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Chair

The Honourable Robert Nault

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● (0850)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Robert Nault (Kenora, Lib.)): Colleagues, I'll bring this committee meeting to order.

We are waiting for Margaret Skok, but we'll get started with our first witness simply because, as you know, we have an hour and 15 minutes, and I want to make sure we get to use it all. As I understand it, the bells will ring at 10, and a vote at 10:30 is what we've been told. We'll go until 10 with the two witnesses we have, and then I've suggested to the other two witnesses that, through the clerk, we will postpone their video conference to another day.

I understand that Professor DeBardeleben has a class to teach and will have to leave us around 9:30.

Prof. Joan DeBardeleben (Chancellor's Professor, Carleton University, As an Individual): I have to leave here by 10, so that's okay.

The Chair: Okay, so that will work. Thank you.

She is a chancellor's professor in the department of political science and the institute of European, Russian and Eurasian studies at Carleton University. She also holds the Jean Monnet chair on European neighbourhood policy.

Welcome to the committee. I will turn the floor over to you for your opening comments, and by then I am absolutely confident that Margaret Skok will be here.

Joan, go ahead.

Prof. Joan DeBardeleben: Thank you very much, committee members, for giving me this opportunity to speak to you today about these issues.

There are many issues on the list of questions that were provided to me and I won't be able to deal with all of them, given the time limitation, but I'm happy to give you further input if you request it.

My own expertise lies in the area of Russian politics and relations between the European Union and Russia, and also in the context of the Ukraine crisis and the EU-Russian shared neighbourhood. I won't be addressing issues related to central Asia specifically today.

Before considering Canadian responses, it's important to understand Russia's main priorities and interests in eastern Europe. I would identify three.

The first are status concerns. Here, Russia seeks to achieve equal status and recognition with other actors that it sees as its point of reference—namely, the European Union and the United States. This has been a recurring theme of Russian foreign policy under Mr. Putin. In relation to the U.S., Russian leaders object to what they call the "unipolar" global power system and to U.S. appropriation of the right to act unilaterally and to violate international law at will. In relation to the EU, Russia has objected to the latter's claim to define the meaning of European values and to establish itself as the source of continental regulatory norms.

Second are security concerns, especially objections to NATO expansion in its neighbourhood, combined with the sense of exclusion from effective influence on European security arrangements.

Third are Russian regional geopolitical objectives—namely, Russia's desire to retain a special sphere of influence in the non-EU, post-Soviet space. Ukraine has been seen by Russia as a very pivotal element of this priority. Russia's actions in 2013 and 2014 in relation to Ukraine and Crimea, in my view, reflected Russia's failure to achieve this objective by other means.

Unfortunately, these Russian priorities have brought Russia into conflict both with the EU and the west more broadly in the context of the Ukraine crisis. Nonetheless, I believe that Russia would prefer to be integrated into the European security and economic framework if this could be achieved in compatibility with these three objectives.

Given the uncertainty and the unpredictability of the Trump administration's positions on these issues, I believe that Canada should pursue a policy of alignment and co-operation with the EU in its policies toward eastern Europe and Russia. In my view, the EU's long-term objectives are consistent with Canadian interests. These include a path toward reopening dialogue with Russia on issues of shared concern, such as the Arctic, the environment, and shared security concerns, while strongly defending the territorial integrity and the right of countries that lie between the EU and Russia to pursue their own foreign policy preferences, as well as support for democratic governance and rule of law. However, the path to realizing these longer-term objectives, which I think are shared by Canada and the EU, is difficult and unclear.

I would suggest three steps or intermediary priorities. First would be measures to bolster the democratic stability and political reform processes in east European countries, including both EU member states that border Russia—the Baltic states and Poland—and post-Soviet states that are not part of the EU, particularly Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, which have recently signed association and free trade agreements with the EU.

To this end, I would advocate for stronger Canadian engagement in promoting good governance and rule-of-law reforms in these countries, in tandem with the EU. Of particular value to countries such as Ukraine and the Baltic states would be programs to share best practices in realizing accommodation in multi-ethnic societies. Russian population groups in several of these countries may be vulnerable to Russian propaganda. Ukraine in particular is struggling with finding an adequate model for devolving some power to regional authorities to meet the conditions of the Minsk II agreement, which still offers the best avenue for resolving the impasse over Ukraine, weak as this agreement may be. Canada, as a successful federation with a multi-ethnic society, should endeavour to offer assistance and service in addressing this problem. Given the many internal challenges facing the EU at this point in time, leaving such development assistance efforts primarily to the EU would, in my view, be a mistake.

Also, in the Baltic states, Canada should accompany its NATO commitment in Latvia by diplomatic engagement on a civilian basis to assess whether Canada can provide support in other arenas to help bolster the resilience of domestic civil society in the face of potential soft-power influence from Russia.

● (0855)

Second, Canada should continue to take a strong position in support of the inviolability of post-World War II and post-Cold War borders in Europe. While it is difficult to foresee a scenario under which Russia's annexation of Crimea could be reversed, insistence on the territorial sovereignty of European nations should remain a key security commitment of Canada based in our alliance system, and importantly, in recognition that violations of this order can open a Pandora's box of instability, ethnic conflict, and territorial claims.

Third, Canada needs to recognize the dangers of the current escalation of tensions with Russia. Russia and the west face a classic security dilemma. A security dilemma is a dynamic where efforts by one side to ensure security can elicit reactions that further endanger that security. On the other hand, the failure to take those measures is perceived to undermine security. This is the dilemma. A failure to escape this logic may create a paradigm shift where threats of escalation, increasing militarization, brinkmanship, competing spheres of influence, reduced economic and energy interaction, and a broad securitization of the relationship can take on a long-lasting character.

It is not clear or easy how to escape this logic while rejecting Russian revisionism in relation to post-war and post-Soviet borders. In this context, the minimalist objective is to stabilize the situation; that is, to re-establish a geostrategic and security balance and some level of predictability. From there, perhaps the foundation can be laid for efforts to rebuild trust.

