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Chair

The Honourable Robert Nault

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● (0845)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Robert Nault (Kenora, Lib.)): Colleagues, let's bring our meeting to order today, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), on the study of the situation in eastern Europe and central Asia 25 years after the end of the Cold War.

Before us today is the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, represented by Mr. Michalchyshyn and Mr. Zakydalsky.

As usual, we'll give our witnesses an opportunity to make some comments, and then we'll get into some questions and dialogue.

We'll turn it over to Mr. Michalchyshyn or Mr. Zakydalsky.

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn (Executive Director and Chief Executive Officer, Ukrainian Canadian Congress): We're going to split our time, but I'll start.

It's an honour to have the opportunity to testify here today. The Ukrainian Canadian Congress is the umbrella organization for our community, which brings together our national, provincial, and local Ukrainian Canadian organizations. We have six provincial councils, 19 local branches, and 29 member organizations across the country. Since 1941, we've been leading, coordinating, and representing the interests of our community across Canada.

We are a member of and work closely with the Ukrainian World Congress, as well as ethnocultural communities across Canada. Through the Canada-Ukraine stakeholder advisory council with Global Affairs, we provide consultations with the Government of Canada on Ukraine-Canada relations. We meet regularly with government officials, politicians, stakeholders, policy-makers, as well as leaders in our community.

We're here today to talk to you about the situation in eastern Europe as you are undertaking what we feel is an extremely important study on the situation 25 years after the end of the Cold War.

In the last decade, we have witnessed the rise of an aggressive and imperialist Russian Federation, which seeks through force to return Russian hegemony to regions formerly part of the Soviet Union. For example, in 2008 Russian troops invaded South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia. In 2014, Russia invaded and occupied Crimea in Ukraine and parts of the eastern Ukrainian oblasts or provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk. Provocations against the Baltic states, such as the kidnapping of an Estonian intelligence officer from Estonia and the seizing of a Lithuanian ship in September 2014, suggest that Moscow is testing NATO's commitment to its easternmost members.

For the first time since World War II, a state has attempted to change the borders of Europe by force. A Europe whole, free, and at peace is under direct threat from Russia. Russia seeks to replace the principles outlined in the Helsinki Final Act with the principles of Yalta, a Europe based on spheres of influence.

In Russian-occupied Crimea, Crimean Tatars, ethnic Ukrainians, and indeed anyone who opposes the occupation are subject to a regime of terror. Russian occupation authorities have banned the Mejlis, the representative assembly of the Crimean Tatar people, and have been persecuting its leadership. Dozens of Ukrainian citizens are currently illegally imprisoned in Russia or in occupied Crimea.

The House of Commons citizenship and immigration committee heard the testimony this fall of Gennadii Afanasiev, a young man who was illegally arrested, tortured, and imprisoned for two years before his release in 2016. I encourage members of the committee who are not familiar with his testimony to review it. His experience outlines the methods Russian authorities employ against those who dare voice dissent in any form.

In the eastern Ukrainian oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk, Russia's war against Ukraine has led to the death of over 9,900 people, over 23,000 wounded, and over 1.4 million internally displaced. Thousands of Russian troops are on sovereign Ukrainian territory, including over 700 tanks, 1,250 artillery systems, 300 multi-rocket launch systems, and more than 1,000 armoured personnel carriers.

Russia's war against Ukraine is very much an active war. Russian and proxy forces shell Ukrainian positions and residential areas on a daily basis. Since the end of January, shelling and violence by Russian and proxy authorities have increased, particularly in the areas near the town of Avdiivka in the Donetsk oblast.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is currently the subject of a case brought by Ukrainian authorities to the International Court of Justice with regard to alleged violations of the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. On March 6 at the ICJ, the deputy minister of foreign affairs of Ukraine Olena Zerkal stated:

> The attacks on Ukrainian civilians are the logical conclusion of the Russian Federation's support for groups that engage in terrorism. The destruction of Flight MH17 with a Russian Buk system did not stop Russian financing of terrorism.

Canada and Canadian foreign policy support the values of freedom, democracy, self-determination, and the right of sovereign states to choose their own alliances. These values are under threat by the renewed Russian imperial spirit. Canada has a vital national security interest in ensuring the return of peace and stability to the region, to the European continent, and a vital national security interest in opposing and deterring Russian aggression.

We share a long border with Russia in our north, and Russian actions represent a direct challenge to Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic. Experts have repeatedly pointed to the fact that militarization in the Arctic is likely to remain a top priority for Russia's military in the coming years.

● (0850)

I'd like to turn it over to my colleague, Orest Zakydalsky.

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky (Senior Policy Analyst, Ukrainian Canadian Congress): Canadian foreign policy with regard to eastern Europe and central Asia must focus on two strategic objectives. First, opposing and deterring Russian aggression, and second, supporting the strengthening of democracies and democratic institutions in the region. The best way to ensure the return of peace to Europe is to ensure the success of a democratic, prosperous, and strong Ukraine, whose territorial integrity and sovereignty are respected.

Canada's policy to deter Russia, taken in close consultation and coordination with the United States, NATO allies, and the European Union has arguably had the effect of slowing Russia's aggression. However, our policy has not to date reversed that aggression. Time and again, Russia has shown, through its actions, that it responds only to strength. Canada has several foreign policy options that, taken in coordination with allies, would simultaneously and significantly raise the cost on Russia of further aggression, and also assist Ukraine in more effectively defending itself.

The UCC calls on the Government of Canada to implement the following policies in these three spheres: first, security and defence; second, sanctions; and third, international assistance.

First, with regard to security and defence, the UCC welcomes the recent announcement by the government to extend Operation Unifier until the end of March 2019. We believe that the Canada-Ukraine defence co-operation agreement should be signed. This agreement will help to continue to improve interoperability and deepen co-operation between our two militaries. Ukraine should also be added to the automatic firearms country control list. We should continue to support the reform of Ukraine's military through the NATO-Ukraine trust funds. Finally, Canada and NATO allies should provide Ukraine with defensive equipment, most importantly, anti-tank, anti-artillery, and surveillance systems.

With regard to sanctions, Canada, in co-operation with the EU, G7, and other like-minded allies, should significantly strengthen economic and sectoral sanctions against Russia, including the removal of Russia from the SWIFT international payment system. Canadian members of Parliament should adopt a Magnitsky amendment to the Special Economic Measures Act to allow Canada to impose sanctions in the form of travel bans and asset freezes on individuals responsible for human rights violations. The Government of Canada should designate the so-called Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic as terrorist organizations, and the Russian Federation as a state sponsor of terror.

With regard to international assistance, Canada should ensure that Ukraine remains a country of focus for Canada's international assistance and a key foreign policy priority. We should continue and increase technical assistance to the government of Ukraine and assistance to Ukraine's vibrant civil society to ensure the success of the government's reform process and the continuing consolidation of democratic institutions.

The implementation of the Canada-Ukraine free trade agreement will provide for increased business and investment opportunities. Canada should continue to support economic development in Ukraine, most importantly, for small and medium enterprises. Canada should continue to provide humanitarian assistance to those affected by Russia's invasion, both through international institutions and bilaterally. Finally, Canada should continue to advocate for Ukraine in international forums such as NATO, the OSCE, and the UN, and support Ukraine's further integration with the EU and NATO.

Canada has a vital national interest in ensuring that Europe remains whole, free, and at peace. This goal cannot be attained without a democratic, sovereign, and territorially whole Ukraine.

We thank you for the opportunity to appear here, and we welcome any of your questions.

● (0855)

The Chair: Thank you very much to the Ukrainian Canadian Congress.

We'll go right to questions. We'll start with Mr. Kent.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thanks to both of you for attending. Your insight is always welcome here at committee.

