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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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● (1535)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) our briefing on the situation in Ukraine will commence.

Before I introduce our witnesses, I just want to see if it will be all right with the opposition if we have some other members ask some questions, or whether you require them to be signed in. Obviously, for voting purposes, which we're not going to have, they would have to be signed in. Is it all right? Do we have consent for them to ask questions?

Mr. Jean-François Larose (Repentigny, NDP): I don't have a problem with that.

The Chair: All right. Obviously, that will be in the proper rotation, so we don't need to sign our members in then. Thank you very much for that, by the way.

To our witnesses who are here today, thank you very much for taking the time to be here to talk about what is going on in Ukraine.

I will introduce the witnesses, but when you have a chance to go, if you could, reaffirm the organization you are with and pronounce your names. That would be great.

We have Ms. Hetmanchuk, who is with the Institute of World Policy.

Thank you very much for being here today.

Next we have Mr. Kozak, who is chairman of the external affairs committee of the League of Ukrainian Canadians national executive. He has just stepped away for a second. We will get him back again.

We have Ms. Coynash, who is with the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group.

Welcome, and thank you for being here.

Last at the table here we have Mr. Rybachuk, who is with the United Actions Center.

Once again, thank you all for being here.

I'm going to start with you, sir, to give us your opening comments. We'll go all the way through, and when we are finished we'll then take turns going back and forth between the opposition and the government to ask questions.

Mr. Rybachuk, thank you very much for being here. I will turn the floor over to you for 10 minutes.

Mr. Oleh Rybachuk (Chairman, United Actions Center): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am genuinely excited and honoured to be here. The last time I was here was almost nine years ago, when I was with the presidential candidate, Viktor Yushchenko. We were attending question period and the government was responding to difficult questions. We really enjoyed the atmosphere.

I could not have imagined what would happen afterwards—how Viktor Yushchenko's campaign would proceed, how he would be almost killed by poisoning, and how his major rival would become the next President of Ukraine. It would have been impossible for me to imagine. It just proved how relatively speedy the development of life is, and how we can find ourselves unexpectedly in many positions. I couldn't imagine that nine years after the Orange Revolution I would be talking about the state of democracy and civil society in Ukraine. I'm proud to talk about this, and to talk about what happens in my country today.

Internationally speaking, you are aware that Ukraine is practically ready to initial a long-awaited agreement with the European Union on political association and free trade. We are ready to initial. It's technically done, but everyone in Europe is saying that unless there is much progress in democracy, we can forget about ratification of the agreement.

We are progressing on a similar agreement with Canada. Your Prime Minister has stated that because the opposition leaders are in jail, it would be difficult make an agreement unless things change. Yesterday, Putin again became President of Russia. This does not augur well for my government or for President Yanukovych, who was campaigning with the slogan of better relations with Russia. We can predict that pressure for Ukraine to become a member of the Eurasian Union, as Mr. Putin loves to put it, will only increase. In his first statement, Mr. Putin says that the CIS, or what remained after the Soviet Union, would be his priority. In that strategy, Ukraine is the number one target.

Domestically, we have little to be proud of. The first election after two years of the Yanukovych presidency was an election of local authorities. Local elections have had a serious setback, and the world didn't recognize them as democratic. There is backsliding on democracy according to all the international partners of Ukraine. There are problems with freedom of speech. Civil society, which I represent today, sees more and more pressure from secret services to control its activity. Peaceful assembly is getting more and more difficult.

It is interesting that for the first time in 20 years of independence the party that now represents a majority in Parliament is losing votes. Those votes are not coming to the opposition. Roughly 40% of Ukrainians support neither the government nor the opposition. This is something we have to think about. The opposition in any country is not always united. I remember a German joke saying that there are three types of animosity: just enemies, blood enemies, and members of a coalition. I guess this is something universal.

● (1540)

The biggest challenge is that many Ukrainians do not actually believe that the opposition, even if it's united, is an alternative to the government. This corresponds to our own experience. What happens in civil society today is that there are many attempts for civil society to initiate and to put forth a totally different quality of politician to come back to power.

But how to do that is another question. What we are trying to do is to make politicians accountable, specifically the opposition, because there are high hopes that the opposition can really be an alternative to power. If you call yourself an alternative, you have to be accountable. You have to be very clear on what basis you are finding candidates for the next election and what makes you different from government.

We have a broad public movement called Chesna, or Honesty, and that movement calls for all members or candidates for parliamentary membership to meet six core democratic values, which could help voters see that these are really things that remind us that there is an alternative to the present government. Many civil campaigns are aimed at changing the mindset of voters, because it is clear that if voters do not change their minds, it's impossible to have new types of politicians coming to power in Ukraine.

In this regard, we really appreciate having this opportunity to talk to you today, to talk to the members of Parliament of the country that was the first to recognize our independence, the country that is well known in the Ukraine as a country with a strong and independent foreign policy. I'm specifically grateful—and if I may, on behalf of all Ukrainians here today, I will express our sincere gratitude—to Mr. Dechert for initiating these hearings. I know there will be some Ukrainian politicians talking to your committee in a few days, and therefore it's a great opportunity for us also, in a very frank exchange of views, to answer some of your questions.

Thank you.

● (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rybachuk.

Now we're going to move to Ms. Coynash.

I'll turn the floor over to you for 10 minutes.

Ms. Halyna Coynash (Representative, Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group): Thank you. I'm Halyna Coynash from the Kharkiv human rights group.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for allowing me to be here today. Frankly, I would have preferred to be here as a tourist. Unfortunately, I'm here with really quite serious things to say.

The hearings are taking place in a time of very great concern over human rights in Ukraine and generally where democracy is going. It is of no wonder, considering that Ukraine has now become a country with political prisoners. This is a very, very major step backwards. There is a lot of knowledge, obviously, in Canada about the situation with the political trial of Yulia Tymoshenko; the former Minister of the Interior, Yuri Lutsenko; and many others.

The charges against Lutsenko are trivial and totally absurd, to the point where.... I'm sorry. I will actually try to read because I think I'm probably going to get flustered otherwise—sorry.

Witnesses for the prosecution have actually stated in court that the alleged offences he was charged with were actually standard practice, and are still standard practice, within the ministry, and yet he has been convicted and sentenced to four years in prison. There were terribly serious infringements. Witnesses were stating in court that they had been pressured by the investigator, that the investigator had actually dictated what they should say. All of this was stated in court, and yet it was ignored.

There were huge irregularities in both the cases of Tymoshenko and of Lutsenko, and those of other people as well—Ivashchenko and some others—with why in fact they were remanded in detention anyway. The use of detention is one of the reasons for Lutsenko's oncoming case at the European Court of Human Rights. It's no accident that the court in Strassbourg has fast-tracked this particular case and has also appointed a public hearing on April 17, which is something it does not do very often. It's obviously showing how important it sees the case.

The swift and unequivocal statements from western countries, including Canada, make it clear that nobody is under any illusions about the political nature of these trials. Western democracies became implacable over the arrest of Yulia Tymoshenko. They are absolutely right not to budge; however, it would be most unwise to assume that a compromise over Tymoshenko, even if such a thing were offered, could allay other concerns.

The concerns are very great at the moment. They are not only over Tymoshenko, Lutsenko, and a few others. There are already a number of other victims of politically motivated or selective prosecution in Ukraine, and there are very many other trends that have absolutely no place in a law-based democracy.

The evidence of similar selective use of criminal prosecution and of unacceptable methods of quashing dissent has been overwhelming for a very long time. The last two years have been marred by the first questionable election since 2004—those were the local elections in October 2010—by political persecution, harassment, and other methods of pressure against not just political opponents but also civic activists, people who are in any way asserting their rights.

The Yanukovych-initiated judicial changes of 2010 have made judges—who, frankly, were never renowned in Ukraine for independence—seriously dependent and seriously controlled, in particular by the prosecutor and by the high council of judges, which has highly dubious makeup, including many members of the prosecutor general's office.

