

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Joint meeting of the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Committee on Foreign Policy and Inter-Parliamentary Co-operation of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, HC 916

Tuesday 20 May 2025

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Emily Thornberry (Chair); Alex Ballinger; Aphra Brandreth; Phil Brickell; Richard Foord; Uma Kumaran; Blair McDougall; Abtisam Mohamed; Edward Morello; Sir John Whittingdale.

Questions 1 - 15

Witnesses

I: The following Members of the Committee on Foreign Policy and Inter-Parliamentary Co-operation of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine gave evidence: Oleksandr Merezhko (Chair), Oleksandr Kopylenko (Deputy Chair), Andriy Sharaskin (Secretary), Iryna Herashchenko, Mariya Ionova, Ihor Kryvosheiev, Natalia Loktionova, Olha Rudenko and Yelyzaveta Yasko.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Oleksandr Merezhko, Oleksandr Kopylenko, Andriy Sharaskin, Iryna Herashchenko, Mariya Ionova, Ihor Kryvosheiev, Natalia Loktionova, Olha Rudenko and Yelyzaveta Yasko.

Chair: Today the Foreign Affairs Committee is honoured to be joined by the Committee on Foreign Policy and Inter-Parliamentary Co-operation of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, for a special joint session. We will be talking about a wide range of issues affecting our two countries. Everyone joining us is very welcome.

Perhaps we could begin by introducing the members of the two Committees, starting with the British.

Phil Brickell: My name is Phil Brickell; I am the Member of Parliament for Bolton West.

Richard Foord: Hello, I am Richard Foord. I am a Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament from Devon.

Blair McDougall: I am Blair McDougall; I'm a Labour Member of Parliament from East Renfrewshire in Scotland.

Abtisam Mohamed: Hello, I'm Abtisam Mohamed. I am the Labour Member for Sheffield Central.

Sir John Whittingdale: I am John Whittingdale. For a long time I was chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine—I am currently vice-chair—and I am a proud holder of the Order of Merit of Ukraine.

Chair: I am Emily Thornberry, I am the Chair of the Committee and the MP for Islington South and Finsbury.

Edward Morello: I am Edward Morello and I am the MP for West Dorset.

Uma Kumaran: Hello, I am Uma Kumaran, the Labour MP for Stratford and Bow, in London.

Aphra Brandreth: Hi, I'm Aphra Brandreth. I'm the Conservative Member of Parliament for Chester South and Eddisbury.

Alex Ballinger: I'm Alex Ballinger, the Labour MP for Halesowen.

Q1 **Chair:** That is the Labour, or rather the British side—there are a lot of Labour people. I wondered if the Ukrainians might also introduce themselves. Oleksandr, I wonder if you might be able to ensure that we can do that.

Oleksandr Merezhko: I would like to introduce Natalia Loktionova.



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Natalia Loktionova: Hello everybody and good morning; nice to see you here. My name is Natalia Loktionova. I am a Member of Parliament and a member of the Committee.

Olha Rudenko: Hello everyone. My name is Olha Rudenko, and I am a member of the Servant of People party, so pro-presidential.

Oleksandr Merezhko: I am Oleksandr Merezhko, the Chair of the Ukrainian Foreign Affairs Committee.

Petrov Anton: Hello everybody, my name is Petrov Anton. I am a member of the secretariat to the Committee.

Oleksandr Merezhko: The rest of our colleagues online will introduce themselves.

Oleksandr Kopylenko: Dear friends, I am Oleksandr Kopylenko, deputy Chairman of our Committee.

Mariya Ionova: I am Mariya Ionova, a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee and also co-chair of the Equal Opportunity Caucus; my political course is European Solidarity.

Ihor Kryvosheiev: Hello, dear colleagues, my name is Ihor Kryvosheiev and I am a Member of the Parliament of Ukraine from the Servant of the People party.

Andriy Sharaskin: Hello, my name is Andriy Sharaskin. I am a Member of Parliament, a member of the Committee and a veteran.

Yelyzaveta Yasko: Good morning, my name is Liza Yasko, and I am a member of this Committee and of our delegation to the Council of Europe, working on a number of important international law initiatives. I am also an alumnus of the University of Oxford.

Q2 **Chair:** On our side, we have lots of questions—I am so sorry. Oleksandr, I wonder if you would be kind enough to begin by introducing the topic, and update the public on the current situation in Ukraine?

Oleksandr Merezhko: The current situation remains difficult but stable. We continue to fight, and there is a hope that there will be negotiations. But at the same time, I do not believe that the negotiations will be productive, for the simple reason that Putin does not want peace or a ceasefire. It poses a serious danger to him remaining in power—that is why I do not believe it. On the other hand, the most important thing is to remember that the only way to deal with Russia and Putin is not by negotiating—Putin takes that as weakness—but by imposing stricter sanctions and providing Ukraine with military means, weaponry and assistance.

The war has entered its fourth year. You can imagine how difficult it is; Russia continues to kill civilians. But we stand firm, and we are grateful for friends like the UK, Germany, France, Poland and the Baltic and Nordic



states, because your help and assistance helps us to survive and to bring peace closer.

