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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, May 7, 2019**

**Chair**

**Mr. Michael Levitt**



# Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Tuesday, May 7, 2019

• (0850)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)):** Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the 139th meeting of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today we have the pleasure and honour of hosting Mr. Rihards Kols, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Latvian Parliament, joined by the Ambassador of Latvia, His Excellency Karlis Eihenbaums.

Gentlemen, thank you for appearing today to highlight the strong ties between our two countries as friends, partners and allies, as well as our mutual commitment to both NATO and the multilateral order. Canada was one of the first G7 countries to recognize the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1991 and one of the first to ratify Latvia's ascension to NATO.

We currently have over 600 Canadian Forces members stationed in Latvia to lead a NATO battle group. We have heard only good things about the warm welcome the Latvian people have given our men and women in uniform, even in the face of misinformation meant to sow division.

I also will point out that we had the previous chair of the Latvian foreign affairs committee testify before us back in 2016.

With that, Mr. Kols, I believe you're prepared to make an opening statement, and then we will open up the floor to members to engage you in some very interesting questions. With that, the floor is yours, sir.

**Mr. Rihards Kols (Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Parliament of the Republic of Latvia (Saeima)):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[Translation]

Good morning.

[English]

Mr. Chair, your outline took away a few lines that I had in my speech. Nevertheless, thank you very much for having me here today. It's a great honour to be here among friends and politicians committed to NATO and to alliance generally.

My speech—it is not my speech, actually—is a speech on behalf of Latvian people. It's not only words; it's an assessment of Latvia's people towards Canada and Canadians.

As we celebrate the 98th anniversary of the establishment of our diplomatic relations, we take stock of the positive and friendly relations existing between Latvia and Canada as well as our mutual reasons for looking forward to the future together.

In our actions and policies, Latvia and Canada are like-minded states with common values. We share an interest in a rules-based international order, individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Canada has always been quick to support the aspirations and needs of Latvia's people, and we have always appreciated it. You did not recognize the Soviet annexation of the Baltics; you took in Latvians fleeing prosecution after World War II. In fact, you welcomed and cared for the future president of Latvia, Vaira Vike-Freiberga, together with some of our greatest writers and thinkers, and, on a personal level, members of my own family who are now proud Canadian citizens.

After 50 years of hardship, Canada was the first G7 country to recognize the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1991. Today, we collaborate closely in the United Nations and in NATO, and you also supported us by being the first country to ratify the treaty of Latvia's entry into NATO. While we could not show you the same courtesy and generosity, we did what we could and we were the first EU member state to ratify the significant CETA.

I am very glad to see the steady development of our interparliamentary context as it is important to continue a dialogue between the Saeima foreign affairs committee and the Canadian Parliament's SCFAID. It allows us to exchange views on issues of common interest.

Today, on the centenary of parliament of the Republic of Latvia, at a time when the international situation is volatile, Canada's presence in Latvia matters a great deal. We are marking the 70th anniversary of NATO this year, and Latvia celebrates its 15th anniversary of joining the NATO family. There's no doubt that the alliance remains the key pillar of the security in Europe. As a proud and slightly bemused *persona non grata* in Russia, I will not try to mince words.

The ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine and Georgia has disrupted nearly a generation of relative peace and stability between the Kremlin and its western neighbours. President Putin's ulterior motives remain uncertain. In violation of international law, the Kremlin illegally annexed Crimea, a Ukrainian peninsula less than half the size yet slightly more populous than Latvia. Ever since, Russia has been insisting on its military assertiveness, showcasing its conventional power and rattling its nuclear sabre. In Warsaw 2016, NATO leaders gave the signal to put our guard up more visibly so that no one in their right mind could be tempted to test what the alliance is made of.

With Canadian troop deployments to Latvia leading a multinational on-land battle group as a part of NATO's enhanced forward presence, Canada assisted countries like my own in dealing with the new threats and dangers aimed at the heart of universal western values, the rule of law and democratic government. You stepped up, devoting time and resources and demonstrating the kind of leadership we often lack in today's society. It was solidarity in action and a strong signal for deterrence. Your commitment is a clear demonstration of your understanding of today's geopolitical realities.

NATO's northeastern flank is conspicuously exposed. The only territory that connects NATO's European members to the Baltics is the geostrategically important Suwalki Gap, a 100-kilometre border between Poland and Lithuania that adjoins the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad in the west and Belarus in the east. Being surrounded by countries that are not members of NATO makes us, the Baltics, especially vulnerable. We are ready to invest in our defence and we have been doing that for years.

