



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Erasing Ukrainian Identity and Culture

Wednesday, September 24, 2024

3:00 – 4:30 p.m.

2247 Rayburn House Office Building

As prepared for delivery

Good afternoon and welcome to today's Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on "Erasing Ukrainian Identity and Culture." I extend a special welcome to our outstanding panel of witnesses, three of whom are testifying virtually, from Michigan, New York and London. I will introduce them shortly.

When we talk about Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, what first comes to mind is the brutal invasion that began two and a half years ago, in February 2022.

But in fact the war began eight years earlier, in February and March of 2014, when Russia invaded and illegally annexed the Crimean peninsula, and occupied parts of eastern Ukraine.

Much of the debate over why Russia invaded Ukraine twice in eight years has focused on geopolitics – specifically, the pros and cons of NATO expansion.

But that is not the whole story, or even the main story.

As we will hear today, Russian Tsars and Soviet leaders tried repeatedly to deny and eliminate Ukrainian culture for the last three centuries. They used tactics like banning Ukrainian-language publications and cultural societies, and exiling or imprisoning intellectuals.

Now Putin, a post-Soviet leader, has made cultural erasure a central pillar of his campaign of aggression and violence in Ukraine.

Through a combination of indiscriminate attacks on the civilian population and targeted attacks on cultural infrastructure, Russian forces have destroyed monuments, theatres, churches, universities, libraries, archives, museums – and the list goes on.

Artists, journalists, academics and others who create and preserve culture have faced detention, torture, displacement and death.

In occupied territories, education has become a key vehicle for “russification.”

In the words of PEN America, Putin “seeks not only to control Ukrainian territory, but to erase Ukrainian identity and culture, and to impose Russian language ... [and a] militaristic version of Russia’s culture, history and worldview, on the Ukrainian people.”

Denying a people their culture and their identity is a violation of their human rights.

It may not be the first violation that comes to mind when we think about war.

But it is incredibly important because cultural rights are indispensable to human dignity and a people’s self-determination. Cultural traditions and practices are an expression of our humanity and give meaning to our lives, individually and collectively.

To quote a report authored by another of our witnesses today, cultural heritage is “a message from the past and ... a pathway to the future.” I understand that to mean that culture is the source of human resilience.

In fact, Ukrainians know that the survival of their country is completely intertwined with the survival of their culture and identity. We will hear this afternoon about defiant efforts, both within and outside of Ukraine’s borders, to protect and preserve cultural heritage and to support new cultural production.

The question for us today is what more we can do to support those efforts.

The Biden Administration has taken important steps such as investing \$7 million through its Ukraine Cultural Heritage Response Initiative to “support Ukraine’s efforts to protect and repair damage to Ukrainian cultural heritage sites and collections, [and to] expand and strengthen public-private partnerships with civil society in Ukraine.”¹

¹ “U.S. Department of State Announces \$7 Million for Ukraine Cultural Heritage Response Initiative.” DoS Media Note. February 23, 2023. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-department-of-state-announces-7-million-for-ukraine-cultural-heritage-response-initiative/>.

I believe it is also important that the Administration is taking a comparative approach that recognizes that other peoples, such as the Tibetans, are also being subjected to cultural erasure. I appreciated Ambassador Uzra Zeya's remarks to this effect last November.²

The U.S. government is also committed to holding Russian authorities accountable for the atrocities being committed in Ukraine. To date, Congress has authorized investments to document war crimes and crimes against humanity; eased restrictions on U.S. support for international legal mechanisms, including the International Criminal Court; and expanded U.S. jurisdiction on war crimes, in order to advance accountability for the war in Ukraine.

But I am sure there is more we can and should be doing, so I look forward to the recommendations of our witnesses.

I turn now to my colleagues for any opening remarks they may have.

² Uzra Zeya, "Remarks at the U.S. and Canada IRFBA Ministerial Side Event on Cultural Erasure." (November 29, 2023). <https://www.state.gov/remarks-at-the-u-s-and-canada-irfba-ministerial-side-event-on-cultural-erasure/>