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Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta to Ukraine*

‘THE GREATEST CHALLENGE HAS BEEN TO INTERVENE PROMPTLY AFTER THE BEGINNING OF THE WAR’

– *Your Excellency, please tell us about the specifics of the activities of Your organisation as a monastic catholic order with internationally recognised sovereignty and its own constitution. What impact did Russia’s armed aggression in Ukraine affect the activities and position of the Order? How has the Embassy’s work in Ukraine changed since 24 February?*

– The war in Ukraine has had a wide and profound impact on the activities and position of the Sovereign Order of Malta. The Order, through its representatives, has repeatedly emphasised in the competent international meetings, especially at the United Nations in Geneva and New York, the gravity of the humanitarian consequences that this crisis has caused and is still causing and the need to implement all available means to end this suffering.

With regard to the Order’s activities, I would, first of all, like to mention that they are mainly carried out by our humanitarian agency, Malteser Relief Service of Ukraine, which has three important facilities in the West of the country: in Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Berehove, as well as various psychological rehabilitation centres in the East of Ukraine. Unfortunately, the latter have had to suspend their activities due to the conflict. The first three facilities, on the other hand, since the beginning of the war have carried out intensive support work for refugees on the borders with Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania, and for IDPs that received shelter in the various facilities within the country. The Malteser Relief Service of Ukraine is also carrying out a complex activity of receiving, storing, and distributing humanitarian supplies from abroad.

As for the Embassy, it has always remained with its entire staff in Ukraine. From 4 March to 7 June, it moved to Lviv in order to be able to support and coordinate Malteser’s activities more closely. During these months, the Embassy continued to carry out its diplomatic activity by having contacts with the Ukrainian government and especially with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Social Policy and Veterans Affairs (with the sole purpose of supporting the families of the veterans in difficulty). I have had many meetings with representatives of the International Committee of Red Cross and other UN humanitarian agencies in order to exchange our experiences on the ground and to share information

for the better organisation of our work. Finally, I would like to mention that in 2019, I signed an intergovernmental Cooperation Agreement between the Order and Ukraine, which permits us to import humanitarian material tax-free, which is particularly useful at this time.

– *The Order of Malta has almost a thousand-year history, maintains diplomatic relations with more than 100 countries, and is engaged in humanitarian activities in more than 120 countries, including providing food. Please tell us about measures taken by the Order at the international level due to the food crisis, especially in the context of the Russian war against Ukraine.*

– Food is fundamental, but during this crisis, the Order of Malta has imported into Ukraine not only food but also many other basic necessities such as medicines, water, hygiene products, generators, ambulances, etc. To be able to do this, the Order has activated its international network not only in Europe but also all over the world. Hundreds of humanitarian convoys have arrived from abroad to Malteser Relief Service of Ukraine to be distributed throughout the country. In addition, the Order has prepared and delivered, with its specialised staff and volunteers, hundreds of thousands of meals to refugees and IDPs, and has assisted thousands of adults and children in need of help due to war trauma. In addition, we are also carrying out fundraising campaigns all over the world.

– *Ukraine is the most mined country in the world now. Every day we hear about the death or injury of the civilian population due to landmines because people do not listen to the advice of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine; hence, people do not know what to do. Are you considering creating centres in different cities and villages of Ukraine to conduct relevant training for civilians?*

– The Embassy of the Order of Malta to Ukraine knows how important and complex this issue is. For this reason, in 2021, we organised an international video conference on the subject of landmines in the East of Ukraine. I remember that it aroused great interest and was attended by representatives of many international agencies such as the OSCE, Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, OCHA, UNICEF, etc. It was a qualified and constructive discussion. However, to answer your question of whether we are considering setting up centres to educate civilians on how to avoid the dangers arising from the possible placement of mines, I have to say that this would be a new experience for us as it relates to technical-military issues that are traditionally outside our field of activity. However, I cannot exclude the possibility that within the purely humanitarian limits in which our role must be performed, we might be able to make a contribution in this matter to prevent further suffering.

– *The Order of Malta actively participates in solving the issues related to and faced by Ukrainian refugees. What challenges do you face in your work? Based on your observations, how do Ukrainians adapt to the peculiarities of life in the country of temporary residence?*

– Indeed, the Order of Malta’s efforts have mainly focused on supporting refugees and IDPs. The greatest challenge has been to intervene promptly after the beginning of the war. In fact, I would like to recall that the Order was among the first to be present on the ground supporting the refugees both in Ukrainian territory and in the territories of neighbouring countries where they were able to find shelter. Another important challenge was to understand in time the different needs of these people and to ensure their provision within the humanitarian loads sent by the Order to Ukraine. Another challenge was the storage and management of the tonnes of delivered goods. In a short time, Malteser had to set up extensive warehousing facilities, equip itself with sophisticated software and the means to rationally dispatch and deliver everything to the country. Among the challenges, we still face now is the arrival of the cold weather, which will bring a serious change and worsening of the immune system scenario, and the need to continue to keep the international community’s attention high on what is happening in Ukraine. It will also be necessary to involve new additional resources to support humanitarian activities and the exchange of information between all those who are working in this area.

With regard to Ukrainians who are currently abroad because of the war, I must say that we have positive information about them. The various countries that have welcomed refugees have done this with generosity and admiration for this brave people. Moreover, the Ukrainian refugees have also shown that they are able to adapt to different realities with a practical sense and with a willingness to cooperate and integrate. However, it should not be forgotten that this situation cannot continue indefinitely and that some host countries are on the verge of collapse and need broader international cooperation.

– *Providing assistance in places of active combat operations and in temporarily occupied territories remains a particularly complex issue. Are representatives of the Order of Malta working in these directions?*

– This is one of the most complex and delicate problems. As I have already mentioned, the Order of Malta is distributing its humanitarian aid throughout the country. To date, we have reached more than 65 towns, many of which are, or have been, in the frontline zone. We have also sent ambulances to the East of the country for the populations affected by the bombings. We are also trying to increase our presence in the highest-risk areas but access is not easy.

– *Mr Ambassador, please share whether the Order, despite the war, continues the implementation of traditional projects, in particular soup kitchens, rehabilitation of children with disabilities, etc.*

– Absolutely. One of the characteristics of the humanitarian activity of the Sovereign Order of Malta is precisely that of being able to manage emergencies while continuing to go ahead with the normal programmes of assistance to people in need. I can therefore confirm that with a few limited exceptions,

our projects are continuing. Now in this regard, I would like to mention that in addition to the distribution of meals and the rehabilitation of children with disabilities, we also organise summer camps for children, now for children from the East of Ukraine, psychological support for fragile people, help for poor families, educational programmes for integration, first aid courses, and so on.

Finally, I would like to add that it has been our tradition in Ukraine for several decades to organise the feast of St Nicolas for children in need. We will do everything we can to hold this celebration also this year, not only to give the little ones a day of happiness but also to share our wish for peace for the whole country.