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*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
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ESTONIA'S EXPERIENCE: PRACTICING SUSTAINABILITY, WEATHERING STORMS

– *Your Excellency, could you tell us about your career path prior to your appointment as Ambassador to our state.*

– I have been in the Estonian public service for most of my adult life. I started right after university and have held posts at different levels of responsibility in the security sector during my career.

I am not a career diplomat. This, however, is not to say that I lack experience in international relations. I firmly believe that in our modern world international cooperation is essential in all spheres of life. Naturally, each country has to pull its own weight, but ultimately the strength of the free world can best be measured by the number of democratic nations.

– *What priority objective have you set for the team of the diplomatic mission when you became the head of the embassy?*

– Special thinking – that of cooperation, of learning from each other's best practices – is what I have brought with me to Ukraine.

Looking back some thirty years ago, our countries had a similar starting position on their roads of independence. At that time, we received a number of well-wishing experts in Estonia, who wanted to teach us how we should best reform our country. Some of these recommendations were extremely valuable. Some less so.

In the early years after regaining our independence, we relied heavily on donor countries but quite soon decided that we should also contribute to the development of other countries. So, starting in 1997, we have been stepping up our development cooperation, focusing on sharing our transformation experience.

Despite the help and advice, we received many decades ago, we do not like telling others how they should live. We rather explain to them what problems we have faced and show them the solutions that we have applied. This allows our partners to learn from our mistakes and successes.

The objective for our team is to be there for Ukrainian friends to offer examples of how we have addressed similar challenges.

– *How would you describe the current state of Ukrainian-Estonian relations?*

– I am glad to say that our countries have excellent relations. As a diplomat, what else could I say! Still, there are only a handful Estonian ambassadors who have such a steady flow of high-level visits – presidents, ministers, parliamentarians,



Президент України Володимир Зеленський приймає Вірчі грамоти від Посла Естонської Республіки Каймо Кууска

President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy receives credentials from Ambassador of the Republic of Estonia Kaimo Kuusk

state secretaries. Although, I wish I could take credit for achieving this by myself, it is a teamwork of different people and institutions.

Also, we would not have achieved anything if it had not been for the interest on the Ukrainian side. At all my meetings – both in Kyiv and in the regions – I have felt like a very welcome guest and saw genuine interest in deepening and broadening cooperation even further.

– *It has been a year since the coronavirus pandemic began. What measures does Estonia take to cope with this crisis? What is the pace of vaccination?*

– As an EU member state, Estonia has participated in the joint procurement of vaccines. Therefore, we started early and have made strides in protecting our population. At the end of July 2021, little less than 50 percent of our population have received at least one shot of the vaccine; about 40 percent are fully vaccinated.

Managing the pandemic has been a huge challenge for us, similar to the rest of the world. One of the most difficult aspects has been to get people to understand that in this crisis the actions of each and every one of us makes a difference.

Until the autumn of 2020, we had very low infection rates (single digits per 100 000 inhabitants in 14 days). People let their guard down. After the autumn school holidays, the infection rate started to spike rapidly. Then, at the beginning of 2021, after New Year celebrations, from a relatively high plateau our COVID-19 infection rate relative to the Estonian population became the highest



Прем'єр-міністерка Естонії Кая Каллас і Посол Естонії в Україні Каймо Кууск відвідують район проведення ООС

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas and Ambassador of Estonia to Ukraine Kaimo Kuusk visit the Joint Forces Operation area

in the world in several weeks. Our healthcare system – which is quite strong – was on the verge of collapsing. Just a little more, and we would have run out of medical personnel. Our prime minister Kaja Kallas turned to her Ukrainian counterpart and asked for doctors and nurses, if needed. And Ukraine was ready to help, forming a team to be sent out.

The unpopular and costly but also extremely necessary lockdown measures taken by the government helped us to come back from the brink of the void. The infection rate in Estonia is one of the lowest in Europe today.

What really helped us to weather the storm – to continue the functioning of society, get schools and businesses back to work – was our early adaptation of digital services. Based on existing infrastructure, we also partnered with the WHO last October to develop a digital vaccination passport. Part of this project has taken on the life of the European digital vaccination certificate.

