

Foreign Affairs Committee

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

Tuesday 20 December 2016

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Members present: Crispin Blunt (Chair); Ann Clwyd; Mike Gapes; Stephen Gethins; Ian Murray.

Questions 321-438

Witnesses

Rt Hon Sir Alan Duncan, MP, Minister of State for Europe and the Americas, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Sir Tim Barrow, Political Director, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and Neil Crompton, Director Middle East and North Africa, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sir Alan Duncan, Sir Tim Barrow and Neil Crompton.

Q321 **Chair:** Welcome to this morning's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee and our last oral evidence session on our inquiry into the UK's relations with Russia. I invite our witnesses to identify themselves for the record.

Sir Alan Duncan: I am happy to introduce them, if that is all right, Chairman. On my left I have Tim Barrow, who is our political director and a former ambassador to Russia. On my right, I have Neil Crompton, who is the Middle East director in the Foreign Office and therefore covers a lot of the Syrian side, which you may be covering today.

Q322 **Chair:** Thank you Minister, and thank you for coming so well supported. If there is going to be a division in this, we might address questions on issues of analysis of Russian relations to Sir Tim, and if it is a question of policy, we will direct them to you. That may enable us to get through it in good order.

I gather you were going to make an opening statement—thank you very much for giving us a copy of it for the record. It will enable us to move straight to questions.

Sir Alan Duncan: May I add one thing to the statement?

Chair: Of course.

Sir Alan Duncan: This is the first opportunity for us to say anything in public following the murder of the Russian ambassador in Ankara yesterday. We obviously fully condemn this heinous attack, and you can be assured that the Foreign Office, in the proper way, has been in contact both with our Turkish and Russian counterparts to express our condolences.

Q323 **Chair:** Thank you. I am sure that feeling is shared by the Committee.

We will start with questions for Sir Tim, given his experience in Moscow and as political director. Sir Tim, what is your analysis of the drivers and objectives underpinning current Russian foreign policy?

Sir Tim Barrow: If we look at the development of Russian policy over the last period, we see inevitably a selection of important drivers: economic, internal, but also very strongly the national security agenda, the sense of threat from terrorism—I echo Sir Alan’s comments about the Russian ambassador—and the risk to the Russian state from terrorism and from instability around the region.

In the development of recent policy, I think the national security agenda is perhaps the pre-eminent driver for the current leadership.

Q324 **Chair:** Is that their security or their country’s security? Would you divide the two like that?

Sir Tim Barrow: No, I would not divide the two. I think it is their country’s security that is the driver—the concern about instability in the region and terrorism. I think that is keenly felt.

Q325 **Chair:** Do you think they see us as a strategic adversary?

Sir Tim Barrow: No, I don’t. I believe they hold a view of NATO which is not in line with how we wish NATO to be perceived, and indeed what NATO is about, which is that NATO is a defensive organisation. It is a legacy of previous times, but we have work to do in order to express clearly and well what NATO policy is designed to deliver. As I say, it is a defensive organisation. That is why we have supported the NATO-Russia Council and communication around NATO and NATO decisions to ensure there is not misunderstanding and miscalculation and mistake of intent in our policy.

No, I do not think we are in the position of being a strategic adversary. I believe when the Foreign Secretary was here he made the point very clearly, and I agree with him, that we have to avoid getting into an old cold war logic and into that mentality. I don’t think we are there yet and I think we are right to try to avoid being there.

Q326 **Chair:** You do not think we are in the cold war logic?

Sir Tim Barrow: I think we are closer to it than we have been. I think things have changed, but I don’t think we are in a set pattern, an irredeemable logic of being adversaries. There are big policy areas where we disagree, but there have also been instances where we have been able

to work together. We need to avoid both sides becoming trapped into cold war logic.

Q327 Chair: What do you make of their domestic policy and the creation of this rather Russian nationalist, orthodox, almost anti-western-liberal identity in Russia? It strikes me that they are creating an identity in Russia which is deliberately designed to be different from western liberal values. It strikes me that has got more to do with the regime's own position, rather than being consistent with Russia's identity as a part of the European cultural civilisation. It is almost as if they are artificially trying to create something different that supports the regime.

Sir Tim Barrow: Again, I think there are different strands at play in Russia. One of the tensions we have when we talk about Russia is this is a very old nation in a very new phase of its identity. I was there, as you know, when the Soviet Union collapsed. I and others perhaps underestimated the impact of that moment and the difficulties of that legacy. What we are seeing is Russia finding—forging—its own current identity.

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the challenges that all nations face, there is huge agenda, both internal and external, that it needs to tackle. When I was in Russia I did not see anti-western identity hardwired into Russia. In many areas there is huge respect for the culture and values, but there are also differences that we are trying to work through at the moment.

Q328 Chair: Who is their long-term strategic competitor?

Sir Tim Barrow: You would have to define different areas. In my view, the biggest change with regard to Russia and its interests is the growth of China. That is not unique to Russia, but if you look at the Russian environment, the changes with regard to China are the most profound and the biggest that any of us have witnessed in the past 20 years or so. That has made them a competitor and the Russians would be quick to say that. That is the change in their area that is the most dynamic and the biggest.

Q329 Chair: If you had Russia's overall interests at heart, security against a rising China or the need to manage the relationship with China would presumably be your long-term strategic priority, wouldn't it?

Sir Tim Barrow: If I were sitting making policy in Moscow, I think that would absolutely be a priority, but it is clear that they also attach a great deal of priority to relations with the West, including relations with the US. Because they occupy a vast area of territory, they have direct interests to the south, not just central Asia but beyond, and we are seeing that playing out.

Russia, with something like 11 time zones and straddling an eighth of the world's land mass, inevitably looks east, south and west in the dynamic challenges it faces. I don't think we see the relationship with China as the only priority that they have to manage. As I said before, you have the risks to national security in terms of stability and terrorism, which they see

coming from a different area. They also want to find a relationship with the West that serves their national interest.

Q330 Chair: I cannot recall a period when our rhetoric about Russia—ministerial rhetoric and from our ambassador to the United Nations—has been worse, including during the cold war. How have we got to a place where Russia's interests would appear to sit elsewhere, without there being different interests for Russia as a country as for its administration? I would be happy for the Minister to take that.

Sir Alan Duncan: Perhaps I can give a brainstorming answer to that. It is the big question, which goes to the point about needing to understand the psychology of Russia. Twenty-five years is no time at all in the history of Russia, but it has been a crucial 25 years.

It goes back to your first question about Russia needing and wanting to redefine itself as a powerful nation that deserves respect following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Obviously, we had our Litvinenko difficulties, so there have been impediments in our personal relationships. There have also been issues that we feel very strongly about, such as Ukraine and subsequently Aleppo. We need to balance the respect they deserve with firm talk about the things of which we thoroughly disapprove.

I hope that the balance of language and action is finding its feet, perhaps a little bit more than it has done in the past. Our attitude, which is in the paper I gave the Committee at the start, is one of very firm views where we think they are behaving improperly, such as challenging other countries' territorial integrity, but showing the proper respect that a great nation is due. That is the balance; perhaps we could strike it better, but that is the balance that we have to strike.

Sir Tim Barrow: I don't think it does us, others or Russia any good if, where we have points on which we profoundly disagree, we are not clear and open about that disagreement. I think that is really important, in terms of our relationship.

Sir Alan Duncan: It is a matter of being strong on engagement and firm on the opinions we hold when we engage.

Q331 Chair: What view do you take of the lecture given by the director of MI6 and his portrayal of Russia, which was interpreted by the Russian ambassador here as meaning that Britain views Russia as a strategic adversary?

Sir Alan Duncan: They are doing things of which we disapprove and of which we should disapprove. I think they are a growing cyber threat; some of their public comments stray rather far from the truth; their challenge to the territorial integrity of Ukraine is not acceptable; they have annexed Crimea, and the prosecution of the conflict in Aleppo is unacceptable. We have to be firm in making a stand against that.

The UK is enormously respected in eastern Europe and relied upon in very many respects for its leadership role in talking about the defence and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

security of smaller countries that feel under threat. I think we should be proud as a country that we are standing up for what is morally and politically right, and it is correct that we do that in language that leaves things totally clear and not unclear.

Q332 Ann Clwyd: I went to Russia when we were giving food aid to Russia. I think that we sometimes underestimate the huge humiliation that Russians felt at the time. I remember having conversations with scientists who were selling bits of string, knobs and anything they could get hold of to earn some money on the street. I think we really have underestimated that. Do you agree?

Sir Alan Duncan: That is the people. I think there is a distinction between the population and the regime with which we are dealing. You are deeply experienced in many parts of the world where people, post-conflict or post a change in the country, are feeling difficulty of that sort. We don't in any way want to humiliate Russians or Russia as a political regime, but we have to be respectfully firm where we think they are doing things across the world that are wrong. We will be, and that is what we do, but I hope we don't do it in a shrill, hectoring, lecturing way. That is not our purpose. Respectful engagement perhaps summarises the policy that we would like to follow. We would welcome the same in return, because where work together rather than against each other, that can only help the wider world.

Q333 Chair: Where are we doing that?

