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Chair: Mr. Sven Spengemann



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• (1605)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Sven Spengemann (Mississauga—Lakeshore, Lib.)): Dear colleagues, welcome to the fourth meeting of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[*English*]

Pursuant to the order of reference of October 22, 2020, the committee is undertaking a briefing on the situation in Belarus.

[*Translation*]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the order of the House adopted on September 23, 2020. Proceedings will be published on the House of Commons website.

For information purposes, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee.

[*English*]

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of “floor”, “English” or “French”.

[*Translation*]

Members attending in person must conduct themselves as they would normally if all committee members were meeting in person in a committee room and keep in mind that the Board of Internal Economy's guidelines for wearing masks, as well as health protocols.

[*English*]

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you're on video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. For those in the room, your microphone will be controlled as normal by the proceedings and verification officer. When you have 30 seconds remaining in your questioning time, I will signal you by holding up this yellow sheet of paper. When you're not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

[*Translation*]

I would now like to welcome our witnesses.

[*English*]

We have David Sproule, senior Arctic official and director general, Arctic, Eurasian and European affairs.

[*Translation*]

We also have Alison Grant, director of Eastern Europe and Eurasia.

[*English*]

Mr. Sproule, we will start by giving you the floor for seven minutes of opening remarks.

Please go ahead, sir.

Mr. David Sproule (Senior Arctic Official and Director General, Arctic, Eurasian and European Affairs, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will provide a short overview of the situation in Belarus, starting just before the August 2020 presidential elections and covering Canadian engagement in the current crisis. I will then be pleased to take your questions.

Canada's relations with Belarus before this have been quite modest, yet quite positive, following diplomatic re-engagement and the removal of Belarus from the area control list in 2016. That removal lifted all measures in place on Belarus since 2006 because of improvements in the conduct of the 2015 presidential elections, release of political prisoners and Belarus's facilitation of negotiations on Ukraine.

Prior to the presidential elections of August 9, large-scale opposition rallies had already begun to take place. Demonstrators protested election campaign restrictions that would prevent the holding of free and fair democratic elections. In the lead-up to the election, Canada engaged Belarus directly and multilaterally at the OSCE to register our concern with the deteriorating situation, and to urge the government to uphold its international human rights obligations.

Widespread electoral irregularities were immediately reported following the election. The opposition, non-government organizations and other governments, including those of Canada, the U.K. and the U.S., as well as the EU, announced that they would not accept the results and characterized the elections as fraudulent.

Despite the peaceful nature of the protests that erupted, security forces cracked down brutally, and arbitrarily arrested protestors in an attempt to stop peaceful assemblies. Reports emerged of torture and other forms of ill treatment of detainees, including sexual and gender-based violence. The UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus has indicated that, to date, at least 20,000 individuals have been detained, with some still remaining in detention. Journalists have also been targeted, detained, beaten or had their accreditation revoked.

Authorities have also stepped up detentions and prosecutions of prominent members of the opposition coordination council, which has a seven-member leadership with Svetlana Tikhanovskaya as head. To date, all but one member of the leadership are in exile or detained in Belarus.

Alexander Lukashenko continues to attack the opposition, accuse the west of interference and reject calls for a rerun of the presidential elections. Workers from state-run factories, private businesses and students have begun to strike after Lukashenko ignored Ms. Tikhanovskaya's ultimatum deadline of October 25 for him to resign. On October 29, Lukashenko reshuffled personnel in top security posts, including the minister of interior, and designated others as presidential aides in regions with high levels of protest and opposition activities.

Canada has been strongly engaged in a response to events in Belarus since the beginning of the crisis. Canada is a long-standing advocate for human rights, and we have sent a firm message to the Government of Belarus that its actions are unacceptable. Our response has been in close coordination with like-minded partners, which include the EU, the U.K. and the U.S. Together we have declared that Lukashenko lacks the legitimacy to lead Belarus, and combined our efforts to support the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people.

Canada has issued 10 statements to date, including through the Media Freedom Coalition's executive group, which is Canadian and U.K.-led, as well as participated in a Canada-led joint statement on Internet shutdowns in co-operation with 30 partner countries.

Canada continues to engage our partners in steps aimed at finding a peaceful resolution to the political impasse in Belarus. Minister Champagne has coordinated with his counterparts and had calls with Ms. Tikhanovskaya. He has also spoken with Belarusian foreign minister Makei. Canada continues to advocate for mediation through the OSCE, to be led by current incoming chairs, Albania and Sweden.

Also at the OSCE, Canada pressed to invoke the Moscow mechanism with 16 other states, which established a fact-finding mission on human rights allegations in Belarus. The resulting report and recommendations are now public.

Minister Champagne's recent visit to Lithuania on October 16 reinforced common support with the Baltic foreign ministers for the people of Belarus. Together, the ministers committed to working with international partners to ensure that those responsible for the violence and undermining of democracy in Belarus are held accountable. Minister Champagne also met with Ms. Tikhanovskaya in person during the visit to Lithuania.

On September 23, Canada announced \$600,000 in funding to support civil society in Belarus, with a focus on helping independent media and women. Our officials are in discussion with potential programming partners on how Canada's assistance can best support democratic governance and democratic actors.

