



BULLETIN

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Canada's Ukrainian Diaspora and the Country's Strong Support for Kyiv

Piotr Kościński

The existence of a large, very politically active Ukrainian diaspora in Canada largely explains the strong commitment of the country to military and economic assistance for Ukraine. This makes Canada an important partner for the EU's and Poland's joint projects in building support for Ukraine, including both the construction of a stable democracy there and in strengthening its economy. Cooperation with Canada through NATO can contribute to strengthening the Alliance's eastern flank.

The Canadian government has repeatedly emphasised that it does not accept the annexation of Crimea by Russia and opposes Moscow's support for the separatists in Donbas in eastern Ukraine. In tandem with both the U.S. and the EU, Canada has imposed sanctions on Russia, tightening them several times and as recently as February.

There are three key reasons explaining the involvement of Ottawa. First, Canadian politicians recognise that the conflict in Ukraine is more dangerous for it than other major conflicts in the world, including the war against the Islamic State (a.k.a. ISIS/ISIL) because it could lead to another Cold War between countries that possess nuclear weapons. Second, it is the result of a conviction that the importance of this conflict is such that Ukraine must be supported. This assistance is implemented in different ways, including recently through direct military support, but for the time being is mainly limited to military training. Third, the background of a very strong Ukrainian diaspora in Canada further affects political decisions. All of Canada's political groupings must acknowledge its concerns.

Military and Financial Support. Two hundred Canadian soldiers soon will leave for the western Ukrainian training grounds of Yavoriv in the Lviv region (near the Polish border) and in the vicinity of the city of Kamianets-Podilskyi to train Ukrainian military personnel and police. Together with the Americans and the British, the Canadians will participate in non-lethal training, that is such things as flight safety procedures, logistic systems, treatment of the wounded and sick, and landmine clearance. In 2015 alone, the cost of this operation, which is scheduled to last until 31 March 2017, will amount to CAD 16 million.

Ukraine also will receive certain military equipment, including CAD 66 million worth of night vision devices and warm clothing. At the moment there has been no decision to sell weapons to Ukraine, but in the past few months this issue was debated in Ottawa on several occasions, though Canadian politicians apparently do not want to act alone. Representatives of Ukrainian Canadians have tried to press the government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper to persuade the White House to send weapons to Kyiv. Should this happen, Canada's situation politically would become easier as it would just be joining the United States. Canadian Defence Minister Jason Kenney announced in February that military-grade intelligence satellite images of Donbas will be provided to Ukraine's authorities.

In the meantime, Canada provides significant development assistance to Ukraine. In 2014, Ottawa announced that Ukraine remains a priority country and is the only state to receive such funds in Eastern Europe. The effects have been visible already. In 2012–2013, Canada donated CAD 30 million for projects in Ukraine. In 2014, the promised aid increased to CAD 100 million. The primary stated objective is to “improve the economic opportunities of Ukrainians and strengthening of democracy in this country.” When focusing on issues of democracy development, Canada is working with the Polish Foundation for International Solidarity. The main priority of Canadian support for the Ukrainian economy is to help farms and small and medium-sized enterprises (SME), particularly those run by women.

In a visit to Kyiv 11–12 May, Foreign Minister Rob Nicholson announced a new project to provide CAD 30 million over six years to support increasing the competitiveness of SMEs, as well as CAD 12 million to strengthen the cover over the destroyed Chernobyl nuclear reactor (plus an additional CAD 3.5 million to improve nuclear safety in the country), CAD 5 million to combat organised crime and CAD 1.2 million to help the military health service of Ukraine.

How the Diaspora Affects Politics. Canadians' positive stance towards Ukraine is not new. In 1991, Ottawa tried to be the first in the world to recognise the independence of Ukraine after the fall of the Soviet Union, ultimately to be overtaken by Poland some five hours later. In subsequent years, Ukrainian issues have been very significant to Canadian politicians. Today, all major political parties in the country have an almost identical position on Kyiv. If, for example, the opposition Liberals and New Democrats criticise the Conservative prime minister for taking part in the fight against the Islamists, they call on him to strongly oppose Russian actions towards Ukraine. In the Canadian House of Commons, MPs are doing everything they can to show their support for Kyiv. On 29 April, MPs discussed Ukraine for four hours, though it was not a debate in the strict sense because all of them presented very similar views. Almost every one of them was later praised by the political action group Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC).

In Canada, 1.2 million people are of Ukrainian ethnicity, according to official statistics, with those of Polish origin following (approx. one million). The Ukrainian Canadians include leading figures in the country's politics, such as Ray Hnatyshyn, Governor General in 1990–1995, the premiers of Manitoba (Gary Filmon, 1988–1999), Saskatchewan (Roy Romanow, 1991–2001), and Alberta (Ed Stelmach, 2006–2011). Meanwhile there are many people not directly related to the diaspora who are involved in Ukrainian issues. For example, Chrystia Freeland, a writer and journalist whose mother was Ukrainian (Halyna Freeland, née Chomiak), is a member of the Liberal Party and very actively supports Kyiv; she is now included on a Kremlin "blacklist" of people prohibited from entry to Russia.

The UCC is very well organised and operates, apart from Ottawa, particularly in regions where there are many ethnic Ukrainian residents, especially in Manitoba (where Ukrainian roots stretch to 15% of the population), Saskatchewan (some 10%) and Alberta (also 10%). Ukrainian activists are very efficient in persuading politicians to their cause and in organising campaigns to support their ancestral country, such as the collection of money for the Ukrainian army.

Meantime, the unexpected collapse in the richest Canadian province of Alberta of the Conservative provincial government after more than forty years of rule, with the May elections of the left-wing New Democratic Party (NDP), threatens to expand to the federal government and across Canada where Conservatives are in power, including perhaps PM Harper.

But even if the NDP wins in the national elections on 19 October (which is rather unlikely), a change in terms of foreign policy towards Ukraine should not be expected. On Ukrainian matters, the NDP is even more radically anti-Russian than Conservatives. According to recent polls (conducted at the end of April and beginning of May), the two main parties, the Conservatives and the Liberals, enjoy similar levels of support (30–33%), while NDP remains in third place. There is no significant political force that would change Canada's foreign policy on the matter, especially towards easing its stance on Russia or limiting support for Ukraine.

Possible Future Cooperation. Past experience shows many benefits of cooperation with Canada on Ukrainian affairs. Canada is a major partner of Poland among the bilateral donors to Kyiv. The government of Canada has supported the Polish–Canadian Democracy Support Programme, implemented by the International Solidarity Foundation to support pro-democratic changes in Ukraine. Under this programme, the Foundation plans to finance through 2016 about 25 projects implemented by partners from Ukraine and Poland (NGOs, local governments, media). The projects will address local government reform and support independent media and building a common space for citizen awareness. The total planned budget for the programme in the years 2014–2016 is CAD 5.5 million, of which CAD 4 million is a contribution from the Canadian side.

Such cooperation can be extended. The European Union and Poland specifically should more efficiently cooperate with Canada on development aid for Ukraine, also in bringing together donors, both international organisations and states. Representatives of Ottawa have a significant voice in the EU.

Canada, in presenting a very firm stance on the war in Ukraine, is also a very important partner for EU Member States, and especially those in NATO (of which Canada is a part), that hold a similar position. There is especially a chance to strengthen NATO's eastern flank through a greater presence of NATO forces and infrastructure in the region and by improving the political-military mechanisms needed for a rapid decision to send troops in an emergency.

As Ukrainian politicians appreciate the actions of Canada and advice coming from the country, it is advisable to interact with Ottawa in order to effectively persuade Ukraine to speed up necessary reforms.