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WORKING TOGETHER FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

– *Your Excellency, Ukraine and Georgia are long-standing strategic partners, given the similarity of the historical past, active cooperation, common challenges, and threats the states are facing. Ukrainian and Georgian cooperation makes it possible to consolidate efforts to counter Russian aggression affecting both countries. The militarisation of the occupied Crimea reduces the security level in the strategically important Black Sea and the Sea of Azov region. Mr Ambassador, are Ukraine and Georgia developing joint approaches or creating any security and defence projects to counter this?*

– Ukraine and Georgia have truly been strategic partners and friendly peoples for centuries. We work together on a parity basis to address common challenges and threats, particularly, in the security sphere.

On 13 December 2019 in Kyiv, in order to develop interstate relations, the President of Ukraine and the Prime Minister of Georgia signed the Regulations on the Ukrainian-Georgian High-Level Strategic Council, which establishes a defence and security mechanism (DSM) of cooperation between the two countries at bilateral and multilateral levels.

As part of the joint work on the DSM in 2020–2021, Andrii Taran, Minister of Defence of Ukraine, paid several official visits to the country, in particular held a meeting with the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence of Georgia. The parties coordinated measures to strengthen security in the Black Sea and counter the Kremlin's aggressive policy in the region.

On 23 April 2021, the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Ukraine and Georgia joined the typically tripartite meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Poland, Turkey, and Romania in Bucharest. In its framework, Dmytro Kuleba, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, and David Zalkaliani, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs of Georgia, held a bilateral meeting to discuss Russia's illegal actions in the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea as well as militarisation in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, in particular the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, as well as the territories of Georgia, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region. D. Kuleba and D. Zalkaliani pointed out mutual interest in strengthening cooperation with NATO and its member countries in order to accelerate preparations for the accession of Ukraine and Georgia to the North Atlantic Alliance. The importance of further development of meaningful Romania-Po-

land-Turkey security negotiating format with the participation of Ukraine and Georgia was emphasised for the sake of efficient response and protection of NATO's eastern flank from Russian aggression.

One of the current DSM practical forms of Ukraine and Georgia is to conduct joint international military exercises in the Black Sea under the auspices of NATO and the United States, aimed at increasing the defence capabilities of the two countries, especially the naval component; working out mechanisms for interoperability and cooperation with NATO member states and partners; and exchanging information and experiences in the Black Sea region rapidly. It was agreed to hold a series of military exercises in 2021 together with the member states of the Alliance, in which units of Ukraine and Georgia take part.

Within the cooperation with NATO, Ukraine and Georgia are also implementing a number of bilateral projects to exchange information and experience on ensuring security in the Black Sea and combating hybrid threats.

Ukraine has initiated a new format of naval cooperation in the Black Sea jointly with other member states (Georgia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey), which aims to unite the efforts of the parties to strengthen peace and security in the region, to ensure compliance of naval activities in the Black Sea area with the norms and principles of international law, as well as to counter threats of an armed force of the third countries against the parties of the format.

Ukraine and Georgia are fruitfully cooperating on the platforms of leading international and regional organisations to counter Russian aggression and liberate the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine and Georgia by initiating and adopting relevant decisions (resolutions) of the UN, OSCE and CoE. Besides, Georgia co-authored and supported the UN General Assembly resolution initiated by Ukraine, "Problem of the militarization of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Ukraine, as well as parts of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov" (7 December 2020). In turn, our state supported the Georgian draft resolution on the withdrawal of foreign troops illegally deployed in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region (Georgia), which is currently being processed at the UN.

– *Mr Ambassador, in March 2021, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyi launched the Crimean Platform diplomatic initiative, which aims to unite international efforts to de-occupy the peninsula, promote the Crimean issue on the international agenda and protect human rights. Georgian territories are also occupied by Russia. What can Ukraine learn from Georgia's strategy on peaceful de-occupation?*

– The Government of Georgia is constantly taking measures aimed at the peaceful liberation of the sovereign territories, Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region, which are temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation.

