

*From the Ottawa Citizen, March 19, 2002*

It's in Canada's interest to maintain a friendship with Ukraine, which heads into an election March 31.

President Leonid Kuchma has been persona non grata in many western nations since 2000, when a security guard turned over tapes that apparently were made in Kuchma's office, and which suggested that he had assassinated opponents, suppressed the media, fixed elections, taken bribes and illegally exported weapons to Iraq.

Kuchma's allies -- the oligarchic parties that, apparently out of fear of losing their economic privileges, did not continue a program of major economic reforms when they took over the government last year -- have been unable to obtain further IMF credits. The lack of serious economic reform has meant little western investment has come in.

The use of government resources to reduce the access of opposition parties to the public during this election campaign has been criticized by the European Union and the United States, though observers recognize that this campaign appears to be freer than was the presidential campaign of two years ago. Furthermore, the rapprochement between Russia and the West since Sept. 11 has made western nations less interested in overlooking Ukraine's blemishes.

Nevertheless, it is important that the West, and especially Canada, remain involved in Ukraine.

It is the second largest country in Europe, with a population not far short of Britain or France. Since it became independent in 1991, Ukraine has indirectly shielded the Balkan and Central European countries from Russian pressure.

The West has to be careful not to apply a higher standard of conduct to Ukraine than it does to Russia. If Ukraine is not as far along in economic liberalization as is Russia, it nevertheless enjoys, according to Freedom House, a greater degree of political freedom. Nor should Ukraine be compared with Central European countries. Since independence, it has had to create a state and a sense of nationhood, to overcome a far more authoritarian past and a lack of experience with a market economy.

The cooling of Ukraine's relations with the West has resulted in the country moving closer to Russia. Should the coming election result in a further lack of serious economic reform, it's unlikely

appreciable western investments will enter the country to balance the flow of Russian capital.

Canada has made a greater political investment in Ukraine than... almost any other western state. More than a million people of Ukrainian descent ensured Canada was a principal centre for nurturing Ukrainian culture during Soviet oppression. Canada was the first western country to recognize Ukrainian independence, and has spent more on technical assistance in Ukraine than has any western country save the United States.

Canadian must continue to stimulate economic reform and strengthen Ukrainian democracy. Ukraine, like Russia, remains one of the former Soviet states most likely to make a successful transition to democracy and to a successful market economy.

We should keep Ukraine's importance and its relatively good performance in its neighbourhood in mind when considering its shortcomings. We can make political and economic progress in Ukraine a condition of further assistance, but we should not disengage.

*Derek Fraser has been Canada's ambassador to Ukraine, Hungary and Greece. He is now director of the EastWest Institute of Canada, based at the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria.*