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Chair: Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury

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• (1545)

[*Translation*]

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

I would like to welcome all members and all witnesses.

Witnesses will be given a maximum of five minutes for their remarks, after which we will proceed with a round of questions.

Welcome, Ms. Puyosa, Ms. Marin and Mr. Smolansky. I invite you to make your opening statement of up to five minutes each.

Colleagues, one of the witnesses, David Smolansky, will have to leave the meeting at 4:20. If you have specific questions for Mr. Smolansky, I invite you to ask them during the first two rounds of questions.

[*English*]

Mr. Smolansky, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. David Smolansky (Deputy Director, ConVzla Presidential Campaign): Thank you, Chair and members of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Venezuela has reached its breaking point, testing the limits of civility, politics and diplomacy. On July 28, the country held a presidential election that both the United Nations and the Carter Center declared lacked transparency and integrity. Despite these adversities, democratic opposition candidate Edmundo González Urrutia won in a historic landslide, defeating Nicolás Maduro by nearly four million votes, the largest margin in Venezuelan history.

The democratic movement, led by María Corina Machado, who was illegally disqualified by the dictatorship from running for president after winning the opposition's primary a year ago, put on an epic performance during the July 28 election. We organized more than 600,000 people as witnesses and volunteers, who collected, preserved and published the voting records for the world to see.

This unprecedented display of civil resistance in the face of authoritarian regimes has inspired many pro-democracy movements around the globe. This effort exposed the extensive fraud orchestrated by the regime-controlled electoral council and supreme court. We won, and we have proven it. The regime knows it, and the international community knows it as well.

If the criminal regime remains in power, a wave of migration and regional instability are inevitable. Neutrality is not an option; it is complicity. The leaders of the regime must face individual sanc-

tions, and the International Criminal Court must move forward with issuing an arrest warrant for crimes against humanity.

The Venezuelan people have shown immense bravery by overwhelmingly voting for change, despite relentless repression. As a call to action, I urge the recognition of Edmundo González as the president-elect of Venezuela. It is essential to implement individual sanctions against those responsible for the election fraud and for the human rights violations, to shut down the regime's torture centres and to work with partners in the region and beyond to tackle the narcotics activities emanating from Venezuela.

I have recent data here that I wanted to show, but I have a technical problem.

Two months after the election, security forces and non-state armed groups loyal to the regime have killed 27 people and carried out more than 2,000 illegal detentions. Among the detained are at least 107 teenagers and 216 women, with numerous reports of brutal torture. Children have been tortured with punches and electric shocks, while women have faced sexual abuse in common jails. The regime's security forces have also launched a "knock-knock operation", going door to door after thousands of volunteers and after leaders of the democratic movement.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has stated that the regime is engaging in a state of terrorism, while the UN fact-finding mission has reported that Venezuela has reached unprecedented levels of repression. According to some NGOs and official figures, tens of thousands of Venezuelans have fled the country since July 28, adding to the eight million Venezuelans who have already left. The refugee crisis now surpasses the displacement of people from Syria and Ukraine.

The Venezuelan humanitarian crisis is the most severe in the western hemisphere. According to the World Food Programme, 9.3 million Venezuelans cannot eat three times a day, making it the largest population in this condition in the region and the fourth largest globally, compared only with countries like Yemen, Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Meanwhile, according to Transparency International, 21% of Venezuela's economy is driven by illicit activities, such as drug trafficking, mining and human trafficking.

• (1550)

The regime's survival has been made possible by the support of Cuba, Russia, China and Iran. Cuba has provided critical expertise in repression, Russia has supplied military backing, China has provided technology for social control, and Iran has assisted in evading sanctions and bolstering counter-intelligence operations.

Again, neutrality is not an option. That is complicity. We urge the international community to act before it is too late.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Smolansky.

Colleagues, does anyone have any specific questions? Our guest has to leave soon, so we are not going in order.

Mr. Majumdar.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar (Calgary Heritage, CPC): Thank you very much.

David, it's very good to see you. Thank you for taking some time to be at committee today to share your views.

You were on the presidential campaign for Edmundo González, the individual who everybody recognizes won the election, except for those in the Maduro regime. The Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has failed to denounce Venezuela's sham election and Maduro's authoritarian regime.

From your perspective, how did this happen?

Mr. David Smolansky: As I said in my remarks, we are asking the Government of Canada and the international community in general to recognize Edmundo González Urrutia as the president-elect of Venezuela. This action will respect what the majority of Venezuelans said in the July 28 presidential election. At the same time, it will respect what our constitution says. The Venezuelan constitution says that, when you have a presidential election with different candidates participating, the candidate with most of the votes becomes the president-elect. After that, on January 10, he starts the administration.

An action that will help a lot in this epic effort that millions of Venezuelans have made this year is to recognize president-elect Edmundo González Urrutia and—if I may add—protect the integrity of María Corina Machado, who is in Venezuela fearing persecution by the regime. Recently, just a few days ago, members of her team, specifically her security team, were kidnapped by security forces in the regime. Members of the campaign, as we speak, have refugee status in the Argentine embassy, where they have been for more than 200 days.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Johns, go ahead, please.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Thank you so much for your testimony.

You talked about the International Criminal Court investigation that's been opened up. Can you talk about the importance of that ICC investigation and its potential value in addressing human rights violations? Also, what alternative mechanisms should be considered to address the ongoing situation in Venezuela, beyond the International Criminal Court investigation?

Mr. David Smolansky: There has been an ongoing investigation at the International Criminal Court for more than five years. I have to express my gratitude that Canada was one of the first countries to support that investigation in 2019, when it started, along with others in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The investigation is against different members of the regime who, according to almost 10,000 victims, have committed or ordered crimes against humanity. The different types of crimes are despicable. As I said in my remarks, right now there are at least 107 teenagers who have been detained since July 28. As we speak, 64 remain in jail. Most of them are in common jails. Children have been tortured with electric shocks and punches. Also, we have innocent women—part of the democratic movement—who have been illegally detained and sexually abused. There are different political leaders who are, right now, also illegally detained in the biggest torture jail in Latin America and the Caribbean, El Helicoido.

That is why it is important for Attorney Khan and the International Criminal Court to speed up the investigation and issue arrest warrants against those responsible for ordering or committing crimes against humanity.

• (1555)

The Chair: Alexis, go ahead, please.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): [*Member spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you very much for joining us, Mr. Smolansky. I am pleased to meet you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Smolansky, I think the world is closely watching everything that's happening in Venezuela. International political pressure may not be as strong as it should be.

I think my colleague Mr. Majumdar spoke just before me about what Canada could do.

I have two questions for you.

First, how much can Canada do? Are you asking Canada to impose sanctions, for example, on the regime's leaders? Can it do that?

Secondly, I'd like you to give us a picture of the extent of corruption in Venezuela, including within the judiciary.

How pervasive is corruption among judges, and how important is that politically?

Thank you, Mr. Smolansky.

[*English*]

Mr. David Smolansky: Thank you so much for your questions.