Chair: I have to say that the experience of members of the Committee in visiting Ukraine—and Members of Parliament more generally, many of whom have now visited—is that all of us are struck by the extraordinary strength and determination of the Ukrainians. We are overwhelmed by your bravery. It is an honour to give you any help that we can; we mean that very sincerely. For those of us who have had the honour of spending any time in Ukraine or with Ukrainians, to see the force that you have and the strength that you have as a people is really very moving. Do you mind if we begin with some questions? Coming out of the visit to Ukraine, Alex has some questions.

Q3 **Alex Ballinger:** Thank you, Chair. I, too, was incredibly impressed by the resilience of the Ukrainian people and parliamentarians over these three years. In the short time that we were in Kyiv, there were a number of air raid sirens. A couple of days ago, we saw Russians again attacking civilian targets—destroying the minibus where nine people were killed. I cannot even imagine how hard it must be on the frontlines. One of the asks when we were there was for more on air defence. Could you say a bit more about how the UK and our allies can help you on air defence to protect those civilian locations and help with the fight on the frontline?

Oleksandr Merezhko: I will respond quickly and then I give the floor to Mariya Ionova on this important issue. From my perspective, one of the crucial things in terms of our defence is to have reliable air defence. Air defence protects our civilian population in Kyiv and other cities in Ukraine. To do it effectively we need, for example, Patriot systems. That is important because Russia is using all kinds of means, including Shahed drones and ballistic missiles. It is a crucial issue when we talk about the coalition of the willing. I believe that one of the guarantees for Ukraine could be closing the sky, and creating an air defence shield for Ukraine. I hope that will be included in this project, and this idea to help Ukraine to create reliable security guarantees. On that, I would like to give the Floor to Mariya Ionova.

Mariya Ionova: Dear colleagues, I thank you one more for this great opportunity for an inter-committee exchange. It is very important to keep this tradition on a regular basis, especially in the light of the conclusion of recent landmark agreements, such as the security agreement and the 100-year partnership agreement. I also wish to thank the British nation, and of course Members of Parliament who have regularly visited Ukraine, not only during the last three years, but also in the last 11 years since the Russian aggression started in 2014. I also congratulate you on the conclusion of the trade and security deal with the European Union yesterday, at the first post-Brexit UK-EU summit. When we are talking about the Ukrainian situation, nobody wants an end to the war as much as Ukraine does. Today we will discuss a lot of issues. I add my warm words to those of the Chairman in thanking you for consolidating the transatlantic support for Ukraine.



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Let us be honest: President Trump has opened this window of opportunity to end the war, but I think our joint efforts must really be focused on making the end of the war just and fair. We must stop losing not only our territories and our time, but first of all our people. You are right that we are losing our civilian people and our armed forces every day, and for us these numbers are painful and heartbreaking. We need a just peace, not a capitulation, and not the appeasement of an aggressor.

Unfortunately, we have all these appeasement actions, as I can remember happened when Georgia was occupied even in 2008. That is why I would like to say to our true friends here that we have to be clear about our unity internationally, and also our national unity, to save our national identity. The best negotiators are our Ukrainian armed forces. That is why we must do everything to give them everything to fulfil their service.

Our Ukrainian armed forces are not all professional—not 100%. They are regular people who are heroes, each of them, women and men. They just want to live in an independent, European country. That has been our natural civilised wish and desire for many years, yet for a lot of years Russia has just wanted to delete us from the world map. That is why Ukraine's territorial integrity means no concessions to the aggressor, because he will go further. We will never satisfy his hunger; we just have to stop him. That is why, when we are discussing the question of Crimea—the cornerstone of Trump's plan is the issue of Crimea and other territorially occupied and illegally annexed territories of Ukraine. The *de jure* status of Crimea is the backbone of international law and security. That is why there can be no backsliding on the territorial integrity of Ukraine. We really need strong decisions on the non-recognition of the illegal annexation of Crimea and other territories.

There are no diplomats in Trump's team; it is all businessmen. That is why every day we hear, "deal, deal, and deal." If democracy and territorial integrity are a "deal", we will never accept it. That is why we will be very strong in our values and principles. We are thankful that our British colleagues are on the same page as us in not only defending, but fighting for, those principles and values. That is why there is a deadlock on the battlefield; in whose favour that deadlock is will depend on our strategy.

In 2023, after attempts at a counterattack, the war entered a stalemate, and both sides had a choice of further strategy. But nowadays Russian aggression represents a new kind of warfare, with new technologies and strategies. Unfortunately, they learnt lessons. That is why we also need this new strategy. We need unification of the type of drones that we operate and produce, not in the hundreds. In Ukraine we have 214 types of first-person view drones, and the same is true of other types of military warfare, from armoured vehicles to main battle tanks and jet fighters. That is why we need more air protection and why we were asking to close the sky three years ago. I am sorry to say it in public, but we were too slow.

That is why we are always asking to simplify the procedures and be more operative in production. We know how many countries have given to us



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the last pieces, because they understand that it is better and cheaper to stop the war in Ukraine than let it spread to western Europe. We do not want that, and we are ready to fight and stop the aggressor—but, of course, with joint efforts, more weapons, more able sanctions against the aggressor and more international transatlantic unity. The western allies, including the UK, also have to place their military industries on a war footing. It is also possible to replenish your arsenals and substitute the US deliveries—as we have discussed before—and support Ukraine while we take the major responsibility on ourselves. That is the reality.