We were told by the OSCE this week that ceasefire violations are down along the line of contact, although both sides are still very close. Russian armour and mobile armoured artillery are still too close to the line to allow anything close to a normalization along the line of contact.

At the same time, we see a deepening economic crisis as a result of the blockade. On the one hand, for very logical reasons, Kiev has said, as of this week, that the blockade will be absolute and there will be no cargo in or out of eastern Ukraine, but that has caused a number of domino-like impacts. Industrial production is down, I understand, by half. The IMF has delayed delivery of $17.5 billion in economic stimulus and aid. The Russian-backed separatists are now pushing for a referendum, a Crimean-style Russian referendum, for accession to Russia.

I wonder if you could offer some insight and advice on exactly how this blockade will be managed given the variety of ways in which it's exacerbating the situation on the ground.

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: With regard to the blockade, the national bank yesterday came out with revised economic data that revised the GDP growth for 2017 from 2.5% to 1.9%, somewhere around there. I mean, it has an impact, but it's not catastrophic by any means on the Ukrainian economy.

With regard to the IMF, I think once these numbers have been turned over to the IMF, the next tranche should be in the next few weeks. Of the $17.5 billion, this is $1 billion out of that.

In terms of what happens in the occupied territories, these so-called people's republics are under complete control of the Kremlin. They are marionettes. Basically, they will do what Moscow tells them to do. We have to remember that Kiev stopped trade with these regions because these republics seized Ukrainian enterprises that were working in the area. This blockade is very much the result of actions taken by Russia and its proxies.

● (0900)

Hon. Peter Kent: Given that it's the industrial heartland, and given the very strong negative impact it has on the Ukrainian economy in the west, would you say that the only way this blockade could be lifted would be full and complete compliance with the Minsk agreements by the separatists, and respect by the Russians?

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: That is what Kiev has said, and I think that is accurate. With Minsk, what we've seen is that since they have been signed, these agreements have been routinely violated by Russia. Not a single point of them has ever been implemented. I mean, there have been some periods of relative calm for a week or two, here and there, and then Russia, when it wants to, ratchets up violence and pressure again. Part of implementing Minsk is getting western countries to put more pressure on Russia to meet those obligations.

Hon. Peter Kent: I have a quick question, and it's a big question regarding reform. When the committee visited Ukraine in January, we saw and were told there were any number of very encouraging signs with regard to civil society and police reform, media training, and legal aid assisted by the Canadian National Judicial Institute. But we were also told that many, if not most Ukrainians still believe that corruption is an everyday reality, and that you don't get by in life without corruption in either minor or major forms.

I'm just wondering what your thoughts are on the sense of urgency and how, from top to bottom, through the judicial system, through Parliament, through civil society, a greater sense of urgency for realistic reform can take place sooner rather than later.

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: Absolutely. We agree with what your committee saw, which is that, as much as there is progress in highly visible areas of policing and justice, every time there's progress in those areas, it can also uncover more corruption. That's been one of the paradoxes that the Ukrainian judicial system has been dealing with. The more resources they place into anti-corruption, the more they discover deep corruption within their ranks.

Obviously, a free and open media will report on these things, so there is a simultaneous, growing distrust by members of the public. Both of us have family members we talk with, so while there is this parallel track of both fighting the corruption and cynicism, we see that there needs to be a sustained, long-term effort to fight this systemic corruption. It's as small as this. The medical system is not funded properly, or the school system, so parents or patients will bring funds to their doctor or their teacher to give their patient or their student extra support. That's not seen as the same thing as an official skimming off of percentages of a loan or a government program, but there are many levels of corruption.

We've been working through the Ukrainian World Congress and with our partners there, with many NGOs, to build a sustainable base of funding for these groups to allow them to see multi-year plans, and that it's not a flash in the pan. This will all not be resolved in three years or five years. This took a long time to develop, and it's about social values, citizenship. We're seeing some progress in those areas, but I guess our main point is to say to you, as parliamentarians, and to Canada that we can't allow those small setbacks and those shocking stories of corruption that are uncovered to cause us to withdraw our support. All of those things actually point out that we're working right in step with the right partners in Ukraine, who are mostly of a younger generation that has not participated in the government system to the degree that other people have. A lot of those former regime folks have fled.

Again, Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze was here, the vice-prime minister of Ukraine, formerly a civil society activist, formerly a journalist. These are the people who have inherited this mess. We believe, in the majority of cases, that things are going in the right direction and that a sustained, long-term vision is required to get past this large problem that envelops both official and non-official Ukrainian society.

● (0905)

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kent.

We'll go to Mr. Sidhu, please.

Mr. Jati Sidhu (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you both for showing up in front of the committee.

You mentioned in your opening remarks that the western world needs to keep the pressure on. As you know, Canada is a leading advocate for Ukraine on the international stage, with the latest decision to extend the military mission in Ukraine to 2019. We've been there on the ground since 2015. About 200 personnel are training the Ukrainian military. Up to 3,200 Ukrainian military members were trained.

In your view, does training support the Ukrainian army in an effort to defend yourself on the ground?

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: Sorry, has the training supported the Ukrainian army in defending itself?

Mr. Jati Sidhu: Yes.

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: Very much so. What Unifier is focusing on is a lot of small team training, bomb disposal, land mines, and these sorts of things.

What we've heard is that these were the kinds of things that are very much needed—this sort of small, lower team coordination command, that kind of thing. Certainly, everything we've heard from people in Ukraine is that this training has had an enormous impact.

Secondly, the other thing to remember is that it's not a one-way street. Our Canadian personnel is actually learning a lot as well about Russian hybrid tactics and so on from their Ukrainian counterparts. I think Unifier is an example of a win-win for both us and Ukraine.

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: I can add one more specific example. The area of first aid training and certification is something that.... I know that the Canadian military mission there has been working to provide higher standards of first aid response training to soldiers who didn't have it. That's another example of something our community has been working with through the world congress, providing first aid kits—or what we would call a proper first aid kit—and front-line training, because that's something they were lacking.

That's a direct decision by Canada and by our community to cause fewer people to die from injuries on the front line that shouldn't have caused hospitalization but should have been treated right on the front. That's what we're seeing as a direct impact of Canadian training there.

Mr. Jati Sidhu: It really is helping then.

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Jati Sidhu: My second question relates to the landscape change in the United States, and the United States' "soft power", if you want to call it that, arguably being on the decline. Do you see a potential change in Russia's future course, particularly in regard to the intervention efforts in Ukraine?

● (0910)

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: Sure. In terms of the United States' policy on Ukraine, I would say traditionally the American position has been to support Ukraine through NATO, through the EU, and directly. There are definitely strong allies in Congress and in the Senate, who have visited Ukraine and who understand the situation in the contemporary setting.

We haven't seen Russia change tack through any of the interventions that have taken place thus far. Certainly the Canadian military mission is one of many training missions by other militaries from the NATO countries that are training troops in Ukraine as well: Poland, Latvia, the Americans, and the Germans. None of it has yet been enough to convince Russia to change course. The current U.S. administration and its views on this topic are under close scrutiny, both in Ukraine and Canada, as they are everywhere in the world. We don't really know what to speculate will happen next.

Mr. Jati Sidhu: Mr. Zakydalsky, you mentioned a few times that we need to keep up the pressure from the western world. Do you think the intervention is increasing or decreasing for the last year or six months? Where do you see this going?

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: I would say that any attempts to weaken sanctions, weaken western resolve, will result in increased violence and increased military operations by Russia. At a minimum, the level the pressure is at now, the sanctions that are on Russia now, seem to be keeping Russia where they are, in the sense that the front line in Ukraine hasn't moved significantly.