– *Estonia's mandate as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council is ending this year. What results have been achieved over the tenure? What international problems have been in the focus of the Estonian Mission to the UN? Is the issue of Russian aggression against Ukraine still on the agenda?*

– In our campaign for the elected seat at the Security Council, we stressed the importance of the rules-based international order and bridging the digital divide. We have also kept these concepts in our focus during our membership.

The global pandemic hit three months into our membership, in March last year. This meant that participation in the UN events had to be adjusted to the age of video conferences. I am proud to say that we were able to contribute to reshaping the informal Security Council so-called Arria-formula meetings so as to ensure a truly global viewership and participation.

Topical issues, such as the events in Belarus or Afghanistan, have featured heavily in the agenda. There have been two meetings dedicated to the situation in the temporarily occupied Crimea.

Estonia is eager to work together with all the countries of the UN, big and small. Yet, when the commonly held rules are disregarded, we are compelled to react and call the spade a spade. These rules protect all of us, whatever the size of a country.

– In May last year, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine announced that our country would join efforts with Estonia and Latvia in combating the spread of distorted historical facts by Russia, first of all, those related to World War II. Was this statement backed by concrete actions?

– History is part of the story that we tell. About ourselves, about our country, and our place in the world. There are no alternative facts relating to history, only alternative interpretation. The trouble is that instead of interpretation, Russia is systematically trying to manipulate facts.

Estonia remembers very clearly that World War II started on 1 September 1939, after Hitler and Stalin had divided Europe and the world into spheres of interest.



Каймо Кууск із представниками Литви та Латвії під час святкування 30-річчя акції «Балтійський ланцюг» («Baltic Way 30»)

Kaimo Kuusk and representatives of Lithuania and Latvia celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Baltic Way

A year later, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia were erased from the map. The Soviet authorities deported people from the Baltic countries, just as they did in the western parts of Ukraine.

The concrete actions to withstand the distortion of history – be it more distant, such as World War II, or more recent, such as the occurrences in Crimea in 2014 – are too many to count. We have to fight falsehood with facts. Estonia has learned strategic patience in doing this. It took us nearly 50 years to restore our independence. We never gave up because the facts were on our side.

Our historians and state institutions are cooperating, and the embassy in Kyiv is ready to help additionally with contacts in Estonia.

– *Your country is often called Europe’s digital leader. 99 percent of its public services are available online. Ukraine is now also striving to become a completely digital state, and Estonia is known to be actively helping us to achieve this. What are the main areas of such assistance?*

– The most visible sign of our cooperation in the digital sphere is that the infrastructure for the Ukrainian Diia and Trembita systems is based on the Estonian equivalent X-road. The citizens and other users of this system can call up their passport information or car insurance on the computer or smartphone. It is not necessary to know in which government database it is kept.

We started developing our digital society by providing internet connection for schools in 1997. Since 2001, we have a mandatory national ID card (in Ukrainian context the “internal” passport) with a chip. Ukraine started implementing the Diia at the age of smartphones, eliminating need for some of the technologies Estonia used. This gives Ukraine an opportunity to leapfrog and even be better than us! I would like to stress that now you have already become an inspiration for others.

– *The Second Ukraine-Estonia Digital Forum was scheduled for the autumn of 2020, but it did not take place because of the pandemic. When do the two states expect to return to this idea?*

– The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our lives in many ways. One of these changes is the fact that many plans had to be cancelled and events had to be postponed. The first Digital Society Sandbox forum took place during President Zelensky’s visit to Estonia in November 2019.

We have already had several follow-up meetings to prepare for the next bilateral Digital Summit, but yet, I do not know when we will be able to hold it. Hopefully, it will be soon – as soon as the pandemic subsides.

– *On 27 November 2020, the Prime Ministers of Ukraine and Estonia Denys Shmyhal and Jüri Ratas signed an intergovernmental agreement on technical and financial cooperation. The Estonian Prime Minister emphasised that after the conclusion of this agreement the cooperation between the states would break new ground and Estonia would be able to provide more practical assistance to Ukraine. What exactly did Mr Ratas mean?*



Підписання угоди про технічну та фінансову співпрацю між
Естонією та Україною

Signing agreement on technical and financial cooperation be-
tween Estonia and Ukraine

– In November 2020, we were hoping to welcome Denys Shmyhal in Estonia. Again, due to the pandemic, it was impossible. Instead, the prime ministers signed the agreement on technical assistance at the online meeting.