That is why our joint strategy shall be as follows. First, a wartime economy: it is time not only to produce armaments but to prepare logistics and repair hubs. Secondly, there should be new technologies, because we see how the Russians are creating new technologies, and giving that strategic protection, which is why it is time to invest in the research and development of new weapons and battlefield strategies. Thirdly, we need to build up internal resilience, to consolidate our societies and get them prepared for a fight if peace efforts fail.

We must take these preventive actions now and western assistance to strengthen Ukraine's negotiating position. We really need to help our armed forces to strengthen our negotiating position. It is only the situation on the ground that Putin is interested in. That is why they are talking about whole regions, or Crimea, or something like this. We will not accept it, and unfortunately there is still a strong challenge at our Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. We have to be honest about this situation. Again, only through strong actions and strong sanctions can we stop him and take a strong negotiating position.

It is about not only strong sanctions and weaponry but NATO membership for Ukraine. We will not bargain with this, and it is not Putin's deal. Our society would like to be part of NATO. Our society and our armed forces would make NATO stronger. It is in our mutual interest. To finally get the invitation would not only be a signal for Putin that you will be with us politically, but a really strong message that NATO would, for Ukraine, stop Russia once and for all. That would be the just peace. That is why it is so important for us.

Another symbol we have to ruin is the Druzhba pipeline. We really need sanctions. The main issue is oil and gas: they are the blood for Putin's Russian military forces. Also there are the frozen assets. I think everything is—

Chair: I am so sorry to interrupt you, but we are going to come to frozen assets a little later. May I continue to focus on the security question? I remember from when we visited that you have on your Committee people who actively fight on the frontline—Andriy is one of the people on the Committee. I want to make clear to the public the situation in Ukraine: everyone has to be on the frontline, including politicians. Some days they spend time on the frontline and other times they are in Parliament feeding back their experience.

- Q4 **Phil Brickell:** It is a real privilege to have this joint session with Ukrainian colleagues today. It was an honour to visit Ukraine and to spend time in Kyiv in February. I want to touch on the 100-year partnership that was signed between Prime Minister Keir Starmer and President Zelensky at the start of this year. It covers a number of areas including defence and security, of course, but also cultural and energy issues. Do Ukrainian colleagues want to comment on the signal that sent to citizens across Ukraine about the relationship with the United Kingdom?

Oleksandr Merezhko: I will try to respond quickly and then give the floor to Liza Yasko.

First of all, it is an extremely powerful message to our society and to the whole world that we have concluded this 100-year strategic partnership agreement. It is extremely important. I remember reading in the memoirs of Churchill that he once said that the country behind which the UK stands cannot lose the war, so for me it is an extremely important signal. It is also a strong signal to Putin and to Russia that we are not alone—that there is solidarity after all, and that we have a very important, reliable and powerful friend in the UK.

We are hopeful, even in terms of inter-parliamentary dimensions, so to speak, and we want to join as an observer to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. Again, please support us in this endeavour, because we want to be closer to you. We know that the UK is not part of the European Union, but we are trying to do everything we can to bring our nations closer to each other, and to use all platforms and opportunities to do that. I thank you again for your visits and your support, because I view you as our advocate—as our attorney—before the United States. I am personally grateful for what Keir Starmer did to support us after some misunderstanding in the Oval Office. We continue to rely on your help and support.

I would like to give the Floor to Liza Yasko, who has been patiently waiting for her turn.

- Q5 **Chair:** I know that Liza has been waiting for some time but, before she speaks, an announcement has just come out in the press. The UK has announced 100 new sanctions on Russia. We have just announced that we are sanctioning 14 more members of the Social Design Agency, who are responsible for Russian-funded disinformation; 46 financial institutions, which help Russia to avoid sanctions; the St Petersburg Currency Exchange and the Russian Deposit Insurance Agency; and 18 more ships in the shadow fleet. I have just been given a piece of paper with that news so I thought I would share it with you before we went on.

I am so sorry, Liza—I know you have been waiting for ages.

Yelyzaveta Yasko: Thank you for sharing that news, Chair, and thank you friends and colleagues from the UK. I wanted to start by saying a few things about our security, but I will respond on the sanctions. I was an author of a Council of Europe resolution on the importance of sanctions—on making sure that Russia is pressured, the evidence for why sanctions



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work and why it is important to have them. Thank you for being very strict and confident in applying this approach, because it has seemed that, especially in recent months, the reality of politics around the world is shifting dramatically.

Unfortunately, on the situation on the ground, the mood and the security situation, I would not say that there is much optimism. I say that publicly because we Ukrainians—I say this as a human being and as a mother—could not imagine that the things that were happening to Ukraine, done by the Russian aggressor, would be repeated and repeated, because we believed that there would be common sense and humanity in the world's reaction. I do not need to explain that, unfortunately, not everyone understands that. Even those of our partners and friends who were very strict are shifting, because of different geopolitical situations.

I say that to say thank you. If you asked the average Ukrainian person on the street, they would probably say that the British people were with us, and that all your Prime Ministers, despite the political turbulence inside your country, were supportive of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. We highly appreciate that, so thank you for that.

On the security situation and the war situation, unfortunately there is no stability. As my colleague said, we are advancing our drone technologies, but the Russians are doing so too. Every day, the technological advancement of the Russian army is growing. Despite the bravery, resilience and incredible brain work of our intelligence and security services, and of our people, Russia still has made a lot of technological advancements. Any assistance with air defence will help us tremendously, because it is not a secret that we need much more help. We need to protect our Ukrainian cities. Unfortunately, civilians remain one of the targets of this terrible war. Every week and every day we have victims. Unfortunately, there is no stability and no decrease.