There have been individual efforts in Avdiivka, a couple of years ago in Debaltsevo. Part of that is that Ukraine's military is much stronger, much better equipped, much better prepared than it was when the invasion started, and part of that is, I think, a successful and unified European, American, and Canadian response. But any weakening of that will result in further attempts by Russia to seize territory. I think the past experience is that Russia responds to being dealt with from a position of strength, so our position is that the pressure on Russia has to be increased in order to get them to de-occupy eastern Ukraine and Crimea.

Mr. Jati Sidhu: Thank you, Mr. Zakydalsky.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sidhu.

We'll go to Madam Laverdière, *s'il vous plaît*.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Zakydalsky and Mr. Michalchyshyn, thank you very much for joining us this morning and for making your presentations.

You mentioned the need to strengthen the Canadian sanctions. You brought up Magnitsky-type measures. The committee just completed a study where we included some measures of that kind. During the study, we unfortunately noted that the Canadian sanctions system was not always implemented in the most effective way possible.

I am still concerned by the fact that someone like Vladimir Yakunin is not on Canada's sanctions list, while he is on the U.S. list.

What do you think about the potential effect of Canadian sanctions? Beyond Magnitsky-type sanctions, how can we strengthen our sanctions regime against Russia?

● (0915)

[*English*]

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: There are two things. One, Magnitsky gives Canada the tools with which to sanction human rights abusers in Russia, and I understand from listening to some of the testimony, it's probably broader. That is extremely important for showing these officials who support the Russian regime that they can't get away with it, that people are watching them. That, in turn, perhaps makes other officials think about whether or not that's a course they want to continue.

Unlike in Soviet times, Russian officials, Russian business people, keep their money in western banks, not in Russian ones, so we have an effective tool—or will have, once Magnitsky is, I hope, adopted—to put significant pressure on these people, and in turn on the Russian regime. There is a reason why, when the United States passed Magnitsky in 2012, the reaction from Russia was as severe as it was. It was because it's an effective tool.

The second issue is sectoral sanctions on the Russian economy. There have been quite a lot implemented in Canada, the U.S., and the EU and we believe these should be strengthened. These work when they are all implemented together.

One of the things we would very much like to see is for Canada to take a lead in this and argue for this with our American and European partners because if Canada does it themselves, that's good but it's not nearly as effective as when it's done in concert. I think that's something everyone in Canada, the EU, and in the U.S. understands, that these things have to be done together. We are hopeful that Canada will, in NATO, the EU, and the G7, continue to be a strong advocate for keeping the sanctions we have now because we have seen no change in Russian behaviour, and strengthen them as necessary to put more pressure on the Russian regime through the economy.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: You also mentioned the large number of

[*English*]

internally displaced people.

[*Translation*]

We are talking about nearly 1.5 million people.

Can you give us details on the general situation of those internally displaced people? Where are they? How are they living?

[*English*]

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: Indeed, the situation isn't well known. Because it's been going on for multiple years and involves multiple regions, it isn't easy to see where all these people are. We know that the Canadian government, through some partnerships in Ukraine with the International Red Cross and others, provides some level of support for crisis needs and some that are longer in term. We don't believe that is large enough in terms of a support program.

What we know about the situation is that more and more people continue to leave the areas of conflict, as they see no future for themselves economically. There are no systems of health and education, and as was mentioned, the economic situation there is not good. Unfortunately, the elderly are often left behind in these areas because they have nowhere else to go and they have no resources to transport themselves. They are most often the victims in these conflict areas.

What we have seen happen in Ukraine on the ground is that there have been civil society movements and government agencies that are trying to provide welcoming centres in other regions of Ukraine, and some assistance with housing, language, and job training. Again, the capacity of the Ukrainian government and civil society to do those things is not high. It's a new problem that they've been tackling for the last two and a half years. We would welcome any renewed attention on that. Of course, there are many successful international examples of the kinds of programs that do work.

I think the big question for these people right now—the ones we hear from—is how long they will be away. Are they going to rebuild a life for themselves somewhere else, or will they ever go back to their home town or home village? I think that uncertainty over the conflict and the length of time that it continues is the biggest factor that's causing this instability within the Ukrainian population, which is almost two million people. That is a significant number of people.

● (0920)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Laverdière.

[*English*]

We'll go to Mr. Saini, please.

Mr. Raj Saini (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Good morning to both of you, and thank you very much for coming this morning.

I want to talk about a situation in the Donbas. Right now, we have the special monitoring mission that's there, and the line of control has been established, I think for a couple of years now. I think there are only five border checkpoints that are along that line. Has that not become the de facto border now between Russian and Ukraine?

The reason I say that is that in other conflicts around the world—even if you look at Kashmir—the line of control, whether agreed upon or not, has been something fixed and has been accepted on both sides. Also, there's outside pressure to maintain some sort of equilibrium between the Russian-controlled and the Ukrainian-controlled.... Now, when you have border points, and when you have a situation where the line has been established and accepted, that becomes the line of control.

Has that not become, de facto, the border between Russia and Ukraine?

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: Part of the Minsk agreements is that Russia obligated itself to withdraw its forces from Ukrainian territory. It's worded in such a way that it's not Russian forces, but that is the meaning of it.

The contact line that separates occupied Ukrainian territory in Donbas and the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, and government-controlled Ukrainian territory isn't.... I wouldn't characterize it as a border exactly. It separates two armies from each other, the Russian and proxy army, and the Ukrainian army on the other side.

Russia doesn't formally acknowledge that is there. De facto, those are Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia. Part of the Minsk agreements is that they have stated they would withdraw and turn over control of the actual Ukranian-Russian border, turn over control of the Ukrainian side of it to Ukrainian authorities, although that was two and a half years ago and it hasn't happened.

Where our policy needs to be modified is to not only ensure a ceasefire but also ensure that sovereign Ukrainian territories return under the control of the Ukrainian government. That's why there's a necessity for increasing pressure on Russia.

● (0925)

Mr. Raj Saini: The reason I suggest that is that if you look at Minsk I and you look at Minsk II, Minsk II was initiated by the Normandy four, and one of the issues was that Crimea was not mentioned in that package of measures. There was this trying to de-escalate on both sides of the border, but also one of the aspects of the package of measures was to make sure there was a devolution of power from Kiev so that these regions would have some autonomy to some extent.

I'm trying to say that it seems to me that in Minsk II there has been a challenge in implementing Minsk II from whatever side. It seems to me that is now in a position.... If that has become the line of control and the de facto border, is there not a worry on the Ukrainian side that this may become a frozen conflict? Because Crimea has not been mentioned in this, what's the future? What are the steps going forward? How should we resolve this issue?

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: The reason the political parts of the Minsk agreements haven't been implemented is that the security parts of them have not even begun to be implemented. The reason the security parts of Minsk have not begun to be implemented is that there are still thousands of Russian troops on Ukrainian soil, and they keep shelling the Ukrainian army.

I think the first step is to get Russia to stop doing that. The way to do that is to increase pressure on them. The reason Crimea was not part of Minsk is that the Russians refused to include that in any of these discussions. The occupation of Crimea is separate from the Minsk agreements and its de-occupation is a separate issue from the ongoing hot conflict in the east.

How to resolve this? It's not easy, but the way to resolve it is that there has to be enough pressure placed on Russia to make the cost of continuing the war in the east, continuing the occupation of Ukrainian territories in the east, and ultimately the continuing occupation of Crimea untenable for the Russian government. Probably the best way to do that is through economic means and to make those costs higher.

Mr. Raj Saini: The next question I want to ask is about the disinformation that's happening right now. The reason I say this, having visited Ukraine and Kiev, and having visited Latvia and Kazakhstan, is that there seems to be a fact that you have a significant Russian minority, an ethnic minority, living there. I don't know what the exact number is. I think it's around 20% in Ukraine.

