

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Autocracies and UK Foreign Policy, HC 109

Tuesday 22 October 2019

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Chris Bryant; Ann Clwyd; Stephen Gethins; Conor McGinn; Royston Smith.

Questions 70-163

Witnesses

I: Heather Wheeler MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Martin Harris, Director, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, FCO, and Kate White, Director, Asia-Pacific Directorate, FCO.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Foreign and Commonwealth Office](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Heather Wheeler MP, Martin Harris and Kate White.

Q70 Chair: Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Minister, please introduce yourself and the two members of staff you have with you.

Mrs Wheeler: Heather Wheeler, the Member of Parliament for South Derbyshire and Minister in the Foreign Office for Asia and the Pacific area.

Kate White: I'm Kate White and I am the Asia-Pacific Director at the Foreign Office.

Martin Harris: I'm Martin Harris and I am the Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Q71 Stephen Gethins: Can you give an overview of your assessment of the risks posed by autocracies to academia in the UK?

Mrs Wheeler: Yes. We have concerns that autocracies are causing trouble in academia, to the extent that we see this as a threat that needs dealing with, and are therefore dealing with it. I will bring Kate in on that, but one of the things you may be aware of is that we have introduced a thing called trusted research, where the Government have worked hand in hand with academia, so that if they think they have any issues there, they know that we have got their back. Kate, would you like to add a little bit more?

Kate White: Thank you, Minister. There are a number of ways in which there could be concerns. We have been aware for many years of anecdotal reports of interference and efforts to put pressure on academics. That is now protected under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, and that is a really important principle.

Through the Foreign Office, we have also been tracking the way these debates have unfolded in places such as Australia and other partner countries. As the Minister mentioned, in areas where there are very sensitive areas of research or really important national assets that our universities hold very dear, we want them to be internationally focused, but we also want them to do that in a way that is clear-eyed if there are risks. We are trying to work with the academic institutions to maintain that international platform, but in a way that is safe and protects national security where it needs to.

Q72 Stephen Gethins: If this is important, can you explain why this was not mentioned in the written evidence, and are there areas that were not in the written evidence that you might want to highlight to the Committee?

Mrs Wheeler: Absolutely. First things first, I must apologise for the omission, and for the fact that it wasn't in the written evidence. It is kind of you to get that on the record for us.



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The FCO is actively working with the Department for Education, other Whitehall Departments and the academic sector to mitigate future risks. Exactly as Kate has mentioned, the Government have enshrined this protection of academic freedom in the law through the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. We have this ongoing conversation with academia right across the country—not just the Russell Group, but higher education institutions as well. We have not covered everything, but we will do our best.

- Q73 Stephen Gethins:** Thank you. Is there anything else that you think the FCO is doing to ensure that UK universities are not being influenced by autocratic states that you would like to get on the record today for our inquiry?

Mrs Wheeler: Sorry—could you say that again?

Stephen Gethins: Given the evidence, is there any other work that the FCO is doing that you think universities should be aware of, or that we should be aware of, to ensure that our universities are not influenced by autocratic states?

Mrs Wheeler: Thank you. I understand where you are coming from. We are working with the largest representative groups in higher education. We have ensured that that is an ongoing conversation, because we want to talk about the research being done and any national infrastructure projects that might flow from that, so that higher education institutions and universities are completely au fait with any risk that they might be exposing themselves to regarding their future work.

- Q74 Stephen Gethins:** Are you engaging with the devolved Administrations on that?

Kate White: I am not certain how the devolved Administrations are being brought in, but we can clarify that for the Committee.

- Q75 Stephen Gethins:** Would you mind, as it is quite important? Perhaps you could write to us on that question. Finally, we are told by senior university staff that some students are being manipulated and used by the Chinese embassy. How are you monitoring and responding to instances of such influence?

Mrs Wheeler: We certainly keep a close eye on things such as Confucius Institutes, any illicit financial arrangements, and Chinese students who are being duped regarding their bank accounts. We are very careful about those things. As Kate said earlier, we have also kept an eye on what happened in Australia, where some Chinese students went on to the streets—they were pro-China, rather than pro-Hong Kong—and the issues going on there.

- Q76 Chair:** What did you think of the incidents in Nottingham, which were similar?

Mrs Wheeler: Genuinely, I don't know about that, Chair. My apologies. Kate, do you know about something happening in Nottingham? I live up that way, but I don't know anything about it.



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Kate White: I think it was around the Hong Kong situation.

Chair: It was, yes.

Kate White: All this debate is about how freedom of expression and assembly in this country is taken forward. We want academic institutions to be alive and aware to the ways that overseas student groups can potentially be influenced by their host Governments. That is the area of interest to the Committee. If people are protesting peacefully within the law, then that is obviously lawful in this country.

Q77 **Chair:** This is not just about the influence that host Governments can have on students; it is also about the influence that students can have on wider society. The challenge that draws us into this question and leads us to organisations such as Confucius Institutes is not that they are subsidised to teach Chinese—it is a matter for the Chinese state if it wishes to allocate resources in that way. However, the way that the language is taught, the way students are influenced, and the leverage placed on institutions—we will come to that in a moment—can have a direct impact on the liberties we value. The openness that we see as crucial to academic integrity can become a weakness to autocratic states that are willing to exploit that to further their ends and undermine our freedoms.

Kate White: Absolutely, and we are clear-eyed about Confucius Institutes being political organisations. They are not akin to the British Council, for example, which is involved in teaching English in countries around the world. We want universities to be aware of that, and to be alive to the way groups of students might be expressing certain views on behalf of others. It remains important that there be no compromising of the principle of academic freedom enshrined in law in this country. If there is—and if universities raise those concerns with us—then the Government will be supportive, if they feel that academic freedom is coming under pressure.

Q78 **Royston Smith:** Those of us with universities in our constituencies understand the importance of the Chinese market to universities' financial fortunes. The cross-Departmental international education strategy has a clear focus on boosting UK education in the Chinese market. How are you advising other Government Departments to ensure that academic freedoms are protected, and are balanced with universities' commercial interest?

Mrs Wheeler: Very good question. There are about 106,000 Chinese students in this country, and we would certainly ask universities to very seriously consider whether they thought they were sharing those students throughout the country, rather than an area becoming so much of a magnet that it changed the style of the university. That would be a risk. We meet regularly with pro vice-chancellors to make sure that they are completely aware of the standards that should be upheld by universities, but also of the British values that should be upheld by the universities as well. At the moment, we have not had particular grumbles back, but we want to make sure, through things like the trusted research work, that



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they feel they can come to us, either through the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy or the Department for Education.

- Q79 **Royston Smith:** What you are saying is that you have a dialogue with universities and university representative bodies, and you talk to them about the commercial advantages versus academic freedoms. You have advised them on what you think is a sensible balance.

