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ACHIEVEMENTS OF UKRAINIAN DIPLOMACY IN KAZAKHSTAN

– *Mr Ambassador, what challenges does the Embassy of Ukraine encounter during the pandemic? How does it organise its work at this tough time?*

– Primarily, I would like to express my gratitude for the invitation to co-author the *Diplomatic Ukraine* periodical this year.

Of course, as in the rest of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the activities of the Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Kazakhstan. We are facing new challenges, among which there is the reduction or even the complete cancellation of direct flights between Ukraine and Kazakhstan awhile. Logistic obstacles have led to a decrease in trade turnover. All personal meetings were moved to online platforms.

New realities, however, have given rise to new solutions and views. The embassy continues working hard under these conditions. We hold meetings with representatives of Kazakhstan via Zoom, Skype, and other platforms. Although the online format cannot replace live communication, there are certain advantages, for example, saving time and resources.

Nowadays, most of the embassy's activities take place online. It should be noted that the Republic of Kazakhstan is a large country in terms of area size. Our audience is Kazakhstanis, Ukrainians in Kazakhstan and citizens of other states. Therefore, it would be impossible to organise a meeting or a joint event in the remote locations of the country during the pandemic, while an online conference or video call allow everyone to unite in order to communicate or solve urgent issues face-to-face.

At the end of May, we completed a long-term work on a project of a Ukrainian-language audio guide at the ALZHIR Museum and Memorial Complex of Political Repressions and Totalitarianism Victims. Thanks to the initiative of First Lady Olena Zelenska, foreign diplomatic institutions of Ukraine can thus popularise our language in the world. The audio guide in the ALZHIR museum became the seventeenth outside of Ukraine and the first, and hopefully not the last one, in Kazakhstan.

The Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Kazakhstan is also rather actively present on all major social networks, and this contributes largely to the popularisation of Ukraine as a modern European state. We emphasise our multilevel

achievements in all spheres of life. This primarily refers to conveying truthful information to the citizens of Kazakhstan about Russian aggression in the east of Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, the diplomatic initiative to return it back (Crimean Platform), and the economic component. The topics and methods are varied: from official statements and videoconferences to photo and video flash mobs, exhibitions, film broadcasting, etc.

Social networks and online communities also allow us to constantly keep in touch with the citizens of Ukraine in Kazakhstan, quickly disseminate information on consular topics, and promptly respond to challenges and threats, especially during the pandemic.

– *What is the current level of bilateral relations, for instance, trade and economic ones? How has the pandemic affected the economy of Kazakhstan in particular and the society of the country as a whole?*

– Since 2014, i.e. since the beginning of the Russian armed aggression against Ukraine, there has been a tendency towards a reduction in trade between Ukraine and Kazakhstan. It has decreased by more than fourfold over the last six years.

One of the reasons for the fall in the volume of trade is a decrease in the export of Ukrainian goods and services to the Kazakhstani market due to the aggressive policy of the Russian leadership, which violated the World Trade Organisation rules and restricted the transit through its territory. The use of alternative delivery routes, in particular the Trans-Caspian one, leads to an increase in the cost of these goods in the Kazakhstani market, which ultimately reduces their attractiveness to consumers. In addition, Kazakhstan is actively implementing a policy of import substitution by creating joint ventures with world-renowned companies. The gradual removal of Ukrainian goods from the Kazakhstani market is also a result of increased competition from Russian and Belarusian goods, which have certain advantages due to the membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, using within its frames the tools to limit the supply of certain types of Ukrainian goods to the markets of the member states.

The embassy takes all possible measures to inform Ukrainian business circles about the opportunities and potential needs of the Kazakhstani market, as this market is promising for Ukrainian entrepreneurs due to a wide range of business cooperation, particularly, in transportation, fuel, energy and industrial complexes, agriculture, food industry, etc.

