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I HOPE THAT ONE DAY UKRAINE WILL BECOME PART OF THE EUROPEAN FAMILY WHERE IT RIGHTFULLY BELONGS

The cooperation between Norway and Ukraine has its roots in ancient times. Our common history goes way back to the Viking Age. The Vikings came down the Dnipro River to work in Rus with the Princes who ruled at that time, in 10th–11th centuries. One of the Norwegian kings married Yelyzaveta, the daughter of Grand Prince Yaroslav the Wise, who is now known in Norway as Queen Elisiv. As we know, Yaroslav gave his three daughters away to different European kingdoms: France, Hungary and Norway. Yelyzaveta became queen in 1045, and ruled until her husband Harald the Hard Ruler, who was also the founding founder of our capital Oslo, was killed in the battle of Stamford Bridge in England in 1066. She became a widow and then married the Danish king. Hence, she stayed in Scandinavia for the rest of her life. That is our underlying historical connection.

A thousand years has passed and we have your Maidan Revolution. It was a starting point of our modern relations. Certainly, we had very close relations with Ukraine ever since independence in 1991. We recognized diplomatically Ukraine as a sovereign state on Christmas Eve, 24 December 1991. On 5 February 1992, diplomatic relations with Ukraine were established. In December 1992, we opened an embassy here in Kyiv. It was first located in a hotel room. Later on, when the first ambassador was looking for premises, we found a building on Striletska, 15. We have been there since we took over that building in 1993 and are planning to stay there in the future. It is a nice location in Kyiv and we are very happy to be there. The relations between our countries from 1991 until 2014 were very good and close. However, the Euro-maidan, which made such a strong impression on everybody in Norway and in the world, became a new impetus for further deepening our relations.

Politically, Norway was and still is very clear in supporting Ukrainian sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. We have condemned the Russian aggression in Eastern Ukraine, the illegal annexation of Crimea, which is a violation of international law. We have introduced sanctions or restrictive measures against the Russian Federation exactly as the European Union has done. The only difference is that, whereas the European Union has to renew the sanctions every six months, we do not have to do that. They will be maintained until we see some positive developments towards the settlement of the conflict.

At any rate, we are also closely following the conflict through our OSCE monitors. We have now 12 Norwegians working in the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission. Most of them are in the field in Donbas, in Donetsk and Luhansk on both sides of the contact line. They do a very important job, sometimes quite a dangerous and challenging one. There was a tragic incident two years ago when an American was killed by a bomb, but there have been no fatal accidents since then. Our people are observing the conflict and reporting every day so that we get the picture of what is going on.

Our political relations have been close. Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg was in Kyiv back in November 2014. Former president Petro Poroshenko also visited Oslo in October 2016. Finally, Prime Minister Hroisman was in Oslo in January. Our countries have built an elaborate network of political contacts as attested to by many other visits, including at the ministerial level. The intensive and close political dialogue between our countries continues to subsist.

We are, and will continue, supporting Ukraine, its independence and sovereignty. We also look forward to working closely with the new president and his team. This is a kind of a constant process, because Ukraine has made the choice of European integration. In the course of her visit to Kyiv, President Erna Solberg launched a major support package for Ukraine amounting to approximately 20 million EUR per year. About one fourth of that assistance goes to humanitarian projects in the East of Ukraine and in the conflict area. The rest is allocated to bilateral projects within three main fields: energy efficiency, rule of law and good governance, as well as finalizing European integration and adaptation to the European standards. Now we are also launching the fourth area of cooperation, the healthcare.

Let me provide an example from the energy efficiency track. It is changing street lights in Zhytomyr, where classical light bulbs have been replaced with more energy efficient LED lights to save money for the city council and preserve the environment. There are many other similar projects dealing with changing heating systems in schools, hospitals and kindergartens, which makes them more efficient, less expensive and more environmentally friendly.

