



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 125

PUBLIC PART ONLY - PARTIE PUBLIQUE SEULEMENT

Thursday, October 24, 2024

Chair: Mr. Ron McKinnon



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• (1545)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ron McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting 125 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format.

I would like to remind participants of the following points.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. All comments should be addressed to the chair.

Members, please raise your hand if you wish to speak, whether participating in person or via Zoom. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can.

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

I would like to welcome our witnesses today.

As an individual, we have the Honourable Chris Alexander, distinguished fellow at both the Macdonald-Laurier Institute and the Canadian International Council. He is also a former Canadian ambassador and a former minister of citizenship and immigration. Welcome, sir.

We have Justin Ling, a freelance investigative journalist, who I believe is online.

From the American Sunlight Project, we have Nina Jankowicz, chief executive officer, also by video conference.

Welcome to you all.

I now invite Mr. Alexander to make an opening statement. Normally we would limit this to five minutes, but I understand that you're looking for six, so we'll accommodate you as best we can. Thank you.

Please go ahead.

[Translation]

Hon. Chris Alexander (Distinguished Fellow, Macdonald-Laurier Institute and Canadian International Council, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

For 10 years Russia has been invading Europe's largest state. A full-scale onslaught began in 2022, as you all know, challenging the alliances, institutions and principles Canada fought two world wars to uphold. Moscow's genocidal war of aggression recalls the horrors of Hitler and Stalin, yet we've still not committed fully to defeating this aggressor or to Ukraine's victory.

Why is that? Part of the answer is Russian disinformation, Russian active measures and Russian interference. According to Jakub Kalensky, deputy director of the community of interest on hybrid threats at Europe's centre of excellence in Helsinki, Russia produces over 60% of the disinformation worldwide and 80% in Europe. Its main vectors of distribution are still social media platforms, as Meta recently confirmed to you, but grey zone media, influencers and other proxies, as well as state propaganda outlets like Russia Today, are also major threat actors. They torque debates and magnify niche conflicts into societal breakdowns. On Twitter/X, the owner himself regurgitates Kremlin talking points and rolls out the red carpet for Russian and other state-sponsored bots.

No, Meta, TikTok, YouTube and other platforms are definitely not doing enough. We still have no idea how much Russian-backed, Chinese-backed and Iran-backed spending influences our politics or our elections. Meanwhile, unregulated promotion of political extremism and polarization has tipped newsrooms across Canada into free fall, causing a dangerous loss of self-awareness in local communities and national debates.

Far from being marginal players, Russian information assets and active measures are often kingmakers in our elections. In other words, to prevent Ukraine's victory, Russia is investing heavily in propaganda and political and cognitive warfare to ensure that we never make the military commitments needed to win.

Let me give you two Canadian examples, one past and one present.

Over 2018 and 2019, the anti-immigration People's Party of Canada, the yellow vest movement, trucker protests and Wexit all began. Then COVID hit. By early 2022, truckers were blockading Ottawa and several border crossings. You know the history. To be clear, these protests did attract ordinary people with genuine grievances over vaccine mandates, but many of the ringleaders and extremists who joined them had been radicalized online by Moscow-backed active measures. Their funding came from shadowy corners of the MAGA demimonde, even as far away as Bulgaria, and had all the hallmarks of Russian influence.

The blockade's timing coincided with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Attempts to replicate these convoys, some successful, took place in every NATO country, as well as Australia and New Zealand. Russian state propaganda promoted this story relentlessly. Russia Today did 250 reports on Canada's protests alone.

What was Moscow's motive? It was to distract a country with a huge Ukrainian diaspora as the Kremlin launched its war of aggression. Did it work? In a word, yes. We continue to underestimate Moscow's strategic ambition. Beyond reconquering Ukraine, they want to disrupt and destabilize democracies, roll back American and allied influence, and break the EU and NATO. They sow discord and erode trust with anti-immigrant, xenophobic, anti-LGBTQ, anti-west and anti-women campaigns, as well as hate speech, separatism and disinformation about elections or health issues, as the trucker blockade, the yellow vest movement, the PPC, Wexit, the anti-vax movement, pro-Hamas protests and many extreme elements that play into elections in Canada and allied democracies have shown us.

I am now on the second issue, which relates to a current matter. Seven documents tabled before you originate in the pre-1991 archives of the Ukrainian KGB. They are in the hands of Canadian national security officials, because they are evidence of a serious effort to undermine Canada's national security and collective self-defence. They have also been authenticated by several of the world's leading experts on KGB documents.

In a nutshell, these records document a KGB operation to talent-spot, recruit, develop and run as an agent a Canadian citizen who has been a prominent journalist in this country for over three decades. His code name in these KGB files was "Stuart". His recruiter, handler and paymaster over the period discussed here, from 1982 to 1990, was another agent, code-named "Ivan". Some of the world's leading experts on KGB documents have attested to their authenticity. If "Stuart" continued as an agent after 1990, as there is now every reason to believe he did, we have no access to those files, because they are in Moscow.

These documents illustrate the challenge our democracies face. For decades Moscow has been recruiting and paying policy-makers, influencers, politicians, journalists and others to act as their proxies, to undermine trust in our institutions and to dissipate our political will. Even at the height of so-called glasnost, when so many believed Moscow's imperialism and global subversion campaigns had ended, such recruitment was still happening.

The agent described in these documents was an illegal, working for Directorate S of the KGB's First Main Directorate, which today has the same name and purpose in Russia's External Intelligence Service, or SVR, as Mikhail Mikushin and the Vavilovs previously did in Canada, as well as the 10 illegal agents arrested and expelled from the U.S. in 2010.

● (1550)

This journalist has been prolific, publishing as many as 200 articles per year in Canada and the U.S. since 1990. His recent subjects are instructive. There are countless stories about Ukraine's Nazi links or Nazis in Canada, defamatory pieces about the family of Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland, provocative takes on procurement and other issues at the Department of National De-

fence and in the Canadian Forces. In short, these are themes that Moscow would be delighted to promote. They also aim to weaken Canadian support for Ukraine.

Previous efforts to expose this journalist's long-running covert ties to Moscow have resulted in attempts to intimidate current and former Canadian parliamentarians, including my former colleague James Bezan as well as Canadian Army officers.

Canadians need and deserve quality, independent journalism now more than ever. We need to bolster our national security and defence and to back Ukraine's victory fully. Moscow's information war, its active measures and continuing espionage are a serious hindrance to all of this.