Canada's presence is much appreciated. The eFP framework nation commitment is a genuine Canadian international peace-keeping operation. Contributing to the eFP is Canada's way of paying into an insurance premium to maintain peace and stability in the region.

We highly value Canada's decision to renew its commitment to the NATO mission in Latvia for four years immediately prior to NATO's Brussels summit in July 2018. Once again, you demonstrated strength of character and the wisdom to know what the right decision is. You showed certainty in uncertain times. We honestly look up to you for that.

We have significantly together—Europe and North America—increased the readiness of our forces, triple to the size of NATO's response force, and the Brussels summit marked another addition, the so-called Four Thirties initiative: 30 battalions, 30 warships and 30 squadrons ready within 30 days to bolster combat readiness by easing the transfer of troops across Europe in the event of crisis. As a member of the national guard of Latvia, I have had the pleasure to train alongside your troops and to see the benefit of day-to-day co-operation, of the experience of fighting together. Day by day, we are all becoming stronger and more resilient. We've become brothers and sisters in arms. That, at least, is partially due to Canada's commitment to establish a permanent, rather than rotary, position in Latvia.

The Baltic Defence College co-operates with Canada intensively, enabling cultural exchange and a transfer of valuable knowledge. Together we managed to build and occupy the most modern military

polygon in the region. Canadian troops have aided us in learning and practising our skills with the latest military technology and equipment. Our relationship extends beyond NATO in the form of bilateral co-operation.

I really hope that the Canadian troops located in Latvia are at least as happy as we are. I hope that Latvia is a home away from home for many Canadian and allied troops.

Do you know what? Locals like you too. A recent poll showed that nearly half of the people in Latvia believe that the country's security has improved compared to what it was back in 2015. Why is that? It is the presence of NATO allies in Latvia. Hard training and procurement also count. This is now happening at a pace and with an intensity unmatched since the renewal of independence in 1991. Canada is currently winning the hearts and minds of the local population. Around 60% of people in Latvia believe that NATO contributes to their security. This remarkable level of popular support has consecutively remained steady for the past few years. When asked if they can be proud of Latvian soldiers, two-thirds of respondents polled gave a positive answer: yes. Remarkably, the vast majority of Latvians no longer see Russia as an imminent threat. Rather, they view Russia as an aggressor.

A poll commissioned by the Latvian Minister of Defence revealed that only 17% of residents opposed the presence of battalion, while 43% approved of it and 30% were neutral on the issue. At a time when America seems to withdraw from the global stage and the United Kingdom is leaving the European Union, Canada's interest in strengthening traditional alliances is greatly appreciated. Canada is making a profound impact at this time when the international situation far beyond its own borders is so volatile. Canada's presence in Latvia matters a great deal. This, along with the transparency-based approach to its ongoing presence in Latvia, has increased public support and trust in NATO as a whole.

These achievements really are something, but we cannot be lulled into complacency. Russia's behaviour in Crimea and eastern Ukraine brought about a fundamental change in the EU's and NATO's relationships with Moscow. The revival of power politics and thinking in terms of spheres of influence, and the cynicism that Russia has shown for the sovereignty of its neighbouring countries, have an impact on our security analysis and on our policy towards Russia.

We have to stand united against this infringement of international law and respond to Russian behaviour—sensibly, of course. NATO needs to continue adapting to address the evolving challenges. We are not in another Cold War. The new situation is, in a way, more complex. Many common security interests—Iran, Iraq, Syria, and fighting terrorism and extremism—still exist. So does our interdependence. In fact, that's why sanctions are a relatively effective means of applying pressure. Nevertheless, Russia's actions must be a wake-up call to review our defence strategies.

It is important to fully implement NATO's Brussels summit decision in order to improve the alliance's readiness and ability to reinforce. Russia poses challenges on a strategic level, as demonstrated by the violation of the INF treaty, but it also continues to threaten regional security. Continuous strengthening of Russia's military posture, including offensive capabilities, in the Baltic region and in the Arctic, thus impacting Canada's national interests, cannot be justified by purely defensive needs. Russia's ambiguous hybrid warfare, with an increased focus on asymmetric, less conventional military capabilities and activity, has made it considerably more difficult for NATO to counter destabilization efforts, information operations, cyber-attacks, disinformation, propaganda and psychological operations. Ambiguous warfare represents a security challenge not just for the Baltic States but also for NATO as a whole.