Mrs Wheeler: In a word, yes, but it is about not accepting risk at any price, and about upholding British values. I will ask Kate to come in a bit more on this. That is what is important for our universities' quality. We want our universities to be as welcoming as they can be. Meeting people from around the world enriches students, absolutely. Equally, there are important issues to do with research and future intellectual property. But we are a welcoming country, and we want to stay like that. Do you have anything to add to that, Kate?

- Q80 **Royston Smith:** Before you answer, Kate, if you have had this dialogue and conversation with universities and their representative bodies, and have advised them of what you think is a reasonable balance, what advice have you given them? Can you give me any examples of when they have actually acted on your advice?

Kate White: I can say a bit more about that. Universities are independent entities. They want to talk to Government on this and many other areas, but they will take their own decisions in line with laws and regulations that exist, one of them being about academic freedom in this country.

The initiative highlighted by the Minister on trusted research takes as its grounding the fact that universities absolutely want and need to be internationally focused to be competitive. That world-class research base cannot continue if universities close up against the outside world. There is a lot of exciting, world-leading research happening in and with China that academics in this country rightly want to collaborate on, but if they choose to do so, they need to do it in a well-informed way. That is what this trusted research campaign is seeking to do—raise awareness and understanding. It is also the sort of aim that your Committee has: to make sure that people are not naive when they work in certain ways on certain issues with certain countries.

- Q81 **Royston Smith:** It is not either/or, is it?

Mrs Wheeler: No, it is a balance.

- Q82 **Royston Smith:** It is not that we should have no collaboration and protect ourselves, or have open gates for people to gain commercial benefits. What I am trying to get at is: where do we set that, and what kind of conversations do you have with universities, vice-chancellors and their representative bodies on where you think that should be pitched? Have you ever had a conversation with anyone who said that they thought things had gone too far?

Mrs Wheeler: No, but when we get to the stage where there is sensitive technology in research and development, we are quite clear about the visa



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regime, and that there are strict regulations on that. We have had those conversations straightforwardly with pro vice-chancellors. Kate, do you want to talk a little bit more about that?

Kate White: The Committee may be aware that there is a scheme called ATAS—the academic technology approval scheme. Any postgraduate students coming to this country who are studying in areas that could be linked to weapons of mass destruction are required to obtain an additional certification. There are areas like that where different policies can be used to help understand and better manage risks.

Q83 **Royston Smith:** A recent FBI report identified several tactics used by foreign agents to influence United States universities, ranging from unsolicited invitations to leveraging joint research opportunities. Have you identified any such tactics being used in UK universities?

Mrs Wheeler: I would take you back to the trusted researcher paper that I mentioned. In effect, seeing what might obviously come down the track, we have been very proactive in starting that off. Regarding whether a case has come across my desk, no, one has not. That is probably all I can say.

Q84 **Royston Smith:** Are there any mechanisms to co-ordinate action to address any of those sorts of threats? How would you do that, and how would you spread that, if you were taking that sort of action?

Mrs Wheeler: You are absolutely right. That is a good question. We have growing and constructive dialogue with a range of countries at official level. Unfortunately, you will understand that that is being conducted in a private forum. I think the answer to your question is yes.

Q85 **Chair:** Who is in charge of that co-ordination?

Mrs Wheeler: Us, but mainly the Department for Education.

Q86 **Chair:** Is there a single person?

Mrs Wheeler: I do not know.

Kate White: At senior official level, the director general at the Department for Education co-ordinates a Whitehall working group and has led, for example, some of the meetings hosted with Universities UK.

Q87 **Chair:** Who is that currently?

Kate White: Paul Kett.

Q88 **Chair:** Thank you. You mentioned Universities UK. We had a conversation with Bill Rammell and others. I do not know if you have seen the evidence they gave. We were a little surprised by Mr Rammell's evidence, because he suggested that this was not something that he was particularly aware of. Is this a conversation that you have had with Mr Rammell, Minister?

Mrs Wheeler: No, I have not. I said it quite quickly, so perhaps I was not super clear, but the work that is ongoing on this is at official level, rather



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than ministerial level, other than my being briefed when necessary. I am very happy to meet Mr Rammell.

Kate White: I think it is fair to say that there are varying levels of awareness and interest in this issue among the universities. Our aim is to increase that, and to bring it up to a high level across the piece.

Q89 **Chair:** The Russell Group also mentioned this to us and said that they have not had meetings with the Government. Are there any universities in particular that you have met?

Mrs Wheeler: That is a surprise, because the Department for Education has met the Russell Group.

Q90 **Chair:** That is not what they told us. I am sure the Department for Education has met the Russell Group on many matters, by the way; I mean specifically on this issue.

Kate White: In addition to that, the chief scientific adviser at the Foreign Office hosted a meeting, along with Universities UK, back in June this year. That was 30 pro-vice-chancellors—I think pro-vice-chancellors for research. I can double-check which universities were involved, but there were 30 people at that meeting, so we are making—

Mrs Wheeler: This was specifically on the awareness of security in higher education.

Q91 **Chair:** May I ask this, just to be clear? There is a slight difference, which I admit is a nuance difference, between security as in the theft of intellectual property or access to what may be controlled information—for example, as you mentioned, regarding weapons of mass destruction—and what we are focusing on, which is the use of our own open institutions to exercise influence or control over us. I am just checking that you have had that secondary conversation. Our interest is very much in the way the autocracies seek to influence. That is the conversation you have had?

Kate White: That is part of the conversation, which I think is linked to the point about the absolutely fundamental importance of academic freedoms.

Mrs Wheeler: Yes, absolutely. By putting that in the higher education Act, we have made it clear that we will protect them if they feel that these issues are impinging on either how they are doing business or the students themselves.

Q92 **Chair:** Has anyone asked for that protection?

Kate White: I am not aware, but we can double-check with Department for Education colleagues. There is a statutory body, defined in the law, that people can appeal to.

Mrs Wheeler: Yes, it is the Office for Students that deals with it at that level, so they would be the ones to go to.

Q93 **Chair:** That is fine; we can go to them. The evidence that we have heard over recent weeks and months is that this influence is exercised in



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different ways. We have all mentioned the Confucius Institute of late, but other influence is exercised. I don't know whether you heard Radio 4's "Today" programme a number of weeks ago, when the vice-chancellor of Liverpool University was interviewed. She spoke about a campus that they had in China. She was asked whether the university could guarantee academic freedom on their campus in China, and she said that they could. The interviewer expressed surprise at this, on the grounds of talks or conversations about Tiananmen Square or the Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, but she was clear that they could. I find this extremely surprising.

Given conversations with other universities around the world, and particularly the University of California system, it would be very surprising if those university outstations were not used in some way to exercise influence on universities here in the UK by suggesting that, for example, financial partnerships could be dissolved or student numbers could fall. Have you had conversations with universities about that directly? Have you spoken to Liverpool University, by any chance?

Mrs Wheeler: No. We can follow that up, but no. The meeting with the scientific adviser—mind you, that was June, so if this radio interview was a few weeks ago, that would be after the June meeting, wouldn't it?

