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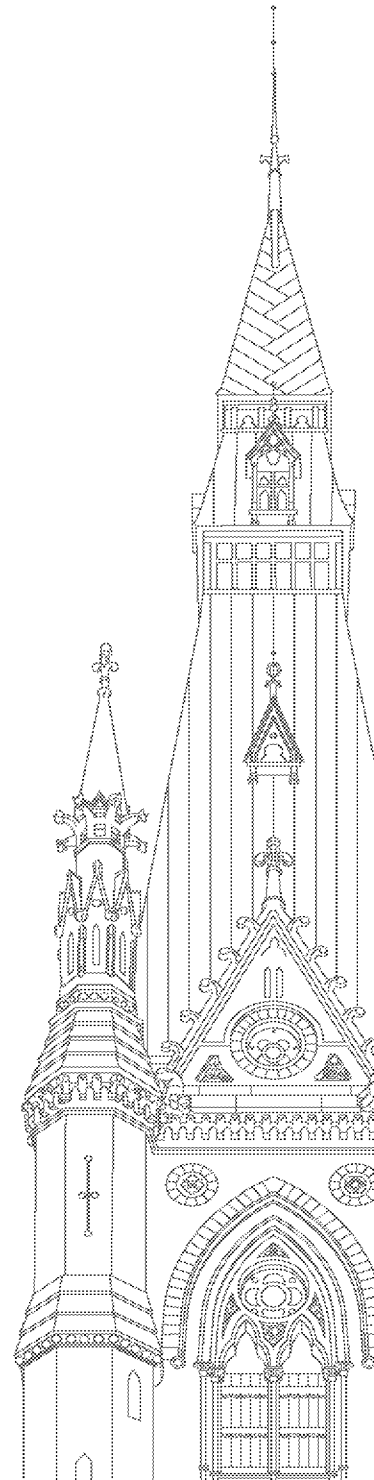
Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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Thursday, November 3, 2022

Chair: The Honourable Bardish Chagger



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• (1105)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 38 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

The committee is meeting today to continue its study on foreign election interference.

[*English*]

Our first panel consists of the security and intelligence threats to elections task force. For the second panel, we have two experts who have spent much time examining the vulnerabilities of the electoral system to foreign election interference and misinformation or disinformation.

I would like to let the committee know that all virtual witnesses have undergone the pre-committee connectivity and audio tests.

With regard to interpretation for those on Zoom, you have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of floor, English or French. Those in the room can use the earpiece and select the desired channel. Before we start, I will remind you that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

For our first panel, we have Tara Denham, director general, office of human rights, freedoms and inclusion, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development; Lisa Ducharme, acting director general, federal policing national intelligence, Royal Canadian Mounted Police; and Adam Fisher, director general, intelligence assessments, Canadian Security Intelligence Service. We will also be hearing from Mr. Lyall King, director, risk mitigation programs, Communications Security Establishment.

Mr. King, I know you have four minutes, but because you are the only person speaking, I will provide leniency. You can have up to five minutes.

Welcome to PROC.

Mr. Lyall King (Director, Risk Mitigation Programs, Communications Security Establishment, Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force): Thank you. That's very kind, Madam Chair. I appreciate that.

Hello. Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee, for the invitation to appear today.

My name is Lyall King, and I'm the former chair of the security and intelligence threats to elections task force—SITE for short. I am now the director of risk mitigation programs at the Communications Security Establishment. I am pleased to be joined by my colleagues from each of the organizations that make up the SITE task force.

I know that earlier this week you heard from the CSE and CSIS. While that brief focused on threats of foreign interference as a whole, I will focus on providing an overview from the SITE perspective.

The SITE task force comprises officials from the Communications Security Establishment, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, Global Affairs Canada and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Together, we have a mandate to provide a clear point of engagement within the security and intelligence community for government partners; to review and focus intelligence collection, assessment and open-source analysis related to foreign interference; to provide government partners, senior public servants and other partners with situational awareness; and to promote the use of intelligence, assessment and open-source information analysis in the protection of electoral processes through sharing with partners or, when mandates permit, taking action to mitigate the threat.

Each organization here today has a distinct mandate that allows us to work together to reduce the threat of foreign interference against our democratic institutions in Canada.

I would like to take a moment to highlight some of the important contributions that our partners have made to the SITE task force. This is an overview and does not cover all of the roles and responsibilities of SITE members.

CSIS provides threat briefings and intelligence reporting to Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections and provides assessments of hostile state activity methodologies and capabilities to Government of Canada decision-makers.

Global Affairs Canada provides research on disinformation campaigns targeting Canada by foreign actors and reports on global trends, metrics, and incidents.

The RCMP investigates criminal activity related to interference or influence of Canada's electoral processes and works closely in partnership with intelligence, law enforcement and regulatory agencies.

CSE provides intelligence and cyber-assessments on the intentions, activities and capabilities of foreign threat actors, protects government systems and networks related to elections through cyber-defence measures, and provides cybersecurity advice and guidance to political parties, provinces and other institutions involved in democratic processes.

It is important to note that, in addition to SITE, there was a panel of non-partisan senior civil servants who administered the critical election incident public protocol. SITE provided regular intelligence updates to the panel and also gave classified briefings to Canada's main political parties to ensure that they were aware of the threats.

The important work of the SITE task force progresses outside of election periods as we continue to help the government assess and respond to foreign threats to Canada's electoral processes.

Members, I hope this has helped paint a better picture of the SITE task force and the important role that each of our organizations plays in safeguarding Canadian democracy.

I do thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today, and we look forward to answering any of the questions that you may have.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that excellent introduction.

We will start with six-minute rounds, commencing with Mr. Cooper, followed by Mrs. Romanado, then Madame Gaudreau and then Mr. MacGregor.

Mr. Cooper, go ahead.

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

I will direct my questions to whichever witness is able to answer them.

I want to talk about the 2021 federal election campaign. It has now been established that there was interference by Chinese Communist-controlled media. There was a proliferation of disinformation on social media platforms that was influenced or controlled by the Chinese Communist regime. There were civil society organizations that had reported on such interference during the election campaign, including DisinfoWatch.

During the election campaign, the rapid response mechanism at Global Affairs had observed such interference in terms of the spreading of disinformation, specifically targeting the Conservative Party and individual Conservative candidates. One glaring example was in the case of Kenny Chiu, the incumbent Conservative member in the riding of Steveston—Richmond East.

It had been mentioned that there is in place the critical election incident public protocol, the purpose of which is to communicate transparently with Canadians during an election about incidents that threaten the integrity of the election. Pursuant to the protocol, barring any overriding national security or public security reasons, the agencies will inform affected parties of any information regarding interference.

Was Kenny Chiu informed?

● (1110)

Mr. Lyall King: Madam Chair, I can begin with a comment and then perhaps open it up to my colleagues.

Thank you very much for the question. I appreciate it.

I would just note that there were activities observed, certainly during the election. I will note in context, as well, that it's activity that we also see on a persistent basis; that is to say, we observe things before, during and after an election. That's what SITE is also looking at, the task force, looking at those behaviours over a period of time.

I will say—

Mr. Michael Cooper: My time is limited. My question is specifically about the 2021 election.

I know there were things that were happening before and there are things happening now, but this protocol is in place during the election campaign. The panel is in place during the election campaign. Pursuant to the protocol, if there's evidence of interference, the affected party will be informed.

My question is very simple. Was Kenny Chiu informed?

Mr. Lyall King: Thank you. I appreciate that clarification on the timing.

I will very simply say that we had advised the critical election incident protocol panel of the information. In terms of making public statements, it is their decision whether or not it meets a threshold to do so. We at SITE simply present the information.

I will open it up—

Mr. Michael Cooper: Barring any overriding national or public security reasons, pursuant to protocol, the affected party will be informed. Was he informed or wasn't he?

Mr. Lyall King: My apologies, sir. I will ask my colleague Adam Fisher from the service if he may be able to respond to that particular question.

Mr. Adam Fisher (Director General, Intelligence Assessments, Canadian Security Intelligence Service, Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force): Thank you very much.

Good morning, Madam Chair. Through you, thank you for the question.

On that issue, we clearly can't speak to specifics of cases or investigations. What we can say—I'm echoing what my colleague has said—is that throughout the election, any incidents or intelligence that pointed to foreign influence activity from a foreign state would have been provided in a coherent manner to the panel of five. From there, it was for them to determine whether it reached their threshold and required onward action.

I can assure you that certainly we were alive to threats throughout the election period and leading up to it and providing intelligence and advice, along with our colleagues.

• (1115)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Pursuant to the protocol, if a certain threshold is met, the public is to be informed.

The public wasn't informed. Why not?

Mr. Lyall King: I will attempt to answer that. Thank you for your question.