Sir Alan Duncan: Well, I think we are. Whether we are getting the response we would like—certainly we are not in Ukraine. Indeed, I was in Georgia three weeks ago looking at the barbed wire around South Ossetia; that is slightly different, but it must not be forgotten. There, we were encouraging the Georgian Government to continue their policy of engagement with the Russians. In that sense, I think we are a good and constructive influence. That is an example of where we are practical and realistic, and are not hectoring, lecturing and negative all the time.

Q334 Chair: Before we go to Mr Gapes, I will bring in Mr Gethins, because you have pressed the Georgian button.

Sir Alan Duncan: Is there a Georgian button? I didn't realise. Perhaps I should have left it unpressed.

Chair: I was tempted to go down that route and get you to use that example, but he will do so much better.

Sir Tim Barrow: On the point about where we work together and the potential benefits that are available for all sides, the classic example in recent times is the negotiations on Iran nuclear. We had the privilege of being part of that. We worked very closely with Russia, China and other colleagues to deliver a deal on Iran nuclear, which was extremely difficult to do, and we continue to work on the implementation of that deal. So I think you can see examples of where we have been able to work together.

Q335 Chair: Any more?

Sir Tim Barrow: Well, if you want to look at other areas—

Chair: We are a P5 nation. I am conscious that we rarely find ourselves on the same page.

Sir Tim Barrow: In the UN Security Council yesterday, we were passing a resolution to extend the mandate with regard to the Tribunal on the Former Yugoslavia. So there are areas where we work together. I am not here today saying that there are not plenty of areas where we have been disagreeing, but you asked for examples of where we do work together. I think P5 is a good place to look for potential where we work together, but unfortunately on areas such as Syria we have not been able to find that agreement, and that is a great loss.

Sir Alan Duncan: And in past years as well they have been part of the Quartet for the—rather stalled—Middle East peace process. They have, none the less, been part of that process.

Q336 **Stephen Gethins:** Minister, it was good to hear you raise the South Caucasus and Georgia in particular. What are our long-term strategic priorities? One thing that always strikes me is that Ukraine gets a huge amount of international attention, and rightly so, but the issues in Georgia are now almost a quarter of a century old. What are our long-term strategic objectives there?

Sir Alan Duncan: When you look at the map, there are lots of strategic issues that are more than a quarter of a century old—

Stephen Gethins: Indeed.

Sir Alan Duncan: —but I think not giving up on defending the territorial integrity of sovereign nations is perhaps one way of putting it. These issues never have an easy resolution, but if you just shut up about it, those who have annexed land or taken it over win, so you must not give up on these things. I think to be a consistent voice defending a rules-based system, which in the end is perhaps one of the distinctive differences between us and Russia at the moment, is an important role for the United Kingdom.

That is our long-term policy, which could also be interpreted, if you like, as a strategy. Maintaining that, sticking with it and not letting up on it is our approach. So a rules-based system and defending the integrity of sovereign nations is very much the approach that we are taking.

Q337 **Stephen Gethins:** Where do you think the Russians are in terms of the South Caucasus at the moment, from your conversations?

Sir Alan Duncan: Just trying to hold their ground, I think. I do not see any reversal—I do not sense it. It would be great if there were, but I do not see it. I do not know whether Tim Barrow agrees.

Sir Tim Barrow: I think that is right. I think there was one instance in the South Caucasus which we should point to, which was when tensions flared again between Azerbaijan and Armenia and Russia was part of the efforts



HOUSE OF COMMONS

to restore some balance there. In terms of the strategic, which you rightly point to, Mr Gethins, we are not yet in a position where we are able to make the progress we would like to, particularly with regards to Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Q338 **Chair:** A final question from me before I go to Mr Gapes: what does Russia want from us?

Sir Alan Duncan: Maybe respect? I don't think there is an easy answer to that. Although I have dealt with Russians over many years in the oil business and subsequently in politics, I am not perhaps as deeply immersed in their thinking as to be able to answer that question. Perhaps I can bat that to Tim Barrow, who has been living with this for longer.

Chair: We are very lucky to have a political director so expert.

Sir Tim Barrow: Thank you. That is a dangerous way to put it.

Chair: Michael Gove might not approve, but never mind.

Sir Tim Barrow: What does Russia want from us? I think the Minister is absolutely right: it wants respect. It would like to see development on economic relations. I think the Russians would like us to see the world more like they do, but on that one I'm afraid the differences will continue. Clearly, they would rather that we did not have such profound disagreements with regard to Georgia or Ukraine or some of our actions in Syria, but I think they are also looking for some sort of common ground, potentially, on the question of terrorism with the West. That is a difficult area, but it is an area where they do believe there is a threat that is common to both them and the West, so they feel it should be possible to find common ground. Delivering that has not been possible in Syria for other reasons.

Sir Alan Duncan: I think they benefit from being less suspicious of us. That is one of the thoughts that have been growing in my mind in my six months in the Foreign Office. They always seem to think that we are up to something against their interests, which, if only they understood it, is not our primary intention at all.

Q339 **Mike Gapes:** Can I start with the appalling murder of the Russian ambassador? It has been reported this morning that the Russian media are blaming the West, rather than Turkey, for the murder of the ambassador. Given that the media in Russia are very much controlled and influenced by the ideology of the people that run Russia, is this part of the paranoia, the mindset that you are referring to?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is too early, and perhaps inappropriate as well, because the experience of yesterday's murder is still so raw, to really try and analyse this too deeply, so quickly. Certainly, it was not Turkey's fault and nor do I think it was "the West's" fault. Quite what was in the mind of the Turkish policeman who killed the ambassador yesterday, I think it is too early to say and we may never know.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I would like to hold back from over-analysing this at the moment. Particularly, the Turkish Foreign Minister has gone to Moscow today. It was a pre-planned meeting, but he stuck with it.

Mike Gapes: With the Iranians as well.

Sir Alan Duncan: With the Iranians. That was already planned and they are sticking with it. I was in communication with Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, the Turkish Foreign Minister, yesterday.

There are some very high sensitivities here on the part, inevitably, of both the Turks and the Russians and I do not want in any way to stir up something that is insensitive or ill-judged. The one message that has to come out today from everybody is that this is an utterly heinous and unacceptable murder of a diplomat and we totally condemn it.

Q340 **Mike Gapes:** Sir Tim Barrow talked about the rules-based system, which is being challenged. You have already referred in your introduction to the cyber-attacks that have originated from Russia. There is now a very strong suggestion being investigated by the CIA that the US election was interfered with by Russia to assist their Manchurian candidate. For example, today United Russia—Putin's party—has signed a memorandum of agreement with the Nazi-linked Freedom party in Austria. Isn't there a pattern of behaviour here of undermining the values of the democratic, liberal, open-minded western model, whether in the US or in the European Union, and that Russia is pursuing asymmetric warfare to undermine the solidarity of NATO and the European Union?

Sir Alan Duncan: There is no doubt that, using modern technology, they are interfering in many parts of the world. We also saw it in Montenegro, where there was a very serious interference—I think undeniably Russian-inspired, if I can put it that way—in the democratic process in Montenegro.

Quite what the effect was or what exactly they did in the United States is unclear, but there is no doubt and we just have to accept it as a fact that cyber-warfare is now a part of modern life and the Russians are using it as best they can in a political dimension, not just in a commercial one. There is political interference through cyber and that is one of the threats we have to be aware of; we have to be on our guard and be able to defend against it. The world is changing: there are new threats.

Q341 **Mike Gapes:** What about my wider point that this is part of an overall approach to undermine the solidarity and collective work of the EU and of NATO?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is possible. One can only speculate whether this is absolutely determined and pre-planned.

Sir Tim Barrow: As the Minister rightly said earlier, there is a temptation on the Russian side to have great suspicion of western intention. There is a risk for us that we see a huge policy of great complexity from the Russian side. As you say, what we see so far are threats that we must be robust in defending ourselves against. We need to make sure that there is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

unity within NATO and within the west generally. I am not yet in a position to ascribe a full description to what is going on, but you are right that in this and other areas, we must respond robustly and clearly to threats.

Q342 Mike Gapes: Can I take you to Syria? The Foreign Secretary summoned the Russian ambassador to the FCO last week. Why specifically did he do that?

Sir Alan Duncan: Neil was involved in this as the director for the Middle East so, for the authorised version, Neil Crompton.

Neil Crompton: He wanted to express our strong concern about the situation in Aleppo. He wanted at this stage to urge Russia, as the intervening power in Syria and one of the two external powers with the most influence over the regime, to ensure proper humanitarian access for those residents of Aleppo left behind, and to ensure that Russia, as a member of P5, meets its responsibilities to ensure that those fighters evacuated from Aleppo were not abused in any way.

Sir Alan Duncan: Perhaps we can delineate or explain the severity of this. On some estimates, you probably had 3,000 civilians killed by Russian activity. A lot of that activity has destroyed medical facilities: at one point, no working hospitals were in place in Aleppo. Perhaps half a million people were under siege, and the Russians were blocking humanitarian aid and the ability of people to leave. Nothing really can get more severe than that, so calling in the Russian ambassador was absolutely appropriate and the right thing for the Government and the Foreign Secretary to do.

