



## DEBATE PACK

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# Russian interference in UK politics and society

Main Chamber

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Debate nominated by the Backbench  
Business Committee

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The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

# 1. Summary

On 13 November, Prime Minister Theresa May gave the annual [speech at the Lord Mayor's](#) banquet. She had some strong words for Russia:

It is seeking to weaponise information. Deploying its state-run media organisations to plant fake stories and photo-shopped images in an attempt to sow discord in the West and undermine our institutions.

So I have a very simple message for Russia.

We know what you are doing. And you will not succeed. Because you underestimate the resilience of our democracies, the enduring attraction of free and open societies, and the commitment of Western nations to the alliances that bind us.

## Elections and the referendum

The Prime Minister was later asked in the House of Commons whether those comments could also cover Russian actions in relation to UK elections and the referendum. The [usual response](#) is that: "To date, the Government has not seen evidence of successful interference in UK elections."

The Intelligence and Security Committee met for the first time on 23 November 2017 and [indicated](#) that it would be investigating Russian activity against the UK.

Enquiries are focusing on the more than 13,000 Twitterbot accounts that were active during the referendum campaign and were deactivated after the ballot.<sup>1</sup> Researchers from the University of Edinburgh [found that](#) out of the 2,752 Russian Internet Research Agency accounts suspended by Twitter in the US, 419 were attempting to influence UK politics.

The House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee [wrote to Facebook, Twitter](#) and Googler in October 2017 asking for details of advertisements and pages linked to Russia during the campaigns for the Brexit referendum and the 2017 General Election.

### Twitter

On 13 December, Twitter [wrote to the DCMS Committee](#):

Among the accounts that we have previously identified as likely funded from Russian sources, we have thus far identified one account—@RT.com— which promoted referendum-related content during the regulated period. @RT.com spent a total \$469,900 in advertising on our platform in 2016, with \$44,615.87 of that amount devoted to ads that were served users in the UK. Only \$1,031.99 of that amount was spent on six

referendum-related ads during the regulated period. I have provided a list of the Tweets in the attached appendix.

Damian Collins, chair of the committee, [responded the next day](#), saying that Twitter's statement was "completely inadequate", that Twitter had only looked into paid advertising, and that the committee had asked a far wider range of questions than Electoral Commission was asking.

### **Facebook**

On 13 December, [Facebook sent](#) a letter to both the Electoral Commission and the House of Commons Digital, Culture Media and Sport Committee in response to the Electoral Commission's request. Facebook said that the 470 accounts linked to the Internet Research Agency, based in St Petersburg, had paid for three advertisements related to Brexit, appearing in 200 news feeds. Facebook did not comment on non-paid posts, which had reached millions of voters in the US, nor did it investigate traffic associated with the UK general election.

Damian Collins, chair of the Digital Culture Media and Sport Committee, [argued that](#) Facebook had not done a thorough job:

Facebook's statement to the electoral commission does not answer the questions that I put to Mark Zuckerberg. It would appear that no work has been done by Facebook to look for Russian activity around the EU referendum, other than from funded advertisements from those accounts that had already been identified as part of the US Senate's investigation.

### **Google**

Google [responded](#) to the Electoral Commission on 8 December 2017, saying it had found no evidence of Russia-funded activity on its platforms. A spokesperson said: "We took a thorough look at our systems and found no evidence of this activity on our platform."

### **Electoral Commission**

The Electoral Commission [is investigating](#) digital campaigning – the use of data held by parties, campaigners and social media companies for targeting, how political ads are used on social media, and the use of bots – in the light of the Commission's experience in general elections and the EU referendum, particularly with a view to campaign finance. The Commission's regulatory powers, however, apply only to individuals or organisations or actions in the UK or to conduct that takes place within the UK. In a report issued on 14 November the Commission stated:

We cannot use our own civil sanctioning powers on non-UK based individuals or organisations or on conduct that takes place outside the UK, although we can of course look to track and reach conclusions where non-UK individuals or organisations can be shown to have been involved in UK election-related activity.

