

What is behind Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's trip to Utah?

What Utah leaders thought was a long shot became a reality

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy greets Utah Gov. Spencer Cox as he's introduced during the National Governors Association's 2024 Summer Meeting held at The Grand America Hotel in Salt Lake City on Friday, July 12, 2024. | Isaac Hale, Deseret News

Editor's note: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenksyy is participating in today's National Governors Association meeting in Salt Lake City. Deseret

News will have coverage of the event throughout the day.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy described his country's ongoing war as "one of the most transparent battles between good and evil in our time" during a brief speech Friday at the National Governor's Association meeting in Salt Lake City.

"There are different wars in the world, but this is a war where it's absolutely clear what is good and what boundaries evil crosses. This is one of the most transparent battles between good and evil of our time. It's clear that Ukraine has nothing wrong before God and people," he said.

Ukraine, he said, suffers because of Russia's "criminal" acts and unprovoked aggression.

"Evil must always, always lose," he said.

During the 10-minute speech, Zelenskyy received repeated standing ovations from the governors, the delegates and the capacity standing room-only crowd at the ballroom of the Grand America.

While in Utah, Zelenskyy met with both Democratic and Republican governors attending the conference, Utah elected officials, business executives and leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

"During a private meeting, the Ukrainian president spoke with a church delegation led by Elder Quentin L. Cook of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. They discussed the church's presence in Ukraine and humanitarian assistance throughout the region," said Irene Caso, church spokesperson.

Utah Senate President Stuart Adams, who led a trade and humanitarian mission to Ukraine in May 2023, including a meeting with Zelenskyy said, the Ukrainian president and state leaders engaged in constructive discussions,

focused on enhancing collaboration across humanitarian efforts, business and trade for the mutual benefit of Utah and Ukraine.

In his speech, the Zelenskyy thanked Americans for their support and reiterated what he has said many times, that Ukraine does need the United States and other countries to fight for it.

“We do not ask for your boots on the ground,” he said.

Ukraine only seeks air defense systems for its cities, weapons for men and women on the front line and support in protecting normal life and rebuilding, he said.

“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. “To ensure the true victory of good, your voice — each governor, each community leader, each heart — is crucial.”

In introducing Zelenskyy, Cox also talked about good and evil. He said it’s sometimes it’s hard to tell who the good guys are and who the bad guys are in world conflicts.

“This is not one of those times,” the governor said, receiving the first of what would be several resounding standing ovations in the room for Cox and Zelenskyy.

Cox said Zelenskyy and his wife, Olena Zelenska, both of whom he said he spent time with Thursday, are good people thrown into an impossible task. Lesser people, he said, would have fled the country.

“This man and this woman did not do that,” Cox said. “They stood up to evil and their country rallied around them.”

Why is President Zelenskyy in Utah?

The honorary consul of Ukraine in Utah sprang into action when he and the governor's office learned three weeks ago that Zelenskyy would be in Washington, D.C., on July 10-11 for the NATO summit.

Jonathan Freedman, who has served as honorary consul since 2008, contacted Ukrainian ambassador Oksana Markarova in Washington and suggested Zelenskyy should come to Salt Lake City afterward to attend the National Governors Association summer meeting at the Grand America. Utah Gov. Spencer Cox chairs the organization.

"He was committed in Europe, he had firm commitments and they said it was impossible," said Freedman, president and CEO of World Trade Center Utah.

Cox extended a formal invitation from the governors association to the ambassador for Zelenskyy to come "and that really set things in motion," Freedman said. "Over the last three weeks, what was a long shot increasingly became more and more likely until on July 4 that it was confirmed."

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Zelenskyy, who has not traveled in the United States outside Washington, D.C., New York and California, arrived Thursday night and will spend most of Friday in Utah. Along with his wife Olena Zelenska, 35 high-ranking Ukrainian government officials accompanied him.

Freedman, who received the Ukrainian Order of Merit award from Zelenskyy

last year, said it was “unbelievable” that he accepted the invitation.

“It’s a very impressive delegation this week in Washington, D.C., and they’re adding this stop in Salt Lake City,” he said. “Had we gotten one of these members of the delegation, we would have been thrilled. To have them all is outstanding.”

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy gestures to the crowd as he’s introduced during the National Governors Association’s 2024 Summer Meeting held at The Grand America Hotel in Salt Lake City on Friday, July 12, 2024. | Isaac Hale, Deseret News

What Zelenskyy will do in Salt Lake City

Zelenskyy is scheduled Friday to meet privately with members of Utah’s congressional delegation and governors attending the NGA conference. He

will also speak to conference participants in an open session.

