HOUSE OF COMMONS

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Russia-Ukraine Crisis, HC 1064

Tuesday 25 January 2022

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Stuart Anderson; Sarah Atherton; Dave Doogan; Richard Drax; Mr Kevan Jones; Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck; Gavin Robinson; John Spellar; Derek Twigg.

Questions 1-36

Witnesses

I: James Sherr OBE, Senior Fellow, Estonian Foreign Policy Institute, International Centre for Defence & Security, Tallinn, Estonia, Associate Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Programme, Chatham House; and Olga Tokariuk, Non-resident Fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: James Sherr OBE and Olga Tokariuk.

Chair: Welcome to this Defence Select Committee hearing on 25 January. I am delighted to welcome two guests here: James Sherr, who is a senior fellow of the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute at the International Centre for Defence and Security and an associate fellow of the Russia and Eurasia programme at Chatham House, and Olga Tokariuk, who is a non-resident fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis.

As you may guess, with those titles and backgrounds, we will be discussing the Ukraine-Russia crisis. This is a one-off session, where we will be delving into some of the challenges and issues, and looking at where things may go. I am grateful to our two experts for joining us this afternoon. I invite Stuart Anderson to kick off the questions.

Q1 **Stuart Anderson:** Thank you, Chair. Before we drill down into different detail, I will ask the question that is probably on everybody's lips at the moment: what do you believe is the risk of full-scale war? Olga, could you start us off, please?

Olga Tokariuk: Hello, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for inviting me to this event. It is an honour to be speaking from Kyiv, Ukraine, at this crucial moment, because security and peace matter for not only Ukraine but the whole of Europe.

I will just describe the mood in Kyiv and what the Ukrainian authorities and the public are saying, because I am not just a non-resident fellow at CEPA, but also a journalist. I have been working as a journalist for the last 16 years, writing for Ukrainian and international media. I was actually a little bit late today because I had a deadline—I had to submit another article.

What can I say about the perception here in Kyiv? Well, the Ukrainian authorities, especially in recent days, have been making multiple statements trying to calm the public down. There were signals coming in that are very worrying, and are contributing to an increase in anxiety here in Ukraine, such as signals about a mounting Russian presence on Ukraine's borders, about Russian troops now on the territory of Belarus—just several hundred kilometres from the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv. Of course, the decision by several Western embassies, including the UK's, to withdraw the family members of their staff from Kyiv also contributed to a feeling of anxiety and worry among Ukrainians.

In recent days, the Ukrainian Government have been trying to calm people down by saying that there is no risk of an imminent Russian invasion, and that if a large-scale attack happens, it will not be sooner than in several weeks, because now the numbers of troops stationed at Russian borders do not indicate that there is a risk of invasion in the next days. Also, an editorial was published yesterday in one of the major Ukrainian media

outlets, Pravda, penned by former Defence Minister Andriy Zagorodnyuk, and other defence experts, who argued that there are no signs of an imminent invasion happening today, tomorrow, or in the next days. Those signs would be the stationing of Russian field hospitals and several other indicators that they still do not see. So, according to Ukrainian observers and the Ukrainian Government, there is no risk of an invasion in the next days, but it is possible that it might happen over the next several weeks; they do not exclude this possibility.

On the public mood, in general there is no panic. The majority of people are not packing their bags and leaving their houses. They are resilient and are resolved to stay and to defend Ukraine in whatever way they can.

Q2 **Stuart Anderson:** James, what would be your opinion on that?

James Sherr: I think the risks of all-out war against Ukraine are considerable. I agree with Olga and with my friend Andriy Zagorodnyuk, a former Defence Minister, that it is not an imminent risk. It is certainly not going to happen until the Beijing Olympics conclude, in my view. But let's understand why. We had the Minsk accord seven years ago. The Russians have been trying all other means—very unpleasant means—since then to destabilise Ukraine; since his election, to manipulate and intimidate President Zelensky; and to pressure Germany and France, in particular, to force Ukraine to concede to Russia's fundamental demands, which have been on the table at least since 2014—far earlier, I would argue. And all of this has reached a dead end. That led to a decision, at the end of last year, to force the issue. This became clear in January last year, when Sergey Lavrov, the Foreign Minister, presented what he called, publicly, an ultimatum to Germany and France to either make their wards, as he called them, in Ukraine behave, fall into line and comply with Russia's demands, or see Russia do it itself. Everything we have seen since then has followed from that.

I think that, for a variety of reasons, it would be very difficult and damaging for Russia, and for Putin's own standing within the élite, to back down. I think that until recently they fully expected that the mounting pressure and the ultimata they have presented would create real fissures inside the West, play upon divisions that always exist in any American Administration, and begin to produce some form of compliance with the essence of their demands. And that is not happening. Even in the past several weeks and days, there has been a marked toughening of our response. So the Russians have put themselves in a trap and it is hard to see how this can resolve itself without enormous damage. So I come back to my answer: I think the risks are now considerable.

Q3 **Stuart Anderson:** You have both said that there is a high risk, but it doesn't look like an invasion is going to happen tomorrow. Could I just have a straight yes, no or "highly unlikely"? Do you think that in the next three months we will see Russia invade Ukraine? James, I will come back to you on that.

James Sherr: It is still in the balance, because if we can do what we have not yet done, which is persuade the Russians that the consequences will be ruinous—that, on our part, would depend upon military steps and not simply economic and financial steps—I think it will not happen. But the odds remain very high, and if you go beyond February, the logistical challenges of mounting a considerable and devastating attack become progressively less favourable for Russia. So next month is going to be point of maximum danger, in my view.

Stuart Anderson: Do you share that view, Olga?

Olga Tokariuk: Yes, I tend to agree with James on this. I think it is still in the balance. The likelihood is very high, but there is still room to change Putin's calculation.

Q4 **Richard Drax:** From what I am reading, it all depends very much on the ground and the ability of tanks to move fast. That ability is granted if the ground is frozen, which I understand it is now. Of course, in the spring it gets all boggy and muddy, and makes manoeuvre far harder. I take it that is going to be a major factor in Putin's decision to invade or not.

James Sherr: There are other factors. The Russians have not mounted a combined arms warfare operation on this scale, or anything like it, since the assault on Berlin in 1945. This is a formidable undertaking, co-ordinating airborne forces, amphibious forces, ground forces, aircraft, all the rest of it, to achieve very quick results with a country—I think we underestimate this in the West—that has demonstrated extraordinary resilience, and has the ability to be defeated and reconstitute itself.

Add to that equation that, aside from those serving in and now deployed by the Ukrainian armed forces, we have a very large number of recent veterans of the Donbass conflicts of the past several years, who are highly experienced professional people who of course know their own ground, country and conditions.

I absolutely do not share the view of a number of admittedly well-credentialed Western experts who believe that if the Russians use devastating force, this will all be over in a matter of hours or a couple of days. I think there are elements inside the general staff of the Russian armed forces who share my view that this is more difficult than it looks.

