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TECH-ENABLED ROLE MODEL: FROM TROUBLESOME PAST TO HERALD OF PROGRESS

– How would you assess the current state of Ukrainian–Estonian relations? What are the main achievements and challenges? Are there positive trends and, if any, in which fields?

– Roughly speaking, our diplomatic relations were established almost 30 years ago and I am proud that during this time Estonia was among the biggest supporters of Ukraine, both in the past and the last couple of years before and after the Revolution of Dignity and the Russian aggression. Honestly, we regard it as our moral obligation to support our friend at such a difficult juncture. Given this fact, our relations have been really close politically as attested to by many visits, including that of the President of Estonia, who has been here 3 times over the last 18 months. In fact, Estonian President was the first foreign head of state to visit the contact line and the war zone, which is yet another way of expressing our support of Ukraine coupled with supporting your country in Brussels, which is very important for Estonian diplomacy and government. I am convinced that in the next two years, when Estonia becomes a member of the UN Security Council, the situation will remain unchanged. What is more, Ukraine has been the main recipient of Estonian development assistance and various ongoing projects are testimony to that fact. Estonia has also been transferring its know-how of reforms to Ukraine.

However, while the political ties have been cordial, the only area that has suffered is the economic relations because of the obvious impact of the aggression. After the trade relations between Ukraine and Russia were cut off in 2014, the purchasing power of Ukrainians has decreased and, consequently, so did the Estonian export. But there have also been some unfortunate cases of Estonian investors, who suffered huge losses due to the absence of the rule of law and malfunctioning court system in Ukraine. That has cast a sort of a shadow on our bilateral relations, because the previous government was not really willing to deal with those issues. And if you do not protect the investments of your closest friends, that will definitely have an impact on friendship as well.

– We are grateful for your unwavering support and your personal contribution to it. Do you already know where you are going to continue your service?

– After 11 years of diplomatic service, I am looking forward to returning home, back to Estonia. At the same time, I will continue to maintain my links to Ukraine as head of the Estonian Centre for Eastern Partnership, which deals with the problems of Ukraine and other Eastern Partnership countries.

– *This year Estonia has, for the first time, been elected as non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. It is already joining statements by other members of the council pertinent to supporting Ukraine. In this regard, what objectives does Estonia set for itself in this capacity? Will this influence the Ukrainian-Estonian relations, given the fact that both countries are facing the same security threats?*

– I would say that Estonian membership in the Security Council will not come as a major shift in our relations as they are good and close anyway. Hence, we will continue doing our job. With regard to Ukraine – and not only Ukraine – it is our own global interest to maintain the rule-based international order, especially given that Estonia is a small country and is not among the mightiest powers in military terms. Therefore, we will be working to uphold international law and its primacy, which is to the benefit of Ukraine as well. To be more specific, whenever the Russian aggression comes up, Estonia will definitely be on Ukraine's side. In addition, we are ready to share our experience in information technology and electronic governance, in terms of which we are one of the leading countries of the world, thus bringing an innovative approach to such a traditional institution as the UN Security Council. As for other priorities, I would also mention conflict prevention, sustainable development and fight against climate change.

– *Ukraine is constantly exploring ways and means of deepening cooperation with NATO. One of the existing opportunities is joining NATO's Centres of Excellence, of which three are located in the Baltic states. Almost two years ago, Ukraine formally expressed its wish to join the NATO Energy Security Centre of Excellence in Lithuania, but the process remains pending. What are the main obstacles? Is there a possibility of Ukraine's joining the Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Estonia?*

– I am not in possession of the information regarding the centre of excellence based in Lithuania. I suggest adopting a broader perspective. In my opinion, Ukraine's progress in acceding to those centres will move in parallel with building close relations with NATO, it is part of that process. Your impatience and some sort of disappointment is understandable but it is part of a bigger picture.