Ukraine has similar agreements with a number of countries and international organisations. While an agreement in and of itself will change little, it creates an improved framework for our very active cooperation in the sphere of development cooperation.

The Estonian Government and NGOs carry out approximately 40 different projects in Ukraine annually. This agreement makes possible one particular project – a pilot project to manage queues at the borders.

This summer, driving home from Ukraine to Estonia, I saw a line of trucks 14 km long waiting to cross the Ukraine-EU border. It was more than +30 C outside, and I just thought those trucks and drivers would melt into tarmac. This means lost time for the drivers and their families as well as lost time and money for logistics companies. It is also less than ideal for the residents of the border areas. Respective electronic system will allow people to book a time of border crossing online. Then, it will not be necessary to wait at the border for hours and days. I think, Ukraine should work hard to make physical borders between Ukraine and the EU least visible and felt.

– During Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit to Estonia in November 2019, a document on cooperation in the organisation of territorial defence was signed between the Ministries of Defence of Ukraine and Estonia. In accordance with it, Estonian specialists would help us to implement a pilot project on territorial defence in certain regions. No doubt, Ukraine has a lot to learn from Kaitseliit. How is this project progressing today?

– The idea behind territorial defence is that the country's security is undivided, thus, we all contribute to it. Every citizen and every local community matters. Kaitseliit, or the Defence League, is an organisation of volunteers who are trained similar to the Defence Forces. At the end of the day, however, they return home to their regular jobs rather than going to barracks. The biggest advantage of those volunteers is that they know their hometown in Estonia or a local forest or swamp better than the potential Russian aggressor. They are highly motivated to defend their families and the place they live in. They react quickly, therefore, pose a death trap to the enemy.

The cooperation has slowed down a little bit due to the COVID-19 restrictions, but we will resume it in the coming months.

– Last year, Estonia hosted a summit of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). During the video conference, the Investment Fund of the 3SI was inaugurated. Kersti Kaljulaid noted that, if successful, the Investment Fund model could also be implemented in countries outside the EU. Ukraine has repeatedly expressed interest in participating in the Three Seas Initiative, for example, as an observer. In your opinion, can Ukraine be engaged in this format (including through project cooperation) and can our country count on Estonia's support?

– Not only does Estonia see the 3SI as an extremely valuable cooperation format for increasing connectivity and thereby enhancing economic development on the north-south Europe axis but also as a solid platform for transatlantic cooperation. The need for modern infrastructure is becoming ever more imperative in terms of geopolitics, economic growth, and sustainable development.

The 3SI Investment Fund is a unique financial vehicle that brings together public and private capital to meet our region's infrastructure development needs. It is politically driven but fully commercially operated. The fund has already raised more than €1 billion, and the first three projects are approved for financing.

Estonia sees Ukraine as a natural extension of the initiative, and investments into 3SI connectivity projects will benefit your economic development as well. Many priority projects are directly connected with Ukraine. One example would be Via Carpatia, which, when linked to railways in Ukraine, could have a major positive impact on Ukraine's integration with the 3SI countries and beyond. Ukraine should definitely offer to bring into the Investment Fund some public and private resources.

– In the article ‘How Estonia’s experience will help Ukraine to get rid of queues at the border’ for *European Pravda*, you noted that this problem could be solved by introducing an electronic border crossing system, which has to include the option to book a place in the waiting line. Could you please elaborate on this mechanism?

– I have already mentioned the project of electronic management of queues at the borders. Estonia faced this problem in the city of Narva, where the border crossing station is in the heart of the city and kilometers-long queues were blocking traffic across the city.

The Estonian Government decided to turn to private companies for help in solving this, and a public-private-partnership was established for managing the situation. Cars and trucks – rather than waiting in the city centre – can wait for their turn at a parking lot and arrive at the border when their turn is up.

A Schengen evaluation team that visited the Estonian border with Russia commented on the excellent organisation of the border queue management. The only recommendation was to communicate with more clarity that, in addition to the paid-for service, it was still possible to cross the border without a service fee.

When launched, this system will look similar in Ukraine. Those who pay a small service fee can plan their border crossing in advance. This is especially important for holiday makers and logistics companies. Local residents who cross the border regularly can choose whether they want to wait at home or at the parking lot provided by this system.