In this regard, we welcome intensified co-operation between NATO and UN institutions as well as a close transatlantic partnership to counter hostile state-sponsored disinformation involving Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. The Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, or NATO StratCom, and the cybersecurity defence in Riga and Tallinn are successful examples of a joint international approach and collaboration for research. We are thankful to Canada for providing generous funding in the creation of NATO StratCom, as you were the instrumental part in helping thoughts become reality in Riga, Latvia. We also congratulate the recent decision to join StratCom. I'm absolutely certain that this co-operation, deepened even further, will let all of us reap the benefits. In principle, the threats analyzed by StratCom and CCD in Estonia are applicable to all NATO allies, and both centres' individual nations require direct participation and a unified approach to these activities.

Additionally, while we invest in analysis and research, we have yet to put to use the conclusions drawn from the work done by, for example, StratCom. There is an urgent need to operationalize the conclusions in the theoretical realm and develop practical and concrete recommendations, action plans and clearly articulated strategies.

In order to guarantee our people the desired level of security, stability and conditions for continued prosperity, the response to these capabilities and practices has to be high on NATO's agenda. This entails enhancing the capacities of StratCom and CCD and strengthening our co-operation with non-NATO institutions to be able to develop integrated and joint responses. Few individual allies have the capacity to counter the multiplicity of unconventional state-sponsored threats, which we must not forget include organized crime, sabotage and other forms of direct action. It is imperative that we share knowledge and provide better dissemination of intelligence across the alliance. Too often, we have seen the damage that the failure to share intelligence has inflicted on our societies. Communication must be more active, indeed proactive, if we are to address these new threats.

Of course, it is not just our military alliance that bonds us together. We invest and we exchange. Canada and Latvia enjoy a mutually beneficial trade and investment relationship. In February 2017, Latvia became the first EU member state to ratify CETA, one of the most advanced and modern trade agreements, the benefits of which we are already reaping. Even though the trade in traditional goods between the countries can be viewed as moderate, in recent years the

total level of trade has been substantially boosted by Air Baltic purchases of Bombardier aircraft. We were the first to purchase 20 of these new aircraft for commercial purposes. The \$303-million deal was truly substantial, adding to our merchandise trade balance sheet. We've gone from strength to strength. Canada's exports of electrical machinery and equipment to Latvia have increased by 189%. Your imports of prepared meat and fish from Latvia have risen by 700%.

I have spoken quite a bit, so please let me address you now with something that's a bit more lighthearted. In Latvia, Latvians see themselves as connected with Canada. They're drawn to it as a land of promise and a land of refuge for relatives who fled World War II, and also because it's friendly, clean and tough. In connection with this troop deployment, people in Latvia were asked about their association with Canada.

Hockey was the answer given by most. One-third of respondents thought of hockey when they were thinking of Canada. We are importing coaches from Canada. Our world championship team is coached by a Canadian, Bob Hartley from Hawkesbury, Ontario. Before Hartley, we had Chief Ted Nolan. We have seen that Canadian coaches give us an edge and in 2014, Latvia came awfully close to beating Canada in the Sochi Olympics quarter-finals.

Around a tenth of Latvians polled said that in their mind's eye they saw wealth and prosperity in Canada. They saw Canada's maple leaf logo, maple syrup and lots of trees beside maple trees. They also saw plants, shrubbery, forests, rivers, mountains, birds of prey, polar bears and life on earth in all its natural beauty.

Canada and Latvia are allies, friends and partners in many ways and I'm honoured to be here today to further strengthen our relations. I very much look forward to a continued friendship and collaboration.

I will be more than happy to take any questions you might have.

Again, thanks for a very warm welcome.

● (0905)

**The Chair:** You're very welcome. Thank you, Mr. Kols, for that overview. I think you hit on the point of the warmth and the closeness between our countries.

With that, we shall move into questions. We're going to begin with MP O'Toole, please.

**Hon. Erin O'Toole (Durham, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to Canada and thank you for that lovely overview.

I love the fact you ended on some warm notes about hockey rivalries and the like. I think most Canadians, before they think of Op Reassurance, think of Latvia from a hockey perspective as well, whether it's the juniors or the Olympics, or that sort of thing. Thank you for building on the relationship by coming here to meet with us.