Kate White: I can say a bit more on the general principle. The universities that are doing this well will be entering into partnerships that genuinely have two-way benefits and where the contracting with the Chinese partner is very clear about what will and will not be the case. Speaking very generally—I don't know about that specific campus or case—I can say that our interest with our internationally facing academic institutions is for them to go well briefed and well versed into discussions with international partners and to set those parameters very clearly. Then they are much better protected against the sort of coercive leverage that you described as a potential.

Q94 **Chair:** Are you aware of other incidents? For example, do you have a standard briefing for all universities that go into partnership with, for this purpose, Chinese universities?

Mrs Wheeler: No, I think that would be more DFE, rather than us.

Kate White: I can say more. We get anecdotal reports, sometimes from universities, that x or y pressures are being applied to them. In those situations, the advice that I and my team would always give would be absolutely to stand clearly to the values and principles by which their university is established. If the implication is that perhaps students from a certain country will not wish to come to this university if speaker X or speaker Y comes and gives a talk to this university, as a hypothetical example, the university then has a choice. Does it compromise its value of academic freedom—we do hope not—or do they say, "Actually, this is what our strength is, and we will not be the sort of robust academic institution that we seek to be if we compromise and bend to such pressure."?

Q95 **Chair:** Ms White, I understand your point. The reason I raise this as a



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concern is because for many universities, as you will be aware, the income from foreign students, particularly from some autocratic states, and the partnership that can come from a remote university campus in an autocratic state, can bring enormous economic benefit to a university. Therefore, that choice over whether or not to stand up for academic freedom over a particular speaker can become one in which the grey is easier to hide in than the white.

I raise this because of course there are some obvious examples. Were the Dalai Lama to be invited, the Chinese Government, for example, would immediately make comments about that. We have been told about other individuals who have spoken, and other conversations that have been raised. We have also heard about soft influence, where people studying for a PhD, for example, have been told that a thesis topic would be very unwise because they are simply never going to get a Chinese visa, and therefore it is not even worth trying. All the investment that they have made into a particular language will then come to nothing, because the Government in question will simply refuse them access to the state. Some of these pressures can be a lot harder than others. I wonder whether you have been aware of that?

Kate White: Yes, there are those sorts of pressures, whether it is countries using their own visa policies to limit, as you mentioned, the academic sphere. I think that happens in journalistic visa cases as well; we have certainly heard anecdotal evidence of that. With all those things, our advice seeks to ensure that people are in a strong negotiating position. For an academic institution, their brand carries a lot of value, and that should never be underestimated. They also have leverage in that situation if they draw up a contract in the right way.

Q96 **Chair:** They do, but of course all these institutions on their own, though they are not small businesses, are smaller, naturally, compared with the education sector in the UK. They are only a component part, so the Government surely have a role in offering what can be best described, I suppose, as collective protection. Have you looked at measures such as the Australian foreign influence transparency scheme, for example?

Mrs Wheeler: Thank you for mentioning that. What I want to get over is that this is an ongoing conversation that we are having through the year with the pro-vice-chancellors, again stressing that it is not just the Russell Group; it is higher education too. We can discuss all of these things. At the minute, exactly as Kate has been saying, they are not coming to us and telling us that they have these issues, but now that there are more anecdotal conversations of the grey, rather than the white or the black, that will help us enormously with our follow-up conversations with the pro-vice-chancellors after this meeting.

Q97 **Chair:** The Australian scheme is not terribly new; it has been going for a while. It would be good to have a look at that, I would have thought. What more can the UK do to protect UK researchers who carry out research abroad?



Mrs Wheeler: I don't know that people have actually come to us with egregious problems. Where we have conversations in the margins—and there are concerns in the margins—I think the best way for us to carry this forward is our open dialogue with the pro-vice-chancellors. I would like them to know that we are there to protect them. I would like them to know that we believe that British values ought to be upheld each and every time, but that equally they must come and talk to us, to BEIS and to the Department for Education. Exactly as Kate said, the channel for that, where there are concerns from the students' point of view, is the Office for Students, sponsored by DFE. I am sure that there are issues here, there and everywhere; it is just not something that they have brought up.

Q98 **Chris Bryant:** Changing the subject, do you think that the Russian state and/or the Chinese state have sought to interfere in British politics?

Mrs Wheeler: That is a really good question. We have had issues over Facebook—was it Facebook or Google? Facebook, wasn't it?

Martin Harris: Facebook.

Mrs Wheeler: Facebook have just taken down a number of sites again where they are suggesting that they may have been involved in the run-up to the American election. Martin, you are more plugged in on the malign influence of our friends. What is going on?

Martin Harris: Thank you, Minister. Certainly, in the case of Russia, we don't have any evidence of successful interference in UK electoral processes. As the Minister said, we remain vigilant on this and we remain, also, in regular contact with social media providers, such as Facebook. One of the things that has been encouraging is to see Facebook become increasingly ready to take action where they can identify that there are false accounts that present that kind of risk. We have seen that just this week and we have seen it earlier in the year, where Facebook has been ready to take down accounts that cause concern in this area. Alongside that is the Government's broader work in countering disinformation, which we do with partner countries across the world.

Q99 **Chris Bryant:** I note that you say we have not seen any examples of "successful interference"—a phrase that Theresa May has used regularly—which suggests that you are aware of attempts that were not successful.

Mrs Wheeler: I think that is almost an unfair question, Mr Bryant. Martin what would you like to say?

Martin Harris: I would say both those things: there are no examples of successful interference; and the other point is that we remain vigilant on this. There is ongoing research to see what those incidents of attempts to use Facebook and other platforms have been. We continue to support that and we see action by Facebook in response to it.

Q100 **Chris Bryant:** I find this a bit frustrating. I think Ben Nimmo at the Atlantic Council has done a considerable amount of work on targeting of



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British MPs, for instance, by sites based in St Petersburg run by the Russian state. That is not contested. It is true that that has not led to somebody being removed as a Member of Parliament or somebody not getting elected or a change in an election or referendum result. But it sounds as if you are then saying, "Well, that isn't true; that didn't happen; that doesn't happen".

Mrs Wheeler: Thank you for getting that on the record. Every time that is mentioned, it puts a frisson down certain people's backs, which is great. I think, Martin, it is quite fair for him to say that there is no evidence of it affecting an election. Certainly, since 2014 there have been several highly visible, disruptive, destructive cyber-attacks against the nation, as opposed to individual MPs. We are going to be completely clear about this. If there is evidence of individual MPs, as you say, from Mr Nimmo's experience, that is something that we can look at, but in the round it has not affected an election, and I think that is the question that we started off with.

Q101 **Chris Bryant:** But we have been given evidence that the Russian Foreign Office and secret services set about trying to remove the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Russia and successfully managed it, for instance. It just seems as if the Foreign Office is a bit complacent. We are just dealing with Russia at the moment, but we can move on to China as well.

Mrs Wheeler: No, not complacent. That was you, the APPG chair.

Chris Bryant: It was me.

