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‘WE ARE TAKING THE INITIATIVE’

– *For several years now, enhancing interaction with African countries has been one of Ukraine’s foreign policy priorities. Please tell us about the current state of Ukraine’s relations with the countries where you are accredited. What areas appear the most promising?*

– Over the period of my almost two years of work in the region, I could say with cautious optimism that things actually have moved forward. We have managed to re-establish dialogue with certain West African countries (Guinea-Bissau, Gambia, Guinea) and deepen our ties with others (Côte d’Ivoire, Senegal, Liberia, Sierra Leone). All these countries are different. We need a specific approach to each of them. When I say ‘approach’, I primarily mean a set of tools and arguments that should change their often biased attitudes towards Ukraine, especially towards the present-day Ukraine, which is heroically resisting the Russian invasion, defending its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and hence the right to live freely. The concept of ‘the right to live freely’ bears a very particular meaning for Africans, given their complex history.

Reflecting on the current state of Ukraine’s relations with the West African states, I would dare to use the term ‘reassessment’. This means a reassessment/review of a set of stereotypes that have been ingrained in the minds of the citizens of these countries for decades, mainly associated with the former Soviet era, where Ukraine was primarily regarded as you-know-whose ‘little brother’, the undeniable dominance of the Russian language, history, culture, traditions, etc. Yes, do not be surprised, but there are still individuals here in Africa who still think so.

We must acknowledge the fact that we have wasted several decades in Africa. And that is a pity. Nowadays, we have to make up for this lost time as quickly as possible, methodically, competently, and most importantly, systematically. This is what we are doing. I would agree with Minister Dmytro Kuleba that the current stage of our relations with Africa is a renaissance period. And a mutually beneficial one to boot.

I cannot help but mention the fact that Dmytro Kuleba’s three tours of African countries (in total, he visited eleven states), as well as our Government’s decision to establish ten Embassies on the continent this year, have played a truly



З Президентом Гвінеї-Бісау Умару Сісоку Ембало

With Umaro Sissoco Embaló, President of Guinea-Bissau

tangible role in facilitating dialogue with African countries. Notably, the Africans genuinely appreciate this, understanding the complexity of such a decision, especially its financial aspects amidst the Russian war. It is pleasant to hear words like ‘welcome’ and ‘count on our hospitality’ from the leaders of the countries where we open our diplomatic missions.

Nowadays, apparently, some West African countries perceive our dialogue with them mainly through the prism of the Russian war in Ukraine, which they call not a war but rather a ‘conflict’ or even a ‘political crisis’. They do not want to choose sides between Ukraine and Russia. They call this ‘neutrality’ or ‘equidistance’, which determines their position not only in bilateral contacts but also in international organisations, especially the UN General Assembly during the voting on Ukrainian resolutions.

Here, I would like to thank Liberia and Côte d’Ivoire for remaining our reliable partners, whose support we greatly appreciate. I would also like to commend The Gambia and Sierra Leone, which have been unequivocal in supporting Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders. The rest of the countries keep professing their neutrality, sometimes quite selectively, not forgetting, however, to ‘shower compliments’ on the Russian dictator Putin whenever possible.

And let's be realistic: this is already a result, albeit a cautiously optimistic one. We have to continuously discuss, explain, persuade and even sometimes raise our voices to make this result better and more weighty. And so shall it be.

As for the most promising areas of our cooperation with West African countries in trade and economy, I will not list certain noteworthy projects we are already working on with some of the states for the reason that highly unwanted 'experts' can exploit this information. However, I would like to note that Ukraine has excellent proposals in the cybersecurity and digitalisation fields, as well as in the development of economic cooperation, business and interpersonal contacts, technological partnerships, and the technologies and experience exchange in areas of mutual interest.

– *What are the main obstacles that the Embassy has to overcome in defending Ukraine's interests in the West African countries?*

– As I have already partially mentioned, there has been an information vacuum in the region for several decades regarding present-day and dynamic Ukraine. Of course, someone somewhere has heard something about Ukrainian achievements, but those messages were inconsistent and sporadic. Unfortunately, the sparse Ukrainian diaspora, consisting mainly of the wives of Africans who used to study at our universities, is not yet a cohesive community with a consolidated *Ukrainianness*. We have to work with these people and bring them together not only by marketing Ukraine through compliments for 'delicious borscht and varenyky' but also by consistently involving them in various discussions and artistic events aimed at demonstrating both Ukraine and Ukrainians in these countries – highlighting their charm, intelligence, strength, professionalism, kindness and cleverness.