In 1945, the Gouzenko revelations resulted in a royal commission that turned Canada into one of the Cold War's most reliable allies. I call upon you, the foreign interference commission, our governments, intelligence, and security and law enforcement agencies at all levels to work together to end the impunity with which Russia has operated in Canada. We need to acknowledge, assess and attribute active measures, disinformation, influence operations and other malign activities that originate in Moscow and act to disrupt and prevent such activities and hold the perpetrators to account.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Alexander.

We will go now to Mr. Ling to make an opening statement of up to five minutes.

Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Justin Ling (Freelance Investigative Journalist, As an Individual): Thank you so much for having me here today. I will do my best to keep to time.

Off the top, really briefly, I want to recognize that my being here as a journalist is a little awkward. I'm used to covering these hearings, not testifying before them. I agreed to explicitly because I think this ought to be a non-partisan matter. The fact that I agree so fully with Mr. Alexander, someone whom I have sparred with in the past, should be a testament to the fact that this should be an issue around defending our country from adversaries so that we can more robustly debate our domestic politics among one another, for better or for worse.

I have been covering Russia's illiberal and colonial activities around the world for more than a decade now. I have spoken at great lengths to American, European, Ukrainian and NATO leaders about this challenge, including visiting the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga. I've built relationships with Ukrainian leaders as well as Russian dissidents trying to dismantle Vladimir Putin's empire. For my work, I've been sanctioned by the Russian regime. I've been targeted in the past by Russian information operations and by the Kremlin's "useful idiots" over here.

• (1555)

[*Translation*]

I will be pleased to answer all your questions on any of these topics.

[*English*]

Today I mostly want to talk to you about one specific story from the past. It's about my connection with a man named Kirill Kalinin who was, at least according to his business card, the press secretary for the Russian embassy in Ottawa.

Over about two years, Kalinin and I corresponded, usually through the official Twitter account of the Russian embassy in Ottawa. I regularly reached out to seek comment and perspective from Kalinin and the embassy more broadly. I found myself chatting with him quite frequently. It was through these messages that Kalinin began to pitch me stories and suggested research that I ought to pursue.

Kalinin, for example, touted the existence of "a very interesting archive at the embassy" that was full of information about Nazi war criminals hiding among us here in Canada. This is similar to what Mr. Alexander was just describing to you.

It could prove, Kalinin claimed, "a big connection to the Ukrainian Canadian Congress". This would be a trend through a lot of our conversations going forward.

Other times, Kalinin would try to sell the narrative that political parties in Ottawa—all of them—were being duped into a reflexive anti-Russian bias or discrimination.

Kalinin and I kept up our correspondence for many years. We even got beers together a couple of times in Ottawa. I, of course, always disclosed this relationship in anything I published.

On one occasion, he asked me if I was interested in a story. He asked me if I knew that Chrystia Freeland had a Nazi grandfather. What I can tell you—I'm not going to recap the whole story, since I believe we're all familiar with it—is that when he first pitched this to me, there were no publicly available sources, research, news articles or anything of the like that were making this allegation in the public record. In a follow-up message, he pointed me to a box of records at the Alberta archives all about Michael Chomiak, who was Chrystia Freeland's maternal grandfather.

I declined to pursue the story, but I can tell you that in the months that followed, this story started popping up in a variety of supposedly independent blogs, touting the line that Freeland had inherited this supposed Nazi ideology from her grandfather.

Very clearly, I was not the only one being pitched this story. Robert Fife of The Globe and Mail asked Freeland about the Russian smear campaign. After that, it became national and international news.

This story should have invited us to have a conversation about Russia's malign skullduggery happening in the capital. It's a conversation that Mr. Fife had tried to start. Unfortunately, we started scoring on our own team. Commentators began insisting that the only disinformation here was the allegation that Russia was responsible for the story. Others refused to accept Russia's fingerprints. At one point, TeleSur, Venezuela's propaganda outlet, published a curious story claiming that it was the Communist Party of Canada that had dug up these records.

Anyway, I'll cut a bit of a long story short and say that Kalinin was eventually removed from the country in 2018—a call that I think was right.

However, I think the entire saga asks us to become more serious about this issue and to become more serious about how we expose and accredit and attribute foreign malign information operations here in Canada. They often are not as well-organized, purposeful, effective and nefarious as we give them credit for. A lot of the time, they are slapdash, amateur and even, in the case of Kalinin, friendly. Foreign interference is often less cut and dried and less transactional than we think. A lot of the time, it is interpersonal relationships, and this sort of thing is very hard to criminalize or legislate against.

Sometimes sunlight, as I'm sure we're going to hear in a minute, is the best disinfectant. I think the indictment filed in the U.S. about Tenet Media and its connections with Russia Today exposes how effective it can be to just put on the record the intelligence we have.

I'll try to wrap up right now and say that if I can make one recommendation—and I hope I can talk more about this in the Q and A—it's that we need to get more serious about attribution, about publishing the intelligence and the evidence we have of these information operations, and about giving people the information necessary to defend themselves against these information operations and to disrupt them at the very source.

Thanks so much.

• (1600)

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

We go now to Ms. Jankowicz to make an opening statement of up to five minutes.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Nina Jankowicz (Chief Executive Officer, American Sunlight Project): Thank you.

Distinguished members of the committee, it's an honour to address you today.

My name is Nina Jankowicz, and I lead a U.S. non-profit, the American Sunlight Project, which is dedicated to increasing the cost of lies that undermine democracies.

I'm also the author of *How to Lose the Information War*, a book that examines European responses to Russian disinformation.

I've spent a decade studying this topic. I teach a graduate-level course on it at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs and I have advised governments, including Ukraine's, on their responses to the Kremlin's influence campaigns.

My message to you today is not optimistic. Despite increased awareness of foreign-backed online influence campaigns, democracies like Canada and the United States are more vulnerable to them today than they were eight years ago.

The Kremlin continues to actively exploit deepening fissures in our societies in order to amplify democratic discord. Social media companies have rolled back their efforts to address disinformation on their platforms and have restricted access to their data, making it difficult to hold them to account. Researchers studying this phenomenon, including me, have been baselessly attacked as censors, enduring harassment and violent threats for our public interest investigations. However, my own organization has seen evidence of Russia's continued attempts to manipulate democratic societies.

