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Mr. Bernard Patry

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• (1635)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bernard Patry (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.)): Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), this is a meeting with the parliamentary delegation from Estonia. First of all, I want to say welcome to your delegation, Madam President. It is a real honour for us to have you here from Estonia following the visit of our Speaker to your country a little over a year ago. With your permission, I would like to ask my colleagues to introduce themselves. I'll introduce myself first.

I am the chair of the foreign affairs and international trade and development committee. I am a member of Parliament from the ministerial side, the ministerial side meaning that right now we are a minority government. As you can see, there are more members on the opposition than on the ministerial side, but I must excuse some of our members because right now there is a Canada-Europe Parliamentary Association meeting. Some of our colleagues will, I hope, come a little bit later.

I will ask my colleagues to introduce themselves, please.

Mr. Peter Van Loan (York—Simcoe, CPC): I'm Peter Van Loan. I met you all earlier. I am a Conservative member of Parliament for York—Simcoe.

Mr. Ted Menzies (MacLeod, CPC): I'm Ted Menzies, Conservative member of Parliament for Alberta.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC): I'm Kevin Sorenson, Conservative member of Parliament in Alberta. The riding is Crowfoot.

The Chair: Madam President, if you want to say a few words, introduce yourself and the members of your delegation, please.

Her Excellency Ene Ergma (President, Riigikogu (Parliament) of the Republic of Estonia): Allow me to introduce the members of my delegation.

Mr. Argo Künemäe is the chargé d'affaires of the Republic of Estonia in Canada.

Mr. Marko Mihkelson is the chairman of the foreign affairs committee.

Mr. Sven Mikser chairs the committee of defence.

Mr. Mart Opmann is the chairman of the economic affairs committee.

Mr. Mart Nutt is a member of European Union affairs committee and constitutional committee.

Mr. Heiki Sibul is the secretary general of the Riigikogu, our Parliament; and Madam Merle Pajula is head of the Department of Foreign Relations.

The Chair: Now, do you want to say a few words about the communications or the introduction, or would you like to go very freely between questions and answers between our two delegations?

Her Excellency Ene Ergma: Honourable Chairman, distinguished members of the committee, dear colleagues, first of all, let me thank you for the opportunity to participate in this meeting of the standing committee. It is a pleasure for me to discuss the matter of international politics with Canadian colleagues.

I would like to open our side of the discussion with a brief glance into the present situation.

Estonia's rapid development since 1991 and its political and economic success have been based upon extensive political and economic reforms, a functioning parliamentary democracy and liberal economy, and free trade policies. After regaining independence, Estonia administrations accepted, as did the majority of the people, that accession to the EU and NATO needed to be our major foreign policy objective.

In November 1995, Estonia submitted its application to become a member of the EU. After a national referendum in September 2003 approved EU accession, we were members of the EU on May 1, 2004. A month earlier, Estonia had become a member of NATO.

The long-awaited membership in the EU and NATO has given our nation both a sense of achievement and a feeling of security, but EU and NATO accession also means that Estonia must bear much bigger responsibilities and commitments than before. Achieving these priorities was not the end of the story for Estonian foreign policy, but rather a new beginning on a much more demanding level.

Estonia totally shares the conviction of the majority of EU member states that the European Union's international role needs to be increased. Having grown in numbers, the EU now enjoys a great responsibility in the world. The EU 25 must tackle global issues such as the fight against terrorism, environmental protection, climate change, illegal immigration, and the violation of human rights.

At the same time, I would like to stress that the most essential guarantee of Europe's security and stability is a strong transatlantic relationship. For Estonia, one of the most important priorities in the EU's common foreign and security policy is the matter of transatlantic relations. We Estonians see NATO as the only credible guarantee of collective security in Europe. Estonia continues to actively contribute to the NATO operation in the Balkans and Afghanistan in accordance with its capabilities and available resources.

The EU 25, with inhabitants of half a billion people, also has a great responsibility towards its neighbours. As an EU state, Estonia clearly realizes the need for creating and strengthening a zone of social and economic welfare, as well as stability in the immediate vicinity of the union's external borders.

Due to Estonia's geographical location, in the context of our European neighbourhood policy, our attention has been mainly concentrated upon cooperation with the union's eastern neighbours, including Ukraine, Moldova, and South Caucasus countries. The emerging democratic reforms in those societies need to be supported.

