

'Defending Democracy': Evidence to the JCNSS inquiry, March 2024

Dr Hugo Drochon, Dr Dan Lomas, Prof Rory Cormac

On behalf of the University of Nottingham's Centre for Research into Ideas and the Study of Political Ideologies (CRISPI) and Centre for the Study of Subversion, Unconventional Interventions and Terrorism (SUIT). Both Centres have academic expertise in influence, secret statecraft, and conspiracy theories.

Executive Summary

Foreign actors have attempted to destabilise UK democratic institutions is clear. Publicly available evidence suggests we can expect this to continue, including a specific focus on forthcoming elections. The UK has taken steps to treat the threat more seriously, but more can be done. First, excessive secrecy and a lack of transparency risks backfiring by unwittingly feeding politicisation and conspiracy theories. Second, foreign interference exploits existing internal weaknesses and divisions; an internal/external divide is artificial, and the UK should work to reduce internal polarisation to reduce vulnerability. Third, legalisation will not solve the problem; it can only form one aspect of a wider holistic response.

A: The Defending Democracy Taskforce and the Risk of a Conspiracy Trap

1. The 2021 Integrated Review (IR21) said that the protection of democracy was a 'first study' of any government¹, calling for a cross-government approach to defending democracy which placed public 'confidence' in the system at its heart. IR21 identified the 'Election Cell' – a body to 'coordinate security preparations and responses for elections'² – and the work of the Counter Disinformation Unit (CDU)³, first set up in 2019, as mechanisms to actively counter disinformation.⁴ The wider remit of the Defending Democracy (DD) Taskforce is reflected in the IR refresh with the 'focus on foreign interference'⁵. To this, can be added the Joint Election Security and Preparedness Unit which tracks threats through government departments and the intelligence agencies.⁶
2. The wide remit of the taskforce reflects the cross-governmental nature of the threat, and any initiative across government, the devolved administrations, and the private sector is to be welcomed. It is right that the effort is also centrally coordinated under the Security Minister, reporting upwards to the Prime Minister through the National Security Council.⁷ It is also commendable that the taskforce has been energetically adopted, meeting eleven times in the last year.⁸

¹ *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review*. 4.

² 'Defending Democracy – Policy Exchange Speech', 15 June 2021 < [Defending Democracy - Policy Exchange Speech - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) >

³ 'Fact sheet on the CDU and RRU', 9 June 2023 < [Fact Sheet on the CDU and RRU - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) >
The CDU aims to 'understand disinformation narratives and attempts to artificially manipulate the information environment to ensure that the government understands the scope and reach of harmful mis and disinformation'. This can include 'posting a response on social media and rebutting a claim'.

⁴ *Global Britain in a competitive Age*, p. 74.

⁵ *Integrated Refresh Review 2023*, p. 49.

⁶ Hansard, 4 February 2024 < [Written questions and answers - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament](#) >

⁷ Hansard, 21 July 2023 < [Written questions and answers - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament](#) >

⁸ Hansard, 17 January 2024 < [Written questions and answers - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament](#) >

