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# Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security

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Chair: Mr. Ron McKinnon





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• (1100)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Ron McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting 121 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. I remind participants of the following points. Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. All comments should be addressed through the chair. Members, please raise your hand if you wish to speak, whether participating in person or on Zoom. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best as we can.

We're undertaking today the study on Russian interference and disinformation campaigns in Canada. I apologize to the committee, because the notice went out this morning. While it is valid according to the rules, it's not best practice. It had been my intention to send it out on Friday, but due to an error on my part it didn't happen, so I apologize.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on September 19, 2024, the committee is starting its study of Russian interference and disinformation campaigns in Canada.

I now welcome our witnesses for the first hour. From the Russian Canadian Democratic Alliance we have Yuriy Novodvorskiy, founder and administrator, and Guillaume Sirois, counsel. From the Ukrainian Canadian Congress we have Alexandra Chyczij, president.

I now invite Mr. Novodvorskiy and Mr. Sirois to make an opening statement of up to five minutes. Please go ahead.

**Mr. Yuriy Novodvorskiy (Founder and Administrator, Russian Canadian Democratic Alliance):** Thank you for your invitation and for addressing the national security threat posed by Russian propaganda and cognitive warfare.

My name is Yuri Novodvorskiy. I am the director of the Russian Canadian Democratic Alliance. I am accompanied by our counsel, Guillaume Sirois.

The RCDA is a volunteer-led, non-profit organization created in the wake of Russia's criminal invasion of Ukraine. Its core mission is to support the development of the Russian-Canadian community around the ideals of democracy, human rights, civil liberties and the rule of law. Opposing the invasion of Ukraine and Putin's regime is a core focus of our organization, along with supporting political prisoners in Russia.

I have three key points that I would like to focus on today.

First, Russia is actively engaged in cognitive warfare against Canada and its allies.

Second, this cognitive warfare is significantly impacting the stability of civil society and institutions in Canada.

Third, this threat has not been taken seriously for too long, and now we are facing the compounded effects of years of Russian propaganda.

I will conclude my presentation with a series of immediate calls to action for your consideration.

Russia has been conducting propaganda campaigns in Canada that are aimed at sowing social division and eroding trust in our institutions, including the media, for years. The goal of these campaigns is to create a divided and distrustful society that is easier for Russia to manipulate and control. Russia seeks to influence how Canadians think and vote, and ultimately to shape Canada's policies to advance its own strategic interests. These include re-establishing a world order aligned with its authoritarian values, dismantling NATO, lifting sanctions and ending Canada's support for Ukraine. These efforts are targeting the Russian-Canadian community and the greater Canadian population, as evidenced by the Tenet Media operation.

Although Canada has shown more resilience to Russian propaganda than our American neighbours, we are already starting to witness its effects. There is declining support for the war in Ukraine, increasing radicalization and social divisions, and eroding trust in our democratic institutions. These have been strategic objectives for Russia since at least the annexation of Crimea in 2014. These narratives, including the Tenet Media operation and during the last two general elections, have directly targeted the Prime Minister, specifically because of his support for Ukraine and his condemnation of Russia's human rights abuses.

Furthermore, these narratives are notably echoed by certain media outlets and at least one political party in Canada, which received close to a million votes in 2021 and is poised to gain even more in the next election. Even if these fringe elements do not succeed, larger parties may be tempted to court their voters by adopting a less robust stance in support of Ukraine, for instance. As we have seen in the neighbouring United States, it is not a question of whether these narratives become part of the mainstream national discourse, but when. By then, it may be too late.

The Canadian videos from Tenet Media have made headlines, but they represent only the tip of the iceberg of Russian propaganda in Canada. Russia has been waging its cognitive warfare in Canada for close to a decade. A foreign nation should not be permitted to shape Canadians' thoughts and policies, especially when this has been an ongoing issue for so long.

The Tenet Media videos about Canada have been viewed over a half million times. If a foreign power chartered a cargo plane to drop 500,000 propaganda leaflets over Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal, criticizing Canadian policies and the Prime Minister and undermining our society and institutions, what would have been the reaction? The Tenet Media operation is much worse than that.

Our institutions are not equipped to respond to or even detect these threats from Russia. We have learned of the Tenet Media operation from a United States indictment, and our government does not want to tell us anything more than what is already public. Without our American allies, this propaganda campaign might never have been detected. Except for public condemnations, our government has seemingly done nothing in retaliation. Vladimir Putin is not deterred by public statements.

As a result, the RCDA has the following calls to action for your consideration.

First, we must address this issue as the national threat it poses. This is not mere disinformation or propaganda. It is cognitive warfare targeting all Canadians, particularly the Russian-Canadian community.

Second, there should be one agency or institution that is clearly responsible and accountable for defending and responding to this threat, coordinating with the other actors involved, such as other democratic nations, CSIS, CSE, Global Affairs Canada, political parties and civil society.

Third, we need to ask the foreign interference commission to examine and assess the events related to Tenet Media. The RCDA already made that request weeks ago, but we are still waiting for a response and no witnesses related to the Tenet Media events are slated to testify before the commission.

Finally, social media platforms provide the infrastructure that has made much of this cognitive warfare possible. As such, they should be held to a higher standard of reporting and managing foreign interference.

In conclusion, we must recognize the severity of this threat and take immediate action to counteract Russia's cognitive warfare strategies. Our national security, societal cohesion and democratic values depend on it.

Thank you.

• (1105)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I now invite Ms. Chyczij to give an opening statement of up to five minutes.

Please go ahead.

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij (President, Ukrainian Canadian Congress):** Thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members, for the opportunity to speak to you this morning.

The Ukrainian-Canadian community has been the target of Soviet and now Russian disinformation for many decades. What many Canadians have difficulty understanding is that this is not a case of homeland against diaspora. Our Ukrainian government is not targeting us. It's a foreign government, the Russian government, that has made us the object of its disinformation.

As my friends have alluded to, CSIS has identified Russia as a foreign actor and player in disinformation. To quote from their report, "Russia also continues to attempt to discredit Canada's Ukrainian community, falsely claiming that it is composed of neo-fascists who control Canada's foreign policy." There's more that they say, but I'm sure you've read the report.

When our intelligence service comes to these conclusions, why is Canada still a safe haven for Russian operatives? One of the reasons is that some Canadian politicians, foreign policy advisers and staff in Global Affairs hold a naive view of Russia and the threat it poses to Canada and our democratic institutions.

For over a decade, our community advocated for the ban on RT, Russian television. That didn't happen until a full year after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. RT was finally sanctioned by Canada—along with other Russian institutions, such as Putin's think tank, the Valdai club—but no action has been taken by the government with regard to those in Canada who collaborate with these institutions. Many Canadian contributors to RT are allowed to operate with impunity. Indeed, some of them are invited to appear before Canadian parliamentary committees. Others are given grants from Canadian taxpayer money to produce Russian propaganda films.

We also know that Canada is a preferred destination for Russian sleeper agents. There doesn't appear to be any detection or prevention of foreign espionage in Canada. They come here because we make it easy for them to establish their identities, all the while carrying on their spycraft. They then move to other allied countries, posing as citizens of a reliable allied partner: They're now Canadians.

You know the story of the Vavilov family and of course Mikhail Mikushin, who was recently exchanged in the Evan Gershkovich exchange. He was a colonel in Russian military intelligence, a valued asset of Putin's.

Russia co-opts authoritative, influential and persuasive individuals, such as academics, journalists and social media influencers, whom Stalin called "useful idiots", to repeat and amplify its narratives. When these narratives are word for word what the Russian embassy and Putin are saying, why does no one ask why?

We know that we're here to discuss the RT-run Tenet or Doppelgänger operation, involving a Canadian company owned by two Canadians using Canadian social influencers. They produce Canadian-themed videos on hot-button divisive issues. Once they have the ear of a frightened and disaffected audience, they blame the economy and everything else that is wrong in the world on Canadian support for Ukraine—who are all Nazis, by the way. The government has failed to do anything. This creates a culture of impunity that normalizes this behaviour of referring to Ukrainians as Nazis. This has also posed a threat to our community, unfortunately. We surveyed our community and saw a substantial increase in the number of anti-Ukrainian hate-motivated incidents. We have asked two successive ministers of public safety to speak out and condemn this behaviour, but they remain silent.

We know that for decades the Soviet Union engaged in “active measures”, or operations to discredit our post World War II diaspora, who were very critical of the Soviet regime. We posed a threat to them. One of these operations, unfortunately, was the Deschênes commission. Evidence in Operation Payback shows a campaign to inflame the Canadian public by falsely claiming that the infamous Dr. Mengele was hiding in Canada. This campaign was started by a Canadian representative of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, Sol Littman, who deliberately planted false stories. Once the Canadian public was sufficiently inflamed, the Mulroney government convened a commission of inquiry that cleared all but 29 individuals.

• (1110)

However, today we hear repeated calls for the disclosure of the names of these people, over 800 of them, who have several generations of descendants.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry. Could I get you to wrap up?

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** Yes.

We would also like to speak to the Russian propaganda film, *Russians at War*, which was produced by a former producer of Russian television. It is an example of the kind of naïveté that we have in Canada, which not only condones but also finances the white-washing of genocide.

I look forward to your questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We go now to Mr. Bezan for six minutes.

**Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake—Eastman, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here and for participating in this important study.

I just want to start off by drilling down a little on the Canada Media Fund. A sum of \$340,000 of taxpayer money went to Anastasia Trofimova. As you mentioned, she was a former employee of RT, Russia Today.

Do you believe that the Government of Canada should recoup those funds for funding Russian misinformation?