● (1550)

Those in power, including the local authorities, are using the law enforcement offices, the courts, the tax inspectorate, the police, and even such apparent innocuous bodies as the sanitary hygiene service as instruments of pressure or repression. The media is also being used for these purposes as well. Freedom of peaceful assembly has been consistently violated over the last two years. The courts almost always allow applications to ban meetings for basically no reason whatsoever. The Berkut riot police are used in an extremely heavy-handed manner. There is also a disturbing number of cases where, in the case of peaceful assembly, the courts have actually sentenced people, maybe to three days' imprisonment, maybe to 15 days' imprisonment. At the moment it's not 10 years, as it once was, but it is still a serious violation. They are simply exercising their right to freedom of assembly.

What is particularly worrying, I suppose, in all of this is that the courts, the prosecutor, all of them, work together. My organization, other organizations, as I'm sure my colleagues would all say—we are appealing against many of these bizarre decisions to ban demonstrations, to imprison people. They appeal them, and the appeals are simply knocked out. Nobody wants to listen at all.

Other methods are extremely worrying. For example, the use of the traffic police has become very common to stop people getting to demonstrations. That can be blockades. It can also be such methods as the police.... The traffic police simply go to a company that is providing transport and quietly tell them—or not so quietly, I have no idea; I have never been there. But it is quite clear that they are informed that if they continue, if they offer transport on that day, they can expect their licence to be removed. Or a driver will suddenly find that the police stop him and decide that he's drunk. That's obviously a serious offence, and nobody is going to check whether in fact he has any alcohol in his system at all.

There have also been a number of prosecutions against people expressing their right to protest, which fully warrant being considered political persecution as well. The protests against the draft tax code in November 2010 coincided totally with the Orange Revolution; it was the anniversary of the Orange Revolution, which doubtless particularly annoyed certain people in power. There were thousands of people on Independence Square in Kiev. The authorities didn't want to do anything too heavy-handed at the time. They gave some very token concessions, which were almost immediately cancelled. Then the riot police and the municipal authorities came in at dawn. They removed all of the protestors within minutes. I think it was something like 20 minutes.

● (1555)

The Chair: You have one minute left. Continue.

Ms. Halyna Coynash: I'm sorry. I'd better hurry.

The point about that particular protest is that eight people have spent time in prison and are facing criminal prosecution. The prosecutions are over totally absurd things.

One very last point that I would make—I'm sorry, I didn't realize how long I was taking—is that along with all the other problems in all of this is the fact that the media has become seriously under the control of the authorities. This means that people are simply not getting a chance to understand what is happening. It is vital that countries like Canada, which has shown so much support, are aware of the need for information, are aware of the need to be monitoring the elections, and are also just generally aware of the need to be highly supportive and pay attention to what is happening in Ukraine.

I'm sorry I've run over. Thank you very much for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Coynash.

We're now going to move to Mr. Kozak.

Welcome, sir. We're going to turn the floor over to you for 10 minutes.

Mr. Ihor Kozak (Chairman, External Affairs Committee, League of Ukrainian Canadians National Executive): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

It is an honour for me, as it is for the League of Ukrainian Canadians, for which I chair the committee on external relations, to appear before this august body and to respectfully share with the distinguished members of the standing committee our concerns and hopes for our ancestral homeland, as well as some recommendations concerning our government's policies towards Ukraine.

At the outset, allow me to express our sincere appreciation to you for convening these hearings. It is also very relevant that the hearings are being held in tandem with the international conference, “Ukraine at the Crossroads”, which is taking place later this week under the auspices of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress and involves many subject matter experts from across Canada and around the world.

The topic that I will be speaking about at the conference dovetails as one of the topics of your hearings, namely, the current situation in Ukraine and its possible implications for Ukraine's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. The implications of Ukrainian Euro-Atlantic integration go far beyond the interests of Ukraine and its people. Due to its strategic geopolitical location at the west-east crossroads and at the frontier of the European Union and NATO, its significant size and population, and its abundance of natural resources, as well as great human and scientific capital, the strategic vectors of Ukraine's future development will no doubt have a serious impact on the national interests of many countries around the world, and those of Canada in particular.

Since that moment in time over 20 years ago, when Canada became the very first western country to recognize Ukrainian independence, Canada and Canadians have played a role of significant importance in assisting the Ukrainian state and its people in taking their rightful place in the world's community as equals amongst equals, adopting democratic values, and overcoming many challenges, from the wounds caused by the Chernobyl disaster to the traumas resulting from years of Soviet-era oppression, most significantly the Holodomor—genocide by famine.

However, the process of Ukraine's integration into the free world and the democratization of its society is far from over, and it would be unrealistic to expect that these two short decades should be enough to undo the centuries of harm caused by czarist and communist oppression. Therefore, Canada's active role in this important process should not stop. On the contrary, today more than ever, Ukraine and its people need Canada to stand by them.

Since regaining independence in 1991, Ukraine has also made a great deal of progress on the road to becoming a full and valuable member of the western community. Ukraine's unilateral decision to abolish its nuclear arsenal and its long-standing support of United Nations and NATO peace initiatives around the globe are only two examples of such efforts. During the exemplary, democratic, and peaceful Orange Revolution, the Ukrainian people proved to the world their commitment to democracy and their civic maturity, which were reconfirmed in two subsequent parliamentary elections.

Then, two years ago, Viktor Yanukovych, the current President of Ukraine, and his team came to power. Right from the onset, the situation with democracy deteriorated and has been worsening ever since. Freedom of expression came under siege, politically motivated persecutions became prevalent, and numerous other core democratic values have been violated. These critical issues are perhaps best reflected in the fate of one individual, Yulia Tymoshenko, the former Prime Minister of Ukraine, who was prosecuted on politically motivated charges and imprisoned.

At the same time, geopolitically, Ukraine has been persistently dragged into Russia's sphere of influence by the openly imperialistic, clearly anti-democratic, and brazenly anti-western regime of Vladimir Putin and company. I am certain that over the course of these hearings you will receive ample testimony in this regard. Even today, you've already had two examples. Mr. Rybachuk eloquently pointed out that Mr. Putin is back in power, and is still in power for another four to eight years. This means additional pressure on the regime in Ukraine, which means additional threats to Ukrainian democracy.

● (1600)

Ms. Coynash, I believe, did a superb job of describing violations of the basic principles of democracy, predominantly human rights, in Ukraine, so I will not elaborate further on that.

The question of the day, ladies and gentlemen, is how should Canada and its western allies react to the current situation in Ukraine? Clearly, due to the limited time offered to me for these opening remarks, I'm not in a position to elaborate in detail, but I'd be more than happy to elaborate further during the question period.

I would like to emphasize, however, that regardless of the nature of the decisions taken by the Canadian government and the Canadian Parliament, the following two elements should always be kept in mind and in balance with each other as much as possible.

First, the current Ukrainian government must be kept accountable for its actions now and in the future, including prior to and during the parliamentary election in October this year. This will require enforcement of the Ukrainian government keeping to democratic principles.

Second, whatever actions are taken to call the Ukrainian government to account have to be carefully designed and calculated to prevent an adverse strategic impact. I would like to emphasize the sensitivity of the matter at hand. Actions in support of the democratic process in Ukraine should not involve isolation of Ukraine. That would have a negative impact on the Ukrainian people and conserve the current Russian regime by drawing Ukraine closer into its geopolitical orbit and thus its authoritarian methods.

In conclusion, Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen, allow me to say that these hearings, together with the Ukraine at the Crossroads conference, constitute a precedent-setting sequence of events at a critical time for Ukraine. Ukrainian Canadians and all of our fellow citizens can take pride that the cumulative impact of these interrelated and internationally significant proceedings will further affirm Canada's leadership role in supporting the Ukrainian people's aspirations for a truly western state—founded on those core values we so much cherish in Canada—and strengthening the very stability and prosperity of Europe.

Thank you. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

● (1605)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Kozak.

Ms. Hetmanchuk, we'll turn the floor over to you for 10 minutes.

Ms. Alyona Hetmanchuk (Director, Institute of World Policy): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for the invitation. It's a really great honour to be here today.

In my introductory remarks I would like to focus on the parliamentary elections that are to take place in October 2012 and on media freedom.

