HOUSE OF COMMONS

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Disinformation diplomacy: How malign actors are seeking to undermine democracy, HC 703

Tuesday 6 January 2026

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Emily Thornberry (Chair); Fleur Anderson; Alex Ballinger; Aphra Brandreth; Phil Brickell; Dan Carden; Richard Foord; Uma Kumaran; Edward Morello; Sir John Whittingdale.

Questions 181-247

Witnesses

I: Stephen Doughty MP, Minister of State for Europe, North America and Overseas Territories at Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and Jonny Hall CMG OBE, Director, Hybrid Threats Directorate at Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/138112/html/

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Stephen Doughty MP and Jonny Hall.

Chair: Happy new year. The Foreign Affairs Committee is coming to the end of its inquiry on disinformation, and we have had several evidence sessions and met with experts here and overseas. We have also had a lot of written evidence, and we would like to thank people who have helped with this inquiry and have spent time giving us their evidence.

Today, we are hearing from the responsible Minister, Stephen Doughty. Could you introduce who you have with you?

Stephen Doughty: I have Jonny Hall, who is the director of our hybrid directorate.

Q181 **Chair:** Lovely. I will begin by asking a general question. What assessment have you made of the scale of the threat that we face in Europe from disinformation, and, probably most importantly, how much threat do we face in the UK?

Stephen Doughty: First, Chair, happy new year—blwyddyn newydd dda—to you and the Committee members. Genuinely, I want to thank you and the Committee for undertaking this important inquiry. I think it is absolutely crucial and timely. I genuinely welcome the scrutiny and the ability to share some of the work that we have been doing.

Q182 **Chair:** The more we have been finding out, the more we realise how important and timely it is.

Stephen Doughty: Absolutely, and I have been visiting and engaging in many of the same locations that you and the Committee members have visited.

The first thing to say is that disinformation is nothing new. The Russians coined the phrase over a century ago, and we can look at many different examples in history, including extraordinary examples such as the KGB, the promotion of lies around the origins of AIDS and many others. It is important to recognise that it has been going on for a long time, but we do see a completely different scale and nature of the threat.

New technology has made it easier to spread harmful activity widely, and we now face co-ordinated, well-funded information operations by hostile states that are determined to weaken and divide our democracies and societies, and it is part of a growing wave of wider hybrid threats that we see across Europe and beyond, including targeting the UK. I want to be clear that this is information warfare. The playbook spans fake news sites, deepfake videos and armies of bots flooding social media with lies; you will have seen and heard of many different examples.

Just to will give the Committee an idea of the scale of the threat that we face, particularly from Russia, this year Russia alone plans to spend €30 million weekly on state propaganda—its own budget proposals admit that—and that is a total of €1.5 billion. Outlets such as Rybar already push

content in 28 languages, reaching millions. We know from very high-profile examples, such the Skripal poisonings, that we were flooded with different conflicting, disturbing and fake narratives about the origins of that attack, which we know of course were in Russia.

We see overt state propaganda, but we also see covert operations outsourced to others to hide Russia's intent. We see that most clearly in attempts to fracture unity and support for Ukraine, and that work is happening everywhere; it is happening in the UK, in Europe and in Africa. The Security Minister, my colleague in the Home Office—Minister Jarvis—has spoken about that as well. We are also resisting that, and we can and will identify and resist shoddy attempts to interfere in our democracies. We will build resilience. You made visits to many countries, whether it is Moldova, Romania or the western Balkans. We are working closely with a range of allies and partners, including the EU, and we are responding.

I want to highlight three particular areas that we are working on. First, we are acting against organisations and individuals behind Russia's information warfare through sanctions and exposures. Since autumn of 2024, we have sanctioned 38 Russian-linked organisations and have hit agencies such as the Doppelgänger network, Rybar and Pravfond. Those are all fronts for Kremlin lies and criminality, and they demonstrate—and this is really important to understand—a co-ordinated attempt to destabilise countries and regions that matter to our own security and stability.

We are really clear: we know what you are doing. If you are running propaganda mills, attacking our systems, freezing assets and blocking services, then we will freeze assets, block services and shut you out. We obviously cannot police or deal with every individual piece of content, but we can take out the nodes and networks that are amplifying and doing the biggest amount of damage, whether in the UK or elsewhere.

Secondly, we are providing direct support to those on the frontline of Russian attempts, whether that it is in Ukraine, Moldova or Romania, and that has proved very effective. Thirdly, we are continuing to work with France, Germany, the EU and others; we are sharing lessons, co-ordinating responses and maximising the impact on adversaries. We are also working closely here in the UK—as you asked, Chair—with our fellow Ministers in other Departments, particularly in the Home Office, MOD, Cabinet Office, DSIT and DCMS. This is a cross-Government effort. I will speak to more of the international aspects today in answering your questions, but I want to be clear that this is a cross-HMG effort. We are taking the insight that we see in what is happening elsewhere and using that to build resilience here, which is the responsibility of domestic Departments.

Let me say one last thing. Despite our strong efforts internationally, working with partners, allies and others to disrupt Russian information warfare, I am sorry and shocked to say that there are those in our politics who shamefully undermine that work and our national security. Whether that is as willing fools or as paid agents, as we saw with the former leader

of Reform in Wales, who took Russian bribes to share narratives—or quite frankly those who do it for free in this place and elsewhere—that fundamentally undermines all of the incredible work that teams across Government are doing with our allies. We need to be clear about that and call it out for what it is.

Q183 **Chair:** The impression that we got, and I hope I am speaking on behalf of the Committee, is that we were shocked to see the extent of organised disinformation in countries across the world. Our concern is to what extent it is happening in the UK and whether we are sufficiently alert to it. I will give you an example that was just in the *Evening Standard*—other members of the Committee will laugh at this, because, as a London MP, I keep wanging on about this—and that is the way London is maligned as a centre of violent crime.

There has been an analysis of Reddit by Mark Hill, a lecturer at King's College, who showed that there has been a year-on-year increase in the number of posts pushing the narrative that London is a dangerous and lawless city, despite the fact that there has been a reduction in violent crime in London. The number of posts contributing to that narrative has gone up from 874 in 2008 to 258,000 in 2024. When you look at them, you can see that the images are AI generated. There is a huge amount of suspicion as to what is going on, and there does seem to be some form of organised undermining of our capital city. Given that challenge, and what we have learned is happening in other countries, can we be confident that this is being countered in the UK?

Stephen Doughty: I think we can be. The Security Minister made that clear in his remarks to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy last year. For example, he talked about the last general election and was clear that there were attempts at interference activity. That is very clearly documented, but equally, he said, "We judged to have not reached the relevant thresholds to impact or influence the outcome of elections." That is a crucial point, and I share your concern about the scale. This is an ever-evolving threat, and we must remain laser-focused on it across Government. There is a range of measures being undertaken, including a review by Philip Rycroft and others, and colleagues in the Home Office and Cabinet Office are working on these issues. We work with Ministers through a body called the Defending Democracy Taskforce, which I sit on. The joint election security and preparedness unit, insight from what we see happening elsewhere in the world, what we know that networks are doing and the sorts of networks that we are attempting to disrupt and degrade are part of that in understanding our own efforts against this action.

We are doing a good job in defending, and the British people are part of that, too. People are incredibly savvy now at spotting fakes and issues, but these threats are evolving and expanding. The figures you cite do not surprise me at all. We all see it as Members of Parliament on our own social media accounts. I will come back to my first point: this is information warfare. It is not just individual tweets or posts on TikTok; these are co-ordinated, systematic efforts by adversaries to undermine our

democracy and that of our allies and partners, particularly around key topics like support for Ukraine.

