



**Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office**

The Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP
Secretary of State for Foreign,
Commonwealth and Development Affairs

King Charles Street
London
SW1A 2AH

Tel: 0207 008 5000

Email:
fcdo.correspondence@fcdo.gov.uk

www.gov.uk/fcdo

Tom Tugendhat MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

13 July 2021

Dear Tom

Thank you for your letter of 5 July about the BBC World Service and how it is supporting the Government's priorities as set out in the Integrated Review.

The Integrated Review highlighted the BBC World Service as the world's most trusted broadcaster. The BBC reaches 468m people worldwide every week in 42 languages. The FCDO is committed to the World Service and it remains a key partner in promoting our values globally through its independent and impartial broadcasting. Since 2016, we have provided over £370m via the World2020 programme, which has seen the creation of 12 new language services and provides enhancements to existing services. My officials are currently working with the BBC ahead of the upcoming Spending Review to determine future funding for the World Service, and this work will of course consider the priorities outlined in the Integrated Review.

I am pleased to hear that the Foreign Affairs Committee welcomes our additional £8m investment for the World Service to tackle disinformation and develop digital platforms, which was provided despite the very challenging financial environment. This builds on the success of our investment in the World2020 programme, which has helped the World Service reach 351m people weekly since the programme began in 2016. As the Prime Minister outlined in the Integrated Review, we must continue to defend the integrity of our nation against state threats, including disinformation. The £8m uplift for the World Service will help to support these efforts

You raised concerns over the extent to which funding allocated to World Service languages is attuned to wider UK foreign policy considerations and objectives, which I will address here. The FCDO is providing the BBC World Service with £94.4m for FY 21-22, of which £3m is to tackle disinformation. The BBC World Service does not provide digital literacy, but the BBC will continue to deliver media literacy assets – providing young audiences with the tools and information they need to tackle disinformation. These include media literacy content for African and Indian audiences for distribution across available regional platforms, the ongoing partnership with 'BBC Young Reporter' to deliver media literacy workshops to more than 7000 students in India in FY 21-22, and – funded separately by the licence fee – the English-language 'BBC My World' YouTube channel for 13-16 year olds, which is accessible across the globe.

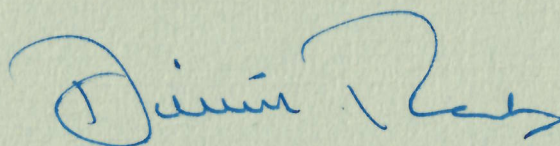
The UK is firmly committed to promoting media freedom across the world, and we continue to support the BBC's work in bringing impartial and independent news to Russia and China. FCDO funding provides enhanced services for Russian speakers in Russia and surrounding communities, which has further strengthened the BBC's efforts to provide trusted and impartial news in a hostile media environment. In 2019-20, BBC Russian saw an increase of 32%. BBC Chinese saw an even greater increase of 141%. As I said at the time, China's decision to ban BBC World News in mainland China is an unacceptable curtailing of media freedom. The specific points that you have raised regarding specialist capabilities of BBC staff in Russia and China, and the BBC bureau in Hong Kong, are operational matters for the BBC to respond to.

The FCDO supports the BBC in the condemnation of threats to the safety and editorial independence of its staff. We continue to condemn the persecution of current and former BBC Persian employees and their family members, and the many individuals who have had their assets frozen or are banned from leaving Iran. We regularly raise this harassment directly with the Iranian government, as well as in multilateral fora. On 24 June, we reiterated our deep concern about harassment of BBC staff at the BBC Persian event that took place alongside the Human Rights Council and was attended by multiple supporters of media freedom.

Lastly, we share the concerns of many stakeholders about proposals to develop "Future Vertical Communications Networks" and are stepping up our international engagement to increase our influence in the global digital technical standards landscape. Through the UK's G7 presidency, we agreed a Framework for Collaboration on Digital Technical Standards. The UK will also host the Future Tech Forum later this year, bringing together governments, industry, academia and civil society to discuss core principles to guide the evolution of an international technology ecosystem.

The BBC remains a key partner in helping to promote our values through its mission to bring high quality and impartial news to global audiences, including where free speech is limited, and we will continue to support it.

Yan Smith,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dominic Raab".

THE RT HON DOMINIC RAAB MP



Foreign Affairs Committee

House of Commons · London · SW1A 0AA
+44 20 7219 6106 · fac@parliament.uk
www.parliament.uk · [@CommonsForeign](https://twitter.com/CommonsForeign)

From the Chair
Tom Tugendhat MP

Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP
Secretary of State
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs
FCDO

5 July 2021

Dear Foreign Secretary,

The BBC World Service serves a vital public service function across the globe, remaining – as the Government highlighted in the Integrated Review – the world’s most trusted broadcaster, contributing substantially to the UK’s soft power. I welcome the FCDO’s May announcement awarding the World Service additional funding aimed at tackling disinformation world-wide and enhancing its digital offer. Concerns remain, however, about the extent to which funds allocated to the language services are attuned to wider UK foreign policy considerations and objectives.

The Integrated Review was clear on the challenges Britain is likely to face in the years ahead, including the threat disinformation poses for democratic governance, security and social cohesion. Some of the states most guilty of disseminating inaccurate reporting and spreading disinformation in the United Kingdom and around the world also have a worrying record on domestic censorship. The World Service provides a powerful counterbalance to such developments, but without adequate funding and targeted use of resources in the most strategic locations, we risk losing the information war on key grounds. In 2019/2020 BBC Chinese and BBC Russian services reported a year-on-year growth of 140.2% and 31.8% respectively, and yet the funding allocated to these services remain low in relative terms considering the geopolitical significance of the two markets.

I would therefore welcome your assurances that the strategic and geopolitical importance of countries, as outlined in the Integrated Review, is taken into account in funding allocations to the World Service, and would be grateful for a response to the following questions:

- Does the new funding allocated to combating disinformation and enhancing the World Service’s digital offer include support for expanding its digital literacy programmes to strategically important countries?
- What representations have you made to the World Service about the public service need for delivery of impartial news services in Russia and China and future funding allocation to these services?
- What assessments have you made about the specialist capabilities required of BBC World Service staff working on engaging with audiences in heavily censored news markets such as Iran, Russia and China?
- In 2016 the BBC closed down some 16 BBC Chinese editorial positions in London and offshored these jobs to Hong Kong. Given the 2020 introduction of the National Security Law and recent years’ political developments in Hong Kong, do you consider it a tenable position for the World Service to keep a bureau in Hong Kong?
- What plans are in place to safeguard the safety and editorial independence of BBC World Service staff working in jurisdictions that are clamping down on press freedom, and in the case of BBC Persian, where staff are experiencing escalating levels of harassment?

- The Chinese Communist Party is reportedly promoting a new method of managing internet traffic, Future Vertical Communications Networks (FVCN), which would allow authorities to inhibit or block outright the flow of international media, including on the African continent where the BBC World Service has invested substantial resources. What plans does the FCDO have in place for addressing such actions by authoritarian states seeking to limit access to international media online?

I would appreciate a response by 14 July, which I intend to place in the public domain.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tom Tugendhat', with a stylized, cursive script.

TOM TUGENDHAT