– *Bilateral economic relations between Ukraine and Estonia have developed and grown in the past years. Ukrainian citizens have registered in Estonia the biggest quantity of companies under e-Residency. In 2019, the Ukrainian-Estonian Chamber of Commerce was founded to develop the bilateral business contacts. What are the further prospects of economic cooperation?*

– From my perspective, it will depend on certain developments in Ukraine. If Ukraine's economy picks up, for which you need the rule of law and investments I was talking about, then Ukraine will import more from Estonia, while Ukrainian products and services will also become more competitive resulting in the ensuing rise of exports to our country. As I have mentioned, a lot depends on the developments in Ukraine. More broadly, I think that times are changing. While there is scope for traditional trade relations, including the export of Estonian fish to Ukraine or the import of Ukrainian fruits and juices, we have to move upwards. For instance, there are Ukrainian IT firms that are based in Estonia, there are Estonian IT companies established in Ukraine. Therefore, this sector can be mutually beneficial for our countries. I am sure that many other such sectors are yet to emerge and they will definitely trespass the post-Soviet confines that had existed in the past. I think that many Ukrainian companies view Estonia as the doorstep to Europe, namely Northern Europe, and quite a familiar environment. If even a small part of production is located in the territory of our country, it is considered an EU product, the only limitation being the observance of the EU rules of origin. That is why I perceive it as a win-win relationship.

– *Are there any projects implemented by the Embassy aimed at fostering our economic cooperation?*

– That is part of our routine activities. For instance, the Chamber of Commerce has been inaugurated recently and I was present at the event together with my Ukrainian counterpart. There are also numerous business delegations coming over and the Embassy is entrusted with organizing their visits. For my part, I have visited the Estonian Chamber of Commerce to speak about Ukraine in the Estonian regions and not only in Tallinn to make people acquainted with your country. Apart from that, we held a business seminar during our President's visit last year. And, for instance, when the E-Residency project holds its events in Ukraine, we assist in arranging them to promote Estonia and speak about the opportunities for Ukrainian companies in our country.

– *Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are in a process of restructuring and liberalising their electricity sectors aiming to create a common Baltic electricity market open to competition. Last year, the leaders of the Baltic states and Poland signed a deal to connect their power grids to the European Union and break their dependence on Russia. This year, Finland, Estonia and Latvia signed an agreement to create a common gas market. What can Ukraine learn from Estonia's experience in this field?*

– When Estonia joined the EU in 2004, we did not have any external links in terms of energy and were largely an 'energy island'. On the contrary, now Estonia is linked to such countries as Finland, Sweden and Poland. The reason is that it is an important security matter. Even though we have produced sufficient amounts of electricity throughout our independence, efficiency is another di-

mension that cannot be overlooked. In the world of today, a small country with a self-sufficient 1.3 million strong market would not make any sense. Consequently, when there is a peak season of hydroelectricity in Northern Europe, for example, we all win from that. The same refers to wind energy. To benefit from it, you also need links to spread the electricity produced and for backups in those periods when there is no much wind. Ukraine is a different case, because it has energy links with its neighbours and has been buying its natural gas for the last couple of years using a reverse flow from Central European countries. In other words, you are already aware of the benefits and Ukraine is putting them into practice. Moreover, given the prospect of expiry of the gas transit from Russia, Ukraine's willingness to join the EU Energy Market becomes all the more important. Therefore, we have to further pursue that direction.

– *European media have recently reported that Estonia was among the four countries, which prevented the EU from adopting a long-term climate neutrality goal at the summit in Brussels. Is it true? What is Estonia's position on the issue of climate change? Is there any cooperation between our countries in the area of the environment and renewable energy?*

– Obviously, it is hard to deny that climate change is real and human-induced. Hence, I would not single out that very meeting. Basically, Estonia is committed to fighting climate change as our country is being increasingly confronted with its repercussions. We used to be proud of our sense of sustainability in electricity due to large deposits of oil shale. We even exported electricity to neighbouring countries. However, given the polluting effect of oil shale and an unexpected steep rise in prices, Estonia joined the EU carbon emission trading system nearly 10 years ago and I contributed to those negotiations as well. That means that in the north-eastern part of Estonia, where oil shale electricity is produced and where much of the population is Russian speaking, power stations are ceasing their work. The need arises to retrain the people and produce more value-added products out of oil shale, such as oil. But, then again, the profitability is linked to oil prices. Still, Estonia continues to make progress in that regard and cannot be considered a climate-sceptic. On the contrary, a couple of weeks ago for the first time in living memory, there was a day in Estonia when not a single megawatt of electricity was produced out of oil shale. Despite difficulties, we are on the right track. Recently, the Prime Minister convened a working group covering many institutions and scientists to search for rapid and innovative options of dealing with these issues. Such a meeting could not have been better timed as hundreds of people stand to lose their jobs in the biggest unemployment crisis we have ever faced. The more so that many people have spent their entire lives in the energy sector, which also holds true in Ukraine. Hence, addressing these challenges is a substantial problem for the government. Luckily, our economy is performing well with practically no unemployment except for that particular region of Estonia.

