

The London Free Press

Delegation of Ukrainian politicians visit London during learning excursion

By [Hank Daniszewski](#), The London Free Press
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Alisa Riabova, deputy mayor of the Ukrainian city of Pavlograd, London city councillor Harold Usher and tour organizer Kadie Ward wrap themselves in the Ukrainian flag. A delegation of Ukrainian municipal officials were in London Wednesday as part of a tour to learn about Canadian municipal governance. (HANK DANISZEWSKI, The London Free Press)

London may have a divided city council and a mayor in court on fraud charges, but our problems pale compared to Luhansk, an eastern Ukrainian city torn by a revolt of pro-Russian separatists.

Despite the turmoil, Luhansk Mayor Sergiy Kravchenko was in London Wednesday as part of a Ukrainian delegation trying to learn about good municipal governance.

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Speaking through an interpreter, Kravchenko said he speaks to his deputy mayors daily and his city is under control.

“Regardless of our current condition, we are looking forward towards more peaceful times and it’s of great interest to visit London and see how things are done here,” Kravchenko saide.

Luhansk is an industrial city of about 450,000, close to the Russian border. About 70% of the population speaks Russian.

Citizens in the city couldn’t even vote in this week’s presidential election, won decisively by candy magnate Petro Poroshenko, because of disruption by the Russian separatists.

But Kravchenko said he believes his nation is turning the corner with the presidential election and a victory by Ukrainian troops, who thwarted an attempt by rebels to take control of the airport in the nearby city of Donetsk on Tuesday.

“One of our new president’s slogans is “We start a new life.” I hope he will do everything in his power to bring the country together,” Kravchenko said.

Oleksander Kucherenko, the Ukrainian director of the agency that organized the exchange visits with Canada, said it’s a tough time to be a Ukrainian mayor as they try to run their cities while facing armed insurrection from separatists, with the apparent support of Russia.

“It’s a stressful time. You can’t expect a good economy or reform in a time of war. We need to settle this crisis,” Kucherenko said.

Kucherenko said the new Ukrainian president plans to give more authority to local officials and is looking to Canada as a model.

“Decentralization is badly needed, it has long been postponed since independence in 1991,” Kucherenko said. “It has stalled the progress of Ukraine.”

He said Ukraine needs strong political will to move forward on closer ties to the European Economic Union.

Kravchenko and Kucherenko were part of a seven-member delegation that met with city councillors and officials with London Economic Development Corp. and Downtown London.

The delegation moves on to Niagara Falls Thursday to attend a meeting of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.