American Sunlight recently identified what we call the "sleeper agent network" on X. It consists of over 1,100 likely automated accounts that post hundreds of times per day and that repeatedly retweet overt Russian propaganda within 60 seconds of its being posted.

Despite Elon Musk's promise to rid his platform of bots, some accounts in this network have been active for over a decade, springing into action at key moments. In that time, they have generated over 100 million posts on divisive issues, from the war in Ukraine to disinformation on the recent hurricanes.

They've also become involved in Canada's information space. In the past six months alone, they have amplified false narratives about the "freedom convoy" and about Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland hundreds of times.

More evidence of Russia's continued online influence campaigns includes the recent indictment from the U.S. Department of Justice. The DOJ identified a scheme in which two Canadian nationals allegedly set up Tenet Media, a shell company that ferried \$10 million U.S. from Russian propaganda network RT to conservative YouTube influencers with millions of collective subscribers.

The influencers posted about divisive issues, from alleged racism against white people to censorship to trans rights. Canada is mentioned over 300 times in the videos, while Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is mentioned 60 times. The genius of this scheme is that while RT was paying influencers to create the divisive content that they were already creating for a built-in audience, Russia was simply adding fuel to the fire.

These two case studies show that Russia is still active in undermining our democracies and that the current paradigm of playing "whack-a-troll"—focusing on stopping Russian disinformation and influence efforts at the source—is not the best use of our resources.

Russia increasingly attempts to dupe users into trusting local, authentic, seemingly independent sources of information. Conveniently, these are sources that social media platforms are much less likely to moderate.

What, then, can Canada do to respond to Russian and other foreign disinformation campaigns while preserving freedom of expression?

One effective reform is to simplify the declassification process so that Canada's intelligence agencies can quickly release information related to exigent national security threats, election security or foreign state-backed disinformation campaigns.

The U.S. and the U.K. governments found success with this tactic when declassifying information about Russian troop movements prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This helped to shore up public support for Kyiv.

A public notification process like this also undermined the effects of the so-called "Macron leaks" during France's 2017 election, essentially prebunking the claims made by Russia-enabled disinformers.

Second, Canada should strengthen and clarify its laws governing influencers and online political content. Neither the Canada Elections Act nor the Competition Act stipulates that influencers paid to create political content must disclose the source of their funding, unless that source is a political entity. This is a loophole that bad actors like Russia can exploit.

● (1605)

Finally, Canada should continue to invest in robust information literacy programs. It's important for these programs to be targeted to local communities and delivered by trusted local messengers, educating not only school-age children but voting-age adults as well.

In particular, Parliament should consider earmarking funding for programs that marry existing local efforts, such as tech literacy courses, with information literacy education. This programming should not label content as good or bad, trustworthy or not trustworthy, but give citizens the objective tools they need to navigate today's polluted information environment. They would then be a better equipped to approach content from Russia or elsewhere with healthy skepticism, protecting democracy from the front lines.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, indeed, as well.

We'll start our first round of questions with Mr. Bezan.

Mr. Bezan, please go ahead for six minutes.

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

I want to thank our witnesses for appearing.

Mr. Alexander, it's great to see you again and to have you here.

You worked in Moscow as deputy head of mission for the Canadian embassy. Is that right?

Hon. Chris Alexander: That's correct.

Mr. James Bezan: Are you fluent in Russian?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Yes.

Mr. James Bezan: These documents that you've dropped on the table today are quite disturbing. Have you been able to get that authenticated as being true to fact?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Yes, and it's not just me. I've been aware of the documents and able to read them for many months. I'm not sure exactly how many months it's been. They have been shared with, as I mentioned, national security authorities in Canada, and I believe other jurisdictions, and many hands, not just mine, have gone to the people they know in the world of expertise around KGB documents to authenticate them.

Every authority that has come back—and these include some of the best authorities in the United States and several in Europe, including Estonia, Ukraine, and the U.K., I believe, as well as a specialist in paper quality and manufacture, because the documents were made at a certain time using paper that came from a certain place—has authenticated these documents and has confirmed that they are what they claim to be.

Mr. James Bezan: Okay.

This individual, “Stuart”, as his code name is, is currently working still as a journalist.

Hon. Chris Alexander: That's correct. You will see in the documents that he is named there very clearly in cursive handwriting as “David Pugliese”. He has been working as a journalist in Canada ever since.

Mr. James Bezan: That reporter is very familiar to me, as he reports also on national defence.

Is that why the KGB would have been interested in making use of him to collect information to share with the Kremlin and use his cover as a journalist to do so? Would he have been duping CAF members and the Department of National Defence and others?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Absolutely.

His subsequent career—and I'm not sure for how many years, as I haven't analyzed it completely—did focus for quite a long time on national defence and national security issues. Those issues would, for obvious reasons, have been of great interest to Russia's intelligence services, particularly in this recent period when they've been engaged in overt aggression against Ukraine and other countries.

At the time when he was recruited, which is what these files tell us the story of, it's not clear what he was going to do as a journalist. He was starting out. I think the Ottawa Citizen is mentioned as a first employer. I'm not sure what he was working on at that time, but later one of his main areas of focus was national security and national defence, as you say.

Mr. James Bezan: I think we'll need some time to digest the information that's in here.

I'm just wondering if this has been handled. You said it was handed over some time ago to Canadian intelligence agencies. Which intelligence agencies would have received this intel?

Hon. Chris Alexander: From what I know—I was not the person doing the handing—it was given to counter-intelligence authorities and law enforcement authorities within the Department of National Defence, as well as CSIS.

Mr. James Bezan: Okay.

Do you believe those briefings would have been carried up the chain and investigated and shared with the Prime Minister, the Minister of National Defence and the Minister of Public Safety?

Hon. Chris Alexander: I can't speak for the highest levels, but I know from my experience of working with these agencies over many decades that they are absolutely assiduous in briefing their superiors; and this would have been considered a very serious matter that would have required internal attention.

It's also an issue that was probably looked into even before these documents arrived, so it may have been an opportunity to connect some dots.

• (1610)

Mr. James Bezan: I want to change topics a bit.

We know that the Government of Canada, through the Canada Media Fund, recently financed through TVO a Russian propaganda film called *Russians at War* to show the appearance of empathy for those Russians who have invaded Ukraine. It was definitely filmed illegally on Ukrainian territory.

I'll direct this to all three witnesses. How has Russia been successful in making use of, again, a former RT reporter who was able to produce and direct this film using taxpayer money here in Canada?

