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Chair: Mr. Sven Spengemann





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• (1535)

[Translation]

**The Chair (Mr. Sven Spengemann (Mississauga—Lakeshore, Lib.)):** Colleagues, welcome to the 33rd meeting of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[English]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on Tuesday, March 23, we will now proceed to a briefing on the current situation of Alexei Navalny.

With us today is Mr. Navalny's chief of staff, Mr. Leonid Volkov.

Mr. Volkov, thank you for being with us today. You will have the opportunity to deliver a brief opening statement of five to seven minutes to brief the committee on the ongoing situation of Mr. Navalny.

After that, we will proceed to questions from the members of Parliament. As always, I would encourage all participants to mute their microphones when they're not speaking. When you have 30 seconds left in your questioning time or your testimony time, I will signal you with this yellow piece of paper.

Interpretation services are available through the globe icon on the bottom of your screens as always.

Mr. Volkov, I now invite you to take the floor.

**Mr. Leonid Volkov (Chief of Staff for Alexei Navalny, As an Individual):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and members of the committee for hosting me. It's a great honour.

I will try to keep my open remarks very short because the most interesting and important part is always the Q and A, of course.

The basic facts are that Mr. Navalny has now been imprisoned for 180 days. He is now recovering from his hunger strike of the last 24 days, which he was on in order to get a medical examination by civil doctors he could trust after he developed numbness in his legs and in his arm during his unlawful imprisonment.

Despite the multiple requests from the...and the verdict of the European Court of Human Rights for his immediate release—the European Court of Human Rights being an integral part of the Russian legal system—the Russian government has refused to release him. So he is staying in prison.

Our abilities to be in touch with him are very limited. He is allowed to have visits by his lawyers Monday to Friday on working days. No letters are allowed, but his lawyers are still able to at least

communicate with him verbally, so we are able to stay in touch with him through his lawyers.

In the meanwhile, the Kremlin has developed a new campaign, a crackdown, against Navalny's political organization. We don't have a formal party. We have filed papers to register a party nine times over the last eight years. All of these attempts to register a party have been rejected, so we have never been allowed to participate in an election as a political entity.

Still, we have a vibrant and strong political organization. We used to have 40 regional offices in all major Russian cities. Our candidates have managed to participate in local elections as independents—not being endorsed by any party—and have managed to win local elections many times.

Our movement runs completely on crowdfunding, so we are very able to crowdfund our anti-corruption investigations and our original offices and our electoral campaigns.

Inside Russia, we have several million supporters who are engaged while following our investigations on social media, donating to us and participating as campaign volunteers in our campaigns.

Now the prosecutor of Moscow has recently made a request to designate our political movement as extremist, which might sound fun for a very peaceful movement that only tries to get to participate in elections, but it's not that fun because it means that after the court decides that we are an extremist movement—this will happen on May 17, one week from now—the leaders of the movement could face up to 10 years in prison and donors, even if they send 100 rubles, like a \$2 donation, up to eight years in prison, and the members up to six years in prison. So we have had to formally dissolve the movement, and as of now it formally no longer exists.

Having said that, we have stayed quite optimistic. We consider all of these moves by the Kremlin as their electoral campaign, their preparation for the upcoming election. Russia will elect the State Duma of the national parliament in four months, in mid-September. This will be a very important parliament. It will be sitting during the transition in 2024 when Mr. Putin will have to either get re-elected or to appoint someone else. Still, he will face some significant challenges to his upcoming transition. It is very important for him that this Duma be very clean, very sterile.

While the approval ratings of his party, United Russia, are about 27%, the Kremlin apparently admits that it's not possible to achieve the electoral results they wish, the constitutional majority in the Duma, without applying extraordinary measures. That's why not only is Alexei Navalny in prison, but also why very many important opposition figures are either under house arrest or forced to leave the country. It's why the Kremlin is trying to force us to close our original offices to prevent any independent politician from campaigning.

Putin has learned this lesson in the past and knows very well that it's the best strategy to stuff ballots and to rig the election on the day of polling. It's smart to steal the election in advance—just not letting anyone participate, not letting anyone like independent, competitive candidates be on the ballot. That's exactly what the Kremlin is doing now.

Still, we have our strategy, which is called “smart voting” or tactical voting as in the U.K., for instance. We endorse the relatively strongest candidates in every district. We ask our supporters to vote tactically for those who have the best chances to defeat and unseat the incumbent United Russia candidates. We hope that we will be able to achieve a lot in the September elections, based on our experience in two previous regional elections where we managed to defeat many of the United Russia members.

This will contribute to more political turbulence and more competition in Russian internal politics and we hope this will help us to push things a little bit towards democratic change and transition.

The final goal of our political movement is democratic change and transition, and we believe that Russia is basically a European country by its history and its culture. It belongs to Europe. Being European to us means having working institutions, competitive elections, fair courts, independent media and so on, everything that Putin has destroyed and demolished in the last 20 years, and everything that citizens actually need to define how the country should develop and where it should go.

Now we are often asked what does it mean? You want Russia to become a European country, but what does it mean? Portugal and Denmark, Sweden, are so different. But they have the greatest common divisor, which is that they have working democratic institutions, which citizens may use to decide where the country will go, like Liberal to Conservative, left to right, a little bit here, a little bit there. These are very important things, and we have to realize that Russian citizens do not have any of these tools in their possession now, and the basic thing now, the basic strategy, is just to reinstate the basic political institutions to relaunch political competitions, which are now close to non-existent in Russia.

That's where we are now, where we are going. I'm very much waiting for your questions.

Thank you so much for your attention.

• (1540)

**The Chair:** Mr. Volkov, thank you very much.

Just on a technical note, the interpretation tells us that the sound is good in terms of quality, if you could just increase it a bit in your responses to questions. Maybe the way to do that is just to speak a

more directly into the mic rather than having it at an angle. I'll leave that for you to figure out, but if you could just bring the volume up a little, that would help us to interpret for our colleagues.

