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REVOLUTION AND REFORMS: THE PROPHETIC PERFECT?

– *Mr Ambassador, at the end of last year, namely on October 23, 2018, the President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko received credentials from the newly appointed Ambassadors to Ukraine, including you. Could you please tell us about the diplomatic path that preceded your appointment? Is it your first visit to Ukraine? Please share your impressions of staying in our country.*

– I started my diplomatic career in 2001. In January or February, I embarked upon a long process of what we call a “diplomatic exam”. It usually has seven or eight stages in Belgium. Then, in September, I received the results of the exam by post and it turned out that I had succeeded. I was very happy that day. At that time, I was working at the parliament. I came to my office and found out about the terrorist attacks in the US. It was September 11, 2001. It sounds like a strange story but it is a real one.

As for my first experience as a diplomat, in 2002, I served as the first secretary in Venezuela. I stayed less than one year there. Then I came back to Brussels and was a desk officer for the South American countries. My next destination was Morocco where I worked as a counsellor for four years. In 2008–2011, I acted as head of the mission in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Then I returned to the capital again. I worked as a diplomatic adviser of the then government, for both the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister. At the end of my mission, the Prime Minister asked me what country I would like to work in. I guess the system is more or less the same as in Ukraine. A diplomat usually receives a list of open positions, makes a choice and then proposes it to the minister and government. You ask for the position but you also have to justify it. I saw a lot of peaceful and, I would say, easy countries on the list. However, my eye fell on Lebanon, because when you are an ambassador in Beirut, you also cover Syria. So, I chose “Lebanon plus Syria”. That was my first choice and I was granted it.

Nevertheless, I must confess that one year before I went to your country for the first time, but not as a diplomat. I made a short trip to Ukraine in 2013. I was really impressed by the energy of the country. It was a few months before the start of the Euromaidan, at the end of the summer. After that, I remember, I came back to Brussels and was preparing the materials for the Prime Minister on the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius. There was a discussion on

the Association Agreement and I told the PM that something would happen in Ukraine. I do not know why but I told him that. Although I was in your country in summer and felt that wind of change, I did not expect such a significant backlash. Nevertheless, I felt something. Then, when I was the ambassador to Lebanon, I remembered that and, seeing that the position in Kyiv was open, I asked for it. Ukraine was my first choice again. Thankfully, the government gave me this opportunity to be here.

– *So, that very first impression of Ukraine became the defining factor, which influenced your choice of the country?*

– Right. My first impression in 2013 was energy and desire of freedom, a wind of change. Now, more than five years since then, I am here and I can see a big change.

– *Do you still feel that energy?*

– Yes, there are many changes. For me it is easier to see them than for you because I have in my mind the picture of 2013 and the picture of 2018–2019. I can compare and I can see the change. It is obvious that there are changes, especially with regard to freedom.

– *Brussels is the capital of the EU and NATO, and the heart of European policy. Does such a status give some advantages to Belgian diplomats? Being one of them, what could you advise to Ukraine on its European integration path?*

– We are a small country. Small and beautiful, but yet important. We are at the centre of the European family and are the guardians of the European values. I am one hundred percent pro-European and do not hesitate about that. That is my feeling. I believe that Ukraine is now on the right way, the European way. However, we have to speak frankly to the authorities and, first of all, to the citizens of Ukraine. I must say that the path to a European perspective will take time. Why? Because there are still institutional problems here, particularly the high level of corruption. You need a real reform process to move forward to this European perspective.

– *In your opinion, what can speed up the movement of Ukraine to Europe and what are the main obstacles on this way?*

– The best way to speed it up is to make more reforms. You have a key for it. Surely, this process depends on both the people and officials. You need not only less corruption, but also a real reform of judiciary, a real rule of law.