Chris, do you want to kick off? Then we can go with Mr. Ling and then the other witness.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Sure.

I think the dynamic at work in that case was a Russian reaction to our reaction of sanctions.

Russia Today was sanctioned by Canada and other G7 countries, and by Ukraine earlier, shortly after the full-scale invasion in 2022. It had been a very effective channel for propaganda. It was on our cable packages. It was available to many Canadians. We would run into people who watched it and see the reporters around Canada, as I mentioned.

That was no longer available, so they tried to find other ways to get Russia Today's propaganda in front of Canadian audiences. Film festivals were one way to do it. This is a film that was clearly made with that objective in mind and should be considered a war propaganda film, in my view.

Mr. James Bezan: I'm running out of time here. I have just one final question.

Today it was announced that the Government of Canada has removed Denis Kamyshev, who is a director of Gazprombank, from the sanctions list. He was sanctioned in 2022, and they have now taken him off that list. Minister Joly made that decision yesterday, I believe.

How dangerous is it for us to take people off the list who are actually helping fund Putin's war machine and their invasion in Ukraine?

Hon. Chris Alexander: In my view, it sends absolutely the wrong signal. Gazprom, whether someone is a former executive or a present one, was central to that war machine and central to Russia's intelligence operations and their disinformation operations. There are many more people who, in my view, could and should be sanctioned—some resident in Canada, some resident elsewhere—to strengthen our hand in helping Ukraine win.

Mr. James Bezan: Thank you.

The Chair: Now we go to Mrs. Zahid.

Mrs. Zahid, go ahead for six minutes, please.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair. Thanks to all the witnesses for appearing before the committee.

My first question is for Mr. Ling.

Mr. Ling, you wrote in *The Walrus* in 2019 that the Russians could decide Canada's next prime minister. Do you still have that worry?

Mr. Justin Ling: I think it's absolutely possible they could if we don't mount the right defences. I think we mounted the defences relatively well over the last number of elections, and I think we also benefited from the fact that Russia had distractions that kept it from worrying too much about Canada. Certainly they used their propaganda arms to target our government, as well as the opposition parties, and to target Minister Freeland.

Certainly they have tried to weaken resolve here, but frankly, I think they have devoted most of their resources in the past to fuelling, let's say, the Brexit conversation, and fuelling nationalists across Europe in other avenues, so the fact is that if they put their mind to it, if they put their resources to it, I certainly think that would be a serious risk that we would have to face.

I think, frankly, that we do not have the mechanisms. As I think Ms. Jankowicz pointed out very well, we just do not have the mechanisms to appropriately attribute and to call that campaign out when we think it is happening.

I think the point of some of my remarks at the opening was to underline the fact that it's critically important that we actually figure out legislative or procedural changes that allow us to highlight when these operations are active—when we can identify people who are on the take, as it were, be they journalists in Canada or others—and I think until we do those things, we'll continue to be vulnerable.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

Next, what is Tenet Media and what is their role in this operation? How would you describe that?

Mr. Justin Ling: Certainly the allegations filed by the Department of Justice are still that: allegations. No one has been convicted. However, as laid out by the Department of Justice, Tenet Media was more or less a talent agency meant to finance partnerships with right-wing influencers in the U.S., to find them sponsorships and deals to finance their increasingly impressive revenue streams.

As we've seen from this indictment, it was financed to the tune of some \$10 million by Russia Today. It wasn't just financed by Russia Today; Russia Today basically set the editorial line for much of the content produced by these influencers, edited the videos and asked them to share specific pro-Kremlin talking points. This was not some time in the distant past; this was last year, according to the indictment.

We have to believe that this is probably not the only operation to look like that. We know that since Russia Today has been either banned or sidelined in the west, Russia has been looking for other avenues to spread its message to captive audiences, particularly on the political right but also on the political left. We have to imagine that there are probably media organizations like Tenet Media that may be part of this alleged operation.

Just as a last point, it's frankly pretty embarrassing that this information had to come out from the Department of Justice. The Canadian government should have had a hand in revealing this information and tipping its hand in terms of what it knows about whether or not Tenet Media—or other groups like it—also delivered some of these services in Canada.

To highlight this last point, the closest we've gotten recently was a comment from the Prime Minister at the foreign influence public inquiry suggesting that Tucker Carlson and Jordan B. Peterson have been taking this Russian money. We've haven't received any evidence from the government as to whether or not it has anything to back that up.

It's a great example. If the Canadian government has intelligence that really prominent influencers and media personalities in this country and internationally are in fact taking Russian money, the government should put up or shut up. It should give us that information so that we can decide for ourselves, or it should retract those allegations, because I think it risks making us the boy who cried wolf.

• (1615)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: With regard to all of those risks that we have, what measures should Canada take to protect our democracy from foreign influence and interference campaigns like Russia's?

Mr. Justin Ling: I think Ms. Jankowicz got it exactly right. An actual regime of declassification for intelligence that connects to foreign influence operations is critically important. This is something that our security agencies cannot do on their own. This is going to require either policy changes or legislative changes.

As it stands, there is an overarching concern for protecting sources and methods or for protecting the sanctity of our judicial system. Both, of course, are incredibly important policies, but we also have to add a third plank to that. It is that when declassification or public attribution can actually be used to disrupt an influence operation or an information operation, it should be incumbent on us to declassify or release that information in order to arm the public in defence. Frankly, when we don't do it, it leaves us shadowboxing and making allegations and suppositions for which we don't have evidence.

That also maligns things like, for example, the “freedom convoy”. I don't think we actually have fantastic evidence or intelligence that supports the idea that Russia did anything more than trump it up in their state-owned media. If that intelligence exists, I think it should be released. If that intelligence does not exist and if there's no evidence for it, I think we should say so, because otherwise it risks us finger pointing and doing exactly what Russia wants us to do, which is to suspect each other and become paranoid so that it can break down the ties that keep our democracy working.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Zahid.

[*Translation*]

We'll now give the floor to Ms. Michaud for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Kristina Michaud (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for their presence.

Mr. Ling, thank you for being with us here.

As you said, I understand that it's not usual for a journalist to testify before a committee. Usually, you cover them—

• (1620)

The Chair: Just a moment, there's a problem with the interpretation.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: I can start again. I don't know if the interpretation is working.

Mr. Ling, you can wave if you can hear the interpretation.

You're still not getting the interpretation.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll suspend just for a minute.