Q184 **Uma Kumaran:** We heard extensively that cognitive and hybrid warfare is quite terrifying when the Committee visited Romania late last year. They held their presidential elections in 2024 and those were suspended due to the sheer scale of disinformation from Russian intervention. One of the things that we discussed was the information campaign targeting the Romanian diaspora abroad, especially in Britain. In relation to what the Chair was talking about, there is a lot in London. Fake conscription letters were sent out to Romanians in London, and the Romanian authorities had to issue a clarification that this was not true. I take your point that people are getting savvier, but if you receive an official-looking letter in Romanian with the seal of the Ministry saying that you are being conscripted to fight in the war against Ukraine, that is pretty terrifying. What are we doing in Britain to make sure that foreign interference is not continuing to happen like this?

Stephen Doughty: The example that you cite is deeply disturbing and I am well aware of the attempts to influence the diaspora here—not just the Romanian diaspora, but other groups too. We are incredibly alert to that—my colleagues in other Departments who I have mentioned certainly are. I discussed these issues when I was in Bucharest with the Romanian authorities. We have seen that with other diaspora groups from other countries that you mention.

We are working very closely through the Defending Democracy Taskforce, with the Home Office, DSIT, DCMS and others. I am confident that we have a very good sense of what is going on and the types of tactics that are being used. Ultimately, there are a number of ongoing reviews in light of recent events. What you rightly point out is that, although people are savvy now to the disinformation that is out there, new techniques and new tactics are being used all the time.

Q185 **Chair:** Although people are savvy to the fact that there is disinformation out there, they do not necessarily realise they have been influenced by it. That, by definition, is what the problem is. You may think in principle, "Oh, I know there are bots," but if you point out, "Well, this is a bot," people will argue. I have started doing it on my own social media. I said, "New year's resolution, let's identify some bots." I will retweet a bot and say, "This is a bot because of this, this and this," and the amount of arguing I get—some of which is of course from bots—shows the difficulty.

Stephen Doughty: I go back to the example I gave of the narratives that were put out around the Skripal poisoning. Those were reflected back to me unwittingly by individuals in my own constituency and even around this place. This has been going on for some time, but I am equally as confident that we have very strong co-ordination in place and an understanding of what is happening. That is why the work that we do as the FCDO is so crucial in understanding what is happening in other locations and what might be the new front, tactics and angles that Russia in particular is using.

Q186 **Uma Kumaran:** How confident, or comfortable, are we that we can explain to the British public that this is happening? Are the Government willing to declassify or make public any of this information? If you go on Reddit, if you Google or if you look on Twitter, this stuff is out there. Are the Government considering a public information campaign to explain to people, "This is happening, be aware."? I appreciate we have a Defending Democracy Taskforce—the Department is doing great work there—but if we are not telling people that we are doing it, how will people be aware that this is even happening?

Stephen Doughty: I will come to Jonny in a moment to give some examples. Obviously, you will appreciate that there are complexities around attribution and about what we can say about certain things and whether that is the right thing to do at different points. But we have taken some very public action against some of the agencies I mentioned, including Social Design Agency, Doppelgänger and others. We have used our sanctions very clearly. To give you an example, in December the Foreign Secretary gave her Locarno speech on this issue, and we imposed seven more sanctions targeting entities and associated individuals. This included Rybar and the Centre for Geopolitical Expertise, which is actually a Moscow-linked think-tank linked to the Russian intelligence services that has been funding and directing a malign influence network known as Storm-1516.

We also sanctioned Pravfond, which is a front for the GRU, so we have taken a number of high-profile examples. I could not be clearer in what I said at the start of this session, and this is why I think this Committee's inquiry is so important: this is information warfare. This is co-ordinated. I hope that members of the public watching this Committee will see the scale of this.

Q187 **Uma Kumaran:** What you are saying is right; the Committee is pretty terrified listening to what we heard. Given the fact that this is warfare—it is hybrid and cognitive warfare—have we considered establishing a national counter-disinformation centre where all this work can be dealt with by one unit, rather than different Departments, as we are seeing now, so that they have dedicated responsibility for tackling this?

Stephen Doughty: We do work very close together with different Departments. I will turn to Jonny, who can say a little bit more about some of that co-ordination.

Jonny Hall: Can I just expand a little bit on the Minister's last answer and then bridge into this one? I think it is really important, as the Minister said, and it is one of the central rationales for the scaling up of public activity that we have taken over the last year to 18 months in response to this threat. When we attribute and when we sanction, as the Minister says, that has intended disruptive and deterrent effects on those responsible and on state actors behind those campaigns, but it is also very much intended to contribute to that public awareness and understanding of the reality of what is happening, precisely in the way that you mentioned in terms of public communication. Exposing and being able to articulate the

reality of what Russia, in this instance, is doing—the tactics, techniques and procedures, and what it is that people should be alive to—absolutely, we feel, has that public resilience benefit to help drive that conversation.

More broadly, in terms of the cross-Government architecture, as the Minister says, we are currently working on, and will continue to improve, how various aspects of capability work across Departments. We are not currently looking at a single entity to deal with this, given the different nature of the challenges between domestic security and the range of actions we would look to take, upstream and internationally, to raise the costs against specific actors for this. But we are absolutely continuing to look at how we strengthen the frameworks, the governance and the join-up between various Departments, and the coherence of our efforts.

Q188 **Fleur Anderson:** Following on from there: I have read your response to our inquiry on that, and about the cross-HMG structures. It has a whole section on that, which was very good to see because there are a lot of comments from others who are looking at the Government's response on disinformation and saying that it is not joined up enough.

We heard from the permanent secretary that there are a lot of cuts going on in the FCDO. There are a lot of staff being reduced, especially in London in the first wave and then in the missions overseas in the next wave. How many staff are working on this issue? What would that be in relation to how many were working on it last year, and how many do you think will be working on it by next summer, after the cuts have gone through—to give an idea backing up what you are saying about responding appropriately to the increasing scale of the threat?

Stephen Doughty: I totally understand where you are coming from, Ms Anderson, but I am not going to get into specific numbers on staffing or funding, for the very reason that that gives insight to our adversaries. What I can absolutely assure you of is that this is one of the highest priorities for the Foreign Secretary and myself in terms of resourcing and support. There has been a substantial uptick in activity and capability on this.

In terms of that cross-Government piece, I understand where some of that critique has come from. I am regularly, even at a ministerial level, discussing these issues with my counterparts, particularly in the Home Office, MOD, Cabinet Office and elsewhere. I was doing so just in recent weeks and will be doing so again next week. This is a significant ministerial priority and a significant priority for resourcing. If you look at it within the context of the overall investment this Government are making in defence and security, and the spending targets that the Defence Secretary and the Prime Minister have set, as well as the SDR and the NSS, that covers a whole range of capabilities and resourcing beyond conventional military and security capability, and this is part of that.

Q189 **Fleur Anderson:** I absolutely understand that you cannot say, "These people are in post here," and what they are doing, but can you give any more reassurance, or is there a way of writing to me afterwards, about the

numbers? We do not want to find out, in a year's time, that the numbers have actually gone down in different units that you are talking about, and we did not realise that was happening. We have been asking questions about staffing, and I absolutely understand you cannot say, for security reasons, where they are, but can there be assurance about the numbers, because there are big changes going on in the next few months?

Q190 **Chair:** Can I put it another way? If you find it difficult to answer that question, maybe it is easier to answer it this way: given that it is a ministerial priority, can you assure us that there will be no reduction in staff dealing with these matters?