You have media that emanates from Russia and is very predominant in certain parts of the country. The media ownership in Ukraine is not that high. It seems that there's this huge amount of disinformation. I've seen the disinformation, whether it be the fake tweets or Facebook posts.

How is that going to be resolved? What is the best way or approach to make sure the right information is being conveyed to the population? If you look at certain outlets, you'll see they're giving a very rosy picture of what's happening in the Donbas when that's not true. What do you think is the best way to combat that?

● (0930)

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: I'll break that up into two parts. I think that this disinformation, as we've seen, is happening not only in Ukraine. It happens on a worldwide scale. It happens in Canada. One merely needs to scan the television channels and certain Internet sites to get that stream of consciousness and thought.

Again, we can give you our observations of what's happening in Ukraine. There are attempts by media and civil society to support open media, to support independent journalism, and to provide counter-information. It's not a good idea to shut down media, but it's a good idea to provide balanced information both in Canada and in Ukraine on what's happening.

What we do at the Ukrainian Canadian Congress is put out a daily bulletin and a weekly bulletin. We do our best to inform our community here, and the diaspora does its best to inform itself of what's happening. We definitely see strong attempts to influence world opinion.

To your previous question, I was going to say that our concern is that there has been this talk of “Ukraine fatigue” and “Russia fatigue”. The most important thing, in our view, is to not accept these as borders and to not accept the current situation as “that's just the way it is, so let's move on”, so to speak. It's important not to accept the outcome of the disinformation as accurate or relevant.

Both at the community level in Canada and in working with our diaspora around the world, the Ukrainian government is struggling to figure out how to provide in Ukraine—and this goes back to the question of legitimacy and systems—accurate information to people in multiple languages, but I think this goes to the broader issue that we're seeing right now in Europe in terms of the electoral processes that are happening and the various ways that disinformation can happen through funding certain media outlets and political parties, and through civil society or NGO groups that are funded in murky ways.

I think all of us must remain vigilant. Not only is it a problem on the ground in Kiev, but it's something that is actively happening around the world, and not just on Twitter. All of us can be easily manipulated into thinking that everything's fine or everything is one point of view or the other. We support the balance. We support independent journalism. We support the sharing of information with multiple sources, broadly speaking, and we question anybody who doesn't, anybody who says it's a one-sided story, so “end of story”. This is where we welcome the interest of this committee and others in talking about Ukraine. I think that your trip and this kind of discussion balance the disinformation and show us that there is an international effort to find out what is actually happening on the ground.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Saini.

We'll go to Mr. Levitt, please.

Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.): Thank you for being here this morning.

Can you talk about the situation being faced by Crimean Tatars?

Russia banned the self-governing body of the Crimean Tatars, the Mejlis, and our foreign minister has noted how deeply troubled she is by the politically motivated application of anti-terrorist and anti-extremist legislation, which has led to the harassment of human rights activists, arbitrary detentions and disappearances, and the persecution of Crimean Tatars and other minorities. An estimated 20,000 Tatars have left Crimea since Russia annexed it.

Can you shed some light on this ongoing and disturbing situation?

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: It's a very sad situation. It has its deep roots in history in terms of the situation of the Crimean Tatars in the forties, with forced deportation from Stalin, and then their eventual mass return to Ukraine post-1991.

The current situation is as you read it. It's easy to read terrible stories. It's a story of suppression and pressure. Many of the committee members here met Gennadii Afanasiev in the fall, a young man who was a photographer and a student who organized a small demonstration in Crimea. He was abducted, sent into the Russian prison system, charged with all sorts of offences, and tortured into writing confessions against his fellow citizens.

We believe that's what is happening now. As you mentioned in your question, many people have voluntarily left. They're proactively leaving because they're afraid of what might happen to them. There are people there, doing what they can in a repressive regime.

I think for all of us, it's the new front of human rights. We're watching Russia's approach to human rights live on the ground in Crimea. It's not good. It has religious, ethnocultural, and racial implications.

What can Canada do? I think, as you said, it's strong statements from our government, by our parliamentarians. As in the previous question, it's not accepting Crimea as part of the Russian Federation, which is sanctioning people who claim to be members of Parliament from that region; supporting further clampdowns on travel to that region; and putting pressure on Russia because Russia claims that Crimea voted in an alleged referendum to be part of the Russian Federation. We can see engagement with Russia as part of that process in terms of putting pressure in the Crimean situation, and in any engagement with Russia, we need to bring up the human rights situation in Crimea, because they are the current, alleged authorities there and have responsibility.

I think, thanks to Mr. Afanasiev and dozens of others, there are very good lists online in the newspapers of who exactly has been arrested, where they're being held. We're working with Amnesty International and other human rights groups to free them, to publicize their cases, and to really put pressure on the regime in charge there.

● (0935)

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: I would add that every time someone is imprisoned or convicted on some ridiculous charge, there's a prosecutor, an investigator, and a judge who take those decisions. Their names are readily available. They should all be subject to sanctions. These are policies that emanate from the Kremlin. There are people who implement them, and they shouldn't get away with that. One thing we need to do is to look into these cases, to look at who has taken illegal decisions, what investigators and prosectors have done in these cases, how so-called judges have ruled, and hold them accountable for their actions.

Mr. Michael Levitt: You mentioned the clampdown and the oppression against human rights defenders, which is certainly something we've seen, unfortunately, both in this committee and in the subcommittee on international human rights. We see the repression of human rights defenders by oppressive regimes in far too many jurisdictions right now. Civil society pushing back and a strong civil society are ways to make sure that message is getting out loud and clear.

Can you give us a bit of an overview on the state of civil society in Ukraine at the moment, and to what extent there are any organizations on the ground in Crimea, as well, that are lending support? We know that when there is a strong civil society and those voices are able to get out, it's also the most effective way for other countries to be able to help support, locally, the activities of human rights defenders. What is the situation at the moment?

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: There's not a huge ability for civil society to operate in Crimea. What we know is that many of the groups that were operating in Crimea have moved to Ukraine. The people have moved on, but their activities continue. CrimeaSOS, for example, is the group that publicizes the plight of individual prisoners who are held.

One of the more complicated factors is the issue of citizenship and passports, as with Mr. Afanasiev's case. He is a Ukrainian citizen with a Ukrainian passport who has been arrested and put into a Russian prison system. There is a very key element of jurisdiction and of pressure being exerted by people to accept the new normal.

One of the strongest things that we've seen is that, fortunately, the western media—BBC, *The Guardian*, and others—have gone into Crimea because they're allowed to travel into Russia and talk to people, though people are afraid to give their names or to take pictures.

I was just reading a BBC article. Two weeks ago was the celebration of Taras Shevchenko, Ukraine's national poet. This BBC article mentioned that there were people in Sevastopol, I think, placing flowers at the monument and Russian security services were filming every single person that came to place flowers and asking for their name. Again, there's a sliding scale from the extreme torture and repression, to everyday persecution and pressure.

We've been told of the pressure to switch documents, to become a Russian citizen. To participate in the health care system and to work for what is largely now a military economy in Crimea, one has to be a Russian citizen. So there's the unspoken pressure of accepting the new level of oppression and not speaking out against it for fear of economic exclusion and non-participation in health and social services. That's a very big concern.

As I mentioned, the international human rights groups are very active in Russia. They've been active in Russia for many years. They've put pressure on many cases in the Russian court system. This is the newest element for them, to see Ukrainian citizens being put into the domestic Russian system for a variety of charges. We're pleased that they're taking that seriously.

There are many Russian activists who are also in similar situations, but because their situation may not have the international profile, they're not getting that kind of support.

● (0940)

The Chair: You'll have to leave it there for now.

