

**Hong THACH NGUYEN,**  
*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary  
of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to Ukraine*

## **UKRAINE-VIETNAM RELATIONS: CHARTING THE WAY TO BETTER UNDERSTANDING AND PARTNERSHIP**

– *Mr Ambassador, you have taken office in Ukraine this year. What is your impression about this country? Do you have favourite places?*

– I started my term as Ambassador to Ukraine in December 2020, but I first came to Kyiv 40 years ago as a college freshman, when taking the first steps to become a diplomat. As an ambassador, and especially an alumnus of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, I will do my best to boost ties between our countries.

I have visited several places in Ukraine. All of them have left a different impression on me: diverse Kyiv, ancient Lviv, vibrant Kharkiv, open-minded Odesa... Everywhere I came, I saw peaceful life with beautiful landscapes, architectures, and green parks. People are smart, hardworking, friendly, and cordial. Given this potential, I believe that Ukraine will soon accelerate its development.

– *What are the key directions of the embassy's activities in Ukraine?*

– Vietnam-Ukraine relations are all about traditional friendship, comprehensive partnership, and cooperation. I highly appreciate the progress of cooperation between our countries in political, economic, and educational fields since Ukraine's independence. Many agreements have been signed between our countries.

Overcoming the challenges of time and historical upheavals, Vietnam and Ukraine are building their relations on a solid basis of mutual understanding, respect, concurring interests and aspirations of the two nations. In order to renew and efficiently enhance such ties, we set priorities to deepen interaction in the following directions.

**Tourism.** Vietnam and Ukraine have huge potential to develop their tourism. Vietnamese people like travelling, including to Ukraine. I know that Ukrainian people travel a lot, too. Exchange of tourists and cultural activities can be very helpful in advancing economic relations. The embassy is working with related agencies in both Vietnam and Ukraine to find ways to increase the number of tourist arrivals.

**Trade.** Ukraine has much strength that Vietnam needs for its industrialisation and modernisation. Vietnam, in turn, has some industries that can be of interest



У межах відрядження до Півдня України 21–23 березня 2021 року Посол В'єтнаму Хонг Тхач Нгуєн зустрівся з в'єтнамською громадою в Херсоні та Миколаєві. На фото – зустріч із головою Херсонської ОДА

On 21–23 March 2021, Hong Thach Nguyen, Ambassador of Vietnam, met with the Vietnamese community in Kherson and Mykolaiv during his trip to southern Ukraine. In the photo – a meeting with the Head of the Kherson Regional State Administration

to the Ukrainian market. The potential of Vietnam and Ukraine and the complementarity of the two economies pave the way for the further development of bilateral trade and economic relations. Now and in the near future, the focus will be on such areas as IT, production of electronic and agricultural products, textiles, footwear, woodworking, etc.

**Sister cities.** Over the last six months of my stay in Ukraine, I have been working with authorities of various regions and cities. The embassy attaches great importance to connecting localities of both countries, as this is currently an efficient way for us to establish and deepen cooperation in many areas. I hope that next year there will be several agreements on sister cities signed between localities of our countries. They will contribute both to city-to-city relations and overall Vietnam-Ukraine cooperation.

– *How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the work of the embassy? In your opinion, will the concept of traditional diplomacy change in the post-pandemic period?*

– The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly changed diplomacy at various levels and our embassy is no exception. In the early phase when the pandemic broke out and Ukraine introduced quarantine restrictions, the embassy switched to the remote mode. Meetings were shifted to digital platforms. Many activities were cancelled for safety reasons.

After some time of adaptation, the embassy is gradually getting back to the new normal with the use of digital tools. Though no one can deny the importance of technology at the times of physical distancing, we think there are no substitute for the traditional way of conducting diplomacy with face-to-face interactions, eye-to-eye contact, reading between the lines or examining subtle tones and body languages, and other non-verbal clues that cannot be seen well from the four corners of a computer screen. Moreover, digital diplomacy is vulnerable in one way or another to cyber security attacks. Regardless of technological advancement, no platform or tool is 100 percent secure. Besides, there are risks of exclusion of some voices in important discussions, since the global digital divide remains wide and the availability of internet infrastructure and access to the internet varies greatly. Thus, the shift to digital tools may be at the cost of the representation of certain stakeholders.