Q5 **Gavin Robinson:** This question is for you in particular, James, if you do not mind. There was considerable commentary over the weekend suggesting that this is all a large geopolitical bluff, that Russia has aspirations to be treated seriously once again—getting President Biden to meet in Geneva, for example, shows that they are a player worth talking to—and that Russia has aspirations of curtailing the support that Ukraine has, but they have no intention of mounting a military campaign.

You suggested in your initial response that they are now in something of a trap, as if their geopolitical bluff is not working. What is the danger that full-blown war within the next two or three months occurs accidentally?

James Sherr: I do not put a high risk on that. I certainly do not think, contrary to a lot of what we hear and a lot of disinformation, that Ukrainians, and Ukrainian radicals in some ways, are going to provoke a response from Russia. The Russians are trying to engineer this, trying to engineer a regime change—they have been doing that for a while. They do not understand Ukraine; that has not been happening. I do not see Ukraine providing the sort of pretext that would enable Russia to do it. The pretext that they might fabricate would be very transparent to everybody else.

Like all dangerous aggressors, Russia would far rather that we—all of us—capitulate to its demands without fighting, but they have always accepted the reality of war. They have prepared for it. I do not think that they are, in principle, afraid of it or that they rule it out. What affects it is their assessment of the correlation of forces at the time—all of them: economic, military, the psychological or morale factor in the West as a whole, cohesion, unity. All those things get factored together in any estimation of likely consequences. They expect more inconvenience and all the rest of it before they make this decision. Sorry for a long answer.

Chair: There is lots of interest in this. We have two more questions, but can we keep them quite short?

Q6 **Sarah Atherton:** James, you seemed to suggest that if Russia were faced with a military opposition, it may back down. Is that what you were saying? If you were, what would you suggest the scope of that military opposition would be?

James Sherr: I think that Ukraine's own capacity to deter what we fear is greater than advertised—greater than we appreciate. In fact, it has not been played up enough. Unfortunately, I did not hear any reference to it in the parliamentary discussion we just had.

A number of people in Washington and elsewhere have gone on record saying that if anything like this occurs, there will be a fundamental reassessment of our force levels in the eastern flanks of NATO. This has quite an effect. To say to the Russians, "You have accused us of all sorts of nonsensical threats that we are not posing, but be in no doubt that if you give us a reason to pose them, then we will," has the effect that we are doing it.

The fact that there is already discussion and some plans afoot to transfer troops, and that weapons deliveries are now taking place at an accelerated pace, all matter. I think much of this should have been done back in March, but better late than never, and it is starting to register. All this in combination has, and will continue to have, an impact, even if the Russians, as I suspect, remain very sceptical as to whether we are going to go forward with the types of sanctions that we are discussing, and as to whether they can endure them or not.

Olga Tokariuk: Might I add to James's answer to the previous questions? On the question about the weather conditions and whether if it is winter or

spring plays a role, according to many military experts it might not play such a big role after all, because it is not a given that Russia would focus on a land invasion. Also, the Ukrainian capacity to defend and to oppose a Russian land invasion is now much larger than it used to be, with all the Javelin anti-tank missiles and the delivery of the UK aid last week, with other anti-tank weapons. It is not a given that Russia will focus on a land invasion. If it does not, and if it focuses more on air missile strikes, that could be a real danger and it does not depend on weather conditions. That is one point I wanted to make.

Another point, if I may, is about the probability of the Ukrainians being provoked into something. That is what Russia would really like to see, and they are trying all they can in this area. It has also been pushed by Russian misinformation for a long time and by Russian officials. The Ukrainian authorities and military show incredible restraint, so it is very unlikely that something like that is going to happen and that they could be provoked.

The last question was about what kind of military deterrent could be in the NATO response. The article I submitted today was about the latest military assistance delivered to the Ukraine from the UK, the US, the Baltic states and the Czech Republic. All this is a very strong deterrent to a possible Russian attack. On the one hand, it boosts Ukraine's military and society morale. It gives Ukrainians the feeling that they are not alone, that they have not been abandoned by their Western country partners and that there is concrete assistance coming in—not just words, but deeds. As you probably know, "God Save the Queen" was trending on Ukrainian social media last week after the UK sent the military assistance.

In Russian eyes, we are seeing historical messages from the Crimea in reaction to this military assistance. This indicates that Russia really does not want it to happen. It does not want the Western weapons coming to Ukraine, and that could serve as a really strong deterrent. As I said before, the problem is that most of those weapons are focused on Russian land hardware, but Ukraine's crucial weaknesses and vulnerabilities are air and missile defence. That is what military experts tell me, so that is coming from credible sources.

Chair: Thank you, Olga. Kevan, do you want to come in quickly on this one?

Q7 **Mr Jones:** James, you raise the issue of concern within the Russian military about the scope of an invasion of Ukraine. Can I ask for your opinion about what public opinion would be? Clearly, in Afghanistan and Chechnya, they became very unpopular in terms of body bags going home. Do you have any insight into what the current thinking is there?

James Sherr: When it comes to ordinary Russians, the only thing that the Russian elite and establishment fear at this point is not internal privation, inconvenience or anything else; it is a major overseas venture like this that fails. Every regime change in Russia has occurred after a surprising defeat in an external war, and they are aware of this. Nothing could be

more damaging to Russia's prestige—its position in the region, in Europe and in the world—to the Putin regime and to Putin personally than to start a war and fail to achieve objectives, and they are aware of that.

But there is another thing they are aware of. Let's remember that the authority in Russia—Putin's own authority—depends on respect. What he is conscious of, and has to be conscious of, is the trust and respect of the Russian elite and all the establishments that constitute it—a very large body of people. To have invested all this into not only resubordinating Ukraine to Russia but damaging and undermining the whole system of European and transatlantic security, and to let it fail, poses real risk to his own position in these establishments. So he is under pressure, I think, from two directions.

Q8 **Chair:** Thank you. Can I lead on from that very quickly and ask about options for Russia on how far an invasion might go? There are suggestions here in the UK that the Luhansk-Donetsk area would be easy to take over. Essentially, they have proxy forces there already, so Putin could say, "Look, I've defied NATO—I've invaded," and look strong back home. Option 2 would be more towards the Dnieper river, linking up the land corridor with Crimea. Option 3, potentially, would be a very bold move: taking over the entire country. I know they are very crude, but could you give us rough assessments as to what options there might be and the possibilities of them actually taking place? Olga, do you want to quickly go first?

Olga Tokariuk: I think that James would be better positioned to answer this.

James Sherr: A low-risk objective for Russia is to enforce what they already occupy: the Donetsk and Luhansk Republics. That would change the military equation, and possibly the political equation, too, in very damaging ways for Ukraine, without occupying new territory. It would not be opposed by Ukrainian armed forces. Going along with it, if they can pressure Lukashenko into conceding it, would be the establishment of a permanent, long-term group of forces in Belarus. Not only would that, again, be extremely damaging to Ukraine, which is a factor that you have to consider, prepare for, resource and budget; it would also change the security equation overnight in the Baltic states and Poland. Don't forget that Poland, Latvia and Lithuania have common borders with Belarus, so even the requirements of a NATO tripwire deterrent would have to be considerably revisited and ramped up. That is one possibility.