In the face of the new challenges of our time, our embassy initiates and also joins the Ukrainian-Kazakhstani business forums, meetings of the Ukraine-Kazakhstan Business Council and online conferences with the participation of business representatives from both sides. On 18 June 2021, the 14th meeting of the Joint Interstate Ukrainian-Kazakhstani Commission on Economic Cooperation was held in Kyiv. Such events allow us to create new common ground in cooperation with Kazakhstan in order to expand the presence of our goods and services to

their market. We hope this will help to increase the activity of Ukrainian business in establishing mutually beneficial relations with Kazakhstani partners.

According to experts, as a result of COVID-19 pandemic, last year was the most difficult for the economy of Kazakhstan (and the world in general) over the past two decades. The consequences of the pandemic have become more devastating for the country's economy than the crises of 2008 and 2015. For instance, it decreased by 2.5 per cent in 2020. The economic downturn has severely affected the most vulnerable population strata. The coronavirus crisis has significantly impacted the retail, hotel industry, wholesale, and transport sectors, which account for about 30 per cent of urban employment. The rural population of the country has also experienced convulsions.

At the same time, it should be noted that timely and decisive actions were taken in Kazakhstan to minimise the impact of the pandemic on citizens and the state economy. For example, three packages of anti-crisis measures were launched aimed at supporting the population and business, maintaining socio-economic stability, and resuming economic growth.

– *Ukraine has been represented in the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route International Association with headquarters in Nur-Sultan for four years. What results have been achieved during this time? Is the trade turnover growing on this route, including on the Ukrainian territory?*

– Since 2018, the Ukrzaliznytsia Administration of Railway Transport of Ukraine is indeed a member of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) and actively participates in the expansion and development of this association.

In 2019, the Ukrainian Sea Ports Authority and TITR signed a memorandum, which is aimed at attracting goods travelling through China, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine to European countries, in particular, using ferry crossings in the ports of the Black and Caspian Seas. Transportation of goods along this course is still more costly than by land, and the route itself is logistically more difficult. It has its own advantages, however, including the absence of sanctions and a favourable political climate. Besides, it opens up additional opportunities for increasing freight traffic on the Asia-Europe connection route.

Last year, experts estimated the growth of trade in the region of the Trans-Caspian route to \$922 billion. The cargo capacity exceeds 30 thousand containers in 20-foot equivalent. Today's throughput capacity of the Trans-Caspian route is more than 30 million tons of cargo.

Within the framework of this project, Ukrzaliznytsia has established competitive tariff conditions for the transport of goods along the route, has developed schedules for the movement of trains on the territory of Ukraine at an average speed of 650 km/day, which will allow to cross the country in less than 40 hours. It has identified the 'threads' of the schedule for the movement of freight trains

to all western border crossings of Ukraine with Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania.

– *At the meetings of the UN General Assembly, Kazakhstan usually votes against the adoption of resolutions on Crimea, in which Russia is called an occupier and the indicated temporarily annexed territory is called Ukrainian. Why do you think Kazakhstan chose this position? Can Ukraine do something to change it?*

– Unfortunately, despite all the embassy's efforts as well as the ones of the Permanent Mission of Ukraine to the United Nations and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, last year, as in previous years, Kazakhstan, however, voted against the UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/75/192 'Situation of human rights in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Ukraine.' Frankly speaking, we do not understand this position of the Kazakhstani leadership.

More than once we have heard statements by Russian politicians and officials about 'donated territories' and 'Kazakhstanis' lack of statehood.' There are examples of how Kazakhstan handed notes of protest to the Russian embassy on this basis, and at the same time, Kazakhstan votes against a resolution that supports the territorial integrity of Ukraine and blocks the repetition of cases of annexation of territories in the future.

Until 2014, such reproaches from certain mouthpieces of the Kremlin also sounded in Ukraine. Russia's crimes are now condemned by most countries in the world. It is complicated to answer why Kazakhstan has joined the list of states that clearly gravitate not towards democracy and progress but in an opposite direction.