Lately, we have also made substantial investments in renewable energy, which were not state funded projects but private initiatives. The Norwegian company NBT has already invested 375 million EUR in developing a wind farm in Southern Ukraine, near Syvash, which is close to Crimea. It is already being constructed and is supposed to be finished by the end of 2019. One more project is being concurrently developed in the Zaporizhzhia region, which is even bigger and will have the capacity of 750 MW, thus making it the largest wind park in Europe. The project implementation is currently at the financial stage. Therefore, it is expected to be carried out within three or four years. That was one of the investment agreements signed during Prime Minister Hroisman's visit to Oslo in January.

Another significant issue for us is solar energy. The Norwegian company Scatec Solar has already built solar parks having the capacity of 150–200 MW in the Cherkasy region and is currently working on their enlargement. By the end of the year, it should reach 250 MW, which accounts for 250 million EUR of investments. The possibility of other projects is also being considered. For Norway, energy is now becoming a crucial issue when it comes to projects and investments.

Norwegian export is on the rise. Our seafood and fish are well-known in Ukraine. In Kyiv, we have three Egersund Seafood shops and restaurants. Actually, seafood is our largest export category, now estimated at 100 million EUR per year and counting. Raised in cold clear waters, our fish is very healthy and tasty. Still, we also try to export other commodities. Due to the economic crisis following the Maidan and the conflict in the East, the balance of trade plunged considerably, as did the Ukrainian economy, which shrank by almost 17 percent in 2014–2015. Now we are gradually getting back to the previous level and the 2019 statistics confirm that tendency. The Ukrainian export to Norway is growing as well. It is lower than import but still Ukraine is picking up. One of the main products Ukraine exports to Norway is skis. Norwegians love to go skiing, and many of their skis are produced in Western Ukraine. As to other categories of Norwegian imports from Ukraine, I can mention agricultural products, food for fish farms, machinery, clothes, furniture, etc. I am pretty optimistic about the prospects of bilateral trade and I expect that it will continue to grow even more in the years to come.

The second area of cooperation is the rule of law and democratization. Norway is now one of the biggest funders of the Council of Europe Action Plan for Ukraine, which covers tackling corruption, reforming the prosecution and judiciary systems, promoting the freedom of the press and human rights.

The project ‘Probation. Opportunity for Change’ is also worth mentioning. It is aimed at advocating for alternative sanctions for prisoners. The idea is to try to adapt people to civilian life at the end of their sentence and give them an opportunity to reintegrate into society as law-abiding citizens. This project also has its centre in Kyiv, where three Norwegian experts are currently working together with the Ukrainian Centre of Probation at the Ministry of Justice. In early March, we opened the office of NORLAU, the Norwegian Rule of Law Advisory Team to Ukraine, in Kharkiv.

The flagship programme within the democratization track is ‘Democratic School’, whose main recipients are grades from the fifth to ninth. It supports educational reforms through developing a curriculum of the new Ukrainian school in close cooperation with the Ministry of Education. This project deals with school autonomy, local democracy and the ways for involving both parents and local communities to achieve these purposes. Its priorities also include pupils’ democracy in schools, digitalization, new methods of teaching, e-learning

and training for teachers. The programme is now active in about 230 schools all over the country and is there to serve as a major contribution to modernizing school thinking so that it can be more in line with the European system.

Another large-scale project that we have been supporting since 2003 deals with social adaptation and re-education of former military servicemen and their families, including many of those who have been engaged in active combat in the East of Ukraine and now do not have a job or civilian alternative after finishing their service. Many of them have had very tough experiences and can be physically traumatized as well. This project offers them three-month courses in different areas, be it economy, IT, business, how to create your own business, how to apply for civilian job, etc. It helps them increase their capabilities and qualifications. It also offers some psychological assistance for those who need it. Graduation ceremonies take place every semester, when students finish the courses. It is always a very nice occasion and I usually take part in two or three of these ceremonies across the country.