– *At the start of the 20th century, Belgium was among the pioneers of doing business in Ukraine, being one of the largest investors in the coalmines of the Donetsk region. In this regard, do Belgian investors have any plans to make new investments in Ukraine? What are the most interesting sectors for them?*

– There are many such sectors because there is a great potential in your country. Belgian companies have a keen interest in participating in the modernization of Ukraine, in the agricultural sector and development of transport, energy

sector and green economy. I am very pleased to see that there are many Belgian companies present in Ukraine but all of them expect a level playing field for both domestic and foreign investors. Despite sometimes unfavourable investment climate, we now observe a high level of investment: the famous 'InBev' company, 'Puratos' in Odesa, 'Schröder' in Ternopil, 'Skelia', the leader of IT sector, in Lviv, to name a few. The crucial issue of creating a healthy business environment needs to be addressed if you want the potential Belgian investors to overcome their hesitation to invest.

– *It should not be forgotten that the armed conflict in the East of Ukraine is still ongoing. Is it an insurmountable obstacle preventing the growth of investment?*

– I agree that some investors are hesitating because of the Donbas conflict. It is still a problem and we all hope that the war will end but the main challenge is within the boundaries of the country.

– *Investors can face different problems in Ukraine, including administrative or customs clearance delays, unannounced inspections, etc. Sometimes companies have to contact the Embassy and request the diplomatic intervention of their own State. Were there such cases in the Belgian practice? Are there any problems that can be solved only after the Embassy's intervention?*

– We had some problems but it was before. Three weeks ago, I was in Odesa and met the authorities of the city and of the port. We talked about this. I really think that they do their best now. A lot of goods from Belgium are coming to Ukraine via the port of Odesa, as well as other ports. The port authorities make every effort to prevent any possible problems. Therefore, it is not an issue for the Belgian companies now. The biggest problem for the investors is the rule of law. With the better rule of law, I am sure the investors will not hesitate anymore and will come to invest.

– *Mr Ambassador, you are good at predicting Ukraine's future. In your opinion, when can we expect the business climate to improve to the extent that Ukraine will see the influx of investments?*

– I hope it will not take too long. It depends. There will be elections soon. I really hope that with a new majority and a new government Ukraine will move forward. I really hope that in one or two years we will see a better investment climate. Of course, I hope so for the sake of Belgian companies, because I represent my country, but I really hope so for the sake of Ukraine too. You need investment and you need a better economy.

– *Thank you. That is a very optimistic point of view. Please tell us what is being done in order to intensify the bilateral economic relations? Are there any business fora organized in our states aimed at fostering direct business linkages?*

– I always try to be realistic and optimistic, to think positively. We are active in this direction as well. At the end of May, we will have a commercial mission with Belgian companies. They will visit Kyiv and Kharkiv.

– *Assisting Ukraine in its reforming process is a big part of the Embassy's work. What are the other areas of cooperation, which are promising, but still not that much developed?*

– I have already mentioned that the best way to support Ukraine is to invest in your country. The more you will have foreign investments, the more the country will be open and free. We have another important area of cooperation with Ukraine. It is not promising but really useful. That is demining. We are now supporting the HALO trust, an NGOs active in the eastern part of Ukraine. Belgium possesses the expertise in demining. For example, when I was in Lebanon or in Sarajevo, we also had demining programmes. Now it proves very helpful in the Donbas region.

– *The issue of climate change is very high on the political agenda of European states. This January thousands of people took to the streets of Brussels. They demanded decisive actions to be taken by the government to tackle climate changes, namely to use the renewable energy resources and implement air pollution reduction measures. Belgium also takes steps in this direction. Your country has plans to gradually abandon nuclear power and focus on renewable energy. By the way, Ukrainian TV journalists have visited a greenhouse building in Belgium recently and concluded that the project could be a nice example of investment cooperation between Belgium and Ukraine in the area of green industry. Are there any prospects for the development of bilateral cooperation in the renewable energy sector?*

– It is an important question, which will be a priority in my diplomatic mission here. The renewable energy provides bright prospects for the Ukrainian energy sector. First of all, it will enable Ukraine to become more energy independent country. Another reason is that the global climate change demands urgent action, so we have to start our cooperation in environment protection and green economy now. The first step will be the construction of a new wind power station in Kherson oblast. There is a consortium of three companies, of which two are Belgian. It is a big investment of 150 million euro, with the support of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Last week I was in Dnipropetrovsk oblast and the city of Dnipro and met with the local authorities. Together with a development agency, we talked about the cooperation in the fields of environment, green economy and waste management. I hope that we will have such a cooperation not only in Dnipro, but also in many cities and oblasts of Ukraine.