I will simply note that this is a decision that is in the sole purview of the panel of five, as we would refer to them, the panel of five senior civil servants. The SITE task force does not have insight as to how and when they make those decisions. We stand here and we deliver the information so that they are able to make an informed decision.

We, as SITE, would not be able to answer the question of why something had or had not met the threshold. That is up to the purview of the panel, sir.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Denham, did you want to say something?

Ms. Tara Denham (Director General, Office of Human Rights, Freedoms and Inclusion, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force): Thank you, Chair.

I just wanted to add to it, because the reference was to some of the reporting of the rapid response mechanism.

Just to echo answers of other colleagues, we did see some of the activity, but in the reporting of the rapid response mechanism—again, we're looking for foreign threats—we were not able to verify whether the behaviour was directed by state, whether it was organic or whether it was an intermingling of the two.

I just want to clarify that.

The Chair: Thank you.

I will just remind all colleagues that if we're going to interrupt, it's best that we go through the chair. For the purposes of our interpreters and the work that we do, it's important that we provide time to our guests, who have accepted our invitation to be here with the information we are looking for.

With that, Mrs. Romanado, you have six minutes.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoine, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

First of all, I want to thank the witnesses for being here today.

I also want to inquire a little bit more about something that was mentioned in the opening remarks. Mr. King, you mentioned the classified briefings to political parties, and we were just hearing a little bit about that. Could you elaborate a little bit on what you would classify as a political party?

As you can imagine, Canada can have hundreds of different political parties that are registered with Elections Canada. Some of them may not be as well established or as well known. Do you provide these classified briefings to all political parties that are registered, or is there a certain threshold or criteria that are required?

Mr. Lyall King: Thank you very much for your question.

I would first say that it was the role of the Privy Council Office, our colleagues in the security and intelligence and the director there who brokered these engagements. It's not SITE directly; it's through the Privy Council Office.

They would send invites out to, I believe, registered political parties. From my recollection, an invite would have been sent out explaining what the intent and purpose was, and then there would be a follow-up for those who were willing to engage. It was really on the invitees to accept or decline.

The Privy Council Office is the body that would have done that.

Thank you.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Okay, thank you.

You mentioned classified briefings. I know that, for instance, when a minister or a parliamentary secretary is sworn in, we go through additional security background checks and so on in order to receive security clearance status of secret or further up in terms of top secret, and so on.

When you mentioned classified briefings to political parties, volunteers and employees of political parties do not necessarily have classified security clearance. Could you elaborate a bit on what you referred to when you said “classified briefings”?

Mr. Lyall King: Thank you, again, for the question.

The classified briefings were typically at secret level. It was, to be fair, a fairly small grouping. We would naturally look at, perhaps, campaign managers or chief information officers of the parties to target them in terms of the information briefings. We'd provide some general overviews of the nature of the threat to understand the threat landscape and what we were dealing with on a regular basis. We'd provide some context for what they may see and, at the end of the day, just open a dialogue to be able to have some open discussions with partners in that space should something arise.

They were classified briefings with a fairly small community at the secret level.

• (1120)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you.

Switching gears a bit, I wanted to get your thoughts—it could be from anyone on the panel today—on the benefits of a registry of foreign agents. What are your thoughts on that?

Mr. Lyall King: I will open it up to see if any of my colleagues want to have a say first.

Mr. Adam Fisher: Through you, Madam Chair, thank you for the question. I can take a run at that.

I'm not a policy person. I'm not from a policy department. We provide intelligence and advice to government, so I hope you'll forgive me for answering the question in a general way.

What I would say is that the threat of foreign influence activity is something that is felt not only here in Canada. It's felt by our closest allies, our Five Eyes allies. We're all dealing with the same threat and from, in large part, the same aggressive adversaries. There's a lot to learn from each other. There's a lot to learn from our partners, as they are learning from us. My understanding is, for example, that the SITE task force is unique to Canada and is something our allies have looked to emulate in their jurisdictions.

Yes, I'm not answering your question directly, but I would say there's a lot to learn, and I know that certainly in intelligence circles we speak on a constant basis with our allies, and in policy circles, as well, the same is being done. Ultimately, of course, it's up to the government to decide what sort of policy fixes they'd like to see in place to address the issue.

Thank you.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Mr. King, do you want to chime in on that one?

Mr. Lyall King: Thank you.

I don't really have much more to add, other than to say that there are obviously a number of tools that can assist us in attempting to identify aspects of foreign interference. While I wouldn't want to comment specifically on a foreign registry, I would just say that could be another of those tools that could be implemented, among the others. As Mr. Fisher has highlighted, we look to understand and share with allies...their best practices also, what they have in play and how that may or may not assist us in our efforts to combat foreign interference.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Ms. Gaudreau. You have six minutes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm from a wonderful little area not far from here, Laurentides—Labelle.

As I listen to everything that's being said, I'm thinking about my constituents, the people following our proceedings and voters in general, and wondering what information they need to know.

It's not at all reassuring to hear, right off the bat, that foreign actors are targeting a specific party in an effort to interfere in elections. I want to use my time to learn more from the witnesses.

I understand what the role of the Privy Council Office is, but I want to know what the limits are regarding information that is not to be shared, once the threshold has been reached.

I'd also like to know why we are learning about this now and why it takes a committee to have this discussion.

Perhaps those concerned are aware of what's going on, but how is it that voters know so little about the problem of foreign interference?

I'd like a short answer, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

Mr. Lyall King: Thank you very much for the question, Madam Chair. Maybe I will have a go at answering this.

I think it's a fantastic question. It's one that we've talked about a fair bit as a SITE group in terms of wanting to make sure that information is relevant and available to the public as well, so I would say that when it comes to constituents, it's about education and information sharing at the end of the day. That's what it comes down to.

In terms of educating, certainly the Government of Canada—CSE—has produced a number of reports over the years on threats to democratic processes, in 2017, 2019 and 2021, updating the types of things that people can look out for and how they can protect themselves. There's plenty of advice and guidance online as well, which we have on our website.

We've also issued, as I'm sure you've heard this week, the national cyber-threat assessment, which does talk a bit more generically about what people may expect to see and what the real risks are to Canadians with respect to cyber-threats. Cybercrime is one of those.

Equally, we mentioned the activities of nation-states in those products as well, in terms of Russia, China, North Korea and Iran. As well, I know the service has issued a number of products publicly to describe the ways in which foreign-fed actors behave and the methodologies they use. So “education, education, education” is one thing I would say.

The other thing is letting people understand what is a good source. Evaluate your sources, and that's I think probably a challenge there. It's not just the SITE task force and our intelligence agencies playing a role here, but equally, certainly, Elections Canada as well, in terms of providing clear, valid, good information for the public.

I'll stop there and open it up to my colleagues if they have additional comments.

• (1125)

Mr. Adam Fisher: Madam Chair, if I can have a couple of seconds, I can add to that and reinforce the message from my colleague.

From a service perspective, we see this as critically important. Foreign-influenced activity cannot be addressed by the federal government alone, never mind other levels of government and civil society.

Although our founding act and our mandate have always been to provide highly classified information to government, we have, in the last five to 10 years, developed a very robust stakeholder engagement program through which we engage with civil society, academics, communities, diaspora communities, the media, industry and all levels of government. We do that in an unclassified setting. There's a lot we can talk about in an unclassified setting that prepares Canadians well to be able to identify the threats that we face in an FI environment.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you.

I have a very important question. Are we adequately equipped?

When I think about two-factor authentication and the biometric information financial institutions have been requiring of their clients for quite some time now, I wonder whether we have the tools we need to respond to cyber-attacks against individuals.

You monitor the situation beyond the scope of elections. Do you think we are way off track when it comes to our legislation? You mentioned our Five Eyes partners. Are there comparisons to be drawn in terms of what's being done elsewhere? Are there best practices we should be following?

[*English*]

Mr. Lyall King: Madam Chair, I will attempt to answer a bit of that question.

I would say that we are in an environment that is increasingly on-line. We talked about this, and I'll refer back to the national cyber-threat assessment for this piece. Canada has a pretty significant digital economy. We understand people are working in hybrid ways now. We have to use the Internet, so it comes down—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: In light of your expertise, do you think we are adequately equipped?

If not, efforts are needed on a number of fronts: privacy protection, education and digital media transparency. That's a lot. You shouldn't be working in the wilderness.

Are we well equipped?

[*English*]

Mr. Lyall King: Thank you for the clarification.

My response is that it's an ever-changing environment. We always have to be evolving ourselves and our methodologies to address the threats. Can we ever be 100% sure that we are able to deal with everything? I think the answer is no.

I think the point here is pushing the bar and the message around resilience. It's not necessarily whether something will happen, but being prepared for when it happens, and that means being able to detect—

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to go to Mr. MacGregor for six minutes.