Recent developments in Russia, one of our neighbours, leave us wondering if the democratic forces of society are strong enough to survive the concentration of power in the hands of a central government. We are worried to see that minorities in Russia are losing their national identity under pressure from the centralist power. Members of our Fennougric family are among them. There also seems to be a certain trend in Russia to avoid proactive participation in solving conflicts in areas like South Ossetia and Transnistria. Chechnya is still an open wound. I sincerely hope this policy will be revised.

• (1640)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

To break the ice, we will ask Mr. Van Loan to ask the first question.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I am glad you did put on the table the security questions right at the outset, because I am not sure Canadians appreciate how truly vulnerable and insecure Estonians can feel in a country that has spent more time in history occupied by others than enjoying their own freedom and independence.

The independence that has only recently been regained, merely a decade ago, is something that has to be carefully protected. For that reason we in the Conservative Party were very happy to see NATO accession occur, and that was a crucial priority for Conservatives. We think it is important that the ties this establishes, and other ties of security between the countries, stay strong, especially in view of recent developments in Russia that can only be alarming to small countries like Estonia that really have to depend upon others for mutual and collective defence. Simply put, a country of 1.4 million cannot stand up to Russia.

As a result, one of the issues that has troubled us in the Conservative Party for some time has been the failure of the government to establish proper full level diplomatic relations with

Estonia in the form of actually having an ambassador and an embassy on the ground in Tallinn.

In view of the security situation, in view of the importance of Estonia and the trade that has grown some fivefold or more in the past decade between our two countries, and in view of the fact that we have, for example, in the greater Toronto area alone over 10,000 people of Estonian background, I think it would be most beneficial for Canada to have that link.

I would be very interested in hearing the views of the delegation from Estonia on how it views that question of proper diplomatic representation for Canada in Tallinn.

• (1645)

The Chair: As you can see, it is an easy question from the opposition.

Mr. Sven Mikser (President, Defence Committee, Riigikogu (Parliament) of the Republic of Estonia): Thank you for the question. I think it is quite obvious that we would welcome full diplomatic representation in Estonia. We are at the same time obviously well aware of the financial and other limitations that especially small countries have. Obviously Canada is a much bigger country than Estonia.

At the same time, we appreciate very much the very good work that your ambassador, who is residing in Riga, unfortunately, Ambassador Andriago, is doing.

Obviously, the sooner we are able to have an embassy with a diplomat permanently residing in Tallinn, the happier we will be. I think we would then like to respond in kind.

Unfortunately, with the situation we are in today, we have limited human and financial resources on both sides.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: It is certainly difficult to understand the fiscal argument from the Canadian side. An office is maintained there with five on-the-ground staff, but there is no proper representation. So cost is clearly not the issue. There is obviously a lack of responsiveness from the government, which brings me to the second issue I wanted to raise for the record. Again, it is one where I think the Conservative Party clearly has spoken about wanting to see progress, and I know there is an ongoing review. That is the issue of visa travel. Canada continues to require visas for people travelling from Estonia to Canada. It certainly does not reflect the type of relationship we have with other countries at a similar level of development.

Estonia has one of the most successful, if not the most successful, post-Soviet, post-east bloc, economies in Europe. It has a highly educated, highly sophisticated population. People are not seeking to leave Estonia any more. They are seeking to emigrate to Estonia. If anything, it is Estonia that should be imposing visa requirements elsewhere.

I can certainly tell you from my own personal experience with Estonians seeking to travel here that the visa requirement has been imposed in an onerous fashion and occasionally in an indiscriminate fashion. I think it is high time Canada recognized the maturity of Estonia. The fact is it is not 1985 any more; it is now 2005. It should go ahead and establish that visa reciprocity.

I want to know from you if that is an important priority for Estonia and if that kind of visa reciprocity is something you would like to see happen.

Mr. Mart Nutt (Member, Constitutional Committee and the European Affairs Committee, Riigikogu (Parliament) of the Republic of Estonia): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

For Estonia's part, I would like to explain a real, practical situation, not just a moral one. Since last year, May 1, citizens of Canada have been able to visit Estonia without a visa, as all Canadian citizens can visit all European Union countries without a visa, but a requirement still exists for Estonian citizens. The biggest practical problem is that the embassy that issues visas to Estonian citizens is located in Warsaw, Poland. It takes a minimum of three weeks, usually more, to get a Canadian visa.