Nonetheless, technology is developing extremely fast. It will certainly create many tools and platforms, which can be incorporated more and more widely to our daily work.

– *Mr Ambassador, in recent years, the partnership between Kyiv and Hanoi has considerably strengthened. What are the prospects for cooperation between our countries in the political and economic dimensions?*

– As I have mentioned, Vietnam and Ukraine have stable political and economic relations. In 2020, the total trade turnover reached \$644 million, which is a 22.5 percent increase compared to 2019, while exports from Ukraine grew by a staggering 92 percent, despite the difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is, however, still a modest share in each country's foreign trade, which is incommensurate with our potential.

Vietnam and Ukraine have great potential for developing bilateral relations. Both countries have strategically important geographical locations linking our regions to the outside world. The strength of each country can efficiently contribute to their mutual development. In addition, Vietnam has a large diaspora community in Ukraine. This group is well aware of the peculiarities of both Vietnam and Ukraine and is willing to serve as a bridge connecting our countries.

As for political cooperation, we seek to resume bilateral political consultations and exchange visits at all levels. Again, this will have an impact on the economic dimension: During the 15<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Vietnam-Ukraine Intergovernmental Committee on Economic, Trade, Scientific, and Technological Cooperation in January 2021, both sides agreed that it was important to create a legal framework facilitating bilateral exchange of goods, particularly agricultural products. In that sense, an FTA with a favoured tax system can help to turn prospects into reality, thus further promoting our bilateral trade. In my meetings with Deputy Minister for Economy Taras Kachka, we agreed to set the target of increasing the annual bilateral trade to \$1 billion in the next three years. This is an achiev-

able goal, given the potential and will of both sides. We are also working with the competent authorities on the possibility of organising charter flights. After providing such transport on the regular basis, it will be time to establish direct flights between two countries. This is one of the key factors to boost tourism and trade.

– *It is important to note the question of the free trade agreement. This year, our countries have agreed to resume work on the FTA. How will the implementation of this decision influence future bilateral relations?*

– At the 15<sup>th</sup> session of the Intergovernmental Committee on Economic, Trade, Scientific and Technical Cooperation between Vietnam and Ukraine, the two sides agreed to resume preparatory work for negotiations on the free trade area. I think this is important in order to enhance our bilateral trade. Ukrainian goods are now in a more difficult position in competing with goods from the member states of the Vietnam-Eurasian Economic Union, as the latter have more favourable trade tariffs with Vietnam than Ukraine. If an FTA with Ukraine is in place, Ukraine will compete better with them in the Vietnamese market. Ukraine can sign a bilateral FTA with Vietnam or simply join the multi-lateral FTAs that we have already adopted. The latter helps increase exports not only to Vietnam but also to other markets.

– *Despite the damaging impact of the pandemic, the Vietnamese government has managed to maintain a positive growth rate of the national economy, which amounted to 2.9 percent in 2020, being among the highest ones in Southeast Asia. How has your country managed to achieve this, and what should Ukraine pay attention to in the story of Vietnamese success?*

– When the pandemic broke out at the end of 2019, Vietnam responded promptly and strongly to cope with the challenges in order to protect people's health while maintaining the rate of socioeconomic development. This approach proved to be successful, as reflected in the positive economic growth in 2020 against the background of the global economic crisis caused by the pandemic.

Throughout the development of Vietnam, the most essential factor for its success has always been ensuring political stability and social peace, which is of crucial importance for business environment and the attraction of foreign investment. Political stability has been cited by investors as one of Vietnam's strengths that contribute to the security of their investments.

Besides, Vietnam has signed free trade agreements with all the major economies in the world (15 signed, 2 being negotiated) to expand its export market. After 35 years of renovation and international integration, Vietnam is now considered one of the most open economies in the world. Important FTAs, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA), which have significantly invigorated our exports, have recently been signed.

