



Stage 2 Interview Summary: Ukrainian Canadian Congress (Ihor Michalchyshyn and Orest Zakydalsky)

Ihor Michalchyshyn, Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, and Orest Zakydalsky, Senior Policy Advisor of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, were interviewed by Commission Counsel on June 20, 2024.

Notes to reader

- Commission Counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets to assist the reader.

1. Background

- [1] Founded in 1940, the Ukrainian Canadian Congress (“**UCC**”) is an umbrella organization that brings together numerous Ukrainian Canadian community organizations from across Canada. With regards to its internal structure, the UCC has six provincial councils, as well as local branches which operate at the community level. The UCC represents the interests of the Ukrainian Canadian community, namely by advocating on its behalf before provincial and federal governments.
- [2] Ihor Michalchyshyn has been the Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director of the UCC since 2016. Prior to this, he had been involved as a volunteer with the UCC for approximately 10 years. Mr. Michalchyshyn holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in the areas of politics and public administration, and worked in Manitoban provincial politics prior to his current position at the UCC.
- [3] Mr. Michalchyshyn is in charge of overseeing and managing the UCC. He also acts its spokesperson, fielding media requests, meeting with Members of Parliament and cabinet ministers, and representing the UCC at public events, amongst other tasks.
- [4] Orest Zakydalsky is the Senior Policy Advisor of the UCC and has been working at the organization since 2014. Previously, Mr. Zakydalsky worked as a researcher and took



part in various projects in Ukraine on behalf of Canadian organizations, including election observation missions and regional governance projects.

- [5] The interviewees explained that policy positions taken by the UCC are often derived from consensual positions emerging organically from the Ukrainian Canadian community. Resolutions adopted at the UCC's triannual congress further inform the organization's work and shape its general policy direction. Mr. Michalchyshyn also stated that the UCC receives feedback from its local branches and member organizations with respect to community members' concerns and positions, which in turn inform the policy positions adopted.

2. Ukrainian Canadians' experiences with Russian Foreign Interference

- [6] Mr. Michalchyshyn explained that the Ukrainian diaspora has been present in Canada since the end of the 19th century, and that multiple waves of Ukrainian immigration to Canada throughout the 20th century means that the community is now one of Canada's largest ethnic groups, with 1.4 million respondents self-identifying as Ukrainian Canadians in the 2016 census.
- [7] Ukrainian displaced persons fleeing the war in their country following the February 2022 Russian invasion has led to a large influx of Ukrainian nationals in Canada. Mr. Michalchyshyn explained how these recent events have fostered a renewed solidarity within the community and have rekindled an already-strong connection with Ukrainian heritage. The fact that there was already a history of Ukrainians landing in Canada to escape from persecution has united the community in welcoming the recent waves of displaced persons.
- [8] Turning to foreign interference experienced by the Ukrainian Canadian community, Mr. Michalchyshyn stated that the Russian Federation was, to his knowledge, the only state actor targeting the community. Both interviewees emphasized the historical context surrounding modern Russian foreign interference and transnational repression



efforts directed against the Ukrainian Canadian community, stating that the current reality was the continuation of an approach previously embraced by the Soviet Union.

2.1 Forms of Foreign Interference

- [9] Asked by Commission counsel what were, in their opinion and experience, some examples of Russian foreign interference in Canada, the interviewees identified Russian disinformation as the most prevalent form of Russian foreign interference.
- [10] On the mechanics of the disinformation process, MM. Michalchyshyn and Zakydalsky explained that disinformation narratives sponsored by the Russian Federation are promoted on Russian state media outlets – for instance, television broadcasters such as *Russia Today* (“RT”) and *Sputnik News* – as well as through social media. The objective would then be for the disinformation narrative to be widely amplified across the social media ecosystem or even to be picked up by traditional Canadian media outlets.
- [11] Commission counsel then asked about the penetration rate of Russian state media within the Ukrainian Canadian community and the Canadian public in general. Mr. Michalchyshyn stated he believes the portion of Ukrainian Canadians who consume these sources of information to be small. As for the general public, he mentioned that the removal of RT by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (“CRTC”) from Canadian airwaves – a measure the UCC had lobbied for – was a step in the right direction, but that RT’s content was still widely available on the internet. The interviewees lamented the inability or the inaction of the Canadian government or regulatory authorities to block this online content in Canada.
- [12] Both interviewees mentioned that, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the single most important Russian disinformation narrative concerns the war, and more specifically falsely portraying Ukraine’s leadership as Nazis and fascists, that Ukraine should not exist as a separate nation, or that Ukraine and its Western allies were responsible for starting the war. They also highlighted that similar narratives had been propagated by the Russian embassy in Canada and expressed their strong



disappointment with the lack of consequences imposed by the Canadian government in that regard.