Thank you, Mr. Levitt.

I'll go to Mr. Allison, please.

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses today.

I know one of the things you suggested is that we continue raising the issue. With my involvement with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, we always raise the issue and raise resolutions. I know you probably follow that as well, but I wanted to say that. When we're at international forums, it's something we do as a country all the time.

I have one question. I want to follow up on what Mr. Sidhu was talking about to try to get your thoughts on where Russia is headed with all of this. When we were in eastern Europe, this was the topic of debate with every country we were with. We talked with OSCE officials, those on the ground, monitoring missions, NATO strategic communications centre. Everyone has an opinion on this.

We've also heard testimony at committee that Russia has all these wars and fronts going on, but they're really in disarray at home economically and they can't afford to be in every place. The best job they can do is to create mischief and problems everywhere.

Based on the relationships you have in Ukraine, where do you think they're heading in the long term? We've heard this whole issue of hybrid warfare, which is a new term for me. People said that maybe they're sending people there to train to go to other places.

My sense was that I didn't think they were going to try to take more territory, but are they prepared to be there forever? Where is their headspace? I know that's like asking where Trump's headspace is, almost an impossible question.

Based on your relationships and who you talk to, what are your thoughts anecdotally?

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: I think they'll try to get away with as much as they're allowed to get away with, to put it simply. I think what you see is a pattern where, when the Russian regime meets significant resistance, they tend to back off. There has been international resistance to what Russia's doing. In our view, it can be much stronger and more effective if some of the policy options we're talking about are explored and implemented.

In terms of where Russia is economically at home, sure, it's not a healthy economy, but that is something that war distracts from. Just the fact that they can't afford to be doing some of this stuff and that it's hurting them economically is not a reason for the regime not to do it. What would work, I think, would be to make the cost of doing these things much higher. Perhaps some of the Russian policies would then be rethought. Structurally, the Russian economy is an oil-based economy. The energy sector is probably the most effective to be targeted for sanctions. The second is banking and financial. A lot of this money that comes out of Russia goes to us in the west—

● (0945)

Mr. Dean Allison: Is this a distraction for back home? I mean, we know it is, but do you see them, if left unchecked, trying to take more territory? To go back to Mr. Saini's point, they've moved the boundaries, and it doesn't look like they're trying to advance them as much as they're just trying to create as much chaos as possible.

I guess if the allies or whoever don't push back, is there a chance, in your opinion, that they would take more territory, or would they continue to use this as a distraction in terms of dealing with their issues back home?

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: This is all speculation, but I think it's safe to say that if the Ukrainian armed forces moved back from the line of control significantly, when they withdrew, there would be no question that there would be further incursions and territorial gains. There's a variety of thoughts about what the ultimate end goal of that is from a military perspective.

Further to earlier questions, I think if western countries, Canada and the EU and American allies, decide that they've had it in Ukraine —we've done our bit, and it's time for all of us to pull out and let them solve it themselves—we would see a scale of military intervention to political and social intervention that we have not yet seen. I think it would be on the scale of what we're seeing in Crimea and in eastern Ukraine, actually, with that kind of government system, that kind of disrespect for human rights and political and journalistic freedom. Our concern is that we don't have the short view of....

The current situation is in many ways a stalemate, but that doesn't give full credit to the Ukrainian armed forces in terms of what they're doing to hold back what is a desired further territorial invasion. It takes a lot of effort. Even though the current situation is not good in terms of Ukraine, in terms of military or social civil society, corruption, and other things, the situation is much better than it would have been had there been no assistance from Canada and other allies. That's a very important point to emphasize.

Mr. Dean Allison: Thank you.

Do I have more time?

The Chair: Sure.

Mr. Dean Allison: Do you want to ask a quick question?

Hon. Peter Kent: Yes.

Just to follow on from that, beyond the borders of Ukraine, I think everyone's reassured by the red line that's been drawn by NATO, Canada included, in the Baltics and in Poland, but we're seeing new demands for democratization in Belarus. Russia's responded with border controls. We see that Serbia is rushing to Russia's embrace without much encouragement, and their provocations with Kosovo and other former Yugoslav republics.

We know that the EU is becoming disenchanted with Serbia and we know that they're not very happy with Poland, given their resistance to EU refugee policies. Do you have concern that in fact western Europe is becoming somewhat fatigued and unenthusiastic about continuing and prolonging, and perhaps expanding, their defence of those who have chosen democracy in the former Soviet Union?

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: I think it's clear to see that there is.... I don't know that I'd say it is disinformation, but there is definitely a thread of thinking that the situation is at a stalemate, that nothing anybody has done, from the EU or the western, the Canadian side, is making a difference. We are concerned that this is not an accurate representation of the impact of what has actually happened on the ground.

Certainly, as we've said, there's no one solution. It isn't an easy situation to resolve in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. We can all understand the frustration of allies saying, “We've devoted so many resources. Why isn't it resolved?” That, I think, is not doing service to the many people who have been killed and the many people who have been injured.

The diaspora here in Canada and in Europe remains very vigilant to countering that argument. There are many positive examples of what has changed on the ground. We are on the path, with the judicial system, with police reform, to fundamentally change the lives of Ukrainian citizens, and, I think, provide an example to people in Belarus and Russia of what is a better future, what a democratic system with full freedoms of the press can be in a country that is ready to participate with the EU and Canada on free trade, on human rights, and on other such international agreements.

I think we are just on the cusp of getting over that argument about whether we have to pull out or do more. From our perspective, we're here to say, “Let's not be shortsighted about it. Let's continue the hard work.” Creating the Ukraine as a key ally for Canada and for the EU that protects European security, regardless of the question of NATO, is vital for global security. The Ukraine is really, historically and contemporarily, on the front lines of that conflict.

● (0950)

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you.

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

We'll now go to Mr. McKay, please.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you both.

I want to have you speak to the elephant in the room, namely the Putin-Trump relationship. I'll just read you a sampling of the headlines that come up: “Ukraine Is Worried About The Cost Of Trump And Putin’s Special Relationship”; “Ukraine, first casualty of Trump-Putin Alliance”; “Ukraine clashes leave several dead and test Trump's Russia stance”; “'It's a pretty disturbing time for Ukraine': Trump's Russia ties unnerve Kiev”.

I'm sure you know these headlines better than I do.

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: I have one here.

Hon. John McKay: Okay, there we are.

In the last 100 days, hasn't this long-term commitment just become a great deal longer?

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: I'm sorry, whose...?

Hon. John McKay: I mean the long-term commitment of the west to solving this. Given the budding relationship between Mr. Putin and Mr. Trump, doesn't this simply make this whole thing that much longer? Russia, as you have rightly said, only understands strength and resolve, and this relationship mitigates against both strength and resolution.

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: A lot of what we're hearing is about ties between the Russians and people who worked for the Trump campaign, people in the administration. Paradoxically that lessens the ability of the administration to manoeuvre in the area.

Any overture to Russia is seen within the context of all of these things that are going on. That coupled with the fact that a sizable majority in both houses of Congress support the projection of American security to Europe, I think in the long run is going to mitigate a lot of this problem. Having said that, it's certainly not ideal that the one person that the U.S. President seems unable to criticize is Putin.

Again, I think the role of the United States in Europe and in global security transcends one administration or another. I think that this is an understanding that the world is a more secure and more peaceful place with a United States that is involved in the security architecture. Our hope, and it's not a false hope, is that understanding will prevail over any isolationism or these kinds of things.

I think that's it.

● (0955)

Hon. John McKay: That's an interesting answer from the standpoint of it being a paradox. That the more the relationship gets exposed, the less manoeuvring room the U.S. administration or Congress has and the more difficult it is for congressional and Senate members to be anything other than “strong on Russia”.