To this end, I believe that Canada should support the initiation of a cross-European, transatlantic security dialogue, perhaps in the context of the OSCE, to engage in an open consideration of how the existing security architecture might be revised to take account both of Russia's security concerns, which it feels NATO expansion has undermined, as well as the security and sovereignty concerns of small and medium-sized European countries that feel threatened by Russia. While the U.S. is at the moment an unpredictable and therefore potentially unreliable partner in undertaking such an initiative, I believe that Canada should work with the EU and the OSCE in that direction.

Thank you very much. I'm happy to respond to any questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'll go to Mr. Kent, please.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you for being with us here today.

You spoke of encouraging better governance, and I guess democratization in a number of the east European post-Soviet states. What about encouragement at the same time? Aside from Crimea and the Donbass invasion, what about encouraging better governance within Russia itself?

Mr. Putin doesn't show any signs of receiving such encouragement very positively. I'm just wondering what your thoughts might be.

Prof. Joan DeBardeleben: My view is that it would be very difficult to have a positive influence on the domestic situation inside of Russia. There are several reasons for that.

First, past experience hasn't proven that to be a very successful approach. In fact, in some cases it can backfire.

As you probably know, the Russian government is very wary of western interference. It claims there has been heavy interference in the Ukraine and other parts of its neighbourhood. Certainly it has taken defensive measures to prevent what it perceives to be potential interference domestically, including the foreign agents law, which basically prevents organizations, NGOs within Russia, that have arguably any kind of political activity, from receiving any foreign funding. This is a very punitive action for these NGOs. It basically disempowers them. This shows the willingness of the Putin regime to act assertively to reject efforts to try to promote, as you might say, democracy internally.

Furthermore, because I do believe Putin genuinely has a high level of popular support, those ratings that you read from the various public opinion surveys may not be exact. Based on my experience and my interaction in Russia, I believe that the Russian population generally stands behind Mr. Putin in terms of his primary approach.

Part of that is because a sense of humiliation occurred in relation to what happened in the 1990s in Russia. There was an economic decline, which was perceived by many people to be based on a kind of western model. From the perception of many Russians, that was a great failure of Russian policy, to accept western advice in that context with those consequences. There would be quite a strong popular receptiveness to any interpretation put out by the Russian government in relation to attempts by the west to influence domestic arrangements inside Russia.

The other problem is that when you take that path, you don't know what the outcome may be. It can be very unpredictable. You might end up with a stronger nationalist government in place, a more unpredictable one. The outcome could easily be worse than what we have now. I would recommend against that approach.

● (0900)

Hon. Peter Kent: On the committee's January visit to a number of countries in eastern Europe, particularly Ukraine, Latvia, and Poland, we heard concern—and I hope I'm reflecting the concern that I think we heard—from a number of sources about the ponderings that if the west were to give up on Crimea, there might be some advancement towards normalization and a pullback from eastern Ukraine.

Particularly in Latvia, though, we heard voices asking if that were to happen, what's next? Would it be an encroachment on Latvia, similar to that on eastern Ukraine, or to the Baltics generally and in Poland?

They're seeing the fatigue, if you will, in some parts of Europe with regard to the Crimea-eastern Ukraine position so that we're now talking bargaining chips.

Prof. Joan DeBardeleben: Yes. I think the bargaining chip kind of discourse can be quite dangerous. There definitely can be the risk—and given the uncertainty in Washington right now, I think one has to consider this even more seriously—of some kind of what I call a "great power" bargain being struck between some of the more powerful countries at the expense of some of the less strong countries that lie between the EU and Russia. I think that's a very risky path to go down, because it can encourage actions or misunderstandings on the part of the Russian side as to what position the west would take in terms of defending certain parts of the alliance.

In terms of Crimea and eastern Ukraine, I think one does have to make a distinction. As I said, realistically it's hard to foresee a scenario in which Crimea would be returned to Ukraine. That's not only because of the Russian determination to keep it, but it's also because probably the majority of the population.... I don't know, but it's at least possible that the majority of the population in Crimea would prefer the current situation.

That's not to say that the referendum that occurred there was legitimate. I don't think it was a legitimate referendum, but I can't easily see how that situation would be reversed.

That doesn't mean that rhetorically one accepts it. The principle involved in achieving it is still objectionable, particularly because of the Budapest memorandums of the early 1990s, where Ukraine was given a guarantee of its territorial sovereignty by Russia, by western countries, in exchange for its giving up its nuclear weapons. I think it would set a very bad precedent to accept that this was done with legitimacy. That means, however, that although rhetorically one has to continue objecting to it, one has to be a bit realistic about what the outcome of that rhetorical objection is likely to be.

The situation in eastern Ukraine is quite different. There it's a truly unresolved situation. I think it looks more and more like it may turn into a so-called frozen conflict, an unresolved conflict with no clear exit path, but I don't think we should accept that outcome, at least not yet. That's why I would advocate to at least make some more attempts to try to break the deadlock.

There are some very clear issues at stake there that have to do with.... I guess it does depend, to a certain degree, on how you interpret Russian motives. If you interpret Russian motives as being to destabilize Ukraine and ultimately force Ukraine back into its orbit, then there would seem to be very dismal prospects for any kind of resolution. I'm not sure I accept that kind of logic. I don't think Russia necessarily wants an unstable neighbour. It would be a constant risk to Russia from a security perspective.

I think the outcome we should strive for in the broader scope—then maybe from there we can go back to thinking about how to resolve the east Ukraine problem—is an acceptance on Russia's part that Ukraine could have a relationship with both the west and Russia, perhaps in exchange for some other kinds of...I don't like to use the word "concessions", but by responding to some other concerns. I think this is the desirable outcome.

As you may know, currently, since the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area agreement between the EU and Ukraine was put into force at the beginning of 2016, Russia has unilaterally excluded Ukraine from the CIS Free Trade Agreement. That has in part—that and the war—led to a dramatic decline in trade between Ukraine and Russia. That's detrimental to both partners. I don't think it serves our interests either.

