Feds must do more to support Ukraine, say experts, Ukrainians, opposition MPs

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To date, Canada has committed $2.9-billion in combined loans and direct funding to support Ukraine’s defence against Russia and in support of Ukrainian citizens, but opposition MPs and Ukrainian political figures say Canada needs to provide more. Immigration lawyers say there are significant delays in getting Ukrainians to Canada, and find the process itself ‘convoluted’ and ‘confusing,’ while others urge more military spending to support Ukraine’s defence of its territory.

Military supplies, and immigration experts say its immigration program for Ukrainians is “lacking.”

This figure includes $1.3-billion in direct funding to Ukraine, and $1.6-billion that has been made available as a loan to Ukraine.

Of the direct funding, the government pledged $500-million in military aid to Ukraine for 2022-23 in the most recent government budget. Since January, the government has provided $118-million in military equipment to the war-torn country. And, Canada has committed $245-million in humanitarian assistance, and $35-million in development funding to partners in Ukraine, for a total of $280-million.

Canada has also introduced special immigration measures for Ukrainians fleeing the war and wishing to come to Canada. The Canada-Ukraine authorization for emergency travel (CUAET) and, the new stream for Ukrainians seeking permanent residency, was said to cost $111-million over five years, with $6-million ongoing beyond that.

But two months into Russia’s war on Ukraine, Canada’s implementation of its immigration program for Ukrainians fleeing the region is falling short, say immigration lawyers and opposition MPs. Meanwhile, Ukraine’s ambassador-designate to Canada Yulia Kovaliv continues to urge Canada for more military support—as do opposition MPs.

Delivery of new immigration streams ‘disappointing and lacking’ As outlined by experts, the main issues for Ukrainians trying to come to Canada at this point are the need for a counterfoil visa (meaning a visa with a physical stamp or sticker in one’s passport), the need for biometrics, and the lack of a refugee resettlement program for Ukrainians.

“I think the initiative overall is good. I think the delivery has been somewhat disappointing and lacking,” said Barbara Jo Caruso, a practicing immigration lawyer and member of the Canadian Immigration Lawyers Association.

“It’s been a much slower and much more painful and tedious exercise than most would have thought and the public, I think, have been led to believe. And that’s where I think the government should be encouraged, to try to do
more,” she said, noting that there are many more Ukrainians waiting to come to Canada than have already arrived here.

Aidan Strickland, press secretary to Minister of Immigration Sean Fraser (Central Nova, N.S.), said the Immigration Department has approved 85,000 applications but to date, over 23,000 have arrived in Canada. Between March 17 and May 1, the department received over 196,000 applications.

The government has taken a “risk-based approach” to biometric screening, Strickland said, exempting Ukrainian applicants 17 and under and 61 and over, and those previously approved for a Canadian visa within the last 10 years from providing biometrics.

However, Caruso said that in practice, the process for Ukrainians to get a biometrics appointment before they come to Canada (as required) has been “extremely difficult and challenging” because the government uses a third party for biometrics, and those offices are overwhelmed.

“It would be a lot more effective and efficient to do the biometrics here in Canada,” she said—something that NDP MP Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, B.C.), her party’s immigration critic, has also been calling for since the conflict began.

Visa applications and biometric appointments for Ukrainians are being prioritized, Strickland said.

Jaimie Chan Yun Liew, a professor at the University of Ottawa and an expert on immigration, citizenship and refugee law, said she wants to see the government implement a refugee resettlement program for Ukrainians.

Ukrainians fleeing the war can come to Canada as temporary residents and are granted work permits for two years. But Liew said a refugee resettlement program would enable them to access much more support.

The government has put in place some temporary resettlement support for Ukrainians, including settlement program services such as language training which are normally reserved for permanent residents. The government has also pledged support by providing targeted charter flights to Canada for Ukrainians, shortterm income support to ensure basic needs are met, and temporary hotel accommodation for up to two weeks.

However, the government is operating under the assumption that most Ukrainians will want to return to Ukraine. For those who do want to become permanent residents, the process can be difficult and confusing, Liew said. Some are pursuing refugee status, but that can be a risky endeavour. When an individual applies for a refugee visa, they give up their temporary resident status. If they are rejected, they may have to leave Canada.

“It’s a very complicated process. It is lengthy in terms of wait times. There’s no guarantee you’ll get refugee protection. And the fact of the matter is that yes, there’s a war going on, but it’s not clear that what’s going on there will be seen by Refugee Board members as enough to fit the definition of refugee,” she said.