Canada and the U.K., on September 29, were the first countries to sanction Alexander Lukashenko, following his holding of a secret inauguration for himself. Altogether, Canada has sanctioned 42 Belarusian officials under the Special Economic Measures Act for gross and systematic human rights violations. These actions have been taken in close coordination with the EU, the U.K. and the U.S.

● (1610)

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, you might be aware, but the phone lines are not working for the staff.

The Chair: Ms. Sahota, thanks very much for raising that. We'll pass that over to the clerk and IT team.

I'm not sure if there's a reason to suspend, or if we should simply continue and it will be fixed imminently.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: You could probably continue.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: It's just that ParIVu has a delay, so as soon as you can get that up and running, it would be great.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Sahota and Madam Clerk.

We go back to you, Mr. Sproule, please.

Mr. David Sproule: The imposition of sanctions demonstrates Canada's strong commitment to human rights and democracy in Belarus and to the dignity of its people. This coordinated action with our partners reinforces our assertion that violence and those acts which undermine democracy will not be tolerated by the international community. Belarus, in retaliation, has announced that it would impose sanctions against EU, U.K. and Canadian officials but has not to date revealed any details.

In conclusion, Canada will continue monitoring developments in Belarus and engaging constructively with its partners to find a peaceful resolution in the country. Canada stands in solidarity with the people of Belarus and will continue our diplomatic efforts to bring about positive change.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Sproule. It's good to have you back with us, and welcome.

Ms. Grant, welcome to you as well. My understanding is that you will make your points in response to members' questions. If you'd like to make a comment now, I'd be happy to give you the floor. Otherwise, at your discretion, just do it in response to the next round of questions.

Ms. Alison Grant (Director, Eastern Europe and Eurasia, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you. Yes, I will be able to take questions along with Mr. Sproule but I have no prepared statement.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Our first questioner is Mr. Chong. The floor is yours for six minutes.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your opening remarks.

My first question is about Ms. Tikhanovskaya. I understand that, as you mentioned in your remarks, and as was publicly reported, Foreign Affairs Minister Champagne met with her in Lithuania.

I want to know what the Government of Canada sees as her role going forward, and what status they are going to accord her.

Mr. David Sproule: Ms. Tikhanovskaya has been an active leader in terms of the civil society opposition to the government's holding of the elections in such a fraudulent way.

Her husband, as you may know, was detained before the elections, and she stood in his place. She works very closely with the coordination committee, a group of leaders from various sectors of society, to mount a concerted and coordinated opposition to the actions of the government surrounding the elections and the repression since the elections.

Hon. Michael Chong: Do you accord her any formal status in the current situation, or simply recognize her as a candidate in the previous election?

Mr. David Sproule: We recognize that she has been accepted by the Belarusian civil society and many leading members of the opposition for her leadership role. She has been very effective in terms of reaching out to the diaspora in various countries. She has been a leader on the ground, and she has undertaken liaison with like-minded country leaders whom we work with carefully.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

Mr. Sproule, you mentioned in your opening statement that the decision to re-engage diplomatically was producing positive results. Do you still hold that position in light of the events of the last two or three months?

• (1615)

Mr. David Sproule: During the 2015 elections, we saw a number of positive events that led to the lifting of the area control list sanctions. Indeed, there was a release of political prisoners. There was less repression in terms of the holding of elections. There was enhanced freedom of the press and reporters. In addition, Belarus

hosted the Minsk process vis-à-vis Ukraine. Those positive developments led us to that lifting.

However, you're quite right. Since that time, we have seen a regression, particularly in the lead-up to and the holding of these elections, which has forced Canada to reimpose sanctions pursuant to our legislation.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you for that answer.

When the government lifted sanctions in 2016, it mentioned in its statement that it did so in coordination with or following similar actions by the United States and our European allies. What actions did they take at the time that were commensurate to the lifting of sanctions?

Mr. David Sproule: They lifted some of their restrictions in terms of travel and in terms of designation of economic measures against particular individuals, not all in the case of the United States, where some were left on, but for the most part, our actions coincided very closely with those of like-minded partners.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

To your knowledge, did the United States lift sanctions back in 2016, too, or was it simply a lifting of travel restrictions?

Mr. David Sproule: They lifted some, but as I indicated, some of their sanctions were not lifted. For example, my understanding is that Mr. Lukashenko remained on their list, as did his son and some officials.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

What threats to Ms. Tikhanovskaya do you think there are with her being in Lithuania? What threats to her personal safety are there?

Mr. David Sproule: Indeed, she did flee to Lithuania as a result of feeling insecure and of the threats that were posed against her when she was in Belarus. There is concern about that, and I am aware that government officials there are assisting in terms of the providing of security. I know that care is being taken and her situation monitored carefully with that concern in mind.

Hon. Michael Chong: Can I ask you one last quick question? Why did the government use sanctions under the Special Economic Measures Act, rather than the Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act, when it announced sanctions in the last couple of months?

Mr. David Sproule: It did so because we saw that the criteria for using SEMA were met exactly. In other words, there were gross and systematic violations of human rights by the Lukashenko regime, together with his officials and those who implemented those repressive measures.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chong. That's perfectly timed.