What we should be pushing for broadly in that context is that the relationship between Ukraine and Russia be restored in terms of trade and those kinds of very practical and pragmatic interactions. At the same time, Ukraine would retain its right to pursue its own choice in terms of its relationship with the European Union and western partners.

I'm not convinced that's against the Russian interests. Because we've gotten into this level of high distrust, I think that it has become difficult to get there but we should continue to work toward getting there. Part of that would be to try to unravel the knotty problems of the Minsk II agreement, which one moment people seem to have given up on and the next moment they say out of the other side of their mouths that it's the only possible solution. To me, this is kind of a perplexing situation.

There are two issues there that need to be resolved, if one accepts the premise that there's a long-term solution one might work toward. First, there needs to be a devolution of power within Ukraine, which Ukraine is blocked on at the moment. Second, of course, Russia needs to give back control of the borders between Russia and Ukraine to Ukraine. There's a sequence issue there.

I think we should try to work on that first issue, if possible. We should put in what we can to try to help look for solutions to that first issue of devolving some power in a way that doesn't compromise Ukraine's sovereignty.

● (0905)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kent.

We'll go to Mr. McKay, please.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Thank you for coming here.

Garry Kasparov appeared before this committee a few months ago. I don't know whether he said it publicly, but he certainly said privately to me that the approach of the west and other nations is like everyone playing chess while Putin is playing poker. Until you understand that he's playing poker, you're probably not going to understand how he approaches this.

It makes perfectly good sense in the sense that Russia is nothing other than an organized kleptocracy, with Putin at the centre and spreading out through the oligarchs. To wit your comment that all the NGOs are defunded and therefore there is no alternative voice, indeed, anybody who purports to provide an alternative voice ends up in hospital, or worse.

In light of its being, if you will, a criminal organization, how is it that you can expect your proposals of dialogue and security arrangements, etc., to work unless you have a very robust western reaction to what Mr. Putin is doing?

Prof. Joan DeBardeleben: I think that depiction of Russia is a bit too extreme. I wouldn't characterize it quite that way. There is, of course, a lot of corruption and there is a certain element of criminality in certain aspects of Russian society, but to describe the whole system in that manner would be a vast oversimplification.

If we look at the broad trajectory of how Russian foreign policy has evolved since the collapse of the Soviet Union, particularly since the enlargement of the EU, we see there's been a consistent expression of certain types of concerns that have come out from the Russian leadership under both Mr. Putin and Mr. Medvedev, who many see as a somewhat more moderate leader. They're reflected in those three points that I addressed.

If you look at speeches going back, the 2007 Munich speech by Putin is often cited as a very clear expression of this, and it continues as themes that show a kind of logic and rationality to the way these issues are viewed in Russian policy circles. I think those concerns have to be taken seriously. That's not to condone the abuse of power that no doubt occurs in Russia, and the suppression of some elements of civil society, particularly those that are critical of the basic structure of power. But if we want to avoid the other risks I was talking about, which are the risks of escalation into a paradigm that is even worse than the Cold War because it's more unpredictable and it doesn't have the same structures of balance we had then, we have to —

● (0910)

Hon. John McKay: Isn't the flaw in your analysis that in order for Russia to, if you will, stabilize its borders, it has to expand? This was a kind of Catherine the Great approach to Russia, that it actually has to keep encroaching on its neighbours in order to stabilize, if you will, the inner Russia. There's the inner Russia, and then there's the outer Russia. As long as you're pushing the borders on the outer Russia, destabilizing the rest of that part of the world, that's the only logic that makes any kind of sense to Putin or anyone who might succeed Putin.

Prof. Joan DeBardeleben: I wouldn't say it's an imperialist strategy in that sense. I think Russia wishes to have a sphere of influence, a sphere around it where it has a certain level of significant influence. That's not unique to Russia. Historically in other large countries, this has been a fairly common desire, for reasons of security. In the Russian case, it also is augmented by the sense of loss of, you could call it, empire, or the loss of superpower status, which requires some time to adapt to. This is true of many empires, actually. Adapting to the loss of empire is something that requires some time. The desire to have influence in the neighbourhood is not equated, in my mind, to a simple expansionist imperialist scenario.

Hon. John McKay: This is a desire to have influence. Doesn't that inevitably lead to destabilization? The Baltic states are worried sick that they're next, and it makes perfectly good sense given their history, given the attitude of the Kremlin that inevitably the expansion of the Russian sphere of influence means them.

Prof. Joan DeBardeleben: We have an alliance with the Baltic states, and with Poland. I think we should definitely support that alliance and the security guarantees that are provided, and that's being done. I would totally support that position.

I think it's unlikely that there would be an overt attack on those countries. I think the greater danger would be of domestic division. That's why I recommended in my first intermediary point that it's important for us to pay attention not only to sending our support mission to Latvia in a military sense but also, if it's desired on the part of those countries, to engage in thinking together about how minorities can be better integrated. Because really that's the key to internal stabilization, integrating your own population and building loyalty among your own population, including the Russian minority.

Hon. John McKay: I think your point about hybrid warfare is right on. The key ethnic group is the Russians in the eastern part of those Baltic countries.

Before my fearless leader here cuts me off—

The Chair: Very quickly, please.

Hon. John McKay: You didn't raise any issue with respect to the role of the Russian Orthodox church vis-à-vis the Ukrainian Orthodox church. I'd be interested in your thoughts on that.

● (0915)

Prof. Joan DeBardeleben: I don't have any particular thought about that issue. It's not something I really looked into, so rather than make a comment based on an impression I won't answer that question.

Hon. John McKay: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McKay.

[*Translation*]

It is now over to you, Ms. Laverdière.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Thank you.

First off, Mr. Chair, I feel compelled to acknowledge the arrival of a second woman on the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Welcome, Ms. Mendès.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès (Brossard—Saint-Lambert, Lib.): Thank you.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I am delighted to have you join us. Little by little, we'll get there.

Secondly, thank you, Ms. DeBardeleben, for that excellent presentation. I was fascinated by what you told us. It was extremely informative.

