

**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**Hearing
on
Erasing Ukrainian Identity and Culture**

**September 25, 2024 - 3:00 p.m.
2247 Rayburn House Office Building**

**Statement of Dora Chomiak
CEO
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Co-Chairman McGovern, Co-Chairman Smith and all of the distinguished Members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, it is an honor to testify before you today.

My name is Dora Chomiak, and I am the CEO of Razom. Razom, which means “together” in Ukrainian, is a U.S.-based organization focused on Ukraine that grew out of the 2014 Revolution of Dignity. Our mission is to build a secure, democratic and prosperous Ukraine. Appreciating the Maidan’s legacy as a meeting point for civic activism through culture, such as music, art, poetry, photography, or cinema, Razom embraces the same creative resilience that fuels Ukrainians in times of struggle and war.

In response to Russia’s full-scale war in February 2022, Razom quickly expanded our activity to deliver aid and advocate for US support to counter Russia’s aggression. We have raised over \$140 million, with grassroots donors representing nearly every Congressional district. Our efforts to support the Ukrainian people are further fueled by our deep belief in the need to foster, celebrate, and preserve Ukrainian culture.

Russia’s intent in Ukraine is nothing less than the destruction of the Ukrainian nation, the Ukrainian language, and the Ukrainian people. When I last had the privilege to testify before Congress in 2022 on how civil society contributes to Ukrainian victory, I wrote: “Russia seeks to eliminate Ukraine’s right to self-determination, and even more so to destroy the idea of Ukraine and what it means to be Ukrainian.” Culture and identity motivated Putin to invade. Kateryna Lakovlenko, a Ukrainian art historian born in the Donbas said, Russia has its “own idea that Ukraine does not exist as a culture... That’s why they want to destroy everything: to show that [in Ukraine] there is nothing. This is, very clearly, a colonial way of thinking. This is how empires always work.”

Culture, in this context, is deeply political. Culture refers to shared characteristics and beliefs. Culture cannot exist without community and people coming together. Under repressive regimes, where political processes like free elections are not possible, culture can be a means of activism

and protest. Indeed, dictators try to censor or control the arts because of their powerful political potential.

When I grew up in the United States during the Cold War, if you looked at a political map of Europe, it would be impossible to locate the independent state of Ukraine. Throughout history, independent Ukraine was at times physically absorbed by nearby empires or politically dominated by others. But, of course, Ukraine still existed beyond the constraints of a political map because Ukrainian culture, language, and national identity existed. Ukraine was visible because of its culture even when the borders of the state were not.

For hundreds of years, Russian and Soviet leaders worked systematically to denigrate and destroy Ukrainian culture. And here I explicitly include all the cultures of Ukraine, including Crimean Tatars, Jewish communities, Greek communities, and religious minorities such as Protestant and Evangelical Christians which are especially targeted in today's Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine. The specific examples of targeting Ukrainian culture are too numerous to count, but I will highlight three. In 1876, the Russian emperor issued the Ems Decree, which entirely banned the use of the Ukrainian language. The Ukrainian composer who wrote "The Carol of the Bells," Mykola Leontovych, was murdered by a Soviet agent in 1921. At the same time as Stalin's man-made famine targeting Ukrainians, the Holodomor, the 1930s also witnessed what's called the "Executed Renaissance," a period during which tens of thousands of Ukrainian artists and intellectuals were executed by the Soviet regime. In short, Russian leaders worked hard to hide Ukrainian culture on the world stage and attempted to block Ukrainians themselves from knowing their own history. Ihor Poshyvailo, director of the Contemporary Maidan Museum in Kyiv, said it simply: "By destroying our past, Russia tries to destroy our future."

This policy of cultural genocide continues today. The largest Ukrainian language printing house in Ukraine, Factor Druk, was struck by three Russian missiles on May 23. Razom collaborated with an author to publish a children's graphic novel at Factor Druk, and many authors we work with publish their books there. In 2022 in occupied Kherson, Ukrainian conductor Yuriy Kerpatenko was shot in his home by Russian soldiers for refusing to participate in a pro-occupation concert.

All across Ukraine's temporarily occupied territory, museums' empty shelves, such as those in the Kherson Local History Museum and the Kherson Art Museum, testify to Russia's looting of Ukrainian art, likely appropriated as a part of Russian culture and history as has been practiced for centuries. Ukraine's Ministry of Culture states that 123 artists and cultural figures have been killed and 1,147 heritage sites have been damaged or destroyed. As of September, 2024 UNESCO has verified damage to 438 sites, including 142 religious sites, 215 buildings of historical or artistic value, 32 museums, 32 monuments, 16 libraries, and an archive. According to Ukraine's Ministry of Culture, approximately 1.7 million objects from Ukraine's museum heritage have fallen under the control of Russian occupation authorities.

