

Alex LENAERTS,
*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
of the Kingdom of Belgium to Ukraine*

DEEPENING COOPERATION AND FURTHER LONG-LASTING PARTNERSHIP OF BELGIUM AND UKRAINE

– *Mr Ambassador, could you please outline the major achievements in cooperation between our countries over the past few years. What are the main issues on the current bilateral agenda?*

– Trade, economic, and investment cooperation between Belgium and Ukraine continues. The economies of both countries, just as those in the whole world, are now mitigating the negative impact of the coronavirus crisis. Despite this, the work of strengthening bilateral cooperation in the fields of energy efficiency, renewables, industry, engineering, and science continues. There are regular meetings between parliamentarians and civil society that establish an exchange of experience in the formation and implementation of state policy in the rule of law, fight against corruption, renewables, and energy efficiency. There is continuous work on the development, simplification, and improvement in the fiscal sphere with respect to income and capital taxes in both countries as well as expanding cooperation between Ukraine and the Kingdom of Belgium in the field of trade and economic cooperation.

– *The energy sector of Belgium is one of the world's epitomes of market transparency and liberalisation. About 20 percent of Belgium's energy balance consists of nuclear, wind, and solar energy. It is known that on 11 February, during the meeting of the Association Council in Brussels, Ukraine expressed its readiness to join the EU Green Deal and an ambition to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 concurrently with the European Union. What advice should Ukraine take into consideration to repeat Belgium's success and approach the EU standards in the area mentioned?*

– Although our attention has shifted towards combatting the new challenge, climate change is galloping. Climate change requires action, as does economic recovery these days. We are in a situation when joint effort can have bigger and cross-boundary effect. Of course, dealing with the new circumstances requires more commitment, and I am glad that Ukraine has voiced strong commitment to the ambitious targets of the European Green Deal.

I must also admit the EU Green Deal's targets are also ambitious for Belgium. The Belgian government will cooperate with regions to renovate Belgium's aging housing stock. It has also imposed restrictions on the production

of vehicles that do not meet zero emission standards. These challenges are also besetting many countries, including Ukraine. In practice, we can see that there is strong support from citizens for a more environmentally friendly and sustainable economy in Ukraine. Cities and villages of Ukraine need smarter mobility, renewable energy production, and green transformation of industry. Belgium has accumulated some expertise in this sphere, for example, in off-shore wind energy and optimisation of railway and water infrastructure and is ready to share its knowledge. I support Ukraine's readiness to join the EU Green Deal targets. We are facing serious environmental and climate changes, so we need to find a joint approach to tackle it.

– *Evidence of active economic cooperation between Ukraine and Belgium consists in the successful operation of Belgian companies in Ukraine, such as Sun-InBev, Vatra-Schroeder, Melexis, Deceuninck, and Massive, to list a few. The agreement on the acquisition of the Etalon insurance company by the Belgian Fortis Bank also proves that the Ukrainian financial services market remains promising. Are there any new Ukrainian-Belgian economic and investment projects to be developed in the near future and are there any obstacles to interaction in this sector?*

– Belgium is an important trade and investment partner of Ukraine. Belgian companies have been active in Ukraine for a long time now that exceeds last 30 years. But the most prominent ones you just named are also the biggest Belgian investors into the independent Ukraine. Reconnecting with this past, Belgian businesses were among the first to invest in Ukraine after its became independent. Economic exchanges between our countries have grown ever since. In 2020, Belgium ranked 11th in terms of bilateral trade in goods between Ukraine and European countries, which is about 2 percent of the total trade turnover with European countries. I am also proud to welcome this year a new investment project from Western Ukraine.

