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UKRAINE SHALL MAKE ITSELF KNOWN TO THE WORLD

– *It has been four years since you came to Ukraine in 2014, the year of dramatic events. In what ways has Ukraine changed and in what ways has it stayed the same over this period?*

– To begin with, Ukraine has definitely changed and is constantly changing for the better. Euromaidan has altered the mentality of people and set in motion fundamental reforms, which have already been launched and gradually being implemented. These changes are tangible. They are altering the way in which politics are being managed, the business climate is improving and eventually the way Ukrainians perceive their own country. Maidan is an important milestone that has driven Ukrainians to assert their country as a subject of international relations and as a forward-looking, modern, democratic society. It is undeniable that Ukraine is moving in the right direction. Therefore it is crucial that the path of reforms it has taken exist not only on paper, but be actually implemented and felt on the ground.

Seeing this trend happen is probably the most uplifting feeling I experienced in serving my country in Ukraine, since this broadly based Euromaidan movement cannot leave anyone indifferent. Euromaidan may be considered today as the point of reference – Ukraine has time before and after. Hence, the country has turned a new page of its history. Ukrainians have made an irreversible choice. If there is any backsliding and return to the old habits, it would be a betrayal of that spirit. There is no room for cynicism about what has been achieved so far, but not for complacency either. I believe we should be all confident and positive about the future and with that spirit a confident Ukraine should make itself known to the world.

– *Mr. Ambassador, how would you describe the state of Ukraine-Belgium bilateral relations today? Have the focus areas changed during your tenure?*

– It is worth mentioning that the revolutionary events in 2014 have given a new dynamics and a new meaning to our bilateral relations. The political dialogue has become more genuine and focused. Ukraine and Belgium are partners both bilaterally and in the multilateral fora, judging by the way how we interact in the UN, Council of Europe or OSCE, just to name those. The two countries are really talking business now, they have a focus, concrete common interests and objectives, which certainly improve the quality of bilateral dialogue.

The European choice of Ukraine, its search for collective security guarantees, its actions in defense of the international legal order and its endeavour to reinforce democracy, human rights and the rule of law constitute the overall framework in which our bilateral dialogue is articulating itself.

As I see, Ukraine needs to assert its true independence and its own vision of its own destiny. This has a fundamental European connotation in the sense of the values and a model of society that we identify ourselves with and that puts the citizens at the center. This is a broad movement that has gradually gained strength over the nearly 27 years of Ukraine's independence, but it received a strong impetus in 2014, resulting in a very strong and focused road map in the form of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. The Agreement is a starting point, which is now through its implementation, gradually enhancing the development of ever stronger political and economic relations with the EU, and Belgium as an EU member state is part of that evolution.

I would like to note that both countries are active in their economic interchanges, political contacts, investment and trade relations, which are constantly increasing, despite the big crisis in 2014–2015. The Free Trade Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union has its effect. Notably, this is proved not only by trade statistics between the two regions, but also between Belgium and Ukraine. Furthermore, Belgian investors have never left Ukraine during those challenging years, they are even expanding now, and newcomers are arriving. It is obvious that economic participants are also encouraged by the gradual improvement of the business climate and the emergence of a new generation of honest, ethical and thus, more reliable business partners. Young dynamic Ukrainian entrepreneurs speaking foreign languages are currently creating better context for exploring fruitful business relations, influencing trade and investment relations in a positive way.

However, I must admit that there are still cases, where Belgian companies are confronted with dubious administrative practices or so-called 'inspections', hindering their business plans and preventing them from going full steam ahead. Therefore, it is also important for Ukraine not only to be forward-looking in its reforms, but also to clean up the legacy of the past. The government is expected by the business community to exert effective authority and eradicate harmful red tape, unnecessary delay in administrative decisions, which altogether creates obstacles for business development and tarnishes the image of the country at large. When it comes to attracting business, the best ambassadors for Ukraine are the companies that are happily investing in the country. Law-abiding companies that create jobs and pay taxes in the country should be spread a red carpet. This is how every country is competing for foreign investors, so there is no room for old-style corrupted practices. Create a fair, level playing field and investors will flock to Ukraine, attracted as they are by genuine business opportunities.

