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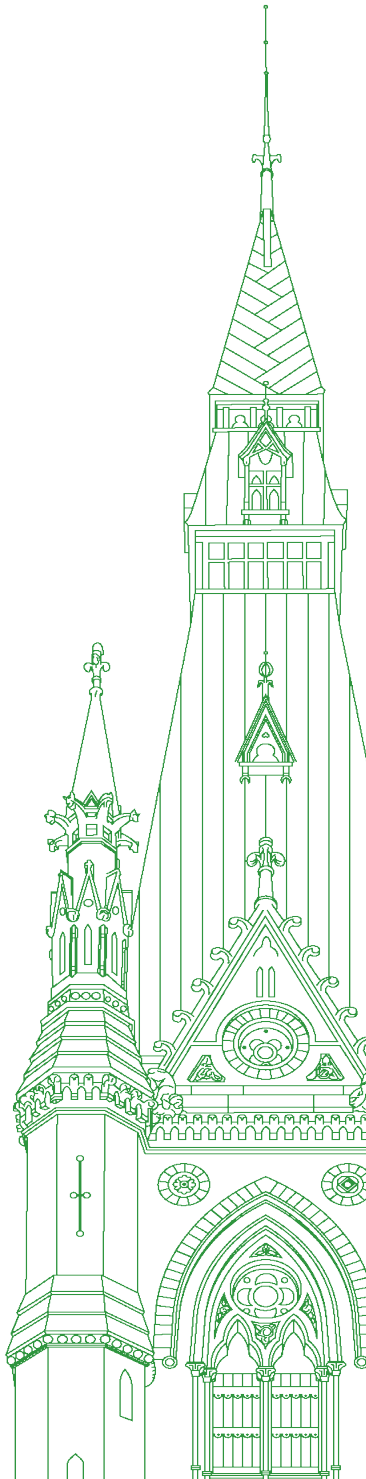

Chair: Fayçal El-Khoury

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Monday, April 13, 2026

● (1535)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome everyone to meeting number 15 of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the subcommittee on Monday, January 26, 2026, the subcommittee is meeting to examine the current situation for democracy and human rights defenders around the world.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

[*English*]

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses and members.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your microphone and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

I will remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[*Translation*]

Welcome to the witnesses.

[*English*]

As individuals, we have Ms. Gabrielle Bardall, assistant professor of political science and chairholder of the Canada research chair in women, democracy and power in the Francophonie, from the Université Sainte-Anne; Mr. Leslie Campbell, analyst and consultant, international democracy assistance, by video conference; Professor Miriam Cohen, associate professor and chairholder of Canada research chair in human rights and international reparative justice; Mr. Kevin Deveaux, lawyer, by video conference; and Ms. Monika Le Roy, fellow, Montreal Institute for Global Security.

From the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus, we have the Honourable Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, head and president-elect of Belarus, by video conference.

[*Translation*]

Welcome everyone.

You will each have five minutes for opening remarks.

We'll start with Gabrielle Bardall.

Gabrielle Bardall (Assistant Professor of Political Science and Chairholder of Canada Research Chair in Women, Democracy, and Power in the Francophonie, Université Sainte-Anne, As an Individual): Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to be here today.

My name is Gabrielle Bardall. I am the Canada research chair on women, democracy and power in the francophonie at Université Sainte-Anne. I bring over 20 years of experience in democracy assistance across more than 60 countries, including with the United Nations, international civil society organizations and Global Affairs Canada.

My central message is this: Supporting resilient democracy internationally through Canada's foreign policy tools is urgent, but it requires a shift—from technical support to protecting people, power and participation. Canada is uniquely positioned to lead that shift, by setting the normative agenda, establishing a special representative and mobilizing Canadian expertise.

We are living through a rupture in the international order. The rules-based system is under strain. In this context, support for democracy is not only a values issue; it's really a preventative security and economic policy—the essence of national strategic interests.

Canada has strong assets to respond. We have a respected track record, recognized expertise and global credibility. To remain effective, however, we must update how we understand democratic threats.

The nature of democratic erosion has fundamentally changed. We are no longer seeing only the dismantling of institutions. We are also seeing the manipulation of institutions and the shrinking of participation, including in untraditional ways such as through violence against women in politics.

The indicators and targets have also changed. The indicators of democratic decline are appearing in new places. Attacks on women's rights organizations are among the clearest early warning signs.

The strategies used to undermine democracy have also become more sophisticated. We are seeing hybrid approaches that combine restrictive legislation, digital manipulation and narrative warfare. Gendered disinformation and identity-based attacks are increasingly used to polarize societies and weaken democratic cohesion.

Taken together, the central challenge to democracy today is the systematic shrinking and distortion of democratic space.

Canada's work in supporting parliaments, electoral systems and governance remains essential, but it is no longer sufficient on its own. Canada must build on these strengths with approaches that protect participation, respond to hybrid threats and engage directly with power dynamics. This includes recognizing that democratic contestation now takes place in information spaces and public narratives, and that trust-based, long-term partnerships are critical to sustaining democratic resilience.

Canada also has a comparative advantage in how it works. Some of Canada's most effective leadership has been demonstrated through our engagement on the women, peace and security agenda, which emphasized relationships, networks, and sustained engagement across government, civil society and international partners. This model prioritizes trust, convening power and political insight, allowing Canada to operate with flexibility in complex environments.

To operationalize this shift, Canada should take three key steps.

First, it should ground its approach in a clear normative framework for democracy, drawing on international commitments and Canadian constitutional principles, and consider developing a more integrated national action framework.

Second, Canada should establish an office of a special representative for democracy to facilitate coherent cross-government responses, provide visible leadership, convene partners, align Canada's tools and enable rapid responses.

Third, this role should be embedded within a broader, more formal network of Canadian expertise, ensuring real-time insight, adaptive policy and rapid response through a model inspired by the Women, Peace and Security Network – Canada or options suggested by colleagues here.

Finally, this work must be grounded in multipartisan commitment and gender-based analysis plus, or GBA+. Democracy is not a partisan issue—it is a foundational Canadian value. Likewise, GBA+ enhances our collective national security and economic interests.

In closing, to defend resilient democracy today, we must move beyond technical fixes and engage directly with the realities of power—who holds it, how it is contested and who is excluded. Canada has the experience, the credibility and the tools to lead. What is needed now is the strategic focus and institutional anchor to act on that leadership.

Thank you.

● (1540)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bardall. You did a good job of staying within your allotted time. I hope the others will do the same.

We will now hear Leslie Campbell's opening remarks for five minutes.

[*English*]

Leslie Campbell (Analyst and Consultant, International Democracy Assistance, As an Individual): Thank you, Chair.

Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the subcommittee. Thanks very much for inviting us all to participate today.

I'm going to give a little history here but come around to very much a similar point to [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] created Department of Government Efficiency in the United States, or DOGE, ordered officials at the State Department and USAID to immediately suspend [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. While a true review never took place, several weeks later, a termination list was circulated that cancelled—

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Chair, I have to raise a point of order. I think there's a connection problem, and it could affect the health and safety of the interpreters. Can you check whether the problem can be fixed?

The Chair: Yes, we'll check that right away.

● (1545)

[*English*]

I would like to continue with you, Mr. Campbell. If the problem persists, we'll come back to you and you won't lose any time.

Please go ahead. You can start from the top.

Leslie Campbell: In late January 2025, the newly created Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, ordered officials at the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development to suspend [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] a review. While a true review never took place, several weeks later, a termination list was circulated that cancelled—

The Chair: I'm sorry to cut you off, Mr. Campbell. We would like to come back to you. We'll try to correct this situation.

I invite Professor Miriam Cohen to take the floor for five minutes.

The floor is yours.

[*Translation*]

Professor Miriam Cohen (Associate Professor and Chairholder of Canada Research Chair in Human Rights and International Reparative Justice, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair and members of the committee, my name is Miriam Cohen, and I am the Canada research chair in human rights and international reparative justice at Université de Montréal.

Thank you very much for inviting me to be here today and for considering the situation of democracy and human rights defenders around the world. It's an honour to contribute to the committee's work on an issue that directly concerns the rule of law, democratic governance and the protection of fundamental freedoms.

My remarks will focus on three areas. First, I'll provide an overview of the current situation of human rights defenders internationally. Then, I'll discuss legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms for protection, and I'll end with some best practices and recommendations.

Human rights defenders play an essential role in any democracy. They help to ensure that human rights are protected and respected, and that democratic principles are upheld. Human rights defenders come from a wide variety of backgrounds. They are youth, adults, members of indigenous communities, recognized professionals and civil society actors. Active in both urban and remote areas, detention settings, and conflict and post-conflict zones, they work alongside refugees, migrants and asylum seekers. They are also present in new arenas such as climate change, AI and emerging technology.

Despite the crucial role they play, human rights defenders are routine targets for intimidation, attack, abduction, false accusations and serious rights violations, by both state and non-state actors. They are unfairly tried, wrongfully convicted and sometimes murdered or forced into hiding.