• (1115)

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** Absolutely, I think it's.... I'm sorry. I don't know if that was directed to me.

**Mr. James Bezan:** It was for both witnesses. You can start.

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** I'll start, then.

Absolutely, I think it's scandalous that Canadian taxpayer money funded this production, and we call for a full investigation as to what she said on her application. Did she disclose that she worked for RT? Of course, RT has scrubbed any reference to her from its website. They understand that it's a liability now. However, we need to understand whether the Canadian funding agencies knew that she was a former employee—she produced 11 films for them—and whether they knew that she was entering sovereign Ukrainian territory with an invading army that is committing war crimes.

These are questions that need to be asked, and I think the funding should be recouped, because I am sure that the Kremlin is just giggling at how clever it was in tricking Canadians.

**Mr. James Bezan:** Would any of the other witnesses like to comment on that propaganda film?

**Mr. Yuriy Novodvorskiy:** Thank you.

The RCDA opposes any film that minimizes or that hides the atrocities committed by the Russian government or the Russian army in its invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, we believe that there is a place for honest journalism and for documentary films from the conflict.

The RCDA doesn't have information. We have not seen this film, but if the investigation shows that this film was organized under false pretenses on its application and that it was made with the knowledge and approval of the Russian government, then we do support further action.

**Mr. James Bezan:** Wouldn't we just assume, though, if there's a journalist or, in this case, a director embedded with the Russian troops, that they're there with the blessing of the Kremlin?

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** I can speak to that.

Absolutely. It is inconceivable that Russian military intelligence did not know that this woman spent seven months embedded in occupied territory.

**Mr. James Bezan:** What's the role of the Canadian government, then? Other than getting back our taxpayer dollars, what role does it have in seeing whether she actually filmed, and maybe has footage of, war crimes being committed, which of course are all glossed over in the propaganda film? What international laws did she break, essentially, that the government has not yet taken any action on?

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** We know she violated Ukrainian law by entering into occupied territory without the permission of Ukrainian authorities. There is the possibility of violation of sanctions, and the RCMP would be well served to investigate the circumstances around her filming of this documentary. Also, of course, the RCMP is collecting evidence of war crimes and should seize her footage.

She claims she saw no evidence of war crimes, but in seven months we know that in every single territory that is liberated from Russian occupation, we find evidence of war crimes. We know that they are torturing and executing Ukrainian prisoners of war, so it's inconceivable that in the seven months she saw nothing.

**Mr. James Bezan:** You said that you've had a couple of meetings with the former and current Minister of Public Safety about Russian disinformation, and you are not satisfied with the response that you've received to date from either. I'm assuming it was Minister Blair and his predecessor.

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** No, I should clarify. It was with Minister Mendicino.

**Mr. James Bezan:** Okay.

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** He did not take up our request to make a public statement, and we have not been able to secure a meeting with Minister Leblanc.

**Mr. James Bezan:** Okay. He won't even meet with you on this important issue and how we deal with disinformation. It's another cover-up in the works here.

You mentioned other activities of the Russian Federation, going back to Soviet times. Outside of social media, which we know they've really penetrated, and RT of course, and other propaganda tools that they've used, do you believe that any of our mainstream media are being compromised by either the Soviets or the Kremlin today?

• (1120)

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** If you look at the reporting, it is very often word for word what is coming out of the Kremlin and out of the Russian embassy.

I'll say to you, Mr. Bezan, if it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it's not a chicken.

**Mr. James Bezan:** In closing, are you aware of any evidence of any journalists today, or academics, who are being compromised because of ties back to the Kremlin?

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** We know that at the University of Ottawa there is a regular contributor to Russian television, and we know that at Carleton University there is a prominent member of the Valdai club, which is Putin's think tank.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Bezan.

We go now to Ms. O'Connell.

Ms. O'Connell, please go ahead. You have six minutes.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell (Pickering—Uxbridge, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair.

I'm glad to see my Conservative colleagues take this study so seriously, and I sincerely hope that there isn't an attempt to shut it down or limit it, as our first witnesses have already highlighted pretty significant areas of concern. I think it's imperative that this committee do this work. I'd be quite disappointed after that line of questioning to see any sort of limitations of looking into this study coming from Conservatives, or any attempts to not continue with this study when this is our first day. I guess we'll see. I guess we'll see if there's action behind the words we just heard.

Moving to my questions, I found—and this is going to be directed at both organizations—that as a local MP I could honestly feel a shift and a difference in the narrative around the public perception of the invasion of Ukraine. For example, I remember in the early days attending vigils in my community in Uxbridge, which has a large Ukrainian population, and how quickly on social media that support for Ukraine started to erode. Even in our first debates on the Canada-Ukraine Free Trade Agreement, it was pretty uneventful. There seemed to be all-party support. Then you started to see things shift.

A large part of that was changes in the narrative online, on social media accounts. When this came forward with regard to influencers being potentially and allegedly paid by Russia to look like and mimic Canadian organizations or Canadian social media pages, you started to put two and two together. I could very clearly see that shift, as just a local MP, with Ukrainians in my riding as one example, but overall I was hearing people start to defend Russia, or seeing Russian flags on the Hill and protests against anything really....

My first question is—and I'd like both of your perspectives on this—do you believe that for those with influencer accounts that were being funded, or allegedly being funded, by Russia, they really didn't know who was paying, or is there a world in which people wouldn't know that Russia is sending propaganda?

On the comment about if it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, if you're repeating Russian propaganda and then claim you had no idea you were being paid by, or repeating, Russian propaganda.... Have you seen other examples of this claim, where they had no idea who was footing the bill? Maybe I'll start here, if you don't mind.

**Mr. Yuriy Novodvorskiy:** Even though, right now, these are still allegations, even a cursory search would show that these perspectives are coming from the Russian government. Many times, if not word for word, they're idea for idea. The idea is coming from the Kremlin and propagated in Russian government propaganda channels.

To address something said earlier, I agree with Ms. Chyczij. RC-DA is dissatisfied with the Canadian government's response to the disinformation that we have seen permeating Canadian social media, but also in regard to enforcement of the measures that have been enacted, including sanctions.

We have questions as to how these sanctions are enforced, why violations of sanctions seem to be.... These investigations seem to be coming from the United States, not from within Canada.

Even if a lot of the disinformation seems to be happening in the United States, due to the interconnectedness of the Canadian-American ecosystems, narratives that originate there permeate, eventually ending up in Canada and affecting the national discourse here.

• (1125)

**Mr. Guillaume Sirois (Counsel, Russian Canadian Democratic Alliance):** To your prior comments about the changing narrative among your constituents, this is actually something that's increasingly backed by data.

There is some interesting analysis, including from Marcus Kolga, showing there are more and more Canadians exposed to the Kremlin narrative online. These narratives are having an impact on how Canadians think about the Ukraine war, for instance. This is not only a Ukraine war issue. It's also an issue that targets broader issues in Canadian politics, such as the housing crisis, inflation and even Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. That has been something the Kremlin has done in Canada for close to a decade, as my friend alluded to in his testimony—

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell:** I'm sorry. I don't mean to cut you off, but I am limited on time.

Do you think it's also problematic when politicians are being paid to fly around the world by institutions like the Danube Institute? It has been known to promote anti-Ukraine and, more so, Kremlin propaganda. Do you think it's problematic if Canadian politicians are also being paid by institutes that share that?

I'll start here, since I know I'm limited on time.

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** Absolutely, because there is the possibility and the appearance of bias. All trips paid by other entities should be banned for Canadian politicians.

I beg to differ with my friend. I believe there was a Canadian social media influencer who was working for Tenet, Lauren Southern. She did produce videos on immigration crime, anti-white sentiment, anti-LGBTQ+ paranoia, residential schools, unmarked graves, inflation and the housing crisis. She said that Canada is on the brink of chaos and that Canada is becoming a communist hell-hole under Justin Trudeau.

These are not just American-directed narratives. Canada was directly targeted.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. O'Connell.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fortin, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being with us today.

As the testimony shows, the issue of interference, including Russian interference, is an important and troubling one.

I don't know if you are aware of other states that engage in interference in Canada. In your opinion, is there a significant difference between the types of interference and is there a way of distinguishing them?

In fact, in this case, we know that it is coming from Russia. Is there a difference between Russian interference and, for example, Chinese or Indian interference, or interference by other states? In your opinion, is there anything specific that would allow us to recognize the types of interference?

Mr. Novodvorskiy, do you have any comments on that?

**Mr. Guillaume Sirois:** I can provide some information.

Indeed, we are seeing a convergence of interests among the various states in an attempt to interfere in our democratic institutions. Every authoritarian foreign state has its own interests. There are certainly interests that are coming together to overturn the world order and create conditions that would be more tolerant of authoritarian actions such as those undertaken by Russia in Ukraine.

• (1130)

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** Do you think there is anything specific about Russian interference or is it simply the same problem, which should be fought in the same way, regardless of where the interference comes from?

[*English*]

**Mr. Yuriy Novodvorskiy:** The Russian government has devoted considerable resources to its propaganda via social media, more so than India and some other countries. I can't speak to potential Chinese efforts at foreign interference.

These methods are more sophisticated and come in through many different channels, different social media platforms, Russia Today, TV channels and other media in an attempt to essentially surround people with the same false narratives.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** How could Canada better protect itself from these tactics?

[*English*]

**Mr. Yuriy Novodvorskiy:** Here is one of the things I would bring up. One of the calls we mentioned is that ideally there should be one agency or institution clearly responsible and accountable for defending against these threats. The last I looked, it seemed like combatting disinformation was a responsibility shared among many different agencies, which potentially means that none of them are directly focused on this.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** Ms. Chyczij, I apologize for pronouncing your name so horribly. Forgive me.