Moreover, another topic I am working on now for the Council of Europe is the question of prisoners of war and the humanitarian exchange of prisoners of war. I want to stress that this is an area where you could maybe help us more. Recently, we have had some progress in arranging exchanges of prisoners of war, but thousands of people are still missing, either officially in our register of missing people, or people who have been illegally kidnapped or detained in Russia. Many people are missing, and we do not know where they are. Only after negotiations can they be released.

Countries such as the United Arab Emirates are helping us with prisoners of war, and we are welcoming every possible mediator who can help us to release more prisoners of war, civilians and Ukrainian children. I am stressing this because our sources say that there might be another round of exchanges, which we welcome a lot. For us, the ceasefire and any possible peace is possible only after our prisoners of war are returned. We ask for your support in that.

I absolutely join in the gratitude for the agreement between the UK and Ukraine. Please be more outspoken to your public. We really want to



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contribute all together for the security of the future and of Europe, our continent—this is very important—but it does not look like the war will be over anytime soon. Every average Ukrainian understands that, and that is not optimistic, so we can do much more.

Chair: Blair McDougall wanted to ask about Russian state asset seizure, which both our two Chairs have been working on. We are putting out a joint op-ed about this, and I hope there will be more.

Q6 Blair McDougall: Thank you again for welcoming us in Kyiv last month. Some €300 billion of frozen foreign exchange reserves are being used to underpin loans, but not being transferred to Ukraine. Could you set out the arguments for why we should transfer them wholesale to Ukraine?

Oleksandr Merezhko: First, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Madam Chair for this initiative and op-ed. It is an extremely important issue. I came across an opinion by a Swedish-American economist, Åslund, who says that for Ukraine to win the war it needs €50 billion a year. That helps to increase and enhance our military capabilities, first of all, and to defend us. It is crucially important.

I specialise in international law, and I absolutely agree with Madam Chair's argument that it is in line with international law to make the aggressor pay for the damage done to the victim of the aggression. We should always proceed from the fact that there is a perpetrator and there is a victim of the aggression. The aggressor, first and foremost, should pay for the crimes of aggression, for war crimes and for the damage and destruction, because he has already destroyed a huge chunk of our power grid and our economy.

I also believe that the money should be not only frozen but confiscated and transferred to Ukraine. That might also have a deterrent effect on Russia. If, for example, each time Russia bombs Ukraine, Ukraine receives €10 billion from the frozen money, it might have a kind of deterrent effect—at least a little bit—on the aggressor.

I would like to raise another issue. I believe that not only sovereign assets should be frozen, confiscated and transferred to Ukraine. We should also think about the assets of Russian oligarchs, like Abramovich and so on, because they feed the Russian war machine. They support the Russian war against Ukraine. They are accomplices in the crime of aggression. They should also be held responsible in material terms for the crime of their country, which they support. We should continue on this path.

By the way, I have just read about what Madam Chair was saying about sanctions. It is a truly historic day. We are so grateful to the UK, which is the leader in this regard. I hope that other countries will follow your example. Thank you for being a leader in supporting Ukraine.

Q7 Blair McDougall: Can I ask about that idea of showing leadership, Mr Chairman? One of the arguments that we hear when people push back on the transfer of assets is that it has to be done in a way that unites all the G7 countries, and that we do not want to split countries, with some acting



and some not. In other areas of defence and support for Ukraine, we have moved on from worrying about unity and instead we have the coalition of the willing. Do you have a view on whether it needs to be done unanimously or countries like the UK could take a lead and act alone?

Oleksandr Merezhko: I would say that this is an important issue of justice, international law and political will. Yes, I see that there are countries that are reluctant to give money, for their economic interests, but we should put the interests of stopping the aggression and punishing the aggressor at the top.

I do not want to name names, but unfortunately there are some countries that call it an act of war because they do not want to give up the money. That is why they are trying to find any kind of pretext. The decision should be taken collectively by the G7, understanding that there might be some countries who will be against it. That is why it is dangerous: it is not a fair position and it is detrimental to European interests and Atlantic solidarity and, of course, to the interests of international justice.

Chair: Thank you very much. We also want to ask about the special tribunal for the crime of aggression against Ukraine.

Q8 **Aphra Brandreth:** I echo everybody's words about how grateful we are for you taking the time to meet with us today. Given the limitations of the International Criminal Court in prosecuting the crime of aggression against Ukraine, how important is it that we establish a dedicated special tribunal to ensure that Russia's political and military leadership is held accountable?

Oleksandr Merezhko: It is tremendously important. Again, this is about how to punish the aggressor. If the aggressor is going unpunished and rewarded through any kind of concessions, including territorial, that puts the whole of global security in danger. It opens Pandora's box. It creates a very dangerous precedent for other regions, like the Indo-Pacific. If the aggressor is not punished, potential aggressors will definitely commit acts and crimes of aggression all over the world.

I view it as the continuation of the Nuremberg trials and the Tokyo trials. Luckily, we are going to conclude an international treaty, which will become the legal basis for the creation of such a tribunal, between Ukraine and the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe consists of 46 member states. I hope that countries from other regions will join—maybe Australia, hopefully Japan, New Zealand, maybe South Korea. The Nuremberg tribunal was created on the basis of agreement between four states, and the Tokyo tribunal had 11 states. We have enough legitimacy for this tribunal. It is crucially important to create it as soon as possible. Maybe some of my colleagues would like to add to that.