Russian troops continue to destroy Ukraine's historical, architectural, and archaeological heritage every day. The Russian military deliberately targets and shells museums, memorials, university buildings, and cinemas. They fire rockets at churches, temples, cathedrals, TV towers, and monuments. Russia is not just destroying Ukrainian cities and villages, but is systematically destroying Ukraine's cultural heritage. The destruction of the Ukrainian cultural facilities is a systematic and purposeful Russian policy to destroy Ukrainian identity.

One of the most insidious ways that Russia is seeking to eradicate Ukraine's identity is by abducting Ukraine's children. The Ukrainian government has identified over 19,000 children by name as having been forcibly abducted and transferred to Russia, Belarus, or the occupied territories, but Russian officials brag that they have "saved" over 700,000. Russia changed its adoption laws so these children can be "adopted" by Russian families and raised not as Ukrainians, but as Russians. Stripped of their language, told their families have abandoned them or been killed, and raised to learn that there is no such thing as Ukraine or Ukrainians—this is one of the clearest examples of Russia's genocidal intent, and it is why the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Vladimir Putin and his "children's rights" commissioner. I want to thank a Member of the Commission, especially Congresswoman Susan Wild, for passing H.Res.149, condemning the Russian kidnapping of Ukrainian children. The resolution passed with overwhelming bipartisan support.

Fully reclaiming Ukraine's heritage goes hand-in-hand with reclaiming its sovereignty. Yet, I want to be very clear, it is not enough to simply defend centuries of Ukrainian cultural roots; Razom also believes in the need to amplify and share Ukrainian culture with the world. Ukrainian culture is alive, sophisticated, and evolving, even in the face of the overwhelming violence Putin continues to unleash. In fact, after more than 900 days of war, we are seeing a flourishing of literature, theater, music, and film even as Russian missiles pummel Ukrainian cities.

Razom has worked hard, even before the full-scale invasion, to amplify Ukrainian culture to American audiences through various programming. For example, in two weeks we will host the second Ukrainian Cultural Festival in New York City, where attendees will immerse themselves in the world of Ukrainian literature and view the best in contemporary Ukrainian film.

Our program "Razom Cinema" aims to elevate the presence of Ukrainian movies in the U.S., encourages recognition of Ukrainian films by various art institutions and their curators, and promotes Ukrainian filmmakers to new audiences outside of Ukraine. Over the years of our work, we've supported a variety of world premieres at world-renowned film festivals like Sundance and Tribeca by ensuring a strong Ukrainian representation on stage so that the audience gets to hear their stories firsthand.

Through our outreach, we work closely with various communities around the U.S. to help them bring these films to their audiences to provide a chance for Ukrainian cinema to be screened in new places. Ukrainian filmmakers have now predominantly turned to the power of documentaries to capture and expose Russia's war crimes against Ukraine - most risking their lives to do so. We continue to create spaces to share these stories and have vital conversations

around them. In fact, this evening Razom is showing the film *Checkpoint Zoo* here in Washington, DC, a film that documents the daring rescue led by a heroic team of zookeepers and volunteers at the Kharkiv Ecopark Feldman, who risked their lives to save thousands of animals trapped in a zoo when Russia invaded.

Another program I would like to spotlight is “Razom Literature.” Razom Literature supports the translation of Ukrainian novels and poems into English, organizes book tours, and hosts book clubs that meet monthly to read and discover modern Ukrainian authors and poets, such as Serhiy Zhadan, Artem Chekh, and Viktoria Amelina. Tragically, Viktoria was killed as part of Russia’s campaign of targeting civilian areas.

Razom supported the publication of the book by Volodymyr Rafeyenko, twice displaced person from Donetsk and from Bucha, who wrote about his experience in his critically acclaimed novel *Mondgreen*. Olena Stiazhkina’s book *Cecile the Lion had to Die* is another book by a writer from Donetsk that describes the horrid realities of the Russian occupation of that city in 2014. This year we supported *My Women* by Yuliia Iliukha, which spotlights 25 stories of Ukrainian women dealing with the trauma of war.

The academic world is another realm in which Russia has sought to sideline Ukraine. Ukrainians have always placed an immense value on knowledge and scholarship, yet US institutions rarely approach Ukraine without orienting it through the perspective of its colonial occupier. Ukraine has often been studied or understood as a subset of Russian or Soviet studies, existing on Russia’s terms rather than on its own.

To study Ukraine or its neighbors typically requires subscribing to a Russian studies program, which are in abundance. Such academic programs diminish the direct exploration of Ukraine and place the emphasis instead on the colonizer. The result is a skewed perspective on a sovereign country.

This distortion is no accident. Russian state academic and cultural institutions understand that so much of how and whether the United States is able to support Ukraine and defend our own national interests are downstream of how Americans study, learn, and understand Ukraine.