The work that Olga talked about earlier is, of course, highly possible and very appealing—minimal ground forces involvement and mainly aerial activity. Don't forget Ukraine's vulnerable infrastructure—its whole energy infrastructure—and targeting all of this. Enormous damage to the economy, the energy system, the electricity grid—all of these things they could do. Infrastructure war—very damaging, very menacing, with incalculable consequences.

But the question they have to ask themselves is this: "Supposing we do all

of this and it fails? Supposing Ukraine comes out of this tougher and more determined and more consolidated than it has ever been, and supposing this galvanises the West into rethinking its whole level of defence commitment and the US into rethinking the whole level of its defence commitment in Europe? Does that leave Russia better off?" I am sure that these questions have been discussed.

Olga Tokariuk: If I may add to that, I think there might be multiple fronts where Russia can attack and it might be done also to disperse Ukrainian forces, to distract their attention so that they cannot just go in one direction. There might be attacks on multiple fronts, using multiple types of forces, and that could also be combined with so-called hybrid attacks, with cyber-attacks. We have seen already indications and we have seen what looked like a minor cyber-attack, but it is possible that some malware was inserted during that attack that could be activated at a later stage.

Actually, today's blackouts in the central Asian republics are also seen as a warning signal in Ukraine, because it is unclear what the reasons are and there are fears that there could be blackouts and that the connection and electricity supplies could be cut off, with cyber-attacks that would disrupt the functioning of various sectors of the Ukrainian economy.

Russia has multiple options. It also has its agents on the ground, working undercover and waiting to get into action once the situation arises. It is also important to expose those agents, such as Murayev, with the recent Foreign Office statement. An attack can occur on multiple fronts and we should be prepared for that.

Q9 **Chair:** And is it fair to say that the further west that you go, the harder it will be to retain and hold the ground, because there would likely be an insurgency from Russia to maintain their forces there to keep the peace?

Olga Tokariuk: Yes, that is what is often said, but also the resistance in eastern Ukraine shouldn't be underestimated. I spoke to people from Kharkhiv yesterday and they said, "Well, if the army was able to defend Ukraine in 2014, when they were fighting in their slippers, now the Ukrainian army and the Ukrainian armed forces are in much better shape and are much stronger." As James previously said, there are so many people, like the veterans, who have experience of combat. Now the territorial defence units are being formed and people are joining from all social strata and from all ages. I think the insurgency will not only be limited to western Ukraine or central Ukraine; you can also expect strong insurgency in eastern Ukraine, in those areas that Russia considers it would be easy to capture.

Q10 **Chair:** Thank you for that. Before I turn to Richard to take us forward with the next question, could I ask you something, James? You mentioned Beijing. I am surprised that, and really curious as to why, an attack has not taken place, given where we are—it's all set, ready to go. But you mentioned Beijing and I am just wondering whether President Xi got on the telephone to Putin and said, "We like what you're doing out

there: amazing stuff, keeping the West busy. We've got something similar going on with Taiwan, so we're watching with interest. But do you mind just holding back? International attention will be on the Beijing Olympic games. Do you mind waiting until that's finished?" Is that a potential conversation that might have taken place?

James Sherr: The Chinese have already come out officially and backed Russia's demands to the West, so there is no question that Russia has the full diplomatic support of China. There is also no question that Russia already relies upon China, to a considerable degree, as a major compensating factor to the effectiveness of Western economic sanctions.

I think we should be in no doubt that if we fail to rise to the challenge in Ukraine and follow through with steps we are beginning to take, our prestige and our reputation in China will be greatly diminished. There could be no greater fallacy than to say, "Well, we must let Ukraine go because China is the big adversary and we must concentrate there". We will be in a far weaker position to do that.

May I also reinforce Olga's point? The Russians want to destroy Ukraine's combat forces. They don't want to be in a position where they have to occupy ground, have to deal with civilians, have to deal with an insurgency and have to deal with Ukrainian special forces, sabotage and all the rest of it. And they dread getting bogged down in a long war. They want this to be devastating, conclusive and short.

Chair: Thank you for that. Let's now turn from the operational side of things to why it is all happening, or why it might be happening, and what Russia is up to.

Q11 **Richard Drax:** I think, to a certain extent, your last answer answered, in part, the question I am about to ask you. What does Russia hope to gain from this latest military build-up on Ukraine's borders? How is it different from the build-up in the spring of 2021, which I believe was for a matter of weeks and much of the hardware was left behind, obviously for the troops to come back and occupy at a later date?

James Sherr: I think what happened in 2021 was what the Russian military would call a reconnaissance—an effort to assess the mettle, capacity and awareness of Ukraine and the West. They will have factored in the Biden-Putin meetings in all of that along with everything they've seen, and, in fact, I have to say, the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan and the way that happened—all of those things—to get an assessment of just who they are dealing with and what kind of opposition we have.

I think that their conclusion, whether right or wrong, is, "The West is very weak and we can afford to continue pushing them." That is, in a large part, why we are where we are. The fact that we are now pushing back—I have to reiterate that I think we are beginning to show signs of pushing back effectively—I think has come as something of a surprise to them.

This is nothing new. In fact, this has been going on from the beginning, from the day that Ukraine became formally independent—from the day the Cold War officially ended. Russia, as Putin puts it, wants Ukraine to define its independence in co-operation with Russia, to subordinate itself to Russia and make that the condition for what we would call independence—of course, that is no independence at all. The Russians have not made it secret. They want a new security order in Europe, based on what I think the Prime Minister recently referred to as the Yalta principles. Those objectives are very old.

We are at a point where they feel that if there is going to be a war—this is where they were at least a couple of weeks ago—there is no better time for it than now: "The longer we wait, the worse things get. The reality, politically, has been slipping away from us. Everything we have tried to do by other means has run up against a dead end." That is why I think we are here—I am pleased to see Olga nodding.

Q12 **Richard Drax:** Thank you, James. Olga, can I ask you the same question? What is Russia trying to gain—that was the first part of my question—and what is different from spring 2021?

Olga Tokariuk: In general, I agree with what James said. I just want to elaborate on something: I agree that, for Russia, it is a now or never moment. They feel that, now, the moment has come to solve the Ukrainian question, as they themselves frame it.

I also agree with the point that Russia has lost other types of leverage over Ukraine. Especially since 2014, since it started the war in Ukraine, attitudes towards Russia, and conversely towards Ukraine's integration into the European Union and NATO, have changed significantly and shifted in the other direction. If, before the war, a significant part of the Ukrainian population wanted to have partner relations with Russia, now the figure is a tiny minority of about 10%. Instead, according to polls, about 60% of Ukrainians support the integration of Ukraine into the European Union and NATO. Prior to Russian aggression in Ukraine, that support, especially for NATO, stood at not more than 30%. Russia has achieved the opposite of what it wants in Ukraine by launching the war. It has failed on that front.

Russian attempts to have political influence in Ukraine are also failing. Pro-Russian politicians lost a huge amount of the support that they enjoyed before the war. Now, pro-Russian politicians poll at about 5% to 10%. That is a huge difference from the previous levels of support when pro-Russian President Yanokovych was elected in 2010. In today's Ukraine it is impossible to imagine that a pro-Russian politician would be elected as President or occupy high position in the Government.

