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Chair: Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury

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• (1600)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 50 of the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Before we begin, I would like to remind all members and other participants in the room of the following important preventative measures.

To prevent disruptive and potentially harmful audio feedback incidents that can cause injuries, we remind all in-person participants to keep their earpieces away from their microphones at all times.

As indicated in the communiqué from the Speaker to all members on Monday, April 29, the following measures have been taken to prevent audio feedback incidents.

All earpieces have been replaced with a model that greatly reduces the probability of audio feedback. The new earpieces are black in colour, whereas the former earpieces were grey. Please use only an approved black earpiece.

By default, all unused earpieces will be unplugged at the start of a meeting.

When you're not using your earpiece, please place it face down on the middle of the sticker for this purpose, which you will find on the table, as indicated. Please consult the cards on the table for guidelines to prevent audio feedback incidents.

The room layout has been adjusted to increase the distance between microphones and reduce the risk of feedback from an earpiece in the room.

These measures are in place so that we can conduct our business without interruption and to protect the health and safety of all participants, including the interpreters.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules for members and witnesses.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For members on Zoom, please use the “raise hand” function. The clerk of the subcommittee and I will manage the speaking order as well as we can.

You may speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice of floor, English or French. If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately.

I remind you that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

In accordance with our routine motion concerning sound tests, I wish to inform the subcommittee that all witnesses have completed the required tests in advance of the meeting.

[*English*]

Before I start, I would like to bring to your attention that in our last study we agreed that we would do three studies—one on Georgia, one on Iran and one on Ethiopia. I would like to emphasize that, if the time allows us, we do a study on Sudan, because the situation there is going in a terribly bad direction.

• (1605)

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the subcommittee on Tuesday, April 30, 2024, the subcommittee is beginning its study on Georgia's draft law on foreign agents.

I would like to welcome our witnesses.

From the Center for Development and Democracy, we have Ketevan Chachava, executive director, by video conference.

Ms. Chachava, welcome. You have up to five minutes for your opening remarks, after which we will proceed with a round of questions.

Ms. Chachava, the floor is yours.

[*English*]

Ms. Ketevan Chachava (Executive Director, Center for Development and Democracy): Thank you.

Honourable members of the House of Commons, I am deeply grateful for this opportunity to speak before you today. It is an honour, privilege and great responsibility.

My name is Ketevan Chachava. I am a civic and democracy activist from Georgia with 18 years of experience in the non-profit sector. I am the executive director and founder of the Tbilisi-based NGO, the Center for Development and Democracy, as well as a steering committee member of the World Movement for Democracy and a non-resident fellow of CEPA.

I stand before you as a proud Georgian citizen, committed to the democratic, Euro-Atlantic future of my country. I am a representative of tens of thousands of Georgians, from the young to the elderly, from the so-called silent generation to generation alpha, who have taken to the streets in peaceful protest for the past month.

I address you today with a deep concern regarding recent developments in Georgia, specifically the reintroduction of a Russian-style draft law on transparency of foreign influence, also referred to as the “foreign agents” law.

Our struggle is not about opposing a single piece of legislation. It's about defending the very fundamentals of our democracy: freedom, rule of law and our chosen path of Euro-Atlantic integration, which is protected by the Georgian constitution.

The stated objective of the proposed legislation is to ensure transparency concerning foreign influence and funding by implementing a specialized database. While transparency is universally valued, this legislation mandates that NGOs and independent media receiving over 20% of their funding from abroad must register as organizations carrying out the interests of a foreign power. Such categorization and the stigmatization of the organizations is one of the biggest issues that we all face. It diminishes the dignity and respect of not only the organizations but also the individuals associated with them.

This legislation mirrors oppressive measures seen in Russia, Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, where similar laws have silenced dissent, violated international human rights standards and led to closures or forced exile. Such laws serve only to weaken democracy, as evidenced by the V-Dem report.

Georgia, as an EU candidate and NATO aspirant country, finds itself at a crossroads where upholding democratic principles is crucial. Different opinion polls consistently indicate that 75% to 80% of Georgians support European and Euro-Atlantic integration. However, the proposed law contradicts these principles, posing a significant threat of silencing the vibrant civil society and free media. These pillars are vital and integral to our aspirations for EU and NATO membership.

The progression of events has been alarmingly fast. Announced only on April 3, the law has already passed with two hearings. The stakes could not be higher as we anticipate the final readings of this law by the end of June.

We continue to protest under the banner “Yes to Europe! No to Russian law!” Our peaceful demonstrations are met with disproportionate force and targeted violence against opposition leaders and civic activists, further worsening the crisis and existing polarization, which is becoming deeply alarming.

Therefore, I call on you to stand with us in this critical moment, on the right side of history. We seek your assistance against the at-

tacks on civil society and media freedom, which are signs of democracy backsliding. Your reaffirmation of support for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations is crucial. Let us send a clear message to the members of the government and the Parliament of Georgia that attacks on civil society and media freedom are unacceptable and are damaging our democratic progress. This is not the path towards advancing closer to the Euro-Atlantic family, which Georgia is striving to join.

Thank you for your strong support of Georgia's NATO membership. Your dedication to human rights and democracy worldwide is deeply appreciated.

● (1610)

Thank you for your attention. I am looking forward to hearing your insights and addressing any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Chachava. Well done. That was five minutes perfectly.

Now I would like to invite Madam Natasha Lindstaedt, professor in the department of government at the University of Essex, by video conference.

Welcome.

Prof. Natasha Lindstaedt (Professor, Department of Government, University of Essex): I want to thank the subcommittee and honourable members for inviting me to this session. My name is Natasha Lindstaedt. I'm a professor of government at the University of Essex, and I'm an expert on authoritarian regimes and autocratization.

For the last several years, I've been involved in a research project that included travelling to Georgia in September 2022 and interviewing two dozen interviewees, including academics, individuals who worked at NGOs, opposition politicians and journalists.

Foreign funding is the lifeline of NGOs in Georgia, and the new draft law that designates NGOs that receive more than 20% of their funding from abroad as operatives of foreign government would effectively undercut NGOs in Georgia. This attack on NGOs represents a clear assault on democracy, as NGOs give a voice to those who are unrepresented and powerless; they are vital to fostering civil society. NGOs also support political participation, the free flow of accurate information and media literacy.

Autocrats consider weakening NGOs a critical step to preventing threats to their power, and many autocratizing countries, including Hungary, Kyrgyzstan, Cambodia, Egypt, Ethiopia, China and Uganda, have possibly been inspired by Russia's very tough foreign agent laws.

