

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy visits Utah for National Governors Association meeting, thanks Utah delegation for visiting his war-torn country in 2023 while inviting other states to follow.

[Katie McKellar](#)



When inviting Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the stage Friday, Utah Gov. Spencer Cox had a somber message regarding complex world

affairs.

"Sometimes it's hard to tell who the good guys and the bad guys are," he said, pausing before emphasizing each one of his next words. "This is not one of those times."

To that, the ballroom full of hundreds attendees at the Grand America in Salt Lake City — where Cox, as chairman of the National Governors Association, hosted a conference as a capstone to his "[Disagree Better](#)" campaign — gave a standing ovation, some attendees banging their fists on tables.

"There is evil in this world, and there is good in this world," Cox continued. "And we have to be on the side of good or we stand for nothing."

Zelenskyy, wearing his usual khaki-green T-shirt and pants, then marched out on stage to deliver his speech — calling Ukraine's war with Russia a result of "unprovoked and unjust aggression," and a war where it's "absolutely clear" what is good and what is evil.

"This is one of the most transparent battles between good and evil of our time," Zelenskyy said, addressing the group in English. "It's absolutely clear that Ukraine has done nothing — nothing — wrong before God and people."

He said "all the pain" Ukraine suffers "is only the result of Russia's criminal actions."

Zelenskyy expressed gratitude for all the support from other countries across the world, "united to help us to see our freedom." There's a "common human understanding," he said, that comes from Russia's war with Ukraine:

"Evil must always — always — lose," he said, to applause.



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy speaks at the National Governors Association Summer Meeting at the Grand America Hotel in Salt Lake City on July 12, 2024. (Courtesy of the Utah Governor's Office).

Zelenskyy came to Utah the day after he went to Washington, D.C. for a NATO Summit, where President Joe Biden announced a new \$225 million weapons aid package, including a Patriot missile system to strengthen Ukraine's air defense system, the [Associated Press reported](#).

Zelenskyy's speech in Utah was in front of about a dozen governors from across the country sitting at a table in front of a room full of hundreds of other attendees. His message focused on continuing support for Ukraine — not for "boots on the ground" to fight, but continued military aid in air defense and weapons as well as "support in protecting normal life and rebuilding."

"This is all we need to withstand and drive Russia from our land, and to send

a strong signal to all other potential aggressors, which are watching," Zelenskyy said.

Zelenskyy said the carnage from Russia's ongoing onslaught of missile strikes — which recently struck Ukraine's largest children's hospital this week, the [AP reported](#) — continually presents Ukraine with "a huge range of tasks" affecting the country's citizens. That's why he said "we so deeply appreciate when our friends from around the world come to Ukraine to see everything for themselves."

Zelenskyy's visit to Utah comes about 15 months after a [delegation of Utah](#) leaders, businesses, and humanitarian nonprofits became the first ever state-led trade and humanitarian delegation to Kyiv since the war broke out.



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy meets with Utah Gov. Spencer Cox and First Lady Abby Cox at the National Governors Association Summer Meeting at the Grand America Hotel in Salt Lake City on July 12, 2024.

(Courtesy of the Utah Governor's Office).

The connections forged and strengthened during that Utah delegation helped bring Zelenskyy to Utah on Friday, Cox said.

"It was kind of a long shot to get him here," the governor told reporters ahead of Zelenskyy's speech, noting the Ukrainian president has visited major U.S. cities on the coasts, like New York, California and Washington, "but this is his first trip to the heartland of the country," and it was made possible because of Utah's existing connections with Zelenskyy and other Ukrainian officials.

Utah's May 2023 delegation included Utah Senate President Stuart Adams, Utah's Honorary Consul of Ukraine Jonathan Freedman (who is now also president and CEO of World Trade Center Utah), nonprofits [August Mission](#) and [To Ukraine With Love](#), and others.

Zelenskyy, who met [personally with the Utah delegation](#) during its May 2023 visit to Kyiv, the [Deseret News](#) reported, urged other state leaders to visit his country amid the ongoing war. Come, he said, and "speak the truth."

"Tell everyone who has not seen such a war that good must always triumph in war," he said, telling the crowd "your voice, each governor, each community leader ... is crucial. And I invite all of you to visit Ukraine and to see our people, our struggle."

Many do, but not all Utah Republicans support sending aid to Ukraine

Some Republican members of Congress have opposed sending more support to Ukraine, which since Russia's invasion in 2022, has grown to more than [\\$175 billion](#). [Utah Sen. Mike Lee has been among them](#). In February, Lee expressed concerns about ensuring that funding is focused on military aid and not directing billions toward "the Ukrainian government that

could be used to pay the salaries of civilian employees, bureaucrats and other workers of the Ukrainian government."

However, Utah's governor told reporters Friday morning ahead of Zelenskyy's speech that the U.S. must continue sending aid and support to Ukraine because of the threat Russia poses.

While Cox said the U.S. "should be very careful with taxpayer dollars" and "make sure every dime, every penny is being spent in the way it's intended to be spent," he also said the money that's been sent to Ukraine "is going to a very great cause — saving a country that would have been overrun two years ago if it were not for the support" from the U.S. and around the world.

"There is still evil in this world, and that evil is on the march right now, and that evil feels emboldened," Cox told reporters. "It is up to good people everywhere. This is what America does best. It's what we did best in World War I and World War II, and I'm grateful we're able to slow down and stop evil without risking the blood of our people."

While it's "certainly appropriate for people to ask questions" around funding being sent to Ukraine, Cox said, "we should support Ukraine."