I share two points of view with you. First, by expanding our military presence, we risk an endless escalation, which will never lead to a solution. Second, it is necessary to work with our partners in the EU. We may be a bit too focused on what is happening south of the border right now, so we are probably not paying enough attention to key partners such as the European Union. That worries me.

You indicated that it would be advisable to work with the European Union. Perhaps our new ambassador could forget about Germany and devote all his time to the EU. The idea would be to work with the EU and OSCE on reviewing the security structure.

Could you elaborate on that for us?

[*English*]

Prof. Joan DeBardeleben: This is the really hard nut to crack, the security issue. In some way it's probably bold to even bring it up as a possibility because I think you have to work around the edges with Russia to try to rebuild trust without necessarily dealing with that really difficult problem. The big issue in dealing with thinking about how to assure security, both for Russia and for the neighbouring countries, is the transatlantic dimension and NATO.

We remember that Mr. Medvedev proposed the idea of convening a kind of discussion about a new security architecture in Europe in 2008. That was kind of pushed aside by both Europeans and North Americans because it was seen as a potential effort to split Europe from North America. I think that would be a risk.

Of course we now have the additional problem, and we have an administration in Washington whose intentions are not entirely clear on that matter. It might seem to be a rather volatile can of worms to open up at the moment, and one should say that. However, I suppose if Washington draws back from a strong security commitment in Europe, this will place increasing pressure on the EU and on Europe to fill the gap. I'm not foreseeing the most drastic scenario where the NATO commitment would be rescinded. I don't hear that coming out of Washington right now. There seems to be at least an expression of support for the NATO security guarantees, but there could be some ambiguity short of that. This may push Europe into having to take a stronger position in terms of its own security commitment to countries that are its members and also members of NATO.

That could provide an opening for the EU to take a stronger role. I don't know about the EU, but member states, Germany in particular, see some potential in the OSCE to play a more leading role. I think that might be the best vehicle for this kind of discussion. It's not an organization that Russia has a high level of trust in, but it certainly has a higher level of trust than in NATO or any alternatives. It would provide a framework within which one could try to sit at the table and begin to lay out what the key security concerns are of the various parties. We have an Atlantic security community. There is no European security community that effectively operates today, and that's a large root of the current problem.

NATO expansion close to Russia's border, I think, is the key irritant that has led to the current crisis. I would identify that as the most important factor, and the fear that Ukraine and Georgia eventually would be admitted to NATO. I think that's unlikely. I can't foresee that ever happening, but I don't think the Russians see it that way. I think they still have a reasonable, in their minds, fear that that could be the outcome. That would be an intrusion into what they would consider to be their very near neighbourhood. That would be, I think, unacceptable.

This discussion is very important, and I would foresee the OSCE as being the best vehicle through which to pursue that conversation.

● (0920)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Of course, I was kidding when I said that the new ambassador should focus solely on the European Union, since Germany is just as important.

We haven't spent much time discussing the energy issue. What impact do you think it is having on the situation?

[*English*]

Prof. Joan DeBardeleben: The energy interdependence—I would call it—between the European Union and Russia has, on balance, been a stabilizing factor. The underlying logic of the European Union in its relationship with Russia has been pretty well the same as the underlying logic of the European integration process, which is that economic interdependence is more likely to breed peace and stability. Up until the 2013 Ukraine crisis, despite the crisis in Ukraine that occurred over energy in the first decade of this century, it has generally been viewed as something that could be stabilizing because it's not only Europe being dependent on Russia, but Russia being dependent on Europe for its markets. It's a mutual interdependence.

We've seen in the course of the crisis that it's probably been one of the areas where the two parties have been able to deal most fruitfully and most constructively with each other, both in resolving Ukraine's energy problems and also in terms of the overall framework of controversial issues like the third energy package, where Russia has actually backed off.

I think the risk of reducing.... There has to be a kind of balance here, because on the one hand you don't want to be overly dependent, and the EU doesn't want to be overly dependent; and on the other hand, if you reduce that economic interaction to too low a level, it reduces the incentive to operate with each other in a civilized manner.

I think on that particular issue, things are not going too badly at the moment.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madame Laverdière.

I want to take a minute to recognize Margaret Skok, who has shown up.

Ms. Margaret Skok (Senior Fellow, Global Security and Politics, Centre for International Governance Innovation): I was on time but I didn't know about the—

The Chair: My apologies for sending you on a wild goose chase, wherever you ended up. I think you were in Centre Block.

Ms. Margaret Skok: I was everywhere, but I said, "Happy Valentine's" to everyone. Thank you.

The Chair: Colleagues, I think we will let Madam Skok make her presentation. She is a senior fellow from the Centre for International Governance Innovation. You'll notice that she was also the Canadian ambassador to the Republic of Kazakhstan, and she also served in Canada's embassy in Moscow in the early 1990s.

Margaret, I'd like you to do your presentation and then we'll get right back into questions, with both of you, in the time we have remaining. I'll turn the floor over to you.

Ms. Margaret Skok: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's not a region that many people know very much about. I enjoyed the last comments that were made about the interconnectivity. Part of the former Soviet Union absolutely connected to Europe, absolutely connected to the east.

I was just in Washington last week and met with the other four central Asian ambassadors and they all reminded me that whereas in 1991, after the collapse of the former Soviet Union, the majority of the trade was with Russia. A majority of the trade for most of these countries now is with Europe. There are a couple, like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, that still trade predominantly with Russia but they have forged new relationships.

As we maintain our relationship with the United States, they maintain their relationship with their traditional partners, which in some circles are called the spheres of influence: Russia and China. However, they have forged new relationships that are bilateral, multilateral, and international. It is these international organizations and relationships that will make the difference in terms of prodding them—and one ambassador actually used that verb—to move forward in modernizing their economy, modernizing their governance structures, and modernizing who they speak with and how they speak.

The OSCE and NATO are critical—and I'm sorry that I missed the first part of Joan's presentation—and the OSCE in Russia is still respected. Those organizations are also our Canadian eyes and ears on the ground in that region. There are a lot of Canadians who operate with NATO and the OSCE.