My question may be wrong. It may be in some respects that rather than lengthening this conflict, there might be some possibility that it contracts the conflicts. Maybe that's a little optimistic. I take your response. It's an interesting response. Certainly, I lived the paradox for the last three days. I was in Washington. A Canada-U.S. group met with 85 senators and congressmen. There was a lot of mumbling into the coffee cups when these kinds of issues arose.

Circling now into Canada's response because this does create difficulties for both our military and non-military response. I can only see us as staying the course in the present context. What's your response, if you will, to the political turmoil? We have to rely on the Americans for leadership. We're standing up a brigade group in Latvia. We're re-upping in Ukraine. We're taking over missions in Iraq. We're thinking about what we could do that would be effective in Africa. Yet all of it is highly dependent upon the working assumption that the Americans will be taking the leadership.

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: I agree with your premise.

I think the best thing Canada can do, and has been doing, is to be consistent, outspoken, in many venues, whether it's parliamentary or otherwise. As you said, the biggest problem with the American involvement in this sphere right now is an inconsistency and an uncertainty as to which way it will go. I think it's part of that.

You also mentioned the timeline on the horizon. I think despite the current swirling uncertainty, we see Canada and other Ukrainian allies remaining steadfast on the path, knowing that if it's 100 days, 200 days, or four years, or whatever the timeline is, the reforms and the plans that Canada and its allies are undertaking, including the Americans, will over time provide fruitful results. Again, nobody knows exactly how long it will take. The current speculation is in many ways a test of where American lawmakers are prepared to go or not go, what the American public feels.

I think we appreciate the consistency and the support from Canada, from both the previous government and this government, and the position that this is beyond politics, that this is a strategic, key foreign ally. In every forum possible, I think it's incumbent at this time for Canada to play a lead role in perhaps re-convincing our American allies—the ones you met, the senators, the congressmen, and the other level of administration in the U.S.—that indeed their previous position is sound, and that they should, over time, return to some consistency in their position as well within the EU-U.S.-Canada alliance.

We have seen the Americans, in the last 25 years, pour as much money and resources as Canada into Ukraine and other allies to strengthen civil society and the military. I think we need to make that argument to them, as we have made here, that a withdrawal on that scale would not serve the American interests. It would be a poor strategic outcome to suddenly withdraw what's been a long-term commitment over 25 years, and longer in terms of the Cold War and that kind of effect.

● (1000)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McKay.

We'll have one last question before we wrap it up, Madame Laverdière.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you very much for giving me the floor, Mr. Chair.

We are learning that former Russian MP Denis Voronenkov, a Kremlin critic who had to flee to Ukraine, was shot to death this morning on the streets of Kiev.

We are also learning that an arms depot on the military base of Balakliia, a city in eastern Ukraine, was the target of a series of explosions. The Ukrainian government is calling the incident an act of sabotage.

I know that you may not yet have heard the news and that my question may be sudden, but what is your reaction to the two events?

[*English*]

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: The explosion at Balakliya was around 3 a.m. Kiev time last night, or rather this morning. Yes, it is being investigated by the military prosecutor as an act of sabotage. There are some reports that right before the explosion people had heard an unmanned drone flying over the area.

The surrounding area, within about five or six kilometres, has been evacuated. About 20,000 people have been evacuated. There doesn't appear to be any threat beyond the immediate fire and this kind of thing. Ukraine has gone to heightened alert around other bases, ammunition depots, and so forth. We'll see what the cause of this was. It is not clear yet.

Voronenkov was in Kiev. He had defected or fled from Russia, and he was testifying about former Ukrainian President Yanukovych in investigations into what role he played in Russian troops coming into Ukrainian territory.

A lot of enemies of the Russian regime end up dead: Litvinenko in London, Politkovskaya in Moscow. The list goes on and on. Vladimir Kara-Murza, who appeared before this committee and who was poisoned a couple of years ago, was just recently poisoned again. Thankfully, he is recovering, from what we've heard.

Again, this happened today, so we don't know the extent of it but certainly a lot of it has the hallmarks of things we have seen happen to other people in other places, in other cities. We'll gladly update the committee as this proceeds. That's what we know now.

● (1005)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Colleagues, this wraps up our discussion with the Ukrainian Canadian Congress. We very much appreciate both of you coming and spending this time with us. Again, if there is any other information that you want to pursue with the committee, feel free to send it to us as we continue with the discussion of this very important subject matter that we are having today.

Colleagues, we are going to suspend for about five minutes, and then we'll hear from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia.

Thank you.

● (1005)

(Pause)

● (1010)

The Chair: Colleagues, I'd like to bring the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development back into session.

We have about half an hour to spend with the Minister of Foreign Affairs from Latvia, Mr. Rinkevics. We want to thank him very much for making the time and effort to be with us.

Following our normal process, the minister will start off with some opening comments, as long or as short as he likes, as our guest, and then we'll get right into questions from committee members. As most of you will recall, we were in Latvia for a short period of time in January and had an opportunity to talk to a number of people. This is a good opportunity to follow up on that, and we're looking forward to it.

Minister, welcome. I will turn the floor over to you for some opening comments. Then we will go right to questions.

● (1015)

His Excellency Edgars Rinkevics (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia): Mr. Chairman, honourable members of the committee, thank you very much for having me this morning. I'm really delighted to be here.

As I told you, Mr. Chairman, I miss the foreign affairs committee back in Latvia so much that I decided that during my visit to Canada, I should show up for some questioning. If you don't get questioning once a week, you lose a little bit of sharpness in discussion and the spirit of Parliament.

Mr. Chairman, really, I very much appreciate this opportunity to address the committee, especially taking into account that you recently visited my country, Latvia, and that we have now a very special bond through NATO. I want to use this opportunity one more time to express our gratitude to Canada and the Canadian government for the leadership taken back at the Warsaw summit, agreeing to lead a NATO-led battle group in Latvia.

I will discuss the practical issues of deployment, logistics, and legal issues with both the Minister of Defence and the Minister of Foreign Affairs later today. I think that what the Canadian government has done so far, and the relations we have now developed over a couple of months and that we continue to develop, show that the spirit of solidarity and the allied spirit in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization are very much alive. I will not really make long comments, because I very much enjoy questions and answers. Those are more lively debates. I just want to make a couple of points.

First, as you know, starting from the Russia-Georgia war in 2008 and followed by the illegal annexation of Crimea back in 2014, there is a developing situation in the east of Ukraine. We are witnessing enormous change and enormous challenge, not only in Europe but also on the global stage. We have a revisionist power, Russia, that really wants to review and revise the results of the Cold War. We have seen that international law as we know it is being challenged. It's not only the United Nations Charter on the illegal annexation of Crimea; the Budapest memorandum that was signed by Russia, Ukraine, the U.K., and the U.S., which guaranteed the territorial integrity of Ukraine, has also been thrown away.

From that point of view, taking into account our historical background, the occupation of the Baltic states by the Soviet Union back in 1940, and our struggle for freedom, where we also had the support of Canada—Canada was home for many Latvians, Estonians, and Lithuanians during the Soviet occupation, and still is home for many Latvians—I believe that it is of paramount importance that we stand united in full solidarity against those attempts to revise history.

From that point of view, our approach to Russia has been twofold. One is to deter and contain, and I think that the presence of NATO troops in the Baltic states, as well as in Poland, sends a very clear message that no further possible provocations by Russia will be welcomed.

I will go from Ottawa back to Washington, to meet Secretary of State Tillerson. Along with my Lithuanian and Estonian colleagues, we will also have meetings in the U.S. House of Representatives, with Speaker Ryan, and with members of the U.S. foreign relations committees of both the Senate and the House of Representatives. We will also discuss the approach of the new administration, but I already feel that despite what the press sometimes writes and reports, we have both Canada and the United States very committed to European security.