Mrs Wheeler: I remember the goings-on at the time, because I remember the text messages coming in saying to get in and vote for your good self.

Q102 **Chris Bryant:** I do not think it was that, Heather—Mrs Wheeler.

Mrs Wheeler: Well, I've got them—thank you, Mr Bryant. There is an APPG AGM going on this afternoon for a different country, and there are text messages going around saying, "Can you come and help make sure that the right chairman gets the AGM?"

Q103 **Chris Bryant:** The point is that the evidence presented to us, not by me but by others—I am sorry to harp on about this, Chair—is that this was organised by the Russian state. That should worry us, shouldn't it?

Mrs Wheeler: The obvious answer is that they didn't like you, so they found a way to find somebody else, but that's not the point, is it?

Q104 **Chair:** Minister, forgive me, but you will understand my slight concern that we are in some way accepting that the dislike or displeasure of a hostile state should be allowed to have influence on democratic elections within this House.

Mrs Wheeler: I don't think they did. That is my point, because there were lots of text messages going around to support Mr Bryant, so I don't think they did.

Q105 Chris Bryant: That is not the evidence that has been given to us. The evidence is that the Russian ambassador was trying to get Conservative MPs and others to vote in a particular way—in favour of Mr Randall, in fact—which is why the best part of 200 people turned up to an AGM. However, even leaving that aside, Ben Nimmo’s work for the Atlantic Council shows that a set number of MPs here are repeatedly targeted with all sorts of negative stuff by the Russian state. Do you think that is untrue?

Martin Harris: Shall I—

Mrs Wheeler: Yes, please. It is not my experience, but yours.

Martin Harris: The first point is that we support the research into this issue. A lot of research is going on into the ways that social media platforms, in particular, are being abused by the Russian state. The second point is that we are taking action against that, which involves both exposing this so that it is clearer what is going on, and conversations with the social media platform providers themselves, who are in the best position to take action when they can see that their platforms are being abused. That conversation has developed over the past three years, and is developing successfully so that we are both getting better at identifying the patterns of behaviour that show false identities, bot activities and the presence of trolls that can be controlled by the state—

Q106 Chris Bryant: And bots.

Martin Harris: And bots—and then see Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and others take action to pull down those accounts. As I say, we have seen that in action, directed towards the UK but also Ukraine, the United States and other European partners.

Q107 Chris Bryant: And China? Does China target British MPs when they travel there?

Kate White: You will all be aware that there is a very active Chinese embassy in London, which has many links into Parliament.

Chair: Yes, I was informed of their displeasure.

Kate White: The other thing that we are seeking to do is make sure that we are clear what the difference is between influence and interference. We think it is perfectly legitimate for foreign embassies here to have many contacts with politicians across the political spectrum, of any kind, just as we would through our network of embassies around the world. Now, if you or others have any evidence that that is not the way in which that is being taken forward, I am sure that law enforcement agencies and others would be interested in that. This is not an issue that is currently on my radar screen, but you are raising the question.

Mrs Wheeler: It goes back a while, but we all remember when Richard Graham, the chairman of the APPG for China, was meant to be going on a trip and had his visa pulled. We are all aware that that happens, but it



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does not stop us wanting to engage, and it does not stop MPs getting involved and engaging—quite right too. We call it out when we see it.

Q108 **Chris Bryant:** We had a similar issue on this Committee with Mr Rosindell, when the Chinese were trying to say that we could not go to China—I think because he had been to Taiwan. I understand the distinction between appropriate and inappropriate influence. My question is this: let's say that 20 British MPs were going to China. Would they be targeted by the Chinese secret services?

Mrs Wheeler: Have you ever been?

Chris Bryant: Yes.

Mrs Wheeler: And have you seen the gang that follow you around?

Chris Bryant: Answer the question. Honestly, this does not seem like a trick question to me.

Q109 **Chair:** I would have thought that this was one of those questions to which the answer "Yes" is so screamingly obvious that it is slightly surprising that you are not giving it.

Mrs Wheeler: I certainly remember being followed around when I was in China. Does that help to answer the question? I would expect people to look after people and to be there. If foreign Governments have groups that follow people around, that is what they are going to do, isn't it? I am sorry, I am a bit confused as to why this is—

Q110 **Chris Bryant:** So would you take your normal mobile phone to China?

Mrs Wheeler: No.

Q111 **Chris Bryant:** Why not?

Mrs Wheeler: Because I want my private phone calls to stay private.

Q112 **Chris Bryant:** That, at its very least, is evidence that you are being targeted.

Mrs Wheeler: Yes, but it is their country. Those are the rules of the game.

Q113 **Chair:** Would you take your mobile phone to France?

Mrs Wheeler: I do.

Q114 **Chair:** Would you take it to the United States?

Mrs Wheeler: I have never been, but I probably would.

Q115 **Chair:** Canada? Germany? Italy? Can you see the pattern I am building up here?

Mrs Wheeler: Yes.

Chair: You would not anticipate this from free countries, but you would from autocracies. I come back to the reason for this inquiry: we are



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looking at how autocracies seek to influence democracies. We are not looking to say there is a free pass for autocratic states to do whatever the hell they wish on their own territory.

Q116 Conor McGinn: I think, Minister, that not just parliamentarians, but people living in autocracies under repression, will be hugely concerned that a Foreign Office Minister says, "Well, that's just the way it is there." I have not heard you express an opinion on whether it is right or wrong that these countries seek to influence, whether duly or unduly, parliamentarians or academic institutions to pursue their agenda. Surely we are in opposition to the agenda that many of these autocracies have, and it would be important for a United Kingdom Minister to clarify that it is not okay to do these things because, "It's their country."

Mrs Wheeler: Of course. Thank you very much, Mr McGinn. It is good of you to say that. Under no circumstances should anybody be put under pressure when they visit any country. Under no circumstances should any country have a malign effect on another country, whether that is a visiting MP, a visiting Minister or whatever it is. That is completely wrong, absolutely, but it is what it is.

Q117 Chris Bryant: I think we would all want it not to be what it is. These autocratic measures, the corruption and so on make it much more difficult for British businesses who want to do more business in Russia or China—for people who are used to the rule of law and living in a free society—because they cannot take their phones either.

Mrs Wheeler: The interesting thing is that the rules-based system is very important, and at every possible opportunity we stress that that should be the case. Kate, do you want to come in?

Kate White: I just wanted to come in on a couple of points related to what you have just mentioned, Minister. On China, we have talked a little bit about technology and booming research, innovation and development budgets, and of course there are many positive aspects of that. However, we are extremely concerned about certain technologies, such as artificial intelligence or the way that data could potentially be used in the Chinese social credit system, and how that is likely to be being used in Xinjiang, where there is a surveillance culture, and potentially around 1 million Uighur people and other Muslim and minority groups have been detained—in our view, arbitrarily. These are all examples of great concerns that we have about the way that those sorts of measures are being used in China at the moment. It is something that we regularly raise publicly internationally in order to express our concerns.