– *Estonia has actively assisted Ukraine in the development of the ‘Trembita’ system of electronic interaction, which started functioning at the end of May. The office of the newly elected president Volodymyr Zelenskyy goes even further and plans to increase the share of government web-based services to 90% by 2024. The Ukrainian delegation headed by Advisor to the President of Ukraine Mykhailo Fedorov has recently been on a visit to Estonia to discuss the prospects for cooperation in the area of e-governance. Can we expect that Estonia’s support will continue to hold?*

– First of all, it is very encouraging that President Zelenskyi has e-governance among his main priorities. In this regard, I believe that our cooperation will certainly continue but I would not determine any concrete topics at this point. I am sure that Estonia could also contribute to ‘Trembita,’ which has already proven to be a success story of Estonian and EU assistance to Ukraine. However, to fully unleash the potential of the project, some things remain to be done and this is where Estonia can help with its experience. What is meant here is digital identity, without which it is impossible to use digital government services. In Estonia, every person has an ID card with a chip for using computer, logging on to e-mails, accessing e-bank and other services. Ukraine has already made tangible progress in mobile digital identity, but you still need a population register, which would include every single person. I am sure that there will be other projects in the future. There already are many Estonian experts in Ukraine conducting their activities within the EU framework. Considering the recent news about Jaanika Merilo, a famous Estonian-Ukrainian promoter of e-governance, who is now in charge of the e-health component of e-governance in the presidential administration, the room for continuing our cooperation in that direction is very promising.

– *For the third year in a row, Estonia leads Central and Eastern Europe in the World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders. Ranked 11th globally, Estonia is the only country in the region where freedom of the press is classed as satisfactory. The organisation describes the Estonian environment for journalists as «broadly favourable» despite the fact that the private media, as in Ukraine, are mostly in the hands of just a very small number of individuals. What is the secret to success?*

– In Estonia, we love rankings, especially when we occupy top positions in them. As for the World Press Freedom Index, there are two other rankings to put next to it. Estonia has been one of the freest economies in the world for the last 25 years, as well as one of the least corrupt – certainly, in the post-Soviet space, but also ahead of many Western European countries, according to the Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International. Therefore, Estonia represents a free environment, where media owners have no impact on politics or members of parliament. These days, we have to discuss what the place of media in Ukraine is. Here, media often means television as 75 percent of the population get their news from it. In Estonia, the share of the Internet is certainly

bigger along with public broadcasting. A huge part of the population receives news from public broadcasting, which is not subject to any private influence at all. Hence, if one asks about lessons for Ukraine, they are obvious. Unfortunately, your previous government was unwilling to develop public broadcasting and reduced its funding by half, although it could serve as a counterweight to the media captured by oligarchs. Newspapers also remain important, but nowadays most people read them online. Historically, in Estonia we have had a morally ingrained perception of media as a source of enlightenment, which can be traced back nearly 150 years ago, when Estonian journalism began to take shape. At that time, most Estonians were peasants; therefore, receiving education and getting acquainted with the outside world was very important.

– *In 2013, Tallinn became the world's first capital city to offer residents free public transport. Estonia as a whole has been following suit, and last year set the ambitious goal of becoming the first country with free public transport nationwide. Buses are now free of charge in 11 of its 15 counties. In your opinion, is it possible to introduce a similar system in Ukraine?*

