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...AND MAY MARIGOLDS BLOOM IN FLOWERBEDS OF ASHGABAT

Brotherhood, the custom and friendship in these parts, the law for noble kin and mighty tribes.

– *Magtymguly Pyragy, The Future of Turkmenistan*

As it just so happens, you live in a country for a while, talk to the people, get acquainted with its history and culture, admire the landscapes, and feel that it has become your country, too. You come to understand and sincerely love it the way it is, warts and all, with all its virtues, victories, and challenges. You do everything to the best of your ability and beyond – certainly, within the scope of your competence – to develop and strengthen friendship and cooperation between it and your native state. Turkmenistan has become such a country for me.

Never have I dreamt of it happening, but happen it did. I arrived in Ashgabat on 14 July 2014, right in the middle of a scorching summer. Marigolds in the city's flowerbeds immediately caught my eye, evoking memories of the popular Ukrainian song 'Mother sowed marigolds.' The favourite flower of the Ukrainian people, which can be seen near almost every house in Ukrainian villages and is praised in the most heartwarming Ukrainian songs, is blooming in large numbers here, in flowerbeds of Ashgabat. It was a good sign, like a glint of light, like a linkage with home, with Ukraine.

And the sign did find its way to reality. For me, it feels warm in here; not hot, but warm, at any time, both in sultry heat and frigid cold. I feel warmth when addressed as 'sister', from the joyful reaction when people hear that I am from Ukraine, sincere regret over the events in the east of our country, and wishes of peace and prosperity. I feel warmth among these hard-working, beautiful, tolerant, sincere, and hospitable people, calm in their own dignity to themselves and others, who love their country, history, and culture and are proud of them.

My colleague was once astonished at my saying that I felt in Turkmenistan as if I were in Switzerland, the treasured place where I had worked for almost eight years. 'How can you compare?' she wondered. In fact, I can. Both states are calm, tolerant, clean, safe, with a balanced foreign policy and constructive proposals. The neutral status is another aspect both countries have in common.

A good sign came true in terms of work at the Embassy of Ukraine as well. Before that, I had dedicated my entire career to multilateral diplomacy, mostly

Ukraine's cooperation with the UN in different areas, and here, almost unexpectedly, I was engaged in bilateral diplomacy, which prompted some misgivings. However, high professionalism, knowledge, and a fine sense of the country as well as dedication to the cause combined with the ability to organise a work flow at the diplomatic mission headed by then-Ambassador of Ukraine to Turkmenistan Valentyn Shevalov became important factors for my quick immersion into the activity. In the early days, I found my conversations with V. Shevalov particularly rewarding, thanks to his profound understanding of matters discussed and the ability to take a detailed look at processes and events. It also bears mentioning his relentless devotion, a perfect sense of teamwork as well as his sense of humour, which would not leave him even in the most challenging situations. All of these had an inspiring and empowering effect, even when, due to sorely lacking human resources, we had to perform a seemingly unbearable amount of work – which we managed since at the embassy I have, indeed, always felt an important part of a united team working on a common cause.

I also felt comfortable and safe in the apartment located in a residential building in the territory of the embassy complex. It was especially important for me that I could watch from the balcony of my apartment every morning as the sunrise changed the colour of the tops of the Kopet Dag Range towering high above the roof of the embassy.

The latter is nestled in one of the most beautiful and greenest districts of the city. Standing nearby, in a small wonderful square, is a monument to T. Shevchenko to which floral tributes are laid on the days of national and other significant dates or visits of officials from Ukraine. It is quite a symbolic fact that on the opposite side you can find the National Music and Drama Theatre of Turkmenistan named after Magtymguly Pyragy, a great Turkmen thinker, classic poet, and philosopher ranking as high for the Turkmen people as does T. Shevchenko for Ukrainians.

I knew quite a lot about Turkmenistan, but what I saw left me astounded. Nowadays, Turkmenistan is a modern forward-looking country. Radical transformations are taking place at a rapid pace. Modernisation of all spheres of society is combined with constant care for the revival and preservation of high spiritual traditions and customs of the Turkmen people, the deep content embedded in them, and its original culture. The pace of construction and commissioning of state-of-the-art medical centres, health resorts, educational institutions, scientific, cultural, and sports centres, not only in the capital but throughout the country is truly stunning. Dozens of office and residential buildings with landscaped areas and adjacent social facilities are being built. Railways, seaports, and gas pipelines are being constructed. It would be no exaggeration to say that the capital, like the whole country, is being developed and improved right before our eyes. Particularly rapid changes have been observed in the last decade.

