

Revealed: Government hiding truth about Russian oligarchs' visas

Tuesday 12 March 2024, by [GEOGHEGAN Peter](#) (Date first published: 24 February 2024).

'The whole thing stinks of a cover-up... We know Putin's cronies used and abused this scheme'. Plus: the Russian-linked money still rolling into Conservative party.

Last week, Alexei Navalny died. His crime? Speaking out against corruption.

In response, the UK brought in new Russian sanctions - on six men accused of running the Arctic prison camp where Navalny died.

That's right, a handful of guards in a remote Russian penal colony now won't be able to enjoy the charms of a trip to Britain. This is, as *Bellingcat's* Eliot Higgins said, a ["totally flaccid response"](#).

Even more worryingly, however, the British government is still covering up its own role in enabling Putin and his cronies.

I'm talking here about 'golden visas'. This was the notorious scheme that allowed anyone who committed to investing £1 million (upped to £2 million in 2014) the immediate right to live in the UK, followed by a fast track to citizenship.

And guess where some of the biggest demand for golden visas came from? Yep, Putin's Russia.

More than 2,500 'Tier 1 visas' were issued to individuals from Russia between 2008 and 2020, [according to government statistics](#). Recipients included now sanctioned former Chelsea owner [Roman Abramovich](#) and [the former wife of Vladimir Potanin](#), one of Russia's richest men.

Eighty-five per cent of Russian golden visas were given out during a seven-year-long 'blind faith' period, which ended in 2015, during which almost no due diligence was done on the source of applicants' wealth. But even after that, the problem continued.

The UK's Intelligence and Security Committee's 'Russia report' - [eventually published in 2020](#) - warned that "the exploitation of the UK's investor visa scheme" was "the key to London's appeal" for Russian oligarchs and their money.

Golden visas were so notorious that in March 2018, Theresa May [commissioned a review of the regime](#) in the wake of the nerve agent attack targeting former Russian military officer Sergei Skripal in Salisbury.

So, what did the review say? We don't know. Because *almost six years later* the government is still refusing to publish it - even though it has admitted that 10 sanctioned Russian oligarchs had bought golden visas.

I have written before about how broken Freedom of Information is in Britain. But even I was shocked

by what happened when I FOI'ed for the golden visa report.

The Home Office responded saying that they didn't need to send me the golden visa report - because "the information is already accessible" - and pasted [this link](#) to a written statement from Suella Braverman in Parliament last January.

The idea that cherry-picked words by the then-Secretary of State is the same as a copy of an official review is, of course, ludicrous. But that's what you get with a government that has presided over the worst FOI response rates on record. (I've plans afoot for how we can properly reboot FOI in the UK. But that's for another day.)

Braverman's statement was one of the reasons I wanted to get - and share - the review. [She admitted](#) that the golden visa scheme had attracted a "disproportionate" number of applicants from countries identified by the government as at risk of money laundering and terrorist funding.

A "minority" of golden visa investors, she said, were "potentially at high risk" of having links to corruption or organised crime, including 10 Russians sanctioned following the Ukraine invasion.

So how many of these individuals were given British passports? What was done about their visas? What other countries did corrupt money flow from?

We don't know - because the government refuses to tell us.

It is "highly inappropriate and scandalous for the government to block this vital information," Bill Browder, Putin's longtime bête noire and the architect of [the Magnitsky Act.](#), told me.

"These visas should be withdrawn immediately," And Browder is not the only one shocked by the government's evasion.

On foot of my FOI, Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesperson Layla Moran MP has written to Home Secretary James Cleverly calling for the review to be published immediately. (Letter attached below.)

"The government promised a review into the Tier 1 visa scheme in March 2018. Nearly six years on we are still waiting for them to publish that review," Moran said.

"Frankly, the whole thing stinks of a cover-up. We know Putin's cronies used and abused this scheme - so why won't the government give us the full picture?"

Of course, golden visas were a dream for crooks and money-launderers from around the world, not just Russia, ever since John Major's Conservative government introduced residency through investment in 1994.

The scheme was rebranded Tier 1 (Investor) Visa - 'golden visa' - in 2008, under a new points-based immigration system to attract investors in the wake of the financial crisis. In 2011, the coalition government pledged to ["roll out the red carpet for entrepreneurs and investors"](#), by giving those who invested larger sums of money permanent residency faster, and significantly relaxing residency requirements.

And that's exactly what happened.

As [Spotlight on Corruption](#)'s graphic shows, between 2008 and 2019, more than 10,000 golden visas were issued. Just 9% of golden applications were refused - in comparison to 42% of asylum

applications.

As far back as October 2015 [Transparency International UK warned](#) that it was “highly likely that substantial amounts of corrupt wealth from China and Russia have been laundered into the UK” through the tier 1 visa regime.

A former Conservative minister this week told me that they had warned the government to close the golden visa route “years ago” but the Treasury refused “even though they knew there were people with NCA [National Crime Agency] files against them” using the route.

Sue Hawley, executive director of Spotlight on Corruption, said: “Two years on from Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine, we still have no clearer idea of who got golden visas, what threat they posed to the UK’s national security, and what the government has done about their visa status. The government is effectively marking its own homework on this in secret and that is clearly highly unsatisfactory.”

The Home Office said that it had already published the key findings of the review and would be making no further comment.

But this newsletter will continue to push the government for full transparency on this.

I have lodged what’s called an ‘internal review’ against the Home Office’s refusal to disclose the review. If that’s not successful, my next step is a full appeal to the Information Commissioner’s Office.

It won’t be quick - or easy - but we won’t be giving up.

Peter Geoghegan

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