I think you wanted to comment on this.

[*English*]

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** I think that Canada would be well served to follow the example of Finland, Norway and Denmark. They begin to teach critical thinking and disinformation detection in kindergarten. Now Finland tops the European media literacy index, which measures a nation's resilience to disinformation.

There was a program I was watching this morning on PBS, where a class of grade 6 students was being interviewed. Their ability to detect social media disinformation was truly astounding and would put all Canadians to shame. I believe that if we started this kind of teaching in our schools, we would be a better country for it.

[Translation]

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** What you are proposing is interesting, but what would we say to children in a primary school? Would we talk to them about foreign interference? I have a hard time seeing how this could be applied in a concrete way.

[English]

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczj:** They don't tell them that Santa Claus doesn't exist. They use age-appropriate mechanisms to teach them fact from fiction. They teach them to think critically, to question and not to accept.

There was an American student in this school who said, "In America, whenever I had doubts about something, my teachers told me no, that if it's reported in the newspapers, it must be true." It's that ability not to accept everything at face value.

I am certain that Finland, Norway and Denmark would share these programs with us. That's something that this committee could recommend.

[Translation]

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** How long has this program been in existence in Finland?

[English]

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczj:** I don't know for sure, but certainly we have grade 6 students already, so it's been at least six years. Of course, Finland and countries neighbouring Russia are very much aware of disinformation. They share a border with Russia. They're going to build a wall between Finland and Russia. These countries have very much been the victims or the targets of attempts to sow disinformation.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Fortin.

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** Thank you.

[English]

**The Chair:** We go now to Mr. MacGregor for six minutes, please.

**Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of our witnesses for being here today. It's greatly appreciated.

Look, no one around this table is a stranger to misinformation and disinformation. I wish I could show you what comes into my email inbox on a daily basis. Honestly, I think that if you look at a number of conspiracy theories...there are multiple Venn diagrams that could be constructed out of what we're talking about here today.

From my perspective, this is partially a frustrating thing. This committee and the topic of foreign interference have been pretty top of mind for the last couple of years. In fact, this committee conducted a study in 2022. The report was tabled in the House of Commons in March 2023. It was looking at Canada's security posture vis-à-vis Russia. We were looking at all kinds of areas of Russian involvement in cybersecurity espionage and in misinformation and

disinformation campaigns, and we made a series of recommendations in that report. That's about a year and a half ago now.

Maybe I'll turn to the Russian Canadian Democratic Alliance with this question, because in your opening statement you wanted us to address this as a "national security threat". You wanted to see one institution responsible. We made a recommendation to the government about examining the full extent of Russian disinformation targeting Canada: the actors, the methods, the messages and the platforms involved.

In response, the government said that in budget 2022 they had committed to providing \$13.4 million over five years to renew and expand the G7 rapid response mechanism. I'm just wondering if you can comment on that, because if we've made a recommendation and they've provided a response, I'd like to have your feedback on how well that's working, so that maybe we can update our recommendation in this report.

• (1135)

**Mr. Yuriy Novodvorskiy:** I'll start by saying that whatever has been done, I think there could be.... There should be increased transparency as to the effectiveness, because from the latest news that we've heard, it is not clear to us what actions the government has taken beyond public statements.

I'll turn to Guillaume.

**Mr. Guillaume Sirois:** I agree with my friend.

As to the narrow point of RRM Canada, they are active and they are trying to identify these threats, but Lauren Chen, who helped set up Tenet Media, was actually very active during the 2021 general election in amplifying content related to the People's Party of Canada and discrediting the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party.

She hosted a debate with Maxime Bernier and one PPC candidate, which received 16,000 views, right on September 10 of that election year. That wasn't detected by RRM Canada, and the Tenet Media operation was not detected by RRM Canada, so even though they are trying, for some reason they are not able to detect these threats, from what we've seen.

**Mr. Alistair MacGregor:** Thank you for that.

We also looked a lot at the roles that Internet service providers play in this, and at the platforms themselves. You can look at Twitter, now known as X. If I were to put up a tweet out there about Ukraine, the replies would be instantaneous.

I guess maybe I'll turn this question to you on just anything you would.... Because we have tackled this issue, we've made our recommendations in the past. It seems that Internet service providers and major social media platforms continue to operate in a way that allows this misinformation and disinformation to spread. It appears to much of the public that nothing has really changed in the last couple of years. Is there anything you can add that our committee should really be pushing on this front?



**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** Yes. I agree completely. I think we need to complete the ban on RT, and that is to block them on Internet channels, on Internet providers. Other countries have done this, and some social media platforms have. Meta/Facebook has. TikTok has. If we block them on the Internet servers because there is.... You don't need cable television to see Russia TV in Canada today, and that's the problem.

Another solution is to block the source of some of this information. Canada is the only country that has not expelled a single Russian so-called diplomat since the full-scale invasion. The EU and other NATO countries have kicked out 600 of them. We have yet to throw out one. Also, we have a huge disproportionality in diplomatic representation. We have 69 Russian diplomats registered in Canada, but we have only 17 in Moscow. Where's the proportionality here?

**Mr. Alistair MacGregor:** I'll just end my first round on this. I think everyone around this table is fairly well aware of how important this subject is and why we're looking into it. However, just to get it on the record for Canadians watching this, how is that serving Russia's strategic interests if the Canadian public is being flooded with misinformation and disinformation?

• (1140)

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** We know they're struggling on the battlefield. The battle for Kyiv that was supposed to last for three days is now in its third year. The Russians are looking to other means, and that is to undermine support for Ukraine around the world. We know the Europeans have uncovered politicians who were paid directly by the Russians. We know the Europeans have a whole commission that has been established to look for disinformation and identify and combat it. I believe that the EU commissioner responsible for this is actually in Canada, meeting with our foreign interference commission.

There needs to be greater co-operation among allied countries and a pooling of resources, because it's hard to do it alone, but if you're working with like-minded partners, you can amplify the results of your work.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. MacGregor.

We're starting our second round, and we'll go with Mr. Lloyd, please, for five minutes.

**Mr. Dane Lloyd (Sturgeon River—Parkland, CPC):** Thank you, and thank you to the witnesses for being here today. This has been very interesting. I appreciated Ms. Alexandra Chyczij's reference to Finland. Recently, with my other hat—being in the Canadian military—I had the pleasure of meeting with a colonel from Finland and talking about the military and cyber-preparedness that that country has as opposed to our country. I was very impressed by that.

However, getting back to this, actually at this committee back in June 2022, we had former minister Bill Blair at committee. He was the minister of emergency preparedness at the time, but during the 2021 election he was the minister for public safety. At that time, I was very concerned, and I remain concerned about foreign interference in our elections. I asked him point blank, as the record shows, "Has your government identified disinformation in the 2021 federal election as being from foreign sources?"

His words were, "I can advise you—I checked in anticipation of your question—that I have not received any information that Russia was involved in any effort at foreign interference in the last federal election."

Now, I said:

I understand that, but if Russia sees that one country can influence our elections, they might be emboldened to try to do that themselves.

Has your government identified any foreign interference in the 2021 federal election?

He replied that his agencies were very alert and that they had not identified any foreign interference.

We now know that not to be the case. There was foreign interference in our election. Was it surprising to you that back as early as 2022, we had ministers in this government who said there was no foreign interference happening in our country? Is that surprising to you at all?

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** I think there's a definitional question that we need to establish. What does foreign interference mean?

I know that at the foreign interference inquiry we are struggling to convey that interference doesn't mean busing voters to a nomination meeting. That's the most obvious form of interference. It also includes the kind of disinformation that has been prevalent in Canada for 60 or 70 years, and so I think it's understanding terminology that is important here.

**Mr. Dane Lloyd:** I noted in your testimony that you were talking about barriers within the government to taking effective action on foreign interference, including Russian interference. You were talking about people at Global Affairs who have a naive view. Could you elaborate on what their naive view is? What is the issue there?

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** Well, I don't want to reveal my age, but I remember going to school in the eighties. The academics who taught history, whether it was Russian, eastern European or whatever, were all schooled in the Soviet school of academia. They all spent their summers in Moscow being wined and dined by the KGB, and they would come back and repeat, really, Soviet lines of thinking.

There is concern in the academic world that Slavic and eastern European studies have been colonized by the Russians, so we need to start with our educational institutions, start decolonizing them and focusing not on the Russian imperialist view of the world but on the other countries neighbouring Russia, namely Ukraine.

We have politicians, staff and advisers at Global Affairs who take a very benign view of Russia. When the full-scale invasion started, many of them were sitting there and saying, "Oh my God, the lion ate my face. What happened here?"

It's a question of restaffing with individuals who understand what Russia is today. The Helsinki Commission is recommending to the U.S. government and to other governments that they need a reset, and I'm not talking about the Obama reset. We need a complete rethinking of our approach to Russia and to identify it as a global security threat.

• (1145)

**Mr. Dane Lloyd:** Thank you for that. I can remember, in the weeks preceding Russia's second invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when Conservatives were calling for expedited shipments of essential military equipment for Ukraine...that Conservatives were accused of being warmongers. Do you think that, in trying to assist and prepare Ukraine in anticipation of an imminent invasion, being called "warmongers" is an example of how Russia has been able to infiltrate the thinking and debates in this country? Is that an example?

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** It's not just in this country. I mean, Canada works with its allies. What President Zelenskyy experienced in Washington, and is experiencing, is a slowdown in the delivery of weapons. The current thinking is that the Americans and the allies are giving Ukraine enough not to lose, but certainly not enough to win. We are hopeful that, in the remaining days of the Biden administration, this will be rectified.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We go now to Ms. Zahid. Ms. Zahid, go ahead for five minutes.

**Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for appearing before the committee today.

My first question is for Alexandra. To follow up further on my colleague MP O'Connell's question about the Danube Institute and its ties to the Kremlin and Russian propaganda, we know that four Conservative MPs—Stephen Ellis, Philip Lawrence, Rosemarie Falk and Shannon Stubbs—accepted a lavish sponsored trip, funded by the Danube Institute and Canadians for Affordable Energy, that included a \$6,000 dinner bill, with \$600 bottles of champagne. Should Canadians be concerned about trips like this and potential ties to Russian propaganda?

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** I think any ties to any... There are other conflicts in the world. There are other governments that attempt to wine and dine Canadian politicians, but it's not just restricted to politicians. We have the Valdai club. There are at least four or five tenured academics in our Canadian universities who regularly travel to Moscow at the invitation of Putin, are wine and dined by him and continue to teach in our universities.

**Mrs. Salma Zahid:** Thank you.

My next question is, do you think that Russia's disinformation, misinformation and influence campaign played a role in the Conservative Party's decision to vote against implementing Canada's free trade agreement with Ukraine, despite the request from President Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian government for the Canadian Parliament to do that?

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** I think it was unfortunate that Canada could not demonstrate all-party support for the free trade agree-

ment, but as to the influence, I'll ask Mr. Bezan to answer that question.

**Mr. James Bezan:** Mr. Chair, to suggest Russian interference, when the Russians call me a Nazi and they continually—

**The Chair:** Excuse me.

**Mr. James Bezan:** —dish me on their national television... I think it's very rich to have that coming from the member.

**The Chair:** Sir, you're not recognized on a point of order.

**Mrs. Salma Zahid:** It's my time, so I have a point of order.

Would you like to comment on that?

**Mr. Yuriy Novodvorskiy:** Yes, I agree that, for any organization that has ties to the Russian government in any capacity, those ties should be critically analyzed before government officials accept invitations from institutions like that.

**Mrs. Salma Zahid:** Thank you.

My next question is, what role do western social media platforms play in amplifying Russian-backed misinformation campaigns, and how are these platforms being used to create the divisions within these societies?

• (1150)

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** Well, we heard about Tenet. That is, if you read the indictment and, of course, look at the platforms of these influencers, you will see exactly what they did. I referred to the themes and the narratives that they are promoting.

However, as I said, Facebook has now banned RT. That's not enough. I think there need to be better filters on social media to look at bots, bot farms. You said, "You post anything on Ukraine and you're flooded by, you know, artificial intelligence." It is a phenomenon that we as a country have to deal with and address, because it's not just the "Ukraine question": It's pervasive throughout all aspects of our society and political arena.

**Mrs. Salma Zahid:** Going further into RT, how does Russia use RT and other state-run media to advance its agendas, both domestically and internationally?

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** We know they're a tool of the Russian government. They work closely with the FSB. They are one and the same in effect, and they do exactly what we have seen; they buy politicians in the EU, and they buy social media influencers. They're way ahead of us in terms of the mechanisms that they use, and we are, in many ways, sitting ducks here, because we have been very comfortable in Canada for a very long time.

We bought into the peace dividend after the Cold War, and now we have to reframe our thinking and build our defences to be more resilient. As I said, that starts in school with our youth, and it will be a generation or two before they are educated, but we have to start that form of education with politicians. We have to clean out the vectors of this disinformation, starting with the Russian embassy, and prevent this garbage from coming into Canada.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fortin, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Chyczij, I think I'll call you by your first name, as you suggested earlier. Alexandra, I understand that Finland has set up an elementary school education program. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I understand that this has also been done in Norway and Denmark. You told me that the program has been in place for about six years.

Has there been an assessment of the impact or effectiveness of these measures on disinformation in countries that have decided to proceed in this way?

[*English*]

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** Yes, there is something called the European media literacy index, which measures a country's resilience to disinformation. It measures European countries, and those three countries ranked numbers one, two and three in terms of their ability to resist disinformation.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** Do you have a copy of that report? If not, can you get one and send it to the committee?

[*English*]

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** I'm sorry. You said a copy of...?

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** I am referring to the report you mentioned that refers to studies done in Europe on the impact of disinformation.

[*English*]

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** Yes, we can send you what we have, and I certainly believe that Finland's ambassador to Canada might be prepared to share.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** I'm sorry. I don't want to rush you, but I only have a few seconds left.

Do you also have information on Finland's elementary school curriculum? Do you have a copy of that?

[*English*]

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** I'm sorry—the volume....

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** Do you have a copy of the Finnish elementary school curriculum you spoke of?

[*English*]

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** No, we don't have the program or the curriculum, but it is something that I recommend that this committee do a study on, and we will certainly make inquiries with the ambassador of Finland to Canada.

• (1155)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** I think I'm out of time.

**The Chair:** You have 15 seconds.

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** Thank you, madam, for coming here today. What you are telling us is important, and I would like the committee to invite you to come back whenever you are next available. If you have any other information on the issue, please send it to us, because we have to react.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Fortin.

[*English*]

We go now to Mr. MacGregor for two and a half minutes.

**Mr. Alistair MacGregor:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

At this committee we have often had the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service before us as witnesses to update the committee on their activities. Of course, a lot of what they do by its very nature goes unreported. They have to operate in a very clandestine world. They have to be very mindful that their sources could be compromised and their lives even put in danger if they reveal too much information.

However, in the spring session, there was a rare moment of unity when the entire House of Commons came together in very short order to pass Bill C-70, which among other things pretty much brought an analog law up to date in a digital world. It has allowed CSIS to be a bit more proactive in how it shares information with other entities. Certainly I've had meetings with CSIS officials since that act received royal assent. The service is still coming to terms with how it's going to implement some measures, but it certainly is being a bit more proactive.

When it comes to the work that our security and intelligence agencies are doing—and this includes the officials at Public Safety Canada—and you compare it to some of the European examples, are there any wishes that you have for how maybe those agencies could be a little more proactive with the Canadian public in a non-political way in underlining the gravity of the threat and the measures that need to be taken to counteract it? Could they maybe be a bit more proactive when we actually have some success in stopping some of these campaigns?

Maybe I'll start with you, and we can ask everyone to comment on it quickly.

**Mr. Yuriy Novodvorskiy:** Thank you, Mr. MacGregor.

I would say that it's not surprising that there's limited transparency from security agencies, because that's the nature of the work. However, as a member of the public, without greater transparency, it's very hard to understand what's being done behind the scenes versus not being done at all.

We've seen that in the course of the current public inquiry into foreign interference, where it seems like sometimes the Canadian government might just not be aware of the foreign interference campaigns, and we later find out the allegations. It seems, at least to the public, that the Canadian government was not working on these cases at all.

**Ms. Alexandra Chyczij:** To me, it is inconceivable that a colonel in Russia's military intelligence, Mikhail Mikushin, could have spent a decade in Canada, earning two degrees, one of which was at Carleton University, where the Valdai club member holds tenure. It is inconceivable that Canada's intelligence services did not identify him for over a decade. It was the Norwegians who had to do it for us.

Similarly, the Vavilovs were here for over a decade. They moved on to the United States. I mean, this is how they work. They become nice Canadians—we're all nice people—and then they go on as trusted allies and continue their work. They were exposed by the Americans.

I don't understand it. What are our security services doing?

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I have to draw the line there. That brings an end to this panel.

I would like to thank all of our witnesses for being here today. Thank you for all of your input.

Go ahead.

**Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.):** I don't have a question around it.

The witness, Alexandra, has mentioned this Valdai club a couple of times. I'm just wondering if she could send the committee information on that, so that we'd have it for our report.

**The Chair:** I would invite all witnesses, if you have further information to share with the committee, to please send it to the clerk. He will make sure it's appropriately translated and distributed to the committee.

Thank you very much.

With that, we will suspend to bring in the next panel.

• (1155) \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• (1205)

**The Chair:** I call this meeting back to order.

For this panel, as an individual, we have Marcus Kolga, senior fellow with the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, and from the Centre for International Governance Innovation, Aaron Shull, managing director and general counsel.

Both of our witnesses are appearing by video conference.

Before we start with witness statements, I want to remind people that we had asked that anyone who has recommendations and suggestions for the auto study report get them in, hopefully by today. Sooner is better, because the analysts need to work them into the report. Could we do that?

I would also ask the clerk to remind people to get witnesses for this study in by Friday, if at all possible, so that we can organize that as well.

We will go now to Mr. Kolga for a statement of up to five minutes.

Please go ahead, sir.

**Mr. Marcus Kolga (Senior Fellow, Macdonald-Laurier Institute, As an Individual):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for the privilege and opportunity to testify before you today. I want to begin by expressing my gratitude for your recognition of the serious threat that Russian information and influence operations pose to our democracy and society.

For the past 15 years I've dedicated myself to monitoring and exposing Russian information warfare and influence campaigns targeting Canada and our allies. This is not a partisan issue. Safeguarding Canada's cognitive sovereignty and the integrity of our information environment is essential to defending our democracy and maintaining social cohesion.

The September 4, 2024 indictment from the U.S. Department of Justice highlights the extent of this threat, but it is just the tip of a much larger iceberg. For over a decade, Canadians have collaborated with Russian state media outlets like RT and Sputnik news, and with platforms like Montreal's Global Research, which the U.S. state department has identified as a key pillar of the Russian disinformation ecosystem. They also enable and collaborate in Russian transnational repression, targeting Canadian activists like me, communities and even parliamentarians.