One more equally important area of cooperation is culture. For instance, last year we organized the Grieg Fest in Zhytomyr. The event is named after Edvard Grieg, one of the most famous classical composers of Norwegian origin. On April 13, there was a big event in Kyiv called the Nordic Night, which was organized by the representations of the Nordic countries together with Ukrainian civil society organizations. We presented our values, traditions, tourism opportunities, music, cuisine, and culture. We invited a Norwegian speaker who talked about the business peculiarities, innovation technologies, and women's entrepreneurship in our country. It was a huge event with hundreds of people involved.

On 11 October, an important event was held in Kharkiv dedicated to a Norwegian explorer, diplomat and humanist Fridtjof Nansen who was the first person to cross Greenland on skis back in the 1880s. He also tried to reach the North Pole by ship, although he did not succeed and drifted three years through the Arctic Ocean, with his ship covered in ice. Later, he took up diplomatic and humanitarian activities. In 1921 to 1922, at the time of the famine, he was in Ukraine as the High Commissioner for Refugees of the League of Nations, trying to help Ukraine and Russia in that terrible situation. To that end, he established an office in Kharkiv, where his team was working during this period. Being active in the Kharkiv and Dnipro regions, they were helping villagers survive the famine. Literature is also a promising area for the development of cultural ties. Norwegian writers are regular visitors at the Book Arsenal Festival in Kyiv. Our Embassy also tries to screen Norwegian films and support cultural projects.

Norway is not an EU member, but we are members of the European Economic Area and the Schengen Area. Our integration with the EU reached its cruising altitude in 1994, when the European Economic Area Agreement was

signed. Therefore, Norway possesses useful experience, which may be valuable for Ukraine. You have signed the Association Agreement with the EU and Ukraine is now adopting European standards in many fields. According to the latest figures, about 54 percent of the Association Agreement provisions have been already fulfilled. On the initiative of the Ukrainian party, we have started expert dialogue and consultations on European affairs in the fields of common interest, where we try to share our experience and insights.

I have spent almost three years in Ukraine and have grown truly fond of your country. It is not only about beautiful places but also about the people in Ukraine, friendly, hospitable, positive and forward-looking. Being a little bit individualist-minded, Ukrainians remind me of Norwegians. You know what you want but you are not thinking collectively. You all have your opinion as attested to on many – often dramatic – occasions. Norwegians are also independently-minded people, so I think we can find some common ground here. Like you, Norway is relatively young as nation. We were a part of the Kingdom of Denmark for almost four hundred years until 1814. Then we were in union with Sweden until 1905. One century does not feel as a long time in historical perspective. We cherish our independence and freedom. That may be a reason why Norwegians decided not to become a member of the European Union. Ukrainians are now also deciding their future themselves and the period of foreign ascendancy is in the twilight.

The presidential elections are a recent example of this. They were conducted in free and fair manner, which really demands respect. Of course, there is always something you can criticize, but everything went very well and very calm. There were no big problems on the Election Day and people got a chance to voice their opinion. The main thing is that the elections were free, fair and competitive which is not obvious in all the countries of the post-Soviet area. You have an opportunity for a real democratic choice and that is something to be proud of.

We are working tirelessly to improve our bilateral relations, and I have a few dreams relating thereto. One dream, which is not philosophical but a very concrete one, is to get a direct flight from Oslo to Kyiv. That would really boost tourism and make our contacts much easier. People would be able to come for a short weekend and discover Ukraine. It is a very practical thing but still an important one. And this dream has been fulfilled, when SAS started direct flights to Kyiv on 26 October. Nevertheless, my cherished dream is to see that Ukrainian aspirations are met, when it comes to joining the European family, which is where Ukraine rightfully belongs and which is the choice of the Ukrainian people. Everything we can do to support that ambition is to work every day assisting Ukraine's reform process. The EU membership is your strategic future goal and you are moving in the right direction. We laud the European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Ukraine.