We will now go into round one of our questions, consisting of six-minute segments each. Leading us off will be Mr. Diotte.

The floor is yours.

**Mr. Kerry Diotte (Edmonton Griesbach, CPC):** Thank you, and thank you for being here, Mr. Volkov.

I guess the one question that's on everybody's mind off the top is how Mr. Navalny's health is. Is he getting proper medical attention?

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Should I collect several questions, or should I answer them one by one?

**The Chair:** You'll have a six-minute segment, Mr. Volkov, with Mr. Diotte. Then we'll go to another six-minute segment. I'll announce each segment. They can ask you as many questions as she or he would like in that segment.

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** I see.

Thank you very much, Mr. Diotte.

His health is now better. He is in the hospital. It's a prison hospital, so it's not a very nice place to be, but at least there is some medical supervision and medical attention. He is being given treatment.

That was such a strange form of a public political compromise. The main requirement of his hunger strike was to get the doctors of his choice—trusted doctors—to examine him. Putin couldn't agree to that because it would mean losing face, but the international pressure and domestic pressure were very strong, so they compromised.

He was examined by civil doctors in a civil hospital in Vladimir. They gave the results of the examination to Navalny's personal doctors. They checked. They agreed on some things and disagreed on something else. They agreed on the treatment, and now he is being given that treatment that was approved by his personal doctors—

• (1545)

**Mr. Kerry Diotte:** That's great news. That's good. Overall, he's doing quite well.

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Yes. It's much better than it was. He's recovering from a hunger strike. It takes time. The hunger strike lasted for 24 days. You need pretty much the same time for a safe recovery after that.

**Mr. Kerry Diotte:** That's good news.

You've touched on journalism. I was a journalist for 30 years, so the state of journalism always interests me.

Now, in our country, some independent media complain that they're not often allowed at high-level government news conferences, or that if they are, they won't be allowed to ask questions. What's the state of independent journalism in Russia? Is it under threat, and what can be done about it?

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** It's quite close to non-existent. The Kremlin has a very efficient propaganda and disinformation machine. The Kremlin has full control over television, media and newspapers, with the Internet being the only relatively free resource where different opinions may exist and co-exist.

The Kremlin is now actually launching a huge campaign against important independent Internet media. The most recent news is that they've designated Meduza, the largest independent news outlet, which is based in Latvia, in Riga, to be a "foreign agent", which is a very nasty designation, because it in fact prevents any advertisers from working with them. It influences the media in a very bad way financially. Also, of course, if they manage to kill Meduza, they will go after everyone else.

Meduza is now trying, for instance, to launch a crowdfunding campaign. Hopefully, they will be able to collect enough donations to keep going, to kind of reimburse them for the loss of advertising, but of course it's a very hard time for independent media. That's on the one hand, but on the other hand, we see a boom in investigative journalism in Russia, for instance. People are really trying to find independent information, so more and more people are turning away from the television because they realize now that it's all propaganda. People are actively looking for independent dissenting opinions online.

One last thing—very short—is that what's really important here are the positions that the major Internet platforms will take. Technically, the Russian government has passed a bunch of laws that make any sort of anti-Putin publication on the Internet illegal, of course, and they impose huge fines on Google, Facebook, Twitter and so on for not deleting this information. So far, Google, Facebook and Twitter are not caving on the this. At times they pay these fines, but they don't delete this information. If they manage to carry on, that would be okay. If they start to cave to these government requirements, this will have a devastating impact.

**Mr. Kerry Diotte:** Thank you.

Mr. Chair, do I still have a minute or so?

What actions do you think you would like to see the Canadian government take on the release of Mr. Navalny? We've had some sanctions, obviously. What else would be useful right now?

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** That's a tough question, because Putin is taking this very personally. Putin, apparently, really feels very personally offended by the fact that Mr. Navalny dared to survive the poisoning; dared to investigate his own poisoning; dared to return to Russia after being poisoned; and, of course, dared to launch this investigation about Putin's luxury palace on the northern seashore. This exposed all this way of thinking that, for Putin, really, money, gold-thread carpets are the most important things in the world. This exposition was very dangerous for Putin, actually. It also exposed that Putin really cares very much about money. Our short answer is to sanction his close friends, his oligarchs, the holders of his assets.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Diotte.

We will now go to Mr. Fonseca, again for six minutes, please. Go ahead.

**Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Mr. Volkov, for coming before our committee on foreign affairs.

Mr. Volkov, as soon as Mr. Navalny recovered from the poison attack he decided to return to Russia. I have to say, amongst all of us, we found this to be a very courageous decision. Can you tell the committee about the factors that influenced Mr. Navalny's decision to return to his home country, where he was persecuted by the regime?

• (1550)

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Thank you, Mr. Fonseca.

We never had such a discussion. Even when Alexei was still in a coma, for all of us—I mean for me, for his wife, for his close friends and colleagues—it was never a subject of concern. We all knew that once he recovered he would go back. He would never consider a continuation of his political career in exile.

During his 10 years of an active political career he has faced very many repressions and risks. He was attacked with a chemical acid in 2017, narrowly not losing an eye. He had to undergo many surgeries after he had liquid thrown in his eye. He was harassed by the government in many ways. He spent one year under house arrest. He spent a total of eight or nine months in jail, in detention, having been arrested for 15 or 30 days after, and then before a trial was even announced.

He has built a large political movement. He had the feeling that now, staying abroad, staying in exile would nullify all of this. It would denote that all the risks that he had taken already were for nothing.

We all understand. It's very clear for us in Russia that you can't be an efficient political leader if you stay away. Many have tried this, and no one's succeeded.