Regarding the first question, yes, as I said in my remarks, it is important that Canada implement individual sanctions against those in Venezuela who are responsible for committing crimes against humanity, violating human rights and being involved in drug trafficking, illegal mining and human trafficking, and also those who are responsible for corruption and money laundering. Venezuela, according to Transparency International, is one of the most corrupt countries in the world.

As I also said in my remarks, at least 21% of the economy in Venezuela today is driven by illicit activities, which is really striking when you consider that Venezuela is the country with the largest proven oil reserves in the world. I have to say that Venezuela is not producing oil, not because of the sanctions, but because of corruption. Your question is very accurate. Venezuela used to produce 3.2 million barrels of oil a day when Chávez came to power 25 years ago. When sanctions were implemented five years ago, Venezuela was already producing only one million barrels of oil a day, so the oil company was already in shatters. By the way, those sanctions were lifted a year ago, with the compromise from the regime to recognize the results of the presidential election. But you see what is going on. They have not recognized it yet, even though we have proven that we won.

According to different scholars, it is estimated that in Venezuela during these 25 years, at least \$300 billion was stolen. Obviously, that scheme of corruption has involved important members of the judicial system, including judges and someone who has a very important role now, Attorney General Tarek William Saab, the one who is also ordering illegal detentions on a daily basis.

If I may—I'm sorry if this answer is taking longer—we need to understand that corruption in Venezuela is not as you might see it in other parts, because Venezuela is now run a lot on illicit activities. I would like to, in this case, raise awareness of the drug trafficking that is coming from Venezuela. A lot of the cocaine that is produced in Colombia, Bolivia and Peru goes through Venezuela and ends up in the Caribbean or Europe.

This situation—the illicit activities, the violations of human rights, the crimes against humanity, the brutal persecutions against the population—has created the largest migration and refugee crisis in the world right now. Eight million people have fled Venezuela, which is more people than have fled Ukraine and Syria.

Thank you.

• (1600)

The Chair: Thank you.

I would just like to mention that we have exceeded 10 minutes with our esteemed witness. We can either stop or continue. It's up to the committee entirely.

Mr. David Smolansky: I have time to continue, Chair.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In my opinion, Mr. Chair, we should continue the conversation with Mr. Smolansky, without wishing to take time away from the other witnesses. We have two witnesses whom we can question during the last hour of the meet-

ing. Mr. Smolansky has considerable experience with Venezuela. I wish he could spend a few more minutes with us.

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

[English]

Okay, we will continue.

We have Ms. Damoff, please.

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

Thank you for being with us today.

I want to correct something my Conservative colleague said, that the PM didn't say anything about the election. Minister Joly put out a statement on September 9 condemning what was happening in Venezuela. I just want to get that on the record.

You and your family have lived with persecution in Venezuela for generations now. I appreciate your coming, and I appreciate the work that you've been doing for your home country. It's really quite horrible, and Canadians aren't paying attention to what's happening in Venezuela, which is also an issue. I appreciate your being here to shine a spotlight on it.

I was in Costa Rica this summer and went to a migrant shelter. All the families I met there were from Venezuela and had travelled through the Darién Gap, many of them losing loved ones as they came through there. They had left because of the absolutely horrific conditions that exist in Venezuela.

I wonder if you could talk a bit more about the migrant crisis and what Canada can do, in terms of what's happening, to assist people who are being forced to leave Venezuela.

Mr. David Smolansky: Thank you so much, distinguished member of the subcommittee, for your words and your question.

I had the opportunity, before being in this role, to work at the Organization of American States for five years to address the Venezuelan migration and refugee crisis. I had the opportunity to visit more than 11 countries across the region, including Canada. That was between 2018 and 2023.

As of the moment of this hearing, there are eight million Venezuelan migrants and refugees, as I said earlier. It's the largest migration crisis in the world, surpassing that of Ukraine, which has been facing a brutal invasion since 2022, and surpassing that of Syria, which has been in a civil conflict for more than a decade. Three million of those eight million are in Colombia, 1.2 million are in the U.S., 1.5 million are in Peru, and approximately 500,000 are in Brazil, Chile and Ecuador—there are 500,000 Venezuelans in each of those countries.

However, it goes beyond that. There are 220,000 Venezuelans in Argentina, 150,000 in Mexico, 120,000 in Panama, more than 120,000 in the Dominican Republic, and approximately 50,000 in Trinidad and Tobago—that is already about 4% of the population. Also, approximately 30,000 Venezuelans are in the ABC islands—Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao.

One of my main concerns is that if Maduro prevails by force, more people are going to flee. Some organizations are predicting that this migration outflow could jump from eight million to 10 million by 2025. Last year was the year when the most Venezuelans crossed the Darién Gap—350,000. By the way, some of them entered Canada after crossing into the United States.

It is important to understand that the only solution to stop Venezuelans from fleeing their own country is to restore democracy and freedom in Venezuela. People are not fleeing for any other reason. The only reason people are fleeing the country is that they're facing a brutal dictatorship. People are fleeing because of human rights violations, lack of electricity, lack of water, hyperinflation, shortages of food, shortages of medicine, and crime.

I would respectfully ask the members of this subcommittee to implement any efforts you can to protect Venezuelan migrants and refugees, and to integrate them into Canada, not deport them. When Venezuelans are deported to their own country, they face severe harassment and threats once they get there. I respectfully ask this subcommittee to promote policies to protect and integrate the Venezuelan migrants arriving in Canada.

We are not leaving our country because we want to. We have fled the country because we didn't have any other option.

Thank you.

• (1605)

The Chair: Mr. Majumdar, you have the floor.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: David, thank you for describing the scale of what we're dealing with: eight million displaced and \$300 billion stolen by the socialist thugs of Maduro. I have tremendous Venezuelan neighbours in southwest Calgary, who have been anxious about their own families and about the technologies Maduro has been using to control the people through cellphone apps, access to information and censorship.

You know, I think of Ottawa as a place that could be a capital in the world that has courage when it comes to these issues. However, to my Liberal colleague's point earlier, I don't think Ottawa has shown up as a voice of courage or moral leadership when it comes to standing alongside the people of Venezuela, especially when our American partners—with their clear perspective on the values of our region, and their clear security interests for our own continent—are out of sync with what Ottawa is putting out.

Let me come back to the deplorable dictatorship Venezuela is dealing with. To your knowledge, what kind of partnership does this deplorable, despotic, socialist thug regime have with other ones, such as Iran, Russia or Cuba?

Mr. David Smolansky: Thank you very much for the question, distinguished member of the subcommittee.

I would say that Maduro's regime has four strong allies at this moment. It could be more, but the four are the main pillars to keep it in power. One is Cuba, which has been there from day one. For 25 years, we have had thousands of Cubans in Venezuela who have served as intel and counter-intel agents. There are bilateral agreements between Cuba and Venezuela.

Something very powerful is that the fact-finding mission of the United Nations released a report—if I'm not wrong, it was a year or two ago—which said that, according to victims, Cuban agents advise and participate in tortures in Venezuela.