Since April 2018, despite the destructive initiatives of Russia and the Abkhazian and Tskhinvali separatist regimes under its control, the Georgian government has been implementing 'A Step to a Better Future' peace initiative, which provides

a set of measures to promote reconciliation, resumption of dialogue and cooperation between the Georgian, Ossetian, and Abkhazian communities. This initiative, implemented within a policy of reconciliation and engagement, is above all an unalterable step towards the peaceful and sustainable development of Georgia; it entails clear measures to improve the socio-economic and humanitarian situation of the population living in its temporarily occupied territories. The initiative aims to promote relations between the Georgian, Abkhazian, and Tskhinvali communities, nurtured on common interests and contacts on both sides of the dividing line.

'A Step to a Better Future' initiative contains a specific list of measures in the following areas: expanding and facilitating trade across dividing lines in order to create new opportunities for the population of the occupied territories (the state encourages and supports joint and individual business projects related to trade between Georgian, Abkhazian and Ossetian communities); to create opportunities for additional quality education and increase its accessibility at all levels in the country as well as abroad for Abkhazian and Ossetian youth and Georgian youth living along the dividing line; to create mechanisms for easier access of the Abkhazian and Ossetian communities to the benefits acquired in the process of the development of Georgia, primarily, medical services.

For the past three years, the attractive and rational initiative of the Government of Georgia has been hampered by pro-Russian Tskhinvali and Abkhaz separatist regimes, which impede its implementation at all levels. At the same time, Georgia spares no effort and struggles persistently to improve living conditions in its temporarily occupied territories, as well as protect the rights and freedoms of the local population.

Georgia's active work within the platforms of leading international and regional organisations is noteworthy. In 2020, thanks to efficient cooperation with partner countries, in particular Ukraine, Georgia received considerable international support through the adoption of relevant resolutions and statements within the UN, OSCE and CoE. For example, there were adopted the resolutions 'The Situation in Georgia' (27 February) at the 43rd session of the UN Human Rights Council and 'Status of internally displaced persons and refugees from Abkhazia, Georgia, and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, Georgia' (3 September) at the 74th session of the UN General Assembly; and joint statements were made on behalf of 15 members of the OSCE's Group of Friends of Georgia (3 September) on the 12th anniversary of the Russian-Georgian war and on behalf of 15 member countries of the Group of Friends of Georgia during the 27th OSCE Ministerial Council (3–4 December). In 2021, with the support and co-authorship of Ukraine, the resolution 'Cooperation with Georgia' was adopted at the 46th session of the UN Human Rights Council, which recorded the main human rights violations in the Georgian territories occupied by Russia (10 March).

As part of consolidating efforts to reach de-occupation and ensure human rights in the Ukrainian and Georgian temporarily occupied territories, the Ministry of the Temporarily Occupied Territories and Internally Displaced Persons of Ukraine and the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality signed a Memorandum of Mutual Understanding and Cooperation on 17 May 2018. This document is aimed at establishing cooperation between Ukraine and Georgia in the field of information exchange on best practices in peacebuilding, reintegration, and conflict resolution.

– In late 2020, the presidents of Azerbaijan, Russia and the Prime Minister of Armenia concluded an agreement to end the protracted Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. On the one hand, its main goal is to stabilise the security situation in the Caucasus, but at the same time, it deals with legitimising the presence of the Russian military contingent in the region, which is officially almost 2,000 peacekeepers. Your Excellency, what threats does the presence of the Russian military in the Caucasus pose to Georgia?

– The Russian Federation has significantly intensified its strategic efforts to maximise and legitimise its military and political influence, as well as to achieve the desired political climate in areas, which are of geopolitical value. This activity is mostly directed to the south (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan). The mediation of official Moscow in the process of reaching a ceasefire agreement ensured the events unfolding according to the scenario prepared by the Kremlin. Accordingly, adjusting the ‘peace mandate’ to its own interests, Russia has increased its military and political access to the region, which implies maintaining influence over Armenia while creating a lever of influence on Azerbaijan.