Q13 **Richard Drax:** Olga, may I quickly interrupt? So the more they fail, logically the more likely invasion is.

Olga Tokariuk: The more they fail with other means, the more Russia sees military force and coercion by force as the only solution to subjugate Ukraine and to bring it back into Russia's orbit. That is also doomed to fail, because Russia and the Kremlin under Putin's regime fail to understand

the amount of change that has been going on in Ukraine since 2014, and the transformation in the civil society, the conscience of people and the democratic institutions that are becoming stronger with every passing day. Russia underestimates Ukraine very much and that is why it has undertaken these aggressive steps.

If and when it comes to an invasion, there would be the question of the motivation of Ukrainian soldiers versus Russian soldiers. Ukrainian soldiers would be highly motivated to defend their land. I am hearing voices and speaking to people in eastern and southern Ukraine, who say that they have nowhere to go and that they will not give up their land. There are more than 1.5 million internally displaced people who had to flee from occupied Crimea, from occupied Donetsk and the Luhansk region, and they do not want to flee again. They are willing to protect their new homes. Russia greatly underestimates their resolve.

Richard Drax: Olga, thank you very much. I am going to hand back to the Chairman.

Q14 **Chair:** Just to conclude that important piece of evidence, would it be fair to say that without Russian interference, Ukraine would eventually join NATO and/or the EU over the next couple of decades or so, and that Russia really needs a buffer zone? It really does not want either of those two organisations rubbing up against it. Therefore it is useful for Russia to have that bit of land, so that breaks the two.

Olga Tokariuk: I think that Putin's main motivation is not as much to restore the Russian empire or to create buffer zones. His main goal is to cling to power, to stay in power and to preserve his kleptocratic regime. He sees democratic states at Russia's borders, such as Ukraine, as an existential threat to that goal. Multiple revolutions in Ukraine led to the Government change. Ukraine has freedom of assembly, it has free media, it has an opposition and it has free elections. All those things are absent in Putin's Russia and that represents an existential threat to Putin's regime. He is acting on account of that logic. Bringing back the USSR or restoring the Russian empire is just a useful narrative to sell this to the Russian population to try to gain some popular support.

Chair: Thank you, Olga. That was very comprehensive.

Q15 **Sarah Atherton:** In answer to the very first question, you mentioned the mood of the Ukrainian people being stoic and "keep calm and carry on", but how do the extensive cyber-attacks and bomb threats affect their outlook? What about regions like the Donbass, where there are mixed loyalties and subversive tactics being deployed? What is the mood like there?

Olga Tokariuk: Thank you for that question. In fact the cyber-attacks and the bomb threats are nothing new for Ukraine. Those threats have been present for years. You might remember major cyber-attacks in 2017 that disrupted the operation of various Ukrainian governmental and non-governmental services, and also head of operations around the globe. These, unfortunately, are not something new, and the same applies to the

bomb threats. Now we see an increase of these words, and according to Ukrainian security services they are being co-ordinated by Russian intelligence via social media such as Telegram.

There are more of these threats, and of course it irritates people, but the main emotion and the main feeling that I myself have and I see among Ukrainians is not that of fear but of anger. It makes Ukrainians very angry, because we just want to continue with our normal lives. We see that our country is changing: it is developing, it is actually becoming a better place to live with every passing year, despite war and all the Russian attempts to destabilise it. I myself studied abroad, and I made a conscious decision to go back and live in Ukraine and work for the development of this country. I never regret it, and I actually see these changes. Ukraine is changing and this irritates Putin, but we see these Russian attempts to prevent our development and feel a lot of anger, and this anger can be used in a constructive way. We are now directing it into strengthening our resilience.

As for your question about the loyalties in eastern Ukraine and Donbass, of course, there are a lot of people—mostly elderly people, especially those who stayed in the areas that are close to the contact line—who decided they had nowhere to go, and they did not have an option to move and start life anew in other parts of Ukraine. The loyalties of those people can still be with Russia, or rather with the USSR: they might think that there is a possibility of returning to the times of nostalgia. They are nostalgic, and they might have those loyalties out of pure nostalgia, but from what I gather when I speak to people in those areas, the most proactive people there are all pro-Ukrainian. Those who support Russia are usually a passive minority, but those who support Ukraine are an active majority.

Q16 **Chair:** Thank you. James, do you have anything to add?

James Sherr: May I just reiterate a key point that Olga made earlier, which is fundamental and has been lost? Before Crimea—before Russia detached parts of Ukraine—support for NATO membership in Ukraine never exceeded 30%. It was normally about 25% or 30%. We have not been able to penetrate Russian thinking to the point where they understand, "The only thing that creates this hypothetical NATO threat is you. The only thing that makes Ukrainians anti-Russian is you."

After Crimea, I was having dinner in Kyiv with a very senior member of their defence establishment who is very pro-NATO, and he burst into tears. He said, "With everything going on, I always thought of them as a kindred people. I never thought they would do this." One should not underestimate this. Russia has caused all the problems it fears, Russia has created all the threats that it has, and we have not been able to get through to them. We are dealing with an elite of people, a whole class of people, who are historically, psychologically and temperamentally unable to accept the reality of Ukraine as a different people, a different place—a place of its own, a land of its own. That has been the basic problem.

Olga Tokariuk: If I may add, I wanted to touch on the issue of the Russian-speaking population, which is sometimes confused with loyalty to Russia. In fact, a lot of Russian-speaking people are in the Ukrainian armed forces and are fighting against Russian aggression. A huge majority of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine does not want to see Russia in Ukraine—does not want to have any connection to Russia—so it absolutely does not define loyalties. That is sometimes lost, as I see it, from the media presentation of the situation and the debate in Ukraine.

Q17 **Derek Twigg:** This question is maybe to Olga first. Do you have a view about whether the Russian military leadership and the Kremlin and Putin are absolutely working from the same plan? Are they completely at one about what should happen with Ukraine? You mentioned before, James, that there was some concern, and you also talked about the establishment. Have you got any intelligence that there is any divide at all between the Russian military leadership, and Putin and the Kremlin?

Olga Tokariuk: I don't have intelligence, but I think it is plausible, and there are indications that there is no unanimity in the Russian leadership for a potential invasion of Ukraine. As we know, the ultimate decision is up to one man, and if he decides to invade, other people will just stay quiet. I think what we should focus on, and what Western countries and the UK should focus on, is Putin's inner circle. They are extremely rich people with strong connections to the West. They send their children to study at Western universities, store their wealth in Western banks and buy expensive property in Switzerland, the UK, Italy, and other countries. Those people might be really reluctant to lose access to the wealth that they store in the West, and reluctant to not be received in the West as they are now. If Russia launches a new invasion of Ukraine and there are severe costs, they will feel the impact of the new sanctions. I hope that is being discussed in the UK and the West: how to culturally target Russian kleptocrats, and how to target Russian money in the West. I think that is leverage that the West has over Russia that has not been used to the extent that it could be. It is very strong leverage.