Russia first started placing restrictions on NGOs in 2005 but implemented much more rigorous laws in 2012 following fraudulent elections that led to massive protests, and then again more stringent laws in 2014 and 2020. Under this expanded legislation, authorities in Russia have the power to label individuals, not just organizations, engaged in political activity as foreign agents. This leaves them very vulnerable to jail terms of up to five years should they fail to report their activities precisely in line with the law's requirements.

Though Georgia's law is not as stringent as the laws in Russia, this is the trajectory. These laws are incredibly arbitrary and, as mentioned, the goal is to make it near impossible for NGOs to operate, particularly those that are supporting democratic norms. By making the law arbitrary, it makes it difficult to determine what is permitted, forcing NGOs to err on the side of caution and focus solely on their own survival rather than any activities that are actually supportive of democracy.

According to some experts I interviewed in Georgia, Georgia is not democratic because it is more of a competitive authoritarian regime. The Georgian Dream party is not committed to democracy and is under considerable influence from Russia.

Opposition politicians, NGOs and academics claim that they were already being surveilled by the Georgian government, and this is inspired by the Soviet Russian-style tactic of *kompromat*, to find compromising information on them that would then be used against them.

Russia does not accept the boundaries of the post-Soviet world, and Georgians remain very concerned about facing another invasion, or that their de facto leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, is either dependent on the Russians or has coinciding interests. Russia, through its vast propaganda machine, claims that the greatest existential threat facing countries in the post-Soviet sphere is western values embodied by, for example, non-traditional forms of marriage.

NGOs work to counter these disinformation campaigns. Closing civic spaces and infringing upon the work of NGOs is a global trend. It's a frightening one, and more and more people are facing serious restrictions.

Though authoritarian regimes often do not ban NGOs outright, they want to keep a close eye on them, and they mimic democracies in many different ways, one of which is to create these fake NGOs known as GONGOs, which are merely extensions of the state. Georgia has done this as well. The Georgian government has embarked on other tactics to weaken NGOs, whether they be engaging in personal attacks on people who work in NGOs, starting to show the salaries of people who work in the NGO sector, publicly shaming people who work in NGOs, claiming that protests are organized by NGOs to destabilize the country, claiming that people who work for NGOs don't care about democracy or the Georgian people, ex-

plaining people working in NGOs or supporting far-right groups that might directly attack NGOs.

The spate of attacks on NGOs is a critical tool used by authoritarian regimes to expand their power, and though these laws are passed in defence of sovereignty, they represent a clear break from democracy. As Russian influence continues to grow in the region and around the world, these types of copycat laws are more likely to become the norm.

Thank you.

• (1615)

The Chair: Thank you, Professor Lindstaedt.

[*Translation*]

We will now proceed to questions.

Mr. Majumdar, you have the floor for seven minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar (Calgary Heritage, CPC): *Merci beaucoup.*

Madam Chachava, thank you very much for your commentary. What do you believe the implications will be for your current status and registration?

Ms. Ketevan Chachava: Basically, as I mentioned, the law itself is brought in the name of transparency. If transparency were the true idea of the law, there are all the different options available with existing legislation—with minor changes to ensure extra transparency—with grants, for example.

Unfortunately, this legislation is bringing the stigma that will basically make sure that no NGO in this country will register under the name that is being imposed on us, which is “an organization carrying out the interest of a foreign power”. We do not represent a foreign power.

If this legislation is passed, potentially by the end of June, there are 60 days before it goes into force. That means that we all have to register ourselves. The Ministry of Justice has the power to register everybody who received grants in 2023 that were more than 20% of their income, which would mean that being in this registry literally brings a stigma. It makes it almost impossible for people to work under this name because, again, going back to the history of Georgia, “foreign agents” is not really a term that anybody as a civic activist, for example, would ever agree upon.

Logistically or officially, there is no official interference with registration until the first month that we are not registered, which would potentially be in September, just one month before the elections in Georgia. That would mean a \$25,000 lari fine, which is around, I want to say, \$12,000 Canadian dollars.

For every month after that, it's a \$20,000 lari addition, which would mean that we will not be able to function if we do not register. If we are not ready to take the stigma, it will mean that basically there will be no NGOs left in this country and no free media, which is getting support from our western partners, including the U.S., Canada, the EU and so on.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you, Madam Chachava.

May I ask a follow-up question? I understand that there's been a delegation going through Washington from Georgian Dream, claiming that this legislation is designed to stave off extremist and Russian interference. In your opinion, what is the true intent of the law?

• (1620)

Ms. Ketevan Chachava: As I have mentioned, if transparency was the main idea, as Georgian Dream has tried to say.... Nobody in this sector is actually against transparency. We are already very transparent. Every NGO, on its official website.... We publish every grant we receive from our western partners.

To be honest, if there is any fraud, money or potential questions, this is not really the area that needs to be investigated. There is really none.

Unfortunately, what we can already see, from past years.... Since last March, when this law was first introduced, there has been a huge protest, and Georgian Dream has withdrawn its support for this law. Since then, a very intensive, anti-western, anti-NGO propaganda, disinformation and misinformation campaign has been carried out.

Even today, to be honest, there's already a huge danger. For example, today, my colleague was beaten in the streets, along with media representatives.

There's already quite high tension and polarization. They're saying the NGOs are agents and the NGOs are here to—I don't know—destabilize and have a colourful revolution. They're saying everybody who has studied abroad is a potential agent.

All this ongoing disinformation and misinformation is already harming the sector so much that we can see what the potential threat is here.

As I have mentioned, bringing this Russian-style law.... This is not an EU, western-style, transparent approach law. This law has a number of issues in it, including, one, fining, destabilizing and literally closing down the NGOs and media organizations, as well as potentially sending us into exile.

As we have seen with similar legislation in Russia, Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, this is not a positive potential development.

If the true side of this is a backsliding of democracy, it's going to be a true slide. The true outcome of this legislation will be silencing the independent voices that are so vital in democratic societies. That's how the very vibrant and strong civil society of Georgia, which we have been so proud of, might just disappear.

This is actually quite a dangerous zone that Georgian Dream is entering.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: I have time for one final question, for Professor Lindstaedt.

How can the Georgian government refer to this law as European when all allies have condemned it as being completely incompatible with European values?

Prof. Natasha Lindstaedt: I think that's just something that regimes.... In particular, regimes that are autocratizing try to spin things in different ways. They spin it as being European or about their sovereignty to mask the real reason behind this law.

I think it has already been mentioned that this is to deal with any kind of potential threat to the ruling party, because NGOs, to an autocratizing country, are that one big threat. They're vibrant, particularly in a country like Georgia. They are supportive of democracy—they're vital to supporting democracy—and they threaten the incumbent Georgian Dream party and the government there.