It's not a normal situation, as we are in the NATO alliance and Estonia is a member state of one of the most important partnerships for Canada. Our interest is that this problem be solved as soon as possible, and this will be useful to both our countries.

Thank you.

• (1650)

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like to have my colleague introduce himself and say which riding in which province he represents.

Mr. Paul Forseth (New Westminster—Coquitlam, CPC): My name is Paul Forseth. I'm a member from the Vancouver region on the west coast of Canada.

I see in the background notes here there is a concern about being able to join OECD. I do on occasion get to travel a little bit to your part of the world. I'm certainly hopeful you'll continue to be able to join all these international organizations and perhaps someday get into the European Union and all the rest of it.

I plan on going to Moscow, Kiev, and probably Minsk this coming fall, so at least I have some awareness of that realm of the world. We must continue to build partnerships and have ongoing exchanges. Also, it is helpful to build personal relationships so it's not just always committee delegates going to another committee. When you have a friend, you can now communicate on the Internet and send photos back and forth.

Canada is looking for alliances to do good things at the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the OSCE in Vienna, the parliamentary group there, and the OECD. That's why I'm here today. I got a last-minute notice there was a delegation coming, and I was very pleased to be able to be here and see what kind of friendships we could strike up, as I am certainly interested in visiting Estonia in the near future.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Forseth.

I will ask a question if you don't mind. We should have one from the ministerial side.

Mrs. Ergma, you mentioned that Estonia supports a stronger EU foreign policy role in the world. Among the 25 EU members, Estonia is a very small state. Do Estonians have any concerns about what weight their voice will have in a common European foreign and

defence policy, and are Estonians positive about the results of EU accession so far?

Her Excellency Ene Ergma: We really think we must have a very strong common foreign and security policy. There is one good example where the EU has shown very good action, and it was during the election in Ukraine. I think the results in this election are due to the fact that the EU acted very seriously. This is, I think, a very good sign.

Mr. Marko Mihkelson (President, Foreign Relations Committee, Riigikogu (Parliament) of the Republic of Estonia): Lately, actually during the last decade, there has been quite a lot of talk about a common foreign security policy of the European Union, and now after the accession of ten new member states, this theme is up again.

As Madam Speaker already said, this is a very important issue, not only for Estonia but for the other member states as well—not only to think, but also to act together to find a way to formulate common foreign security policy. The case of the Ukrainian election was a very good example of where not only the European Union can act together to achieve good results, which is in our interest and based on our shared values and common understanding, but also how the EU and the North American states work together in support of each other. This is a big challenge now for us, and for Ukrainians, of course, to show that this part of the world can really be transported to the democratic and liberal way of governing.

The other part of your question was about feelings in Estonia right now after the accession to the EU. I must say that when we had the accession referendum in the fall of 2003 we had the support of something like two-thirds of the people who came to vote, who said yes for accession to the European Union. We see right now that the latest polls actually show us that we have an approval rate of around 70%, or even more than 70%, so actually we see growth in the population's support after joining the EU. This actually tells us that Estonia was ready, far before May 1, 2004, to be a member of the European Union. This is the case.

• (1655)

Mr. Sven Mikser: If I may add a couple of words, before the European Union membership referendum in September 2003 the naysayers, the no camp, were painting a very gloomy picture of what life within the EU might look like for a small country like Estonia, and actually none of those very gloomy predictions has come true. That probably explains why the approval rates have been growing.

I'm a very true European; at the same time, I would describe myself as a good atlanticist as well. To explain the common foreign security policy, the European leaders are reaching a common position on an ever-widening range of issues, but this doesn't mean that the individual foreign policies that may have been made in capitals like London or Paris—or Tallinn, for that matter—will cease to exist any time soon.

While the range of issues on which Europe speaks with a single voice is increasing, at the same time, individual foreign policies of individual European countries will remain on very many issues. When you look at the UN Security Council, where European Union members have two permanent seats with veto powers at the moment, you do not see any wish to give up one of those seats; rather, you see that another EU member country is actually seeking permanent membership on the UN Security Council with veto power. I think there will be a common European foreign policy that is strengthening and gaining weight; at the same time, you'll see that individual foreign policies will remain on very many issues.

