



Foreign Interference Commission

Public Consultation Process

Small Group Consultation Meeting Public Summary

In the summer of 2024, Commissioner Marie-Josée Hogue and members of the Foreign Interference Commission's (the "**Commission**") Public Consultation Process ("**PCP**") team met with five individuals belonging to the Ukrainian Canadian community in a meeting organized with the assistance of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress (the "**UCC**"). This is a summary of the information shared at that meeting.

Notes to reader:

- The Commissioner has not and will not be making any findings about the accuracy of the information shared at the consultation meeting or make any findings of fact based on this information.
- The meeting attendees did not make an oath or swear to tell the truth before sharing information at this meeting.
- The meeting attendees were not subjected to cross-examination.
- The meeting attendees have reviewed and approved the contents of this public summary.
- Meeting attendees were given the option to anonymize themselves for the purposes of the present public summary. Where meeting attendees opted to anonymize themselves, they are designated as "Participant 1", "Participant 2", etc.
- At each of the consultation meetings, the meeting attendees were asked to answer two questions, which are set out below. The meeting attendees were each given a total of 15 minutes to respond to both questions.
- Where necessary, Commission counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets and in the footnotes to assist the reader.

Executive Summary

- Certain attendees provided background information about historical efforts by the U.S.S.R. to sow disinformation about the Ukrainian community and to try to drive a wedge between Ukrainians and other diaspora communities, particularly the Jewish community. More specifically, attendees discussed allegations that Ukrainian Canadians were Nazis and war criminals, referencing the *Commission of Inquiry on War Criminals in Canada* (also referred to as the Deschênes Commission), which found that such allegations were “grossly exaggerated”.
- Certain attendees reported that those same allegations – that Ukrainians are Nazis – have recently re-surfaced and are being amplified on social media and through traditional media channels, leading to serious repercussions for the Ukrainian Canadian community, including harassment and defacement of Ukrainian Canadian property. One attendee explained why, for them, being accused of being a Nazi is an affront of a colossal nature.
- Certain attendees spoke about the consequences of disinformation circulating about the Ukrainian Canadian community, explaining that it discourages Ukrainian Canadians from running for political office, and that Ukrainian politicians are forced to think twice about what they advocate for.
- Certain attendees spoke of their own efforts to counter mis- and disinformation, including through editorial journalism and academia. One attendee said that a book about KGB archives was the target of uninformed and misleading commentary. Another attendee described ongoing cyberattacks against a Ukrainian Canadian organization.
- Certain attendees talked about the challenges they faced when trying to counter disinformation, describing what felt like a wall erected by mainstream media that blocked their efforts to share their writing on the subject.

1. Participants' responses to Question 1

The first question posed to the participants was: *How are you, your loved ones and members of your community impacted by foreign interference in Canada's electoral processes and democratic institutions?*

Participant 1

Participant 1 stated that foreign interference manifests in many ways, the most important being the manipulation of the news and influencing the way that voters think and act.

Participant 1 noted that the Ukrainian Canadian community's experience with foreign interference is different than certain other diaspora experiences the Commission has heard about because they are targeted, not by the Ukrainian government, but by the Russian Federation ("**Russia**") (and, before that, by the U.S.S.R.).

Participant 1 began by providing historical context for the foreign interference experienced by members of the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada, including the brutal occupation Ukraine was subjected to by both the Soviets and the Nazis during World War II. Participant 1 explained that, after the end of the war, Ukrainian communities worked in collaboration with Jewish communities to facilitate the release of prisoners. Participant 1 said that, in reaction to that collaboration, the KGB [Soviet state security agency] tried to create a wedge between the two communities by organized disinformation campaigns labelling Ukrainians as Nazis. Participant 1 spoke of "useful idiots" in the West, including in Canada, namely people who were naively ready to promote Russian narratives and who amplified this message across multiple channels, including within democratic institutions. Participant 1 referenced the [1985-1986] *Commission of Inquiry on War Criminals in Canada*, commonly referred to as the Deschênes Commission. Participant 1 said that the Deschênes Commission found that the allegations that Ukrainian war criminals were living in Canada were grossly exaggerated.