Jonny Hall: One reassurance I would give is that through the director restructure process, which I heard the permanent secretary talk to you about, we have created a new director position. That is the directorate that I am now charged with building, which is specifically for hybrid threats. That is an evolution of our work, but even against the backdrop that you talked about and that the permanent secretary talked through, we have sharpened the remit of my responsibility in this role, specifically around this set of threats that we face, and therefore the way in which we ensure that we have the capabilities, tools and expertise to deal with the ministerial priority that you mentioned, Chair.

Q191 **Chair:** Does that mean there is no reduction in staff numbers?

Jonny Hall: As the permanent secretary said, we are now working through all the staffing and headcount across the whole organisation. I hope it is of some reassurance that, in terms of that director accountability piece—

Chair: It is not much.

Stephen Doughty: I am happy to write further to hopefully give you some more reassurances. This is a significant priority for the Foreign Secretary, myself and Ministers across Government, and we expect it to be resourced accordingly.

Chair: We hear that, but it is always good to have it backed up with numbers and if we cannot have the numbers, then at least something that gives us some more general reassurance.

Fleur Anderson: I have one more question on the funding.

Chair: Go on then. We are not pushed for time in the way we thought we might be.

Q192 **Fleur Anderson:** Back on the funding, you said that if this is warfare, the scale of it is enormous and there is a huge uplift of funding to the Ministry of Defence. Will some of the funding for this work across Government—in the way that the units are shared across different Departments—be able to come out of defence spending, given that it is a defence issue as well, to maybe compensate from some areas that might otherwise be reduced because of reduction in FCDO spending?

Stephen Doughty: Defence spending does include work on information threats already. This is a cross-Government piece of work; that is why I emphasised the co-ordination between ourselves, the Home Office, the Ministry of Defence and Cabinet Office on this. It is clear that the 5% target that we have on national security by 2035 includes the work to tackle information threats and information warfare.

Q193 **Chair:** Might there be some people who used to be paid for by the Foreign Office who are now paid for by the Ministry of Defence?

Stephen Doughty: I do not want to speak for the Ministry of Defence and their budgeting. They go through their own process and you are welcome to ask those questions to the Minister for the Armed Forces. What I will say is that there is a cross-Government perspective on this and there is close working between Jonny and his colleagues in the MOD, Home Office and elsewhere, as there is at the ministerial level.

Q194 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Can I just ask you about the principle surrounding the definition of disinformation? There are core examples, like that MH17 was full of corpses or was shot down by a Ukrainian aircraft, which demonstrably is false information. But we discovered when we were looking, for instance, in Montenegro and Moldova, that the principal debate there is about whether or not they should join the European Union. At what point is this a robust political argument with opposing views, and where do you draw the line and say, "No, this is disinformation"? How can you ensure that we keep on the right side of the line and that we are not censoring, as some would suggest, freedom of speech?

Stephen Doughty: I am a strong believer in freedom of speech, as are the Government. It is one of the things that makes this country great, and I am proud that we have the robust political and media landscape that we do here. I want to be really explicit: we are not talking about when somebody has tweeted something that is wrong, fake or something that I personally or the Government disagree with. We are talking about co-ordinated, highly funded operations emanating from adversaries. Those can sometimes be terrorist organisations as well. That is what we are focused on tackling. We are not in the interest of censoring or responding to an individual message, whether it is on TikTok or Telegram, nor would we have the capability to do so. What we are looking at is widespread.

You get to the very important point that sometimes what is happening here is the exacerbation of existing, legitimate and entirely proper political debates, but skewing that into division attempts to totally undermine democratic systems. Going back to that historical example of the conspiracy theories about the origins of AIDS, there were others out there who were positing these conspiracy theories and were totally wrong. The Soviet Union at the time totally weaponised and actively energised that in a way that would not have happened organically. I think that is what we are talking about here.

Q195 **Sir John Whittingdale:** When we were in France, we talked to VIGINUM. They said specifically that they did not seek to counter argument, but were

actually focusing on the propagation and amplification through bots and artificial means.

Stephen Doughty: That is absolutely right. Jonny can probably say a little more on that.

Jonny Hall: We work very closely with our French colleagues in VIGINUM. You have probably heard a lot of use of the slightly clunky expression "FIMI", or foreign information manipulation interference, because of the definitional challenge. Like VIGINUM, we are very much focused on the who as much as the what: who is behind this, what are the networks being used to propagate the narratives, and how do we build the tools to make it harder for those responsible to operate and mislead, deceive and sow deceit at the scale that they are? We are absolutely making sure that we are focused on that delicate balance.

Q196 **Uma Kumaran:** Following the annulled Romanian election, the European Commission opened formal proceedings against TikTok for the scale of the disinformation that was out there, using the Digital Services Act. Given that we have different sets of tools for regulating risks around elections here, are we working with European partners on this and, if we are, what are the barriers to co-operation? Minister, I know you said that it is not about individual messages, but it is a concerted scale campaign. There is one on TikTok, one on Instagram, one on Facebook; you only have to look at any of the comments some of us get and you can see that it is happening. What are we doing, and would we consider taking action, as the European Commission has?

Stephen Doughty: Ultimately, the actions of the European Commission are for them to take under their European-wide legislation. We have a series of legislative tools here. It is a matter for our domestic Ministers how those are developed to further our response to threats.

We are co-ordinating very closely with partners around the world; in fact, I have taken part directly in discussions with the European Union around hybrid threats. One of the things we launched as a result of the UK-EU summit in May was the security and defence partnership with the EU. I have taken part in these conversations directly in Brussels. We are working closely with Kaja Kallas and her team to look at these threats. The EU is of course pursuing its democracy shield programme. We are looking at that with interest, and they look at what we are doing with great interest. In the last year we have substantially ramped up and shown real leadership with European partners and colleagues in responding to and sharing best practice—that is work that Jonny and many others have done with colleagues—because we are all seeing different aspects of this, but we all have different legislative environments and different instances.

I do not want to focus on any one particular platform, because in some ways the platform is not the issue: it is the origins, the networks and the nodes. They might be using anything, from Discord through to Telegram, TikTok or Facebook. If we just try to go after each individual platform or

each individual message, we will not deal with the scale of this. It is the origins and the networks behind it.

Q197 **Chair:** Are you keeping a close eye on the European legislation so that, if it is successful, we could perhaps co-ordinate and use the same kind of legislation? We have legislation, but it is for the protection of kids. The European legislation is much broader than that.

Stephen Doughty: Fundamentally, these are questions for ministerial colleagues in DSIT, DCMS and elsewhere, but we are watching very closely what other countries are doing in response to these threats, like they are watching us as well.

Q198 **Chair:** That is why this is not co-ordinated. That is one of our complaints.

Stephen Doughty: I totally agree with you that there needs to be much more co-ordination. That is what we have attempted to do, particularly in the last year. I can absolutely assure you that, at the ministerial and official levels, there has been a step change in our level of engagement with individual partner countries and Europe-wide.

Q199 **Richard Foord:** How is the FCDO combating Russian hostile state activity in the information space?

Stephen Doughty: In a range of ways. I would particularly point to some of the designations that we have undertaken and some of the exposures that we have done, which have been substantial and impactful. Quite frankly, they show the scale of this. If people think they are getting away with it, they should think very differently, because we know what they are doing and how they are doing it, and we will not stand idly by while they do it. We have shown that repeatedly across the last year.