– *What areas are potentially attractive to Belgian investors and should be developed in Ukraine?*

– Ukraine is definitely on the radar of Belgian companies. Ukrainian agricultural business is a very promising and strong sector. It concerns not only growing crops in fields, but is also Ukraine's keen interest in increasing productivity and adding value to food production, which leads to the creation of jobs, increase of production capacity and exports, and thus to a sustained development of Ukraine's economy. Like many other European countries, Belgium is considerably interested in such approach. Belgian companies do not want to miss this train, so there is a large number of Belgian representations active in agribusiness in Ukraine. Belgium that has one of the densest transport networks as well as plenty of know-how in engineering takes also interest in Ukraine's construction sector, which is developing fast. It is noticeable that a visionary approach is present in improving Ukraine's transport infrastructure, be it road, railway, airports or waterways. Belgian companies also value the strong Ukrainian engineering tradition in the field of machine building, aerospace, IT and microelectronics. Energy independence is nowadays a challenging issue and Belgian companies offer numerous innovative solutions in energy efficiency, energy saving, and renewable energy. Therefore, Belgian investors find the development of renewable sources of energy attractive. Recently I read about a Belgian engineering company that intends to build a solar power panel field in Zhytomyr oblast and a Memorandum of Understanding in this area has already been signed. Because of climate change and carbon emission, fossil fuels and non-renewable energy sources will soon come to an end. The future lies in low-carbon and renewable energy solutions, so these is the sphere, in which Ukraine has all opportunities and technologies to keep pace with the times and make the necessary switch to cleaner energies. Thus, the bilateral economic activity is developing fast and I am glad that my country is part of it.

– *Your Excellency, could you please comment on what you are currently working on? Are there any new initiatives that you can mention?*

– In the month of May we successfully organised two Belgian trade delegations. The first one, as a matter of fact a joint Belgian-Luxembourg trade mission, took place in April and traveled to Kyiv, Dnipro and Zhytomyr, familiarizing the participants with local companies' capacities and business processes. The second trade mission was a joint Belgian-Dutch endeavor. It was held in Mykolaiv in May and aimed at enhancing the cooperation between the port of Mykolaiv and North Sea Port, a cross border port area stretching from Vlissingen in the Netherlands to Ghent in Belgium. It is known that Ukraine and Belgium have already established cooperation between the seaports of Odesa and Antwerp – a second-largest port in Europe, the port of Mykolaiv and the one of Ghent, the port of Zeebrugge and that of Chornomorsk. Last summer, the Ukrainian Sea

Ports Authority signed the agreement with Belgium's Novadeal Ltd, a subsidiary of the DEME Group on conducting dredging works at Yuzhnyi port. Hence, Belgium is interested in further intensifying of marine transport cooperation with Ukraine, which is advantageous for both nations. The success of Ukraine's exports is the success of the Belgian seaports, since Belgium is the gateway to Europe for Ukrainian products. Signing the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement in its turn has undoubtedly gave an impetus to strengthening such interaction.

As for the cultural initiatives, the Embassy traditionally participates in the organisation of the annual international festival "Journées de la Francophonie" designed to promote the French language and Francophone culture, which takes place in many Ukrainian cities. This yearly Festival is the fruit of an intensive cooperation between a growing number of embassies representing member countries of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie: France, Canada, Lebanon, Morocco, Switzerland, Vietnam, Egypt, Armenia, Greece, Cyprus, Moldova, and many more as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, the French institute in Ukraine and Alliance Française Ukraine.

There are also several other cultural projects scheduled for 2018 including exhibitions, literary events and concerts. Particularly, two accomplished Belgian musicians – Toon Fret, flute, and Veronika Iltchenko, piano, toured around Western Ukraine in May. It was their second concert tour in Ukraine. In 2016 the same duo performed in Dnipro, Kharkiv, Hlukhiv, Trostianets, Sumy and Kyiv. This year, we continued our commemoration program of the centenary of the Belgian Armoured Car Corps in Ukraine during the First World War. Initially deployed to the Galician Front in support of the Tsarist army in 1916, the Belgian military unit retreated to Kyiv in 1917 at a time when Ukraine strived for its statehood in the winter months of 1917–1918. In Last February, exactly hundred years later, Belgian filmmaker Arnout Hauben presented in Kyiv his documentary based on stories of the witnesses and Belgian historian August Thiry retold the captivating story from these soldiers, quoting from the diaries they kept and the letters they wrote home.