These trends fit into a broader context of democratic backsliding. Global indicators show that civil and political liberties have been consistently deteriorating for over a decade. When democratic institutions are weakened, human rights defenders often become targets, precisely because they serve as a counterbalance.

Today, various legal mechanisms and instruments help to protect human rights defenders.

In 1999, the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, recognizing their role and their right to promote and protect human rights. Although not legally binding internationally, the declaration is based on the Charter of the United Nations and the major international treaties on human rights. In addition, the UN Human Rights Council examines matters related to the protection of human rights defenders through its universal periodic review and special procedures. The special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders plays an essential role, analyzing information on violations and developing recommendations.

A number of regional initiatives complement these frameworks.

In Europe, the Council of Europe adopted a declaration to improve the protection of human rights defenders and has a general rapporteur responsible for monitoring the situation of human rights defenders.

In Africa, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights created a special rapporteur on human rights defenders mandated to pay particular attention to certain types of vulnerable people, including women's rights defenders and environmental advocates.

It is also important to point out that states can neither delegate their responsibility to protect human rights defenders nor use exceptional circumstances to shirk their responsibility. The protection of human rights defenders stems from a fundamental obligation under the rule of law. Human rights defenders are vital to the workings of a democratic society. Their work helps to prevent rights abuses, strengthen public trust and support the rule of law. For that reason, their protection is imperative to democracy.

With that in mind, it is especially important for the international community to prioritize three things.

The first is to fight against impunity for perpetrators of violence against human rights defenders.

The second is to guarantee freedom of association and access to funding for civil society.

The third is to ensure clear and consistent political support for democracy and human rights defenders at risk.

● (1550)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Cohen. I'm very glad you stayed within your allotted time.

We will now hear opening remarks from lawyer Kevin Deveaux for five minutes.

[*English*]

Kevin Deveaux (Lawyer, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chairperson.

Thank you to the committee for this opportunity to present.

I'll just briefly give you my background. I've been a lawyer based in Halifax for 35 years. I was elected four times to the Nova Scotia House of Assembly. Twenty years ago I left politics and started working internationally, first with the United Nations and more recently as a consultant, focused on political governance and, particularly, support to parliaments and political parties. I've had the pleasure of working directly with more than 80 parliaments around the world.

My focus today is probably more broadly to talk about Canada's role in building systems that can ensure democratic resilience and support the democratic advocates around the world. In particular, I think we can all agree that in the last year or so the world order has shifted. It's no longer good enough for Canada to follow others. It's time for us to lead. I would hope that the speech from January in Davos by the Prime Minister was a starting point for that, but if it's going to be more than words on a page, then we really do need concrete ideas about how Canada is going to build those coalitions of middle powers. It's no longer about us being in the back seat. It's about finding our added value and being prepared to lead in securing democratic states and values.

I understand that Canadian foreign policy has shifted away from perhaps other priorities to now focusing on Canada's security and on building stable trading partnerships for our economic prosperity. I don't disagree with that pivot, but I would say that we don't have security as a country and we don't have stable trading and economic prosperity without partners who are following democratic standards. For example, there's the rule of law. Without an independent, robust judiciary, the enforcement of trade agreements and supply chain contracts isn't going to happen. Without robust civil society and free media, holding the government to account becomes much more challenging. We need to ensure that those democratic standards and values, and countries based on those, are the basis of our partnerships.

If we're talking about a new world order, I would also argue that it's time for a new approach. The old way of overseas development assistance, or ODA, and project-based modalities where the global north imposed its needs on the global south will no longer be viable. Canada needs to lead not through the prescriptive requirements that it imposes through project cycles but through collaboration amongst like-minded democratic countries and nascent movements in more autocratic settings, as I think we will hear from our fellow presenter from Belarus.

Canada does have unique value, whether that's our two languages, our two legal systems, our cadre of experts in many fields of democratic governance or our history of gender-based analysis as a priority. These are things that I think allow Canada to provide and have the gravitas to lead. We want to facilitate dialogue and solutions between the north and south. Again, this isn't about imposing from the north to the south. It's about how we begin to talk to each other as equals. Let's not create a new institution that will be looking to solve problems that may or may not exist. Let's invest in bespoke and tailor-made analysis and use Canada's convening power to create solutions where democracy is challenged or threatened.

I have one very concrete recommendation with regard to that. I think the Government of Canada needs to invest in a rapid deployment system of democratic governance and security experts who can provide timely, high-quality political analysis that can inform the government as it makes decisions with regard to global events. I suspect—in fact, I'm pretty confident—that this is lacking at the moment.

Such a system should be external from the government so that we can have more frank advice and analysis. It should be based on a roster of Canadian experts from which a small group can be drawn. They can conduct political and security analysis in hot spots. Think of Bangladesh after the 2024 uprising, or think of Lebanon, perhaps, in a month or two, if possible, when this conflict ends. It would be able to draw upon Canadian academics and think tanks for background and analytical research. It would be able to provide Global Affairs Canada and the broader government with concrete political analysis and recommendations within weeks of a global crisis to inform our actions and policies. It would give Canada a seat at the table through a rapid, evidence-based analysis that can be shared with potential partners.

Canada's offering to its partners is a commitment to facilitate and create space for an informed dialogue that can create solutions and support tailored interventions to a given country or region in a given circumstance. By building a rapid deployment system for political analysis, Canada is building a reputation as a broker and an incubator of bespoke solutions for a given country or region in crisis. This is soft power, and soft power is a type of political capital Canada needs as we seek new trading and security partners.

● (1555)

Finally, I would just say that I think some of the other recommendations I've heard already, particularly from Madame Bardall around a special representative or an office of democracy, fit very well within this rapid deployment as ways of enhancing Canada's capacity to speak and act quickly.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

I would now like to invite the Honourable Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to take the floor for five minutes.

Welcome, Madame. The floor is yours.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (Head and President-elect of Belarus, United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I want to thank the Canadian Parliament and government for your commitment to freedom, democracy and human rights.

Canada was always one of the staunchest supporters of the Belarusian democratic movement. I want to thank you for that, but first of all for supporting Ukraine, because the fates of Belarus and Ukraine are intertwined.

My name is Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. In 2020, I was an ordinary housewife, and I decided to run against the dictator Lukashenko, who ruled the country for 30 years. I did it out of love for my husband, who was a blogger and was imprisoned after his decision to challenge the dictator. By all independent counts, we, the Belarusian people, won that election by a landslide, but predictably, the dictator refused to step down, and he unleashed real terror in Belarus. Thousands of people were imprisoned and many more were forced into exile, including me.

In exile, we continue to fight. We have formed the government in exile and democratic institutions as an alternative to the pro-Russian regime in Minsk. Many western countries recognize us as legitimate representatives of the Belarusian people and call me president-elect. I'm glad that Canada, since 2020, no matter who is in power, has recognized our movement and in 2024 launched formal strategic consultations with Belarusian democratic forces.

Belarus is a perfect example of what happens when you neglect democracy. It shows how security and democracy are intertwined. Authorities that don't respect their own people also don't respect their neighbours. The regime in Minsk made Belarus a launch pad for Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Belarus is used for hybrid attacks against Europe. Russia deploys nuclear weapons and strategic missiles to blackmail our neighbours—Lithuania, Latvia and Poland. The dictator is selling our independence to Putin in exchange for his political support.

All of that happens against the will of the Belarusian people. Most Belarusians are against the dictatorship, support Ukraine and lean toward a European future.

Any dissent, any form of resistance, is cracked down on by the regime. Since 2020, 65,000 people have passed through detention. On average, every single day, 10 people are being detained on trumped-up charges. People are arrested for everything—for comments, for likes on Instagram, for donations to Belarusian volunteers fighting in Ukraine or for helping the opposition. As we speak, more than 950 political prisoners remain behind bars, including 120 women.

Last year, thanks to U.S. diplomacy and European pressure, more than 500 people were released. Unfortunately, it didn't stop the repression, and new hostages have since been taken.

Belarusian prisons remind us of the Stalin times. People are regularly beaten, tortured, punished by isolation and cold, and kept incommunicado. Many have died behind bars already. Even those released cannot enjoy full freedom. They remain under surveillance and restricted in rights. Those abroad face transnational repression. The regime has denied them passports, documents and consular services, making them de facto stateless.

The regime abuses international mechanisms, such as Interpol, to chase political opponents. Those who are active in exile, including here in Canada, are blackmailed with their relatives' prosecution in Belarus. Even abroad, our people cannot feel safe. Those who return to Belarus to renew documents, for example, or visit elderly parents are often arrested right on the border.

The regime in Belarus wages war not only against its own people but also against Belarusian culture and identity, our language and our history, just as Russia is doing in occupied territories in Ukraine. Their goal is to make us another Russia and destroy our pro-European aspirations.

Today, I came here to ask Canada to be a leading voice for freedom and democracy worldwide and to put the Belarusian situation in focus.

I have some practical suggestions for Canada.