The presence of Cuban agents has been felt after July 28 with this knock-knock operation—in Spanish, “*Operación Tun Tun*”—which is basically having agents of the security forces knocking on your door and looking for you. Some of the people who have been illegally detained are victims of neighbours who have told that those people have participated in the democratic movement. It's the same methodology that Fidel Castro invented in Cuba with the *comité de defensa de la revolución*, the CDR, a revolutionary defence committee. Hundreds of Venezuelans have been illegally detained since July 28 through that methodology.

I have to add that Diosdado Cabello, who is individually sanctioned, not only in the U.S. but also in Canada and the European Union, for drug trafficking and using money from drug trafficking to finance terrorist activities with the ELN and the FARC dissidents, has been appointed as the so-called “minister of justice and peace”.

That is why the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has stated that in Venezuela, there is a state of terrorism, and that is why the fact-finding mission of the United Nations has said that Venezuelans are living in unprecedented levels of repression.

Beyond Cuba, it's also Russia. When Chávez was alive, he invested at least \$12 billion in buying military equipment from Russia. It is said that apparently members of the Wagner Group are in Venezuela, specifically in the southeast of Venezuela, with the role of taking care of gold mines, oil refineries and gas fields.

Iran is also helping the regime, or helped the regime in the past, to evade sanctions. The regime started to buy fuel from Iran—again, ironically, when we have the largest oil reserve in the world. Also, there are—and this is very frightening—bilateral agreements with Iran on security, intelligence and counter-intelligence. There is a program run by the Revolutionary Guard of Iran that does capacity building with security agents of Venezuela.

Then there is China—this is the fourth one—which has provided technology for social control. The two Venezuelan colleagues who have been invited, who have done very good work on digital authoritarianism and misinformation, could explain the role of China in social media in Venezuela, where China has provided technology for social control, for example the technology to create a parallel ID for social control.

At the same time, China, through a company named Norinco, has provided equipment for repression. I was a direct victim in 2017, when I was still in Venezuela as a mayor, when I was repressed heavily for 100 consecutive days with others. Others were even killed with the equipment that the regime has been using during the last, at least, seven years.

• (1610)

I would say those are the four, but then we could add the regime of Nicaragua. For example, Nicaragua's regime has already offered to Maduro revolutionary fighters. That's what Ortega calls them, "revolutionary fighters". They are—

The Chair: Excuse me. Could you wrap it up, please? We still have two witnesses, and your time has expired.

Mr. David Smolansky: Yes. I'm sorry.

They are to be imported into Venezuela to defend the revolution. That's the reality we are facing at this moment.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[Translation]

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

Mr. Smolansky, you covered a lot of ground. I wish you could stay with us for the next six hours, but that's not possible.

You discussed issues that are of great concern for us as well. We're talking about the migrant crisis, of course, but we're also talking a lot about transnational repression. I would like to know if you are aware of any transnational repression by the Government of Venezuela against Venezuelan nationals in various countries.

• (1615)

[English]

Mr. David Smolansky: Yes, I am aware. There was the specific case of Lieutenant-Colonel Ojeda in Chile. A former member of the armed forces, he defected, the way thousands of soldiers and police have defected, and was able to flee the country. He was killed in Chile. All the evidence shows that it was planned in Venezuela and he was executed by members who were following orders of the regime.

Transnational repression from Venezuela has become a reality, unfortunately. That is why some democratic opposition leaders who have been able to flee the country don't like to remain in cities close to the border, because there are intel agents in cities like Cúcuta in Colombia, among others.

The Chair: Mr. Lake.

Hon. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Wetaskiwin, CPC): Mr. Smolansky, I'm not going to editorialize. I have some comments that are on the record, in writing, about the situation. I'm struck by the contrasts.

The BBC, a couple of weeks ago, wrote the following:

The result has been recognised by President Maduro's allies including Russia, China and Iran, but not the majority of foreign governments, who have called on the government to release the voting tallies to prove the result.

The article also says:

Multiple foreign governments have said they believe the opposition won July's election in Venezuela, but stopped short of recognising Mr González as the president.

On Twitter, U.S. Secretary of State Blinken said this in a tweet, which kind of goes in conjunction with what the BBC said: "Venezuelans voted for change. Maduro's post-election repression

has killed or jailed thousands, and winning candidate [González] remains the best hope for democracy. We must not let Maduro and his representatives cling to power by force. The will of the people must be respected."

Contrast that with the Trudeau government. On the federal government website, under "What Canada is doing", here's what it says:

Canada is committed to protecting human rights. We're helping Venezuelans find a negotiated solution to the crisis by promoting a peaceful return to democracy. Canada is supportive of the negotiation process between Venezuela's democratic forces and the Maduro regime. Canada will support agreements made by the parties at the negotiation process. We strongly encourage the parties to take part in good faith.

What faith do you have that the Maduro regime will be negotiating in good faith, which, according to our website, the Canadian government is putting its faith in?

Mr. David Smolansky: Edmundo González Urrutia and María Corina Machado, as the leaders of this democratic movement, and in the case of Edmundo González as president-elect, have said and have proposed on different occasions, during the campaign and after the victory of July 28, that they are ready to have a real negotiation with Maduro. But the real negotiation is not to have them in power indefinitely. It is to have a transfer of power, to have a peaceful and orderly transition that will benefit not only Venezuelans but the whole region.

Unfortunately, there has been no response from the regime since July 28. They don't want to negotiate. That's the reality.

The Chair: Thank you for your time.

I understand that you have to leave at this particular time. We thank you for your presence, and I thank all my colleagues who addressed some questions to you. The answers were very beneficial for us. Thank you again.

Mr. David Smolansky: Thank you very much for the invitation, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I would like to invite Ms. Maria Marin to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Maria Marin (Director, ProboxVE): [Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]

Thank you very much.

Honourable members of the House of Commons, it is a great honour, privilege and responsibility to appear before you as a representative of Venezuela's civil society.

My name is Maria Virginia Marin. I am 36 years old. I have spent almost six of these years in exile, and this is extremely common. According to UN data, there are at least seven million people who, like me, have been forced to leave their country because of the economic and social crisis, political persecution, lack of opportunities and total disrespect for human rights.

Over the last two decades, the government's hegemony over the communication ecosystem has drastically reduced access to information, with at least 408 media outlets that have closed since 2003. The opposition and independent journalists have been censored in traditional media, so they have sought refuge on social networks, but then they were also attacked on these platforms, with more than 60 sites blocked by the government.

In 2019, I founded ProBox, a non-profit that focuses on identifying and exposing the mechanisms used by Maduro's regime and its counterparts in Cuba, Nicaragua and, increasingly, El Salvador. They use these methods in the online information ecosystem to consolidate control of their political systems. There are massive propaganda strategies and systematic disinformation campaigns by the Venezuelan ruling party. Their goal is to contaminate the conversation on social networks and to distort accusations made by civil society in these spaces.

For example, between 2023 and 2024, on X—formerly Twitter—of the 1,100 trending topics we monitored, the ruling party generated 901, ranging from pro-Maduro propaganda to amplifying anti-sanction narratives, using AI avatars pretending to be journalists and attacking opposition leaders. Many of these posts used the language of gender-based violence. They also defamed human rights activists like Rocio San Miguel and Javier Tarazona, who have both been illegally detained.