They'll try to spin it in a different way, and that's something, as I mentioned, that many autocratizing countries do. They say something, but they're really doing something else. We've seen this type of spin being used in Hungary as well, to justify these types of infringements on NGOs, but it's really a pretext to prevent any threats to their power.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lindstaedt, and thank you, Mr. Majumdar.

Now I give the floor to Madam Vandenbeld for seven minutes.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My first question is for Ketevan Chachava.

I just want to start by saying I think all of us have admiration and support, and we stand in solidarity with you and all those like you. I've seen the images of the thousands of Georgians in the street, fighting for your freedom and your democracy, for freedom of the press and for civil society.

I'm very glad that one of the things you said is that this isn't about one individual law; this is about making sure there is going to be space for democracy, civil society and media freedom in Georgia.

This is my first question for you. Can you tell us, first of all, the impact this will have, widely, on Georgian civil society and on Georgian independent media?

Could you also update us a bit about what is happening in the streets right now?

Thank you.

• (1625)

Ms. Ketevan Chachava: We truly feel and appreciate the solidarity and support. Once again, thank you so much for having us today and discussing these very stressful developments in Georgia and Canada. Thank you for all the support we have seen for the past decade, since the independence of our country.

The impact of this law on civil society is going to be crucial. There are over 30,000 registered NGOs in this country in various fields of work, from watchdog organizations working on election observations and on raising voter awareness to those fighting for human rights and for women's rights. There are a number of cases that Georgian NGOs have won in different international courts, defending the citizens of this country.

Additionally, there are a lot of regional organizations or different types of organizations that will be under this law literally closing down, for example, those who work on the smaller scale on their local issues addressing and fighting for children's rights, animals' rights, providing free food or providing services for people with disabilities or IDPs. The numbers are limitless, because this law does not have any distinction, or there's no difference based on the field of work. Sometimes there is a mix-up of this law with the potential work of lobbyists.

Again, if there is a misunderstanding, there is a law in Georgia about lobbying. If there is a need for additional clarification, that could be addressed. Once again, this law has nothing to do with transparency. This law directly attacks and abolishes civil society, basically. It destroys civil society. Once again, there's no way that an NGO in this country will register. We would be given the name "foreign agent" when we are not and have never been foreign agents. Additionally, with all the fines that are going to come every month, you can imagine that there's literally no chance of NGOs dealing with such high financial fees.

Concerning the updates on the protests, it's now 1 a.m. in Georgia, but there are already people and young people outside in the streets. Since the reintroduction of this law from April 3, street protests have not stopped. There have been thousands and even over 100,000 citizens in the streets protesting this law. The most important aspect, I think, in this protest is that it's a very clear message: no to Russian law, yes to Europe.

Our European and Euro-Atlantic integration is a main priority for Georgians. It's a main priority for our country's future. That has also been strengthened by our constitution. Therefore, yes, that has been a lot of motivation. It has given me a lot of inspiration to see a younger generation, even my children, who are 12, 13 or 14 years old, out in the streets protesting and defending their rights and their future.

Ms. Anita Vandebeld: Thank you so much for explaining all that to us.

To the young people who are in the streets—I hope that some of them are watching—know that we Canadians are standing with them and supporting them in their bravery and their courage in fighting for democracy and for their rights.

I would like to, if I have time, ask a quick question of Professor Lindstaedt.

Professor, you said that the trajectory of this law is going toward the kinds of things that are done in Russia. I note that the protesters are referring to this as the "Russian law". I know that often authoritarian regimes will use the language of democracy and will mimic and try to draw parallels where there are none in order to try to justify repressive laws and the undermining of democracy.

Could you talk a little about how that is done and how it's being played out in Georgia?

• (1630)

Prof. Natasha Lindstaedt: Do you mean how authoritarian regimes mimic democracy in general?

Ms. Anita Vandebeld: No, I mean how they use the language of democracy to cloak the fact that what they're doing is very undemocratic.

Prof. Natasha Lindstaedt: That actually touches upon the last question a bit. It's a very good question.

In addition to mimicking democracy, like the institutions, they like to use the language of democracy. In some cases, these laws have been copied by the Russian law almost verbatim, word for word. It's not clear if Russia is directing countries to do this word for word, or if they're inspired by or there is just some collaboration or coinciding interest, but we see that Russia is playing a huge role here, particularly in the countries in the post-Soviet sphere.

On using the language of democracy, why do they do this? We speculate on whether or not they're trying to showcase some kind of legitimacy to their own public and to convince them that they're living in a democratic society. To use this specific language of democracy is just a very common tool used by autocratizing countries.

We've found from surveys in authoritarian regimes, in countries that are authoritarian, that the people living in them sometimes are led to believe that they do live in a democracy and that the elections are relatively free and fair. That just shows how strong some of these propaganda campaigns have been.

In the Georgian case, it is a much more difficult case for those leading the regime, the Georgian Dream party, to convince the public that what they're doing is for democratic reasons. I think a lot of the Georgian public is well aware of what's happening, and they can't have the wool pulled over their eyes, but they use this type of—

The Chair: Can you wrap it up, please? We are out of time.

Prof. Natasha Lindstaedt: Yes.

The use of this type of lingo is often something that they do.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank our witnesses for being with us today to take part in this extremely important study. Our hearts go out to you. I want you to know that most of the members of Parliament on this committee are banned from travelling to Russia. There may already be something that unites us.

We've already talked a lot of talk about Russia since the beginning of this meeting. Ms. Lindstaedt, for the committee's information, can you demonstrate what the links are between the Russian government and the leadership in Georgia, please?

[English]

Prof. Natasha Lindstaedt: It's not exactly clear what the links are. I can base it only on what the people I interviewed said: that they're not entirely clear whether the de facto leader, Ivanishvili, has coinciding interests with Russia, as I mentioned, or is being controlled by Russia, and that's something that different people have speculated on—to what extent?

In many ways, Russia does not see the countries in the post-Soviet sphere as independent. It doesn't respect their sovereignty. There is an aggressive propaganda campaign—obviously in countries like Ukraine, but also in countries such as Georgia—to try to polarize, to try to provide this idea that western values are trying to infiltrate traditional values and also that western forces are destabilizing Georgia. Russian influence and propaganda, which we sometimes refer to as “sharp power”, because it's sort of perforating and undermining regimes, is extensive, to the degree that I can go into more detail if needed.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

That brings me to my second question, which will be for Ms. Chachava.

Some experts believe that an attempt is currently being made to distract the public from this bill and to further divide the opposition by putting LGBTQ+ issues on the political agenda, such as the same-sex marriage legislation, which, depending on the party in power, would protect family values and children.

I think this is pure propaganda to achieve certain ends, but do you have any information for us on the subject?