You've mentioned that we're strong allies, friends and partners. That's only been growing. We share national interests in both trade, investment, and security, of course. I'm going to focus a little bit on the security piece.

The polling numbers you provided on the support for Operation Reassurance and a Canadian presence in Latvia were interesting. Certainly we're very proud of the mission. It was started under a Conservative government and extended by the Liberal government, so there's bipartisan support.

Where do you think Op Reassurance needs to go over the next few years if there is a permanent presence? Certainly there have been large training exercises by the Russians. Where do you see Op Reassurance going in the next four or five years to make sure that we show that it's not a temporary sign of support, but a permanent presence to ensure that the imperial aggressions of Russia are not tolerated?

**Mr. Rihards Kols:** As I've rightly pointed out, Canada has shown, in very crucial times in my view, a very strong leadership. A fine example is the Brussels summit. I had the chance to be present over there, not at the summit itself, but they had a side event called NATO Engages. I had the opportunity to directly engage with your Prime Minister Trudeau.

What was interesting was that we all knew what the atmosphere was before the summit. In the few days before, President Trump made public remarks on pulling out of NATO indefinitely and so on, so there was a lot of uncertainty. Your announcement just before the summit that you would extend your mission to Latvia to 2023 was a really strong message that we will not sell our principles, values and commitments made. This is something highly valued in Latvia. It's hard to explain what the reactions were in Latvia after these announcements were made. Shortly after, the Prime Minister visited Latvia and reassured that the decision wasn't just a hawk for public appearance and that it was the Canadian government's decision.

I'm not in favour of having this "enhanced forward presence" title of it. It should be a permanent position. We know that the Baltic States are the external border of NATO. That won't change; it will stay as an external border, and as Russia's aggression continues on different fronts, the very strong, solid position of NATO bases and troops at the external border is essential in the long term. It doesn't matter if it's a five-year or a 10-year assignment. It's also a clear message to adversaries that we are here to stay and that this is something they have to count on. It's a reality.

What more could be done? In Latvia, the military reforms that we have been undergoing for the past five or six years are immense. We hadn't seen anything like that before. After regaining independence, it's hard to describe our military's situation. It was very weak, and there wasn't a proper structure implemented. Right now, enhanced forward presence and oversight from Canadian leadership give us a lot of tools to improve our defence capabilities.

In regard to infrastructure building as well, our committee and I were ratifying the bilateral agreement between Canada and Latvia, incorporating our military sphere and investing in military infrastructure. This is something that we wouldn't be able to do single-handedly because it requires know-how and knowledge as

well. After more than 25 years of independence, it's hard to get specialists with that kind of skill set.

• (0910)

**Hon. Erin O'Toole:** You've touched on the information warfare that Russia engages in. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about how we may be able to partner there, efforts by Latvia to counter the information warfare propaganda and cybersecurity threats within the region and whether there's a role for Canada on a cyber-front. You mentioned the permanence of a forward-operating location for NATO, but I think NATO needs to harden our collective efforts on info and cyberwar as well. Do you have any comments?

**Mr. Rihards Kols:** I totally agree with you. We all know that cybersecurity and cyberspace have no borders, and there are no regulations whatsoever in cyberspace. Therefore, just implementing some measures in one region of the world won't solve the issue. It has to be a very compact and global solution.

My view is that we need a global regulation on cyberspace; call it the "Geneva digital convention". It would set up rules and principles in cyberspace. I know there are many people skeptical of that. It's going to be another convention that not all UN member states will join. It's not a fact that everybody joins, just those who understand that we need to have certain rules and principles set in cyberspace. By setting these principles and rules, we can actually take some countermeasures in that regard.

At this moment, we are very much limited to have any countermeasures. The only country that has done it so far is, just recently, the United States. It was conducting a counterattack, or cyber-attack, on the Russian troll farms. I think it was back in February.

We have to build up our defence systems and structures including cyber-defence. This is something that we have to have high-level experts implement in both the military and civil life.

In the case of Latvia, we have a very extraordinary situation. We have the army, which consists of more than 5,000 professional troops, whereas we have the national guard, which is a voluntary military service. I'm a member of the national guard.

It's an engagement where we can have high-level experts contributing to our defence capabilities voluntarily by giving their skills sets and implementing them in practice. We call them the elves. They are testing our systems where we have weak spots and so on, so we can improve in that regard. There is a separate unit within the national guard dealing with cyber-defence and cybersecurity.