What will distinguish the coming elections from previous ones? Firstly, there is a new electoral system, and a new law on elections suggests a semi-proportional representation system, with half of the members of Parliament elected from the party list and the other half in majoritarian constituencies. This is a step back. Such a system existed in Ukraine from 1998 to 2002.

Why would a semi-proportional system not be accepted? Because practising a so-called administrative resource, or to put it simply, falsifying election results, is easiest in majoritarian electorates. Majoritarian elections, in the Ukrainian case, are a battle of riches rather than of candidates. The majoritarian system is also required for the ruling party to facilitate coalition negotiations in the new Parliament.

The main question today is not about who wins the election. It is about how to form a coalition in the Parliament. Some analysts suggest that the scenario of 2002 may be repeated, when the opposition won the election but the majority in Parliament was formed by the ruling party. It is obvious that Ukrainian authorities hope that the first round of people's deputies will form the ruling coalition. The principal goal of the Party of Regions—the party of President Yanukovych—is to win a so-called constitutional majority. It's simply to win 300 seats in the Parliament. It will even enable them to elect the president to Parliament, something increasingly being discussed in the internal political circles in Ukraine today.

In my opinion, elections really have little chance of being fair and democratic, but we will hardly witness such gross falsification as we had in 2004 when the Orange Revolution took place. I would put it this way: if in 2004 we witnessed clumsy or stupid fraud, this year we might experience smart fraud. I'm sure the Ukrainian government will be more innovative and more creative in order to falsify election results. The main fraud will take place, in my opinion, after the election, in the process of forming a ruling coalition.

Another distinguishing characteristic of the coming parliamentary elections is that they will take place in the conditions of severe confrontation between the authorities and the opposition. For the first time in Ukrainian political history, the most famous leader of the opposition—I'm talking now about ex-Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko—has been intentionally excluded from the election process. At present, there is very little chance that Tymoshenko will be released and will have the opportunity to lead the list of her party, the Batkivshchyna party.

The problem of political prisoners has also considerably adjusted the priorities of the opposition before the election. The energy of its leaders is focused primarily on getting political prisoners out of jail, which is not a usual task for the opposition in democratic contests. Actually, the role of the opposition in Ukraine, to some extent, is played by civil society today.

● (1610)

Elections will be a severe test for both the government and the opposition. Perhaps for the opposition it will be even more decisive than for the authorities, since the governmental team, despite all internal divisions, will manage to use the threat of losing power in order to come forward as a monolithic team. The opposition hasn't yet demonstrated such unity.

As for public expectation with regard to the election, we come across a paradoxical pattern. On the one hand, there is a deep conviction that these elections will be unfair, that lots of fraud in favour of the party in power will take place and the ruling party will achieve the result it needs in this election. But on the other hand, there is also hope that elections will be a turning point, after which the whole trend of the country's development may change.

I think it's important to say that today 90% of Ukraine's population is in blatant opposition to President Yanukovych. Some people are in the political opposition, some people are in the so-called social opposition. They are opposed to the abolition of social benefits the Yanukovych government initiated. Some people are in the intellectual opposition. Some are in the moral opposition. Even many government members are in opposition to the president and his family, which is becoming increasingly influential.

The problem is that all these opposition groups are really fragmented and lack a single powerful message that could bring them all together. For the moment, as representatives of civil society, we are trying to find this single powerful message that could bring all these opposition groups together.

I know that a hot topic now, or a hot question, is, can one expect something like a new Orange Revolution in the case of ballot rigging? In my opinion, I agree with those experts who claim that Ukrainian society is not ready for change. Not only are the authorities not ready for change, but the opposition as well, since it has to use much effort to release political prisoners, instead of developing any clear agenda or action plan.

The most important thing is that the population doesn't believe the opposition is able to offer something radically different. People would also like to see new political leaders. Among the more or less new faces are Arseniy Yatsenyuk and Vitali Klitschko.

Arseniy Yatsenyuk, a former foreign minister, is considered to be confusing, too slippery, as some Ukrainians put it, while Vitali Klitschko is regarded as too unprepared politically. However, Klitschko is currently maybe the most fashionable trend in Ukrainian society and in the ex-pat community.

In general, Yulia Tymoshenko remains the only real opposition leader because the rest of the opposition leaders look quite artificial. I would put it that way.

A frequently asked question is how much does the opinion of the west matter to Yanukovych. My answer is that it is important as long as it does not object to his personal commitments and personal interest. He is ready to talk with the west as long as there are no calls, for example, to free Yulia Tymoshenko.

My impression is that the more one continues to say, “Free Yulia”, the higher probability is that she will stay in prison. Both President Yushchenko, during his presidency, and President Yanukovych today, proved one thing: once the name “Tymoshenko” is switched on, all the rest—including their personal political future, promised reforms, European integration, the perception in the east and in the west, the personal international context—becomes irrelevant.

● (1615)

As a former journalist, I would also like to make some remarks on media freedom. I will begin with the good news, because we haven't heard good news today, so I think it's important, and there is so much less of it.

First of all, in spite of expert forecasts, we still have live political talk shows on Ukrainian TV where both the government and the opposition representatives are invited. There are four popular political talk shows on four popular TV channels today.

Secondly, we observe a global trend emerging in Ukraine of the new media superceding the conventional. More and more Ukrainians get their daily information from social media and news websites, which have always been very popular in Ukraine. The number of Internet and social media users has increased, in contrast to several years ago. The latest poll shows that more than 25% of Ukrainians use the Internet on a daily basis.

Even Ukraine's top investigative journalists doing research on the president's family and his property are not persecuted by the government.

Now I'll go to the negative trends. There has been one strong trend present in Ukraine under all presidents, which started under President Kuchma. The most popular media in Ukraine belongs to Ukrainian oligarchs, and the oligarchs want to be on good terms with the Ukrainian authorities. They're used to managing their media manually. Threatening calls to TV channels' top management and editors-in-chief are the normal practice.

I call the situation the "Berlusconization" of Ukraine. By the way, the example of Italy and Berlusconi is frequently used in the dialogue with Europe by First Deputy Prime Minister Khoroshkovsky, formerly state security head, who is the de facto owner of the most popular channel in the country.

The main trend is that political news in Ukraine has disappeared from Ukrainian television and leading media in general. The news has become more tabloid-like, because the channel managers and editors simply avoid hot political topics in order to not irritate the owners or the Ukrainian government. I am sure a lot depends on each particular top manager and editor. Some of them are so worried about their jobs that they are reluctant to provoke the authorities.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you. We'll catch anything else we need with the questions.

We will start questioning the witnesses with the opposition, and we'll go back and forth between government and the opposition.

I want to welcome Madame Latendresse to our committee.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Thank you very much.

I have a question for Mr. Kozak, but it can be answered by everyone if you like.

In a way, the past communist transition in Ukraine and Moldavia was quite similar to what happened in Romania and Bulgaria, but as we can see now, Ukraine is having some difficulty going on with the revolution that started.

Do you think that Europe missed something and didn't offer a clear option to Ukraine and Moldavia? Do you think it's too late now for Europe to do something real to help Ukraine in her transition?

Mr. Ihor Kozak: Thank you for your question.

Certainly it's not an easy question to answer. The opportunities for Ukraine during the Orange Revolution and even prior—after the collapse of the U.S.S.R.—were great. The reason why perhaps it didn't materialize is twofold. I think we should admit, as folks in Ukraine do, that the leadership—the so-called leadership elite—at the time of the Orange Revolution did not seize the moment. The opportunities were there and not enough concrete steps were taken.

For example, as a former Canadian military officer—I'm retired now, but I can speak from experience—I was involved in various diplomatic missions under the auspices of NATO. After retirement, I was doing some not-for-profit work in the Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine, and there was a lot of rhetoric from President Yushchenko at the time and other Orange leaders, but very few concrete steps were taken to meet the requirements that were there.

I believe on the one hand that Ukrainian leadership didn't seize the moment and were not fast enough to react and to do what was necessary to integrate as quickly as possible into Europe.