- [13] The interviewees also referred to specific events involving disinformation narratives focused on Canada, namely:
- a. Disinformation targeting Chrystia Freeland: The interviewees mentioned that Minister Freeland, whose grandfather was Ukrainian, seems to be a recurrent target for Russian disinformation campaigns since her appointment as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2017. The allegations made against her focused on claims that her grandfather was a Nazi collaborator during the Second World War.
 - b. Events surrounding Yaroslav Hunka's appearance in the House of Commons: Yaroslav Hunka is a Ukrainian Canadian who fought in the Galicia Division of the Waffen-SS. Mr. Michalchyshyn explained that, following Mr. Hunka's appearance and standing ovation in the House of Commons during Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit in September 2023, Russian state media outlets seized on the story to reinforce their persistent narrative of Nazi influence in Ukraine. As mentioned by Mr. Michalchyshyn, the story made international headlines, which accentuated the negative impact on the Ukrainian Canadian community.
- [14] The interviewees then discussed the challenges posed by attribution of responsibility to the Russian Federation of Russian-aligned discourse conveyed through disinformation campaigns and narratives, especially those circulating on social media platforms. Both interviewees agreed that definitive attribution was difficult to attain, partly because most people repeating or sharing perspectives voiced in Russian media were, to the best of their knowledge, not doing so at the express bidding of the Russian state. However, Mr. Zakydalsky pointed out that false narratives do not emerge on their own and that whoever sows them has a motive for doing so.
- [15] Moving to the impact of these disinformation narratives on the Ukrainian Canadian diaspora, Commission counsel then prompted the interviewees to comment on a community safety survey the UCC carried out with Ukrainian Canadians in 2023.



Mr. Michalchyshyn noted that the results demonstrated a significant increase in anti-Ukrainian hate incidents since the beginning of the war. Examples of such incidents include harassment and verbal abuse, vandalism of property, anti-Ukrainian graffiti, and hateful messages being spread on social media.

- [16] The interviewees added that the UCC has encouraged its members to report such incidents to the police, as well as to the UCC. However, their impression is that most anti-Ukrainian incidents are not reported to law enforcement, in part because of a lack of confidence in police response. Further, they believe that the effects of hate incidents vary from one community member to another: some have been emboldened by the attacks as it justifies the importance of speaking out against pro-Russian narratives, while others are more fearful of publicly displaying their support for Ukraine.
- [17] Mr. Michalchyshyn added that narratives underlying these hateful incidents are the same as the ones that are promoted by the Kremlin since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As such, he stated that he believes that Russian disinformation is a catalyst for the spread of anti-Ukrainian hate incidents in Canada.
- [18] On the topic of the impact of Russian disinformation in Canada, Mr. Michalchyshyn explained that the spreading of false narratives contributes to building distrust in Canadian society, democracy and public institutions. While specific disinformation narratives may focus specifically on Ukraine and Ukrainian Canadians, Mr. Michalchyshyn asserted that the larger objective pursued by the Russian Federation was the destabilization of democracy and the destruction of public confidence in democratic institutions. In that sense, even if the immediate consequences of Russian foreign interference may be felt more directly by Ukrainian Canadians, the broader repercussions concern the Canadian society as a whole.
- [19] More specifically on the subject of Russian foreign interference during the Canadian general elections of 2019 and 2021, the interviewees did not have knowledge of specific incidents targeting the electoral processes, or specific candidates or ridings. Nevertheless, they stated that they do not believe that Russian foreign interference simply stopped during election periods. Both Mr. Michalchyshyn and Mr. Zakydalsky



added that the Russian Federation was a sophisticated actor that engages in foreign interference activities at levels that may go undetected by the Canadian government and its agencies.

- [20] As an example of concrete Russian foreign interference operations on Canadian soil, the interviewees mentioned the actions of the Russian embassy in Ottawa. Mr. Zakydalsky highlighted the disproportionate size of the Russian diplomatic contingent compared to that of Canadian diplomatic corps in Russia, and added that he believes the embassy staff to be engaged in surveillance activities against members of the Ukrainian Canadian community. As evidence of his claims, he noted that individuals not publicly associated with the UCC have been sanctioned by the Russian Federation, alongside UCC directors and officers. In his opinion, the inclusion of these individuals on sanctions lists shows that the Russian Federation is actively monitoring the Ukrainian Canadian community.

2.2 Response from and interactions with government agencies and law enforcement

- [21] Mr. Michalchyshyn and Mr. Zakydalsky were then asked by Commission counsel about the UCC's relationship with government agencies and law enforcement on the subject of Russian foreign interference.
- [22] Mr. Michalchyshyn explained that, in the course of its advocacy and outreach work on behalf of the Ukrainian Canadian community, the UCC regularly meets with various Canadian elected representatives and government officials to discuss issues of concern, including Russian foreign interference. For instance, the UCC has been meeting with Global Affairs Canada ("**GAC**") for a number of years regarding Canada's diplomatic relationships with Ukraine and the Russian Federation. Those meetings are occasions for the UCC to formulate policy recommendations and relay its members' priorities.
- [23] Moreover, Mr. Michalchyshyn stated that in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and in light of the corollary rise in anti-Ukrainian hate incidents, the UCC has

also met with Public Safety Canada (“**PSC**”) and law enforcement agencies. For instance, in February 2023, the UCC met with then-Minister of Public Safety Marco Mendicino and the chief of the Toronto Police Service to discuss the situation.