Mariya Ionova: I kindly ask if it's also possible to give the floor to my colleague Iryna Herashchenko, who will answer the questions on disinformation.

I will start by saying that, yes, we greet the 17th package of sanctions on the 200 shadow fleet, but unfortunately Russia's shadow fleet is around 1,000. That is why there is still a lot of work to do.

Also, I will just say a few words on disinformation. It is a real challenge for all of us. After 2014, when the Russian aggression started with the annexation of Crimea, there have been three narratives that they are providing in different European countries, and also in Great Britain. First of all, they say it is a historical issue that Ukraine is not an existing country and so on; it is like historical Russian territory. So they are trying to exchange the story and the history. The second is that it is impossible to accept Ukraine's membership of NATO; this is the narrative they are working on.

Also, they are very actively providing the narrative, "Do not help Ukraine with military support." That is why we so strongly asked for all the Russian channels and social networks to be stopped, including in Great Britain. We know, for example, that the newspaper of Lebedev was popular in Great Britain. Unfortunately, some Russian channels are still very active. We saw what was going on in Romania during the campaign, and also in Poland. So we have to not only pay attention and take things into consideration; we really have to take actions.

My second issue is about the international organisations—the justice organisations—which Oleksandr has mentioned, and also about what Liza mentioned, the hostages and prisoners. Let's be honest, and we are discussing this, that the International Committee of the Red Cross is not capable. We should also say publicly what is going on with our prisoners and hostages. First of all, there is a huge number. Second, there is the violation by the Russian Federation of—I do not know—each provision of the Geneva convention. That is also why, for example, we have sent so many letters, not only to the International Committee of the Red Cross, but also to United Nations Committees, like the Committee against Torture and the Human Rights Committee—and nothing. Nothing. The torture is awful; we cannot compare it even with the second world war. We have this evidence; we have this documentation.

The world has to know the ideology of the Russian Federation. So I kindly ask you, as your diplomats and your diplomatic experience are some of the best in the world, to say publicly that, unfortunately, some of our international organisations are not capable of delivering the truth. I am not asking for anything else—only the truth. Thank you. If possible, Iryna Herashchenko will continue about disinformation, to answer your question.

Chair: Before we move on to disinformation, I want to focus on this issue for a little bit longer. We have many questions about disinformation, and we really want to hear about it, but I am trying to take things in a logical order, if that is all right. Richard wanted to ask another question or so about international law and the crime of aggression.

Q9 Richard Foord: Here in the UK Parliament, I have been an advocate for the special tribunal for the crime of aggression against Ukraine but I am



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curious to know how you answer people who are sceptical. You will hear people say things like, "It is pointless to have a special tribunal for the crime of aggression because of the immunity of sitting Heads of State, Heads of Government and Foreign Ministers." How do you respond to people who say that only when Putin is defeated could this actually amount to anything?

Oleksandr Merezhko: As a professor of international law, I cannot not answer this important question—I cannot help myself. I have studied this issue very attentively and I have published an article with regard to this argument that there are immunities for the big three—President, Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs. There is no such immunity, and the trend of international law is not to recognise such immunities when serious international crimes are committed, like crimes of aggression and genocide—we are talking about genocide being committed by Russia against the Ukrainian nation. If you look at the practice of some courts, like the ICC, we can see very distinctly that there is no immunity; politicians and statesmen cannot hide themselves behind the concept of immunity, from a legal point of view.

Secondly, it is important to bring to justice not only natural persons—war criminals like Putin, his entourage and so on—but Russia as a state itself. It might become an additional argument for us to make Russia pay reparations, as a form of international legal liability or responsibility for the crimes committed. The tribunal will also allow these different forms of international legal responsibility to be imposed on Russia. Maybe my colleague, Iryna Herashchenko, will explain in more detail.

Iryna Herashchenko: Thank you very much, dear colleagues; I am very happy to see you. I should remark on the responsibility of Putin and the Russian people. For us, it is very important. It is the collective responsibility of the Russian people—not only Putin and his team—because every day, Russian people support the war. Every day, Russian military people kill Ukrainian people. It is very important to organise international tribunals and to look at the collective responsibility of all Russian people.

My colleague gave you good information on the security situation and the situation on the frontline. I think the security situation has now degraded, and we may be in a very difficult position because every day the war transforms.

My colleague gave you a lot of information on security, but I want to make a short remark in our discussion about disinformation. I was the special representative of President Poroshenko in the peace process and the Minsk group, and I worked very actively.

In terms of Russian disinformation, this hybrid war is a big problem. Ukraine has a unique experience of resisting Russian disinformation. As early as 2014, our team began blocking Russian TV channels and social media platforms, not because they were media, but because they were tools of the Kremlin propaganda machine. At the time, some European



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citizens and institutions criticised us, but time has proven that we were right because it is very important to block Russian propaganda.

Today, Russia continues to interfere in elections and manipulate public opinion across the globe. It is part of its hybrid war. Telegram has become one of the main tools of information warfare. Russia spreads fakes and intimidating rhetoric and interferes in international affairs through that platform. We call for a co-ordinated response, legislative regulation, codification of find and search, and restrictions on the channel's links to Russian intelligence services. Now we have a project of law in the Ukrainian Parliament to block anonymous channels on Telegram. It is a very important and unique challenge for us. Our team has initiated a draft law requiring de-anonymisation of Telegram channels.