There have also been questions about personal contacts between Russia and Arron Banks, one of Leave's main backers.

### **Origin marking and truthfulness of online materials**

The Electoral Commission has been recommending that legislation, which was passed in the pre-social media age, should be amended to require online election and referendum campaign material to include an imprint in the same way print material must. At present, the Electoral

Commission best practice recommends that online material should include an imprint.

## EU

The EU set up the [East StratCom Taskforce](#) in 2015, a unit dedicated to countering Russian “disinformation campaigns” in the Eastern Neighbourhood countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. [Russia warned](#) in November 2017 that raising the unit’s budget would harm EU relations with Russia.

## Russian money in London

Some [\\$50 billion per year](#) were leaving Russia and heading for Western financial centres until the oil price falls of 2014. A significant proportion of that money is the fruit of corruption, and Western financial institutions are accused of profiting from those illicit gains. The laundering of corrupt money in Western finance systems implicates Western institutions in malpractice and makes it more difficult for the West to do anything about it. It also strengthens the Kremlin’s grip on its domestic elite. Together these constitute a powerful tool against the domestic opposition, [according to](#) Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss:

Western acquiescence in profiting from the corrupt gains of Russian elites then acts as a psychological weapon to demoralise the Russian domestic opposition, which feels abandoned and finds the Kremlin’s arguments regarding the hypocrisy and moral bankruptcy of the West reinforced.

## Impact?

Although there is some evidence of coordination in favour of Leave coming from Russia, some [analysts argue](#) that it would not have been enough to swing the referendum result, and that the discontent of the British electorate was behind the vote.

## 2. Press Articles

The following is a selection of news and media articles relevant to this debate.

Please note: the Library is not responsible for either the views or accuracy of external content.

### **Russian tweets on Brexit were minimal, study shows**

Financial Times  
Hannah Kuchler and Aliya Ram  
19 December 2017

### **Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach fears crippling Russian attack on web cables**

The Times  
Deborah Haynes  
15 December 2017

### **Cold War codswallop: Cash-strapped UK Defense Chief deploys Russian deep-sea cable scare story**

RT  
15 December 2017

### **Twitter refuses to unmask Kremlin trolls to MPs**

The Times  
Matthew Moore  
15 December 2017

### **Twitter response to Russian meddling in British politics 'completely inadequate'**

The Herald  
14 December 2017

### **Dozens of Russian 'imposter accounts' run by Kremlin-backed agency posed as US news outlets on Twitter, study finds**

Independent  
Selina Wang  
07 December 2017

### **Here's the first evidence Russia used Twitter to influence Brexit**

Wired UK  
Matt Burgess  
07 December

### **UK spying fears spark Russian software ban**

Financial Times  
David Bond  
01 December 2017

**Parliament's intelligence committee considering Russia investigation**

IT Pro  
Zach Marzouk  
24 November 2017

**More of the Same in Response to Russia?**

Carnegie Europe  
John R. Deni  
23 November 2017

**Russia introduces curbs on foreign media in response to RT legislation**

The Times  
Tom Parfitt  
16 November 2017

**Russia attacked energy, telecom and media in Britain: government official**

Reuters.com  
15 November 2017

**Intelligence watchdog urged to look at Russian influence on Brexit vote**

Guardian  
Robert Booth and Alex Hern  
15 November 2017

**How Trump walked into Putin's web**

Guardian  
Luke Harding  
15 November 2017

**Theresa May puts UK at the heart of fight against Russian meddling**

Financial Times  
Sebastian Payne  
14 November 2017

**Russia used hundreds of fake accounts to tweet about Brexit, data shows**

Guardian  
Robert Booth, Matthew Weaver, Alex Hern and Shaun Walker  
14 November 2017