Q118 Chair: One of the issues that has come up consistently before this Committee and that has been a matter of grave concern to us is the erosion of the international rules-based system and the rule of law. We have seen it undermine our economic foreign policy in things like the World Trade Organisation and many other international arbitration organisations. We have seen it through the massive theft of intellectual property from businesses around the UK, including of composite materials in wind turbines, and indeed in the attempted theft of highly technical



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military kit. We have seen it time and again. What really concerns me is this: is it really that the UK Government's policy has changed—you are the Minister for China—from, "This is wrong, this is unacceptable, this is a breach of international law and it must stop," to, "Well, you know, that's just the way they are"?

Mrs Wheeler: No, and you are very kind to carry the conversation on. Interestingly, the Government is reforming the existing regime for assessing things like national security risk to ensure it is fit for purpose. Last year, we published a White Paper and consultation on that, and legislation will follow when parliamentary time allows.

Q119 **Chair:** For absolute clarity, the Government's policy is still that theft of intellectual property and abuses of privacy by any state—in this case, autocratic states—is wrong.

Mrs Wheeler: Absolutely, and when we have situations like the straits of China and Taiwan, where our Navy is going up and down, and we have people who are going to break UNCLOS, we will call that out. That is absolutely wrong. The rules-based system is very important, and we will protect and stand up for it where we can.

Q120 **Chair:** We have spoken a little about the role of social media companies, particularly in relation to Russia. Does Her Majesty's Government believe that it is the responsibility of those companies, or does the Government itself have a role in assisting them, to defend themselves? Is it Facebook's responsibility, or does the Government have a role in ensuring the ability of democracies to flourish in a social media age?

Mrs Wheeler: We know, don't we, that DCMS have had strong conversations with the social media platforms? A number of Ministers have gone over to California a couple of times to try to see them face to face about it.

Martin Harris: I would add that the White Paper on online harms, which DCMS has produced, really sets out the Government's thinking on how that can best be regulated.

Q121 **Chair:** What is the Foreign Office's role in the national security communication stream of the Government Communication Service?

Kate White: I can give you an example on China. We are working closely with the Government Communication Service. There are officials sitting alongside us within what we call the national security implementation group, which is the senior official group that looks at China policy issues. They are partners, and we are partners of them. We need communication experts to help us better communicate to the wider UK public and audiences in an intelligent way about China. There is often not enough awareness in this country about China—I would say that, wouldn't I, because that is the area that I care most about. Equally, it is often the case that people aren't really interested in being spoonfed this information. That was one of the communication challenges around, for example, the recent trusted research campaign, which the Minister mentioned. We know that academics don't want to be told what to do by



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the Government. They value their independence, but they want to take account of the best available information, so we want that to be a collaborative and supportive information and communication engagement exercise.

Q122 **Chris Bryant:** Can I go back to my technical issue—Magnitsky? We have batted this back and forward between ourselves and the Foreign Office and two different Foreign Secretaries, both in the Chamber and the Committee, but I think that the Foreign Office now accepts—because you have written to us to say so—that there is no obstacle to our implementing Magnitsky-style sanctions before our departure from the European Union, which includes, if there is a transition period, during that transition period. Can you tell us what the plan is now?

Mrs Wheeler: Yes. I am not sure whether the Secretary of State wants to announce it or not. You know how much the Secretary of State—

Chris Bryant: He has been fully engaged from the very beginning.

Mrs Wheeler: Absolutely. We are at the stage where we can introduce an SI. I am sure the Foreign Secretary wants to announce this, so—

Chris Bryant: Oh, just do it! Nobody will notice; there is other stuff going on.

Mrs Wheeler: The Foreign Secretary will announce relatively soon that a new SI will be brought in.

Q123 **Chris Bryant:** Do you think you need any primary legislation to do anything else?

Mrs Wheeler: My understanding from conversations with the Foreign Secretary is that he is completely sure that the SI will cover it and will be able to include names.

Q124 **Chris Bryant:** That was going to be my next question—great. What criteria are you using to determine whether people should be sanctioned?

Mrs Wheeler: That is a very deep question. I will go to my Russian friend on that one.

Martin Harris: I would say that, first of all, this is a global regime, so it is actor-agnostic. It refers to serious human rights violations or abuses anywhere in the world. In line with our obligations under the Sanctions Act, at the point when we lay global human rights sanctions regulations, there will be an explanation of the purposes and the creation of any criminal offences that it leads to.

Q125 **Chris Bryant:** We have always thought of Magnitsky, because it related to Sergei Magnitsky, as being more Russia-orientated, but you are quite right that it is the world over. In relation to China, are we beginning to identify officials involved in the human rights abuses of the Uighur community, which you referred to earlier?



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Kate White: I think Ministers will make decisions and announcements in due course, once the new regime exists.

Mrs Wheeler: If you don't mind, I will leave it to the Foreign Secretary to make his announcement.

Q126 **Chris Bryant:** Go on! You must be doing some kind of assessment, surely, because the Foreign Secretary would not be able to come to a view until you had done a series of assessments of significant human rights abuses around the world. China would be one of the key areas. Possibly 1 million people, as you just said, are being effectively detained. Surely you must be looking at names of officials.

Mrs Wheeler: Exactly as Martin said, it is—what did you call it?

Martin Harris: Actor-agnostic.

Mrs Wheeler: Actor-agnostic. That is a great line. There is work going on, and I do not want to pre-empt any announcement. You would be surprised where the countries are.

Q127 **Chris Bryant:** If someone were to have set up a camp in South Africa where everybody who belonged to a particular church was interned, we would be looking at the people who organised that internment, wouldn't we?

Mrs Wheeler: Certainly, if that broke our rules, we would look at that. The point with Magnitsky is that they have to have a connection, don't they?

Martin Harris: Yes, as you say, Minister, the rules are the first point that we need to address. With respect, I think it is putting the cart before the horse to come to the listings before actually establishing the legislation and putting down the statutory instrument. In the first place, it is determining the scope of that sanctions regime, and once that is in place, you look at the listings that would apply to it. It is not possible to give the Committee details of what listings may come.

Chris Bryant: You are not giving us the cart or the horse.

Martin Harris: I think we have made clear the responsibility under the Act to report to Parliament as we lay the statutory instrument that will be required.

Q128 **Chris Bryant:** Actually, it is within a year of the legislation having been tabled, which passed in May. We are a long way after May now, so we are past the day when you were meant to have reported to Parliament. There has not been a report yet, has there?

Mrs Wheeler: Can I give you the good news that the Foreign Secretary wants to make an announcement about that?

Chair: We'll leave it there. Ann, you wanted to jump in.

Q129 **Ann Clwyd:** Has the Foreign Office considered using these sanctions



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against the people named in the murder of Khashoggi?

Mrs Wheeler: Can I say the Foreign Secretary would like to make a statement about that relatively soon?

Q130 **Ann Clwyd:** Where is the Foreign Secretary? We keep asking to see him. Where is he?