Furthermore, Canadians continue to engage with sanctioned Kremlin-aligned think tanks such as the Valdai club and the Russian International Affairs Council, which played pivotal roles in the laundering of disinformation and in efforts to affect policy and opinions in Canada through the influencers connected to them. These Kremlin-controlled entities, including RT, are not merely propaganda tools. They are designed to weaponize information in order to manipulate our understanding of the world around us, undermine our democracy and erode our social fabric. They are not bound by any physical borders, either.

An FBI affidavit released alongside the DOJ indictment of September 4 provides detailed minutes of high-level Russian meetings and strategy documents. One of Vladimir Putin's closest advisers, Sergey Kiriyyenko, was involved in these meetings, underscoring the personal importance of these operations to Putin. Among the documents in the affidavit are instructions to Russian propaganda agents to monitor western information environments for domestic conflicts, friction points and crises, and to artificially create and intensify tensions in countries allied with the United States. The documents instruct agents to create false narratives and lies. They are delivered through western influencers and state media platforms like RT to achieve this. Global Affairs Canada has now identified RT as an arm of Russia's intelligence apparatus engaging in psychological operations and disinformation, while its cyber-actors target western nations, including Canadian critical infrastructure.

The U.S. indictment exposes the significant involvement of Canadians in RT's activities. It alleges that a company established by two Canadians received \$10 million from RT to create a platform for transmitting these narratives to Canadian and American audiences. While this may seem like a large sum, it is only a fraction of the \$3 billion that Russia spends annually on information operations globally. The indictment claims that Canadians were producing content for RT as early as March 2021 and that RT funneled money to these individuals through U.K. shell companies as recently as this year. RT was added to Canada's sanctions list in July 2022, which raises serious questions about potential violations of Canadian sanctions laws. This committee should inquire as to whether the RCMP is investigating these Canadians and others collaborating with Kremlin-controlled entities.

Both the DOJ indictment and the FBI affidavit are smoking guns. They provide clear evidence of Russian operations targeting Canada, a threat that has persisted for nearly 90 years. Perhaps the most alarming case of Russian intelligence operations in Canada, and one that's been largely ignored, is of GRU Colonel Mikhail Mikushin. For over a decade, Mikushin attended Carleton University and the University of Calgary. He even wrote an article for the Canadian Naval Review journal and volunteered on a Canadian political campaign. Shockingly, it wasn't CSIS, CSE or the RCMP that uncovered Mikushin's identity as a GRU colonel recently. It was Norwegian intelligence. That's Norway, not Canada. The service Mikushin provided to Russia's intelligence operations was so important to Vladimir Putin that he was included in the August prisoner swap, returning to Russia alongside Putin's other GRU assassins and hackers.

- (1210)

It's unlikely that Mikushin was the only Russian intelligence agent working in Canada, nor are the Canadians behind Tenet Media the only Canadians collaborating with RT and other Kremlin media. If we seek to disrupt, stop and deter such operations, we must hold those behind them and their Canadian collaborators to account by investigating and exposing them, enforcing our existing laws, properly implementing new ones like the foreign influence transparency registry and BillC-70, and simply ending our willful ignorance to this threat.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Kolga.

We go now to Mr. Shull.

Mr. Shull, go ahead, please. You have five minutes.

**Mr. Aaron Shull (Managing Director and General Counsel, Centre for International Governance Innovation):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, members of the committee. It's a pleasure to be with you again.

I think I would start by just noting what we all know, that Russian disinformation campaigns pose a grave threat to our democracy, but they also follow what we refer to as a calculated disinformation kill chain. It begins by pinpointing societal vulnerabilities and then crafting deceptive content to exploit these weak points. Through amplification by bots and fake accounts, these false narratives gain undue prominence and are further spread by unwitting influencers. By manipulating the public's reaction, these actors sow discord and confusion, achieving their goal of undermining our democratic processes.

Now, in response, Canada has implemented a number of measures. One of them is the rapid response mechanism, which monitors and addresses foreign information manipulation. We also have the digital citizenship contribution program through Heritage, which supports these efforts by promoting digital literacy and raising public awareness.

Looking ahead, we must, however, do more to strengthen our defenses. First, by expanding our sanctions regime in coordination with our allies, we can impose tangible consequences on those perpetuating disinformation. Second, by utilizing the Communications Security Establishment's offensive cyber-capabilities, we can disrupt disinformation networks at their source, following the successful model that the NSA, in the United States, used in advance of the last election. Finally, we must implement a national digital resilience strategy that engages all levels of society.

This strategy would involve collaboration with provincial and territorial governments to embed digital literacy in school curricula, ensuring that students from an early age are equipped with the critical thinking skills needed to navigate the digital world. Additionally, agile adult education programs, led by educational institutions and supported by community organizations, would provide vulnerable populations and the wider public with the tools to recognize and counter disinformation.

Public awareness campaigns coordinated through community hubs like libraries and local cultural institutions would reinforce these efforts by ensuring that digital literacy becomes a national priority.

Let me pause there for a moment: Digital literacy must become a national priority. By fostering collaboration between government, civil society and educational institutions, we can create a unified and resilient front against foreign information manipulation and interference by helping Canadians critically assess the information they encounter and reducing the societal impact of disinformation.

Recent intelligence assessments, including CSIS's report entitled "Moscow's War in the Ukraine: Implications for Russian FI Activities in Canada", highlight the ongoing risk we face. While Canada differs from other Western nations in its level of exposure to Russian foreign influence activities, these operations do persist and target specific groups, including the Russian diaspora in Canada, to promote disinformation about the conflict in the Ukraine.

According to CSIS, Russia is using pro-Russian proxies and unwitting influencers to amplify narratives aimed at discrediting Canada's policies on the Ukraine and smearing the Ukrainian diaspora. These attempts are particularly concerning given the size of the Russian-speaking population in Canada and the Kremlin's focus on exploiting divisions within Canadian society. Furthermore, the CSIS report stresses that while Russian foreign influence activities have declined in some areas due to its loss of reputation in Western countries, we cannot afford to underestimate the continuing threat. Russian state-linked actors remain committed to using disinformation to undermine social cohesion and trust in Canadian institutions and to counter Canada's strong stance on Ukraine.

Our understanding of this threat continues to evolve, and there has been important recent research that highlights valuable insights. The report, entitled "Canadian Vulnerability to Russian Narratives About Ukraine", authored by my co-panellist, Marcus Kolga, who is testifying, reveals that a significant portion of Canadians, indeed, 71%, have been exposed to at least one Kremlin narrative. Many believe these narratives or are unsure of their falsehood. This highlights the urgent need for comprehensive media literacy programs and increased public awareness to counter the spread of Russian disinformation in Canada.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and I will look forward to questions.

• (1215)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll go now to our round of questions.

We'll start with Mr. Shipley, I believe, for six minutes, sir.

**Mr. Doug Shipley (Barrie—Springwater—Oro-Medonte, CPC):** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to both of our witnesses for being here today.

I'd like to start with Mr. Kolga.

Mr. Kolga, welcome back to our committee. I have a two-part question, Mr. Kolga. Can you speak about how Russia uses transna-

tional repression to discourage dissent and exert control over individuals living in Canada?

The second part to that is, how can we, as legislators, better protect diaspora communities from these forms of control and coercion?

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** Indeed, Russian transnational repression is a persistent and growing threat to our democracy. Transnational repression itself is when a foreign regime uses coercion, threats, intimidation and violence to discredit and silence regime critics, including activists, minority communities and even parliamentarians. This is happening in Canada. In the worst cases, the Kremlin has tried to poison its critics, like the Skripals in the United Kingdom, or use brutal violence, like in the case of Alexei Navalny's colleague, Leonid Volkov, in Lithuania.

In Canada, we've observed Russian government surveillance of diaspora groups, campaigns to discredit parliamentarians and efforts to incite hate towards the Ukrainian diaspora. I've personally been targeted multiple times by the Kremlin and their proxies and influencers in Canada to intimidate and discredit me. Russian state media regularly publishes articles about me. Former Canadian diplomats, academics and officials connected to Kremlin think tanks like the Valdai club, Russian companies and a trade promotion agency have tried to discredit and defame me through poison pen campaigns. I was among the first Canadians placed on the Kremlin's sanctions list.

In 2019 I received a series of emails threatening to kill me and my family, originating from Internet IP addresses in Canada and in Moscow. When I looked to help from the RCMP, they told me to report it to my local law enforcement agencies. They, in turn, told me to report it back to the RCMP, who then told me to report it to CSIS. CSIS, as we all know, is a black hole that focuses primarily on the collection of information. Luckily for me, an officer in York Region picked up my file a few months later and opened an investigation. They found one culprit, a radicalized Russian nationalist living between Thornhill and Florida. Thankfully, York Regional Police provided me and my family with victim training and a phone number to call in case of a future emergency.

I should also mention that for the Ukrainian community, Russia's incitement of hate has manifested in violence towards Ukrainian community members, including vandalized businesses, homes and even vehicles. Students have been intimidated, and the Ukrainian Canadian Congress has even been forced to create a national crisis hotline to support victims.

We've also witnessed parliamentarians targeted with transnational repression. In 2018, the Deputy Prime Minister, Chrystia Freeland, and her family were the targets of just such a campaign, where historical facts were distorted and manipulated to defame her and her entire family and, in fact, the entire Ukrainian community. A story was first planted into a Moscow blog that was run by an alleged former KGB agent. It then spread from there into the constellation of Kremlin-aligned online proxy platforms. That story eventually metastasized into our national media, which willingly ran this very well-orchestrated Russian information operation against her. This is not unlike the Chinese state's Global Times campaign against former Conservative Party leader Erin O'Toole in 2021, which, coincidentally, was first exposed by my organization, DisinfoWatch.