Participant 1 stated that the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine indicated that Ukrainians wanted to move closer to the West and Europe. Participant 1 said that this movement eventually led to the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent invasion of

Ukraine in February 2022. Russia promotes the narrative that its recent invasion was to free Ukraine from Nazi occupation.

Participant 1 stated that pro-Russia and anti-Ukrainian disinformation narratives are amplified by Russian media, as well as Canadian media, sometimes by accident. Participant 1 explained that such disinformation campaigns on social media were intended to discourage Ukrainian Canadians from running for political office. Participant 1 further noted that Ukrainian politicians now need to think twice about what they advocate for.

Participant 1 spoke about the appearance of Yaroslav Hunka in the House of Commons, which they said sparked a new wave of disinformation about Ukrainians being Nazis. Participant 1 stated that Mr. Hunka's appearance led to requests for the release of the classified Deschênes Commission files, which would create a frenzy over the names of alleged war criminals, all of which has negatively impacted the Ukrainian Canadian community.

Participant 1 said that the Ukrainian Canadian community has been subject to hate speech, with anti-Ukrainian graffiti painted on walls, and acts of violence. They said that the Canadian government has not assisted the community with any safety measures.

Participant 2

Participant 2 referenced a KGB campaign, named *Operation Payback*, to create a wedge between the Jewish and Ukrainian communities. Participant 2 also referenced this successful KGB disinformation campaign which targeted Ukrainian and Jewish communities.

Participant 2 said they had been identified as a nefarious person by the USSR and have now been designated *persona non grata* by Russia.

Participant 2 referenced a book recognized by the American Library Association (“**ALA**”) in 2023. Participant 2 explained that the ALA subsequently withdrew its recognition of the book following baseless commentary published in *The Nation*. Participant 2 said that commentary was written by someone who had not read the book, and that the

commentary was amplified in Canada and the US in order to block the proposed reprinting of the book. Participant 2 described these events as an exercise in suppressing academic freedom.

Participant 2 said that organizations and individuals that had previously circulated figures on alleged Nazi war criminals hiding in Canada have recently reappeared, repeating similar claims to the effect that thousands of Nazis are still hiding in Canada. Participant 2 said these people have been promoting the notion that Canada is to blame for allowing Nazis into the country. Participant 2 said they tried to publish commentary in response to these claims, but not a single Canadian media outlet would publish their writing. Participant 2 expressed the view that traditional media and social media outlets are being overwhelmed by a Russian propaganda operation, including anonymous posters and Russian bots publishing and amplifying material online.

Participant 3

Participant 3 described themselves as having been active in the Ukrainian Canadian community for over six decades, namely in leadership positions of community organizations, noting that their close family members are also active in Ukrainian Canadian community matters. Participant 3 said that, having studied the plight of Ukrainians following independence from the U.S.S.R., along with Ukrainian history and culture, they are acutely aware of Russia's disinformation efforts targeting the Ukrainian Canadian community. Participant 3 said that, as a result of their work, which focuses on promoting democracy and countering Russian disinformation, including organizing events, awarding grants, and publishing written work on these matters, the KGB was and the FSB [the Federal Security Service of Russia is its principal security agency] is fully aware of who they and their family are. Participant 3 is proud to be on Russia's sanctions list; Participant 3 cannot travel to Russia as a result.

Participant 3 mentioned that their academic work had led them to be aware of the pervasive and widespread nature of Russian disinformation within the Canadian media ecosystem. They believe that this has a direct impact on Canadian policy, as the opinions of elected officials and the Canadian public are mainly forged by the news.

Participant 3 said that the Russians are very skilled and have a long history of using western democratic institutions to promote their objectives, using the openness of western societies to work against western interests.