– *Belgium is one of few countries in the world, which has the longest period of education, including a compulsory one until the age of 18. In your opinion, which peculiarities and requirements for education in your country are the greatest achievements or could be the best example of the successful implementation of educational programs? Can we introduce the Belgian experience in our country?*

– Of course, Ukraine can introduce some elements of our education system, but there is no need to make copy and paste. There are different indicators that can explain the good results of Belgium in education. First, it is a combination of early childhood, kindergarten and elementary school in one building from the age of two or three to twelve years. Education is fully funded by the government and that has a positive effect on the continuity of education. Second, relatively small elementary schools (in most cases not more than 300–350 students) seem to improve the quality of education. This gives parents a wider choice of schools for their children. Third, the external examination in secondary education, which is organized by the government, makes comparison between schools possible. As a result, parents can choose a better school for their children. Another element is a strong cooperation between universities and companies, which provides undergraduates or recent postgraduates with opportunities for professional fulfilment and growth. That is also very important. For example, I remember visiting the University of Liège in the south of Belgium where I saw this very strong connection between the university and private sector. There is an area called Sart Tilman surrounding the university, where there are numerous start-ups, research centres and incubators for companies. I am sure that you will introduce such an approach in the future. By the way, Belgium also offers educational opportunities for Ukrainian students, especially through the Erasmus + programme.

– *What is the place of cultural diplomacy in the Embassy's activities? Belgium is known in Ukraine mostly for its food: chocolate, waffles, fries, beer. Does the Embassy aim to enhance the Ukrainians' knowledge of the Belgian culture?*

– We try to promote our culture, especially the comic books. Did you know that we have a longstanding tradition of comic books? The most famous is the Smurfs. I am sure the readers have heard about it. This year also marks the anniversary of Tintin and we are now trying to support the first Ukrainian edition of Tintin comic books. I hope we will succeed.

– *In conclusion, Mr Lenaerts, could you please tell us about yourself? Having such a tight schedule, do you have an opportunity to rest and what are your favourite places in Ukraine? Do you have a hobby? What do you like to do at your leisure time?*

– That is true. I have a very busy schedule. Every week I meet with diplomats, politicians, businessmen, representatives of civil society. All in all, many interesting people. It cannot be called a hobby but I like to meet people. I also enjoy going to other cities. There is no use in staying in the capital because you have a big country. In order to understand Ukraine, I need to visit all the cities and oblasts. That is kind of what I do. I was in the west, south, and east of Ukraine. It is important not only to meet the officials, but also the civil society. I always go to universities. Recently, I visited Oles Honchar Dnipro National University. There was a lecture in the beginning but my favourite part was the exchange of

views, students' questions and answers on human rights. I did it in Dnipro, in Odesa, in Kyiv, and in Uzhhorod. The next step will be Kharkiv.

I also like the architecture of your cities, I am not an Orthodox but I am really impressed by Orthodox churches. I like the culture and traditions, the beautiful landscapes you have. But the most important is that here in Ukraine you have very friendly people. That is why I like your country.

– *And what about Ukrainian cuisine?*

– I like borscht. As for desserts, it is difficult to say, I am not quite fond of them. I must confess that I have also tasted your wine. I was surprised, you have a really good wine, both in the south of Ukraine and in Zakarpattia. I was once invited by the authorities of Uzhhorod to attend the Sakura festival, which turned out to be a wine festival as well. And I tasted all the wine of the region. To conclude, you have good food and good wine.

– *Before being appointed to Ukraine, were you required to complete any language courses?*

– No. It is true that I have to learn Ukrainian, but until now I did not have enough time to do it. Ukrainian is a difficult but beautiful language and I am planning to learn it.