The chronic (but, I am convinced, curable!) stereotype that Ukraine is 'russia's eternal sister' is still quite tangible in West Africa. And the 'russian-Ukrainian conflict' or even 'misunderstanding' is a temporary occurrence that is 'a consequence of Western interference in fraternal relations'.

This kind of nonsense we have to debunk and firmly reject almost regularly. And it is incredibly confusing when even university professors and ministers engage in such rhetoric!

Typically, while talking to some high-ranking officials and politicians, I notice their indeterminateness and even cowardice in articulating any pro-Ukrainian message (for example, their unwillingness to comment on the apparent causes and consequences of the russian war in Ukraine, even through the prism of the food crisis in Africa), as they always try to consider how their leadership (mostly pro-russian but declaratively neutral) would react and whether it goes in line with their country's official position.

Anti-Western sentiment in the region is steadily (albeit cautiously) gaining momentum. Europe no longer holds the same authority as it did a few years ago.



З Президентом Кот-д'Ивуару Аласаном Уаттарою

With Alassane Ouattara, President of Côte d'Ivoire

Consequently, and unfortunately, the principle that the European community supports or approves a particular initiative, idea, project, or plan no longer carries the same influential weight. To some extent, this complicates the perception of arguments among Africans in favour of our Euro-Atlantic course and the EU's support for Ukraine, let alone NATO.

In the region, especially in the country of my residence, it is crucial to pay meticulous attention to monitoring the activities of the Russian diplomatic mission, including its narratives, trips, meetings, etc. As I have already mentioned, the host country's declarative neutrality regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war does not prevent the Russians from conducting their covert game with local officials, especially at the municipal level (city halls), in terms of matters such as establishing partnerships between these cities and the 'Russian Crimea'. It is clear that such things are not carried out without the awareness of the local Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Therefore, we must instantly monitor and surgically remove these steps by, among other things, raising maximum awareness in the media and sending a convincing protest note to the 'neutral' Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Speaking of the challenges of working in the region, I cannot help but note the strange political and communication culture of officials at various levels, especially in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which perplexes me and most of my Western counterparts. Unfortunately, for some reason, officials here tend

to consider it normal not to respond to notes verbales from foreign diplomatic missions. Virtually all decisions are made literally at the last minute. In order to get a response, we have to write, call and insist repeatedly, but even this does not guarantee a result. Regrettably, non-commitment and non-fulfilment of promises are specific features of the political establishment. As you can understand, this is a significant problem.

Certainly, we must adapt to these realities, equip ourselves with incredible patience, and keep improving, which is precisely what we are doing.

– *Mr Ambassador, how are we perceived in the countries where the Embassy operates? What soft power tools does the Embassy employ to enhance fruitful cooperation between Ukraine and these states?*

– It varies. I can say for sure that Ukraine is permanently ‘on the air’ in most of these countries. Senegal, for instance, is already accustomed to it because I regularly appear in the press, on the radio, and television. Some media workers even find it excessive. Guinea and Côte d’Ivoire eagerly embrace new information about events in Ukraine. This is particularly evident from posts and comments on the Embassy’s social media pages.

Liberia is closely following the events in our country and understands Ukraine well. I plan to hold a press briefing for Liberian media soon.

We can cautiously note that the overall perceptions and attitudes towards Ukraine in the region are improving and expanding, becoming more adequate and dynamic. Ukrainian news, messages, needs and imperatives are gradually finding their way here. However, some countries persistently profess a stance of ‘neutrality’ in the Russian war against Ukraine, which hinders the desired condemnation of this war from their side.

The process is moving forward, albeit slowly. It is worth noting that in my personal communication with officials and politicians of various levels, I hear more and more often the words of compassion, sympathy and ‘willingness to help in any way possible’. A year ago, this was unthinkable.

Indeed, many outright supporters of the toxic ‘Russian world’ here frequently express anti-Ukrainian comments and statements. We know who nourishes, sponsors and directs them in the country’s media space. Yet, eventually, we manage to find arguments and facts in favour of truth and sound logic, neutralising their public convulsions.