– *Mr Ambassador, the balanced development of your country's economy testifies to the existence of a perfect economic strategy. Accordingly, what reforms should Ukraine implement so that the path of rapid economic growth of the European state does not remain a vague hope for us?*

– Belgium supports the European integration direction that Ukraine has chosen and the democratic reform agenda in conformity with the principles of the rule of law, free market, and multilateral cooperation in the areas of peace and security. Rapid economic growth is possible only from a synergy effect of well-implemented reforms. The Association Agreement is bringing its benefits; however, this cannot remain the only objective. I travel through the country a lot and see that the authorities of all levels understand how crucial it is to advance, to keep reforms irreversible, particularly regarding the rule of law, energy, environment, and climate change. Needless to say, there is a strong demand for advancements in these spheres from Ukrainian citizens.

– *Belgium has long been cooperating with Ukraine in the military sector, through NATO and bilaterally. Could you please elaborate on the other formats of Belgian assistance to Ukraine in the context of Russian aggression and the war in the east of Ukraine.*

– As you may know, Sophie Wilmès, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, visited Ukraine on 7 May as the leader of a delegation from the Benelux countries, where Belgium holds the presidency in 2021. The ministers were in Shchastia checkpoint to see for themselves how one of the crossing points on the contact line works. Undoubtedly, Belgium expresses its full support and solidarity with Ukraine, especially when it comes to its territorial integrity.

– *During your meeting with Serhii Shkarlet, Acting Minister of Education and Science, on 6 October 2020, the topical issues of the normalisation of bilateral cooperation between Ukraine and Belgium in the field of science and technology were discussed. In particular, since the beginning of 2017, 32 collaborations have been established between scientific institutions of the two countries and 945 joint scientific publications have been prepared. Could you please tell us more about the agreements and prospects for cooperation in this area.*

– Science and research relations between Ukraine and Belgium are already on a high level. During the meeting with the Acting Minister, the deepening of bilateral collaboration in science and technologies between Ukraine and Belgium was discussed. Dozens of Ukrainian students and research fellows already have an opportunity to continue their studies in Belgium. Ukrainian Erasmus exchange students choose Belgian universities for their profound academic programmes and extensive extracurricular opportunities. The embassy supports the volunteering community and youth organisations that cooperate with each other in both countries.

– *Beyond doubt, one of the most powerful sources of cultural understanding between states is the integration of common historical points of convergence, themes, events, links, and interests into the countries' narratives and activities. This emphasises mutual respect and creates the need for further cultural communication. Can this idea be traced in the context of Ukraine and Belgium?*

– Ukraine and Belgium take part in big book fairs or music festivals and are always represented by talented people. Let me also note that Ukrainian-Belgian cultural cooperation always ways a personal dimension. Every resounding success in painting, literature, music, cinematography, or other art direction is based on personal story and initiatives. It was my pleasure to see at the beginning of June 2021 how the Odesa Philharmonics gave a warm welcome to the Belgian renowned violinist and conductor Michael Guttman, who paid a visit to Ukraine with his concert for the Odesa Classics Festival. He was a student of the great Isaac Stern, who instilled in him the basics of the Odessa violin school. Thus, Michael Guttman considers himself to be the successor of the Odessa performing tradition.

– *For several years now, the countries witnessing a significant influx of migrants have seen an increase in anti-European and anti-integration sentiment within their borders. Currently, the issue of the migration crisis in Europe and its consequences for the EU members remains quite controversial. From your point of view, how does Belgium manage to regulate the problem of migration?*

– I would not assess migration as a problem. The life of every person is priceless. Such is the conclusion that the European continent and Belgium in particular have apparently made from the migration wave that took place over recent years. Belgium has come a long way from creating infrastructure and educational programmes for refugees to integrating immigrants into the labour market nowadays.

The Kingdom of Belgium is a stable and reliable donor in development assistance. The country's foreign policy on migration aims at making it part of the international development effort and the fight against human trafficking. There is also fruitful cooperation with such organisations in this field as the UN, the IOM, the EU institutions, the Belgian Ministry for Social Integration, Fedasil (Federal Agency for the reception of asylum seekers), the Belgian Immigration Office, and the Belgian Development Cooperation.