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

I really appreciate hearing from our witnesses today. The committee that I'm usually a member of is the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security. The witnesses' organizations are no strangers to appearing before that committee.

I'm glad to see the procedure and House affairs committee looking at this issue, because at the public safety committee, we have looked at issues of ideologically motivated violent extremism and Canada's security stance vis-à-vis Russia. We have had a number of experts in the field and representing your agencies—including the chief of the defence staff—who have painted a very stark picture about the changing geopolitical tensions in the international order, particularly the threats posed to Canada and other like-minded democracies by Russia and China. I think the testimony from General Wayne Eyre was a wake-up call for every member of that committee. We have heard a lot of information in the course of both of our studies about what foreign actors are attempting to do to disrupt the Canadian democratic system and influence our citizens and our democratic norms.

What I would like to hear a bit more from you about is.... One of the areas that we have concentrated on is the role of social media platforms. We've really grappled with what the correct course of action is for Canada's Parliament to take in terms of how we regulate them and what kinds of partnerships we need to establish with them.

Could one of you inform us as to what your working relationship is like with some of the major social media platforms? Are there ways that parliamentarians could help you improve that relationship?

Take a few minutes to talk about that, please.

● (1130)

Ms. Tara Denham: Madam Chair, I could perhaps start on that one. Thank you for the question.

Again, I'm going to start with the context of the elections. As this committee is familiar with, there was the Declaration on Electoral Integrity Online. That's a voluntary declaration that social media companies were encouraged to participate in. A number of them have signed on, which is progress. I think we need to continue to work on those types of declarations and encourage more social media companies to sign on.

From a Global Affairs perspective, we're looking at that and sharing what we've done, so a best practice is that declaration. We then look at what other countries are doing and the result of that. That type of work, like the declaration, also encourages social media companies to work together; they're collaborating to understand what the space is and what actions are taken. We then look at that and say, if the collective of this is happening not only in Canada but in other countries, then how do we engage in a global conversation, perhaps about frameworks of behaviour for social media companies?

I know there are a lot of conversations about legislation. National legislation would not be the purview of Global Affairs. I can say that we're watching that and we engage in entities like the Freedom Online Coalition, of which Canada is currently the chair. We try to push those conversations about what can be done when you're talking about actions that cross national and international borders.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you for that answer.

Mr. King, you mentioned that it's an ever-changing threat environment, and I think the subtext is that we have to be nimble. In your opinion, what are the legislative, policy and funding gaps to which parliamentarians should pay particular attention to enable your collection of agencies to meet this ever-changing threat environment? What should parliamentarians, maybe those on the public safety committee and this committee, be paying attention to, so that you have the tools required to do your jobs and protect our democratic system?

Mr. Lyall King: Thank you for the question.

To be quite frank, I don't think I would be qualified to necessarily comment on some of those big things you've asked for, sir.

I think I would underline—keeping it in a SITE perspective and the particular roles and mandates of our organization as part of SITE—that we need to continue to make sure we have an open dialogue with social media companies. We each have different areas of focus and different ways to engage. From a cyber centre perspective, that means working with them to try to highlight threats that we see through our aperture, what we understand that to be, and to learn from them as to how we can detect, respond to and reduce those threats.

I would not want to comment on the legislative aspect of things. I would maybe double down, from a SITE perspective, that we want to continue to engage and have an open and collaborative, sharing relationship where that's possible.

Adam, I'm not sure whether you would like to comment from the services perspective.

• (1135)

Mr. Adam Fisher: No, I think you covered it nicely.

I could make a pitch, and I hope my colleagues will forgive me for doing this. I'm on solid ground in doing it. I know my deputy director has said the same thing in front of this committee.

In terms of social media and the technology of foreign-influenced activity, the threat is evolving. Certainly, speaking from a service point of view, we don't have all the tools to adequately understand that threat. What I'm referring to in particular is the ability to look at data and integrate that into our investigations and assessments. Our act has not kept pace in terms of the technology and the legal landscape in that respect.

That's something that certainly my organization would flag as perhaps needing something there.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now go for five minutes to Mr. Calkins, followed by Monsieur Fergus.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): Thank you.

I'll keep going on that vein of questioning.

Mr. Fisher, is it because the legislation is not technologically neutral enough, or is there some other gap? Can you be a little more specific, without giving away our monitoring posture or anything like that? Your answer was interesting, but vague enough that I might not have got it.

Mr. Adam Fisher: It was probably by design, Madam Chair. Forgive me for being so general about it. It's really not my area of expertise.

I'll say that our act was designed in 1984, and it has not had significant changes or amendments. Certainly the technological environment we find ourselves in now, combined with the very real necessity to guard privacy rights and constitutional rights that are top of mind here, requires a rethink of how we approach these threats.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Madam Chair, in 1984 I was singing along to Van Halen on the radio, and I can assure you that is a very long time ago. If we were lucky, we had a Sony Walkman.

This is a little bit alarming, so I'm hoping there is a way that you and your organization can be a little more direct, maybe through another medium, with members of this committee, but your point is well taken.

I have a general question for you. It's one thing to identify the threat. It's one thing to monitor it, and it's one thing to track it, given the current structure of the legislation. It's another thing to inform the panel of five that you talked about, and it's another thing for them to decide that a threshold is met and to inform electors or to talk to political parties.

I want to talk a bit more about what we are doing to interdict, disrupt and, if necessary, carry out an investigation and prosecution of a foreign actor that might be operating within the territorial confines of Canada. Is there anybody here who can speak to whether or not we have any gaps on that front?

Mr. Adam Fisher: Madam Chair, I can perhaps start, and then I'll hand it over to my colleague from the RCMP.

Certainly in terms of action that the service can take when it sees foreign-influenced activity occurring within Canada, we have mechanisms under our threat reduction mandate, both warranted and non-warranted solutions, that are sometimes applied to foreign-influenced activity that we see in an attempt to diminish that threat. We usually approach this in a very collaborative way with other government agencies and departments so that we choose the best tool.

When it comes to prosecution, that does become difficult in this space. It's the age-old problem of transferring intelligence into an evidentiary arena, and that is difficult. There are ways to do it, and it's always an option on the table.

I'll stop there and maybe let my colleague from the Mounties jump in.

Ms. Lisa Ducharme (Acting Director General, Federal Policing National Intelligence, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force): Thank you for the question.

With respect to foreign interference threats in general, the RCMP uses all of its authorities to be able to tackle these problems and looks for the criminality per the Security of Information Act. It must be able to prove that there is espionage, release of classified information, foreign influence, threats or violence. It also has the Criminal Code, which has various offences such as threat, intimidation and bribery of officials, and it also has other legislative tools at its disposal.

When it comes to election issues, it is the Commissioner of Canada Elections who is responsible for determining whether they wish to proceed with an investigation, and that is with the advice of Elections Canada and the panel of five, and through the SITE task force advising the panel of five.

The RCMP has a memorandum of understanding with the Commissioner of Canada Elections to investigate what they want to pursue. We can work with them on joint investigations, and we can provide technical assistance, advice, guidance and other such support, should they wish to proceed with an investigation.

Thank you.

• (1140)

Mr. Blaine Calkins: My colleague adjacent to me just said that elections are a very short window, and this process sounds like it is a very long process.

Madam Chair, I'll take the time from my colleague in the next round, if it's possible.

If you could boil down any efficiencies that this committee should be aware of, anything that can make that process more efficient for your organizations, and let this committee know, I think this committee would appreciate it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Vice-Chair Nater was kind enough to offer time for an answer right now, but we can take that in writing, per Mr. Calkins' preference.

[*Translation*]

Now it's over to Mr. Fergus for five minutes.

Hon. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for sharing their insights today.

This is a very serious issue.

I have three questions, and I'll start with the easiest one.

Mr. King, in response to a fellow member's question, you said that China, North Korea, Iran and Russia were the top four countries responsible for political interference on social media.

I know most of our questions have focused on China, but can you tell us briefly what the other countries are doing? Is it the same

thing that China is doing, or is it different? Is there a difference quality-wise in their unwanted interference?

Mr. Lyall King: Thank you for your question.

I'm going to switch to English, so I can provide a clearer answer.

[*English*]

Thank you very much.

I should clarify something there. When I listed the countries that I did, they're from the national cyber-threat assessment, which speaks to the strategic cyber-threats to Canada from nation-states, rather than specifically those countries being engaged in social media-related activities targeting us in a political sense during that. I should really just clarify that.

I will note that, generally speaking, when it comes to threats to democratic processes—and it's no surprise, as we've mentioned this before—China and Russia tend to be the two big players in that space. They do represent different threats to us because they behave in different ways, because of their different interests, intent and capabilities.

