

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [UK Relations with Russia](#), HC 120

Tuesday 29 Nov 2016

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Members present: Crispin Blunt (Chair); Ann Clwyd; Mike Gapes; Stephen Gethins; Mr Mark Hendrick; Mr Adam Holloway; Daniel Kawczynski; Ian Murray; and Nadhim Zahawi.

Questions 176-320

Witnesses

I: Mary Dejevsky, journalist and broadcaster, and Lord Truscott, Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute.

II: Anna Belkina, Director of Marketing and Strategic Development Head of Communications, RT, Oxana Brazhnik, Bureau Chief, Sputnik UK, and Nikolai Gorshkov, Editor, Sputnik UK.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mary Dejevsky and Lord Truscott.

Q176 **Chair:** Welcome to the Foreign Affairs Committee's oral evidence session in connection with our inquiry into Britain's relations with Russia. I welcome our two witnesses and invite you formally to identify yourselves for the record.

Mary Dejevsky: I am Mary Dejevsky, a journalist with *The Independent* and *The Guardian*, formally Moscow correspondent for *The Times*.

Lord Truscott: I am Peter Truscott, a Member of the House of Lords, speaking in a personal capacity today. I have been following Russia/USSR for about 35 years, dating from the days of my doctorate on the Korean war. I am a former foreign and defence spokesperson in the European Parliament and a member of the delegation for relations with the Russian Federation. I have written three books on Russia, including on Yeltsin and a biography of Vladimir Putin. I am a former UK Energy and Trade Minister.

Q177 **Chair:** That is a pretty comprehensive set of authorities on both your parts, so thank you very much indeed for agreeing to give evidence to us. I will begin with a general question and would like the reflections of both of you on it. What would you say are the main goals of Russian foreign policy?

Mary Dejevsky: In some ways it is easier, in this context, to say what I think the main aims of Russian policy are not, because I think there is a view that Russia's foreign policy is aggressive, expansionist and born of a post-imperial nostalgia. I think that almost the opposite is true: that Russia's foreign policy today is born of weakness, of empire in retreat, and an acceptance of its post-Soviet borders. That has created a whole lot of problems.

If you were looking at the positive aims of Russian policy, I would say it is for Russia to be respected, as I hear repeatedly from Foreign Minister Lavrov—less from Putin but certainly from Foreign Minister Lavrov and from Russian politicians. They crave respect because they think that they have been disrespected, to use the jargon, for the last 10-20 years. They want to be seen as a power; maybe no longer a great power, but a power with influence and a country whose word is at least listened to and whose point of view is appreciated.

Lord Truscott: Thank you for inviting me, Chairman and Committee. I would slightly differ from Mary in the sense that I think Russia's foreign policy objectives can be summarised as the wish to be recognised as a great power and treated as such. Then they have a whole series of regional objectives below that, which are really based on Moscow's concept of spheres of influence. No doubt, we will be talking about different regions during the discussions, if we look at the policy towards

Syria, the Far East, China and all the rest. That is how I would summarise it.

Mary Dejevsky: If I could add one word: security. I know you would see that maybe as a prime motivation of defence policy rather than foreign policy, but I think it is absolutely crucial to everything that Russia has been doing over the last 20 years.

Q178 **Chair:** Who would you identify as Russia's key allies?

Lord Truscott: If you look at Russia and the various organisations it is involved with, on the one hand you have the Eurasian Economic Union, which is a group of its allies in the former Soviet Union, and then, for example, you have the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which involves countries in central Asia but also China, and which has recently been expanded to India and Pakistan. Those are the regional groupings of allies that Russia has currently.

Then there are other allies outside those regional groupings: Syria is the classic example of its main ally now in the Middle East. In fact, one could arguably say its only real ally, because the other relationships, with Iran for example, are tenuous and not as stable as its relationship with Syria and the Assad regime.

Clearly, Moscow is also looking out for other allies and to develop relationships further. It will be looking to have a closer relationship with the United States, for example, with the election of Donald Trump, which we will come on to later, and also expanding its influence in Central and Eastern Europe—and even Western Europe. For example, the recent nomination of Fillon as the Republican candidate in the French elections, who is likely to face Le Pen in the second round—either of those personalities would be a potential ally for Moscow in the future.

Mary Dejevsky: I do not really agree because, in the conventional sense, one of Russia's huge problems at the moment is that it does not have any allies worth speaking of. It may be on the lookout for some; it may have temporary alliances; it may have a declining relationship with Syria but, frankly, I do not see any country that Russia is usefully or formally allied with today.

Lord Truscott: Can I come back on that? I think there are clearly countries such as Belarus which is pretty close to Moscow. There have been differences between Lukashenko and Putin but, clearly, they have a close relationship. Other countries such as Kazakhstan, although slightly wary of Moscow's influence, you would put in the allied camp.

Of course, we have not mentioned China although I mentioned the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. While not a formal ally, Moscow finds it useful to develop the relationship with Beijing as a counter-weight to what they see as the United States dominance in power terms—what they look at as the unipolar world dominated by the United States. It is useful for Moscow to play the China card and, clearly, while not a formal alliance, there has been development of the relationship with joint manoeuvres in



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the South China sea and recently, Russia sold Beijing 24 Su-35s—\$2 billion of modern equipment has been sold to China. They have a very close energy relationship. China obviously needs Russia's natural resources, and Russia needs the hard currency from China. There is a whole development of pipelines going from Russia to China.

So while not an alliance, certainly there is a political relationship there. Perhaps you could argue that the relationship with the United States is more important to both countries than the relationship with each other because they do not quite trust each other. Nevertheless, there is a partnership there, and I do not think we should ignore it because it is a real partnership.

Q179 Chair: If it is a real partnership now, who is Russia's long-term strategic competitor? Surely it is China rather than the United States?

Lord Truscott: Traditionally of course, in the cold war and after, it has been the United States. That has been a fact because of the cold war, but the relationship with China has always been uneasy, going back to the ideological split with Mao and the 1960s when they had border war. Certainly when you talk to the Russians privately, they are concerned about the growing power of China and particularly the position in the Far East where they have those vast empty territories.

There is a fear that China can, in effect, expand into the Far East, into those empty territories. So there is a degree of friction in the relationship. You are right to say that neither side entirely trusts the other and Russia is a bit wary of China's rise whilst at the same time finding that rise useful to play off against the United States currently.

Mary Dejevsky: I do not think there is anything like an alliance, even an embryonic one, with China. Russia was certainly trying to play the China card after the Western sanctions to try to show that there was an alternative out there and to say, "Look what we might do if you really put the clamps on us." But I do not think for a moment that was realistic. I speak as someone who has an unfinished doctorate in Russian views of China from the 17th century through to the 1970s. There is an enormous suspicion and fear there which, when you get down to it, surmounts almost everything else.

I went with Gorbachev to Beijing when he went for the summit meeting that was disrupted by Tiananmen Square. For almost the first time, the Kremlin party took with them some Russian Chinese specialists. They were scholars and journalists who had last been in China before the Sino-Soviet split, and they were horrified and totally shocked by the degree to which China had developed, at least as could be seen in Beijing and Shanghai. They were on the verge of complete horror and fear because of how they saw that, in terms of development, China seemed to have overtaken. This was in the last days of the Soviet Union, when there was no food and everybody was queuing. I have never forgotten the response of those Russian Chinese specialists when they first arrived in Beijing.



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Lord Truscott: I agree that there will be no formal alliance between Beijing and Moscow because of the distrust that Mary has outlined but nevertheless, particularly once the sanctions were imposed on Russia, there was a coming together of the two interests. It was very notable that, at a recent military parade in Beijing, the person next to President Xi Jinping on the podium was Vladimir Putin, so they have been brought together as a partnership of convenience. Of course, were relations to improve with the United States on either side, they would quickly move further apart. There is not going to be a formal alliance, but it is a partnership of convenience.

Q180 **Chair:** Could you not suggest that, actually, Russia's strategic competitor, and indeed strategic threat given how many thousands of kilometres of border there is between the two countries, is actually China? If the Government of Russia had the interests of Russia at stake, they would be much more interested in securing their position with the West in order to have some kind of security relationship with the United States and Europe vis-à-vis China—that would be the long-term interest of Russia—but, of course, the threat to the Administration in Russia is actually from a kind of orange revolution and the importation of liberal European values and politics, hence the direction in which the Russian Government have taken policy. That direction is very antithetical to the United Kingdom, which is probably the strongest example, but also to the rest of the West. Could you make a case that the interests of Russia and of the Russian Government are wholly different?

Lord Truscott: I think that the Russian Government would argue that they are indivisible, but that is a matter for debate. In terms of the long term, you are right. Russia is very concerned about China's development and the strategic threat from China in the long term, but in the short and medium term the fact is that they are more concerned about what they perceive as the threat from NATO and the West, which is what is determining their policy currently. That is what is pushing these two unlikely bedfellows together. If they felt less concerned about their security in the West, they would feel more concerned about China.

Q181 **Chair:** Do they think there is a real threat to the security of Russia, or do they think there is a real threat to the security of the Government? Those are different things, aren't they?

Lord Truscott: I would argue both, because the Government obviously thinks there is a threat to the Government, the Kremlin and all the rest—the regime, as it were—but of course the Russian people have been convinced that there is also a threat to them, because most of them get their information from television. Some 80% of the information that people receive in Russia is from television, which is of course massively state controlled.

The perception, and I have talked to a lot of Russians, even recently, is that there is a real fear of war. They are getting the message from Russian media that they are being threatened from the West and that they should prepare for war. There have been exercises, and nuclear bunkers have

been reopened. Forty million Russians have been engaged in manoeuvres to guard against a nuclear attack.

Q182 Chair: But all that is delivered to them by the Russian Government through the Russian media. It will come as something of a surprise to us that we are some kind of threat to Russia and that we are about to invade, because that is laughable on this side of the equation.

Lord Truscott: That is what we think, but it is not how it is perceived in Russia. You can say that it is all down to Russian propaganda, but throughout history, it has been very easy to stir up Russian paranoia about their security, about being invaded and about being threatened.

Q183 Chair: But surely that is being done artificially by the Government in order to sustain the position of the Putin Administration in Russia with its electorate and supporters, rather than its being an actual representation of Russian interest.

Lord Truscott: Well, it's funny: if you talk to ordinary Russians, intelligent Russians who travel in the West and see Western media—the internet is not blocked in Russia—you will see that intelligent, middle class, educated Russians are actually concerned about the ratcheting up of tension with the West. And there is another way of looking at it, Chairman.

Even if you are right in saying that it is all propaganda and the rest, the rhetoric on both sides has been ratcheted up to a degree that I have not witnessed in 35 years, and I think there is genuine fear on both sides—some people in the West and some people in Russia—that it could lead to conflict. You might say that it is all stirred up by the Kremlin, but I think a lot of Russian people have genuine concerns. They think it is not just Russian propaganda. It is what they themselves imagine—the threat as they perceive it.

Mary Dejevsky: I don't think Russians needed any state propaganda machine to convince them that their security was at risk. Most recently, they saw everything that happened in Ukraine. At the time, I was going around television and radio studios in London, talking about this and listening to what the other side was saying, and I have never heard more diametrically opposed interpretations of the same events as I did about the events in Kiev and eastern Ukraine in those months.

Russians didn't need anything, whether it was propaganda, information or any spinning from the Kremlin through their media. It was entirely natural to them to think that the West, and NATO in particular, had designs on what they saw as their own backyard. Their interpretation of what happened in Ukraine—obviously, I am not subscribing to this interpretation, but the interpretation that they had almost unanimously was that there had been a coup in Kiev to depose a legally elected President.

Chair: We will come on to Ukraine.



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Mary Dejevsky: Okay. That was not a view that needed propagandising; it was a view that came naturally because of everything else that Russians saw around them.

Q184 **Stephen Gethins:** I have a couple of questions, building on what you have said about Russia's alliances. First, who would Russia see as its closest ally in the European Union? Secondly, could you talk a little more about Russia's relationship with Belarus, because that country is often overlooked? Is that something that we should be looking at a little further? I would be interested to hear what you think about Russia's relationship with Belarus, and Belarus's relationship with the rest of Europe.