As I already mentioned, in a particular social stratum of the countries where I hold accreditation, people have a positive image of the former Soviet Ukraine, where they studied. However, after the collapse of the USSR, the prevalent Russian presence on the continent and its communication campaigns filled the information vacuum about Ukraine.

Apparently, it would be irrational to erase from the minds of Africans the pleasant memories associated with their time in Ukraine, even during the Soviet

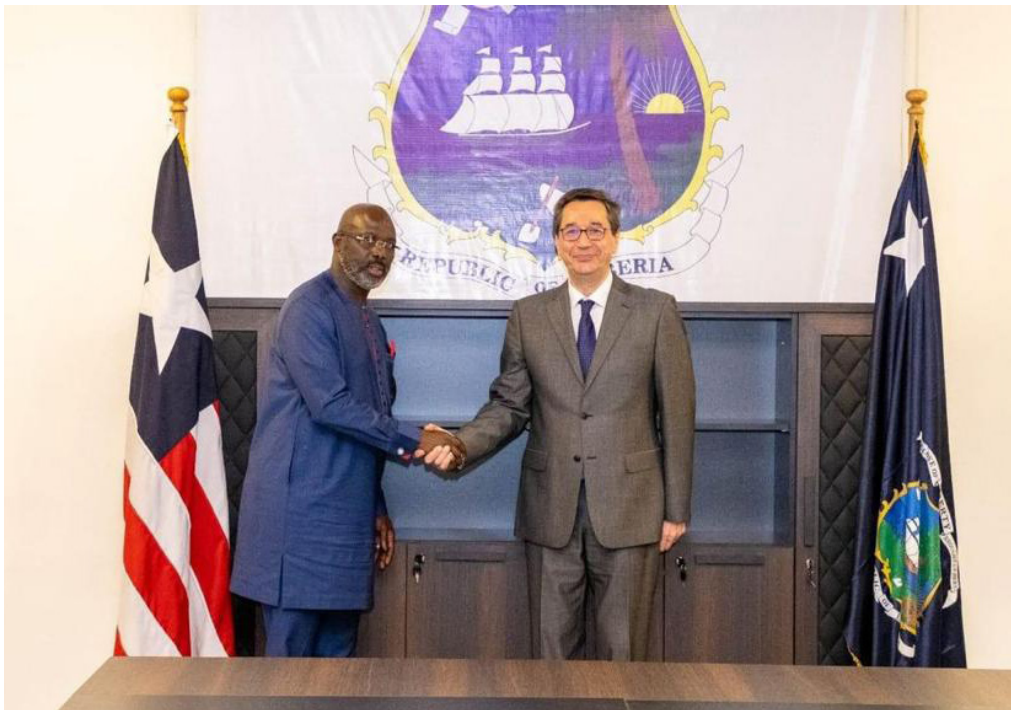
era. The presence of such memories is an undeniable competitive advantage compared to other countries that need to build their image ‘from scratch’.

Our task today is to shape these nostalgic sentiments within the target audience of former Ukrainian students and connect their memories and impressions to present-day Ukraine.

Speaking of soft power, I would say that despite being a global trend, many view it narrowly, primarily through the prism of cultural or public diplomacy, whereas actual indicators of effective soft power utilisation encompass, by various counts, at least 50 categories, including economic, digitalisation, and educational aspects.

Undoubtedly, we must also consider other elements of soft power, such as a strong economy, a favourable investment climate, and advanced technologies, especially in critical energy, mining, and agriculture spheres, that are important for Africans. There is potential in all of this, of course. However, before that, we should make efforts to create a qualitatively new image of Ukraine for the majority of Africans and to eradicate any references to the Soviet era.

– *Over the past years, we have witnessed a wave of coups d'état in African countries. Specifically, the military took over power in Guinea, where you represent Ukraine's interests. What are the key factors driving these coups? What repercussions do they have on the overall security situation across the African continent?*



З Президентом Ліберії Джорджем Веа

With George Weah, President of Liberia



3 Президентом Сенегалу Маки Саллом

With Macky Sall, President of Senegal

– The analysis of this distressing and perilous trend in Africa currently prevails over others in the expert discourse within the countries of my accreditation. In less than three years, power has transitioned into the hands of military juntas in five African countries (Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon). This is exceedingly dangerous.

It seems that the current situation may soon lead Western Africa (unfortunately, that is the direction) into a military confrontation involving a substantial number of the continent's states. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is justifiably taking a firmer stance in its dealings with the military juntas, particularly in Niger, by threatening military intervention. Nigeria, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Benin, and Côte d'Ivoire have already expressed their readiness for action.