**Brexit was not due to Russian dark arts**

Financial Times  
Tony Barber  
06 November 2017

**MP asks Stirling University about Joseph Mifsud's 'link to Russia'**

The Times  
Daniel Sanderson  
03 November 2017

**UK lawmaker calls for probe into suspicions of Russian role in Brexit campaign**

Politico  
Paul Dallison  
19 October 2017

**Israeli spies 'watched Russian agents breach Kaspersky software'**

BBC News Online  
11 October 2017

**Yet Another Major Russia Story Falls Apart. Is Skepticism Permissible Yet?**

The Intercept  
Glenn Greenwald  
28 September 2017

**Britain's top military officer warns of threat from wave of Russian propaganda and spying**

Independent  
Jon Sharman  
17 December 2016

**More Russian spies are trying to gather intelligence in Britain now than at the height of the Cold War, warns former GCHQ official**

Daily Mail  
Larisa Brown  
18 July 2016

**More Russian spies in Britain now than during Cold War, security expert claims**

RT News  
25 January 2016

**Alexander Litvinenko: Profile of murdered Russian spy**

BBC News online  
21 January 2016

### 3. Press releases

#### **Cyber security: fixing the present so we can worry about the future [Extract]**

**The National Cyber Security Centre  
15 November 2017**

Ciaran Martin, CEO of the NCSC, addresses the growing threats within cyber space at The Times Tech Summit.

[...]

Right now, we are facing, as a nation, two significant groups of threats in cyber space. The first is hostile states. The Prime Minister sent Russia a clear message on Monday night – we know what you are doing, and you will not succeed.

I can't get into too much of the details of intelligence matters, but I can confirm that Russian interference, seen by the National Cyber Security Centre, has included attacks on the UK media, telecommunications and energy sectors. That is clearly a cause for concern - Russia is seeking to undermine the international system. That much is clear. The PM made the point on Monday night – that international order as we know it is in danger of being eroded.

[...]

#### **'PM speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet 2017' [Extract]**

**Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street  
13 November 2017**

[...]

Chief among those today, of course, is Russia.

In a recent speech President Putin said that while the interests of states do not always coincide, strategic gains cannot be made at the expense of others. When a state fails to observe universal rules of conduct and pursues its interests at any cost, it will provoke resistance and disputes will become unpredictable and dangerous.

I say to President Putin, I agree. But it is Russia's actions which threaten the international order on which we all depend.

I want to be clear about the scale and nature of these actions.

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea was the first time since the Second World War that one sovereign nation has forcibly taken territory from another in Europe. Since then, Russia has fomented conflict in the Donbas, repeatedly violated the national airspace of several European countries, and mounted a sustained campaign of cyber espionage and disruption. This has included meddling in elections, and hacking the Danish Ministry of Defence and the Bundestag, among many others.

It is seeking to weaponise information. Deploying its state-run media organisations to plant fake stories and photo-shopped images in an attempt to sow discord in the West and undermine our institutions.

So I have a very simple message for Russia.

We know what you are doing. And you will not succeed. Because you underestimate the resilience of our democracies, the enduring attraction of free and open societies, and the commitment of Western nations to the alliances that bind us.

The UK will do what is necessary to protect ourselves, and work with our allies to do likewise.

That is why we are driving reform of NATO so this vital alliance is better able to deter and counter hostile Russian activity. It is why we have stepped up our military and economic support to Ukraine.

It is why we are strengthening our cyber security and looking at how we tighten our financial regimes to ensure the profits of corruption cannot flow from Russia into the UK.

So we will take the necessary actions to counter Russian activity. But this is not where we want to be – and not the relationship with Russia we want.

We do not want to return to the Cold War, or to be in a state of perpetual confrontation.

So whilst we must beware, we also want to engage – which is why in the coming months the Foreign Secretary will be visiting Moscow.

For there is another way.

Many of us here looked at a post-Soviet Russia with hope.

Because we know that a strong and prosperous Russia which plays by the rules would be in the interests of the United Kingdom, Europe and the world.