Q343 Mike Gapes: Is it our view as a Government that Russia has violated international law in Syria during its period of intervention?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am not versed in the detailed technicality. I am familiar with the process of trying to judge whether IHL has been breached; it is a very important process.

Q344 Mike Gapes: I said "international law". International humanitarian law is one aspect, then there is another question of international law.

Sir Alan Duncan: All right. None the less, we are again into legal details so I do not want to say something that is inaccurate. Neil, what would your answer be to that?

Neil Crompton: That is a complicated legal question. What is clear is that they are in breach of agreements that they signed at the Security Council and through the International Syria Support Group, where they committed over a year ago to support the ceasefire in Syria. They subsequently signed a Security Council resolution and committed to work both to improve humanitarian access and to get a sustainable political process under way.

Q345 Mike Gapes: Minister, you said the Russians had killed 3,000 civilians in Aleppo.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Alan Duncan: Russian attacks have killed people, yes.

Mike Gapes: Right. If that is the case, have they breached international humanitarian law?

Sir Alan Duncan: I cannot give you a direct answer to that because I do not directly cover the Syria brief. Perhaps what I can do is take you into this issue by saying that the UK is very strongly supporting efforts to make people accountable for crimes committed in Syria, whatever they are, for instance, with the collection of evidence and offering a budget for such projects. There is a UN commission of inquiry, there is a UN board of inquiry investigation, and we are pushing for a lot of this to go to the ICC.

Q346 **Mike Gapes:** Can I just get back and unpack this? If you cannot say whether or not they have violated humanitarian or international law, have the Russian military committed war crimes in Syria?

Sir Alan Duncan: I can only give the same answer, because I do not handle the Syrian brief personally and this is a very technical legal matter.

Mike Gapes: There must be a Government view, surely.

Sir Alan Duncan: If there is, and if it exists, then I have to turn to my right, but that does not come across my desk.

Chair: The rhetoric from the Foreign Secretary and from our ambassador to the UN implies that the Russians are in violation of international law in the way they are conducting this.

Q347 **Mike Gapes:** You yourself said that there is a question of referring to the International Criminal Court. A reference to the ICC would presumably be because there was concern that war crimes had been carried out.

Sir Alan Duncan: That is broader than just the Russians, I suspect.

Mike Gapes: Okay, but as I understand it you need the Security Council to refer that case, and in the Security Council Russia has a veto.

Sir Alan Duncan: It has used its veto six times.

Q348 **Mike Gapes:** Yes. In the past we have had problems with countries that are not signatories to the ICC also, and Russia is not a signatory, as far as I am aware. Is the ICC route realistic given what Russia's attitude has been, and that they are not a signatory?

Neil Crompton: Probably not, for the reasons you give. If they were cited, the Russians would veto a referral by the Security Council.

In the end, the formal legal position is that only a court can make a judgment on whether or not a war crime has been committed. We have asked the UN commission of inquiry to look at the question of whether war crimes have been committed by either the regime or the Russians. We are providing evidence, and we have trained a lot of people on the ground in Syrian NGOs and others to provide objective evidence to support them in standing up in an international investigation or in a court of law, if it ever



HOUSE OF COMMONS

comes to that. If there is deliberate targeting of civilians, and if evidence emerges that there has been deliberate targeting of civilians, then that would put them on the wrong side of the international community.

Q349 Mike Gapes: One final question. A lot of the evidence will be based on individual testimony. I raised this with the Prime Minister yesterday. There will be people in Aleppo and elsewhere in Syria who could be witnesses in such cases, but people who might regard their evidence as “difficult” might, for obvious reasons, have an interest in those people disappearing or being killed. What are we doing to protect the white helmets and others in Aleppo and elsewhere who might have the evidence that would be required to have an international legal process against the perpetrators of crimes and atrocities?

Neil Crompton: The immediate priority, as we were aiming to do, is to get the UN to have overall responsibility for the situation in Aleppo to provide humanitarian access. We also had a report on the situation inside Aleppo, which will give some diplomatic protection to people on the ground. We were successful in securing a resolution yesterday—thankfully with Russia’s support—and we now need to ensure that the regime, the Russians and others honour that part of the agreement. That is the first layer of protection.

Q350 Mike Gapes: But the Syrian ambassador at the UN strongly denounced that resolution.

Neil Crompton: He did.

Q351 Mike Gapes: The reality is that without the complete co-operation of the people now in charge in Aleppo—not just the Syrian army, but also the Russians, the Iranian militias, and Hezbollah—large numbers of people who have provided humanitarian assistance and medical help for victims will be fearful for their lives. Realistically, how can we get the UN to provide that protection?

Neil Crompton: It is going to be diplomatic cover. The UN still has people on the ground. There is no international appetite at the moment for a protection force. We will have to take this one step at a time. You vividly illustrated the policy dilemma we face.

Sir Tim Barrow: But we have got—as Neil says, not a small thing—a resolution through the Security Council with Russian support. It was unanimously adopted, there was no abstention. You point to the Syrian ambassador’s comments, quite rightly, and there is an obvious tension there between the Syrian regime’s comments and Russian support. We need to continue to work through the UN to do all we can to provide the sort of help, to the maximum we can, into Aleppo.

Q352 Mike Gapes: Are the Iranians, and therefore Hezbollah, on board?

Sir Tim Barrow: Neil, you are our Iran expert?

Neil Crompton: With protecting civilians in Aleppo?



Q353 **Mike Gapes:** Yes.

Neil Crompton: Less so, I would say. The Iranians have allowed the Russians to front the international diplomacy. They have been involved in discussions—the Turks, the Russians and the Iranians are in a meeting today—but as Tim Barrow suggests, we put primary responsibility on Russia, as a permanent member of the Security Council, to exercise its responsibilities in this area, particularly as it has just made important commitments.

Sir Tim Barrow: I think, Mr Gapes, if I may say so, you are absolutely right to point to that complexity. Sometimes when we talk about Syria, or have this conversation about Russia, as you say, there is the regime, there is Russia and there is Iran, all operating in an alliance that is not necessarily identical in all its aspects. That is one of the complexities. It also points to why, in some of your earlier questions, finding the exact definition of who has done what and where the lines are is complex.

Q354 **Ian Murray:** The Prime Minister said in the House yesterday that the European Council heard from the mayor of eastern Aleppo who expressed that all he was looking for was “to get those who have survived through years of conflict, torture and fear to safety”. She responded by saying that, “Together with our European partners, we must do all we can to help”. What are the UK Government’s policy options for helping in Aleppo?

Sir Alan Duncan: Neil, this has a Syria focus, rather than on Russia.

Neil Crompton: Sure. Again, the immediate focus is on ensuring that those people who want to leave Aleppo can do so safely. Added to that, we need, on top of the various agreements that have been reached between various players in the region, to ensure that the UN has proper oversight and is able to report back on what is going on. Then for us, as UK HMG, to support humanitarian operations going into Aleppo. It is two sides of the same coin. I think DFID announced a further £10 million in life-saving aid at the end of last week to support the humanitarian operation, as part of a major and continuing humanitarian operation. That is the immediate focus.

Q355 **Ian Murray:** Is it just a humanitarian response? Is there any UK Government policy response in terms of further sanctions? How, for example, is the UN Security Council resolution that was passed at the weekend going to be implemented and what is Russia’s response to that?

Neil Crompton: Well, Russia supported the Security Council resolution, so we now want to hold Russia to honouring its part of the bargain. We have applied sanctions, or we pushed for them, and succeeded in extending the European sanctions, which originally applied to human rights violations to a number of Russians who were involved in those. I think if there is a continuation of the conflict, logically we would seek to continue to shine a spotlight and put pressure on the perpetrators through EU mechanisms. We are realistic that we are not going to get UN sanctions over Syria, but that is one of our policy tools.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q356 Ian Murray: What is the response from other UK allies, not just to the resolution that was passed at the weekend but to potentially what Russia's response might be?

Neil Crompton: On what, sorry?

Q357 Ian Murray: On the UN resolution and also the humanitarian issues.

Neil Crompton: I think there is very close co-ordination between like-minded countries. The Foreign Secretary was at a meeting in Paris on the weekend before last. When I say like-minded countries, it is mixture of Europeans, the closer European allies, and key regional players—Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and others—with whom of course we maintain contact. I think there is a very high degree of international unity about what needs to be done.

There has been a high degree of frustration that Russia has, for so long, blocked effective action through the Security Council, which is why we see initiatives by Qatar and Liechtenstein, for example, to try to mobilise support among the UN General Assembly to circumvent Russia's use of the veto in the Security Council. I think there is a high degree of international consensus about what needs to be done.

Q358 Ian Murray: Are you confident that the Russians will allow the resolution to be implemented?

Neil Crompton: No. They have not honoured all the agreements they have made in the Security Council in the last year.

Q359 Ian Murray: What will be the UK Government policy response if the UN resolution is not implemented by the Russians?

Sir Alan Duncan: If they veto, they veto. We've been there before.

Neil Crompton: We will continue to try to expose where there is a gap between Russia's rhetorical commitment or policy commitment and their actions on the ground and, in company with our partners, try to increase diplomatic pressure on them to honour the agreements they have made.