- [24] Mr. Michalchyshyn explained that one of the UCC’s main objectives in these meetings was to have politicians publicly raise the issue and speak out against hate incidents targeting the Ukrainian diaspora. Furthermore, the UCC urged its interlocutors to consider the increase in the number of reported incidents as a pattern rather than viewing them as local and isolated events.
- [25] Generally, the interviewees expressed their frustration at what they consider to be a lack of follow-up from government agencies and law enforcement after meetings with the UCC. Mr. Michalchyshyn described these interactions with relevant authorities as “*speaking into a black box*”, meaning that the UCC does not know whether their concerns are taken seriously by authorities and whether actions are subsequently taken to address these concerns. These general comments applied to the UCC’s interactions with government representatives in particular, but also with law enforcement and specialized agencies such as the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (“**CSIS**”). Mr. Zakydalsky highlights a documented incident of vandalism in Ottawa in August 2022 by persons apparently associated with the Russian diplomatic corps, which the UCC has reported to government officials.¹ They have not received a response.
- [26] According to the interviewees, the feelings of frustration and disappointment at the perceived lack of follow through by relevant authorities are also widespread within members of the Ukrainian Canadian community. The interviewees relayed experiences shared by UCC members who reported anti-Ukrainian hate incidents to their local police service and are not aware of any actions taken by police in response to their reports.
- [27] On a broader level, the interviewees characterized the government of Canada’s response to Russian foreign interference as insufficient to deter capacity-building and future interference actions by the Russian Federation. According to them, this stands in

¹ See UCC0000002.



stark contrast with actions taken by other Western democracies, most of whom have taken measures to expel Russian diplomats following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. They also shared their perception that the government of Canada's lack of response against perceived Russian foreign interference is disheartening to Ukrainian Canadians and fosters a sentiment that the government is not standing alongside the community.

- [28] With regards to what could be improved in the UCC's interactions with government agencies, Mr. Michalchyshyn mentioned that having a dedicated point of contact within departments would allow for better exchange of information and retroaction as to measures taken by the government. The current perception is that when the UCC reaches out to government officials, they either receive no response or a perfunctory response.

3. The UCC's proposals regarding Russian Foreign Interference

- [29] Over the last years, the UCC has made many specific recommendations to the Canadian government with regards to measures that could be adopted to address Russian foreign interference. Further, both Mr. Michalchyshyn and Mr. Zakydalsky have appeared on multiple occasions to testify before standing committees of the House of Commons on matters related to the Ukrainian Canadian community and the Russian Federation more generally. At the end of the interview, Commission counsel asked the interviewees to discuss some of the recommendations they made to the Canadian government.
- [30] The UCC staunchly advocates for the removal from Canada of Russian diplomats as well as suspending diplomatic relations with Russia, which the UCC refers to as "an adversary to Canada" and a "genocidal" regime. At the very least, they recommend reducing the number of accredited diplomats in Canada, which they view as disproportionately high.



- [31] On Bill C-70, *An Act respecting countering foreign interference*,² the interviewees noted that the UCC had previously advocated for the creation of a foreign agent registry such as the one introduced by Bill C-70. They have stated in the past that persons working for adversary countries (for example countries against whom Canada has imposed sanctions) should be required to register.
- [32] The interviewees raised concerns about the government's investigative and enforcement capabilities in the likely event that some foreign agents fail to respect the registration requirements introduced by Bill C-70. Both Mr. Michalchyshyn and Mr. Zakydalsky evoked the similar lack of enforcement and investigative resources deployed by the Canadian government for cases of breach of sanctions introduced in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a disturbing precedent.
- [33] As previously mentioned, they also referenced the CRTC's decision to ban RT from the list of non-Canadian programming services authorized for public distribution in Canada as a positive first step, one which the UCC had also advocated for. Nevertheless, Mr. Michalchyshyn emphasized the need to continue efforts in limiting the reach in the digital environment of Russian state-backed or state-sponsored broadcasters whose narratives aim to sow distrust in Canadian society and democratic institutions.
- [34] Another recommendation put forth by the UCC was to deliver and develop public programs of media literacy as a way to counter Russian disinformation. The interviewees referenced existing educational programs in Finland and Estonia which teach children to identify false information.
- [35] As a concluding remark, Mr. Michalchyshyn reaffirmed that, in the UCC's opinion, Russian foreign interference should be perceived by the Canadian government as a permanent threat and be given more attention. According to him, the Russian Federation's desire to target and discredit individuals and states that oppose it and its world vision will not disappear, as recent technological advances and the expansion of social media have further increased the Russian Federation's capacity to disseminate

² [At the time of the interview, on June 20, 2024, Bill C-70 had not yet been granted royal assent and was not yet officially a law. Royal assent was given by the Governor general in council later the same day.]



Public Inquiry Into Foreign Interference
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Enquête publique sur l'ingérence étrangère
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its narratives. Unless the Canadian government takes serious measures against the Russian Federation, the interviewees expressed their concerns that its foreign interference against Canada will continue unabated.