Mrs Wheeler: I am sure he would be delighted to make the announcement at the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, but I think he will make it on the Floor of the House. As august a body as this is—

Chair: We look forward very much to hearing from him.

Q131 **Ann Clwyd:** I don't know whether you asked this earlier, Chris, but what about those people identified in the repression of the Uighurs?

Mrs Wheeler: Yes, Mr Bryant just mentioned that. Kate, you had a word about that. As my colleague Martin has mentioned, we intend to lay the SI relatively soon. That is the basis for the areas where we will then, after that, name the people. The matter is in train.

Q132 **Ann Clwyd:** Is it imminent?

Mrs Wheeler: Yes, in parliamentary terms, it is imminent.

Q133 **Chair:** Can I touch on a few other areas? You told us you were investigating the possibility of introducing a power to block a listing on national security grounds when you wrote to us.

Mrs Wheeler: Right.

Q134 **Chair:** Could you tell us the result of the investigation and when you intend to share its finding?

Kate White: Which bit of the—

Chair: You told us that you were investigating the possibility of introducing a power to block a listing on security grounds.

Mrs Wheeler: This is for contracts going forward.

Q135 **Chair:** This came in response when we wrote to you about areas where we discussed whether the FCA was appropriate and had somehow managed to miss out on areas that we had put in our sanctions report, which you may remember, a number of months ago.

Chris Bryant: It is the Financial Conduct Authority, isn't it?

Chair: Yes, the FCA.

Mrs Wheeler: Right, okay. I beg your pardon. I'm sorry, I'm going to look for this. Do you know what page it was on? I'm trying to find it for you.

Kate White: Minister, you will have to write to the Committee.

Mrs Wheeler: I'm sorry, we will have to write to you about that. I don't know why I can't find it immediately. My apologies.

Q136 **Chair:** Okay. Maybe I can ask more generally, then, rather than on the specifics. What co-operation has there been between the Foreign Office and the FCA to ensure that inappropriate listings do not occur or cannot occur and that financial crimes are properly prosecuted?

Mrs Wheeler: We have done a lot of work on illicit finance, but I don't think that that is the same as listings.

Q137 **Chair:** It is not the same. We would argue that illicit finance is more to do with narcotics, guns, pornography and that sort of thing. We are talking here about potentially sanctioning individuals who exploit our markets to, in reality, launder the proceeds of crime. We have seen this certainly with Russian senior officials owning apartment blocks overlooking the Ministry of Defence. We have seen it with the EN+ listings and the questions that it raised, because of course you will remember it was sanctioned in the United States, but not in the United Kingdom. There are many other areas where we have raised concerns about this, so I would be grateful to know how the Foreign Office is co-operating with the FCA. The FCA will find it very difficult to be able to identify suspicious activity unless they have co-ordination with the Foreign Office.

Mrs Wheeler: Right. Excellent. Martin would like to answer.

Martin Harris: I think many of these points were addressed in your sanctions inquiry and the evidence that was presented at that time by the Foreign Office. As to the key relationship between the FCA and the Government, the FCA is an independent regulator and arm's length body. The key relationship is with the Treasury.

Q138 **Chair:** That's not really very helpful, is it?

Martin Harris: It has responsibility for the Treasury's function in sanctions implementation, to ensure that sanctions happen.

Q139 **Chair:** How many embassies has the Treasury got?

Martin Harris: The Treasury is then linking into the Foreign Office and our network, in terms of the overall Committees and national security structures that we have to manage particular countries. The issue of sanctions compliance is one that the Treasury has responsibility for.

Q140 **Chair:** This isn't just sanctions compliance. This is about the propriety of money moving through our systems, which is not simply to do with sanctions but with individuals and the appropriateness of their investment in the UK.

Martin Harris: I would need to refer you to the evidence that was given for the sanctions inquiry.

Q141 **Chair:** I just asked about that and you didn't have an answer for me.

Mrs Wheeler: No—he means at the last inquiry.

Martin Harris: The sanctions inquiry. Because of this issue of the relationship between the FCA and the Government.

Q142 **Chair:** Well, let's go back to it. The question I asked you was, what are you doing? You told us in response to that sanctions inquiry that you were investigating the possibility of introducing a power to block listing on national security grounds.

Martin Harris: Yes, and we will write on that issue.

Chair: I am finding this a very light session.

Q143 **Ann Clwyd:** What has the FCO done to improve compliance rates among estate agents, lawyers and accountants for anti-money laundering rules?

Mrs Wheeler: Certainly, we take anti-money laundering very seriously. The issues where we have put greater responsibility on estate agents are more around whether people have got a right to stay in the country—that side of things.

Equally, on the money laundering side, we've been looking at a London phenomenon, which could also be outside London. The work that has been going on with the Treasury on that has linked in. I'm afraid that is slightly an extension of the first question. Martin, I don't know if you have another thought on that.

Martin Harris: I think I must go back to this question of how we work with other Government Departments to manage this problem. Obviously, the issue that you raise is a question of law enforcement. So, it is for the National Crime Agency in particular to be responsible for ensuring that our laws are properly enforced in that area.

The FCO plays its role in cross-Whitehall international work against illicit finance. We are able to provide that geographical and political expertise to domestic policy Departments and to the operational Departments such as the National Crime Agency.

Mrs Wheeler: To repeat what Martin said, we link in with the National Crime Agency and that is where the Foreign Office gets involved—at that stage.

Kate White: Another international dimension, for example, that our embassy in Beijing is responsible for, related to anti-money laundering, would be helping to foster collaboration with the People's Bank of China, at the China end. That would be the sort of interface that, through the FCO's expert people on the ground, we would better understand the Chinese regulatory system.

We would be able to play that back in if there were cases of concern that involved Chinese individuals in this country. We would co-operate with the Chinese authorities in that way, rather than the FCO being the immediate counterpart for those organisations that you mentioned, which would be more our domestic departmental policing.



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Mrs Wheeler: At the beginning of the session—I apologise; it happened just before you arrived—we were talking about issues with Chinese students, who inadvertently might have been used as mules for their UK bank accounts. That is how we are now linking in with the Bank of China to assist as well.

Q144 **Conor McGinn:** If we cannot make much progress with questions on specifics, maybe we might have more success bringing it back to questions of wider geopolitical and diplomatic matters. The overarching context of this inquiry is about the threat to the rules-based international order from autocracies. In your experience, what is the most effective way to co-operate, both bilaterally and multilaterally, with our allies and partners to counter that?

Mrs Wheeler: Good question.

Conor McGinn: I am thinking of examples like Russia's annexation of Crimea, Assad's use of chemical weapons, North Korea's nuclear testing—different in scale and size, but a threat none the less.

Mrs Wheeler: The links that we have, either through NATO or—I was going to say the G7—those links are key to making sure that the rules-based system carries on across the world. Issues over the sanctions that have been put on Russia, because of Crimea; concerns in the Ukraine as well. Linking in with our American friends has been—it is too cheap to say it's worked very well, but it's been a very strong response—

Q145 **Conor McGinn:** Not for our previous ambassador in America, but none the less...