We also understand that we have to do our part. We are increasing our defence budget, and next year it will be the famous 2% of GDP. This year it's already 1.7%. We are working very closely with our Canadian friends and partners within the defence realm, as well as in foreign affairs, to address those practical issues.

● (1020)

I also believe that we should not forget about assistance to such countries as Ukraine, Moldova, or Georgia, which are implementing sometimes very painful but necessary reforms. We have to uphold their territorial integrity, both in symbolic statements but also in very practical terms. I think that continuous support for the reform process in Ukraine will actually be of benefit not only to Ukraine but to Europe as such.

I also believe that we have to understand—this is my conviction—that taking into account the steps taken by NATO in both NATO summits, in Wales as well as in Warsaw, the probability of military provocation against NATO members such as Latvia is very low.

Then, we also understand that we are in the 21st century, and so-called hybrid warfare is actually going on. I believe there are two very sensitive areas, which I'm prepared to address in detail, if you have some questions, but which I will mention.

One is cybersecurity. We are witnessing many attempts to penetrate our IT systems, whether it be of the foreign ministry or defence ministry. Those attacks occur almost on a daily basis.

We are also witnessing unprecedented—and this is the second dimension that I want to refer to—propaganda warfare, to some extent. I would say it's nothing new to us in the Baltics. Even before our colleagues in the European Union—France, Germany, and the U.K.—were subject to the unprecedented attacks, the propaganda warfare against their governments, we already had those. We have been developing necessary responses for years.

The NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence is based in Riga. We are analyzing not only the propaganda warfare of Russia but also the propaganda warfare by extremist groups such as ISIS. We understand that we are actually under attack by multiple agents. It's not only Russia or government propaganda; it's also extremist groups that are trying to undermine our way of living. One of those is ISIS.

We take things, then, in a bit broader context, but talking about the propaganda warfare we have seen right now, yes, we are indeed still in the process of trying to assess all mechanisms and tools and to work out effective countermeasures. Among those I could mention is media literacy. I think that journalists could probably.... It's very dangerous to teach journalists what to do and how to think; however, I think the development of critical thinking.... Verifying sources is something that should be put high on the agenda. It's actually, in a broader sense also, the raising of awareness in our societies that not everything you read in social media or on the net is really true.

We have also in the Baltics the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, where journalists analyze methods of propaganda and how to find what is right, what is wrong, and how to address those issues.

Secondly, I don't frankly consider Russian-owned state media propaganda tools as free media that are subject to the same rules as the normal media. That's why we sometimes take some harsh measures when we see that some law is broken. Our respective authorities suspend for some definite period of time—subject to court review, of course, afterwards—the broadcasting of that or another Russian media outlet that is actually financed and governed by the Russian government.

● (1025)

From that point of view, I would also like to stress we are aware that when Canadian troops arrive later this year, there will be attempts to challenge them. That is not so much in a military way, but to try to influence both our society back home, saying that we really don't need those Canadians, but also Canadian society here, saying, why are you spending so much money in a faraway country where nobody has interest? I think that we should be aware of that. We are addressing that also, as are our Canadian counterparts.

I will stop here. I don't want to make this a 30-minute lecture and leave. I would be very glad to answer any questions you have on any subject I have mentioned, or any I haven't mentioned. I haven't mentioned many things just because I want to have a more interactive discussion.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

I will go straight to questions then, and to Mr. Kent.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for fitting our committee into what I know is a very busy schedule.

I'd like to thank you for the hospitality that our committee received during our visit in January to Latvia, and for Latvia's enthusiastic support, economically, with regard to CETA and the early endorsement ratification of that important agreement.

I'd also like to thank Latvia for the words from your ambassador to Ottawa in countering some of the discouraging words from the ambassador of Russia here, saying that Canada's participation in the NATO mission was part of a general threat of security in Europe and that, as you just said in terms of disinformation, Latvia doesn't need those Canadian soldiers.

I would like you to amplify on the IT and propaganda threats. During our visit to Riga, we were powerfully enlightened by briefings at OSCE headquarters on both of those issues, not only with regard to IT penetration and threat or Russian television propaganda, but also from the internal work of agents of Russia—retired military, Russian military, or retired KGB agents—who will be working, as you say, to stir up and provoke internal controversy about the NATO mission.

Mr. Edgars Rinkevics: Thank you.

First of all, thank you very much for those kind words about your visit. I will pass them along to the chairman of our foreign affairs committee, Mr. Kalnins. I think he was also delighted to host you.

In answer to your question on Russian retired KGB or military officers as active agents to stir up some controversy, frankly, I do not expect direct provocations against Canadian troops or soldiers from other countries. Canada will be leading multinational forces, from countries including Albania, Spain, Italy, Slovenia, and Poland.

Here is what we have seen so far. Since 2014 we have many American soldiers coming and spending time with exercises in Latvia. We have had many exercises. We haven't had examples of attempts to make direct provocations against them, such as engaging in some kind of activity in the bars or pubs after they have finished their working day or their service and have some free time. Actually, there have been only one or two incidents reported by the press so far. I think that we are quite well prepared to disseminate whatever occurs and to make sure that any incident is correctly related.

We have already witnessed at least one example in Lithuania with the German troops, because Germany is leading a NATO battle group in Lithuania. As German troops arrived, all of a sudden, over one weekend, there was some fake news in the media that German troops were raping a young boy in one small Lithuanian village. That's why I believe we all have to be prepared for such absolutely fake news. There were no grounds for that.

Thank God, both Lithuanian and German authorities were quick to verify and to set the facts straight. Actually, what may well have been intended as provocation ended up in disaster for those intending that provocation, because it was not a story about German troops harassing Lithuanian children; it was a story about the propaganda machine failing.

From that point of view, we are aware that there could be some attempts, especially at the beginning, to discredit the whole mission. I also know that both ministries of defence take this seriously, and some plans are being put in place.

Regarding all other kinds of possible provocations, I don't believe we are going to see mass demonstrations, and so on. What is also important—and our current experience shows it—is that there be a very strong and broad public outreach program. It is important that there be some kind of public diplomacy, and that Canadian troops go to schools and play some sports with children—in summer, it's probably not going to be hockey, but in winter, certainly—so that we also put a more positive spin on it.

I know that both defence ministries are currently working on that, but I don't expect some retired KGB or military guys going down the streets and doing nasty things.

● (1030)

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kent.

I'll go to Mr. Fragiskatos, please.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here. You'll be happy to know that Canadian hockey fans have long appreciated the Latvian contribution to our great game—Arturs Irbe and Sandis Ozolinsh. I just wanted to mention that. I know you've ratified CETA, but there are other reasons our countries have such good relations, Minister.

I want to ask you a question about spheres of influence in Russia. It is not uncommon to come across views within media, within academic circles, that go something along the following lines. If we want global stability, as we should naturally, then we need to recognize that Russia wishes to have a sphere of influence, and like it or not eastern Europe is seen, at least from the Russian perspective, as being in its sphere of influence.

I disagree with that view because I think that the democracies—I emphasize that, the democracies— of eastern Europe deserve to be free, secure. Could you counter that view, though, and speak to it from if not an eastern European's perspective, then from a Latvian's perspective?

I know you can't speak for the region as a whole. I think it's very easy to dismiss the security interests and democratic interests of countries like Latvia and to simply say that Russia's sphere of influence is eastern Europe, and if we want international stability then we ought to recognize that. I think it's very dismissive. I wonder, Minister, if you could touch on that point.