As a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council, Russia has the reach and the responsibility to play a vital role in promoting international stability.

Russia can, and I hope one day will, choose this different path.

But for as long as Russia does not, we will act together to protect our interests and the international order on which they depend.

[...]

## 4. PQs

### Cyber-Warfare Defence

27 Nov 2017 | 632 c10

**Asked by: Fabian Hamilton**

I wonder whether the Minister heard BBC Radio 4's "Profile" yesterday on Yevgeny Prigozhin, otherwise known as Putin's chef, and his so-called troll factory in St Petersburg. If the Minister heard it, he should be very concerned indeed about Russia's increasing efforts at cyber-warfare and the threat of disruption it poses to our democracy and the defence of the realm. What steps are he and the Department trying to take to minimise that serious Russian threat?

**Answering member: Mark Lancaster | Ministry of Defence**

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to say that I did not hear that profile yesterday because I was at the 100th anniversary of Cambrai—the first use of the tank—in France, and a marvellous event it was, too. He makes a reasonable point, and I can only refer him to some of the comments I have made during this question about investment and how seriously we take the threat.

### Topical questions: Electoral Fraud

22 Nov 2017 | 631 c1031

**Asked by: Matt Warman**

Many people believe that online voting may have potential for the future. What is the Minister's assessment of online voting in the light of allegations of Russian electoral hacking?

**Answering member: Chris Skidmore | Cabinet Office**

I believe that the UK electoral system is one of the most robust in the world. It is difficult to manipulate through a cyber-attack, as we operate a manual counting and manual voting system. As the First Secretary mentioned in his earlier answer, that may be seen as old-fashioned, but it ensures that our system is protected and our democracy safeguarded.

### Topical questions

21 Nov 2017 | 631 c855

**Asked by: Jo Swinson**

At the last Foreign Office questions, the Foreign Secretary told me that the UK could not pinpoint any direct Russian cyber-attacks on this country. Today, he tells us the Prime Minister's comments last week about Russia's sustained campaign of cyber-espionage and disruption refer only to other countries. Why does he think the UK is uniquely immune to Russian interference, or is he just complacent about the threat?

**Answering member: Boris Johnson | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

I should be clear with the hon. Lady that, because of the sensitivity of the intelligence involved, it is impossible for us to pinpoint these attacks in public. When the Prime Minister referred to “meddling in elections”, she was referring to meddling in other countries.

**Foreign online activity  
21 Nov 2017 | 901951****Asked by: Barry Sheerman**

What steps he is taking to tackle foreign online interference in UK political activity.

**Answering member: Boris Johnson Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

We have seen no evidence of any country successfully interfering with our robust electoral system, but we know, of course, that Russia seeks to undermine our institutions by using disinformation to further its ends, including through social media. The best guarantee against that is a free, open press and an accessible media.

**Business of the House  
16 Nov 2017 | 631 cc596– 97****Asked by: Barry Sheerman**

Can I urge the Leader of the House to take more seriously what the Prime Minister said this week about Russian interference in our democratic processes—not just here but right across Europe, not just in terms of social media but money flowing here, both in the referendum campaign and in our general election? We have not had any motion in this House on that subject—no Select Committee, and our Intelligence and Security Committee is only announced today. Can we not get on with it—scrutinise, bring the spooks in, GCHQ, get some answers?

**Answering member: Andrea Leadsom | Cabinet Office**

Mr Speaker, I think the hon. Gentleman’s grammar was perfectly acceptable. He raises an incredibly important point. I think the Prime Minister was absolutely clear—she is extremely concerned about interference by Russian sources, and she is looking at this very carefully. She could not have been clearer. I think he should be reassured by that.

**Social Media: Russia  
15 Nov 2017 | 113335****Asked by: Jo Stevens**

To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, what meetings she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the role of social media platforms in alleged Russian interference in the 2016 EU Referendum.

**Answering member: Matt Hancock | Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport**

Ministers from the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport have regular meetings with their ministerial colleagues on a range of issues.