It's very complex, because there is no one kind of medicine or ingredient that swallowing a pill will solve. This is complex. I know that all the cyber-defence systems are constantly tested by adversaries, not only by Russia. We know other countries are testing our vulnerable parts.

I have a favourite quotation from a dear friend, Professor James Sherr, "Look for your vulnerabilities and there you will find the KGB."

This is the way we have to conduct the assessment of our policies and strategies, and look for our weaknesses, because at some point those weaknesses will be exploited by Russia, one way or another.

I hope I answered your question. This information, again, is another chapter, which is very broad. First and foremost, we have to invest in our people and education.

● (0915)

**The Chair:** Mr. Wrzesnewskyj.

**Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair.

Welcome, Mr. Kols, and congratulations on your election to the chair position.

Your family and my family actually have something in common. You referenced relatives in Canada, and I assume they arrived here as refugees post-World War II, as did all four of my grandparents.

Canada was freedom shores, and here in Canada we have tremendous support in making sure that the freedom that has washed up onto Latvia's shores remains. We are part of the strong defence to make sure that freedom isn't lost again. It was lost at terrible human cost.

Having said that, Canada has an incredible history of bringing in refugees, your family members, our family, my family. Black slaves from the United States used to come through the Underground Railroad to find refuge. There were the Vietnamese boat people and most recently, Syrian refugees.

You also talked about the unconventional sponsored threats, especially in cyberspace. We just concluded a study that looked at the divisions that are being created in that virtual arena, that virtual world, the divisions that lead to xenophobia and nativism.

You also spoke of shared values. Part of our shared liberal democratic values here in Canada is our multiculturalism and acceptance of all people.

How do you see this rise of nativism and populism, especially among parties of the far right in Europe, and the threat they pose to the European Union? We know the Kremlin stands behind a lot of that. What is your position when it comes to those particular types of threats?

**Mr. Rihards Kols:** It's a very topical and good question, particularly because we are now facing the European Parliament elections. Again, there is a fear that populism will be boosted even more, particularly in spreading these fears and phobias, across the European continent.

Talking about Latvia in particular, Latvia is committed, as any other country in the world, to the UN refugee convention. If there is an individual who is in need of international protection, we will grant it to them, there is no question about it.

Another question, of course, is this: What is happening within Europe on irregular migration? That is an area where, yes, there are different attitudes among the politicians. We have certain different policies being persuaded within Europe on this automatic relocation of asylum seekers, immigrants who a lot of member states are opposing. Latvia is among those countries as well. That is connected with EU agreements and treaties. There are certain competencies that are in the hands of EU institutions. There are certain competencies, exclusive competencies, for member states. Immigration is an

exclusive member state competence. Therefore, the ongoing political mantling that has been happening in Europe since 2014, when Europe was severely hit by a migrant influx, is still there. If we talk about populism in Latvia, it's slightly different from the populism in the rest of Western Europe. It's a classical populism. It's populism on who's going to promise more. You're going to have a much higher pension, a much higher minimum salary and so on, even though they have no financial backing on that, on their promises and so on. In that regard, there is a populism in Latvia.

Overall, yes, I have to say the society in Latvia is very conservative. The majority of the society is really conservative, with conservative views. As I stated at the beginning, we're not against refugees and none of the politicians are. I haven't seen a politician in Latvia opposing that. Yes, it might come out in the news, there might be headlines opposing the migrants coming from North Africa or the Middle East and so on. Yes, it's because, again, we have to scrutinize it through the EU policies that are in place. We have the Dublin regulation and we an external border. There are certain duties the member states have to conduct if they have the EU external border. These include guarding it, assessing all the individuals who are coming in, scrutinizing and so on.

This said, the core value for the EU is the solidarity, there's no doubt about that. In this way, as well, solidarity doesn't mean just the one thing, replacement of individuals across member states. Solidarity can be shown by giving technical assistance, human resources—

● (0920)

**Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj:** Can I stop you there? We have limited time and I'd like to get one more question in.

Yes, European solidarity is being undermined in various ways. Liberal democratic values are under attack, which is a corrupting of those values. Also there's the class corruption. I'd like to reference Nord Stream and the "Schröderization" of the political elite and corporate elite in Europe that's been ongoing for the longest time. We've even seen some of that here in Canada.

How interconnected is the oligarchic system in Russia with some of the business interests in Latvia? Also, in particular, could you just reference Nord Stream and what attempts Latvia is making to prevent Nord Stream?