I also want to mention someone who has been in the news a lot most recently, and that is His Highness, the Aga Khan. He runs a public-private sector operation in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. It is a critical and majority investor in some of these countries, particularly Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The focus is on microfinancing, education, and training young people to look for jobs.

I'm not even following my presentation, but you'll have it if you need it.

What is really important is that there are approximately 67 million people in central Asia. Unlike the west, where the majority of demographics are older, 40% of the demographics are 30 years and younger. Unlike some of you, I understand from the Kazakh ambassador, having recently been in Kazakhstan in Astana, that Astana is not at all like Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, or Turkmenistan. The poverty is not like what we see when we look at Africa, for example, or the traditional third world countries. The poverty and the economic growth are uneven. The legacy issues are corruption, governance, and just not knowing how to move forward.

After 1991—and I was in Moscow during the coup—there was a Soviet general who said, "We lost the Baltic fleet; we will never lose the Black Sea fleet." In 1992, already, they knew what their imperial and their historical—as they would term it—tendencies would be in central Asia and in the former Soviet Union.

● (0925)

There are 67 million people in central Asia—I'm not counting Afghanistan because it is a separate issue—of whom, as I said, 40% are young. It used to be that if they did not find jobs, as migrant labourers, they would go predominantly to Russia, and secondly to Kazakhstan. As the economy and commodity prices shrank, those young and middle-aged people were stopped at the borders. Migrant labour, carrying drugs, and carrying illicit arms were pretty lucrative, but more lucrative—when they were stuck and not able to cross the border into Russia—was radicalization.

Radicalization cannot be underestimated in central Asia. At any one given time, there are seven million people on the move in central Asia. These are predominantly Muslim countries. They are secular governments and totally firm against terrorism, but since the collapse in 1991 of the former Soviet Union, there is also a search for a value system. The Soviet Union came with a value system. Post-1991, the only "ism" that appeared on the horizon was capitalism, and the only direction that was provided by the west was democracy.

They were traders from the Silk Road, way before the drugs, centuries ago. It was china, grain, then drugs, then narcotics, then illicit trade in human beings, and now it's terrorism. I was reminded by my defence colleagues that there is nothing new about ideologies and there is nothing new about terrorism. They have existed for centuries. What is new is technology.

The other issue is that these migrant workers, or these young, radicalized fighters, return home. They are brothers and they are fathers, and they are sisters. They come back to their villages and they are embraced as their own, and no one knows who has been radicalized.

I have reports on insurgents' activities, but there is always a lot more than what happens. In an example last week that did not make the press, 17 people were arrested in Kazakhstan—and I quote the ambassador—"as a preventative measure". We won't hear from those 17 people again. These governments are interested in stability. They know that their relationships to new partners and to economic growth are critical to their sovereignty. They're not interested in terrorism. It is something that will take them in a direction that they have never been interested in.

Each country in central Asia is a little different. They have long-standing ties to Russia and to Europe. In 1923, when the former Soviet Union closed its borders—unimaginable that you could close such a large country—central Asia was doubly closed. That was where the nuclear weaponry was being developed. That is where there are still—and I've been in five of them—biological and chemical weapons labs, and they're not terribly secure. They have wooden tables that they work on, doors that don't lock, and screen windows where the air goes back and forth, and everything that is carried by air is transmitted to the region. Tajikistan and southern Kyrgyzstan are probably in the worst shape, in terms of diseases and chemical and biological weapon transfer. It doesn't cost very much; pay somebody $100 and they can go into a lab and get it.

As a result of the Soviet Union—Moscow at that point—doing these tests and doing this development, nobody had even heard of these countries. When we speak of Samarkand, many people still think that it might be in India or Pakistan. I often compare the old Silk Road to the Hudson's Bay Company in Canada. These were traders from a long time ago.

● (0930)

In addition, their 77 years in the former Soviet Union trained them to work really hard, in double, triple, and quadruple jobs. These are people who have a huge work ethic and who have had to survive under many different disputes, conflicts, and wars.

In addition, central Asia is where the labour camps were, not the concentration camps. That's another reason central Asia was closed. It speaks to why it is such a tolerant, inclusive, multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multireligious region. In those labour camps were the Russians, who didn't tow the line, the Ukrainians, the Volga Dutch, the Volga Germans, the Poles, the Greeks, and the Koreans.

In these countries you have Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, and Hindus. Everybody is there. They survived. They are intermarried. Religion isn't a fanatic thing for them of course, because of their time under the Soviet Union, but Islamism, in its—I'm going to use this word with my apologies—perversion, has frightened them. These governments are interested in stability. They know that their sovereignty, as nations independent of Russia and China, and their economic stability depends on their governance and their anti-terrorism. They are looking for models.

The European Union is doing a lot within central Asia in sectors of production like food processing—on top of the machinery Canada brings in—in terms of mining, in terms of co-operation on nuclear non-proliferation.

These countries do not have weapons now. Between Russia and the United States there are approximately 1,800 nuclear weapons. Some of the weaponry has been hidden in—I don't want to call it eastern Europe because in the old American nomenclature it was called the eastern bloc—countries that are now part of the EU. Shortly after the collapse of 1991, there was some weaponry hidden in some of those poorer eastern bloc countries.

I believe what my colleague said. Interconnectivity, economic interdependence, and the work of multilateral, international, and bilateral partnerships are key, and radicalization cannot be underestimated.

● (0935)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Skok.

We're going to go right to questions. I understand it's Mr. Sidhu's time.

Mr. Jati Sidhu (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you both for sharing your knowledge.

I'll go back to the European Union.

Professor, you mentioned that there's a lot of uncertainty in that area, especially after the Brexit vote, including inequality between the states and slow economic recovery. To what extent do you think these pressures have resulted in the decline of democratic openness, a return to nationalism, and the rise of extremist parties in that part of the woods? What's your take on that?

Prof. Joan DeBardeleben: These are just some of the challenges that the European Union faces in terms of the rise of populism. Of course, it has been triggered by a variety of factors, including the 2008 economic crisis and the aftermath of that which, of course, Europe more or less imported from North America in my view; the sovereign debt crisis, which was related to some flaws in the euro's own construction perhaps; and also the refugee crisis.