The Putin regime is the responsibility of all Russians, including the so-called liberal opposition, which helped to build and entrench independent media and so on.

Mariya talked with you about a very important problem for us: our hostages. I think it is very important to spread a lot of information about Ukrainian hostages. We are speaking of people like Victoria Amelina and Volodymyr Vakulenko, who were tortured by the Russian Federation. Stanislav Aseyev was a prisoner in a Russian prison. I think it is very important to do that with their books and with information about those people.

Chair: I am going to ask Sir John Whittingdale to ask some questions on Russian disinformation as well. He has particular expertise and insight into this. John, could you lead off these questions?

Q10 Sir John Whittingdale: If I may, I will build on what Mariya and Iryna have already said. We are subject to Russian disinformation, as are many countries. You have mentioned Romania and Georgia. Last week, I was in Moldova, where there is a massive Russian disinformation campaign, propagated through Telegram, as you have mentioned. Also, TikTok is now a major platform carrying a large amount of disinformation. Obviously, the disinformation aimed at Ukraine will be different. A lot outside Ukraine is about how countries will get drawn into the war if they co-operate with NATO, but could you say a little more about what impact disinformation is having in Ukraine and what more might be done to counter it?

Mariya Ionova: Hello, John; nice to see you. Thank you for all your work and all your support. I think that you are right. We had not mentioned TikTok. It is really an issue, especially in Moldova. For us, Moldova is very important; we will fight for Moldova. And, by the way, we are really happy about the results of the elections in Romania.

My proposition is probably to have a plan for special hearings between our Committees, where we will invite our Executive institutions to give you more and deeper information about what we are doing and how we act. I think it is important to tell not only EU countries but the UK, as Iryna mentioned, what we have done, starting from 2014.



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When we are talking about such channels, it should also be a closed meeting, together with our intelligence services, because it is their job. It's about security; it's about security for all of us. We have a lot of issues now about freedom of speech inside our country, but we are talking now about propaganda and disinformation from Russia, which is poisoning free countries. We really have to stop this.

It is also about Russian so-called journalists. We see how many European countries are financing them and inviting them as special guests, as though they are civil activists. I am sorry, but they were main actors in all 22 years of Putin's leadership in Russia. Those people also have to take responsibility because they were supporting his policy. But what have we seen? We have seen how they have become rising stars in many conferences in EU capitals and in the USA. Sorry, but if you ask them the direct question, "Is Crimea Ukraine?", they will not answer you. It is not 50 shades of grey; this is black and white; this is about truth and lies. It is only if we stand altogether that we can stop it.

If it is possible to take into consideration my proposition to have a special meeting, probably a closed meeting, with our security services to discuss a plan of what to do together, we can share with you good examples from our experience of how to stop Russian propaganda, because it is not information; it is disinformation and propaganda. This is not only a direct war, but a hybrid war, and, believe me, Putin spends billions of dollars on his propaganda machine.

Unfortunately, we have seen how the Russians have become more active in the USA, and we also have to take that into consideration. I again come back to my request to you, with your diplomatic experience, to be more active with our American friends. We are really relying on Congress and on the Senate. We have to change all this terminology that they would like us to accept as normality. For us, it is not normality. "Deal" is not normality; democracy, yes, is normality. When talk about justice and the tribunal, for us this is normality; we will not trade justice.

Again, this is not only for Ukraine; it is for the whole international order and for global security. We cannot just delete this puzzle. This puzzle is very important, because it is about justice. We are talking about hostages and torture, and about killed children. The mother of a four-year-old boy was killed in Vasylykiv yesterday; she was covering her baby.

I can also tell you about the experience of my nephew and of Iryna's nephew, who is 22 years old. He is a volunteer in the military, and he has been wounded in the war three times. He was wounded for a fourth time in the recent missile attack in the Sviatoshyn region. One was a ballistic missile, and we had more than 20 people killed. We care about each life, and that is the big difference between us and Russia.

My request is that the picture is much wider. I kindly ask you not to exclude, or not to give an opportunity to trade with, part of the picture—

Q11 Sir John Whittingdale: Mariya, you referenced Russian disinformation



affecting America. We are going to Washington in two weeks' time, and this is certainly an issue we will raise. Do you think that the extraordinary lack of understanding that Mr Witkoff appeared to show when talking about the eastern area of Ukraine and the history was a direct example of Russian disinformation that he had somehow swallowed?

Mariya Ionova: It is not about understanding; this is his ideology, because he is a business partner of one of the Russian oligarchs. I am sorry to say this publicly, but it is open information. So this is not about understanding; it is about ideological principles and values. We are ready, and you know the truth, which is why the first issue in Russian propaganda is to delete these things and to give their narratives for the reasons for the war. They are working on this very hard.

In that regard, if possible, we will send a paper on what we think we should do altogether. If your visit to the USA is in two weeks, let us send this information, and you will probably take it into consideration. We know there are people who know the truth, and this includes the American nation—they know the truth, and they really support Ukraine. So we just need to correct the team of Trump and their disinformation. Unfortunately, Witkoff has disinformation, and that is his ideology. Again, we would like them to come to Ukraine. Why is he going only to Russia? Let him come to Ukraine—no problem. If he has any questions, we are ready to answer. He should not only go to Kyiv but go one hour from Kyiv, to Chernihiv, or three hours to the Sumy region, where he will see the reality.