Lord Truscott: With regard to the EU, Russia has traditionally had close relations with countries such as Hungary. You will have noticed the recent election in Bulgaria of the pro-Russian—

Stephen Gethins: Yes.

Lord Truscott: In those sorts of countries, the Russians have traditionally had quite a lot of influence, and in the rest of the Balkans, some of which are outside the EU. I think that increasingly, as I mentioned earlier, they are trying to make inroads into Western Europe to develop alliances. That is where they are with the EU, but of course, that having been said, you need to look at sanctions. Sanctions have been imposed against them and have been upheld unanimously, so Russia's allies are not that strong or that motivated within the EU to take a different line from the rest of the members.

On Belarus, I think there is a bit of an uneasy relationship between Lukashenko and Putin. In the past, there was talk of a union between Belarus and Russia, and I think Lukashenko got cold feet because he had the impression that this union would in effect mean that Belarus would be merged with Russia and that Russia would be the dominant partner. Lukashenko wants to remain in control and to be his own man.

That said, there is a very close military and economic relationship with Belarus. Even now, under sanctions, it is pretty much an open secret that a lot of sanctioned goods are exported to Belarus and then rerouted to Russia. A lot of things like French cheese that can end up on the supermarket shelves in Moscow come via Belarus, so there is that relationship. I mentioned before that Belarus was one of Moscow's traditional allies, so I don't think Belarus would take a different line to Moscow, but they are a bit wary of a close embrace of the Russian bear.

Mary Dejevsky: I think that is true. The aspirations that Belarus has for itself may often be underestimated, because since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus has always been thought of as a subordinate to Russia—as part of the same thing—and this move to a union sort of encouraged that. But Belarus was the first country, I think, from the former Soviet Union to have its own currency, to change all its road signs and to change the livery of the planes that managed to be at Minsk when



the Soviet Union collapsed. It has kept those sorts of symbols of being different.

If you are looking towards allies, as it were, in the European Union, I am not sure that Russia sees former Warsaw pact countries as potentially its closest allies. I think it understands that there is a legacy there and it is not a particularly positive one, despite the results of recent elections. I think it is much more interested in having—as it sort of has been able to—a decent relationship with Germany. You can laugh, but Berlusconi and Putin had very good personal relations. Their daughters socialised and stayed at each other's dachas, villas and things. Italy and post-Soviet Russia have got on quite well, almost regardless of who is in charge.

Q185 Mike Gapes: Can I ask you about ideological allies? One thing that is quite striking at the Inter-Parliamentary Union, for example, is that when we try to get motions agreed, there is invariably difficulty not only with the Russian delegation but with the Cubans, Venezuelans and Ecuadorians. This is topical because of Castro's death. How much does the legacy of Soviet, Communist International and World Federation of Democratic Youth ideology colour foreign policy not just in Latin America, but perhaps among elements in the ANC in South Africa and among people of that generation who still think and react the same way—that it is all about anti-imperialism, the United States, and so on?

Lord Truscott: You are right, Mr Gapes. There is still an ideological alliance with countries such as Venezuela, Cuba and Ecuador, but it is still sort of historical. It is based on previous history, and it is also a generational thing. I am not sure how long and how close the relationship between Cuba and Russia will be.

Of course, it was very close in the Soviet days when Cuba was effectively subsidised by the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union fell apart, those subsidies disappeared, so the relationship is not quite so close. They will clearly vote with them in the UN and all the rest, but it is historical, rather than economic or military, or with any sort of real modern depth to it. Their relationships with other countries—for example, China, in Central Asia and the near abroad—are more important to them than the old historical, ideological relationships.

Mary Dejevsky: That is true. It is a vestige more than anything that can be capitalised on today, but I also think that in certain areas, there is a depth of expertise that maybe we tend to overlook—for instance, the Arabists and people who speak Spanish and Portuguese, because that was the training that they were given, and their knowledge of those areas.

I threw out an argument that said maybe Russia had learned from what looked like very unsuccessful—disastrous in a way—approaches to Ukraine in the past three or four years, compared with how it was handling Syria. I said that maybe they had learned something from the experience in Ukraine and I was immediately put right. I don't accept it completely, but there is a degree of truth that, as they said, there is a large body of expertise about the Arab world, specifically Syria, and that Russian



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politicians and people in the Kremlin think they know about Ukraine when maybe they don't know at least a lot of things about Ukraine. Whereas with Syria, they were taking advice from their own experts and were getting it more right than they were with Ukraine.

Q186 **Nadhim Zahawi:** What is Russia's endgame in Ukraine?

Mary Dejevsky: My view is that Russia is determined to keep Crimea. I don't think there is going to be any hope of Crimea going back to Ukraine, at least in the foreseeable future. I think it took Crimea because it was panicked at what was going on in Kiev and concerned that it was going to lose Sevastopol. It was determined to keep Sevastopol and the agreement that it had with the previous Government in Kiev. It was a security consideration initially to take Crimea.

If we look at the Kremlin, I think that Russia accepts that Ukraine is an independent sovereign state. It accepts Ukraine within its current borders, with the exception of Crimea. I don't think it has the slightest designs on eastern Ukraine. To the extent that it has been meddling in eastern Ukraine, which is exaggerated from our point of view, it is worried about security on that border and that border being completely porous.

It also has a degree of concern about the whole cultural thing and the Russophones in Ukraine, in Russia's view, not being able to have a federated system. My view is that Russia wants a Ukraine that is secure within its current borders and it is prepared to accept the demarcation and the establishment of a firm border in the east of Ukraine, along the current line.

The problem is very analogous to the problem we see between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. It is that sort of border and it is those sort of cultural and historical tensions that are very similar. My view is that since 1992, Russia has accepted the independence of Ukraine.

Nadhim Zahawi: Other than Crimea.

Mary Dejevsky: It took Crimea out of a security panic at that particular time. It is not going to give it back because it saw it as an anomaly that it belonged to Ukraine at all.

Lord Truscott: To come back to Mr Zahawi's question, I think Russia took the Crimea primarily because it was concerned about NATO expansion and the idea that Mary alluded to: that NATO could take over Sevastopol where the Black Sea fleet is based and have that as a NATO base. That was a red line for Russia. It was concerned that the new regime in Kiev was very keen to join NATO and it was part of NATO's move to offer membership to Georgia and Ukraine from the Bucharest NATO summit of 2008.

Of course, if you look at history, from the time of Catherine the Great, Russia has always fought to seize and hold Crimea. The last conflict we actually had with Russia—the last time that Russian troops killed British troops—was during the Crimean War of 1853-6. That, unsurprisingly, was



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about keeping control of Crimea and Sevastopol. That war was ended by the treaty of Paris, but Russia later repudiated it in 1871 and started building bases on the Crimea again; so it has got a long history, and that is why Russia sees Crimea as strategically very important to it.

I would agree with Mary, in that I do not think Russia has territorial ambitions in east Ukraine. I think it sees east Ukraine as a liability in political, military and economic terms. I think what it found was that having eastern Ukraine under the control of Russian separatists was a way of putting pressure on Ukraine not to join NATO and not to go into a free trade agreement with the EU that would conflict with Russian trade interests.

You can see a pattern. Russia has done this before. Even in Yeltsin's period, if you look at Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgia, there is a pattern here where Russia gets involved in separatist conflicts. Those conflicts are then frozen and that is a way of Russia maintaining its influence in that area. The same thing is happening in Ukraine, and it will continue until there is a political settlement, but I think Moscow has no desire to hold eastern Ukraine as a sort of territorial gain.

Mary Dejevsky: I actually do not agree that Russia wants, or really wants to accept, what you call a frozen conflict in eastern Ukraine. The less it has to do with eastern Ukraine—I do not think it even wants to meddle in eastern Ukraine. There is a huge liability there with security and in terms of shoring up the industry there. It is a complete rust belt. You really would not want to get involved there, and I do not think it does.

I do not think it wants a frozen conflict; I think it wants a Ukraine that is independent and secure within its own borders and that doesn't have designs on going anywhere else. There was a rather nice little expression; about a year ago people started saying, "Russia has gained Crimea but it has lost Ukraine." I actually think the Kremlin accepts that it has lost Ukraine.

Lord Truscott: Can I just clarify what I was saying?

Chair: We have a lot of questions to get through and you both gave very comprehensive answers, although it would be marvellous to do this all night.

Q187 **Nadhim Zahawi:** I just want to come back on the issue of not wanting to be in eastern Ukraine. There was a story when we were in Ukraine that Russia actually wanted to go further and take Kharkiv. It is contrary to what you are saying—that they don't really want to be in eastern Ukraine. I understood your argument on Crimea. While you answer that, could you also answer this: what should have been the west's reaction to the annexation of Crimea? After all, it breaks international conventions in that sense.

Lord Truscott: As the separatist movement was spreading in Ukraine, there was a feeling that the more the separatist movement developed the more pressure it put on the regime in Kiev. But I agree with what Mary



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was saying earlier, in the sense that a frozen conflict is not the ideal solution even for Moscow. They would prefer a political solution and to withdraw from eastern Ukraine, but all these disputes have been a way of putting pressure on Kiev—

Q188 **Nadhim Zahawi:** But if you make the argument that it is all about security—that that is why they went to eastern Ukraine—why didn't they do it after the Orange revolution?

Lord Truscott: Because at the time of the Orange revolution, there was no talk of Ukraine joining NATO. That is the big difference. Also, if you look at the international context—

Q189 **Nadhim Zahawi:** So it has nothing to do with the porous borders and the security of eastern Ukraine, which was the point being made—the reason they actually went in there is to secure their border.

Mary Dejevsky: There is a big difference between the aftermath of the Orange revolution and the overthrow of Yanukovich in that when Yushchenko took over after the Orange revolution, basically there was no disorder either in Kiev or in Ukraine. There was no threat to the security of the state in Ukraine and there was no threat to Russia's security. I think that is the difference between the aftermath of the Orange revolution—why Russia didn't act then—and why it did act when Yanukovich was overthrown, because it saw its own security being threatened.

Lord Truscott: I think NATO made the big difference.

Q190 **Nadhim Zahawi:** So how should the west have responded to the annexation of Crimea?

Lord Truscott: It is probably a bit pointless looking backwards—looking in the rear-view mirror. I remember asking General Petraeus the same question about what we should have done in Afghanistan, and that was his reply: that there's not much point looking in the rear-view mirror. We need to look at the reality now and what we should actually do about it.

My view is that, given the changing international picture, we need to accept that Crimea is going to stay part of Russia unless we are willing to go to war. We give de facto recognition but not de jure recognition to Crimea, but we use that as a way of negotiating with Moscow over the position in eastern Ukraine, so there is full implementation of Minsk II by both sides involved. There are also negotiations across a whole range of other areas, such as a joint position on Syria, and we should put Crimea into the mix. I do not think there is any point in trying to say that Russia should give up Crimea, because it will not.

Q191 **Mr Hendrick:** Do you feel that in recent years, Russia and perhaps President Putin have made a calculation that under the Obama presidency the aim was to get out of Iraq and Afghanistan, and that the averse nature of the United States towards future conflict is such that Russia feels that it can do what it wants in eastern Ukraine, in the same way that it can in Syria?



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Mary Dejevsky: No. I completely reject that hypothesis. I know that there is a view that because Obama supposedly ignored his own red line in Syria, Russia saw that as a sign of weakness and therefore started to behave more aggressively because it thought it could get away with it. I simply do not think that that is a valid interpretation.

Q192 **Mr Hendrick:** Why not?

Mary Dejevsky: Because Russia sees itself as weak, not strong. It does not need more security obligations and to take on extra things; it has quite enough on its plate without taking on things that it does not need to take on. I don't think that Russia saw itself, either when Obama took over or later with the red lines, as being in competition with the United States, and I don't think that is why it intervened in Syria.

Q193 **Mr Hendrick:** Both of you have made great play about Russia being worried or concerned about NATO. But doesn't NATO itself look weaker, because the driving force behind it—the United States—does not look as if it is interested or fully engaged? It talks about the pivot to Asia now and is less involved in military defence within Europe. Doesn't that say that it is actually NATO, not necessarily Russia, that is looking weaker, and that that has emboldened Putin to do what he has done?