I would just like to be very clear that the comment on those four countries that I noted was in relation to the broader strategic threat to Canada from a cyber perspective, sir. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thanks for clarifying that.

Can you tell us the difference between what China is doing and what Russia is doing? We've talked a lot about China, but I'd like to hear about Russia as well.

What kinds of activities is Russia engaged in, and how are they different from China's?

[*English*]

Mr. Lyall King: Thank you.

I'll make a brief comment and perhaps open it up to my colleague from the service as well.

Again, I have to underline that I obviously can't get into the specifics of some of the things that we understand of the behaviours and activities of these states, but it's easy enough to point out, I think, from open-source intelligence and what you see in the press, to be quite frank, as to how things unfold. You'll even see social media companies, for example, outing the use of fake accounts and that sort of thing.

Russia and China do have different ways of operating in that sphere, but I couldn't comment specifically on some of the things that we observe. I will maybe just open this up to Mr. Fisher from the service to see if he wants to add any nuance to that.

• (1145)

Mr. Adam Fisher: Sure. Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll speak in general terms again, not specific to social media, and I'll just make a couple of comments.

My colleague has already referred to this. Their approaches and their activity in the FI space do depend on their strategic intent. From open sources, you can generally infer that Russia is more inclined towards disrupting and undermining our system of government through messaging that casts what is happening here in some doubt. China, I would say, by comparison, is more interested in working within the system to corrupt it, compromising officials, elected officials and individuals at all levels of government, within industry, within civil society, using our open and free society for their nefarious purposes.

That's how I would, at a very high level, generally distinguish between the two. I would say that, without a doubt, China is the foremost aggressor in this space.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Ms. Gaudreau. You have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I will be asking our valued witnesses questions that they will have to answer in writing for the purposes of our report. We'll let you know when we need those answers by at the end of the meeting.

I'm going to fire off all my questions.

You said that you looked to what the Five Eyes partners were doing, so I'd like to know what best practices the Five Eyes have adopted.

You also talked about the tools you use to carry out your work. We don't have time to get into them now, but I'd like to know more about those tools.

I asked you earlier whether you were adequately equipped to do your work. You mentioned a few things, but I'd like you to provide a more thorough answer.

Lastly, two things I took away from your comments were transparency and education. What do you need on that front?

You can take the last little bit of time to tell me what you need in order to ensure people are educated about this. As pointed out, we should be embarrassed about the state of privacy protection. The legislation goes back to 1984. I hope that will get through to people.

You have about 30 seconds to comment.

Mr. Lyall King: Thank you for your questions.

Once again, I'm going to answer in English.

[*English*]

That's a lot of questions.

I would just maybe underline, in terms of the authorities and tools we have to do our jobs, that, as Mr. Fisher has already stated, the service might require some updates to legislation, given the age of that.

CSE did have the Communications Security Establishment Act come into force in 2019, which has enabled and provided us with additional tools, which we are using. Therefore, from a CSE perspective, we feel that this modernization has really helped us quite significantly, and it just remains to continually invest in our ability to stay on top of the issue from a technological perspective with investment.

Perhaps Tara or Lisa would like to speak.

The Chair: Not this time, but I look forward to hearing from you next time.

Mr. MacGregor, you have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you, Madam Chair.

To our witnesses, I want to focus specifically on Russia, because of the conflict in Ukraine and the changed relationship between Canada and Russia because of that conflict.

At our public safety committee, we have heard testimony during the studies that I previously mentioned about the relationship between the Russian government and various Russian criminal organizations that commit a variety of financial crimes around the world. There's also a sort of loose relationship between the Russian government and these criminal organizations within Russia.

My two questions are as follows. Can you comment about this relationship vis-à-vis foreign influence? Second, how has activity from Russia changed from the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine? What kind of trends can you broadly speak about that you have observed since the start of that conflict?

● (1150)

Mr. Lyall King: Adam, do you want to have a crack at that first?

Mr. Adam Fisher: Sure. We're veering a little bit outside the scope of election security.

Certainly, with the conflict in Ukraine, we've seen Russia using social media to promote its narrative of blaming the invasion on the aggression of NATO. That narrative is obviously counter to the one the west subscribes to. What the conflict has changed has been maybe their focus in terms of the narratives they're pushing, through both overt and covert means.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: To be clear, I was asking whether their activity has changed vis-à-vis interference in elections, not only in Canada but also among our democratic allies, just to be specific.

Mr. Adam Fisher: I'm not sure I have an adequate answer for you on that one in an unclassified forum.

Mr. Lyall King: Perhaps I can just offer that it's a space we continue to look at to try to understand. Again, it may veer a little bit outside of what the SITE focus is, but in terms of understanding the nexus between the various components of the Russian regime—

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now go to Mr. Nater for two minutes—maybe even two and a half—followed by Ms. O'Connell.

Mr. Nater, go ahead.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses.

I want to start with a question and open it up to whoever is best positioned to answer it.

When we see some diaspora approaching a million to 1.5 million individuals within Canada, and the fact that often an election can be decided by a handful of seats—a dozen or so seats, with a total of 20,000 to 30,000 votes total, can influence an election—how capable are foreign state actors currently of moving that needle by 20,000 to 30,000 votes among the diaspora within Canada?

Mr. Lyall King: I'm sorry, Adam, but I may pick on you for that one.

Mr. Adam Fisher: Madam Chair, thank you.

I'm hesitant to comment precisely on the extent to which foreign adversaries can turn the needle in certain ridings or elections.

Certainly with respect to China, they look to interfere domestically in all respects. That includes in certain elections and ridings. They certainly see local diaspora as an opportunity to advance their narrative and to coerce and pursue outcomes that are in the interests of the PRC. The intent is there, and certainly.... I'm speaking in very general terms here. I'm not speaking specifically of the last election or any particular riding. In general terms, certainly they see that as an opportunity for foreign influence activity.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you for that.

I want to go briefly to Mr. King.

Earlier this week, the Chief Electoral Officer stated that Elections Canada did not experience any breaches to its IT infrastructure or interference with its electoral operations, which I think is good. My question for you is whether you would agree with that.

Second, very briefly—and perhaps you can answer in writing at a future date—what threats do you see in terms of the IT infrastructure for Elections Canada when considering 338 electoral districts and 338 riding offices?

• (1155)

The Chair: I'll give 30 seconds for an answer.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you.

Mr. Lyall King: Thank you very much for the question.

Madam Chair, in response, I would certainly say that I absolutely agree with the Chief Electoral Officer in terms of that assessment. The cyber centre has worked very closely with Elections Canada for many years, in terms of hardening systems and being able to detect and defend in that space. We're quite confident on that particular view.

The other thing, in terms of looking at the overall threat—

The Chair: I'm going to have to let it go there. I'm sorry. I was trying.

We will make sure that we.... I will reiterate a couple of points at the end.

Ms. O'Connell, you have three minutes.

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

On Tuesday, we heard from CSIS that foreign actors, whether it's to disrupt or influence elections, are not strictly supporting one party over the other, but are really about showing distrust in political institutions and in democracy. That vein is the context for my questions.

The 2020 CSIS annual report also talks about foreign governments continuing to try to interfere in Canadian affairs—in this context, elections. That same 2020 CSIS report speaks a lot about incels, and in particular people who go to forums to promote violence against women.

In the context of foreign state actors trying to promote violence, disinformation and misinformation, would you suggest that incels—which CSIS has identified in terms of violent extremism—are a forum where foreign state actors might want to create upheaval in our democratic institutions? In particular, would the promotion of violence against women be a forum where foreign state actors might love to delve in and promote disinformation and misinformation?

Mr. Lyall King: Thank you for the question, Madam Chair.

Again, I'll answer that in a general way. What I would say is that our adversaries are opportunistic. They look for issues that are divisive domestically and they exploit them. Certainly that is a theoretical possibility, and foreign adversaries could take advantage of that domestically.

I would also clarify or expand a bit on the reference to foreign-influenced activity disrupting Canadian society and undermining our institutions. Equally, in foreign-influenced activity, there are states that are looking to exploit the system we have from the inside in a covert and deceptive way. That is equally worrisome and of concern for the service from a national security perspective.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you to the witnesses for your participation.

As the members have requested, we would appreciate it if you would send the clerk the necessary information, whether classified as secret or not.

We also appreciate the time you've taken to participate in our study. We thank you for the work you do and the responsibilities you shoulder.

Have a good day.

[*English*]

I will suspend really quickly and we'll get ready with panel two. Please stay close to your seats, because I'd like to start it within two minutes.

Thank you.

• (1155) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1200)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Now that the second panel is ready, we will resume the meeting.

We have two witnesses joining us.

We are welcoming Marcus Kolga, director of DisinfoWatch, and Jim Judd, former director of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, who is appearing as an individual.