Thank you, Mr. Sproule.

The next round goes to Dr. Fry, for six minutes.

Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much for that excellent briefing.

I just wanted to follow up. At a period in which we lifted sanctions, did we only have 16 other OSCE nations that were agreeing to lift sanctions or did we have more join after that?

Mr. David Sproule: When we lifted sanctions in 2016...?

Hon. Hedy Fry: Yes.

Mr. David Sproule: Those were the key countries that had imposed sanctions in 2006, for the most part.

Hon. Hedy Fry: As you well know, given even the Helsinki agreement, all of it is being violated.

Canada is actually a part of the OSCE. I wonder what the OSCE is planning to do with the fact that ODIHR—which, as you well know, monitors elections in the region—was not allowed to monitor elections. Way back last year, they had made 32 recommendations for allowing free and fair elections, against the torture of political prisoners and for allowing members of other parties to be able to run their candidacy without any discrimination or any fear. None of that has happened, and ODIHR was denied.

What are the steps that you think OSCE as a whole, which I know works on consensus and therefore can get zero done in any instance.... I'm sorry for being cynical here. Is there something that the OSCE as a body can do? Belarus is a member. Belarus has agreed to all of the agreements, yet is not obeying any of them.

What do you really think OSCE can do, other than economic sanctions, border restrictions and so on? There's rape. There's torture. There's sexual violence going on. There is complete intimidation.

What I wanted to point out, which I think the committee should know, is that the people heading up most of these protests in the streets, day after day, are mostly women, yet women are being intimidated by threats of rape and sexual violence. What can the OSCE as a body do?

Otherwise, the OSCE is really toothless in doing anything.

• (1620)

Mr. David Sproule: So far, the OSCE has done two things mainly. One is to offer mediation services through its co-chairs. The co-chair is currently Albania, and the next co-chair will be Sweden.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Yes.

Mr. David Sproule: Unfortunately—and maybe predictably—the Lukashenko regime has rejected that offer. However, they have also appointed a rapporteur to undertake a study of the situation there. He has not been able to travel to Belarus, but he has produced a report—yesterday—with many recommendations insofar as what should be done.

Among those, there are several that Canada has already adopted, for example, not to recognize the election, to call it fraudulent and to call for new elections. He has also suggested other measures that member states of the OSCE should undertake, and we are currently studying those.

Hon. Hedy Fry: One of the measures that was suggested was also to release political prisoners and to stop the intimidation and arrest of journalists. What, if anything, has Lukashenko done to respond to both of those, which are very clear questions and decisions

that are being put by OSCE? What has Lukashenko said he would do?

What do you do to a country that just says no? Can you kick it out of the OSCE? I don't know.

Mr. David Sproule: The OSCE does not have enforcement mechanisms, per se. It relies on the actions of its member states, and member states do the sorts of things that Canada has been doing, such as imposing sanctions and economic pressures, making public announcements, working in conjunction with others to bring attention to the situation and reminding Belarus of its international human rights obligations.

Hon. Hedy Fry: I was just going to get to the human rights violations that are going on right now in Belarus. Are there any OSCE nations currently, at this point, that are not joining in the sanctions and the recommendations that have been made by OSCE and ODIHR? What are the countries, other than Russia, that are supporting Belarus and are not joining in the sanctions?

Mr. David Sproule: There are a number of countries that have not joined in the sanctions. The main countries and institutions that have are the EU, the United States, the U.K., Norway and one more. The others have not gotten there yet.

We are hopeful that they will follow the lead that Canada and others have taken, and follow in our footsteps in terms of developing those sanctions. We believe they're effective. They send a strong political message, and they have a real impact on the individuals who have undertaken these violations.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Fry and Mr. Sproule.

Before we give the floor to Mr. Bergeron, I want to canvass your views, colleagues. We are advised that we're still having trouble connecting our staff colleagues to the live feed of this committee proceeding. I'm in your hands with respect to the need to suspend. I'm told that this is not something that's quickly fixed.

Let's have a quick round of thoughts. Should we continue, in light of the time we've lost because of the vote, or is there a strong feeling that we would want our staff to be accessible to us in real time?

• (1625)

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I would say that it's been suggested in the past that we just allow our staff to sign into the Zoom call. It's not an issue for me, because I'm in the room.

I don't think we should suspend, but can we not simply give staff the opportunity, at least on a temporary basis, to sign into the Zoom call itself?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

We will put that question to our IT team and the clerk.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Erica Pereira): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's not common practice right now, and we are working on solutions to make staff's joining the meetings more secure.

Mr. Kerry Diotte (Edmonton Griesbach, CPC): I'll just mention that we had major issues with our first meeting, so we really should have these things straightened out.

I'm okay without staff today, but I hope it's fixed for our next meeting.

The Chair: Does anybody else want to weigh in on this issue quickly?

Hon. Hedy Fry: I just want to say that it seems strange to me that staff can get in on in camera meetings but can't get in on public meetings. Surely the security for in camera meetings should be more stringent than that for public meetings.

I think this question is important. I understand that negotiations are going on. Perhaps all of us could go back to our respective whips and see what we can do to rectify this, so that staff can come in on public as well as in camera meetings properly.