Lord Truscott: It depends how you look at this. If you look at it from Moscow's point of view, Moscow thinks it is reacting to moves from the other side. Part of the deterioration in relations that happened from about 2002 onwards was when the United States unilaterally abandoned the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. If you look at it from Moscow's point of view, a whole series of events happened after 2001, when there was the honeymoon with Tony Blair and George Bush in Slovenia. From 2002 you had the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty being abrogated; then you had Iraq; then you had the issue of Kosovo; then Libya and all the rest.

From Russia's point of view, there have been a whole series of actions from the West that have challenged it or undermined its power. It feels that in security terms it is reacting to the West. One of the points of that is what it sees as NATO's expansion. It says, and I think the evidence shows this, that it was given verbal promises that NATO would not expand up to its borders, and it did. There were people in meetings with John Major and all the rest who say—and now it is in the German archives—that verbal promises were made, although they were not put in writing. Russia sees those as aggressive acts.

You can look at Russia and say that it is being assertive and it wants to take on NATO. But I do not think the Russians are that stupid, with a budget one tenth the size of NATO's, that they are thinking they can take on NATO. I do not think that is the Kremlin's thinking at all.

Q194 **Mr Hendrick:** Is this not hybrid warfare, the type of which we have seen in Ukraine, where the Russians denied for weeks the fact that they were in eastern Ukraine? I had lunch with the former Chair of this Committee and the Russian ambassador. He denied, point blank, that Russian troops were in eastern Ukraine. Two weeks later, he was back on TV explaining



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the situation. This hybrid warfare gives a totally new dimension to warfare. NATO's article 5 would not seem to apply. I know that Ukraine is not in NATO but there is obviously a question about the other Baltic states, maybe at some stage in the future. Hybrid warfare is a whole new ballgame. It is not timidity or fear driving that; it is a genuine concern about how they might pursue war in the future.

Lord Truscott: You are right that hybrid warfare and cyber-warfare is a whole new dimension. That is part of NATO's problem—its existential crisis. The type of warfare that we will be fighting in the future is informational, propaganda and cyber. It will not necessarily be tanks against tanks. We have to face up to that reality. The nature of warfare is changing. As General Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff in Russia, said about hybrid warfare and non-linear warfare, you can achieve your political aims today without actually fighting wars. NATO has to sit up, take notice and adapt.

Mary Dejevsky: I want to dissent a little bit on the concept of hybrid warfare. It is very easy to say, "This is a whole new game. Everything's totally different. The Russians weren't playing by the rules that we recognised." There is a lot of discussion among military experts about whether there is such a thing as hybrid warfare. I tend to the view that there actually isn't—that you use the tools and weapons that you have at your disposal for the particular task in hand, and that hybrid warfare is not particularly new.

I have been carrying around a cutting from one of the Russian establishment newspapers, which carries the headline, "NATO is rushing towards Russia." The newspaper is from the past autumn, and it has a map, with flags on, of NATO countries getting closer and closer to Russia. That is the view as seen from Russia.

Q195 **Mr Hendrick:** Lord Truscott mentioned frozen conflicts. Obviously, the situation in Moldova—Transnistria and so on—falls into very similar categories. If Ukraine were a one-off, and these places had not happened before, you would say, "It was all an accident. Russia doesn't really want this." Isn't the truth that Russia does not want resolution of the situation in eastern Ukraine? You say it wants a stable state there. Well, it may want a stable state that is nothing to do with the European Union or NATO, but it would rather have a frozen conflict than a stable Ukraine trading with the European Union

Mary Dejevsky: I understand what you say, but I actually disagree.

Lord Truscott: As I said before, I think that Moscow regards eastern Ukraine as a liability, and they would actually like a political solution. In their ideal world, they would like to retain Crimea, be accepted back into the international community on an equal level, start trade relations again, and have investment and all the rest. They would like to draw a line under Ukraine. It is very difficult at the moment.

Q196 **Mr Holloway:** The future Dr Dejevsky referred to NATO encroaching on Russia. In a sense, isn't Russia behaving entirely rationally to have live



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border disputes with Georgia and Ukraine? It makes it rather difficult for anyone to take them into NATO and, therefore, an article 5 commitment. It seems an obvious and—dare I use the word?—sensible thing for Russia to have done in its own terms.

Mary Dejevsky: I suppose it depends where you start from. I might start from a slightly different place and say that Russia intervened in Georgia and in Ukraine as a reaction, rather than as something that it undertook of its own volition because it decided that this was a good tactic. People look at this differently, asking what is action and what is reaction. I tend to think that both in Ukraine and in Georgia, Russia was reacting rather than taking the initiative.

Lord Truscott: The two statements are not incompatible. I do not think it is coincidence that before the Georgian war, there was the Bucharest NATO summit, where Georgia and Ukraine were put on track for NATO membership, although they were not offered the max, and within a few months, Georgia and Russia had gone to war. Partly, people blame Saakashvili for overreacting to the situation, but I think it suited Moscow very well for that conflict to happen. Once it happened, NATO membership was clearly off the cards for Georgia.

Mary Dejevsky: There is a corollary to Ukraine and Georgia. Looked at from the Kremlin, there is a red line along the NATO borders as they now exist which Russia will not cross. It understands article 5, and I do not think it has any intention of challenging it. I know how it would look if you were in the Baltics, but I think if you look at it from the Kremlin, it looks different.

Q197 **Daniel Kawczynski:** On that point, Mrs Dejevsky, the Kaliningrad Oblast and the Polish border is probably already the most highly militarised part of Europe. If the trajectory of tit-for-tat missile deployment continues, it will be equivalent to the North-South Korea demarcation line in future generations.

To return to your earlier point about the huge difference and polarising perspectives of these difficulties between Russia and NATO, can you spend a little time explaining their perspective? If you go to Poland, they feel threatened by the missiles in Kaliningrad, but the Russians feel that Kaliningrad is vulnerable to the huge increase in missiles and deployment on the border near them. We have just heard from our own Prime Minister that 150 British troops will be positioned near the Kaliningrad Oblast from next year on.

Chair: A particularly fine regiment, if I may point out.

Mary Dejevsky: When you see the reports from this country—we are talking about Russians holding exercises as close as they can possibly get to the borders of NATO. If you are sitting in Moscow, you are hearing reports in the Russian media talking about manoeuvres, including inside Ukraine—the training of troops inside Ukraine by NATO troops and NATO advisers stationed in Kiev—even though Ukraine is not a member of NATO and is unlikely to be a member. Thank goodness, the Americans and



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President Obama stopped short and resisted all the advice to supply weapons to the Kiev Government, but if you are sitting in Moscow, you see NATO encroaching further and further towards Russia. That was the gloss that was put on the trade agreement with the European Union.

My view of the trade agreement was that this was something totally different, and that Russia has traditionally seen the European Union as much less malign than NATO, and as not a threat. The trade agreement with Ukraine seemed to me entirely possible, but at the beginning of autumn when that agreement was due to be signed, people started reading it. They started reading it in Russia, and we started reading it here. There were security elements to which Russia certainly felt it had not been alerted, and which it didn't know anything about. This was more than a simple trade agreement; it had a security aspect. I think that is when Russia's view of the trade agreement changed, almost overnight, from something it was really not that concerned about to something that it was very concerned about.

Q198 Daniel Kawczynski: We have had written evidence on that from the Russian ambassador. Lord Truscott, with your experience of the Russian mentality and what is going to be practicable in order to get the Russians to change some of their perspectives or the way they behave in certain areas, and purely from the psychological perspective—you know how the Russian mindset works—do you think that they can be bludgeoned with these sanctions? Or is it more effective to negotiate with them and go the extra mile? Can you see such a confrontational approach to enforcing sanctions actually altering their mindset?

Lord Truscott: We have to ask ourselves what we are trying to achieve by imposing sanctions. If you are trying to get the Kremlin to change policy direction, you are not going to achieve that. If you think in terms of the Russian psychology historically, I think that the Russian people, if put under pressure, will tough it out. What often happens in these situations where sanctions are imposed is that people rally behind their Government, the ruling regime.

Mr Gapes mentioned Fidel Castro dying. What was the result of 50 years of sanctions against Cuba and the regime there? It didn't make a blind bit of difference. If anything, it united the people behind an authoritarian leader. If you look at the history of sanctions generally, they may have some effect in bringing a country to the negotiating table, but they very rarely lead a Government to give up what it sees as its vital strategic interests.

Q199 Daniel Kawczynski: They are of course recalibrating their domestic production to avoid having to be so dependent on imports from Europe. I know of some very large British manufacturers—obviously I won't name them—who are using their plants in India to supply equipment to the Russians. Obviously, trade with the US, China and others is at record highs, so how can it be practical? How can our limited sanctions have any effect when the rest of the world is not only continuing to trade with Russia but is increasing trade to unprecedented levels?



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Lord Truscott: We are, to a certain extent, punishing the Russian people with the sanctions, but we are not necessarily influencing the élite. That is the problem. If you look at trade generally, I think the EU has 12 times more trade with Russia than the United States does. The EU is disproportionately suffering from sanctions compared with the United States. Recent estimates are that sanctions have cost the UK some \$10 billion in trade, so we are experiencing a degree of pain as well. You rightly point out the situation with other countries. We talked earlier about China, and Russia is doing more trade deals with China, which is putting more financing and investment into Russia. It is not the same sorts of levels that Russia would get from the West but, nevertheless, the levels are quite significant.

Of course, a number of Western companies are still happily doing business in Russia. Just look at BP and the Anglo-Dutch company Shell, both of which are still heavily involved in Russia. A number of Russian companies are still heavily involved in the West and on Western stock markets—Gazprom and Rosneft are listed on the London stock exchange. Trade is still happening even in these circumstances.

Q200 Daniel Kawczynski: My last question is to Mrs Dejevsky. It is sometimes difficult to criticise one's own country and apportion blame, but I would like you to spend a little time explaining the mistakes that the United Kingdom is making with regards to Russia. You said in your written evidence that the UK is seen in Russia as "yapping from the sidelines in double forte support of US policy". Would the United Kingdom have more clout in Russia if it took a different approach?

In Russia I have heard the Russians saying "You"—Britain—"don't really have a foreign policy of your own. You just do what the Americans tell you to do with regard to relations with Russia." Of course we are now seeing a change in America, and we are potentially also seeing a change in France. How could we have more influence with Russia ourselves, rather than just seeing us as "yapping", as you say, what the Americans tell us to do?

Mary Dejevsky: Unfortunately the time for this may already be past, but if we had shown more solidarity with the European Union—the French, Germans and Italians had what I would call a more realistic approach towards dealing with Russia. There was some sort of debate in those countries, a public discussion at a very high level about how to deal with Russia, which we have not really had here. The UK has appeared to be incredibly proud of the fact that it took a lead, as it would say, in implementing sanctions, that it kept everybody on board and that it was flying the flag for a hard-line post-Crimea policy. In a way, though, that was a false form of solidarity, because it was showing almost an excess of leadership, beyond what was realistic or productive in what could be done.

Q201 Daniel Kawczynski: So can you envisage us at some stage in the future being very isolated, potentially?

Mary Dejevsky: The combination of leaving the European Union, which means that we will not be part of a European foreign policy towards



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Russia, and what has just happened in the US, leaves the UK looking incredibly isolated. I am just waiting for the day when Boris Johnson comes out and starts changing the UK's words, at least, towards Russia. I think we are going to see that in the next few months.

Q202 Chair: Let us move on. One quick question: does the Foreign Office understand Russia?

Lord Truscott: Some people at the top of the Foreign Office do understand Russia. Further down, probably not; we are losing a certain level of expertise in the Foreign Office. There are fewer Russian experts and fewer people who can speak Russian. Following on from Mr Kawczynski's question, there is a problem with the UK being behind the curve when it comes to foreign relations and sanctions. It is quite obvious, with the nomination of Fillon, that in next year's French elections they will be pressing for sanctions to be dropped.

Trump is also either going to drop or ease sanctions considerably. If we want to get ahead of the curve, what we should be doing is abandoning sanctions and trying to develop a constructive relationship with Russia. Yesterday there was a statement from the Foreign Office, still going on about regime change in Syria over Aleppo and Assad being removed. We are really behind the curve. There is a danger that we are going to be saying what America was saying a month ago. We should really be getting ahead of the curve and saying "Look, this is how the world is. It is maybe not how we'd like the world to be, but we accept the reality. Let's get ahead of the curve and see how things are going."

