



Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office

Alicia Kearns MP
Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee
House of Commons
London
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[by email: fac@parliament.uk]

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Dear Alicia,

Follow up to FAC Session on the FCDO's Annual Report and Accounts

Thank you for inviting Juliet and me to give evidence on the FCDO's Annual Report and Accounts on 28 March. I welcomed the opportunity to discuss various aspects of the FCDO's work and our priorities for the future. I hope the Committee found it a useful session.

I promised to follow up on a number of areas.

1. Chris Bryant MP (14.45): When were the last communications with the Russian ambassador? The Chair suggested the Minister for Europe may want to write.

Minister Docherty is writing to you separately. We remain in contact with the Russian Embassy in London when necessary. The most recent meeting was on 17 April when Tom Drew, Director General, Defence and Intelligence, summoned the Russian Ambassador, Andrey Kelin, and made it clear that the UK considers Mr Kara-Murza's conviction to be contrary to Russia's international obligations on human rights, including the right to a fair trial. The previous meeting was on 6 April when the FCDO's Eastern Europe and Central Asia Director, Ben Fender, summoned the Deputy Head of Mission, Alexander Gusarov, to the FCDO to discuss the situation of Vladimir Kara-Murza. During the meeting, Ben also recalled the Committee's recent evidence session with me and made clear to Mr Gusarov, for the avoidance of any doubt, that President Putin would not be welcome in the UK.

2. Neil Coyle MP (14.46): What we do to combat Russian embassy disinformation? I said we could write to the Committee covering our approach.

Russian diplomatic social media accounts regularly post wilfully misleading disinformation, with the aim of sowing distrust in their host countries and to

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undermine truthful reporting of Russian actions in Ukraine in particular. We are taking both direct and indirect actions in response to disinformation disseminated by Russian embassies worldwide, including in the UK. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology is working directly with major social media platforms to encourage them to cooperate to remove harmful disinformation swiftly in line with platforms' terms of service and to promote authoritative content which accurately depicts the ongoing situation in Ukraine across their sites. Although the Government welcomes steps that platforms have taken in response, including demonetising, de-amplifying and labelling content from Russian state affiliated accounts, we are clear that more needs to be done given the scale and egregious nature of Russian disinformation.

HMG is also countering Russian disinformation by ensuring that honest and verifiable information on the war in Ukraine is publicly available, and that people are made aware of the false narratives being spread by Russia. For example, HMG regularly posts the latest information we have on the facts on the ground, has declassified intelligence to highlight the nature of Russian atrocities and to debunk their false claims, has published details of the nature of Russian disinformation, and proactively communicates globally to ensure that the truth is told well. We provide strategic communications support to the Government of Ukraine to help them to tell their story to the world and to rebut the shameless falsehoods pushed by the Russian State's propaganda machine.

3. Chair (14.57): Asked for further information on the level of funding and resources for the new FCDO Directorate on the hostile manipulation of information and on key performance indicators. The Chair also asked if the Committee could visit in due course.

Details of funding and resources for the new FCDO Directorate for this financial year are still in the process of being finalised. We are therefore unable to provide further details at this stage. The Directorate would welcome a visit by the Committee and would be able to share the latest resource picture in more detail at that time.

4. Neil Coyle MP (14.59): I said I would check whether the Integrated Security Fund (ISF) would provide an annual report to Parliament.

The specific governance rules of the Integrated Security Fund (ISF) are yet to be determined and approved by Ministers. Nevertheless, Ministers attach considerable importance to keeping Parliament fully informed, so we expect that the ISF will follow the same arrangement as the CSSF: while there is no statutory requirement to do so, an annual report to Parliament ensures transparency of the deliverables of the Fund.

5. Drew Hendry MP and Chair (15.20): I offered to provide further detail on language spending and the Chair asked for a breakdown on the number of civil servant Mandarin speakers by department.

The FCDO will spend around £7m this financial year on the range of language training provided for its staff, of which just under half will support learning Mandarin for FCDO and other HMG staff. As part of our increased investment in China capability, we have made part-time Mandarin lessons open to staff in all government departments – at beginner, intermediate and advanced level. 170 people undertook part time lessons in FY2022/23.

The FCDO only holds data for its staff who have completed FCDO-certified training at C1 / C2 levels. The number in any given year fluctuates as passes expire and exams are taken. Currently, we have 53 Mandarin speakers with a valid C1 pass and 25 with a valid C2 pass. This data does not include speakers at other levels or those not certified through FCDO exams, Country-Based Staff (many of whom are multilingual), those who brought language skills from outside the FCDO, or those who have undertaken informal training across the FCDO.

6. Royston Smith (15.21): Asked about the number of Cantonese speakers in Government.

The FCDO currently has fewer than 5 UK based staff with a valid FCDO qualification in Cantonese. We do not hold figures on staff who speak languages to a lower level, who qualified outside of the FCDO, or whose qualification has lapsed. Our missions across the world also employ staff locally who are fluent in their native language.

7. Chris Bryant MP (15.38): Observed that published sanctions information was not clear online. He asked how much resource was going into ensuring sanctions policy is pursued vigorously and rigorously.

The Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 requires Departments to publish guidance in relation to every sanctions regime. The Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI), Department for Business and Trade, and Department for Transport lead on the implementation of financial, trade and transport sanctions respectively through licensing, outreach and guidance, including regular engagement with industry. The FCDO and other departments regularly exceed the legislative requirements providing tailored guidance to a range of different stakeholders. Our guidance on gov.uk is used by a wide range of stakeholders to access sanctions information and is kept under constant review.