Q18 **Derek Twigg:** James, in your view will the Russian military leadership just do as they're told by Putin, or, as we have seen in the past, will they rebel against the political leadership?

James Sherr: First, it is important to understand that on a general geopolitical and geostrategic level, there is a very tight commonality of outlook between Putin and the military establishment—between the whole system. Now, at the same time, the Russian military are very good at going through a lessons learned process. They keep doing this, and that is why I detect elements of greater realism about what they might be up against in Ukraine. They are not hiding that from Putin. However, if you look at the way the whole system works and is structured, and the psychology of the players involved, unless and until there is a demonstrable reverse attributed to Putin's policies, I don't think any of these people will be sticking their heads above the parapet. I am quite confident of that. Look at what happened to Nikita Khrushchev after Cuba. He went too far and got into a situation he couldn't deal with. There was a

certain amount of face-saving, but he had to basically climb down, and he was out of power fairly quickly. You could see a lot of tensions and irritations before that, but it took that reverse to do it. We are not there yet, are we?

Q19 **Derek Twigg:** There is obviously a clear risk in things going wrong, and therefore, if he wants to keep his military onside, that is a big gamble for Putin as well, isn't it?

James Sherr: Yes. If he has gone too far—and possibly he has—the stakes for him personally are now much higher than they have been at any other point. He started all of this on a roll. They were all on a roll when all this was starting in 2021. Now, I think the mood has become different, precisely because of steps that have been taken. The very steps that a lot of people in Europe called provocative introduced these elements of scepticism and reservation; they enabled us to have the discussion we are now having and made that discussion realistic. Two years ago, this would not have been a realistic discussion to have, but it is now.

Q20 **Derek Twigg:** Can I just go on to hybrid warfare? We can go back to 2014 and Crimea. Are we starting to see that to any great extent at the moment? Are little green men—special forces behind Ukrainian lines—starting to appear, not to mention information and cyber-warfare?

James Sherr: As Olga said, there are agents; there will be more. Some have been caught; some have been exposed. You can't fool many people twice. We have been through all of this in 2014. We have all drawn conclusions, Ukrainians most of all. I don't see this happening, and I certainly don't see any possibility of it working. I think this is going to be a very dangerous situation however it plays out, but I think we are now looking at overt massive force, or a very costly alternative—I don't know what that alternative would be, but the green men scenario is no longer the alternative.

Olga Tokariuk: I agree that it will not be using the green men, because there is no element of surprise anymore. Everybody is now prepared for something like that that could happen, so there would be no element of surprise. That is the first point. Secondly, Russia back in 2014 and 2015 realised that it was not enough to have agents and special forces dressed as locals to capture and hold even the parts of Donbass that they did, because the Ukrainian army in the summer of 2014 was pushing back and was reconquering some of the cities captured by Russians, like Sloviansk. What Russia had to do was to send its conventional military. In the battle of Debaltseve, that is what they did. The Russian conventional military had to interfere to support the forces that were already there to recapture the territory—otherwise, they were not able to stop the Ukrainian army advance, and we are talking about 2014, when the Ukrainian army was in dire straits.

Chair: I am going to have to hold you there. We have a vote coming up at 4 o'clock. We have lots of questions—this is a fascinating discussion. Kevan wants to come in here, then over to David.

Q21 **Mr Jones:** James, you mentioned earlier on that if they did invade, it is not an easy invasion. What assessment do you think has been taken in the Russian military of the economic cost to Russia, not just in terms of sanctions, but in the capacity to keep large numbers of troops stationed within the borders of Ukraine?

James Sherr: In practical terms, I don't think that is a constraint. The costs to Russia in terms of their economy, their defence economy, their defence system and the way it works are a mere fraction of what it would require for many NATO allies. All these GDP comparisons don't mean anything. Even their contract soldiers are paid a pittance and don't even begin to have the kind of allowances and all the rest of it that NATO volunteer forces have. Running a conscription system for us is vastly more expensive than the system they are running and the costs they have for weapons systems and all of that. Their whole system works differently from ours. Of course it is an economic burden and of course there are constraints, but they are bearable, and, at the same time, Putin has created a mobilisation, and in many ways a militarised state, that is designed to concentrate the limited power they have on doing these high-priority things. Up to now they have been doing this very cleverly, very resourcefully and very well. So I don't think that is where the main vulnerability lies at this point.

Olga Tokariuk: I think Putin doesn't really care about how much money this will cost, also because the Russian population in general does not have a very high standard of living if you go outside of Moscow and St Petersburg. Russian propaganda has been there for so many years, talking about the external threats of the West and of NATO, and dehumanising Ukrainians, describing them as fascists and as a threat—as I said, describing a question that should be solved in expressions reminiscent really of Nazi, Goebbels propaganda. The head of the Russian delegation at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Pyotr Tolstoy, said that Ukrainian leaders should be hanged from the lamp posts. That is the rhetoric about Ukraine that is being broadcast every day on Russian state TV. Maybe in a more subtle manner, this disinformation is also targeting Western audiences in those countries of the West that are more vulnerable to Russian malign influence, such as Italy and Germany.

I have to say a thing or two about Italy. Tomorrow, President Putin will be speaking with the Italian business circles. That is another aspect of how Russia is trying to undermine the support of the West. When it realises that it cannot achieve its objectives in speaking to political leaders, it uses the business context and business connections with enterprises in European countries—Western countries—to try to pressure the Governments via those businesses. It is remarkable that Putin is speaking tomorrow with representatives of the most important Italian industries. I think we should follow what he says there—whether they will speak about Ukraine. Of course the topic is economic relations and everything, but I am sure that pressure will be put on Italy to abstain from supporting the joint US and EU position on Ukraine. That is another matter, but I think it is important.

James Sherr: I just want to say, coming back to the hon. Member who asked the question, that if Putin can say at the end, "I was the person who reversed this Ukrainian deviation—this heresy—and brought Ukraine back to the motherland," then all these sacrifices, all these costs, don't mean anything. That is his understanding, and he will be right in making that calculation.

Q22 **Dave Doogan:** Thank you, both. Obviously, it remains to be seen how this pans out, but there may be some small measure of success for Putin or success for the West, or it may be a face-saving exercise or some exit that is allowed to prevail. Whatever the outcome, what is your assessment of the likelihood of this spilling over into other elements of Russia's western frontier with NATO, particularly in terms of our NATO allies in the Baltics?

James Sherr: I am sitting here in Estonia—I said something about this at the beginning. If they are able to maintain a group of forces in Belarus, even if something is worked out in some way over Ukraine, we face a problem that we have not faced until now, and it is going to put our NATO collective deterrence and defence system under pressure. That is going to have to be addressed. The Russians will have the capacity, however this turns out, to maintain a level of military tension in the entire area from the Black sea, from Bulgaria, all the way to the gulf of Finland—the Finns themselves are aware of that, and the Swedes are aware of it—going into at least the mid-term. There is a very strong connection here. The notion that you can just remove Ukraine and all these problems from the equation and preserve the strength and security of the rest of us doesn't work. There are too many of these interconnections.