I'm not a political leader. I'm a political manager. I am running the political organization's day-by-day operations of our bureaucracy, of our original offices. We decided jointly with Alexei two years ago, when the threat of my imprisonment became too large, that I had to leave the country, basically, in order to ensure the smooth operations of the organization. For him it was impossible to call people to turn out for a rally if he was not participating.

He is a politician. He is a citizen of Russia. He did nothing wrong. He did not violate any law. Why should he stay abroad? It's one very important thing that we never had a discussion on. It was all clear for us from the very beginning. He didn't have doubts. He didn't ask me, for instance, if he had to go or not.

**Mr. Peter Fonseca:** Yes, he had amazing conviction. I have to say, Mr. Volkov, the way you said that this is despicable.... We see this as despicable. Mr. Navalny being poisoned, this attack on him, is not only an attack on him but an attack on human rights and democracy. That's what it's an attack on.

How likely do you believe it is that the Russian government will perpetrate further similar poison attacks against other opposition leaders, opponents, in the near future? How likely is that? Even for you, do you worry? Do you go to a restaurant? Do they know where you are in Lithuania? Do you worry that you're being followed, that bad things are going to happen to you and to your family? It must be very difficult to just manage day to day.

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Since COVID, I have not been to a restaurant for over a year now. Other than that, before August 2020 we considered the largest threat for a politician in Russia normally to be arrested and put in prison. If one decided to go abroad, one could have a feeling of avoiding any possible risks. After August 2020, after the poisoning of Mr. Navalny, of course, we all realized that no one is secure and that Putin is ready to deploy chemical weapons not only against former KGB agents whom he considers to be traitors, like Sergei Skripal, but also against his political opponents.

Before August 2020, we had a mental model that he distinguished between political opponent and traitors. Traitors have to be killed. Opponent have to be harassed, put in prison and so on. Of course, who could think about things like poison? Now that it has happened, of course, no one can feel safe, but frankly, what can one do to protect oneself against such a thing as being poisoned by a substance that is non-visible and non-palatable? We take some regular precautions. We try to see what's going on around. We have cameras on the buildings for relief and for, but in general, that's just the level of risk we have to face, unfortunately.

• (1555)

**Mr. Peter Fonseca:** We've seen the reports about how Russia gets involved in elections in the United States or other parts of the world. Do you think that they are tapping into your communications, your phones and anything that you're doing online? How does that affect your network and your family members? What is the fear factor there or the chill that everybody is experiencing?

**The Chair:** Mr. Volkov, please give just a brief answer and then we'll have to go to the next member.

Thank you.

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Of course, they do a lot. They run wide-scale, sophisticated cyberwarfare information and disinformation campaigns. We are well aware of it. We are used to living in such a toxic environment. Each of our employees gets a lot of phishing attacks, for instance, and everyone is trained on how to respond to those attacks. They were a little successful as they managed to break into my mother's email. That was nasty because she was not so tech savvy and was not able to protect herself. Our communications with members of our staff and so on are quite secure.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Fonseca.

**Mr. Peter Fonseca:** Thank you.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Mr. Bergeron, before I give you the floor, I would like to make sure that Mr. Volkov has access to the interpretation.

[English]

Mr. Volkov, if you require interpretation, have you selected...?

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Okay.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Mr. Bergeron, the floor is yours for the next six minutes.

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

Mr. Volkov, thank you so much for joining us today. We really appreciate your taking the time to have this conversation with us. May I express our full solidarity and ask you please to pass it on to Mr. Navalny.

A few days ago, I also had the opportunity to speak at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and to demand freedom for Alexei Navalny. I was very proud to do so on behalf of my colleagues. Canada, like other Western countries such as the United States and the countries of the European Union, has taken a number of measures along the lines you are asking, such as imposing sanctions against certain oligarchs funding the activities of Vladimir Putin. Canada has sanctioned nine prominent Russians.

Perhaps you or your organization could send us the names of other oligarchs whom the Government of Canada might sanction.

If the objective is to cut off the funds feeding the brutish Vladimir Putin, I feel that we really have to be specific with our actions and to be able to clearly identify those persons, as well as the reasons why they should be on the list.

[English]

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Thank you so much for your support and for your question, Mr. Bergeron.

Talking of personal sanctions, first of all it's important that Europe, for instance, and also the U.K., U.S., and Canada, took the first step. Yes, they went from sectoral economic sanctions to personalized sanctions, because unfortunately every time a round of sectoral sanctions is launched, they of course open a lot of champagne there in the Kremlin. They're just happy.

This is because foreign sanctions against the Russian economy are something they can blame everything on. Why does the income of the average household in Russia decrease for eight years in a row? It's because of the evil West, because of NATO, because of the U.S., because they are trying to kill our economy with sanctions. Such sanctions just give them an opportunity to steal more and explain everything using their propaganda machine.

Contrary to that, personal sanctions, we believe, are efficient, because propaganda can't sell them as being sanctions against Russia. They are against individuals, and these individuals are, of course, not our country and don't represent our country. It is thus very important that, for instance, the European Union adopted the European Magnitsky law for human rights violations and started to sanction some individuals.

Now, having said that, the first list of individuals was quite weak. They were mostly people such as security forces officials who, yes, are in charge and are responsible for Mr. Navalny's poisoning. Still, they don't travel abroad and they don't have assets abroad.

The idea of personal sanctions against Putin's friends and oligarchs is not to see Mr. Putin shorn of financial support. Unfortunately, he has access to enormous funds. Russia has exported oil and gas worth more than \$3 trillion U.S. over the 20 years of Putin's rule, and he and his friends got hold of the majority of these funds. The idea is to build leverage against Putin and his friends, because every time Europe or the U.S. tries to build bridges, to compromise, to build a dialogue, unfortunately Putin, with his psychology, considers it to be just a sign of weakness.