On the other hand, I believe that the west—the European Union and NATO—also didn't react adequately. It had a moment and missed an opportunity. If you remember, at the Bucharest summit, on the question of Ukrainian membership, for example, even the action plan was discussed, and Germany and France de facto blocked it, did not provide a chance for Ukraine to adopt the membership plan for NATO. Excuses are many. You can talk about issues in Ukraine; there's democracy, there's human rights. We can talk about the state of the Ukrainian economy and so on and so forth.

If you look at other member states in eastern Europe that joined NATO—and there are many—they also had a number of reasons why they should not be accepted. There were problems with democracy and human rights and other problems like that. Yet the west decided to pull those states—whether it was Romania or other states—into its sphere of influence and then de facto force on them those democratic values and other standards that NATO and the European Union bring with them. I think they have had pretty favourable results. I believe that the west also had the chance, and it missed the opportunity after the Orange Revolution, to show Ukraine what it needed to do and that it was actually welcome.

I don't think it is too late. I believe that even though President Yanukovych, for example, states that he is not interested in Ukraine joining NATO, we remember that as a prime minister he said he was. It's possible he can reverse, and his successor definitely can. People in Ukraine are definitely pro-western, and I believe it's paramount for the west and Canada to show people in Ukraine and democratic forces that they're interested in Ukraine, that Ukraine is a European state, and that the west will do whatever is necessary to make sure Ukraine stays a pro-western state and democratic.

Thank you.

● (1620)

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: I think I heard something quite like that. In the eventuality that Ms. Tymoshenko is free, then also Mr. Lutsenko and others, do you think the negotiations could go back to almost where they were before all this happened?

Do you think there is still hope that it can improve and get better?

Mr. Ihor Kozak: I believe so. I believe that the reaction.... The word here is "engagement". I know it's very challenging. It's not easy for democratic governments in the west to talk to the current government of Yanukovych. I believe the word is "engagement", engaging the government and telling it they're interested in European membership for Ukraine—whether it's free trade with Canada or with other interests the Ukrainian government has—and showing that those agreements will go in tandem with the democratic values, with the principles of democracy, etc., with the upcoming elections. I believe that is the way to engage.

Isolation, in my opinion, is out of the question. It would have a profound adverse effect; it would push Ukraine into the Russian sphere of influence, and it would definitely do more damage than good for the state of democracy in Ukraine.

Ms. Halyna Coynash: Can I...?

Just to add to that, I basically do agree, except I would just say that any such process needs to be very much focused on civil society as well, so that they understand. The civil society in Ukraine does support the west. It also saw all the years of the Orange Revolution, and there are many things to condemn the Orange leaders for.

On the other hand, the fact is that Europe did not really ever actually make anything at all specific. It made a lot of noises, and they were all wonderful noises, but it didn't actually offer anything. I think at the moment we have a situation where engagement.... We have on the one hand engagement and on the other hand a situation that is really—I've forgotten the word—an impasse, where they can't sign an agreement while they have political prisoners. They can't sign an agreement while there are serious human rights problems.

There has to be some sort of understanding, at least to the population, so that they understand very fully what, for example, the elections mean this year. They mean that, yes, there is an option of western support: Canadian support, U.S. support, and European support. On the other hand, it must go along with real commitment to democracy.

● (1625)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move now to the government side. We have Mr. Dechert. I believe he's going to be sharing his time with Mr. Hawn.

Mr. Bob Dechert (Mississauga—Erindale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for being here today and sharing this important information with us.

I think all Canadians are very interested and concerned about the situation in Ukraine. As I think you know, many, many Canadians have a family heritage from Ukraine, and the connections between our two countries go back more than a hundred years. It's very important to us that we see real democratic progress in Ukraine. We were all very excited at the time of the Orange Revolution about what we saw happening. Now we see, from the perspective of where we sit in Canada, that things may be taking a step backwards.

I have a number of questions, and then I'll share my time with Mr. Hawn.

First of all, Mr. Rybachuk, you mentioned Viktor Yushchenko and the fact that he may have been poisoned. We have been told that Yulia Tymoshenko is unwell. She is apparently quite ill today in her prison cell. You may know that a team of Canadian doctors, along with some German doctors, visited her recently with the support of the Canadian government.

Do you see a pattern of what happened to Mr. Yushchenko being repeated with Yulia Tymoshenko? What are your views on that?

Mr. Oleh Rybachuk: Thank you, Mr. Dechert.

No, it would be rather wild guessing on that, because I personally believe that the poisoning of Viktor Yushchenko was planned and executed, not within Ukraine—or not only within Ukraine. The case with Tymoshenko is exclusively domestic. It's irrational; it's political suicide. You cannot apply logic to what President Yanukovych is doing. There is absolutely no logic. There's some personal obsession. It's politically suicidal, as I emphasized, but it would be difficult for me to imagine that there is some outside source of influence. That's natural Ukrainian stupidity.

Mr. Bob Dechert: You think it's coming from within Ukraine. Do you have any views on her health in general? Do you think these reports of her illness being caused by a third party are true?

Mr. Oleh Rybachuk: About Yulia Tymoshenko...?

Mr. Bob Dechert: About Yulia Tymoshenko. Do any of the four panellists have any information on that?

Ms. Halyna Coynash: Again, it's wild guessing about that.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Okay. I think we may have some witnesses in another meeting who have some more information on that.

What would you say to the possibility of Ms. Tymoshenko being released to come to a western country for health treatment? Do you think that would be a good idea? Would it be supported by the people in Ukraine?

Mr. Ihor Kozak: Is that question to me, Mr. Dechert?

Mr. Bob Dechert: To any of you, sure.

Mr. Ihor Kozak: First of all, as you know, the Canadian government and Canada went out of their way to provide doctors to examine Ms. Tymoshenko. From what I understand, they were not very well received by the Ukrainian government. Their credibility, I suppose, was questioned and they were not allowed to do a full examination. So I think before we move forward, it would be in order, probably, for them to be allowed to complete their examination and then to come to some concrete conclusions—a specialist—as to what the state of her health is. Then one could go from there. But at this point it would be speculative for me to make any further statements.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Fair enough.

You know that the Prime Minister of Canada and our Minister of Foreign Affairs made some fairly significant statements earlier last year about the apparently politically motivated trial and conviction and imprisonment of Yulia Tymoshenko. Do you think that has any impact in Ukraine to put pressure on the Government of Ukraine? Can any of you tell us, first of all, whether the people of Ukraine know about those statements? Do you think it has any beneficial impact?

Who would like to...Ms. Coynash or Ms. Hetmanchuk?

● (1630)

Ms. Alyona Hetmanchuk: I think, unfortunately, not many people in Ukraine know about that. I doubt that the Ukrainian authorities paid much attention to those statements. In my view, the only country that could have a very real influence on the Ukrainian authorities today is the United States. It is the only country that has real leverage.

Ms. Halyna Coynash: This may well be through a political point of view about the U.S.A. I have no idea.

From the point of view of the Ukrainian population finding out about the statements made, on the whole, those who did not read the Internet did not find out because television totally distorted the information. I was following it quite closely and writing about it, but only for publications that would allow those sorts of publication. They did not hear the condemnation and what was happening, and I would stress this very strongly. One of the problems has often been that while the west wants to make the criticism very strong, at the same time they want to say positive things. And of course what happens with the media or the television channels, which are very strongly under government influence, is that the back patting and the hand shaking and so forth get shown on television, but the actual condemnation does not. That is also a major danger.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Is there a lack of press freedom, media freedom, in Ukraine?

Ms. Halyna Coynash: There's a complete lack of press freedom, I think. Yes, there's total distortion.

But the other problem—and just very quickly on the subject of Yulia Tymoshenko—I found even among human rights people...I think there was some degree of bemusement or even indignation that the west has reacted very strongly to Tymoshenko when there have been so many other issues to react to. Of course, I do understand that in Canada you have many other problems, but in Ukraine, people are seeing other politically motivated prosecutions, other cases of total lawlessness.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Thank you very much.

I'll defer to Mr. Hawn.

The Chair: Thank you. Mr. Hawn, we'll move up to the next round.

We're going to move back to the opposition side.

