# UKRAINE RENEWS ITS INDEPENDENCE

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*Kyiv, Ukraine.*The

average age of the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine's 450-seat parliament, is 41. Only three of the elected representatives are older than 60, while 17 were under 30 at the time of their election.

This means that when Ukraine declared its independence, many of us were essentially children, and some weren't yet born. What do we remember from Aug. 24, 1991?

I was 6. My memories of that day are of something profoundly significant. People didn't go to work; they gathered in the city center, on what is now Hrushevsky Street, greeting each other in an atmosphere of incredible joy and uplift.

Now, in the 10th year of Russia's war against Ukraine and 18 months into its full-scale phase, we are renewing our independence with an unquenchable passion to keep it.

My thoughts drift back to the Verkhovna Rada elected in 1990, before independence. Its composition was diverse and varied. There weren't many professional politicians. There were only Ukrainian patriots and Communists.

Everyone had an agenda. Some aspired for greater autonomy within the Soviet Union. Some defended the Ukrainian language. Some were building their careers with an eye toward Moscow. All etched their names in Ukraine's history when they accomplished what our ancestors had dreamt of for centuries and what society demanded at that moment—independence.

On Dec. 1, 1991, the Ukrainian people overwhelmingly affirmed their desire for independence in a referendum with 84% turnout. In the Crimean peninsula, more than 54% voted in favor of independence. In the Donetsk,

Luhansk, Kharkiv, and Odesa regions, support was over 80%.

Today's Russian propaganda conveniently forgets these numbers, insisting in its narrative that Ukraine and Ukrainians don't exist.

Historians often joke that people living through major historical events don't realize how significant those times are. There's some truth to that. When the current Verkhovna Rada was elected in 2019, the primary demand of the Ukrainian people was a renewal of political authority.

No one could have imagined the challenges we would face in less than three years: working during a full-scale war, making pivotal decisions, defending the nation's sovereignty, and upholding the rights of Ukrainians to exist.

Like all Ukrainians, I will never forget Feb. 24, 2022, the day Russian troops invaded. By 7 a.m., a full-scale war had been raging for two hours. Russian forces were advancing in the Sumy, Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Zhytomyr, Luhansk and Donetsk regions, and from the direction of Crimea (seized by Putin in 2014).

From Belarus, they were moving toward the Kyiv region and the capital city itself. Cities like Odesa, Kherson, Kharkiv, Zhytomyr, Mykolaiv, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipro and Kyiv, along with their surrounding areas, were under missile attack.

In Kyiv, lines formed at petrol stations, railways and ATMs—but even longer queues formed outside military recruitment offices. Tens of thousands of men and women were eager to take up arms to defend their homes, their loved ones, and their country against the invader. Ukrainians enlisted *en masse* in territorial defense units. Those ready to fight were given weapons. In Kyiv alone authorities distributed 20,000 rifles on Feb. 24.

Our constitution clearly stipulates that in the event of an attack on Ukraine's territorial sovereignty, Parliament must convene and vote to impose martial law. At 7 a.m., the Verkhovna Rada fulfilled its duty to defend the nation, strengthen its defense capabilities, and continue being a free, independent people.

Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin was telling the world that the state of Ukraine no longer existed.

Ukraine surprised the world, the enemy and even itself. We have managed to unite, support each other, and rally around what's crucial: our nation, our freedom, and the future of our children.

History is made by ordinary people. They become heroes, and the future depends on them. This isn't the first time Ukraine has had to fight for its right to exist. We must win. Each and every one of us knows what we are fighting for.

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