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TWG Conference - "At the Threshold"

OPENING REMARKS

Orest S. Deychakiwsky, President, The Washington Group

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the TWG Leadership Conference -- "At the Threshold.", which we hope that you will find interesting and informative. A one day conference cannot possibly explore all aspects of the Ukrainian reality in depth, including U.S.-Ukrainian relations, or even, for that matter, the Ukrainian-American community's role. What this conference attempts to do, however, is to provide you with five "slices" of the Ukrainian reality: to examine five specific subjects within the overall political, strategic, humanitarian, economic and technical environment in Ukraine, with a focus on the U.S.-Ukrainian relationship. These are: U.S.-Ukrainian Military to Military Cooperation, Ukraine's Role in International Space Programs, Ukraine on the Eve of Presidential Elections, U.S.-Ukraine Business Cooperation, and Trafficking of Women from Ukraine.

As the title of our conference suggests, Ukraine most certainly stands "At the Threshold". What does that mean? Ukraine, like the entire world stands the threshold of a new millennium -- a millennium that will be filled with incredible possibilities, especially with the continuing rapid advancement of knowledge in such areas as science, health, communications. The potential is astounding. And the fact of the matter is that it is the advanced democracies of the West, with their open political and economic systems are leading the world in these advancements. Will Ukraine be positioned to become an integral part of the West, or will it be fated to remain on the periphery of Europe? This remains to be seen. Unfortunately, Ukraine's political leadership does not appear to have made the fundamental decision to make thorough-going reforms conducive to joining the West. Its enlightened foreign policy leadership has certainly moved Ukrainian foreign policy in the direction of the West. Ukraine's foreign policy, in my view, is a success. Ukraine enjoys good relations with her neighbors, works cooperatively with Euro-Atlantic institutions, and plays a constructive role in fostering security and cooperation in Europe, and the importance of this cannot be underestimated. Ukraine's foreign policy has been commendable and far-reaching, especially given the internal and external political constraints under which it operates.

But a Western-oriented foreign policy is simply not enough when Ukraine's internal situation remains ambivalent. Yes, there have been positive changes – Ukraine has created basic pluralism and ethnic tolerance. It serves as a stark contrast to Bosnia or Kosovo. However, many expectations of the West, of the diaspora, and, most importantly, of Ukrainians themselves have gone unfulfilled. The socio-economic, psychological legacy of Soviet imperialism and Communism weighs heavier than many of us thought. Changes will take time, but will not come until Ukraine decisively moves on a reformist path and cleans up government. Despite the rhetoric of its leadership and the progress that has occurred in some respects, Ukraine has yet to make the fundamental decision to go in the direction of the open, democratic, prosperous and progressive West. Alas, much of what transpires on the ground in Ukraine – the corruption, inadequate rule of law, stifling bureaucracy, over-regulation – belies the rhetoric, and serves to neutralize the positive changes that have taken place with Ukraine's independence and since Ukraine's independence.

Ukraine can't wait much longer to make some fundamental choices. October's presidential election provides the Ukrainian people with at least a partial opportunity to make these choices. Strong reformist candidates with a realistic chance to win have not emerged. The choice is between tepid, skeptical reformers who have done little to arrest Ukraine's plummeting economy or launch real reforms, and those who would attempt to turn the clock back – back to a murky semi-Soviet Slavic Union with a semi-closed, irrational economic system and an authoritarian political system that will bring nothing but continued misery for the long-suffering Ukrainian people.

In short, Ukraine stands at the threshold between further political and economic reforms that would bring it closer to its western neighbors, and backsliding into political stagnation and economic decline. I do not believe that it can continue to muddle along, as it has been doing for the last few years, without incurring rising costs, including in such critical areas as health and education which have a profound impact on Ukraine's future.

So, what is to be done? How can we help?

Ukraine's straddling the fence has not made it easy for the West, for the United States, and, indeed, for the Ukrainian-American community. It has been downright frustrating at times. Perhaps the easiest course of action would be to throw up our hands in despair and write Ukraine off, and some already appear to be moving in that direction. But it would not be the right course of action.

Thankfully, the United States has not abandoned Ukraine, recognizing its strategic importance, and neither has the community, despite the disillusionment of many of us with certain aspects of the Ukrainian reality. I would contend that as a community, and as individuals, we need to do what we can to encourage Ukraine to make the right choices as it stands at the threshold. And we need to continue to encourage the West, and, first and foremost, the United States, to not only remain engaged, but to strengthen that engagement. We need to continue to support Ukraine as well through well-thought out assistance programs, especially those designed to strengthen

Ukrainian civil society. And, I might add, supporting Ukraine also includes constructively criticizing the government of Ukraine where necessary, say, for instance, when the government violates press freedoms. The two – support and constructive criticism -- are not mutually exclusive.

During this conference, you will meet people or find out about what is being done to encourage Ukraine to make the right choices. You will hear some concerns about Ukraine's reality and its direction. But you will also definitely hear about some of the things Ukraine is doing right -- things that are indications of Ukraine's ability to, indeed, cross the threshold in the direction of positive change.

Many people, including Ukrainian-Americans, indeed, many of you gathered here today, are contributing to positive changes in Ukraine – whether through your professional activity, participation in Ukrainian-American organizations that actively support Ukraine, contributing assistance to projects dealing with Ukraine, supporting your Washington-based Ukrainian-American offices, or other ways. I hope that those of you who are involved will remain involved, and those of you who aren't, will become so. We – and the we here could mean the United States, the Ukrainian-American community or we as individuals – need to be involved with Ukraine for the long term. After all – we, and the generations that came before us, were in for the long term before independence, even when that independence seemed like a distant and at times quixotic dream. We went through the period of high hopes, and occasionally unrealistic expectations, but now we see the reality and, for good reason, we don't always like everything we see. We know that freedom (and I'll define freedom here as a true democracy and market economy) and independence are not the same. To keep Ukraine independent, it needs to be genuinely free, and that will take patience, time, persistence, and, above all, commitment, first and foremost by the political leadership and people of Ukraine themselves. But we, too, have to be in there for the long haul -- and ultimately, this is what this conference, and the entire Joint Conferences exercise taking place this week, is all about.

In conclusion, I want to thank all of the people who have made this conference possible, including many TWG Board Members and the individual panel moderators, as well as TWG Corporate Sponsors – the New York Selfreliance Federal Credit Union, Rochester Ukrainian Federal Credit Union, Philadelphia Ukrainian Selfreliance Federal Credit Union and Chicago Selfreliance Ukrainian Federal Credit Unions. I thank the New York/New Jersey Professional and Businessman's Association for their co-sponsorship of the TWG conference. Finally, I would like to especially acknowledge our Joint Conferences Coordinator, Roman Goy, without whose vision, commitment and effort the Joint Conferences – a unique event in Ukrainian-American history -- would not be possible.

Thank you.