To go back to my comments at the start, one thing I would emphasise is that we are seeing how they are doing this in locations around the world, and we are exposing that too. It is not just in Europe, of course; it is what they are doing in Africa, the global south and elsewhere in propagating these narratives on an industrial scale. We work very closely with other partners to identify this and make sure that those countries and populations can see what is happening and build their own resilience to these kinds of threats.

Q200 **Richard Foord:** When we are exposing it, drawing attention to it and illustrating to the world what is going on, how do we avoid inadvertently promoting Russian disinformation?

Stephen Doughty: That is a very good question. We all have to consider the tendency to show outrage about something by resharing it and commenting on it. I have certainly learned over the last years to try to avoid doing that. We all have to think very carefully about not accidentally amplifying narratives in other ways. We take that into significant consideration when we are looking at exposures or otherwise. Jonny may want to say a little about that.

Jonny Hall: It is absolutely a challenge and, as the Minister said, it is one of the many careful considerations that go into any choice we make to expose, attribute, sanction and take action in the public domain. It comes back to the question of networks, as opposed to narratives, and the behaviour of those responsible. When we make a choice to attribute and expose, we are making a choice to pull back the curtain on the various ways and means that the whole ecosystem—the architecture—operates, as opposed to being drawn into a narrative rebuttal, which risks drawing attention to the specific narrative itself.

Q201 **Richard Foord:** When you are trying to educate people and illustrate to the public some of these TTPs, how do you do that without giving examples? People are most interested in specific cases and being switched on to the fact that a particular item is information manipulation.

Stephen Doughty: I will let Jonny give a bit more of the detail, but I will give you two examples from last year. In May last year, we sanctioned 14 members of the Social Design Agency—one of the most notorious examples of Kremlin-funded information operations, which particularly targeted unity and resolve over the war in Ukraine, and so on.

To give an example of the sorts of things we are doing in other parts of the world, in July, alongside NATO allies and the EU, we exposed and sanctioned four entities and 21 operatives of the Russian state, including a body called the African Initiative—a social media content mill established and funded by Russia and employing Russian intelligence operatives that conducts information operations in west Africa. We are taking some very deliberate and public actions to expose not only that they are doing it but the means by which they are doing it and the entities they are doing it through.

Jonny Hall: Building on what the Minister said, let me look at some other examples. To deal with the challenge, when we exposed the Social Design Agency—the organisation behind the Doppelgänger network—and attributed that to the Russian state, one of the things we were very careful to do was to spell out some of the weaknesses in the network's approach, including the limited traction, the limited engagement and the ineffectiveness of various parts of the content precisely for that reason. We wanted to spell out the tactics, techniques and procedures, and raise awareness, while also being very clear that there is actually not a uniformly effective mind and hand behind some of this. We can see it and we want to raise awareness of it, but we do not want to overstate the impact that it is able to have. We are walking that tightrope.

Q202 **Chair:** Can I raise something that we decided to deprioritise as a question? Given the Minister's answer, I think it is an important one to ask. Is the FCDO going to expand UK support for independent media and fact-checking initiatives in Africa?

Stephen Doughty: We are engaged in supporting a range of independent media and fact checking, as you know. Fundamentally, it is probably better if I get Minister Chapman to write to you on that issue, because she

is going through the ODA allocations process in different civil society and other initiatives that we are involved in, given the changes that are going on in budgets. But we are acutely aware of the importance of free, independent media, strong civil society organisations and so on, as part of the collective response to this kind of activity by Russia and others.

Q203 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Minister, you mentioned Ukraine as being a place where the information war is perhaps at its height, both in terms of seeking to undermine morale within Ukraine and to undermine the President, but also globally in trying to detach countries from support. It features specifically as an article within the 100-year partnership that we have signed to support Ukraine. Can you give us some more detail about how we are supporting Ukraine in countering that kind of disinformation?

Stephen Doughty: As you say, it is a crucial part of the 100-year partnership. As I think I said in a previous session, we cannot look at this as a one-way street. This is also about us learning directly from Ukraine, and indeed Baltic partners—Romania, Moldova and so on—about the techniques and tactics that are being used, and what are the most effective ways to build resilience against them. I will let Jonny say a little more about specific work, but you will appreciate that we cannot go into granular detail on a lot of these things, for obvious reasons—we do not want to expose them.

Jonny Hall: I would add only that we work with the Ukrainians across all the strands that we see as necessary to combat the type of information warfare that they are facing in an extremely acute way, but which we are also seeing across the entire continent. We exchange and provide technical assistance but also draw learning from the Ukrainians on strategic communication. We also provide assistance in exchange on our own techniques around open-source intelligence and the identification and illumination of the threat, and work together very closely on that, as well as on how we engage with global audiences about the nature of what is really happening. It is a multi-faceted relationship across the piece in terms of the information domain, and as the Minister has said, through the partnership what we really hope to do is deepen that and continue to draw on the incredible work that the Ukrainians have done to inform how we build our capabilities as much as the other way around.

Q204 **Alex Ballinger:** The Committee had the opportunity to visit a number of countries in the eastern European neighbourhood over the past few months—places like Romania, Moldova and Bosnia. You will be aware that there are massive Russian disinformation campaigns in those areas. I appreciate the sensitivities about sharing too much detail, but could you say a little more about the support that we are providing to those types of countries in the easter European neighbourhood? Also, in our discussion with the permanent secretary, there was a suggestion in the accounts that the amount of money being spent on that work was reducing. Could you clarify whether that is the case?

Stephen Doughty: On the second question, I go back to my earlier points about the wider commitment that we have across Government to

spend 5% on national security by 2035. Of course, that includes tackling information threats, but I am very happy to write to follow up on that.

Again, I do not want to appear reluctant, but rather than going into specifics about the work that we do with those countries, I reassure you that, first, even at a ministerial level there has been a lot of direct contact with the countries that you have visited. I have been to all bar Bosnia, but I am in regular contact with the Bosnia and Herzegovina Foreign Minister and others on a range of topics. We discussed these issues in the margins of the western Balkans summit as well.

In recognition of our collective work to defend security, we have a number of NATO allies with whom our work is particularly crucial. That also forms part of wider NATO resilience in this area. Our work in Moldova to ensure the resilience of the democratic process was crucial and critical, and was hugely welcomed by the authorities there. They were under a sustained and pretty blatant attack, directly from Russia, to undermine their democratic processes in a range of ways. Of course, that was not just information operations; it was a whole range of other matters, as you will have heard on your visit there. I am quite confident in what we have been doing. Of course, we are always looking at where the next fronts are, because they are trying out these techniques and tactics—and I am sure that they will be doing it again—in elections in a range of locations across the next year. We are acutely alert to that and are working with different agencies in different ways to build resilience.

Q205 **Chair:** Can I tighten this up a bit? I think the reduction in funding for the work in Bosnia has been in the public realm. Even if you cannot tell us now—and if I've got that wrong, if it's just something that I have been told and it has not been in the public realm, then obviously you cannot give me the figures—if it is in the public realm, could you write and give us the figures? If it is not in the public realm, could you at least give us percentages or trends? We felt, when we were in Bosnia, that the work being done was incredibly important. We were disappointed, to put it mildly, that that work might be being cut back at this vital moment.

Stephen Doughty: Allocations across the board in ODA, as you will know, are under discussion by Minister Chapman. I am happy to write to you with further detail on that. I think there might be a misinterpretation of overall cuts versus cuts in particular programming here. I want to get you the exact detail on that and not give the wrong answer today.