Q203 Mr Hendrick: Both of you have failed to mention the Litvinenko affair—the fact that a state can kill somebody who was formerly Russian, a British citizen, on the streets of this country. There has never been an apology or an acceptance that that event took place, or that the people responsible should take responsibility. Do you think we should brush that under the carpet, and do business as usual?

Lord Truscott: I was looking at that the other day. I was Energy Minister when that happened and I looked into it. I remember also the Markov case in 1978: he was murdered in south London. It is an appalling thing. Intelligence agencies do occasionally kill off political enemies. I think it is totally unacceptable that, in effect, there was an act of nuclear terrorism on the streets of London. Clearly, we should ensure that that is properly investigated. There was a public inquiry and we made our point about it.

We need to say that that sort of thing is unacceptable. Unfortunately, in the world it does go on. There are other intelligence agencies, such as Mossad, that get rid of their political enemies abroad. The Litvinenko question: people are still arguing about the details, the level of state involvement, whether Putin knew about it or not. The conclusion of the inquiry was that he probably knew about it.

Q204 Chair: Do you accept that conclusion? Do you think that is the right



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balance to strike?

Lord Truscott: I was not a member of the inquiry. That was their—

Q205 **Chair:** Given everything you know about Russia and everything else, do you think Sir Robert Owen got it about right?

Lord Truscott: I look at the background of Litvinenko. First of all, he was an ex-KGB man—

Q206 **Chair:** On the central question of Putin's possible involvement, do you think the conclusion of Sir Robert Owen was—

Lord Truscott: I do not know, but I know that he was a KGB traitor and the KGB do not look too kindly on KGB traitors. He was also left-hand man to Berezovsky, who was public enemy No 1, so he would have had a lot of enemies.

Mary Dejevsky: I would like to say something about—

Chair: Ms Dejevsky, if we may—

Mary Dejevsky: There is a degree of scepticism that is in order that we didn't know a lot about—

Chair: Ms Dejevsky, I am so sorry, I would love to run this session—

Mr Hendrick: She has said she wanted to say.

Q207 **Ian Murray:** May I just unpick a little bit of the information you gave in response to Mr Hendrick earlier about Italy and Berlusconi? You have talked a bit about France, you skirted on Germany. How is it that other EU countries seem to have much better relations with Russia than the UK? Is it because we have been out on a limb or is it because we have nothing to lose?

Mary Dejevsky: I think one of the reasons is the lack of expertise, or the lack of expertise actually being used in places where it could make a difference. I think there is also the question of proximity. If you go to Germany, Russia just feels that much closer. There is more coverage of it in the press, more books written about it, more discussion about it. It is somehow more real than it seems to us here. I think that is one reason for it.

There was a question, "Does the Foreign Office understand Russia?" I think there has been a loss of expertise, but more to the point, there has been a loss of historical memory. It is so easy just to go to Russia now and say, "Oh it's so awful and dreadful and terrible." But people who say that go without the slightest knowledge of how it was in the '60s, '70s, '80s, even the '90s. The continental Europeans generally have a better appreciation, more alive memories, that it was not always like it is today and that, in a lot of ways, it is actually better today than it was in the quite recent past.

Q208 **Ian Murray:** A lot of your evidence this afternoon has been, if I summarise it correctly, that the UK is getting this completely wrong



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through a lack of expertise, potential ignorance, perhaps following an American line but slightly further behind the curve than the Americans. Given that, why are we not taking a much more nuanced approach like the Germans or the French or the Italians to Russia? It cannot just be about a lack of expertise in the Foreign Office.

Lord Truscott: My view on this—I have been studying foreign policy for many years—and the whole thing is that British foreign policy since the second world war has been to stay as close to the United States as possible with the idea that Britain will have more influence in the world if we can influence America, albeit being their junior partner. The only time we did not stand with the United States since the Second World War was over the Vietnam war.

I remember interviewing Harold Wilson for my doctorate and he was telling me how President Johnson gave him a ring and said, “Can you support us in the Vietnam war? Just send a platoon of Highlanders in their kilts with bagpipes as symbolic support for us in the Vietnam war.” Harold Wilson said no. I think that was because he had the left wing and the trade unions breathing over his shoulder. He was the only Prime Minister that said to the United States, “No, we are not going to support your policy.” That is why I think it will be quite interesting under Donald Trump, incidentally. And that is why I think in the past, up to now, we have always said, “What the Americans do, we’ll do, and what the American policy is, we’ll support.”

Q209 **Chair:** In terms of doing business in Russia—it is particularly a question for you, Lord Truscott—would you encourage UK businesses and investors to invest in Russia today?

Lord Truscott: I should say I have no financial business interests in Russia, but my wife is Russian and I have been going to Russia for 10 years, spending time on the family dacha for up to a couple of months a year. So I know the Russian people and Russian psychology pretty well. In terms of the business environment, I have advised British companies, and other companies, who do business with Russia. I have always said to them that you have to go into Russia with your eyes open.

There are high levels of corruption—it is endemic—the legal system is opaque and the judiciary needs reform; but, having said that, provided you have good Russian partners and do not get sucked into corruption or paying bribes, you can actually do very well investing in Russia. Look at BP, for example: although it had a pretty fraught relationship with some of the oligarchs over TNK-BP, it made billions of pounds on its investment. A whole range of British companies have done very well in Russia. You can do well in Russia in business terms, as long as you go in with your eyes open and understand that it is a high-risk environment, as many emerging markets are.

Q210 **Chair:** How serious is the broader anti-corruption campaign today? What is your interpretation of the recent arrest of Alexei Ulyukayev?



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Lord Truscott: The Russians will always say that they are tackling corruption, but it is no secret, if you look at Transparency International, that they are one of the worst countries in the world at the moment for corruption. It is a problem that Russia has to deal with, but it goes throughout the whole of Russian society because there are so many people, for example in the black economy, not paying their taxes. It goes the whole way through the Russian economy and is something that continuously needs to be tackled, like in many parts of the world, I guess.

In terms of Alexei Ulyukayev, I am not privy to the details of that case but my impression is that it was a political set-up because he challenged Rosneft's takeover of Bashneft. As a result, he found himself in deep water and, to a certain extent, got out of his league. As I said, I am not privy to the details. He is an economic liberal and Rosneft taking over Bashneft is one state company taking over another—something that, I presume, in policy terms, he did not particularly agree with.

Q211 **Chair:** So the anti-corruption drive is not very serious: he just got on the wrong—

Lord Truscott: I don't know the ins and outs of that particular case, but he is the only Minister to have been arrested in modern times. I do not think that is necessarily an example of an anti-corruption drive; I think it is a particular case with particular circumstances.

Mary Dejevsky: Could I say something about the Ulyukayev case and about corruption? Yes, there is pervasive corruption, top to bottom, in Russian society, but it is actually less bad now than it was 10 years ago. People might disagree with that, but that is my assessment.

About Ulyukayev—I think that the arrest of Ulyukayev is very, very serious. I do not know any more about the whys and wherefores—whether it is political, whether it is anti-corruption or what it is—but for many western business organisations, Ulyukayev was the person who came and gave keynote speeches; he was the face of the Russian Government. If, in five years' time, we see that things are starting to go wrong, for whatever reason, in Russia at the very top, we may look back and see the arrest of Ulyukayev as being, as it were, the start of something that could be much more serious. I just plant that idea.

Q212 **Chair:** I want to probe it. Going wrong for the cronies around Putin?

Mary Dejevsky: Yes.

Q213 **Chair:** This is then beginning to go wrong for the—

Mary Dejevsky: I think, potentially, it has more implications than maybe it looks like.

Lord Truscott: I think that political set-ups are not unique to Russia.

Q214 **Chair:** No, but they are quite spectacular, aren't they? The deputy head of Moscow's Ministry of Internal Affairs' Committee for Economic Security and Combating Corruption, Dmitry Zakharchenko, was caught with \$123



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million—that is quite spectacular.

Lord Truscott: Well, his own Ministry said that his arrest was strange and surprising, which I think sums it up.

Q215 **Chair:** The arrest was strange and surprising, or the fact that he had that amount of money—

Lord Truscott: His own Ministry said his arrest—

Mary Dejevsky: I think we are confusing two different things here. Ulyukayev is one thing but the head of the anti-corruption squad is something quite different. I would actually single out Ulyukayev as being the more indicative, the more important of all the things that have happened in the anti-corruption sphere in the last couple of years.

Q216 **Ann Clwyd:** Lord Truscott, three years ago, you nominated President Putin for the Nobel peace prize. Have you changed your mind?

Lord Truscott: This was in relation to a specific event. That was in 2013 when Russia had just negotiated a deal with Syria to get rid of most of its chemical weapons stocks, which they did. I would argue that had Assad maintained his full chemical arsenal, the situation in Syria would be a lot worse than it is today.

I think there was a particular window of opportunity then to work with Russia to achieve a political settlement. What I tried to achieve with that nomination was to encourage a constructive approach with Russia—to encourage their efforts as with getting Assad to scrap most of his chemical arsenal and to encourage them to bring about a political settlement in Syria. Sadly, that opportunity was not taken and we know what has happened.

The Russians say, for example, that the British Foreign Office told them that last October Damascus would fall to the rebels. So, on 30 September, they intervened in Syria. So, a political vacuum was created and Russia filled that vacuum. Now, looking at the tragic situation in Syria—with the fall of Aleppo and the humanitarian crisis there with the civilian population—in this environment it is going to be very difficult to achieve a political settlement. An opportunity was lost and that is what my nomination then was pointing to. Of course, I am not endorsing the tragedy that has happened subsequently in Syria, or the involvement in Ukraine, or the seizure of Crimea. It was a particular response to a particular set of circumstances.

Q217 **Ann Clwyd:** Do you think there can be any meaningful relationships between the UK and Russia while President Putin remains in power?

Lord Truscott: Well, I would hope so. By all accounts, he is going stay in power—stand next time round in 2018—so he is going to be around until at least 2024.

The sad thing for me is that it started relatively well. I remember the state visit when he came to London in April 2000. The United Kingdom was the



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first country he visited outside the former Soviet Union. He made a visit to Belarus but the United Kingdom was the first country he visited. Relations were actually quite good then. His first meeting with President Bush in Slovenia in 2001 went very well. I remember the famous time when Bush said he looked into the man's eyes and got a sense of his soul and trustworthiness. It all went downhill from then.

If we had had a different approach to Russia and not really fallen out with them and seen the deterioration in relations that we did between 2002 and 2008, we could have been on a different path. I hope that—

Q218 Chair: We are going to come to a question on that. I hope to think about it in advance as to what we might do about that, but I do not want to ask it yet.

Q219 Mike Gapes: In passing, you mentioned President-elect Trump. What is your assessment of Trump and the potential for relations between Russia and the US as a result of his victory? Is he Putin's useful idiot or is he actually likely to be a more serious person than that?

Mary Dejevsky: I think the prospects are actually quite positive. I would like to reject at the outset: I do not think the Russians were rooting for anybody in the American election; I do not think they were guilty of dirty tricks in so far as probably everybody is cyberhacking everybody else's elections.

Q220 Mike Gapes: Well, we do not know, do we? None of us knows.

Mary Dejevsky: No, but I think we can put the allegations to one side and say, Trump has won; what is his relationship with Putin likely to be?

I think that Putin's message of congratulations was unusually interesting because it talked about wanting to make a new start. I think that the prospects of Putin seeing eye to eye with Trump, at least initially, are better than with Hillary, and probably better than with almost anybody else, first of all because Trump seems to be his own man. Secondly, as a businessman he is entirely hands-on and practical and we would probably deride him as totally values-free, but for Putin that will be a breath of fresh air because he is fed up of people preaching values to him.

The word "transactional" has been used a lot in terms of the potential relationship between Putin and Trump, and I think there could be a perfectly decent relationship that could maybe even transform the atmosphere between both the US and Russia, and Europe and Russia. I mentioned that Putin and Berlusconi got on. In terms of character, Trump is probably closer to Berlusconi than he is to other more conventional European leaders. So I think that the initial possibilities are quite promising.