We'll start with Mr. Kolga.

Welcome, Mr. Kolga. You have four minutes for your opening statement.

[*English*]

Mr. Marcus Kolga (Director, DisinfoWatch): Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee, for dedicating your time to study the threat posed by disinformation to election integrity and, indeed, the cohesion of our entire democracy.

My name is Marcus Kolga. I've been monitoring, analyzing and exposing Russian disinformation for the past 15 years. In 2020, I started DisinfoWatch, a platform dedicated to exposing foreign disinformation narratives with the support of the U.S. State Department and Journalists for Human Rights, under the roof of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute. DisinfoWatch was initially focused on tracking foreign disinformation about COVID-19. We expanded its scope in 2021, and we were actively tracking foreign narratives during the last federal election.

In the weeks before the September 20, 2021, election, we were alerted to Chinese state media narratives that directly targeted the Conservative Party and its leader, Erin O'Toole. Simultaneously, members of the Chinese Canadian community brought to our attention similar narratives appearing on local Canadian Chinese-language media platforms and the Chinese social media channel WeChat. WeChat is commonly regarded as a tool used by the Chinese government for surveillance and repression.

On September 9, 2021, the Chinese Communist Party-owned tabloid Global Times published an article attacking the Conservative Party's foreign policy platform. The Global Times article threatened Canadians that if they elected a Conservative government, Canadians should expect "strong counter strike and Canada will be the one to suffer".

At the same time, an anonymous article was posted to WeChat targeting an incumbent MP, Kenny Chiu. In September 2021, Chiu introduced a private member's bill to create a Canadian foreign influence registry modelled on existing Australian and U.S. legislation. The registry law would have required individuals and groups acting on behalf of identified foreign authoritarian regimes, such as Russia, North Korea, Iran or China, to identify and register themselves. This would have threatened Chinese government influence operations in Canada. The anonymous WeChat article falsely accused Chiu of seeking to "suppress the Chinese community" through his bill.

Both the Global Times and WeChat narratives were shared on local Chinese Canadian digital and social media platforms.

According to Taiwan's leading disinformation analysis NGO, Doublethink, Chinese state actors often use low-level disinformation disseminated on chat platforms—

• (1205)

The Chair: I'm going to pause this really quickly, Mr. Kolga. I know that you are trying to get a lot of information in. I can assure you that we will provide you avenues to provide us more information when we're outside of this hour.

With two official languages, receiving the message in the other language is something we need to slow down for a bit.

Mr. Marcus Kolga: I will indeed.

The Chair: Okay. We want to hear what you have to say.

I'm going to continue the clock. You are currently at two minutes and 17 seconds.

It's over to you.

Mr. Marcus Kolga: Perfect. Thank you.

According to Taiwan's leading disinformation analysis NGO, Doublethink, Chinese state actors often use low-level disinformation disseminated on chat platforms like WeChat and others as a method of attack. The method and content of the narratives spread about former MP Kenny Chiu are tactically consistent with those identified by Doublethink.

After analyzing open-source data and consulting with key stakeholders, we believed and continue to believe that the timing and content of these narratives were consistent with previous Chinese government information operations and indicated the likelihood of a coordinated operation targeting Chinese Canadian voters. We published our initial report on September 14, 2021, and a subsequent report in December. Researchers from the Atlantic Council's digital forensics lab and McGill University later confirmed our findings in separate independent reports.

Now I'll briefly speak a little bit about Russian interference.

Russian information and influence operations are persistent and they are growing. They do not turn on and off with election cycles and have intensified during the course of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Over the past 36 months, we have observed the Kremlin exploit the COVID pandemic by amplifying vaccine hesitancy and anti-lockdown narratives, a threat that I anticipated at the onset of the pandemic. These were key issues during the 2021 federal election.

Recent Russian information operations have also focused on dehumanizing and marginalizing Canadians of Ukrainian heritage, including those elected to public office, regardless of political affiliation. Deputy Prime Minister Freeland has faced ongoing attacks since 2017 from the Russian embassy and domestic proxies aligned with it that accuse her of being a neo-Nazi.

Russia's primary and full-time focus is to undermine and destabilize our democracy by exploiting the most polarizing issues of the day. Their operations focus on amplifying and legitimizing narratives that support the extreme left and right so as to erode trust and cohesion within our society. These attacks affect our political environment and choices every day, not just during election periods.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kolga. Believe it or not, I gave you an extra 45 seconds, and I can't wait to hear more from you.

With that, we are now going to Mr. Jim Judd.

I'll be a little lenient with you, but try to keep it to four minutes, if you can. Welcome.

Mr. Jim Judd (Former Director, Canadian Security Intelligence Service, As an Individual): Thank you.

As noted, my name is Jim Judd. I am a retired federal public servant. I retired from the federal government in 2009. I am here today, I assume, because I was asked by the Privy Council Office several years ago to do an assessment of the critical election incident protocol that had been put in place creating a panel of senior officials for the writ period of the election to monitor potential foreign interference in the election of 2019.

I did the work. The report was published two and a half years ago or so. The work was done on the basis of interviews with a large number of people, including the members of the panel, security agencies, academics and former public servants, and a lot of research, mostly in public source material. In the course of doing my work, I did not have access to any of the intelligence that went to the committee and just relied on the interviews to get their perspectives on what had happened.

The review was mandated by the protocol itself, which said that following the election, there should be a review done.

That's essentially the short story, I hope.

• (1210)

The Chair: Is that it, Mr. Judd?

Mr. Jim Judd: I think so.

The Chair: I appreciate that.

Thank you so much for those words.

We are now going to start our opening round, with six minutes to Mr. Cooper.

[*Translation*]

After him will be Mr. Fergus, followed by Ms. Gaudreau and then Ms. Blaney.

Go ahead, Mr. Cooper. You have six minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I'll direct my questions to Mr. Kolga.

Mr. Kolga, you spoke about evidence that DisinfoWatch gathered respecting activities on the part of Chinese Communist state actors using social media platforms to spread disinformation against the Conservative Party generally and certain candidates specifically, with a real emphasis on the riding of Steveston—Richmond East and Kenny Chiu.

In the case of Kenny Chiu, and maybe speaking more broadly about this type of interference that occurred during the election, is there any indication that the interference materially affected the outcome of the election?

Mr. Marcus Kolga: Thank you for the question.

It's incredibly hard to measure the impact of these sorts of operations on election outcomes. At the same time, we can't dismiss that they may have had an effect, but in this case it's certainly very difficult to measure. We can assume that these operations, which were in the Chinese language, targeting Canadians of Chinese heritage, probably connected with thousands of members of those communities. We can measure the impact on various forums and such. We can see how many people have accessed or commented on many of these posts.

Again, there's no evidence that the outcome of the election, whether in that electoral district or any others where there are high percentages of Chinese speakers, was directly affected or that the outcome would have changed because of this specific attack. The fact is that, again—

Mr. Michael Cooper: I'm sorry. My time is limited.

But it can't be ruled out, either.

Mr. Marcus Kolga: It cannot be ruled out.

• (1215)

Mr. Michael Cooper: You were speaking a little bit about the scope of the disinformation campaign. I will give you a bit of time to perhaps expand on exactly what occurred. How was this used? How many people might have come across some of this disinformation?

Mr. Marcus Kolga: Again, if we're talking about this anonymous WeChat campaign, what happened was a narrative about Mr. Chiu and his legislation, the private member's bill that would have enacted a foreign influence registry. As I said in my introductory remarks, this legislation would have required actors advocating on behalf of specific foreign authoritarian regimes to register with the government.

This is something the Chinese government would not want to have enacted, so it's entirely possible that the narrative was placed onto WeChat—a platform, by the way, that is largely controlled by the Chinese government—by actors aligned with the Chinese government. WeChat is widely used by Chinese speakers around the world, including in this country.

The overall impact of that narrative is unknown, but the fact that it spread to various other platforms and forums—Chinese-speaking forums here in Canada and local media—does indicate that the narrative was widespread. It's likely to have been seen by tens of thousands of Chinese Canadians, perhaps hundreds of thousands.

Again, whether it changed their voting intent during the election is unknown, but the fact that so many people saw that narrative should be of concern, and I think we can certainly assume that was an effort to undermine the integrity of our elections.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that.

I want to ask you a little bit about the critical election incident public protocol. It is a mechanism that is purportedly designed to be transparent, to bring it to the attention of Canadians that interference is happening during the course of the campaign. It appears—in fact, I think it was established—that the critical election incident public protocol was not invoked. There was no public notification that was provided. Voters in Steveston—Richmond East, etc., would not have been informed about this disinformation campaign, and the threshold is fairly high.