**Mr. Rihards Kols:** On the Nord Stream, we have a very clear position. We oppose such a project that undermines the sovereignty of certain countries in Europe. They will become more dependent on Russian gas as well. It's in violation of the EU Energy Union principles as well and, of course, it's interconnected with the Russian ambitions to influence either politicians or businesses within the European Union.

The Latvian position hasn't changed in any documents or in any national positions that we are expressing at the EU institutions. We oppose this project, and we try to persuade other member states to do the same. We would be happy if this project were abolished once and for all. I'm on the record. I would welcome sanctioning Nord Stream 2. I would welcome that, particularly as there are double standards, as certain member states actually are portraying right now, particularly with regard to Nord Stream 2.

We have a package of sanctions against Russia with regard to Russia's aggression in eastern Ukraine and the illegal annexation of the Crimea, but in the meantime, you're developing a project that is affecting that particular country being attacked by Russia. Of course, you could argue that those are only purely economic means and nothing else, but no. Maybe for certain European member states it's an economic one, but for us it's purely political as a soft power, in order to further its influence in politics and affairs within the European Union. I guess that the Nord Stream 2 in general is actually the one that is further fragmenting the European member states.

On your final question on corruption, we don't have oligarchs by the classical.... Yes, we have individuals who are somewhat connected with wealth and politics, but in the past eight years their impact has been reduced dramatically. In 2012, Parliament was dismissed because one of the so-called oligarchs in Latvia was a member of Parliament and the general prosecutor's office asked to investigate his apartment or something like that. You have to get consent from Parliament, and Parliament turned down the general prosecutor's request. The president, based on that issue, in decree number two dismissed Parliament and called for extraordinary elections. Since then, corruption is still there, but not on such scales and in such operations. This is something that we are taking very seriously and addressing.

Right now, we have a new head of the anti-corruption bureau. At first, everybody was slightly skeptical. Nothing happened for a year or so, and everybody thought it was another appointment that would serve some group of interests and so on, but in the end, what we see right now is that Riga is affected by the biggest corruption scandal since restoring our independence. Again, I have to mention that the Riga municipality is run by the pro-Russia party, which has an agreement with the United Russia party, so there you can find the linkages. In that connection, maybe I answered your question from the Russian oligarch point of view.

• (0925)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Caron, you're going to have extended time because we're doing a slightly longer round of questions, so please proceed.

[Translation]

**Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for the presentation, Mr. Kols. It was very interesting.

I will refrain from making jokes about hockey, even though I really want to.

I have two questions for you. Here's the first one.

In the invasion of Crimea, we saw the significant role that the Russian minority in Ukraine could play in Russia's decisions towards its neighbours, particularly those of the former Soviet Union.

You also have a Russian minority in Latvia. I would like to know from your perspective what the relationship between the state, the government, and the Russian minority is like. Can we draw some parallels between Ukraine and Latvia—perhaps this also applies to

the other Baltic countries—with respect to this Russian minority and its relationship with Russia?

[English]

**Mr. Rihards Kols:** To answer this question, I have to go back into history, and I also have to specify, when we talk about the Russian minority, do you mean ethnic Russian or Russian-speaking?

**Mr. Guy Caron:** I mean Russian-speaking.

**Mr. Rihards Kols:** That is important because Russian-speaking also includes Belarusians and Ukrainians as well, in Latvia.

If we talk about ethnic Russians, ethnic Russian minorities in Latvia account for 10% of our population. When we talk about the Russian-speaking population, then it's around 30% to 32%, which is a considerable part, but I mean we have a very diverse minority in Latvia, and we do not distinguish one larger group or smaller. The engagement from the government, from the state level, with minorities is on all fronts and all levels.

There is one thing in regard to non-citizens, and I have to go back into history. I don't know how many of you know the status and why Latvia adopted such a status for individuals as non-citizens. It all goes back to 1991 when we regained our independence. At that time, during the 50 years of occupation, around 800,000 people from across the Soviet Union were sent to Latvia.

In the meantime, if we look at Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Latvia was the severely militarized Baltic country among all three Baltic States. We have a lot of military bases and Russian troops based in Latvia. After regaining our independence, we had more than 25,000 Russian military officers, with their family members, in Latvia.

The situation was slightly different in Lithuania. The percentage of these individuals was much lower. Yes, they pursued the way of granting citizenship to all. Estonia was slightly higher, but not as high as in Latvia.