Q360 Ian Murray: Could that include extension of the sanctions?

Sir Alan Duncan: The constant vetoing of resolutions is, I think, self-discrediting in many ways. You may wish to get on to sanctions later, but I would not say that immediately it is in our mind to extend them. Retaining sanctions, yes, because I think they are having some effect in a broad and persuasive way, in the context of the broader economic pressure following the fall in oil prices and things like that. The maintaining of sanctions is definitely part of our policy, but suddenly pushing to have them changed and increased is not something we are advocating at the moment. Retaining them, yes.

Sir Tim Barrow: You mentioned sanctions in the Syria context, Mr Murray. There is one area where we continue to try to push, which is on the JIM report with regard to the use of chemical weapons. There is a commitment that if that is found to be the case, action should be taken.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We will continue to push for sanctions—in this case, with regard to the Syrian regime, in the light of that, and Neil can say more if that is of use.

Q361 **Ian Murray:** The UK Government's Foreign Office had a public spat through the Minister with the Russian ambassador on Twitter. I wonder if that was helpful or unhelpful.

Sir Alan Duncan: When?

Ian Murray: It was 13 December.

Sir Alan Duncan: Was it on Aleppo?

Q362 **Ian Murray:** Yes, on what they were doing in Aleppo. Do you think that was good diplomacy or bad diplomacy?

Sir Alan Duncan: Making our views clear through Twitter is an important method of modern politics and hence, obliquely, diplomacy. When, so often, politicians are accused of not having clear opinions, it is right that we are out there, up front in condemning what we consider to be unacceptable conduct in Aleppo. Should someone then choose to respond, that is part of the way Twitter works, but I think we have been right to be absolutely clear and unequivocal about unacceptable conduct in Aleppo that is causing massive human misery and need not. We make no apology—quite the opposite: I fully defend the Foreign Secretary in doing this and think it was right.

Chair: It was Mr Ellwood, in fact.

Sir Alan Duncan: Either and both. Our policy is as one.

Ian Murray: It is important to say that most of the real information that has been coming out of Syria has been on Twitter and Facebook, from people on the ground.

Sir Alan Duncan: That is another very good point.

Ian Murray: That kind of public dialogue—spat may be too strong a word—with the ambassador was helpful?

Sir Alan Duncan: It puts Britain's position clearly in the public domain. As you rightly say, Mr Murray, it reaches straight to those who are suffering the pain. That is a good thing.

Chair: Well, some would say the exchange actually reflected rather well on the Russians.

Sir Alan Duncan: I did not see the exchange.

Chair: The challenge was, "What are you doing?" and Mr Yakovenko then replied saying that in the last 24 hours, Russia had secured the exit of 7,796 people, including 3,496 children.

Sir Alan Duncan: Let's remember why they were there in the first place.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Tim Barrow: And the numbers in total—

Chair: They do seem rather precise.

Q363 **Ann Clwyd:** I'd like to place on record my appreciation for the work of our ambassador at the UN. The message that Matthew Rycroft put out,

"For every barrel bomb dropped

For every chemical weapon deployed

For every bullet fired on innocents

There will be accountability"

was referring to Aleppo, of course. It must have been very frustrating to be involved in those negotiations, but I am sure that lots of others appreciate his putting it across.

Sir Alan Duncan: We will convey that very clearly to Matthew Rycroft—thank you.

Q364 **Ann Clwyd:** Can I ask you about the International Criminal Court, because the suggestion there is that there will be accountability. Presumably that must be accountability to the ICC. People are gathering evidence: NGOs and others are gathering evidence that can be used in future trials. A group of us met the Russian ambassador on the day he met the Foreign Secretary. We found some of his responses amazing. For instance, he said that we should be doing more on humanitarian aid. We pointed out to him that the large aid convoy was bombed and asked how people are supposed to deliver humanitarian aid and whether he happy for Britain to deliver aid by air, as people have been pressing—certainly in the House of Commons. He didn't answer the question. Then he was asked about the bombing of hospitals. His answer to that was that there are no hospitals in Aleppo. So we asked, "What are they, then?" He said they were jihadist training camps. How do you develop a dialogue, when people are dealing with their so-called facts, as opposed to our facts?

Sir Alan Duncan: I like to think that we and our politics live in a rational world and we value the truth. One of the things we set store by is knowing when someone is not telling the truth. In this conflict there are clear and obvious occasions where people are not telling the truth and saying that black is white when it isn't. On Aleppo, there are many such examples and they are very distressing. That is where we have to show the courage and the leadership to have clear views, point out truth from fiction and stand our ground. I hope that is what the UK is doing. We are having to do so—let us be absolutely frank—with Russia in a number of areas. Aleppo and Ukraine are two main examples. We will not be pushed around and be told that what we believe to be the truth is not. We will try and tell the truth, advertise the truth and make it clear. That is what we will do and it is one of our main weapons of diplomacy.

The ICC is quite a complicated, precise legal process, as Neil Crompton mentioned earlier. It is not something we can dictate: we cannot wave a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

wand and make it happen. It has been much more successful in Africa, for instance, than in other parts of the world. There are very technical steps towards invoking it.

Sir Tim Barrow: It starts exactly as you say, with gathering evidence. It takes time, but it is vital that, as far as we can, we make sure that evidence is not lost and that there is accountability and a commitment to accountability; that the tragic scenes we have seen in Aleppo or elsewhere are not forgotten; and that, where we can, we gather the evidence and build the cases so that the truth, as the Minister has so eloquently put it, does not get swept away by the tide of events. It can take time and it can be frustrating but this careful accrual of evidence and the determination that there be accountability should persist.

Q365 **Ian Murray:** May I just stick with Syria for a few more questions in the context of Russia? Minister, you said at the start in answer to the Chair's first question that you think that Russia is craving respect or trying to crave some respect, so why do you think Russia intervened in Syria? Was it to gain that respect? Did the West leave a vacuum? Were they looking to protect a strategic ally?

Sir Alan Duncan: Again, you are asking me to stray into Syria, although of course it involves Russia, but I will try to say what I think. I think there probably was a bit of a vacuum and they will take any steps they can to fill a vacuum. They obviously have historical links with Syria, in particular when Hafez al-Assad was there, so they will look on it as their previous sphere of influence. If they can see a way of doing something, they will, and they did.

Yes, it is not just a matter of respect. It is about the calculated, deliberate extension of their sphere of influence, as we are seeing in a number of corners of the world, of which Syria is the most vicious and nasty perhaps at the moment. Yes, it is a power play. To say that all they are trying to do is solve the problem and end the civil war is a very unconvincing stance.

Q366 **Ian Murray:** Hindsight is probably the best thing to have in foreign policy terms.

Sir Alan Duncan: Some of us try to have a bit of vision as well, when we are allowed.

Q367 **Ian Murray:** Let's put that away for a moment. Do think we should have done anything differently in response to Russian intervention in 2015?

Sir Alan Duncan: Again, this is very much about Syria. That is a very Syria-centric question and I do not cover that directly. We are still in the midst of this deep nastiness and to ask for that sort of historical perspective at this stage is not easy. I think it is going to take a lot more time and can be only answered properly once it is resolved if it is, and we hope it is soon, rather than while we are still in the midst of a potentially fast-changing situation.

Q368 **Ian Murray:** But you will be of the view now that Russia is the key influencer in Syria and that could be a key influencer of brokering any



HOUSE OF COMMONS

ceasefire or political settlement. Would the UK Government welcome that?

Sir Alan Duncan: You say “key influencer” as though they are benevolently in command of a difficult problem and, if only we were to engage with them, suddenly it would all be solved. That is certainly not how I see it. I think they have been a very malign influence and they have made the situation worse. That has to be pointed out very robustly.

Q369 **Ian Murray:** So you don’t see them as one of the key players?

Sir Alan Duncan: Oh, they are in the mix; that is undeniable. Whether they want to help solve the problem, I find unconvincing at the moment.

Q370 **Ian Murray:** Would you support an initiative if they decided to try to find a way through?

Sir Alan Duncan: Whatever our policy is, that will be our policy. It is not a matter of whether I support an initiative or not; it is a matter of what unfolds.

Sir Tim Barrow: The ways through, as you know, have been set down with Geneva and the UN Security Council resolution. If there is a way forward, within those contexts, we would support it, but we are not going to support an initiative that does not take account of the Syrian people and the needs for inclusive Government change and political process.

Ultimately, the tragedy of Aleppo is quite rightly preoccupying us, but it does not mean the end to the suffering in Syria and it does not mean an end to the conflict and difficulties of Syria. We are right to talk about Aleppo and the urgent and desperate humanitarian situation but we should not lose sight of the fact that the precepts that we previously set out are the right ones to try to tackle the wider Syrian problem.

Sir Alan Duncan: Let me give you an example of where Russia has been on the wrong side of the scope for initiative that you have put in your question. If you go back to October, we actually tried to secure a UN resolution. It would have urged a ceasefire and demanded that all parties immediately end aerial bombardments on Aleppo, but the Russians vetoed it. There is a perfect example of them being a negative force, rather than a positive one. They have now vetoed six resolutions since 2012.

Q371 **Chair:** I get the sense that you want us to go back to the ISSG agreement and the UN Security Council resolution that supported it in November.