First, keep pressure on the regime. Keep sanctions strong. Demand the release of all political prisoners and a full stop to repression. Canada has leverage and you have power.

Second, continue and increase assistance for our civil society, for democratic forces, for cultural initiatives and, of course, for independent media.

● (1600)

Programs such as Journalists for Human Rights, funded by Canada, help empower our connection with the people on the ground and provide them with truth, not propaganda. Canada can also support the International Humanitarian Fund to help victims of repression, which we launched with Norway and which 12 other countries have already joined.

Third, support our accountability efforts. Canada can support the case in the International Criminal Court against Lukashenko's regime for crimes against humanity. We must bring perpetrators to justice, not only for repression but also for complicity in Russia's war and the deportation of Ukrainian children to Belarus.

Fourth, help Belarusians in Canada so that they can feel safe. We have small but very active communities in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. Establish simplified legalization mechanisms and provide Belarusians with the necessary documents and asylum. Recognize Belarus as an unsafe country to return to and prohibit extradition to Belarus.

Fifth, help us raise the issue of transnational repression in the UN and OSCE. I know Global Affairs puts a lot of focus on it. We must prevent dictators from misusing international mechanisms for political prosecution.

Finally, strengthen the relationship with Belarusian democratic forces and the United Transitional Cabinet, because changes in Belarus are inevitable. As history shows, dictatorships collapse when no one expects it. We must prepare for a post-Lukashenko Belarus now, so that when the moment comes, we can put the country on the right track.

In the end, I ask you to form a group for a democratic Belarus in the Canadian Parliament and organize joint events together to highlight Belarus, Ukraine and our struggle for freedom. Our fight is not isolated. It's part of a global fight for freedom, democracy and human rights. Of course, change in Belarus is our task—the Belarusian people's—but no fight for freedom can be won when you're alone. We need allies on our path, and we count on Canada and your leadership.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Due to the situation, I gave you more than two minutes extra. I feel sorry for the other witnesses. I have to respect the time, but you got special consideration.

Now I would like to invite Ms. Monika Le Roy to take the floor for five minutes.

The floor is yours.

● (1605)

Monika Le Roy (Fellow, Montreal Institute for Global Security, As an Individual): Thank you, Chair and members of the subcommittee.

Canada has a genuine and distinguished record in supporting democratic governance abroad. During the Pinochet and Argentine dictatorships, Canadian funding sustained independent researchers who later helped design the democratic institutions that replaced those regimes.

Canada led the Commonwealth efforts to impose sanctions against apartheid in South Africa when larger allies resisted. At the 2001 Summit of the Americas, hosted in Quebec City, Canada anchored the declaration that became the Inter-American Democratic Charter, embedding democratic conditionality into the institutional architecture of an entire hemisphere.

The question before this committee is not whether Canada believes in democracy support. It is why we have not built the doctrine, sustained funding or institutional coherence to do this work systematically. Canadian engagement has been episodic, shaped by program cycles and political wins. That has constrained our credibility and reduced the strategic return on our own interventions.

I offer 20 years of practitioner experience at the OAS, navigating democratic crises in Venezuela, Nicaragua and Haiti, serving as senior policy adviser to two Canadian foreign ministers and providing field leadership supporting targeted democratic interventions across five continents.

Today I want to offer three propositions.

First, democracy support is of Canadian national interest. Democratic partners make better trade and security partners. They offer rule of law, contract enforcement and regulatory predictability, the very conditions Canada's trade diversification agenda depends on. Investments in legislative oversight or judicial independence are not charitable acts. These are investments in the durability of the economic and security partnerships our country relies on.

The counterfactual also matters. Authoritarian actors are actively undermining the rules-based system Canada depends on, displacing multilateral norms and destabilizing the environment in which Canada trades, invests and operates. This is not values divorced from interest. It is national interest policy and it should be treated, structured and funded as such.

Second, political institutions are a necessary investment. Civil society support matters, and Canada has capable organizations doing it, but civil society without functional political institutions produces advocacy without governance. In open societies, democracy requires legislatures that work, parties that compete responsibly and elected officials who can govern. In closed environments, it requires protecting the political and civic space that keeps democratic possibility alive.

The numbers are stark. Of Canada's roughly $12.3 billion in official development assistance, about $165 million goes to democratic development. Of that, just $4.75 million reaches legislatures and political parties. When Canadian parliamentarians engage directly with peers through mechanisms like ParlAmericas and the Parliamentary Centre, they build institutional trust and political relationships that open doors and anchor security partnerships.

Third, credibility depends on consistency. Canada's multilateral positions, political statements and global affairs programming must reinforce one another. Belarus illustrates the challenge. Magnitsky sanctions are in place, and they matter, but designation without proportionate support for political institutions and without sustained engagement with democratic forces in exile, reveals a gap between what Canada says and what it deploys.

This subcommittee has heard from the president-elect from Belarus. A legitimate question is whether Canada's material support is proportional to the leadership position it claims to hold. It's time to meet the moment. Global official development assistance dropped by nearly one-quarter in 2025. Democracy and governance programming experienced some of the steepest cuts in decades, where the largest funder, the United States, has halted roughly 90% of a $3-billion annual budget. This is a vacuum that will not remain empty. The only question is what and who is going to fill it.

My recommendations do not require new money. They require rebalancing and doctrine.

First, the committee should ask the government to develop a public Canadian democracy support strategy, one that links Canada's political and multilateral positions to programming and explicitly treats democracy support as an investment in Canadian economic and security interests.

Second, direct Global Affairs Canada to fund political actors—legislators, parties and elected officials—with the same intent applied to civil society. Supporting political institutions is not interference. It is the most direct investment Canada can make in democratic durability.

Third, recommend predictable multi-year partnerships with key democratic institutions that carry Canada's credibility into the field. The model here is partnership, not episodic grants. Sustained support allows planning, expertise retention and the long-term relationships this work requires. Canada has the tools, the credibility and the strategic interest to play a serious role in supporting democracy abroad. What we have lacked is the doctrine that connects these tools and the consistency that convinces our partners we mean what we say.

Thank you.

● (1610)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Le Roy. You finished right on time.

[*English*]

Now I would like to move to questions and answers, but before that, we have to go back to Mr. Leslie Campbell. I will just let you know that we are probably going to continue to have the same problem. If the problem persists, we will have to say sorry to Mr. Campbell.

Mr. Campbell, we will give you another chance. The floor is yours.

It appears Mr. Campbell is no longer with us, so we will go to the next step, which is questions and answers.

I would like to start by inviting Mr. Majumdar to take the floor for seven minutes.

The floor is yours.

Shuvaloy Majumdar (Calgary Heritage, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for all of your testimonies today. We really appreciate hearing your perspectives on how democracy and international affairs serve the national interest. It's been very insightful.

Sviatlana, it's really good to see you healthy and thriving again. You've been a great friend to Canada, and hopefully Canada has been a good friend to you and your cause. Maybe I could start with you very briefly.

A case against Lukashenko has now been brought to the ICC for crimes against humanity, but Canada has not joined. Should Canada support this effort, and what outcomes would you expect from the ICC?

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: First of all, I have to say that Lithuania's referral was an important breakthrough. The ICC has now opened an investigation into alleged crimes against humanity linked to Belarus. It's focused, in particular, on the deportation and persecution of political opponents. Of course, it's not just a symbolic case. It means that, for us, the doors to justice are open. There is still a long road ahead, but the road exists. We started work on this case three years ago, so some even lost hope.

What I expect from the ICC, first of all, is a serious, professional investigation that preserves evidence and identifies those most responsible for the crimes. Second, we await arrest warrants when the legal threshold is met. Third, it's a message to every official in the Belarusian system that impunity is not forever.

I do not expect miracles tomorrow, but for the victims, even this opening of the case really matters. I think that Canada, of course, can support the accountability process more effectively. At a minimum, Canada should or could publicly support this investigation, share the evidence with the prosecutors where possible and fund, for example, documentation work, and protect witnesses and survivors on its territory but also support universal jurisdiction cases.

We call on more countries to join Lithuania's referral, so Canada can join this case in the frame of the International Criminal Court.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: In Poland, I had an opportunity to meet many of your colleagues, who are very sophisticated actors in how they represent Belarusian activists and civilians down to the village district. Systemically, what kind of support could be provided to you and your colleagues in these challenging times?

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: We are really people and a nation without a state. First of all, of course, we need support for our people. While putting pressure on the regime, we are asking for support for our civil society, because it's the backbone of any uprising. We ask you to provide assistance to Belarusian civil society activists, young initiatives and independent media and journalism, including human rights reporting.

Also, cultural and educational programs are extremely important, because the regime is trying to erase everything Belarusian. For example, we can propose to increase support for media through the Journalists for Human Rights program that is chaired by Marcus Kolga.

Also, contributions to the International Humanitarian Fund are essential, because we are expecting more political prisoners to be released, hopefully soon, and all of them will need psychological and physical rehabilitation.