Ashgabat, a white marble city in the sea of greenery, cast a spell on me at the very first sight. New buildings, constructed in the same style, are at the same time very diverse, with architectural forms often revealing their purpose: the building with a globe on the roof is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the one with an open book is the Ministry of Education; the building in the form of a lighter is the office of the oil and gas complex; the building in the shape of a tooth – a wisdom tooth, I guess – is a state-of-the-art dental centre; the newly built airport made in the form of a bird, etc. The Palace of Happiness, the Central Civil Status Registration Office, is visible from afar and is made in the shape of a giant octagon with a globe inside, along with the teardrop-shaped building of the Zirka hotel that I associate with a full sail; another wonderful spot is Elem, the world's largest indoor Ferris wheel, whose facade resembles gulyaka, a traditional Turkmen women jewellery. Magnificent palaces and exhibition halls, university complexes, modern hotels, parks, and numerous fountains make what is today's Ashgabat. The city is crossed by wide avenues, and modern highways connect the city centre with its former outskirts. The Kopet Dag Range can be admired from almost every corner of the city.

Most of the new buildings are decorated with traditional ornaments, among which, in particular, are *goli*, the main elements of carpet ornaments of various Turkmen tribes. The octagonal star of Oguz Khan is present almost everywhere; it is a multifaceted symbol with a deep philosophical meaning and historical origins. Nowadays, it is believed to be a unifying link between the past, the present, and the future.

In 2013, Ashgabat was listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as 'the most white marble city in the world', and the star of Oghuz Khan, which adorns the centre of the TV tower in Ashgabat, was acknowledged as its largest architectural image in the world. However, these are by no means all the records of Turkmenistan.

Special attention should be paid to the super-modern Olympic town, a 'city within the city', which was built before my eyes for the Fifth Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games (the 2017 Asian Games). Almost my entire stay in Ashgabat coincided with the preparations for the 2017 Asian Games. It seemed that the event left its mark on all activities in the country, and the anticipation of this sporting holiday was felt in the air. The games were a complete success, and the opening and closing of the 2017 Asian Games will hardly be forgotten by those – me included – who witnessed this enchanting and fabulous action. Nor will I forget other sporting events that I had the honour to watch and even partake in. In general, the attention paid by the Turkmen authorities and, first of all, President G. Berdimuhamedow to the development of sporting activities in the state and the promotion of a healthy lifestyle among young people deserves a separate story.

The area near the Palace of Happiness or the observation deck in the mountains, where you will be taken by cable car, allows you to admire the panorama

of the fabulous white marble city. When the night throws its veil on Ashgabat and the mountains, the city turns into a magical shimmering sea of lights, a sight sure to capture your undivided attention. You fall in love with this city, and it remains memorable for years. It is small wonder that one of the most common meanings of the name Ashgabat is a 'city of love'.

The central part of Ashgabat is immersed in greenery, and large areas of green zones can be found in its outskirts. In Turkmenistan, there is a good tradition: Twice a year, in spring and autumn, the whole state conducts a nationwide campaign to plant greenery called Yovar, which brings together representatives of all social groups. The President of Turkmenistan, deputy prime ministers, ministers, and ambassadors of Turkmenistan to other countries, if resident in the capital at the time of the event, are also invited to join the campaign, as are heads of diplomatic missions accredited in Ashgabat. As the ambassador put it, if to collect all the trees he had planted during his stay in Turkmenistan, it would make quite a large grove, which I am pleased to have enriched with several trees of 'my own'.

When you get to know the city better, it turns out that its colours are not limited to white and green. Its streets are colourful thanks to the magnificent national silk clothing of Turkmen women. With the commencement of an academic year, the streets of Ashgabat and of all other settlements in Turkmenistan become even more colourful. In the morning and afternoon, they abound in bright red or sapphire dresses of female students and bright green garments of schoolgirls. Boys and male students prefer black suits and white shirts, and everyone is wearing traditional skullcaps. This is the future of Turkmenistan.

A country that is constantly moving forward needs well-educated citizens and highly qualified specialists. The national authorities thus pay considerable attention to the education of children and youth. Buildings of new preschools, secondary schools, and higher educational institutions are being erected in all regions of the country, and state-of-the-art information and communication technologies are being widely introduced into the educational system, with schools and universities being equipped with modern computer equipment and multimedia teaching aids. Every year, on 1 September, all first-graders of secondary schools receive computers as a gift on behalf of the President.