– I think we should start with determining the problem and goals. Do you want to increase people's mobility? Do you want to improve the conditions of the social system? If you are in favour of the second, it may be better to increase social support for the people to be compensated for utility bills in case they are facing financial difficulties. If your goal is to reduce environmental pollution, encouraging wealthy car owners to use public transport by making it free may not be effective due to lack of interest on their part. Hence, it implies that quality and prestige are also taken into account. For instance, I served as ambassador to Switzerland, where train schedules are precise and any delay is perceived as a reputational catastrophe for a company. That is why public transport is used even by MPs living in cities other than the capital and is not seen as humiliating or disreputable. This is a common standard of achievement for all countries and I think that Estonia is on the track to meet the target. For instance, upon my returning to Tallinn, it will take me from 12 to 15 minutes to get to work. And as far as I don't own a car, using public transport is a normal part of my life. The only thing that is truly necessary is making public transport nice and clean and its schedules more precise. Supplementary measures may also include limiting car traffic in the city, as it is the case in Tallinn, where parking is very expensive in the downtown. If to talk about rural areas, it is important to ensure that local communities have appropriate public transport for them to go to work and for their children to go to school so that they will not have to move from villages to the nearest town to lead their lives.

– *What is the place of cultural diplomacy in the activities of the Embassy? How important is the promotion of national culture for modern diplomacy? Does it help diplomats to achieve their desired goals?*



Надзвичайний і Повноважний Посол Естонської Республіки в Україні Герт Антсу (у центрі) зі співробітниками Посольства
Gert Antsu, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Estonia (in the middle) with the staff of the Embassy

– For small, or peripheral, countries, the challenge is to make themselves better known, understood and appreciated globally. Culture is a way of achieving that. As an Estonian, I am really proud that I come from a culture-heavy country. For instance, the world's greatest living composer is Arvo Pärt, who has retained that status for the last 8 consecutive years. There are many other renowned composers and conductors from Estonia; Estonian film-making is doing well these days too. We are promoting our music, films and literature globally and in Ukraine in particular. It is a bit unfortunate that political and economic affairs have consumed the lion's share of the Embassy's energy and that we have had much less time for cultural activities than I would have wished for. Still, we tried to do as much as possible. For instance, we have already organized three organ concerts in Lviv and a post-folk band Puuluup performance at the Karpatskyi Prostir Festival in Ivano-Frankivsk. Besides, on our Independence Day, we screened new Estonian films at the Kyiv Film Festival. As for literature, it was not so good a time as of recently, because last year the most prominent translator of Estonian literature into Ukrainian passed away. It is rather difficult to remember Ukrainian authors, whose books have been translated into Estonian. The first names that come to my mind are Myroslava Makarevych, Andrii Kurkov and Serhii Loyko, with the latter two writing in Russian. Hence, such famous Ukrainian poets as Serhii Zhadan are

probably unheard of in Estonia. Translations from Estonian into Ukrainian are more popular as there is a new crop of young people who can study Estonian at Ivan Franko National University of Lviv. Recently, one of the students translated a collection of poems by Doris Kareva, a modern Estonian poet. It is a wonderful book in the sense that it is bilingual, which is especially exciting for those who know both Estonian and Ukrainian. Another translation worth recalling is the book by Imbi Paju entitled 'Memories Denied', dealing with the hardships of Stalinist times, which is very topical for Ukrainians as well. These are the two books that were translated last year and I hope the list will be extended to include other works, because this is the best way to learn about each other.

– *What prompted you to learn Ukrainian? Was it difficult?*

– Certainly, it was. However, it is only when we compare things that we can appraise them. Hence, it was much easier for me than it would be for people from Belgium, Portugal or Korea who are not familiar with Slavic languages. For me, to learn Russian and Polish was easier, especially the 'understanding' part. To speak a language is a different matter. Unfortunately, unlike some other countries, we don't spend three months in Lviv before taking up the post and we don't have a year off to master Ukrainian. Still, I feel that if it hadn't been for my busy schedule, I would have learned Ukrainian even better. Every person needs a weird hobby, so I will definitely keep mastering Ukrainian upon my returning to Estonia. I have nearly 30 books in Ukrainian, especially fiction books. Besides, these days one can find some Internet sources or even Ukrainian radio and TV channels in Estonia. I consider it obvious to show respect for the country you are working in and it is also a useful means of communication with the Ukrainian people in a bid to show that we are your friends and that we appreciate you. Nowadays, learning languages is a must and I am sure that my successor will take up Ukrainian as well.