● (1615)

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you very much. I really appreciate that. That's a good survey of events. I'm sorry to cut you off. I have just a brief couple of minutes left.

Ms. Le Roy, it's nice to see you. You have incredible experiences across Asia and the Americas, both on a policy and a practitioner level. Your testimony suggested ways in which doctrine and support could be provided to actors across these areas of your expertise.

What do these areas in Asia and the Americas tell you about Beijing's approach in undermining these democracies around the world?

Monika Le Roy: I just returned from spending two years in the South Pacific, building democracy programs that were literally designed to confront China's incursion into the South Pacific sea. They've moved into a region where western governments were, for the most part, absent. They immediately moved in to start building deep-sea ports to support their naval blockades if they wanted to move into new territories. They are interfering and building partnerships with security apparatus across the Pacific Islands region. They're using money to destabilize and corrupt governance institutions and natural resources.

Simple partnership programs that work with political parties, that work with governance structures and that work with legislators to build transparency capacity provide a very safe and low-effort alternative to the Chinese government for partnership with the rest of the world.

In regard to Venezuela, I think we've all seen what has happened in the country over the past year in particular, but that was 15 years of erosion by a government that was getting substantial funding from the Chinese government to do erosion of democratic structures and eliminate their human rights systems in order to ensure that the Chinese government had access to long-term oil resources.

Canada did play a role in supporting International Criminal Court prosecutions or investigations into the situation in Venezuela, but it fell short of taking additional action to support the opposition. Supporting local actors—political parties, civil society groups—is essential to providing a counterpart for foreign interference that's intent on weakening structures that would support our allies.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Okay. Thank you.

Chair, I understand that I'm probably at the last five seconds of my time, so I return the floor.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I would like to invite Ms. Anita Vandenbeld.

Anita, welcome back. We missed you. I hope all is well. You have the floor for seven minutes, please.

Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much. It's wonderful to be back, especially with this incredible panel. I think we could spend many hours with these witnesses.

I have a question for each witness. If we don't get to you in this round, maybe we can follow up.

I'm going to start with you, Mr. Deveaux. You and some of the previous witnesses spoke quite a bit about the ODA model of project X, where there are four to five years of funding for a particular country to do a particular project with pre-set activities, outcomes and outputs, but the model doesn't work when it comes to this urgent global threat of democratic backsliding.

You talked about rapid response. You talked about going into areas where there's high risk that perhaps mobilizing an arm's-length institution or some form of expertise would be better than having projects that can sometimes require months or years for a contract to be signed.

Can you tell us a little bit more about what that might look like?

Kevin Deveaux: Thank you, honourable member, for the question.

As I was saying in my presentation, Canada does have a lot of skills and capacity that I, frankly, as someone who's worked on practically every continent, believe are being underused. There are many Canadian experts who've worked for other organizations, including Mr. Campbell's former NDI, or the UNDP, but we, as a country, have never really corralled them into using that expertise for ourselves.

This isn't to be disrespectful to Global Affairs Canada, but I think there are certain skills and acumen that come with that ability to implement democratic governance projects directly—technical assistants, experts—that aren't found, necessarily, in Global Affairs Canada. I really, truly believe that having a roster of those people who then, through some third party external organization, whether that's a new one or it becomes a subset of something that already exists external from government, allows for a more frank analysis and an ability to, probably, ask questions or meet people the government, perhaps, wouldn't be able to. From that, developing a political economy analysis in a crisis situation is something that I believe the Government of Canada would find very valuable as it decides to make decisions.

However, I think our partners would as well. To go back to the Davos speech and the coalition of middle powers, it's an opportunity for Canada to be at the table, to bring something that actually can provide value that our other partners would want, based on the skills we have, and then to take that and use it as the beginning of a dialogue.

Again, instead of trying to impose a cookie-cutter approach to our work, it's thinking about how Canada can help develop a bespoke or tailor-made solution. Again, whether that's in Bangladesh in 2024 or, God help us, Georgia eventually becomes a place that's less autocratic, how do we begin to use our skills to talk about strategy and approaches that are both politically informed but also address all the points that need to be addressed to ensure that democratic standards are being met?

Thank you.

● (1620)

Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you very much.

I would note that you and I first met almost two decades ago, when we were both with UNDP in New York doing this kind of work.

Kevin Deveaux: Indeed.

Anita Vandenbeld: There are others on this committee who've done similar work.

My second question is for Professor Bardall.

Gabrielle, you've done a lot of work on women, peace and security, and you did mention GBA+ and the tremendous backsliding that's happening. Really, the litmus test is what's happening to women's organizations globally. I wonder whether you could talk a bit about that and the nexus between gender and security, which I know you've done a lot of work on.

[*Translation*]

Gabrielle Bardall: Thank you for your question.

Yes, right now women's rights defenders and women's rights and democracy organizations are among the prime targets of threats to democracy. Nearly 70% of women's rights organizations have experienced threats and harassment both online and off-line, 57% have identified state actors as the perpetrators of the attacks and almost 20% have been the victims of serious violence or threats of violence, including death threats.

These threats have significant repercussions, silencing people and hiding much of what goes on in authoritarian regimes, which use gender and identity issues in an effort to divide society, be it here in Canada or other countries. In addition, the rise in populism is tearing at the very fabric of democracy.

Under the women, peace and security initiative, Canada put some very powerful models in place, especially under the leadership of former ambassador Jacqueline O'Neill, for whom I had the honour of working for a time. Not only did those models deliver the women, peace and security program, but they also promoted effective co-operation between the Canadian government and Canadian civil society.

The office of the ambassador for women, peace and security took a whole-of-government approach, working with many government departments, providing support to international missions, and giving political cover and legitimacy to certain actors abroad targeted by authoritarian actors. What's more, the ambassador's office built very close ties with Canadian civil society, which provided support and a rapid response mechanism, which Mr. Deveaux mentioned, to explain certain things or identify solutions in complex situations.

We therefore have considerable experience and expertise in working in complex situations, and that expertise could certainly be applied to the challenges facing democracy today.

● (1625)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Vandenbeld.

[*English*]

Anita Vandenbeld: Mr. Chair, I see that Mr. Campbell is back. Perhaps we could hear his opening remarks.

The Chair: Yes, we will, but after finishing the first round.

[*Translation*]

We now go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for seven minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being with us today.

Ms. Tsikhanouskaya, I had the opportunity to meet you a few times here, in Ottawa, and recently in Berlin, in February. You are a model of courage, bravery and perseverance. Again, it's an honour to have you with us.

I was wondering about something that has come up lately and given rise to questions. We saw some progress recently, with the release of the 250 political prisoners in Belarus as part of a deal negotiated with states in the west at the end of March. Some experts have told us that this creates a risk of legitimizing an authoritarian regime. Is that true? Obviously, the goal was to get political prisoners out of prison and that was achieved, but if it goes hand in hand with the lifting of sanctions or the legitimation of the regime, isn't there a risk for the international community?

[*English*]

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: First of all, I have to say that we are grateful to President Trump, special envoy John Coale and everyone who worked so hard to release political prisoners, because every life saved matters. When even one person walks out of jail, it's a victory for the family and a small breath of air for all of us.

Let us be honest. If the regime frees some people and then keeps arresting new ones, it's not justice. It's like a revolving door. It's not accountability. Prisoner releases are good, but they cannot become a substitute for ending repression. We must judge policy not only by how many people are released but also by whether torture stops, whether arrests stop and whether new political prisoners stop appearing.

Of course, we understand that President Trump's approach is more transactional. It really might be a success story for President Trump, and we hope that these humanitarian efforts will continue. Here we have to divide the humanitarian track and the political one.

We are in constant communication and consultation with our American partners. They are actually not doing anything behind the back of the Belarusian democratic forces, and we really appreciate this relationship. Of course, regimes are usually using political prisoners as bargaining chips. We sometimes need to use this sanction relief to release political prisoners. Also, most American sanctions were imposed because of human rights abuse, and they can be used to release political prisoners.

For example, European sanctions were imposed because of the hijacking of airplanes, because of threatening our neighbours and because of the participation of Lukashenko in this war. We're asking our European partners not to copycat the American approach at the moment but to leave the sanctions for the bigger game. We just have a formula—American sanctions to release people, European sanctions to release the country—because we need systematic changes to stop repressions and to make Belarus free and independent from Russia's claws so it can become a reliable partner for Europe. It's a long and much heavier road ahead.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: This next question may seem a bit out in left field, so you don't have to answer, of course.

Given what's going on in the Middle East, how do you see what could be unfolding in Belarus, which is completely in Russia's pocket, with the current conflict between the U.S., Israel and Iran? How do you see the situation? In terms of what could come out of the conflict, do you see it having a positive or negative impact on your situation?

It's fine, if you don't think it will make a difference. I can ask another question.

● (1630)

[*English*]

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: The world is going crazy now. There are so many conflicts in the world. What is important for me and for my country is that Belarus remains in focus and that Ukraine remains in focus, because the attention of the strongest in this world is dispersed everywhere and Belarus might be overlooked in this context.