Regrettably, my conversations with numerous African analysts and diplomats (Guinea, Niger, Gabon) indicate concerns regarding the spread of the 'coup epidemic' to other countries in West and Central Africa. Chad and Sierra Leone are currently facing this risk.

There are reasons to believe that the growing activity of Russia and the Wagner Private Military Company (PMC) in Africa is related to these concerns. Recent reports show that certain military personnel in Niger and Gabon are receiving consultations from 'strategic planning and communication experts' from the Wagner PMC, who have had 'successful experience' in Mali and Burkina Faso (gold and oil export is their area of expertise!). Who would have doubted it?

This, if you will, is one of the driving forces behind the explosive trend in Africa. Additionally, as we well know, the muscovite grand narrative aims to oust the 'colonial Western spirit' from Africa, as Omar Tchiani, the new 'Nigerien leader', pompously declares, while ignoring 'à la russe' neo-colonialism. We are closely watching the course of events and drawing relevant conclusions.

It is noticeable that muscovy has recently been actively promoting (contrary to the West) the message that it never had an official colonial presence in Africa despite its notorious far-reaching and oppressive colonial history in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe.

By the way, it is interesting to note that in 1889, Russia made its closest attempt to establish a presence on the continent through an unauthorised mission led by Nikolai Ashinov, a Russian explorer. He and his small contingent landed in Sagallo, present-day Djibouti, and temporarily declared it 'New Moscow' (!). However, the French, who had already established control over Djibouti, ousted impudent Ashinov and his 'researchers' in less than a month. Instincts are doing their job...

– *Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire share a strong connection with Ukraine, as our peacekeepers contributed to the restoration of stability in these countries. Additionally, both states support Ukraine within the UN General Assembly and have joined the Crimea Platform. What are the prospects for Ukraine-Liberia and Ukraine-Ivoire relations? What should underpin our cooperation?*

– Indeed, out of the five countries of my accreditation, these two are relatively more manageable for me to work with, especially when assessing events in Ukraine through the prism of the Russian war. Both the Presidents and the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, whom I frequently communicate with, express strong condemnation of the bloody Russian war in Ukraine and seem to feel the pain and suffering of Ukrainians more deeply. I believe these countries wholeheartedly embrace the concepts of 'sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine', and we thank them for that.

Apparently, Monrovia and Abidjan are well acquainted with Ukrainians, remembering our peacekeepers who contributed significantly to establishing peaceful life, demilitarising armed groups, and maintaining sustainable peace in these two countries. What is important is that these two friendly states still value this, acknowledging the professionalism, bravery, resilience, and humanism of Ukrainian peacekeepers.

We appreciate their support for Ukrainian initiatives on the international stage, especially at the UN General Assembly, where Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire consistently vote in favour of our resolutions. As you rightly pointed out, both countries have joined the International Crimea Platform, firmly condemning Russia's criminal annexation of Ukrainian Crimea.

Such a basis is undoubtedly a powerful motivation for us to intensify our political dialogue with them and deepen trade and economic cooperation in all

possible directions. I am convinced we will increase our trade turnover despite the Russian war.

Regarding Liberia, for instance, we soon intend to consider and implement several essential projects aimed, in particular, at developing the country's road infrastructure and digitalisation services. And there are worthwhile initiatives, which Minister Dmytro Kuleba discussed with President George Weah during his recent visit to Monrovia. I cannot reveal all the cards yet.

Côte d'Ivoire is also our promising partner in West Africa, and we have a lot to work on. Our cooperation should go beyond importing cocoa beans (essential ingredients for our confectionery industry) and Ukrainian exports of certain types of raw materials. We are already working on various programs in energy, education, agriculture, high technology, and the extractive and processing sectors. I hope we will see results soon.

Meanwhile, we are working on a series of high-level and top-level visits that will further encourage the implementation of previously reached agreements.

The main point is that we have much to offer to our Liberian and Ivorian partners as we see the prospects and are actively moving forward.