Lord Truscott: I think that under President Obama Russia was regarded as an adversary, and that under Hillary Clinton Russia would also have been regarded as an adversary. I think that her idea of a no-fly zone in Syria was potentially very dangerous. Under Trump, I think there will be a dialling down, at least of the tension, which would be a good thing, and in



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terms of the relationship between Moscow and Washington under Trump, they both regard Islamist fundamentalism as the main enemy—the main adversary—and that is where there could be a coming together of minds.

Q221 Mike Gapes: What about Edward Snowden and the fact that he is in Moscow and is clearly a complicating factor in the long-term relationship between the two countries?

Lord Truscott: Well, a complicating factor, but maybe Moscow regards Snowden as a useful idiot.

Mary Dejevsky: I do not think it is a big factor. The importance of the Snowden thing can be exaggerated.

Q222 Stephen Gethins: One thing that struck me when I was in Russia with the Committee was the very courageous civic society that exists there, in terms of rule of law and Mothers of Russia. Should the UK be doing more to try to build up those relationships? I am not talking about just the Government level but other levels. What should we be doing to try to support civic society in Russia? Or should we?

Mary Dejevsky: I think there is potential for doing maybe a bit more at civil society level, but a huge amount is made of what is called the foreign agents law and the fact that it is now more difficult if not impossible for Russian civil society organisations to receive foreign money. We tend to get a bit hooked on that rather than looking at what these organisations are doing. I think there is a problem regarding the number of organisations in Russia that are hugely laudable but depend on foreign money. There are people in Russia with a lot of money, who could afford to give it to civic organisations. I am sort of horrified. Memorial, one of the most respected organisations in Russia, which does a fantastic job of investigating and tracing people who disappeared in the purges, and finding burial sites and missing relatives—all those sorts of things—and wants to commemorate individuals from those times, even that organisation depends 80% on foreign money. Why? Yes, we should support it but shouldn't Russians be supporting it too?

Q223 Stephen Gethins: Sure, but if you look at LGBT issues, if you look at rule of law issues, if you look at the mothers and relatives of serving soldiers or of people who have disappeared—exactly these kinds of organisations—in any other society people give to these organisations. They are very laudable. So why do you think Russians don't feel they can give to these organisations, or why don't you feel that Russian business can give to these organisations?

Mary Dejevsky: I don't know why Russian businesses can't give to these organisations.

Q224 Stephen Gethins: But why do you feel they don't? You have looked at it. Is it the environment?

Mary Dejevsky: Each of these organisations and groups are different. If you are looking at LGBT issues, Russia is a very conservative society. You



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would have difficulty with that in Poland and much of Central Europe. It is not unique to Russia.

Q225 Stephen Gethins: What about Mothers of Russia? If Russia has anything, it has respect for the military and therefore for the families of the military. There are a number of live conflicts: conflict in the north Caucasus, conflict in Syria, conflict in Ukraine. Why do you think the families do not feel they are better supported?

Mary Dejevsky: I am sorry. I don't quite understand. I think they are very well supported in the Russian context. They are hugely influential inside Russia. You can argue that the original organisation of soldiers' mothers was partly responsible for the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Lord Truscott: May I answer—

Stephen Gethins: The Chair reminded me of the time, so perhaps you could wind up after this.

Lord Truscott: I was just going to give a plug to the British Council and cultural and educational exchanges. I think these are the best way to support civil society. The greatest hope with Russia is the younger generation: people who travel and people who are educated abroad. Many of our public and private schools and universities are full of Russians and we should encourage that.

Q226 Stephen Gethins: You are helping me out. I have been made aware of the time, so I have a final question for both of you. I know that the Chairman will appreciate the succinctness of your answers. What concrete actions can the UK take to improve relations with Russia? We are making recommendations for improving that relationship. What would your recommendations be?

Lord Truscott: My main idea or thought to put into the pot when you make your deliberations is that we should end sanctions against Russia because I don't think they are helping. I think, in fact, they play into the hands of those who demonise the West and point to us as an enemy. That is very much the message that is coming across in Russian. It is harmful to relations between Britain and Russia and does not achieve anything, apart from punishing the Russian people. The message they are getting from the media and the Kremlin is that the West is hurting them for its own particular reasons.

I think we should be developing a constructive relationship with Russia, bearing in mind the practicality that sanctions will be coming off next year anyway, or will be eased considerably. That is something we could use to gain leverage with Russia and to achieve some of the things we want to achieve on the international front.

Mary Dejevsky: I think there is going to be a big generational change. We are just about at the tipping point. When there were elections two years ago, I was trying to calculate how many voters would still have a

living memory of the Soviet Union. It was just about at the tipping point. I think we will see something different in the next generation.

We must be quite careful when talking about the number of young Russians who are studying and working in the UK. Yes, they are, but how many of them are picking up from the British media and official statements and policies a negative view of their country which they don't accept? If there is one thing we can do—I am not sure how realistic it is—

Chair: That is what we want. What can we do?

Mary Dejevsky: On the political front, very specifically, I think our policy on Syria—ditch Assad, support moderate rebels etc.—may come to grief in the next three weeks, but it is unfortunate that we didn't change that policy to accept a role for the Russians. We didn't accept ceasefire proposals and we didn't accept what I think is Russia's view that what is wanted is stability in so far as it can be kept in Syria, rather than putting their weight entirely behind the survival of Assad.

I also think that there is an extent to which British policy, at least in what we say, is so often attached to the language of values, even when we are so vulnerable on the values issue and when we treat China quite differently. There is a double standard both in what we say and what we do in the way we treat Russia and China. If we treated Russia a little bit more in the way that we treat China, we might have had a better relationship and might have a better relationship in future.

Q227 **Chair:** I thank you both very much for the evidence that you have given and for giving the Committee the benefit of your substantial experience. We have very much appreciated your time.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Anna Belkina, Oxana Bruzchnik and Nikolai Gorshkov.

Q228 **Chair:** Thank you very much to our next set of witnesses for coming to give evidence to us today. Please could you formally identify yourselves for the record?

Anna Belkina: I am Anna Belkina, head of communications for RT international news network.

Oxana Brazhnik: I am Oxana Brazhnik, bureau chief of Sputnik UK.

Nikolai Gorshkov: I am Nikolai Gorshkov, editor of Sputnik UK.

Q229 **Chair:** I am very grateful to you for coming. This is to representatives of both organisations, so if the two of you from Sputnik would decide who will answer on your behalf.

The BBC was set up to inform, educate and entertain. What would you describe as your values and your founding principles?

Anna Belkina: First, I would like to thank the Committee for inviting us to appear here today, myself as the representative of RT, to help understand how to improve UK-Russia relations through the role of our organisation.

As the head of communications, it is my duty to illuminate the purpose of RT. We received the invitation to appear here eight days ago, and I have made every effort to ensure that we could do so and contribute to the discussion.

As a global news organisation, we are an award-winning, internationally acclaimed team of journalists first and foremost. Our role is to tell the news as we see it, and often to give space to overlooked stories and alternative perspectives. Indeed, our track record shows that often, dissenting political voices that might have appeared on RT years ago have gone on to redefine the political discourse of today.

Q230 **Chair:** Obviously we are very happy to receive a written submission, but a lot of the points you are making here you will be able to make in the questions that come to you. If you are not, and you feel you have not been able to say what you want to say in principle, please feel free to then give further evidence to the Committee in writing, if when you look at the transcripts you think you haven't quite got your points across. What I want to do right now is focus on the question of values and founding principles. Can they be encapsulated in a way that the BBC's are?

Anna Belkina: It's exactly as I said. We provide an alternative perspective on current affairs and report under-reported stories first and foremost.

Oxana Brazhnik: Sputnik was founded and based on two different organisations. The first one is the Russian newswire RIA Novosti, and the second is the radio station Voice of Russia. Initially, the values of both those organisations and Sputnik itself are to present a Russian perspective on many events happening all around the world and bring different points of view and different stories from across the globe. Having such a network and such a huge amount of offices and hubs in different countries makes us unique in the ability to get different stories, different people and different experts, and to present their views and share them with a global audience.

Nikolai Gorshkov: If I may add to that, the BBC has several mission statements. With the World Service, it is projecting the British view of the world to the outside world. With BBC Monitoring, it is observing, understanding and explaining to audiences. I would say that we are not much different. We are projecting a certain view of the world, but giving our audiences background context and angles that are not necessarily covered by other media.

Q231 **Chair:** Who is the target demographic for each organisation?

Anna Belkina: TV viewers all around the world, really.

Q232 **Chair:** So no particular—

Anna Belkina: Our viewer is somebody who is curious and who, as our motto says, wants to question more and is open to a diverse range of viewpoints, and perhaps is a little bit tired of the same stories that have existed and dominated the headlines for quite some time. They see that the world is a complex place, perhaps a little more complex than what they have seen reflected in their headlines, and they are turning on to RT to get something different—to get the stories that are not receiving wider attention from other outlets, and to hear fresh new points of view.

Q233 **Chair:** Could you illustrate that with a story you have run recently?

Anna Belkina: Sure. Actually, I would like to illustrate this with a story that we ran a few years ago, but that is still reverberating right now—actually, a couple of stories. One that I think is an excellent example of our work is the Occupy Wall Street protests, which as we know happened a few years ago. For the first almost three weeks, RT was the only news network reporting from the scene of the events, because we saw it not as a little flash but a reflection of something bigger and broader. As we know, the protests themselves have gone on to become a global phenomenon, but we have also seen them as a sort of origin story that has reverberated through the most recent US presidential election. They very much impacted on the candidacy of Bernie Sanders, for instance, and even changed the narratives on the issues covered in the Democratic primaries. And a lot of the similar sentiments we have seen reflected in this force that brought Donald Trump the victory in the election.

Q234 **Chair:** Thank you. Oxana and Nikolai, in a competitive media landscape, what distinguishes Sputnik?

Oxana Brazhnik: You mean from Russia Today?

Q235 **Chair:** No. You are operating in a competitive media environment. If you see them as your competitors and you've got to distinguish yourselves, please explain; I'm sure that would be helpful. But who are your competitors and how do you distinguish yourselves from them?

Oxana Brazhnik: Being a global organisation, of course, we see competitors, or rather global media, like the BBC, like France 24, like Deutsche Welle and some other global agencies and global media organisations. Of course, we are competing with them in terms of news coverage and how fast can we get a story, or something like that.

As for RT, of course they are our competitors online definitely, but actually our biggest distinguishing feature is that we are working on different platforms; they are TV and we are a radio station. And this is a completely different thing involving different approaches to how we work, how we approach stories and how we present the stories.

Nikolai Gorshkov: You could also mention the likes of BuzzFeed or Vice or Huffington Post. So, in a way, we are competing with the established global media but also with the upstarts—and very well-developed upstarts. But we are trying and I think we are successfully breaking out of the



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tunnel vision, thinking outside the box and giving the audience something that they would not necessarily get elsewhere, by way of context, wider context, wider background, more angles to a story.

Q236 **Chair:** Is there anything that would distinguish you from those providers? What would your unique selling point be to me? Why should I listen to Sputnik?

Nikolai Gorshkov: I think we are making the audience think for themselves. We're giving them something which is not a given, but food for thought. And unfortunately, having worked for other media in my life, I know that sometimes the media are giving people a ready-made product, which basically is kind of denigrating people's ability to think for themselves. Actually, what you need to give them as media is food for thought, rather than opinion or something that has already been prepared for them.

Oxana Brazhnik: And of course, it is a range of stories, actually. As I said—

Q237 **Chair:** Any particular story you would like to parallel to RT's Occupy Wall Street story that would define Sputnik?

Oxana Brazhnik: I can tell you that even in the office in Edinburgh, for example, we cover stories from all around the world. We made very significant coverage of the events in Kashmir, for example, or on detention centres in Australia. We have made lots of reports on the coup in Brazil. And many other stories from all across the world.

Q238 **Daniel Kawczynski:** This is a question for RT. I know that I and others who have appeared on RT, we have—the other day, I was called by an American neo-con think-tank a Trojan horse for the Kremlin, or a Putin apologist, because I have dared to appear on your show. I see that as an attack on freedom of speech. But could you just tell the Committee a little bit about the very eclectic mix of journalists that you have working at RT, because what I find very interesting is that they are not identikit—they are not all Russians—and the standard of journalism is very high? Could you just let the Committee have your understanding of the range of journalists working for you?