• (1635)

[English]

Ms. Ketevan Chachava: As I've mentioned, disinformation, misinformation and anti-western propaganda have all come together, especially for the past month but basically since last year's protests. You are correct when you mention the LGBTQI draft law, which is a draft constitutional change. At the same time that Georgia reintroduced the agents law, they have also been having meetings in the region and having these discussions with the wider public.

Honestly, there is less than six months left before our upcoming parliamentary elections, which will be extremely important, being the first fully proportional elections. As you might be aware, this could mean that for the first time Georgia will have a multi-party democracy in place. Therefore, this whole spring has been occupied by discussions of western agents; attacking NGOs; potential threats

from the west, including the LGBTQI community; and the rights of women. Those are also coming up in discussions.

As you might be aware, also in the fast track, Parliament has made a change by abolishing gender quotas for the upcoming parliamentary elections, basically with three-day discussions, and getting those gender quotas took a number of years of advocacy and fighting for. All of this legislation that has been ongoing at the same time—while there is the protest, while there is the large discussion about basically abolishing freedom of speech and freedom of assembly—of course is a warning and is a very depressing development.

As was mentioned, seeing the number of people protesting and coming out, being very loud about the importance of our constitution and defending our constitution... It is very democratic. We believe the legislation that we've mentioned is anti-constitutional. Even if these laws are adopted, for sure we will continue to fight in the constitutional courts. Then we will continue to Strasbourg and so on. Of course we will not get tired of fighting for these rights and fighting for Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic future.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: My question is for both witnesses, if they can answer it.

Is that government propaganda working in certain segments of society?

We are seeing people who are protesting, who want more freedom and who are fighting for democracy. However, does the rhetoric of the government, which is clearly trying to use different means to achieve its ends, work on certain segments of Georgian society?

[English]

Prof. Natasha Lindstaedt: Just briefly, I think it does work with a small segment of society, particularly in a country like Georgia, where there are patron and clientelistic-style elections, where there's an exchange of favours in some ways at some of these elections. Some of this propaganda does work with a segment of society, but I believe survey research has shown also that Georgia has a big chunk or a large majority of people who really do want democracy.

I'll save more time for Ketevan.

Ms. Ketevan Chachava: Thank you.

I want to say that, unfortunately, propaganda kind of works in certain amounts, of course. That's why I guess propagandists usually use propaganda. Misinformation and disinformation, with all the channels and available sources that the government has, of course is working. Fortunately, it's not working on the majority.

Again, 75% to 80% of Georgians are very strongly supportive of Georgia's EU and NATO integration. I think it has been extremely important that our western partners have been very fast. We have shared with you the links to our western partners' reactions, from the State Department to the EU to the UNDP, and all the different international organizations as well as concrete countries.

The Chair: Thank you, madam. We are over by 15 seconds.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much, ladies.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*English*]

Mr. Green, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Matthew Green (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you very much.

I would like to begin with Ms. Chachava. I'm new to this committee, and I want to offer you the opportunity to provide context. I don't have a deep background in this. I want to acknowledge that right off the bat.

What would you say to people who might be watching this committee and looking at even just your office set-up, with an American flag, a NATO flag, a European Union flag and a Ukrainian flag? What would you say to people who might look at that and say, gosh, this isn't really an organization that's kind of centred and completely focused on Georgia?

I want to offer you the opportunity to respond to that, so that we can take that off the table.

• (1640)

Ms. Ketevan Chachava: Just to give a short background about Georgia, our neighbour, Russia, is occupying 20% of our country. Georgians have been fighting to survive for many centuries, and the choice of the Georgian people to move forward with a democratic, free society has been made.

Since we gained independence over 35 years ago, Georgians have been fighting for freedom and dying for freedom. We have been moving forward to become members of NATO and the EU. Every government that has won any election in this country has always been pro-western and has been very clear that NATO and the EU are the future for Georgia. This is where we strive to be.

When it comes to the Center for Development and Democracy, thank you for the question and an opportunity to say a few words about us.

We were established in 2008, actually when Russia had occupied additional parts of Georgia and we were in a war. For us, it is crucial that we bring our country closer to you.

One of our main founding principles has been to support awareness-raising, to work with people, and we actually work with religious leaders very closely. We work with different groups of society. We try to bring dialogue. We try to overcome the polarization that our country is facing.

As you mentioned, yes, we are not hiding. Yes, it's very clear where we stand, because this is what the mission and vision of our

state has been. In the Constitution of Georgia, article 78 says that Georgia is going to become a member of the EU and NATO, and that's the mission of our country and every elected official in this country.

Of course we, as a civil society, fight for freedom—we fight for freedom of expression, we fight for freedom of speech, we fight for human rights and we fight for democracy.

We observe elections. We want to ensure the voters have their rights and that their rights are secured.

I have been educated. I just graduated from King's College London. With U.K. funding, I have been lucky enough to study in the U.S., and I have been lucky to receive Canadian support as well.

Of course, we try to bring our partners here and work together.

Mr. Matthew Green: Okay. From the outside looking in, I'm not on this committee, but I heard your testimony. What I'm trying to reconcile—and this is for all of the witnesses today—is that we look at this new response that we have in the west towards TikTok. We talk about foreign interference. We talk about foreign ownership.

My next question would be for Professor Lindstaedt. I know you're an expert in comparative politics. Recognizing that, how would you help us unpack what is being proposed in Georgia and this reaction that we're seeing in the west towards entities like TikTok, for instance?

Prof. Natasha Lindstaedt: It's my understanding that some of the issues related to TikTok have to do with concerns about surveillance and so forth, and don't really have anything to do with supporting democracy. In this case, these NGO laws are really about trying to cut at the heart of groups that are so vital for democracy, transparency and the free flow of information; they aren't about surveilling the population.

It's a really good question, but I think there are really huge differences here, because some of the people who are working for these NGOs... It's not foreigners who are working there. They are Georgians who are working there, and they rely on foreign funding to keep them afloat.

They are trying to help promote democratic values in their own country, which are important for any country that is trying to support free elections, civil society and all these types of things.

That's where I would see that the difference lies.

• (1645)

Mr. Matthew Green: It's your testimony, and I totally appreciate that. I found it very helpful.

The TikTok conversation has an element around foreign ownership but is primarily driven on the platform—its algorithms, its AI, its ability to have backdoor access—whereas what we're contemplating here is more about active NGOs on the ground that are promoting ideology that might be counter to the government's line.

Is that a fair characterization?

Prof. Natasha Lindstaedt: Exactly. They are threatening to become the Georgian Dream party.

Mr. Matthew Green: I'm going to ask a follow-up. Yes, let's segue to that—it's a good segue.

The Georgian Dream party has claimed that the foreign agents bill aims to increase transparency in foreign funding. It says that it draws inspiration from western laws like the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act.