“I anticipate that he will talk about the current plight of Ukrainian people which continues to grow more dire every day,” Freedman said, noting Russia bombed a large children’s hospital in Kyiv, resulting in dozens of deaths and injuries.

On Thursday, Biden announced a new military aid package for Ukraine and told Zelenskyy: “We will stay with you, period,” The [Associated Press](#) reported. The Ukrainian leader also pushed for the help to arrive faster and for restrictions to be lifted on the use of U.S. weapons to attack military targets inside Russia.

“If we want to win, if we want to prevail, if we want to save our country and to defend it, we need to lift all the limitations,” Zelenskyy said, standing alongside NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg at the close of the NATO summit.

Biden was asked about the restrictions again hours later in a press conference with reporters. He said, “The question is, what is the best use of the weaponry (Zelenskyy) has? I got him more long-range capacity, as well as defensive capacity. I’m following the advice of the chief of staff of the military, the secretary of defense, and my intelligence people, and we’re making a day to day basis on how far they should go in. That’s a logical thing to do.”

On Friday, Zelenskyy will witness Cox and Markarova signing a sister-state relationship between Utah and Kyiv Oblast, the Ukrainian province surrounding the capital city of Kyiv. Utah Senate President Stuart Adams and Utah House Speaker Mike Schultz will also be there. Markarova [attended](#) the One Utah Summit, Cox’s gathering of business leaders designed to celebrate Utah’s achievements, provide an economic update, and connect the state’s

government and business community, in April.

“That is significant as we have very few sister-state relationships. It’s a strong statement of support,” Freedman said.

Also Friday, Freedman said, Ukraine’s first lady will meet with Utah philanthropists to raise funds and humanitarian aid for the country’s most pressing causes, specifically to help vulnerable children. Zelenska’s priorities include housing orphaned children, providing schools with laptops and other supplies and nutrition.

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy shakes hands with Utah Gov. Spencer Cox as he's introduced during the National Governors Association's 2024 Summer Meeting held at The Grand America Hotel in Salt Lake City on Friday, July 12, 2024. | Isaac Hale, Deseret News

Utahns in Ukraine

Utah has strong ties with Ukraine going back many years.

"We have phenomenal organizations in our state that are doing meaningful work in Ukraine," said Freedman. They include To Ukraine with Love, August Mission and the Stirling Foundation.

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In May 2023, Adams, R-Layton, led a 30-person trade and humanitarian delegation, including state Rep. Jordan Teuscher, Craig Buttars, commissioner of the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, Freedman and business leaders, to Ukraine.

According to World Trade Center Utah, the mission had three goals:

- Foster a deeper relationship with Ukraine during its darkest time of need.
- Provide ground support in partnership with August Mission.
- Explore business opportunities in aerospace and defense, technology and agricultural sectors.

During the trip, Adams, Freedman and other members of Utah group had an 80-minute [meeting](#) with Zelenskyy. The meeting focused on opportunities for Utah to help the war-torn country, particularly in the area of energy technologies and in agriculture security. The Ukrainian leader told the group

that Ukraine was seeking partnerships, not handouts.

Teuscher, R-South Jordan, described the mission as a “great success,” resulting in hundreds of connections and opportunities.

“It is fitting to have President Zelenskyy come here. Utah has connected with Ukraine in ways that are unparalleled in the country. Thousands of Utahns have volunteered or donated to support Ukraine. Utah businesses have partnered with Ukrainian companies, and our nonprofits are building homes, schools, and hospitals in Ukraine,” Teuscher [posted](#) Thursday on X.

He added that he hopes Zelenskyy's visit is “fruitful in securing continued support for Ukraine, ensuring they receive the tools needed to win.”

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Utah showed enormous support for Ukraine immediately after the Russian invasion in February 2022. State officials bathed the capitol building in blue and yellow light and raised the Ukrainian flag, the first time a foreign flag was over the statehouse.

“It was a tremendous show of support and what I would encourage Utahns to do is to continue that support,” Freedman said.

“Ukrainians are fighting for their freedom, for their lives, for their families, for their land. This is a worthy, righteous cause. They are fighting against a great evil. We believe in democracy. We believe in all these ideals,” he said, adding Utah was founded by religious refugees. “It’s literally in our DNA to stand up and support those that are being terribly afflicted by such a great evil.”

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy honored Jonathan Freedman, CEO of World Trade Center Utah, on Thursday, Sept. 21, 2023 in Washington D.C. with the Ukrainian Order of Merit award. | Youtube.com/@PBSNewsHour

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