We could do this, if we wish to.

Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): I would disagree. I hope we can just continue. If the delay were horrendous, that would be a problem.

For this particular meeting, I think we should continue and try to plod our way through it.

I'm always wary about giving an opinion on anything technical, because I'm not sure of the facts. I would say that we know the House is working in good faith on this. If we give them a bit of the benefit of the doubt, we should just keep plodding on today. Hopefully it will be rectified in the future.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Colleagues, we seem to have a consensus. With that, we will continue.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bergeron, you have six minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Montarville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank you for joining us once again this week. I hope we'll manage to go deeper than we did last time.

One of the things that mystifies everyone a bit is Russia's motives in this conflict. We know that there's no chemistry between Mr. Lukashenko and Mr. Putin. During the first moments, the first days of the popular uprising in Belarus, we saw that Russia hesitated between taking the side of Mr. Lukashenko or opposing him.

Mr. Lukashenko went to Moscow. There was an exchange between the two men and, at the end of the discussion, Russia, it seems, took Belarus's side.

In your opinion, strategically or tactically, what led Russia to choose to support Mr. Lukashenko rather than be part of a process like the one that most OSCE countries seem to want to follow on this issue?

[*English*]

Mr. David Sproule: I believe that Russia is very anxious most of all for security on its border. It has long-standing cultural, economic and historical ties with Belarus and is anxious to keep it within its sphere of interest. With respect to the role that Russia plays in this situation, we take a lot of guidance from civil society and opposition leaders. As Ms. Tikhonovskaya indicated, it is her firm hope that Russia will play a positive role in promoting dialogue. She even offered for Russia to help in offering assistance.

We, Canada, are very keen that Russia play a role. We disagree with Russia that Lukashenko should continue to be in power. He has lost his legitimacy. The holding of the elections and the repression after the elections have excluded him from any right to continue in power. We have a strongly different view from that of Russia's with regard to his continuing to be in power, along with those in his regime.

● (1630)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I think Ms. Tikhonovskaya is right to think that any resolution of this conflict cannot be achieved without Russia's agreement and participation.

That said, if it's true that Russia has security concerns at its borders and has long-standing ties with Belarus, the question is why did Russia choose to support Mr. Lukashenko rather than Ms. Tikhonovskaya, who is very willing to work with Russia? Why did Russia go so far as to issue an arrest warrant for Ms. Tikhonovskaya?

How can Russia's attitude, which is difficult to understand, to say the least, be explained when the country could very well have followed in the footsteps of the entire international community and demanded that Mr. Lukashenko leave office and that Ms. Tikhonovskaya be allowed to take power?

[*English*]

Mr. David Sproule: It is interesting. Indeed, Ms. Tikhonovskaya has indicated that the current problems are not European-Russia problems; they're domestic problems that have to be resolved domestically amongst the Belarusian people.

In terms of Russia's motives, it's always difficult to ascertain what is motivating Mr. Putin and the Russian government. Overall, they would like to judge how best they can maintain the influence they do, and we as a country would like to see Russia exert their efforts in a positive way to bring about a resolution that is satisfactory to the Belarusian people, not to Mr. Lukashenko.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: In that regard, what kind of contacts do you have with Russia, and what responses are you getting from Russia in terms of the pressure you're putting on Russia to bring Ms. Tikhonovskaya to power in Minsk, instead of keeping Mr. Lukashenko there?

[English]

The Chair: Could we have a brief answer, please, Mr. Sproule?

Mr. David Sproule: To date, we have coordinated closely with our like-minded partners insofar as this crisis is concerned, and we will have to consider how to engage with Russia. We will look at that, depending on the circumstances as they evolve, and make a decision about the best way forward, keeping in mind, over and above all, that we're here to support the aspirations of the Belarusian people, and certainly not the aspirations of Russia vis-à-vis their relations and their ongoing influence in Belarus.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sproule.

Our final set of questions in this first round go to Mr. Harris, for six minutes.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Sproule, this is a most intriguing situation. Did the Canadian government decide that the elections in Belarus were fraudulent prior to the elections or after election day?

Was there something that happened on the day that caused the decision to be made, or was it the activities prior to that? Was it the outcome of the vote that gave rise to the notion that it must have been fraudulent? No explanation has really been given about that.

• (1635)

Mr. David Sproule: There were strong indications and those raised grave concerns for Canada and our like-minded partners about whether or not those elections could be free and fair. Indeed, we didn't have observers from the OSCE who were able to be part of that, which would give some reassurance.

There were the reports that we received in terms of the behaviour of the government officials and their permission to allow people to vote freely and fairly without any sense of pressure, the outcome, which was completely out of sync with everyone's estimations of the support that was enjoyed by opposition party leaders, and then, of course, there was the immediate repression and clamp-down on media reporting. All those together made it so there could be no other conclusion than that this was a fraudulent election process.

Mr. Jack Harris: Obviously, the repression afterwards was clearly indicative of a repressive state. There's no question that it was outrageous and to be condemned. It seems curious that, prior to that, there wasn't any public condemnation of the behaviour of the Belarusian officials.