You'll note, likely, that here in Canada one of the recommendations on foreign interference is a kind of foreign agents registry framework as well.

Could you perhaps give us a little understanding about the distinctions between Georgia's foreign agents bill and the U.S. FARA?

Prof. Natasha Lindstaedt: I think, in this instance, we're talking about the Georgian Dream party being threatened by its own people who want democracy—whether it be the opposition, journalists, academics or people who work for NGOs—rather than some sort of foreign entity. To me, that's where the distinction lies. It isn't about the free flow of information that is so critical in a democracy. It's about trying to undercut people who are trying to share transparency and information and to support civil society in—

The Chair: Thank you, Professor. I'm sorry to cut you off. Your time is up.

[*Translation*]

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for appearing before us and participating in this study.

We'll suspend the meeting.

• (1645) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1650)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

I would like to welcome our witnesses.

We have Magdalena Dembińska, full professor in the department of political science at the Université de Montréal, appearing as an individual by video conference. We are also hearing from Jeff Sahadeo, professor in the Department of Political Science at Carleton University, and Natalie Sabanadze, senior research fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House. Ms. Sabanadze is also participating by video conference.

You will have a maximum of five minutes for your presentation, which will be followed by a round of questions.

Ms. Dembińska, the floor is yours.

Ms. Magdalena Dembińska (Full Professor, Department of Political Science, Université de Montréal, As an Individual): Good afternoon, everyone.

Thank you for your invitation.

In my view, the Subcommittee on International Human Rights must monitor three interrelated aspects of the current situation in Georgia: the content of the draft law on foreign agents; instances of violent repression of peaceful protests; and parallel announcements of legislative changes targeting the LGBTQ+ community that target “gay propaganda”.

The Georgian Dream government is presenting the transparency of foreign influence draft law as being similar to the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act. The opposition, on the other hand, sees it more as modelled on the Russian legislation, with potential consequences for freedom of expression and civil society activism in general.

Comparing the content of the three statutes—the American and Russian statutes, as well as the Georgian draft law—clearly leans toward the opposition's interpretation. While the U.S. act targets individuals and political organizations that are controlled and funded predominantly by foreign governments deemed to be enemies, the Georgian draft law targets all civil society organizations, media, academic institutions, religious or sports organizations and even humanitarian organizations that are funded at a rate of 20% or more by foreign sources. All of those organizations would have to register as agents of foreign influence and, as a result, their activities would be closely monitored.

Although the draft law does not mention which foreign power is concerned, the rhetoric of the government and members of Georgian Dream is clear: Western influence is being targeted.

An event slipped under the radar as a result of the tensions surrounding the draft law on foreign agents. On April 19 of this year, the Georgian Parliament introduced amendments to tax legislation. Those amendments facilitate financial exchanges, especially with Russia, and investments in tax havens. The amendments clearly benefit the founder of the ruling party, Bidzina Ivanichvili, a Georgian millionaire who got rich in Russia, and Russian oligarchs.

Why did the government decide to introduce the legislation on foreign agents now? Why do so at all, knowing that mass protests will follow? The same draft law had already been proposed in the spring of 2023, but it was withdrawn as a result of massive street protests. This is déjà vu. Experts are speculating, but there is every reason to believe that this is an election strategy. Parliamentary elections will take place in October 2024—I could talk more about that, as needed. It also may have seemed timely, as Europe and the United States are busy elsewhere, focused on their own upcoming elections and so on. Also, since it has already been a candidate for membership in the European Union since last December, Georgia feels, in the short term, that the stick is less important than in 2023.

Is the situation beyond Georgian Dream's control? Although the governing party was counting on the fatigue and exhaustion of the protest movement owing to the slow legislative process, the use of force against protesters can have the opposite effect on the resolve of protesters and the potential rallying of otherwise very fractured opposition forces. So this is an attempt to distract the public and divide the opposition further by bringing LGBTQ+ issues and legislation banning same-sex marriage back on the political agenda. However, despite the overwhelming support—some 80%—of the population for membership in the European Union and NATO, this societal issue is divisive and, with all the propaganda, has the potential to rally some of the undecided voters.

The Orthodox Church and social conservatism are still well rooted in the Georgian public sphere, all in a society where 62% of people report feeling unrepresented by existing political parties and where perspectives on society diverge between urban centres and rural spaces.

Another card that Georgian Dream is playing is the threat of a second front in Georgia opening if neighbouring Russia is provoked. The memory of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war is strong, as is the lack of western support to push Russia back from the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

• (1655)

The Chair: You have 40 seconds left, Ms. Dembińska.

Ms. Magdalena Dembińska: Although the government has so far been rather balanced between EU membership and increased trade and air travel with its northern neighbour, it is now clear that Georgian Dream is moving closer to Russia, benefiting the economic interests of some of its members. The society, which is largely pro-western, is at the same time torn apart by fear of armed conflict, by values, and by fear of the economic and social consequences of turning away from Russia caused by geography.

In short, the draft law on foreign agents goes beyond human rights. What is currently playing out in the streets of Tbilisi and in the elections in October is the type of political regime and the geopolitical orientation of the—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dembińska. I apologize for cutting you off, but I have no choice.

Ms. Magdalena Dembińska: I've said everything I had to say.

The Chair: That's perfect.

Mr. Sahadeo, you have the floor for five minutes.

[English]

Dr. Jeff Sahadeo (Professor, Department of Political Science, Carleton University, As an Individual): Thank you to the committee for inviting me.

I'm Jeff Sahadeo, professor of political science at Carleton University. I have lived and worked in Georgia for parts of three years now and have many friends and colleagues involved in the demonstrations.

I want to talk first about the motivations behind the bill's introduction. As it's been said before, with elections approaching in a few months, Georgian Dream wants, basically, to cut off any inde-

pendent outlets that might critically examine the run-up to the election, offer the alternative parties a voice or survey the election to offer some kind of independent count.

Georgian Dream are determined not to lose this election. I do not think they will accept a loss in the election. Right now, their support hovers around 25%, which is more than any of the other parties in a proportional representation but certainly makes them far from comfortable that they will actually legitimately form a majority. They have already gone to the trouble of deregistering far-right parties so they can't split the vote, and Georgian Dream have moved to try to occupy that space themselves.

Another argument for the timing is basically a chaos theory argument that Georgian Dream want demonstrations. They want this opposition—perhaps they didn't appreciate the extent to which they would get it—to keep the opposition on the defensive. If there are clashes, they can blame youth or they can blame these pro-western organizations. They can also exhaust the opposition before the elections.

