

16/07/2003

Gateway to Eastern Europe

WHILE membership of the European Union is its long-term goal, and its trade is still dominated by its links to the countries of the former Soviet Union, in particular Russia, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit, and that of the Ukraine Foreign Minister earlier this month to the Philippines, Singapore and Brunei, show that Ukraine is trying to develop ties with new partners as it makes the transition to democratic institutions and the market economy. The presence of the Defence, Primary Industries and Education Ministers in the delegation accompanying the first-ever visit by a Malaysian Prime Minister indicates the major areas that Malaysia is keen to explore and develop with the East European republic.

As the most important component of the former Soviet Union next to Russia, the Ukraine's well developed scientific and industrial base makes it a major producer of military equipment. Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak has expressed interest in its electronic air surveillance system, for example. Although no concrete deals have emerged, looking at sources other than the West in countries such as Ukraine for military purchases makes good sense because it can lead to better buys for Malaysia based on cost-effectiveness, future growth and technology transfer. More than 500 Malaysian students have already discovered that a medical education conducted in the English language at the Crimea State Medical University offers a more cost-effective alternative to the traditional education destinations in the Anglo-Saxon West.

Bounded by Russia to the north and east, Belarus to the north, Romania and Moldova to the southwest, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland to the west, and the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov in the south, Ukraine occupies a strategic position in East Europe. This is why Dr Mahathir is keen to make it a gateway for the export of Malaysian products, especially palm oil, to Eastern European countries. In the same manner, as Dr Mahathir pointed out, Malaysia could be Ukraine's springboard to Southeast and East Asia. Malaysia and Ukraine have much to gain if concrete actions are taken to strengthen bilateral ties.