– Over the course of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, first Umaro Sissoco Embaló, President of Guinea-Bissau, and later a delegation of African leaders, in particular Macky Sall, President of Senegal, visited both our country and then Russia with 'peace plans'. Undoubtedly, the war affects the food situation in Africa, so local political elites are interested in a swift, peaceful settlement, which does not necessarily take into account Ukraine's interests. Mr Ambassador, how can we strengthen Ukraine's position regarding the end of the war, explicitly emphasising that Ukraine's victory is the only acceptable outcome?

– Yes, there was indeed a 'parade of peace plans' allegedly intended to resolve the Russian war in Ukraine. We remember well the broad media coverage of the so-called Chinese, the Brazilian, the Vatican, and ultimately, the African 'peace plans', the latter of which became the most talked about and most quoted in international media.

I was somewhat involved (particularly with Senegal) in preparing the African mission led by Cyril Ramaphosa, President of South Africa, to Kyiv on 16 June 2023, as well as the visit of Umaro Sissoco Embaló, President of Guinea-Bissau, on 26 October 2022.

My firm belief then and now is that all these 'peace plans' from our partners are far from perfect and, therefore, not viable. All of them persistently ignore Ukrainian realities, which are just a few formal sentences in a hastily drafted document for the concepts' authors. It was simply (let me use this phrase) a 'fad': if someone wants to position themselves as a peacemaker, why not me?

In numerous conversations with African politicians and high-ranking officials, I distinctly sensed their fears regarding displeasing the Russians and provoking

putin, as they believed that the decision to end the war depended entirely on him. Their goal was to bring Ukraine to the negotiating table with the chief russian criminal. The terms for this were another/secondary matter (!). I emphasised, 'No, it won't be like that with Ukraine.' And this did not sit well with some of them.

I am still convinced that the statement 'to end this war' (thankfully, not 'conflict' or 'crisis'), as articulated multiple times by Cyril Ramaphosa and Azali Assoumani, the current Chairperson of the African Union, and subsequently echoed numerous times by other African officials, had a single pivotal purpose: to ensure the swift export of Ukrainian wheat from the blocked ports, primarily to Africa, which is already experiencing the effects of the russian war in the form of numerous famine cases.

When I made a direct proposal to African leaders, suggesting them to say it directly to putin's face, without fear, to unblock our wheat exports for immediate delivery to Africa, their responses often included phrases like 'well, you know, we need to find a middle ground' and 'be able to listen to our interlocutor'.

Of course, we appreciate the willingness of all our African partners to speak out in favour of peace in Ukraine and put forth specific ideas such as 'a roadmap' or 'a peace plan', which would involve negotiations with the international war criminal putin. However, in my opinion, they should learn to be genuine authoritative peace mediators (if they are to undertake this noble and highly challenging mission) rather than primarily acting as messengers and retransmitters of the kremlin dictator's ideas. Then, perhaps, such collective missions would yield results.

The analysis of the situation reveals, at least in the countries of my accreditation, that hardly anyone mentions the well-known 'peace missions or plans' for Ukraine. Those who wanted have already realised that these were primarily political and opportunistic manoeuvres aimed at improving the image of certain politicians.

Evidently, the only instrument to put an end to the russian war in Ukraine is President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Peace Formula, which is becoming increasingly recognised and supported worldwide, including several countries from Africa. I am convinced that their number will grow in the future.

– *What methods does russia use to influence the political and economic situation in West Africa? What effective countermeasures would you highlight?*

– The russian propaganda machine has firmly entrenched itself and taken an honourable place in muscovy's foreign policy. Recently, I had the pleasure of comparing interviews with the ambassadors of this country in three African states, whose purpose, among other things, was to highlight the 'momentous and incredible achievements' of this year's 'russia-Africa' summit.

It is a challenge to find emotionally and semantically balanced words to refrain from a realistic assessment of russian diplomats' key statements. What a

‘sovietism’ with all its attributes of discrediting opponents, self-satisfaction, and megalomania! It’s just ‘cut-and-paste’.

A tried-and-true tool for disseminating their narratives, dating back to the days of the former USSR, is a professionally constructed deception with a style eloquently inherited from the Soviet diplomacy standards. This outrageous lie quite dosed (and generously paid for) occasionally appears in thematic blocks in print media, radio, and TV in certain African countries.

A highly ‘up to date’ muscovy’s strategy is the deliberate discrediting of Western/NATO/EU countries with the aim to enter African markets. Unfortunately, in some cases, this strategy finds support in African societies, given the sensitive context of colonial history.