• (1620)

(Pause)

• (1620)

The Chair: The meeting is resumed.

[*Translation*]

Nous recommençons.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm going to do a test.

I don't know if the interpretation is working or if the witnesses can hear me clearly in English. It looks like it is. Excellent.

So I was thanking all three of you for being here.

Mr. Ling, you were saying that it was unusual for a journalist to testify before a committee. Usually, you cover them. I especially want to thank you for taking part in this. You said at the outset that the foreign interference issue absolutely shouldn't be a partisan issue, and that it needs to be addressed more seriously.

I feel as though, over the past few weeks, we've been caught up in accusing one party and the other for not doing enough, of deflecting the debate on whether or not a party leader should get a security clearance. In short, I feel that, by having these debates, we're losing sight of the objective and the essential point, which is to counter this foreign interference.

I see you nodding. I imagine you agree with me. I'll let you answer, but I'd like to know something first. We realized that there had been foreign interference in our last election, and even in some leadership races. However, we're on the cusp of another election. It's no secret that this can happen from one day to the next.

Have we learned from this past interference? Do you think we're ready to call an election and counter foreign interference in the future? Is Canada ready for that?

Mr. Justin Ling: Thank you very much. I'll answer your question in English.

• (1625)

[*English*]

The short answer, and I'm going to do it backwards, is this: No, we have not learned our lessons.

I think you're absolutely right, to go to the first part, that this has become a largely partisan exercise, and given the state of polarization in this country, it's no great surprise that everything has. It's critically important that we step up to all types of foreign interference, especially when it helps our political party, but also especially when it hurts our opponents. I frankly don't think that has always been the case.

The rapid response mechanism that Prime Minister Trudeau developed with the G7, as well as the critical response team, whose name I can't remember, that was created inside PCO and operates during elections, are both fantastic ideas in principle. I think they were actually designed specifically for the Russian threat and need to be readapted to take into account how India, China and potentially other countries interfere. That's really important, but most of all they need to be recalibrated so that they can communicate with the public more effectively.

In the last two elections we've seen, that internal mechanism inside PCO seemed to not brief opposition parties, particularly the Conservatives, when it impacted them. The mechanisms seemed to be slow and maladapted and, most importantly, they didn't communicate with the public. It is very important that we tell the public when they are being targeted by foreign influence operations, because it's the only way to protect them from it. It's the only way people can protect themselves from it.

I think it is very important for attribution to become the centre of all of our disruption operations, because, frankly, we don't have the criminal prohibitions in place that we would need to do this. Our foreign influence registry is slowly being built, but it's not there yet. It is really important that we look to attribution and to public acknowledgement of interference as our best shield against it.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you.

All kinds of suggestions have been made over the past few months. We're talking about adding parliamentary committees on Indian interference, for example. There's the independent Hogue commission that's going on. There have been studies at the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. Right here, we're doing one on Russia. There was Bill C-70, and I think everyone agrees that good work was done, but that all of this is evolving extremely quickly.

In addition, we know, as Mr. Alexander said earlier, that social media platforms are the main media used, and they certainly don't do enough. All of this is evolving so quickly that Bill C-70 may already be obsolete. All these suggestions and all these studies in parliamentary committee are therefore very interesting, but do we really need to create other committees to study the matter?

Of course, it's interesting to hear from witnesses who, like you, come to talk to us about all this and share their expertise with us, but at some point, the government will have to take action.

So what do you suggest? I can ask the other two witnesses as well, but what should the government do at this point?

[English]

Mr. Justin Ling: I'll keep it really short because I would like to hear from the other witnesses as well.

We don't need more committees. The committees and the inquiries that are happening now are fantastic.

However, we know that CSIS—and to some degree the CSE and sometimes the RCMP—have the intelligence, are running the operations and are collecting the signals intelligence, in some cases, that are necessary for attributing these campaigns. We should give them the mechanism to call interference out immediately, as opposed to studying it a year or five years after the fact.

I think it would make a fantastic difference and it would be very useful, particularly with astroturfing efforts that are increasingly common on Twitter but are also on TikTok and elsewhere.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: I don't have much time left.

Mr. Alexander, could you give a brief answer?

Hon. Chris Alexander: I think the main thing to do is to take a more serious approach, and really show the willingness to tackle these issues.

The reason we haven't painted the real picture of the convoy here in Ottawa is that a number of the leaders of this movement were radicalized on social media. We don't have access to what's going on in the heads of these people when they're in front of their phones. Major social media networks don't share trends on their platforms.

The money that partly funded this movement came from the United States, from the "make America great again", or MAGA, networks. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police, or RCMP, and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, or CSIS, don't necessarily understand what's going on within these networks, which are linked to Russia.

It's very complex to track a payment that's transferred from Bulgaria to Texas and then to British Columbia.

We're not up to the task, given all the threats we're facing, such as China's interference and terrorist threats. We're not necessarily making it a priority to counter the threat coming from Russia. Information needs to be strengthened. Our regulations and laws need to be strengthened.

As Mr. Ling said, you have to—

• (1630)

[English]

The Chair: Excuse me, Monsieur—

[Translation]

Hon. Chris Alexander: —be prepared to say publicly and very quickly that Russia is responsible for this.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

I'm going to extend Madame Michaud's time a bit and give Ms. Jankowicz a chance to respond. I can tell she's desperate to do so.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Nina Jankowicz: Thank you, sir.

I think one of the most important things.... Obviously, we've all talked about declassification and how important it is to have rapid public communication in the face of disinformation campaigns, so I think that's agreed upon here.

I would just stamp my feet to the point I made earlier about updating legislation to reflect the realities of the Internet. This need not be overly burdensome on the platforms. They need to step up, but I think the chances of that happening in the political environment around content moderation right now are unlikely.

What I would suggest instead is those additional disclosures that I mentioned before. Russia is doing a lot of its work through information laundering. That's what this Tenet Media operation was. It was paying an intermediary to pay others who were already talking about these salacious, divisive topics. Make sure that there are disclosure laws around payments like that, and then make sure that those disclosure laws are actually implemented and that there are consequences for violating them. That's really important.

Other than that, it's more oversight and transparency over the social media platforms. It's not requiring them to necessarily take down certain content, but perhaps conducting audits. What are they doing to respond to foreign interference? What business practices do they have in place to make sure that there is no advertising or things like it being bought in rubles? What are they doing to deal with automated accounts, as I mentioned before?