The development of higher education designed to train highly professional staff for various sectors of the national economy is of particular importance. The number of students studying in Turkmen and foreign educational institutions has significantly increased. Ukrainian universities also assist in training a new generation of specialists for Turkmenistan in a wide range of specialties.

Every day here brings acquaintance with the history, culture, and traditions of the Turkmen people. I learned so much during my stay: wedding ceremonies, the climate, the time when poppies bloom in the valley, and that marigolds are called 'velvets' here. I found out a lot about the traditions, history, and moder-

nity of the country, listened to songs and watched people dancing. I also had an opportunity to try on women's hats and fell in love with traditional dresses of Turkmen women. I attended many events on the occasion of Turkmen holidays, namely Turkmen Horse Day, Turkmen Carpet Day, Turkmen Melon Day, Harvest Festival, and others, each time discovering new facets of the national heritage of this richly endowed nation.

It is for good reason that acquaintance with the cultural and spiritual heritage is said to be the surefire way to bring peoples together. I felt this principle in full when I first took part in the celebration of Novruz, the National Spring Festival. Events to mark it took place in the foothill Akhal valley about 20 km away from Ashgabat. Here one could observe a Turkmen settlement with yurts, yards with pets, workshops, trade rows, high swings covered with flowers, steaming cauldrons in which traditional dishes of national cuisine were prepared, couches decorated with carpets on which women and girls gathered to embroider a wedding dress and a dowry for a bride according to traditions. Everything here conveyed the atmosphere of a Turkmen village anticipating the big *toi* (holiday) and preparing to receive guests.

Deeply immersed in the festive atmosphere of this makeshift village, I experienced ancient rites, enjoyed songs and dances, tasted traditional Turkmen dishes, and felt the sincerity and hospitality of the Turkmen people. I was pretty excited about the performance of the famous national equestrian group *Galkynyş* of the Akhal-Teke equestrian complex, where I saw all the beauty of the Akhal-Teke breed and the skillfulness of the riders, among whom there were even girls.

It was also the first time I saw *kushtepdi*, an ancient fast Turkmen dance that has survived as a ceremonial and entertaining part of traditional celebrations. In 2017, it was included in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and is often performed at various events. I always wanted to join the dancers, but the fast pace of the dance and the wide range of motion prevented me from that.

Still, there were plenty of opportunities to enjoy Turkmen dances. There is a good tradition in Turkmenistan: All the people present are invited to dance, both guests and hosts, at events on the occasion of holidays, opening ceremonies of some buildings, concerts or other events. That was how we gradually mastered the art of Turkmen dance. *Akja Täjiiyewna Nurberdiyewa*, Chairwoman of the Mejlis of Turkmenistan, can be mentioned as particularly active in involving those in attendance to dancing at such events. Besides, she also turned out to be a very skilled dancer herself.

However, I would not like to mislead anybody into thinking that our work was all about holidays and dances. On the contrary, events on the occasion of holidays, many of which are celebrated on Sundays, the opening of new objects, exhibitions or forums, almost regularly attended by the President, deputy prime

ministers, ministers, and heads of other institutions, provided an additional opportunity to communicate with them to discuss current or urgent issues. The ambassador was therefore always ready for work on holidays and passed this practice on to us. We consider such events as part of our work requiring thorough preparation.

It is also worth noting that Turkmenistan has a six-day working week. Thus, Saturday was not exactly a day-off for us. The ambassador was always fully prepared for active work and a possible visit to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in those days. Other employees usually came for several hours in the morning and, in the absence of urgent tasks, went about their business, while remaining in touch and in a stand-by state. At least, that was how I felt.

It took me a long time to make up my mind and use one of the popular types of local transport in Ashgabat - the first car passing by that will stop at your request, a thing I hardly ever practice in Kyiv. Later on, I overcame my fears and was very pleased about it because I was able to learn more about the people of Turkmenistan.

Behind the wheel were ordinary people, mostly Turkmen, Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and Russians. Most of them are eager to talk, while some prefer to stay silent, mainly because of my ignorance of Turkmen. As soon as I started talking, they told me right away, 'You are from Ukraine.' The answer to my asking how they knew was almost always the same, 'The accent gives you away.' Then I understood it was my pronunciation of the letter 'r'.

