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U.S. CONGRESS EXPRESSES STRONG SUPPORT FOR FREE ELECTIONS IN UKRAINE

By [Taras Kuzio](#)

On May 12 the U.S. Congress held a hearing entitled "The Future of Ukraine and the Interests of the United States" dealing with Ukraine's upcoming presidential election and the state of its democratization. In addition to former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine and Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs in the Department of State Steven Pifer, the list of expert witnesses giving evidence also included Nadia Diuk, head of the Europe and Eurasia Program in the National Endowment for Democracy, and Anders Aslund, director of the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Carnegie Endowment.

The hearings, organized by the European Subcommittee of the House International Relations Committee (HIRC), came ahead of a visit to Kyiv later this month by a large delegation of U.S. Congressmen and Senators. That delegation is headed by Rep. Doug Bereuter, who chaired the hearings and is head of the European Subcommittee of the HIRC.

The hearings and concurrent resolutions, which were simultaneously submitted to the House and Senate, come at a time of unprecedented heightened U.S. interest in Ukraine's elections. Former U.S. National Security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski arrived in Kyiv today on a private visit.

No other Western country, including Canada with its one million citizens of Ukrainian origin, has shown such an intense interest in Ukraine's upcoming election. The high U.S. interest was reflected in Aslund's comments to the hearings, "There is no other event in Europe this year as important as the presidential elections in Ukraine in October 2004."

Earlier, on April 15, Pifer had addressed the fourth meeting of the Action Ukraine Coalition on U.S.-Ukrainian relations. Present were Ukrainian American organizations, U.S. government agencies, senior congressional assistants, think tanks and the media. Action Ukraine Coalition brings together the Ukrainian American Coordinating Council, the Ukrainian Federation of America and the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation.

U.S. Helsinki Commission Chairman and Rep. Christopher H. Smith co-sponsored the resolution with HIRC Chairman Rep. Henry J. Hyde. In the Senate, U.S. Helsinki Commission Co-Chairman Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell co-sponsored it along with Senator Christopher J. Dodd and Senate

Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) Ranking Member Senator Joseph R. Biden.

The concurrent resolutions called upon the Ukrainian authorities to hold a "democratic, transparent, and fair election process." They outlined measures aimed at discouraging regressions in democratization, as well as promotion of independent media and fair elections.

The resolutions also provide concrete and numerous steps - which the Ukrainian authorities are recommended to follow - that would allow for a free election campaign prior to election day. The recommendations also advise how the authorities could ensure that Ukrainians will be able to freely elect their new president in October.

The resolutions "acknowledge and welcome[s] the strong relationship" between the United States and Ukraine since 1991. They also outline a U.S. commitment to Ukraine's transition to a "full democracy."

Unlike comments made earlier this year by senior members of the Democratic Party, the resolutions do not threaten Ukraine with sanctions if it fails to hold free and fair elections. The resolutions merely point to the link between upholding the democratic election process and Ukraine's future Euro-Atlantic integration.

According to Orest Deychakiwsky, staff advisor at the U.S. Helsinki Commission, "these resolutions are a manifestation of House and Senate concern for Ukraine's future, as free and fair elections will be an important factor in consolidating democracy, human rights and the rule of law and bringing Ukraine closer to the West."

Deychakiwsky dismissed the likelihood of criticism being voiced by Ukrainian President Kuchma such as he made in 2002 when the U.S. Congress supported a similar resolution on democratization and the elections. Deychakiwsky said, "The resolutions show that Congress cares about the Ukrainian people, who deserve an opportunity to see their restored independence come to full fruition."

The Ukrainian authorities have yet to react to this month's resolutions. This is likely to take place only after the visit to Kyiv later in May by the U.S. Congressional delegation.

However, the World Congress of Ukrainians (WCU) did decide to pre-empt Kuchma. In a letter dated May 11 to the Senators and Representatives who sponsored the resolutions, Askold Lozynsky, chairman of the WCU, condemned them. As was the case with a similar 2002 WCU protest over a

U.S. Congress resolution, the central argument of this most recent condemnation was surprisingly reminiscent of Soviet protests, which typically denounced Western criticism by pointing to alleged worst Western "failings" and "double standards. (www.csce.gov Ukrayinska Pravda, May 13; The Ukrainian Weekly, May 2).