Sir Tim Barrow: Yes—that has been the foundation of our policy. Neil can say more about it, but Geneva and the Security Council resolution have been the foundation of our policy.

Q372 **Chair:** Has there not been some element in which we collectively—the West, perhaps particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, given the failure to get effective military co-operation with the Russians in Syria—have been at fault?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Neil Crompton: The Foreign Secretary has spoken in the House about the constraints that there have been on western policy and, indeed, our own policy. I think John Kerry tried very valiantly to pursue an agreement with the Russians.

Q373 **Chair:** It struck me that he didn't have the full co-operation of the Pentagon in making an effective military co-ordination with the Russians and identifying who our mutual enemies are in both Daesh and al-Nusra. We failed to make a go at that. That's correct, isn't it?

Neil Crompton: Well, they tried valiantly to reach agreement on that. I think the core problem is that there are two different narratives around what is going on in Syria. Our view, as the Minister and Tim said, is that there is a civil war going on, which requires a political resolution. The Russians have presented their intervention and subsequent campaign as being about defeating terrorism in Syria, which is part of a broader struggle against Syria. Figures vary from month to month, but since they first intervened in September last year, ostensibly to defeat Daesh, we estimate that 80% of their airstrikes have not been against Daesh targets. Over the weekend, when you saw the events in Aleppo and the process of evacuation, we saw Daesh retake the town of Tadmur—Palmyra, as it is more commonly known—from the regime and the Russians.

The Russian narrative has evolved since they first got involved. Originally, they intervened to fight Daesh. Then they made a lot of the presence of al-Qaeda fighters, who certainly exist in parts of Syria. At least in Aleppo, a city of 200,000 people, we estimate that the Nusra front element of that, or the al-Qaeda element, is somewhere between 200 and 300 fighters. Other western countries have put it slightly higher, but you are talking a matter of hundreds, not thousands and thousands.

Q374 **Stephen Gethins:** So who else are they fighting in eastern Aleppo? Who is doing the fighting in eastern Aleppo from the rebel side?

Neil Crompton: Who has been fighting for the—

Q375 **Stephen Gethins:** Who is fighting in eastern Aleppo? Who would the Russians and the Assad regime class as the rebels in eastern Aleppo? Who are they fighting?

Neil Crompton: They have been fighting largely the moderate opposition for a long time. Aleppo was totemic for them. It was the moderate opposition's largest urban stronghold. It is Syria's second city, and traditionally and historically it was an important trading centre.

Q376 **Chair:** Who are the military forces? Al-Nusra, Daesh, the Free Syrian Army, all the people who are in rebellion against the Assad regime and its allies in eastern Aleppo—who are they? You said that there are 300 al-Nusra fighters.

Neil Crompton: Three hundred al-Nusra.

Q377 **Chair:** Who are the rest?

Neil Crompton: The rest are moderate opposition fighters.

Q378 **Chair:** Define. How good is our battle picture?

Neil Crompton: Well, it's certainly not 100%, but we have lines into the moderate opposition. We know the political leadership who speaks for the moderate opposition overseas—the High Negotiations Committee. We have lines into other groups. We talk to close allies who have strong links into the opposition.

Q379 **Chair:** The evidence that we have taken as a Committee on war on ISIL and operations in Syria is that the hard power who are aligned roughly with us—the group that you've just described—actually turns out to be vanishingly small when push comes to shove. They are various grades of Islamist fighters.

Neil Crompton: Certainly, the moderate opposition includes some Islamist fighters—well, large numbers of Islamist fighters, but there are no Daesh in eastern Aleppo. Daesh are further east. In their public narrative, the Russians essentially try to present everyone as a member of al-Qaeda and the al-Nusra front, as they are known locally.

Q380 **Chair:** But we fail to properly identify who is and isn't, which has made our job of countering that narrative rather more difficult, hasn't it?

Sir Tim Barrow: I think, Chair, you are absolutely right; it is very difficult to draw precise distinctions in a battlefield. Some of the people doing the fighting in eastern Aleppo are civilian citizens of eastern Aleppo under threat. It is a logic of the battlefield. The tragedy is that if you accept the narrative that lumps everyone together, you do, if you are not careful, create a greater terrorist threat from the people who are seeking to defend their own families and their own places, by saying that the only choice they have is to align themselves with the most extreme elements or, indeed, ultimately, terrorist elements.

The pressure of the battlefield can cause shifting alliance; but I do not think we should ignore Neil's point about armed opposition, including the people of eastern Aleppo themselves, in the face of extreme military pressure from the regime and its supporters. I think this is true more generally; we see the tactics of the regime, including barrel bombs and other such instances. That is in our view more likely than not to promote radicalisation, rather than managing to defeat terrorist elements. There is a complex picture, which shifts under the pressure of the battlefield; but I think it is really important that we do not ignore the fact that there are people who are fighting who are seeking to protect their city, their families, their place and their lives.

Q381 **Stephen Gethins:** Thank you for those responses. Turning to Ukraine for a moment, I wonder if you can demonstrate how you think sanctions imposed because of Russian actions in Crimea and in the east have affected Russian policy and practice.

Sir Alan Duncan: It is very difficult to measure the definite effect of sanctions because it is a broad weapon, but it has had a serious effect on putting economic pressure on Russia. It also targets some individuals, of course, and the Russian economy in general is under some pressure. It is



quite oil-dependent. It is thought to have contracted by 3.7%. Perhaps up to half a per cent. of that general picture has been caused by sanctions. Put it this way; if you were to lift them, it would set them free and, I think, release a lot of activity, which we would regret. I think that to keep sanctions and keep the pressure on is the right policy; and so we should persist with this continuing, if you like, broad policy of disapproval, which is clearly making the statement and is understood and is causing a bit of pain.

Q382 Stephen Gethins: Obviously, a key plank of foreign policy has been to work with European partners in terms of sanctions. Are you still sure that all EU member states are committed to continuing sanctions?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think so. I think that all European states understand the importance of seeing the Minsk agreement implemented and fulfilled. I do not think, in any conversations I have had, there is anyone who wants to resile from that. So yes, I would say that there is unity.

Sir Tim Barrow: We just saw the unity within the European Council; the sanctions were rolled over again. That debate was had and that decision was made last week, as you know.

Q383 Stephen Gethins: Could you foresee—obviously the EU has been an important part of your policy towards Russia: in the aftermath of any potential leaving the European Union, how would UK policy be applied in those circumstances?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think that the likely picture is that once we are not a member of the EU, we will not want to distance ourselves from actions of this sort. We will still want to be part of it, which would mean that there would need to be a parallel process that combines and unifies our actions with those of the EU once we have left.

In different circumstances, there might be different arrangements, so this is only speculative. I am sure that we would want to remain in harness with the European Union efforts of this sort in areas of foreign policy where not only do we agree but we are one of the main participants and leaders. That is what I imagine is going to happen.

Q384 Stephen Gethins: So, business as usual, but—

Sir Alan Duncan: Restructured.

Sir Tim Barrow: The key to the policy has not just been the unity within Europe, but also with the US. If we just had EU response and not the parallel and same response from the US, we would not have had the effect which we sought and it would not have had the effect which we have seen.

Policies towards Russia and policy on the Ukraine will need to be a Western policy, which is not therefore purely an EU or European policy. There is already a structural discussion that embraces key allies beyond the EU. Of course, you will also have a NATO response, not as sanctions, in other areas. It is a Western approach, rather than an EU approach.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Alan Duncan: If we were to ease sanctions, I do not think anyone would think the Russians would then say, "Oh, thanks very much, we are now going to behave much better as a result". Probably you would end up fossilising the Ukraine. In my view, this would have a retrograde effect. What you need is agreement in advance for something that is properly implemented after which you might then contemplate reducing or removing sanctions.

Q385 **Stephen Gethins:** So, if I am correct, you are confident of continued EU cohesion regardless of whether or not the UK is still part of the European Union?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes.

Q386 **Stephen Gethins:** Good. Further down the line, how does Russia get its sanctions lifted? If it is really hurting Russia and it is decided, "Right, we really need to figure out a way to get these sanctions lifted?" how do they go about doing that?

Sir Tim Barrow: They implement the Minsk agreement with regard to the sanctions that are tied to that. There are of course sanctions with regard to Crimea as well, so we need to make that clear. The point about sanctions is not that they are an end in themselves, they are there, as you rightly said, to try to influence Russian decision making. We can point to their impact in that I think they were one of the reasons why the Minsk agreement actually was eventually reached, so the way forward is clear. It is implementation Minsk. That is what we are seeking. We are not seeking sanctions for the sake of sanctions, but seeking where implementation Minsk is moving forward with regard to Ukraine and Ukrainian sovereignty.

Q387 **Mike Gapes:** As you are aware, the United States has legislation on the sanctions that further than we do, in particular the Magnitsky Act, which allows the US Government to sanction individuals who are implicated in gross violation of human rights. Would the introduction of similar powers provide our Government with a lever to influence individual Russian decision makers?

Sir Alan Duncan: You know the detail better than I do.