Anna Belkina: Sure. First, as you have accurately noted, RT has an incredibly diverse staff, both in our main Moscow studios and around the world. We have more than 40 nationalities represented at RT, across the entire vertical of news production. That team is as diverse in their viewpoints as they are in where they are coming from. What brings them together and brings them to RT is their desire to present a more complete picture of the world—a broader picture—by looking at the coverage of current affairs critically and saying, "There seems to be a vital perspective missing here", or, "Why are we not seeing coverage of this story that I am hearing about?" That is what unites this really diverse group of journalists.

Q239 **Daniel Kawczynski:** Secondly, when I was in your studios recently, I saw that one of the journalists was probing a White House spokesman on



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some really difficult questions. He refused to answer and challenged the journalist, saying, "I'm not answering. Russian Government controls your television station." Do you get a lot of those attacks on your impartiality when politicians do not want to answer the difficult questions put to them?

Anna Belkina: Thank you very much for drawing attention to that. Disappointingly, we do see a trend, among some establishment political figures as well as some in the media, to try immediately to delegitimise and dismiss RT for, as you illustrated, asking perhaps inconvenient questions or for putting forth viewpoints that might challenge the established narratives, rather than trying to understand and engage with the channel, which would be much more productive for everybody. That is just harmful.

Q240 **Daniel Kawczynski:** In London, if you are going to run a story about a local, national or international issue, what interference, if any, would you get from Moscow or Moscow politicians?

Anna Belkina: None. We are entirely editorially—

Q241 **Daniel Kawczynski:** Have you ever been telephoned by a Russian official to ask you to change a story or do something differently?

Anna Belkina: Absolutely not. RT is editorially independent and has been that way from day one. We believe that that is reflected in our reporting, which presents many points of view from across the political spectrum of any country and issue that we are covering.

Q242 **Ian Murray:** This question is mainly directed to Sputnik News. Many commentators suggested that you set up the radio station in Scotland to exploit the tensions of Scottish nationalism. How do you respond to that kind of accusation or description?

Oxana Brazhnik: Those are very interesting accusations because the first questions from our side are: why not Scotland? Why not Edinburgh? What is wrong with Edinburgh? If you look at Scotland, half of the people are pro-independence.

Chair: It is 45%, actually.

Oxana Brazhnik: Yes, so if we just chose our staff in accordance with their political perspectives and views, we would never get anywhere. This is definitely not the case. Our reporters include those who support independence and those who voted against it, or who perhaps do not support it at the moment. I would definitely argue with that.

Nikolai Gorshkov: We are also being accused of peddling conspiracy theories, but isn't the theory of us setting our foot in Edinburgh to disrupt something a conspiracy theory in itself? It is completely unfounded. We decided to invest in journalism rather than in overpriced properties in London. We looked at London rental rates for a radio studio and decided that it is best to go elsewhere and invest in journalism, rather than in bricks and mortar.



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Oxana Brazhnik: Yes. Compare it to the BBC experience, when they moved their operations to Manchester, for example. We decided to open our office in Edinburgh because it is the second biggest political centre in the country. It is definitely a good source of stories, experience, experts and academics. It is a good place to be.

Nikolai Gorshkov: You might say that we took the lead from the BBC in moving up north.

Q243 **Ian Murray:** Chair, I am not denying there is bricks and mortar or investment in journalism; what I am questioning is the motives for doing so. Mr Gorshkov said in response to your initial question that Sputnik is giving audiences something that they would not get elsewhere. Does that include comparing Scottish independence to the issues in Crimea?

Oxana Brazhnik: Not at all actually. Do you mean how we cover—

Nikolai Gorshkov: In what way?

Q244 **Ian Murray:** There were accusations that Sputnik News was comparing the two situations—comparing the issues around nationalism in Scotland and Scottish independence with the issues in Crimea.

Oxana Brazhnik: Can we talk about some particular examples?

Ian Murray: Is that something that you—

Oxana Brazhnik: No, this is something new for us. If you can recall some particular example, we can discuss it.

Ian Murray: Well, some commentators said that that was exactly what you did.

Oxana Brazhnik: Can we just get some particular examples from our reporting on our website or radio stations or something like that? What commentators said is definitely not what we are doing. I cannot rely on the words of people who are not working on this.

Chair: Stephen Gethins—one of the SNP politicians who boycotted Sputnik because of the message it might be giving out.

Q245 **Stephen Gethins:** Well, what I would like to ask about is your coverage of Syria. You were talking about trying to cast a critical eye, taking in different perspectives. You will know that this Committee looked into military action and we have not been uncritical of western action in Syria ourselves. Given that Russia is taking military action—I see some of the areas where you have highlighted US action in your reporting on mistakes that have been made, but I wonder whether you can tell me about any examples you have used about Russian military action and some of the mistakes that they might have made in Syria.

Oxana Brazhnik: Actually, we have our reporters working on the ground, so we are not just getting our information from other media sources or military organisations; we are getting that from people who are there. Our reporters talk to the locals and see the situation. In particular, if we



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compare the coverage we did on Syria to the mainstream media, you would see that, for example, we pay attention not just to eastern Aleppo, but to the western side, too. We also pay attention to other areas of the country that are not really covered by other news sources.

Q246 **Stephen Gethins:** Sure, I get that. You will have noticed that Channel 4 News reported from both eastern and western Aleppo and that is great journalism, but I am wondering about you guys in particular. Where have you been critical of Russian military action in Syria?

Oxana Brazhnik: Usually when we have questions on Russian military actions, we address them to the Ministry. As soon as the Ministry operates and they have their operations on the ground, so there is—

Q247 **Stephen Gethins:** Sure. Could you maybe just give us an example?

Oxana Brazhnik: Frankly, I cannot recall—

Stephen Gethins: One criticism—perhaps you can dispel this for us—is that you perhaps cast a critical eye over western actions, but not over Russian actions. That may be a criticism. I am not saying it is one from me; I am just giving you the opportunity to tell us where you have been critical of Russian military action in Syria.

Oxana Brazhnik: I cannot recall a particular article at the moment. We can look at what we did—

Q248 **Stephen Gethins:** So you cannot think of any examples.

Oxana Brazhnik: We cover Syria from various sources on the different formats; we cover it on radio and on the wires. In our radio reporting, we usually present both points of view on particular events, with a more critical—

Q249 **Stephen Gethins:** Mr Gorshkov, can you give us an example of where you have been critical of Russian military action? An example would be great.

Nikolai Gorshkov: For a specific example, we will need to get back to you.

Q250 **Stephen Gethins:** So you cannot think of any examples where you have been critical of Russia.

Oxana Brazhnik: You can easily listen to the very first episode of “Hard Facts”. It was very critical in relation to both aspects of what is going on in Syria. It is on our website. It was about Syria in general—the general situation in Syria.

Q251 **Stephen Gethins:** I know Mike Gapes is about to come in, but to give you one last opportunity, can you just give me one example—even if it was on the radio—where you have been critical of Russian military action?

Oxana Brazhnik: I cannot recall any particular report with a particular headline at the moment, but—



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Stephen Gethins: Okay.

Q252 **Chair:** I tell you what: there is no need to do it now. Have a look at your archive and if there is an example that answers Mr Gethins's question, let us know.

Oxana Brazhnik: If you want us to provide you with examples of some critical reporting on what was going on there, we can definitely do that.

Q253 **Chair:** That would be very helpful. It helps to answer the charge that is obviously sitting behind the question, which is that it is entirely one-eyed.

Nikolai Gorshkov: We here represent mostly Sputnik UK, obviously. Coverage of Syria is not our forte here in the UK, so that is probably why we cannot directly give an example.

Q254 **Chair:** Yes, but obviously it is helpful to answer the charge that is being made, which is that your coverage is entirely one-eyed. If you are able to give us that, that is all. I quite understand why you would not be able to produce it without notice.

Oxana Brazhnik: Yes, but I should say that usually our motive is to be balanced. We always provide both sides—both perspectives on the story.

Chair: Then that is fine, and it will be very easy to produce an answer for Mr Gethins.

Oxana Brazhnik: Absolutely, yes. We are ready to do that.

Q255 **Ann Clwyd:** I used to be a journalist myself, so I want to ask what your take was on one of the most criticised actions during this war: the bombing of the UN convoy. Who did you apportion the blame to?

Oxana Brazhnik: Actually, if you look at our reporting, you will see that it is based on reports from the ground. Our take was to show what was going on there—to present the situation how it is. As journalists, we are observing the situation. We are observing the events and what is going on and we are telling our audience the facts. So that was our take: to provide the facts.

Nikolai Gorshkov: I don't think it's our remit to apportion blame to anybody. It was factual coverage. Factually, we would cover all sides of the story: the events took place and there were accusations, allegations or information coming from this side or that side. It would be factual reporting rather than anything else.

Q256 **Mike Gapes:** First of all, to Sputnik, what relationship do you have with your former head, Vyacheslav Volodin?

Oxana Brazhnik: Actually, it was the job. I have no relations with him.

Q257 **Mike Gapes:** Because, as you are aware, he is now Mr Putin's deputy chief of staff and is on the EU sanctions list because of his role in Crimea.

Oxana Brazhnik: He is not the deputy chief of staff at the moment.

Mike Gapes: Not at the moment, but he was.

Oxana Brazhnik: He is the Chairman of the State Duma of the Russian Federation at the moment. But that has no relation to my role in Sputnik or to my responsibilities here. It was my experience.

Q258 **Mike Gapes:** Anna Belkina, you said that you provide an independent and alternative editorial perspective. Does that mean that you do not have a requirement to provide balance in your broadcasting, if you are just producing alternative perspectives?

Anna Belkina: There seem to be a couple of points to note here. First of all, our reporting is always factual, so in any coverage of any story we base the reporting first and foremost on the facts of the case. Then in every story we will present as many perspectives as possible that might be relevant. That said, we also look at the overall coverage of any particular issue.

We are looking at RT as part of a healthy news diet. We are saying, "This is a story. These are the facts of the case. We have provided perspective A, perspective B. We are seeing that there are some voices or perspectives that are relevant, which are maybe not getting the light of day. Here are some issues that maybe need some more highlighting." Our focus is first and foremost on that, because in today's world we operate in a news environment where everybody is consuming an increasing number of news sources. We seek to complete the picture that is out there, rather than echo what is already out there.

Q259 **Mike Gapes:** The BBC has a 215-page-long document of editorial guidelines. It even publishes it on its website. Does RT have something comparable for editorial guidelines? If so, can we see it?

Anna Belkina: We do have such a document of editorial guidelines of course. It is not published on our website.

Q260 **Mike Gapes:** Is it a public document in Russia? Is it available?

Anna Belkina: It is our internal document.

Mike Gapes: It is your internal document.

Anna Belkina: Yes.

Q261 **Mike Gapes:** You have never published it.

Anna Belkina: We have not. But we are very clear; we have been very transparent from day one about exactly what our position is and what our mission is within a broader global news ecosystem, which is to complete the picture, add something new to the conversation, rather than just echo what is out there.

Q262 **Mike Gapes:** Would it be possible, even without us publishing it, for it to be made available for our inquiry, so we have an idea what your editorial guidelines are?

Anna Belkina: I will surely look into that for you.



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Q263 **Mike Gapes:** Thank you. Your head, Dmitry Kiselyov, is on the EU sanctions blacklist as well, because of his role with regard to Ukraine. What is your attitude to that? Do you think that undermines your view that you are editorially independent?

Oxana Brazhnik: That is for us, I think. It doesn't have any relation to Sputnik at all, so no, it doesn't influence our editorial policies somehow. They are personal sanctions due to an absolutely different kind of job that he did, so it doesn't refer to us at all.

Q264 **Mike Gapes:** I have also seen a quote—I don't know where it was published, but I am told that he said in 2014 that Russia should turn the USA into radioactive ash.

Oxana Brazhnik: Okay. I should say that our editor-in-chief is not Dmitry Kiselyov. Our editor-in-chief is Margarita Simonyan. Our editorial policy is guided by other people, if you are asking me about that. We have a team of editors working in Moscow and here, in Washington and other parts of the world.

Nikolai Gorshkov: That quote has been mentioned many, many times and it is question, of course, probably to Mr Kiselyov himself. But as a journalist myself, I would say that journalists do use hyperbole and metaphors often to get the point across.