He considers his Western counterparts, unfortunately, to be hypocrites. Quite reliable sources have said that his favourite TV series is *House of Cards*. He thinks that they are all...you know, they say the words they have to say about human rights, liberty, democracy. That's because they have to say it for their voters, but they don't really believe it. "They need my oil and and gas," thinks Putin, "and they really need money. They will deal with me, they will work with me, whatever I do. There are no red lines, and I can do whatever I want."

Every time President Macron or the Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz supposes that despite everything, despite all the human rights violations, they still have to compromise and so on, Putin thinks, "Ha, I have won again. They still need my oil and gas so much."

The personal sanctions against Putin's oligarchs are important to win leverage against him, to build a strong position. Freezing his assets, and these are nominal—these are assets of his friends, but of course they're his personal assets, actually—would allow western leaders to talk to Putin from a much stronger position than they do now, because money really matters a lot for him.

That's our idea. Appeasement politics, unfortunately, has failed.

● (1600)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Bergeron.

I am sorry, your time is up.

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** A point of order, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Yes, go ahead.

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** The question to Mr. Volkov was about individual sanctions. We are expecting him to provide a list, not aloud, of course, of oligarchs and the reasons why they should be on that list. I just wanted to make sure that he will be able to send the list to our clerk.

**The Chair:** Okay.

Thank you very much.

Thank you Mr. Bergeron.

[*English*]

Thank you, Mr. Volkov.

We will go straight on—

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** I'm sorry—

**The Chair:** Yes, please go ahead.

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** It also came to my mind that we have this list of 35 names that we actually published in some media, but I'll be happy to share it also with your committee.

**The Chair:** Okay.

We will now go to Mr. Harris for the final segment in round one, again for six minutes.

Mr. Harris, you have the floor.

**Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP):** Thank you, Chair; and thank you, Mr. Volkov, for joining us.

First of all, on my own behalf and I think I speak for the very vast majority of Canadians, who abhor what's happening to Mr. Navalny in Russia and also other individuals who have been taken on by the state and in some cases murdered and poisoned, and in Mr. Navalny's case, the ongoing threats and imprisonment and attempted assassination, we admire the personal courage and strength of Mr. Navalny and people like yourself in taking on this very heavy challenge.

I'm sure that the decision he made to go back to Russia and face the consequences of being sure that he's there to lead will inspire others to also continue to try to bring about the kind of change that is required inside the Russian Federation.

That said, you're speaking openly here in a public meeting about the issues. You have means of communicating with people inside Russia, sometimes unencumbered, sometimes found out, but by the sounds of things, you do have a means of getting your message across to people.

I suppose this is an aspect of how disinformation can take place. I'm assuming you are aware of a report by Amnesty International, which is a well-known and well-respected international organization that supports people who are fighting against authoritarianism, dictatorship and human rights violations throughout the world. There was a report published suggesting that they had removed Mr. Navalny from their list of prisoners of conscience because of some reported statements that he had made in the past.

Are you aware of that allegation, which seems to have been taken seriously for some particular time, and do you know anything about where that might have come from?

• (1605)

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Thank you very much, Mr. Harris. This is a very important issue because it actually showcases the spread and the strength of a Kremlin disinformation campaign against Alexei Navalny and how seriously they are taking Alexei Navalny and his movement.

Actually, it was back in 2013 when Navalny ran for mayor of Moscow and they started to plant articles of disinformation against him in the western media. For instance, they posted an article. They paid for an article in the Jerusalem Post pertaining to him being anti-Semitic, which is quite funny because he was a guest of honour on my chuppah, and a lot of different stuff like that.

This year's campaign was, of course, the most noticeable. It included attempts to undermine his credibility and the credibility of our movement on many different international platforms, including people impersonating me, contacting different national and international bodies such as the parliamentary assembly of OSCE and others, and also including disinformation.

The case of Amnesty International was very remarkable because they succeeded in that case. They presented them with a number of falsely interpreted quotes or the statements that Alexei Navalny made in 2007 and later revoked and condemned them, but they managed to push this case through some of the original branches of Amnesty, which led them to their decision.

Now, fortunately, he has been in touch with them. They are campaigning strongly and we are very grateful to them. They are campaigning worldwide to protect him and to release him. It is my information that they will also soon reconsider their decision about Alexei's status as a prisoner of conscience. They told me just yesterday that they will issue a press release on May 12 after they have examined how a Russian disinformation campaign managed to influence them and how they were made victims of this disinformation campaign.

They will not only reinstate his status, but they will also issue a post-mortem, which I hope will be very interesting, of what happened and how it happened.

**Mr. Jack Harris:** And hopefully a condemnation of the action to create this whole thing in the first place.

I'm wondering another thing. We know what you're facing and the difficulties of operating in the official election sphere in Russia. There is a question, I suppose, of where you go from here in terms of the campaign to bring about change inside the Russian Federation.

I'm wondering how you capture the spirit of the people inside Russia, who are seeking.... They don't like authoritarianism any more than anybody else does, but after the failure of the Soviet Union, for example, the situation did not lead to a widespread increase in people's standard of living or their ability to operate within a non-authoritarian regime. We have Mr. Putin offering this still, and we wonder whether people can be expected to believe that things might change under a different regime.

I'm wondering, then, when your campaign.... I'm looking at something that's published by Radio Free Europe about the creation

of a new political party in 2018, which may have been the last time a new party was created. This is the Russia of the Future party, created in May 2019 by your organization, which talks about real changes and real reforms.

I would call these "generalizations", to some extent, not creating, it seems to me, a vision for a new Russia or a new Russian federation with the kind of prosperity that might come to elevate people's standard of living. I wonder, do you have the kind of vision that attracts people? We see reports of opinion polls by Levada-Center—I don't know whether you believe those polls or not—showing that they don't seem to be totally pro-Putin but don't seem to be recognizing that your movement is as strong as we might want to see it or you might want to see it.