We sometimes hear narratives from the Kazakhstani side about a considerable number of Russian military bases in their territory, strategic partnership with the Russian Federation, allied relations within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the Eurasian Economic Union and the need to act in accordance with these obligations. May I note that this concerns the obligations with the aggressor state!

As the embassy constantly communicates with the Kazakhstani public, I would note that many Kazakhstanis do not understand why their country votes this way. Therefore, it is not only us striving to get an answer to this question.

For its part, the Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Kazakhstan works hoping for a reasonable position of the Kazakhstani authorities. For instance, in 2020, Kazakhstan abstained from voting at the 75th session of the UN General Assembly for the resolution A/RES/75/29 '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.' This is already a signal of change.

– *The current priority of Ukrainian diplomacy is to create the international platform to achieve the de-occupation of Crimea. The Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Kazakhstan is also involved in this work. It is known that you have already held meetings with representatives of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Stud-*

ies and the Parliament of Kazakhstan and invited them to join the initiative at the expert and parliamentary levels. In your opinion, can we hope for the participation of Kazakhstan in this format?

– To date, the efforts of Ukrainian diplomacy are aimed not only at achieving peace in the East of our country, but also at the de-occupation of Crimea. The embassy conveyed an invitation to Kazakhstani high and the highest-level officials, members of parliament, and experts to participate in the Crimean Platform summit. This initiative was created to fulfil the difficult task of the 21st century: with the diplomatic efforts of the international community, to de-occupy a part of our Motherland, which was annexed by the invader, whose arsenal includes nuclear weapons and an army of millions rattling weapons near our borders.

We still look forward to receiving active assistance from Kazakhstan on this issue. The experience of the Crimean Platform is unique, but I would not wish it to be useful to others.

I actually held meetings with the leadership of the Institute and invited experts from this institution to take part in the summit. Unfortunately, I cannot gratify you with a positive answer now, since Kazakhstani side has not provided it at all. Meanwhile, increased interest of Kazakhstani political scientists and experts from non-governmental organisations to take part in the Crimean Platform is observed, so we will await them at the summit.

– One of the topics that you raise at your meetings with representatives of the government of Kazakhstan is strengthening cooperation in the information sphere in order to counter hybrid threats and spread of fake news. How relevant is this problem for the information space of Kazakhstan?

– In February, I held a meeting with Aida Balaeva, the Minister of Information and Social Development of Kazakhstan. We meticulously discussed the issues of hybrid threats, which affect both Ukrainian and Kazakhstani information spaces.

Kazakhstan is hugely influenced by the great information clout of the Russian Federation. Of course, such large-scale publishing houses as RIA Novosti or Sputnik, being significantly represented and covering a wide audience in the country, are promoting their agenda.

Yet, during the meeting, I noted that the dissemination of objective information from various sources in the news stream is a top priority for Ukraine. In view of this, the embassy has repeatedly offered Kazakhstani authorities to consider the possibility of opening the offices of Ukrinform and Kazinform on a reciprocal basis. We are also working on the registration of the UATV channel in the Kazakhstani media space.

The implementation of these initiatives would contribute to the objective dissemination of news about Ukraine, as well as help the Kazakhstani audience to take a closer look at what exactly is happening in our state in time of the Russian aggression.

– *What sources do Kazakhstanis usually use to learn about Ukraine? How do Kazakhstani media cover the situation in Donbas?*

– Again, I will highlight the Russian influence on the Kazakhstani media repeating the Kremlin's narratives about Ukraine and Donbas.

Over the past decade, however, Kazakhstani online portals have appeared, which rather objectively cover the situation in general. There are many Telegram-channels and accounts of leading bloggers and political scientists on social networks, which receive information from various sources and analyse the situation in Donbas in detail. The embassy is often asked for a comment on certain topical issues. For our part, we are massively disseminating important signals in the information space of Kazakhstan.

– *Emine Dzhaparova, First Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, noted that our country has long-standing historical ties with the Turkic states. What unites Kazakhstan as one of the Turkic states and Ukraine? What general pages of history are adopted by our cultural diplomacy in this country?*

– Indeed, the historical relations between Ukraine-Rus and the Kipchaks go back to antiquity. Formerly, we were neighbours and, having a common border, we traded and concluded contracts. More than once we became allies in the wars of that time, and sometimes we resolved conflicts among ourselves, taking up arms.