Could you maybe speak to that protocol and the threshold that must be satisfied? Do you have any thoughts on that? On the one hand, it probably should be fairly high, but on the other hand, timing is limited. How can this protocol be used or how can it be improved to provide greater transparency in a timely manner?

Mr. Marcus Kolga: Well, the protocol was introduced before the 2019 election, along with several other measures, including the continuation of the RRM, which is critically important to protecting our democracy. I think that was a very good first step. In 2019, it appears to have done its work. Whether it was to deter foreign actors from trying to interfere...it seems to have done its work.

I cannot comment on the thresholds that were put in place. With this incident and the fact that Chinese state media, Global Times, was directly trying to interfere in our election by injecting various narratives into it, I'm not sure how that fits with those thresholds. I unfortunately can't comment on that.

My understanding, from reading the publicly available information, is that when that threshold is met, the political parties involved and the candidates who are targeted are notified, and the public is notified.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

We now go to Mr. Fergus for six minutes.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses. I'm less familiar with Mr. Kolga, but I have the utmost respect for his work. I'm quite familiar with Mr. Judd, as well as his work and career in the public service.

Thank you for your service to Canada, Mr. Judd.

Mr. Kolga, your opening statement was extremely insightful and relevant. You said that foreign actors looking to destabilize our democracy exploit polarizing issues that already exist in Canadian society.

Can you tell us more about that? Can you give us any examples? How do foreign actors do that?

[*English*]

Mr. Marcus Kolga: Thank you very much for that question.

I outlined how some Chinese state actors were doing that during the previous election. They were using state media outlets such as Global Times, which is controlled by the Chinese Communist Party. They use platforms like that to inject false narratives into our information environment and the global information environment. The hope for them is that they are picked up by various actors domestically and spread in that way.

Russia, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, has been active on an ongoing basis. Their operations never stop. They never sleep. They are constantly seeking to exploit the most polarizing issues in our society.

Certainly during the COVID pandemic, they were extraordinarily active, promoting anti-vaccination narratives and anti-lockdown narratives. They were promoting anti-government narratives at the same time. During that period, we saw a number of domestic anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown organizations amplify those narratives.

Indeed, all of that crescendoed in February of this year during the Ottawa truck protest. We saw RT, Russia's state media channel—which used to be available on our public airwaves and is no longer, thankfully—broadcasting interviews with extremists inside that protest who were exploiting those protests to promote anti-government narratives. The leaders of these anti-vaccination groups who were given a platform on RT were calling for the removal of our government, in fact.

The Twitter platforms of those organizations, later in February, when Russia invaded Ukraine, switched their narratives from anti-vaccination, anti-lockdown and anti-government narratives to ones that were explicitly anti-Ukrainian. There were certain tweets where those organizations were directly taking statements from the Russian embassy in Canada and retweeting them.

This is the ultimate objective of some of those organizations: to take those state narratives, find local actors who will amplify them, and affect the discussion and local debate on those issues.

● (1220)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much for those examples. They were very helpful.

Let's go back six months to what happened during the occupation in Ottawa.

Do you think Russian influence on social media was as impactful as that of the Chinese government or actors associated with China?

[*English*]

Mr. Marcus Kolga: I would say, in my assessment, that the Russian government is very effective at finding the most polarizing issues and amplifying them and finding the actors domestically to amplify them.

China is not as sophisticated when it comes to its operations, so I would think that the Russian government's efforts during that period were far more impactful than the Chinese government's.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: I have one last question for Mr. Kolga, before I move on to Mr. Judd.

Do you think Russia's activities have as big of an impact on Canadian voters as China's?

[*English*]

Mr. Marcus Kolga: For clarification, do you mean during the election? Okay.

It is hard to measure. As I mentioned in my opening statement, Russia's efforts are ongoing. They are persistent, so I think that the overall impact of Russian information operations may have been more significant during that election.

China targeted specific ridings and, in those ridings, the impact was far greater than Russia's. If we're looking at the ultimate outcome of that election, it's hard to say which government would have had a greater impact.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: I don't have much time left, but I have the same question for you, Mr. Judd.

Do you think Russian and Chinese influence had the same impact on the election results?

[*English*]

Mr. Jim Judd: What I am about to say is based on public source information. I haven't seen a piece of intelligence for a very long time, three grandchildren ago. Public source information is quite extraordinary—not just here. It's, in fact, global—Europe, the United States and so on.

Certainly, I don't think I would disagree with anything Mr. Kolga said about the activities of these individuals. For me, it was quite a new experience, because when I was working, this was not an issue. There was a very different basket of priorities for CSIS and national security issues in my time.

• (1225)

The Chair: Thank you. We'll come back to you again.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Ms. Gaudreau. You have six minutes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you to the witnesses.

Just a heads-up that I have two questions for Mr. Kolga and two questions for Mr. Judd.

Mr. Kolga said that a protocol was established in 2019 to protect democracy and had not changed since, so I'd like some clarification.

Very quickly, I'd like Mr. Kolga to tell me what hasn't changed since the protocol was introduced in 2019.

[*English*]

Mr. Marcus Kolga: I'm not sure how much has changed within the protocol or whether the thresholds have changed. I have no information about that.

The threat certainly has evolved. That's what has changed since 2019. In 2019, we believed that the threat to our democracy was exclusively targeting our elections and writ periods, whereas since that period, I think our understanding of the threat has evolved. I've mentioned several times during my testimony that the threats—certainly from Russia, and from China as well—are persistent. That's what has changed.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you.

I gather that the protocol isn't adequate to respond to growing threats. I have another question for you, and then I'll move on to Mr. Judd.

Mr. Kolga said the public needed to be educated. We talked about transparency and education with the witnesses in the previous panel. I'd like Mr. Kolga to tell me whether the public was ever informed of foreign interference. If so, what information can he provide to the committee on the source of that activity, for the purposes of our report?

I'm somewhat naive about all this, so I'd like to know what being advised looks like.

[*English*]

Mr. Marcus Kolga: Again, thank you for that question.

We, DisinfoWatch, did try to inform the public when these efforts were brought to our attention in early September. We took the time to look at the information we received. We tried to process it. We couldn't necessarily trace it directly to the Chinese government, but given the nature of the messages that were targeting Mr. Chiu, that campaign in British Columbia, and there was also another—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Madam Chair, my question was actually about the information that was shared with the public or the people concerned. Is it possible for the committee to get those communications and links? That's what I wanted to know.

I'll let Mr. Kolga send us that information.

Now I'll turn to Mr. Judd.

Mr. Judd, I heard you say in your opening statement that the Privy Council Office had asked you to clarify the critical election incident public protocol. You said you didn't have access to certain information. What information were you missing in order to do the job properly? It is possible, however, that I didn't hear you correctly.

[*English*]

Mr. Jim Judd: Thank you.

What I intended to say in my opening comments was that in the course of doing my work, I had no access to any of the intelligence that went to the panel from SITE, the integrated intelligence organization.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Madam Chair, I asked why the witness didn't have access to that information.

[*English*]

Mr. Jim Judd: It was classified above my security classification level, and given the time that was at play, it would have taken quite a long time to re-establish what I used to have as a security classification. That's essentially it.

I would say, though, with respect to this issue, that my understanding from the 2019 election was that the political parties were privy to SITE information on an ongoing basis throughout the election and even before. I understand that this continued to be the case in the last election as well. Chances are that someone in your party knows a lot more about this than I do.

• (1230)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Madam Chair, I'm trying to educate myself here, because foreign interference is a subject I know little about, and I'm learning things that are extremely distressing.

My next question is for whoever wishes to answer.

What are the tools we need? We heard suggestions in terms of what Five Eyes partners were doing, but I'd like to know what the first step is in order to reduce the spread of this activity.

I think I have a minute left, so I'd like the witnesses to say a few words about that.

[*English*]

Mr. Marcus Kolga: I'll quickly give a few of my thoughts.

I strongly believe that exposing these efforts, analyzing them and explaining them is incredibly important. That's the work we do at DisinfoWatch. I think the government should expand the initiative it's already taken with the critical election incident public protocol and make that into a full-time organization. That includes civil society, academia, media members and representatives from all of the major parties in Canada as well as social media—

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Blaney, go ahead for six minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to both of the witnesses for your testimony today.

I'm going to start my questioning with Mr. Kolga.

In one of your responses to a question, you said very clearly that Russia never sleeps. I thought that was an important thing to pick up on. We know that Russia never sleeps and that it is constantly looking at ways to create destabilized realities within other countries. I think all of us are concerned.

Really, this study is about two things: ensuring that Canadians have confidence in our electoral process and systems and ensuring that we have the best protection from any foreign threats. We know that the more disinformation gets out there, the less Canadians believe in the systems we have. They're winning, and we can't let that happen.