All of that can be done without impinging on the freedom of expression of Canadian citizens, and I think that's something that should be considered.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: We will go now to Mr. Julian.

Mr. Julian, please go ahead for six minutes. Welcome back to the committee, ever so briefly.

Mr. Peter Julian (New Westminster—Burnaby, NDP): Thank you.

Thanks to our witnesses for stunning testimony.

Ms. Jankowicz, I'd like to say you're a bit of a folk hero to many of us in Canada for standing up for democracy and for transparency at this very difficult time.

I'll start with Mr. Alexander. That was stunning testimony.

David Pugliese is currently a journalist with Postmedia. Is that not true?

I understand from what you said in your testimony that we lost track after 1990 of whether or not there are other payments that have taken place since then.

Hon. Chris Alexander: The reason we have these seven documents or the eight pages that are before you in translation is that they came out of a Ukrainian archive. The KGB, which was a Soviet-wide organization, had branches and archives in Kyiv up until the breakup of the Soviet Union. We have this. It's an incomplete set of documents even from that period, I think, because of that period.

What happened after 1991-1992 is in Moscow documents that we don't have.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: This testimony, which states that a journalist is involved, is quite explosive.

Have you considered the possibility that other journalists in Canada are also involved in such a network?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Unfortunately, yes.

Over the past few years, we've realized that Russia is very active in a number of sectors, including the media. There are several cases in Germany of journalists who have recently received significant amounts of money to publish pro-Russian things. There's Tenet Media. There are also potential cases in Canada.

Further to Ms. Jankowicz's comments, I would say that we need to proceed in the right way. Some journalists raise doubts and tend to take sides in an issue. They may have such links, but it's not proven. However, it's something our governments need to think about and take stronger action.

● (1635)

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you very much.

[English]

I'd like to go to Mr. Ling and Ms. Jankowicz now.

You raised the issue of facts as opposed to fiction. We are currently going through a U.S. election process in which Tim Walz has been the victim of horrific false allegations invented and amplified by Russian disinformation networks.

Ms. Jankowicz, I know you've spoken about the censorship that takes place on X. A BBC documentary on Modi, articles critical of the Turkish government and critical comments about Donald Trump have all been censored by X.

In this type of explosive environment, where the means seem to be greater and greater for Russian disinformation, how do we take action promptly to ensure our democracy is protected?

I'll start with Ms. Jankowicz.

Ms. Nina Jankowicz: This is a wonderful question and one that is extremely pressing, because, as you said, we have unelected officials—owners of these platforms—making content moderation decisions not only for the American town square but also for the global town square.

This, again, is where I think oversight and transparency mechanisms can play an important role in shining a light on what makes it into our feeds and in educating people. I think a lot of people who use Twitter or other platforms like it don't understand that Elon Musk, who claims to be a free speech crusader, is actually suppressing content for his authoritarian buddies in places like India and Turkey and, frankly, pumping up Donald Trump's content as well. Oversight and transparency are key to that.

Unfortunately, though, it's not necessarily a quick fix. This is more of a generational thing. Until we have a viable alternative in a more democratically minded social media platform—I mean small-d “democratically”, not a partisan platform—there's not much we can do. There are some regulatory regimes in other countries. Australia is where there are transparency powers that hold Musk and others to account for the business decisions they make in surfacing some content while suppressing other content. I like those systems. I don't know what they would look like in the Canadian context, necessarily.

Relying on this, rather than putting the burden of liability on the platforms—which might over-moderate and remove legitimate speech—is probably the best solution.

Mr. Peter Julian: We heard testimony about the Psychological Defence Agency in Sweden, which has had to combat Russian disinformation.

What are your thoughts about how rapidly we need to move to fight back? Is having a digital resilience strategy or a psychological defence agency a practice we could potentially bring to bear to protect our democracy here in Canada?

Ms. Nina Jankowicz: Was that directed at me, sir?

Mr. Peter Julian: It's to Mr. Ling.

Mr. Justin Ling: I think we can over-engineer a solution, to put it quite simply.

I hear a lot of conversations about the need for better media literacy, for example. I know that there has been a lot of faith put into initiatives, some directed by Google, to do prebunking, particularly for foreign information operations, and frankly, I think a lot of those models couldn't hurt, but I think the single greatest thing we can do to fight foreign information operations— and just to keep hitting this drum—is attribution.

More than that, if I can just extend this a little bit, it is to build faith that if these operations happen, the government, our security services or both will tell us. Beyond that is building faith in our responsible media, given some of the testimony we've heard today. Our responsible media is very, very important.

There have been, I think, some very careless comments made over the last year around the issue of foreign interference that suggest that journalists in Canada are on the take for China or other countries. I think that does a lot of damage at a time when we need to be investing faith and trust in media, especially when they earn it, to help us combat these malign foreign efforts. This is doubly true for the social media platforms where some of this fake content lives and exists and in some cases thrives.

This is all to say that doing this sort of psychological defence is super-important, but I think we need to make sure that the public can have faith that they are being told the whole truth about who's targeting us, and when and how it's happening.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you. I'm going to have to cut you off there.

We're going to start our second round. We're running out of time here, so we'll end this round after Mr. Julian. We will start with Mr. Motz for...

Go ahead, Ms. O'Connell.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell (Pickering—Uxbridge, Lib.): Can I suggest that if the witnesses are available, we go our full hour on this? This is important. We have three witnesses who have provided a lot of information. I'd rather cut into the second hour than cut this short.

The Chair: We will go through an hour, but I'm happy to extend a little bit if the committee's in favour of that—

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: If the witnesses are available—

The Chair: —if the witnesses are available.

We'll carry on with a normal round.

I understand that Mr. Ling may have to leave earlier. If you do have to leave, thank you for your time, and leave when you need to. We will carry on.

We will get the full hour that we're supposed to have here, despite our problems with technology.

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

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

We have heard repeatedly that a lot more can be done to combat Russian disinformation.

Mr. Alexander, how would you say that Russian disinformation has shaped Canadian public discourse? How have the propaganda tactics changed from 20 to 25 years ago to today? How does that impact that public discourse?

Hon. Chris Alexander: First, on how it changed, during the Cold War in the 1990s everyone was alive to Soviet propaganda—maybe in the period of glasnost less so, but it was a real issue. There were real measures to counter it. There was no access to Russian television. There might have been some shortwave broadcasts that you could get at home, but not on your television set, radio and so forth.