I could feel the expression of fondness for Ukraine, sincere wishes for peace, welfare, and harmony emanating from those I communicated with. Some shared their impressions of a recent visit to Ukraine, studying or communicating there with friends, some recalled the past times in Ukraine, for instance, military service, work, business trips, and some were delighted with Ukrainian dishes. They asked questions about Ukraine, too. People often wondered how I felt in Turkmenistan, whether I liked it or not, whether I expected to see what I have seen. They asked about the places I have visited, what I have seen, and advised me where to go and what to pay attention to. They were sincerely delighted when listening to my impressions.

They shared thoughts about their life. Someone's son or daughter was studying in Ukraine; someone's son was to bring a daughter-in-law from Ukraine. Here is a car driver 'sleeping peacefully, not worried about his unlocked car', and here is another one laughing, 'Afraid of getting into the first car passing by? There is nothing to be afraid of, everything is fine here.' Indeed, during my entire stay in the country I had no doubts that Ashgabat is one of the safest cities in the world.

All of these short conversations and other talks with people convincingly testified the sincere and friendly attitude of the Turkmen people to Ukraine. This was a tangible proof of the statement by President of Turkmenistan G. Berdimu-

hamedow, who said that 'friendship, mutual fondness, and respect between the peoples of Turkmenistan and Ukraine have withstood the test of time', which is absolutely true. I would say that respect is the basis of our relations, with fondness being their aura.

Respect and positive attitude towards Ukraine have always been felt at the official level as well. Apparently, Turkmenistan is ready for large-scale and mutually beneficial cooperation with our state. When getting acquainted with the preceding history of Ukrainian-Turkmen relations, I was pleasantly surprised at its immensity. The groundwork of cooperation in all areas was substantial, so our task was to strengthen it and build it up. I wanted to do as much as possible, especially due to the embassy's close engagement. Employees of the expedition of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, who received correspondence from diplomatic missions, often noted that the Embassy of Ukraine sent more requests about official meetings of the ambassador with Turkmen officials than all other embassies combined.

Due to the small staff of the embassy, we had to deal with a wide range of issues. At different stages, it was slightly expanded or narrowed, depending on the change in the quantitative composition of the embassy. These issues included political, cultural and humanitarian, and information aspects as well as communication with local media, maintenance of the website of the embassy and much more. The aptly written ambassador's speech that I authored for the very next reception after my arrival on the occasion of Ukraine's Independence Day added another, so to say, creative area.

Thus, given the number of areas I was responsible for, I often had to participate in the ambassador's meetings with Turkmen officials at various levels, including deputy prime ministers, ministers, and heads of other national institutions, during which important issues of Ukrainian-Turkmen cooperation were considered. All of these meetings left a pleasant impression. We felt the readiness to cooperate and the desire to develop collaboration.

Apparently, we most often had to communicate with colleagues from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, especially when preparing visits of officials from the capital. Their high level of professionalism, efficiency, and unfailing friendliness always attracted much attention. It was nice to see a great number of young female diplomats as well as many female students at the Institute of International Relations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan.

During my work at the embassy, Ashgabat was visited by a large number of delegations and representatives of Ukraine. Particularly significant were the official visit of President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko in October 2015, the working visit of Minister for Foreign Affairs Pavlo Klimkin in November 2014, delegations of Ukraine headed by Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Regional Development, Construction, and Housing H. Zubko for participation in the 4th

meeting of the Joint Intergovernmental Ukrainian-Turkmen Commission on Economic, Cultural, and Humanitarian Cooperation in May 2015 and in the International Conference entitled *Policy of Neutrality: International Cooperation for Peace, Security, and Development* in December 2015.

All of these visits were successful. Despite the 'trimmed-down' composition of the embassy - a few months before the high-level meeting the adviser and the consul had been recalled to Kyiv as part of the rotation - the visit was properly organised, as noted by both the Ukrainian and Turkmen sides. Its results were similarly satisfactory. Important agreements were reached between the presidents of the two countries, a Joint Statement and nine intergovernmental agreements were signed in the fields of agriculture, industry, tourism, and education.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Deputy Prime Minister of Ukraine were received by the President of Turkmenistan during their visits. The 4th meeting of the Joint Intergovernmental Ukrainian-Turkmen Commission on Economic, Cultural, and Humanitarian Cooperation was successfully held. Within the framework of the International Conference on Neutrality, important working meetings of the head and members of the Ukrainian delegation with deputy prime ministers and ministers of Turkmenistan took place.