I'm just wondering if you could talk about the fact that Russia never sleeps and how, not only during elections but also outside of those and even pre-election, that is a problem.

Mr. Marcus Kolga: Thank you very much for that question.

Absolutely, Russia does not sleep. Russia has been engaging in disinformation and influence operations for a very long time—nearly a century. Joseph Stalin began creating deep fakes, if you will, by doctoring photographs, already in the 1930s.

It engaged in this throughout the Cold War. Canadians of central and eastern European heritage were constantly targeted with Russian disinformation during that time because they were critical of the Soviet occupation of their countries. They were often labelled as neo-Nazis and such. Those sorts of narratives were intended to dehumanize, marginalize and silence them, and create second-class citizens of those Canadians.

We're seeing very much that same sort of process right now during this war with Ukraine. The Ukrainian diaspora, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, has been targeted with similar narratives and operations.

When we look at Russian disinformation operations in general, all of that is intended to break down, geopolitically, Canadian and U.S. support for NATO. It's intended to break down the cohesion within that alliance because, as we've seen, Russia is unable to compete with us when we're united.

Domestically, in Canada, they try to break down the cohesion within our society. That means breaking down trust in our democratic institutions, in all of our elected officials—all of you in this committee—and in our media and such. It does that by injecting different pieces of disinformation, conspiracy theories and such, in hopes that various far-left and far-right extremists will pick them up. They hope those narratives will eventually filter into our mainstream media and interfere in our normal democratic debate. That is the ultimate outcome of Russian information operations.

Unless we stand up to it and make an effort to expose narratives, as you are doing right now with this study, and have an active discussion on how we address this challenge, they will win. They have a budget of hundreds of millions of dollars for these efforts. They are doing this day and night. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands of people employed to undertake this task of injecting those narratives, of using social media and of exploiting our freedoms to gain the advantage.

We definitely need to step up our game. I think that during the current Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Canadian government has started to acknowledge the breadth of this threat and is taking measures to address it. We need to continue to do that.

As I was trying to say in my previous answer, we need to take a whole-of-society approach and an inclusive approach. That includes media, social media giants, civil society and, of course, government and our elected officials. We need to have that discussion all together because that's the only way we're going to inoculate ourselves against this and defend against foreign disinformation operations in the long term.

• (1235)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I think that's really interesting. I think of the convoy that was outside and how many people were yelling about fake news. I saw reporters right in front saying things like, "Say whatever you like. We're totally open. You're on live television." People were just losing that connection with the understanding of our reality.

My next question is really around targeting marginalized groups. I think of myself; I represent rural and remote communities. I'm just curious about the strategies that could be used against more remote communities, marginalized communities, indigenous communities and ethnic groups. I think those would be specific and targeted.

I'm just curious whether you have any feedback on that.

Mr. Marcus Kolga: That's a great question. It deserves its own study, I think.

We need to be working with local media and smaller media organizations that speak to these groups to ensure they get the good information, the facts and the truth.

We've been reading reports about how smaller media organizations are simply going out of business. They're disappearing. A robust and trustworthy media is one way we can defend against foreign disinformation. Certainly making sure that vulnerable groups—minority groups and such—have access to that information is an extremely important way, and I believe an effective way, we can combat disinformation and misinformation.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next we have Mr. Calkins for five minutes, followed by Ms. O'Connell.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Kolga, I guess, basically, if I can summarize what you're saying, in an environment where Canadians might be disenfranchised—if you're an oil patch worker who lost his job, if you're somebody whose kid was kicked out of college or university because they didn't want to get vaccinated, or if you lost your job or were unable to travel—these create breeding grounds for frustration. It can be anything. It can be any type of source of that frustration.

I'm from the west; I'm from Alberta. I know what western alienation does. I know how my constituents think, because I think just like they do. I have been here for 17 years, through a Liberal government and a Conservative government. I can tell you that people's attitudes and their frustrations are completely different depending on who's governing the country.

If we actually have...and the Prime Minister of this country's own caucus colleagues have basically stood and said that he has a wedge, stigmatize, divide approach. Does that provide fertile breeding grounds for these kinds of organizations, like Russia, to manipulate the Canadian public?

Mr. Marcus Kolga: Yes, absolutely. The Russian government exploits those grievances, and it aggravates them. That is exactly how it operates.

I should remind you, though, that it has been doing this for quite some time. Just about a year and a half ago, we did a study of over 100 Twitter accounts that had been taken down by Twitter. We had access to the deleted tweets of those accounts that were connected to the Russian government, and they went back to 2014.

In 2014, those accounts were actively doing the same. They were attacking the Harper government on various issues. They are agnostic with regard to any sort of political party. They will sink their fangs into the left and the right, and they will tug on any specific issue until it tears us apart. This is what they do.

It doesn't matter who's in government, whether it's the Conservatives one day, the Liberals the next, the NDP another day, or perhaps the Bloc one day. All of those parties—even when they are in opposition—will be attacked when they are critical of the Russian regime, and, again, those grievances that do emerge toward whichever party is governing will be exploited by Russia.

• (1240)

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Given the fact that in your testimony you have just said that it doesn't really matter who the political actors are who are making the decisions of the day, our democratic institutions are vulnerable to these attacks regardless.

I just went and looked. WeChat has 1.25 billion users globally and over a million users in Canada. I just went onto Facebook to DisinfoWatch's page, and you are lucky, sir—and this is not a slight against you in any way, shape or form—to get into three digits when it comes to views of your explainer videos and so on.

Can you give this committee any indication of what needs to happen? Salacious information or misinformation seems to be gobbled up and consumed by the consumer a lot more readily than the truth is. As parliamentarians, how do we bridge that gap?

Mr. Marcus Kolga: That's a very good question. I should add that we do try, and our impact is largely in the media and in mainstream media when they report on the reports that we have. You shouldn't take that from our Facebook views.

I think the problem is quite far gone at this point. I don't think we can put the genie back into the bottle, but we can take measures to inoculate future generations. That means ensuring that we look at countries like Finland, which has enacted early childhood digital media literacy strategies, making sure that's in our curricula, informing Canadians, and doing what we can to expose these disinformation narratives so that elected officials, our media, and anybody who's interested in finding the facts have that information available.

I think that's what we need to start looking at right now because, as I said, we can't put the genie back in the bottle. I think these information operations, the disinformation and the polarization of our society are almost at a point of no return.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: In the context of a Canadian general election or even a by-election, notwithstanding that we don't want to put very many.... You know, we enjoy our freedom. We enjoy free speech. We enjoy all of these things. Every western liberalized democracy does. However, should we consider or should this committee be recommending that those platforms be somehow identified or taken off-line during, say, an electoral writ period when we know full well that certain types of platforms are specifically being used?

The Chair: I'm going to ask that you hold that thought.

I'm going to send the screen over to Ms. O'Connell for five minutes.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Kolga, I'm going to start with you.

Mr. Judd, I hope I'll have some time. I have some questions for you as well.

Mr. Kolga, I found your last intervention particularly interesting. It was about making sure that elected officials have the disinformation and information available to them. I transport in my mind to your comments earlier, too, about Russian TV broadcasting the convoy and how awkward it must be for those elected officials who posed with convoy members or who brought them coffee, and then they could be broadcast on Russian TV after that. Your comments about elected officials having this information, understanding their role in the very disinformation and the agents of Russian foreign actors are quite interesting.

I want to get to my questions around some of your comments on disinformation and that you can't discredit what could have been an outcome in Mr. Chiu's election. You spoke about the involvement of Chinese agents or activity from China. You also spoke about ongoing activity from Russia, and you specifically named Minister Freeland as somebody to receive that attention from these actors.

I have a couple of questions here, and then I'll leave it to you. How do you distinguish that ongoing Russian activity against Minister Freeland doesn't have any impact but activity during the election period for Mr. Chiu could have had an impact? I think that disinformation or activity from foreign state actors is real, but I think we have to be very careful about certain parties using it as the excuse for a loss.

I can tell you that the voters in Steveston—Richmond East rejected Mr. Chiu in 2015. Then he won the election in 2019. Looking at the numbers of the 2019 and the 2021 elections, there was a difference of 4,412 votes for Mr. Chiu between those elections. I also note that, from the 2019 election to the 2021 election, voter turnout was smaller by about 3,070 votes. One could argue—I'm sure the Conservatives would—that the voter turnout was smaller because of the disinformation and the campaigns from China. I'd also like to point out that, in my election, from 2019 to 2021, my voter turnout was smaller by over 5,000 votes, which is more.

How can you determine that, if the electors in 2015 rejected Mr. Chiu...? Voter turnout was smaller across the country. How can you determine that the Chinese actions had an impact and that the Russian actions had no impact for Minister Freeland? Do we run the risk of playing this game of where impact was had versus protecting our democracy overall from foreign interference, instead of trying to pick winners and losers riding by riding, when you can't determine it with any data?