Q206 **Alex Ballinger:** I am pleased to hear about the sanctions that the FCDO has placed on a number of these organisations, including the Social Design Agency and others. As such organisations continue to pop up and as different techniques are being used by the Russians, do you think that economic sanctions—the sanctions that you are placing on those organisations—are sufficient, or are there further steps that the FCDO needs to take against those hybrid actors?

Stephen Doughty: The sanctions do work; we know that. They work in terms of the sheer exposure of the organisations, their tactics and

techniques, the fact that they are involved in things that might cause them to be sanctioned in the first place. We are very clear about that; that is why we continue to use that as one of the key tools and will continue to do so. As you know, I do not comment on future designations, but we are always looking at different opportunities to do that. We also do it with co-ordination through the G7 rapid response mechanism. We did that, particularly on the Social Design Agency, in January last year. That statement obviously illustrates the types of activities that such organisations are engaged in.

Alex Ballinger: Thank you.

Q207 **Aphra Brandreth:** It was reported in December that the FCDO was the victim of a cyber-attack by the Chinese state-linked Storm-1849 group. Could you confirm the nature and scale of that breach, and whether you have confirmed who was responsible?

Stephen Doughty: I am not going to get into that particular question. You will be aware of the reporting, but obviously we investigate any potential threat against the FCDO, or any other part of Government, very seriously and take appropriate measures to respond and build resilience against future attempts.

Q208 **Aphra Brandreth:** So we have not confirmed whether it did or did not occur? Perhaps Mr Hall can elaborate?

Stephen Doughty: I do not really want to add anything further on that at this stage, for obvious reasons.

Q209 **Aphra Brandreth:** I wanted to ask, given that last time there was a confirmed cyber-attack by Storm-1849 on MPs and the Electoral Commission, which I think occurred between 2021 and 2022, it took three years for the perpetrators to be identified. Are we expecting to wait that long for this to be confirmed?

Stephen Doughty: I think you would agree with me that it is very important that we take any form of attribution or response to any allegations very carefully and seriously. We do attribution on a case-by-case basis. It is not helpful to speculate about potential actors. We take the security of our systems and data very seriously and whenever we choose to attribute, it is on the basis of a thorough investigation and is in the interests of UK national security.

Q210 **Aphra Brandreth:** I take what you are saying, but given the clear security threats posed by China, and given that we have heard from the executive director of the China Strategic Risks Institute, the Joint Committee on Human Rights and the Intelligence and Security Committee, to name just a few, asking why China, unlike Russia and Iran, have not been placed on the enhanced tier of the Foreign Influence Registration Scheme, could you perhaps explain what threshold you feel China has not met, but that Russia and Iran have?

Stephen Doughty: What I would say, as we and other colleagues have said before on this issue, is that countries are considered separately, and

decisions are made on the evidence. Of course, the political influence tier of FIRS, which came into force at the same time as the enhanced tier, includes all states. You referenced different alleged cyber incidents, but I will give you a couple of examples where there has been clear action taken. On 9 December last year, the Foreign Secretary announced sanctions on two China-based tech companies—i-Soon and Integrity Tech—for reckless and indiscriminate cyber-attacks against the UK and its allies. In August, the National Cyber Security Centre published technical advisory linking three China-based companies known as Salt Typhoon with targeting of telecommunications. In April, the NCSC did a similar technical advisory, exposing two spyware campaigns that were used to compromise mobile devices. So I am very confident that, when the evidence is clear and it is in our national security interests, we expose and take action against entities, whether they come from China or elsewhere. Of course, there are a range of threats posed by a range of actors, and we take the necessary actions to respond.

Q211 **Aphra Brandreth:** You mentioned the December 2025 sanctions on the China-based cyber firms. Are the Government considering designations for known Chinese-linked disinformation and influence networks more broadly?

Stephen Doughty: We have not publicly attributed any information operations from China in the UK, but you will be aware, and I am sure the Committee is aware, of allegations elsewhere in the world such as in Canada, the Philippines and Taiwan, that their authorities have referred to. Of course, we take information threats and information warfare, from wherever it comes, very seriously. We keep a range of options under review. I do not, as you know, comment on future possible designations, but I think our record shows that, across a range of threats that we have seen emanating from Chinese individuals or entities, we are not afraid to act where it is necessary to do so to protect our national security.

Q212 **Aphra Brandreth:** I totally note that. I just think there seems to be an apparent disparity between the actions taken against Russia and Iran—when they have linked FIMI campaigns—and those linked to China. I wanted to specifically share that the Committee heard from witnesses who said that Chinese narratives on the Ukraine conflict appear to be co-ordinated with Russia. Is there any assessment being done by the Foreign Office on this?

Stephen Doughty: I am as deeply concerned by any reports of disinformation emanating from China as I am from anywhere else. We will continue to develop our capability to respond. We take a long-term and strategic approach to China, rooted in our national interest. There are huge opportunities with China as a trading partner and a co-operator in many other fields but of course, we also recognise there are real national security threats as well. The Security Minister set that out clearly when he responded in the Chamber on these issues in November. We have looked very carefully at the examples—you will be aware of the example of the so-called "Spamouflage" operation in Canada, the possible alleged electoral interference reported by the Philippines' National Security Council

and Taiwanese authorities talking about a 60% increase in misinformation. We are well aware of the types of activities, but as I said, we have not publicly attributed any activities here in the UK. I do not know if Jonny would like to add anything.

Jonny Hall: Only that we are clear that the challenge of information manipulation and interference is not limited to Russia. This is a challenge that multiple states are now using the tactics and tools of. While we have stepped up the scale and tempo of our activity against the acute threat from Russia over the last 12 to 18 months, we are absolutely expanding both our own work, our partnerships and our engagement with our allies globally beyond Europe on what this threat picture looks like and what that means for future action.

Chair: Despite budget considerations. If it is all right with the Committee staff, I will undertake to send the Minister the piece of evidence that we heard about China amplifying Russian messages. If he is in a position to comment, that would be good to have.

Q213 **Aphra Brandreth:** Linked to all that, Minister, perhaps one question is: which is more of a priority for you, national security or the economic opportunities that China presents?

Stephen Doughty: We do not take either/or decisions like that. We take strategic decisions based in the UK's national interest, and our national interests cover a range of issues. The Security Minister was very clear about the range of national security threats, and that we absolutely respond appropriately to those. There is a track record of examples, some of which I have illustrated to you.

Q214 **Aphra Brandreth:** If I can move on to Iran—so, from one significant country to another—written evidence to this Committee has said that, alongside Russia and China, the Iranian regime "plays a key role in spreading disinformation to advance its extremist ideology, nurture antisemitism" and "undermine democratic institutions in the West." What is the Foreign Office's assessment of that threat? In particular, given the rise in antisemitic incidents across the UK, what is the role of these activities in fostering antisemitic sentiment and the threat to Jewish communities in the UK?

Stephen Doughty: We are very clear about the risk from Iran. You will have seen that in the National Security Strategy last year we called out, "years of aggressive and destabilising activity by the Iranian regime which has included activities specifically targeted against UK interests at home and overseas." I would include the matters that you referenced within that. We are very concerned about the threat that Iran poses both across the middle east and beyond in seeking to exploit divisive issues, including in the UK. This covers a range of hybrid and other activities. You will have heard what the director general of MI5 said in October last year: that it had tracked more than 20 potentially lethal Iranian-backed plots in the last year. We are incredibly clear-eyed about the threats posed, whether that is in the information space or physically.

Q215 **Aphra Brandreth:** Given all that, the Intelligence and Security Committee was critical of the Government's response to Iranian threats and raised concerns about the level of internal expertise. Does the FCDO think it has the required expertise to ensure it can competently assess these Iranian threats? Is anything being actively done to enhance that expertise?

