

**Antonio GAZZANTI PUGLIESE DI COTRONE,**  
*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary  
of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order  
of Saint John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta to Ukraine*

## **PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT: THE NEW CHALLENGE FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTIVITY**

First of all, I would like to take this opportunity to express my thanks and gratitude to Mr Pavlo Kryvonos, the director of GDIP and all his collaborators for the precious support they gave to the Embassy of the Sovereign Order of Malta in Ukraine to organize a series of cultural and charity events.

The 2018/2019 are two very important years for the relations between the Sovereign Order of Malta and Ukraine.

In 2018 our two states celebrated 10 years of official diplomatic relations. This event was also an opportunity to publish a commemorative book «Sovereign Order of Malta and Ukraine: 10 years of diplomatic relations, 27 years of serving to the needy» which summarizes many activities carried out by the Order of Malta in the country since 1991.

On the other hand, 2019 is the year in which the first Cooperation Agreement, aimed at facilitating the humanitarian activity of the Order of Malta in Ukraine, was signed between the governments of our two states. It was a very important historical moment from a formal and substantial point of view, that testifies to the continuous and fruitful collaboration between the Order of Malta and Ukraine.

It is important to mark once again that the Order of Malta has been working in Ukraine since 1991 and all its constant attention is focused on the poor and the sick, children and orphans, on the weakest sections of the population. Since 2015 the Order of Malta is also present in the East of the country, near to the areas where the Humanitarian crisis is particularly dramatic. In this background the Order of Malta with its facilities, medical and paramedical staff and volunteers, is providing an important psychological rehabilitation support for about 15,000 people.

I would like to stress on this last matter and give some clarification. In many countries, also in Eastern Europe, the issue of the mental health has always been the subject of increasing attention. Through the focus of the World Health Organization and through various social projects concerning the mental health psycho-social support, a certain awareness of mental health has also increased in Ukraine. Humanitarian Organization Malteser Ukraine, together with Malteser International, is engaged in the project, which aims to develop and support

the psychosocial care of internally displaced persons in Kyiv and its surroundings and also in the regions of the Eastern parts of Ukraine, in Lugansk and Donetsk. Several psychosocial centers have been established and managed with local professionals, volunteers and staff who have been recruited also among the IDPs. During the implementation, the target audience of the aid has gradually become wider, and the assistance and psychosocial support has also been provided to the resident population.

Generally, it seems difficult to carry out a qualitative analysis and a corresponding evaluation for MHPPS programs: one reason is the fact that mental health is a taboo subject, therefore the number of those who show willingness to report their difficulties is limited. On the other hand, in the context of mental health the data are difficult to obtain. It is difficult to speak in terms of healing or through the proof of reduced mortality. In this regard the most important indicator is the reduction of the suicide rate. Even though there are no completely reliable data, previous assessments have focused mostly on quantity and less on quality.

Since July 2015, a team of over 80 professionals has been working in psychological support centers run by the Malteser in Eastern Ukraine and in the Kyiv region. Malteser psycho-social centers operate in Mariupol, Volnovakha, Severodonetsk, Shchastia, Kramatorsk, Druzhkivka, Pokrovsk, Yuzhnoukrainsk, and Kyiv. Displaced persons receive free legal, psychological and social support; public officials, social workers and volunteers are provided knowledge and skills in providing psycho-social support for displaced people during training programs, seminars and roundtables. Anybody has the opportunity to learn to provide psychological or medical first aid. Psychologists, psychotherapists, social workers, and lawyers are working at these centers; some of these are experts working in international organizations or specialized working groups at the local or national level. The work of the Centers corresponds to world standards and is based on effective practices, including the experience of the Israeli Trauma Coalition, standards of the WHO and the UNICEF. The project is implemented in cooperation with the Ukrainian Association of Professionals in Overcoming Consequences of Psychotraumatic Events and National University 'Kyiv Mohyla Academy'.

In 2016, the Psychosocial Rehabilitation Center in Sloviansk was visited by three Foreign Ministers on a state visit to Eastern Ukraine: Pavlo Klimkin (Ukraine), Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Germany) and Jean-Marc Ayrault (France). They managed to speak to employees of the Center, as well as to clients of our various rehabilitation programs.

Thanks to the partners – members of the Swiss Rotary Club – Malteser Ukraine managed to organize a rehabilitation program for groups of children from Eastern Ukraine, as well as from the 'grey zone'. These children came to Lviv in small groups, together with their caretakers and psychologists who had worked with

them before. Here they were provided with a very full and varied schedule (the Malteser took great pains to organize everything well), so for many the trip was not just a fun and exciting adventure but also brought the benefits of true rehabilitation and socialization, surreptitiously transforming children's hearts.

At this point I would like to share some more specific details about our project in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions, which is coordinated by the center in Kyiv. As already mentioned, the main aim of the project is to improve the living conditions not only of Internally Displaced Persons but also of the community that hosts them, thus helping the establishment of a peaceful and functioning society.

The project includes individual aid given directly to the victims of the conflict, the training and supervision of the operators who provide psychosocial support and also the implementation of the ability to react in times of need of the competent local services, thing that is achieved through their active involvement in cooperation, thus developing civic and social sensitivity.

Every effort is made in order to achieve psychosocial stabilization of the victims of the conflict in Ukraine along the contact line, as well as increasing the capacity of the local population to overcome the psychosocial consequences of the conflict in Ukraine.

The measures that were implemented in this project considered also very important for sharing information regarding the topic of psychosocial support and mental health. Public events for the dissemination of knowledge regarding psychosocial interaction aimed at helping were organized and promoted. More than 6000 people were involved.

In the Malteser centers there is a wide range of psychosocial support measures and therapy course formats. You can choose between individual and group therapy sessions, consultations that aim to discover some topics of everyday life, support courses such as theater, sewing and cooking workshops. Much of the offer contributes to the activation and development of mutual assistance services among the center-goers. Around 5800 people are involved in this part. In addition, there are also mobile groups that reach remote places and inhabitants.

The project also includes the organization of courses aimed at improving operators' qualifications and also the supervision of psychosocial and psychotherapeutic methods adopted by local psychologists and social workers. These are daily training courses, seminar and conference series. Surveys and interviews with staff and volunteers are also carried out in the project areas to ensure the quality of the work.

This and many other projects are the humanitarian commitments that the Order of Malta is carrying out in Ukraine, in collaboration with the central and local authorities and with other Ukrainian and International organizations. I am convinced that this work will become even more intense and fruitful in the future thanks to the constant commitment and dedication of all the women and men who work in the structures of the Order.