Participant 3 said that Ukrainian Canadians are a major focus of Russian influence operations, noting that a Canadian Ukrainian organization is the target of constant cyber threats, and that measures put in place in response do not always prevent disruptions to its operations. Participant 3 provided an example, describing the disruption of a livestream of a scholarly presentation on Ukrainian citizenship and sovereignty hosted by this organization, which was interrupted by a hardcore pornography hacking. Participant 3 also described attempts to smear their reputation and the reputation of the same organization, in the aftermath of the Yaroslav Hunka scandal. Participant 3 described these efforts to smear the organization as damaging and distracting.

Participant 4

Participant 4 said that Russia seeks to hide aspects of its history, particularly the USSR's history as an ally of Nazi Germany in the ravaging of Western Europe from 1939 to 1941, which current Russian propaganda covers up and refuses to acknowledge. Participant 4 cited the Holodomor [a Soviet man-made famine in Ukraine in 1932-1933] as an example of Russia's efforts to deny its role and refuse to acknowledge and take accountability for its oppression of Ukraine and the deaths of four million Ukrainians. Participant 4 said that, instead, Russia advances false claims to Ukrainian history as the foundations of the modern Russian state relying on them as a justification for Russian attacks on Ukraine.

Participant 4 said that some of their dearest friends have been maligned by Russian disinformation, including an individual who, among other things, held leadership positions in an international institution, in academia, and in provincial politics. Participant 4 said that this individual was not defended by those Canadian organizations that should have fact-checked the allegations against this individual and defended them, but instead their reputation and legacy was destroyed.

Participant 4 said that Russian lies are massively spread through social media, trolls, and bot warehouses. Participant 4 said that the constant tsunami of disinformation causes

people to doubt and question what is the truth and stated that it is hard to run a democracy under these conditions.

Participant 4 said they are a lawyer. Participant 4 said that their practice was affected negatively by Russia's actions in Canada. Participant 4 said they are also a journalist and their role as such was impacted negatively by being listed on Russia's persona non grata list. Participant 4 said they know that the KGB and FSB have tracked them and maintained a file on them for many years.

Participant 4 stated that it is an affront of a colossal nature to call Ukrainian Canadians "Nazis", explaining that their mother-in-law had been taken by the Nazis from Ukraine and shipped to Germany in a cattle car where, as an Ostarbeiter, she was then sent to Austria to work for a bauer [peasant farmer, in German] and forced to labour on a farm surviving on one loaf of bread a week.

Participant 5

Participant 5 said they are an active journalist, and the former editor and owner of a news organization.

Participant 5 stated that the current party nomination system in Canada can be easily manipulated, particularly because people do not need to be Canadian citizens to vote in nomination contests.

Participant 5 stated that Russian-sponsored social media disinformation campaigns are extremely dangerous and worrisome. Participant 5 referred to constant portrayals of Ukrainians as Nazis as a dangerous narrative.

Participant 5 said that they have been attacked on many occasions for pointing out the truth, noting that their Facebook and email accounts have been hijacked. Participant 5 said that disinformation has been spread about the current war in Ukraine in efforts to curtail humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

Participant 5 said that Canadian mainstream media accepts or fails to detect Russian disinformation and further spreads that false information. Participant 5 opined that mainstream media also maintains an iron curtain in that they only publish certain articles

or viewpoints while failing to publish others, including articles aimed at correcting the record.

2. Participants' Responses to Question 2

The second question posed to participants was: *What are your suggestions for how you and others in your community who may be vulnerable to foreign interference could be supported and protected, and for how foreign interference could be detected or combated?*

Participant 1

Participant 1 said the first imperative is the closing of the Russian embassy in Canada and the expulsion of Russian consular officials, stating that they were a vector of disinformation in Canada.

Participant 1 said that, while Russia Today [RT] is no longer available on cable stations in Canada [following the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications' ("CRTC") decision to that effect], it is still accessible online from Canada. As such, Participant 1 noted that a person in Canada can access the same media propaganda shown in Russia. Participant 1 expressed the view that this is why there has been a 300% increase in violence and hate incidents directed at the Ukrainian Canadian community.