After the elections on July 28, the government changed its approach. These former propaganda tools turned into the ideal instrument to carry out a massive persecution campaign to track down any critical voice. Using a false narrative of “peace and justice”, state actors delegitimized citizen protest and used labels like “terrorist” and “fascist” for anyone who opposes the results announced by the pro-Maduro electoral body. The government has also updated an application called VenApp, which, as of July 30, allows people to anonymously identify protesters.

There has also been intensified institutional violence through “operation knock-knock”, a campaign designed to continue repressing any dissident voices on social networks. It displays arrests and alleged confessions, and doxes dissident voices. The goal is to create a widespread climate of terror to silence critical voices. It reveals Maduro's repressive communication resilience, as it's called, which shows up not only in the form of censorship and blocking of platforms such as X, but also in Maduro's ability to find alternative ways to intimidate any opponents.

Unfortunately, our ability to study such operations has become increasingly limited. There have been several closures of APIs such as X in 2013 and tools such as Meta's CrowdTangle in August of this year. All of this has exacerbated the situation. In Latin America, researchers' access is extremely restricted. We face language barriers with content moderators, and most platforms only grant access to institutions and organizations located in the U.S. and Europe. This makes it very difficult to analyze and report on these practices in any language other than English.

In conclusion, I would invite you to work together to close this gap in access to data. As a region, we should be trying hard to reduce this gap. The struggle to restore democracy to Venezuela is a race against the clock. The authoritarian practices of the Maduro

regime not only silence millions, but also export a model of social control that threatens the entire region.

That is why international solidarity is more necessary than ever. Together, we can demonstrate that democracy is a universal value and that the struggle for the respect for human rights has no borders.

• (1620)

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Marin.

Now I invite Ms. Puyosa to take the floor for five minutes.

• (1625)

Ms. Iria Puyosa (Senior Research Fellow, Democracy Tech Initiative, Atlantic Council, As an Individual): Honourable members of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development in Canada's House of Commons, I am honoured to appear here today to give testimony on the Maduro regime's systematic use of digital repression tools for political persecution in Venezuela. These tools are part of a calculated strategy to silence dissent, instill fear and maintain an iron grip on power.

My testimony will highlight key tactics employed by the regime, drawing on my research on this matter over the last decade.

The scale of surveillance in Venezuela is deeply concerning. The Venezuelan government has built a sophisticated apparatus for monitoring and controlling its citizens' digital lives. At the heart of that system lies the homeland system, or *sistema patria*. This system allows the regime to collect massive amounts of personal data, with or without consent, in order to track citizens' consumption habits, political affiliations and even family relations. The Maduro regime has shown blatant disregard for the privacy of citizens' communications. Evidence suggests widespread interception of phone calls, text messages and Internet traffic.

A report by Telefónica, for example, indicates that, in 2001 alone, over 20% of its user base had their communications intercepted at the behest of the security agencies of Venezuela's regime. As you know, Telefónica is a Spanish company. We suspect the number of wiretapped lines is likely higher in Venezuelan companies, particularly in the case of the state-owned company Cantv, which provides service to more than half of the Venezuelan population.

While this has not been definitively proven, we suspect that sophisticated spyware is highly likely to be in place, given the detailed information about private conversations that pro-government figures have revealed on numerous occasions on broadcast television and at public events. A vast network of video cameras are deployed across the major cities of the country, adding to the invasive surveillance network and its regime services.

While the full capacities of that system remain unknown, we know facial recognition technology is certainly being used to identify and track individuals of interest to the regime. The lack of transparency surrounding this technology raises serious concerns about its potential for abuse and its chilling effect on freedom of assembly.

Social media platforms, while vital for accessing information and organizing in the face of a restrictive media landscape, have become a space of digital repression. Activists, human rights defenders and journalists are subject to harassment in those spaces. Doxing and online harassment campaigns targeting journalists and activists who dare to criticize the regime often lead to off-line consequences, including arbitrary detentions and short-term disappearances. Authorities use tools like the state-owned messaging app VenApp, as well as social media monitoring, to identify and track dissidents. Information obtained by illegitimate monitoring is often used to intimidate, harass and even detain individuals. Doxing—revealing personal information online—is also used against activists and journalists.

Days after the July 28 election, many citizens reported seeing drones patrolling cities in the context of increased militarization and popular protests. This is even more alarming considering that Venezuela also has armed drones that were seen during combats in 2022 with dissident Colombian guerrillas in the south of Venezuela.

The Maduro regime's systematic use of digital repression tools presents a grave threat to human rights and democracy in Venezuela and the western hemisphere. The international community must stand in solidarity with the Venezuelan people and take concrete actions to condemn the regime's digital repression tactics, sanction entities involved in deploying these digital repression tools, support organizations promoting digital rights and freedom of expression in Venezuela, and assist Venezuelans seeking refuge from persecution.

• (1630)

Let's remember that the fight for democracy and human rights in Venezuela is inextricably linked to the battle for democracy and human rights across the western hemisphere.

Thank you.

The Chair: Now I will open the floor for questions and answers. I would like to invite Mr. Randeep Sarai.

Welcome, Mr. Sarai, to our committee. The floor is yours for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I'm not normally a member of this committee, but I am fascinated by this very challenging situation that Venezuelans are facing.

The member who is normally here, Anita, has asked me to ask Iria Puyosa this question: How is the Venezuelan government using digital repression of protesters, and how can this be prevented from expanding into other parts of the world?

I understand that they're using many tools and techniques to suppress people's voices. Also, in some ways, they actually encourage people to rat them out or report them if they're supporting anybody except for the current governing authoritarian regime. What are those tools, and how can the world learn from that and make sure it doesn't happen in other parts of the world?

The question is for you, Iria Puyosa.

Ms. Iria Puyosa: Thank you for the question.

As I introduced in my opening statement, the Maduro regime has used a series of digital repression tools, including tools for monitoring the communications of the citizens in social media communications, but also in private communications, through phone communications, messaging app communications and Internet navigation.

Recently, after the July elections, they weaponized the Venezuelan homeland system and developed a messaging app, VenApp, asking people to dox individuals who were demonstrating against the government or individuals who were part of the electoral organization or the democratic forces.

They are also using social media platforms for those purposes, to ask individuals to report who the demonstrators are and who the dissidents are and the people who are against the regime, and to indicate where they are located. That information is used by the regime security forces to arbitrarily detain these individuals, who have been imprisoned without any due process.

This is part of the large digital repression system that I was describing. Surveillance, monitoring, harassment and censoring are integrated in order to consolidate and to help the Maduro regime stay in power.

Of course, the success they've had and are having in the use of digital repression is obviously setting a bad example for other authoritarian regimes around the world. These kinds of regimes have been, in the last few years, sharing knowledge and practices in order to learn from each other how to repress the population and how to stay in power against the will of their citizens.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: How many arrests do you know have been made, and who has been targeted as a result of the reports that this VenApp has instigated? Do you know how many people have been arrested or detained as a result of people reporting them through this app?

