

DCMS Secretary of State's oral statement on Ukraine

Mr Speaker,

We have entered the 8th day of Ukraine's fight for survival, and in the week since Vladimir Putin launched his unprovoked, premeditated and barbaric attack on a free and peaceful neighbour.

The UK has led a united Western response to his brutality.

We are working with allies around the world on multiple fronts, to ensure the Russian dictator feels the full cost of his invasion.

On the military front, we've provided Ukraine with the weaponry to inflict significant losses on the invading Russian forces. On the economic front, we've worked with international partners to cripple the Russian economy.

But as history has shown us, there are other powerful ways of isolating rogue regimes. Culture and sport can be equally as effective as economic sanctions if used in the right way.

And so in the last week I've been working to mobilise the full might of the UK's soft power against the Russian state, and applying pressure – both publicly and privately – across the sectors, to use every lever at their disposal to entrench Putin's position as an international pariah.

Culture is the third front in the Ukrainian war.

Earlier this week I brought together governing bodies from across sport, and I made the UK's position clear: Russia should be stripped of hosting international sporting events, and Russian teams should not be allowed to compete abroad.

Across sport, across the arts and entertainment, we're ostracising Putin on the global stage. The upcoming Champions League Final and Formula 1 Grand Prix will no longer be held in Russia. Likewise, Russia has been banned by UEFA, by FIFA, by World Rugby, by the International Tennis Federation, and the International Olympic Committee.

Venues across the country have cancelled upcoming performances by the Bolshoi and Siberian Ballets.

Disney and Warner have pulled their films from Russia. Netflix has stopped its projects there; BBC Studios and ITV Studios have stopped trading with Russia too. And Russia has been banned from taking part in the Eurovision Song Contest.

Mr Speaker, Putin is now suffering a sporting and cultural Siberia of his own making, and it will be causing the Russian leader real pain.

Ask Ukrainian tennis player Sergiy Stakhovsky, who gave a very moving interview on the radio earlier this week. A few weeks ago, he was playing at the Australian Open. Now he's back in Ukraine, preparing to fight for his country's survival. He said that Putin loves nothing better than watching Russia's sports teams glory on the world stage, his athletes draped in the Russian flag.

Putin needs the kudos of these global events to conceal his illegitimacy and the hideous acts he is perpetrating in Ukraine. The Russian despot is desperately trying to hide the grim extent of his invasion from his own people.

It's why I strongly support, and continue to encourage, the kind of emotional displays of solidarity we've seen across sporting events in the last week, including the Carabao Cup Final and the Six Nations.

Lights and symbols cannot stop bullets and bombs, but when Russians see their favourite footballers wearing shirts emblazoned with the bright blue and yellow of the Ukrainian flag, it helps open their eyes to the cold reality of Putin's actions.

Likewise, every time an international organisation or figure publicly stands up against what he is doing in Ukraine, they chip away at Putin's wall of lies.

So I thank and applaud all those – in this country and internationally – that have done so, and I continue to push for organisations to exile Putin's Russia from their ranks.

It's why I've called on UNESCO to bar Russia from hosting its annual World Heritage conference in June. It's absolutely inconceivable that this event could go ahead in Putin's country, as he fires missiles at innocent civilians in neighbouring Ukraine. If it does go ahead, the UK will not be attending.

And it's why I urged the International Paralympic Committee yesterday to urgently rethink its decision to allow athletes from Russia and Belarus to compete.

Mr Speaker, this pressure works.

The IPC's decision was the wrong call, and I welcome the fact that overnight they have listened, and reversed that decision this morning, and I wish our athletes the best of luck in Beijing over the coming days.

Later today, I'll be hosting a summit with countries from all over the globe to discuss how we can continue to use the power of sport to isolate Putin at home and abroad.

We have to keep ratcheting up the pressure. Putin must fail.

In my department, we've also been working tirelessly to use the power of tech and the media against the Russian dictator and to shut down and counter his propaganda and lies. They are key weapons in Putin's arsenal.

And so the department's Counter Disinformation Unit has been working to identify and remove Russian disinformation online.

Alongside the U.S. and others, we've also been working closely with platforms to take pre-emptive action against Putin, and to demonstrate the consequences of his brutality in real-time to the Russian people. Apple has paused all product sales in Russia. Google has added new safeguarding features to Google Maps and Search. Whatsapp is hosting a helpline for Ukraine's State Emergency Service that sends people information and critical news about the local situation.

While Big Tech has stepped up in a really positive way, we're also encouraging and supporting platforms to go even further to tackle certain challenges, including disinformation, service disruptions, and the humanitarian crisis triggered by the conflict.

In this digital age, the Ukrainian war is being fought on the ground and online.

And so we need to use tech wherever we can as a force for good, to counter Putin's aggression, to expose his weaknesses and to bolster the people fighting for their survival in Ukraine.

Mr Speaker, from the moment Putin began his invasion, I was also very clear that he must not be allowed to exploit our open and free media to spread poisonous propaganda into British homes.

RT's own Editor-in-Chief called the network an "information weapon" of the Russian state, and that's why I wrote to Ofcom last week, urging them to examine any potential breaches of the broadcasting code. Ofcom has since opened 27 investigations into RT, and are now reviewing whether to revoke RT's licence entirely.

In the meantime, those investigations have been taken over by events and I was very glad to see yesterday that the channel is now officially off-air on British televisions, after it was shut down on Sky, Freeview and Freesat.

In the meantime, I have written to Meta and TikTok, asking them to do everything they can to prevent access to RT in the UK, as they have done in Europe, and I'm glad that YouTube has already answered this call and done so.

Mr Speaker, we're on the side of free media.

That's why it was brilliant to see that the audience for the BBC's Russian language news website has gone up from 3.1 million to 10.7 million in the last week. Despite his best efforts to censor reporting in Russia, Putin's own citizens are turning to factual, independent information in their millions.

And at this point, I'd just like her to offer my heartfelt thanks and admiration to all those journalists, working for the BBC, ITV and other news outlets, who are risking their lives to bring us unbiased and accurate news from a live war zone.

Mr Speaker, we will keep ratcheting up the pressure on Putin. I will use all the levers in my department to ensure he is fully ostracised from the international community.

I commend this statement to the House.