

Remarks to the National Press Club by Kateryna Argyrou, co-chair of the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations

Canberra, Australia, 28 February 2024

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Thank you, Ambassador. It's a pleasure to be speaking today at the National Press Club. Thank you all for your interest. I acknowledge in particular the members of both the Press Gallery and the Parliamentary Friendship Group of Ukraine, wonderful to see you.

As some of you may have noticed, I am heavily pregnant. 8 and a half months to be exact. Due to pregnancy complications, I should be on bed rest right now. But the reason I am here and not in Sydney, is because I have the opportunity to be the voice of those people who can't speak with you directly right now. And Ukrainians desperately want to be heard!

Since the beginning of this week, Stefan Romaniw, Chrestyna Kmetj and I have been meeting with politicians at Parliament House, advocating for Ukraine. Yesterday was a particularly tough day for me. Not only because it was physically difficult to walk up and down the halls of Parliament all day, but because I attended a Ukrainian documentary screening called "Bullet Holes" organised by the Australia-Ukraine Parliamentary Friendship Group, under the leadership of Senator Bilyk and Senator Reynolds – thank you for hosting this important event. The documentary is about Ukrainian children that were murdered by Russia. It was incredibly difficult to hear stories of innocent children that Russia just ruthlessly slaughtered. I was also shaken by a story of a pregnant woman that was captured by the Russian armed forces and was beaten on her belly with metal rods! She was told that because she was Ukrainian, her baby should die, that because she was Ukrainian her baby did not deserve to be born into this world.

This is the reality of what is happening in Ukraine every day. Children are murdered and raped, maternity wards are bombed, entire cities are systematically destroyed. I have my sisters and cousins in Ukraine. I don't want them to be raped or experience what this pregnant woman experienced. I have 6 of my family members on the frontline. I want them to survive. I want to see them again. This is why I and other members of our community spend every spare minute we have doing everything we can to help Ukraine – this war is deeply personal for our community.

Australian support for Ukraine, which is approaching \$1 billion dollars, has been significant. It has achieved a lot. It has helped us fight. Ukrainians here and in Ukraine are incredibly grateful and will always remember how Australia stepped up in Ukraine's darkest hour. But there is more to do.

Over the last two years, Australia has unfortunately slipped from being the largest non-NATO contributor to Ukraine, to being the sixth largest — after Japan, Sweden, Switzerland, Austria and the Republic of Korea. Assistance packages have become smaller and less frequent. Yet, in research the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations commissioned earlier this month,

a significant majority of Australians supported the Federal Government providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine, increasing sanctions against Russia, and providing Australia's retired and unneeded military equipment to Ukraine. So we're appealing for Australia to link its support to the scale of the challenge.

If Ukraine is to "end Russia's illegal and immoral war on its own terms" — as Ministers claim is their goal — Australia's support needs to be delivered at a scale and frequency that will help shift the dial. Stepping back — doing less, and doing it less often, as has been the trend — is not in Australia's national interest.

Our community has come to Canberra this week with 4 main messages regarding how Australia can step up in 2024:

- 1) Provide Additional military support for Ukraine
- 2) Provide pathways to permanent residency for displaced Ukrainians in Australia
- 3) Reopen the Australian Embassy in Kyiv
- 4) Implement A whole-of government approach to Ukraine

On the first point – military support is paramount. Over 80% of Australia's contributions to Ukraine have been military-related. And so I commend the Government's decision this month to contribute \$50 million to the International Fund for Ukraine, which delivers priority military equipment to Ukraine.

As the sad story of the Taipan helicopters showed us, there is a clear need for creative and proactive thinking about opportunities to support Ukraine. This hinges on two-way dialogue, where both countries can have a better platform for collaboration, can compare notes, make decisions quickly and act at scale. What we have been advocating for is for the Australian government to consider donating decommission equipment and to look at capabilities that will be phased out or which are surplus to ADF needs, such as M1 Abrams tanks, ASLAVS, and potentially Tiger helicopters. We have also noticed that the ADF is auctioning off Unimogs, All-terrain vehicles, and boats on a site called Pickles – we would welcome the opportunity to discuss how those items could potentially be transferred to Ukraine as they would go a long way in saving lives.

I would also like to note that new money is also needed. From my last two years of work advocating for more military aid to Ukraine, it is evident that the biggest handbrake is hesitancy in the Department of Defence. Support for Ukraine comes out of the existing Defence budget, which leads to reluctance in providing more military aid to Ukraine. So we hope that the Budget this year will include a line-item for military support for Ukraine, so the current hesitancy can come to an end.

Second, immigration and visas. Ukrainians who came to Australia seeking safe haven are increasingly asking about their future in the country. It is common for families to be on different visa categories, which gives them not only different levels of support but also different lengths of stay. There is currently no readily identifiable pathway for them to secure permanent residency, which is causing major stress and anxiety.

Third, reopening the Australian embassy in Kyiv. Australia is the only one of Ukraine's partners in this fight which has not returned a diplomatic presence to the country. Over 80% of the foreign missions which closed at the start of Russia's war have now been reopened for more than six months. The new Australian Ambassador, living in Poland, is yet to set foot in Ukraine after almost 3 months on the job. To be in Ukraine right now is to understand the reality of the war. A visit by the Foreign Minister to Ukraine to reopen the embassy would send a strong message of solidarity this year.

This time last year, I watched Ambassador Myroshnychenko stand on this stage and ask the Government for a plan for how Australia could support Ukraine militarily. While that request has not been taken up, the breadth of Ukraine's needs — for offensive capabilities, for defensive and protective technologies, for coal, for medivac channels — make coordination and strategy essential.

Now's the time to establish a Ukraine Support Coordination Office within the Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet, which would be focused on evaluating and prioritizing humanitarian, military, diplomatic and legal opportunities for Australia to support Ukraine and Ukrainians. This would also be a channel through which private-sector contributions to Ukraine can be effectively coordinated to enhance strategic impact and complement Government contributions.

These four asks — a whole of government plan, reopening the Australian Embassy, visa pathways to provide certainty to displaced Ukrainians, and meaningful and creative military support — have been at the heart of the AFUO's conversations with ministers, shadow ministers, crossbenchers, and many others across the Parliament this week. We look forward to continuing these discussions and seeing these initiatives delivered.

While this weekend marked two years since Russia's full-scale invasion, this month we also marked 10 years since Russia illegally occupied eastern Ukraine and annexed Crimea. This July will be 10 years since the 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade, a unit of the Russian armed forces from Kursk in the Russian Federation, shot down 38 Australians flying on MH17.

In the last decade, time has taken on new meaning for Ukrainians. Many feel they are living on borrowed time. For others, they long for a time without war. Political leaders here and around the world have been fond of saying that they are 'with Ukraine for as long as it takes'. Two years in, this language of solidarity seems misplaced — we should not settle for a protracted, bloody stalemate, but instead we need partners who want to invest now to end this appalling invasion as quickly and efficiently as possible, to help bring an end to the human suffering.

So it's time to be bold, to double down, and to act quickly. Australia, please help us hold the line. Defending democracy isn't easy, fast or cheap. But it is right.

I want my soon to be born son to enjoy a peaceful future where he can choose what subjects to study at school and what path to pursue in life, not what weapon to pick up and what military mission to carry out.

Our community in Australia calls on the Government to be brave — like Ukraine.

Thank you all for your time. Slava Ukraini!

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