– *During the working visit to Brussels, President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko held talks with Prime Minister of Belgium Charles Michel. Amongst others, he informed about the prospects of deploying a UN peacekeeping mission in Donbas. Does the Belgian government have a particular opinion on this issue?*

– In the course of the visit, Petro Poroshenko took part in the Fifth Eastern Partnership Summit and had a series of meetings with the EU institutions' leaders, with the heads of State and government of the EU member states and was also granted an audience by His Majesty King Philippe of the Belgians. The primary issue on the agenda was the fulfillment of the Minsk agreements and the ceasefire in Donbas. The Prime Minister of Belgium Charles Michel expressed his support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and its aspiration for European



Надзвичайний і Повноважний Посол Франції в Україні Ізабель Дюмон, Надзвичайний і Повноважний Посол Канади в Україні Роман Ващук та Надзвичайний і Повноважний Посол Бельгії в Україні Люк Якобс виконали французькі пісні під час святкування Дня франкофонії в Києві. Червень, 2018 рік

The Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the French Republic to Ukraine Isabelle Dumont, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Canada to Ukraine Roman Waschuk and Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Kingdom of Belgium to Ukraine Luc Jacobs presented French songs during celebration of the Francophonie Day in Kyiv, June 2018

integration. In my opinion the possibility of deploying a UN peacekeeping forces on the occupied territory of Ukraine could be, if given the right format and meaningful mandate, an important catalyst in working towards the right pre-conditions for peaceful settlement.

Early June Belgium was elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for 2019–2020. Considering how important it is for maintaining international peace and security and asserting the country in the international community, Belgium is conscious of the responsibility that comes with it. The motto of the Belgian UNSC campaign and mandate is ‘Fostering Consensus, Acting for Peace’. In this respect, Belgium also demonstrated solidarity with Ukraine’s election as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2016–2017, particularly when it comes to condemning aggression and encroachment on territorial integrity.

– *Does the Embassy of Belgium in Ukraine has ever tried to engage with the Ukrainian diaspora in Belgium, and if so, how?*

– *As a matter of fact, the Ukrainian diaspora in Belgium is not as large as that in Canada or Poland, though it has been formed over decades and is indeed in-*



Портрет зі Смурфом (2018)
Portrait with Smurf (2018)

fluent, living in the country that is host to the European and Euro-Atlantic institutions. I believe it is for that reason that the Ukrainians feel the power to stand for Ukraine and its nationals. They do not hesitate to confront stereotypes, debunk myths, correct biased news reports starting propaganda. The Ukrainian community is also active. Notably, in the framework of the Rotary clubs' activities and under the aegis of the ICC Ukraine-Belgium-Luxembourg, a group of children of soldiers from the ATO zone went on a recreation to Belgium in 2016 and 2017. Other ways of expressing solidarity are the collection of clothing and hospital and other medical equipment that distributed to the most needs. Therefore, despite being not numerous, the Ukrainian

diaspora in Belgium has a formidable impact on the public opinion, defending interests of their fellow citizens and spreading patriotic ideas abroad and linking up with Belgian NGO's that are engaged in Ukraine.

– *What is your favorite part about living in Ukraine?*

– If I had to define the most appealing thing about living here that would be the people. Ukrainians are very amicable, warmhearted and welcoming. I feel that hospitable treatment wherever I come. The Ukrainian nation cherishes its century-old traditions and at the same time is busy exploring contemporary tendencies in art. People are keen on art and open to experiments. The large number of art galleries and exhibits is astonishing, concert halls and theaters are full, audiences most often honour actors, opera singers and musicians with a standing applause and flowers. What I have also noticed is the eagerness of Ukrainians to travel and how they are enthusiastic about discovering new cultures. I am surprised and delighted about how much Ukrainians know about Belgium, but at the same time are curious to learn even more about the country and its capital.

I am sincerely proud of the fact that I have been present and supported Ukraine at the crucial time of its nation building, nonetheless, at a high cost. Ukrainians feel now more united as never before. I am of the opinion that the political leadership in the country should even more convincingly grasp this historic opportunity and take inspiration from the uplifted spirit of the nation, to uphold the line of reforms, make them irreversible and discard once and for all the detrimental legacy of the past.