All of these things have contributed to it. I think this is a risk. It's a risk worldwide. We see it. We see the rise of populism around the world and some kind of a reaction against globalization. It affects a reaction against trade agendas, against immigrants, against all these kinds of impacts of international intrusion into the domestic space.

We don't know what will happen after the elections in Germany, France, and the Netherlands, but the leaders currently of these countries are committed to a different vision, and the elites at the European level likewise.

I think we should continue to try to strengthen partnerships with these countries in dealing with the refugee crisis. We're trying to do that and through the CETA agreement trying to promote economic growth and to generate a positive model of what you could call globalization or at least trade, trade relations, but no doubt these kinds of issues do reduce the capacity of the EU to deal with some external challenges.

I mean there has been a diversion of attention from the Ukraine problem to a certain degree because there are other issues, the refugee crisis in particular, that have taken first place. That's part of why I said I think we should not withdraw from eastern Europe, what we're calling here eastern Europe, the countries between the EU and Russia in terms of Canada's development aid program.

I know there was a viewpoint that this was kind of the EU's responsibility now, this region. There was a drawback and the idea that some of these countries, I think the term was, “graduated” too. I remember that from a few years or decades ago. Now is the time when I think we need to re-engage in terms of not just the NATO commitment but in terms of sharing our best practices—which we have been quite successful with, particularly in terms of our multiculturalism—and not just picking out one country or two countries.

But that region is key to stability. We should make a commitment to support what the European Union is trying to do, because they are under such strain right now with so many different challenges. We can make a positive contribution, as we have in the refugee envelope.

● (0940)

Mr. Jati Sidhu: Do you see that as a threat to the European Union itself?

Prof. Joan DeBardeleben: Yes, there is a potential threat. It's kind of ironic because the talk maybe a decade ago was that the European public was passive and not interested in the European Union. There was talk of a kind of permissive consensus, that they just went along with what the elite said.

Now we see that the public has been activated and not always in the direction that the elites were hoping. In other words, there are strong Euro-skeptic tendencies in some countries. It could be a threat. Even the EU documents refer to the situation of existential... and I don't know if it's threat or crisis, but there is a kind of existential situation that challenges on some level the fundamental rationale of European integration.

This is the place where Russia also poses a challenge because we saw some intervention or attempts to intervene in the American election. I think people in Germany and France are very concerned about this, that there is an attempt to influence public opinion.

We know that there is support coming from the east for certain right-wing movements in Europe. It's important to support.... There's not much we can do, frankly, from here, but we have to watch it carefully and try to align with those countries that are able to maintain the values that we support. I'm quite hopeful that the elections will come out in a more positive direction, but no doubt it's a situation of uncertainty.

Mr. Jati Sidhu: That was my next question, actually. How can we help from this part of the world since we have trade with those countries and we're looking forward to having more trade with the European Union? How can we help?

Prof. Joan DeBardeleben: I think it's important to keep a positive discourse—we're doing pretty well in this regard—and to not feed into the negative discursive space that's emerged, to actively combat the depiction of certain situations in a way that supports the populist narrative or in many cases the Russian narrative in those countries, and to maintain strong relationships with those partners that we share values with.

That sounds good, but ultimately we can't affect the domestic outcome of elections in European countries, and we wouldn't want to try. It's not really our purview to do that. I don't really think, in that sense, that we can do too much, but I think the contributions we've made have been in the right direction. Taking a role in the refugee crisis doesn't by any stretch of the imagination relieve the pressure on Europe, but it sends the message that globalization has some positive elements, that internationalization, the international community, provides positive support, not just threats. That's the narrative that has to be put forth, and it is being put forth. That may be what we can do at this stage.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Saini, please.

Mr. Raj Saini (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Good morning. Thank you very much for being here. It's been very interesting so far.

Ambassador Skok, since you're from my hometown, I thought I'd start with you, make you feel a little bit more welcome.

Ms. Margaret Skok: Which hometown is that?

Mr. Raj Saini: The Waterloo region.

I want to talk to you about something that you didn't mention in your remarks, but I think it has huge importance to the geopolitical stability of those five countries. I'm talking about water. Prior to 1991, the Soviet Union had a bargain between Kurdistan and Tajikistan in which they would provide water over the summer, and the other three entities—Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan—would provide coal, gas, and electricity in the winter.

It seems now that there's no clear understanding among the five countries. Before we talk about anything else, there are more bilateral agreements here and there, some disagreements with the hydroelectric power upstream. How do you see that playing out before we...?

This leads to the second question, so if you could, kindly comment on how that water crisis plays out.

● (0945)

Ms. Margaret Skok: You're absolutely right. Transboundary water management is a huge mess. They do not trade very well. The mountain regions are really important, because they begin in Kazakhstan and China, and then they become the Pamirs, the Hindu Kush, and the Himalayas. These are peaks of 7,000 metres. They are glacier caps. They melt. This year the water will not be a problem because of the climate change issue, which we understand from some of our colleagues does not exist, but it does exist there.

The rivers run north, downstream. There are upstream and downstream considerations. One is agriculture. It is about irrigation. It is about cattle and grain. It is also about drought, and it is about flood plain management. CIGI did a security governance conference in Astana a year ago. We're proposing one in May in Ottawa, because one of the things that we can do with all of our thousands of lakes and rivers and the International Joint Commission between Canada and the United States is transboundary water management.

They have begun to speak to each other. The Kyrgyz ambassador said last week, “We don't need to speak to the Uzbeks, because we will control the water.” The Uzbek ambassador said, “Kyrgyzstan is very poor. If we pay them, they'll give us the water.”

In the meantime, and it is an exaggeration to call it this, perhaps a successor nation in the central Asian grouping might be Kazakhstan. For the last seven years, it has paid probably $100 million a year to pay, correctly, the transit tariff of gas or oil through Turkmenistan to Kyrgyzstan for the winter, in return for water.

