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Public statement to the Senate Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, inquiry into Australian support for Ukraine, 5 July 2024.

OPENING STATEMENT - PUBLIC SESSION

Thank you for the opportunity to appear at this public hearing today.

The Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations is the voice for the Ukrainian community in Australia. We are the peak body for 22 community organisations across the country, with interests across culture, business, youth, religion and women's issues. We represent the interests of the 57,000-strong Ukrainian community in Australia. Since the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion, the AFUO has been working across different levels of government and across the community to support Ukraine and Ukrainians, particularly the 11,400 Ukrainians that are here in Australia today displaced by Russia's war.

I'd first like to acknowledge the deep gratitude across our community for the valuable contributions the Australian Government has made to support Ukraine's resistance and more importantly survival. Ukrainians will never forget how the Morrison Government and the Albanese Government stepped up in Ukraine's darkest hour. This gratitude is expressed to me frequently as I talk to anyone from Ukrainian soldiers on the frontline through to displaced Ukrainians rebuilding their lives temporarily here in Australia.

The enormous breadth of Ukraine's needs — for offensive capabilities, for shells, for defensive and protective equipment, for coal, for medivac channels — make coordination, consistency and strategy absolutely essential. While greatly appreciated, Australia's efforts across the humanitarian, military, diplomatic and legal spheres, appear to many in our community to be siloed and sporadic.

There is no clear line of sight to Australian support, unlike what we observe from Australia's allies, partners and friends including the US, UK, Canada and Japan. We hear the Australian Government wants to 'empower Ukraine' to end Russia's war 'on its own terms', but that requires scale, action and political will. Ukraine can only win this fight if it is properly armed and supported. To shift the dial, Australia's contributions — which have become smaller and less frequent over time — must scale up in ambition and become more joined-up in execution.

While I am no military expert, as a person, who had six family members on the frontline in Ukraine and as a community leader that's currently coordinating the Defend Ukraine Appeal, I have a good understanding of the situation on the frontline in Ukraine. I would like to present some examples of missed opportunities to explore here.

First, armoured vehicles. One of the most pressing needs is equipment for promptly evacuating wounded soldiers from the battlefield. There is a critical shortage of armoured vehicles such as Bushmasters and Hawkeis. We deeply appreciate Australia sending 120 Bushmasters, however, as the war has only intensified, no new armoured vehicles have been sent to Ukraine for over one year. Every single brigade out of 50 that we have contact with through the Defend Ukraine Appeal has a critical shortage of armoured vehicles for medical evacuation. To address this need we fundraise dollar by dollar here in our community to send non-armoured vehicles to be used as med-evacs to evacuate wounded soldiers. These vehicles, however, are quickly destroyed and are far more dangerous to be used on the frontline. Unfortunately, Ukrainian soldiers don't have a choice. This is why AFUO purchased over 70 off-road vehicles for friends and relatives of our community members. This need could have been addressed much better by the Australian government sending more Bushmasters or supplying other equipment such as Hawkeis and ASLAVs to Ukraine. Using armoured vehicles for medical evacuation could have helped save many lives of combat medics as well as soldiers.

Second, Helicopters. When we first heard about the Australian government decommissioning Taipan helicopters, we began asking our contacts whether med-evac helicopters like the Taipan would be useful in Ukraine. Our contacts from over the 50 brigades we work with presented examples of situations where med-evac helicopters are critical — some of these examples were described in detail in the relevant submissions to this inquiry. What we realised is that no single brigade out of those that we are helping had helicopters available for medical evacuation, while almost every brigade performs critical lifesaving tasks, where helicopters could have been incredibly effective. Sending decommissioned Taipans to Ukraine could have been such an easy win for the Albanese government and would have saved thousands of Ukrainian lives. Sadly, a disposal strategy was chosen instead.

The third example is drones. Through the DUA we have raised funds for purchasing over 100 Mavic drones for reconnaissance in Ukraine. It took us more than a year to purchase so many drones. This was only possible because various community groups volunteered their time and energy. To our surprise we found out that the Australian government grounded all DJI drones to conduct a review, however we remain unaware as to whether these drones will be taken out of service. Thousands of Ukrainian lives could be saved by providing these and other types of drones to Ukraine.

These are just three examples of missed opportunities, where Ukraine's needs weren't prioritised and unwanted equipment is seemingly not considered for its potential use to Ukraine.

Committee members will be aware from the Federation's submission to this inquiry that the AFUO strongly recommends the adoption of a whole-of-government approach to support for Ukraine, which was first championed by my fellow co-chair, the late Stefan Romaniw OAM. By establishing a Ukraine Support Coordination Office within the Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet, our hope that such an office would ensure that Australia's support can increasingly be strategic, timely, coordinated, and comprehensive. By appearing not to have a cohesive and well-telegraphed Ukraine strategy which draws together Government and non-government initiatives alike, Australia's next move has not been easy to deduce, which has led to uncertainty in our community.

While it is heartening to hear Government ministers say that 'Australia stands with Ukraine' and will do so 'for as long as it takes', what our community really wants is to end this war as soon as humanly possible. We do not want a bloody stalemate which consumes our country and countrymen for years into the future. In this sense, every contribution Australia makes is a vote for the end of the war, so each one needs to be aligned with what has come before it and how it can meaningfully contribute to Ukraine's victory. This can only be achieved with a considered, proactive and ambitious strategy that leverages the capacities of the entire government and country.

On the 17th of July, our community — along with all Australians — will mark ten years since commercial passenger flight MH-17 was shot down by Russian-backed separatists over Ukraine. Russia was emboldened by the weak international response to their occupation of Crimea, which set the stage for the deadly and traumatic period Ukraine is now navigating. I'm optimistic for Ukraine's free future, but to get there I believe Australia must start playing a bigger role, commensurate with our size, stature and ambitions for the world, to help defeat Russia and secure a lasting peace.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

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