My thanks to the BBC World Service for once again working with the British Council to arrange this meeting and to David, to Dr Bobo Lo and to Stephen for being here.

I must begin, of course, by making it clear that our discussions with colleagues from the BBC World Service about this Fringe meeting pre-dated the recent events in the Caucasus - but, plainly, it is right that this evening’s event will not ignore that trauma and what it implies about Russia’s attitude to the rest of the World, near and far.

My task this evening is, however, to concentrate primarily on the British Council and Russia. With that in mind I could of course, regale you with a litany of grievances, frustrations, bewilderments that have accumulated as a result of the experiences of the British Council’s encounters with the Russian authorities in recent years...

But I’m not going to do that it would be intriguing – but not productive. I’ll therefore focus on the future rather than the past and say categorically

- that, consistent with our purposes over the last 74 years, the British Council is not motivated or politically engaged or motivated in Russia;
that we seek scrupulously to observe national law and – like others – we would value a stable legal framework in Russia; and
that we are most definitely not what President Medvedev called “a nest of spies” in Russia or anywhere else.

The British Council is in Russia entirely to advance Russian understanding of the UK, to do it through activities which are similar to those which we undertake in over 100 other countries in the World, and to enrich cultural and educational opportunities for Russian people, over a million of whom used the services of the British Council last year.

Even though the Russian authorities compelled us to close in Ekaterinburg and St. Petersburg this year, the British Council remains open in Moscow. From there we will continue to work with and for the wide spectrum of Russians in education, in business, in artistic activities who comprehend our purpose clearly, who enjoy their association with the British Council, and who share our commitment to ensure that our status in Russia is completely regularised and normality in international cultural relations is fully restored.
That isn’t the rose-tinted desire of an innocent who expects the World to be a place of permanent peace and light.

On the contrary, those ambitions are grounded in the objective political reality that the Russian Federation is a gigantic neighbour of our country and continent and mutual, understanding and trust must be fundamental components of any stable and productive relationship.

Despite the turmoil of the last year there are already some encouraging elements in place, of course. They include the Turner in Russia exhibition in November brokered by the British Council between the Tate and the Pushkin Museum; the biggest ever Education UK exhibition in Russia; the partnership between the Council, the Goethe Institute and the Moscow Linguistic University to develop foreign language teaching in Russia and across Europe.

Having said all of that, the sad fact is also that by limiting the locations we can work in, the partners we can work with, and what we can do, the Russian authorities now restrict us to a very traditional and narrow way of conducting cultural relations.
Even with those imposed inhibitions however there is still far more demand from the Russian people than we are able currently to meet.

It is therefore worth striving for progress to a stable, sustained and mutually beneficial relationship with Russia through further advances in educational and cultural co-operation and in international exchanges, crucially, between the young people of the UK and Russia.

We call those school, University and young professionals contacts, exchanges and shared experiences ‘cultural relations’. It is a ‘people to people diplomacy’. It enables human beings to dismantle distortions, to develop mutual understanding of the need to take advantage of the common opportunities and to combat common menaces and, out of that, to evolve the means of using opportunities and overcoming the dangers.

And I believe, the British Council believes, that - the need for such linkages is heightened, not reduced, when political and diplomatic relationships between countries are strained, as they currently are with Russia.
As we have recognised when confronted by other conditions which are characterized by tension, it is better to sustain relations with the broadminded people in every country who seek wider knowledge and experience than to sit passively on the sidelines waiting for the clouds to clear.

It doesn’t mean ignoring or deferring to injustice. It doesn’t mean unconditionally seeking or sustaining a British Council presence in a country, regardless of the internal realities. There have been and are systems that simply make meaningful cultural relations impossible and then we keep out or – reluctantly – get out.

That commitment to building cultural relations between peoples doesn’t mean, either, that it is a soft and cosy alternative to the dilemmas and dangers of political reality. On the contrary, working to foster exchanges of knowledge, to strengthen opportunities, to encourage understanding and build trust between peoples and cultures can be arduous especially for the country nationals who work for the British Council.
It is just over 2 years, for instance, since our centres in Ramallah and Gaza were burnt out by terrorist gangs. But, to their great credit, our dedicated people - mainly Palestinians - are still active and successful in both places. We are in Zimbabwe, Burma, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan providing educational opportunities, encouraging creativity, opening windows on the World for people in ways that wouldn’t exist if the British Council wasn’t operational. That is why we don’t give up our commitment to people – including Russian people - easily. That resolute attitude – and its practical applications – is certainly justified by present and foreseeable conditions:

Faced by the great global challenges of our time – economic instability, endemic poverty, menaces to the environment, energy insecurity, terrorism, armed conflict – we know that the World will be a better and more secure place when engagement between Russia and the United Kingdom is based on partnership rather than tension. Trust rather than suspicion.

We will continue to work toward that end, motivated by the conviction that it is right and propelled by the reality that the human desire for comprehension and cooperation
always eventually surmounts efforts to sustain ignorance and introversion.

Anyone needing proof of that need look no further than modern history - specifically the modern history of Russia.