There's the question of state capture, where the ruling party controls more and more of the economy and society. This has already been discussed. Again, to follow up on Professor Dembińska's comments, this law allows them to go after everybody. They've been very open about that. They've argued that there are 26,000 NGOs in Georgia, a country of four million people. To count that, they have to count every independent organization that's not part of the government. There are very heavy fines. These include on media organizations and the like. They want to foster this narrative of decadent young people who do not profess to follow the language, fatherland and faith triad that Georgian Dream are actively pursuing.

In terms of a re-emergence of Bidzina Ivanishvili, who's come out of the shadows now, as a background, his fortune of about \$5 billion is equivalent to one-third of the entire GDP of the country. It's 10 times more than any other oligarch has in any other country. He has largely wielded power behind the scenes, so when he came out and gave a speech last week in which he attacked the “global party of war”, it was ironic that he did not name Russia—which occupies 20% of Georgia and of course has invaded Ukraine—but rather attacked internal enemies.

It's a clear turn towards the language of Viktor Orbán in Hungary. We've seen how Robert Fico in Slovakia uses language. Irakli Kobakhidze of Georgian Dream, who's the prime minister, was at CPAC in Budapest. As has already been discussed, he is relying heavily on his anti-LGBTQ program.

In fact, I was talking to a colleague of mine who went home for Easter. In conversations with her older relatives in the village, they were saying that some of these people who believe this Georgian Dream propaganda are now actually starting to associate Europe with LGBTQ rights. This is exactly the Georgian Dream scenario.

Pro-European is now starting to mean different things, and that's how Georgian Dream is trying to manipulate society with propaganda, but there's a vulnerability to it. There is a very conservative portion of society in Georgia.

Ivanishvili, again, has not been attacking Russia. Money laundering from Russia to Georgia has increased significantly since the war. Georgian Dream has restored flights between Tbilisi and Moscow, which had been cancelled, so we are at a tipping point.

To conclude, this law's at the tip of an iceberg. What's motivating a lot of the protests is the mobility issue to Europe. From a country of four million, there's potentially about a million Georgians who are working illegally now in the European Union. Of course, there are many working legally, too. This need to escape to Europe is the card the European Union can play, the need for young Georgians to work in Europe.

In a society that's increasingly impoverished, Georgian Dream do not want to talk about socio-economic issues. They want to talk about foreign agents. They want to talk about LGBTQ.

Thank you.

• (1700)

The Chair: Thank you, Professor. That was perfect—five minutes.

Now I would like to invite Madam Natalie Sabanadze.

You have the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Natalie Sabanadze (Senior Research Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Programme, Chatham House): Thank you very much. It is a great honour to address you on this topic, which is very important for Georgia.

I would like to start by describing this law as a perfect case of the weaponization of transparency. Under the pretext of transparency and openness, it definitely aims at silencing and delegitimizing civil society, undermining independent media and simply suppressing dissent and freedom of expression and thought.

Georgia has a vibrant civil society, and this is entirely thanks to foreign, namely western, support. Georgia's partners have invested in democracy promotion since Georgia regained independence in the early nineties, and that is exactly what resulted in Georgia's being a free country, despite not being a perfect consolidated democracy.

In the official narrative justifying the law, it is being compared to similar American, British, French and other legislation. FARA, the American act, is most frequently invoked and, incidentally, was also most frequently invoked by Putin when he introduced a foreign agents law.

These acts aim at unfriendly countries and organizations that lobby on their behalf. The Georgian law aims at friends who helped out through difficult years of transition and invested in making Georgia more democratic and, in fact, more transparent. If FARA and similar acts target enemies, Georgian law targets friends, namely its western supporters, with whom we want to be institutionally linked through membership in the European Union and NATO.

According to this draft—we've heard this many times—every organization that receives more than 20% of foreign funding will have to declare itself as an agent of foreign influence. This will cover not only media and civil society organizations but also academic institutions and research centres. There is no significant local

funding for this, and even if there was, I think you can imagine that the selection criteria would be very strict, a total loyalty to the ruling party. Both in its letter and its spirit, this bill bears a close resemblance to the foreign agents law passed in Russia.

This is why protesters in Tbilisi call it the “Russian law”, and we have seen how this law has destroyed civil society in Russia. Furthermore, Russia has been amending this law and making it even more draconian, expanding its scope of application from organizations to individuals. People are encouraged to spy on each other and denounce their acquaintances and neighbours as potential foreign agents or suspected foreign agents. The ease with which labels—such as “traitors” and “enemies of the people”—are applied is eerie, especially in the country that lived through the horrors of Stalinism.

The political motives that underpin both the Russian and Georgian laws are the same. These are prevention of the so-called coloured revolutions; suppression of critical voices; eradication of western influence, especially western democracy-promotion measures; and destruction of an open, pluralistic society. In the case of Georgia, there is an additional and very important factor: Georgia's European integration.

The adoption of this law will be a serious obstacle to the opening of accession negotiations. When a similar law was adopted in Hungary, the European Court of Justice struck it down, deeming it incompatible with European law and values.

Official statements from high-level EU representatives all warn the Georgian government against the adoption of this law and call on the authorities not to jeopardize Georgia's prospects of full European integration.

Thousands of people who are standing in the streets of Tbilisi are fighting for their future. They see clearly the choice. One is turning Georgia into a Russian-style autocracy, and the other is becoming a European democracy. The majority of them have made their choice, except that it has to be defended now.

Thank you.

• (1705)

The Chair: Thank you. Now, we open the floor for questions.

We'll start with Mr. Majumdar. You have the floor for four minutes, please.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: I'll start the questions with Ambassador Sabanadze. Thank you for that presentation.

You were the voice of Georgia to the European Union. Do you believe Europe has the strength today to confront Russian interference in Georgia?

Ms. Natalie Sabanadze: That's a very good question, and I think that's something the European officials are really struggling with.

What is happening in Georgia is a surprise for Brussels. In fact, it's a surprise to many people, me included, because you are right: I was representing Georgia in Brussels for eight years, and I was doing it under this government. I resigned three years ago when I saw that the direction was changing dramatically.

Georgia, for many in the EU, could have been taken for granted, because Georgia was so determined to join the European Union and NATO. It was ready and did bear costs for it. The 2008 war is just one example.

Therefore, the kind of shift is really extraordinary. It is a dramatic departure from the foreign policy trajectory that Georgia has been pursuing since the restoration of independence.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you.

Ms. Natalie Sabanadze: With this pivot and how the EU can deal with it, on the one hand, it has candidate status and it has accession negotiations. It tries now to negotiate and put pressure on the government and say that if they pass this law, they will not move on to another stage. I think this is the only thing the EU can do.

However, the Georgian government propaganda can use this against the EU and say, you see, they are the ones who don't want us. Therefore, it puts the EU in a very difficult position.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you very much.