3. While a welcome initiative, the disparate organisations involved pose problems for coordination generally and for the Defencing Democracy Taskforce's stated aim of ensuring public 'confidence' in the electoral system specifically. Even for experts in the field, based on information publicly available, the structure, funding, and activities of the DD initiative is unclear. More importantly, this lack of information poses significant issues for trust and risks becoming counterproductive. Activity conducted to 'defend democracy' particularly in the realm of counter-disinformation can quickly fall into a 'conspiracy trap': seen as part of a government effort to manipulate, rather than correct, political discourse. A good example of counter-disinformation going wrong can be BBC Verify, which itself has become the subject of conspiracy itself.
4. The implication of the 'conspiracy trap' is that, whilst there will always be an inner hardcore who are subject to domestic/foreign disinformation, **the UK government needs to be as open as possible on the machinery of the Defencing Democracy (DD) Taskforce**, and to provide as much information as possible on the aims, methods and activity of government in protecting UK democracy, where possible.
5. Active counter-disinformation efforts by the state in debunking and factchecking risk backfiring. They can be misperceived, sensationalised, and feed conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are at the sharp end of disinformation as they have a 'self-sealing' capacity: no amount of new information will challenge the held belief, but instead might reinforce it: try telling a 'Truther' that 9/11 was not an inside job by Mossad and the FBI. Whilst at the sharp end, they are also a widespread phenomenon; our research shows that over 50% of the UK population believes in at least one conspiracy theory, making it a wide-spread phenomenon.⁹
6. Seized by nefarious internal or external actors this can be weaponised to sow discord in the UK: conspiracy theorists are more likely to think violence is the way to solve social problems. This is compounded by social media that is driven by the attention economy: the aim is to retain the attention of readers to sell advertisement, and salacious material, like conspiracy theories, retain the attention, are therefore promoted by the algorithm.
7. The aim, however, is not to eradicate conspiracy theorists, which would be authoritarian, and would backfire: authoritarian countries have even higher levels of conspiracy belief (over 70%). Conspiracy theories are, as Christopher Hitchens once put it, the 'exhaust fumes' of democracy. We need to ensure there is a 'critical' public sphere, necessary for democracy, and not a 'conspiracy' one. **Although there are no magic bullets, a number of levers can be activated, including regulation of social media to downgrade conspiracy material, and broader online education: higher critical education lowers conspiracy belief.**
8. Conspiracy theories are not the cause of disenchantment with democracy, it is disenchantment with democracy that leads to conspiracy theories. **The work of the DD Taskforce is therefore double virtuous: by ensuring democracy works conspiracy theorising concerning its malfunction will reduce.**

⁹ Hugo Drochon, 'Britons are swallowing conspiracy theories. Here's how to stop the rot', *The Guardian*, 28 November 2018 < <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/28/britons-swallowing-conspiracy-theories-stop-rot-research-fake-news> >

B: Foreign/Domestic: An artificial divide?

9. The Defending Democracy Taskforce aims to protect ‘the democratic integrity of the UK by reducing the threat of foreign interference’. There are notable examples of attempted foreign interference in UK elections, as identified by 2020 Russia report of the Intelligence & Security Committee.¹⁰ The UK’s decision to sanction Russian media such as RT/Sputnik was a welcome step, yet the UK, and wider Allied democratic processes, remain vulnerable to interference. The UK intelligence community believes there is precedent for China to influence democratic processes.¹¹
10. The threat of foreign actors on UK electoral security is not in doubt. The UK today faces a sustained campaign by foreign actors to erode the political and cultural life of the UK. Nonetheless, it should be noted that these groups openly exploit existing divides in UK society, and **the best interference campaigns already build on organic, internally crafted deep divisions in society**. The divisive nature of current UK political discourse – from the culture wars to deep divisions on global events, to the use of technology and competing media narratives – offers a fertile ground for foreign actors to exploit.
11. Whilst it is easier to focus on external threats, any artificial divide between ‘foreign’ and ‘domestic’ is a significant blind spot in the UK’s approach. **The best defence against foreign interference starts by building resilience at home and efforts to heal polarised, toxic, and post-truth political discourse**. Efforts to defend the UK’s democratic processes need to adopt a broad church response to the democratic process and to integrate cross-party views to ensure that any measures have the widest possible support. Anything less and the initiative could be seen as part of bipartisan politics and therefore open to doubt.