• (1610)

**The Chair:** Mr. Harris, I'm sorry, but you're a minute and a half over your allotment. I'm wondering if we could ask Mr. Volkov to park that question in his mind and return to it in your second, follow-up opportunity in round two, which we have to go to now just to be able to get through the full second round.

I will turn it over, with your indulgence, to Mr. Chong for the next five minutes, please, but let's park the question by Mr. Harris and circle back to it.

Mr. Chong.

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

Mr. Volkov, thank you for taking the time to appear in front of us today.

You mentioned that sanctions are effective in countering President Putin's actions, a view I share. Alexei Navalny published a list of Kremlin oligarchs who are responsible for enabling and keeping President Putin in power. Some of those oligarchs hold significant assets in Canada.

Recently, the former world chess champion and Russian opposition figure Garry Kasparov also urged Western governments to apply sanctions on those Russians responsible for the poisoning and arrest of your colleague Alexei Navalny.

While the Canadian government has sanctioned some Russian individuals, it has inexplicably omitted others. To that end, I would like to ask you about whether the Canadian government should apply sanctions on five specific individual. All five of these individuals have been sanctioned already by the United States, by the United Kingdom and by the European Union.

The first person I'm wondering whether or not you think should be sanctioned by the Canadian government is Yevgeny Prigozhin, who runs the Internet Research Agency and the mercenary Wagner Group, and is on the FBI most wanted list, and whose organization has targeted Canada and Canadian government officials with disinformation.

What is your view on putting him on the sanctions list?

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Yes, of course. He is a very dangerous criminal, first of all.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Thank you.

I have four other people I want to ask you about.

There is Dmitry Kovtun, who is a former KGB FSB agent and now a businessman in Russia.

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Well, Kovtun is the guy who is responsible for the killing of Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006. He is a KGB agent. He doesn't travel abroad; he doesn't have assets. Sanctions will not, unfortunately, harm him, but still it's an important symbol.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Okay.

The third person I'm wondering about is somebody who was identified by a royal commission in the United Kingdom as being responsible for the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko, someone who is also a former KGB agent and now a Russian parliamentarian. His name is Andrei Lugovoy.

• (1615)

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Yes. Lugovoy and Kovtun [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] together, so this is the same story.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Two other individuals who were sent to Salisbury, England to poison Sergei Skripal with Novichok were Colonel Alexander Mishkin and Colonel Anatoliy Chepiga.

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Sure. Of course.

Unfortunately, with the exception of Prigozhin, the last four names you mentioned are just criminals and killers. They are Russian security forces officers who committed lethal attacks in the U.K. in 2004 and 2018. They have to be brought to court, but sanctions will only have a moral effect.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Prigozhin certainly is somebody with significant interests internationally.

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Yes.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** What is so concerning about the lack of Canadian government sanctions about him is that the European Union, the United Kingdom and the United States have placed sanctions on him and we haven't.

In effect, the Canadian government has given Mr. Prigozhin plenty of time to shift his assets outside of this country in anticipation of potential future sanctions. This is the reason why I believe it's so important that western democracies work in concert to impose sanctions on oligarchs, to ensure that they can't anticipate these sanctions and shift assets outside of our country.

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** I can't agree more.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Mr. Chair, I have no further questions. Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chong.

We will go to the next set of questions, which will be asked by Ms. Saks.

Please go ahead, Ms. Saks, for five minutes.

**Ms. Ya'ara Saks (York Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Volkov, for joining us at the foreign affairs committee today. Your testimony is very important to the work we do

here and critical for making the important decisions that we have to make as a Canadian Parliament and government.

Chair, I will be sharing my time with Dr. Fry.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Ms. Ya'ara Saks:** She's laughing.

If Dr. Fry wishes to share time, it's available to her. She can just give me a wave.

**Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.):** Excuse me, Mr. Chair.

I would like Ms. Saks to use the time fully. Splitting a small amount of time doesn't work really well.

You go ahead, Ya'ara, and do your thing.

**Ms. Ya'ara Saks:** Thank you, Dr. Fry.

**The Chair:** Thank you for the clarification.

**Ms. Ya'ara Saks:** My apologies, Mr. Volkov.

We discussed earlier about the move to label and disband democratic opposition extremists. We have talked about the big picture risks for Mr. Navalny, family members and yourself from the very aggressive and despicable acts of poisoning that have been done by units from the FSB.

What are the risks to your followers and other democratic activists in Russia? These are the people on the ground day to day. In terms of fostering a movement, it's not just the leadership who are at risk.

Are the people on the street at risk?

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Yes, they are and the risks are growing.

When we had protests in January of this year, 12,000 people were detained, which was effectively the largest wave of repression in our country since 1937—since Stalin's time. Over 1,000 people were arrested following this detention. It was for short terms, like 15 or 30 days, but it's still very important. People are losing jobs, being fired and expelled from their institutions and their colleges and so on.

Putin has shown that he is ready to scale up the repressions, unfortunately. He has put our supporters at risk.

For instance, the new law and designation of our organization as an extremist would entitle all our donors to up to eight years in prison, so we will have to stop accepting any donations inside the country once this court decision is effective. We have 160,000 donors who send us an average of 500 rubles or \$7 U.S. a month. We will have to stop all of this because otherwise any of them would be at risk.

Putin doesn't have a repressive machine strong enough to arrest 160,000 people, but he would arrest 10 of them randomly to scare all the others.

• (1620)

**Ms. Ya'ara Saks:** To set an example.

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** It's just to scare all the others. That's what he's doing. At every large protest rally, he would arrest maybe 1% of the participants—very random people—but then the other 99% also feel vulnerable. He thus increases the level of terror and distrust in society. We each have to think a lot about protecting our supporters and we try to do a lot to protect them.

