

Speech by Olena Zelenska at the Global Healthcare Initiative for Ukraine Conference

I would like to welcome all participants! Thank you for coming.

I would like to start by thanking you. First of all, I would like to thank First Lady Eva Pavlová and the organizers of the forum, the Czech Health Technology Institute.

Thank you for organizing this conference and for inviting such a large Ukrainian delegation. I would like to thank the Minister of Health, Vlastimil Válek, for his great understanding of the challenges facing the Ukrainian health sector. We must also thank the entire European Commission for creating such a unique instrument as the Ukraine Facility. And I am grateful that the Czech Republic was the first country to use this program to launch health projects in Ukraine. Thank you.

Ukraine has been resisting unprovoked Russian aggression for ten years. It is three years since the full-scale invasion began. When a terrorist attack occurs anywhere in the world, the whole world is shaken. But with the pain and shock comes support. It always comes. Above all, it is doctors from all over the world who lend a helping hand, because humanity knows no boundaries. Nowadays, there are terrorist attacks in Ukraine every day.

This is no metaphor. These are the methods of warfare that Russia is applying against the civilian population of my country. Daily terror for three years. Let me give you just a few examples so that you can understand the scale of the catastrophe that Ukrainian doctors and paramedics face on a daily basis.

For example, on April 4th, Russia struck Kryvyi Rih, which we have just discussed. A Russian Iskander ballistic missile, equipped with a cluster warhead, landed on a children's playground. Twenty people were killed, including nine children. On that day, our rescuers and medics managed to save the lives of 13 injured children and more than 70 adults who were taken to hospitals in serious condition. Many of them are still there. A week after the attack on Kryvyi Rih, another Russian attack resulted in a fire in the center of Sumy. More than 130 people were injured.

The number of lives saved would have been less if it had not been for a 13-year-old boy who, despite a head injury, broke the glass in the crowded, burning bus and opened the blocked door. That day, doctors at Sumy Hospital saved 11 children's lives.

And on April 24th, there was a night attack on a residential area in Kyiv. Twelve people were killed and more than 80 people were hospitalized. Rescuers were struggling to extricate people who were left in the rubble. These are just a few examples of what Ukrainian doctors are facing. And we are only talking about April.

At the largest children's hospital, Ochmatdyt, children are hospitalized daily with injuries they sustained as a result of the war. In the first two years of the invasion alone, there were 300,000 new cases of disability. Loss of limbs of course, accounts for a large percentage, but also injuries to the face, brain, spine, loss of sight and hearing.

To live a full life, these people need not only acute treatment but also months and years of rehabilitation. Our doctors are now gaining unique experience in treating war injuries. At the same time, however, peacetime diseases, if we can call them that, are not disappearing: cancer, cardiovascular diseases, etc. People with disabilities and chronic diagnoses also need care. The burden on each doctor and each hospital in Ukraine is, therefore, many times greater than in neighboring countries. So much for the treatment of physical injuries.

In addition to physical injuries, there are also psychological injuries—often invisible, but all the more dangerous. As First Lady, from the first months of the war, I have overseen the All-Ukrainian Mental Health Program. This is a nationwide project of acute psychological help.

Why is it important now? Let me explain with another example. Let us return to the recent shelling of Kyiv. While rescue workers were searching under the rubble for a 17-year-old Kyiv resident, a boy named Danylo, his classmates—girls and boys—were waiting by the rubble of his house.

Many of them arrived, and we all watched on the news all day as they waited there. They stayed there all day, hoping for positive news of his rescue. But unfortunately, there was no positive news. The boy died under the rubble. It is said that the death of one person psychologically traumatizes dozens or hundreds of people in the vicinity. We can imagine the state of the Ukrainians today. After all, since the beginning of the all-out war, we have not found a person in Ukraine who has not had someone close to them injured by Russian attacks or at the front. This applies to children as well as adults. The strain on the psyche of Ukrainians is unprecedented.

That's why this All-Ukrainian Mental Health Program was the first response to that call. We connected government institutions, municipalities, educational institutions, employers, and international partners to provide support where people study, work, and live: in schools, health facilities, workplaces, and communities.

We are working to change the very approach to mental health, so that seeking help becomes an act of strength, an act of resistance to violence, and not an act of weakness, as has been assumed for decades in our society. I am grateful that the Czech Republic is supporting us in these difficult times to save people and their physical and mental health. I am pleased that today our countries will sign two memoranda of partnership in the field of health.

Let me tell you about it. This is a unique cooperation that we started two years ago at the First Ladies and Gentlemen's Summit in Kyiv. It is actually a direct, horizontal cooperation in a clinic-to-clinic format between health facilities in Ukraine and in other countries. Without unnecessary bureaucracy, built on professionalism and trust, with the aim of saving lives faster and more efficiently.

The importance of such cooperation is invaluable. On the one hand, no country can cope with the many daily challenges that Ukraine faces today. On the other hand, these hard-won experiences need to be shared. And our doctors are ready for it. Such partnership programs save lives and keep faith in people. Every collaboration, every joint operation, is not only a life saved but also a contribution to our common future.

And we are proud to have launched this project, especially every time we receive news of its results. For example, when we learn that Ukrainian and French doctors have managed to perform a unique operation to remove a fragment stuck through the nasal cavity of a soldier who suffered an eye injury. A six-year-old girl who suffered severe burns was helped to regain mobility by working with Italian colleagues.

We currently have 62 memorandums signed with 22 countries. And I am grateful that the Czech Republic will be the 23rd.

I would like to talk separately about other partnership opportunities.

It will soon be three years since the Olena Zelenska Foundation, my foundation, was established in response to the challenges of war. Our mission is to restore basic, primary human needs. We focus on humanitarian aid, access to education, healthcare, and psychosocial support.

And in that time, we have achieved significant results. Most importantly, we have received support from a number of countries, major corporations, and philanthropists around the world. For example, together with our partners, we are creating learning spaces in hospitals so that children undergoing long-term treatment can gain knowledge. We provide equipment to healthcare facilities.

For the third year, we have also been organizing psychological and rehabilitation camps for children affected by the war. And soon, we will launch a new large-scale psychosocial support project for adolescents and young people in Ukraine. We are creating special youth spaces where young people can meet like-minded peers, get help, and be heard.

Today at the conference, the Foundation's Director, Nina Horbachova, will tell us more about our current challenges and the projects we are ready to develop together with new partners. I would like to thank everyone present once again, with special thanks to the Ministry of Health of the Czech Republic.

I know that the Ukraine Facility project will reconstruct and modernize six hospitals in Ukraine. This is a very important contribution.

Dear friends, I am coming to the end of my speech.

I believe that together we can do it. We will meet all the challenges. There is strength in unity and humanity.

Thank you again.