The borders of the Great Steppe (Pontic, according to the Greeks) pass through the territory of modern Ukraine, cross the Dnipro, reach the Danube. Ancient caravans from Kyiv, Chernihiv and Halych were sent through the lands of the Kazakhs to China and Persia.

The likeness of our history is confirmed by similarities in the vocabulary of Turkic origin, for example, *shablia* (a sabre), *sokyra* (an axe), *maidan* (a square), *kylym* (a carpet), *kurhan* (a mound), *tlumach* (an interpreter), *osavul* (an esaul), *sahaidak* (a quiver), *namet* (a tent). There are about 4,000 such words in the Ukrainian language.

Many Crimean Tatars were deported to Kazakhstan during the genocide in 1944. Their descendants value the memory of their roots and their ethnic homeland – Crimea. There is a cultural centre of the Crimean Tatars in Almaty, which includes many Crimean Tatar families of the region, who have preserved their native language and traditions.

The Crimean Tatar language is very similar to Kazakh, because both belong to the Turkic language group. While watching the film *Haitarma*, which was broadcast in our cultural and information centre, the Kazakhstanis did not even need a translation. Last year, for the Crimean Tatar Flag Day, the embassy prepared and distributed a slide-show presentation on the similarity of *Qırım tatar tili* and *Kazakh tili*.

– *What is the role of cooperation with the Ukrainian diaspora in the activities of the embassy? Is it possible to implement joint projects now?*

– The importance of the Ukrainian diaspora in Kazakhstan is worth noting. This is the third largest community (after the Kazakh and Russian), which is one of the most influential ethnic groups in the republic according to historical and cultural characteristics. Kazakhs and Ukrainians are historically close peoples. Both the leadership of the state and ordinary citizens respect the significant contribution of the Ukrainians to the formation and development of Kazakhstan, particularly, to the Virgin Lands campaign.

Compared to other ethnic groups in Kazakhstan, there is a fairly high percentage of intellectual workers among the Ukrainians: agronomists, geologists, doctors, teachers, engineers, soldiery, scientists.

The Ukrainian diaspora in Kazakhstan plays an important role in the activities of the embassy because with their help and support we can disseminate and popularise Ukrainian culture, language, and traditions.

To date, the Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Kazakhstan interacts with 17 ethnic Ukrainian communities, six Sunday schools, in particular with the State Institution Complex “Kindergarten-School-Gymnasium No. 47” of Nur-Sultan, where the Ukrainian language and literature are taught as separate disciplines. Several churches of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church function in Kazakhstan. This cooperation contributes to the consolidation of efforts to meet the spiritual needs of ethnic Ukrainians.

Thanks to the initiative and persistence of individual Ukrainian communities, as well as with the support of the embassy, the Ukrainian Family radio programme has been broadcast on an ongoing basis, and the *Ukrainian News* Ukrainian-language newspaper has been published in electronic format in Kazakhstan for many years. The Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Kazakhstan together with the Ukrainian communities annually holds scientific, educational, and cultural events at the local and international levels and provides the publication of books. One of the latest publications is a collection of works by Taras Shevchenko called *Kobzar*, translated into Kazakh language.

As I already noted, in the current conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, most events are held online. Yet, despite some limitations, this method allows one to increase the number of participants in various events. For example, last year, the Ukrainian community in Kazakhstan held a Ukrainian song contest Strings of the Heart, which was attended by representatives of the Ukrainian diaspora from Australia, Russia, the European Union, Canada, the United States to list a few.

Therefore, the Ukrainian diaspora holds a proud place in the activities of the Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Kazakhstan, as it contributes to the advancement of the interests of Ukraine in Kazakhstan and helps to fulfil the embassy’s tasks in the cultural, humanitarian, and economic spheres.