Olga Tokariuk: There is a big risk that full-scale war on Ukraine, if Russia decides to launch it, could spill over outside of Ukraine's borders. The Baltic countries are a potential next target, but the countries of the Black sea region are also worried—the countries of central and eastern Europe are worried. What is a bigger threat here is that it will most probably lead to big cracks in the international structures that exist now—in NATO and the European Union. We already see the shifts and divisions. If you look at the list of countries that are committed and have said they are ready to provide Ukraine with defence assistance, those are the Baltic states, the Czech Republic and the UK, but no other western European countries. If an attack on Ukraine happens, the central and eastern European countries and the Baltics will feel again that they have been betrayed by the Western countries, and this will ultimately undermine the stability of the Euro-Atlantic institutions and might lead to really unpredictable consequences.

Q23 **Dave Doogan:** Thank you. James, earlier you detailed a scenario in which Putin has almost painted himself into a corner through an element of miscalculation on his part, and now he has a problem that he has to get out of somehow. Am I characterising your comments accurately?

James Sherr: I think there are elements of this that are very strong now that were not present at the beginning—I will put it that way. I don't think they are in a state of desperation yet, but—

Q24 **Dave Doogan:** But this is not panning out the way that perhaps he had hoped a month or two ago.

James Sherr: I don't think that it has. I emphasise that since this started I don't think the responses have been what he expected. I refer to another expert, Michael Kofman—I have my disagreements with him, but I respect him very highly—who said some time ago, and we are fully in agreement on this, that you don't want the Russians to be in a position where they feel either desperate or emboldened. We are getting closer to that point with the scissors closing, which is why this remains a very dangerous situation.

Q25 **Richard Drax:** James, you have just said that you think the Russians did not expect the rection that there has been from the West. If we look at the reaction from the West, the UK is giving a very strong reaction, Germany is being criticised for being incredibly weak, and other countries have muttered various things. Do you think that the response from the West will be hamstrung by all the internal wrangling that we are seeing? Because I assume that you agree that unity is strength. The whole point of NATO was to act as one—sadly, Ukraine is not in NATO—in order to deter aggression from a country such as Russia.

James Sherr: That is a very important question, and it enables me to say that for the Russians the country that really matters, more than any other, is the United States. They are always outraged by the pluck and defiance of the UK, but they tend to explain it away as us basically being the reconnaissance battalion of the Americans. They are obsessed with the United States. It was the weakness they saw in the Biden Administration, for a whole series of reasons, beginning as early as February last year, and the missteps, that led them to think that they could push the Americans, and then much of the West as a whole, into doing all this. The reaction from the Biden Administration that I have been describing, which is different, has only started, in my perception, relatively recently. It could still go the other way, because there is an argument inside Washington—there always is. If the promising vector that has developed is now abandoned and we start equivocating again, looking for compromises that are not there and telegraphing an absence of resolution on our part, the Russians will swiftly feel emboldened again. It is very much in the balance. That is why I said we are not there yet, because the encouraging developments we have seen have occurred only recently.

You mentioned the Franco-German factor and the syndromes in both France and Germany. They are deep and very, very different. It was interesting to see the reaction elsewhere in Europe to President Macron's speech in the European Parliament. His immediate response included a statement that France is now willing to send troops to Romania! Well, splendid, but you have to ask what is going on there.

Here is the devil's question: what is better—a low-common-denominator transatlantic consensus which is ineffective, or an effective coalition of the willing led by the United States, which is the one country they really care about, that is doing the very things that worry them? I have my answer—it is probably obvious to you. My concern is that the Biden Administration will default to one of its dogmas, which is that transatlantic consensus—meaning consensus with the Germans—is more important than anything else. If they do that, I think we are on a losing wicket.

Q26 **Richard Drax:** The United States has put 8,000 troops on standby. Are you insinuating that you would have liked to have seen NATO put tens of thousands of troops, within NATO's borders, on standby—not just 8,000—to say to Russia, "We're here"? "Not that we are going to have a major world war, we hope, but we are here to deter"—rather than just standing back and waiting for perhaps what is the inevitable? Is that what you would have liked NATO to have done?

James Sherr: The numbers are less important than the change in the dynamic, the decision—and the articulation of the decision—to reinforce the eastern flank of NATO, and the articulation of the threat that we will reinforce it considerably more and change it, if anything were to happen. Until recently, the Administration in Washington was unwilling to consider any responses at all, apart from economic and financial sanctions. This is a step change, and that matters more than whether it is 8,500 now or 10,000 now.

By the way, I still think—and the point also applies to our own Government—that it is always a mistake, particularly in dealing with a very dangerous adversary at a point of crisis, to tell a dangerous adversary what you will not do. I understand that there are reasons for us to conclude that it would not be a good idea to put British or American armed forces in harm's way in Ukraine itself. You don't announce this, because it gives Putin an absolute green light, and it removes from the equation all manner of other military responses that are essential, that don't involve forces on the ground in Ukraine.

Beginning with cyber-intelligence, special forces' reinforcement of troops where they are, our traditional policy has been, and must remain, that we don't comment on the presence of special forces and we don't comment on their absence. You don't say, "Because Ukraine is not a member of NATO, we will not defend it." There is nothing in the Washington treaty that prohibits a NATO ally from going to the defence of somebody outside NATO. Kuwait was not a member of NATO, was it? You don't say these things.

Chair: Okay.

James Sherr: Sorry.

Chair: It is amazing stuff, but we have got to go on to some other things.

Q27 **Richard Drax:** Olga, to go back to the question, which I slightly diverted

from, for which I apologise: is the Western response leaving hamstrung the agreements for the West to try and deter Russia?

Olga Tokariuk: Can I add to what James just said? One of the major things that emboldened Putin after the spring build-up last year was the agreement reached in the summer of 2021 between the US and Germany on Nord Stream 2. Putin got what he wanted: by escalating at Ukraine's borders in the spring, he got a meeting with Biden, and he got an agreement favourable for him on Nord Stream 2, which in Ukraine was seen as a betrayal, because this is a clearly geopolitical project that is pushed by Gazprom and by business interests in Germany. It has absolutely no economic use: it is a purely political and geopolitical project of Russian leverage over Ukraine and over Europe, so I think that emboldened Putin and forced him to push to the more aggressive actions that he is resorting to now.

I absolutely agree with James when he says that maybe certain things should not be voiced, because also they are taken badly in Ukraine. Nobody in Ukraine expects NATO boots on the ground—that is clear—but when we hear that said and emphasised for the 1,000th time, it does not really boost our morale. Also, I see signs coming from the Ukrainian Government and the expat community that Ukraine, in its diplomacy and its dealings with other countries, is now willing to focus more on multilateral formats than on the formats at EU or NATO level, because it sees that there is no unity inside the EU and there is no unity inside NATO. So, for example, the format that is being discussed now and very much looked forward into is the trilateral format with the UK and Poland. There is an appetite in Ukraine to explore what are the possibilities of military co-operation in this format, and if it could be somehow taken seriously into consideration in the UK.