Mike Gapes: So do politicians; I accept that.

Nikolai Gorshkov: The way I read it, he was not threatening the United States. It was a reminder in his way that Russia is still a great power and in nuclear terms, a superpower, and should be treated accordingly. It wasn't a kind of veiled threat of eliminating anyone or turning anyone into ash. It was hyperbole and it caught the eye of some people. Others got upset. Sometimes journalists overstate what they try to put across, but it is a question of the personal choice of every journalist, and their style.

Q265 **Mike Gapes:** To all of you, how do you assess the environment in the UK for Russian-based media? Is it welcoming?

Nikolai Gorshkov: Not really.

Oxana Brazhnik: Yes; unfortunately, it is not as welcoming as we would probably like it to be. One student who approached us to take an internship at Sputnik said that a lot of people in the media are afraid of us without having a proper understanding of why they are so afraid. What are we doing that is so bad?

We are ready to talk to people and the media. We held open-door events from the beginning: to welcome the media to our office; to present ourselves; to show how we are working, what we are doing and who we are; and to introduce our reporters and staff. We were very transparent, and we are ready to go on with that transparency from our side. If you or your media have any questions for us, we are ready to answer them.



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Nikolai Gorshkov: Obviously, we are approaching and chasing a lot of politicians, newsmakers and experts, everyone, on a daily basis. Some people turn us down and say that they are not talking to the 'Kremlin propaganda machine'. What is disappointing is that, instead of checking us out, they are basically denying themselves an opportunity to do that and to expose us, if that is what they think.

Q266 **Mike Gapes:** I am one of the politicians who refuses to go on propaganda channels. I have a view that, if I wish to speak, I don't wish to be used. If I wished to try to get material that was broadcast on your channels, is it rebroadcast back into Russia, or is it purely directed at the rest of the world?

Oxana Brazhnik: Actually, we have some materials that are translated into other languages, but it is for each language service to decide whether something is interesting to their audience. It is not up to us to insist that, say, the Spanish version of Sputnik translates some particular stuff.

Q267 **Mike Gapes:** So a British politician who speaks on your channel is not speaking to Russians?

Nikolai Gorshkov: To the world.

Q268 **Mike Gapes:** So they are speaking to people who are following in English, and it is not going to be retransmitted back?

Nikolai Gorshkov: But it is all available on the website. You can tune in on the website.

Q269 **Mike Gapes:** It is all available?

Nikolai Gorshkov: Yes.

Q270 **Mike Gapes:** Everything that you broadcast?

Oxana Brazhnik: Everything, yes.

Nikolai Gorshkov: Yes, I would think so. I can only vouch for the English one, but yes. Even in Russia you can tune into the English-language Sputnik.

Oxana Brazhnik: All the radio shows are available on our website, and live broadcasting is definitely also available. Not all the news blogs are available, because it is like running thing.

Q271 **Mike Gapes:** I ask RT to give us the same view. What is your assessment of the media environment in the UK?

Anna Belkina: Sure. I think this further expands on the theme that Mr Daniel Kawczynski brought up a little while back. There seems to be a bit of a knee-jerk reaction and a rather harmful trend to dismiss a voice that is saying something different simply for challenging the established narratives on particular issues. Of course, we are very encouraged by the fact that Mr Kawczynski, the hon. Chairman of this Committee, other Members of the British Parliament and notable public figures come on RT, whether that be RT UK here in London or our global channel. We hope that

continues. I further believe that it illustrates just how open we are to hearing from across the political spectrum.

Q272 **Chair:** Might they show that in Russia?

Anna Belkina: That is the second part of the question, if I may just wrap up my point. Disappointingly, we have seen some rather hostile rhetoric, particularly, but not exclusively, from the establishment media in the UK, as well as from members of the think-tank and pundit community. That is illustrated, for instance, by the recommendation of the Atlantic Council, which is influential on both sides of the Atlantic, that RT specifically should be added to a list of potential cyber-attack targets. Most recently, it has been illustrated by the Henry Jackson Society—if I am not mistaken, it has also provided testimony to this Committee—which wants to blacklist and monitor anyone who appears or engages in any way with the Russian media. That is extremely damaging.

Q273 **Chair:** You interviewed me on Thursday. Would that be broadcast in Russia?

Anna Belkina: RT does not have Russian-language television broadcasting because the organisation was set up primarily as an international news broadcaster. However, we have a very robust and massively popular digital platform, which includes the website in Russian as well as a very popular YouTube channel and other platforms. The majority of our content, which is gathered, produced and aired on our international foreign-language news channels, is translated and published for a Russian audience, which we believe is also very diverse, very curious and eager to hear these viewpoints.

Q274 **Chair:** Does that include me?

Anna Belkina: I believe so.

Nikolai Gorshkov: RT is available to the Russian market as well.

Q275 **Chair:** Right, so if I am interviewed by you and I am rude about Russia, that will be accessible.

Anna Belkina: Absolutely.

Chair: Very good.

Q276 **Mike Gapes:** Can I ask one final question to RT? In October, your bank accounts with NatWest in the UK were closed. Why do you think that was done?

Anna Belkina: I wouldn't want to speculate on this, but it is fair to say that it happened, and the situation was a bit mishandled. We had enjoyed at that point a more than decade-long relationship with the bank, and then with absolutely no warning or explanation we received a notice that we will no longer be serviced by the bank and that there will be no recourse or room for discussion. I can say that we are in a conversation with the bank, and that it is ongoing.

Q277 **Mike Gapes:** So you haven't secured alternative banking arrangements.

Anna Belkina: We are continuing to speak with the bank.

Q278 **Mike Gapes:** With NatWest?

Anna Belkina: Correct.

Q279 **Daniel Kawczynski:** Actually, I am very interested in the fact that some of the most vocal critics of Russia and RT have appeared on your programme. I think you invited Andrew Mitchell, one of my colleagues, on the show immediately after he made some very strong anti-Russian comments.

In terms of the journalistic arena—you are all professional journalists—what is fascinating is that when your colleague was attacked by that White House spokesman, the other journalists came to her defence and said, "This is a completely legitimate question." In terms of the bond between professional journalists, do you get any support and integration from BBC journalists and British journalists? Do they try to engage with you about helping you with your professional duties?

Anna Belkina: I am not sure what you mean by helping us with our professional duties, in terms of reporting. However, if I understand where you are going with this correctly, in terms of the BBC in particular, our journalists and programme hosts regularly appear on BBC programming—in particular, "Newsnight", which seems to be a favourite—to land a different perspective on whatever the issue of the day is. It is usually something involving Russia. It has been a wonderful experience for both sides. It is not exclusive to the BBC, as far as British broadcasters are concerned. I say that because you brought it up.

RT is also active and very engaged within various international journalistic organisations. We see ourselves as part of the international community of journalists, and we treat them as peers. It is our desire, and we think it would best serve everybody else, for that relationship to be reciprocal. We were very much encouraged by the journalistic community's response to such treatment of our journalists.

Nikolai Gorshkov: Having worked for the BBC for 20 years, I have many friends there. They invite me from time to time—not just my friends but people who know me—to take part in programmes. What is a bit disconcerting is that more often than not, it feels as though they would like to use me as a spokesman for the Kremlin, to present the Russian point of view. I keep telling them, "I can take part in your programme as a journalist, but I am not going to speak on behalf of Mr Putin or Mr Lavrov, or anyone else." They get very disappointed and sometimes cancel my appearance, because the view is that they need a Russian journalist to present the official Russian point of view, which I am not entitled to give them because I am not a Russian official. But that is the culture.

Q280 **Daniel Kawczynski:** Did I hear you right in saying that you worked—

Nikolai Gorshkov: I was a BBC News Moscow correspondent.

Q281 **Daniel Kawczynski:** For 20 years?

Nikolai Gorshkov: I was an editor in the World Service, then a Moscow correspondent, then a head of region in the BBC Monitoring—for 20 years, yes.

Q282 **Ann Clwyd:** We had a debate on Syria in the House of Commons about two weeks ago. I made a long-ish speech and suggested that people should protest outside the Russian embassy over the behaviour in Syria. A lot of British-based media picked that up. Is that something you would have picked up, because the Foreign Secretary also agreed?

Oxana Brazhnik: Do you mean reporting the story? Yes, our news wires take a lot of stories from what happened in the Parliament or what was said regarding Syrian events. If there were protests in front of the embassy, we would definitely cover it. We have covered such events previously. So yes, why not?

Nikolai Gorshkov: We actually did go. One person was standing in front of the embassy.

Oxana Brazhnik: Yes.

Q283 **Ann Clwyd:** It could not be organised in one day.

Nikolai Gorshkov: It was not on the same day.

Q284 **Ann Clwyd:** The whole point was that people feel very angry about Russia's involvement. We made that very clear during the debate on Syria. It is very easy for you to say that there was one person there.

Nikolai Gorshkov: You are asking about the embassy protest.

Q285 **Ann Clwyd:** No, we hadn't organised it. It was a suggestion. It had not yet been organised. It may still be organised. Will you cover it?

Nikolai Gorshkov: Sure.

Oxana Brazhnik: Yes. If there is a protest, we will cover it.

Q286 **Chair:** Do either of you make a profit on your British operations?

Anna Belkina: RT is non-profit. We have a very limited commercial operation. As I am sure you have seen, a little bit of advertising airs on RT. Some of our digital content, including our website and YouTube channel, is monetised, but it is a very small fraction of the overall RT operating budget.

Q287 **Chair:** So when you say non-profit, I assume it does not cover its costs.

Anna Belkina: No. Overall, even in the grand scheme of things, whatever revenues we receive from the digital operations and on-air advertising are just a tiny fraction of the overall operating budget.

Q288 **Chair:** Okay, so what funding do you receive from the Russian state?

Anna Belkina: In terms of the volume?

Chair: Yes.

Anna Belkina: Last year, the funding was 17 billion Russian roubles, which I believe translates roughly to some £200 million.

Q289 **Chair:** What—for RT in the UK?

Anna Belkina: No, no. The RT global operation, which includes five 24-hour news channels, and then a hub and a separate channel in the UK. There is an RT America channel in the United States and there are all the digital channels. This is for global.

Q290 **Chair:** Okay, but what does RT UK get?

Anna Belkina: Those are our internal figures. Although we are very transparent about our overall budget, the specific breakdown is our proprietary information.

Chair: Okay. Is Sputnik able to be any more transparent?

Oxana Brazhnik: Actually, if we are talking about our numbers, the funding for Sputnik UK operations is around 1.8 million.

Q291 **Chair:** It would obviously be interesting to see what value the UK has and what RT UK is out of that 400 million, but—

Anna Belkina: Two hundred million. I said 200 million. RT UK is a very valuable part of the RT family.

Q292 **Chair:** And percentage-wise? Can you give us an indication?

Anna Belkina: We are not putting a money figure on it, but we very much appreciate their input.

Q293 **Chair:** What input is there from the Russian state in return for this funding?

Anna Belkina: There isn't. Once again, as I stated, RT is entirely editorially independent. I think there is an appreciation of and value seen in RT diversifying the overall public discourse and news ecosystem within which we operate. That is seen as valuable, as is, obviously, when relevant, transmitting the Russian perspective on certain issues.

Q294 **Chair:** When the Russian President gets interviewed on your channel and says that RT "is funded by the government, so it cannot help but reflect the Russian government's official position on the events in our country and in the rest of the world", he is deluding himself as to the extent of his editorial influence, is he?

Anna Belkina: Not at all. There are several components to this issue—it is a little bit conflating the issues of funding and editorial policy, among others. If I may address all of them, first of all, news is the kind of thing that is first and foremost produced by people, and it requires some form of capital. No news exists without some kind of funding. Also, all the people who ever work in any chain of news production are bound to bring in their own perspective of how they see the world. That perspective can be

informed by their national origins, their socioeconomic background and a whole range of hosts. That is, to an extent, reflected in the reporting—that is reflected in absolutely every news organisation's reporting, whether public or private, and anywhere in the world. That is the reality of the news environment.

RT, having been set up in Russia and operating in that environment, is bound to have a deeper understanding of Russia, and the ability to communicate Russia to the world, so to speak, but it is important to understand that there is not necessarily a homogenous point of view from Russia. Rather, it is a combination of various aspects, from civil society to the broader public and, yes, to some governmental institutions. We do our best to understand and to communicate that to the world in the best way that we can, to provide that service.