What did Canada make of the fact that in July, there were 33 Russian mercenaries arrested by the Belarusian government authorities, accusing Russia, presumably, of trying to destabilize the election? What did you make of that? What do you make of that?

Mr. David Sproule: Mr. Lukashenko must have been in a very difficult position, after being so critical during this disruption between Russia and his government insofar as that allegation was concerned, when, upon the election being held, he had to reach out to Mr. Putin for support to maintain his power.

Mr. Jack Harris: The attitude toward Russia seems to be odd, given the fact that in 1999 there was an agreement between Russia and Belarus to undertake the state union, which was recognized as a soft annexation of Belarus by Russia. If followed through, it would amount to the same common currency, parliament, defence and foreign policies, according to the briefing note we received. That seems to me to be part of Russia's plan.

What confidence does anyone have that Russia has either changed that plan or no longer wishes to have the kind of influence that would imply over Belarus, regardless of who's in power?

Mr. David Sproule: Since 1999 Mr. Lukashenko has exerted an effort to distance himself from that kind of control, where he finds it possible. As far as Russia's motives are concerned about Belarus, they're very difficult for us to judge, except that Putin's actions since the election have indicated that he's quite determined to maintain a very close relationship regardless of who's in power in Belarus.

Mr. Jack Harris: That would be either him or Tikhonovskaya. Would he be equally interested in a close relationship with her, if she were the leader?

Mr. David Sproule: It's doubtful, given his support for Lukashenko and her opposition to Mr. Lukashenko. So far, he has sided with the Lukashenko regime.

Mr. Jack Harris: Why would Mr. Putin or Russia, in general, be able to help in ensuring that the civil society in Belarus was going to have some sort of control over the future?

Mr. David Sproule: It is quite possible that the opposition and civil society will seem to be overcoming in their opposition to Lukashenko and the repression, and they may be the side that prevails. Canada, for its part, would like to see everything set right democratically and for free and fair elections to be held. If that trend starts to continue, it may well be that Russia has to reconsider the position it's taken in continuing to support Mr. Lukashenko.

• (1640)

Mr. Jack Harris: It sounds like wishful thinking to me.

I have one last question concerning the state of play.

Are the sanctions that have been imposed actually effective, or are they symbolic? Do these individuals actually have any economic relationship with Canada or any stakes in the results of those sanctions?

Mr. David Sproule: We expect that some do, but what is really important is that these sanctions be imposed in solidarity with like-minded countries. After all, if you look at the countries that have imposed sanctions—the U.K., the United States, the EU and its member countries—that suggests, of course, a large area with countries that people like to travel to, invest in and do business with. It will have a personal impact on those people.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Harris and Mr. Sproule.

We'll now go on to our second round of questions.

I just want to remind colleagues and witnesses that we have a couple of two and a half minute slots in that round, so be mindful of the time.

Our first round of questions is for five minutes and goes to Mr. Genuis.

The floor is yours.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Sproule, my colleague, Mr. Chong, asked you about the use of the Special Economic Measures Act as opposed to the Magnitsky act, and you said that the criteria were clearly met for the Special Economic Measures Act.

I just want to probe that a little bit. Is the implication that the criteria were not met for the Magnitsky sanctions? Are the criteria different for those different sanction vehicles? What are the practical consequences of choosing one sanctions vehicle over the other?

Mr. David Sproule: Perhaps for this question I would defer to my colleague, Ms. Grant, who is more active on these issues and could offer a better answer than I could.

Ms. Alison Grant: Sure. Thank you.

In this case, sanctions under SEMA are imposed in relation to the actions of a foreign state. This is appropriate here because it's the actions of a foreign state that we've seen in terms of the human rights violations committed by the Belarusian state against its people, whereas Magnitsky is based more on the individual. In this case, SEMA has been completely appropriate. The trigger that's provided in SEMA is where we find gross and systematic human rights violations to have occurred and to have been committed by a foreign state—in this case, by the Belarusian administration. I think that speaks to why we used the SEMA mechanism.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

If I understand correctly, though, because SEMA is not a sanction against individuals, it would still allow individuals who are in senior roles within the Belarusian state to travel, to move their money and to own assets in other countries.

Ms. Alison Grant: Yes.

Sorry, I need to correct myself. The sanctions enacted under SEMA are, in this case, targeted against individuals. We have 42 individuals to whom sanctions will be applied under the SEMA for Belarus. The consequences for those individuals are that they are inadmissible to Canada, that Canadians cannot have dealings with those individuals and also that their assets, if they have assets in Canada, will be frozen. Those are consequences against a set of individuals,

but the reason the trigger was reached in SEMA was the human rights violations that we judge to have been actions of a foreign state—in this context, the state of Belarus and the administration of Belarus. That is what distinguishes SEMA.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: If I understood you correctly, the trigger is different but the effects on the individuals are the same. There would be no need, I suppose, to impose Magnitsky sanctions as well because the effects on the individuals are the same. Is that right?

Ms. Alison Grant: That's my assessment, yes. I need to qualify that I'm not a sanctions expert, but that is my assessment.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I have a different question.