The campaign against Ms. Freeland also demonstrates that Russia is playing the long game, operating between elections to impact election outcomes, not just during elections—an important fact that has been clearly missed by the commission looking into foreign interference in our elections. In terms of national security, this is a significant threat, as we currently leave the door wide open for Russia, China and Iran to target and attack our citizens and residents. We need to be doing much more in terms of protecting these vulnerable communities.

• (1220)

**The Chair:** Mr. Kolga, I wonder if you could move your microphone to just above your upper lip.

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** Is this better?

**The Chair:** Maybe move it down a bit further.

Go ahead, Mr. Shipley.

**Mr. Doug Shipley:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to Mr. Kolga for that answer and thank you, Mr. Kolga, for your courage in all you do and for being back here today.

My second question, Mr. Kolga, is also for you. Recently, Canadians learned that the Liberal government used \$340,000 of taxpayer money to fund a Russian propaganda film titled *Russians at War*. Do you think it is appropriate for the Government of Canada to be funding a Russian propaganda film?

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** I think the basic answer is no.

The content of that film and the nature of it have been widely discussed in the media over the past couple of weeks. One point that I think hasn't been made clearly enough is that the vetting process for granting money for these sorts of projects, even for film festivals that decide to screen films like this, is clearly not rigorous enough. We are ignoring the threat of Russian information operations, the way they try to manipulate us and how they do it.

With regard to this film, it would have taken some simple vetting to look at the filmmaker. The fact that the filmmaker made 12 films for RT over the past decade or less—it was six years, or something like that—should have been a huge red flag. We know, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, that RT is an extension of Russia's intelligence apparatus. Again, it didn't take much. You just have to put the filmmaker's name into Google and you would find this out.

I would conversely say that there are some very good Russian journalists we should be supporting—people like Dmitry Muratov, the editor of Novaya Gazeta, who's in Toronto today to speak at a gala for Journalists for Human Rights. He bravely speaks out against the Kremlin, despite all the threats against him, and he continues to live in Moscow.

There are hundreds of independent Russian journalists living abroad whom we could be supporting, who will speak truth to the war and who have been doing so. They've been forced into exile.

There's a lot more that we could be doing. Again, we have to be very careful about who we're funding in terms of any sort of content that's proposed about Russia.

• (1225)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Shipley.

We go now to Ms. Damoff for six minutes, please.

**Ms. Pam Damoff:** I'm sorry, Chair. I didn't realize that I was first up here. Thank you.

Thank you to both witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Kolga, it's lovely to see you again.

We've talked a lot about disinformation when it comes to Ukraine, but the previous witness also talked about it being on housing, inflation, immigration and the Prime Minister that Russia is feeding disinformation that is finding its way into Canadian discourse.

Mr. Kolga, maybe we can start with you. I wonder if you can talk about the influence that Russia is having on these particular conversations.

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** Thank you for the question. It's good to see you as well.

This is a very good question. I don't think we're able to necessarily directly measure the impact of these narratives. You are right that Russian state media and its influencers on both the far left and the far right—it's important to note that they're on both sides of the political spectrum—target some of the most polarizing issues in society today. They target both sides of them, and they use influencers, proxy platforms and state media, like RT, to start tearing in both directions in order to pull apart the cohesion of our society.

These documents that I mentioned in this FBI affidavit—and I strongly recommend that every member of this committee look up the affidavit and look into the documents that are included there—clearly outline these objectives, and they're exactly consistent with what I was saying before. What these operators do is they look for those. They monitor our information space. They monitor social media for those specific subjects, and then they develop narratives in the Kremlin and with the organizations that work with them to attack those narratives. They've been effectively doing this.

I would say that in this affidavit I'm mentioning that is connected to the "Doppelganger" affair, one of the primary tactics there was to create fake news outlets. I think the impact of that was probably quite low, and I think we focused far too much on it. What we haven't focused on is the role that the influencers play in these campaigns.

That affidavit says that there were nearly 2,000 influencers in the western world who were used to amplify those narratives. I know that there are Canadian influencers as well, again on the far left and the far right, and we know from the Tenet Media indictment that there are clearly Canadians who are helping with the amplification of those narratives.

That's where the real threat is. We don't know what the impact is, but it is an important part of Russia's disinformation laundromat to clear out the Russian state fingerprints on them and to have those narratives amplified in our own ecosystem.

The final point I would make is that in a study that we did with Digital Public Square in 2023, we actually found that there were 200,000 accounts on Twitter that were actively promoting these narratives to Canadian audiences, and over 90% of them were far left and far right accounts, so in terms of impact, we do have that number.

**Ms. Pam Damoff:** There's a Canada subreddit where it came out that four user accounts represented 92% of submissions, and they were Russian-run propaganda.

I'm not on Reddit, but I wonder if you could speak to how these comments put on platforms like Reddit, Rumble and others... Canadians may think, "Well, I'm not on Reddit, so I'm not influenced by them," but how do these comments filter from those platforms into the common discourse, so that people believe the disinformation is true even when it's not?

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** I'll answer very quickly, and I'll let my copanellist answer as well.

You don't have to be on Reddit to be exposed to these sorts of narratives. You mentioned Rumble. That's a very important platform for the far right. You just have to be on Twitter or any other social media account. These narratives are planted everywhere by these Russian operatives, so—

• (1230)

**Ms. Pam Damoff:** I'll just interrupt. Even if you're not on Twitter... I had a senior come into my office who had heard information at a coffee group. He's not on Twitter, but it filters from these social media platforms into the seniors' coffee groups.

Is that right?

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** You're absolutely right, because they filter from Russian state media into social media and to influencers, and then they also migrate onto alternative media platforms that some people in our community might be consuming because they don't trust mainstream media or they don't see value in that sort of media. That's how these narratives metastasize from the state media—again, social media—through proxy platforms.

As we saw with Tenet Media, the Kremlin is also paying these sorts of influencers. The people at that coffee club meeting may be

consuming media from those sorts of platforms. Tenet Media is the only platform that we know of right now. I am sure, as I said in my opening remarks, that it is the tip of the iceberg.

**Ms. Pam Damoff:** Mr. Shull, I don't know how much time I have left, but did you want to comment on that?

**Mr. Aaron Shull:** Yes, sure. To pick up on what Marcus said—I don't want to let this point go sailing by—they're pushing both left-wing and right-wing ideologies. That means they don't care about the message, so the question becomes, what is the objective? It's to polarize societies. It's to undermine trust in institutions. It's to exploit social tensions. It's to discredit opponents. It's to shift public opinion on foreign policy. It's to promote Russian interests. It's all to sow confusion and create mistrust. That's what they're trying to do.

Your question was a sound one, but it was about the tactical approach. The tactical approach is which platforms you use, which message you send and how long it is or how many characters there are, but the broad point is that the underlying current of all of this stuff is these pretty sick objectives.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Damoff.

[Translation]

Mr. Fortin, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Mr. Kolga and Mr. Shull. Thank you for being with us today to discuss this important study.

Mr. Kolga, you mentioned an affidavit from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, or FBI. This document would provide a brief explanation of the situation as perceived by the FBI in the United States. Do you have a copy? Can you send one to the committee?

[English]

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** Yes, I will.

[Translation]

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** Thank you, Mr. Kolga.

You said earlier that you yourself had been a victim of reprehensible behaviour, but that you didn't know where to lodge a complaint. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the RCMP, the regional, municipal and other police, as well as the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, or CSIS, are all passing the buck. A witness in the previous panel touched on the subject by suggesting that an organization dedicated exclusively to combatting interference be created.

I would like to know what you think about that. In your opinion, could such an organization meet the needs expressed and help counter these interference tactics?

[English]

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** I completely agree that an agency, a unit within government, to support the victims of transnational repression would be extremely helpful.



When these sorts of attacks happen, it is psychologically taxing. It is very difficult to deal with them. Reputations are harmed. There are impacts on family members. At the moment, there is zero support for the victims.

I would also argue that there are hundreds, possibly thousands, of victims of transnational repression in Canada right now. We have seen how the Chinese government has targeted its own diaspora, and how it has targeted Uyghur and Tibetan activists in this country.

The only support they have is when we talk to each other. We have an informal network, and we try to do as much as we can to support each other. The government really does have a role here to support those victims, but also to enforce the laws that we have by implementing Bill C-70, which will provide some degree of protection for the victims of transnational repression.

I would also argue that Canada has a role to play in creating an international network of nations where there are victims who are targets of transnational repression. Canada is not the only country where there are victims. We know that citizens of the U.K. and Sweden, among others, have been targeted. Working together, maybe within the framework of the G7 or NATO, might be helpful in creating that international network and an international front, like a coalition, to push back on transnational repression.

• (1235)

[Translation]

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** Thank you, Mr. Kolga.

Have you asked any federal government body to create such an agency or an intermediary with whom interference complaints could be lodged?

[English]

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** Formally, I don't think I have. I've made the suggestion in several reports. As a witness in other committees, I have made the suggestion.

I would make one concrete suggestion right now. Such a unit could be housed underneath the proposed foreign influence transparency commissioner. That's an independent office to be created through the registry, and it could be housed under there, as that commissioner would be relatively independent.

[Translation]

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** Thank you, Mr. Kolga.

I would like to raise one last point with you.

You told us about the lack of support for people we could call “genuine journalists”. I don't remember the exact term you used. If I understand correctly, these are independent Russian journalists who would likely be working outside of Russia. These journalists relay reliable information that can be useful in the fight against foreign interference.