In connection with the visit of H. Zubko in May 2015, one episode springs to my mind, which is more significant than meets the eye. However, given the inherent ability of Turkmen diplomacy to convey without words no less than with words, which I repeatedly witnessed, I consider it very illustrative in terms of attitude to our state.

As early as the end of February 2015, which was declared the Year of Neutrality and Peace in Turkmenistan, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan requested that our ambassador's article on Turkmen neutrality be prepared for publication in the newspaper *Neutral Turkmenistan* (a body of the Cabinet of Ministers of Turkmenistan). Such an article was prepared and sent to the Ministry within the time specified. However, it did not appear in the newspaper in a few days as it was always done, nor did it come out in a month or two, all of it in the absence of any reaction from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan. Our cautious questions on the matter were also left unanswered.

After a while, in the whirlpool of new tasks, it was somehow forgotten. That was until the very next morning after the visit of H. Zubko, during which the Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister was received by the President of Turkmenistan and a meeting of the Joint Intergovernmental Ukrainian-Turkmen Commission was held. The counsellor at the embassy came into my room with a fresh copy of the *Neutral Turkmenistan* in his hands. Having drawn my attention to the report on the meeting of the Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister with the President and the material on the meeting of the Joint Intergovernmental Ukrainian-Turkmen Commission, he read a few lines, probably familiar to him,

and laughed saying, 'You see, even the *Neutral Turkmenistan* quotes me' and left, closing the door. A minute later the door opened again, and I heard: 'It only quotes me but prints you completely'. I opened my copy of the newspaper and saw on its third page in the column 'Opinion of a Foreign Diplomat' the same, almost 'forgotten', article by Valentyn Shevalov, Ambassador of Ukraine to Turkmenistan, about the 'open-door' policy of neutral Turkmenistan.

It was very unexpected. For us, such a concentration of materials related to Ukraine in a single issue of the newspaper sent a powerful positive message. I am deeply convinced this was no accident. That was a way of emphasising respect for Ukraine and the importance of relations with our state for Turkmenistan, which did not pass unnoticed by the diplomatic corps. Colleagues from other countries repeatedly mentioned this 'festive' issue of the newspaper devoted to Ukraine.

Urban and transport infrastructure development projects are often said to have become symbols of Ukrainian-Turkmen cooperation, a statement which was not bereft of substantial grounds. At the time of my arrival in Ashgabat, Ukrainian construction companies had been involved in the implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects of Turkmenistan's development programmes for over ten years.

I watched reports over and over again on local television from the commissioning ceremony of the state-of-the-art railway and road bridges across the Amu Darya River built by the Ukrainian-based Altcom Financial and Industrial Group. I listened again and again to the warm words of gratitude of the President of Turkmenistan to the Ukrainian company. The peculiar thing about this event was that not only the President of Turkmenistan but also the President of Uzbekistan was present at the ceremony, as the new bridges connected these two countries. Thus, Ukrainian bridge builders have also, as it were, contributed to the development of friendly relations between these two neighbouring countries. I felt joy for Turkmenistan and pride for Ukraine.

Earlier, the same company built several smaller bridges as well as a runway in the airport in Dashoguz, along with appropriate infrastructure facilities.

An important project in the framework of socio-economic transformations in Turkmenistan was the construction by the Ukrainian-based Interbudmontazh Construction Association of a drainage and communication tunnel and a complex of cleaning facilities, which experts claim to be unique and unparalleled by their scale and engineering solutions, taking into account the increased seismicity and complex geology of this area. Everything I have heard and seen about this blows my mind as a mathematically deprived person. The fact that such complex grandiose constructions of a cosmic level were designed and built by a human being are beyond my imagination. It was a pleasure to see the work of Ukrainian builders highly appreciated by the state leadership.

While working at the embassy, it fell to me to deal with one of the major priorities of Ukrainian-Turkmen relations, the cultural and humanitarian sphere, in particular, issues of cooperation in the realm of education. Students from Turkmenistan, of whom there were about 13,000 at the time of my arrival in Ashgabat, held one of the leading positions among foreign nationals studying in Ukraine at that time. Subsequently, due to a number of reasons, in particular, the developments in the east of our state and the cancellation of direct flights between Kyiv and Ashgabat, their number decreased significantly.

