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## **TODAY, THE WAR IN UKRAINE IS THE PRINCIPAL ISSUE ON THE AGENDA OF EUROPEAN COUNTRIES**

– *The Kingdom of Belgium has provided significant humanitarian and financial assistance, both bilaterally and under international organisations. Belgian military aid to Ukraine has already proved to be effective in the defence of our state. We are grateful for Belgian support to our state in countering Russian aggression. Mr Ambassador, what are the main issues at the top of the current Belgian-Ukrainian agenda?*

– The relations between Belgium and Ukraine as an independent country started more than 30 years ago. To my great pleasure, I see how they have developed into a profound and professional understanding and cooperation at different levels, which was the basis for further intergovernmental, economic, and military support when the war broke out. Today, the war in Ukraine is the principal issue on the agenda of European countries. Dealing with the unjust and brutal consequences of the war that influence the lives of millions of people has united Ukraine's partner countries. We learn from each other and support establishing assistance and aid systems, including security assistance.

This is my second year as the Belgian Ambassador to Ukraine, and I have lived through the bigger part of the war, being in Kyiv and travelling around the country. I have seen the determination of Ukrainians to defend and rebuild their country. The challenges ahead of Ukraine and of its partner countries, remain formidable. Ensuring effective communication between Belgian and Ukrainian parts of government and helping Ukrainians defend Ukraine's borders means being operational and active, which means following the example set by Ukrainians. As an Ambassador in a war situation, I have devoted a substantial part of my time to operational problem-solving. After the reopening of the Embassy in July 2022, the next challenge as of October 2022 was the Russian attacks on electricity and heating infrastructure. Specifically, we have tried to turn the Embassy into a Belgian point of invincibility, while in the broader sense, of course, we have also been providing technical and material assistance to Ukraine on the energy front. And we have started preparing for the next winter in May 2023 already.

– *Not only do Belgium's government structures, such as the B-FAST mechanism, provide aid to Ukraine, but also NGOs and even individuals contribute their efforts to helping our state. Your Excellency, what are the most notable initiatives aimed at supporting Ukraine?*

– The most visible effort in Belgium itself concerns the more than 60 thousand Ukrainians who have been registered in Belgium under the temporary protection status. However, what we cannot instantly see is the effort of Belgian families and individuals who have opened their doors as of the first days of the war to accommodate Ukrainian families and help them get back on track.

The most remarkable mobilisation of resources has come, in my view, from initiatives by Belgian citizens and NGOs, resulting in the arrival of large numbers of trucks with humanitarian and medical aid from Belgium in Ukraine.

– *Mr Ambassador, you have made many visits to the Ukrainian regions and seen the consequences of Russian aggression. Could you please tell us whether Belgium is considering the possibility of implementing projects on Ukraine's regional recovery and development? Do Belgian companies show a willingness to be involved in the post-war recovery of Ukraine? What spheres are considered the most promising for Belgian investors?*

– I have visited many regions of Ukraine, and the scope of damage is enormous. The resilience of Ukrainians commands a lot of respect. The moment a district or town is liberated, Ukrainian companies, food suppliers, etc. return and train or postal service is restored immediately.

Despite the war not being over, when the risk of destruction remains high, it is indispensable to help citizens restore their homes and critical infrastructure. We have channelled a large portion of our aid through international organisations, but we have also been involved in a number of local, Ukrainian-driven initiatives. For instance, since last year, Belgium has started cooperation with the Dobrobat non-governmental organisation. With the support of the government of Belgium, this Ukrainian NGO has succeeded in setting up a reliable shelter in a kindergarten in Chernihiv planned to open this October and has restored a school in the Sumy region in a very short time period.

– *Belgium attaches great importance to the situation of people in need, the assistance to civilians, and the protection of human rights. How does Belgium support the vulnerable groups of Ukrainian society?*

– The civilian population is paying an extremely high and painful price for the brutal Russian aggression. Belgium is particularly concerned about the number of child victims and the impact of the widespread destruction of hospitals, schools, and kindergartens. In figures, Belgium is within the top 25 donors to Ukraine by GDP. Compared to 2022, Belgium has this year doubled the amount of aid to Ukraine it is allocating to funds that support initiatives led by several of Belgium's international partner organisations: Human Rights Monitoring Mission of the

Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, UNICEF's Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations against Children in Situations of Armed Conflict, UN Conflict-Related Sexual Violence Trust Fund, and others. Yet the needs remain forbiddingly high.

When Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Hadja Lahbib visited Ukraine last winter together with Prime Minister De Croo, she stated: 'In view of the accounts of abuses and serious violations of international humanitarian law that we are receiving from Bucha, Mariupol, Kramatorsk, and many other places in Ukraine, Belgium wishes to express a strong and very clear message concerning the abuses and crimes committed in the context of this war of aggression: these must be solidly documented in order to guarantee that their perpetrators do not go unpunished.' My colleagues in Brussels have been very active in terms of accountability, supporting Ukraine in its efforts to set up an International Tribunal. At the occasion of the Foreign Affairs Council held in Kyiv on 2 October, Minister Lahbib reiterated these messages of support.

You also mentioned the B-FAST mechanism. It stands for Belgian First Aid & Support Team, which is Belgium's rapid emergency response mechanism. For example, after the explosion of the Nova Kakhovka dam and the floods it caused, Belgium immediately sent food and medical equipment for a value of 1.6 million euros: medicine, reservoirs for the storage of drinking water, etc.

– *On 4 May 2023, Ukraine, the Kingdom of Belgium, and the Kingdom of the Netherlands signed a Joint Declaration, which provides for cooperation between the Parties, namely in respect of military assistance to Ukraine, Peace Formula, security cooperation, accountability and restoring justice, and sanctions and compensation of war damages to Ukraine. Your Excellency, what measures have been taken to fulfil the declared aims? What steps are to be taken in this regard?*

– By this day, Belgium remains committed to providing Ukraine with the necessary support to help it prevail against the Russian war of aggression. On 11–12 July, Vilnius hosted the Summit of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The security of Ukraine is of great importance to NATO. Within the framework of the NATO–Ukraine partnership, we will promote long-term NATO interoperability, reform and reconstruction of Ukraine's defence industry, institution and capacity building. A clear roadmap for the sustainable transition of Ukraine's armed forces to NATO standards, as well as other support were on the table of the NATO Summit in Vilnius in July 2023.

'Our country will look at how we can participate in these military programmes. All of this should help him [President Zelenskyy] achieve one thing, and that is peace in Ukraine. That will lead to the ultimate security guarantee, which is to become part of NATO,' said Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo during the NATO Summit in Vilnius. Belgium reaffirms its solidarity with Ukraine and its people in their defence of their freedom and our shared values. There

will also be a new NATO–Ukraine Council for consultations on, for example, rebuilding the Ukrainian security and defence sector.

– *Belgium is to hold Presidency in the Council of the European Union in the early half of 2024. Mr Ambassador, can you share the information about the future agenda for the Belgian Presidency in the Council of the EU?*

– The final version of the Programme goals of the Belgian EU Presidency in the first half of 2024 will focus on strengthening the European Union and making progress in areas such as climate change, economic growth, and social cohesion. As a neutral mediator, Belgium will act to lead the legislative work and seek compromises among the EU member states. As the rotation presidencies work in trios, Belgium cooperates with Spain, which holds the Presidency in the second half of 2023, and with Hungary, which will take over the EU Presidency after Belgium.

Inevitably, Ukraine’s EU accession process, which is long and demanding, will be a priority under the Belgian EU Presidency.

– *How does the Embassy manage to promote Belgian culture in Ukraine nowadays?*

– Books can provide solace in hard times. I am delighted to see three Belgian comic books were translated and published in Ukrainian in Kyiv in the past year, despite the full-scale war. The most recent presentation of comic albums of Tintin adventures became possible thanks to the support of the City Hall of Brussels, which is a twin city of Kyiv. I am very pleased that there is a high demand for books in Ukraine, particularly, and happy to have been able to send large numbers of translated Belgian books to libraries all over Ukraine.