I found it interesting that the Government of China was quick out of the gate to endorse the existing president. This seems to be an interesting case of daylight between the Russian position and the Chinese government position. I wonder if either of you have thoughts about what the strategic agenda of China is. Is it distinct from Russia's? What are its goals in Belarus? What does this suggest about the relationship between Chinese and Russian foreign policy?

• (1645)

Mr. David Sproule: They did take slightly different approaches. It's not uncommon for China to support authoritarian regimes, and therefore they have done so, to a great extent, in this case. I think that Russia's position has to be a little more nuanced. They are on the border with the country, and it was part of their sphere of influence—in fact, part of the Soviet Empire—and their ties are more essential, closer—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Can I just ask a quick follow-up question in the time I have left?

What does it mean to Russia that China has taken this position in their immediate backyard?

Mr. David Sproule: I don't know what it means for Russia. I think overall it indicates that China sees itself as a world power and it has interests and will play a part, as appropriate, everywhere internationally, not just in their region.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Sproule, again, that was perfectly timed.

The next round, again, is five minutes, and goes to Mr. Fonseca.

The floor is yours.

Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Sproule, following up on Russia, I've read some reports that there's a semi-permanent Russian military presence in Belarus. Are you aware of that?

Mr. David Sproule: Again, I'm going to defer this question to Ms. Grant.

Ms. Alison Grant: No, I don't have details on any Russian semi-permanent military presence. I know that a point of contention between Russia and Belarus over the years has been the establishment of a military base in Belarus, and you've seen Alexander Lukashenko publicly make comments about it that weren't welcomed by Russia. In early September we saw a gathering of the Russian national guard and law enforcement near the Russian-Belarusian border. It was called back after the meeting between President Putin and Lukashenko on September 14, where those were withdrawn. They weren't in Belarus proper, though. That's the information I have.

Mr. Peter Fonseca: Just to follow up on that, what are the risks that Russia would or could intervene directly in Belarus?

Ms. Alison Grant: I would say that it's hard to gauge the risks of something like a Russian intervention. We obviously do not want Russia interfering in Belarus's internal affairs. As Mr. Sproule said, Russia is very concerned about stability on its borders. We've seen that before with other states too. It will be tracking political stability. They, to date, have publicly recognized Belarusian sovereignty and have not made any declarations that imply that they will be intervening, so it is something to monitor and to watch. It's hard, again, to gauge the risk. From the Russian point of view, they look at stability on their borders, and a massive deterioration of stability would be a cause—

Mr. Peter Fonseca: Thank you.

We've seen many vulnerable citizens put themselves out there in these protests. We've seen women. We've seen people with disabilities, factory workers and those from academia. It's quite a swath of the general public that is out there in these protests. There are hundreds of thousands of people. They continue to grow. Another group that I want to bring to your attention is athletes—Olympians, world champions, number one tennis players in the world, etc.—who are protesting.

In terms of our foreign policy, I've been asked by the Belarusian Canadian Alliance and Mr. Mitt Korot whether there would there be an opportunity for Canada to look at providing a refugee status, permanent resident status, so these individuals who are being persecuted, if they thought of coming to Canada, would be able to be sponsored to come here.

● (1650)

Mr. David Sproule: This is a question that would have to be determined in each individual case, as to whether or not the individual in question meets the criteria for status as a refugee. It's very difficult to speak in very general terms. It is possible to talk about the difficult situation that the Belarusian people find themselves in within their country, but whether any individual—be they athletes or otherwise—would meet the criteria would have to be determined.

Mr. Peter Fonseca: Thank you very much.

Again, on Russia, to what degree does Belarus depend on Russia economically and military-wise? Do they have support from anybody else? We heard China, but besides China, who has gotten behind Belarus?

Mr. David Sproule: Since the crisis...?

Mr. Peter Fonseca: Since the crisis.

Mr. David Sproule: There have been many countries that have not been as supportive and as actively engaged in terms of pushing back against the regime as has Canada and like-minded others. In terms of active support, there hasn't been very much. It's difficult to see why governments would want to back what many think will be ultimately a losing proposition by Mr. Lukashenko as he continues his repression of his own people.

Mr. Peter Fonseca: Play this out. As these protests continue to grow, where do you see this conflict ending?

The Chair: Give very brief answer, Mr. Sproule, please.

Mr. David Sproule: I think it's indicative that it's not likely to end as Mr. Lukashenko would like and that repression has not so far succeeded. There will have to be some sort of compromise on his part, and we would advocate fresh new elections and a new start with a regime that's respectful of human rights.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Fonseca and Mr. Sproule.

[*Translation*]

The next series of questions will be asked by Mr. Bergeron.

You have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll ask my questions all at once.

Has the Canadian government coordinated with other western countries on sanctions against the Belarusian leadership?

There appears to be credible evidence that peaceful demonstrators have been tortured. It appears that, last week, the Canadian government had no evidence of the presence of Syrian mercenaries in Nagorno-Karabakh.

This time, does the Canadian government have any evidence that torture is actually being practised by the Belarusian government?

[*English*]

Mr. David Sproule: I'll try to answer your questions in order. To answer your first question with regard to coordination of sanctions, yes, we have coordinated very closely with sanctions. You will know that the first set of sanctions that Canada imposed was done in coordination with and on the same day as the United Kingdom, and soon thereafter, the EU followed.