Lukashenko is sitting at the table of dictators—the table of losers. We see the fate of dictators. Of course, there might be different methods to eliminate dictators—like in the case of Venezuela, for example, or Syria or now Iran—but it's also a warning to dictators that dictatorship is not forever and that they have to behave because they might be next.

I understand that the dictators of the world are talking to each other. They are learning from each other. They are sharing their tools and instruments to suppress and intimidate the world order, but I believe the democratic world is much stronger. You have many more tools to use. Maybe the problem is that the democratic world doesn't believe in itself enough to be a strong power against dictatorships.

Democratic changes in Belarus are important for democracy worldwide. That's why we ask our partners, our allies, not to postpone the Belarusian topic and not to overlook this in this turbulent world.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much.

Ms. Le Roy, Mr. Deveaux talked about—

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, but you're out of time.

[*English*]

Now I would like to invite Mr. Leslie Campbell to take the floor for five minutes.

Welcome back, Mr. Campbell.

Leslie Campbell: Thank you. I hope the audio problems are resolved now. Of course, interrupt me if they're not.

I think I will go away from my prepared text, just because we're already into this discussion. I'll try to pare it down a little bit to reflect the debate.

First of all, for a little context, I come to you from just outside Washington, D.C., where I've been working with the National Democratic Institute, or NDI, for almost 32 years. I left there in the fall, but I'm a Canadian from the Canadian political system in Manitoba and Ottawa, and I brought my experience in Canada to bear internationally.

I was going to talk about some of the inside things that happened with DOGE, the Department of Government Efficiency, cancelling most of the democracy programs, but the fundamental and most important issue is that three billion U.S. dollars' worth of support to democracy abroad, human rights defenders and people like Ms. Tsikhanouskaya are, if not completely gone, radically changed and radically reduced. It was an incredible blow to a project that has been going since World War II, basically.

An even bigger blow is the point that was just made by our Belarusian colleague about authoritarian learning and dictators getting together and learning from one another. They're still doing that, yet democracies have had this blow with these programs that brought many organizations and individuals together.

As an example, NDI, my former organization, worked with more than 300 Canadian politicians, members of Parliament, former members of Parliament and former politicians over the years to bring their expertise abroad, and that ability is reduced. To shorten this and add to what my colleagues have said, there's never been a better time for Canada to join in a full and very Canadian way not the network of authoritarians working together, obviously, but the network of democracies working together.

I've been talking about this in Canada for many years. One of the things that has come up a number of times is that, yes, it's great that Canada plays a role, but there are so many other players, so what would be the niche and what would Canada do where it wasn't duplicating or where it would have the biggest effect? Much of that concern is now gone. There's not a lot to duplicate anymore. There are some other democratic countries that are working in this field, but again, with the loss of the largest programs funded by the U.S., there's a huge opening.

I'm not going to take any more time except to mention the idea of a rapid response mechanism to respond to unexpected or, perhaps, untimely changes. Again, we heard that dictators usually fall unexpectedly. Coups happen unexpectedly, sometimes in a democratic direction. Wars have unexpected outcomes. I'm not defending wars even remotely, but sometimes they create openings. Individuals, and we can think of some even in the last couple of years, have led revolutions that have sprung up that we never expected to spring up and cause change. Of course, a lot of those were put away by force.

I'll end on this: I think it's extremely important for Canada to really get in there with all that it has to offer, which is an amazing amount. There's now the leadership in Canada that's very interested in this. Provide Canada's particular credibility, expertise and commitment to these issues and really, in a sense, double down on what's been done in the past. The way has been cleared for doing that, so I would encourage much more action.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

● (1635)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Campbell.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Zuberi to take the floor for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being with us today.

[*English*]

I want to thank everyone for their important testimony.

I'll start with Ms. Le Roy.

You spoke about the Parliamentary Centre and another organization. How important are these organizations for the promotion of democracy?

Within our government, Canada has supported these institutions. How important are they, how important is the work they've done and how important is it to support the future of these institutions?

Monika Le Roy: I think they're as important as Canada decides it wants them to be, and they're as important as you, as members of Parliament, decide you want them to be.

The Parliamentary Centre is a non-governmental organization that was created by an act of Parliament and was intended to create greater co-operation and greater programming and partnerships using Canadian parliamentary expertise globally.

If you look at transitional democracies operating in different countries, more often than not the parliamentary model is the one that is more easily transferable and translated. That includes members of the staff of Parliament as well as yourselves, who can participate whether it's in relationship building, in capacity building and training or in sharing expertise from committee structures and oversight and accountability mechanisms.

ParlAmericas is a parliamentary association of which Canada is a board member, and its other board members consist of all the countries in the western hemisphere. I think it is the only entity that actually has all of the countries of the hemisphere and still includes Cuba in that platform. It is a gathering of MPs coming together to tackle shared challenges.

Sameer Zuberi: There are a lot of associations like the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Commonwealth, etc., that we are involved in. I appreciate that response.

Professor Cohen, I'd like to ask you about some of your work that I've come across, actually.

[*Translation*]

I know you have written columns in Le Devoir and other publications alongside human rights advocates.

[*English*]

With respect to the challenging situation in the Middle East, in Gaza and in the region generally, I know that you have done some work and writing on this. Can you share with us how we can help promote democracy and human rights and defend human rights defenders?

● (1640)

Prof. Miriam Cohen: Thank you for the question. It's an important to think about the role of Canada in active conflicts and how civil society and human rights defenders can be supported.

At the moment, in the conflicts that are taking place in the Middle East, but also in other conflicts, look at civil society on the ground and what it needs. There's a dire need for funding for civil society organizations working with partners in Canada but also on the ground and, as I think others' testimonies have mentioned, for getting asylum seekers and support for those who would like to seek refuge in Canada.

Sameer Zuberi: I have been to Jerusalem. It was about seven or eight years ago. It was a wonderful experience. I engaged with people from all backgrounds—Jewish Israelis, Palestinian Israelis—and engaged with people in the West Bank. What I noticed in Jerusalem was that I met a lot of people who were involved in dialogue, bridge-building and the promotion of respect of everyone regardless of one's background.

What I noticed back then, seven or eight years ago, was that, in that sector, those who are doing the difficult work of bridge-building tend to be very much pressurized, and the societies are not really supporting them.

Do you have any opinions on how we can encourage a thickening of that space? I recognize that my witnessing of that was quite a long time ago as compared to where we are today.

Prof. Miriam Cohen: It's very true that the situation has changed a lot on the ground. I also visited many years ago. I think the best way now to provide support is to, again, have this collaboration with organizations that are on the ground and see what they need.

In terms of human rights defenders, what is very important is that the situation is dire on the ground, not only in Gaza but also in Iran. They have to go underground. They are subject to arbitrary detention and torture. Seeing the organizations that are doing the work, what else do they need to be supported? Funding is one thing, but if there are Canadian organizations working in those areas of conflict, support those Canadian organizations and the local ones as well.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

The Chair: Now I would like to ask Ms. Kronis to take the floor for five minutes.

Tamara Kronis (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, CPC): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

To start, I'd like to ask Ms. Le Roy a couple of questions. We get a lot of people who come to this committee and argue that Canada should be more active abroad. I'm wondering if you could help us think a bit about the line between supporting democracy and, actually, going further than that and inadvertently, or advertently in some cases, interfering in another country's internal affairs.

Monika Le Roy: I think I highlighted this distinction in my remarks, where there's supporting democratic transitions and democratic institutions, and then there's also the alternative to that, which is supporting the creation of civic space.

When working with political institutions, like political parties and legislatures, in almost every single one of those scenarios, you are working with the government, with the approval of the government, and defining programs in a partnership format, in a partnership setting.

As for supporting, challenging or operating in spaces to try to create civic space, Iran would be a great example of that. In the past, one of the activities that Canada did incredibly successfully was facilitating international dialogue between the Iranian people and their diaspora in Canada and in-country, supporting Internet opportunities for them to have conversations and public forums to talk about how they felt about what was happening in that country.

Those are two very different initiatives and approaches because the dynamics were extremely different.

It also depends on the values of the country that you're operating in. I've worked in the Middle East on women's political participation programming, where governments welcomed and celebrated that programming coming in as an opportunity. I've worked in programs in the South Pacific, where there was greater concern about how our work to empower women in a political space and public forums was going to change the community dynamics. I think, to that extent, much like what Kevin was saying and much like what Les was also saying, it really is a country-by-country dynamic, having that ability to understand where that line is and, if you're going to cross that line, as one could argue that we have by creating civic space in Iran, doing so intentionally. This is where creating a doctrine and a strategy that's coherent for our country to engage in this work is helpful.

● (1645)

Tamara Kronis: That's actually a perfect segue into my next question. Are there any safeguards that Canada should be putting into place to make sure that our actions are consistent, transparent, fit into international law and don't stray into the kind of foreign interference that we are struggling with in this country?