It is very unfortunate to state this since there is a strong foundation and mutual interest in cooperation in this area. In addition to the agreement between the Governments of Turkmenistan and Ukraine on cooperation in education, cooperation agreements have been concluded between a number of Ukrainian and Turkmen higher educational institutions. For the purposes of exchanging experience in the fields of teaching, research, and practical training of students as well as solving all the challenges related to the education of the Turkmen youth in Ukraine, the Council of Rectors of Higher Education Institutions of Ukraine and Turkmenistan has been established and two of its meetings have been successfully held.

In November 2016, a delegation of Ukraine headed by R. Hreba, Deputy Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine, visited Ashgabat and took part in the International Scientific Conference *Education and Sports in the Age of Power and Happiness*. In addition to participating in the discussion of the conference agenda, members of the delegation met with the leadership of the Ministry of Education and visited a number of educational institutions in Turkmenistan, which for both parties found very useful.

As a person who has worked for a long time at the UN, I could not help but be interested in Turkmenistan's cooperation with the UN. Expanding and intensifying the partnership with this organisation is one of the key aspects of the country's foreign policy. It is a matter of pride for the country that on 12 December 1995 the resolution 'Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan' was adopted, whereby the UN General Assembly 'recognised and welcomed Turkmenistan's status of permanent neutrality and called upon States Members of the United Nations to respect and support this status of Turkmenistan and to respect its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity'. On this occasion, the Arch of Neutrality was installed in Ashgabat, whose composition is based on the traditional Turkmen *tagan*, which serves as a stand for a cauldron under which the fire is lit. This image symbolises the unquenchable hearth and strength of the common home, which is the state.

In connection with the widely celebrated 20th anniversary of Turkmenistan's permanent neutrality, many countries, including Ukraine, held events on that occasion, and the UN General Assembly adopted another resolution on the permanent neutrality of Turkmenistan. Both in 1995 and in 2015, Ukraine co-sponsored these resolutions.

Until 2017, 12 December was celebrated in Turkmenistan as the Day of Neutrality. In 2017, in accordance with the resolution of the UN General Assembly initiated by this country, 12 December was declared the International Day of Neutrality.

Permanent neutrality is the cornerstone of the state's foreign policy. Turkmenistan clearly demonstrates that being neutral does not mean being passive. Turkmen neutrality is about active positioning, full-fledged involvement in international processes through peacemaking, and contribution to efficient models of economic cooperation.

Neutral Turkmenistan has become a negotiating platform for resolving existing problems in the region and beyond. Thus, a number of talks were held in Ashgabat under the auspices of the United Nations, which played an important role in achieving peace and concord in Tajikistan. Negotiations on the settlement of the internal Afghan conflict took place here in the late 1990s. In 2007, the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia was opened in the Turkmen capital to support regional efforts aimed at enhancing confidence-building capacity and using best international practices. The capital of Turkmenistan hosts numerous interstate meetings and important international forums, which is also the implementation of the country's foreign policy on the basis of positive neutrality.

Turkmenistan's activity is also manifested in the preparation for each session of the UN General Assembly of a number of new initiatives and proposals for the development of previously introduced ones, covering a wide range of current issues of the global agenda (transport, energy, food security, water security, emergencies, sports and more).

The initiatives in the realm of transport, in particular, the promotion of multilateral partnership models aimed at intensifying and improving the efficiency of transit and transport connections on the international arena, stand out distinctively. In 2004 and 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted resolutions 'Role of transport and transit corridors in ensuring international cooperation for sustainable development'. In December 2016, the First Global Sustainable Transport Conference was held in Ashgabat under the auspices of the United Nations, in which the delegation of Ukraine headed by Minister of Infrastructure V. Omelian took part.

It is worth noting that Turkmenistan highly appreciates the cooperation with Ukraine in the realm of transport. The bridges built by Ukrainian builders are considered here as an important component of the programme to create international transport corridors that revive the Great Silk Road.

Energy security is another important area upon which Turkmenistan is actively working. Ashgabat offers to develop a universal mechanism within the UN to ensure the reliable and safe operation of the international energy infrastruc-

ture, taking into account the interests of both producing and transit countries as well as gas consumers. In 2008 and 2013, the UN General Assembly adopted Turkmen-initiated resolutions 'Reliable and stable transit of energy and its role in ensuring sustainable development and international cooperation.'

Ukraine has supported Turkmenistan in both transport and energy security initiatives and has co-sponsored relevant resolutions.

