

New York, NY (UCCA) – August 24, 2016 will mark 25 years since the people of Ukraine proclaimed an end to centuries of bondage, and resolutely vowed to protect their new democracy, while charting a future course towards closer European integration. Sadly, this historic anniversary is overshadowed by the knowledge that for the past 2 years the people of Ukraine have been fighting to defend their nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity from military, economic, cyber and information warfare – or hybrid war - by Vladimir Putin's Russia. Just last month, Ukraine recorded the highest number of civilian casualties from Russian attacks in over a year, twice that of the previous month.

Despite overwhelming odds, Ukraine's brave new generation of patriots has risen to the challenge of countering Putin's machinations, fighting both on the battlefield for their freedom, as well as against corrupted officials for much needed social and economic reforms in the name of dignity for all. We stand united with those maintaining an heroic defense against a brutal aggressor in a life and death struggle for their nation's very survival.

Throughout this struggle, strong U.S. support for Ukraine will remain critically important now and in the coming years, especially in the process of securing Ukraine's borders from continued violations from foreign occupiers. The Ukrainian Congress Committee of America (UCCA), the nation's largest representation of Americans of Ukrainian descent, looks to the United States to not only live up to its public and binding security guarantees to Ukraine, but to further develop our shared 20-year military relationship, with Ukraine's record as the only non-NATO partner nation to have contributed actively to all NATO-led operations and missions for the past two decades. We should also encourage the U.S. to maintain funding for educational, professional and cultural exchange programs to further aid Ukraine's emergent civil society as a backstop against proxy or direct intervention by foreign aggressors.

At a time when Ukrainians should be celebrating the 25th anniversary of their independence, many cannot help but think of their friends and neighbors illegally held captive by the Russia Federation: Oleh Sentsov, Olexandr Kolchenko, Oleksiy Chyorny, Akhtem Chiyhoz, Mykola Karpyuk, Stanislav Klykh, Mustafa Dehermendzhy, Ali Asanov, Viktor Shur, Valentyn Vyhivsky, Hayser Dzhemilev, Ruslan Zeytullaev, Ferat Sayfullaev, Olexandr Kostenko, Serhiy Lytvinov, Nuri Primov, Andriy Kolomiets, Rustam Vaytov, Enver Bekirov, Vadym Syruk, Muslim Aliev, Arsen Dzheparov, Refat Alimov, Yuriy Ilchenko, Emir-Usein Kuku, Zevri Abseitov, Remzi Memetov, Rustem Abiltarov, Enver Mamutov... Ukrainians around the world stand united to give voice to those facing brutal repression in the areas of Ukraine currently illegally occupied by Russian forces – an occupation that has not only manifested itself in imprisonment, but in the all too common “disappearance” of those deemed to be trouble-makers, be they activists, journalists, or a beset upon minority, such as the indigenous Crimean Tatars.

Perseverance in the face of tyranny exemplifies the best of our nations' common history, and it has made Ukrainians into who we are today - fiercely independent, loyal to their country, and passionate about freedom. Let us pause on this historic anniversary to honor the sacrifice of those on the frontlines of democracy, and hail them with glory, as they remind us of the true price of freedom.

Slava Ukrayini! Heroyam Slava!.