Monika Le Roy: My argument for that would be the democratic oversight that this committee itself offers and what is in your mandate, which is to seek clarification from the Government of Canada, from Global Affairs Canada, in terms of what activities they are doing and how they're approaching their democratic initiatives and their support abroad. You, as members of Parliament, I think, are among the best suited to understand that nuance and where that line exists and operates.

Increasing opportunities for engagement through Canadian-led and Canadian-headquartered organizations like ParlAmericas or the Parliamentary Centre, or the programs that the president-elect has been citing, with Journalists for Human Rights, where there's transparency and public discourse about this, are going to help clarify what those lines are.

Tamara Kronis: In the context of, you know.... What I've heard you say is that there are circumstances under which Canada should, in fact, support a movement that might lack majority backing or clear majority backing within its own country. Do you think that the approval or the decision to do that should happen at the executive level? Do you think it should happen at the legislative level? Is this a question for Parliament? Is it a question for GAC?

Where do you think the decision-making should lie to ensure that we're careful and thoughtful about it?

Monika Le Roy: I will refer back to my remarks, where my comment was that our programming, our political statements and our multilateral positioning should be aligned. It's not a straight answer, but the answer is that in all of these places—

Tamara Kronis: I think what I was—

Monika Le Roy: —and I'm going to come back to the example of Venezuela—

Tamara Kronis: I realize that was in your remarks, but my question is more about the how. We've seen, in a whole bunch of circumstances, that sometimes things come to Parliament and sometimes things don't come to Parliament. Where do you think the locus of decision-making should happen? How do you think we can do this in a way so that we are being the most thoughtful about it?

The Chair: Provide a quick answer, please, because the time is up. Thank you.

Monika Le Roy: The quick answer is to create a doctrine that delineates who is allowed to choose or who is approving what aspects of the programming.

Tamara Kronis: Is that through Parliament?

Monika Le Roy: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

I invite Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe to take the floor for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Le Roy, Mr. Deveaux spoke to us about the speech in Davos. You spoke to us about Beijing, and what you saw and experienced in Southeast Asia, among other places.

Isn't there an obvious contradiction between what was said at Davos and the fact that, three days earlier, Mr. Carney was shaking hands with Xi Jinping? Three days after that meeting, we were told we need to be wary of world powers and stick together as middle powers.

Don't you see the risk given the diplomatic thaw between Canada and China? Normally, the very nature of diplomatic relations is precisely to allow for debate—or at least discussion—of more delicate or sensitive issues with the country with which diplomatic ties are being renewed.

[*English*]

Monika Le Roy: He mentioned both Kevin and me. Maybe I'll quickly jump in first.

We don't live in a world where we can interact and co-operate only with our allies and with people who share the same values and systems and structures that we have.

Canada will make the economic choices that it has to make in the interests of our domestic population. Would we benefit from working with greater democracies? Absolutely, we would, and in places where there is greater risk of Chinese interference to undermine the values that we want to share in the interests of our country, we have the opportunity to build stronger relationships to counter that.

The Pacific Islands are a great opportunity and a great region for this example. All of the Five Eyes partners, except for Canada, are very actively engaged diplomatically and through programs in-country, whereas Canada, for the first time, opened a high commission and a presence in Fiji, one of the 18 Pacific Islands countries, just this past August.

Creating opportunities where there are Commonwealth political structures with which we can share a lot of processes and structures and build greater relationships with for trade and co-operation is an opportunity to counter the influence of China in that region and create greater opportunities for Canada for partnerships with countries with like-minded values.

● (1650)

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Deveaux, you can jump in and answer that question.

[*English*]

Kevin Deveaux: I'm agreeing with Ms. Le Roy. I think that in almost all cases, we're going to want to build, if I can still use the term, a “coalition of the willing”—if it hadn't been disparaged 20 years ago during the Iraq war.

However, I think there are going to be circumstances in which those coalitions might include China, to be brutally frank. Think about the scam centres in Myanmar that have been created because of the conflicts that have happened there. Think about Cambodia, where the scam centres are operating. There might be specific, very concrete examples in which that coalition and the implementation of new strategies might involve ASEAN partners, for example, in those places that are more democratic—like Malaysia or Indonesia or Singapore or the Philippines—but the coalition might also include other partners in those circumstances.

I think we do need to be practical. I think we do need to recognize that it is a multipolar world order. There are other actors that have influence.

At the same time, I think we, to a great extent, are looking for coalitions that involve those who are going to be promoting those democratic standards. I don't think that prevents us from having dialogue, from having discussions, but at the same time, as we build up our ability to intervene in an active and proactive manner, I think we're going to develop a gravitas that's going to allow us to have a lot more opportunity to influence the direction of where those things go, versus, perhaps, actors who are more interested in transactional relationships.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

Ms. Cohen and Ms. Bardall, either one of you could answer my next question.

There's a bit of an elephant in the room. For a while now, we've been talking about funding for programs that Canada should implement. However, if we look at the current budget allocation for international aid or international development, we see that Canada has just cut another $2.5 billion in the latest budget. Of course, we see what's happening with USAID, the U.S. Agency for International Development. There's a sort of trend toward significantly reducing funding for international aid, even in European countries. It's the same in Japan, too. Budget allocations are shrinking right before our eyes, quite rapidly. Don't you think that's a pretty serious problem?

And that's not even counting the connection between the defence budget and the international aid budget. Every time we're told that the defence budget is to be increased, due to that connection, the international aid budget is cut. Yet, in our view—or at least in my view—these should be two separate budgets that need to be treated completely differently.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry. You will have to ask your question in the next round because this exceeded the time by almost one minute.

You have the floor for five minutes, please, Anita.

Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to start by picking up on something that President-elect Tsikhanouskaya said, and also Mr. Campbell, which is this idea that authoritarians are learning from one another, but democracy practitioners, for want of a better word, are not necessarily. We don't have those networks, and where we did have them....

I'm going to go to Mr. Campbell first. You were talking about what happened when $3 billion was suddenly cut out of this kind of work. We lost things like the World Movement for Democracy. This was a network of 400 human rights defenders around the world, those defenders who were being connected.

Does this not risk isolating movements like that in Belarus? Now we're seeing, of course, hopeful signs in Hungary, Georgia and places like that. Do we not isolate those human rights defenders, those movements, by not having that connecting fibre so that those lessons and those experiences can be shared? How do we create a system? Could Canada be part of creating that kind of model, where there is that cross-learning globally, across continents, by human rights and democracy movements?

I'll start with Mr. Campbell, but I want to save some time for the president-elect to talk about how it would impact her on the other side. Go ahead.

● (1655)

Leslie Campbell: Thank you very much. I'll address that very quickly because I want to give as much time as I can.

Yes, so much has been lost. Actually, I can tie this into a previous question from one of the other members of Parliament on this committee about the kinds of programs that may exist that may not be fully supported by a government in a country, but they're very important, nonetheless. We have someone from Belarus here, but we've also supported, in this community of ours, dissidents and activists from Tibet, from Myanmar, from Iran, obviously, from Venezuela and from Belarus—and I could go on.

I think it's relatively obvious why, in some countries, you might have what we often call an “offshore program” to provide networking, training, support and advice, and that's very important. It's a lifeline for people who are fighting for their rights and human rights.

I can't really overemphasize what has been lost in terms of the networking and support around the world. However, I think what could happen—and I'll wrap this up very quickly—is not reinventing any wheels. In fact, I'm not arguing for that at all, but for a rapid response capacity to support, when a dictator falls unexpectedly, civil society, the very brave activists who have been pushing this type of activity for a long time and making small progress, and to have a group of like-minded countries that are willing to pool that. You can then have the rules of engagement. You can have oversight. You can have very eminent people, whom we all respect, be are part of, perhaps, something like an overseeing board that then pulls together these activists, these hundreds, even thousands, who have worked in this field for so long and who are right now out there.

It doesn't have to all be funded by Canada. It can be funded in part by Canada. Maybe Canada could play convening, motivating and catalytic roles, but get others together who will also contribute the funding for something like this.

I'll stop there, just in the interest of time.

Anita Vandenbeld: Go ahead, Ms. Tsikhanouskaya.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: First of all, I just have to confirm how much we appreciate Canadian help and assistance and solidarity with the Belarusian democratic movement. Of course, you know that as a movement, we are in a position to ask, because we are a people without a nation, without a state, and we just really rely on your support.

To be frank, small symbolic grants are appreciated, but they're not enough. We need multi-year support, predictable support, institutional support, because democratic forces cannot work from month to month like a family counting coins on the kitchen table. We need to know that we will be supported to support other people, to keep Belarus in focus, to fight against really brutal enemies.

Again, we understand that it's our fight, but we need allies on this path, because we are protecting democracy. We are on the front line of this fight and we shouldn't underestimate the strength of dictators. If they see that there is no unity, there is no desire to help the nations who are fighting against dictatorship, they perceive that as weakness and they think about democracy as weakness. You have to show that, no, we will not leave people who are sacrificing their lives, their freedom. We will not leave them alone. We will support them because they are on the right side of history.