**Social Media: Russia**  
**15 Nov 2017 | 113254**

**Asked by: Liam Byrne**

To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, what discussions she has had with social media companies on spending through Russian-linked accounts designed to influence the (a) 2016 EU referendum and (b) 2017 General Election.

**Answering member: Matt Hancock | Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport**

Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Ministers have regular discussions with representatives from the major social media companies which cover a wide range of issues. Details of ministerial meetings are published quarterly on the Gov.uk website. The DCMS Select Committee investigation into fake news is also a vital part of our response to fake news and disinformation. The findings and recommendations of this enquiry will be announced in due course.

**Russia: Social Media**  
**15 Nov 2017 | 113153**

**Asked by: Jim McMahon**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what discussions he has had with his counterpart in Russia on social media propaganda targeted at the UK.

**Answering member: Sir Alan Duncan | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

The Russian authorities are well aware of our concerns, as set out by the Prime Minister on 13 November. I am travelling to Russia before the end of the year, where I will have the opportunity to raise this issues in person.

**EU Referendum Campaign**  
**20 Jul 2017 | 627 c974**

**Asked by: Bradshaw**

Can my hon. Friend confirm—or, if not, ask the Electoral Commission—whether it has received allegations of illegal financial funding from Russia to elements of the leave campaign?

**Answering member: Bridget Phillipson**

The commission is aware of media reports that allege that there could have been Russian involvement in the EU referendum. These cover a wide range of alleged activities that are beyond the commission's remit.

Any allegation with evidence that a registered campaigner accepted impermissible donations from Russia would be investigated in line with the commission's enforcement policy, but I am sure that officials from the commission would be more than happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss this matter further.

### **Russia: Electronic Warfare**

**06 Feb 2017 | HL5275**

#### **Asked by: Lord Stoddart of Swindon**

To ask Her Majesty's Government, further to the reported remarks of the Secretary of State for Defence on 3 February that Russia had carried out a sustained campaign of cyber attacks against the UK, whether they will publish the evidence supporting that statement; whether they have made formal representations to the government of Russia with a view to ending any such campaign; and if so, with what result.

#### **Answering member: Earl Howe**

In his speech of 2 February 2017 the Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon) spoke about widely reported examples of Russian cyber activity against countries around the world. He acknowledged that the United Kingdom (UK), along with its Allies, is strengthening its capability to resist any form of attack.

The UK will attribute specific cyber incidents privately or publicly when we judge it in the national interest to do so. We currently consider public attribution on a case by case basis.

## 5. Other Parliamentary material

### 5.1 Debates

#### **European Council [Extracts]** **HC Deb 23 October 2017, Vol 630 c48**

[...]

#### **Asked by: Mr Barry Sheerman**

On European security, in the week when Hillary Clinton reminded us of how pleased the Russians are about Brexit and instability across Europe, was there a discussion in the Council about the part Russia plays in Europe and the security of our nation going forward?

#### **Answering member: Theresa May | Prime Minister's Office**

As I said in response to the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) earlier, Russia was not a subject on the agenda of this European Council, but it has been on previous Council agendas. The hon. Gentleman talks about disruption across Europe; of course, the Russians have indulged in disruptive activity—not just the illegal annexation of Crimea, but also the actions it has taken to interfere in democratic elections in a number of countries. This is a subject that I am sure the Council will return to.

[...]

#### **EU Referendum Campaign [Extracts]** **HC Deb 20 July 2017 Vol. 627 c974**

[...]

#### **Asked by Mr Bradshaw**

Can my hon. Friend confirm—or, if not, ask the Electoral Commission—whether it has received allegations of illegal financial funding from Russia to elements of the leave campaign?

#### **Answering member: Bridget Phillipson**

The commission is aware of media reports that allege that there could have been Russian involvement in the EU referendum. These cover a wide range of alleged activities that are beyond the commission's remit. Any allegation with evidence that a registered campaigner accepted impermissible donations from Russia would be investigated in line with the commission's enforcement policy, but I am sure that officials from the commission would be more than happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss this matter further.