Ms. Iria Puyosa: It would be hard to point out the exact number. We know that in the days following the election, while popular protests were in development and they deployed these tools for repression, they detained around 2,000 people in just three days, but of course it's difficult to say that it's just because of doxing and the VenApp, because they use all of these tools. They use social media. They use VenApp. They use the security forces. They use snitches in the population.

All of those things contribute to the repression of the population, so it would be hard to single out a particular case that was exactly because of that, although in a few cases they actually broadcast the detentions and said that they received information from individuals using WhatsApp channels—they were able to do that—or using VenApp. They recorded and published on social media the moments when they were doing the detentions, proving to the population that, yes, this system is in place: “We receive information and we act on this information.”

● (1635)

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Do you think any particular groups, like reporters, activists or any minority groups, are more vulnerable to this? Are they more vulnerable to snitching through the app or any other digital apparatus?

Ms. Iria Puyosa: In the past, human rights defenders, journalists and political activists were more likely targets of repression in general. However, after the elections, most of the individuals who were detained had a very different profile. They were youth from low-income neighbourhoods who were just demonstrating. In some cases, they were actually in their houses when they were detained. We suspect some of the cases are people who were targeted because somebody in the neighbourhood wanted to earn points with their bosses at the party.

It's less a specific target and more the general population now, particularly young people. A significant number of the detainees are very young people. There are even teenagers or minors. It's not a specific profile like it was before. Now it's more the general population.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I know that groups like Apple and Google have banned this app on their devices. I think it's only web-based now. Is there anything else that countries like Canada can do to help prevent these types of apps or these types of digital technologies harming democracy and people's freedoms in Venezuela?

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Puyosa. The time is up.

I'll give you 15 or 20 seconds if you want to answer quickly.

Ms. Iria Puyosa: Yes. I think the Government of Canada can help curtail digital repression in Venezuela by sanctioning the providers of these tools. In this case, VenApp is Venezuelan-owned and developed, but the regime used tools and technologies developed and provided by other countries.

That is a way in which you can be helpful. Try to target those companies from other countries that are providing technology to the Venezuelan regime.

The Chair: Thank you.

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

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you.

Thank you for your extremely thoughtful testimony.

The international community pushed the Venezuelan opposition into the election as a democratic solution, as I think you might agree. It seems that now the international community must stand for the election it encouraged Venezuela to undertake.

Perhaps I could start with you, Iria. What steps can Ottawa take to catch up with what Washington is trying to do?

Ms. Iria Puyosa: Like I said at the end of my opening remarks, useful things for the Government of Canada to do are joining in with the sanctions to entities involved in deploying the digital repression tools and continuing to support organizations working on freedom of expression and digital rights in Venezuela. I think that is something we will continue to appreciate.

Also, as David Smolansky mentioned at the beginning, the continued support for the human rights abuse and crimes against humanity investigations in the context of Venezuela is an issue to which Canada can continue to contribute.

Of course, at the moment, the Venezuelan people are expecting support from Canada and other democratic countries around the world to make sure that the will of the people expressed in the elections is respected and that president-elect Edmundo González can take power in January 2025. We expect the democratic governments around the world—including Canada, of course—to have a role to play in that.

● (1640)

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you very much.

My second question would be for Maria.

What kind of specific actions has the socialist thuggery of Maduro taken to go after the Venezuelan opposition with different leaders, different tools of suppression and different attempts to divide the opposition, who have been heroically standing together all this time, despite being displaced to the tune of millions across the region? It strikes me that the opposition in Venezuela has a resilience and a strength in the idea of “*Libertad, libertad, libertad*”.

I'm curious to know exactly what the tools are that Maduro is using with his thugs to go after the opposition in Venezuela.

Ms. Maria Marin: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you for the question.

First of all, as we heard from the previous question, according to data from Maduro himself, although this is hard to confirm, in three days, between July 30 and August 3, they received 5,000 accusations through VenApp. Of course, it's very hard to say if this is true, but it allows us to understand the scope of how this technology is being used to crack down on opposition voices.

Internally, we're seeing so many measures being used to monitor and crack down on opponents. These include some very simple methods, such as taking away phones from people on the street, whether they're opposition voices or not. In fact, some teens got into trouble just because there was a Maduro meme somewhere in their feed. We know that people have had their passports cancelled, thousands of people outside Venezuela, which means they cannot go back into the country. For example, if they want to run for office or something like that, they won't be able to go back to the country.

That said, I would say that the principal mechanisms are intimidation, making people's identities public and close monitoring. There seems to be impunity for Maduro. Technology is a means, not an end, but the military, paramilitary and police forces, who are all being investigated for crimes against humanity, are the ones carrying out these methods. We need to take action on these technologies, but we also need to ensure that those responsible for human rights violations feel that they will eventually pay for what they've done—not like today, when there's impunity.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you very much for that.

Iria, let me come back to you. We know that the Maduro regime is working closely with despotic regimes in Beijing, in Tehran and in Moscow to repress their people and to coordinate their consolidation of power over the Venezuelan economy, over the Venezuelan people and over the Venezuelan security services. They've entered into dangerous relationships with the greatest rivals to our North American sensibility.

You would think that Canada and the United States would be shoulder to shoulder in our own hemisphere when it comes to confronting Venezuela and the Cuban, Iranian, Russian and Chinese regimes that are going after them. Can you explain why Canada might have such a meek voice at a time when it's critical to stand for the people of Venezuela?

• (1645)

Ms. Iria Puyosa: Yes, these authoritarian regimes work together. They share knowledge, they share tools and they support each other. We see that clearly in the context of Venezuela.

We believe, or it's my assessment, that democratic governments are shy about responding to the autocratic regimes rising all over the world. In this session we are talking about Venezuela, but we see similar situations in other parts of the world. They collaborate to stay in power. Unfortunately, we don't see democratic governments working together with the same impulse. They have good intentions and there is support, but something more could be done. This is probably a good moment for good allies to get together and on board with that.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you for that.

I mean, here we have the Biden administration trying to show some strength when it comes to Venezuela, and the Trudeau government is nowhere to be seen. There are occasional statements and platitudes, but there are no serious measures—no serious investment, commitment of sanctions, support to Venezuelan civil society or recognition of the opposition. It's a total betrayal of our relationship with America and with the people of Venezuela.

I appreciate your testimony very much.

With that, I'll close my time.

The Chair: I'll give you time to answer that in the next round, because he exceeded his time by one minute.

I'll go to Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

[*Member spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you very much for being here today.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marin, we talk a lot about disinformation. A number of official Venezuelan media outlets have close ties with the government, of course, which means that social media has increasingly come to the fore in Venezuela. To what extent has disinformation become embedded within social media?

To what extent is it used and promoted by social networks?

[*English*]

Ms. Maria Marin: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

The Maduro regime's logic regarding social media means that we can't believe anything we see on social media. Traditional media has been completely co-opted, and now this online strategy minimizes any presence of independent media—civil society, human rights defenders and so on.

Because of the way the truth is twisted, it's very hard to distinguish the wheat from the chaff. They are using bot and drone networks that are state-funded and implemented by the same mechanism the government uses to pay for operations that demoralize opponents, not only within the country but also abroad.