Stephen Doughty: We have excellent teams in our Iran unit. Along with Minister Falconer, I have worked with them very closely on issues relating to, for example, Iranian sanctions—we sanctioned 36 individuals in relation to malign Iranian activity—I am very confident in the advice and the expertise that we receive on these issues.

Q216 **Edward Morello:** Turning to the United States, in the last year or so, the US has either closed, defunded or redirected the activities of the Director of National Intelligence's Foreign Malign Influence Centre, the FBI's Foreign Influence Taskforce and USAID, which has supported anti-FIMI activities abroad, and has closed the Global Engagement Centre. What is the impact of this on UK-US co-operation to counter misinformation and disinformation?

Stephen Doughty: The first thing I would say is that the US remains our primary partner in defence and security. It is a unique and special relationship that goes back decades, not least as NATO partners, but also in terms of our own extraordinary bilateral defence, security and intelligence co-operation. Ultimately, decisions for the United States about how they spend their money and how they organise their organisations are up to them. It is not for me to comment on, but we continue to co-ordinate very closely with the US on a range of shared national security threats.

Q217 **Edward Morello:** Earlier on in your evidence you correctly identified willing fools in British politics echoing Russian talking points. Last November, Nina Jankowicz, who was the head of the Disinformation Governance Board of the Department of Homeland Security, said in evidence, "We see a lot of this pro-Russian disinformation making its way into the US political discourse, all the way up to the highest office of the land, the Oval Office". I just wonder whether our interests in countering misinformation and disinformation still align with the United States under this Administration?

Stephen Doughty: I will go back to what I said, which is that we are not talking here about individual comments, viewpoints or expressions on different matters. I strongly believe in freedom of speech; this country does and we have proud record on it. We are not talking about legitimate political discourse here, or expression of different views, which I may or may not agree with on any particular topic. We have got issues that we have a difference of opinion with the United States on. That is not to shy away in any way from them being our closest defence, security and intelligence partner. What we are talking about here, and what we as the FCDO are aimed at focusing on, is disrupting industrial-scale information warfare by adversaries, which is something that is very dangerous.

Q218 **Edward Morello:** I do not disagree with your point about them being our

closest ally historically. The question I am trying to ask is: how much more difficult does it become for the FCDO to counter misinformation and disinformation when the President of the United States echoes Kremlin talking points that we are actively trying to counter elsewhere?

Stephen Doughty: I would be very clear that President Trump is engaged in extremely important efforts at the moment, alongside ourselves, European partners and President Zelensky, to try and find a peaceful, just and sustainable end to the war in Ukraine. We are working very closely with him and his team on that issue and that is what we are focused on. I am simply not going to get into commenting on any individual point or remark made by anybody in the US system or anywhere else. We are focused on exposing and disrupting industrial-scale operations and identifying and exposing the funding and the organisation that goes into them by Russia and other threat actors. That is the focus of our work.

Q219 **Phil Brickell:** The Minister knows I like to talk a lot about sanctions, so I welcome the measures that His Majesty's Government have pursued over the last 12 to 18 months on disinformation designations in particular—for instance, Rybar. I want to talk a little more about the United States, however. Just before Christmas, US Secretary of State Rubio announced visa restrictions on five individuals including two UK citizens, which the Minister will know about, for allegedly being "agents of the global censorship-industrial complex" who have "led organised efforts to coerce American platforms to censor, demonetise, and suppress American viewpoints they oppose." Those two UK citizens are the CEO of the Centre for Countering Digital Hate and the CEO of the Global Disinformation Index. What do you make of that development?

Stephen Doughty: You will appreciate, Mr Brickell, that there are ongoing processes around those individuals, so I am extremely limited in what I can say, but we are obviously aware that the United States has announced visa restrictions on two British citizens. We do not comment on individual cases; we continue to engage with the US on these issues through appropriate and established diplomatic channels.

Q220 **Chair:** If those two individuals gave permission and said that they did not mind the Foreign Office commenting on what it was they were doing, would you then tell us?

Stephen Doughty: No. We just do not comment on individual cases in that way and it would not be appropriate. We are obviously aware of this case and engage in the appropriate way, but US visa policy is for the United States.

Q221 **Phil Brickell:** I appreciate that, Minister. You said slightly earlier in your testimony that it is not for you to comment on US domestic affairs. However, on X, the US Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, Sarah Rogers, has criticised the UK's Online Safety Act and the EU's Digital Services Act, and claimed that the sanctioned individuals mentioned had "collaborated with U.S. bureaucrats" on "speech suppression". Isn't it the case that free speech in the UK and across Europe is equally as vital as free speech in the US?

Stephen Doughty: We have made it very clear, and I have made clear again to the Committee today, that we are fully committed to upholding the right to free speech. I think it is one of the things that makes this country great. We support laws and institutions that are working to keep the internet free from very harmful content, and we should not be seeing social media platforms used to incite hatred and violence or spread fake information or videos for that purpose. I am not going to get into commenting further on the individuals or the comments made about them.

Q222 **Phil Brickell:** I want to bring this to life a little bit. In the light of the Heaton Park synagogue terrorist attack, the CCDH found that X had failed to uphold its own policies on hateful conduct and violent speech, including 100 posts spreading false flag conspiracy theories that got over 568,000 views. Doesn't this speak to an uncomfortable truth for the US Administration—that, actually, it is often US-owned social media platforms that are host to the systemic disinformation we see flooding our public discourse?

Stephen Doughty: I have spoken regularly in this place in the past, including when I was a member of the Home Affairs Committee, on these issues, and exposed all sorts of different issues that I had serious concerns around. Again, I would get away from focusing on individual platforms because the reality, particularly in terms of what we are looking at, is that any platform can be the medium. Obviously, if you have specific concerns about X, take those up with them and their policies. I am proud of what we are doing with the Online Safety Act. It is going to increase our ability to deal with that very harmful, and most disruptive and damaging, content.

Chair: Only if it applies to children.

Stephen Doughty: There are a range of issues that we are looking at. Of course, we are also looking at other matters in the Defending Democracy Taskforce in terms of wider activities and building resilience to this industrial-style activity we are seeing coming from Russia and elsewhere. I am confident that colleagues in DCMS and other Departments have the appropriate relationships with social media companies and others to engage on these matters. But as I said, I would get away from the very specifics about individual platforms here. We are focused, as the FCDO, on disrupting the origins and the industrial-style operations behind the information that is coming in. I don't know if Jonny wanted to add anything particular to that.

Jonny Hall: I wonder, Chair, if it would be helpful if DSIT provided further information to you on the Online Safety Act and its relationship to the National Security Act and the foreign interference offence, and essentially how it operates in this space, as part of this inquiry.

Chair: Definitely.

Q223 **Phil Brickell:** Has any official within the UK Government been denied a US visa due to their work on countering disinformation or online safety

following the introduction of new visa restrictions? Are you able to say?

Stephen Doughty: Not to my knowledge, Mr Brickell.

Q224 **Phil Brickell:** In your testimony earlier, Minister, you touched on individuals, in this place and elsewhere in UK politics, who propagate disinformation from other hostile actors, including hostile states. One of my areas of concern is the very small financial incentive that can often be used to propagate that. We saw that with the high-profile case of Nathan Gill at the end of last year. Are you able to say more about the overlap between illicit financial flows and how some of this is used to support the spread of misinformation and disinformation to undermine our democracy and that in other countries?