Mr. LeBlanc, sir, you have seven minutes.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the witnesses. It's been an interesting hour so far. I appreciate very much the insight you've given us, the candour with which you've expressed some views. It's very helpful for us, and I hope the fact that this is a televised session of this committee will help Canadians understand and support the government and parliamentarians urging a change in direction in Ukraine. So thank you for making what was a long trip for many of you. I appreciate it very much.

I have three questions, if we have time. First, Ms. Hetmanchuk, you ran out of time. The chairman, I think, cut you off in a very brutal way. I thought it was terrible.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: You did run out of time talking about media freedom, and in any democracy, freedom of the press, access to independent voices, is important. I thought it was interesting when you talked about new media, social media, how many Ukrainians, from your experience as a former journalist, are getting information that way, but social media can also be manipulated. It's often easier to manipulate social media than it would be mainstream media, but I know there's a real concern around the concentration of media, censorship, the fact that media ownership doesn't want to offend those in power. I'm wondering if you have a sense of how Ukrainians are getting accurate, unbiased information. I found the talk show part interesting. Are other independent voices being heard in mainstream media? I'm wondering if you have any suggestions of what Canada could do or Canadian authorities or Canadian civil society, Canadian groups, to engage with partners in Ukraine to perhaps increase or help bring unbiased information to the citizens of Ukraine.

● (1635)

Ms. Alyona Hetmanchuk: I think that many Ukrainians have a chance to get unbiased information, both from new media.... You know, there is a difference in Ukraine between so-called political news websites and social media. Both of them are really independent.

I haven't heard about attempts by government to influence the most popular political websites, but I have heard about attempts by government to make friendships with the editors and journalists of these popular political websites or blogs. Even Prime Minister Azarov, who is a very Soviet type of politician, invites famous bloggers to discuss their activities.

More and more ministers have started to use Twitter. For example, the foreign minister's Twitter feed is very popular among the ex-pat community and civil society leaders. I think it's much more popular than the foreign minister's official statements.

What could Canada do? I think that's a good question. I think Canada could assist NGOs that are involved in media issues...maybe to organize some training for journalists. My institute is concerned with developing policy. We've established a media group, a media club, for journalists, and we also try to educate them a bit, to explain how to cover events.

We have another problem today in Ukraine. Many journalists, in my opinion, have become very pragmatic and sometimes even cynical. Many of them take money, not only from pro-government politicians but also from opposition politicians; everybody wants to survive somehow. That is also a problem.

I think good Canadian trainers would be very useful in this situation.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Thank you.

We have very little time left.

Mr. Rybachuk and others, a number of you touched on the upcoming elections in the fall. There are issues around transparency and open elections; voting processes are obviously important.

I'm wondering at a basic level how you can have a free and open and fair election if opposition leaders are in jail. It seems to be a certain contradiction to run an election where the person who might win is in prison. I think years ago the mayor of Boston was re-elected from jail, but it doesn't happen often.

Mr. Oleh Rybachuk: This is one of the problems. But from the voters' point of view, the biggest problem is that during the last 10 to 15 years there has not been much of a possibility of a different quality of opposition. We have a vicious circle. If you go into politics, you need money. Money is concentrated in a dozen families. Those richest families finance the government and the opposition simultaneously. When you come to power, when you get elected, you're not able to do what you promised. You are expected to promise reforms, but the last thing those who gave you money want is reforms. They want their money back. Therefore, we have this vicious circle.

The only way to break this stalemate between money and morality is to demand politicians' accountability. We have established six democratic criteria, minimum criteria. But the opposition, which claims to be an alternative, are reluctant to commit themselves to those criteria. You know why? Because they already practise the same thing. They're taking money. For that money, they put the people in their campaigns. They would come to power again and it would be the same story. We have a special term in Ukrainian. I don't know how to call it in English, but it applies to people who immediately change positions. They come to Parliament as opposition and next thing they are in government.

● (1640)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Turncoats, I think.

An hon. member: Floor-crossers.

Mr. Oleh Rybachuk: Yes, those turncoats are quite a challenge.

By the way, talking about Tymoshenko, I was there when the courts took the decision. I was in the street. My office was close to the court on Kreschatik. The number of protesters who came there were roughly 2,000 to 3,000. She was getting the support of 14 million people. In Kiev she only had 40%, and Kiev has a population of three million. if a small part of those people would go into the street, it would have an effect. That's the price for this kind of policy, where opposition is not much different from the government. People do not trust and they do not support. It's not so much outside support that politicians need, not to be in jail or out of jail. Rather, it's the domestic support they lack.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hawn.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Dobry den moi ukrains'kyy druzi.

It is a pleasure to have you here.

I want to talk about Vladimir Putin's influence.

Mr. Oleh Rybachuk: Premier Putin, he is a friend of ours. Yeah, right....

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Mr. Kozak, to what extent has he been pulling the strings all along in Ukraine? Is this part of a gradual escalation of his influence? How far do you think he might go to bring Ukraine back under the CIS?

Mr. Ihor Kozak: Thank you for your question, sir. It's very topical, clearly. Ukraine and Russia being interconnected for centuries, for some good and some not so good periods.

In terms of Mr. Putin, we will never know all the details about what goes on behind the scenes. After all, he comes from a KGB background and he knows how to orchestrate those things. But I think there are ample examples of what he's been doing over the past number of years to force Ukraine into his sphere of influence. All we have to look at is the turning off of gas supplies to the Ukraine in the middle of the winter. That is blackmailing at its best. Also, there is the additional effect of putting pressure on Europe, and then Europe putting pressure on Ukraine because they have to look after their own economic and geopolitical interests.

I think he was influencing during the Orange Revolution.... He tried to intervene in the elections. I believe he's influencing Ukraine having its fleet in the Black Sea, and there have been a number of incidents where Russian security officers and military officers have violated Ukrainian rights.

On Wednesday you will have Mr. Nalyvaichenko here, who is the former head of the Ukrainian Security Service. I think he will be best at answering questions about those violations.

As Mr. Rybachuk pointed out earlier, now that Mr. Putin is not only de facto but is back in power, he is not making any secret that Ukraine, whom he considers its neighbour abroad, is going to be pulled into his sphere of influence. He wants Ukraine to be pulled away from the west. He's pressuring Ukraine now about the gas pipeline, trying to take assets.

In short, the pressure is immense and I think it goes in multiple directions, multiple factors from economics, to political, to social, and I'm not even talking about agents of influence and so on.

A voice: Religion.

Mr. Ihor Kozak: Exactly.

The last part of your question is on how far he would go. Obviously, I don't have a crystal ball, but if you look at the example of Georgia—how quickly he started the war, which escalated beyond proportion, notwithstanding the statements from the west and NATO and so on. Considering that he's already in Ukraine with military forces at the Black Sea, I think it would be very easy to set up some sort of a provocation and to even launch a full-scale military invasion, as necessary, if he cannot achieve his desires by other means.

Therefore, I think it's paramount for Canada, its western allies, and NATO to pull Ukraine closer into their sphere of influence and to make sure that this region does not become destabilized.

● (1645)

Hon. Laurie Hawn: It's a scary prospect.

Mr. Rybachuk, is that the biggest problem that Ukraine and the west has had in negotiating to bring Ukraine potentially into NATO, into the EU? Obviously Russia would have a hard time having NATO on its doorstep. So if we're trying to get Ukraine into the EU, notwithstanding anything else that's going on now, shouldn't we really be concentrating on negotiating with Russia rather than negotiating with...? And we obviously have to negotiate with Ukraine, but I think negotiating with Russia in some way is probably as important as that.

Mr. Oleh Rybachuk: I was there, many times. Actually, I was the person whom Putin personally warned—at the time I was chief of staff to President Yushchenko—at the meeting with Putin, when he said, "We are going to disconnect the gas; we are not bluffing. Just tell your president this is very serious." So I have my personal experience.

I can tell you one more thing. Mr. Yanukovych has great difficulties in trying to have a good relationship with Mr. Putin. You should have seen Mr. Putin's body language when we discussed Yanukovych. For Yanukovych, today's president, who was campaigning on the slogan of having a better relationship with Russia, the fact that Putin has come back to power as president means nothing good at all. So there will be serious personal problems overall, on top of it.