This same mechanism abroad tries to minimize any criticisms made by civil society about human rights. This is all something the regime is trying to hide.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I find it interesting that you make a connection with mechanisms outside the country.

You are an expert, which is why you were invited to testify before the committee today. As such, here is my question to you.

To what extent are social networks used, not only for disinformation purposes, but also for transnational repression purposes abroad?

Does overseas social media play a role in transnational repression?

[English]

Ms. Maria Marin: [Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]

I wouldn't say the social platforms directly play that role.

However, the regime has a repressive capacity to extend beyond national borders. The persecution that takes place through social media doesn't just affect people within Venezuela. People outside may fear that their loved ones may be arrested within the country. This has happened to a number of journalists who are no longer in Venezuela. Their possessions and loved ones can all be placed at risk. They also may find that their passports are cancelled.

This is a form of transnational repression. It also seeks to further divide those who are inside and outside the country.

• (1650)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: The social networks of opponents of the Maduro regime are also being monitored. Obviously, those same social networks are used by the powers that be to surveil opponents through social media. They are used not only against opponents, but also against the families or loved ones of opponents who remain in the country.

I see that you agree. Do you have anything to add?

[English]

Ms. Maria Marin: [Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]

No, I have nothing further to add, other than to say, once more, that this is a double-edged sword. The regime is trying to use social media only to repress opposition. However, we know the election process is highly documented in Venezuela today. We know records are kept about the election. This is only possible due to the way civil society uses social media.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Very well.

You just talked about the electoral process. Media outlets that are close to the party in power broadcast exit polls, in violation of the Elections Act.

What do we know about the companies that conducted these polls?

[English]

Ms. Maria Marin: [Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]

We collaborated on an investigation with several other organizations, which showed that many of these polls before the election did not meet basic levels of transparency. In many cases, the owners of these businesses had financial relationships with state actors, and they were not meeting basic methodological standards. In that way, they were hoping to influence people and to demoralize people in

advance of the elections to prevent them from voting, but it didn't work.

On the day of the election, a so-called "exit poll" was set up by a business that didn't really exist. It was entirely false, and this was one of the many disinformation tactics used by the regime to confuse people and to play on their emotions in order to discourage people, to make them afraid and to try to prevent them from making the details of the election results public. However, in the end, that was nonetheless made public despite the attempts to quiet the information. They were trying to confuse and upset people even before the election.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: My question is for both witnesses.

We know about Freddy Superlano's case. I don't know if you're familiar with it, but I imagine you are. He is the national political coordinator of the Voluntad Popular Party. He was arrested on Tuesday, July 30, around 10 a.m. by agents of the Maduro government. We don't know which government branch made the arrest. We don't know where Mr. Superlano was.

Can you give us some information on that?

[English]

The Chair: Your time is up. Give a quick answer, please.

Ms. Maria Marin: [Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]

I don't have specific information about where Superlano is. We can guess that he may be in one of the locations used by the Venezuelan intelligence, like the El Helicoide. However, the state of repression in the country has escalated so quickly that the regime doesn't even have enough space left to hold the people they've arrested, so I don't know specifically where Superlano is.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

• (1655)

[English]

Mr. Johns, you have the floor for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Gord Johns: I'm going to go to Ms. Puyosa.

The U.S. Department of Justice, right now, is investigating a Russian, Kremlin-owned company for spreading disinformation using bots.

Do you believe that this Kremlin-owned company is connected to the type of, what I would call, bots and to the psychological warfare that has been happening to Venezuelans when it comes to using X or other platforms on social media?

Ms. Iria Puyosa: The techniques are similar. As I mentioned before, it's known that Venezuela and Russia have been co-operating in information operations for 20 years, since they funded Telesur in Venezuela and Russia Today. That co-operation has been ongoing for two decades in the way they design information manipulation targeting different populations both inside their countries and internationally.

They share tactics. They share techniques. They use similar ways to deploy propaganda and information manipulation, but that doesn't mean they work together on the operational side. Venezuela had its own apparatus for deploying propaganda, its own trolls, its own troops, its own bots and its own...all the same apparatus similar to Russia but separate. They coordinate in some campaigns, particularly those targeting international audiences in issues related to human rights and issues related to sanctions. In those cases, they work together, but when they are targeting their domestic audiences, they work separately. Each of them has a different apparatus, with similar tactics but not operationally linked.

Mr. Gord Johns: What accountability role would you like to see the international community play when it comes to the social media platforms and how they're held to account, but of course, balancing and ensuring that freedom is happening? What are Venezuelans using to get the right information, to get accurate information, and where do Venezuelans access independent media today?

Maybe I'll start with you, Ms. Puyosa, and I'll give Ms. Marin a chance to follow up.

Ms. Iria Puyosa: After more than a decade of intense government-sponsored disinformation and propaganda in social media and also the companion of censorship of independent media outlets, Venezuelans had to learn to circumvent censorship. Venezuelans who are interested in following the news and who are politically active, make a lot of effort to access information. Venezuelans have been learning how to use VPNs and have been learning how to use different communications to share news using social media platforms.

We have been talking about how the regime weaponized social media platforms to repress, to control and to surveil citizens, but citizens have also learned how to use those same platforms and those things to share information, to work together, to organize and to build communities.

Social media platforms in Venezuela are the battleground on which the regime and the democratic forces have had constant clashes, trying to win over the opinions and shared ideas.

Mr. Gord Johns: Ms. Marin, do you want to follow up?

Also, could you touch on the Ven phone application and how that's being used to influence and to target dissidents?

Ms. Maria Marin: *[Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]*

Yes, one of the techniques used by the regime is to manipulate any information that it can control directly.

Today, the way civil society and independent journalism function in Venezuela is actually one of the most robust systems in the region, which is what has enabled us to adapt quickly to these ad-

vanced repressive mechanisms with the use of various technological methods.

For example, today in Venezuela, we're using techniques like VPNs or using social networks by reuploading them, even when they've been forbidden, like X. There have also been uses of AI to keep the citizenry informed while protecting journalists' identities. This is a positive example of how, even during this terrible period of increased repression in the country, nonetheless, journalists and civil society have taken up the gauntlet and have kept the structures resilient.

The use of VenApp reached a peak in the days following July 30. Once the application was removed from most major download platforms, its use diminished greatly, but its use, nonetheless, remains seared into people's recent memories.

There is a great deal of fear that someone you know or that one of your neighbours might have seen, for example, a WhatsApp status, and that might be enough so-called evidence for the regime to call you a terrorist or a fascist, or even to arrest you.

• (1700)

Mr. Gord Johns: Okay.

Ms. Puyosa, I will give you 30 seconds to just follow up on the VenApp.

Ms. Iria Puyosa: They developed this app, a sort of super app. In some ways, it's similar to WeChat in the sense that the app has channels for messaging between individuals, but it also has features for a marketplace for people to share and buy business. That's helping to get people to use the app, preparing the user base for the moment when they need it for their political aims.