Therefore, after the deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces, the South Caucasus will become a new platform for military competition in the region along with Syria and Libya.

The Kremlin prioritises the Black Sea and Caucasus regions in regard to its official Eurasian geopolitical projects, thus the strategic moves of Russia directly affect Georgia’s security. Russia is expected to try to strengthen its influence on large strategic economic projects in the South Caucasus region, in particular, to annihilate the perspectives of the due functioning of an alternative transport corridor through the territory of Georgia.

– Ukraine and Georgia are determined to join the European Union. Moreover, the countries are active participants of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative. In 2014, the states signed association agreements with the EU, which marked a new step towards European integration. Mr Ambassador, what do you view as the prospects for deepening relations between Ukraine, Georgia and the European Union? In your opinion, what transformations are needed for the EaP?

– So far, it is safe to say that the conclusion of the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine became an important step towards the realisation of the historical choice of the entire Ukrainian people in favour of the European course of the country's development.

This agreement serves as a guide and a programme of the minimum necessary reforms to be implemented for the country's full integration into the European area.

The implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area has contributed to the reorientation of goods and services to the European market, as well as the significant strengthening of economic independence from the Russian Federation. Since the FTA's entering into force in January 2016, the growth of bilateral trade between Ukraine and the EU has reached about 65 per cent, making the European Union Ukraine's largest trading partner. The share of the EU in the goods and services trade structure of Ukraine reached 37.1 per cent in 2020, the one of China, which ranks 2nd, amounted to 12.3 per cent, while Russia's share fell to 9 per cent.

The EaP is a priority geopolitical project for the foreign policy of Ukraine and an additional instrument of bringing Ukraine and the European Union closer together. During the initiative's development, Ukraine and Georgia have proven to be the most active and consistent participants, trying to adapt this project to new realities, taking into account the needs of all sides involved, and bring it to a logical conclusion, which is full EU membership of both countries. Therefore, cooperation with Georgia is an extremely significant aspect, contributing to the further successful development of the EaP and the achievement of the initiative's goals. Just in the early half of 2021, several important steps have been taken to build cooperation between the two countries in this respect. In particular, in early February, the foreign ministers of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova drafted a joint letter in which they presented to the European side agreed strategic approaches to further development of the EaP (for instance, integration into the EU internal market, alignment with the European Union in the fields of transport, energy, digital market, green economy, healthcare and strengthening security cooperation).

On 17 May, the foreign ministers of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova signed a memorandum and launched the 'Association Trio,' a tripartite format of enhanced cooperation with a view to European integration. The document underscores the European aspirations of the three associated EU partners and their ambitions to become full members of the European Union.

The international conference in Batumi with the participation of the Presidents of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, as well as the President of the European Council Charles Michel, has become an important stage for the further development of this format.

– *In 2020, Ukraine became NATO's Enhanced Opportunity Partner. Georgia received this status a few years earlier, which indicates a high level of cooperation between the Alliance and partner countries. What role does the embassy play in military-technical cooperation between states? What could Ukraine learn from the experience of Georgia regarding the enhanced opportunities partnership?*

– The military and technical cooperation between Ukraine and Georgia is developing in accordance with the needs and capabilities of both countries on the basis of annual plans for bilateral cooperation between the Ministries of Defence. It is directly organised by the office of military attachés at the Embassy of Ukraine in Georgia.

Ukraine is interested in drawing lessons from the six-year experience of Georgia's participation in the enhanced opportunity partnership with NATO since 2014, especially in terms of strengthening the capacity and capabilities of the Georgian Defence Forces. The Ukrainian side, which set out to reform the defence sphere, is interested to exchange experience on:

- cyber defence;
- reformation and development of the armed forces, in particular, the implementation of NATO standards;
- personnel management;
- system of reserve service.