Mr. Edgars Rinkevics: The last time that spheres of influence were agreed upon was back in 1939, under the Hitler-Stalin or Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. We unfortunately directly suffered from that, but I think we all saw that it didn't help prevent what happened afterwards. The first big tragedy of World War II was the attack against Poland, and it ended with the big war between Germany and the Soviet Union after all.

I think there is a temptation to think that if we divide the world into spheres of influence—actually, the more modern expression for it is a multipolar world system—understanding that there are countries that have legitimate interests in other countries and that those legitimate interests are contrary to what the people of Ukraine, for instance, or Moldova or Georgia probably want to do, and that Russia has the right to stop them from reforming themselves and putting the values that we all share, such as democracy, human rights, the market economy, the rule of law in place, and if we follow what is currently known as the system in Russia, which is an authoritarian, a very, I would say, “conservative”, to be diplomatic, set of values and so on....

From that point of view, I earnestly believe that if we don't uphold the kind of liberal world order that means promotion of democracy, rule of law, and free trade as part of it—because I believe that nations who are trading fairly and freely are not aligned in spheres of influence, politically or militarily, but are aligned in the direction of more prosperity, more human rights.... That kind of liberal order, which really authoritarian regimes in the world do not like because it undermines their very existence, has prevented us from experiencing major military conflicts in the last 70 years.

Yes. There was a huge struggle between a totalitarian communist regime and the free world throughout the Cold War years, which ended with the collapse of both the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union. In the last 25 years, even with all the deficiencies we have seen, we have at least in my country experienced years of living standards rising consistently, during which we have become part of both NATO and the EU. Actually we have seen an expansion of stability and peace in Europe.

I believe that if there are attempts now to neglect smaller countries, to go back to 19th-century diplomacy with spheres of influence, with inevitable clashes at some point among those great powers, at the end of the day we will all suffer. I think that in general it would be in Russia's genuine interests that neighbouring countries, from Finland and the Baltics in the north to the Caucasus and Ukraine further down to the south, develop freely and in a way such that democracy and market economy and rule of law flourish. That would be the best security guarantee for Russia itself.

Unfortunately we missed an opportunity and Russia missed an opportunity back in the 1990s or the beginning of the 2000s for genuine reforms. Unfortunately, the country has run in a direction that I personally disapprove of.

Unfortunately the noise you hear from many is that the best way to maintain peace and stability in Europe and indeed in the world is to let them have what they want. If they get what they want today, they will demand more tomorrow, and at one point—nobody can say when—we are going to stop. That very much reminds me of the history, unfortunately, of the 1920s and 1930s.

● (1035)

We are the huge beneficiaries of those 25 years of freedom right now. I would say that defending what we have is the only way to actually maintain the core of our own existence, as your Atlantic or western world.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

We'll now go to Madame Laverdière, *s'il vous plaît*.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you for your very insightful presentation. I will sort of respond to your invitation. You mentioned the issue of cybersecurity during your presentation and you invited us to ask for details. I will do that right now.

You talked about daily attacks. Can you tell us more about the source of those attacks and about the Latvian government's reaction?

● (1040)

[*English*]

Mr. Edgars Rinkevics: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

I cannot answer in French, but I understood everything you said.

[*English*]

I just want to stress that when they talk about cyber-attacks, it is very difficult to trace the whole line of the attacks. I am sure that in your hearings you have heard it from your own experts. For instance, if we want to be very formal, then sometimes the biggest attacker is our neighbour in Lithuania or Estonia. We don't really believe that our Estonian or Lithuanian or sometimes Swedish friends are very much interested in our secrets or in our email system, so we try to trace those, let's say, attacks and you end up with proxy servers somewhere in Brazil or in China. But then you have also some reasonable intelligence analysis to suspect that sometimes those are originating in a close neighbourhood in the east.

We witnessed, especially during the period of Latvia's presidency in the European Union—that was in the first half of 2015—attempts to penetrate the information systems of foreign ministries. Because at that point we were the leading agency for the organizations and the content of the whole EU, and not only for foreign and defence policy. We were sharing our responsibilities with the high representatives for foreign and security policy, but we were also responsible for the daily business of the EU at every level, from justice and home affairs to health, welfare, social security systems, and so on. We also noted attempts to penetrate our systems through very specific emails planting viruses, and most of those were information-gathering attempts.

We are paying enormous attention, particularly to defence, foreign affairs, and the interior ministries, and also spending a lot of resources to build the necessary walls. I suspect that if those attempts were really successful, we would see some WikiLeaks type of situation with immediate information warfare involved. I think that we have been rather successful. From that point of view, it is sometimes very difficult to say, especially in a court of law, that we have full evidence that this originated in that city. But the patterns we are analyzing have shown where the real origin is.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'll now go to Mr. Sidhu, please.

Mr. Jati Sidhu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for coming to Canada to meet the rest of the committee, because I wasn't able to go to Latvia.

As you know, Canada firmly believes in Latvia's potential, because you were the first one to sign the CETA and you understand the importance of modern trade. The former secretary of state, John Kerry, made a compelling case why Latvia is such an excellent destination for foreign investment. We lately came up with $350 million towards the deployment of the Canadian battle group into Latvia. Do you think all these assurances will encourage the rest of the world to invest in Latvia in the future?

Mr. Edgars Rinkevics: Thank you very much for asking this question.

Actually, one message I want to leave not only with you but also with the broader public, especially with the business community here in Canada and also all over the world, is that thanks to those decisions taken in Warsaw, thanks to Canada, thanks to other NATO allies, we are probably currently the safest place to invest because that investment is well protected. That was exactly the message I also heard from your international trade minister, Mr. Champagne, when he was in Riga, and I am meeting him later. From that point of view I think it is also very important.

By the way, that is also part of some kind of smear campaign that you sometimes read in the press, some not so serious analysis that World War III is going to start in the Baltics, that there is imminent potential for Latvia or Estonia being the next Ukraine or Crimea, and so on. Sorry for using that language but I will dismiss it in one word, which is “rubbish”. We have to counter those kinds of claims every day. If there weren't a bigger section by NATO I probably wouldn't speak with such a degree of certainty here before you or with the press.

I do believe, by the way, that one way to counter the current wave of authoritarian populist regimes is actually by joining our efforts also to promote modern free trade regimes. I am a real believer that CETA is the first modern free trade agreement the European Union has signed with anyone. I wish that we would continue, also, our very difficult but still very necessary negotiations with the United States in signing a so-called TTIP agreement. Currently, as the new administration is settling in, those talks have been suspended, but let's wait.

I believe that CETA is providing a great opportunity also to build not only, as we have through NATO, a great transatlantic security partnership, but also a great transatlantic economic partnership.

By the way, we are very thankful for the money you are spending on Canadian troops, but we are also spending some money buying your Bombardier planes for our national airline, Air Baltic. I have flown on some three or four flights already with the new Bombardier CS300 series. I would say that this is a really great plane. So trade is already showing some good results. I wish now that Canada will buy some big things from us as we buy from Canada.

We are going to discuss today how we can engage in more trade activity when it comes to IT, pharmaceuticals, and how we can fully use the CETA potential.

● (1045)

The Chair: Colleagues, that will wrap up our discussion with Minister Rinkevics.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the minister for, first of all, coming to the committee, and most importantly, coming to Canada to engage with our ministers on very important matters among ourselves, Latvia, and the whole region.

Again, Minister, thank you. I hope we've sharpened you up just a little bit because the press has been following what you were saying today so they'll be much harder on you than I think my colleagues were, but I can guarantee you we've appreciated your time and we enjoyed it and you are welcome to come before our committee any time. Thank you very much.

Mr. Edgars Rinkevics: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I must admit, you have been much nicer than my own committee back home. Thank you for that.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Edgars Rinkevics: Thank you.

The Chair: Colleagues, we'll adjourn this meeting to the call of the chair.