As for the EU perspective, it is clear to me that we have two factors there. If you remember, we had a good chance after the Orange Revolution, but then there was the French referendum, and the Dutch referendum on the constitution, and then a crisis within the Orange government, with Yulia Tymoshenko, which never ended. That was picked up by opponents of our integration process and that stopped it.

Frankly, I was always saying in Moscow and everywhere else that when Russian diplomats say they welcome our European perspective but they are strongly against NATO...I would tell them it's nonsense. As soon as the EU perspective becomes a reality, we will hear a different story.

You remember the Russian minister of foreign policy, the Russian prime minister, and the president all saying that getting Ukraine into a political association or into a free trade agreement is against Russian legal entities or interests. They clearly observe our integration into the west as a threat to their national interest, and they don't hide it.

Mr. Putin announced that CIS, specifically, Ukraine, and the Eurasian Project was his top priority and he will be concentrating on that. His first statement after getting re-elected was that his priority is CIS, and in CIS, Ukraine is number one.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to move back over to the opposition.

Madam Laverdière.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses who are with us today. I want to start by apologizing for being a bit late. The media are alive and well in these parts. I don't mean to complain, but they are the ones who delayed me.

I was nevertheless able to hear a good deal of your presentations, which I followed closely. One thing that struck me was what Mr. Kozak said about democracy not being built overnight; it takes time.

As we know, civil society is one of the key building blocks of a healthy and thriving democracy. For that reason, I would like you to tell us about the status of civil society in Ukraine.

Thank you.

● (1650)

[*English*]

Mr. Ihor Kozak: Thank you, Madam, for your question. I would happily answer your question, but I believe the other three gentlemen and lady we have here at the table are probably more qualified. They're coming straight form Ukraine. They're involved in depth in civic societies in Ukraine. I believe they are more qualified to answer your question.

Ms. Alyona Hetmanchuk: Civil society in Ukraine is still much stronger and more active than in neighbouring countries. Paradoxically, two years of President Yanukovych in power gave a second birth to civil society in Ukraine, I would say.

There are strong civil society movements. Oleh Rybachuk represents one of them, the New Citizen movement. There is a lot of solidarity between different civil society activists, between different civil society groups, not only in Kiev but in the Ukrainian regions. I would like to emphasize—I mentioned this—that since the Ukrainian opposition today is not united and is very weak, and is preoccupied with the release of political prisoners from jail, opposition leaders, civil society in Ukraine actually plays the role of opposition. That is a real, influential force, and I think it would be very good if Canada assisted Ukrainian civil society to foster the Ukrainian NGO sector and independent think tanks.

Ms. Halyna Coynash: I would really just reiterate that, but also I would say one of the things that my organization, Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, and also the Ukrainian Helsinki Group are doing together with New Citizen and so forth is trying to actually consolidate that civil society work and create networks so that people aren't actually.... There are an awful lot of situations where the government has simply stopped programs.

For example, there were very exciting things happening under the old regime, under Yuri Lutsenko, coincidentally with police to try to fight police impunity, to fight violence, torture among the police in the police force. That was all stopped at the government level, and in fact civil society, probably with support from somebody but not from politicians, has managed to actually keep that going to some extent. So you have police stations being visited, and you have monitoring of the violence that's going on in the police force, which is becoming much worse. That kind of network, that kind of activity, is absolutely vital, and any support for it, and also any publicity for it, is just wonderful. It's very important.

Thank you.

The Chair: Did you have a quick comment, Mr. Rybachuk? We're almost out of time. I'll let you have a response.

Mr. Oleh Rybachuk: Yes, because I have just come to Canada after finishing a tour of 24 major Ukrainian cities, all over Ukraine, where we organized coordination units of Honesty, the parliamentary movement, and I can tell you that we have been joined by probably more than 150 NGOs. I emphasize that it's all over the country; it's like a nervous system that exists in Google groups, thanks to new media, and that allows us to feel confident, to feel that we are shoulder to shoulder.

My impression is that there is no depression in civil society; people all over Ukraine are ready to act. I would just join my colleagues with what is maybe not a strong request but is strong advice, and that is to support the institutional capacity of civil society networks. This is something that could lead to a new quality of politics in Ukraine. Unfortunately, we have 200 parties, but without major promises or differences between them. But something different can come from the civil society. It is a very healthy process that is going on there nowadays.

● (1655)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to move to Mr. Bezan.

Welcome, sir. You have five minutes.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's a pleasure to be able to join the committee today.

I want to thank all of the witnesses for their very honest and forthright presentations.

I'm proud to be part of a government that, going back over the last two decades, has seen Canada being such a strong supporter of Ukraine, starting with Brian Mulroney recognizing the independence of Ukraine in 1991. I was proud to be part of the official delegation led by Prime Minister Stephen Harper just a short while ago.

Also, of course, Parliament and the government supported my bill to recognize the Holodomor as a genocide. As we know, the headache that Ukraine suffers from today is a result of that genocide, the Holodomor. What we see here is that ethnic Russians who were brought in to replace all the millions of Ukrainians who were killed are now influencing this whole political process, based upon ethnicity rather than what's good for Ukraine.

I was there to witness the last presidential elections. I was in Bila Tserkva and I was in Kiev and I saw some of the shenanigans that were being played out. I was shocked, along with many of my fellow people from the Ukrainian community who are here today, at how that election process played out. There was a lack of accountability. There was no transparency on who gets on the deputy list. I was looking forward to some of these reforms, especially with regard to having more direct representation, but with the way it has been presented and the way it's going forward, you have to question the constitutionality of the whole process.

I was there with the Prime Minister, along with our colleagues in the back of the room here, who witnessed how the press has already been brought underneath the thumb of the Yanukovych regime. Essentially, when Prime Minister Harper and our group were moving from the tomb of the unknown soldier, from making a presentation of the wreath at the memorial there and then walking a very short distance to the Holodomor memorial site, the local media left. They weren't welcome at that site. Only the Canadian media were there. It was the same thing when we were in Lviv, where the Prime Minister made the strong declaration that the Holodomor was a genocide. No local media were allowed in that room. Canadian media were there. So we could see that influence already.

I have to just ask about this. Canada has a number of agreements with Ukraine, such as the youth mobility agreement. We're negotiating a free trade agreement. We have the financial transaction agreements. I know where leading Ukrainian Canadians stand on wanting to keep engagement. I guess my question to our witnesses here is.... We're complaining about the actions that have been taken in relation to freedom of the press, to human rights, and to a free and open democratic process, yet everybody is saying “no sanctions”.

If you think, at least, in my opinion.... Yanukovych and his entourage are sitting there as cabinet ministers, saying, “Look what we've got away with already: we've got Tymoshenko in jail and we've got Lutsenko in jail, so let's look at who else we can throw in. We're going to take away all our political opposition, we're going to take away freedom of the press, and we're going to take away individual rights and freedoms.” And nobody is saying anything. I say that if you don't take sanctions, you're rewarding them. I'm looking forward to some feedback on that.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mrs. Coynash.

Ms. Halyna Coynash: I would be delighted to mention it. I totally agree with you that at the moment, any sort of statement that lets Yanukovych and company think they have gotten away with it is extremely dangerous.

I would just mention that on top of Tymoshenko and Lutsenko, whom everybody mentions, just recently another person, who was a definite candidate for the parliamentary elections, Avakov, from Kharkiv—he was the governor—has been put on the international wanted list and will doubtless not return to Ukraine in order to take part in elections that would have certainly elected him to Parliament.

If that is the way they're going to fight the elections, then clearly engagement is a problem. Yes, perhaps sanctions of some sort are needed. The only problem with sanctions is that sanctions must target the right people.

● (1700)

Mr. Oleh Rybachuk: Target the wrong people.

Ms. Halyna Coynash: The wrong people, yes, you're right—a very good correction.

The wrong people must be targeted, and targeted hard, rather than simply going for the judge. Yes, we know from Nuremberg that obeying orders is bad, but on the other hand, if we know that, for example, the people who passed the sentences against Tymoshenko, against Lutsenko, were carrying out orders, then justice for the murder of Gongadze.... We must actually approach sanctions that will hurt those people, the people who give the orders.