The Chair: I just want to pick up on what you said, Mr. Mikser.

You mentioned this common European foreign policy, the same as defence policy, but how do you see, regarding what's happening in the Iraq situation, the split between the former 15 EU members? How do you see this occurring in the future? Do you foresee it will be physical, or how do you see it?

Mr. Sven Mikser: That's a very good question.

Sometimes, looking from a distance, the split was seen—especially after the U.S. defence secretary's unfortunate remarks about new Europe, old Europe—as a split between the traditional old member states of the European Union and the new member states. I would like to point out that actually the new member states have never been a splitting factor within the EU. They have sided with one side or the other if the traditional old European Union members have been split on a particular issue. That has happened, and probably might happen again.

As to Iraq, it was really unfortunate. I think there is widespread understanding, both here in North America and also in Europe, that if situations like that should repeat themselves, then it might be really detrimental to the transatlantic bond and to the unity of the European Union. People in all European capitals, in Canada, and in the United States are working very hard to avoid a repetition of a situation like that. Obviously we now see the Iraq war in context, and with the benefit of hindsight we see that there were probably no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq at the time of the initial attack by the Americans. At the same time, I would say that Estonia's decision to participate in this post-conflict regulation of the Iraq situation was made at a time when we were presented with evidence that there would be weapons of mass destruction, and obviously Estonia is a small country that doesn't have, and will never have, any autonomous capacity to assess whether or not a country like Iraq is in possession of nuclear or biological or chemical weapons.

Obviously, we all should now benefit from this experience, this hindsight.

• (1700)

The Chair: Thank you.

Are there any questions from your side first?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: If I could have another go.... While all the Conservatives are here, I wish that some of the others from the other parties were here, because I did want to give you a chance to opine or speak a little bit about an issue that has been very confusing to Canadians, and it's one that I am sure our chair will understand, relating to language issues. We had a delegation of parliamentarians

at the OSCE meeting in July 2004 who voted in support of a Russian resolution that they believed to be a resolution on equality and human rights, but did not appreciate that it was in fact a resolution designed to frustrate Estonian and Latvian attempts to reassert their national sovereignty and their national character, and particularly to protect the Estonian and Latvian languages—which you can appreciate in small countries are certainly very small languages within the world media context. I can tell you that having spoken to a number of the parliamentarians who were in attendance, I don't believe any of them appreciated what that resolution was really about and what the language issues really were.

I think it would be helpful if you educated those of us who are here today, and the rest of us who may one day look at the written record of our discussions here, as to what Estonia is trying to do in terms of protecting its language and why that resolution was particularly alarming to Estonians.

The Chair: Mr. Nutt.

Mr. Mart Nutt: Speaking about that July OSCE meeting, I can say that it was a propagandistic step from Russia. If you speak about human rights issues, we fully agree that it is a competence of international forums; it's a problem at the international level and it should be solved on the international level too.

But if you speak about human rights issues, there are no international expert groups who have found any violations of the rights of national minorities in Estonia and Latvia. But speaking about Russia, we know very well what happened there. Actually, we already talked about Chechnya and South Ossetia. So it shows, to my understanding, the best Russian political ambitions, but not the real situation. Of course, Estonians were a little bit concerned by that decision made in Edinburgh. It became possible for there to be not very good information, which I think parliamentarians had in that meeting.

I hope our cooperation on that question will be better in the future and we will have more opportunities to give better information on that case.

Mr. Marko Mikhelson: Maybe I could add some remarks to explain a bit of the background as to why Russia is trying, in different parliamentary organizations and also at the current level, to raise this issue of the so-called violation of human rights in Estonia and Latvia.

As you may know, the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. We called it the Soviet Empire, and of course part of this empire occupied Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, since 1940. Basically we can characterize our relations with our great neighbour Russia since 1991 as pretty tense.

Estonia didn't start its independence in 1991; Estonia was declared independent on February 24, 1918. Actually, 85 years ago today, on February 2, 1920, in Tartu, an Estonian town, a peace treaty was signed between Estonia and Russia that basically gave Estonia independence for 40 years, until Soviet Russia occupied us again.