– *Ukraine and Georgia concluded the free trade agreement 25 years ago, yet the economic cooperation between the countries is slightly lower than the political one as trade and investment opportunities of the states are yet to be fully tapped. Undoubtedly, the spread of COVID-19 has left its mark on the trade and economic cooperation of all countries. Your Excellency, should we expect the economic ties to intensify at the end of the pandemic? Does the Embassy of Ukraine cooperate with business associations of Georgia, for example, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry?*

– The coronavirus pandemic along with anti-epidemic measures adopted by all countries have had a tremendous impact on the traditional principles of international economic cooperation. This is an indisputable fact, which we recognise and accept as a starting point for the further development of interstate relations. In this sense, Georgia as a strategic partner of Ukraine is no exception.

In the early spring of 2021, as the second wave of the pandemic subsided, our governments strengthened bilateral contacts (primarily in person and online), even though they did not really suspend the communication during the increased restrictions and lockdowns in our countries. We have visible results and far-sighted plans.

The Ukrainian delegation of the Ministry of Infrastructure headed by the First Deputy Minister visited Georgia. As a result of a series of meetings, the agreements

were reached on modernising the conditions of freight transportation. Besides, further steps were discussed for the development of rail services between Ukraine and Georgia and the development of ports and ferries in the Black Sea basin.

D. Zalkaliani, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs of Georgia, paid an official visit to Ukraine, during which a wide range of issues on the economic agenda were discussed, including those regarding the European integration course of both countries.

In the summer of 2021, joint events were held with the participation of the Presidents and Prime Ministers of Ukraine and Georgia. We also launched preparations for the tenth meeting of the Joint Intergovernmental Ukrainian-Georgian Commission on Economic Cooperation this year.

All these steps are just the beginning of the restoration of the pre-pandemic level of bilateral cooperation between our states.

As for the second part of the question, I would like to note that the embassy did not stop working with Georgian entrepreneurs, even in the absence of the opportunity to hold business events in any of the formats we were used to in ‘normal times.’

Moreover, in addition to our traditional partners, which are the largest Georgian business associations (CCI, Employers’ Association, etc.), we have made new promising acquaintances with our colleagues from the EU Business Council – Georgia, the Georgian Tourism Industry Alliance and the Mediators Association of Georgia. At the end of January 2021, the Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Exporters and Investors Council under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine and the EU-Georgia Business Council.

The lifting of quarantine restrictions, the resumption of scheduled flights and successful vaccination campaigns against COVID-19 in both countries should contribute to the full resumption of business dialogue between Ukrainian and Georgian businesses in the near future

– *Georgia is a country with a rich history, cultural and natural diversity, which is extremely attractive to Ukrainian tourists. The tourism sector is an important niche of the Georgian economy (almost 20 per cent of GDP). The closure of Georgia’s borders due to the spread of coronavirus infection has had a negative impact on tourism, however, the industry is gradually recovering and getting used to the new rules. Mr Ambassador, what are the prospects for intensifying tourist ties between Ukraine and Georgia?*

– The prospect for accelerating tourism between the two countries is eloquently demonstrated by the flow of Ukrainian tourists to Georgia, the number of which quadrupled in April 2021 (compared to April 2020) and has already reached 50 percent of the indicator as at April 2019, which was at record highs for the Georgian tourism industry.

Moreover, after the resumption of scheduled flights between the cities of Ukraine and Georgia in March 2021, Ukrainian companies (UIA, SkyUp and YanAir) increased the number of flights to Batumi and Tbilisi, the tourist capitals of Georgia, to more than 30 per week. We are waiting for the launch of the new low-cost flights of Bees Airline on the route Kyiv–Tbilisi. At the same time, what is worth mentioning is the normalisation of air fares between Ukrainian and Georgian cities, which is one of the key factors for choosing a vacation spot in difficult economic realities.

Therefore, we expect a gradual restoration of Georgia's position as one of the most attractive tourist countries for Ukrainian citizens for the summer season of 2021.

Further prospects will largely depend on the epidemiological situation in both countries and the ability of the governments of Ukraine and Georgia to ensure an effective vaccination campaign, which will virtually eliminate all the inconveniences of crossing the border.