Please provide more details. Who are these genuine journalists? How can we recognize them? What support could be provided to help them continue their valuable work?

[English]

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** I have been privileged to be able to work with Russian human rights activists and independent journalists now for the past 20 years or so. Most of those journalists, who were once based in Moscow—whether it was 15 years ago or even two years ago, before the start of the full-scale invasion—have been forced to flee Russia.

These are outlets like Novaya Gazeta, Echo of Moscow, Mediazona, Proekt Media, and TV Rain. There are many of them. They are based in cities like Riga, Vilnius, Warsaw and Berlin. They are operating from those cities, trying as best they can to circumvent Russian state censors and get facts and truth into Russia. Truth and facts are toxic to the Putin regime.

Canada is right now engaging in a fairly significant way in supporting those media outlets by financing some training and supporting the creation of content, but we need to do much more. We need to be working with our allies to ensure that these outlets are sustained. All of their revenue inside Russia has completely dried up. We need to be working with our allies to make sure they're able to sustain their efforts, again, to promote facts and truth inside Russia. It's facts and truth that will eventually lead to a change towards democracy in Russia and a lasting and sustained peace in Europe.

[Translation]

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** I don't think I have much time left. I'll be brief, then.

How do we identify these journalists? I don't suppose there is a registry somewhere of genuine Russian journalists. Is there a way to identify them and a process to support them?

[English]

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** You're absolutely right; there isn't a registry or a list of those journalists anywhere, but there are some Canadians, myself included, who have been working closely with them and who continue to work closely with them.

I think that through collaboration with people like myself and organizations like Journalists for Human Rights, who work actively in this area, we can create that sort of a list and ensure that those journalists and the platforms that align with democratic values do receive our support.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, gentlemen.

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** Thank you.

[English]

**The Chair:** We go now to Mr. MacGregor for six minutes, please.

**Mr. Alistair MacGregor:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to both witnesses for being with our committee today.

Foreign interference has obviously been a hot topic this year. We had the explosive revelations in the NSICOP report, and we also saw the House of Commons come together in a rare show of unanimous support for an important piece of legislation in Bill C-70. We certainly are looking forward to updates on how our intelligence and security agencies are going to make use of that legislation to beef up their capabilities.

I want to go back a bit further, because, of course, Mr. Kolga and Mr. Shull, you were both really good witnesses for our previous study looking into Canada's security posture vis-à-vis Russia. Certainly your testimony back in 2022 aided this committee in making a lot of the recommendations to the government. It's in that context that I would like for both of you to weigh in.

Is there anything else you would like to tell this committee about? If you compare the recommendations we made in that report, which was tabled in the House of Commons in March 2023, and where we are now, is there anything more you would like to see this committee focus on, where some of those recommendations are still a work in progress? Is there anything that we should be highlighting in that context?

Mr. Kolga, I'll start with you and then move to Mr. Shull.

• (1240)

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** I'll try to be brief.

I think that the government has made some progress, even significant progress, in terms of addressing foreign influence operations. I think a shining example of that is the rapid response mechanism at Global Affairs Canada. It started out rather slowly, some six or seven years ago, but has really become quite bold in its efforts to expose foreign information narratives and those tactics to Canadians to build that awareness. That is exactly what is needed. It's that boldness in clearly exposing those narratives and tactics that will help build awareness.

Bill C-70, as you mentioned, is a step in the right direction. We still don't know how that's going to be implemented.

The previous panel mentioned the fact that there have been major changes to the CSIS Act. Allowing CSIS to communicate threats that they are detecting and observing to vulnerable ethnic community groups, for example, is extremely important. It's incredibly important for them to be able to communicate with civil society organizations like DisinfoWatch to let us know what they're seeing, so that we might be able to expose some of those narratives and tactics.

Making sure that the foreign influence transparency registry is properly implemented will be critically important as well, to help protect Canadians against these sorts of operations as well as against transnational repression.

The last thing I will say is that we need to be enforcing our sanctions legislation. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, with the Tenet Media case we know now, thanks to the United States and the Department of Justice, that two Canadians received financing and funds directly from RT—well, through some U.K. shell companies. They received this funding in 2024, according to that indictment.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, RT was placed on our sanctions list in 2022 already. That raises a number of questions in terms of the Special Economic Measures Act, which allows us to place sanctions on these entities. There are questions as to whether that legislation has been violated.

Enforcing our sanctions legislation is the first thing we need to be doing.

**Mr. Alistair MacGregor:** Thank you.

Mr. Shull.

**Mr. Aaron Shull:** Through you, Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank Mr. MacGregor for his question.

At the risk of sounding like a sycophant, I thought you all did a great job on that report. I particularly liked recommendation five, which was about capital and cost allowances and tax measures for baseline controls on cyber.

I want to throw out a bigger thing that wasn't part of that discussion. This is in terms of what Mr. Kolga talked about when he was targeted. You have a prominent Canadian who's targeted, and no one knows who's on first. We cannot have that. We need to look at how the RCMP functions. While I like the idea of having the commissioner take some responsibility, as currently drafted that is not in their ambit of focus.

This is criminal activity. Let's treat it like that. What would a reimagined RCMP look like were it to follow the FBI, enhancing their national security focus, strengthening their counter-intelligence capabilities and increasing our ability to coordinate and collaborate with allies? To the question "Who's in charge?" when this type of stuff happens, every single person will know what the answer is.

**Mr. Alistair MacGregor:** Thank you.

Mr. Kolga, I'll turn to you for my last minute. Our last panel made use of the phrase "useful idiots". You talked about Russia Today and the fact that we need to really start implementing our sanctions regime. I want to talk about the influencers themselves, though.

Is ignorance a defence? Do you think these people are actively aware? What amount of responsibility should these people bear? How should that influence our committee's recommendations to the government?

• (1245)

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** That's a great question. We've known since 2012 or so, and even before that, because I think RT was actually established in 2005, that this was going to be a propaganda arm of the Russian government. Anyone appearing, or at least the experts, the academics and the activists who continue to appear on RT today....

In fact, we know that one Canadian activist just last week appeared on an RT talking head show. Whether that individual received compensation for that, we don't know, but the fact is that we have Canadians who know exactly what RT is. They know exactly what its role is in terms of our information space, and they continue to appear on it.

This includes those who were appearing on it before 2022; we know of at least two academics. One Canadian academic was what you might refer to as a "star columnist" for RT up until February 24, 2022, when the full-scale invasion happened. If you go to RT and search up this Canadian academic's name, it will bring up hundreds of columns. This individual was producing content for RT on a weekly basis. They were a Russia expert. They knew exactly what they were doing and who they were speaking to.

I know that the previous panel also mentioned Russian think tanks like the Valdai club. There are several—

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, sir. I have to bring this to an end. Can you quickly wrap up?

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** I would echo the previous panellists, who said we should be looking into the Valdai club and other Russian think tanks, among whom there are several, probably a dozen, Canadian academics who are members.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll start our second round now with Mr. Motz.

Mr. Motz, please go ahead for five minutes.

**Mr. Glen Motz (Medicine Hat—Cardston—Warner, CPC):** Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for being here.

All the panellists who have been here so far today have spoken about and made reference to misinformation and disinformation and how it undermines Canada's democracy, erodes trust in our public institutions and polarizes Canadians. Are we doing enough to combat this, in your opinion?

Mr. Kolga.

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** No. We can always be doing more. I think I mentioned in my opening remarks that Russia spends \$3 billion annually on these operations.

Now, these operations that they're funding are targeting their own people, but they're also targeting us. The U.S. DOJ indictment clearly indicates that \$10 million was spent by the Russian government to try to directly influence our information space. We're not even coming close to matching Russia in terms of the resources we are deploying to push back on these sorts of narratives. As I said earlier, I think there are signs of hope and some bright spots where we are trying to push back, but again, we need to be doing a lot more.

I think the previous panel also mentioned that we should be looking at a whole-of-society approach to this. We should be making sure our media has a firm understanding of these operations and who the influencers are, for example, so that they are not inadvertently calling them to be on talking head shows or political programs.

We need to make sure our—

**Mr. Glen Motz:** Mr. Kolga, I'll interrupt you there.

You mentioned that our media needs to be aware. That brings to mind a concern I think many Canadians have. I certainly have it.

Are you aware of any Canadian journalists, past or present, who have acted as agents for the Kremlin?

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** In the past—these operations go back to the 1930s—a GRU agent at the time, named Igor Gouzenko, left the Soviet embassy in 1945 with a suitcase full of information. In it were the names of dozens of Canadians who were directly collaborating with the Soviets at the time. Among them were journalists.

This has not changed. Russia actively seeks out journalists in western countries who are aligned with them, in order to help amplify those narratives. Justin Ling, a Canadian journalist, wrote a piece, I think about two years ago, about how the Russian government and the Russian embassy go about this, trying to pitch stories to Canadian journalists, some of whom have taken the bait and amplified those narratives. We can see some of these narratives being amplified in our mainstream media. We've been seeing that for the past decade.

• (1250)

**Mr. Glen Motz:** Do you know who those are?

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** Yes.

**Mr. Glen Motz:** Can you name them?

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** I'd rather not.

As I mentioned earlier, I've been the target of transnational repression in the past. Some of these journalists have been involved in those operations and have jumped on board with them.

I'd prefer not to get into that.

**Mr. Glen Motz:** That's fair enough. I appreciate your limited candour on that issue, Mr. Kolga.

Mr. Shull, you made a comment about digital literacy and how Canada needs to step up with digital literacy for its citizenry.

What prevents this digital literacy? What barriers exist currently in this country with government or legislation...to give this the priority it needs?