Sir Tim Barrow: First, since you mentioned Mr Magnitsky, we all agree on the tragedy of his death. In many ways, it symbolises and highlights the failure of Russia's judicial and prison system that his death happened and that the perpetrators of his death and those responsible have not been brought to justice.

Your specific point relates to our response. You are right that the US has its Magnitsky Act. We have different powers, which we consider to be relevant and important in this area. The then Home Secretary set this out very clearly. We have powers in place that are at least as robust as the US Magnitsky Act. Individuals of concern can be added to the UK's watch list and this is used by the Home Office for the purpose of national security. That is the means by which, if we have evidence of, for instance,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

individuals involved in the Magnitsky case, that is taken very carefully into account when considering these applications.

Mike Gapes: But that's visa applications. The Magnitsky sanctions go further than that, I think.

Sir Tim Barrow: The primary response to the Magnitsky case has been with regard to visas and we have the powers so to respond. That is the position we have taken.

Q388 **Mike Gapes:** There are amendments currently under consideration to the Criminal Finances Bill. Margaret Hodge has proposed some amendments, which a number of MPs, including me, are supporting, to allow the UK to impose sanctions on individuals. Chris Bryant raised this yesterday with the Prime Minister. There seems to be some confusion in the Prime Minister's answer as to exactly what the Government's position is. Could you clarify whether the Government are prepared to support those amendments to the Criminal Finances Bill?

Sir Tim Barrow: We have said and we are clear that we are committed to promoting and strengthening universal human rights globally. We are currently in discussions on the proposals, which are in Parliament and will be debated in January 2017.

Sir Alan Duncan: The Bill is coming up for Report, so it will obviously be discussed in the House. Certainly the Home Office view is that we have sufficient powers at the moment and our flexibility and scope might be reduced by having Magnitsky powers here.

Q389 **Mike Gapes:** But these are not Magnitsky powers. They are half way towards them. I do not think they are identical. The amendment to the Criminal Finances Bill specifically deals with certain areas of finances, not the gamut of the American model.

Sir Alan Duncan: The Home Office leads on this for the legislation, so I am not fully up to date with any discussions that might be happening because the Report stage is approaching, but if the Committee would like me to write to it as soon as I possibly can, of course I will.

Mike Gapes: That would be helpful.

Q390 **Chair:** That would be helpful. In general, do you buy Bill Browder's analysis of what happened to his lawyer, Sergei Magnitsky?

Sir Tim Barrow: The case of Mr Magnitsky—

Q391 **Chair:** You talked about the failures of the criminal justice system and his death in prison is obviously an example of that. In terms of what appeared to be a crime against his company that sat behind that, do you think there is something wrong with Mr Browder's analysis, which he has repeated extensively in public, both here and in the States?

Sir Tim Barrow: I am not going to debate with Mr Browder about this particular instance. The fact is that Mr Magnitsky died in detention and people have not been held accountable. That charge is grievous and it is a

failing that people have not been held accountable. That would be true wherever and it is true of Russia.

Sir Alan Duncan: I think you have taken evidence from Mr Browder.

Q392 **Chair:** Yes, we have, but we are quite interested in your view of whether Mr Browder is a reliable witness. His account of the theft of documents from his company, which led to tax reclaimed by criminals quite closely associated with the regime, which then led to a process of events leading eventually to Mr Magnitsky being on trial in his absence, dead, is an appalling story about the state of the Russian justice system. Do you share the analysis?

Sir Alan Duncan: What happened to Mr Magnitsky was a tragedy. It was appalling and a posthumous conviction is completely out of kilter with what should have happened. I am not privy to all that happened because I was not involved at the time, so I am not going to comment on the case that led up to that. But I don't think one needs to, to focus on the fact that Mr Magnitsky died in prison and people have not been held accountable, and there should be responsibility for that.

Sir Alan Duncan: We have been quite outspoken in criticising the premature closure of the investigation into his death and indeed the posthumous conviction. We have certainly expressed a very clear stand on that.

Q393 **Stephen Gethins:** To go back again to Ukraine, obviously a great deal of your work to support Ukraine goes on through the Ukraine-EU association agreement. Will that still apply after leaving the European Union, or will a new agreement need to come into place?

Sir Tim Barrow: That question has two parts. Clearly the EU relationship with Ukraine will continue and we will need to develop our own bilateral relationship with Ukraine, which we will want to do. It will be supportive of Ukraine and Ukrainian reform and trade, where our interests remain.

Q394 **Stephen Gethins:** So, similar to sanctions, which we were discussing earlier, it will be pretty much business as usual—the same again. Do you imagine it will be the same again, or do you—

Sir Tim Barrow: It is a kind invitation, Mr Gethins, but, as a former ambassador to Ukraine, I believe that there are things that we can do specifically bilaterally. We need to do things in partnership with our European colleagues, but we also need to play our bilateral role. We do that already. Not all the things we do with Ukraine flow through the EU, nor is that the case for other nations.

Q395 **Stephen Gethins:** What will being out of the European Union allow us to do that we cannot do at present?

Sir Alan Duncan: A general point of enormous importance is that our leaving the EU will not and should not be allowed to diminish our engagement as a serious NATO power and large economy looking to the broader defence and security of eastern Europe and other parts of the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

world. We do not in any way want to see our influence and effectiveness weakened by our leaving the EU and fully accept that in the matter of foreign policy there are going to have to be lots of areas where we will have to work very closely alongside the EU, fully in harness and in harmony with them. We want that to continue.

It may be that we will even increase some of the things we do. For instance, we have a forward deployment into Estonia at the moment—things like that. We are not going to back off from things like that just because we are leaving the EU.

Q396 Stephen Gethins: I am grateful that there is that continued commitment to Ukraine and elsewhere. Obviously the troop deployment is a NATO issue. Just to finish this, what do you think you could do additionally that you cannot do at the moment? What areas are you looking at?

Sir Alan Duncan: I suppose where there is an EU agreement you do it within the terms of that. Where we are the United Kingdom outside the EU, we could do EU plus. We could do.

Q397 Stephen Gethins: What is EU plus? Just to find out what we could do that we cannot do just now.

Sir Alan Duncan: It is a phrase that I just picked off the top of my head—don't take it as formed Government policy with that language. We will be an independent, strong, significant power in the world. We could do further forward deployment. We may have further defence engagement. We may have more military and diplomatic engagement with individual countries on a bilateral basis. Any such thing is possible, as it always indeed has been.

Q398 Stephen Gethins: I can see the defence side of it, which is obviously a NATO issue rather than a European Union issue.

Sir Alan Duncan: It is not just a NATO issue. It could equally be a UK issue. Not everything that we do comes under the umbrella of NATO—not at all. It does not have to be under the NATO umbrella in all cases at all. Indeed, it may be more likely not to be.

Q399 Stephen Gethins: There is a continued commitment to Ukraine and, even if you cannot give any specific examples at the moment, you will look at additional areas where maybe you could continue to deepen that relationship.

Sir Alan Duncan: Well, I cannot project on what we will look at in the future, nor can I speak on behalf of the MOD and future policy, but, in terms of concept, yes.

Q400 Stephen Gethins: Okay. Just to look at things a little more broadly, how do you think the FCO's priority to Russia has changed since the end of the Cold War, over the past 25 years? That is a much broader question. That context may be helpful when we are finalising our report.

Sir Tim Barrow: It is a really important question in terms of this inquiry, because the truth is we have seen, as we have said elsewhere, a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

chequered history to the relationship between the UK and Russia since independence. The focus today is very much on the strength of our responses to the challenges that Russia has been putting down, but we should not forget other parts of that 25-year history, whether it be Her Majesty the Queen's visit to Russia in 1994, which I had the privilege to be part of, or indeed President Putin's visit here in, I think, 2003.

I think it is fair for all of us to acknowledge that after the Soviet Union collapsed, it took us time to try to find the right point of balance and prioritisation within the new situation. We have talked about 25 years. There may have been a temptation—I would certainly say this personally—at some point in the initial period after the collapse of the Soviet Union to think that there was a sort of presumed convergence. What was the memorable phrase? "The end of history," or the death of history, or whatever. Well, history did not stop, and history looms large.

What you have seen over the past 10 years at least, and probably more, is a re-investment—making sure that we do not have Russia too low down our priorities. And not just Russia—the point you make is really important, Mr Gethins—but the other countries that emerged from the former Soviet Union. In some areas, we did very well. It is to me one of the great testaments to our policy that when I sit at NATO or indeed currently at the EU, I see around the table people whom, when I started my diplomatic job, were inconceivable, in the shape of our Baltic friends and whatever—the Estonians sitting next to us in the Council, or whatever. So we got some things right. Did we have it entirely right? I would say, for instance, the fact that it took us until—when was it we opened in Bishkek?

Sir Alan Duncan: That was 2012, I think.

Sir Tim Barrow: Yes. I think underlying your question is: did we get our prioritisation right? I am not sure we got it right all the way through.

Q401 **Stephen Gethins:** You make a very good point about the Baltic states—small independent northern states that have made a tremendous success out of independence—and you make it very well. That point apart, you are right to point out a new assertiveness around Russian foreign policy which has a big impact on its neighbours. Given that new assertiveness in recent years, are there additional FCO resources going into that desk, and will there be in the future as well?

