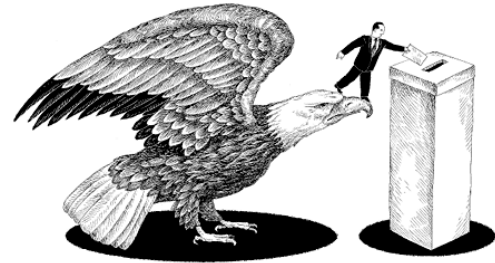


The New York Times

Founded in 1851

*March 8, 2004. Late Edition - Final
Section A, Page 19, Column 1*



How to Help Ukraine Vote

By MADELEINE K. ALBRIGHT

WASHINGTON — Democracy in Ukraine is facing a crucial test as that country prepares for presidential elections in October. An intimidating, sometimes violent campaign has already begun, yet Washington has been strangely and sadly silent about the future of this important American partner.

Just days before I arrived in Kiev last month for a conference on Ukraine's future in Europe, the Ukrainian-language version of Radio Liberty, which is financed by the United States, was forced off its major outlet. Later, a small radio station was closed after it began Radio Liberty broadcasts. And just last week the director of another radio station that was considering broadcasts of the service died in a suspicious car accident.

The rest of the electronic media are virtually all government-influenced, and the future of the only independent television channel is in doubt. Federal tax authorities somehow seem to investigate only businesses that support opposition candidates. Nongovernmental organizations, especially voter education and mobilization groups, face continual pressure.

Meanwhile, supporters of President Leonid Kuchma are trying to push through constitutional amendments that would enhance the power of the legislature — which they will control until at least 2006 — at the expense of the presidency, which they would probably lose in a fair election this October. In this way, even with Mr. Kuchma out of elected office — he has said he will not run again — someone associated with his administration would continue to run the country.

The constitutional changes being debated might be justified under other circumstances, but the legislature, known as the Rada, has little standing because its Kuchma-aligned majority emerged under questionable circumstances after a bitter and unfair election in 2002. It is certainly wrong for the Rada to grab greatly expanded powers for itself just before the presidential election, which is the next significant chance for Ukrainians to have their say on the direction their government has taken.

The path that Ukraine will now choose has enormous importance for the United States. Ukraine has been an important partner since its independence in 1991. It gave up the nuclear weapons it inherited from the Soviet Union, supported efforts to reverse the effects of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, stopped helping Iran's nuclear program, closed the Chernobyl nuclear power reactor, and contributed approximately 1,600 troops to Iraq and hundreds more to United Nations-backed peacekeeping operations in Liberia, Kosovo and elsewhere.

In May, when 10 new members are admitted to the European Union, Ukraine and its almost 50 million people will sit on the organization's eastern border. It will become even more important in dealing with Islamic extremism to its south, the authoritarianism of its neighbor Belarus, and a Russia whose leaders sometimes express nostalgia for the Soviet Union.

The United States does not have an interest in who wins Ukraine's presidency, but we do have a strong stake in how that victory is obtained. Unfortunately, while our ambassadors have spoken out with eloquence and courage about events in Ukraine, the administration has spoken privately, and from a distance. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has been the only senior official to visit Ukraine recently, and that was to get support for the Iraq war. President Kuchma made clear to me during our nearly two-hour meeting last month that he sees the Bush administration as giving little thought, good or bad, to Ukraine, except to repeat what it hears from Russia. The suspicion within the political opposition is that Ukraine's contribution to the coalition in Iraq was intended to buy amnesty from the United States. This cannot be true, but the perception discourages government opponents.

So what should the United States do to encourage democracy in Ukraine?

First, speak out. President Bush and cabinet officials need to insist on free and fair elections and they need to do so soon. This election could well be decided by unfair tactics long before the balloting begins. Senior officials should visit Ukraine, and other opportunities will come this June when leaders of the Group of 8 industrialized nations, the European Union and NATO meet. Already on the agenda is the Bush administration's plan for promoting democracy in the Middle East. Saving democracy in Ukraine belongs on that agenda, too.

Second, increase support for independent news media and civil society. This will require a considerable financial commitment as well as the help of Ukraine's democratic neighbors, which can provide unbiased media and training sites for voter mobilization and monitoring efforts.

Third, join our European partners in describing the alternative futures for Ukraine. A free and fair election, with whatever result, should elicit trade and visa concessions from the European Union as well as a road map to eventual membership in the union, enhanced military cooperation from NATO, and support for membership in the World Trade Organization. These measures, and the prospect of a more stable democracy, would do much to increase needed foreign investment in Ukraine. As President Kuchma considers his legacy, an independent and democratic Ukraine, firmly rooted in Europe and trans-Atlantic relations, should be his clear preference.

If, however, the elections are fraudulent, Ukraine's leaders should know that their entry into Western institutions will slow and that their own bank accounts and visa privileges will be jeopardized. The same should hold true if Mr. Kuchma's faction manipulates the Constitution to its own advantage.

Preserving and expanding the frontiers of freedom around the world requires constant vigilance. That vigilance is being tested in Ukraine today, and so are those who claim to believe in freedom as the universal right of all people.

Madeleine K. Albright was the secretary of state from 1997 to 2001.