To me, one of the most dangerous things is the ability to geolocate reports, and that is what they have been utilizing in this case. They created a new feature for individuals, the users of the app, to geolocate their reports, so they see the coordinates of the place in which the person they are pointing out as a dissident is located. That is a very dangerous use of a social media platform. Of course, it violates data privacy, and it puts the user in real danger. It's probably one of the more recent developments that are highly sophisticated, and it's part of the kit they have for instilling fear in the population.

The Chair: Ms. Damoff, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just want to say that I'm really disappointed. He's not here to hear me say this, but Mr. Majumdar has used this meeting to rage-farm on Twitter with misinformation.

An hon. member: He's smiling about it.

Ms. Pam Damoff: He somehow thinks that's funny. He's posted, "Why does Justin Trudeau recognize a defeated thug dictator over the Venezuelans people's choice?" Just to make sure that misinformation doesn't stay out there, we have not recognized the "defeated thug dictator". In fact, Minister Joly issued a statement. She also issued a second statement with the United States and 30 other countries that unequivocally condemns the ongoing and escalating repression in Venezuela by the Maduro regime, particularly in the aftermath of the elections. We've also condemned the use of the repressive tactics by Venezuelan authorities.

I'm disappointed that we're not using this meeting to collectively recognize the human rights violations that are happening in Venezuela and to together come up with solutions.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: Chair, I have a point of order.

First of all, Ms. Damoff made mention of my absence. I want to make sure people know I'm right here. Second, I think we've been hearing a lot of testimony from our witnesses—

Ms. Pam Damoff: That's not a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Excuse me.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: We've been hearing a lot of testimony from our witnesses, and—

• (1705)

Ms. Pam Damoff: That's not a point of order.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: —I would request that the member focus on not wasting their time.

The Chair: It does not go with the sense of a point of order. I'm sorry.

Ms. Damoff.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Marin, I want to turn to you. On your website, you've written about the co-operation between Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua, and that it's not only military and ideological but there's also a coordination in the position of messaging on social media networks like Twitter.

Can you explain how that coordination is done and what kind of messaging is put out there?

Ms. Maria Marin: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Of course.

We began in 2019 to monitor Venezuela via the conversation on X, which is most used for political content. In 2020, we saw how the digital communication strategies of the regimes in Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua were interconnected. They amplified hashtags like "against North American sanctions"—or European—blaming them for being responsible for crises. When there are conflicts in the region or elections, the communication is coordinated to amplify common messages for them.

We've seen how there is a pattern in the creation of laws to restrict content on social media, as mentioned by Iria earlier. We've seen how these governments co-operate and learn from each other. As with Sputnik, there are classes offered to communications stu-

dents in universities in Nicaragua. In Venezuela's case, there's Chinese technology for social control, for surveillance and to promote disinformation propaganda online, but these narratives in Spanish are made stronger by authorities like Cuba or Nicaragua, and the discourse internally in Venezuela amplifies, in the regime's communications, positions that are in favour of other authoritarian states, like Russia and its invasion of Ukraine.

A campaign online was saying that what Russia was doing was for de-nazification, promoting propaganda as official information on social media. This is very dangerous, especially when there are no mechanisms to counterbalance these advanced structures for communication.

This affects information, and there is the intention to manipulate all of the information that they can't control directly. This is done by Venezuela's regime, but it's also coordinated with the Cuban regime and the Nicaraguan regime, and it's assisted by Russia and China.

Ms. Pam Damoff: We're studying, at the public safety committee right now, Russian influence on social media. I'm seeing similarities in terms of... When people are getting all of their information from social media, they can be easily influenced by what they see because they don't have a verified source of information through which they can filter what they're seeing.

Is that a fair representation?

Ms. Maria Marin: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Absolutely.

The most recent blocking of websites in Venezuela has been of news fact-checkers, not only independent media—

The Chair: Just a quick answer, please. The time is up. You can have a few seconds.

Ms. Maria Marin: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Basically, the most recent measures by the regime have led to blocking fact-checkers and news checkers. This shows that it's not just propaganda online but also disinformation. That's what they want to see in the ecosystem online.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lake, please, you have the floor for five minutes.

Hon. Mike Lake: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to follow up on Ms. Damoff's point, if I can.

This is a committee where we generally decide what we're going to study by consensus. It's interesting that we're studying democracy here. Agreeing what we're going to study does not mean we have to take the exact same position the Trudeau government is taking. In fact, our position on this is very different, and it's very clear. Our foreign affairs shadow minister, Michael Chong, right away in August, tweeted, "Conservatives call on the Trudeau government to: recognize the opposition won the Venezuelan election, cut off all contact with Maduro's authoritarian representatives, and sanction all individuals complicit with this subversion of Venezuelan democracy." We have a clear position in our party, which is the official opposition.

When there are clear distinctions between our party's positions, it is our job to bring them up and hold the government to account for them. That is what Mr. Majumdar was doing earlier.

In contrast, what the Canadian government has basically said on the website is that the Maduro government is bad, but then it's gone on, leading with the section that says what Canada is doing about it. It has not said it recognizes that the opposition won the Venezuelan election. In fact, what it said is that we have to, "find a negotiated solution to the crisis". It said, "Canada is supportive of the negotiation process" and "We strongly encourage the parties to take part in good faith", as though the parties are equal in this situation. The parties are not equal in this situation. The Maduro regime is a partner. Its allies are Russia, Iran and China. It's very clear. That's the quote I read from the BBC earlier. We've said, as a party, that Canada should recognize that the opposition won the Venezuelan election.

I just want your thoughts on the importance of that in this conversation.

• (1710)

Ms. Maria Marin: [*The witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

It's very important, as it has been mentioned, to maintain a position of respect for human rights and the universal value of respect for democracy in Venezuela. One of the positions in my remarks that could help is, for example, asking for more transparency and support for social media. In Venezuela's case today, Cuba and Nicaragua often wash their hands with the excuse that there's a language barrier. Very little is done. A lot more could be done when it comes to technology. This is a means to an end. These platforms... As a government, you could help us reduce the gap in access to information. That's one of the first measures we could attempt to promote in this space.

As a region, access for researchers is very limited by these platforms. They only allow access to organizations like non-profits in the United States or in Europe. It makes it much more complicated for researchers who don't speak English or who are outside of the European or American ecosystems. It's much more difficult for us to document these actions. That's one of the measures that could be taken that everybody could agree on. Ask for more support and transparency from social media platforms.

Hon. Mike Lake: On that issue of social media, to what extent is the word getting out to the Venezuelan people in Venezuela that the

opposition won the election? To what extent is that message being subverted?

Ms. Maria Marin: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

I think it's pretty consistent that Venezuelans haven't stopped informing themselves, despite all of the repression and despite all of the measures. We have continued to look for information through family members outside of Venezuela, who have become a bridge to accessing information. I think this will continue, along with the work from civil society and journalists, despite all of the limitations.

These efforts continue to be made to document what has happened in Venezuela.

• (1715)

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. I want to circle back for some evidence.