• (1245)

Mr. Marcus Kolga: To address your introductory remark about certain politicians posing with members of the convoy protest in Ottawa, having elected officials pose with these people or supporting people who may have legitimate grievances is not disinformation. That's part of our democratic processes. Whether you agree with them or disagree with them, that's not necessarily disinformation.

What I was trying to say was that RT does exploit fringes within that movement who are advocating for the destabilization of our democracy.

As for the outcome in Mr. Chiu's riding, I don't know. I don't know what the history is there. Again, my point was that that specific election was targeted. He, as a candidate, was targeted with foreign operations. Again, we can't measure the impact of that, so I can't—

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: I'm sorry to interrupt.

Was Minister Freeland's election also targeted by Russia?

Mr. Marcus Kolga: If you'd let me get to that, I will.

Minister Freeland has been targeted since 2017 because of her involvement when she became the Minister of Foreign Affairs. As soon as she became Minister of Foreign Affairs, overnight a campaign appeared. We know from various reports by Canadian reporters—

The Chair: I'm going to have to stop it there.

Mr. Marcus Kolga: This is a very important issue, though.

The Chair: It is very important. We are going to make sure that you have the avenues to provide us information.

I have a tough job and I need to keep the train on the tracks.

Madame Gaudreau, you have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I think we can all agree on the fact that whatever the disinformation and whoever the target, it's unacceptable.

The past little while, I have been trying to raise issues so we can have a constructive discussion, but I'm disappointed by what I'm hearing.

Ultimately, we are going to produce a report with findings. My questions are about how we can do better.

Earlier, Mr. Kolga said that Finland had a digital literacy strategy, and I'd like to know which other countries are doing things we should replicate.

I have just one question for both witnesses.

Finland appears to be setting a good example. On a scale of one to 10, where does Finland rank for its efforts to counter disinformation?

Where does Canada rank on that scale?

I'd like both witnesses to answer.

• (1250)

The Chair: Mr. Judd can go first.

Did you get all of that in English, Mr. Judd? Did you understand the question?

[*English*]

Mr. Jim Judd: I understood the question.

I'm still working on the answer.

The Chair: I'm going to go over to Mr. Kolga very quickly, and then we'll go to Mr. Judd.

Mr. Marcus Kolga: I think we do some things well. I think we do other things not so well.

I couldn't give you a specific number, but I think we should be looking to Finland, which is doing a good job. I think we should be looking to Sweden—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: We're just talking. I asked for a number just to get a sense of how Canada measures up: not bad, average or very good.

Where is Finland on a scale of one to 10, as far as its regime goes? Would you give it an eight out of 10? Where does Canada fall—

[*English*]

Mr. Marcus Kolga: If we take Finland, Sweden, the Baltic states, and Taiwan, which are doing this and have been doing this well for a long time, if they are the baseline, if they are the 10, then I think maybe we're on the way to approaching a seven.

The Chair: That was believable.

Mr. Judd, go ahead.

Mr. Jim Judd: The problem we're talking about, disinformation, is a global one. Lots of other governments are asking the same questions you are. Right now, the British Parliament is doing new legislation in response to the Russian interference in Brexit and the election at the same time.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Judd.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Madam Chair, I lost some time because of the interpretation.

What would you give it?

The Chair: You're out of time, Ms. Gaudreau.

We are moving on to Ms. Blaney.

You have two and a half minutes, Ms. Blaney. Go ahead.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I have one question for Mr. Kolga. I want to come back to the question I asked earlier about rural and remote communities, indigenous, ethnic groups, and marginalized groups.

You spoke a lot about small, local, community media and how important it is to have those sustainable systems in place so they can provide information in a trusted way and that they're trusted resources. I also know a lot of these communities use social media as a function of connection in the community.

Could you talk about the threats that could be targeted to those particular groups? I think they're unique and I think that in some ways, if somebody got into that system, trust could be built very quickly. I'm worried about that disinformation, especially recognizing that due to language and remoteness fighting that disinformation could be even more difficult.

Mr. Marcus Kolga: I completely agree with you. Social media is clearly being exploited to connect with and divide these communities, to influence them in various ways. I think there is a really big problem there. On how we address it, I don't think we've even really started discussing that on a national level.

This is why for the past several years, I have been calling for a whole-of-society approach to this problem. That means bringing social media companies to the table. I am sure they are also interested, as it's in their own interest to clean up their act. Making sure they sit down and have this conversation about how these vulnerable communities are protected, and what sort of measures can be put in place to do that, is something the government needs to be taking a lead on, along with all the other groups I mentioned earlier.

It's only in that way we're going to address this problem. We can't just leave it to social media to do it on their own. We certainly can't leave it up to these vulnerable communities. We can't just leave them to their own devices to do this, because it needs some leadership. I think that's one place where the federal government and other levels of government can surely step in to help.

• (1255)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Do you want to add something, Mr. Judd?

Mr. Jim Judd: It's a big problem. I agree with Mr. Kolga in respect of a whole-of-society approach.

If you want to look at a robust regime for dealing with social media disinformation, I suggest you look at Singapore, which enacted laws in the last several years specifically to address social media disinformation campaigns around elections. Now they're adding more to it with respect to hate issues, irrespective of what they are.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Sorry to cut you off, Mr. Judd.

Go ahead, Mr. Berthold. You have two minutes.

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): I'll keep it short.

I want to raise a few things.

Mr. Kolga and Mr. Judd, can you provide the committee with some written information on Finland's regime? What programs exactly has Finland put in place to educate youth?

Mr. Judd, if you have additional information about Singapore that you could share with the committee, we would appreciate it.

Now I'd like to address a comment one of my fellow members made.

Disinformation and foreign interference, whether the target is a member of the Liberals, Conservatives, Bloc Québécois or NDP, is unacceptable—period. It makes no difference. It's unacceptable. We need to do everything in our power to combat foreign influence in every riding so that Canadians are the only ones deciding who gets elected. I think that's the whole premise of today's study.

Mr. Kolga, how much of the responsibility for the spread of disinformation can be attributed to Facebook, Twitter and other social media algorithms?

[*English*]

Mr. Marcus Kolga: Thank you for that question.

Certainly the revenue of social media companies relies on the number of eyeballs that fall onto any piece of content, and they want to make sure that their users remain on their platforms as long as possible so they can expose them to advertising.

I think many of these social media companies have recognized their responsibility in ensuring that disinformation narratives are pushed lower down in their algorithms.

I think Twitter has, certainly over the past 12 months, and I would say even more so during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, really put in an effort to clean up their act. We'll see what happens now with the change in ownership. We may slide backwards there, but that remains to be seen.

At Facebook, I think there is a lot of work that remains to be done. I think YouTube has been quite good in labelling foreign state media when it comes to those platforms.

Again, a lot more needs to be done.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kolga. I have to cut you off there.

You have some homework to do, because we need your answers in writing. Please send them to the committee clerk.

Next we go to Ms. O'Connell for two minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to my colleague.

I didn't have time in the last round, so I do want to get to Mr. Judd with my questions here.

I was actually familiar with your report when I was a member of NSICOP. Obviously, we can't discuss that here in this forum.

I just want to clarify, with respect to an earlier question, the mandate of your role. Can you explain further? It's my understanding that the reason the intelligence wouldn't have been provided to you was that the mandate of your role was to review the process. It's not about individual instances. You weren't auditing, let's say, the process the last time, but you were reviewing the process itself. In that, did you look at the pre-writ question of having this process in place for foreign interference activity during elections?

Mr. Jim Judd: Thank you for clarifying what I meant to say earlier.

The issue of the writ is one that's always bothered me in this respect. Just to go back to what Mr. Kolga was saying, this is an infinite issue. An average election is 50 days. There are 315 other days in the year in which there can be all kinds of mischief, which can, in some fashion, have an impact on politics, but more importantly, I think, on broader social cohesion in this country and others.

● (1300)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

I would like to thank both of our guests for their time with us today. Please do not hesitate to share information through the clerk for committee members to consider. Just to clarify from earlier, if you ask the clerk not to share it publicly, the clerk will ensure that the information is available to members, but not to the public. If anything else can be made publicly available.... If you can just decipher that, we will ensure that it is managed and handled with the care you require.

With that, I wish you both a good day.

For committee members, we are returning to our constituencies next week for Veterans' Week. I hope you take time to think about how we are able to enjoy the freedoms we do today. We will return on November 15 to a subcommittee meeting, so all members will not need to be present, but subcommittee members will be present for Tuesday, November 15.

Throughout the constituency week, you will receive one if not both reports, and we will return on November 17 as a full committee in camera to look at the draft report.

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I wish you the best. Keep well and safe.

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