The second set of sanctions was coordinated very closely with others, and they were very close or even on the same day as the European Union imposed their sanctions. It's fair to say that we do coordinate very closely, because that is how they're most effective when we impose them.

We have quite credible reports of repression such as abuse of a detainee and sexual violence against those who are incarcerated. The human rights abuses from quite credible sources are quite alarming, and that has led to many of the measures that Canada has taken under SEMA with regard to individuals because of these systematic and gross violations.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Bergeron, you have 30 seconds left to ask a short question and get a short answer.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: It would be an insult to our witness to ask him to answer a question in such a short period of time.

I simply want to take this opportunity to thank him again.

Thank you.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bergeron.

[*English*]

Mr. Sproule, thank you very much.

Our next round is two and a half minutes. It goes to Mr. Harris.

Mr. Jack Harris: I didn't hear you, but I think you were referring to me, Chair. Your voice wasn't coming through. Thank you, though.

Mr. Sproule, it was reported that Canada has given \$600,000 in funding to support civil society in Belarus. Could you tell me how usual or how unusual such a move is? Are there further plans to assist civil society, shall we say, in Belarus in order to alleviate the situation and perhaps provide for better communication?

Mr. David Sproule: Ms. Grant has been actively involved in our efforts in this regard, so I'll ask her if she can respond.

Ms. Alison Grant: Thank you.

Yes, we are quite actively involved, especially right at this moment, in determining our programming in support of Belarusian civil society. We did announce the \$600,000 in funding to civil society with the focus on independent media and women's leadership. We are right at the stage of developing projects to correspond to that number.

We're also working very quickly to assess additional programming opportunities in the civil society and democracy sphere, looking at governance and other such issues. I think it is an appropriate and usual response in this sort of situation where we are first and foremost trying to support the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you.

Further on the activities, particularly on the human rights violations and allegations of torture, is the UN involved in any way—particularly the human rights observers? Is there any approach for

them to get involved in this and further identify the potential for a response to that?

Mr. Sproule, you're more involved in that, I think.

Mr. David Sproule: Yes. There has already been debate on this situation as far as the UN is concerned. I believe there have been statements by the Secretary-General about the situation. You will also know that there has recently been consideration of Belarus's human rights record under the UCP at the human rights committee, in which Canada was an active participant.

The United Nations has been quite active on this issue. We fully expect that if the situation continues as it is, it will continue to be very active.

Mr. Jack Harris: What kind of action can we anticipate?

The Chair: You have time for a very brief response please, Mr. Sproule.

Mr. David Sproule: It will be handicapped by the fact that any Security Council action will be undermined somewhat by the role that Russia may play in terms of its efforts to block that sort of action. There are a whole host of mechanisms and instruments that the United Nations can use outside of Security Council resolutions.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

The next round is a five-minute round and it goes to Mr. Morantz.

Mr. Marty Morantz (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia—Headingley, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Sproule, I want to talk to you about the press release from May of 2016 to lift sanctions on Belarus. At the time, they were taken off the area control list. You've gone through the reasons for that. Was this at the request of the Belarusian government?

Mr. David Sproule: I am sure that the Belarusian government would have wanted the lifting of that. It is the case that we engage with the Belarusian government and discuss the issues about why this is there. It is the case that we explain to them the importance of doing certain measures to remove themselves from such a list.

Mr. Marty Morantz: After they were removed from the list, the press release talks about the resumption of normally issued export permits of goods and technology. Were any goods and technology exported to Belarus between the time of the lifting of the country from the ACL and now?

Mr. David Sproule: If you're referring to group two items from the export control list, in our review—and I will have to get back to you about how far back we went—we do not see any permits that have been applied for or given.

• (1700)

Mr. Marty Morantz: It just seems interesting to me that they would want to be taken off that list to be eligible for such exports and then didn't receive any.

If you could check and let us know if there were any, I would be curious as to what was exported after they were taken off the list.

Mr. David Sproule: Are you interested in what was exported from Canada generally, or insofar as arms-related exports?

Mr. Marty Morantz: I mean arms-related exports as a result of Belarus being taken off the area control list.

Mr. David Sproule: Right now I am aware that there are no pending export permits, nor have any been issued to Belarus from that list.

Mr. Marty Morantz: Since 2016...?

Mr. David Sproule: We will go back further and double-check for you to be sure.

Mr. Marty Morantz: Okay. It would be good information to have. Will you return that to the clerk of the committee?

Mr. David Sproule: Yes.

Mr. Marty Morantz: Great.

The press release says, "Going forward, Canada will continue to monitor the evolving situation in Belarus and will engage with the Government of Belarus in order to advance human rights, democratic standards and norms, and respect for the rights of civil society." Just out of curiosity, given it was in the release, what specific engagement did the Government of Canada do with Belarus to further those specific goals?

Mr. David Sproule: If I may go back, you may remember our discussion at the last hearing. The information we're able to give you going back to 2016, if there were any, would not be specific for privacy reasons, but it would be a general statistic, which I think you will probably be interested in.