Of course, I'm talking about this because during the last dozen years Russia never made any effort at reconciliation in regard to what happened in history, when Estonia was occupied for such a long time. Thousands of Estonians were deported to Siberia and many thousands were killed. Regarding many of Estonia's well-known politicians, like Jaan Tõnisson, for instance, and a few others who were killed in 1940, we still don't know where they are buried. So there is a lot of negative emotional energy, let's say, in the relationship between Estonia and Russia.

The Estonian government, of course, has realized the difficulties, the kind of heritage we got after the Soviet Union broke up. In the early 1990s, 35% of our population were non-citizens, people who didn't have the right to Estonian citizenship by our laws. Now this number has decreased to only a little more than 10%, not because the other people left Estonia, but because they became Estonian citizens. Estonian citizenship law is one of the most liberal in the European Union.

• (1705)

Her Excellency Ene Ergma: May I ask one question?

The Chair: Sure. I'd like to comment on what Mr. Mihkelson said, just to follow up, and I'll let you ask a question afterwards.

I agree in a certain way with what you mention. I agree 100% with the fact that this resolution was targeted against Estonia and Latvia in a certain sense. But I want to be sure that I understand your answer well.

You mentioned that 35% were non-citizens. When you have an election in a democratic country, this 35% of the population is not allowed to vote for the parliament. But you mentioned that now this percentage has diminished because they became Estonian and fully participate in Estonian life. My understanding is that it has now been brought down to 10%. Is that correct?

A voice: Yes.

The Chair: To be allowed to vote for the Estonian Parliament you needed to be a descendant of Estonian people from before 1940. That means that people arriving in Estonia in 1941, over 60 years ago, even third-generation descendants, were not allowed to vote. But now, if I understand correctly, that situation has changed.

Mr. Marko Mihkelson: If I may clarify, yes, in 1940 Estonia was occupied and then we regained our independence in 1991. We re-established an independent Estonia. The laws and the right to citizenship are based on the idea that whoever was born in Estonia before 1940 or whoever had relatives had a right to apply to become an Estonian citizen.

But what year was it when we gave all Estonian residents the right to vote in municipal elections?

A voice: It was 1992.

Mr. Marko Mihkelson: It was 1992. It's for local elections. Actually everybody who lives in Estonia as a permanent resident or citizen of course has the right to vote in Estonia.

And as I said, we have a slightly different story of the breakup of the Soviet Union and the question of giving citizenship to the people who came to Estonia mainly in the 1970s or 1980s for the

Russification of Estonia. And the position is the same: without knowing the Estonian language, without knowing the Estonian constitution basics and history, someone would not automatically be granted citizenship.

• (1710)

The Chair: Mr. Mikser.

Mr. Sven Mikser: If I may add a couple of points, basically Estonia has passed a very tough test. We had the OSCE mission that completed its work several years ago, which was stationed in Estonia. We were reviewed very critically during our membership talks with the European Union, and also with NATO. And along with building up democratic institutions and then transferring to a market economy, the treatment of minorities was one of the critical issues that was very critically viewed, and all those institutions have reported that we do not have any outstanding problems with these issues. I'll say that some of those tests were probably such that it would have been very difficult for some traditional democracies in Europe to pass with regard to treatment of minorities and minority languages as well.

So I think when the Russian parliamentarians in different fora such as the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, sometimes also the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, of which I happen to be a member, raise these issues of treatment of minorities in countries like Estonia and Latvia, it's much more for domestic consumption in Russia, where it might be very good to appear to be fighting for your expatriates who are discriminated against in some other countries, when you cannot report success in some domestic affairs back to your voters.

I think this is one of those cases, and it's fairly unfortunate when the parliamentarians from other countries actually follow the lead by Russian politicians without very critically looking at the instance at hand. I think it's really unfortunate and there is a lesson in that. But I predict that these things will keep popping up every now and then in those different parliamentary fora.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: To put it in the simplest terms, Estonians were asking for people who were part of the occupying Russification to make a gesture of wanting to be Estonians if they wanted to vote, to actually have to apply for citizenship. Is that correct? And the Russians felt that was an unreasonable demand to ask you to become a citizen to vote.