It was suggested by colleagues around the table... I'd like to invite my colleague MP Damoff to table the official statement by the Government of Canada that recognizes—

Ms. Pam Damoff: That's not a point of order.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: —the opposition victory and—

Ms. Pam Damoff: That's not a point of order.

The Chair: That's not a point of order to me.

Ms. Damoff, go ahead, please.

Hon. Mike Lake: On that point of order, we would give unanimous consent for that to be tabled, if the government wants....

Ms. Pam Damoff: It's not a point of order.

If Mr. Lake wants to ask for that in his questions, Chair... That's not a point of order for Mr. Majumdar.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Lake. Did you say you give unanimous consent?

Hon. Mike Lake: If the Liberal members want to give unanimous consent for a statement from the committee that encourages the government to table that document Mr. Majumdar was referring to, we would give our unanimous consent for that.

The Chair: Yes.

I would like to have the answer of the Liberal members.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. It's a real point of order this time.

In my opinion, the last three points of order were not well founded. I'll ask the clerk to comment on that.

We are currently debating, and I would like us to continue, out of respect for the witnesses. We can argue afterwards.

The Chair: I agree.

[English]

Mr. Lake [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] others gave their consent to be...the way he asked the question.

Do you agree with him, yes or no?

Okay. There's no unanimous consent. I'm sorry.

You have a few seconds.

Ms. Pam Damoff: I'm sorry, Chair.

The Chair: You still have a few seconds.

Ms. Pam Damoff: No, it wasn't me. It was him.

The Chair: I'm sorry.

You have a few seconds.

Hon. Mike Lake: I'm good now. I don't think I can get what I want to say in—

The Chair: Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor.

[Translation]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for five minutes.

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

I'm sorry our guests witnessed what just took place. However, rest assured that I will not engage in partisan politics during my remaining five minutes.

My next question is for both witnesses.

Earlier, you talked about international measures that could help the cause of the Venezuelan people. In November 2021, the International Criminal Court launched an investigation into the situation in Venezuela. Amnesty International recently stated that the events following the July 2024 presidential election were within the scope of the prosecutor's investigation.

What do you see as the potential value of the International Criminal Court's investigation into human rights violations in Venezuela?

[English]

Ms. Iria Puyosa: For the people of Venezuela—more than 20 million—the case on human rights violations and crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court is extraordinarily important. It is important for the dignity of the people of Venezuela and for human rights. It's not only for Venezuelans but also for anybody experiencing abuse or repression under any authoritarian government in the world.

We are grateful to all the countries that are supporting this investigation, as well as to those who requested the opening of the investigation and those who have been supporting it all the way, such as Venezuelan activists, political activists, human rights activists, digital rights activists, researchers and all the communities working on these issues. It's very helpful.

The International Criminal Court will advance this case, set a precedent and give a fair assessment of what's happening in Venezuela. The people in the chain of command who are responsible for the massive human rights violations in the country will be

prosecuted for those. However, that is a different situation. The general situation is that the country is suffering, but that's separate from the electoral situation. Those two things can continue to cause, at different levels and in different moments....

The ICC case has some procedures. We want to respect that, but the electoral situation is urgent. The elections were in July and the new president has to take office in January. That is a different issue, a more political issue, different from the human rights issue, although they are related.

• (1720)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes, I understand. Perhaps I mis-spoke.

In fact, what Amnesty International said was that events following the 2024 presidential election could be incorporated into the current International Criminal Court investigation into human rights violations that has been ongoing since 2021.

I didn't want to interrupt you, but I wanted to clarify what I said.

[English]

Ms. Iria Puyosa: Yes, it's true. There are similar patterns of violations. There are similar patterns of arbitrary detentions and similar patterns of enforced disappearances. In that sense, repression as violations can be integrated into that. I'm not sure whether the International Criminal Court will do that, but there are similar patterns. You're right about that.

Ms. Maria Marin: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

To add to what Iria was saying, I think there's a public registry of the violations of human rights. It's very clear at this stage. The implementation of technology is to basically persecute dissidents, but not only political dissidents. It is to broaden persecution to vulnerable groups as well—women, indigenous people, minors and so on.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I have only 10 seconds left.

[English]

[*Member spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

I'd like to say thank you very much to the witnesses. I hope the future will be better.

Thank you.

The Chair: *Bueno.*

[Translation]

Ms. Zarrillo, you have the floor for five minutes.

[English]

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

I want to follow up on the intervention we just heard with regard to women and vulnerable populations. I'll go to witness Marin first.

I'd like to ask about the literacy rates for women versus men in Venezuela and also the labour force participation. I understand that there are some differences there. I'm interested in knowing how the lack of access to digital information and the lack of communication over digital channels would affect women differently from men, just based on their labour force participation.

Ms. Maria Marin: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Prior to the primary elections, we carried out a study in Venezuela. We showed that the female candidates received 60% more attacks. They were gender-based attacks. In fact, most of the attacks that female opposition politicians in Venezuela receive have more to do with their gender than their political positions. It tells us a lot about how far behind we are in the debate on protecting human rights when today people are being attacked on the basis of their gender, or when we consider that out of the people detained in Venezuela, and in fact out of people who are participating in the protests in Venezuela, the majority are women. This is often because women have continued to resist when men have had to go into exile or to work. Many men have gone, for example, to Colombia to support their families in Venezuela. These women are currently ensuring that they continue to carry the family burdens while the men are absent. They're also continuing to face these threats and attacks.

Again, it's mainly women, but another aspect is youth. Something that's very innovative about all of this is that youth are once more getting involved in politics in Venezuela after being disconnected for some time. There are also other vulnerable groups, such as indigenous Venezuelans. Right now, repression is occurring not only in the capital. We know more about what's happening in the capital, but what's happening in the interior is much worse. That's not to mention border regions, where military and paramilitary control and repression are much greater.

I don't know if that entirely answers your question.

• (1725)

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much.

It makes me think about another question.

How does the digital oppression—or that oppression that happens digitally or those attacks that happen digitally—whether it's on social media for gender-based violence...? If it manifests in the street, is it more dangerous for women and girls to go to work, to go to school, to be out on the street? Is it more dangerous for youth to be out on the streets going to work? I'm wondering how that's manifesting on the ground.

Ms. Maria Marin: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

It may be making us more vulnerable in areas like privacy, access to information and our devices. In addition, the consequences for women of arbitrary detention.... They are more likely to be sexually assaulted by the repressive organizations. Unfortunately, this is something that affects women more than men, although that doesn't mean that men have not also been victims of sexual violence, which is also deeply concerning. However, the proportion of sexual assaults that affect women is higher.

In fact, in certain cases, sexual violence is inflicted on women who are the partners of political leaders in order to manipulate them. It's a way to psychologically manipulate these women's partners. We also saw that with certain figures' daughters, who may also have been assaulted or harassed, with the goal being to force people who are being detained to give confessions.

The Chair: Our time is almost over. I thank you.

I thank our witnesses for their being here and for the way they gave good answers to the committee's questions.

I thank my colleagues, the translators, the staff, the clerk and the analysts, every one of you.

I believe our time is over. May I have a motion to adjourn?

There is a motion on the floor.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you. The meeting is adjourned.

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