– In 2019, Ukrainians made up the largest group of migrant workers in Estonia. Poland once calculated that workers from Ukraine added 0.5 percent to the annual growth of the Polish GDP in 2013–2018. The cumulative contribution of Ukrainian workers accounted for 13 percent of Poland’s GDP growth over this period. Are there similar calculations about the Ukrainians’ contribution to the Estonian economy? What is the position of the Estonian government on Ukrainian migrant workers?

– Unlike our Polish friends, we do not have such statistics. Yet, the relatively free movement of labour is an essential part of Europe, free and whole. For years, Estonians have sought employment elsewhere, primarily in Finland, Sweden, and the UK. Some people have settled there but owing to the considerable rise of the living standards in Estonia, more people rather choose to return home. Still, the Estonian economy needs more workers.

The Ukrainians who entered the Estonian labour market in the past few years are extremely valuable and necessary. They help us to fill the gaps in many spheres, e.g. in construction and agriculture. In addition, the Ukrainians are very sought-after welders in shipbuilding, IT specialists, and medical doctors.

The Estonian Government does not have a special programme to attract Ukrainian workers but creates the environment for private entrepreneurs with this aim. The place of origin notwithstanding, newcomers to Estonia have access to language training. In general, Ukrainians adjust to life in our country easily, in particular, with the assistance of the Ukrainian Cultural Centre in Tallinn being actively involved in promoting and maintaining activities. The Estonian Ministry of Culture has proposed to its Ukrainian counterpart to put common effort into adding the Ukrainian Easter Egg painting pysanka in the UNESCO List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

– *How many Estonians live in Ukraine now? Is there a vigorous and close-knit diaspora?*

– The Estonian diaspora in Ukraine is quite vibrant and has a long history. The first people from Estonia arrived in the present-day Kherson Region in 1782, when some 500 ethnic Swedes from the island of Hiiumaa were relocated here. Their village had a name Gammelsvenskby, nowadays, it is a part of the village of Zmiivka.

In 1863, several Estonian settlements were established in Crimea, and by the beginning of the 20th century, there were six of them. In addition, many Estonians worked and lived in Ukraine in different times. Dr Mykola Pyrohov, a widely known physician and pedagogue, after whom a street is named in Kyiv, was a famous professor at the University of Tartu. Until now, the May Day celebrations for students in Tartu centres around his statue.

The Estonian community in Ukraine gained new organization level in the early 1990s. Since then, it has been vigorously promoting Estonian customs, including our singing tradition. The diaspora choir participated in the Estonian Song Festivals. The very first festival took place in 1869, and two years ago, there was a choir of 35,000 singers performing to an audience of 65,000.

In addition, we have several active members of the community who have come to Ukraine to do business here. So yes, like our country, the diaspora is not small but compact and very much woven into the Ukrainian society.

– *Finally, please tell us a little more about yourself, particularly about your hobbies. Do you have time to rest? What places in Ukraine do you like most?*

– One may say that diplomats work 24/7. And that is true. Still, without having rest and hobbies no one can last with such a tempo for the whole term. Spending time together with my family is important for me; we like cooking together. We have used the COVID-19 pandemic time to look deeper into the recipe books we have. As a result, I have learnt how to make a good Ukrainian borsch.

It is important to exercise. For years, I played football in the Estonian IV league within the FC Toompea and took part in mountain-biking marathons and various amateur competitions. Now I am just an amateur, no competition. From spring to autumn, I like jogging and cycling. I have recently



Посол Естонії в Україні Каймо Кууск

Ambassador of Estonia to Ukraine Kaimo Kuusk

bought a new helmet in Kyiv, as I forgot mine in Estonia. During wintertime, I adore cross-country skiing. Luckily, there was enough snow this year even here, so I was able to ski on Trukhaniv Island.

Ukraine is huge. My family and I continue exploring it. I have to admit that we have found many picturesque places here. You have seaside, hills and mountains, forests and sunflower fields. In eastern Ukraine, beauty and tragedy are standing side by side. Just look at the marvellous Sviatohirsk Monastery at the riverside and realise that the frontline is just several tens of kilometres away. You have magnificent cities like Lviv, Kharkiv, Odesa, and Uzhhorod. Kyiv itself has streets and quarters to fall in love with. It is good that travelling is opening up again and that an ever-increasing number of foreigners can discover Ukraine.