

United States Senate Floor

Colloquy on Ukraine

Senators John Curtis (R-UT), Thom Tillis (R-NC), and Alan Armstrong (R-OK)

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Senator Tillis:

Mr. President, I had the privilege—I've been in the Senate for 12 years, and I've never led a CODEL—but I decided that one last trip that I wanted to take before I left the Senate was to get back over to Ukraine, to really understand what's going on on the ground and maybe what message we should convey to our colleagues here in the Senate, to the Administration, and to the American people.

This is the second time I went to Ukraine. We also had a very, very productive visit with government leaders in Poland before we traveled over to Kyiv and then to Kharkiv. We were actually the first delegation since the war began that has been able to get out to where the fighting is only about 10 or so miles away from the city center.

But as we were going on the trip—well, first, when you're in Kyiv, where we spent the first 24 hours, it's an amazing sight to see a country that was illegally invaded, that's being bombed on a daily basis, still trying to have some semblance of normalcy.

And this is in Kyiv. But then when you go out to Kharkiv and you see, as you're riding out there, civilian targets—gas stations, convenience stores, schools, and buildings—that have all been bombed by the indiscriminate bombing of Russia, it gives you a real sense of the devastation, the heartbreak, and all that's wrong with the decision that Vladimir Putin made to invade a sovereign nation.

And I, for one, agree with the people of Ukraine that that invasion started in 2014. As a matter of fact, I remember vividly, when I was campaigning in 2014, how critical I was of the Obama Administration. In the face of an illegal invasion, the idea was to send them blankets, not to send them the support that they needed to repel a foreign invader.

Now fast forward: They're invaded again, and they are doing the same things in the outer reaches of Ukraine that they've done in Crimea. They tell kids in Crimea, in school, that the leaders of Ukraine are Nazis and they're there for the "denazification" of Ukraine. I find that rich, since the President of Ukraine is Jewish.

But that's what Vladimir Putin is telling his folks to tell these kids in school: that they're subhuman, that the people of Ukraine—you can't think of them as human beings. You think of them as life forms that they need to eliminate.

Later on in the colloquy, I want to talk about what we need to do. But I also want to go back to a trip that I took a couple of years ago, my first time into Kyiv, and the devastation and the stories that I witnessed in an area called [inaudible].

I did a floor speech after that visit, and I really want the American people to understand what happened there. In about the first month of the war, shortly after they invaded that February, Vladimir Putin directly allowed mercenaries and military officers to authorize their folks on the ground to indiscriminately kill innocent civilians.

There are numerous reports of rape of a daughter, rape of a wife in the presence of the husband, then to have the husband murdered.

This is not fake. This is well documented. As a matter of fact, I went to a memorial where I saw those victims' names on a wall.

That is what we're dealing with in Ukraine. That was four years ago, and they're continuing that systematic terror of this population. That's what we're dealing with here.

We're not dealing with two adversaries or two countries that we have good relationships with, and we're trying to calm a dispute between the two. We are literally talking about—in my opinion; I'll let my colleagues speak for themselves—a fight between good and evil, between communism and Western democracy, between freedom and totalitarianism.

That's what we're confronted with in Ukraine.

I could go on with a number of other examples, but rather than do that now, I'd like to defer to my colleague from Utah, Senator Curtis. It was his first time in Ukraine. Some insights and takeaways for you, Senator Curtis, then we'll go to Senator Armstrong.

Senator Curtis:

Senator Tillis, Senator Armstrong, a delight to travel with you.

I think it's appropriate to point out how much work goes into a trip like this, and to our team and our staff who put this together, and to the Ukrainians who were our hosts, a big thank you for the things we were able to see and able to do.

I'm so glad you mentioned that. I agree. Thank you.

As you mentioned, this was a unique CODEL—the first, as I understand it, since the war began to actually go just a few miles away from the front.

We were told stories where they would actually put a black bag over people's heads as they took them into these underground bunkers so they wouldn't be able to identify where they were

later on. They spared us that indignity and actually put us in vans with curtains that were 360 degrees as we drove into these facilities.

We were then shown firsthand how this war was being fought and why this is a different war than most people expected—and why the Ukrainians actually are having significant progress.

In reality, we saw drone pilots fly these drones into Russia, strike their targets, and have a pretty large impact. As a matter of fact, more Russians are being lost per month than they're able to replace.

My staff pointed out that had you put a snail on the Russia-Ukraine border the day the war started, it would actually make more progress than Russia has made. And I think that's an important story for us to come back and tell, because the American people need to know this is not the war they thought it was four years ago.