Insofar as engagement is concerned, we re-engaged and had discussions. Our department had discussions with their department as far as that's concerned. Those had not been undertaken for some time before that. There was more active work with civil society, and there was increased engagement as far as our embassy in Warsaw was concerned, which has responsibility for Belarus.

Mr. Marty Morantz: Just out of curiosity, with respect to the SEMA sanctions, why were they not put back on the area control list as part of the sanctions? You used the sanctions under SEMA, but why not put them back on the area control list, given what's happened?

Mr. David Sproule: In these circumstances one of the overriding considerations was that we needed to act quickly and send a very strong message. SEMA was a very excellent way to do it, because, as I said, they met the criteria and we were particularly able to put that together quite quickly.

Mr. Marty Morantz: Has there been consideration?

Mr. David Sproule: As far as the area control list is concerned, it always is a fine line to put that in because of the broad nature of those sanctions. To make sure the sanctions you do are aimed particularly at the violators and do not hurt or harm the general population, those have to be done with some care and timing, walking that fine line.

Mr. Marty Morantz: Is it being examined, though?

Mr. David Sproule: We consider all of our options, all of the tools we have in our kit.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Morantz. Thank you, Mr. Sproule.

Our final series of questions goes to Ms. Dabrusin for five minutes, please.

Go ahead. The floor is yours.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin (Toronto—Danforth, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I wanted to pick up a bit on Mr. Harris's question. He was talking about the UN. One of his questions wasn't just about the actions of the UN, but about UN observers. Have there been UN observers in Belarus?

Mr. David Sproule: I'm not sure whether there have been UN observers. I know in the past there have been OSCE observers. Maybe I could defer to Ms. Grant again in case she has better information.

Ms. Alison Grant: There is a UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, which monitors the human rights situation from a UN perspective, but no, I'm not aware of UN human rights observers on the ground.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: Maybe I misheard because I thought there had been reference earlier when Mr. Sproule was talking to an OSCE rapporteur who had prepared a report, but could not travel to Belarus. Is that correct?

Mr. David Sproule: That's right.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: Why were they unable to travel to Belarus?

• (1705)

Mr. David Sproule: The Belarus government did not allow them entry into the country.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: On that same thing, you mentioned that the OSCE didn't have observers in Belarus for the election. Why was that?

Mr. David Sproule: They were not permitted entry into the country to observe the elections is my understanding.

Ms. Alison Grant: I could add just one clarification. The reason was that they did not issue an invitation to the OSCE in a timely fashion, by the deadline that the OSCE's ODIHR arm needed to organize a proper electoral mission. At the last minute there was a move from Belarus, but it was far too late for the OSCE to be able to mount a credible mission.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: So far, I'm not hearing about many people on the ground being able to help monitor.

What are the international resources on the ground who are able to monitor what's happening right now in Belarus?

Mr. David Sproule: We're relying on civil society contacts, like-minded countries with diplomatic missions there, contacts who are in the media, think tanks, universities. Those are the people who we are receiving information from.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: Okay.

That goes a bit to the heart of why I'm asking these questions because throughout the time you've been talking and what we've been hearing, we've been hearing about human rights violations and we've been hearing about political prisoners. Particularly, when I looked at the travel advisory for Belarus, it referred specifically to journalists being targets.

Asking that question, how are we ensuring that these people who are providing us with this monitoring advice—these members of civil society, these journalists, these professors...? What are we doing to ensure their security?

Mr. David Sproule: First and foremost, we're ensuring the confidentiality of the information we receive. We do not want to inadvertently expose them to risks to their person or their families, so we're very careful.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: I didn't catch that last bit because your sound is a little low, sir.

Mr. David Sproule: On our interaction with people who advise us on the situation as it is, if they are under risk for assisting and giving us information, we have to be very careful with its use and its dissemination, particularly its source.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: I have very little time, so I just want to ask about asylum claims.

What are we doing to support asylum seekers? Are they making it to Canada? I'm not asking you as to whether they qualify for refugee status or not. What I am asking is this: What are we doing to ensure that asylum seekers from Belarus can make it to safety, and are they getting to Canada?

Mr. David Sproule: Ms. Grant, has there been an outflow of people seeking refuge?

Ms. Alison Grant: No, that's not something.... I am not aware of an outflow.

We've had good discussions with the Belarusian Canadian Alliance and the diaspora here in Canada, fruitful conversations. I have been in touch.... They are a bit dated conversations, so this wasn't a topic then; however, it is something that does need to be reviewed.

I note that in the OSCE's report out today there was a reference to asylum, so it's certainly something that Canada, with like-minded partners, will be looking at. Of course, it is a lead for IRCC, but we'll be in touch and looking at this.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Ms. Grant.

Madam Dabrusin, thank you for these questions.

That completes our full second round of questions.

I propose that, given the fact that we have some committee business ahead of us, we thank our witnesses for being with us today and for their service, their expertise and their testimony, and that we reconvene shortly in camera to go through the rest of today's work plan.

Mr. Sproule, Ms. Grant, thank you so much for being with us and for your testimony this afternoon.

Mr. David Sproule: You're welcome.

The Chair: We will be suspended for a few minutes until we're back in camera.

Thank you, Madam Clerk.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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