

Exclusive Politics Federal [Russia-Ukraine war](#)

This was published 3 months ago

‘Total joke’: DFAT and ambassador at odds over return to Ukraine

[Rob Harris](#) and [Anthony Galloway](#)

February 19, 2023 — 5.00am

A lengthy workplace safety stand-off between Australia’s ambassador to Ukraine and senior bureaucrats has kept the nation’s embassy in Kyiv shut, fuelling suspicions among senior diplomats that the incumbent will not return.

Bruce Edwards, a career official with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, was [forced to flee Kyiv](#) alongside dozens of diplomats in January last year as tens of thousands of Russian troops assembled at the Ukrainian border before a military invasion.



Australia’s embassy was co-located with Canada’s in Kyiv before the Russian invasion. BLOOMBERG

But almost 12 months after the invasion, 67 of the 81 diplomatic missions that left the war-torn Ukrainian capital have now reopened, many since May – including the embassies of the United States, Britain and Canada – after Moscow’s troops withdrew from the areas around Kyiv last April.

The Australian mission has been [based in neighbouring Poland](#) since last February, with Edwards returning to Ukraine just once since the invasion, when he [escorted Prime Minister Anthony Albanese](#) into the capital alongside a heavy security presence. Sources familiar with the stand-off have told this masthead that Edwards and the department are at odds over whether the staff in Poland should return to Kyiv.

But there are conflicting narratives over the dispute, with some blaming Edwards for not doing enough to satisfy DFAT that he wants to return, while others have laid the blame squarely on the department’s secretary, Jan Adams, for refusing to budge.

Three DFAT sources said they feared Edwards would be moved on to another role before he had the chance to return.

Unlike the ADF and security agencies, DFAT is unable to waive its responsibilities under the Work Health and Safety Act when sending staff to conflict zones. But senior departmental sources said this did not prohibit DFAT from developing a risk management plan to safely return its diplomats to Kyiv.

One senior Australian diplomat, not authorised to speak publicly by the department, said it was a “total joke” that Australia has not reopened its mission.

“No one seems prepared to take any leadership on the issue, and internationally our partners will be looking at us rather bemused that we are donating military aid but are not prepared to go back and show our support,” they said.

Another department source said: “The whole situation is just embarrassing, we are doing damage to our reputation.”

Ukraine’s ambassador to Australia, Vasyl Myroshnychenko, said he believed Australia should be sending its ambassador back to Kyiv because Canberra was missing out on direct access to sensitive briefings and information.

“There are meetings where only the ambassadors of the Five Eyes countries are invited – physically, you must be present,” he said.

“It’s about the meetings you attend, access to the information you get and your ability to go and talk to American, British and Canadian ambassadors.”

He said the relationship between Australia and Ukraine had reached a new level over the past 12 months but “whatever I am doing [in Australia] has to be reflected and mirrored in Ukraine”.



Australian ambassador Bruce Edwards has been based in Poland since February 2022. DFAT

“Australia is, in my opinion, now kind of disadvantaged not having an ambassador there,” he said.

“This is just basic trade and diplomacy. You haven’t had an ambassador [in Kyiv] for 12 months, and in this time we’ve had so many things which have happened, so I think it would be a good thing for him to go back.”

Other foreign diplomats who spoke on the condition of anonymity said Australia was getting a reputation for being overly risk averse. Australia was the first of its key allies to close its embassy in Afghanistan in 2021, which angered some officials within the Australian Secret Intelligence Service, the overseas spy agency, because it meant they lost their presence on the ground to gather vital intelligence.

The masthead can also reveal the former Coalition government knocked back an invitation from the British government to return alongside its ambassador Melinda Simmons and be based within the UK mission last May – ahead of almost every other Western nation.

Simmons, who received a damehood in the King’s New Year honours for her contribution to foreign policy, said at the time: “Us coming back is confidence that Kyiv is a place where you can work and you can be.”

Edwards directed media inquiries about his situation to the department.

On Thursday, Adams said her overall risk assessment had not changed in recent months and it was still too dangerous to send the embassy’s staff back to Kyiv.

“The security situation in Ukraine, and Kyiv in particular, remains complex [and] challenging – it hasn’t improved,” she told a Senate estimates hearing.

“As recently as last week, Russian missiles again targeted Kyiv, with Ukrainians once more forced to seek refuge in makeshift shelters, including subway shelters.”

Australia’s embassy was co-located with Canada’s embassy, which reopened in the middle of last year.

Adams said Canada differed from Australia because it was a member of NATO and “it makes its own decisions – as do we”.

“We’re operating our embassy out of Poland, we’re doing so very satisfactorily. We’re working with partners in a very effective way,” she said.

While Adams has noted the department was following its own advice regarding its “do not travel” warnings for Ukraine, the Australian government continues to have a diplomatic presence in several “do not travel” destinations – including Iran, Iraq, Myanmar, Russia and, until 2021, in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Liberal senator David Van – who travelled to Ukraine in August, including to Kyiv and frontline positions in the east – said Adams has been unable to point to any reason why Australian diplomats could not return to the embassy in Kyiv when the US, Britain and Canada have all returned.

“The department operates staffed embassies in Russia, Iran, Iraq and Myanmar, all of which have ‘do not travel’ warnings and have operated staffed embassies in active war zones such as Afghanistan and Baghdad,” Van said.

“It is vital we have staffed embassy in country so that we can be getting the best assessments from what is happening on the ground.

“How are we supposed to learn anything from the war and be prepared for future conflicts if we are only seeing what is happening from the TV?”

Australia’s embassy in Ukraine formally opened in November 2014 for an initial period of 12 months, following the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17. Edwards, previously posted overseas as deputy head of mission in Port of Spain and Beirut, as well as a stint in Kabul, was appointed to the post in October 2020. He was previously in Kyiv as the mission’s chargé d’affaires.

Asked earlier this month whether Australia would be reopening its embassy, Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong said the government had looked at a “range of security issues” and the decision at the moment was to continue to provide assistance from Poland.

“Obviously, we’ll continue to review that, but the safety of Australian personnel, obviously, is the priority we have to apply to that decision.”

Get a note directly from our foreign correspondents on what’s making headlines around the world. [Sign up for the weekly What in the World newsletter here.](#)



Rob Harris is Europe correspondent for The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age. Connect via [email](#).



Anthony Galloway is political correspondent for The Sun-Herald and The Sunday Age. Connect via [email](#).