Let me ask a follow-up question, because I think we heard Professor Sahadeo describe how Ivanishvili might react under a variety of scenarios. Assuming that the protesters become increasingly agitated into the summer and create a kind of instability, how do you think Ivanishvili's government would react to them? Would they cross the Rubicon into being violent?

• (1710)

Ms. Natalie Sabanadze: I don't know. This is very difficult to predict. What I know is that we are watching almost the same film over and over again. This is not the first time that has happened in Georgia. In fact, in Georgia, the rule is to change the government through street protests rather than through the ballot box.

The last time, with the Rose Revolution, Shevardnadze conceded. Saakashvili conceded too, even though it was a parliamentary kind of loss of power. However, the situation was pretty much pre-revolutionary.

This time, we are very close to this kind of political crisis, and I'm not so sure this government will concede quite so easily. Therefore, I think this is a dangerous moment in Georgia.

You've heard that this is the second time they've brought this law. Backing down a second time is politically more costly than it was the first time, and the protesters are also determined to fight until the very end. Therefore, it is really difficult to foresee who is going to give up first and whether this will become violent.

That is not the plan of the protesters, though. I think people will try to do everything to avoid it, but it can also be provoked. We

have seen cases where they sent some provocateurs to beat people up, etc., so every scenario is possible.

The Chair: Thank you, Ambassador. Thank you, Mr. Majumdar.

Madam Damoff, you have the floor for four minutes, please.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Dembińska, in your opening remarks, you mentioned gay propaganda and talked about LGBTQ2 rights.

You did as well, Mr. Sahadeo.

I'm just wondering if you can elaborate a little on how this law is tied to those rights. You also mentioned same-sex marriage.

Ms. Magdalena Dembińska: I will clarify. Yes, they're two different laws.

The bill on foreign agents is something that is on the table now, but it was also on the table last year. All the issues concerning legislation on LGBTQ+ have also been on the political agenda for some time.

However, what some experts and I observe is that the timing of the proposals to change the legislation on the issues of LGBTQ+ and same-sex marriage right now serves Georgian Dream in trying to divide the opposition in society.

There have been huge protests against the law on foreign agents, and maybe it was a miscalculation by Georgian Dream to put it on the agenda, but putting the laws about LGBTQ+ on the table right now serves to try to divide the opposition. That is because this is something that some portion of Georgian society is receptive to because of the conservative values, the Georgian Orthodox Church and its importance in Georgian society.

As was mentioned, framing them as European values and suggesting that Europeanization comes with these laws and LGBTQ+, etc., is propaganda and serves the purpose of dividing the opposition.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you very much. I don't have much time left, but I'm going to pass it over to my colleague.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you.

I also want to join my colleagues in saluting the courage and convictions of Georgians who have been in the streets over the course of the past month.

I will just ask Professor Sahadeo something. Thank you for coming back. I'm very grateful. Those were very insightful opening remarks.

I was wondering if, in your opinion, the Georgian Dream party is still interested in joining the EU. It's enshrined in its constitution, but I'm somewhat puzzled as to whether or not it's still interested.

• (1715)

The Chair: Answer in 40 seconds, please.

Prof. Jeff Sahadeo: I think the answer is no. I think this is why Ivanishvili came out with that speech last week. It was to make that pivot.

Now, his official line is, “Oh, we'll join by 2030, when we can be sure that the EU will allow us to keep our own sovereignty.” To this argument that we need the EU and the EU has these potential cudgels against us, he says, “We have a friend in Hungary, and he'll block anything the EU can do to us. It's better to stay out for now. We'll wait for more Orbáns and more Ficos, and more Melonis in Italy, and then perhaps we'll join.”

I think the answer to that is no—

The Chair: Thank you, Professor.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, go ahead for four minutes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for joining us for this important study.

Ms. Dembińska, the Georgian draft law stipulates that all Georgian media and non-governmental organizations must register as “conductors of the interests of a foreign power” if more than 20% of their annual revenue comes from abroad.

Do you have an idea of the number of media outlets that could be affected in Georgia?

If you can't answer my question, I won't hold it against you.

Ms. Magdalena Dembińska: I can't give you the exact number, so thank you for not holding it against me.

That said, independent media in civil society and non-governmental organizations benefit greatly from the support and funding of other countries, including western countries. There are a lot of independent media, but I put “a lot” in quotation marks because I don't know the exact number. Perhaps the ambassador would be in a better position to answer you. This is a matter of survival for independent media in Georgia.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ambassador, in the last round of questions, the Orthodox Church was brought up, which piqued my curiosity.

Currently, what are the links between the party in power and the clergy? Are they working hand in hand, or are they operating separately, without interconnection?

[*English*]

Ms. Natalie Sabanadze: Yes, there is officially—and constitutionally, of course—a clear separation, but traditionally the Orthodox Church has played a very important role. In general, because it's a national Georgian Orthodox Church, there is a tradition of identifying the role of the church and Christianity with a kind of self-identification in Georgia, because of the region where it is lo-

cated, that it's just Georgians and Armenians who are Christian nations and so on.

In this particular case, and lately, the church has become very closely linked to the government ruling party. It also has traditionally had strong ties with the Russian Orthodox Church. Even though the Georgian Church is independent, the ties are very strong, and it's definitely a conservative force. It has an influence. The patriarch is considered to be a person that many people respect very much, one of the most respected personalities in Georgia, so the position the church takes vis-à-vis certain issues is quite important.

Normally, they are very conservative. They were against anti-discrimination laws, for instance, that Georgia had to pass in order to get visa liberalization with the EU. They are certainly against LGBTQ+ rights.

In this case, they have been relatively balanced but still supportive of the government position.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I think I have time for one more question.

Ms. Dembińska, you gave us three elements to consider: the content of the draft law, the repression of protests and legislation on LGBTQ+ issues. We understand that all of that is related. The consequences are protests and repression, but fundamentally, what the committee must understand, and what several witnesses have said today, is that the government is trying to create a diversion through legislation that will attack the rights of the LGBTQ+ community in order to pass its draft law on foreign agents.

Do I have a clear understanding of the issues?

• (1720)

Ms. Magdalena Dembińska: The goal is not really to pass the draft law on foreign agents. They have enough votes in Parliament to do that—

The Chair: You have a few seconds left.

Ms. Magdalena Dembińska: Okay.

Rather, it is about dividing the opposition, which is already fragmented and very divided. The protests and violence we are seeing in the streets of Tbilisi right now could rally the otherwise fragmented opposition, but legislation on LGBTQ+ issues is being used to try to divide the opposition and prevent that unification.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dembińska.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you so much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Green, you have the floor for four minutes, please.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you very much. I'm going to begin with Professor Sahadeo.