Mr. Sven Mikser: We have actually never wanted to press our citizenship upon people. After the Soviet Union ceased to exist, some people chose Russian citizenship. Others applied for Estonian citizenship. We have had two ways of acquiring that. Either you can show that you are descended from an Estonian citizen or you follow this naturalization procedure, which is not tougher and not more typical than in many other countries. We have actually encouraged people to express their wish to apply for Estonian citizenship and get it. And we have integration programs that are state financed for people like that.

The Chair: Mr. Nutt.

Mr. Mart Nutt: Thank you. I'd like to add some answers to that.

It's true that there is a relatively big number of non-citizens in Estonia and it is a result of forced immigration during the Soviet occupation period. It should be solved by us, it is clear, but it takes time. There is nothing to do.

Speaking about non-citizens, we have used the principle of *jus sanguinis* in citizenship, which is typical for the majority of European countries. It means you are a citizen of that country your parents were citizens of. But birth is not important in that case. So automatically a person who is born in Estonian territory is not an Estonian citizen. Automatically he or she isn't. At the same time, there are all the opportunities and all the rights to become an Estonian citizen for everyone who has lived in Estonia legally for a minimum of five years. For those children who are born in Estonian territory, they can become Estonian citizens through registration without conditions. So for everyone who is born in Estonian territory, if their parents register them only for Estonian citizenship, then they are Estonian citizens and there are no more problems.

Speaking about elections, as Mr. Mihkelson already said, legally residing non-citizens of Estonia can take part in local elections, not parliamentary elections, but they have all other rights, economic rights, social guarantees. Retirement benefits are the same for everyone. It doesn't depend on citizenship.

Thank you.

• (1715)

The Chair: Thank you very much for this clarification.

Madame la présidente, you have a question?

Her Excellency Ene Ergma: Yes. Both our countries have one similar feature. We have great brother next door. You have the United States and we have Russia.

An hon. member: We have the better neighbour.

Her Excellency Ene Ergma: Yes, that is true. But for us really the problem with Russia is it is very essential, as you have already heard from this discussion.

But my question is, how do you estimate the situation in Russia that is going on nowadays? How do you estimate this? We are next door; we know a little bit. We receive more information and we know the situation, but how do you look here in Canada at the situation in Russia?

The Chair: That's a good question. I'll give the answer to the opposition first. Would anyone like to respond? Mr. Sorenson?

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Yes. I'm not qualified to answer that, although I think there are some things that are happening there that we're very concerned about. We've seen what we believe may be perhaps some impropriety in the Ukrainian election with Mr. Putin campaigning in the sovereign Ukraine. Some of those things are problematic, and I think we're also seeing a renewal to a certain degree. I suppose it's not up to me to offer my opinion, but we are seeing perhaps more power being centralized once again there, and we're aware of it. And those things that are printed in the papers and that's what we're aware of.

We have a government parliamentary secretary here who may speak, or who may choose not to speak, on the issue, but it would be interesting to hear what they have.

I'll let him come back to that. My question is this. If I move to Estonia, in five years could I apply for citizenship? I have no history, I have no relatives who have ever been in Estonia, but I would be afforded citizenship. Would I have to speak the language? I'd have to learn the language?

Her Excellency Ene Ergma: Yes.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: All right. And I'd have to pass a test or have a certain standard as to the Estonian language? But if I couldn't speak Estonian, if I could only speak English, I would not be able to become a citizen?

Her Excellency Ene Ergma: Yes.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: That's correct.

The Chair: Mr. Nutt.

Mr. Mart Nutt: I'd like to mention that you have to understand Estonian on an elementary level. It's a very simple test compared with other European countries where there is a language requirement. You can see that it is one of the simplest. But it's true, if you don't speak any word of Estonian, you cannot become an Estonian citizen.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Say I move to Estonia. If I was working in Estonia, my taxes would be paid to Estonia. Is there any difference between an Estonian citizen and someone who chooses not to be a citizen of the country?

Mr. Marko Mihkelson: If I may, I'll answer that. My wife is a British citizen and she lives very well in Estonia. Actually, she earned this ID card much earlier than I did. This is an Estonian ID card and I got it only a month ago. She had already had it four years, so she enjoys life in Estonia and that's....

• (1720)

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: You're an old country, yet as far as your democracy goes, you're basically a new country, and I find it fascinating that you have a democracy there.