Turkmenistan aggressively participates in the work of UN bodies and its specialised agencies. This country was elected, in particular, to the UNESCO Executive Board, the UN Economic and Social Council, a number of ECOSOC functional commissions and committees. Turkmenistan was also elected – for the fifth time – Vice Chair of the 71st session of the UN General Assembly.

Ukraine and Turkmenistan support each other in elections to UN bodies. Upon instructions from the Government, the embassy has repeatedly requested the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan to support Ukraine's candidacy in the elections to certain UN bodies and not even once received a negative or technical reply. For instance, Turkmenistan was one of the first states to announce its unconditional support for Ukraine's candidacy for non-permanent membership in the UN Security Council in 2016-17. Those aware of the struggle among candidate countries for votes at such elections and conditions that may be put forward will duly assess such a step by Turkmenistan.

There is a Turkmen proverb saying, 'Some people understand words, while others understand signs.' I would say I belong to the second category since, although I understand words, I still perceive signs more sharply. After all, you cannot but perceive the sign when it contains so much and speaks so loudly, touching the soul and imprinting itself in the memory.

The embassy was preparing for the celebration of Ukraine's Unity Day on 22 January 2016. The ambassador was away, and I acted as his deputy. As a tradition, the embassy's staff and representatives of Ukrainian companies operating in Turkmenistan were to lay floral tributes at the monument to Taras Shevchenko. As usual, the Turkmen side was informed about the planned ceremony in advance to ensure the monument would be clean and shiny on that day. I must say that the square, like the monument to Kobzar, is always maintained in a perfect condition. However, winter weather, rain, wind, and sand do their dirty work very quickly.

The day before, my colleagues leaving the embassy watched the work humming near the monument. Launching fireworks of water, a car loudly washed away the sand brought by winds from the sidewalk in front of the park, and employees of city utilities intensively wiped marble on the monument and landscaped flower beds on which in some places withered vegetation and yellow flowers had remained since autumn. Everything went as usual, the way it should be. I had no doubt that everything would go off without a hitch the next day.

What I saw the next morning, however, was truly stunning. Never have I witnessed such a thing before. For several minutes I stood there, speechless. Around the perimeter of the park, along all the curbs and numerous decorative 'paths' of small white stones there were planted ... dozens of bright cyclamens.

Ashgabat, January, chains of colourful flowers in flowerbeds near the Kobzar monument – all of this had tears welling up in my eyes. I am sure that our dear Turkmen friends in this symbolic day for us and in this difficult time for Ukraine thus demonstrated their solidarity with Ukraine and support for the unity and territorial integrity of our country.

I wanted to embrace the whole state of Turkmenistan, all the Turkmen people, all our Turkmen friends. However, the situation only allowed me to express my sincere gratitude to the present staff member of the Protocol Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, invariably smiling Nury, who at that time was their embodiment for me, and to shake his hand firmly.

When in my address to participants of the ceremony I offered to mentally reach out to each other and join those symbolic chains that are formed throughout Ukraine on its Unity Day as a sign of unity of the Ukrainian people, I felt the presence of our Turkmen friends in these chains. Since then, every year, on Ukraine's Unity Day, I cast my mind back to that January square in Ashgabat, blossomed with cyclamens, and bow to this country and its people.

It is also worth bowing for the hospitality displayed by the Turkmen side to a group of Ukrainian children from vulnerable social groups (children of deceased ATO soldiers, orphans, children without parental care), invited to rest in the Awaza National Tourist Zone on the Caspian Sea.

By way of proving that there is no such thing as other people's children, our kids became their own for a while. I personally saw the children during the meeting at the airport, their trip, first to the camp in the mountains near Ashgabat and then by train to the Caspian coast, and how the Turkmen side met them on the way back. The genuine care, warmth, and sincere attention accorded to the children can hardly be ever forgotten.

The years of my work in Turkmenistan have flown by as one instant. This time was intensive, interesting, and bright. After returning to Ukraine, I left a piece of my heart there. Still, I am convinced that instead a drop of Turkmen spirit has poured inside me, like a drop of gold.

My love goes to this country and its hard-working people, to whom I sincerely wish to move forward, overcome all the obstacles in its path, reach new heights, and set new records. May this wonderful land and this sunny state flourish, may the Ukrainian-Turkmen friendship thrive.

...and may marigolds bloom in flowerbeds of Ashgabat.