Mrs Wheeler: Yes. Okay. That was unfortunate. Do you want to add a little bit more, Martin?

Martin Harris: Taking the Russian question and the effectiveness of the sanctions on Russia regarding its illegal annexation of Crimea as well as its destabilising activities in eastern Ukraine, I think it is worth recalling that when those sanctions were put in place in 2014 they were implemented very much as an international coalition, which included European countries, Australia, Canada and the United States. And we continue to maintain the effectiveness and the coherence of that coalition.

We are members of a group that we call the G7+, which co-ordinates specifically on sanctions, and that has been effective, both in sustaining those sanctions over the last five years and in ensuring that they can respond to recent events, like, for example, the attack on the Ukrainian ships in the Black sea—

Q146 **Conor McGinn:** Sanctions are one effective way of dealing with specific incidents involving specific countries, but what about working within multilateral frameworks where those countries have a seat at the table, like the UN and the Security Council? How effective, or otherwise, has the UK's role been there with its partners and allies, when China and Russia are able to veto resolutions? What is your assessment of that, Minister?



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Mrs Wheeler: Our assessment is that we have been as robust as we should be, and that is important because where we have got the agreement—in particular, one of the classics is after the Salisbury incident, when we had 27 other countries rowing in with us to decry what had happened, and naming names of the people involved, and the top GRU people. That is a really big—

Q147 **Conor McGinn:** I am sorry to interrupt, Minister. I understand all that, but I suppose I am making a wider point about the effectiveness of multilateral organisations and the UK's role within them, in terms of combating this threat to the rules-based international order from a range of countries, not just on specific instances and building ad hoc coalitions in reaction to events but—generally speaking—how institutions like the UN and NATO are responding to these.

Mrs Wheeler: That is fair enough. Martin, do you want to say a bit and then I will finish off?

Martin Harris: Yes. Certainly I would say that in a Russia context we have been able to use the institutions of the UN to hold Russia to account and to strengthen the rules-based international system. So we secured very significant success last year in the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the special conference of states' parties that was held in the summer and again in the autumn, to respond to the ways in which the chemical weapons convention has been violated, in Salisbury and in Syria, by putting in place stronger accountability mechanisms and providing the authorities and the resources for that.

Russia has sought to counter those activities and it has failed. We have been able to build very large coalitions; 80 or 90 states have joined us in voting through those structures to defend and uphold the rules-based international system.

Q148 **Conor McGinn:** So, Minister, it is the policy, then, of the UK Government that these issues are best resolved through multilateral institutions and relationships?

Mrs Wheeler: Yes, with our obvious local friends—but definitely yes. And from 1 November, we have the Chair of the Security Council for a month. It means that if something arises, where the rules-based system is under threat, we will be very robust about it.

Q149 **Conor McGinn:** How deep has our involvement been with the European Union, in terms of addressing threats to the rules-based international order? What will the impact be if we leave with a deal—with one eye on the debate in the Chamber—or with no deal? Is there an assessment of the impact that will have on our ability to challenge threats to the international system?

Mrs Wheeler: We want an enduring, close and ongoing relationship with our good friends across the English channel. We want to ensure that where there is a threat to all of us, we work together on it. Nothing will change from that point of view.



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Q150 Conor McGinn: Has a specific assessment been done by the FCO on the impact that leaving the European Union will have on our ability to challenge autocracies in terms of their threat to the rules-based order? I don't know why you look puzzled, Minister, because I would expect, if we were leaving the United Nations or NATO, that we would have an assessment about the impact it would have on our ability to challenge these autocracies and work multilaterally. It is not a loaded question; it is a simple one. Has an assessment been done or not?

Mrs Wheeler: My assessment is that things will carry on as before.

Q151 Conor McGinn: Has an assessment been done by the FCO on the impact that leaving the European Union will have on our ability to challenge autocracies and threats to the rules-based order? Will we be less or more able to do that? Will it remain unaffected? Has any assessment been done?

Mrs Wheeler: I have not seen one.

Q152 Conor McGinn: Okay. Going back to the question raised earlier about the use of cyber and other technologies, we tend to focus on their influence on our democratic and economic system, but how have they used such technology—Ms White, you touched on this earlier—in terms of repression in their own domestic arenas? How do autocracies—if they do at all—share that technology, and how do we try to prevent that? Is there any evidence that Russia, China, Iran and others are sharing this technology, both in terms of domestic use and to advance their agendas internationally?

Mrs Wheeler: We are certainly aware of cyber-issues. Yesterday, it was announced that Russian malware had been based on Iranian malware. It was fascinating how that went around in a circle. They were trying to cover their tracks, by making it look as if Iran was involved in cyber-activity, when it has been declared that it was the Russians. That is a concern, but I have every faith in our services to spot that, to bring it out and expose it for what it is.

Q153 Conor McGinn: Ms White, may I ask you to develop your remarks a little further? Earlier, you mentioned the use of AI in surveillance. Is there evidence that autocracies are sharing those technologies?

Kate White: This is pertinent in the rules-based international system. There are certain areas that are still forming, where international rules—maybe through technical organisations—are in the process of being developed and set.

Building on what the Minister said about some of the ways in which we need to work internationally, there will be many situations in which we need to build much broader coalitions of like-minded countries than we might previously have done, so that, for example, the future rules for and approach to the internet are open and free, in the way we want them to be. Colleagues within the cyber-policy directorate of the Foreign Office work closely with DCMS in some of those international forums. We have

representation at the International Telecommunication Union, which is one of the international bodies that is developing approaches.

We see all of those as key issues for the coming years, so that the vision we have of a free and open internet, and the use of these technologies in line with our principles and values, becomes the international norm, rather than an alternative model. But we are not complacent. I don't think that will be a straightforward set of debates and issues, with so many countries wanting to censor and circumscribe the internet and free media.

Conor McGinn: In answering my previous question, you have anticipated my next one, so thank you for that.

Q154 **Chair:** May I come back to some of the non-state actors that we have occasionally touched on in the past? How do you see the FCO tackling some of those less obvious state entities? I raise the issue now because we are all familiar with the scene of a Russian member of the so-called Wagner Group entering a US camp, barely a few hours after the Americans vacated it in northern Syria. That organisation claims to be a private military company acting out of Russia, but it is quite clearly an arm of the Russian state. How does the FCO deal with those non-traditional elements of autocratic power?

Martin Harris: You are right to say that there is an evolution in the threat that Russian can pose, and the threat of more traditional actors, such as the Russian military, is augmented by the use of other companies. The Wagner Group is probably the most prominent of those.

Chair: Other despotic private military companies are available.

Martin Harris: Just as Russia presents a hybrid threat, we must ensure that our response also displays fusion doctrine, so we are able to look across the whole piece and see the various vectors of influence that the Russian state can bring to bear. Earlier we spoke about illicit finance, and that is one of the vectors that the Russian state can use; these mercenary groups are another, and the disinformation space another. We address the Russian threat through the auspices of the National Security Council and the structure of the National Security Strategy and Implementation Group. That allows us to bring together various parts of Government and the agencies that have that full picture, and to work out our collective response.