We're celebrating the elections in Iraq, and I think everyone, regardless of any stand in the past on Iraq, is excited to see that people in that country now have the ability to vote.

How often do you hold elections? What is your parliament made up of and how many different parties are there? How many parties are represented here? Are you all from the same party? Are some of you in opposition? And thirdly, how often—

Hon. Dan McTeague (Pickering—Scarborough East, Lib.): Before you ask the question, can we give an answer to their question? I understand what you're doing, but I just want to give them a quick answer on Russia and then you can follow me—I will cede the floor to you—if you don't mind. But if you will, allow me just a moment to answer.

The Chair: Mr. McTeague is the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Mr. McTeague, please.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Thank you.

Mr. Sorenson was our chair yesterday in committee and he did an excellent job. That is why I want to make sure I give an answer from the government side. Please don't consider the fact that my colleagues are not here as a sign that the government is not interested. Quite the contrary.

I was late because I had to meet with two ambassadors simultaneously. Obviously, the agenda was tight, and I apologize for my delay.

You asked a question concerning our approach to Russia. I believe it's an evolving relationship we have with Russia.

Mr. Sorenson quite rightly pointed out the concern we had recently with respect to the recent election in Ukraine. As you probably know, Canada took a very active role. Our Parliament did something it rarely does. It spoke unanimously as to the need to have a new election and to discount the first round of elections that took place. We discounted the first round; the second round we liked.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: We liked the first round; the first round was fine. It was the second round we didn't like and it was the third round we supported.

Hon. Dan McTeague: I understand the point, Mr. Van Loan. We believe the results of November 19, 20, 21—somewhere in that area—were not satisfactory to all parliamentarians, so we took a very strong position.

That being said and notwithstanding the relationship of Ukraine with Russia, which of course your country would have far more knowledge of, our political relationship with Russia is of course first and foremost with respect to sovereignty in the Arctic. Our Governor General made tremendous headway, although that too was criticized, ostensibly for a very good reason, as to the cost.

But we are concerned about the ability to work with Russia cooperatively on issues such as non-proliferation and the decommissioning of its aging fleet of nuclear submarines, a matter that of course affects all of us. As an Atlantic nation you yourselves would have concern over the use and extension of its fleet.

We have also been very involved in issues dealing with trade. As to concerns we have had about trade, one thinks of the whole Aerostar Hotel fiasco.

We were one of the first nations to work with Russian officials at the time of glasnost in 1989. We have a very significant company in Canada that has done a lot of work. I'm referring of course to K.C. Rowe's group, which owns CanJet and is involved in a number of trade missions.

There has been a dispute. This dispute has raised a number of flags of concern, but we generally see an evolving relationship with Russia.

We see it as a mature and important partner in international conflict. In fact, our last major deployment of troops took place as a result of the use of a Russian jet to send our expeditionary force, the DART, to Colombo.

It is extremely important for us to understand that there will be irritants and they will obviously be underlined, but we also believe we have a first-class relationship with Russia and we want to

continue to engage Russia, as we do other nations, in a more global and more intricately involved nation-building process for the sake of stability in the international community, which we believe Russia is an indispensable part of.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Perhaps I could give two cents' worth before you answer Mr. Sorenson's question.

I think from the Conservative side we are a little more concerned with the trends and patterns we have seen happening in Russia—the opportunities Mr. Putin took recently to further shut down what had been a very nascent democracy, and that overall trend. There is also a very real concern that Mr. Putin has taken advantage of the focus on the global war on terror to give him a free hand to engage in that consolidation, with less focus on human rights from the west than there should be.

I can tell you that you needed only to be in question period today to appreciate that for the Conservative Party, those fundamental questions of freedom and human rights have to be paramount, and we do not believe that short-term economic interests should trump or override the importance of individual liberty and freedom. I think that is perhaps a bit of a difference between ourselves and the government. For us the importance of human rights has to be paramount.

• (1725)

The Chair: That's fine, Mr. Van Loan.

You have many questions from my colleague, Mr. Sorenson.

Mr. Nutt.

Mr. Mart Nutt: Maybe I'll just explain Estonian statehood, and that may give you some answers. Estonia is a parliamentary republic. The main power is in the hands of Parliament, and government is responsible for the Parliament. We also have a president, but the president is mostly ceremonial. He is elected by Parliament or electoral jury—it depends...it's a detail, actually.