We are not hiding anything. Please go ahead and, again, meet the hostages. They will tell you the conditions they were in in Russian prisons. Iryna mentioned our journalists who have been killed and tortured in Russian prisons. There are still Ukrainian journalists as hostages in Russian prisons. We have to fight for them, because they have been tortured and imprisoned because of their Ukrainian true position.

Russians will always fight with people who have a position other than a pro-Russia position. They are killing Ukrainian nationals and also Ukrainian Russian-speaking people. Their narrative is that they are fighting for Russian people who speak Russian, but they are killing them also. That is why it is not about Russian speaking or Ukrainian speaking; it is really just about not having our sovereignty and a future for our country.

That is why—we are coming back to the beginning—we have to give the tools to our Ukrainian armed forces, who are the best negotiators. We should not spend time on it; we really need fast action.

Q12 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Sticking with the theme of disinformation, Iryna, you referenced the US involvement. They have now cut funding, or decided not to focus US aid on supporting Ukraine in its fight against misinformation and cyber-attacks. What specific countermeasures will Ukraine put in place to address that disinvestment?

Iryna Herashchenko: Thank you for your interest in this topic. Last week, I was on an observer mission of the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE in Albania. It is interesting that, after Romania, Albania during the



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election campaign blocked short reels on TikTok. It is a problem on a global scale.

It might be that Mariya and I organise a special meeting with our European colleagues and our Committee on Humanitarian and Information Policy. Our colleagues on that Committee works very actively on the disinformation problem and the problem with social media—TikTok, Telegram and so on. For Ukraine, the first problem with social media is Telegram, because 80% of Ukrainian people take information from the Telegram platform. The big problem is that it is an anonymous system to Ukraine. It is important to discuss our project in the Ukrainian Parliament to modify and de-anonymise the platform to Ukraine.

May I make a short remark about Russian culture? All the time, Russia continues to use culture—religion and literature—as a tool of propaganda. Every time Russia uses Russian culture and literature as the only great culture in the post-Soviet space, I think that is a big problem for your country and European countries, because you do not know Ukrainian culture—Ukrainian literature, Ukrainian music and so on. It is really important for us to take that information to European countries, because it is an element of Russian disinformation.

Q13 Uma Kumaran: I echo the comments of my fellow Committee members: thank you all for taking so much time to meet with us. It is apt that you mention Ukrainian culture. I am really proud that in the constituency I represent in east London, we have the highest Ukrainian-born population in Britain, so I am well versed in Ukrainian culture; we have a thriving community. Since we have been talking about disinformation, what impact do you see it having on the morale of Ukrainians abroad, and are you seeing any impact on international support? Can you see that the Russian disinformation campaign is affecting how countries are reacting and how they are supporting you?

Chair: Any takers?

Oleksandr Merezko: The thing is that there are different numbers of Ukrainian people living abroad. We do not call them refugees; we use the term “temporarily displaced person”, to emphasise that they are temporarily living in other countries. We are doing everything we can to create conditions for them to come back as soon as possible. We are talking about millions of our people. For example, around 2 million Ukrainians currently live in Poland. I do not remember the exact figures for other countries.

When Ukrainians live in democratic states like the UK and Poland, they do not have a problem with Russian disinformation and propaganda, because in these countries there are good information policies that protect and shield them from the influence of Russian disinformation and propaganda. At the same time, the danger remains with social networks like TikTok. Let us remember that TikTok is a Chinese thing, and unfortunately China is helping Russia to spread its propaganda. Both countries use information and these information platforms as a weapon—a tool—against the free



world. That is why I would ban TikTok, for example. Another problem is the social platform X. Each time I open it I see how deeply permeated it is with Russian disinformation, misinformation and propaganda—it is truly dangerous. I think we should also handle this problem, because it has a certain impact.

The best weapon in our struggle against Russian propaganda and disinformation is truth. That is why I am so grateful to the UK and the BBC, to CNN and to other information outlets that are telling the truth about what is going on in Ukraine. That is why it is so important to keep Ukraine's issue on the radars of global information, because the world is growing used to this war. It is growing used to this tragedy, which happens on a daily basis in Ukraine. That is why it is so important to support the soft power of democracy, like the BBC, CNN and other agencies, as well as USAID.

Chair: I think we might have two more questions for you. I will go back to Uma and then to Phil.

Uma Kumaran: It is just a comment, Chair. Thank you for that answer, because we have an open inquiry on disinformation and what you have said about the BBC is so powerful. We will definitely take that forward as a Committee.

Chair: There is quite a large campaign going on to support the BBC World Service, and we are very grateful to see that you have joined our ranks.

Q14 **Phil Brickell:** My question is about the more than 19,000 Ukrainian children who have been taken to Russia. My understanding is that only about 1,200 of those children have since been returned to Ukraine, despite systematic abduction by the Kremlin; it is likely that the number of Ukrainian children held in Russia is even greater than that. Can the Committee tell us what steps are being taken to try to repatriate some of those children back to Ukraine? What more might the UK Government be able to do to help with that family repatriation?

Oleksandr Merezko: Let me give the floor to Olha Rudenko. She is very knowledgeable. After her speech, I will ask her to give the floor to Ihor Kryvosheiev, one of our members, as he is holding up his hand.