It is also important to highlight a notable strategic trend among russians, namely the militarisation of countries across the continent in a broad context – from arming them to having military advisors within the leadership of you-know-which African countries.

Overall, the modern methods of russian influence in West Africa are still the same. Nowadays, there is no need to speak about creativity, uniqueness, in-depth analysis of events, or even convincing French language (especially in Francophone countries) in the live communication of russians with journalists. And that is a good thing. We leverage this to our benefit.

What are our tools for countering russian propaganda and influence methods? I would say all possible ones. This includes our proactive engagement in the media field, dialogue with expert circles, the business community, and, of course, with the authorities of the countries where I am accredited, primarily their foreign ministries. Our trump is truth, objectivity, facts, figures, photographic evidence, and irrefutable solid messages.

I can confidently assert that we are taking the initiative in this regard.

– *What measures does the Embassy take to intensify political, economic, cultural, and educational connections between Ukraine and the countries of your accreditation?*

– It seems that in my previous statements, I have already partially mentioned some measures in this regard. All I can say is that we are making full use of all the instruments available to us for establishing contacts and influencing the dynamics of our relations with the countries of my accreditation.

Certainly, the dialogue intensity varies with each country. For instance, I directly contact the President or the Minister for Foreign Affairs to address urgent issues with a particular country. Indeed, this significantly accelerates the process. Other countries have their own communication culture. I am talking about excessive bureaucratisation and formalism, leading to frustrating delays in responses to any note verbale. It becomes necessary to engage personal contacts, advise on more optimal solutions to issues, and sometimes even depart

from diplomatic ‘courtesies’ to call a spade a spade. And this, as we know, does not sit well with many officials. But in the end, we manage to get things moving.

This means that the approach to dialogue with countries cannot be standardised. We simulate, estimate, adapt to realities, and use the most suitable option case-by-case.

There are strange peculiarities in certain countries’ cultures (political and communicative) that, in my opinion, are very difficult for us to understand. For example, you meet with a minister, agree on specific matters and their time-frames, shake hands, take photos. Then, the next day, none of the contacts who were present at that meeting responds to calls, messages, or letters. The question arises: why waste time and present yourself unfavourably? Obviously, it negatively affects (potential) partnerships and, most importantly, the ability to trust.

That is why, next time, you double-check it to ensure that the contact/project/counterparty is trustworthy before suggesting the Ukrainian side to engage in a conversation with them.

Unfortunately, this applies to many potential areas for forming our hypothetical partnerships with particular African countries.

I will not dwell on specific measures taken by the Embassy because there are plenty of them. Some, as you understand, are confidential. But I can say that generally, the palette of our work encompasses a wide range of activities, including meetings, press briefings, conferences, roundtables, trips to the regions, visits to parliaments, enterprises, companies, and even sometimes unpleasant conversations with officials with protest notes delivery. This is what we do because result is of the utmost significance.

– *In your opinion, what prevalent myths and biases regarding the region of your activities should be addressed within Ukrainian political and diplomatic circles?*

– Let me begin by noting that over approximately two years, Africans have become more self-assured, actively positioning their region as a venue for real global competition. The politicians and businesspersons in the countries under my responsibility more and more often repeat the phrase, ‘You need us more than we need you’. As they feel ‘trend’, they become more whimsical and demanding.

This self-perception (usually without substantial basis) occasionally allows them to behave arrogantly, artificially demonstrating their significance. Such behaviour is noticeable in their interactions with members of parliaments, ministers, and officials of ministries and institutions, especially in the economic sector.

Therefore, while five years ago, it was relatively easy for many, including Ukrainian business operators / investors / exporters, to provide African partners with precisely what the country needed (and it worked), today you have to be prepared for a more ‘meticulous casting’ to make sure the choice falls on you.

West Africa is changing. Slowly, but it is changing. We should strive to understand our direction better, what we can offer, what risks we are ready to take, and how much patience we have to withstand the established principles of non-compulsion, obliviousness, sometimes absurd bureaucracy, and a tendency to accept certain gifts. Yes, there are cases of corruption here. Countries are dealing with this issue, but unfortunately, there have been no visible results thus far.

Therefore, I would like to advise potential Ukrainian partners willing to enter this market to be cautious and patient and consult with the Embassy on any issue. We will gladly assist and guide you on the best approach, as the understanding of some aspects can only come with time.

Hence, as the saying goes, godspeed!