Stephen Doughty: We all saw those images of wodges of cash that were found. It is a shocking case, and that is exactly why, part-way through December, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Security Minister announced an inquiry into countering foreign financial influence and interference in UK politics. That is being led by Philip Rycroft. I think it will conclude by March, and I await its findings and recommendations with interest.

Q225 **Edward Morello:** In the light of the US national security strategy effectively advocating for the US to overtly support political parties in other countries that share the Trumpian world view, will the scope of that inquiry also cover American influence on the British political system?

Stephen Doughty: I have said what the terms of the inquiry are. Obviously, you are very welcome to write to Philip Rycroft about what he is looking at; he is doing that on behalf of the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. The US national security strategy is a matter for the United States.

Q226 **Chair:** It is striking, is it not, for someone watching that, within the last two minutes, we have discussed three different Government Departments? That rather underlines Uma's point about how this should be centrally co-ordinated.

Stephen Doughty: Going back to that point, we are co-ordinating closely and I want to reassure you, Chair, and the Committee of that. I sat with members of the Defending Democracy Taskforce just a few weeks ago, and there are of course a range of other agencies we have to work very closely with on these issues, including parliamentary authorities, the Electoral Commission and other bodies that have an important role in upholding the integrity of our democracy and systems. The truth is that this includes multiple Departments because this issue affects every part of UK national life and society. If there was anything I wanted to leave the Committee with a clear understanding of, it is that the attempts of our adversaries are widespread and broad in nature, which is why it is important that we look at all the ways in which they are trying to influence our societies.

Q227 **Uma Kumaran:** Minister, what is the reluctance to have a central taskforce here?

Stephen Doughty: There is a central taskforce: the Defending Democracy Taskforce.

Q228 **Uma Kumaran:** Not a taskforce, sorry, but something like the countering disinformation centre I mentioned earlier. Why can we not have just one central agency?

Stephen Doughty: We do work very closely, and Jonny can speak a bit more on the level of co-ordination that goes on between officials, but ultimately, matters of structures of Departments, agencies and other bodies are usually for the Cabinet Office and others rather than ourselves. I am here to speak about the work of the FCDO in these matters, but I can assure you that we are working on a daily and weekly basis with colleagues in other Departments.

Q229 **Uma Kumaran:** We have a National Cyber Security Centre, and I guess this is comparable. Would the FCDO make representations to say that you think it could be a centralised unit?

Jonny Hall: The comparison with cyber is a good one, and as we look at how we build out the architecture to deal with this threat, we look at lessons from cyber. For instance, within the Foreign Office as a director, and ministerially, I am also accountable for looking at cyber threat and the Foreign Office's activity on challenging cyber activity. Therefore, even within our current cyber architecture, we have the NCSC, but it is not the single home for all of the Government's cyber activity. The NCSC has a specific role within Government, and the Foreign Office then delivers component parts as it relates to that. As the Minister says, for an effective response to this FIMI challenge, we need pretty much every Department to play a role in some way. That is why we look at coherence and co-ordination as opposed to a single entity.

Stephen Doughty: It is a really important challenge that you mention. I will look forward to what the Committee recommends, and I am sure that colleagues across Government will as well, but there is a challenge in that sometimes if you stick all things into one agency, people go "That is their business; they are dealing with that." The scale and pervasiveness of this threat is so significant that we need every part of Government and every part of society to be aware, equipped and resilient to respond. That is why the co-ordination that goes on is important.

Chair: The challenge is that there are so many different Government Departments, as you say. We have counted four, I think, that we have discussed just this morning that have a role in this.

Phil Brickell: Five.

Sir John Whittingdale: I have got six.

Q230 **Chair:** Alright, there we are. It is also a question of accountability. Things go wrong. If things go wrong in, for example, the May elections, who will be held accountable for that? That is why this is urgent and important. They are still counting them.

Sir John Whittingdale: We are up to seven now.

Q231 **Fleur Anderson:** As a follow-up to that, is there a Minister in each of those Departments whose job is identified, and do they all sit on the Defending Democracy Taskforce? Where do they all come together? Is there one meeting of all the Ministers who are the ambassadors within each Department?

Stephen Doughty: Yes, we come together in that Defending Democracy Taskforce, and it has the appropriate Departments represented.

Q232 **Chair:** Often?

Stephen Doughty: I am happy to write with what information I can. I do not own the Defending Democracy Taskforce, so I do not want to give information about the way it operates here today, but I am happy to write with some further information about how it is structured and how often it meets. I will say that it is not just Ministers and Government Departments; it is also relevant agencies that have important roles in defending our democratic institutions.

Q233 **Fleur Anderson:** So it is each Department plus others?

Stephen Doughty: Yes.

Chair: Alex?

Alex Ballinger: I think we have covered most of the issues on defending democracy that I was going to ask.

Chair: Did you want to ask some questions about online platforms, or do you think that has been covered as well?

Q234 **Alex Ballinger:** Sure. You have talked a bit about your work with DSIT in the Defending Democracy Taskforce and otherwise. We saw lots of evidence of inauthentic content in the European neighbourhood. How—inside that mechanism or otherwise—are you putting that information and sharing those lessons learned with DSIT so that they can see the same type of behaviour that is happening in the UK?

Stephen Doughty: Closely. That was conversation I was having with my counterpart in DSIT just a few weeks ago. Jonny will want to add a little bit on that.

Jonny Hall: As the Minister said, yes, we do that on an ongoing, persistent, continuous basis of an exchange of information. We look at the systems we have created, getting that flow right between what we identify in the Foreign Office, what we draw from partners, how that feeds into the domestic system, how we work with DSIT and, in the action we take, the upstream links to the domestic.

Q235 **Chair:** We might identify inauthentic and co-ordinated behaviour. Then the question is: in the UK, what can we do about it? We can speak to the online platforms and ask them nicely if they will do something about it, but there is nothing more that we can do, is there?

Stephen Doughty: There is a range of measures under the Online Safety Act, as you know, and the national security legislation and a range of other measures that we are taking to reduce foreign interference. I would definitely recommend, as Jonny suggested, inviting in colleagues from DSIT and the other domestic Departments to discuss that. It would be very welcome.

Q236 **Sir John Whittingdale:** One of the most effective ways of countering disinformation is through properly resourced professional media. The UK was a founding partner of the Media Freedom Coalition and has a strong record of supporting independent media, but there is a perception that it is less of a priority in the Foreign Office than it once was. It is notable that we have not received any report from the Foreign Office on the work on media freedom, which previously was given every six months. Can you say something about what the Foreign Office is doing to support media freedom and if we can have a report, as was always the case before?

Stephen Doughty: I can definitely come back to you with some information on that. I can assure you that work continues, because I have witnessed it. I do not want to name individual countries, but I have seen some of the important work that we are doing with a range of media organisations globally, including in a number European locations where some of the challenges that we have been discussing today are prevalent. I am happy to try and get you some further information on that.

Q237 **Sir John Whittingdale:** If you could. I suggested to the previous Foreign Secretary that the UK could take back the chair of the coalition in conjunction with another country. He was quite interested in that, so I hope that is still something to be considered.

Stephen Doughty: I will take that away.

Q238 **Sir John Whittingdale:** On a similar theme, possibly the greatest asset that we have propagating truth and countering disinformation is the BBC World Service. I raised that with the Foreign Secretary when she came before us just before Christmas. At that stage, she was not in a position to give us any information about future funding of the World Service, but if it is a priority, can you tell us yet whether the Foreign Office is able to say what the Government will be doing to support the World Service?

Chair: And if you cannot tell us today, tell us when we are going to know, because we really want to know.