And Ukraine, we learned, is not the ally that we thought it was four years ago. It appeared, when this began, to be a very weak friend—a friend that was totally dependent on the United States for its support.

In reality, what we found while we were there is Ukraine is not only not weak and not dependent on the U.S.; they're actually now a partner with the United States in providing us things and help that would help us in the future.

And the benefit to the United States far exceeds, in my opinion, what we've actually put into this. And I think we'll see that at an even greater rate in the future.

Clearly, these drones have changed the way battles are fought. What Ukrainians are learning, the data they are collecting—imagine the data from thousands and tens of thousands and millions of drone strikes. That data is all being collected, and that is just one of the small parts that they have to bring forward to us.

I would also like to mention one of the aspects that doesn't get talked a lot about, which is how much humanitarian aid is going to Ukraine that is nongovernmental.

While I was there, I had a chance to peel off from our group and go see a village called Hansen Village. A constituent in Utah, a friend, has started Hansen Village—obviously, it's Mr. Hansen.

The amount of effort and work that he has put into this so that some of these Ukrainians can start over and have hope and have a chance is overwhelming and touching.

I had a chance to talk to a couple of people in this village and hear their stories of imprisonment, of torture by Russia. One gentleman had seen his son tortured to death.

The stories will break your heart.

But I'm so grateful not just for the U.S. support, but for the humanitarian support. It just may be in Utah that we have more people who speak Ukrainian as a second language than anywhere else in the United States, and certainly it touches a lot of the hearts of Utahns.

Well, there's a lot I would like to cover, but I don't want to dominate, and perhaps we can come back for just a minute. But I would like to turn the time over to my colleague from Oklahoma, Mr. Armstrong.

Senator Armstrong:

Thank you, Senator Curtis. And it's truly a joy to travel with you all.

This was not luxurious travel. We were getting tired of each other's odor by the time we got done with this trip. We were pretty confined to the same van for a long period of time.

But it was very impressive on us, I think, and the images that we took away.

A lot of times, we think about things and everything here, and I think the questions that we have here in the U.S. about, man, we have our own issues, we have our own budgetary issues, we have our own fiscal issues that we need to deal with here. All of those are very true, and all of those are very valid questions for Americans to be asking—including myself.

But when you realize what is actually going on there on the ground, you realize the spirit of these people who did nothing wrong, who were minding their own business and had their own country attacked, had a democracy that they valued, that they cherished, and had that attempted to be run over the top of.

And you realize the reason that they've been able to surprise everybody on the field is the spirit that they have and the belief that people like ourselves, people who believe in democracies, are going to be there to help and support them.

I'll tell you what: They have surprised us all because of their passion, their belief in democracy, and what they know to be true versus what they're being told by the Russians.

It's the second time I've gotten to go to Ukraine. It's impossible to miss the spirit of these people and how badly they want to defend their own democracy and not be told somebody else's version of the world, but their own open, free perspective of the world.

But despite that issue, there are also some very important things that we, as the U.S., should be taking from this, and we have a great opportunity to do so.

This war is different than any war that's been before us. This is modern warfare, with AI involved in it, with very low-cost weaponry involved in it. In the business world that I come from, we would call this continuous improvement on steroids.

This is an everyday feedback loop right back into their drone development systems—every day—about how to get better, how to improve their communication with their drones.

They have done a remarkable job. And if you think about the static approach that we have today to war and defense and how long it takes us to develop and acquire through our acquisition systems, that is no match for a group of people that have the spirit that they do and for a continuous improvement process that's being developed.

They are giving us the opportunity to experience that without having to put our lives on the line. We better take advantage. We better be listening and learning from their experience, and we better take seriously an opportunity that we have to help, with our allies, defend democracy in a place that desperately wants it.

This isn't a matter of us not knowing what things will be like after we leave. This is an area that has a democracy. It's a stable democracy, and we need to be there to support it and show how much we care.

I've got about 10 pounds of potatoes here for a five-pound bag, but I'm going to turn it back to Senator Tillis as well.

Senator Tillis:

Lots of great observations. Thank you, Senator Armstrong.

And Senator Curtis, I think what we all left with is an unambiguous view that Russia is the aggressor and Ukraine is the victim.

We all need to understand that when Russia was lying to us and saying that they were just doing a training exercise and then turned it into a "special military operation," our best intelligence estimates indicated to us—not in a public, but in a private setting at the time—that Russia would likely have air superiority within about three or four days and total control of the ground within a week or two.