Q28 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Just to follow on from my colleague's question there, James, you might have briefly touched on this before. Macron has suggested that Europe needs its own dialogue with Russia, separate from the United States. Do either of you feel that there is any merit in that at all?

James Sherr: I know that we are pressed for time, so my answer would be no. The fatigue I always have—the reason I always sigh when the word "dialogue" is mentioned—is that it is irrelevant. What are you going to say? It is the same thing with diplomacy. Diplomacy to achieve what? These are the important questions. Dialogue, negotiation, talking, all the rest of it—yes, it should always be going on; it has been going on during war itself, but the issue is, to what end? Do we have a position? What is our objective? What is our view? These are the questions that need to be discussed, not whether we talk or we don't talk.

Olga Tokariuk: The perception in Ukraine about such initiatives from President Macron is that first, it looks like it is an absolutely political decision, because he is in an election year and he uses it to gain political points ahead of the elections.

The second thing is that from the Ukrainian perspective, it looks not very promising, and dangerous. There will be these trilateral negotiations at the level of advisers—I think tomorrow—in Paris between France, Ukraine and Russia, but France is not seen as a trusted ally here in Kyiv, so there is little trust that these negotiations can achieve something, and there is actually a preoccupation that France might be siding rather with Russia than with Ukraine. So, from the Ukrainian perspective, these formats are not very desirable, but there are other formats that Ukraine sees as more desirable. Of course, it looks for more involvement in the negotiation process of the UK and of the United States, which it sees as really committed allies and partners.

Q29 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Thanks, both, for that. As we talked about it earlier, this is the second time in less than a year that Russia has caused military escalation on the border with Ukraine. If this immediate crisis is peacefully resolved, what steps can NATO take to prevent this happening again? In particular, I am curious what you both feel about how effective sanctions actually are. James, I can start with you again, if you want.

James Sherr: You have finally asked me a question that has stumped me. I think it is a question of what kind of Russia we have. If we are still facing the same Russia, we are still going to be dealing with an adversary. The immediate danger will have receded; we will then have to see what that adversary concludes, and what it decides to do. So, on one level, we could relax our vigilance a bit, but we should not be going off dining out on this and saying, as we have done too often in the past, "We won and they lost, and this problem is over." No; Russia is going to be a problem. Even if we have a post-Putin Russia—it could be better; it could be worse—Russia is going to be a problem, because its whole history predisposes them to a different outlook, a different understanding of Europe and of European security, from that which we sometimes, wrongly, take for granted, and which we seek to uphold.

That is going to be difficult for us in a different sense: to maintain this kind of mature understanding and realistic understanding at a time when the emergency has passed, and not to default to another set of utopias about history ending and our problems being over and a "We won, they lost" triumphalism, is going to be extremely important if we reach that happy point.

Olga Tokariuk: From the Ukrainian perspective, if we are look to centuries of Ukraine's history and struggle for independence, what is happening now is not surprising, because Russia has been trying to subjugate Ukraine for centuries and it succeeded to a large extent. Still, there was a strong Ukrainian movement for independence and sovereignty, and for 30 years Ukraine has been independent, and the population of Ukraine is not willing to give that up without a fight.

Unfortunately, one cannot choose geography, one cannot choose neighbours, so Ukrainians have no choice but to strengthen themselves, to get ready to defend themselves, to live in this constant state of alert—a little bit like Israel does, with an aggressive neighbour just next door.

As for the efficiency of sanctions, I think sanctions work. We see it from Russia's reactions, such as its reactions to the statements that have been made in the West regarding possible new sanctions. The most nervous reactions from the Kremlin were to the threat that there might be some sanctions directly targeting Putin or people immediately close to him. Also, there was a nervous reaction to the statement that the sanctions could target the Russian bank sector and their SWIFT system. We should really listen to those signals to assess whether sanctions are working. The fact that Russia is now trying to have dialogue with businesses in those countries that it sees as weak links, as vulnerable, also indicates that sanctions work. As I said before, there is still a lot of leverage that the West has not used against Russia so far.

Q30 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** That is helpful. Since 2014, the US has already had sanctions imposed on Russia. I read somewhere that Putin has billions in international reserves, so sanctions would not hit him or those close to him directly; they would hit other people instead. I am curious: what would be different this time about any sanctions compared with those imposed since 2014, and how would they directly affect Putin in terms of all the wealth that he has amassed?

James Sherr: We are talking about sanctions that are different at some level. Certainly, severing Russia from SWIFT would be a step change. The issue is whether we can feasibly do it. Can the United States do this without German co-operation? Is the UK—this question has been raised in the debate several times—willing, at the cost of damaging the reputations of prominent people in the UK, to do a clean sweep of rotten money in the City of London and our own financial system? There are all these questions.

The Prime Minister said at one point, "We want the maximum amount of sanctions that are not going to further damage our economies." I am sorry, but beyond what we already have, any further increase, any qualitative change in sanctions, will hurt us as well, because we are starting from a position of Russia already being highly integrated in the financial and economic global system. That is the issue.

Look at the whole energy question as well, with the energy prices we are paying, the impact that this has on people who earn far less than my modest Estonian salary, and expecting the democratically elected Governments to say, "I'm sorry, but for the next two or three years, or maybe a longer period, you are going to have reconcile yourself with paying 40% more than that."

Is all this really going to happen? I think for those reasons and others the Kremlin is highly sceptical. They also understand that business is interested in what they call sebya—in themselves. Western businesses are not charitable institutions. They are not in general unpatriotic, but they have a responsibility to shareholders and so on. If they are exposed and they suffer, this is a braking factor on our own Governments.

So, yes, I can envisage theoretically that we could do certain things in the financial and economic sphere that would be very crippling for Russia and for Putin and the establishments around him, but I question the feasibility of us doing it in the timescale that is needed to deter Russia now in this crisis. If you put all this together, that is one reason why I have said you cannot deter Russia by economic and financial means alone. That is where they are coming from, too.

Olga Tokariuk: I would just add that there are various types of sanctions. There was a list compiled by the Alexei Navalny, the Russian opposition leader, of 35 people, if I am not mistaken, from Putin's inner circle who have not been targeted yet by the sweeping Western sanctions. There are Russian propagandists such as Margarita Simonyan, the editor-in-chief of RT, who is not on the Western sanctions list. So there is still a way to go. Of course, it requires political will and courage, but millions of lives are at stake and should be taken into consideration and not forgotten, although I understand that for many in the West, the further from Ukraine it is, the less awareness there is and the less realisation there is of what danger we are really facing. As I said at the beginning, it is not just Ukraine's security that is at stake; it is the whole of Europe, and potentially even global.

Q31 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** If we did get to the point where Russia invades Ukraine, how should NATO respond?

James Sherr: By doing what we have said. By creating the very threats that Russia claims we are posing.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: By coming good on our promises.

James Sherr: By doing everything to support a Ukrainian insurgency and such elements of the Ukrainian state and armed forces as exist, and helping Ukraine consolidate itself; by turning this into the very long war that the Russians fear—a war that is not going to end; by substantial change in our redeployments and our military capabilities in central and eastern Europe; and by sanctions. I would love to implement all the recommendations of the Intelligence and Security Committee of the House of Commons tomorrow if I could, but the decision is not going to be made by me.