Thankfully, in recent years, studying Ukraine in its own right has been expanding as Ukraine’s resilience has inspired a new generation of scholars. Razom launched the “Ukraine on Campus” program, which brings Ukrainian focused content directly to students and faculty. We have supported a network of over 60 Ukrainian students groups at US universities and colleges, and created toolkits that helped these groups organize screenings of *20 Days in Mariupol* at 50 universities across 23 states in partnership with PBS last semester.

History shows us that Russia’s expansionism, currently focused on Ukraine, will only grow as it finds success. I hope that other nations will not have to experience the scale of destruction that Ukrainians have come to know too well. I hope the Members of this Commission and every

Member of Congress understands that Ukraine is fighting not only for its survival, but also for Europe and the free world.

Indeed, the most critical need now is continued funding for Ukraine. I am alarmed to see that the current Continuing Resolution does not extend nearly \$6 billion in Presidential Drawdown Authority funds for Ukraine, which are set to expire at the end of this week and which we all worked so hard to pass early this year. I hope that after the election in November, both branches will convene to authorize additional funding for Ukraine into 2025, including extending the vital PDA authority. There are other needs as well, such as transferring Russian state assets through the REPO Act, ending sanctuary for the aggressor, and enabling Ukraine to properly defend itself with US weapons. At this point, Ukraine's future will be defined by how serious Ukraine's allies are about giving Ukraine the tools it needs to defend itself and ultimately win. Ukrainians, in the meantime, will continue to fight for their freedom and independence. A shirt I own bears a quote from famous Ukrainian poet and novelist Serhiy Zhadan, who joined the army in response to the full-scale invasion: "We must pass on the most important thing to our children: our culture and our weapons."

The war in Ukraine is a fight to preserve Ukraine's culture which is inextricably linked to Ukraine's survival as a sovereign, independent, democratic state. This is echoed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which recognizes that cultural rights are indispensable to human dignity and self-determination. Volodymyr Sheiko, Director General of the Ukrainian Institute, which I am on the advisory board of, rightly states that "Russia has instrumentalized and misused culture to whitewash its aggressive policies, authoritarianism, war crimes, disinformation, and violations of human rights." I am proud to declare that in the face of Russia's campaign to destroy the very idea of being Ukrainian, Ukrainians are proving that they are resilient and will endure. I encourage this Commission and all Members of Congress to be curious about Ukraine. Each time that we read a book or poem from Ukraine, or watch a Ukrainian film, or learn Ukrainian history, we help keep Ukrainian culture alive and thriving.

I thank you for the opportunity today and look forward to your questions.

Appendix 1: Ukrainian Artists Killed by Russia

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, 123 Ukrainian artists who joined the Armed Forces have been killed, including:

- **Victoria Amelina**, a novelist, died because of a rocket attack on Kramatorsk by Russian troops.
- **Maksym Kryvtsov**, a poet. In 2023, Maksym Kryvtsov published a collection of poems titled *Poems from the Loophole* (*Virshi z biinytsi*) and worked on a novel he could never complete. He died at the frontline in 2024.
- **Serhii Artemov**, leaving his work, the musician volunteered to defend Ukraine from the aggressor, but died in action from mortar fire on April 18, 2023, near Bakhmut, Donetsk oblast.
- **Andrii Petukhov** was a Ukrainian musician, drummer and percussion teacher. Musician died in battle in June 2022 near Lysychansk, Luhansk oblast.
- **Vasyl Slipak** was an opera singer and a soloist of the Paris National Opera, as well as a Knight of the Order for Courage and Hero of Ukraine. He was killed by a Russian sniper in Luhanske, near Bakhmut.
- **Oleksandr Shapoval**, a Ukrainian ballet dancer and soloist of the National Academic Opera and Ballet Theater of Ukraine. He was killed in September 2022 on the front line in Donetsk region.
- **Vadym Khlupianets** was a Ukrainian ballet dancer at the Kyiv National Academic Theater of Operetta. He was killed by Russian invaders near Bakhmut.
- **Mykola Lenok**, musician of Wild Theatre died at the front. He joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine at the beginning of the full-scale invasion.
- **Igor Voronka**, Opera singer, artist of the National Academic Choir "Dumka," died at the frontline in 2024.
- **Oleksandr Serdiuk**, vocalist at the Berehynia Theatre in Kyiv, died during a combat mission.
- **Andrii Pavlenko**, actor and director, died in the war as a soldier.
- **Ihor Mysiak**, writer, author of *The Factory*, was killed in action in May 2023.
- **Andrii Kasianov**, an actor at the Taras Shevchenko National Theatre in Dnipro, was killed in action at the end of August 2024.
- **Oleksandr Menshkov**, writer and volunteer, author of *Me, Fox and the Occupation*, was killed in action in Donetsk Oblast while defending Ukraine.