Of course, I really encourage you to increase and maintain the amount of support to democratic movements worldwide. You cannot help everybody, but I encourage you to support those who are sustainable, who are strong and who are ready to defend the freedom and independence and democracy of their country till the end.

● (1700)

Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you. We certainly are allies in the incredible work that you're doing, and we applaud and honour the work that you're doing.

The Chair: Thank you, Anita.

Now I invite Mr. Davies to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Fred Davies (Niagara South, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all of the presenters today for the incredible information you've given us as parliamentarians. It is enlightening but also troubling, because what I see happening in the world today is the disintegration of support for human rights organizations. We see funding diminishing across the board.

I want to juxtapose that sort of shifting narrative against what we're hearing. We're hearing about a new world order. We're hearing that trade is now transactional, not based on policies that we have espoused as a nation for many years. What troubles me most is that we now have to accept the world as it is, not what we would like it to be. I think an individual said that out loud recently.

In trying to defend democracy, Ms. Le Roy, what is your opinion on how to mesh those two ideas together? How can we defend human rights when we are engaging in transactional contracts with countries such as China, where over years there have been massive civil rights violations and human rights violations? Particularly now, when we're looking at entering into trade agreements with a country that has demonstrated such outrageous human rights violations, how do we square that circle?

Monika Le Roy: I'm not sure I'm the best person to pronounce on whether Canada should or should not be increasing trade with China.

What I would feel comfortable talking about are countries where we want to create increased trade opportunities. I think Canada has woken up to realize that we weren't diversifying early enough and we haven't built enough partnerships and relationships around the world, so we're trying to find the fastest solution possible to a very seismic shift that has happened.

What we can do is find countries where we can help strengthen their democratic practices and processes, because we do want them to have audit-appropriate regulations. We do want them to have democratic parliamentary oversight of government finance and spending on infrastructure and contracts. When we have the ability to influence and support the development of those systems and those financial mechanisms with our partners, we have the opportunity to influence that process.

Fred Davies: Let's drill down into Taiwan, for example. If China does engage in some activities in Taiwan, in your experience in that region of the world, what are the implications of that globally in the promotion of democracy, when we are seeing aggression increasing across the globe?

I use Taiwan as a potential example, but it is happening elsewhere.

Monika Le Roy: In Vanuatu, China is funding primaries for candidates running for elected office. In other countries in the Pacific, they're funding political parties directly. These are the realities of the tactics they're using to interfere in political systems in order to make sure the outcomes are preferential to them. Our opportunity is to work and create partnerships with groups and democratic structures in that country so that there's an incentive to resist that influence.

During the COVID lockdowns in Latin America, there was a lot of concern about China trading COVID vaccines for influence in Latin America. I'm going to quote the former secretary general of the Organization of American States, who testified before the U.S. Senate foreign relations committee. His answer was that you cannot fault a country for reaching for the only lifeboat that's being offered to them.

If we want to build greater opportunities and greater space for people with democratic values, we have to help create that opportunity for them instead of expressing frustration with the fact that they haven't chosen a democratic path.

● (1705)

Fred Davies: Would you suggest that has been happening for longer than we realized? You say we've lost the opportunity to talk about democracy in these countries and regions. It seems to me that we dropped the ball a long time ago.

The Chair: I'm sorry, but we have to leave that answer for the next round, because the time is up.

[*Translation*]

I invite Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe to speak for five minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to get more out of Ms. Le Roy's answer.

If I'm not mistaken, Ms. Le Roy, recent history shows that a former Canadian prime minister succeeded in bringing down an entire regime. I'm referring to Mr. Mulroney, who played a leading role in bringing down the apartheid regime in South Africa. If I recall correctly, it was done precisely by cutting off trade with the apartheid regime. At the time, he managed to convince Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. Reagan to do the same, and that's how the regime was brought down.

Minister Anand appeared before the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development recently. On each occasion, she told us that it was by establishing diplomatic and trade relations that we would succeed in establishing democracy in these countries.

Ms. Le Roy, do you really believe that the Chinese Communist Party will suddenly develop a passion for democracy just because we've reached an agreement on electric vehicles and canola?

[*English*]

Monika Le Roy: Can we and should we be doing democratic support programming in China? I think there's a choice that Canada can make to do that. There are civic actors who want to improve opportunities for dialogue. There are opportunities to support groups advocating for religious freedoms.

You're talking about a very closed space, and the type of engagement that would happen is on a very different scale than in the examples you gave us. Reagan going to China was two very different-sized countries at very different moments in history. Canadian engagement in South Africa, again, was two very different proportional abilities to influence. Canada's ability to influence that Commonwealth conversation was also a little bit different.

I would personally encourage Canada to take actions and support efforts to increase civic space and democratic dialogue in China. That would be my personal choice. I'm a civil society actor.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

I would like to return to you, Ms. Cohen and Ms. Bardall, regarding the question I asked earlier. Funding for international aid and international development is melting away like snow in the sun.

In fact, these funds are often used for programs that address issues ranging from the defence of democracy to the defence of democracy advocates. Some legal programs even help people who are forced to fight in court against tyrannical regimes.

Don't you see a fairly obvious danger when you see funding being steadily eroded by various western governments right now?

Gabrielle Bardall: Thank you very much for the question.

A little over ten years ago, my colleague and friend Ernest Manirumva, who was an anti-corruption activist in Burundi, was dragged from his home and fatally stabbed in the head. At the time, Canada, the United States, and many other actors spoke out immediately to condemn this act. They took significant action to ensure that this type of political violence would be prevented in the future.

Last year, following the U.S. freeze on international democracy assistance, another colleague—whom I won't name here—was also arrested and taken from his home, and there was silence, or nearly so.

That's the difference funding makes.

I believe that first and foremost, both in Canada and around the world today, there is a pressing need for leadership grounded in ethics and morality. We want to hear people championing the values of democracy and human rights. This can be achieved through tools that don't cost much, such as a normative framework. We've heard various ideas here today on how to achieve this. We could have a spokesperson. We could adopt a well-defined Canadian approach rooted in a framework that enables us to denounce such acts.

We have also heard various suggestions here that do not really require increasing an existing budget, but rather propose reallocating existing funds and directing them toward different mechanisms, whether that be a special representative or something else.

We should also work with the tools currently available, whether it be the Parliamentary Centre, ParlAmericas, or our other agencies and organizations working to promote democracy through our expertise. Indeed, we have long shared our expertise with the United States and the UN, for example. The expertise is there. We need to make the most of these funds.

Finally, support for democracy goes hand in hand with our security interests. If we were to increase the defence and security budgets today, I think we could try to examine this link in a bit more depth and see how these two things can work together and, ultimately, be funded accordingly.

● (1710)

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: No.

Thank you, Ms. Bardall.

Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

I invite Mr. Zuberi to take the floor for five minutes.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

I'm giving my time to my colleague Ms. Vandenbeld.

The Chair: The floor is yours, Anita.

Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you very much, and I want to thank my colleague for giving me time on this really important study.

I'd like to pick up on some of my colleagues' questions, which sounded almost like we're putting an opposition or a contradiction between supporting democracy and supporting Canada's economic and security interests. I don't believe this is actually the case.

I want to go back to Mr. Deveaux. You said something in your opening remarks about the Davos speech. If we are to find those economic partners, those security partners, those middle powers, I almost see it as a prerequisite that we are also doing this kind of work to ensure that those middle powers are not falling into the sphere of authoritarianism, so that we have the partners for the long term and we can then talk about our own economic and security interests.

Could you elaborate a little on what you meant about the Davos speech in your opening remarks?

Kevin Deveaux: In Davos, as I said, there were words on a page that were read, but there have to be concrete ways to do this. It's now almost three months since that speech, and I'm hoping that, through this committee and through the government, we can begin to look at what that looks like concretely.

Some of my colleagues suggested a strategy or special representatives, which I think are great ideas. I've mentioned rapid deployment. I guess all our points, to some extent, relate to the fact that if there is to be.... I would argue that it's not a matter of if there needs to be a coalition of middle powers. I think that even in the last three months, we've seen a deterioration of the American hegemony. We're now in a position where perhaps the only alternative to being able to have a rules-based global order is a coalition of middle powers. Canada needs to be one of the leaders in that.

From our experiences—many have mentioned Mulroney's actions against apartheid during the 1980s, or you could look at the Suez crisis in the 1950s—there were times when Canada has stepped up, and we do have respect in what we do. This is another time when we have to do that.

Yes, it's about ensuring that those middle powers in our coalition are going to maintain certain standards, or that we're going to support them in building them and perhaps moving from quasi-democracy to democracy, but at the same time, it's also about us trying to.... I think some wise person once described this as a strawberry field where strawberries are going to pop up in different locations. In this case it's solutions popping up, but there's a root at the bottom that's connecting them all. That root is the values we have, but it's also Canada's ability to build those trusted relationships.