– *Georgia is home to a large and active Ukrainian diaspora and a number of non-governmental organisations. Your Excellency, what are the areas of the embassy's cooperation with Ukrainian communities and what common achievements can you share?*

– It bears mentioning that the first Ukrainian communities in Georgia appeared more than 160 years ago. Now, the Georgian Martynenko, Pashchenko, Bandura, Havva, Shevchenko, Ustymenko, Nahoha, Romanenko families, to list a few, are the descendants of 200 Cossack families from Poltava and Chernihiv Regions who were relocated to Borjomi in 1853. Some of them still live in the settlements of their ancestors in the village of Bakuriani of Borjomi municipality and the villages of Akhaltsikhe municipality.

Currently, 12 Ukrainian non-governmental organisations are registered in Georgia, focusing their activities on meeting the linguistic, cultural, educational, and other needs of compatriots. They work in the humanitarian sphere, regularly educate children and youth of the Ukrainian diaspora to deepen their knowledge about Ukraine and its history; popularise Ukrainian culture, language, literature, and cuisine in Georgia; honour the memory of prominent Ukrainian figures, writers, and poets and disseminate information about them among Georgians. The recent examples include Mykhailo Hrushevskyi, whose life was linked to Georgia (he studied at the Tbilisi Gymnasium, which laid the groundwork for his views), and the prominent Ukrainian poetess Lesia Ukrainka, who lived in Georgia for more than ten years and completed her earthly journey in the picturesque Georgian town of Surami.

The Embassy of Ukraine in Georgia maintains constant communication with local Ukrainian non-governmental organisations, involves their representatives in the celebration of memorable dates, important for Ukraine, and national

holidays, as well as successfully implements the Action Plan of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine for budget program 1401110 named 'Financial support for ensuring the positive international image of Ukraine, activities of the Ukrainian Institute and measures to maintain ties with Ukrainians living outside Ukraine.' About 40 events are held in Georgia yearly with the participation of the Ukrainian diaspora.

The main achievements and meanwhile the main tasks of our cooperation with the Ukrainian diaspora in Georgia are to ensure learning of the native language among children and youth as well as their involvement in the native culture, traditions and history; to hold the annual All-Georgian Competition of Taras Shevchenko Poetry Reciting (by the way, 2021 marks the 15th anniversary of this competition), competitions dedicated to the Day of Ukrainian Writing and Language, to participate in international language and literature competitions for schoolchildren and students, where young Ukrainians from Georgia have repeatedly won prizes. It should be noted that not only Ukrainian but also Georgian youth take part in these cultural events. The 'Ukrainian Vesniankas (spring songs) on Kyivska Street' festivals organised by the Ukrainian diaspora in Tbilisi have won great acclaim and presented to Georgians and foreign guests the entire cultural range of Ukraine: clothing, cuisine, music, singing, dancing, art, and industrial achievements.

What is important for the development of cultural relations between Ukraine and Georgia is to honour the outstanding Ukrainian poetess Lesia Ukrainka, whose figure embodies a cultural bridge of Ukrainian-Georgian friendship and interpersonal relations. Therefore, the Ukrainian diaspora zealously participates in the annual celebration of the artist's birthday (25 February), Lesia's Day 'Lesiaoba' (early October) in Surami, and the promotion of the outstanding Ukrainian woman in the cities of Georgia.

– *Ukraine actively introduces the electronic methods of interaction between citizens, government bodies and representative offices of Ukraine abroad (electronic documents, DRUH and Trembita systems). In your opinion, how will these novelties transform diplomatic activity, and will such forms of online communication stay relevant after the COVID-19 pandemic?*

– The modern world requires new approaches to public administration, improving the quality and accessibility of public services for citizens, reducing the time to receive them and simplifying the relevant procedures.

One of the priority areas for Ukraine is the development of the information society and ensuring information interaction of executive bodies with each other and with citizens, as well as providing information and other services using modern technologies. The very concept of online communication is focused on meeting the needs of citizens and improving their lives. These handy tools will become more and more relevant, as people actively use them during the quarantine and will continue to do this in future.