Q155 **Chair:** That is clearly easier to do in some areas than in others. One challenge of somewhere like Ukraine, where we are seeing a difficult challenge to the Ukrainian Government and its NATO partners, including us, is identifying not just obvious Russian-backed militias such as the one that shot down the Malaysian airliner, or those that have targeted hospitals and other civilian infrastructure, but the less obvious ones such as those complicit in funding attempts to corrupt the recent election which—thank God—failed. How is the FCO dealing with those organisations? Perhaps I could enlarge the question and ask how you are looking at areas such as Hong Kong, where although, quite rightly, the



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Foreign Office has condemned violent protest, we have seen gangs that are presumably linked to criminal organisations and who appear to have been hired to commit acts of violence that will either be blamed on the protesters, or will in some way be used to intimidate them. How do you see the Foreign Office controlling those non-state, but clearly state-backed, actors?

Mrs Wheeler: Perhaps we could do Ukraine first. The UK is a firm supporter of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. We are providing strong support for Ukraine to the tune of £37 million across multiple areas including political, defence, security, humanitarian and reform, as well as our contribution to the OSCE for the special monitoring mission. We are backing up the integrity of Ukraine as best we can. Martin, do you want to add a little to that, and then we will do Hong Kong?

Martin Harris: I just want to underline that we have extended that support to the new Ukrainian Government under President Zelensky's Administration. The Secretary of State for Defence has just visited Ukraine and held talks with his counterpart. They were able to talk about the extensive security partnership that we have with Ukraine, which covers that range of issues. You are quite right to point to Ukraine as a place where many of those hybrid tools have first been deployed and developed by Russia. To take one example, it is the UK that attributed the NotPetya cyber-attack in 2017 to the Russian state. That was actually the Russian state masquerading as cyber-criminals in conducting an attack on Ukraine that had much broader consequences across the world wide web. That partnership with Ukraine is really important for our ability to manage the threat going forward.

Mrs Wheeler: The top line about Hong Kong, as you say, is that we remain seriously concerned about the situation in Hong Kong and the ongoing violent clashes between protesters and the police and what looks like other agents involved. We condemn any violence and urge calm and restraint on all sides. We are also fully committed to stating the obvious, that there ought to be a high degree of autonomy, rights and freedoms under the one country, two systems framework that is guaranteed by the legally binding joint declaration. Each and every time, I will trot that out, because that is what is incredibly important. It is not a matter of interfering; that is the joint declaration. Everybody has rules and they ought to abide by those rules. Kate, do you want to add a bit more?

Kate White: Chair, on your specific question about the concerns about criminal groups, part of the reason for us to continue to emphasise the importance of all those rights and freedoms in the joint declaration is that that provides the framework for transparency when things cause concern in society and for due process and the rule of law in follow-up to any such acts of criminal violence. That is how the whole context of some of the issues that you have been discussing is important, when there are specific situations that cause concern, as those attacks have caused very widespread concern in Hong Kong.

Q156 **Chair:** May I add a further question? We are aware that, sometimes,



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demonstrators or individuals who are struggling with liberties that we support are accused and charged with, and sometimes even prosecuted and sentenced for, crimes that are frankly not crimes that we would recognise. Do you agree?

Mrs Wheeler: Could you give me a for instance?

Chair: There are individuals who have protested in Moscow at various points for gay rights, for example—

Mrs Wheeler: Sorry, I thought you were talking about Hong Kong; that is why I asked the question. I beg your pardon; that is very helpful. Our Government would never interfere with another country's laws per se, but obviously, if they broke the humanitarian rules that we expect to be observed, there are opportunities to call them out in the UN or wherever.

Martin Harris: And indeed, Minister, on freedom of expression, it is very clear that Russia is bound by commitments in the Council of Europe and in the OSCE on that—

Chair: Which it studiously ignores.

Martin Harris: We have spoken out to make clear our concern that those freedoms have been curtailed by the treatment of protestors in Russia.

Q157 **Chair:** Some of those protestors will be charged with a crime and sometimes, as I say, sentenced. When they apply for a visa for the United Kingdom, that crime is often considered on their visa application and can restrict their ability to travel. What are we doing to make sure that individuals whose crimes are clearly trumped up by dictatorial or autocratic states are not held against them?

Mrs Wheeler: Kate, have you any thoughts on that?

Kate White: I think we can ask the Home Office to give more information about whether there are specific visa application issues.

Q158 **Chair:** You will be getting a letter—or rather, the Foreign Secretary will be getting a letter—from me asking about British nationals overseas who have been convicted of crimes that we would not consider crimes or who we believe have been stitched up.

Mrs Wheeler: That is really helpful.

Q159 **Chair:** I would be grateful if you looked into it. The other question that I have on British nationals overseas is, what are we doing to support them? We have a responsibility towards British nationals, wherever they happen to be in the world. What are we doing to support British nationals overseas?

Mrs Wheeler: At the minute, we continue to believe that the best solution in Hong Kong, and for the British national (overseas) passport holders who live there, is that their full rights and freedoms should be respected, as set out in the Sino-British joint declaration. At the minute, our advice on that has not changed.



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Q160 **Chair:** I appreciate that. Can we not do something ourselves? These are British nationals, after all, so we can change the visa or residency requirements for anybody—

Mrs Wheeler: That would look like we were interfering, when we are saying on every other occasion that the Sino-British declaration ought to be observed in every way.

Q161 **Chris Bryant:** Can I raise one other issue? It is about Interpol and the issuing of red notices. One of the common practices of autocratic regimes is that they find somebody guilty or put up a charge that is completely fictitious—this has happened repeatedly in relation to Bill Browder—and Interpol does not seem to have any sort of system to sort out the wheat from the chaff. Consequently, someone like Bill Browder ends up getting arrested in Spain through Interpol because of a completely fictitious red notice from Russia.

Mrs Wheeler: Yes. I don't have an update on the FCO's policy on that.

Q162 **Chris Bryant:** It would be good if you could write. I didn't expect you to know the ins and outs of that, but it is one of the other tools that autocratic regimes use to undermine democracies. They see our soft belly and think, "Let's use everything they believe in against them."

Mrs Wheeler: Thank you Mr, Bryant. We will write to you on that.

Q163 **Chair:** We saw this at the time when the Russian representative on Interpol very nearly became the chief executive. It took several of us to get actively involved; this was not an acceptable outcome.

I hear what you are saying about the Sino-British declaration. I also hear your point about British nationals overseas. I think this is a moment where the UK Government should reconsider. These are British nationals. The visa requirements and residency requirements are a matter for the UK Parliament and not for anybody else.

Mrs Wheeler: I am sure the Home Office have heard you.

Chair: They have. Minister, thank you very much indeed.