"So I'm hopeful our party will continue to rally around this," Cox said of the GOP. "Most of our party does support Ukraine, and I think when (detractors) hear what's really happening over there, they will as well."

In Washington earlier this week, 32 members of NATO formally declared Ukraine was on an "irreversible" path to membership of the Western military alliance, but only after the war with Russia ends, the [Associated Press](#) reported.

While Cox and other state leaders expressed resounding support for Ukraine

on Friday, one of Utah's U.S. senators continues to be a vocal critic, and he's warned against consequences of aligning strongly with Ukraine. Lee, in a March op-ed for the [The American Conservative](#), wrote that "If Ukraine is in NATO, the United States should be out, plain and simple." He also wrote "Putin continues to warn us that Ukraine in NATO could be the match that sparks WWII."

"We must draw a redline with NATO: You can have Ukraine or the United States," Lee wrote. "If allied boots hit the ground in Ukraine, we should walk away from NATO entirely."

Asked about Lee's stance, Cox told reporters, "the NATO question is a really important question and one that needs to be discussed."

"We want peace," Cox said, adding there's no "clear and easy answer ... but that will be part of a peace discussion if and when Vladimir Putin decides he's going to stop killing innocent Ukrainians."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy watches as Oksana Markarova, ambassador of Ukraine, and Utah Gov. Spencer Cox signs a memorandum of understanding between Utah and Kyiv Oblast, the Ukrainian province surrounding the capital city of Kyiv, at the Grand America Hotel in Salt Lake City on July 12, 2024. (Courtesy of the Utah Governor's Office)

Ukraine signs MOU with Utah

After Zelenskyy's speech, the Ukrainian president joined Utah's state leaders in a room packed with other dignitaries for a signing ceremony of a [memorandum of understanding](#) between Utah and Kyiv Oblast, the province surrounding Ukraine's capital city of Kyiv. Cox and Oksana Markarova, ambassador of Ukraine to the U.S., signed the document.

The MOU, Cox said, sets a "traditional sister-state relationship" with that region of Ukraine. It's focused on building a foundation of economic cooperation, "so we'll be working on trade together in that region," he said.

Whenever Ukraine's war with Russia ends, Cox said, the country's going to need rebuilding, and in the meantime, Ukraine's economy needs to stay strong.

"And this helps Utah as well," Cox said. "This is good for our economy, this is good for our entrepreneurs to work closely with their entrepreneurs, and there's so much we can accomplish."

Utah business leaders already established trade connections with Ukraine during the May 2023 delegation. After the delegation's return, a Ukrainian delegation of tech entrepreneurs visited Salt Lake City, which prompted an engineering company to open its U.S. office in Utah, the [Deseret News](#) reported. Additionally, Utah's aerospace and defense association, 47G, has a partnership with Ukraine's Ministry of Strategic Industries to cooperate on defense initiatives, according to the governor's office.

Under the MOU, Utah and Kyiv Oblast commit to working closely together in multiple sectors, outlining at least 10 "priority areas for focus and cooperation, according to the agreement. They include:

- Aerospace and defense
- Health care and life sciences, including biotechnology
- Financial technology
- Manufacturing and supply chain resilience
- Software and information technology
- Tourism
- Energy diversification
- Mining
- Workforce development to meet the needs of high-demand, high-wage jobs created by innovation across all sectors
- Academic cooperation through colleges and universities

Senate President Stuart Adams, R-Layton, and House Speaker Mike Schultz, R-Hooper, joined Cox for the ceremonial signing of the MOU. Both Adams and Schultz said they value fiscal responsibility, as well as continued support for Ukraine.

"What's happening there is a fight between good and evil. Utah and America will stand for the good, America will always stand for the good," Adams said. "And I think we want fiscal responsibility, but there is no question that the rest of the world looks to us, and we will always stand for good."

Zelenskyy's visit to Utah was a full circle moment for many members of Utah's delegation last year, as well as the donors and nonprofits that have contributed to help rebuild the country, even as war rages on.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy (middle) stands with Utah officials after Oksana Markarova, ambassador of Ukraine, and Utah Gov. Spencer Cox signed a memorandum of understanding between Utah and Kyiv Oblast, the Ukrainian province surrounding the capital city of Kyiv, at the Grand America Hotel in Salt Lake City on July 12, 2024. (Courtesy of the Utah Governor's Office)

Utah billionaire Dell Loy Hansen — a real estate mogul and former owner of Utah's professional soccer franchise Real Salt Lake — and his wife Julie Hansen were in the crowd for the MOU signing, and Julie Hansen hugged Zelenskyy after the ceremony. Dell Loy Hansen has committed more than [\\$70 billion to help build homes for Ukrainians](#) displaced by war in partnership with the nonprofit To Ukraine With Love, the [Deseret News](#) reported.

Also in attendance for Zelenskyy's speech was Nick Fowler, director of operations at [August Mission](#), a Utah-based humanitarian nonprofit that was among the first to respond to Ukraine after Russia's invasion. Fowler said he appreciated Zelenskyy's open invitation to his country as well as his

message that the war is a “human tragedy” that should unite people.

“Human suffering is at the heart of it,” Fowler said. “If everyone can just put (political fighting) aside and just think about how they can help.”

Fowler said seeing Zelenskyy in Utah was a “proud moment,” while thinking back on how Utah’s relationship with Ukraine has strengthened over the past year.

“To see that come full circle ... That relationship is going to continue,” Fowler said. “It’s great.”

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