Most recently there were proposals through the World Bank for a hydro dam development. Manitoba Hydro International was one of the bidders. But in Tajikistan what is being built instead is a huge dam, and that dam will divert, will flood, and climate change on top of it will cause mudflows, as we've seen in the past.

Transboundary water management will also.... We are used to water management for hydro, for food, for recreation. Water will become an issue in terms of food security. I don't like to put it on the table as a food security item, but within a year, it might become a food security item.

Mr. Raj Saini: That leads me to the second question, which I'm going to ask in terms of Canadian interests.

The Chinese Marshall Plan for the “one belt, one road” that's going to go through 60 countries—

Ms. Margaret Skok: It did go.

Mr. Raj Saini: Rather, it did go and that road will go through four of those countries.

If we are looking for a launching pad for Canadian interests or Canadian influence in the region, would you recommend Kazakhstan as a launching pad? If you look at the stability of those five countries and you look at the country whose economy is most advanced, and having recently travelled to Kazakhstan, would that be a place for Canadian business to have some interplay with that concept?

Ms. Margaret Skok: You have the one belt, one road initiative. While we lay sleeping, China did the infrastructure with the different banks involved. They have just done a shipment of non-essential goods from China through Kazakhstan, Russia, Europe, the channel, to England. The shipment shaved 22 days off of normal freight forwarding.

Is Kazakhstan a natural leader? With 4% unemployment, which is lower than ours, and 10% to 11% in the other countries—that's probably not true, since there are two that do not really report unemployment and I will leave you some stats—if it is pitched as a leader in the region to the rest of the central Asian nations, it could continue the competition.

There was a question I was asked by students in Kazakhstan last year. There is a C5 plus Europe, meaning the five central Asian countries plus a European arrangement. There's C5 plus Russia, plus the United States, plus China. What about a C5 plus Canada?

My answer was simple. Why not just a C5? Whenever do you sit down by yourselves and speak? They have several regional organizations. One, of course, is the Commonwealth of Independent States. You have the Eurasian Economic Union. You have the Shanghai co-operation agreement. You have the Collective Security Treaty Organization, of which either Russia or China or both are the chairs. When do they ever meet by themselves to speak?

Recognizing that Kazakhstan has economic power to lead I think it would be important, nonetheless, to collect them together, as we are going to try to do again in Ottawa in May, and have them speak to each other and look at our models.

Does that answer the question?

● (0950)

The Chair: Yes. It does. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Saini.

I'll go to Mr. Kmiec, please.

Mr. Tom Kmiec (Calgary Shepard, CPC): I want to go back to something Mr. Sidhu brought up and something you had said, Madam DeBardeleben, about the European Union and who we are supposed to be talking to. You and Mr. Sidhu had mentioned that Europe is very much divided over whether it wants to co-operate with Russia or whether it wants to be western.

I call myself eastern European. I came here from eastern Europe. My family fled here. However, when I talk to people like Marcin Bosacki, the former ambassador of Poland to Canada, he calls himself a central European, so that's moved over time. That's when I talk to these better educated, very much westernized Europeans. In general, they have an opinion on where their interests lie, yet when you talk to the average person my age or younger in what I call eastern Europe, they will say Russia's not so bad. The Soviet Union wasn't so bad.

Who are we supposed to be talking to so that we can determine the best interests of the European Union, and Europe in general? Are there any civil society organizations? We've talked about the European Union and the OSCE. What about civil society organizations that have cachet with populations in different countries that Canada could engage with, both to better understand European interests, whatever those are, and to understand civil society, considering the return of populist movements in western Europe? In eastern Europe, a lot of the very pro-Russian groups are socialists, in Moldova, in Bulgaria, in Poland, in Serbia, so who is it that we're supposed to be talking to?

I have a question that comes after that, once you've answered this question.

Prof. Joan DeBardeleben: That's a really large question.

Just on the terminology, yes, I would use the term “central Europe” to refer to Poland normally. I've picked up your committee's language here with “eastern Europe”, which I would usually use for Belarus, Ukraine, and possibly Russia, but I don't know. We can discuss that. However, yes, it depends on the issue, of course. If we're talking about who we talk to in terms of policy toward Russia, what has evolved is that, although this is temporary—or maybe not temporary—at this moment there's unity in Europe on the sanctions. It could break down.

We also know that the Normandy format, with the leading role of France and Germany in terms of the Minsk II accords, for example, is very important. In terms of high political issues relating to Russia and relating to the overall geopolitical situation in Europe, I think we have to speak to Federica Mogherini, who's the high representative for foreign policy of the EU. We have to speak to the German leaders, probably to the French, and probably to the Poles. Although the Poles were not included in the Normandy format, they certainly have a vital interest and are the largest of the new member states. They also border Russia and therefore represent a somewhat different view.

I would say those could be the key interlocutors there.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Maybe I can just interrupt you, then. When President Duda visited Canada, there was a luncheon where there were a few members of the Canada-Poland group in attendance. I remember being there when he was speaking in Polish, and he said he had come here basically to ensure that NATO would fulfill its military obligations and that the military equilibrium that he was looking for between the European Union, NATO, and Russia was very important. He flat out said he wanted combat troops. He didn't want these rotations necessarily. He wanted actual combat troops because he felt an existential threat to the Republic of Poland. That was widely shared, certainly by his staff as well, and others. Parliamentarians from Poland I've spoken to share the same type of concern regardless of the party to which they belong.

However, with a lot of this Russian aggression in Ukraine, and Georgia, these break-away republics that they support such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia, when you look at them and then look at NATO's response, and NATO's ability to respond, there are a lot of eastern Europeans, central Europeans, or whatever you want to call them, who say, “Well, the past 20 years have been great for an economic relationship for us with the west, but our future, especially when you look at the military equilibrium, no longer rests with the west because you can't count on them.”

In Canada, I think we can accuse ourselves also. We haven't been spending the 2% that we're supposed to be spending to ensure we have that military capability. Can you talk a bit about that?

