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Public Inquiry Into Foreign Interference  
in Federal Electoral Processes and  
Democratic Institutions

Enquête publique sur l'ingérence étrangère  
dans les processus électoraux et les  
institutions démocratiques fédérales

## Interview Summary: Ms. Zita Astravas

Ms. Zita Astravas was interviewed by Commission Counsel on March 19, 2024. The interview was held in a secure environment and referenced classified information.

This summary should be read in conjunction with the Institutional Report prepared by Public Safety Canada (“**PS**”) and summaries of the interviews of the Honourable Bill Blair, Mr. Dominic Rochon and Mr. Rob Stewart.

### Notes to Reader

- Commission Counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets to assist the reader.

## 1. Background on the interviewee

[1] Ms. Astravas has occupied the following positions since 2017:

2017-2019 election	Chief of Staff for the Honourable Harjit Sajjan, Minister of National Defence
2019 election-2021 election	Chief of Staff for the Honourable Bill Blair, Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness
2021 election-August 2023	Chief of Staff for the Honourable Bill Blair, Minister of Emergency Preparedness and President of the King’s Privy Council for Canada.  Ms. Astravas also had a cross-accreditation to the <b>Prime Minister’s Office (“PMO”)</b> on Emergency Preparedness

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- [2] During the 2019 and 2021 election campaigns, Ms. Astravas took leaves of absence from her role as Chief of Staff to act as the Prime Minister's Director of Media Relations (2019 campaign) and Press Secretary (2021 campaign).
- [3] Prior to 2017, Ms. Astravas occupied several positions with the Federal and Ontario Liberal parties and the Ontario provincial government.

## 2. Role as Chief of Staff

### 2.1 General

- [4] Ms. Astravas explained that she had become Minister Blair's Chief of Staff following an interview shortly after the Minister was appointed.
- [5] In her capacity as Chief of Staff, Ms. Astravas managed many aspects of the Ministerial office. She identified managing the Minister's schedule, human resources, interacting with senior public servants, co-ordinating briefings and providing strategic advice, as examples of her duties. She likened her position as the last stop on the train before it reached the Minister. After the 2021 election, as a result of her cross-accreditation with the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) on matters of Emergency Preparedness, she attended briefings with the Prime Minister and PMO concerning such matters.

### 2.2 Information Flow to Ms. Astravas

- [6] Ms. Astravas described the manner in which she received both unclassified and classified information.
- [7] Unclassified information came to her from various sources. Based on recommendations from directorates (Policy, Parliamentary Affairs, Communications and Operations) within the Ministerial office, she would receive information in different ways (e.g. email or paper form), filter that information and determine what needed to be brought to the attention of the Minister.

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- [8] Ms. Astravas indicated that, in the case of classified information, there was a different information flow depending on whether she received Secret information (such as most information related to memoranda to Cabinet) or Top Secret information.
- [9] Secret information, mostly related to Cabinet matters, was typically brought to her by staff within the Ministerial office or, during the COVID-19 pandemic, through encrypted email (if the document classification allowed it). As all Ministerial staff are required to hold a Secret security clearance, they would usually process such classified information and present it to Ms. Astravas with a cover note summarizing its contents. Upon receipt of this information, Ms. Astravas would determine the manner in which it should be brought to the attention of the Minister. If so, Ministerial staff would brief the Minister. These briefings could be delivered with the support of any of the five agencies under the authority of the Minister of Public Safety (the “Agencies” [the Parole Board of Canada, the Canada Border Services Agency (“CBSA”), the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (“CSIS” or “the Service”), the Correctional Service of Canada, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police]), or staff from PS.
- [10] Ms. Astravas explained that she was entirely reliant on agencies in the S&I community to provide her with Top Secret intelligence relevant to the Minister’s mandate. She indicated that she had at least two individuals in her Ministerial office cleared to receive Top Secret information.
- [11] All Top Secret materials would first be provided in paper format by a Departmental Liaison Officer [the Departmental Liaison Officer is a public servant employed by Public Safety who received secret and highly classified material from the Agencies, usually CSIS, in the Minister’s portfolio.] The Departmental Liaison Officer would provide the intelligence to the appropriate security cleared staff within the Ministerial office. Ms. Astravas elaborated that the Departmental Liaison Officer was able to identify the appropriate recipients for Secret and Top Secret products within the Ministerial office, based on the topics that had been assigned by Ms. Astravas to her staff in the Ministerial office, which had been communicated to the Departmental Liaison Officer.