Yes, I think that sanctions may well be required.

The Chair: That's all the time we have.

We're going to move over to the next round, starting with Mr. Opitz. Welcome, sir.

Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, thank you all for being here. You have come from a long way, many of you. Thank you to the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada, which is unbelievably strong and vocal on this issue. The League of Ukrainian Canadians has certainly been a leader, as has the congress, as has Canadian Friends of Ukraine, and so many others.

I'd like to thank Mr. Kozak for being here, a former brother-in-arms. We're both now retired. He has done tremendous work for Canada at NATO, and was in fact voted one of the top 10 or 25 immigrants to Canada at one time. He has demonstrated his leadership within his community.

I would like to thank you very much for that.

I do have limited time, and I'd like to talk about so many things: energy, the natural resources of Ukraine, the gas, and the ability for Ukraine to control its own future through its natural resources. These are all big questions. A military presence of Russian troops on Ukrainian soil provides volumes to be spoken on those issues. Journalists and academics, as we've seen, can certainly be intimidated and forced to modify their views.

Certainly the impact of Canadian NGOs, some of whom I've just mentioned, from here in Canada and Ukraine has been significant. They have made a tremendous impact.

I'm going to ask a couple of quick questions, and hopefully—because I'd like to get a few through—keep your answers fairly brief.

Just going through the election in the medium and long term, how does Canada help assure fair elections in the medium to long term?

Mr. Rybachuk, perhaps you could answer.

Mr. Oleh Rybachuk: Like Tom Cruise, mission impossible is the shortest answer.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Ted Opitz: Okay.

Mr. Kozak, why don't you weigh in there?

Mr. Ihor Kozak: I disagree, actually. Probably for the first time I disagree with Mr. Rybachuk.

The mission is possible. Anything is possible. I believe one way—it's a sad word—is engagement. First of all, let President Yanukovych and his entourage know bluntly and clearly that the world is watching, that Canada is watching, and that everything he is negotiating, including the free trade agreement, is on the table, is at stake here. The first and foremost step here is letting them know prior to the election.

Second, I believe it's important to send observers to Ukraine.

Third, I believe it's important to support the democratic organization in Ukraine, because they're on the ground, they know what they're doing, they know the system, they know their way around, and they will be the ones who can tell us the truth. If you look retrospectively at 2004-05, people said it was impossible to prevent falsification prior to the Orange Revolution. I beg to differ, because we did change history at the time.

I believe that if it happened once, it can happen again. We have to keep trying.

Mr. Ted Opitz: Great. Thank you.

Ms. Hetmanchuk, who are MPs in Ukraine? Can an ordinary person run for Parliament in Ukraine? Who is Parliament generally made up of?

Ms. Alyona Hetmanchuk: Who can...?

Mr. Ted Opitz: Who is the typical member of Parliament in Ukraine?

Ms. Alyona Hetmanchuk: It's a really interesting question, because under this party list system, we have had a lot of very interesting people, very strange people, as members of Parliament. According to the last opinion poll, 40% of today's MPs are going to participate in the upcoming elections.

That is a good statistic, because not everybody feels confident to participate. It's not a secret that we used to have people who used to work either as drivers or assistants, or in security—bodyguards, actually—in different party lists. It was not only in the Party of Regions lists but also in opposition lists. That is the reason that so many turncoats—we call them *tushkey*—appeared in the last years.

Also, all businessmen understand that without political immunity their personal security could be under threat. Of course, many businessmen are also interested in getting into Parliament.

● (1705)

The Chair: That's all the time we have now, Mr. Opitz.

We're going to now move over to Madame Latendresse for five minutes.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a question for Mr. Rybachuk. A few years ago in an interview you hinted that the eventual political retirement of the three major political players—Yushchenko, Yanukovych, and Tymoshenko—might be a positive outcome. I was wondering if you still think that the whole renewal of the political game should occur now.

Mr. Oleh Rybachuk: Out of these three, we have practically two out of the game. I mean Yushchenko and Tymoschenko. And it was mostly because they were so involved in infighting that Yanukovych became the president.

The fact is that Yanukovych was elected the president, and in two years he probably overplayed Yushchenko in the bid to lose the voters' confidence—just in two years. It means that he probably is next to go. The problem here is not with personalities. I would emphasize again that if you don't change voters' minds, if people are electing politicians, not screening them for adherence to basic or core democratic values, which we are trying to launch in this campaign, things will not change.

The key issue is the lack of accountability. We launched some projects like Vladometr, meaning “checking the power”, where we fixed all politicians' promises on the Internet. We have more than 3,000 promises from different politicians, and any time elections come, we remind them about those promises. The major focus of our movement is with people's minds. We would like to change their attitude from “I like that person or I don't like that person” towards a conscious, knowledgeable choice based on the six values criteria, which we would like to spread all over the country.

The same experience in other countries showed that in Romania, out of 225 candidates, they kicked out 96 who did not meet those criteria. This is our ambition. This can lead to changes. Otherwise, we'll get some new faces with the same problems inherited—they'll just be younger—or we'll have corruption with different faces and there won't be much difference.

Mr. Marc-André Morin (Laurentides—Labelle, NDP): I'd just like to have your feedback on my historical perception of Ukraine. It seems to me that all the western powers have been very shortsighted and negligent toward Ukraine throughout history, going back 200 or 300 years.

I think the result was the negligence of western powers in not helping Ukraine make a transition after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. I wonder how it can be fixed. If we had done it at the time, Ukraine would be well off by now. Especially with Putin coming back, I wouldn't swap spots with your country. Your country is a beautiful country, but it's in a bad geographical position.

The Ukrainian people have suffered a lot. The same scenario has repeated itself during the Napoleonic Wars, the First World War, the Second World War, and the collapse of the U.S.S.R. It's about time the western world realized that Ukraine exists.

● (1710)

Ms. Halyna Coynash: Thank you very much. I totally agree with you.

One of the things I would say is that since about March 2010, when Yanukovych basically violated the constitution to get these turncoats to form the government, there has been a very widespread perception among Ukrainians that the west really has turned away from Ukraine and is not really very interested in supporting Ukraine.

I think it's now very important to show support, as my colleagues have been saying, at the civil society level, because there is no point trying to say that this politician is better than that politician. They're all dreadful. But civil society really does want those democratic values and could be supported a lot more.

The Chair: Ouch for the politicians.

Okay. We're going to move over to Ms. Brown for the last question in the third round. That's all the time we have for that, and then we're going to finish it up. There is one more NDP and one more Conservative. We'll take the names. We'll have time for that.

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Do you think Mr. Van Kesteren will have a chance to ask questions?

The Chair: Sure.

Ms. Lois Brown: Thank you very much for being here.

Mr. Kozak, I have a couple of questions I'd like to pose to you, if I may. We have a sizeable diaspora of the Ukrainian community here in Canada. My first question, because I have no idea, is whether any of them maintain the right to vote in Ukraine in the elections. Is that allowed? We see a number of other countries that allow the diaspora to maintain a vote. Is there anything like that? Do they have any influence on this?

Do you have any comments on that?

Mr. Ihor Kozak: It's a very good question, ma'am, and there are many cases where I wish I could still vote. It's not the case. While Canada does allow for dual citizenship, Ukraine does not. Therefore, once you become a Canadian citizen, you abolish your right to vote in Ukraine.

Mind you, a significant population of people from Ukraine here in Canada haven't yet become Canadian citizens. They certainly can vote, and I believe that a lot of them do, through the consulates or through the embassy.

With respect to the influence the Ukrainian diaspora has back in Ukraine because of its engagement and support, I think it's tremendous. We've been involved, and I think I can safely speak on behalf of the entire diaspora here, at every level possible, from supporting families financially for fighting for years when Ukraine was under the Soviet regime, until this day, when a tremendous number of Ukrainian Canadians were there for the Orange Revolution to score independence. This hearing is a case in point. It was organized by the Ukrainian Canadian community.