**Ms. Ya'ara Saks:** I understand. In that vein, in these types of authoritarian and repressive efforts that we see from the Putin regime and the denying of human rights, there's always a trade-off for leaders. They have to promise something in return. You mentioned earlier that often Putin uses the line, "Our economic situation is due to the sanctions from the West", but there's also the flip side of it, of trying to use economic promise to buy power.

What we see in the reality on the ground in Russia right now is that the average life expectancy of a Russian male is about 66 years of age, five years lower than the European Union average. In 2018, Putin, during the World Cup, made a change to pensions across Russia while syphoning billions for his own personal use. We've seen refutations to that, but what I'd like to ask is whether there is a growing opposition, in light of this reality? Where is the average Russian family and individual today in this mess?

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** This also relates very much to Mr. Harris's important questions, which I didn't have time to reply to, so I'll try to combine them and keep the answer short.

Putin was very successful selling the idea of the nineties. The early nineties, after the destruction of communism, were really a disaster for many families. Many families were not ready to see enormous change in everything.

In Soviet times, people didn't know what money was. Yes, money is an institution. It didn't work in the same way in the Soviet economy as it works in the market economy. I'm not talking now about the stock market or something like that. People didn't know what banks were, what entrepreneurship is, what doing business is, what profit is, or selling. People were not prepared for it at all.

The early nineties, while they were the times of big political freedom, were economically a disaster. Putin came to power and managed to gain a lot of popularity by saying that these times will not be repeated. His main political idea was selling the notion of stability. "I brought stability to you"; this was his motto.

Well, it worked all the way from 2002 to 2010. People were ready to forgive him anything for stability. But now—

**The Chair:** Mr. Volkov, I apologize. Just in the interest of time, we have to move on.

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Yes, okay.

**The Chair:** You'll have an opportunity in the responses to other colleagues to elaborate on what you're saying. My apologies; we just want to make sure that we get through the second round of questions.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bergeron, the floor is yours. You have two and a half minutes.

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

Mr. Volkov, I feel that everyone understands why you are waiting for a decision from the court as to the legality of banning your organization. However, while you wait, would it not be astute to launch a new movement?

It could be under a different name. At that point, the Russian state would have to legislate against the new movement.

[*English*]

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Unfortunately, it doesn't work this way. It would be a smart idea, but if a movement is recognized as an extremist movement and someone creates a new one, it is the expert of the investigative committee who will decide whether the new one is a replica of the old one or not. If the expert of the investigative committee finds that the new movement is doing the same as the old one was doing, it will lead to exactly the same repercussions for its participants, unfortunately.

• (1625)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** So you are really forced to wait for the court's decision. If the decision of the court is not in your favour, how do you use see things proceeding?

[*English*]

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** We don't have any doubts about what the decision will be. Russia, unfortunately, doesn't have an independent court. On May 17 it will happen, so we are getting ready for it. We are moving more now into the sunlight. The Internet feels still like a relatively free medium. A lot of things that we are doing are actually enabled through the Internet. For this tactical voting, we don't need offline infrastructure to do it.

We will of course keep moving on with our anti-corruption investigations. Now we relocate some of our stuff from Russia to Lithuania or to other countries to keep it safe. We'll pretty much continue doing what we are doing now. We face a lot of organizational changes. We have to rearrange many processes, but we'll carry on.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** The experience...

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Bergeron.

I'm sorry, but that is all the time you had.

We will continue with the three final speakers.

[*English*]

Mr. Harris is next, for two-and-a-half minutes, and then Mr. Diotte and Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Harris, please; the floor is yours.

**Mr. Jack Harris:** Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to give Mr. Volkov an opportunity to continue his response, but to ask as well, in that he just touched on it, about the use of the Internet.

Is that medium free? Is it easy for people inside Russia to actually see what goes on and receive information that's available on the Internet, or is that controlled as well?

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Putin is trying hard to put the Internet under control, but still it remains a relatively free medium, because the Russian Internet developed itself in the nineties, which was the time of political freedom and economic competition. It thus developed itself in a very competitive way, whereby every Internet service provider tried to build its own transborder link.

For instance, China has three transborder links for its domestic Internet providers, while Russia has more than 900 of them. The Chinese Internet was built by design as a very controllable one, while the Russian Internet was built as relatively free. Now, so far, Putin's efforts to put it under censorship are failing. They're not so successful.

Going back to your previous and very important question, once again, Putin was selling stability and the concept of poverty in the nineties, and that he was bringing stability, and so on. Now, however, Russia is going through a generational change. Putin has been there for 22 years now, so a whole generation has appeared of people who have not known anything but Putin, and they want change and they look for change.

These people are also native Internet users, not a native TV audience. The audience for Putin's TV propaganda decreases, while the audience of people who have Internet access increases. Also, people have travelled a lot. This is very contrary to what people experienced in communist times. People have been very able to travel to Europe to see how democracy is working and how society could live under a democracy, and so on.

It's a slow change. You are right. Putin still enjoys quite a lot of support. The polling of Levada is quite correct; he's at about 50%, but it's not any longer the 80% approval rating that he had 10 years ago. As many people manage to get access to different opinions on the Internet, people try to realize what's going on, and things such as, for instance, our investigative video are of great help here.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Harris.

We will now go to Mr. Diotte for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Kerry Diotte:** Mr. Volkov, we were talking earlier about sanctioning people. How about an individual named Roman Abramovich?

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** He's number one on our list. We suggested him also to the EU, to the U.K. and to the U.S. government. Putin has many asset holders—nominal holders whose assets are actually Putin's own—but Mr. Abramovich definitely holds the thickest wallet.