● (0955)

Prof. Joan DeBardeleben: There are differences within the European Union and within NATO in regard to how hard a line one should take with Russia, how much it should be a military focus, and how much a diplomatic focus. I think there's a unity around the security guarantee. No one knows what would actually happen if there was an attack on one of these countries, but I suspect that NATO would stand up to an actual attack.

The larger risk, as I've said, is not a military attack in that region, and frankly, to focus on that is a bit misguided. The statement has to be strong that the guarantee stands because that's the best kind of deterrent, but in reality the larger problem is whether there's the possibility of internal destabilization. I don't think it's a very realistic likelihood in Poland, but I think in some of the Baltic states that would be the bigger problem.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: If I could just interrupt, the parliamentarians I've spoken to from the Baltic states and many in central Europe, and people just in civil society, journalists and professors from the region, would say they no longer trust that security guarantee—

Prof. Joan DeBardeleben: I understand that.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: —and it's not against a hard military response from Russia.

I think some communities have alluded to a soft military response, so a political party financed by Russia, which scores really well in an election, makes expectations saying, no, we want power-sharing with another party, a coalition government, where they then have significant influence over policy-making in a country within NATO.

The concern isn't so much that in a hard military scenario NATO wouldn't respond. It probably would, and it has in the past, but it would be more so about what happens if there's a soft....

Prof. Joan DeBardeleben: The soft kind of intrusion is very hard to respond to because you can't respond to it very easily militarily. That's exactly the problem, and that's why the tool of NATO, while it's an important one in terms of the security commitment, is not the only tool needed. That's why, ultimately, it depends on the integration of the population in the political structures of the country involved to build the best defence against that kind of intrusion, and that's something we can try to contribute to.

We can make as strong statements as possible on the hard security guarantee, and it's important because of the ambiguity that's been bred by some of the discourse in the American campaign. But on the other issue, it's hard to say how the Russian population in the Baltic states is responding to the situation. From what I've read, they identify as Estonians, as Latvians. They see their future there, but they also have a different understanding of Russia. They're less distrustful. They hear Russian media because it's in their own language. Of course, the leaders of those countries are aware of this, but this is why, I think, a continuing discussion about how better to respond to these challenges in integrating minority population groups is very important.

I don't know if we can contribute to it, but I think dialogue is very important in terms of sharing experience and trying to push that forward.

I don't know what else can be done about it, frankly, because you can't respond to that with an army. It just can't be done. I don't see how you can make a military response to that kind of a risk.

● (1000)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kmiec.

Colleagues, the bells have just started, so we have half an hour.

Mr. Levitt, do you want to wrap it up and ask a question so we'll be out of here in five minutes?

Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.): Sure.

The Chair: I just want to prep the witnesses to keep the answers fairly short because we're going to have to run off and do our duty at the House of Commons.

Mr. Levitt.

Mr. Michael Levitt: Absolutely.

Thank you for your testimony.

I have a comment. It's your reaction to my colleague MP McKay's portrayal of Russia as a kleptocracy. I want to add some scope to that because I think you pushed back on that a little. But I have to tell you that we had Boris Nemtsov's daughter, Zhanna Nemtsova, along with Vladimir Kara-Murza present to us, at the beginning of this committee about a year ago, about their plight and the challenges faced by other individuals who have pushed back against the Putin regime. Sergei Magnitsky is another example.

It's discomforting to see the individuals who sat before us: one whose father had been murdered, and another who had been poisoned and who recently ended up being poisoned again. It seems that pushing back and being in favour of democratic reform and being an opposing voice to the current regime in Russia comes with a lot of risk. Again, I don't want to belabour the point, but I think there's certainly a perspective there that comments on the regime and its current actions and those that seem to oppose it.

Prof. Joan DeBardeleben: There's no doubt that the system has moved in an authoritarian direction and that there's a heavy repression of forces that try to oppose the structure of power. That does not necessarily lead, though, to conclusions about how we deal with that country in a foreign policy sphere. We have to balance our capacity to actually influence that internal situation, which is extremely limited, with our own security interests which also lie in the direction of avoiding an escalation of conflict in a very unpredictable and precarious direction.

It's not a simple situation. I don't disagree with you.

Mr. Michael Levitt: Agreed.

Just quickly, because we probably have about a minute and a half left, this is on human rights, particularly in central Asia. In Canada, we consider ourselves a country that promotes and messages out and seeks to develop human rights around the world. There are challenges— impunity, corruption—but there are also opportunities. Can you give us a bit of your thoughts on how Canada can play a role?

What is the current situation? It varies by country in central Asia, but just speaking more broadly, how do you feel about this?

Ms. Margaret Skok: I want to again reiterate what my colleague said. Engagement is critical. Russia cannot be trusted. A quote from Lenin says that you must always probe with a bayonet. That tells us that we have to do our homework as well. It's not a bad line.

In terms of human rights and corruption, those are legacy issues. They go hand in hand. The countries that were their traditional partners continue to import and export that. These are autocracies from the beginning. As for Russia, in 2013 there was an *Economist* article on Putin that said the Kremlin is but a facade. He surrounds himself with billionaire cronies and all dissension is criminalized.

We're seeing a bit of the movement away from kratocracies in central Asia, in Uzbekistan and in Kurdistan, where there's a devolution of presidential power to government and parliament. Is that democracy? It is a beginning.

That's why our engagements on governance issues, as well as the economy, as well as jobs, and as well as export financing, are really extremely important. If we do not engage in these regions, Russia and China will move in to fill the vacuum in countries which they believe to be theirs.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk carved up Europe, the Eastern bloc, after World War I. As for the Yalta agreement, which everybody loves, Poland hates it because it carved up Poland again. The Baltic states, like central Asia, are not all the same; they're all very different. Lithuania has a completely different history. These are regions that Russia has a continued interest in—the empire strikes back.

The Chair: We'll have to leave it there because of the vote.

To both of our witnesses, thank you very much for your time. It's much appreciated.

Colleagues, the last hour will be cancelled, of course, so we'll see you on Thursday. Mr. Allison will be your chair.

Thank you. The meeting is adjourned.