“A lot of lawyers are not advising their clients to make a refugee claim for that reason,” she added.

While the government has been quite responsive to people’s concerns, Liew said, she believes the government has a lot of work to do to improve programs for resettling Ukrainians in Canada.

“We really need to think about the fact that people shouldn’t have to live in limbo and that they should be able to start to make a new home for themselves here if they want to,” she said.

As far as navigating Canada’s immigration system, Liew said even she has had trouble.

“I find it is convoluted. It’s complicated. It’s changing all the time. And I know the government is doing its best, but I would just say the experience is confusing even for us lawyers.”

Kwan said she also supports the government introducing a refugee resettlement program for Ukrainians so they can access government programs like the Canada Child Tax Benefit and health care.

“Canada needs to step up,” she said.

Canada’s military contributions to Ukraine have ‘made a difference,’ but more is needed. In the third month of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, opposition MPs, expert observers, and the Ukrainian Ambassador-designate all say the Canadian government should be doing more to support Ukraine.

From the beginning, Canada has been a part of the international coalition, consisting of NATO states and their allies in Europe and Asia-Pacific, that have supported Ukraine with money, humanitarian aid, and weapons.

Canada’s aid thus far has been noted by
Ukraine, but after an expression of gratitude, Ukraine’s new chief diplomat to Canada indicated the country is still in need.

“We are grateful for Canada’s military aid, financial and humanitarian support,” said Yulia Kovaliv, the Ambassador-designate of Ukraine to Canada in her remarks to the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Monday, May 2. “The latest supply of heavy weapons and armoured vehicles are vital for the defence of our territory and our sovereignty,” she said.

She praised the incorporation of considerable military, financial, and humanitarian aid in the most recent budget.

However, Kovaliv said “financial and military aid must increase and urgently flow to Ukraine, as the war unfolds.”

Canada has supplied four long-range M777 howitzers to Ukraine, which are capable of accurately hitting targets at longrange distances up to 30 km, and GPS-guided Excalibur shells that allow for extremely accurate fire.

Kovaliv said these heavy weapons have “made a difference” on the ground for Ukrainians defending their territory.

In the earlier stages of the war, Canada supplied small arms like Carl Gustaf anti-armour recoilless rifles, which Ukrainians used against Russian tanks and armoured combat vehicles.

Canada has also delivered body armour, ammunition, small arms, rocket launchers and helmets to Ukraine.

In an April 4 interview on CTV’s Question Period, Ukrainian MP Kira Rudik echoed the Ambassador-designate: “We need as [many] weapons, and different kinds of supplies as possible…. And obviously funding, helping us to cover the holes in our budget right now to make sure that our people have everything needed, and that our army has funds to continue fighting.”

In an April 26 tweet, Minister of Defence Anita Anand (Oakville, Ont.) announced the government had finalized a contract with Mississauga-based manufacturer Roshel for eight armoured vehicles to be supplied to Ukraine “as quickly as possible.” Another contract is currently being finalized for maintenance and repairs of Canadian-made cameras with which the Ukrainian Bayraktar drones are equipped.

NDP MP Heather McPherson (Edmonton-Strathcona, Alta.), her party’s foreign affairs critic, said in an interview that her party is supportive of weapon deliveries to Ukraine.

“I think the government has done some things well, but they have not recognized the urgency and the need for aid that is required with the conflict in Ukraine,” she said.

McPherson said while the NDP will always look at non-violent means of conflict resolution by diplomatic and humanitarian means, Russia’s war against Ukraine is not a case when it can be done.

“We need to give Ukrainians the right to defend themselves, we need to give them the tools they need,” she said.

Brian May (Cambridge, Ont.), the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, said in a statement to The Hill Times that: “Canada has responded to Ukraine’s needs at every step of the way. This aid continues to flow into Ukraine. The Royal Canadian Air Force has deployed two CC-130 aircraft to Europe to deliver military aid from Canada and our allies, and these aircraft have delivered over one million pounds of cargo to date.”

Conservative MP Michael Chong (Wellington-Halton Hills, Ont.), his party’s foreign affairs critic, said he wanted to see Canada meet the NATO spending goal of two per cent of GDP annually on defence, he said in an emailed statement to The Hill Times.

“While we support the actions taken to date by the Government of Canada, Conservatives believe more can be done,” he said.

“Conservatives believe it is time to take the threat of Russia seriously.”

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