We see no conflict between the funding and our ability to maintain our editorial integrity while at the same time communicating the Russian viewpoint. In the same way, I am sure, the BBC World Service sees no such conflict and, most recently, was even rewarded by the British Government for promoting Britain and its values around the world. France 24, too, is seen like that and is given the benefit of the doubt in its reporting, while being praised for promoting a French vision of the world. For organisations such as Voice of America and Radio Free Europe, which are part of the BBG, one of the official charters is to be consistent with the foreign policy objectives of the United States, while receiving public funding.

Chair: Who is Christopher Wood?

Anna Belkina: Christopher Wood is the executive of Russia Today TV Limited, the company that is the service provider for RT in the United Kingdom.

Q295 **Chair:** Does he own RT in the United Kingdom?

Anna Belkina: I am not certain of these details. I am also not quite sure how they are related to the broader purpose of this inquiry but, again, if you have detailed questions about this operation we would be happy to provide them for you.

Q296 **Chair:** What I am obviously trying to understand is the broader financial picture as to how you operate, but let me know—

Anna Belkina: Which, at the end, is not, I believe, the purpose of this—

Q297 **Chair:** Well, ownership and editorial policy are not unknown to be linked in the media. Some people might say things about Fox News and who owns Fox News, so I think it is perfectly right that there should be questions about your ownership and about editorial policy.

Nikolai Gorshkov: Under Russian law, owners do not have the right to interfere with editorial policy. Russian media law says so. An owner does not have the right to interfere in editorial policy.

Oxana Brazhnik: This is the founder.

Q298 **Ann Clwyd:** In order to operate in the UK, you have to abide by the Ofcom broadcasting code. How do you ensure that your news is impartial? And can I put one criticism to you? We all make mistakes. Ofcom found that RT breached its rules on impartiality in four separate news bulletins covering the Ukraine crisis in March 2014. Would you accept that your coverage was biased?

Anna Belkina: First of all, I would like to say that we have an open and honest communication with Ofcom at all times. Our relationship with Ofcom, including the matters you have just mentioned, receives a hugely disproportionate focus from the media and public figures, compared with other outlets.

I believe that there isn't a UK public broadcaster that has not, at one point, received an in-breach finding. Over the period that we have been broadcasting in the United Kingdom, which is 10 years, we aren't even the ones with the most breaches, and that is important to keep in mind. On a particular issue, if there are disagreements, we are always engaged in dialogue, as I said. We are always striving to create the best possible material and at the same time comply with the code, and are continuing to do so.

Q299 **Ann Clwyd:** I accept all that, but I put a specific case to you. Do you recognise that you made a mistake there?

Anna Belkina: We recognise that Ofcom found it to be biased. That is Ofcom.

Q300 **Ann Clwyd:** Did you not?

Anna Belkina: We believe that in that reportage we were, once again, completing the overall coverage and discussion around these very important issues, but we also accept Ofcom's judgment, as we operate here under their regulation.

Q301 **Ann Clwyd:** Thank you. Can I ask Sputnik about checking the stories that you carry on your website to ensure that they are accurate? There was one case during the US election. Your website carried an entirely false story about Hillary Clinton and Benghazi, which was based on a forged document. Where did that story come from?

Oxana Brazhnik: You mean that Blumenthal thing?

Ann Clwyd: Sorry?

Oxana Brazhnik: Which particular story do you mean? On "Newsweek", do you mean? Okay, we admitted the mistake and the reporter who covered that particular story left the company—he is not working with us anymore. If you need more details we are ready to provide them and a description of our position on that. But that was an editorial. It was explained on the website as well that it was a mistake by that particular reporter who was working on a Sunday on a very long shift and just got on the story and reported on that. It happens, you know.



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Q302 **Mr Hendrick:** This is a question to RT, following on from Ms Clwyd's question. I recall a number of RT journalists resigning over the editorial policy with regard to what was happening in Ukraine. Do you want to comment on that?

Anna Belkina: Sure. First, situations like that do not apply exclusively to RT. Once again, I think this is a case where they receive a disproportionate amount of ongoing attention from the media. But where those particular cases are concerned, those individuals are entitled to their opinion, even if we disagree with them. The fact of their resignation doesn't negate the fact that RT creates internationally acclaimed, award-winning content.

Q303 **Mike Gapes:** Ms Belkina, the issue of false reporting is very serious. RT falsely claimed that the BBC had staged a chemical weapons attack in Syria. Is that not true? Is that not a refutation of your claims that you are simply providing an alternative view? Actually, you are running stories that are fabricated.

Anna Belkina: I absolutely disagree with that assessment of our work. I believe the case that you are referring to is another Ofcom finding. If you read into the details of what Ofcom has found to not be factual, it was not the statements that were made specifically about the BBC report but rather that the coverage was based on an independent investigation which, in Ofcom's view, was presented as being more significant than it was.

We fully accepted Ofcom's judgment and aired its decision on our programme. We consider the matter settled. As I said, we are constantly working on producing quality content, improving our content and improving all compliance and editorial matters. On balance, we provide excellent reporting that is fact-based.

Q304 **Chair:** Mr Gorshkov, you pointed out that the law in Russia says that the owners cannot influence the editorial policy of—

Oxana Brazhnik: The founder, not the owner. It is a different thing.

Nikolai Gorshkov: The founder.

Q305 **Chair:** The founder or the owners?

Oxana Brazhnik: For state-founded media, for example, the founder cannot interfere. The ownership is a different thing, legally.

Q306 **Chair:** So that restriction applies only to state-owned organisations.

Nikolai Gorshkov: Because in a way, state media is not owned by anybody. It gets public funding but is not owned by anyone.

Q307 **Chair:** Right. So the law is around state media.

Oxana Brazhnik: The law is about the mass media in general.

Q308 **Chair:** So why is there a law restricting foreign ownership of media in Russia? If there is a law saying that the owners are not allowed to control



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the editorial policy of mass media, why is there a restriction on foreign ownership?

Nikolai Gorshkov: That is probably a question for the Russian Duma.

Chair: You are entirely right; I am just inviting you to speculate as to why that law is in place. It looks like a belt-and-braces exercise.

Nikolai Gorshkov: I don't think Russia is unique in restricting foreign ownership of media. I think that is quite widespread. Are there not any restrictions in the UK on foreign ownership of media?

Chair: Not that I am aware of.

Nikolai Gorshkov: I am sorry; I think there are some. I am not an expert, but I think there are issues.

Q309 **Chair:** Do you think that law is inappropriate? Do you think that foreign ownership of media in Russia should—

Nikolai Gorshkov: But there are restrictions on foreign ownership of nuclear power stations, for example—Hinkley Point.

Mr Hendrick: There are media concentration issues, but not nationality issues.

Q310 **Chair:** I am asking whether you think, in terms of the presence of foreign media in Russia, it would be a good thing if the laws were relaxed.

Oxana Brazhnik: Actually, there is a Russian—

Nikolai Gorshkov: There is a Russian company called the BBC Russian Service, which is owned by the BBC and is freely operating in Russia. That is the one thing. Obviously, you can access Voice of America in Russia; there is a Russian editorial team—not necessarily in Russia. The BBC Russian Service and BBC Monitoring all operate in Russia, and the BBC Russian Service is incorporated in Russia—it is a Russian company.

Oxana Brazhnik: And the structure is pretty similar to how, for example, Sputnik works here. So there is not a big difference.

Nikolai Gorshkov: And by the way, Russian politicians are not shying away from talking to the BBC Russian Service.

Oxana Brazhnik: Yes, they are more willing to talk to the BBC in Russia than people here sometimes.

Q311 **Stephen Gethins:** Last week, the European Parliament agreed to a resolution that condemned Russian propaganda, and RT and Sputnik were cited in that resolution. Can you think why they did that, especially given that this was drawn from MEPs from 28 different member states?

Oxana Brazhnik: Actually, it is very upsetting that such things happen, especially in the European Union, which was always in the position of protecting press freedom, human rights, democracy and democratic values. Being Russian, we were lectured and educated by the European



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Union about all those democratic values. When those countries, which we believe should protect those values, support such controversial resolutions to ban or somehow restrict media sources and global media organisations as big as RT or Sputnik—really, we operate globally—it is really upsetting.

Q312 Stephen Gethins: Is it not a cause for concern? With the European Parliament, as representatives, we are not talking about a member state or a group of parliamentarians in a Parliament; we are talking about 28 different member states that are sovereign. Was that not a cause for concern, given the context of that criticism?

Oxana Brazhnik: Yes, but did you have a chance to check the voting numbers?

Q313 Stephen Gethins: Yes, I had a look and those have to be passed by quite a chunk of Members.

Oxana Brazhnik: Yes. Then you know that this resolution was supported by less than 50% of the Members of the European Parliament, so there is definitely no general consensus on that. Even if it was approved, it was not supported by the majority. A lot of people understand and realise that there is something really wrong about it. I really hope that it gives room for democracy and still leaves room for communication and for extending communication between countries and between the media and politicians.

Q314 Stephen Gethins: Okay, so you reject that criticism, even though it came from, say, 350 or whatever—hundreds of MEPs. You reject that criticism.

Nikolai Gorshkov: I think it highlights one of the problems in Western relations with Russia, which is the subject of this inquiry: the group-think.

Q315 Stephen Gethins: The group-think?

Nikolai Gorshkov: Yes. I think that in relation to Russian media, especially RT and Sputnik, there is this phenomenon of an echo chamber and group-think. Here, we experience this as well. People are dismissing us without any proof. They are just saying, "You are propaganda," and that is it. Where is the evidence? Where is the proof? Check us out, challenge us, but just dismissing us because somebody thinks that we are not good enough is not good enough.

Q316 Stephen Gethins: It is difficult to get consensus in the European Parliament, given the wide range of political opinions and the different member states, but you think that there is group-think on this issue—

Nikolai Gorshkov: I think it is also part of the international climate right now. There is a lot of nervousness, on both sides. There is a lot of tension and people probably get carried away and swayed. I know for a fact, because I have worked in Western media for over 20 years—I am not going to name names, but I know Western journalists who are working hard on building up some kind of momentum against Sputnik and RT because they do not like us. That is up to them; it is on their conscience. I am not going to discuss it here.



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Q317 Stephen Gethins: On both Sputnik and RT—this is just a final question; I know the Chair is mindful of time—Ms Belkina, you mentioned Margarita Simonyan earlier on. Can you just tell us what role she plays in your organisations?

Anna Belkina: Margarita Simonyan is the editor-in-chief of RT, as she is of the world Rossiya Segodnya news agency.

Q318 Stephen Gethins: Okay. For Sputnik?

Oxana Brazhnik: Yes. Margarita Simonyan is an editor-in-chief of Rossiya Segodnya international news agency, and Sputnik is part of that network.

Q319 Stephen Gethins: Okay. Just as a final question: you have always stressed that RT and Sputnik are two very separate groups, but given that key person, do you not see why some people might draw comparisons between your different news organisations, given the key role Margarita Simonyan has in both Sputnik and RT?

Anna Belkina: We believe that it is absolutely possible for two organisations to have the same editor-in-chief and to oversee a very diverse range of viewpoints, as evidenced by multiple media holdings within the UK and other countries.

Oxana Brazhnik: Yes, and we still have different editorial teams. They have their people and we have our people who are working on the news. It definitely gives us different opinions. We are not pretty much fixed on one person.

Nikolai Gorshkov: Again, it is not very much unlike the BBC. You have BBC News, you have BBC World Service, and you have BBC Monitoring. There is one director-general who is also editor-in-chief, but those entities—news gathering, World Service, Monitoring—have their own leadership as well. They are fairly independent and autonomous in what they do.

Stephen Gethins: But they have a charter and they have parliamentary scrutiny. In fact, the BBC sometimes comes to us; you are not alone in news organisations coming here.

Anna Belkina: We also have a charter.

Q320 Mike Gapes: But you haven't published it.

Oxana Brazhnik: I have to check on that. It can be published. I am not sure; I just need to check that, but we have a charter, yes.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed for the evidence you have given. I am very grateful to you for coming to give evidence today. The sitting is now adjourned.