– *What is the role of cultural diplomacy in the work of the embassy? What projects are engraved in your memory the most vividly?*

– Cultural diplomacy plays an important role as one of the three pillars (political, economic, and cultural) of Vietnam's diplomacy. Whereas political diplomacy addresses issues in bilateral affairs as well as coordinates efforts in multilateral and international relations, economic diplomacy promotes economic, trade, and investment exchange, cultural diplomacy contributes to the promotion of cultural and human values, helps the people of other countries to better understand the country, its people, lifestyles, traditions, thereby strengthening friendship and people-to-people contacts. Cultural diplomacy carries out many functions, which cannot be replaced by political or economic pillars.

One of my priorities as Ambassador to Ukraine is to widen cultural exchange between our countries. Key attention is given to promoting the image of Vietnam, its nature, people, tourism, and other heritage to Ukrainian people as well as providing a bridge bringing Ukrainian culture closer to Vietnamese people. I believe that the more we understand each other, the better we cooperate. In this regard, cultural diplomacy can play a leading role.

– *The Ukraine-Vietnam Society is an all-Ukrainian non-governmental organisation actively operating in Ukraine, whose purpose is to promote cooperation between citizens of Ukraine and Vietnam. How does the embassy work with this society?*

– The Ukraine-Vietnam Society was founded in 1991, when the two countries established diplomatic relations. Throughout 30 years of its history, the society has made a significant contribution to the development of the friendship and cooperation between our nations. Many leaders and members of the organisation are well-known politicians, veterans, activists, and entrepreneurs. They are devoted people, who have been playing significant role in promoting Vietnamese-Ukrainian bilateral relations. It was the society that initiated the establishment of a mini museum of Ho Chi Minh at the eponymous high school no. 251. It also organises a lot of activities in cultural and people-to-people exchange.

Aiming to preserve this valuable tradition, the Embassy of Vietnam attaches great importance to the close relationship with the Ukraine-Vietnam Society, holds meetings on a regular basis, and invites the society to almost all events hosted by the embassy. We have also collaborated to organise trips to Vietnam for Ukrainian veterans and members of the Ukrainian Women's Union and connect the society with the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organisations – the highest agency at the national level in Vietnam that is in charge of the country's people-to-people diplomacy.

One of my first activities as Vietnamese ambassador was meeting with members of the society. Since then, I have conducted many working sessions with them to discuss measures to consolidate and widen Vietnamese-Ukrainian



Під час поїздки до Дніпропетровщини Посол В'єтнаму в Україні Хонг Тхач Нгуєн відвідав місто Кривий Ріг. Майданчиком для спілкування представників українського бізнесу та влади В'єтнаму став Центральний гірничо-збагачувальний комбінат компанії «Метінвест»

Hong Thach Nguyen, Ambassador of Vietnam to Ukraine, visits the city of Kryvyi Rih during his trip to Dnipropetrovsk region for discussions between Ukrainian businesses and Vietnamese authorities at Central Iron Ore Enrichment Works of Metinvest Group

bilateral friendship. We are also working with Ukraine's agencies to resume the Vietnamese language and culture classes at the high school no. 251 for Vietnamese Ukrainian and Ukrainian students.

– *Education is among the most successful areas of Ukrainian-Vietnamese cultural and humanitarian cooperation. How has the pandemic affected educational cooperation and student exchange? Are there any near-term projects planned between our countries?*

– In 1994, the Ministries of Education of the two states signed an agreement on cooperation in the educational sphere, which is still in force. In August 2005, a treaty on the recognition of equivalent qualifications was signed.

Many generations of Vietnamese students have studied in Ukraine. This is a highly qualified human resource that contributes to the development of our country. Many Vietnamese graduates from Ukrainian universities are currently holding important positions in the government apparatus of Vietnam, are successful businessmen and top experts in various sectors. We are sincerely grateful to the Ukrainian people for the support provided to us in the difficult years of war, as well as in the post-war period in the reconstruction and development of our country. Vietnam is very interested in deepening a comprehensive cooperation relationship with Ukraine, and its former graduates in Ukraine are a strong bridge and resource to facilitate it.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not affected educational cooperation between our countries. We are still providing each other with 30 scholarships yearly for bachelor, master, and PhD degrees. However, it has affected students in terms of living and studying, particularly entry/exit procedures from countries, residence permits, and health care. The embassy has made every effort to assist them in this regard.