Putin has failed.

He never achieved anything resembling that. He has sent tens of thousands of Russians into a meat grinder. It's so bad now that he's talking about conscription beyond the forced conscription that he has now in Crimea.

Get this: He's forcing young Ukrainians to kill Ukrainians because they're brainwashing these young people into thinking that they're subhuman.

Now, he's not conscripting Russians yet. He's likely going to. But what he is doing is letting people out of prison and giving them U.S. dollars—\$40,000 and \$60,000 bonuses—to go on the battlefield.

One of them was a prisoner of war. He was a sexual predator let out of prison. His family was given \$60,000 to go fight. And now he's been captured, and he's going to be used to possibly trade to get a prisoner of war back from Ukraine.

They've got a kill rate right now—30,000 Russians are dying every month. They are being plowed down, and they're making no ground.

You heard Senator Curtis talking about a snail moving more quickly. That is mathematically true. If a snail started to get to where they are on the front line right now, they would have beaten the Russians.

So, the last 10 minutes we have here before we have a UC coming up, I think at 5:05, is to talk about what's next.

What I think is next is asking the President, encouraging the President, to use, to the maximum extent possible, the sanctions capabilities that Congress sent to him over the past couple of weeks; to put the pressure on Russia; to not be the first President who equivocates against the Russian dictator; to continue the tradition of getting an opportunity, when you can win against communism, when you can win against totalitarianism, you do everything you can to win.

And guess what? It will not require a single drop of American blood on the battlefield.

All the Ukrainians want is support. All they want is intelligence. All they want is to make sure that the European nations continue to do what they're doing and the United States maybe does a little bit more. And that has as much to do with sanctions as it has to do with material support.

I, for one, hope we can do both.

If I have time remaining, I do want to talk about what I think is a dreadful trend over the last year and a half in terms of material support. But I'd like to hear from Senator Curtis and Senator Armstrong about what we think we need to do to help the Ukrainians before they go into the winter, which is when they're most vulnerable.

Because I firmly believe, if they make it through this winter, that Putin's days are numbered—and rightly so.

Senator Curtis, we'll be brief because I want you to have the last word.

Senator Curtis:

I came home convinced that we should continue finding ways to do four simple things:

One, help Ukraine defend itself.

Two, affirm NATO's resolve to use force against any threats or attacks on our members.

Three, impose costs on Russia and those sustaining its war machine.

And four, one of the things we learned over there is signals from the United States matter. We need to send the signal and make it clear, from Moscow to Beijing, that invading your neighbors is not a successful strategy, and we will push back.

Senator Armstrong:

Thank you.

Well, we certainly learned on the very front lines that the Ukrainians are doing a great job of actually way outperforming the Russians on the front line.

But the thing that they are not capable today of defending themselves from are the ballistic missiles and the jet-powered Shahed drones. The Ukrainians don't have the capabilities of building interceptors for that.

And so, you sit there on the front lines with a lot of death going on and destruction amongst soldiers, but meanwhile, every night while we were there, you had air raid sirens continuously.

You think about the impact on the people there. They are really sitting there somewhat defenseless, with drones in the air every night and ballistic missiles.

And so, what I think we can do is—they do need air defense interceptors. They need spare parts and ammunition that assist in the defense of their lands and their citizens, and they need them.

And so that is one reason that I support the bipartisan Fast-Tracking European Investment in Ukraine Defense Act. That is Senate 5175. This legislation would make it easier for NATO allies and other designated partners to purchase and transfer certain defensive munitions to Ukraine while maintaining congressional notification and safeguards against unauthorized transfers.

This cannot be an American effort alone.

Our European allies have an enormous stake, and they understand that. They should continue to carry more of the burden. But Senate Bill 5175 is actually designed to help them do that. It welcomes greater allied investment in the American defense base and creates a more predictable pathway for our allies and partners to provide Ukraine with specified American-made munitions.

I would just say that the Europeans are stepping up. I would say that's one thing that's come very positive out of that. They understand that.

But we need to be taking the actions—if we expect them to be aligned with us on the weaponry and the weaponry they use, we need to make sure that we're adequately providing it to them so they can help support Ukraine as well.

That is one of the particular actions I think we need to take as well.

Senator Tillis:

Thanks again to my colleagues from Utah and Oklahoma.

