ireland's call for

independence is soon to be on the agenda. To prevent it from becoming independent, the British government has decided to intervene by way of an adjustment to the Northern Ireland Agreement. In response, the European Commission has opposed the UK's unilateral measures to change the content of the agreement and has threatened to impose all sanctions on the UK should it overturn the relevant parts of the agreement, which would be in breach of international law. Meanwhile, Scotland's Chief Minister Nicola Sturgeon has announced that plans to leave the UK will be revived next year, with an independence referendum to be held by the end of 2023. It is worth noting that there is a broad base of public opinion for Scotland to exit the UK and that the will of the Scottish public to leave the UK will only increase with time.[5] In addition, Wales is in the process of becoming independent. If other regions follow suit, the British landscape will be left in tatters. It seems that Britain is now in a dilemma, with external forces interfering on the one hand and internal territorial divisions on the other. Therefore, to get the support of the United States and to stand firm in NATO, Britain can only join the camp of sanctions against Russia, making a lot of speeches about sanctions against Russia, and also providing 6,000 missiles and 25 million pounds of military and economic aid to Ukraine.[6] But three months into the war, there has been delayed inaction. It is clear from this that the UK does not intend and cannot afford to provide any practical assistance to Ukraine in a situation where the country is in dire straits, and on the one hand is in agreement with the US, and on the other fears offending Russia and incurring its reprisals.

3. Shift of Domestic contradictions

After Brexit, the free movement of people and goods between the UK and mainland Europe has been considerably impeded, and with a large number of EU workers returning home, there is already a labor crisis in the UK itself, which is the most serious problem that Brexit has brought to the UK and has dealt a huge blow to the UK economy. In particular, in the last two months, under the combined impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the epidemic, and labor shortage, prices are soaring at the fastest pace in 30 years and energy prices are rocketing, causing most British households to face the most serious "cost of living crisis" since the World War Two.[7] Surveys show that around 4% of UK households, or 2.4million adults, are going without food for a whole day because they cannot afford it.[8] The British food crisis is likely to get worse in the coming months as energy costs and taxes increase, causing people's wallets to shrink. This crisis has forced the Bank of England to raise interest rates four times in the past few months and the UK's inflation rate rose to 7% in April.[7] Meantime, the Conservative Party's latest poll has seen a decline due to its ineffectiveness in dealing with the cost of living crisis, and it even lost the local council elections held in early May as a result. A poll commissioned by the Daily Mail and conducted by Saxanta Comers shows that the Conservatives now have a 34% approval rating, six points behind the Labor Party. And Britons are not happy with the actions taken by the current Conservative government to tackle rising prices. Only 24% of respondents thought the Conservatives were better at dealing with rising prices, while 39% thought Labor was better at it. Although UK government cabinet ministers always reply that the government has invested 22 billion when asked how it is coping with the cost of living crisis, media analysis suggests that judging by the results of this poll, this is not enough.[9] Faced with this domestic situation, the Conservative government has stepped up its efforts to impose sanctions on Russia and made a big deal of its immigration policy, also aiming to divert domestic conflicts and the people's attention and to stall for itself.

4. Conclusion

During the international turmoil caused by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, NATO members, led by the United States, announced sanctions against Russia, to which the UK responded

by taking the lead in closing the Investment migration route to interrupt "the money laundering route that has been abused by Russian citizens" and to achieve its goal of sanctioning Russia. The British government, facing an economic downturn after Brexit and in urgent need of foreign investment, is eager to adjust its immigration policy, ostensibly declaring sanctions against Russia, but in reality, restricting capital outflows from Ukraine and thus increasing its strength against Russia. This roundabout tactic is a conventional operation employed by the UK to balance the power of Russia and Ukraine with minimal losses, following its "Continental Balance of Power Policy" that has been pursued for centuries on the European continent; in addition, the UK is facing territorial division as a result of the independence of Northern Ireland and Scotland, and following the US sanctions against Russia at this time is a way for the UK to gain US support and maintain its "great power status" in Europe. At the same time, it is also the usual trick to divert the public's attention when the economy suffers after Brexit and the Conservative government loses the general election. This is not just an announcement to be made in line with NATO's policy towards Russia, but for complex political and economic reasons, and is an important diplomatic tool to defend its national interests.

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