• (1630)

**Mr. Kerry Diotte:** Excellent.

Just shifting to another topic, I have a large Ukrainian Canadian community in my riding here in western Canada. They and many other Canadians are really concerned with the aggressive actions

Putin has taken against Ukraine. What are Mr. Navalny's views on the status of Crimea and eastern Ukraine and the threat that Russia could take further action?

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Alexei was asked many times about the annexation of Crimea. You could easily find many of his public statements on this.

To wrap it up very shortly, we recognize that the annexation of Crimea was unlawful. Putin has committed a crime against Russia and Russian national interests. He violated the international agreements, which caused sanctions to be applied against Russia—undermined credibility of our country in international co-operation and so on—after he publicly violated Russian obligations toward Crimea, according to the Budapest memorandum of 1994.

Now, not all of us.... When a crime is committed and when a crime is recognized, it could easily be reimbursed. When someone kills another person, we could punish the killer, but we are unable to revive the victim. Putin has created a huge problem for the world, which probably will remain a huge problem, like northern Cyprus, or the West Bank, or many other territories for the future. I mean, now there is the fact that there are two million Russian citizens suddenly in Crimea. Their opinion has to be taken into consideration.

We consider that maybe the future government of Russia and future government of Ukraine, with some international mediators, will be able to build some process to deal with the status of Crimea. It is an unlawful annexation, but now it looks like there is no simple way out of the situation that Putin created.

With regard to the eastern Ukraine, it's very clear. Putin's Russia committed crimes against humanity, sponsoring the civil war that has taken the lives of 13,000 people. It's a crime. Russia has to stop supporting paramilitaries in the Donbas region, has to act with agreement according to the Minsk agreements that Russia has signed to give border control to Ukraine, to stop supporting the separatist movements in Donbas, and then the situation will get back to normal. That's quite clear for us.

**Mr. Kerry Diotte:** I have a very quick question.

We talked a bit about your movement and how it's being repressed. What's the general state of the protest movement in Russia, and what has been done to suppress it? I was looking at a Reuters story, and it shows people basically painting over logos of Mr. Navalny, etc.

What's happening?

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** What's happening is that Putin is very effectively building a society that was described by George Orwell in *1984*. The painting over the graffiti belongs there, and many other things also belong there. He is really acting by the book.

**Mr. Kerry Diotte:** Thanks very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Diotte.

We'll now go to our final set of questions, and it will go to Mr. Oliphant, for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Mr. Volkov.

[Pursuant to a motion passed on May 11, 2021, a portion of this testimony has been deleted. See Minutes of Proceedings of May 11, 2021]

**Mr. Robert Oliphant:** I want to assure you, following Mr. Chong's questions—you may or may not be aware—that on March 24, our Minister of Foreign Affairs issued another round of sanctions in direct response to Mr. Navalny's arrest and detention. We are constantly reviewing these sanctions.

We have two different regimes for sanctions in Canada. We make sure that they're both judicious and effective, so we won't be putting criminals on sanctions, despite people perhaps saying.... We look for very effective ways. We also do it in tandem with international partners, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, European Union and so on.

This is a constant discussion. If there are suggestions that you have for that, we're always happy to take them, because we will review them. However, we have two pieces of legislation that we have to follow. We're very careful in how we do that. That list on March 24 was done in concert with the Americans.

I want to get out of sanctions for a moment, though, and talk about the effect of the prosecutors' move against the anti-corruption foundation. How will that limit either your work in Russia or outside of Russia, and do you have any suggestions for Canada, with the prosecutors labelling you as an extremist organization for the anti-corruption work you're doing, on how we can be supportive?

• (1635)

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Thank you very much, Mr. Oliphant.

On sanctions, I think a lot of important things already have been said. I understand how complicated this process is, how many legal complications it has.

One little thing to add is that, of course, it's very important that the international community act together: Canada, United States, European Union and the U.K. However, let me suggest that the key part of the story is the U.K. here.

**Mr. Robert Oliphant:** Yes.

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** If you could kind of push and influence the U.K. informally, it's most essential, because 80% of those assets in question are being stashed in London.

**Mr. Robert Oliphant:** I'll just mention that the government is aware of that and there are conversations.

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Thank you.

Now on the second matter, once again, this extremist organization status, this will have a lot of effect on our ability to conduct offline activities in Russia. Offline activities will become very dangerous for its participants and we will have to limit them to an absolute minimum. We'll have to relocate many of the employees and we'll have to focus on the online.

However, we know what to do. We have a lot of projects that we wanted to launch online but we didn't have resources to do that, because we were busy with some other things on the ground. Now we'll have our hands free to do these projects that were somewhere in the backlog; now we will get back to them, and hopefully Mr.

Putin will not like the consequences of his decision to destroy our offline organization in the country.

Still, the most important thing is how many people we are able to reach. When we started our movement, we had maybe 50,000 followers. After Navalny's presidential campaign, when we built this regional network, we were able to reach several million people. Now we have a daily audience of about 15 million supporters and it's large. We'll keep talking to this audience despite all the problems with all the Internet censorship, and so on, and we'll keep growing it, using also the generational change that is happening in Russian politics now, on which I already elaborated in answering Mr. Harris's question.

**Mr. Robert Oliphant:** Thank you very much.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[English]

**Mr. Robert Oliphant:** I know it's late where you are, but I want to thank you and also to say that I hope you have heard, even though we come at it differently, in Canada there's no difference of opinion among the parties on these issues of human rights and Mr. Navalny in Russia. We are very united on this and we'll constantly find ways to support you.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Oliphant.

Colleagues, that brings us to the end of the period that was officially designated. However, I believe that Mr. Bergeron would like to ask the committee about potentially extending the time for questions.

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Yes.

**The Chair:** Mr. Bergeron, the floor is yours.

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

With Mr. Volkov's permission, I would ask for unanimous consent from my colleagues so that we can continue the conversation, for a final round of two minutes per party.