● (1715)

Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you, and thanks for the strawberry analogy. I think we were very hub-and-spoke. Washington was really the centre, and it all linked through Washington. I think the global south certainly needs to have those roots connecting them all.

Ms. Le Roy, I want to go back to you as well, because you really emphasized in your remarks that it is in Canada's interest to be doing this kind of democracy work. Not everybody sees a connection between supporting a political party in country X and Canada's national interest. Could you maybe elaborate a bit on that?

Monika Le Roy: The number of questions I've fielded already about the relationship between trade and whether we should be doing democracy work I think answers that question. It's better for us to be building economic partnerships and ties with countries that are going to respect the treaties they sign and are going to be financially transparent and ethical in terms of co-operation and operation.

This means engaging with governments that have financial oversight committees or the capacity within their financial oversight committees to understand how their government budgets are being spent and where that money is in fact coming from. This is working with OIG's offices and audit and rule-of-law structures. This creates more conducive opportunities for us to increase trade.

It's also security partnerships. Venezuela, I think, is a really great example. I know that what's happened in the last few months has been very controversial, but I think that in Canada we forget that Venezuela is in fact a threat to our peace and security here. Venezuela's gangs are using Canadian ports to transfer drugs. They're using Canadian casinos and banks to launder money.

The refugee and the immigration crisis of that country, with the proportion of almost a third of its 30-million person population, has destabilized the region, and it is the largest source of migrants moving into the United States. You also have a country in the western hemisphere that has created a foothold for Russian military and for Chinese military and Chinese surveillance technology in our country. They're also a transit point that has linked Hezbollah into the region and into the hemisphere. With these pieces, if we are not paying attention to democracy, the consequences are high.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Le Roy.

I would like to invite Ms. Kronis to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Tamara Kronis: I had intended a totally different line of questioning, but based on what Ms. Le Roy just said about the degree to which foreign governments are actually sinking their claws into Canada in order to do the things you've talked about, I'd like to ask you to elaborate on that a bit. I would also ask you to elaborate on what we need to do to put a stop to that.

Monika Le Roy: I'm going to quickly answer your question from last time in two sentences.

Ideally, it should be the Government of Canada creating a doctrine. Over the past 25 years—and there are members of this committee who have participated in a number of these processes—we've tried to do this five times, and we have not yet succeeded in doing so. Until that time when we can come up with that, I would encourage and invite, through the chair, members of this committee to encourage and call on the government to develop this process, because parliamentarians can and should have oversight of the democratic engagement we have.

I can speak to Venezuela because I spent a number of years working on the crisis. It is open knowledge in Canada, through some of our investigation capacities, that Venezuelan illicit funds have been in our banking and our casino systems for over a decade. The capacity is that there's been a lack of political commitment and ability to respond to that. The Ontario police and the Toronto police have publicly acknowledged the presence of Venezuelan gangs. There was an announcement—I think about eight months ago—that there was a group of gang members that was actually turned back at the border.

These are issues that do come up quite frequently and sort of get lost in the noise of everything else that is going on. If you look at the crisis in Venezuela, you're talking about a situation that I started working on in 2013, and every single year we would be asked, “Can it get worse?” The answer was that it couldn't possibly get worse, yet we are looking at it 13 years later and it is functionally a failed state that has required foreign intervention to somewhat stem some semblance of stability.

● (1720)

Tamara Kronis: Given that you've been inside of government and that I've just heard you say that Parliament should be creating a doctrine that should be debated in the House of Commons and that the executive branch of our government would then follow in terms of dealing with some of these situations, whose responsibility is it? Are the questions or the call to do this to the Prime Minister, or to...?

I stand up in the House on a regular basis. I stood up in the House a few weeks ago and said that the IRGC is in Canada. We have people going missing. We have murders happening on Canadian soil. We have money being laundered through Canadian institutions. The ball is very clearly being dropped. We get no responses to our questions.

My question for you is this: How do we demand better? What do organizations like yours, who are on the outside watching all of this happen around the world, have to say to us in terms of stopping the talk and stopping the platitudes and actually getting to work to be able to keep Canadians safe domestically?

Monika Le Roy: Domestically, your counterpart is the Department of Public Safety and the various affiliated entities that report through Public Safety. Internationally, which is the work we are talking about today, that would be going through Global Affairs Canada. Those two should be talking to one another.

I believe this committee is also having a study on foreign interference that's happening simultaneously to this process. I believe someone from the Montreal Institute for Global Security will be.... They just published a report specifically on this. I would defer to the experts who have been focused on foreign interference in Canada to better answer that question.

Tamara Kronis: Thanks very much.

Do I have any time left?

The Chair: You have 40 seconds. Go ahead.

Tamara Kronis: I'm hoping the chair will indulge me a bit.

Madam Tsikhanouskaya, it is a privilege to have you here today at this committee. I want to ask a question of you that's a bit of a personal one. You're in such a precarious and fascinating place, because you're widely seen as the legitimate winner of Belarus's 2020 election. Of course, you are leading a government in exile. That means you came into leadership under extraordinary circumstances.

I'm wondering if you might comment briefly on the personal costs in terms of that role.

The Chair: Ms. Kronis, I will give Ms. Tsikhanouskaya time later to answer your question in full.

[*Translation*]

I invite Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe to take the floor for five minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Tsikhanouskaya, you can still answer my colleague's question.

[*English*]

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: Thank you so much.

My life didn't prepare me for such a position, where you have to take responsibility not only for your family or children but also for the whole nation. I'm so proud of the Belarusian people. I really enjoy their determination. I see how going through tremendous difficulties in the country and outside the country, going through transnational repressions, having their relatives back in Belarus, they continue to be active, even knowing that their relatives, their mothers, can be detained in Belarus. We've really achieved a lot over these five years. We've managed to build alternative institutions of power. We've managed to open a case in the International Criminal Court. We've formalized relationships with the institutions, despite not being in the country. There are so many closed doors for us, but when you believe in what you are doing, when you have allies in the world, you really believe in your course.

It's difficult. Very often I'm exhausted. It's so difficult for me, personally, to always ask for solidarity, for assistance and for support. It's a bit of a humiliating position, but you are doing this because you know that people trust and believe in you and you put all your efforts into helping the Belarusian people.

I spend so little time with my children, but I hope they will forgive me because they understand that I'm doing this for them, for their future as well. I'm sure that Belarus is not a lost cause. I'm sure that the changes in many countries, dictatorial countries, can start with Belarus. Very often I hear, “Oh, nothing will happen in Belarus until something happens in Russia,” but I'm sure it's vice versa. Changes in Russia will start from changes in Belarus because our society is consolidated and has this courage to continue.

Of course, my task is fighting for Belarus and helping Ukraine as much as we can without having power or having billions of dollars and weapons. Also, one of our missions is to explain to democratic societies that they have to cherish what they have and that they have to help those who are in need, because it's so easy to lose this freedom. Democracy is invisible, but when you lose it, you feel it. Help those who are fighting for you as well now, because regimes very clearly feel this indecisiveness in democratic wars. They're trying to poison the minds of your population, of your citizens, saying, “Why should you care? Why should you care about Ukraine or Belarus? Care about yourself.” It makes your nations indifferent to the problems of other people and indifferent to the fight for democracy.

It's not the easy path. However, I see how many friends we have around the world, and I see how important it's becoming for other countries to defend their democratic principles and values. We definitely have all of the instruments and tools to protect the world we are fighting for.

● (1725)

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you for your answer, Madam President.

I have one last question for you.

In your recommendations, you mentioned that it would be a good idea to establish a Canada-Belarus friendship group, but I imagine that would be with the government-in-exile. How much would that change things for you? How important would that be? It seems to me like something that would be fairly easy to set up.

[*English*]

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: Thank you for paying attention to my request. I truly think that groups for a democratic Belarus in parliaments all over the world will help us to keep Belarus in focus, because we're really struggling for attention. Belarus is not so important because it doesn't have gas, oil, and so on and so forth, but it's important for security and for democracy.

We already have groups for a democratic Belarus in 24 parliaments, and we see that Belarus is on the agenda in these parliaments more often because there are people advocating for our cause. Twice a year, we are meeting in different.... We have interparliamentary meetings. Previous times it was in Rome, in Berlin and in France. The next one will be in London. The greatest capitals are welcoming our interparliamentary co-operation.

There are so many things I want to brag about Canadian assistance, help and solidarity, so I definitely want to see members of the Canadian Parliament during these meetings, being sure that the Belarusian question is not overlooked among your parliamentarians.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you so much.

I thank all of the witnesses for these high-level discussions.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

On behalf of the subcommittee, I would like to thank all the witnesses for taking the time to come here, express opinions and answer questions.

[*Translation*]

I can say that I was truly impressed by this meeting. I thank all the witnesses for their testimony during this meeting on the current situation of human rights and democracy defenders, not only in Canada and Belarus, but around the world.

[*English*]

If you think you will have other things to share or to say or to express, please feel free to write to the chair or the clerk at any time. You will also get any answers you wish to receive.

The meeting is adjourned. Thank you very much.