The Ukrainian Canadian community is very much engaged. What we are trying to do is broadcast the Canadian values we have here to try to pull Ukraine closer to the west and have it become more free and more democratic. We're trying our best. It's not easy, but we are.

Ms. Lois Brown: Secondly, I often get world news from the BBC because they have a fairly well-balanced media outlet. When I'm watching that, I regularly see the commercials that are being put on that station by Ukraine to attract western tourists to come to Ukraine.

I believe the World Cup is being held there?

A voice: The European Cup.

Ms. Lois Brown: The European Cup, yes. So there'll be a tremendous number of people travelling to Ukraine.

Is the Ukrainian government not concerned about the reputation they're developing through this and yet still looking to the west to attract that kind of tourism and that tourist dollar? They don't want it there for just a one-time event. They're looking to attract western dollars to come in.

Are they not concerned that a reputation is going to be out there and that it will deter that kind of dollar from coming in—an economic stimulus on its own?

● (1715)

Ms. Halyna Coynash: They are concerned. Unfortunately, they are concerned in a rather specific fashion.

Euronews is one channel that.... I don't know if you know it here. It's similar to BBC and Deutsche Welle. Unfortunately, it has a Ukrainian service that is actually positively distorting news, and it is doing so with the knowledge of management. I know this for a fact, because I have been writing to them, complaining, for some time. So that's one thing.

A draft law was brought in quite recently, by one of the most pro-Russian and slightly offensive Party of Regions deputies, that would actually outlaw any.... There was something about xenophobia, racism, and also political messages that would be broadcast before, during, and after football matches, which is quite clearly aimed at Euro 2012. There will be quite a lot of those sorts of....

At the moment, the bill has not passed. I don't know whether it will. If they want it to, it can pass.

Things like that are the bad side of it. I mean, I think they are trying to use their old tactics of simply buying *Washington Post* supplement material and other things like that. They are actually paying money to throw propaganda at the west, not change the situation.

Mr. Oleh Rybachuk: I would just add one phrase in terms of how they explain this to President Yanukovych, who is very authoritative. No one dares, probably, to tell him something he wouldn't like to hear. Their message about Ukrainian diplomats or about the image of the country is, "You're a great guy, but the world knows little about your greatness."

So they try to compensate for all that by showing him, personally, one viewer, these ads on TV, and they spend money on that. They spend money on lobbyists. They opened funds in Brussels...lobbyist companies in Washington, and they are purchasing huge advertisement spaces to project a pretty image of Ukraine.

In what you've been saying, you are like a naive western democrat hoping for some understanding of values, etc., and it simply doesn't work. It's a different galaxy. This is not mind-compatible culture. Don't try to impose your logic upon them. They are very different animals.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to start our last round.

We'll start with Mr. Larose, for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-François Larose: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here.

As someone who is well-versed in history, I have a deep respect for your country. Despite great suffering, your immense strength remains intact. If ever a country were able to improve its fate, it is indeed yours, in my view.

I would simply like a bit more insight into some of the comments that were made today. Your presentation emphasized your country's complexity. The situation is certainly very complex. There is something that concerns me with respect to Russia, in the event that you achieve your democratic aspirations of a stronger system for your country's future.

We heard about the negative side of those in power, but are there any key members of the current Ukrainian government who support change? That can be extremely useful. I wonder the same thing about Russia.

In the event that you realize your goal, are you worried that, under Mr. Putin, Russia will decide that its goal is not compatible with yours?

● (1720)

[*English*]

Mr. Ihor Kozak: Your question is topical and complex.

When we talk about Russia, I would like to make a distinction. We don't want to associate Russia as a whole with the regime in power today. In the Wednesday hearings you will hear Dr. Andrey Piontkovsky, one of the leaders of the Russian opposition, and I think he will give you a good perspective of the situation in Russia and how it pertains to Ukraine.

I would submit to you that the ordinary Russian does not have any problems with Ukrainian democratic aspirations, Ukrainian independence. Those are common and basic democratic values. The regime in power now, the regime of President Putin, views Ukraine as "near abroad". It does not imagine its new empire without Ukraine and some other so-called near-abroad countries. But for the average Russian, there is no problem.

Should Russia become democratic—and I believe it will soon—Ukraine will have no problem co-existing with Russia. They will have a good relationship, with lots of trade. Look at Canada and the United States. At one point they were at war, but now they have a great relationship in every respect. So I believe this to be very doable.

As to your second question, about other people within Ukraine's regime who are willing to achieve some positive change, I believe there are probably some. But they're too afraid to speak up. This regime consolidated power quickly after the election, and they put their people in all the key positions. There is a strict chain of command. I believe they're just doing what they're told. They march in this corporate line, and they will not step out. There is not much democratic discussion going on within the current party, region, or the government of Ukraine.

Mr. Oleh Rybachuk: Those people might be there, but they are at a middle or low level. The latest trend in Ukraine is to adopt the sense of "family" as it is used in Sicily. The president's family, actually one of the president's sons, is now appointing key personalities, like governor of the central bank—I come from the central bank, and I am ashamed of that—and ministers of finance, defence, and the interior. They're all family people recommended by the son of the president, who actually is a dentist by profession. One year after his father became the president, he joined the 100 richest Ukrainians, so it's quite a profitable profession in Ukraine, dentistry.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move over to Mr. Van Kesteren.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren (Chatham-Kent—Essex, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and my thanks to all of you for coming here.

As I look at the political spectrum across Russia, the former Soviet Union, and Europe, it's obvious that you have pretty much a captive audience in Europe with regard to natural gas. In the last few years, we've experienced something that I don't think the world has caught onto yet. There's a revolution taking place—it's called shale gas. There are enormous reserves in Greece and in Israel. I'm wondering how you see the shift in power and the alliances that would take place with Greece and Israel. How would you see this affecting your relationship with Europe? How will it change your alliances with Russia? I wonder if anybody wants to comment.

● (1725)

Ms. Alyona Hetmanchuk: Today is a very good time to discuss the energy topic in Ukraine. This is the first time in Ukrainian history that we are not able to negotiate with Russia on gas prices. As far as I know, even people who are close to Gazprom in the Ukrainian government, like the Ukrainian energy minister, are becoming proponents of Ukrainian energy independence.

There are negotiations with the Shell company on coming to Ukraine. There are other different negotiations, so I think it is good that Ukraine and Russia can't make a deal today, paradoxically. Ukrainian authorities finally have a very strong incentive to not only make some statements but to implement a program on energy independence.

Mr. Ihor Kozak: It's a very good topic. On the topic of energy, a lot of things are involved in Ukraine and Europe. Those who control the pipeline control a lot of things in Europe. So on the important shale gas projects, there are clearly some environmental and other concerns. I will not get into the technical matters here, but should Ukraine gain at least a certain degree of independence, that would be a very good thing. It would give Ukraine leverage to negotiate with Russia.

The problem is that with the current regime in Ukraine, I haven't seen anything concrete beyond lip service to attract those investments and give them a good environment in which to invest and do business. Hopefully that will change.

If you look at the question of energy, Russia has been trying very hard to take control of the Ukrainian pipeline and the whole energy-related situation in Ukraine. They understand that not only do they control Ukraine, they also control Europe to a certain degree.

I believe the European Union, the European states, have been rather passive on this. I'm not talking here from a Ukrainian or a Canadian standpoint. But I believe that European states, our allies, should be more aggressive in pursuing their own interests and counting Ukraine into their geopolitical interests. It shouldn't be just Germany doing straight dealings with Russia. They should see the benefit of Ukraine also playing a very important role.

If Europe were to play a more important role in the energy independence of Ukraine, it would be beneficial to Europe itself to be less dependent on Russia and control the situation better. That in turn would have a positive effect on the proactive stance of Ukraine, the democratic process in Ukraine, and so on. In this regard there should be more emphasis on European states being more proactive in this and not letting Russia control the situation, which has been the case most of the time.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Van Kesteren.

That's all the time we have for today. I want to thank the witnesses for taking time to be here. We appreciate it.

We'll be meeting again on Wednesday to discuss further new witnesses on Ukraine.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Oleh Rybachuk: Thank you.

● (1730)

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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