C: The Limits of Foreign Influence Registration

12. **That foreign actors, including Russia, have attempted to destabilise UK, and overseas, democratic institutions is clear**. In 2019, the CMS select committee concluded that the UK is ‘vulnerable to covert digital influence campaigns’.¹² That assessment remains the same today. In their latest report, the Intelligence & Security Committee (ISC) pointed to ‘the efforts of foreign states to exert covert and malign influence on UK policy, democracy and public opinion through attempts to influence social media, journalism and political figures’.¹³ The threat assessment applies to both Russia¹⁴ and China¹⁵. **We can expect attempts to influence forthcoming UK elections**.
13. The National Security Act (2023) aims to make the UK a ‘harder target for those states which seek to conduct hostile acts ... including espionage, interference in our political system, sabotage and assassination’.¹⁶ A cornerstone of the Act, and a significant new provision, introduces the requirement that foreign actors will register foreign influence activities in the UK, or face significant sanction from the UK government under the Foreign Influence Registration Scheme (FIRS). This measure, comparable to the US Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA), is a welcome step forward,

¹⁰ HC 632, *Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament: Russia*, July 2020, pp. 9-10.

¹¹ HC 1605, *Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament: China*, July 2023, p. 43.

¹² ‘Foreign influence in political campaigns’ < [Disinformation and 'fake news': Final Report - Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee - House of Commons \(parliament.uk\)](#) >

¹³ HC. 287, *Intelligence & Security Committee of Parliament: Annual Report, 2022 – 2023*, p. 25.

¹⁴ HC. 632, *Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament: Russia*, July 2020.

¹⁵ HC. 1605, *Intelligence & Security Committee of Parliament: China*, p. 43.

¹⁶ ‘National Security Act, 2023’, 6 June 2022 (last updated 20 December 2023).

especially in cases such as the Lee case¹⁷ or where groups linked to hostile state actors seek to subvert the political process through covert influence.

14. Despite this, **reliance on legislation has limitations**. First, agents of influence can operate independently of state control (e.g. acting in the perceived interests of a state rather than on behalf of that state). Second, much influence work takes place outside of the UK, through cyber space, social media and/or other remote means. Third, FIRS deals with just one specific aspect of foreign covert intervention, narrowly defined. Indeed, we fear that malign actors will find loopholes to bypass legislation, for example by using opaque shell companies, whilst the administrative burden (despite reforms) still increases for everyone else, including, for example business and universities.
15. **Whilst the US has robust legislation in place to combat foreign interference, it has not stopped foreign efforts to undermine the integrity of elections**.¹⁸ In its latest assessment, issued in March 2024, the US IC now judges that China is rapidly expanding its means to covertly influence US elections and, like Russia and Iran, promote pro-China policies, whilst also exploiting the deepening societal divisions in US society.¹⁹ The US IC has detected the covert use of social media and proxy websites, influencers, and other such activities to avoid takedowns by social media companies, promoting authentic narratives that question the validity of the election process.²⁰ Although the UK is judged by the ISC to be a secondary target to the US, **it is likely that Russia, Iran and Chinese actors have the capability and intent to intervene in UK democratic processes, and that it is difficult – as the case of the US shows – to fully protect the democratic process from hostile intervention**, even with the new National Security Act, the well-intentioned FIRS, and the cross-governmental work of the DD taskforce and the UK's intelligence agencies.
16. **The UK cannot legislate its way out of the threat of foreign interference**. The UK's response should combine legislation with both wider attempts to bolster societal resilience and intelligence-led disruption (whilst being as transparent as possible about capabilities if not operations).²¹

¹⁷ Gordon Corera, 'Why did MI5 name Christine Lee as an "agent of influence"?', BBC, 19 July 2022 < [Why did MI5 name Christine Lee as an 'agent of influence'? - BBC News](#) >

¹⁸ *Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections*, March 2021, pp. 3,5,7; *Foreign Threats to the 2022 US Elections, December 2022*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁹ *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, February 2024, p. 12.

²⁰ *Foreign Threats to the 2022 US Elections, December 2022*, p. 1.

²¹ See Mike Burgess, 'ASIO Annual Threat Assessment 2024' for a good example < [ASIO Annual Threat Assessment 2024](#) >