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[12] Ms. Astravas underlined that she did not have a Canada Top Secret Network (“**CTSN**”) account or access to a CTSN terminal during her tenure as Chief of Staff; she was completely reliant on the PS department or the S&I community to provide her with Top Secret information destined to her or the Minister’s attention.

### 2.3 Information Flow – to the Minister

[13] Ms. Astravas explained how operational updates (which she distinguished from policy updates) were provided to the Minister.

[14] She explained that she did not provide guidance or advice with respect to operational updates. She viewed her role as facilitating the delivery of the information to the Minister, often through meetings between the Deputy Heads and the Minister, who was the individual mandated by statute to act on intelligence. She noted that Minister Blair was an avid reader but also wanted to discuss issues with the Agencies; she viewed it as essential to ensure that he had the opportunity, as needed, to have points of contact with the Deputy Heads.

[15] Ms. Astravas further noted her understanding that, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministerial office received a binder at regular intervals containing Top Secret intelligence, which was then provided to the Minister. This appeared to her to be the existing practice in place during the short interval that she was Chief of Staff in Public Safety prior to the onset of the pandemic. The contents of this binder were never modified prior to providing it to the Minister.

[16] During the pandemic, this intelligence binder was no longer provided to the Minister’s Office. Ms. Astravas and the Minister needed to be in secure facilities to be provided with physical copies of Top Secret documents. Typically, when the Minister would head into a secure facility to be provided with classified intelligence, her Office booked a period of time for the Minister to read any relevant documents and, immediately after, a period of time during which he could discuss the intelligence (either in person or via secure video teleconference) with the relevant agency head.

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[17] Ms. Astravas noted that she usually received the same intelligence as the Minister, either in paper or through oral briefings. She was normally present when the Minister was briefed orally, and she had never withheld any classified documents that were addressed to the Minister.

## 2.4 Comments on the role of PS Deputy Minister (“DM”)

[18] Ms. Astravas noted that the relationship between the Agencies and the Deputy Minister of PS varied depending on the individual serving as Deputy Minister. According to Ms. Astravas, Mr. Rob Stewart tended to provide advice that concerned the work of PS (as opposed to the work of the Agencies). Ms. Astravas indicated that Mr. Stewart had never flagged intelligence products to her attention.

## 3. Specific Issues

### 3.1 Alleged Targeting of Michael Chong

[19] While Ms. Astravas was generally aware of the interest of the People’s Republic of China (“**PRC**”) in Canadian politics, she stated that she did not recall receiving the 2021 CSIS intelligence products that first reported on the alleged targeting of Member of Parliament (“**MP**”) Michael Chong by the PRC and other MPs in retaliation for their vote on the February 2021 Uyghur motion in the House of Commons. She indicated that she had likely<sup>1</sup> received the July 20, 2021 Intelligence Assessment (“**IA**”) 2021-22/31, which reported that:<sup>2</sup>

[20] [PRC officials have] taken specific actions to target Canadian Members of Parliament (MPs) who are affiliated with the Canadian parliament’s recent vote on Uyghur genocide motion. [A PRC official] sought information on a Canadian MP’s relatives who may be located in the PRC for further potential sanctions.

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<sup>1</sup> Ms. Astravas indicated that she must have seen this IA since she received all material provided to Minister Blair and that Minister Blair testified before the Commissioner that he did receive this document.  
<sup>2</sup> A version of this Intelligence Assessment dated September 8, 2021, containing very similar language, is available at CAN001080\_R01

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- [21] Given that the Canadian MPs mentioned in this IA were not named, Ms. Astravas said that she did not identify MP Chong as one of the targets of PRC FI activities.
- [22] Ms. Astravas indicated that she did not recall seeing a CSIS Issues Management Brief (“**IMU**”) dated May 31, 2021, regarding the defensive briefings CSIS intended to provide to MPs Michael Chong and Kenny Chiu. This IMU was sent by email to PS officials and indicates that its distribution “must be confined exclusively to the DM Public Safety, Minister Public Safety, MIN PS Chief of Staff, NSIA” (National Security and Intelligence Advisor to the Prime Minister (“**NSIA**”)).
- [23] Ms. Astravas did not know why she had not received this IMU. She stated that, had she seen the IMU, she would have had a strong reaction and would have followed up with the Director of CSIS to ask what CSIS was doing about it. On reviewing the document, Ms. Astravas noted it indicated CSIS intended to brief the MPs, which was a good thing.
- [24] Following the release of the May 2023 Globe & Mail articles discussing the above-mentioned intelligence, as well as during the review process of the Independent Special Rapporteur, Ms. Astravas made inquiries in an effort to confirm with PS whether she had received the aforementioned IMU and related intelligence about the targeting of Michael Chong. She stated that they were not able to confirm what material had been provided to her or the Minister.
- [25] She stated that no one flagged the intelligence concerning MP Chong to her and that, had it been important, it would have been incumbent on PS to bring it to her attention, or the Director of CSIS could have contacted her.