• (1640)

[English]

**The Chair:** Okay, the committee has heard the question. Is there unanimous consent to go up to an additional two minutes per party?

If parties have asked the questions they wanted to, they don't need to take advantage of that, but for those who would like to ask an additional quick question of two minutes in duration, is there unanimous consent by the committee to go on for an additional 10 minutes?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** Is there any opposition?

Okay, we will go in the order of typically allotted questions.

Mr. Chong, would you want to go ahead, or Mr. Diotte?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Sure. I'll go.

**The Chair:** Okay.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Mr. Volkov, you've mentioned that Roman Abramovich is at the top of the list of people who should be sanctioned by western governments. You've mentioned his significant assets in the United Kingdom. He has assets in other OECD countries as well.

Could you tell us why targeting Roman Abramovich with sanctions is so critically important to your cause?

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** We have prepared an evidence pack on these oligarchs that we suggest to include in our supposed sanction list. There we elaborate a lot on Mr. Abramovich.

To make a long story short, he pretends to be a businessman, but he is just a nominal holder of Mr. Putin's assets. He is responsible for the privatization of the oil industry by Mr. Putin. He acquired for some pennies the oil companies that were taken by force using the criminal charges, and so on, from independent businessmen, taken on behalf of the Russian government and then the control over these oil companies was transferred to Mr. Abramovich.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Thank you very much. I appreciate that answer.

That's all the questions I have, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chong.

Now we'll go over to the Liberals.

Mr. Oliphant or colleagues, you have two minutes.

**Mr. Robert Oliphant:** I'm fine. I'm wondering if Dr. Fry has anything. I think that that would be appropriate.

**The Chair:** Dr. Fry, would you like the floor?

**Hon. Hedy Fry:** Not necessarily.

This is also discussed at the OSCE and the OSCE PA. I've heard a lot of this. I have a lot of information, and some of you added to that information, but I don't need any more. It's pretty clear that we are all in agreement in our support, etc.

**Mr. Robert Oliphant:** Ms. Sahota.

**The Chair:** Ms. Sahota, go ahead, please.

No? Okay.

**Mr. Robert Oliphant:** We're good. I think the answers were very complete. In fact, the questions from Mr. Bergeron, Mr. Harris, Mr. Chong and Mr. Diotte have been helpful for all of us, I think, so that's been very good.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Bergeron, you have two minutes.

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

I wanted to have another round because I have a question for Mr. Volkov that complements the one I asked the last time.

He was talking about moving activities outside the borders of Russia. We have certainly seen that that does not necessarily guar-

antee the safety of people outside Russia. Some have lost their lives because of their opposition to the regime. So another question concerns me.

If a number of the leaders are outside the country rather than inside, is there not a danger that the movement in Russia will be weakened?

[*English*]

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** It is indeed the case—speaking of power movements—that people are forced out of the country. That's a fact, and that's why Putin is trying to destroy our off-line movement in the country. That's why Putin is forcing us abroad. That's why Alexei Navalny returned to Russia after he recovered, because he also realized that staying out of the country, in fact, makes us weaker. Now we are in this situation and we have no choice. We have to either cease all of our operations or continue them from abroad. Now we hope that we will be able to still be efficient enough to make a difference, even operating from abroad. That was [*Inaudible—Editor*] this year of online meetings and [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] has taught us a lot about how one can be efficient even from a long distance.

• (1645)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Thank you, Mr. Volkov.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Bergeron.

[*English*]

Mr. Harris, you can ask the witness a final question if you care to.

**Mr. Jack Harris:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Volkov. First of all, I want to say that the persistence that you've demonstrated in your movement, this vision that you've shown for a new Russia, the determination in following up that.... Mr. Navalny should take some comfort in the notion that you've convinced at least me—and, I hope, many people who are watching this—that his suffering and his sacrifice are not in vein.

I just want to ask you whether you feel optimistic about the future of your movement, whether you think that there may also be other leaders who come up inside of Russia as a result of your continuation of this movement if you have to do it from the Internet and perhaps in part from outside the country.

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** We are very optimistic. First of all, you couldn't be a pessimist and continue doing what we are doing. One needs a lot of, or a share of, optimism to do all of this.

Second, while we already see.... For instance, as we had to formally dissolve our network of regional offices, we have also announced that every regional office will be allowed to continue operations on its own. We will pass on the database of supporters, and we will pass on the regional fraction of the database of donors so that they can form a regional movement and continue to do whatever they want, reaching out to their supporters for some new local political projects and running in local elections.

The majority of our former regional branches have chosen to do so, and while Putin has kind of destroyed the centralized Navalny movement, there will be 30 or 40 milieu regional opposition movements that we have prepared, that we have kind of planted. We have gone through a lot of things together, like doing investigations, organizing rallies and such. Now they are able to do it on their own—so many new young leaders in Russia—and this is good.

I'm also very optimistic about the bigger picture. There is a generational change. In federal-level polls, Putin is still doing very well, but in polling for voters under 30, Navalny is going better than Putin, even despite all the efforts of propaganda machines, all

the smear and fear campaigns against him. The clock is ticking in our favour. It's a slow historical process, but it's inevitable [*Inaudible—Editor*].

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Volkov, on our collective behalf, I thank you for taking the time this evening to be with us. Thank you for your candour and thank you for the level of detail that you've provided. The fact that we've kept you beyond the scheduled time is reflective of the committee's interest and concern, so we are grateful that you took the time to be with us and we thank you. Please keep safe.

Colleagues, we can now say goodbye to Mr. Volkov and then reconnect to our in camera setting to continue our discussion on committee business.

Thank you so much.

**Mr. Leonid Volkov:** Thank you very much for your attention and for your questions.

**Mr. Jack Harris:** Thank you very much.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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