There are 101 members of Parliament, so the Parliament is quite small, but Estonia is a small country. There are six parties in the Parliament at the moment. There are 18 parties in society, but only six are represented in Parliament. At the moment three of those parties belong to the government coalition; three are in opposition. I am an opposition MP; Sven Mikser as well is from the opposition, and three deputies here are representing coalition parties. There are different kinds of parties in Parliament—right-centrist parties and left-centrist parties, but no extremist parties. It makes Estonia a quite stable democracy.

The Chair: Mr. Sorenson.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: You have what we would call the federal Parliament. Is the nation divided into provinces or states? When you talk about municipal elections, how many different levels of government are there?

Mr. Mart Nutt: It's a unitarian republic. Estonia is so small that we have one level of municipality. Estonia is not federal and does not have many levels. There is one level of municipality and the second level is a national level. There are no further levels; there is only the national level and the local or municipal level.

Municipalities are quite independent by constitution, so you can find some federal aspects, but it's not a federal country by constitution. Our population is only 1.4 million people; most Canadian provinces are bigger, so a federal structure of the state is not practical in the Estonian situation.

The Chair: Do you have a question, Mr. Menzies?

Mr. Ted Menzies: This is sort of a nuts-and-bolts question.

Hon. Dan McTeague: More nuts than bolts.

Mr. Ted Menzies: More nuts than bolts. Pardon me.

Agriculture—what is your main industry? That's something I've missed here. What supports your economy? Do you export? Are you a member of the WTO?

Mr. Sven Mikser: Basically, my specialty interest obviously is defence, but agriculture used to be quite big in the Soviet times. Basically, it employed approximately 20% of our workforce. Now this has fallen to just about 5%, which I think is quite normal for the country. The agricultural sector is still quite important when you look at its proportion of the GDP.

What's the percentage of agriculture in GDP, Mart?

It is 6% or 7%.

Energy is obviously a big industry. We produce energy out of oil shale, and we basically are independent in the sense that we produce more than we consume. Actually, we sell some. There is oil transit. We bring in refined oil by rail from Russia and we use the Port of Tallinn, which is one of the ice-free ports on the Baltic Sea, to take it out by sea. So this is an important industry.

Timber, forestry, is obviously a big industry in Estonia. Some IT-sector enterprises are relatively important. Those are probably the biggest. Fishing is not quite as important as it is perhaps here in Canada, but it's also an important industry.

• (1730)

Mr. Ted Menzies: So are you self-sufficient in food?

Mr. Sven Mikser: More or less, yes. We export some and we import some. Basically, we have a pretty big dairy industry. We also grow some other crops.

Mr. Paul Forseth: Just to summarize, you've come here as a delegation. Perhaps you could remind us, by going down the list again, of what you would really like from Canada.

Relationships are built on give and take, and you are probably looking for some specific short-term issues and some long-term issues from us. I would like you to just remind us of what they are so that we can consider them.

Mr. Marko Mihkelson: If I may very quickly, Estonia and Canada have excellent relations. As we mentioned earlier, when Estonia was occupied in 1940, and a few years later during the Second World War when the Soviets came back to Estonia, many thousands of Estonians left our country knowing that the Soviet occupation would be very brutal. We know of 22,000 Estonians living in Canada right now in many provinces, but mainly in Toronto.

What I would like to say is that from May 1, 2004, as Mart Nutt already said, we have had visa freedom for Canadian citizens to come to Estonia, and we are very much looking forward to this political decision you have to make about Estonia probably in the spring of this year, April or May, at the end of the monitoring of the process.

As Estonia is a member of NATO, as Estonia is a member of the European Union, and as the approval rate is extremely low for visas right now, we really hope that Estonia will get visa freedom with your country as soon as possible, hopefully by the springtime. This is perhaps the most talked about issue, if we are talking about Estonian–Canadian relations.

But we've already seen during the last two or three years that the number of tourists from Canada has doubled or tripled, and it should be the other way around.

The Chair: I must thank you for sharing your time with us during your visit. I hope to see you this evening at the dinner held by Mr. Milliken.

I just want to point out to my colleagues that we are being called for a vote in about 10 to 12 minutes.

Once again, thank you very much.

Her Excellency Ene Ergma: Thank you.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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