Olha Rudenko: Thank you very much for raising this important question. As you know, in any war the most vulnerable and those who suffer most are the children, and what has been done by Russia can be a sign of genocide. Officially, as you said, they have taken 19,000 children, but unofficially it is more. We do not have access to the statistics and do not know the final numbers, but many more children have been taken. They are being taken from their families, from orphanages, and separated from their real families. The problem is that they are erasing their nationality. They are taking them to far away parts of Russia, such as Siberia, and putting them in special camps. They are completely erasing their national memories and making them become Russian. They are using a lot of pro-Russian propaganda.



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Apart from that, it is very difficult to get them back. As you said, we have managed to take back only a few hundred children. As my colleague said, international organisations like the Red Cross and the UN are not really helping us with that; it is mostly Arab countries such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates that are serving as mediators. With their help, our special organisations are working on that. That is how we are doing it now, and we are talking on any level. We are going to interparliamentary organisations such as the IPU, and we are setting up special committees, for example at the Council of Europe. We are asking at all levels for mediators; if Russia does not want to speak to us directly on this matter, we are asking third parties to be mediators.

However, Russia is not really willing to give us information about these children. They are saying that they are “saving” these children from war—they are not taking them from families; they are saving them from war. That is one of the pieces of propaganda that Russia is using. There is so much to do on this matter, and we are still asking you as the UK, as a Parliament and a special organisation, to help.

Ihor Kryvosheiev: I would like to answer the question about the morale and resilience of Ukrainians. It is very important, and any act of support is important. There are no small or big acts, because our resilience is built on your support. I have met a lot of UK citizens in Ukraine, and I have met UK journalists near the frontline. Every meeting is important. When you visit Ukraine, it really helps us—it inspires us. Also, when we look at a photo and see on it a member of the royal family with Ukrainian veterans, that inspires millions. It is really important. We feel your support.

Is the support enough? Unfortunately, at this moment, the answer is no, because we are still fighting. We are asking you to extend the support, which will extend morale and increase our resilience. We will be stronger with more acts of support. When we talk about support, it is always a good idea to say thank you. I thank you, dear colleagues, for your efforts and for every act of support. I also thank the people of the United Kingdom.

On the question about morale, yes, it sounds like we do not want to fight any more, but my answer to you is that we have no choice, because Russia is very predictable. We had such a war 100 years ago. If you remember, what happened when Ukraine fell in 1921 was that Russia started one of the most horrible genocides in history, the Holodomor. We lost millions of lives of civilians, including children. That was the result of our surrender, so we have no choice. We will fight. When any country talks about appeasement or that Russia will not be held responsible for crimes against humanity, it sounds ridiculous. I am sorry, but it sounds ridiculous.

One more time, I thank you all for your time, your efforts and your acts of support, and I thank all the citizens of the United Kingdom.

Mariya Ionova: May I add some information on some of the questions, if possible?

Chair: Of course. The contributions that have been made by Members of



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the Ukrainian Parliament have been so informative and articulate. It has been really important to hear from you. We are bumping up against the clock a little, but otherwise yes.

Mariya Ionova: Thank you so much. First, before your visit to the US, it is really important to restore the active position and journalism of Radio Liberty. That is why we kindly ask you to speak about disinformation—in that regard, Radio Liberty is like a protection—and about restoring the financing of that media.

On the kidnapping, unfortunately the numbers are much higher. The main problem is to identify where these children are. As you know, the Russians are changing these children's surnames, and they have created filtration camps. Again, we come back to the question of international organisations, which, according to their statutes, have to be more active in this regard. World media should be louder on this topic. Remember that Putin is already being investigated; a criminal case against him has been opened in this regard, because of the children. I can tell you that we are getting such awful photos from temporarily occupied territories, from the Zaporizhzhia region and the Donetsk region, of what they do with the children in kindergartens and schools. It is really like a prison, how Russians are changing their ideology.

Finally, on air defence, I am sorry that I did not thank you for your initiatives during the discussion about the international contingent on our territory. Britain has agreed that they can close the sky, because you can give us Eurofighter Typhoons and F-35s. That is very important. We also thank you for the Gravehawk, which was produced and developed in just 18 months. I will just say that we need more, as you know, and not only for defence but for our existential resilience, as Ihor has mentioned. Notably, you can see the culture of Russians in Bucha, in Borodianka and in Mariupol.

By the way, on the Azov hostages, which Putin has not implemented, more than 2,000 people are still in prison. All the photos are awful. I again appeal to international organisations, which unfortunately are very weak, to do their job.

Q15 **Chair:** Thank you very much. I believe that that brings us to the end of this extremely interesting and informative session, which has been an opportunity for us to extend the friendship between our two countries and our two Parliaments. Is there anything that the Ukrainian Chair would like to say in closing the session?

Oleksandr Merezhko: Thank you. I have two very quick thoughts. First, dear friends, I am so glad that support for Ukraine is not a divisive issue in the UK—that this is something that unites you, no matter whether you are Conservative, Labour or Liberal. That is tremendously important for us. Thank you for the support across the political spectrum, so to speak.



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I will finish with a Churchillian phrase: "Give us the tools, and we will finish the job"—the job of liberation. Please try to tell that to our American friends. Thank you so much.

Chair: Very good. I could not put it any better, Sir, than perhaps saying this: Slava Ukraini.