For us, at that point, we couldn't grant automatic citizenship to all, because that would be a national security threat in the long term, because it was only by 1994 that we got Russian troops out of Latvia. Nevertheless, the non-citizenship status is in accordance with international law. Latvia just didn't decide to invent it and that's it—it's in accordance with international law. In the meantime, we also introduced the naturalization process, where if there is an individual who wants to, he can actually apply and become a full-fledged Latvian citizen. Of course, he must undergo the naturalization process with knowledge of state language and history. We don't have any deadline for naturalization. It's open until the last one... Anyone can do it. Over more than 28 years, yes, the number of non-citizens is reducing. Some people argue that it's naturally because people are dying out and so on, but a lot of them are deciding to naturalize.



Then, of course, the question remains as to why we still have around 200,000 non-citizens. We cannot force citizenship on anybody; that's a human right as well. In that regard, I have to explain why it's very convenient to keep the status of non-citizenship for some. It's because non-citizens are excluded of only two rights: the right to vote and the right to take public office. All other rights are the same as citizens': work, education, studying and travelling abroad.

With that said, they can travel across the European Union and work in other member states as regular citizens, but in the meantime, they also receive—and it's usually the non-citizens right now who are the older generation, age 55 and up—the Latvian pension, and in the meantime, the Russian pension as well. It's a double win for them. They don't require a visa to travel to Russia. Of course, this is a bilateral question between Latvia and the Russian Federation.

Russia is not fully exchanging the information on how many non-citizens actually have Russian citizenship and a passport. They're excluding that information, because it is evidence in the Russian Federation presidential elections that were conducted last year. Even though they registered, how many have a Russian citizenship? Also what about the tourists who were present at the elections?

● (0930)

There was a much higher number of those who voted in the booths in Latvia for the election of the Russian president. So that means a lot of non-citizens are holding, in the meantime, a Russian citizenship as well.

[Translation]

**Mr. Guy Caron:** Basically, you're telling me that the situation of the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia is relatively different from that of the Russian-speaking minority in Ukraine. So the situation is not the same.

I have a second question, which will probably require a shorter answer.

You have a mutual defence pact with the other two Baltic countries, Lithuania and Estonia, and you are taking proactive steps to defend the territory. How proactive are Lithuania and Estonia in implementing the pact? There is a Canadian presence in Latvia. What proactive actions are Lithuania and Estonia taking?

[English]

**Mr. Rihards Kols:** I have a final comment on the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia. I think that issue will naturally die out with the change of new generations. Among the younger generation of Russian-speaking youth, 93% or more speak Latvian fluently. Even if you go to regions that are populated by Russian-speaking people, and you ask, "Do you support Putin?"... "Yes, I support him." If you ask, "Do you want Latvia to be a part of Russia?"... "No way." They understand the reality of what is happening and what benefits they are receiving by living in Latvia.

On the Baltics—Lithuania, Estonia—even prior to the Warsaw summit and the decisions made there, the co-operation among Baltic States was very strong, particularly in the military. We have joint procurement procedures as well. That is setting a fine example for other member states, particularly in the light of new incentives that have been taken within Europe, such as the EU defence fund, or the

PESCO as well. It has showcased that, for member states to have a reasonable expenditure, they have joint public procurements as well.

We also have military attachés. We have delegates from the ministries of Lithuania or Estonia to Latvian ministries. The co-operation is very strong. As well, when it comes to defence expenditure, we're not just looking at the list and saying, because we don't have it, we have to buy it just for the sake of it. Rather, we look at what we need as a region, so it's very much balanced. In Latvia, let's say, the issue is the radar system for detecting low-flying aircraft, whereas in Lithuania there are different needs. We try to leverage that. We're not looking exclusively at Latvia's defence. We're looking at the Baltics' defence altogether. The interaction is very active, and on a daily basis.

● (0935)

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[English]

Finally, we will go to MP Vandenberg, please.

**Ms. Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.):** Thank you for being here. Welcome to Ottawa.

I'm glad that you mentioned StratCom, and the way in which threats are changing. Cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns, particularly using social media platforms, are another means of state-sponsored threats. I noted that your defence minister also mentioned StratCom this week, and the willingness to assist. There is the need to work together with other like-minded countries to share that information.

But there is another side to this as well. You noted that support for the Canadian troops in Latvia is very high, despite the fact that there was a misinformation campaign through Facebook against our troops. One of the things I noted is that Latvia has a very strong school program on critical thinking skills. We know that an informed public that is media literate is our best defence when it comes to misinformation campaigns like this.