The UK Sanctions List page on gov.uk is part of the much larger suite of guidance pages on UK Sanctions, where the public can find information on all types of sanctions, information for each sanctions regime, links to sanctions regulations and related statutory guidance.

The UK Sanctions List is published in four different formats in order to maximise accessibility; this includes both human-readable and machine-readable versions. It was designed in consultation with industry, including providers of due diligence platforms used across a wide range of sectors. Stakeholders can sign up to receive detailed email alerts each time that page is updated, which includes a note on the UK Sanctions List page each time a change is made.

8. Chris Bryant MP (15.43): I said that I would take away Mr Bryant's suggestion of an annual report monitoring the 'success' of sanctions.

The Member for Rhondda suggested reporting on the impact of sanctions through an annual event. I welcome this suggestion and wish to reiterate the FCDO's commitment to strengthening further its engagement with Parliament as we continue to develop UK sanctions in the months ahead.

The UK Government monitors the effectiveness of all its sanctions, including those made through the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019. All sanctions designations, legislation and structures are kept under constant review to ensure that they are as effective as possible in meeting the UK's foreign policy priorities.

Tuesday 23 May marks five years since the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act was passed. We are exploring the possibility of hosting an event for MPs and Peers in May to mark this anniversary. This would be an opportunity to reflect on what we have delivered over the past year and the impact these actions have had across the range of the UK's foreign policy priorities. I will ensure that an invitation for this event is shared directly with the Committee once it is confirmed.

9. Liam Byrne MP (15.53): I said I would check with the team whether there should be more FCDO involvement in HMT decisions on sanctions general waivers.

As the Committee is aware, the Office for Financial Sanctions Implementation, on behalf of His Majesty's Treasury (HMT), issues general licences and specific licences which allow acts that would otherwise breach prohibitions imposed by financial sanctions. General licences allow multiple parties to undertake specified activities and may be seen as a form of general waiver. OFSI is responsible for receiving, assessing and granting/refusing financial sanctions licence applications, seeking input from other departments, including the FCDO, as necessary. The Chancellor of the Exchequer is the ultimate decision maker on these cases.

At working level, OFSI and the FCDO's Sanctions Directorate have regular engagement to exchange information on the pipeline of general licence-related decisions. This provides the FCDO with an opportunity to input broader sanctions and foreign policy perspectives where relevant.

For some specific and general licensing decisions, the OFSI may approach the FCDO more formally and at more senior levels for its view. Our judgement is that this level and manner of engagement serves our collective purposes, striking the right balance between FCDO input (as the department responsible for overall sanctions policy) and resource available to engage substantively on licensing decisions where appropriate. Departments are collectively committed to continue improving coordination on licensing decision-making.

On 30 March, OFSI issued a Written Ministerial Statement in which the Government committed to introducing new legislation to tackle Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), and process changes for issuing legal fees licences that safeguard the sanctions regime against the risk of manipulation, and ensure Ministers are accountable for OFSI decision-making.

10. Chair (16.30): Has China made any representations to the UK on the TikTok ban?

The Chinese Embassy made representations to the FCDO following the UK's decision to prohibit the use of TikTok on government devices. Officials made clear that this was a precautionary decision limited to government devices, given the potentially sensitive nature of information stored on such devices.

11. Chair (16.32): Did China engage the UK on China's Saudi Arabia / Iran peace deal?

We regularly engage with the Chinese on global security issues. On this occasion, the Chinese did not engage with us on the Saudi Arabia-Iran agreement. We welcome the agreement, if it leads to a de-escalation of tension. The stability of the Gulf is important to everybody.

12. Chris Bryant MP (16.34): Are there any other issues in EU countries with UK driving licences?

I am pleased to confirm that we have arrangements for driving licence recognition and exchange with all EU countries. We continue to work with a small number of countries to put in place formal agreements where that is the preferred long-term approach.

13. Chris Bryant MP (16.34): Can you provide an update on artists touring Europe?

The Government recognises the importance of the UK's creative and cultural industries, not only to the economy and international reputation of the United Kingdom, but also to the wellbeing and enrichment of its people. The Government is

committed to supporting the sector to adapt to the new post-EU Exit arrangements, and we continue to work with the sector and directly with Member States to clarify what creative workers need to do to tour abroad. The UK took an ambitious approach during negotiations with the EU. Our proposals would have ensured that touring artists and their support staff did not need work-permits to perform in the EU, and that event hauliers could move freely. Regrettably, these proposals were rejected by the EU.

EU Member States are principally responsible for deciding the rules governing what work UK visitors can undertake in each Member State. From our discussions with EU Member States, we have been able to confirm almost all of them offer visa- and work-permit-free routes for musicians and creative performers, many for up to 90 days. This includes most of the UK's biggest touring markets such as France, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands.

We are engaging the four Member States that do not provide any visa- or work-permit-free routes (Greece, Portugal, Cyprus and Malta). The UK also raised touring at the UK-EU Partnership Council in March.

The Government has provided export support for the UK's creative industries through a range of programmes, including the successful Music Export Growth Scheme, the International Showcase Fund and the Internationalisation Fund. The Export Support Service can also provide online support and practical advice to UK touring professionals.

The UK Government has worked closely with industry to support the UK's specialist haulage sector, who are market leaders in Europe in transporting equipment for tours and concert venues. In July 2022, we implemented the dual registration measure to support specialist hauliers touring for cultural events so that they can operate with both UK and EU/third country operator licences across the respective territories.

Yours sincerely,
Philip Barton

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