This graphic, by the way—the gentleman putting this graphic up is my staff, my MLA, Mike Lehman. It's his birthday today. I don't know if I'm allowed to say that. I won't sing "Happy Birthday," though, for the parliamentarian's sake.

But Mike Lehman is one of the ones who coordinated the trip. You did a great job, Mike.

Mike also prepared these stats for me because I want to give you an idea of what the winter is going to look like and what the Ukrainians are up against.

If last year is any indication, between October 2025 and March of 2026, the U.N. Human Rights Monitoring Mission documented at least 423 attacks on electricity generation, transmission, and distribution facilities; 74 strikes on combined heat and power plants.

Vladimir Putin is trying to freeze the Ukrainians to death.

This is not targeting military facilities. It's targeting homes like people in the gallery have here, hopefully safely. It's targeting schools. It's targeting hospitals.

In Kyiv, the attacks resulted in nearly 6,000 multi-story buildings not having heat. That's what happened last year.

Does anybody believe that Putin is going to do anything less this year?

I could go through a long list of civilian targets, health care facilities, schools. Kids are meeting in subways now because they can't safely go to school.

That's the environment the Ukrainian people are living in year-round. But they have the unique threat of a harsh winter, and literally Putin's strategy of terrorism is to freeze them to death in their homes.

That's what we're up against. That's what he did last year. Many people died.

What I'm worried about, and what we need to do getting ready for this winter, is to change this trend. Our spending has dropped to almost nothing.

Now, we are providing support in other forms beyond just a cash appropriation. But we need to do all of the above.

Ladies and gentlemen, with the proper execution of the sanctions that we have authorized the President to move forward with, with the proper resourcing—and they're not asking for a lot—a lot of this speech alone gives the Ukrainian people hope.

They are a pro-American country. And the Ukrainian people need to know that the Americans are behind them, that Congress is behind them.

And we need this Administration to take a few steps to make it very clear that they are behind them, too.

It starts with fast-tracking some of the funding that's available. I know it's complicated, but we've got to move quickly. And it also continues with the proper imposition of sanctions capabilities enabled in the bill that we passed in honor of Senator Lindsey Graham.

So, over the next 93 days that I have left in Congress, I'm going to do everything I can to use every lever we can to convince the Administration that we've got to make it a priority.

We have to move quickly.

The Ukrainian people are patient and still staunchly pro-American. I didn't go anywhere without having people in bombed-out facilities thanking America for what we've done there.

Well, I think this winter, America can do a little bit more. And if we do, Putin's days are numbered. And that's good for democracy, and that's great for the Western world.

And that is our future—not a reemergence of the Russian Empire, not an opportunity to get success in Ukraine, move to Moldova, and try to Russify all of the free countries that the United States and the European nations liberated.

That's his end goal. It doesn't stop with the occupied territory in Ukraine unless America steps up, Europe continues to do its job, and we stop him in his tracks.

And that, by the way, is not only good for Europe, but it's good for the Russian people who are suffering under his leadership.

I'm going to offer to my gentleman colleagues—we're going to be mindful of time—but if you'd like to make a few closing comments.

I want to thank you. I see at least one of the staff up in the audience. It was a trek, and we were on planes, trains, and automobiles. But I can't think of a more rewarding trip than I had the pleasure of traveling with you all and your staff.

And I thank you.

Senator Curtis, if you'd like to wind up, and Senator Armstrong, go ahead.

Senator Curtis:

All right. My closing remarks are just simply this:

When you make trips like this, you find out firsthand who your friends are and who they're not.

And I will clearly say that Ukrainians are allies and friends, and Putin is not.

I yield.

Senator Armstrong:

And I would just add—and Senator Tillis mentioned this—the Ukrainians are worn out there. They have been fighting this war. Those on the front line have been fighting this war for a long time.

And you realize how much it means to them that we're there.

I think the sanctions bill that was passed was a huge signal that the U.S. is still behind them, but they desperately need that.

They need to know that we care.

I don't know how many times I told somebody, "Listen, if you drove through a neighborhood where I'm from, you will see plenty of blue and yellow flags supporting you. So don't misunderstand that. America wants to see you be successful, and we're working hard to make sure that we help you and we provide the resources that you need."

They are counting on us to be behind them, and we need to follow through on that support.

Senator Tillis:

Well, Mr. President, we appreciate the opportunity to have this discussion among my colleagues.

Again, I thank you all for joining us and the staff that put it together and supported us.

And I hope everybody will say a prayer for Ukraine.

Thank you.