When the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union broke up, we discarded those defences and decided we were all going to work together to build up free media and cover the world. CNN went to Moscow and we got rid of Radio Canada International. We didn't think those Cold War institutions were necessary.

Then the social media platforms came along, and I don't think there's been a greater gift given to malign actors, particularly to states but also non-state actors, to influence our publics than those platforms—especially X, which is totally unmoderated now, but the others as well.

You heard from some of them. They don't do enough. They don't know.... Things have to reach a certain threshold for them to act, so our defences are weaker. Social media is what we call an “attack surface”, which these malign actors—Russia, China, Iran and others—are using in ways we still don't fully understand, and then everything else supports that.

They will get an influencer whose video will go on all these platforms. They will throw stones into the millpond to see which one creates the most disruption, gets traction and goes viral, and then they use their assets to spike that up. They will try to target—“astroturf”, as Justin Ling put it—certain individuals because they don't like them.

What has been the impact? I think it has polarized our politics and destroyed the moderate middle that used to be the glue that held together our political debates—not destroyed it but weakened it.

I haven't mentioned them all, but look at the G7—not Canada but our colleagues and allies in the G7. Every one of those countries has a political party or parties that are co-opted by Russia to some extent. Look at Germany, the Alternative für Deutschland, Sahra Wagenknecht's party: She spouts Kremlin propaganda all the time, and the SPD quite often does so as well. I could go through all of them.

It's a disaster. That would not have happened without social media, without the investment of tens of billions of dollars from Russia and others, and if our defences were not so weak.

• (1645)

Mr. Glen Motz: This question is for all three. In the early stages of this study, we had a witness come ask us a question. The question was, “Why is Canada still a safe haven for Russian operatives?”

I start with you, Mr. Alexander. Keep in mind that I have only a minute or so left and I'd like to get responses from the other witnesses as well.

Hon. Chris Alexander: To give a very simple response, since the major invasion of Ukraine began in early 2023, we haven't expelled, to my knowledge, a single Russian diplomat. There are 60-plus of them in the country. I used to take part in such expulsions. I went to the foreign ministry in Moscow. I did it in Ottawa several times for much lower offences, much more innocent forms of undiplomatic or espionage activity. Now they're invading a country and we haven't touched them, and Canada has a special relationship. It's bizarre. It deserves to be questioned.

There should be action. There are 60-plus of them here and, I think, 14 of our diplomats there. We should pursue parity and take action, and it's leverage that we have. When they do something to Canada and we find this kind of interference in Canada, we should be exacting a price from their side: That's the only language they'll understand.

Mr. Justin Ling: I can give you the really quick answer, which is that they know we won't call it out. They think we'll be inclined to think that they wouldn't do it here and accuse each other of being responsible for it instead of the Russian government.

Ms. Nina Jankowicz: I agree with Mr. Alexander. I think it's pretty shocking, given the thousands of lives that Russia has taken in Ukraine and the large Canadian Ukrainian diaspora, that there have not been any expulsions since February 2022.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Motz.

We go now to Mr. Gaheer for five minutes, please.

Mr. Iqwinder Gaheer (Mississauga—Malton, Lib.): Thank you, Chair. I will split my time with Ms. O'Connell, so maybe you can cut me off when there are about two or two and a half minutes left.

Thank you to the witnesses for their testimony.

My questions are for Ms. Jankowicz.

In your opening testimony you said that there was a need to update our laws regarding social media influencers. Can you expand on that a little bit? Do you mean that in terms of the Canada Elections Act or of the regulations for social media companies in particular?

Ms. Nina Jankowicz: I am not an expert on Canadian law, but I did take a look in preparation for the testimony to see what laws on influencers you had.

As I understand it, there are regulations governing what influencers do when they are doing product placement in the Competition Act.

In the Elections Act, as I understand it, folks are only required to disclose if they've been paid for content if it's coming from a political actor themselves. With something like Tenet Media, when you might want a disclosure asking where the money is coming from and to also encourage the influencers themselves to know their customer and who they're doing the bidding on behalf of—which the Americans, in the case of Tenet Media, did not do—essentially, there's a loophole there. It's just a media company, and they're paying them to create media, but they're creating political content.

What I would argue is that you might need to close that loophole by encouraging influencers who are creating political content to also have those sorts of disclosures if they're being paid by someone, and encouraging that “know your customer” behaviour that so many banks engage in.

Mr. Iqwinder Gaheer: Do you think social media companies will comply if the regulations are put on them?

Ms. Nina Jankowicz: They have done self-regulation when it comes to political advertising in the United States, but that's not flawless and, frankly, a lot of stuff falls through the cracks.

I actually think this should be on the influencers themselves. Just like when you're placing a political advertisement on TV, on radio or in print and you're required to say who paid for that political ad, the same should be true for content that's created and is seemingly authentic, individual-creator content being posted on social media.

Mr. Iqwinder Gaheer: Thank you.

I'll pass it on to Ms. O'Connell.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Thank you all for being here. Your testimony has been really helpful, and we will not have enough time.

Following up on this, Ms. Jankowicz, part of the Tenet disinformation influencer indictment is that one of the things being claimed is that these so-called influencers didn't know they were being paid by Russia. I find that hard to believe. There should be some responsibility on that individual to know who's paying them if they have any integrity.

In terms of your specific recommendations around closing loopholes, how do we help manage that if, even if they disclose it's a political ad or it's being paid for, as you said in your testimony earlier, there was an intermediary for those payments? Do you have any advice on how we should address that?

• (1650)

Ms. Nina Jankowicz: There were two failings in our system. One was that we don't require influencers, just as you don't, to disclose when they're being paid to do political content. Also, the Foreign Agents Registration Act is extremely poorly enforced in the United States. The two individuals—Canadians, as it were—who were in charge of Tenet Media also did not disclose their connection, even though they knew they were working for the Russians. There are two problems there.

I have mixed feelings that we don't have time to get into about foreign agents-related legislation and whether it works or not, but here, again, encouraging them to know their customer would have at least said to these influencers, "Okay, you've been presented this very suspicious-looking CV from a man named Edward Gregorian, who has no online footprint. Perhaps you should do a little bit more digging."

If it is incumbent on them to report that sort of thing, I think it's possible. These aren't dumb individuals; their spidey sense would have gone off and they should have said, "Perhaps I shouldn't take this \$100,000 per YouTube video, because this guy doesn't seem totally legit." That's the behaviour you want to encourage, and putting that on each individual influencer hopefully will encourage some more of that transparency.