First of all, do you think that this sort of critical thinking that is being taught in schools in Latvia has a role in being able to reduce the impact of some of this fake news or disinformation, and is that something we could also be sharing across countries?

**Mr. Rihards Kols:** It's a great question. With regard to engagement, the young generation in particular are very vulnerable. In the 21st century, the speed of information is immense. It's hard to define what is real and what is not real. It's very easy to manipulate people's minds and hearts.

When we talk about the younger generation, yes, in Latvia we started to undergo the educational reform that today is the largest reform of the education system. It not only affects optimizing the school network and so on, but it also touches on the content of education. We had an education system that was based on the leftovers of the Soviet Union and that kind of thinking, that you don't develop individual capabilities and so on, that you just learn by heart, sentence by sentence, and it doesn't develop personality.

Therefore, we are undergoing serious reforms in our educational content. One of them is media literacy. It's not connected to one course. It's linked with different subjects.

Starting in 2021, we will be implementing defence studies in schools, if I'm not mistaken, and maybe the ambassador can correct me. We will have lessons once a week for high school children that will end in the summer in a 10-day camp. Those who want to pursue a military career will already have a sense of what it is. It also involves developing critical thinking and so on. We understand we have to clearly invest a lot in that.

It's not only about the education system; it's about the professionals in journalism as well. Therefore, we have set up the centre of media excellence where we teach young journalists, not only from Latvia, but from the Eastern Partnership countries as well. We know that the Eastern Partnership countries are very much affected by disinformation on a scale that is altogether different from the western countries.

It's a complex thing that we are already addressing in practice. That said, in Latvia and in the Baltics...again I know in the west everybody talked about Russian propaganda after Crimea and after Maidan, and they called it propaganda.

Propaganda by definition is winning the hearts and minds. Whereas the Kremlin's approach is information warfare, because Putin's aim is not to win hearts and minds. He couldn't care less. His aim is to spread fear, people's distrust in their democratically elected institutions, in their statehood, in that kind of an approach.

Therefore whenever we speak about Russia's disinformation, we should call it what it is. It's information warfare, and it's conducted on a scale that maybe in the western countries we saw only for five years. In the Baltics, we've experienced it on a daily basis since we gained our independence. We have grown thicker skin in that regard, society's resilience to that, but of course there are people who are persuaded or affected much more easily. We have to address these vulnerable groups within a society, and one of them is youth.

Of course, it's connected to the countermeasures. We are limited in our activities. I know that Putin is using our values against us. He knows that we cherish freedom of speech, freedom of thought, that they are the core values of our democracy. He's just waiting for a

moment when some country from the west will, let's say, limit TV channels, limit some articles and so on.

● (0940)

That will be viewed as censorship. They will say, "Look, you're going against us in conducting these activities. Look at yourself in the mirror."

We have to have very smart policies and strategies in place. Even for us, it's a very complicated situation within the European Union. Again, we have regulations and directives. One of them is an audiovisual directive, which prohibits the banning of TV channels registered within the EU. A lot of Russian propaganda channels—I don't call them media, because we don't have to legitimize propaganda as media—like RT and Sputnik News, are registered in the U.K. For the time being, the U.K. is still a member state.

In Latvia, we see a lot of TV channels that are transmitted only in the Baltic States. There is hate speech, and an invitation to violence. In accordance with criminal law, we can actually enforce and limit, but we cannot limit these TV channels, because they are registered in other EU member states. That issue is very complex.

Again, that's a vulnerability. Yes, we have very good legal frameworks operationalized, and the four freedoms within the European Union. When we try to impose some limitations, Putin will use it against us. "You set up your own law and rules that you yourself are violating."

● (0945)

**The Chair:** We're going to cut it off there, because we have work to get to. I do want to thank both the ambassador and Mr. Kols for being here, and for engaging with us on issues of importance in the relationship between our country, NATO, the threat being opposed by Russian aggression and, of course, democracy writ large in the region.

With that, we will suspend, and then reconvene to begin our committee business.

**Mr. Rihards Kols:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you honourable members of the committee for providing this opportunity to speak to and engage with you.

I would also like to use this opportunity to invite your committee to visit Latvia. This is an official invitation. Please do. There is a lot to see, and a lot to engage with in Latvia. Please do consider visiting Latvia at some point.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

With that, we'll suspend.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*







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