In recent years, the number of students' exchanges is decreasing due to many reasons, namely the language barrier, non-direct flights, information access, etc. We are now working on measures to make full use of the bilateral educational agreement, enhancing information sharing, organising summer camps, and opening Vietnamese language classes in Ukraine. We are also willing to switch to the English language in implementing the Vietnamese-Ukrainian educational agreement to offer students more job opportunities after graduation.

– *The Vietnamese community in Ukraine is one of the largest in Europe. How closely does the embassy interact with it?*

– The Vietnamese diaspora in Ukraine is a large community that has been making significant contributions to the socioeconomic development of both Vietnam and Ukraine. The embassy always considers the Vietnamese communities in Ukraine to be a driving force in promoting our bilateral interests, as they are the people who profoundly understand Vietnam's as well as Ukraine's strengths and needs. We always draw them into the cooperation efforts and programmes between the countries.

With their support, we have successfully organised various events like Vietnam Day, tourism and food festivals, exhibitions, and music performances, to list a few. In the near future, when the pandemic restrictions are lifted, the embassy plans to cooperate with the Vietnam diaspora in hosting some large-scale cultural events, such as Vietnam National Day and a Vietnamese food festival in different cities of Ukraine.

– *As you have mentioned, in March 2018, a delegation of the Ukrainian Women's Union visited Vietnam to meet with their colleagues from the Vietnamese Women's Union. What is the aim of such meetings?*

– The Ukrainian Women's Union has nourished close ties with the Vietnamese Women's Union and other similar organisations in Vietnam for many years. The visit of the union's members in March 2018 was an important event. This form of exchange is drawing more and more attention as the role of women is significant throughout the world. During the visit, the Ukrainian delegation worked with the Vietnamese Women's Union and women's unions of some localities and agencies. The embassy cooperated with the competent authorities to facilitate the visit.

We see mass Vietnamese as well as Ukrainian organisations as strong players in promoting people-to-people contacts.

– *Three years ago, journalists of the Vietnamese TV channel VTC10 – NET-VIET carried out a press tour around Ukraine, which significantly contributed to the popularisation of the way of life, culture, and traditions of modern Ukrainian society in Vietnam. Are there other such educational campaigns planned?*

– Indeed, press tours can be very efficient in promoting a country in the world. After the trip of specialists to Ukraine three years ago, products of VTC10-NETVIET helped create much sentiment among the Vietnamese toward Ukraine and Ukrainian people. As far as I know, many other media outlets of Vietnam as well as film producers want to make similar trips to explore diverse aspects of Ukrainian life. Last December, right before my departure to Ukraine, I was approached by several film directors to discuss possibilities of producing films or collaborating with Ukrainian partners in this direction. I hope there will be some visits next year, when the spread of COVID-19 is better controlled.

As for Vietnam, we also want Ukrainian media to make similar tours, as they can help Ukrainians to find out more about our country. I believe that letting us talk about ourselves will never be as effectual as letting you talk about us. The embassy always supports trips of Ukrainian reporters and media agencies to Vietnam because later on they present our beautiful outstanding places and landscapes to Ukrainian viewers.

– *We are nurturing hope that travel restrictions will soon be lifted. In the meantime, Your Excellency, what sights would you advise Ukrainians to visit in Vietnam?*

– Like regions and cities in Ukraine, all provinces and cities of Vietnam have their own attractions. The outstanding destinations I recommend Ukrainian friends to visit include Hanoi – the capital of a thousand-year civilisation, vibrant Ho Chi Minh City – the national economic and financial centre, poetic Hue – the ancient capital, or coastal cities and islands with breath-taking beaches like Ha Long, Da Nang, Nha Trang, Mui Ne, and Phu Quoc, and provinces with spectacular mountains and plateaus like Sa Pa, Moc Chau, Ninh Binh, and Da Lat. The tourism infrastructure of Vietnam is becoming more and more developed, catering for the needs of both domestic and international tourists. I guarantee that you will be extremely impressed and enthralled by the sights, landscapes, and heritage of Vietnam. Besides, do not forget to try Vietnamese food. It is praised by the most well-known chefs in the world, like Gordon Ramsay and Anthony Bourdain, and is one of many things that make you want to return to Vietnam.