[...]

**Defence Expenditure [Extracts]****Westminster Hall Debate****HC Deb 27 October 2016, Vol. 616 HC Deb 192– 193WH**

[...]

**Asked by Ruth Smeeth**

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. It is always a challenge to follow my informed colleagues in these debates, so I apologise for any repetition.

The first duty of any Government is the defence of the realm and security of their citizens, so I welcome this opportunity to discuss the Government's ongoing defence commitments. We are living through a period of global turmoil and national uncertainty. Though Britain is preparing to exit the European Union, we must remain an outward-looking nation, committed to fulfilling our role in the world and supporting the efforts for peace and international stability across the globe.

The threats to that peace are many and varied: an emboldened Russian Federation, continuing instability in the Middle East, a Europe struggling to come to terms with the historic migrant crisis, ever-adapting terror networks, and modern technology that expands the potential threats to our country and that has revolutionised the theatre of war. In these uncertain times, it is more important than ever that the UK is committed to maintaining a military that is capable of dealing with whatever threats the future may hold and that meets the capacity and capability needs identified by the strategic defence and security review.

[...]

**Litvinenko Inquiry [Extracts]****HC Deb 21 January 2016 Vol. 604 c1577**

[...]

**Asked by Mr Ben Bradshaw**

Is this not proof, were any further evidence needed, that what we are dealing with in Putin's Russia is a rogue state? The British public will be aghast that the two murderers have only today had their assets frozen by the Treasury. Does that not point to complete complacency on the part of this Government? When will they take meaningful action against the dirty Russian money and property here in London that sustain the Putin kleptocracy? When will the Government implement the will of this House, which in 2012 voted overwhelmingly in favour of passing Magnitsky Act-type legislation?

**Answering member: Mrs May | Prime Minister's Office**

I have answered the last point that the right hon. Gentleman made about the Magnitsky Act that exists in the United States. We have measures that we can take to prevent people from coming into the United Kingdom. In respect of the two individuals whom the inquiry

found committed this murder on the streets of London, it is important that we take every step to bring them to the UK, rather than stop them coming here, because we wish to see them brought to justice. He talked about the position of Russia. As I indicated, we have seen recent examples of the increasing nationalism, authoritarianism and aggression in Russia.

The right hon. Gentleman asked why the asset freeze has been put in place only today. Obviously, I looked into what further action could be taken following the results of the inquiry by Sir Robert Owen. Of course, action was first taken in relation to this matter in 2007 as a result of the initial investigations and the initial assessments that were made by the Government and others. Asset freezes were not put in place at that time. We have looked at that and decided to do so today.

[...]

## 6. Further reading

### Library briefings

[Russia 2017](#), Commons Briefing paper CBP-8157, 30 November 2017

[Fake News](#), Lords Library briefing LIF-2017-0040, 25 April 2017

### Foreign Affairs Committee

Inquiry home page on [UK's relations with Russia inquiry](#)

[The United Kingdom's relations with Russia: Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2016– 17](#), 1st Special Report, House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, HC 332, 21 September 2017

[The United Kingdom's relations with Russia](#), 7th Report, House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, HC 120, 02 March 2017

### Digital Culture Media and Sport Committee

Inquiry home page of ["Fake News" inquiry](#)

[Committee press release on "Fake News" inquiry](#), 15 September 2017

[Letter from Damian Collins MP to Mark Zuckerberg, CEO Facebook](#), 19 October 2017

### Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament

[Home page of the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament](#)

[Press release](#), 23 November 2017

### Other reports

[The Kremlin's Platform for 'Useful Idiots' in the West: An Overview of RT's Editorial Strategy and Evidence of Impact](#), European Values, 18 September 2017.

### Other links

[The National Cyber Security Centre website](#)

[All-Party Parliamentary Russia Group](#) from the Parliamentary website

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