### 3.2 Warrant Application

- [26] Ms. Astravas indicated that Minister Blair had approved a number of warrants during her tenure as Chief of Staff.
- [27] She explained the procedure for the Minister’s consideration of a CSIS warrant application. Ms. Astravas, along with one of her staffers, would thoroughly read the

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entire warrant application package.<sup>3</sup> It was not unusual that senior officials of CSIS (either the Director or the Deputy Director of Operations) would provide a briefing on the warrant where questions could be asked.

[28] During this briefing, Ms. Astravas would typically ask questions about the application, which she viewed as being part of her functions as Chief of Staff. In most cases, her questions related to the threshold to obtain the warrant under subsection 21(1) of the *CSIS Act*, [the CSIS Director or an employee designated for the Minister for that purpose may, after having obtained the Minister's approval, make an application for a warrant if they "(believe), on reasonable grounds, that a warrant under this section is required to enable the Service to investigate (...) a threat to the security of Canada or to perform its duties and functions under section 16"]. Ms. Astravas indicated that a warrant application would usually be presented to the Minister once she and CSIS agreed that it was ready.

[29] Ms. Astravas confirmed [the information received by the Commission from the Attorney General of Canada] that she received a briefing regarding the application for a warrant under section 12 of the *CSIS Act* (the "**Initial Briefing**"). She noted that the warrant application was sensitive, as are all warrant applications. She recalled having spoken to the Director, at some point, that he inform persons, as may be appropriate. She stated that she had not discussed this warrant application with anyone, other than the Minister, outside of the individuals present at the Initial Briefing.

[30] Ms. Astravas did not believe that CSIS had indicated that the warrant application needed to be signed urgently. She recalled having asked questions about the application during the Initial Briefing; these questions would have concerned whether the threshold was met with respect to the warrant.

[31] Ms. Astravas recalled attending a subsequent briefing on the date the warrant was signed, during which the warrant application was presented to the Minister for the first time (the "**Minister Briefing**"). Her office, in conjunction with CSIS, would normally

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<sup>3</sup> This would include the affidavit and the recommendation letter from the DM PS.

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schedule an attendance for the Minister to review a warrant application in a SCIF. She did not recall at whose initiative this briefing was convened. According to Ms. Astravas, this was the first time that Minister Blair was provided with the warrant application, although she believed he was aware that a warrant was forthcoming.

[32] The Minister Briefing was given over secure video teleconference. Minister Blair attended at the Toronto CSIS Regional office. Ms. Astravas and her TS-cleared Ministerial staffer, senior PS officials and CSIS officials attended remotely from Ottawa. Ms. Astravas witnessed Minister Blair sign the warrant application on that day. After Minister Blair had signed the warrant, she considered that this matter was within the Service's remit.

[33] In the interval between the two afore-mentioned briefings, Ms. Astravas had spoken by phone with the Director of CSIS on a number of matters. She believed that she may have been waiting for answers from CSIS on matters that she had asked about during the Initial Briefing. She also indicated that CSIS may have pulled back the warrant application in order to update information or make grammatical changes, which she described as not unusual. She noted that, at the time, CSIS was particularly careful regarding all warrant applications, following a Federal Court decision that criticized CSIS with respect to its duty of candour on warrant applications. At the time, the Ministerial office was also exceptionally busy dealing with a number of high-profile issues of considerable urgency, including the COVID-19 pandemic, border closures, gun control, the mass shooting in Nova Scotia, and issues with Afghanistan, among others. Ms. Astravas noted, however, that had the Director considered the signing of the warrant as an urgent matter, he would have called her, as he had on multiple occasions, to ensure the matter was dealt with on an urgent basis.