What levers, if any, does Canada have to influence the outcomes or put international pressure on the Dream party, the ruling party in Georgia?

Prof. Jeff Sahadeo: It's a great question.

The first thing we can do, as we heard in the previous speaker's statement, is to show our support for the protesters in Georgia to make it clear that we do not tolerate violent actions by the security services. I know that we don't have an embassy on the ground there, but we can observe very carefully, and we can condemn.

The key actors here, I think, are the security services. How much violence would they be willing to use if Georgian Dream orders them to? Traditionally, that's the way governments have fallen: The security services decide that enough is enough in terms of attacking their own people. I think that if we can keep the focus on the demonstrators, on support for them, and on awareness and condemnation of the security services, and make it clear to the leadership, to the security services, that western countries are watching them....

Also, the other key element in this is the individual members of the Georgian Dream party, not the leadership. I think that one of the reasons Ivanishvili came out with that speech is to harden some of the Georgian Dream members who are not so excited about this law, especially after it has had these massive protests, and would be willing to shift the law.

Now, what's going to happen is that the law likely is going to be adopted. The president can then veto this law. It's ceremonial. The president will veto it and send it back with modifications and suggestions. That is a time when we can start to approach Georgian Dream members and talk to them about the way this law might be modified to make it more like a western-style law: They can keep their law if they want but take off the edges of it. I think we could do that, and that would allow elections to be held fairly. I think there is a role for Canada to play.

Mr. Matthew Green: I'll put the same question to Professor Dembińska.

Could you answer succinctly, please?

Ms. Magdalena Dembińska: Our role in Canada is rather limited. I would repeat what Professor Sahadeo said. It's Europe. Europe has many more carrots and sticks right now than Canada may have. Although, because we are in NATO, we could play that card.

The importance is to put pressure to show our commitment to democracy in Georgia, etc., but it is much more about internal affairs than about external affairs.

Mr. Matthew Green: Ambassador, do you have any reflections on ways in which we might be able to pull levers to help support people on the ground, the popular movements that are calling for better democracy there?

Ms. Natalie Sabanadze: I agree with the point about the need to protect protesters. I think they're the really vulnerable ones. Consistent and incremental international pressure does work.

The Georgian Dream is not as susceptible as some other governments were in Georgia, but it is still important, and people hear it, so I think that should be maintained.

I also agree with Professor Dembińska that NATO is an area for Canada to look at.

In addition to that, it's very important to send a clear message to those who are destroying democracy in Georgia that there will be some consequences. That should be coordinated. I think it's one thing for individual countries to do it, but it's another thing to do it in a coordinated manner. Canada and the U.S., Georgia's close partners who have supported Georgia for years—and I have seen Canadian funding for many years for extremely important projects—have ambassadors on the ground or delegations from the capitals who should send a unanimous message on what the consequences of this will be.

• (1725)

The Chair: Thank you, Ambassador.

[Translation]

I want to thank the witnesses for their testimony and their participation in our study.

[English]

Thank you all for your participation; it's highly appreciated.

[Translation]

I am asking the committee members if they agree not to go in camera, so as not to lose two or three minutes.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The committee will now proceed to the consideration of matters related to committee business, Mr. Majumdar.

I remind you that the deadline for submitting witnesses for the study on the current human rights situation in Iran is Wednesday, May 8, at 5 p.m.

A budget of \$7,500 for the study on Georgia's draft law on foreign agents was distributed to all members of the subcommittee.

Is it the pleasure of the subcommittee to adopt the budget?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Now, the subcommittee will resume consideration of Mr. Majumdar's motion that was proposed on Tuesday, April 30 and distributed to everyone on Wednesday, May 1.

[English]

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: I wasn't aware that we were doing committee business, but if we are, I think that we should do it in camera, as we always do. I thought that we were just doing the budget. I didn't think we were going to be discussing studies.

The Chair: You prefer to go to in camera.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Absolutely, or we can do it at the next meeting.

The Chair: I believe we will be out of time.

What do you think, Mr. Majumdar?

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: We agreed that we would discuss this item today, but we don't have time to go in camera, so we can push it to the next meeting, in good faith, knowing that you've had a week to consider this motion. I just want to make sure we get due consideration.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: On a point of order, I'd like to clarify two things, Mr. Chair.

First of all, would the members be willing to do a short statement on everything that we heard, for the committee to release? Could we ask the analysts to draft something? That would be subject to your approval.

Second, you mentioned Sudan. I want to confirm that all the members are in favour of slotting that in a few weeks from now.

Thanks.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Lake.

Hon. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Wetaskiwin, CPC): Anita said that we should discuss committee business in camera, and those are both committee business items. We've moved on from one agenda item to a different agenda item, and we ought—

The Chair: Pam, go ahead, please.

Thank you.

Ms. Pam Damoff: In fairness, when we have witnesses and a committee that gets delayed by votes, we could get members to sub in for us so that we don't have to cut our meetings short, Chair. I think we have resources to six o'clock. Normally we get a full two hours after votes. Maybe we can all try to get subs if we're not able to stay for the full two hours. I think it would be fair to the study and to the witnesses we get.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Damoff.

Go ahead, Mr. Lake.

Hon. Mike Lake: That's really not the case. Traditionally, committees that are due to end at 5:30 end at 5:30 by default. I don't know where this new idea comes from.

We all have calendars. We can agree by unanimous consent to extend, but it's not by default that it goes two hours. If the government decides to have votes, we have votes, and committee time ends at 5:30.

I have 20 constituents who I'm having dinner with at 5:30. I'm going to be late, and I need to be there, but that's not my fault.

The committee time is 5:30. It's 5:30 right now.

• (1730)

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: In that case, I move to adjourn.

The Chair: Pam, do you want to talk?

Ms. Pam Damoff: In every other committee that I'm on, that is what we're told by the chair. We get two hours of committee time. I have not heard from any other committee a hard and fast rule.

Maybe, for the next meeting, Chair, you could clarify that for us so that we know moving forward.

The Chair: I have asked the clerk to comment on this. I believe she will come back with the right answer.

Mr. Ehsassi, go ahead.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: No one is suggesting that Mr. Lake should be denied the opportunity to meet with 20 of his constituents. We would like him to do so. It's just that, if this is going to happen, we can have substitutes, as we do on any other occasion.

Thank you.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Lake.

Hon. Mike Lake: On that note, we don't know when we're going to have votes. I didn't know that we had two votes until we were already having the votes. I couldn't have arranged for a sub because I didn't know that we were having two votes today. That happens in the House of Commons more often than not right now, in a minority Parliament.

I move that we adjourn.

The Chair: Is everything agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you. The meeting is adjourned.

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