Sir Alan Duncan: In general terms, the answer is yes. We are rebuilding our pool of expertise. You have a perfect example sitting on my left who is at the pinnacle of that field of expertise. We have a lot more people learning Russian—I think we have seen a 30% increase—and learning it over a longer period so that the language skill itself is an enhanced skill. Our research resources, again, have been enhanced.

Q402 **Chair:** Can you give us a bit of detail on that? How many people are learning Russian? How much money are you putting into extra research?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have the percentage increase; I have not actually got the exact number, but maybe you know the numbers.

Sir Tim Barrow: I do not have the exact numbers. It is a 30% increase, as you say.

Q403 **Chair:** Can you drop us a note with the detail of exactly the extra capability you are giving to—

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes. We've stuck an additional director into the directorate and things like that, so there has been an increase in personnel, but we can give you proper numbers.

Q404 **Stephen Gethins:** The additional information will be helpful. Do you think the FCO currently understands or has sufficient analytical resources to understand Russian foreign policy?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am smiling because I was thinking if you want to recommend we have a lot more resources across the whole world, don't hold back.

Chair: We do all the time, because it is the view of this Committee that you as an office do not have sufficient analytical capability. We have repeated it ad nauseam on every occasion we have been able to do so. I rather hope you will agree.

Stephen Gethins: The Chair makes an excellent point.

Sir Tim Barrow: Well, I think we do have, within the Foreign Office, the capabilities to analyse Russian foreign policy. That is the question and that is a combination, but it is not just the Foreign Office, it is also across Government. The challenge for us is not just to understand, but to impact and influence, and that is where the real challenge lies. In terms of resources, we have both in the mainstream and also in our research analysts, our Eastern European research group, real deep knowledge and expertise about Russia, which helps us understand Russian politics.

Q405 **Stephen Gethins:** Do you think you were able to adequately predict what has happened in the Donbass, Syria and elsewhere? You are right to have said earlier on that there are lessons to be learned, but how well do you think you did in those particular areas?

Sir Tim Barrow: Our predictions on Syria were pretty good. Russia saw its interest engaged and was willing to move into Syria, militarily, if it deemed it necessary and it did so. On the Donbass, we did less well on prediction. Certainly, that is what it felt like to me. But it was not just us. This is one of the important points. There were many people who had not expected the move on the Donbass.

Do we learn lessons? Yes. Have we looked at that? Maybe, with hindsight, we should have been able to predict it better.

Q406 **Stephen Gethins:** When is the Foreign Secretary going to deliver his message to the Russians face-to-face, as he mentioned a couple of months back?

Sir Tim Barrow: You mean in terms of a visit?

Q407 **Stephen Gethins:** Yes.

Sir Tim Barrow: We said we would like to make a visit but I do not have a current date to announce today.

Sir Alan Duncan: If I may chip in to give you a fact? The estimate is that we have 163 Russian-speakers in the Foreign Office at the moment, of varying degrees of skill, up to degree level. Again, we will give you the details.

Q408 **Stephen Gethins:** One final question: on the trade agreement with Ukraine, do you foresee that rolling over, just so I am clear in my own head?

Sir Tim Barrow: The DCFTA?

Q409 **Stephen Gethins:** Yes, on the Ukraine-EU trade agreement. Do you see that rolling over?

Sir Tim Barrow: it is coming substantively into force with regard to the position with Netherlands. I believe that is the case. We found ways forward within the EU last week, which we hope will mean that that does, indeed, move forward.

Q410 **Mike Gapes:** When was the last ministerial visit to Russia?

Sir Tim Barrow: That's a good question. One year ago.

Sir Alan Duncan: So, my predecessor, David Lidington, in December 2015.

Q411 **Mike Gapes:** Has there been any visit by any other Government Department Ministers since then?

Sir Alan Duncan: No, I don't think so, no.

Q412 **Mike Gapes:** When has any Russian Minister come to this country?

Sir Alan Duncan: We are in the process of reciprocal—I think—invitation at the moment. The date is not yet absolutely fixed, but expected to be in the first quarter of next year.

Q413 **Mike Gapes:** What is the current state of UK-Russia Government-to-Government dialogue?

Sir Alan Duncan: There are many forums, other than visiting the country itself. The Foreign Secretary has had numerous encounters with Sergey Lavrov. The Prime Minister has spoken to President Putin.

Chair: The previous Foreign Secretary had said there wasn't any point talking to Sergey Lavrov, as I remember, in the House of Commons. What's the current view?

Q414 **Mike Gapes:** The Foreign Secretary did say that Russia was in danger of becoming a pariah state. How did Mr Lavrov react to that?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Alan Duncan: I am not familiar with his exact reaction. Even last week, I was at the Foreign Affairs Council, where Sergey Lavrov spoke about a number of things. I beg your pardon—it was the OSCE in Hamburg; I have so many meetings that they all merge into one. He was there. The Foreign Secretary has obviously had many such encounters, in the context of Syria in particular. There is a constant series of encounters.

Mike Gapes: Encounters, but not bilateral meetings.

Sir Tim Barrow: There are bilateral meetings as well. For instance, there was a bilateral meeting between the Foreign Secretary and Sergey Lavrov in the margins of the UN General Assembly. That was a proper sit-down bilateral meeting, at which there was discussion of many of the issues we have discussed today. There have been telephone conversations—11 August, 12 September and 22 November are the dates that have been proffered to me—between the Foreign Secretary and Sergey Lavrov. So there is contact, to answer your question.

Sir Alan Duncan: And between the Prime Minister and Putin in Hangzhou.

Q415 **Mike Gapes:** May I try to get a comparator within the P5? How does this compare with our relationships, dialogues, meetings with and visits to China?

Sir Tim Barrow: In terms of the contact we have within the P5, I am afraid I can't tell you what the contact with the Chinese is.

Mike Gapes: Not just within the P5, but because Russia and China are both members of the P5, I am trying to get a comparator of the relationships, the number of ministerial visits and the level of engagement.

Sir Alan Duncan: I think, at Foreign Minister level, there has been greater engagement on a more regular basis with Russia.

Sir Tim Barrow: I suspect, over a Government, that there was more engagement with China than Russia. That is a consequence of the position we find ourselves in; we've been clear, after Ukraine, that it is not business as usual, which has affected the relationship. That is a decision and a truth that we should not deny. You would not want us to have responded to what happened in Ukraine without there being an impact.

Q416 **Mike Gapes:** To be clear: the main barriers to a productive and positive political dialogue are what has been happening in Ukraine and what happened in Georgia before that, plus Mr Litvinenko's murder, which was mentioned earlier, plus the more recent events in Syria. Those are the main difficulties that we have with Russia?

Sir Tim Barrow: I think you capture some of the things that have tested the bilateral relationship. As I say, there has been an impact on some of our structures of governmental contact.

Our experts behind us have given us some further information since you asked about visits from Russia to the UK since Mr Lidington's visit to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Moscow, which I think was the last visit I hosted. In terms of Russian visits here since 2015, Deputy Prime Minister Golodets visited the UK, and the Education and Science Minister and, I believe, the Culture Minister also visited.

Q417 Mike Gapes: Okay. May I ask you about the state of UK-Russian military-to-military dialogue? Is there a minimal dialogue, or is it continuing at a reasonable level? Given the risk of misunderstandings, nuclear accidents, close encounters with aircraft flying in or near our airspace, incidents like that which happened between Turkey and Russia, and the potential for underwater clashes with submarines and so on, what is the level of military-to-military dialogue?

Sir Tim Barrow: You are right to highlight that particular issue, Mr Gapes; we do not want misunderstandings and misadventure. We are concerned by some of the Russian military's practices, including with regard to the Channel. Yes, there have been, and are, mil-mil contacts designed to make sure that those risks are mitigated. It is in that area where there is still some mil-mil contact. There is not the genuinely bilateral military co-operation. Following Russia's actions in Ukraine, that has changed, but there are still mil-mil contacts designed to mitigate the risk of accident and misadventure.

Q418 Mike Gapes: Do we do co-operation via NATO on the military-to-military side, or do we mainly do it on a bilateral basis?

Sir Tim Barrow: There are both channels; we need to have our bilateral channels as well as NATO.

Sir Alan Duncan: Quite a lot of the NATO co-operation that had been built up was suspended because of Ukraine in 2014.

Q419 Mike Gapes: Because of the annexation of Crimea?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes.

Sir Tim Barrow: Yes.

Q420 Chair: Before going to the final questions, about civil society and our engagement with the regime itself, I have a specific question on the EU-Ukraine association agreement. As I understood your evidence, when we leave the European Union, that will fall as it applies to us. Will it be replaced with a United Kingdom-Ukraine agreement? Would that be seen as one of the actions on—

Sir Tim Barrow: My expectation would be that we would seek to develop our economic relations with Ukraine as we will with other countries in the world after we leave. As we leave the EU, we will need a new basis for our economic relations with Ukraine, as we will with other countries.

Q421 Chair: How important is supporting Ukraine on resilience and reform as a British national interest?