You could also, as I understand it, look at expanding your foreign agents registration and, importantly, as we do not do this in the United States, actually make sure that those laws are enforced.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Thank you.

If any of you have something you weren't able to say in your testimony, please submit it, because I have found everything that all three of you have presented really helpful.

In terms of building trust, if I have a little bit more time, people accuse government of censorship, etc. Would it be helpful for on-line content, if it's not just left up to the social media platforms themselves, to have civil society or a third party that perhaps governments can help support?

I don't know; I'm throwing it out there for legitimate questioning to help educate or dispel some myths. Would that be helpful in building some of that trust amongst the public?

Ms. Nina Jankowicz: I'll jump in, but I know Mr. Ling probably has some feelings on this as well.

I think empowering civil society to do things like information literacy building and trust building in their own communities is important, but not on behalf of the government. That will be viewed as tainted in some way.

Those information literacy programs are very important. In every country I've studied that has much more experience dealing with Russian disinformation than any country in the west, information literacy and resiliency are huge parts of the response. This is not a panacea, but it needs to be invested in now.

I know Canada has been investing in these things. I encourage you to continue doing that.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Thank you.

Is there time for Mr. Ling's response?

The Chair: Give a brief answer, sir.

Mr. Justin Ling: I'll be incredibly brief.

Creating hall monitors—maybe that's too cute—for information on social media probably won't deliver the results you want, and it will become a pariah for political actors, partisans and malign foreign actors to seize on.

As Ms. Jankowicz pointed out very well, you have to go after the technological amplification that helps distort the conversation. Bots, for example, and malign and distorting algorithms are great conversation points and great places to start. Start creating consequences for platforms that don't clean up their act. That is going to be infinitely more effective in creating healthy domestic conversations that won't get polluted by money from the outside.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michaud, you have two minutes.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Alexander, I want to go back to what you were saying to Mr. Motz earlier. He wanted to know whether Russia was continuing to interfere in Canada, because, in a way, it knows that nothing will be done. You were saying that maybe we should start by expelling diplomats and that this is the only language Russia understands.

I find that interesting, because when we are in international forums, parliamentary associations, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, for example, at every meeting, we wonder whether we are going to allow Russia and Belarus to be present at those meetings, because they are members of the OSCE.

Some countries are saying that we need to keep diplomacy alive. If there is no dialogue, we'll never agree, we'll never be able to find a solution together. Other countries are saying that, no, they shouldn't be at the table, because all they're doing is using this platform to spread disinformation.

You seem to be leaning towards the hard line, but I'd like you to tell us more about what should be done to make Canada look a little more robust and to show that we don't accept interference in our democratic institutions.

• (1655)

Hon. Chris Alexander: I think we need to be consistent on that. Russian diplomats, often spies, were expelled following the 2014 invasion, and even later. Even this government did that.

Why not do it after 2022, while Russia is at war with a European country, and not a small country? Ukraine is the largest country in Europe with a special relationship with Canada. I find it hard to understand why this isn't being done, especially since the majority of these so-called diplomats in Canada, in Ottawa, Toronto and Montreal, are not diplomats interested in diplomacy.

They are officers of the various Russian intelligence agencies that have expanded under Vladimir Putin. These are people who consider themselves disinformation warriors. I think our services, as well as the U.S. services, don't necessarily understand that. I think they don't understand the extent to which Russia has mobilized its entire government to influence our debates through various information strategies. They don't necessarily use the old KGB or their foreign intelligence services. This is done by the Kremlin, often using private sector companies.

We understand what it is about. They are ambassadors, and they are former diplomats who now act as information warriors. We need action. Mr. Ling is right to suggest that we call it what it is. If it is interference, it must be acknowledged and stated publicly. What Russia is looking for in Canada and in other countries isn't diplomacy; it's the large-scale conventional war in Ukraine and the information war here.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you.

The Chair: I'm sorry, but I have to stop you there.

[English]

We go now to Mr. Julian for two and a half minutes, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[English]

I want to go back to you, Ms. Jankowicz, to answer the same question I asked Mr. Ling around approaches like the Psychological Defence Agency in Sweden and having a digital resilience strategy.

I also wanted to ask two additional questions.

One is this: To what extent does the manipulation of algorithms help to reinforce disinformation?

We have seen, with Elon Musk on X, algorithms that deliberately force people to read certain content, like pro-Trump content and his own tweets, and that suppress other content.

My final question is around the massive subsidy that the Canadian government provides to social media companies like Meta, Twitter and Google. We spend over a billion dollars a year in indirect subsidies.

Do you feel that it would be more appropriate for the government to demand more of these social media platforms when we're subsidizing them so extensively?

Ms. Nina Jankowicz: Absolutely. Thank you for these questions.

I am a big proponent of information literacy and building societal resilience. I think the Swedes, Finns, Estonians and Ukrainians have learned a ton about this in the past couple of years. They are all more resilient societies than any of our western societies because they are investing in teaching people how to navigate today's information environment. I have a lot of writing on this that I would be very happy to share with all of you. I'll do that after today's session.

In terms of algorithmic amplification, absolutely it is surfacing more disinformation. The more engaging that something is online, the more engaging it likely is. This is how the platforms make their money and keep us scrolling, viewing ads and coming back to their platforms time and time again. It's because of this emotional manipulation, and the algorithms are based on that. Having more transparency around the algorithms would build our ability to inoculate ourselves against it.

As for subsidies, absolutely, 100%, the government should not be subsidizing these multi-billion-dollar corporations. Instead, I am in favour of fining the platforms, especially if they are seen to have illegal or hateful content on them. Some schemes like this exist already in places like the United Kingdom with its Online Safety Act.

It has been a pleasure to be with you all today. Unfortunately, I have to sign off to go collect my son from the nursery.

Thank you for the opportunity.

• (1700)

The Chair: That's actually serendipitous, because it's two seconds before the end of Mr. Julian's time. Thank you for your testimony.

Thank you to all the witnesses for your testimony.

I would invite all witnesses, if they wish, if they any follow-up testimony, to submit a brief to the committee. Any translation that's necessary will be undertaken by our noble clerk here.

Thank you all. That brings an end to this portion of the meeting.

Thank you, Mr. Alexander.

We will suspend as we go in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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