Stephen Doughty: Sir John, you and the Chair will know of my love and admiration for the BBC World Service; I am an avid listener and it is one of my most trusted sources of information that I go to. I love having it on in the car when I am driving around my constituency and to and from London. It is a fantastic organisation, and it is truly remarkable. Despite the difficult fiscal context, that funding saw a significant uplift of £32.6 million—that is 31%—to £137 million for this financial year. I think that demonstrates assiduously our continued support for the World Service. The grant-in-aid funding will be decided through the FCDO allocations process, and the allocation decisions will be made imminently, in good

time for the start of the 2026-27 financial year. Obviously, you will know that the charter review is looking at—

Q239 **Chair:** When is that then?

Stephen Doughty: Imminently; in the new year.

Chair: We are in the new year.

Sir John Whittingdale: We were told in the autumn.

Stephen Doughty: I am very happy to try to come back to you with a more specific date, but it is a very live process.

Chair: We really want to know.

Stephen Doughty: The decisions made in the last financial year give you an idea of the scale of the importance we place on it. I would say—and I say this with huge respect for what the World Service does and must continue to do, particularly the language services and other aspects; it is remarkable—that we need to recognise that the global media landscape, as well as that in the UK, is changing dramatically in terms of how information is disseminated: how many people are actually listening on the radio itself, and how many people are listening linearly versus through clips, on BBC Sounds or through other forms of information dissemination. It is changing dramatically, and we need to recognise that.

Where people are getting trusted information sources from has changed dramatically, including all the platforms we have discussed today. The industrial information warfare we are seeing from Russia and elsewhere must be combatted through a range of mediums and routes, drawing on, of course, the remarkable reporting and trusted work that the World Service do. We have got to be clear about that. Funding the World Service alone is not a solution to the types of problems we have discussed today. It is one of the many important tools we have. It is of course an independent and trusted organisation—we do not control what they say or do; they stand on their own reputation—but it is only one of the many tools that we have. I would not want us to think that it is the sole response.

Q240 **Sir John Whittingdale:** The Government's Green Paper on the future of the BBC, which I will be debating in Westminster Hall in about two hours' time, has a specific section on the World Service in which it talks about considering the way forward for funding. As you will know, the BBC are pressing very hard for the Foreign Office to take back responsibility for funding the World Service. Obviously, that would represent quite a significant increase in expenditure, but is it something that you are at least considering?

Stephen Doughty: I am not going to get ahead of the charter review and the different funding options being considered, but I am well aware of the different proposals that are out there.

Chair: Since we are at 12 o'clock, I have a number of bids in to ask some

quickfire questions, with your indulgence. Take a glass of water and let us see how we get on.

Q241 **Fleur Anderson:** May I ask a question that joins up a couple of your answers during this session? It comes back to funding. We have seen the role of civil society in investigating and unearthing disinformation in the western Balkans, and we know that is across the world, countering that public information. You have twice mentioned ODA cuts, and referred us to Baroness Chapman, in the western Balkans and in Africa. Those cuts might be to civil society organisations that might be doing some of that—it is a big area. We have also mentioned USAID cuts, some of which, as we have heard in oral evidence, are having an impact on the civil society organisations that are able to counter disinformation.

The Home Office has previously spent FCDO budget on hotels in this country, so there is a precedent for spending from different budgets when in the national interest, as it is seen by the Government. Would it be possible for defence money to be spent on the civil society work that is countering what is warfare? That is maybe an expansion of what the Defence budget has been used for, but is it under consideration?

Stephen Doughty: I go back to what I said before about our journey towards the 5% target. That is for security and defence writ large, and of course for dealing with a range of threats and challenges that we face. I would also point to the fact that we already co-ordinate very closely with those Departments through the integrated security fund and other funding mechanisms. I work closely with those Ministers, particularly the Security Minister and the Minister for the Armed Forces, the MOD and others, about how we are jointly aligning our priorities and ensuring that we are collectively delivering more than if we just looked at these on a zero-sum departmental basis. I am always engaged in those conversations and have been so in recent weeks.

Q242 **Edward Morello:** Given that you are responsible for both North America and Europe and, uniquely, have a perspective on overseas territories as our Minister, I thought you might be the perfect person to talk to us about Greenland. What is your view on the statements that have come out of the US Administration about under whose influence Greenland lies?

Stephen Doughty: You heard very clearly what the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary said yesterday. The Foreign Secretary answered questions for, I think, nearly two hours—I was there for much of it—and made her views very clear on this. I have been clear repeatedly that Greenland's future is a matter for the people of Greenland and the kingdom of Denmark. We are absolutely crystal clear about that, and the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have been, too.

Q243 **Edward Morello:** I am just wondering if it raises any difficulties for the British Government, in terms of our co-operation with the US, to have a NATO ally overtly threatening the sovereign territory of another NATO ally to which we are also aligned.

Stephen Doughty: I have consistently been very clear about our position on this over many years. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have been absolutely clear in the last 24 hours. I haven't got anything further to add to that.

Q244 **Edward Morello:** Is Greenland or the Arctic discussed within Government?

Stephen Doughty: Absolutely. In fact, I have met the Greenlandic Foreign Minister twice in the last year and a half. I regularly meet Danish counterparts; I have been in touch with my Danish counterparts in the last 24 hours. I was in Denmark recently, and one of the things we have done under this Government is establish a new working group across Ministers on the polar regions. I am responsible for the Arctic and the Antarctic—among my many responsibilities—and one of the issues we have looked at very closely is the range of UK interests and engagement with allies.

Traditionally, I think the focus would have been solely on the science, the environment and so on but, as both the Arctic and the Antarctic are becoming geopolitically contested, it is very important that we ensure that UK national security interests and those of our allies are met. We continue to co-operate very closely—of course, including with the United States.

Q245 **Edward Morello:** Does that committee meet regularly?

Stephen Doughty: It meets a number of times in a year and, of course, officials meet in between that. I am very happy to provide you with more information on that. We recently published a new strategy on the Antarctic, which is very important, and the Committee is welcome to have a look at that.

I was recently on board the royal research ship Sir David Attenborough, meeting our fantastic scientists and teams from the British Antarctic Survey. Of course, they spend the opposite time of the year—last year and this year, I believe—around Greenland doing important scientific work. We are absolutely committed. I was the first Government Minister in 10 years to go to the Arctic Circle Assembly and I engage regularly with colleagues. I have been up in Tromsø with our Norwegian friends, looking at Russian and other attempts to destabilise the high north, and this is a matter about which I regular contact with our Nordic and Baltic partners in particular.

Q246 **Phil Brickell:** I want to come back to the topic of sanctions, but also Bosnia and Herzegovina. The "Democracy for Sale" Substack reported at the end of last year that Charles Crawford, the UK's ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina in the mid-90s, and Sir Dominick Chilcott, former UK ambassador to Ireland, are both registered as lobbyists for Republika Srpska on the FIRS scheme. Were you aware of that, Minister?

Stephen Doughty: I think I am aware of that, yes.

Q247 **Phil Brickell:** What do you make of what appears to be two former British diplomats lobbying on behalf of Milorad Dodik's regime?

Stephen Doughty: I am not going to comment on individuals or their activities; that is a matter for them to answer. What people do outside of Government, provided it is in line with their requirements under the appropriate regulations that apply to former officials and Ministers, is for them. I am not going to comment on that.

Chair: Thank you. I don't think anyone has any follow-up questions. Thank you for your forbearance and answering the questions as fully as you have. That concludes this particular session.