Sir Tim Barrow: We think that it's very important and that we need to continue to invest in helping Ukraine with its reforms. This Ukrainian



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Government has done a lot more than some of its predecessors, but there is a lot more to do, so we consider that important and are putting programmes and other support in place to help the Ukrainian Government to move forward in this area.

Q422 **Chair:** Do you anticipate that securing Ukraine within the western liberal model or the European family will remain the highest priority for British foreign policy?

Sir Tim Barrow: I suspect that Ukraine will continue to matter. I would put it a slightly different way—letting Ukraine make sovereign and independent choices and move forward as its people choose. Yes, it will continue to matter.

Q423 **Chair:** What support has the Foreign Office provided for civil society and NGOs operating in Russia?

Sir Alan Duncan: It depends on which field. If you're looking, for instance, at LGBT issues, which may be in your mind, we have been really quite robust with the Russians on this. We totally disapproved—and said so—of the law that they described as dealing with the promotion of non-traditional sexual relations. We have raised that bilaterally. We helped facilitate Ian McKellen's visit in 2016, which I think had a very significant impact on the thinking and awareness of youth in Russia. We have increased the funding available to support civil society in Russia when NGOs and charities are facing growing pressure from within, and we are funding, I think, quite a broad portfolio of human rights, civil society and pro-democracy NGOs inside Russia.

Q424 **Chair:** How are we able to do that without those organisations being at risk of being labelled foreign agents?

Sir Tim Barrow: I have had a lot of contact, as you will understand, in my previous job, and to a certain extent we are guided by those organisations themselves, in terms of what is the right way to help them. Of course that has to be done properly; it has to be done in a way that is appropriate for the UK and for the UK taxpayer. But most of the organisations that we have funded have said that they would like to continue to receive funding and that they will continue to argue their case within Russia about the utility of their actions. So I think that we are well placed to listen to Russian organisations on how they see the utility of our help.

Sir Alan Duncan: NGOs are under enormous pressure in Russia. There is the so-called undesirable organisations law, which puts NGOs in serious difficulty. We protested against that and made our views extremely clear.

Q425 **Chair:** How can UK-Russian relations improve while Putin and his associates remain in power?

Sir Alan Duncan: Engagement is essential, but—this perhaps summarises where we came in at the beginning—from a position of firm views on our part, upholding the rules-based order in the world and, of course, having to understand President Putin as a strong personality. We



HOUSE OF COMMONS

should engage with clear and robust opinions. We would certainly be against disengagement. That would be wrong. It is back to the standard phrase—full and frank discussions.

Q426 **Chair:** Endless western leaders have attempted a reset, and it would certainly seem that the new Administration of the United States is going to give that about as serious a go as is possible. What is your assessment of how that is likely to fare in the medium term?

Sir Alan Duncan: I don't think we should prejudge how President Elect Trump intends to handle Russia. I hope in meetings that the UK Government will have with the new Administration, we can make our views, our logic and the intellectual cohesion of our arguments very clear and help be persuasive. The American Administration is not just one man; it is an enormous apparatus, well equipped to gather information and explain to an incoming President what is going on. I don't think, certainly from our point of view, there is a switch that can be flicked, hence our policy of continuing robust, constant engagement, expressing the while a clear view on areas where we think their conduct should be resisted and changed.

Q427 **Chair:** How anxious are you that we are going to find our entire policy towards Russia overturned by a change of direction in the new Administration? Or is the new Administration going to attempt to reset and come a cropper, as every other western Government have over the last decade and a half?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think it would be impolitic of me to prejudge the actions of the incoming President. As a Committee, you of course will form your own view and no doubt express it in your report.

Sir Tim Barrow: But we do see, as the Minister said, that there is scope—indeed, as Mr Gapes and others have said—for engagement, which deals on the basis of the clarity of our positions and talks about our concerns. If we do not have engagement as part of the response, the risk is of miscalculation or escalation. We must be clear, as the Minister said, and we must be robust, but we must also be willing to talk. I don't think it is a bad thing to have another chance to open up channels to Russia and discuss and engage in a way to manage the differences, as well as potential where there is potential.

Sir Alan Duncan: May I just say that it is not all bad? Things work at many layers and many levels. We have had a very successful visit of the Princess Royal. Sir David King, a climate change person, has visited. We of course have the encounters or bilaterals that we have been discussing. We have a measure of co-operation on security for things like the World cup. So there are some foundations on which we can and would like to build, but we think that Russia should not challenge other countries' territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Q428 **Mike Gapes:** On the question of President Elect Trump, would it be correct to interpret his strategy or what appears to be his strategy as being to separate Russia and China? Isn't there a view that he regards



HOUSE OF COMMONS

China as the main economic and political challenge to the United States, from both remarks made before his election and subsequent texts and phone messages with Taiwan's President? Isn't there potentially an American strategy to say to Russia, "You can deal with Europe; I am interested in the Pacific"? Is there any thinking, planning or contingency work going on within the FCO for what could be—to take up the Chairman's point—a reset of US, and therefore NATO, priorities? We could find ourselves very much behind the curve, to use an American expression, if there is suddenly a closer relationship between Russia and the United States and they see this as a way to have mutual beneficial interests.

Sir Alan Duncan: It would be ill advised for us to assume, or even speculate in public, what we believe President Elect Trump's thinking and policy to be, ahead of his ability as a newly inaugurated President to state that for himself. We can always have speculative meetings in the Foreign Office to say, "What if? What if this? What if that?" That is a proper part of policy making.

Q429 **Mike Gapes:** So you are considering these issues in the Foreign Office?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is part of the daily diet in the Foreign Office always to think about what may or may not happen in the world. To say that it is formalised in that way is, perhaps, not really accurate. All I will say is that we will work with the incoming President, we hope in a constructive way, working for a better world, but we are not going to put words into his mouth and pre-empt his own policy statements before he is even in office.

Q430 **Mike Gapes:** Our previous Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, and the Government now, have very close relations with China. We have developed them economically and politically over recent years. Doesn't that indicate that we might have a bumpy ride if—when—President Trump comes in?

Sir Alan Duncan: Not necessarily. I really think that we have to address that once we know where we are and are engaged on a personal level with the new President.

Q431 **Chair:** Minister for the Americas as well as Europe, how good are our links into the transition team?

Sir Alan Duncan: They're there. What we are dealing with, of course, is a slightly unconventional transition. That is self-evident, but I am confident that the UK and the US will always work very closely together. I think that it is in the interests of the world that we do. I am confident that, on many levels, within weeks and months we will be working very closely together—the US and the UK—as we always have done and, I hope, always will.

Q432 **Chair:** Are the links into the transition team in the state they were in before the date of the election itself when the transition team completely changed?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Alan Duncan: I think that there are very good links. You will forgive me if I don't talk about them in public at the moment, but I am confident that they will be in very good shape and will serve our interests well.

Q433 **Chair:** Beyond Putin, if one presumes that relations with Russia are going to remain very difficult while his Administration continues to exist, what long-term strategy do we have for engagement with Russia? What work are we doing on the next generation of Russian leaders? What plans have we got to extend engagement as part of a long-term people-to-people strategy?

Sir Alan Duncan: There are always people-to-people links. One cannot look at many countries and say that it is obvious who is coming next. I think that our current policy should continue as it is and will serve us well for the future. If personalities change, the manner in which we engage can adapt accordingly. I think that "steady as she goes" would be our policy.

Sir Tim Barrow: Just to give some underlying basis to that—for instance, looking at Russian students coming to the UK, I think there were some 3,600 a year. We have had a series of events over the last years, whether it be the Year of Culture, or the Year of Language and Literature, which is happening currently, and there has been work in science and other spheres. So you are absolutely right to highlight that the relationship is much broader than the Government-to-Government, and rightly so.

You were politely sceptical, Chairman, when I suggested that we weren't in the new cold war. One of the reasons I would highlight that is that, at the embassy to which I first went in '80s, everything came through the narrow stovepipe of Government-to-Government. There are now many different forms of connection—people-to-people links, exchanges—that are not Government-to-Government driven and they are the better for it. This Government supports these links, whether it be students, whether it be scientific—

Sir Alan Duncan: We have increased Chevening scholarships, for instance, quite significantly.

Sir Tim Barrow: If you want a symbol of success of people-to-people links, you could choose the two Nobel prize winners—Russians working out of Manchester, I think it was—or Tim Peake's launch with a Russian commander and a US colleague.

Q434 **Chair:** It's all hunky-dory

Sir Tim Barrow: But you hadn't mentioned it yet. I thought I would give you a chance.

Q435 **Ian Murray:** One of the key non-governmental options available, of course, is the World cup in 2018. What is the official position of Her Majesty's Government on Russia holding the World cup?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is decided by others rather than Governments. I am the worst person in politics to ask about football.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q436 **Ian Murray:** It is bigger than football: it is life and death.

Q437 **Mike Gapes:** He's quoting Bill Shankly.

Sir Tim Barrow: We recognise that. The 2018 World cup has been awarded to Russia; it is for FIFA. We are planning accordingly, whether it be on the consular side, the commercial side or likewise.

Q438 **Chair:** Sir Alan, Sir Tim, Mr Crompton, thank you very much indeed for your time this morning. I understand the constraints of giving evidence in public on the sensitive area of relations with Russia but we are grateful for your time.