**Mr. Aaron Shull:** It's probably two or three things.

Number one is a lack of political will and leadership. It's hard to do.

The second barrier is section 91 and section 92 of the Constitution Act, which I won't bore people to death with. The point is, once you get into this interjurisdictional ball of yarn, it gets trickier and trickier.

Then add school boards to that, so there are a lot of players that need to be coordinated. That makes it harder, but just because it's hard doesn't necessarily mean we shouldn't do it. It's about equipping our kids with the skills they need: logic, reasoning, comprehension and analytical ability. Those skills will help here, for sure, but they will help in life generally. We should be teaching them that stuff anyway.

**Mr. Glen Motz:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Motz.

We'll go now to Mr. MacDonald for five minutes.

**Mr. Heath MacDonald (Malpeque, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for being here today and for the resilience you've shown, especially Mr. Kolga with all that you've faced.

Obviously, fighting the interference is key to maintaining a nation's sovereignty and democratic values.

Can each of you, relatively quickly, give this committee three points on what and how we could improve the outcome of this study to ensure we're on the right page? We talked about a lot of different things, and there are a lot of different witnesses here today, so some of it is repetitious.

To prioritize three items we could focus on in our study, could each of you give me a very quick synopsis?

**Mr. Aaron Shull:** Marcus, why don't I shoot first on this one?

Number one, I talked about a national strategy for digital literacy. This will require political leadership. It is one of the most non-partisan issues I could ever imagine—making sure the next generation is equipped for this. Lean into that, because we have a problem. The digital citizen contribution program I mentioned was good. It's just a dosage problem. It didn't do enough. It didn't go far enough, and it was one government department at one level of government doing interesting things. We need to spread it around and make it a national priority.

Number two—I already tipped my hand on this—is looking at the RCMP and making sure they're equipped for the 21st century and have the tools and capabilities they need—whether or not the institution is fit for purpose, both on counter-intelligence and on combatting state adversaries. What Marcus said shouldn't be allowed to happen. We need to know who's running point in this country. If we can't do that, and if we get to where everyone's pointing at somebody else, we have a serious problem that needs to be remedied.

Number three is this: Do it fast and do it with seriousness and purpose, because this is all going to get way worse. You just need to look at the trend lines on AI. This is set to get supercharged like you wouldn't believe, so my third point is this: See points one and two, and do them with purpose.

**Mr. Heath MacDonald:** Mr. Kolga?

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** Yes. Listen to what Aaron suggested, and do that. That's the first point.

Second, I'll go back to the influencers. We need to be working with our allies and figuring out a way to expose them. This is the

best way to protect us and our democracy against these sorts of operations. Exposing influencers using our existing legislation, and working with journalists and our allies to do that—that's very important.

We need to ban all Russian state media. We took some leadership back in 2022, by banning RT from our satellite and cable systems. We need to follow Europe's example and completely ban RT, Sputnik and all of these Russian state media outlets from the Internet and our airwaves.

I would also say media literacy—following Finland's example, working with the provinces to make sure our school curriculum in all provinces, from kindergarten to grade 12, includes digital media literacy. This doesn't mean just one course or one hour per year. This means baking it into every single course so that our children, our future generations, become resilient against these sorts of information operations and disinformation.

As Aaron said, this is only going to get supercharged. We've seen Russia already use AI to start producing content. They are producing content at a rapid rate in various different languages across Africa and South America. They are winning the disinformation game in those territories, thanks to AI. We need to be prepared for that.

● (1255)

**Mr. Heath MacDonald:** Thank you for those comments.

One you've left out—and I think I'll just touch on it briefly—is that around this table, we need to work together. This is a turning point for Canada. It's a scary situation that we find ourselves in. You talk about our future. You're talking about our children. I think it's extremely important that partisan politics, not only around this committee table but also in the House of Commons.... When we do come to votes, we've seen what we can do with Bill C-70, and I will get to that in a second. I think the more pressure that people like you put on politicians of all stripes is certainly important as well.

In saying that, apply Bill C-70 to this case—the foreign interference. How could Bill C-70 help in this type of situation that we find ourselves in?

**Mr. Aaron Shull:** I'll say quickly that it's a triple bottom line.

Number one, CSIS's data provisions have been cleaned up a little, so they're going to be better as a consequence.

Number two, they're going to be able to share information with people who have been targeted by this type of activity, in a manner that they would have been unable to do.

Number three, should someone fall within the parameters of the agent registry, they can basically get nicked for that. In some ways, it's like Al Capone, right? They didn't get Al Capone on murder. They got him on money laundering. Failing to register, in and of itself, is now a crime.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. MacDonald.

Go ahead Mr. Kolga. You may quickly answer.

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** I agree with all of that.

Going back to the point of taking a non-partisan and all-party approach, I completely agree with this. This is not a partisan issue. I've long advocated for the creation of a task force within Parliament, an all-party group that meets on a regular basis to receive briefings about dominant and emerging disinformation narratives, so that all parties are aware of what they are. They can report back to their own caucuses, so that their own members don't fall prey to them.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Fortin, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll be brief.

Mr. Kolga, Mr. Shull, you are basically saying the same thing. You conclude that we have to work with our allies, determine who they are and support genuine journalists. We need to ban fake media, if I can put it that way, or influencers, from social networks. There are a lot of suggestions like that.

I think it is important to provide training in schools. However, we have a problem here because training and education are a provincial responsibility, not a federal one. That's a hurdle to be overcome. There would be administrative hoops to jump through, but nothing insurmountable.

Something has been bothering me for a while. I would like to put a question to Mr. Shull, who works as general counsel.

How can we do all of this effectively while protecting freedom of expression, which is an important pillar of our society? In my opinion, there's a problem there, or at least a hurdle.

Maybe we'll start with Mr. Kolga and then go to Mr. Shull.

[English]

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** It's that freedom of speech that our foreign adversary has exploited.

I would argue that platforms like RT and Sputnik, and Global Times in China, don't enjoy that right to freedom of speech in this country. What they are doing is weaponizing information to try to undermine and destabilize our democracy.

In terms of banning Russian state media from our airwaves, I have no concern about freedom of expression. Canadians can express themselves freely on social media. In the media itself, anyone can write to their editor or write an opinion piece. No one is suggesting a ban on that. What we are suggesting is to clean our infor-

mation space of these foreign adversaries and the weaponization of information they engage in.

• (1300)

[Translation]

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** When we decide who we want to exclude, will we not be slapping a muzzle on certain individuals or organizations? Aren't we going to fall into that trap?

[English]

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** It's not a question of muzzling. Freedom of expression does not mean freedom from scrutiny—

[Translation]

**Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin:** I'm sorry to interrupt, but I wasn't talking about Muslims.

You may continue, but I wanted to clarify that I didn't use the word “Muslim”.

[English]

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** The word I used was “muzzling”, as in silencing.

**The Chair:** Please finish your answer, and then we'll go to Mr. MacGregor.

**Mr. Marcus Kolga:** No one is suggesting silencing anyone or preventing anyone from speaking. Freedom of expression does not mean freedom from scrutiny. Exposing those individuals who are appearing willingly on Russian, Iranian or Chinese state media channels is not an effort to silence them. It is just bringing out this very important fact in terms of Canadians understanding who they're hearing and what subjects they're hearing about, and building awareness of these sorts of operations.

**The Chair:** Thank you, sir.

We'll go now to Mr. MacGregor for two and a half minutes.

**Mr. Alistair MacGregor:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Shull, I want to give you an opportunity to flesh out this idea around your digital resilience strategy. Many members of Parliament, through private members' bills, have come up with the legislative parameters for differing national strategies. Usually that legislation or that bill spells out what the components of the strategy have to be. The benefit of that is that it can prevent policy lurch, because if you have it enacted in law, then no matter what stripe of government is at the helm in Ottawa, they have to follow that law and continue with it.

Do you have a preference? Would you like to see this as a role that the House of Commons takes upon itself, to enact legislation that puts in the guidelines for this kind of a strategy, or are you satisfied that the federal government could do this as a policy initiative on its own through its relationships with provincial premiers and territorial leaders?

**Mr. Aaron Shull:** Yes, please, to all of the above.

If you were to take it on yourselves to legislate, that would be the highest and best signal. We live in a system of parliamentary supremacy for a reason, and should that be the case, I would be your number one fan.

Also, it would require that we have an FPT table on this, which should be at the leaders' level. In my mind, there's probably no more important topic than keeping Canadians safe. The bad guys are here, and they're trying to poison our information society to make it harder for us to live in a democracy. To the extent that we should be doing everything we possibly can to do that, it starts with that leadership.

**Mr. Alistair MacGregor:** Thank you.

I'll leave it at that.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. MacGregor.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today. We appreciate all of your insight and input.

If you have any further information you'd like to share with the committee, please send it to the clerk. He will arrange for it to be translated and distributed appropriately.

**Mr. Aaron Shull:** Mr. Chair, if I might just add one quick point, I'm always happy to appear in front of this committee, but I'd like to ask a favour.

I've sent you all a note, inviting your staff to a lunch in Ottawa. We've done the same for every single Senate staff on national security matters. It will be an educational lunch, not a wine-and-dine; there will be no champagne. It will be more like turkey sandwiches. The point is to educate folks on what's happening in national security. Each of you has received an email. If I could encourage you to encourage your staff to attend, I'd really appreciate it.

**The Chair:** Thank you. I appreciate that.

I'll remind the committee members to get their recommendations for the auto study in ASAP, as well as any further witnesses they might like to propose for this study.

Thank you, gentlemen.

With that, we are now adjourned.

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