

27 March 2014

**Address by UWC President Eugene Czolij
at the UN commemoration of the 200th anniversary of Taras Shevchenko**

Delivered by Ukrainian Congress Committee of America President Tamara Olexy

Your Excellency, Mr. Sinclair,

Mr. Nasser,

Your Grace, The Right Reverend Paul Chomnycky, Bishop of Stamford,

Your Excellency Metropolitan Antony,

Your Grace Bishop Daniel,

Your Excellency Acting Minister Deshchytsia,

Your Excellencies, Ambassadors to the United Nations,

Madam Sushko, President of the World Federation of Ukrainian Women's Organizations,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honor for the Ukrainian World Congress to pay tribute to a great son of Ukraine here at the United Nations – the pillar of universal peace based on respect for the principles of equal rights and self-determination of peoples.

This is truly an ideal venue to mark the 200th anniversary of the birth of Taras Shevchenko – world-renowned poet, artist, political prisoner and spiritual leader of the Ukrainian nation.

Today's commemoration also recognizes Taras Shevchenko as a champion of the Ukrainian language as nations around the world recently marked UNESCO International Mother Language Day.

The contribution of Taras Shevchenko to the intellectual and cultural heritage of humanity has not only withstood the test of time, but continues to inspire the generations of today in the struggle for the principles on which the UN was founded.

As testimony to his international significance, the work of Taras Shevchenko can today be read and appreciated in over 130 different languages and about 1,100 monuments to the great poet have been erected in 40 countries throughout the world.

Taras Shevchenko's life and creative journey evolved at a time when Ukraine was under difficult repression by tsarist Russia. Having lived only 13 of his 47 years as a free man, Shevchenko understood all too well the plights of the oppressed and the downtrodden, and he dedicated his life's work to being the voice of the less fortunate. Through his work he determinedly spoke out against human rights violations, all forms of social injustice and oppression. He also harshly condemned the imperialistic policies of tsarist Russia and encouraged subjugated nations, including Ukrainians and all Slavic and Caucasian peoples to fight for their freedom.

Taras Shevchenko was also a visionary. Having watched his people languish under a tyrannical regime and being forced to spend most of his short life in exile as punishment for his beliefs as expressed in his literary works, he wrote about what he valued most in life – freedom.

In the forward to Peter Fedynsky's first complete English translation of Shevchenko's collection of poetry, the *Kobzar*, Michael Naydan writes: "*It may not be much of an exaggeration to say that today's independent Ukraine could not have been realized without Shevchenko's poetry and his presence as poet-prophet to galvanize Ukrainian identity.*"

The great poet indeed had a vision. It was a vision of an independent Ukraine in which all peoples would live in dignity, enjoying mutual respect, equal rights and fundamental freedoms. His poetry instilled hope and a belief in the Ukrainian people that victory would one day be theirs. Shevchenko's poetry crystallized the national consciousness of the Ukrainian people and his influence is felt to this day. His literary works became, and remain to this day, without parallel, the inspiration of a nation.

In 1964, when US President Dwight D. Eisenhower unveiled the magnificent monument to Taras Shevchenko which stands in the American capital, he spoke of Shevchenko's vision and hope for all subjugated nations.

President Eisenhower stated: *“Our own nation was created as this kind of society in a devout belief that where men are free, where they have the right to think, to worship, to act as they may choose [...] when this kind of freedom is guaranteed universally, there will be peace among all nations.”*

The people of Ukraine are, once again, in a struggle for their freedom.

For months they stood on EuroMaidans throughout the country full of hope, determination and an unwavering belief that victory would indeed be theirs. Peacefully, they took control of their country and their destiny, aspiring to build an independent, sovereign, Ukrainian and European state.

Shevchenko's vision is now the vision of a new generation of Ukrainians inspired to reaffirm their faith in fundamental human rights, democratic values, and a society in which social justice and rule of law prevail; inspired to staunchly defend the dignity and worth of the human person, and equal rights for men and women and nations large and small.

Today, with Russia's invasion and occupation of Crimea, the legacy of Taras Shevchenko will undoubtedly continue to guide the Ukrainian people to yet another victory against a foreign occupier of Ukrainian territory.

We call upon the United Nations to acknowledge both the timeliness and timelessness of the work of Taras Shevchenko and recognize his significance to modern day realities.

In conclusion, I'm sure many of you saw the popular video message titled *“I am Ukrainian”* – one of many that originated in Ukraine during the EuroMaidan protests with the goal of helping the world understand the essence of the crisis in that country. The message takes on new relevance as Russian troops, having annexed Crimea and violated Ukraine's territorial integrity, continue to pose a threat to the sovereignty of the fledgling democracy. A young woman standing on Kyiv's EuroMaidan proclaims: *“We want to be free [...]. We have this freedom inside our hearts. We have this freedom in our minds. And now I ask you to build this freedom in our country.”*

To this brave young woman, and to the Ukrainian people, I reply with an excerpt from one of Shevchenko's most powerful poems, *Kavkaz*, which he wrote in support of the Caucasian peoples in their struggle against tsarist Russia's subjugation in the 19th century:

*Fight — you'll win the fight,
God is helping you!
Behind you stands the truth,
Behind you stands the glory,
And sacred liberty as well!*