Participant 1 asked for safety and support for members of the Ukrainian Canadian community vulnerable to attack, which Participant 1 said would serve as a warning to those with nefarious intentions. Participant 1 suggested a community safety program and calling out attacks when they take place, noting that law enforcement has failed to investigate and prosecute perpetrators.

Participant 1 said that social media outlets need to be held accountable for the information disseminated on their platforms.

Participant 1 said that critical thinking needs to be taught in schools starting at a young age, citing a Finnish program about critical thinking and media literacy.

Participant 1 supports the implementation of a foreign agent registry, noting that registration should start with regards to states that already have sanctions levied against them, like Russia.

Participant 2

Participant 2 said that the Department of Canadian Heritage should review the organizations it funds to determine whether recipients are promoting fair and balanced reporting in journalism. Participant 2 said this question should be evaluated on a balance of probabilities. Participant 2 said that federal funding should not be provided to organizations or agencies promoting unsubstantiated or harmful narratives targeting diaspora communities in Canada.

Participant 2 said that the CRTC should mandate traditional media outlets and social media platforms to require those who post comments to do so under their own name, noting that the use of monikers suppresses open discourse.

Participant 2 said that an independent federal tribunal should be created that could investigate complaints from community groups about fairness in journalism.

Participant 2 called for fairness when investigating claims made, referencing historical and current allegations about Ukrainian war criminals and questioning why there has never been an investigation into persons living in Canada that used to work for the Soviet and/or Russian security services.

Participant 2 said there should be a review of the principle of parliamentary privilege, asking whether it is fair to allow a member of Canadian Parliament to make unsubstantiated allegations without the potential for repercussions.

Participant 3

Participant 3 said that the government of Canada should recognize that Russia is at war not only with Ukraine, but with the West more generally. Participant 3 noted that Russia perceives its propaganda war as an extension of its military operations. Participant 3 said that the government of Canada should have no illusions about Russian meddling in

foreign elections, citing reports of Russian interference in the American and French election, as well as in the Brexit referendum. Participant 3 said that Canada needs to take this threat more seriously.

Participant 3 said that the amount of Russian disinformation has increased exponentially since Twitter became X. Participant 3 said that the Canadian government should look at establishing and funding a fact checking function that could take on some of the specific tropes that Russia uses through a series of presentations or publications.

Participant 3 said that tenured university professors in Canada who maintain long-standing relationships with Russia should be monitored by the Canadian government.

Participant 4

Participant 4 said that Canada should look to the fact-checking approach taken by the American media, in which fact checking is performed in real time during public debates, and try to accomplish something similar to assist in combatting the spread of disinformation.

Participant 4 expressed their view that the major newspapers in Canada have erected an ideological wall that prevents Ukrainian Canadians from having their opinions featured. Participant 4 recommended that the editorial boards of these news outlets review the findings of the Deschênes Commission.

Participant 4 said that the Canadian government should take an interest in those who are platforming or spreading mis- and disinformation here in Canada, suggesting that they are likely funded with Russian money and that the Canadian government should follow their sources of funding.

Participant 4 said the Canadian government should establish an organization that can receive and investigate complaints about Russian disinformation.

Participant 5

Participant 5 recommended an investigation into the propagation of Russian disinformation through Canadian mainstream media and the refusals by those outlets to

publish truthful clarifications, referencing the [1980-1981] *Royal Commission on Newspapers* also referred to as the Kent Commission, as well as the 1970 Davey Report.

Participant 5 recommended against using financial aid to media organizations as a tool for encouraging cooperation, noting that this may backfire for smaller news organizations.

Participant 5 recommended that the political party nomination process be reformed to prevent the placement of a sleeper agent into a safe riding. Participant 5 recommended that only Canadian citizens be allowed to vote in political party nomination meetings.