Olga Tokariuk: I agree that all options should be on the table. This week the Czech Ministry of Defence said that they were ready to consider and accept a formal request from the Ukrainian Government to send troops to Ukraine if Russia launches a new attack on Ukraine. So that should be on the table, too. It should not be excluded. It will not be a collective decision of NATO, but on a bilateral level such decisions should be considered and taken.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Thank you both very much. I will let someone else come in, because I know we are pressed for time.

Q32 **Chair:** I just want to explore that point, which weaves into the next question and leads on from your point, James. I posed in the Chamber that there is a threshold for imposing sanctions that will have any impact,

given the differences in the West. We are now waking up to the sheer scale of the impact of an invasion of Ukraine, which will ripple way beyond Ukraine itself. That is what we are seeing with security and economic consequences right across Europe, and gas prices affected, rippling right to the UK. Grain is another issue, which I didn't appreciate. Ukraine produces a phenomenal amount of grain that is exported across Africa and Asia. That would be interrupted, too. All these things are pointing to Western Governments now taking a far greater interest, rather than just saying, "This is a bit of Ukraine—somewhere else. I don't need to worry about it." With all that in mind, could we not cut to the chase here and prevent Russia from invading—causing all the knock-on consequences—by actually advancing some NATO hardware into Ukraine before an invasion takes place?

James Sherr: I don't think we can do anything to prevent it. We can more effectively deter it and persuade the Russians that we mean what we say. It's not enough to say these things; we have to start doing them. It's not enough to talk deterrence; we have to do deterrence. As I said, fortunately some of these steps are being taken, and the expedited weapons deliveries are just one. I myself hope that there are American and some British special forces in Ukraine, and Canadians as well. It has to be seen that we are willing to raise our game and accept a level of risk that the Russians have accepted for some time. But these things don't prevent war; they give an adversary more reason not to start one. Nobody starts a war in the belief that he is going to lose it—

Q33 **Chair:** Okay, but the debate right now is: what do we do? If you can't do sanctions, can you advance—should it be dismissed? For example, a couple of senior US generals did advocate the case that 15,000 NATO personnel, placed in Ukraine and able to call in extra assets if required, would be enough for Putin to think twice about invasion. That is opposed to what we are doing at the moment, which is saying, "Don't invade; otherwise there will be consequences," while knowing that there are limits on what we can actually do to retaliate after an invasion has taken place.

James Sherr: I think that is going to remain an armchair suggestion, I'm afraid.

Chair: I don't disagree with that. Richard, did you want to come in?

Q34 **Richard Drax:** James, a very quick one. A full-scale invasion occurs. The most appalling bloodshed and loss of life happens, inevitably. The West, NATO—do we sit and watch while it all happens?

James Sherr: Let me cite another parallel. In 1968, as you know, the Prague spring was crushed in Czechoslovakia. Most people forget that at the same time the Soviets were fully mobilised to go into Romania. At just that point, Lyndon Johnson, President Johnson, gave a speech and he said to Brezhnev, "Do not unleash the dogs of war." Nobody asked him what he meant. No one asked him, "Does it mean troops? Does it mean this? Does it mean that?" It defused the Romanian crisis. I have felt and said for a long time that it would have introduced a necessary element of clarity

here had President Biden said, "The United States will not agree to sit idly by and watch the Ukrainian state destroyed." And how can you not say that? If you say, "Under no circumstances will we do x, y and z," you're giving a green light, if necessary, to turning Kyiv into a second Aleppo. And if we say then, "Oh, now we're going to do something"—well, great. The point was to have prevented it from happening in the first place.

Chair: Exactly. We have to move on to two final questions. Over to Gavin.

Q35 **Gavin Robinson:** Olga, perhaps I could ask you this. There has been an awful lot of talk about Ukraine—between allies and between allies and Russia. It seems that the only discussions that involved Ukraine itself were held at the OSCE, and Russia has now dismissed that as a forum. What is your view on Ukraine's direct involvement should there be any future dialogue that involves or invokes issues about its own security?

Olga Tokariuk: You mean direct negotiations between Ukraine and Russia?

Gavin Robinson: Well, at least where it has a seat at the table.

Olga Tokariuk: That is what President Zelensky suggested. He said several times that he was open to having a meeting with President Putin. But I think that is not a good idea, for several reasons. First, Putin doesn't need it; he doesn't want it. He indicated he is not interested in talking with Ukraine, because he doesn't see Ukraine as an agent in itself. He sees it as deprived of its sovereignty and agency, and he wants to negotiate with the big powers—with the US, first of all. So, Putin is not interested.

The second reason why this is not a good idea is that it is very unlikely that Zelensky will be able to outsmart and outplay the former KGB agent at a one-on-one meeting. While all options should be tested, I do not think this is the best way to go. Any negotiations with Russia should happen in the presence of Ukraine's strongest allies.

The Normandy Format, with Germany and France, is virtually dead, and Russia has signalled that it has no interest in engaging in it. Although there are some attempts by President Macron to revive it, I am not sure that they can succeed. Maybe another format, including the US and the UK, could work better, but that is an open question.

I wanted to add to something James previously said, about what can prevent or deter a Russian air attack. What has been happening in the last week, with all the military assistance coming into Ukraine, should continue. That is something that could change Russia's calculus in terms of costs, especially if something that has not yet been considered, such as missile defence to Ukraine, is taken into consideration and discussed.

Some Ukrainian military experts say that these systems can be installed in Ukrainian territory temporarily, not for a long period of time, in order to send a signal to Russia. Without the ability to have superiority in the air, Russia's options would be more limited than they are now. So, that is one option. Another option is to send some military personnel to Ukraine from

the countries that support Ukraine, as instructors, trainers or consultants. There are some of them already, but there should be more.

Gavin Robinson: Thank you very much. I will pass back to the Chair now, James, because we are nearly out of time.

Q36 **Chair:** We have just a couple more minutes. The final question is this. You are aware of what Britain has contributed, and I think it has been well received and is appreciated. Given where we are today, is there anything you would like to see the United Kingdom do more immediately, James?

James Sherr: Again, I do not think that statements about what we will not do are positive. If you look at what has been done, we have revived our reputation of being a country that punches above its weight. Sadly, the truly significant actor here is the United States. What matters, not just from the UK but from the Baltic states, Poland and other like-minded actors, is the candour of that discussion now with the United States.

My last point is that the cold war polices of containment, after the second world war, did not start in the United States. They started in Europe. They were demanded by Governments of the left in Europe—by the post-war British Labour party and by socialists in France and Italy. They persuaded the Americans to change the wartime paradigm, so we have a role with the United States.

Chair: I am sorry; there is a Division bell ringing. Before we sign off publicly, on behalf of the Committee I thank Olga and James. This has been a fascinating session. It was going to be a one-off, but we may decide to explore this a bit further, given how important it is. I am very grateful for your contributions today.